Here and Where You Are

by QueenVee1

Summary

When lab monkey and definite not superhero Darcy Lewis does something incredibly brave and monumentally stupid, she saves the Avengers and the planet from all out destruction at the hands of Thanos.

Picking up the pieces afterward is a lot less fun than she imagined. After an experiment to see the full extent of her new abilities, she finds her fate inexplicably tied to Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers.

Thrown in with the Avengers, she has to figure out where she fits in while navigating the stormy seas of being tied to two of the broodiest soldiers who have ever brooded.
Stubborn Steve Rogers! Mopey and Angry Bucky Barnes! Badass Powered Darcy Lewis! Cool Older Brother Tony Stark! Multiple mentions of David Bowie! This one’s got it all!

Notes

Hello! This is your writer, V (or Vicky, I’m good with either).

This is a longer, fully realized bit of wording that started as a drabbe challenge at Fckyeahdarcylewis over on Tumblr.

I went into those 15 days with absolutely no plan of any kind. I hadn’t even given it any thought before I wrote my first chapter (my goal was to keep as close to 1k each day as I could) and it all snowballed from there. The response to it was overwhelming, and something inside of me said I needed to fully flesh out this world that had blossomed in my head.

You can find the 15 drabbles I wrote Here. I am hoping to update weekly, real life willing, and have no end in sight. Kind of scary, starting this without an end point, but I’ve loved writing it and I hope you love reading it!

TRIGGER WARNING: This story contains major character death (non-graphic). The story is also tagged with 'Angst with a happy ending'. Please consume these words according to your own mental needs.

There’s this false idea that
Love knocks the wind out of you at first glance,
No, darling, that was your beauty
That was the power you wielded in your eyes
And we’ve been bruised and broken, hurt and haunted
But, after every terrible thing, I knew I’ll always have you
Because you grab me by the hand and we’ll fight off the monsters
Together, like all the stories the writers wish they could create
See the end of the work for more notes.
A Billion Little Pieces

“I was a billion little pieces until you pulled me into focus” – Venus, Sleeping at Last

Darcy Lewis grunted when the shock wave slammed into her body. She squinted against the blast of air, glancing over at Jane, eyes widening with fear. "Jane!?"

"I know!" Jane screamed, brown hair streaming in the wind, reaching out to grab Darcy's hand. "Just hold on!"

Pulling herself as close to Jane as she could, Darcy threw her arms around her friend's waist and held on for dear life. This was bad, fuck, this was so bad. This was worse than New Mexico, even worse than London. And seeing as those were already pretty horrible 'apocalypse is coming so make sure you're wearing clean underwear' battles, that was saying something.

All of this started for six measly college credits. Yes, she’d gotten a best friend out of the deal, and a man who looked at her the way she assumed a father would look at a daughter, and yeah, okay, she’d also been around a Norse god who could fly and wore a fabulous cape, but damn she was sick of almost dying.

But this time it didn’t look like almost. It looked like full-on dead.

She could hear sounds of fighting and screaming. She and Jane weren’t even in the thick of the battle, but she could hear it, and that was bad enough. Even being on the fringes was dangerous, and she yelled as something flew by their heads and crashed into a building.

Fuck!

Darcy was pretty sure the buildings around them had been evacuated (or fled from in fear), but as the bricks began to cave in, she figured it was too late now. "What's the possibility we die?" she yelled at Jane, needing the distraction.

"I don't know, Darcy!"

She could hear the terror in Jane's voice. Both of them shouted when a softly glowing stone skidded across the rubble of what used to be a street and came to a stop a few yards in front of them. It looked like it was made of the brightest amber and Darcy could see things swirling within it, and it made her blood run cold. She remembered Jane mentioning something about important stones, the kind of important that only the Avengers (with their powers and strength and ability to not be terrified every fucking minute) could handle... yet there it was, beautiful and terrifying, sitting right in front of them.

Darcy was still holding onto Jane as tight as she could, shielding her eyes against the wind and the sand that it threw at them. "I need a percentage!"
"What?"

The fighting continued around them, a blur of bodies and sounds of pain, the blast of lights and lasers. Darcy couldn’t even imagine what was happening in the war raging; there had been things she’d seen that she couldn’t wrap her head around, including a tree and a raccoon. So much of this was above her pay grade and level of understanding that she needed something to ground her.

Both women screamed when something scorched the ground a few feet in front of them, leaving a line of charred dirt and smoking sand that had turned to glass. If it was symbolic of some kind of line they were about to cross (*fuck, she was so bad at crossing lines!*), then Darcy chose stubbornly to ignore it. Instead she yelled out to Jane again. "Give me a number! How likely are we about to die?"

"What are you talking about?! Ah!"

Darcy oofed when an energy blast detonated nearby, throwing them off their feet and backward through the air. She grunted as she and Jane hit something, knocking the breath out of them. As she struggled to take in a breath, she looked up at the thing her body had just slammed against; it was a panel van, on the side was a flaming skull, wearing a leather jacket and holding a flaming chain.

*Ugh. So tacky.*

Darcy could taste blood in her mouth. She was going to die. She’d gotten lucky the first two times, but the third time would *not* be the charm. She was terrified, her heart racing, and some small part of her couldn't help but think *this is what you get for trying to hang out with people who are cooler than you.*

She wasn’t supposed to be here, not with Gods or superheroes or super soldiers. She was nothing, just a lab monkey, a person who could only tangentially be connected with the Avengers. Darcy should have known better, she should have learned her lesson the first two times and just become a barista at Starbucks, or some equally as mundane of a job.

*At least Starbucks baristas get health care.*

She coughed, rolling in the dirt, watching as Jane did the same. "Janey..."

Darcy followed Jane’s line of sight, seeing the tears wet on her friend’s cheeks. Jane was looking at the carnage ahead of them, the rolling mass of smoke and lights, looking for any sign of Thor. Darcy could see the hope draining from Jane’s eyes as she realized just how bad everything was. Jane needed a distraction, and that was something Darcy had been called her entire life. *Just a distraction.*

"Jane Foster, what percentage are we looking at? One-hundred? Fifty? Two? Just give me something!" She reached out and pulled on Jane’s hand, rising to her knees. The astrophysicist looked at her, and the terror in Jane’s eyes filled Darcy with a steel resolve. She was not going to let the only real friend she’d ever had feel like all hope was lost.

"I don't know!"

"Jane!" Darcy shook her shoulders harder, gritting her teeth, "give me a damn number!"

"Uh... I don't..." Jane let out a sob, "sixty-two percent!"

Sixty-two percent. If Jane's math was correct (and it always was), there was a sixty-two percent chance that she'd never have another cup of coffee, or pet another dog, or walk aimlessly around Target for hours. She’d never kiss someone who was completely wrong for her but felt *so* right. There were a million things she hadn’t done and had always planned on doing later. Now there
might not be a later and it fucking sucked.

Her hazel eyes glanced upward, watching the fight rage around them. She could make out a few familiar sights in the melee; a glint of crimson and gold (Iron Man), the shine of chrome (That one guy? Someone else?), a blur of green and purple (absolutely no fucking clue), a flash of red, white and blue (Captain Fucking America!).

Darcy almost cried when she saw the spark of lightning in the mix, knowing that it was Thor and knowing, with all her heart, that he and Jane belonged together. Not only did they belong together, but they were supposed to get married and be Asgardian royalty and have super hot giant Norse God babies who she would buy stupid gifts for and teach all about the Seattle grunge rock music scene in the early 90s.

This was all wrong.

They were losing, and she knew it. She could feel it like a weight in the air, like smelling ozone and petrichor before it started raining. They were going to die, despite everything, they were all going to die, and all over some stupid ugly gems? No jewelry was worth this bullshit. Her eyes fell to the glowing stone, watching it strobe in the smoke, like it was waiting for something.

Or someone.

"You know what? Fuck this."

Darcy climbed uneasily to her feet, using the tacky van for support. Moving hurt like a bitch and she clutched at her ribs. She couldn't take a full breath without a stabbing pain. Rib fractures? Probably. She'd never had any so she couldn't say for sure. But she hurt, and was exhausted, and was just so over everything. If this gem was so fucking important, then someone needed to grab it, right? If it was a weapon that could be used to keep people from dying, then it was her duty to help. She didn't have super vision or super strength. She couldn't kill anyone with her bare hands, or shoot webs out of her wrists, or turn into a monster. If the only way she could help was to grab the stone and keep it safe, then that's what she was going to do.

She'd probably come to regret it, but she thought that way about a lot of things she'd done in her life, and they'd all led her here, right here, so maybe it was all for a reason. Fuck, she hoped it was all for a reason.

Darcy took a breath, not all the way in because fucking ow, but looked over to Jane with a pained grin. "Tick your percentage up to a hundred for me, kay?"

Jane had to yell to be heard over the wall of sound. "What?"

"If you have a girl and don't name her after me, I'll come back and haunt your ass!"

Realization dawned on Jane’s face, realizing what her friend was about to do. "Darcy, wait!"

She didn't listen to Jane, didn’t even look back at her, afraid that if she did she’d get too chicken shit and stop. She took a few stumbling steps forward, then broke into an all out run, making a beeline for the glowing stone.

Darcy was stupid, so fucking stupid, but she didn't have any super powers. Maybe this was hers.

Stupidity.

Stupidity on a scale never before seen in this galaxy.
She only had to dodge one wayward blast of some kind (was someone using an honest to Odin Star Wars phaser?!) on her way, skidding in the dirt, sliding like it was home base. Right before her fingers closed around the glowing amber gem, Darcy shut her eyes and threw a prayer into the Universe.

*Please let this matter, David Bowie, wherever you are, please just let this matter.*

Jane screamed at Darcy, terror seizing her chest, arm stretching out as if she could stop her from doing what she knew her friend was about to do. When a blast of orange light erupted from Darcy, Jane threw her arm over her eyes, retinas burning with the negative image of her friend’s body.

Almost, as if a switch had been flipped, the sounds of combat went quiet. A hush fell over the battlefield and everyone, wounded, bloody, and beaten, turned their heads to see the body of a young woman begin to hover above the ground, dark hair swirling and eyes burning with amber light.

Thanos - whose massive hand was wrapped around Captain America’s neck, who was seconds away from victory, who was already grinning in triumph - looked toward the woman and the gem, his face contorting in fury. He threw Steve Rogers’ body aside, taking three large steps before launching himself at her. He was moving impossibly fast, too fast, no way for anyone who was there to intervene or stop him.

The woman’s hand rose, her amber eyes turning to look at the purple-skinned creature. He hung in the air, suspended and frozen, death and destruction on his face. The woman looked at him, staring into his eyes, seemingly weighing him with her gaze. A moment of silence, and then the simple word 'no' formed on her lips. With a scream of rage, Thanos was enveloped in amber, combusting into ash, orange electricity sparking through the air where he’d been seconds before.

No one moved.

No one *breathed*.

Finally, in the silence, the woman smiled softly. "Neat."

Blackness.

There was music playing somewhere, something soft and gentle and muted as if it was coming from another room. Darcy was warm, and calm, and she felt great. Like ‘I’ve just spent a weekend in a day spa being pampered and ‘eating whatever I want because calories don’t count’ great. Had she ever felt this great? She didn’t think so.

“Darcy?”

She frowned. That wasn’t her name. Was it? Hers was older, and in a different language, and she didn’t have the right biology to make the sounds correctly. She tried it for herself, letting the name roll around her tongue. “Daaaaaaarrrrrrrrccccccccccccccy.”

“Darcy, can you hear me?”

No. Well, she *could* hear, but she didn’t want to. She wanted to go back to the spa and the zero-calorie cheesecake, and the strong hands of a masseuse named Claude who was wearing shorts way too small to be legal. Darcy wanted to stay there, adrift on a sea of happiness and fluffy towels. She
didn’t want to leave.

Suddenly, and despite her futile cries of ‘nooooooood’, memories began to flood back into her brain, crashing against her mind like a tsunami.

_Owww, damn it._

She heard her name said again, groaning when she realized she couldn’t hide in her spa any longer. Her voice was rough when it her lips formed the words. “There is no Darcy, ‘s only Zuul.”

When she heard a sob, Darcy carefully squinted open one eye. It was bright, _much too bright_, but she slowly focused on the shapes looking down at her. Jane’s head cleared in her vision, and she saw the tears fresh on her face. She watched Jane, her beautiful best friend Jane, the only person who’d put up with her for more than a month at a time, crying softly against Thor’s chest.

Darcy frowned. She was forgetting something, Or remembering something. Everything seemed so fuzzy. _And too goddamn bright! “Hey, Big Guy, whatdja do?”_ She didn’t like it when Jane cried and if Thor was the one to blame, she’d make it known just _how much_ she didn’t like it.

“Wasn’t him, Freaks and Geeks. What on _Earth_ made you grab that stone?”

That voice was new, she thought, turning her gaze from Thor to Tony Stark. Tony Fucking Stark was standing over her, pinning her with a look. And boy was it A Look. “What stone?”

_“The stone. The stone to end all stones?”_

“Was it a Rolling Stone? Richards, perhaps?” Darcy laughed at herself, but it looked like she was the only one. That was sad, as she thought it was a rather funny joke and deserved at least a chuckle. But maybe jokes just weren’t the Avengers thing, as she watched Stark roll his eyes and take a step away from her.

“We’re not sure how you did it, but you absorbed one of the infinity stones.”

Darcy’s rolled her cheek onto the pillow, grin widening when she saw Steve Rogers, _Captain Freaking America_, sitting at her bedside. “I know you. You punched Hitler.” He was dirty, and bloody, and Darcy knew vaguely that it was weird to find that attractive, but _damn_ did he look good.

The small grin he gave her comment made her chest flutter all funny. But when the flutter continued and started getting worse, she realized that maybe it _wasn’t_ just the hunky blond who was looking at her. Nope definitely felt like she was going to erupt. _Erupt?!_

“Wha…”

Darcy sat up suddenly, hearing several chairs screech across the floor as their occupants scrambled backward from her. Her hands were crackling with orange energy. Not lightning, not electricity, but swirls of brilliant amber light. It was almost like smoke, she was able to wave her fingers through it, leaving it spinning in tendrils. For the first time since waking, she felt the stirrings of fear. “That’s… new. What happened to me?”

“Uh, We’re still not sure,” a man with rumpled clothes said as he came closer, pulling his glasses off and scrutinizing her hands. “We need to run tests, see if you’ve had changes at a cellular level. If something in your DNA’s been altered, we could use the information to determine what kind of abilities to expect.”

“Abilities?” Darcy’s eyes widened and she looked over at Jane, her voice rising an octave. “Am I
going to die?”

Jane started to take a step toward her, but Darcy watched Thor place a hand on her elbow, holding her back. She seemed to think better of moving, giving Darcy a small smile, tone encouraging. “No, Darce, no, of course not. You’re going to be fine.”

At Jane’s words, it was like a kaleidoscope flashed over Darcy’s vision. Everything went black, but she could see blobs of colors where people had just stood. Where Jane had been there was a pretty purple, like lilacs, like the pastel plastic Easter Eggs she’d been forced to be excited about as a kid. But as Darcy watched, the purple flashed an angry red color. She wasn’t sure how she knew, but she knew Jane wasn’t telling the truth.

“You’re lying,” Darcy said, shaking her head, “you don’t know if I’m going to be alright.”

“There’s a lot we’re not sure of,” Steve said. Darcy turned her head to where he’d been sitting beside her. “We just want to make sure you’re somewhere safe. Then we can work together on figuring out what happened.”

Steve Rogers glowed a brilliant gold, but there was a vein of cobalt in that gold, pretty and shiny. Beautiful and honest. It took a shake of her head for the colors to dissipate and it left her feeling a bit dizzy. From what she’d seen, he really did believe they were going to be able to help her. Or at least he was lying to himself about it. Either way, she was glad for the heavy optimism he seemed to maintain.

“Did we at least take down Ivan Ooze Guy?” Darcy looked between them when they said nothing. They were all looking at her oddly, like they had no idea what she was talking about, and it pulled her lips into a frown. “Ivan Ooze? Bad purple oozey guy from the Power Rangers movie? Come on, nobody?”

Thor grinned down at her, realizing what she’d been asking. “It was not us, Lady Darcy, but you. You defeated Thanos, The Mad Titan, in single combat.”

She looked up at the god suspiciously. She thought she ought to remember killing someone who had their own tagline. Mad Titan? Really? How fucking pretentious. Even now, knowing she’d be able to tell if he was lying, she still didn’t believe him. “Bullshit,” she breathed, waiting for one of them to laugh and tell her what’d really happened.

“It’s true.” Her gaze swung to Stark, who was gesturing as if he was going to pluck the explanation from the air, annoyed that he was having to validate it in the first place. “It’s ridiculous and outside the realm of anything remotely possible, but it’s true.”

Darcy looked at Jane, and Thor, and the man with glasses, and the delicious blond specimen at her side, but they were all giving her the same look. She’d done it. She’d actually done it. She’d put the call into the universe and David Bowie had made her the Babe with The Power!

“Well then. Score one for Team Stupid!” Darcy said, throwing her still-glowing hands in the air. From behind the group gathered she heard what sounded suspiciously like a snort. As she’d had yet to make anyone laugh, she found herself interested in who she’d broken first. She leaned to her left (putting her closer to Captain America who smelled like freedom and never having to pay taxes again) so she could see around Stark.

The man was leaning against the wall, legs crossed at the ankles, hiding the laugh he’d just made behind his metal hand. His hair was dark and hung around his shoulders. The tactical gear he was wearing seemed like it had far too many latches and buckles than was necessary, and as she blinked
at him, the blackness stole her vision again and she was able to see him in hues.

“Whoooooaaaah.”

He was a swirl of crimson, of blood, like life concentrated down into a color. Around all that red, on the edges and almost looking like it’d been burned, was the color of charcoal and ash. But even under that was a vein of brilliant cobalt, a perfect match for the blue running through Captain America, too.

“So pretty.” The man wasn’t hard to look at, either, to be honest. Not man, she thought to herself, that’s the Winter Soldier. She recognized him from the news, and though he looked a bit too dour for her tastes, she was able to appreciate a man who could give a good ‘brood’. She shook her head - dizzzzy - until her vision cleared and she was left looking at everyone, whole and pure and not colored with crayons.

The entire room’s eyebrows knit together and followed her line of sight, casting a backward glance at the man. Darcy watched the soldier realize everyone was looking at him, pushing off the wall. For what it was worth, she thought he acted entirely appropriately when his jaw clenched, he glared at everyone, then swiftly exited the room. The eyes in the room turned back to her, the range of expressions from mild amusement to outright befuddlement.

She shrugged her shoulders at them. “He’s pretty. I mean, I’m seeing colors. Pretty colors.” She gestured with her hands toward the slowly closing door. “Swirling around. He had a lot of pretty colors. Seeing colors isn’t normal, right? That’s a bad sign?”

Everyone seemed to share a look that she didn’t understand, but it seemed like there was a metric fuck ton of stuff she wasn’t grasping just yet. Like the fact that she could see fucking colors and had killed someone.

“Bruce and Tony will have a look, and we’ll go from there. We’ll figure this out, I promise.” Steve Rogers was radiating comfort and Darcy drank it in, letting her eyes linger on the blue of his eyes, a color she’d be a-okay with seeing all the time.

“Well, you are the man with the plan,” Darcy said, giving him a mock salute. The wry grin he flashed her way made her smile widen. Sweet Jeezie Creezie I made Captain America grin!

As he stood and turned away from her, she threw a thumbs up sign at Jane, nodding her head in the direction of the Captain’s retreating form. As if to say ‘Did you see that? Did you just witness that poetry in motion? It was like the first time listening to The Beatles!’

Her thumb was still lightly glowing.

Jane took a step closer to the bed she was laid out on, mouth turning downward as she looked at Darcy with worry in her whiskey-colored eyes. “Maybe you don’t touch anyone until we get this figured out?”

Darcy made a small groan of disappointment but smiled when Jane raised an eyebrow at her. “Fine, yes. Hands-off the Captain. Got it.”

Soon enough it was just Jane and Thor left in the little medical room, and Darcy shifted under the weight of their gazes. “Okay, the rest of the famous people are gone. Tell me what actually happened.” She saw the look of confusion on their faces. “I mean, yeah, I grabbed the stone and, presto, I ended up killing the purple guy. But after that?”

Carefully, Jane sat on the edge of the bed, making sure there was space between their bodies. “After
you collapsed, everyone stopped fighting. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents took Thanos’ minions away. We couldn’t seem to wake you, so we brought you here.”

“And here is…”

“The Avengers compound in upstate New York.”

Darcy’s eyebrows raised. “How’d I get here?”

“The Vision transported you safely. He was very gentle with your body.”

Frowning at the visual Thor’s words brought, Darcy shook her head. “Okay. How long -”

“The entire trip here. Then another 2 hours.” Jane lifted her hand like she wanted to squeeze Darcy’s shoulder, or throw her arms around her, or something so she knew her friend was actually alright, but she stopped herself. “I was so worried. Why? Why did you grab that stone?”

Darcy opened her mouth to tell her it had been the right thing to do, that she’d just wanted to help, that she could see they were all about to die and it had terrified her to the core, but she couldn’t. She would have to unpack that whole list some other time. “I don’t know,” Darcy said finally, knowing from Jane’s face that her friend didn’t believe her in the slightest.

“It was one of the bravest things I’ve ever witnessed,” Thor said, his golden retriever like smile drawing one of her own. “And the stupidest. Stupid but mighty.”

“Could you please get that printed on a coffee mug? Or a t-shirt?” Darcy watched Jane stand up with a roll of her eyes, glad to have taken the deep worry from her friend’s face, if only for a little while. “So what happens now?”

“I think right now you get some more rest, and then we start running tests, figure out what happened and how to fix you.”

Darcy frowned. “Fix me?”

Jane turned and gave her a pained expression. “That came out wrong. I don’t mean fix. I mean…well, I don’t know what I mean, actually. If this is something that can be reversed, maybe that’s what needs done. If it’s not something that can be reversed, we need to make sure it’s not going to hurt you. If it’s something permanent and you start showing abilities other than your…"

“Kaleidoscope eyes?” she offered.

“… retinal synesthesia,” Jane said, mouth pursing, “then we find out the full breadth of your abilities.”

Darcy had no idea what Jane was talking about, but she nodded her head like she did. “Okay. Sleep. Here? I have to sleep here?”

“… the others expressed concerns about having you travel outside the medical area.”

That had to have been the nicest way anyone had ever been told people were scared of them, and Darcy was grateful for the gentle way Thor was handling her. Not that she was going to break, but being told ‘we’re keeping you locked up because you freak us the fuck out’ probably wouldn’t help keep her as calm.

“Okay. Is it… our place? My clothes?”
Darcy could see it in Jane’s face. All their stuff was gone. She should have known better than to keep anything more than what could fit in a suitcase. It’s how she’d grown up, shuffling from foster home to foster home, but she’d gotten too comfortable with Jane, and the steady work, and the staying in one place for longer than six months.

“Well can I get something else to wear? I think these jeans have seen better days.” Finally taking a moment to look at herself, Darcy was well aware that the clothes she currently had on were toast. Covered in dirt and grime. Parts of them burned and ashy, others as if they’d been charred by fire. Other than a slight headache, and some soreness around her ribs, she felt relatively healthy physically.

“I keep a few pieces here in the occasion I cannot return to Asgard. I can gather some for you. They will likely be too large -”

“Yes. Please. Thor clothes would be lovely. Thanks.” Darcy wasn’t sure why, but wearing a shirt that smelled like the large blond sounded like heaven, like a security blanket she could wrap herself in. “And then we can go and get me more later?” She looked at Jane, her hope fading at the look in her friend’s eyes. “Fine. I stay here. You get me stuff. But stuff I’ll like. None of your L.L.Bean ‘I’m emulating an eighty-year-old woman’ thing you wear so well.”

The flash of annoyance on Jane’s face settled something in Darcy. At least some things hadn’t changed.

“What do you think?”

Bruce removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I think that she’s lucky to be alive. If what Quill said is true, then she shouldn’t have been able to survive touching the stone. He watched one of the stones turn a person to ash when they touched it, just like it did to Thanos.”

“No,” Tony said, arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head, “the stone didn’t destroy Thanos. She did. He didn’t even get a chance to touch the stone. She destroyed him.”

“But that opens the possibilities that she might be dangerous. Is it safe to keep her here?”

Sighing, Bruce slipped his glasses back on, giving Steve an uncertain expression. “Um, the short answer? I don’t know. The long answer? We’ll have to run tests. I don’t even know what tests to run, so we’ll do them all”

“And if she is dangerous?”

Steve’s blue gaze slipped to Bucky. He hadn’t joined their circle, content to stay on the fringe, wanting to hear everything but not wanting to participate. That he’d asked a question at all was surprising. “Then we figure out a way to handle it.”

“Handle it? And what exactly would that entail?”

Sighing, Steve turned toward Tony as he answered. “I don’t want to argue, Tony.”

“This isn’t arguing. This is a discussion. That girl in there saved our asses. You saw how close he
was to taking *everything*. That you’re even *walking* right now is a fucking miracle. There will be no ‘handling’ here. There will be science, and science will be the one figuring this one out, not your weapon.”

Steve could feel Bucky bristle at Tony’s words. There’d been a truce of sorts between the billionaire and his best friend. Defeat Thanos, using *everyone* they had. The Earth and everything on it was at stake. He knew better than to hope that the line they’d been toeing would stay status quo.

“I am not a weapon,” Bucky growled, grey eyes holding Tony’s, refusing to back down. Steve held his breath, not sure if he was going to have to step in.

Tony’s jaw ticked, Steve could almost hear him grinding his teeth, but he turned back to Steve. “She needs to stay in the med ward. The less people know about her, the better. You should radio Barton, make sure when they land in Wakanda that they know to keep it hush.”

Steve nodded, stepping aside so Tony could leave. Bruce reached up and patted Steve’s shoulder as he passed, and he had to wonder if that was some kind of unofficial apology for Tony’s behavior. Steve understood, but it did little to help ease the situation. It was fraught, and messy, and some days it was easier than others.

At least Tony hadn’t argued against Bucky staying here, or going on missions, or being in the same room. But that weight was always there and Steve felt it on his shoulders, as he did with almost everything.

Sighing, he turned toward the only other person in the room, holding his hand out toward Bucky. He watched those slate eyes he knew so well soften, no longer on edge or readying for a battle. Bucky took his hand and Steve pulled the other man against his chest, taking solace as he wrapped his arms around him. “I didn’t think we’d be able to pull it off.”

“Almost didn’t,” Bucky mumbled against Steve’s neck. He took a deep breath - cedar and musk and *Steve* - and pulled back so he could press his lips to Steve’s, soft, softer than he did almost anything else. “Seeing that hand wrapped around your throat…”

Steve nodded, the memory of that moment washing over him again. He’d seen death over and over, but looking in Thanos’ eyes was like looking the reaper in the face. He’d begun to say his goodbyes in his head, and then there’d been a blast and he’d been tossed aside, like a rag doll, like he was inconsequential, like it was all just a game.

He supposed it *was* to Thanos, just another game where he already knew the outcome and was just going through the motions.

But he’d lost. By some miracle that none of them understood yet, Thanos had lost and they’d won the day.

Steve pulled Bucky toward him again, the press of his lips familiar and comforting, sighing against the other man’s mouth as the exhaustion began to set in. “I might sleep for a week,” he whispered against Bucky’s lips, not ready to pull back just yet.

“Liar,” came the gravelly response, and Steve smiled at the affection in Bucky’s tone.

“Gotta call Barton. Make sure the team knows that our savior is alive and well.”

“Nat?”

“Just along for the ride. Sam and Wanda are going to stay, help T’Challa.” Bucky nodded, taking a
step back, and Steve watched as some of the guard returned to his eyes, the look he carried when it wasn’t just them. This was a Bucky no one else got to see. All they saw was the soldier, but Steve knew he was so much more.

Steve took a moment to look at Bucky, just drinking him in, knowing that they’d survived. Against all the odds, his goodbyes had faded into nothing, unsaid and unneeded. He was grateful, thankful. He smiled and started for the door.

“Steve?”

He stopped and turned to look at Bucky. There was something in the other man’s voice that he couldn’t place. “Yeah?”

“What do we do if she is dangerous?”

There was a long silence. It was ended by Steve’s voice, uncertain and tired. “I don’t know, Buck. I don’t know.”
Slip

Chapter Summary

While Darcy tries to make heads and tails about her new abilities, Steve and Bucky struggle with how much they should be helping.

Chapter Notes

I had meant to post this Thursday (as my plan was to post every Thursday, like a little present before Friday!) but I had a crappy day at work and wanted to put something good out there into the universe.

Also, you guys have no clue how overwhelming the positive responses to this have made me feel. Amazing. Awesome. Other words that start with an 'A'. Seriously. Bowled. Me. Over.

<3

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s the matter?
You don’t have enough rain to make up your storm?
Oooh whatcha look so sad for?
Where’s the light I used to know?
Oh it’s gonna slip, slip, slip through your
Slip, slip, slip through your hands.”
– Slip, Elliot Moss

When Bruce Banner had said he was going to run tests, Darcy had expected normal things. X-Rays. MRIs. CT scans. Lots of other medical buzzwords she’d heard while watching reruns of Grey’s Anatomy. Somehow she hadn’t realized how many tests there were out there. She’d been poked, and prodded, and shoved in boxes that made banging noises, and then more blood had been taken.

She’d tried to draw the line at giving a stool and urine sample, but after some heavy glares from Jane, she’d acquiesced.

After three days of sitting around, punctuated by the occasional nap and yet another vial of her blood
being taken, she was sitting on the horrible uncomfortable cot, feet swinging, as people filed into the room. Darcy recognized them all, even if she hadn’t actually talked to any of them.

Bruce Banner aka ‘I get angry and turn green and smash things for fun’ guy.

Tony Stark, a sarcastic asshole who was slowly growing on her.

Steve Rogers, Mr. Apple Pie himself.

Bucky Barnes, (previous?) assassin and the Captain’s best friend.

Jane and Thor were standing nearby, though they’d been careful to keep their distance. In fact, through the whole battery of tests that had been done on her, she’d not come in physical contact with anyone. It’s not like she was normally getting felt up by people all day long, but now that she’d realized it, she realized how horrible she felt about it. Was this how it was going to be all the time? Had Jane really been the last person she’d ever touch?

Fuck, that’s pretty fucking pathetic.

Darcy tried not to react when she cast glances around the room at everyone. Bruce and Tony looked like they were here for the science, as was Jane. Thor was smiling at her softly, but that seemed pretty normal. While others had ‘Resting Bitch Face’, the Norse god had ‘I’m Really Handsome and People Like Me’ face.

Steve had taken a seat at the small table, gaze flicking up to look at the screens as Tony and Bruce arranged them so everyone could see. She supposed it should feel weird, knowing that that was her brain and body up on the screens, but she was doing a nice job of detaching herself, just enough so she didn’t start freaking out. Darcy wasn’t sure what to expect, wondering if they’d called everyone in on purpose, or if everyone had just wanted to hear it and piled into the room with morbid fascination.

Of all the people in the room, the only one that really put her on edge was the man behind Steve. Something about his grey eyes seemed tense, like he was waiting for something to happen. Was something going to happen? She had no fucking clue.

Bruce turned and gave a twitch of a smile. He started without preamble. “We’ve run every test we could think of, and as far as her body is concerned, Ms. Lewis is a healthy 29-year-old. Her blood pressure is normal, every scan came back negative for any abnormal bodily fluctuation, she runs a steady 98.3 degrees and does not appear to have any latent health anomalies.”

“But yes,” Tony said, a satisfied smile on his face. “And that little bit, right there? That bit shouldn’t be there.”

Jane took another step toward the tech, eyes pouring over the image. “You’re suggesting she has
“Yes. Something extra. Something else.” Tony closed the triangle, leaving him, Bruce and Jane with their backs to the rest of the room. Darcy needed to get friends who weren’t huge science nerds, as not understanding what they were talking about was pretty annoying.

“It’s fascinating. Not only is it a genetic anomaly, it appears that it was passed down on her maternal side.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve said, the eyes in the room turning toward him, “maybe I’m misunderstanding, but are you saying that her DNA is different than ours?” He watched Bruce’s chin dip slightly. “Or different than most of ours?”

Bruce nodded. “There is a marked difference between our genes and Ms. Lewis’ genes.”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose toward her hairline and her feet stopped swinging, their conversation finally making all the connections in her brain. “Whoa whoa whoa. Slow down. Pump the breaks. You’re saying I have alien DNA? That’s so fucking messed up!”

Tony pointed in her direction. “Nobody said alien.”

She cocked her head to the side as her eyes narrowed slightly at Tony. “Somebody said alien.”

“Nobody said alien.”

Darcy held her slightly glowing hands in front of her, eyes wide and innocent as she looked at him. “Fine, jeez, no one said alien. But no one said human either.” She turned to Bruce, who was still looking at whatever part of her body was currently displayed in the projection hovering in the air. “So what’s the what, doc? Give it to me straight.”

“As I’ve said, Ms. Lewis -”

She gave him a look. He’d been sticking needles in her for days now, and she’d reminded him over and over that he could use her first name. “Call me Darcy, please. Ms. Lewis was an egg donor who apparently birthed an alien!”

She smirked to herself when Tony threw up his hands and turned his back in frustration. She saw Jane roll her eyes in her peripheral vision; Darcy’d always been good at pushing people’s buttons, it wasn’t her fault that Tony Stark had so many. She could see him start bleeding colors, but shook her head. Not now, synthesizer colors, or whatever it was Jane called you!

Steve’s eyes flicked down toward the floor, doing his best to hide his smile behind his hand. He’d been known to get under Tony’s skin from time to time, but he’d done his best not to outright bait the man. It seemed like Darcy hadn’t learned that lesson yet. Or, she was enjoying it and doing it on purpose. Either way, he was amused.

Bruce cleared his throat and Darcy’s hazel eyes swung back to him. “Your DNA is different than a full human’s, yes, but the term ‘alien’ means something not of this earth and you are of this earth. You’re just not fully human. And it seems that’s why you were able to absorb the gem.”

Darcy blinked at Bruce, uncertain what he meant. “So I’m… what? Some sorta freak of nature?”

“A mutant,” Jane said, a bit too happily. Darcy glared at her friend and Jane had the grace to give her a guilty smile, “but a nice one?”
Darcy frowned at the astrophysicist. As if she needed another reason to feel self-conscious. “No one likes being called a mutant.”

“There are worse things to be called.”

Bucky hadn’t meant to comment out loud, and he bristled when the eyes in the room turned toward him. He pushed off the wall, keeping his arms crossed over his chest. Steve gave him a small smile, but Bucky turned his attention to the subject in question. She was staring at him with an odd look on her face, like she was looking through him.

Once again the man with the metal arm, with all his dark swirling colors, became the focus of the attention in the room, and Darcy watched everyone light up as they looked at him. Almost everyone was filtered a light brown and, somehow, she knew that that meant. They were inquisitive, or questioning. Tony Stark was bathed in a sea of black as he regarded the other man (interesting). Steve Rogers, who had been sitting quietly in front of Barnes and looking unnecessarily hot (in her opinion), continued with his brilliant gold glow, a heavy line of cobalt connecting the two men.

Darcy tried to digest what Bruce had said about her: she had some kind of mutation in her DNA (not alien) and that’s why she hadn’t turned crispy after grabbing the stone. It didn’t really explain why she was seeing colors, or if she could expect any other surprise powers down the road. And really, the only man who would know anything was standing to her right. She shook her head, the colors bleeding from her vision until she was looking up at Thor.

“Thor, Big Guy, help me out.” Darcy turned to the Norse god, her eyes imploring him for some good news. “What’s the what? This gem? What’s it do?”

“It’s the Soul gem,” he offered, giving her a tight smile, “arguably the most powerful of the infinity stones. The ability to see souls, to steal them, to trap them.” Thor frowned, looking like he didn’t want to explain further. At Darcy’s look, he continued. “To have the soul gem is to control souls. Or, depending upon the wielder, destroy them.”

Darcy looked up at Thor, into his blue golden retriever eyes, and was struck dumb. She tried repeating his words over, letting them roll around in her head, trying to make them make sense. But it was impossible.

_Control souls? Trap souls? Destroy souls!? No. Fuck. No. No no no! That’s not... It wasn’t possible... she couldn’t..._

Bucky could see it as it happened. He watched her eyes widen, her pupils dilate. Her skin flushed, and her full lips parted as her breath sped up. He pushed off the wall, tensing. He knew what came next.

Her heart started to thunder in her ears and she felt her skin break into a cold sweat. The room was spinning and her tongue was suddenly too big for her mouth, she couldn’t swallow around it. Darcy couldn’t catch her breath, her hands convulsing into fists in the thin medical-grade blanket beneath her as she reeled and cartwheeled closer to the edge.

This is too much, this is all too much. I just wanted to save everyone. I can’t handle this. I don’t want this. “Fuck, I’m gonna be sick.”

Bucky watched her swallow hard, voice sounding dry. His grey eyes flicked from face to face. The scientist that was attached to the woman’s side reached for her, but Thor pulled her back. No one appeared to have any plan on how to actually help her, but he waited, watching her face, watching her eyes begin to roll back into her head.
“We should -”

“No! Don’t touch her! We don’t know -”

“We can’t just let her -”

Still, nobody moved toward her. Bucky took a deep breath, his muscles tensing. She was going to pass out, possibly hurt herself, and they were all just standing there, arguing what to do. Steve glanced over at him, almost as if he knew what he was about to do.

“Hey. Hey! Don’t -”

Bucky pushed past Thor and knelt in front of the raven-haired woman. She was looking at him but he knew she didn’t see her. The fingers of his prosthetic flexed in the air before he pressed his palm against the center of her chest. It almost spanned the width from clavicle to clavicle and he pushed, hard enough for it to pull her out of the tailspin.

Darcy blinked, her vision in dizzying colored streamers that seemed to bleed and tumble together. Black spots danced at the edge of her vision, growing bigger and bigger. She was going to get lost in all that inky blackness, and part of her knew it would be bad, losing and giving in to the darkness, but she didn’t know how to fight it.

Then, through everything, she felt a firm hand press against her sternum. “I’m gonna pass out,” she groaned, head swaying slightly.

Bucky pressed harder. He hadn’t been turned to ash like Thanos by touching her, so that was something. Nobody was yelling at him anymore, either. Her eyes had gone amber, and he stared into their glow. “No, you’re having a panic attack.”

A panic attack. She could pull and destroy souls at will. That deserved a little panic. A lot of panic. It deserved all the panic. “Is a bad one.”

“Breathe. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Do it. In through your nose.”

Darcy shook her head, swallowing hard, eyes closed. “Can’t. Too much, ’s too much. I’m not -”

Bucky pressed again, more weight, more pressure. “Doesn’t matter what you are, matters what you do. And right now you need to take a breath in through your nose and push it out your mouth.”

It took her another moment before she could comply, but finally Darcy was able to suck a deep breath in through her nose and let it out through her mouth, lips shaking with the effort. Tears had started to leak at the corners of her eyes and she felt them slide free, hot and itchy on her skin. The hand that was pressed to her chest moved so it was gripping her shoulder.

Strong.

Safe.

An anchor.

Bucky felt her chest rising and falling under his hand, her shoulders shaking, chin trembling. “Do it again. In. Out. Again.” He stayed there, kneeling in front of her, hand on her shoulder, able to see the amber still glowing behind her eyelids when they closed.

As she sat there, eyes screwed shut, focusing on her breathing and following the man’s commands,
Darcy was certain she’d never done anything this monumentally stupid. She knew she could be a bit impulsive but this was on a whole new level. If she’d have known what would happen when she touched that stone, would she have?


Not knowing how much time had passed while she’d made an embarrassment of herself, Darcy opened her eyes, only seeing colors but knowing who was there before she saw his face. Eventually the swirl of hues faded and she was left looking into Barnes’ blue-grey eyes. His face was only inches away, just an arm's length between them. Maybe Jane wouldn’t be the last person that’d ever touch her. Goody. “You probably shouldn't touch me, soldier.”

Bucky watched as she refilled her eyes, the sarcastic tone and attitude he’d pegged as her ‘normal’ mode returning. He pulled his hand from her shoulder, flexing the metal fingers where she could see them. “Figured I was pretty safe, all things considered.”

The laugh that broke free from her chest was breathless, and Darcy was happy she hadn’t embarrassed herself any further by vomiting or fainting. She tore her gaze from Barnes' face (his eyes gave Steve’s a run for the money) and looked over his shoulder. Steve Rogers, the man whose blue eyes she’d just been comparing Barnes’ to, was standing just behind him, worry and concern in his eyes. Not for her, she realized, but for the man who’d touched her.

And yet, Barnes’d touched her. Even when everyone had warned him not to.

Smiling softly, Darcy let out a shaky breath, gaze flicking to Barnes’ face once more. “You thinking of signing up for Team Stupid? We have a few openings.”

Steve let out the breath he’d be holding. He knew now that Bucky hadn’t been in any real danger, only touching Darcy with his prosthetic, but when Bucky had darted forward, Steve’s heart had stopped in his chest. He’d been less than three seconds from jumping forward himself, but watching Bucky get there first and not knowing if it was safe had been terrifying.

“Are you kidding?” Steve said, reaching out to squeeze Bucky’s shoulder. “The jerk’s been training his whole life for that unit.”

Darcy looked up at Steve’s words, watching as he squeezed Barnes’ shoulder with familiarity and warmth, the worry softening in his eyes, his lips turning up in an amused grin. She got it, now, the cobalt that ran between Barnes and Steve. She smiled as she watched them interact with each other.

Bucky stood when he was sure her pulse had slowed and her breathing had returned to normal. He looked over at Steve, able to watch the last bit of tension drain from the blond’s eyes. “After you, punk.”

Darcy watched their interplay with curiosity, their colors swirling and mixing. Finally, when she was just about to get dizzy again, she smiled and waved her hand at both of them. “Alright, alright. Stop fighting over me. You’ve both made the team.”

She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw the tiniest hint of a grin ghost onto Bucky’s lips. She knew there were better ways to put it, but as she looked up at the both of them, light and dark, crimson and gold, the only phrase that came to mind was ‘stupid hot’.

“Hey, your hands aren’t glowing anymore.”

Darcy blinked, her attention pulled from the men in front of her, directing her eyes toward Jane. “Huh?” She held her hands in front of her. Gone was the orange glow just beneath her pale skin.
“Well, will you look at that.”

Bruce cleared his throat, nodding toward Darcy as Bucky and Steve took a step back. “Maybe you get some rest and we start again tomorrow?”

She could already feel the exhaustion setting into her bones, her eyelids feeling like hundred-pound weights. Passing out sounded like a great plan. She held up a hand and pointed in Bruce’s direction. “Yes. That.”

Technically they were already in her bedroom, and she didn’t really have the energy to stay vertical until they all left. Darcy laid back on the cot, still an uncomfortable little bitch of furniture, but being exactly what she needed.

Jane and Thor crossed the room and stood next to Bruce, the three of them having a hushed conversation. Bucky turned and left the room, feeling Steve at his back. There was a third set of footsteps behind them, though, and Bucky knew who it was before he’d opened his mouth.

“What the hell was that?”

Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he turned around to see a very angry Tony Stark stalking toward them. “Tony -”

“We don’t know what she can do yet! Less than a week ago she killed what was supposedly the most evil creature in the galaxy and you just grab her without thinking?”

Bucky’s face was a mask, not raising his voice to match Tony’s. “I did think. She was going to pass out. Someone had to do something.”

“She was in the med ward. If we’d needed to, we’d have sedated her.”

“I helped her,” Bucky said, a bit more forcefully.

“And she could have killed you!”

Steve listened as Tony’s shout echoed up and down the hallway. He waited for Tony to speak again, but it appeared that he’d surprised even himself.

“Isn’t that what you want?” Bucky could feel when Steve’s eyes flicked to look at him. Bucky was being careful, keeping any emotion out of his face, out of his voice. He watched a wave of emotions flow behind Tony’s eyes, the man opening his mouth several times only to close it, a war of ideas battling in his head.

“Barnes, If you’re jonesing to play chicken when the grim reaper, be my guest, but don’t put your death on her,” Tony spat, hand gesturing at the door to the medical ward. “If she’d have killed you, how do you think that’d make her feel? ‘Not peachy’ is my guess. Maybe next time you keep your metal hand to yourself.”

He left them in the hallway. The silence felt heavy, and Steve could practically hear Bucky’s mind whirling with thoughts. “Buck -”

“Steve…” Bucky sighed, shaking his head. “Just leave it.”

“Leave it?” Steve sped up until he was walking side by side with Bucky, not sure where they were headed, but not willing to just drop it. “Tony’s right. She could have killed you.”
“You don’t know that.”

“And you don’t know she couldn’t. Why? Why risk it?” He lowered his voice as they passed a few people milling in the halls. They looked up at the two of them and suddenly had somewhere to be, all but scurrying out of sight.

Bucky didn’t want to do this here. There were too many people looking in their direction and there was already enough talk about the two of them among the staff and soldiers. Steve didn’t seem to want to let it go, though, so Bucky lowered his voice, knowing the blond’s hearing was sharp enough to make out the words.

“We work with a lot of people who could hurt someone. Banner. Vision. Wanda. Just because they could doesn’t mean they will.”

“Yes, but most of them have a handle on their abilities. She’s new. We have no idea what to expect.”

They rounded a corner, almost running into a man holding a stack of paper. Bucky stopped him with a hand on his arm, and he watched at the man’s eyes widened in surprise, and the tiniest bit in fear. “Oh, Jesus, I’m sorry. I’ll just…”

Bucky stepped around him with a frown, heading toward the elevators. He pressed the button and crossed his arms over his chest. Steve stood next to him, silent for a moment. The ‘ding’ of the elevator was pleasant and Bucky was glad that the car was empty. As the door hushed closed, he counted in his head. One. Two. Thr-

He smiled softly when Steve started speaking again, just like he knew he would.

“What Thor said, about the stone’s power... we really don’t know enough. I just don’t like the idea of you getting hurt.” When Bucky’s eyes swung over to look at him, Steve could see the disbelief in his eyes. “I know. Come on, Bucky, you know what I mean.”

The elevator doors opened and it only took a few steps to reach their room. Bucky lifted his right hand and pressed his thumb to the lock. He heard it turn over with a metallic click, pushing inside. The room was neat, modern, but the few personal touches made it feel more like a home. A threadbare quilt thrown over the bed. A still life Steve had drawn hung on a wall. A picture of the two of them before the war, obviously taken out of a history book, next to a compass with a picture of Peggy Carter displayed inside.

Bucky crossed to the large armoire and opened it, display racks carefully arranged inside. He slowly started removing the weapons that were covering his body.

Steve watched him remove knife after knife from his person, treating each one carefully, almost lovingly. It was sweet, and he’d have told Bucky as much but he didn’t feel like being glared at anymore than he already was. “I’m just saying we need to take it slow. For her sake, too. I don’t want to push her too much too quick.”

“All I did was make it so she didn’t pass out,” Bucky finally said, resignation in his voice as he turned toward Steve. “I would have done it for anyone.” At Steve’s look, a smirk climbed onto Bucky’s lips. “Almost anyone.”

Steve rolled his eyes, sitting on the edge of their bed, his hand running over the patchwork of the quilt. “Would you have? If it was someone else?” He didn’t look up at Bucky right away, not sure he wanted to show what was running through his head. He’d known, growing up, what kind of woman Bucky preferred. Steve himself shared most of the same preferences. Curvy, dark hair, full lips. It hadn’t gone unnoticed that Darcy Lewis ticked a lot of the boxes they both found mutually attractive.
“Steve…” Bucky watched as Steve sighed then finally flicked those blue eyes toward him. He didn’t like the uncertainty in his lover’s gaze. He crossed the floor and stood in front of Steve, resting both of his hands on the blond’s shoulders. “She reminds me of you, alright? Sarcastic. Witty. More than happy to do something stupid if she thinks it’s the right thing to do. A little punk, just like you.”

Lifting his hands, Steve pulled Bucky closer by his hips, looking up at Bucky through his lashes. “It was brave, what you did.”

Bucky smirked down at him, shaking his head. He knocked against Steve’s chin with his finger, angling his mouth until their lips pressed together, soft and sweet. His voice was a whisper against Steve’s mouth. “If you think I didn’t see your muscles tensing to do the exact same thing, think again.” Bucky took a step back, giving Steve a knowing smirk.

Steve was left on the bed, looking at Bucky, trying his best not to look too guilty. “I wasn’t sure if I was.”

“Yes, you were.”

Sighing, Steve couldn’t help the rueful smile that he shot toward Bucky. “Yeah, I was.”

“See? What did I say? Willing to do stupid things.” Bucky grabbed the hem of his shirt and lifted it over his head.

He watched as Steve’s eyes focused on him, his face losing the humor and filling with heat. He took his time, moving slow, feeling Steve’s eyes on his body as he slowly removed the rest of his weapons and holsters, until he was left standing there in only red boxer briefs.

“I’m going to take a shower. If you’re ready to do something smart, you could join me.”

Steve stood, lips slanting as he looked at his lover, the long lines of his body, the planes of his stomach, knowing the dips and curves intimately. “Not sure if I know how to be smart.”

Bucky lost the boxers in one motion, smirking as Steve’s pupils dilated and his lips parted. He took a step forward, reaching out to tug Steve toward him. “I can teach you.”

“Wake up, Buttercup.”

Darcy groaned, shoving her face further into the pillow. “Nnghhgg.” When the cot started rocking back and forth, she reached out blindly with her arm toward the person who was disrupting her sleep.

“Fine, if you don’t want someone delivering you breakfast in bed…”

At the mention of food, Darcy’s stomach growled angrily, reminding her that she hadn’t really eaten anything in the last few days because of the tests they’d been running and the whole *can destroy souls* thing stealing what appetite she’d had. Apparently she’d gotten her taste for food back, though, and she pushed her curls back from her head as she squinted at Tony and the tray he held. “Don’t you have robots that could do that?”

“Oh, them?” Tony glanced over his shoulder at the robots in question. Dum-E and U were looking in their direction and made sounds of alertness. “Don’t let them fool you. They’re pretty useless.”
Darcy frowned as she sat up. “Then why do you keep them?”

“Because they’re my…” Darcy watched him pause, trying to come up with an adjective that described them. She’d almost thought he was about to say ‘friends’ but she couldn’t be sure. “They’re mine, and I made them, and they’ve earned it. Forget about them. Eat.”

She grabbed the tray when he held it out, setting it in her lap as he grabbed a stool and wheeled himself beside the bed. “PB&J?”

Tony shrugged, “figured if you had a nut allergy we’d have seen it pop up during the tests. You saying it’s not good? Don’t eat it then.”

Darcy growled and held onto it tightly when he feigned like he was going to take it back. “Hey! It’s fine. Just asking.” She bit into the sandwich, surprised to find he’d use peach preserves instead of the traditional grape, but she was more than happy she had food of any kind. “Mohrr tesths?” Tony wheeled back with a frown, grabbing a glass of milk he’d left on the table and holding it out to her.

“Maybe this time with less peanut butter?”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy washed down the bite, tongue clicking after she’d swallowed. “I asked if you still have some more tests to run.”

“Yeah. We just want to cover all our bases. Literally. This is our base of operations and we’d appreciated you not destroying it, if possible.”

“It’s not on my to-do list at this moment.”

Tony leaned forward, stealing a potato chip from her plate and popping it in his mouth, ignoring her glare. “Pretty sure your plans are shot to shit, kiddo, unless you meant to break down yesterday.”

“You liked that?” Darcy asked sarcastically around her sandwich.

“Mmm, not really. But I get it. Dealing with heavy stuff. Sometimes it’s too much.”

Darcy chewed as she looked at him. She didn’t know him all that well, but he looked tired. There were dark bags under Tony’s eyes, but she supposed that was to be expected. Less than a week ago there was a high probability that the entire planet was going to be destroyed. Seemed like a pretty legit reason to lose a few hours of sleep.

She watched from the corner of her vision as the colors began to bleed in all around her. Her normal eyesight narrowed until it was nothing but a pinprick of light, the synthesizer (she really needed to ask Jane what she’d called it again) taking over. Darcy cocked her head to the side. It was off, looking at Tony. Out of all the people she’d seen with this ability, his was the most chaotic. There were parts of him that were black, a jet ebony that almost shined a bit blue or purple. Like an oil slick. And mixed in all that oil was a current of silver. Metal. Fitting, seeing what he called himself.

Everything started to tumble together the longer she stared at him, the sandwich in her hand forgotten. She closed her eyes and focused her breathing. She’d spent too long there, where the colors lived, and it started to make her dizzy.

“Hey, Lewis. Take a deep breath.”

He was closer to her, she could tell in the nearness of his voice, but she was too afraid to open her eyes.
“Lewis, what’s going on? Talk to me. Tell me what you see.”

“Colors.”

“Yeah, I get that. What colors? Be specific.”

“Lotta black.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s good. Very descriptive. Tell me something else.”

“You’re like oil.”

Darcy felt warmth on both sides of her face. Nothing was touching her skin, but she could tell something was there, hovering. It seemed to help, the heat, and she focused on it instead of the colors floating in front of her.

“Are we talking, like, ‘baby oil wrestling’ oil? Or something more industrial?”

The laugh in her chest made her swallow hard. “I really didn’t need to picture you covered in baby oil, Stark.”

“Too bad, it’s in there now. So I’m black like oil. Got it. Anything else?”

“What are you doing to my face?”

“Open your eyes and take a look.”

Darcy didn’t want to open her eyes, didn’t want to be assaulted by the invasion of jewel tones that only seemed to make her nauseous. She heard the huff of air from Tony when she didn’t comply immediately. “You’re an ass, you know that?”

“It might have come up in conversations once or twice, yeah.”

She let out a sigh and squinted one eye open. Darcy’s eyes both flew open when she saw Tony right there, his hands hovering less than an inch from her cheeks. “Ummm…” Darcy watched as he pulled his hands back, rubbed them together vigorously, then placed them on either side of her head. She felt the heat from them, even though they weren’t actually touching her.

“When my anxiety got really bad, I had to ground myself. Or, that’s what the therapist told me. Over and over. Until I finally listened. Eventually. Hopefully it’ll take you less time than it took me.” She watched as he repeated the motion, more heat transferring from his hands to her cheeks. “Human contact was something I did without for a long time. I was more comfortable around machines, things I could take apart and put back together.”

“Like your useless robots?”

“Hey,” Tony took his hands back, glaring softly at her, “I’m the only one that gets to call them useless.”

Darcy grinned at him, watching as he rolled his eyes and put his hands back.

“I’m not one to admit my faults.” Darcy’s eyes widened dramatically in faux shock at his words. “Shut up and listen. I waited too long to ask for help when I needed it, but once we get you squared away, and we will, you should see somebody. We have several people on staff now.”

Darcy sighed, her eyes falling closed, focusing on the warmth he was giving her. “And the thing
you’re doing with your hands? What’s that supposed to do?”

“Figured it’s the closest you’ll get to actual human contact until we know for sure you’re not going to bamf someone into ash.”

Opening hers, she looked into his brown eyes, and Darcy couldn’t help but wonder what made him so brash, especially when it looked like he had some sort of chewy center hidden under all that bravado and ego. Hidden way deep, like Mines of Moria deep, like fish are see through and attract food by bioluminescence deep.

Daddy issues, probably. Me too, Buddy. Me too. “Not sure there’s a lot of people out there that have shared experiences like mine.”

“You think you’re the only person who’s done something ridiculously stupid? Think again, cupcake. ‘Stupid’ kind of comes with the job description.”

She watched him rub his hands together again, then smiled when he held them over the front of her face, hiding her from sight. “I feel... bigger than normal.”

“Nonsense. You’ve barely eaten anything for days.” At her glare he blinked. “Oh. Right. The whole ‘souls’ thing. Feel like something is inside you? Kinda scares you?” She paused, but eventually nodded. “You do realize you know a person who literally has something inside him, right? Bruce’s spent a lot of time learning to quiet the feelings inside of him. You might want to give him a listen.”

Darcy hummed, thinking about Tony’s suggestion. She hadn’t found Bruce Banner to be very talkative, he was kind of anti talkative, really. She’d wear him down, though. Just like she’d worn down Jane. And Selvig. Give her a few days and she’d weasel her way in. “So what comes next?”

“Are you asking for desert?”

She was getting used to giving him The Face. Was it his goal to exasperate everyone around him? And why did it seem so familiar? Because you do the exact same fucking thing, Darcy thought with a sigh.

“It’s not that I don’t love this uncomfortable ass cot, or the steady whirring noises that come from the machines, but I’d love to get out of the med ward at some point. Then you wouldn’t have to bring me breakfast in bed.”

Tony hummed. “I’ll take that under advisement. Now finish your food and we’ll get these next tests underway.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on The Tumbles and The Tweets!
Chapter Notes

Chapter Three! I had planned to post weekly but damn is it hard to wait! Depending on how much writing I can squeeze in during the week, I may update every 3-5 days or so, more if my muse is willing!

I may supplement actual updates with mini-updates, maybe a playlist or something to that effect. As if this story hadn't already become fully planted in my mind...

**Everything is WinterShieldShock and all of it is awesome! :D**

Some Russian is coming in this chapter! If you hover your mouse over the word, it will pop up with a translation for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“People have scars. In all sorts of unexpected places. Like secret road maps of their personal histories. Diagrams of all their old wounds. Most of our wounds heal, leaving nothing behind but a scar. But some of them don’t. Some wounds we carry with us everywhere and though the cut’s long gone, the pain still lingers.

What’s worse? New wounds, which are so horribly painful, or old wounds, which should have healed years ago, and never did? Maybe our old wounds teach us something. They remind us where we’ve been, and what we’ve overcome. They teach us lessons about what to avoid in the future. That’s what we like to think.

**But that’s not the way it is, is it? Some things we just have to learn over and over and over… again.**”

Three days had passed. Darcy’d been at the Avengers Compound for almost two weeks now and she hadn’t seen anything outside the med ward. She hadn’t seen Jane since Monday (she was off sciencing), and Darcy was beginning to feel adrift without her best friend. Yeah, she was getting a lot of facetime with Tony and Bruce as they put her through a battery of tests, but she didn’t know them, and she’d hesitate to call them friends. Maybe one day, when they were done collecting her blood like some sort of polite nurse vampires.

Without the steady guidance and encouragement from her astrophysicist, Darcy was bored, and when Darcy was bored her anxiety got the better of her. Her thoughts turned dark, wondering if she’d ever be allowed to leave this place. Was this it? Was this room going to be one of the only places she’d see for the rest of her life? It was a bit melodramatic perhaps, but the fear that one stupid thing she’d done would alter the trajectory of her entire life left her scared, and frustrated, and stressed.
Tony and Bruce had humored her when she’d tried explaining the wavy colors that seemed to be everywhere, showing up at random times, making her dizzy and off kilter. She had to really focus to get them to go away, and even then it’d take a while for them to fade. Despite test after test, they’d found nothing wrong with her eyes. Her new ‘ability’ was a little bit of bullshit, in her opinion, and she was getting pissed off about everything.

Darcy watched Tony and Bruce argue over her latest blood work and brain scans, throwing out medical jargon that she couldn’t follow and had no desire to learn or understand. She leaned back in her spinning office chair, directing her closed eyes upward. It didn’t matter if she had her eyes closed or not, she could still see the vibrant paints. They were everywhere and she realized that, if asked, she’d be able to point out where everyone was on a schematic map of the building.

Soul gem, indeed. She could see all of them, dark and light, heavy and weightless, drifting through space. Just when she thought she’d start getting dizzy and begin to feel the overwhelming truth of it all, she saw a shiny gold make its way into the room, taking up the seat next to her and catching her attention.

Darcy opened her eyes, glad when the colors faded so she could see his handsome face. She grinned at him. “Captain.”

Steve gave her a small smile at the moniker, his chin dipping slightly in her direction. “You can call me Steve, Darcy.”

Fuck, his eyes are the perfect shade of blue. There oughta be a law. “Don’t know you well enough to call you Steve, Captain.”

Steve nodded his head in Tony and Bruce’s direction but kept his eyes on her. “From our debrief this morning it looks like we’ll get the chance to change that. They’re already setting up a permanent suite for you.” He watched a wave of annoyance crest on her face, almost able to watch her brain turn over his words before her polite smile vanished and a glare took its place.

Mother. Fucker. Darcy’s face hardened as she spun toward Tony and Bruce, their backs to her as they considered the latest batch of results. “Oi! So it looks like this vacation is now becoming a staycation? You assholes didn’t think to let me know that?”

Their attentions were pulled from the screens at her words. Bruce at least had the wherewithal to look guilty, his colors flashing with it as his eyes darted away them back toward her. Tony’s colors (aura? She supposed she’d need to think of a term for the swirls that surrounded everyone...) had stayed exactly the same and a overconfident smug look had lifted his lips.

“Do you know what the full extent of your powers are?”

Darcy’s frown deepened at Tony’s question. “No.”

“Do we know what the full extent of your powers are?”

What a dick. “Not unless you’ve been keeping that from me, too.”

“Are you certain you’d not be a threat to the general populace if you went back to the city?”

The glare was still on her face, but she took a deep breath in through her nose and out through her mouth, just like Barnes had instructed her days ago. Her teeth ground a bit before she answered Tony. “No. I’m not sure if I’m safe.”

“Great. Then you stay here with us and we figure out what to do about it. It’s for your safety as
much as it is everyone else’s, champ.”

As much as she wanted to be angry at Tony for the matter-of-fact way he was talking, she (begrudgingly) admitted he was right. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt someone.

...though if Tony was looking to find holes cut into every pair of underwear he owned, all he had to do was keep calling her cupcake or kiddo or any other patronizing little nickname he thought of.

Sighing, Darcy slowly swiveled her chair back toward Steve, letting Tony and Bruce continue to bicker in the background. The pleasant grin on his face helped the glare and annoyance fade from hers, and she was left looking at Steve with a hopeful smile. “So I haven’t really gotten a chance to see the compound, outside of the sparsely decorated medical ward. Mind showing a girl around? Give her the five-cent tour?”

Steve nodded, standing and holding out a hand to help her out of her chair. “Of course.”

The Avengers compound was just that: a compound. The buildings were connected by hallways, bright light streaming in from every window. Darcy knew jack shit about safety, but she couldn’t help but think that all the glass was a bad idea if someone wanted to attack. When she paid more attention, however, she caught a sheen of blue in her peripheral vision. Maybe it wasn’t normal glass after all. Whatever it was, it added an element of light to the whole place, making it seem less sterile and solider-y.

Darcy’d learned very early during the tour that there was no way she’d remember where everything was. There were training rooms, communal kitchens, lounges, game rooms, a basketball court, a locker room complete with saunas and pools, weight rooms (pfft like she’d ever use them), a headquarters for communications… It was sprawling, and giant, and a lot.

Steve had watched the reality of everything dawn in Darcy’s eyes over the course of the hour it took to show her the whole compound. He remembered, intimately, what it’d felt like entering a whole new world after he’d been pulled from the arctic ice, and he empathized with the inundation of information she was experiencing. “It can be overwhelming, I know. Tony’s A.I., Friday, is getting an update for you. Just call out and she’ll get you where you need to go.”

A disembodied voice leading her around? Yeah. That didn’t remind Darcy of 2001: A Space Odyssey at all. At the first mention of Dave, she was out. “Fancy,” she said finally, dragging her feet a bit.

It seemed like the tour was coming to an end, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to stop looking at Steve Rogers’ polite smiles. She knew her women’s studies professor would criticize her for flipping the male gaze and objectifying Steve, but she couldn’t help it. Mr. Apple Pie was attractive as hell and she was a weak, superficial person unable to look away from something so pretty. Really, it’d be a disservice to the scientists who’d created the serum not to appreciate their incredibly successful hard work.

Steve slowed to a stop, pointing to a nondescript door on their right. They were careful in the housing wing not to note whose room was whose. If someone did attack the compound, they didn’t want to make it easier to find targets. “This is you. The door opens to your thumbprint. Only a handful of people have access other than you, and none of them will use it for anything other than an emergency.”
Darcy looked down at her feet, scuffing the ground with her toe. “That include you?” Her eyes flicked up for his answer. The colors stole her vision for a second and she was left looking at his gold as it strobed the slightest bit.

A wry grin pulled at his lips, and Steve nodded softly. “I’m one of them, yeah.” Actually he and Tony were the only two with access to every room in the compound, including a few none of the others knew about.

“Good to know. And you’re...?” She pointed to a door directly across the hall from hers.

Steve’s eyes widened slightly before he could stop himself. Like hers, there was nothing special about the gray door with its biometric lock and knob. His head cocked to the side as he looked at her, eyebrows raising a bit in her direction.

Darcy watched the questioning look fill his gaze - not suspicious, exactly, but surprised - and she waved her hand in the air, gesturing as she tried to figure out a non-creepy way to answer his unasked question. “Your color bleeds a bit brighter than everyone else’s, and it kind of oozes from that room most of all.”

He blinked at her. She was looking at him, earnest and the tiniest bit embarrassed. “Oh.” He couldn’t pretend to understand how Darcy’s abilities worked anymore than he could understand Wanda’s. Even after fighting Red Skull, and the Chitauri, and now Thanos, the mystical powers were still beyond him.

Darcy watched him digest her answer, surprised when it seemed like he’d just accepted it. She was just glad he didn’t look frightened or angry that she was able to see things he might not have wanted her to.

“It’s not everyday you can say you get to sleep next to Captain America and the Winter Soldier,” she joked.

A second later Darcy realized the slip of her tongue, her face falling, cheeks flaming with embarrassment. “I mean, live next door to Captain America and the Winter Soldier. Not sleep. Live.”

A grin curled onto Steve’s lips at her words and the verbal backpedaling she attempted. He watched pink spread across her face, endearingly embarrassed. He knew, intimately, what it felt like putting your foot in your mouth. It happened to him more than he liked to admit, especially around pretty women. He was almost positive Peggy had seen that same look on his face hundreds of times in the short span they’d known each other.

As he grinned, Darcy almost willed the floor to open up and swallow her whole. She thought better of it, though, and allowed the embarrassment to hang in the hallway. What if the floor actually did open up and swallow her? Until she knew for a fact that it wasn’t one of her powers, she’d rather be safe than sorry.

Steve reached up and scratched at the back of his neck, smiling at her softly. “Can I ask? How you knew Bucky and I...?” The relationship between him and his best friend wasn’t a well known fact and he had to wonder how she’d put it together.

“Live together?” He nodded, and it looked as if he was grateful she hadn’t put it a different way, even though she could guess it wasn’t just living together they were doing. “I can see him standing on the other side of the door.”

Darcy heard a muffled swear from inside their room, not needing to see his swirl of color to know
Barnes was less than pleased that she’d known he’d been standing there the whole time. Steve chuckled, low and amused, and she couldn’t help how her smile brightened at the sound.

She didn’t really want to, but she pointed at the door behind her. “Well, I’m going to check out my new digs. I’m sure I’ll see you around. Thanks for the tour.” She pressed her thumb to the door handle and heard the shift of metal as it unlocked.

It didn’t matter, and Steve knew that, but he still found himself asking anyway. “Darcy?”

Fuck, she really liked hearing her name on his lips. She turned back to him, a thrum of attraction curling in her belly at just the sight of him. “Hm?”

“If you don’t mind me asking… what color? I mean, when you look at me with -”

“My all-seeing eyes?” Steve nodded and graced her with another sheepish look that made her heart flip at his particular brand of handsome. “Gold,” she answered, “Bright. With a swatch of cobalt. You share the blue with Barnes.”

Gold and blue. Blue for Bucky. It surprised him; not that he shared a color with Bucky, because he shared everything of himself with his best friend, but that after all the darkness he’d come face to face with, there was still something about him that’d stayed bright.

Darcy watched a flurry of emotions pass behind Steve’s cornflower blue eyes. “Not quite the red, white, and blue you were expecting?” When his gaze flicked to her, she felt another twist in her belly when his expression finally landed on something like happiness.

“No,” Steve said with a smile, “but I like it better.”

Darcy smiled back. “Me too.”

“Do you and Thor have your own room?” When Jane’s eyes shifted over to look at her, Darcy could practically feel the heat rising into her friend’s cheeks.

“What? No! We each have our own room.”

Darcy cocked her head to the side, leveling Jane with a glare. “But do you stay in your own room?” When Jane busied herself with putting another shirt on a hanger and placing it in Darcy’s closet, it was as good of an answer as anything. “Thor’s not here much, is he?”

“Not really,” Jane answered, voice small. “With the stones and Thanos, he’s been here more than normal.”

Darcy folded a pair of jeans, newly bought since all her other clothing had been destroyed, and laid them on the bed next to her. Her rooms at the compound were nice, but minimal. Sterile would have been a good descriptor, and Darcy couldn’t help but marvel at how this was now her home, at least for the foreseeable future.

So many things had changed in the last two weeks that she was dizzy with it all, and that was without the help of the colors that still randomly swirled in her vision. She was overwhelmed. Before her freshman year in high school, Darcy had never lived in one place for longer than six months. Her entire life had been chaos, living out of a suitcase - or a garbage bag when things had been worse -
with no real structure she could lean on. That had changed when she turned fourteen, and then again when she’d gone to college.

She’d applied for the internship with Jane on a whim, surprised she’d been accepted since her grades hadn’t been stellar. She’d been told later that she was the only applicant, but it didn’t matter; she’d found Jane, and through Jane she’d found Erik. Then Thor had come and her entire life had been upended by mythology and superheroes. Then London. New York. Belgium. Siberia.

And then she’d grabbed a stone and upset everything again.

Darcy looked up when Jane came to stand next to the bed, looking down at her with concern.

“Huh?”

“I asked if you’re doing alright. You look tired.”

Darcy laughed, shaking her head as she continued folding her clothes. “I’ve been poked and prodded more than a lab rat, I’m a mutant who can see colors and control souls, and my new home is a compound staffed by soldiers who don’t know me and run by superheroes that are afraid of me.”

Jane sat on the bed and Darcy watched her friend struggle internally. The astrophysicist had never really been a touchy-feely type person, but the way it was frustrating Jane that they couldn’t hug only made Darcy love her even more. “Jane.”

Darcy threw her hands up with a shout when a blanket from the bed was tossed over her body. She oofed when Jane threw herself on top of her, pinning her to the mattress. The blanket was itchy - she’d definitely have to get a softer one - but she could feel Jane’s arms wrap around her, hear Jane’s breathing in her ear as she was squeezed.

“You’re the stupidest person I’ve ever met, Darcy Anne Lewis, and I can’t believe you grabbed that stone. It was stupid, and brave, and I love you for it but damn it! You’re my best friend and next time warn me when you’re going to do something utterly insane so I can talk you out of it!”

Her friend’s voice had been muffled, but Darcy had caught the subtle inflections and change of tone in Jane’s voice. She slapped at the blanket until she could wrap her arms around Jane, the material keeping the scientist safe from any unknown and dangerous abilities that worked by touch.

“If I thought about things before I did them then they wouldn’t be stupid, now would they?”

She felt Jane laugh, resting her cheek against the bump she assumed was Darcy’s head. “Don’t try to use logic on me, Darcy. I’m better at it than you.”

“You’re also getting to second base. I know they’re fabulous but maybe you don’t want to nuzzle my boobs?” Darcy laughed loudly when she felt Jane pull her body back with a groan. Flipping the blanket from her face, Darcy grinned as she watched Jane’s cheeks tint with pink. “I love you too, nerd.”

Jane straightened the sweater she was wearing and stood up, crossing to the closet again, returning to the task of filling Darcy’s wardrobe with something other than an old t-shirt of Thor’s and a pair of scrub pants she’d stolen from the med ward. Darcy cheeks hurt from all the smiling she was doing, watching Jane as she moved around the room.

Darcy’d been in foster homes with plenty of other kids, but no one had ever felt like a sibling to her until she’d met Jane. And the fact that her last name was Foster? Too much irony for her to handle.

“You think they’d let me paint the walls in here?” At Jane’s raised eyebrow, Darcy shrugged her
shoulders and started removing the tags from another pair of jeans. “I’m just saying, they probably have some awesome way to clean walls so if I was to make this is a little less ‘psycho ward grey’ and a bit more ‘rave in London purple’, I bet they’d be fine with it.”

“Sure, you go ahead and ask Tony Stark if you can paint the walls in his multi-million dollar complex. Let me know how that conversation goes.”

“Maybe I will,” Darcy said, ripping the tags from a soft pair of slippers.

She had no plan to ask Tony for anything. Easier to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission.

But, if she was honest, she probably wouldn’t beg for forgiveness, either.

Bucky glanced up when he saw a flash of ruby in his peripheral vision. He let the weight stack drop, making sure to stop it so it only made a soft click as it landed. He watched Natasha’s green eyes scan the weight room, an almost imperceptible expression crossing her face as they landed on him. She stalked toward him with purpose, and he sighed, grabbing for the towel on the bench, dabbing his brow with it.

Her voice was quiet as she stood in front of him, years of practice carrying her words to his ears and to his ears alone. “A little spider told me that you did something pretty rash the other day.”

Bucky shook his head, rising to his feet. He looked down at her, his face blank. “I helped stop a panic attack. That’s all.” When her lips pursed, he moved around her and the bench, heading for the men’s locker room. It surprised exactly no one that Natasha followed him in, ignoring the looks the other occupants were throwing their way.

As the regular soldiers grabbed their bags and scurried away from the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow, Bucky’s shoulders rose and fell again as he took a seat in front of his locker. “Паук!, I don’t need to explain to you -”

“I’m not talking about me, Barnes, and you know it.”

His grey eyes glanced up as she leaned forward, arms crossed over her chest, glaring down at him. “Nothing happened.”

“And if it had?”

“Natalia -”

“Don’t do that. Don’t say my name like I’m one of your students again. I deserve better from you.”

She was right, he thought, she did deserve better from him. After everything, after all his memories returned, he’d been faced with the fact that his history with Ms. Romanoff went farther back than when he’d shot through her stomach to get at his target. He’d been there, in the Red Room, training her into what she became. A Black Widow. The Black Widow.

And despite the years of damage, of verbal and physical abuse at his hands, Natasha had accepted him, telling him that they’d all done things they’d regretted in the past, that the only thing they could do about it now was make a difference. Balance the scales. Erase the red from their ledgers. Bucky wasn’t sure there was enough bleach in the world to erase what he’d done. That Steve could
look at him and not shudder in disgust was a miracle, and something he hadn’t earned. Which was the whole reason the copper-haired assassin was looking at him so harshly. “Steve was about to do the exact same thing.”

“And if he had, I’d be having this conversation with him and not with you.” She looked at him for another second, frowning when he glanced up at her with pale grey eyes. She shook her head and clicked her tongue before sitting gracelessly beside him. “We just got through something unimaginable. The odds were that we’d all die, but something saved us -”

“Not something,” Bucky corrected, shaking his head, looking over at the spy. “Someone. And she needed help. Of all the people in that room, I was the best one to do it.”

“You mean the most expendable?” When Bucky didn’t look at her, Natasha leaned forward, bracing her elbows on her knees, hands clasped in front of her. “You’ve saved my life several times over. Steve looks at you like you’re everything he’s ever wanted. You really want to make him watch you sacrifice yourself?”

Bucky couldn’t help the clenching of his teeth. “He’s seen me die before.” Natasha moved so quickly that he barely had time to react, catching her fist before it smashed into his cheek. His eyes narrowed at the look in her eyes as he stood, gripping her fist in his hand. “Nata -”

Her foot smashed into the side of his knee, dropping him to the floor. Bucky dropped her hand in surprise, blocking blows with his arms, grunting as her foot kicked into the center of his chest and sent him to his back on the tile floor. He swept her leg, watching as she jumped over it with ease. He sat up, hands wrapping around her ankle when she kicked at his head, pulling her off balance and throwing her over his shoulder. She smacked against the metal lockers, the sound echoing off the tiles, falling to the ground beside him.

Bucky did his best to anticipate the barrage of punches and kicks as they thrust toward his head. He knew her fighting style, could predict where she’d strike next. He flipped to his feet, dodging out of the way when she directed a suckerpunch to his groin. He glared hard at her.

“Really?”

She smirked up at him, her leg extended toward his knee, the same one she’d kicked earlier. He backed away and she used the time to climb to her feet, jumping onto the bench, planting her feet on the locker and using the momentum to wrap her arms around his shoulders and pull him backward. He flipped over her shoulder, grunting as his body hit the tiles

Natasha turned and stood over him, glaring hard. "Жопа." She waited for his breathing to slow, Bucky’s eyes a storm as they looked up at her, before extending her hand to him. Bucky took it slowly, not sure if she was finished with her assault or just wanted him closer to inflict more damage.

They both returned to the the bench, sitting heavily, neither saying anything, happy that they’d expended some of the frustration that’d built up over the past weeks.

“Steve Rogers is one of the best men I know, and for some reason, he’s in love with you. Losing you again after everything… he might not come back from it. We need him, and we need you.”

Bucky listened to her words, even if he didn’t believe all of them, and nodded. “I was only trying to help.”

“You keep telling yourself that, учитель., maybe one day you’ll actually believe it.”
Chapter End Notes

Russian translations
Паук - Spider
Жопа - Ass
учитель - Teacher
Chapter Summary

The scientists help Darcy test her new abilities and it doesn’t go well...

Chapter Notes

Another update to start your weekend out right!

"I am a creature of grief and dust and bitter longings. There is an empty place within me where my heart was once."

- George R. R. Martin, A Clash of Kings

Darcy had showered that morning in preparation for the day ahead, and she’d been impressed with the water pressure in her ensuite bathroom. When she’d been in the dorms her freshman year, there’d been countless problems with the water pressure as well as the amount of hot water available. It had been an annoyance, and she found the Avengers Compound showers were more than adequate.

The fact that she was focusing on the water pressure in her shower, and not on the nerves that were fluttering in her belly, showed how anxious she really was. Anything to keep her mind off the reality of her current situation. Darcy looked around the large cage. No, it wasn’t really a cage. There were no bars, but she knew standing inside of it if they wanted, she’d be effectively held captive.

She walked another lap around the interior, knocking against things with her fingers, satisfied that nothing seemed hollow, that it felt secure. The buzz of claustrophobia was being studiously ignored, as was the flip of her stomach at the prospect of staying in here for the rest of her natural life if something went wrong.

“Are you sure this thing will hold up to anything that happens?”

She heard a bit of static, then Tony’s voice echoed in the chamber. “It’s made to hold the Green Guy, you’ll be fine.”

Darcy glared at Tony through the glass, or plastic, or whatever it was he claimed was safe enough to hold her and any ability that was about to be tested. “But are you, like, sure sure?”

“You’re stalling, kiddo.”
Her eyes narrowed even further, turning her attention from the source of her annoyance to the slightly frumpled man at his side. “Does the Hulk even have a soul?”

An expression close to offense crossed Bruce’s face. “Hey!”

Darcy grinned sheepishly at him. “No offense. I just want to make sure all the soul mumbo jumbo is something this sardine tin can handle. It’s weird because I know you’re, like, two different beings or whatever, but I don’t see two souls when I look at you.” She gasped and snapped her fingers toward him. “What if you’re not two different beings after all?”

The crackle of static. “No one said he’s two different beings. Nobody has ever said that. Will you stop stalling and just take it up to an eleven?”

She rolled her eyes at Tony and held up her hands. They were her normal pale pink, but she watched them flash with amber light as she focused, surrounded by wisps of smoke that her fingers could run through. Darcy flexed them, excited by the possibilities just as much as she was terrified by them. When she found herself at odds, she tended to oversteer into the skid. Is that what she needed to do here?

“To an eleven?” She echoed, watching her hands glow brighter.

“Sure,” Tony said with a shrug and a smirk, “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Steve had been sitting by, wanting to be there for the first full scale test but more than happy to hang in the background, quiet and tense while the scientists did their thing. This was so far out of his realm of understanding that he wouldn’t even try. All he knew was there was no real way to know what would happen, and he needed to be there, just in case.

When Tony started baiting Darcy, Steve stood, crossing to the microphone and bending it away from Tony’s mouth and toward his own. “Tony! No.”

Tony held up his hands in mock surrender, taking a step back from the control panel.

“Hey, Darcy, look at me.” Steve watched Darcy’s gaze shift from her hands to lock eyes with him, holding as he gave her a reassuring smile. “Just... be careful. Let your body do what it wants to do.”

_Easier said than done, Captain_, Darcy thought, _because my body has shit for brains_. She clenched her jaw, throwing him a stilted nod before looking back at her hands. “Right. Here goes. If I die, have Jane clear my browser history.”

Darcy closed her eyes, letting the part of her mind that held the colors take over. She felt a wave of nausea pass over her, almost making her stomach clench in pain, but it subsided and she was left looking into a black abyss. It was a black so deep she couldn’t see anything. Experimentally, she tried to raise her hand and wave it in front of her face, but she didn’t have hands, not here, so she was left tumbling in all that inky black.

’Let your body do what it wants to do.’ Okay, Body. What do you want to do?

She gasped suddenly as she felt an ocean of lines spread out from her body in all directions, like an explosion from the very center of her being. They were there, an infinite sea of souls, everywhere. They hung around her like threads; some she could feel go on forever, planets and galaxies away, others terminated nearby. When she looked down at her body (was it still her body or was it something so much more now?) she could see the lines, so bright and so clear, stretching out from her, endless.
She reached out to pluck at one like a guitar string.

There had been a blast of orange glow from inside the chamber, forcing Steve, Tony, and Bruce to shield their eyes. When the light lessened, they were left looking at Darcy, hovering inches above the floor, her toes barely brushing the ground. Her curls were caught in a wind of her own making, her eyes emitting an amber light, only broken when she blinked.

“Is she alright?”

Tony shook off the shock of seeing her, so much like she’d looked the night she’d killed Thanos, his eyes scanning the readouts from his tech. “Her heart rate is elevated, as is her breathing, but everything is holding steady. No radiation, no heat signature, nothing alarming.”

“You’re telling me that a girl floating surrounded by an unearthly light isn’t alarming?”

Blinking at Steve, Tony gave a short shrug of his shoulder. “Relatively, no, not alarming yet.”

Steve’s eyes glanced over Tony’s shoulder, landing on Bruce. The other man didn’t seem to be in any rush to end the experiment or run for safety, so he took them at their word and turned back to gaze at Darcy, unable to keep the wonder and concern from his eyes.

Darcy felt a reverberating shockwave travel outward along the thread. She’d been stupid, not knowing how far it went, and the possibility that it was light years away hit her like a truck. Would she just be stuck, then? Following this thread until the end of time? Would it even end at all, or was she doomed to be here, in this black, forever?

Bracing herself, unable to do anything about it now, she tried to follow the echo with her eyes, but it wasn’t really her eyes that were seeing it in the first place. She traveled the string, a straight line, needing to see where it ended, needing to know who it ended at. There was a person at the end of this thread and she wasn’t sure what to expect when she arrived. It didn’t take her long to find out, however, maybe only a fraction of a second. She was surprised at the quickness, but what was time when you could find all the beings in the universe?

The end of the line.

*He* was there, down the hallway from her, a swirl of crimson and charcoal, and Darcy watched, with eyes she didn’t need and a mind that wasn’t hers, as his body felt the impact of the ripple. Everything moved in slow motion. She saw Barnes grab the wall as he stumbled, mouth parting as the power moved through him, eyes wide and unfocused as his pupils flashed amber. He tensed, as if he was looking for the source of the attack he was under.

Was it an attack? She didn’t mean it to be. Darcy had no idea what any of this meant, what she could do. Was she hurting him? *Could* she hurt him? The second she thought it, she knew that she could. She could reach into him, rip his soul away, take what was already hers, and it would feel *good*. She *wanted* to do it. Her heartbeat sped at the very thought.

No. No, she didn’t. She couldn’t extinguish his light. She just couldn’t. It wasn’t her. Darcy didn’t want to hurt him, but *it* did. The stone. *It’d* be happy to hurt him, to carve him up and swallow him whole. *It* was hungry and he tasted delicious. And she felt fear grip her stomach so harshly that she doubled over in pain.

It had come from nowhere, this feeling in his chest. Bucky blinked past the orange that was glowing from his own eyes, looking up into the empty air of the hallway. He felt a whisper in his ear, recognizing the voice. He was used to hearing it sarcastic and sardonic, witty and sharp, but the fear
he heard in it now gripped him.

She was arguing with someone, something, and it sounded like she was losing. Bucky could feel her against his skin, caressing, careful and soft. He couldn’t make out the words, but he knew she was bargaining. She was trading something, something to keep him from being pulled apart.

There was a price and it needed to be paid, and it wanted that man, the man Darcy’d brought to its attention. No. No, she didn’t want to hurt him. The thought of hurting him, of hurting anyone, formed a scream in Darcy’s throat and a pain in her chest. She begged, pleading, knowing that its interest had already been piqued. It was hungry and needed something to feed on. There was only one way to sate it, and she knew what had to be done.

She was trading something for him, to keep him from being hollowed out. The empty air of the hallway was filled with a light, emerald green and beautiful. Bucky watched as the glow enveloped him, squeezing into his chest and taking hold. The amber of his vision was changed until he saw nothing but fresh verdant, feeling something extra within him. Something more.

Bucky looked up, the glow fading from his eyes. He could feel her, he could feel she was in trouble. Something bad was about to happen and he wasn’t going to make it in time. He pushed off the wall, stumbling a bit but kept his footing, breaking into a sprint toward where he knew she was.

Tears on her face, Darcy watched Barnes run away, whole and complete and not hurt. Whatever she’d promised had quieted the voice, but she knew it wasn’t gone, not really. Something had changed, something important, and she tensed, waiting for the crash.

Darcy screamed as she was thrown backward, following the thread until she crashed into her own body, but she was too big now, too massive. She could hear all of them, so many voices, each one a line, each one wrapping around her until she was bound and held still. She could feel it, just out of reach, waiting until she surrendered. She was drowning, part of her being hollowed out, and Darcy had a second to wonder what was going to fill back into her when she was gone.

The control room was in chaos. Steve was yelling at Tony as Darcy screamed, clutching her chest, doubled over in pain. The glow was pulsing, bright and dim, dark and light, and underneath it all was a current of air, pushing the amber glow and her dark curls around the interior of the capsule.

“What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Tony screamed, checking the monitors. “She’s going into shock, A-Fib, her brain activity is off the charts -”

“Her body is reacting like it’s in pain, her white blood cells are attacking something inside of her -”

Steve didn’t understand anything they were saying, his eyes on Darcy as she screamed. His gaze was only pulled away when the door to the lab was thrown open and he saw the dark hair and flash of chrome he knew so well. “Bucky?” He watched the soldier pound on the container, screaming something unintelligible.

When Darcy finally opened her eyes, she could see nothing but that familiar amber-orange glow, too bright and blinding. She shook her head, focusing to flick the colors from her vision, leaving just her normal hazel eyes. She blinked, gaze on Barnes who was there on the other side of the barrier, his fists pounding on the cage, mouth screaming something she couldn’t hear. A flood of relief crashed inside of her body. He was there, he was whole, and he was safe. But if he was safe, and whole, and there, that meant the deal had gone through. And now she was the one who would pay.
Darcy tried to answer him, tried to speak or blink, but there was nothing but everything and she was absolutely terrified.

_Oh. Fuck. Oh, fuck, what did I do?_

Bucky turned to look at the window over his shoulder, seeing Steve on the other side. He screamed, fist pounding, begging for the door to be opened. He knew what was in there with her, what it wanted, and it couldn’t have her. If he could get in there, if he could just touch her, he’d be able to stop it.

“Steve!”

“Friday, open the containment door!” Tony screamed at the air, watching as Barnes brought his metal hand against the glass again and again. He saw the blur of blond as Steve ran out of the control room and toward the lab. His heart froze as he watched Darcy struggle, pain on her face.

“But boss -”

“Friday, open the goddamn door now!”

Darcy tried to pull herself together, to pull her own consciousness back from where it’d been flung throughout the universe. She’d thrown it everywhere, to the farthest reaches of her abilities, and now there was no way she’d get it all back. She’d be hollowed, empty, missing part of herself as it feasted.

Gritting her teeth, Darcy thought about herself. She wasn’t perfect, but she was her and that meant everything. All her flaws. All her strengths. Her sense of humor, her ability to love, her beliefs. Stubborn and proud, stupid and romantic. She needed all of it, every piece, and she didn’t want to give up a single cell of herself, not to this stone, not to any thing, despite the deal she’d struck.

Her ears popped as a wave of energy blasted from the very center of her, filling the confined space with a cloud of her, floating in the air. Darcy breathed deeply, trying to capture every bit of dusty orange, every flicker of amber, every single piece of herself, but she couldn’t get it all, there was no way. Part of her floated away on the air and she knew it would leave her hollow and dangerous. She felt her legs give out, realizing it was too late for her to do anything.

Finally, Bucky heard the shift of metal on metal, rounding the corner and leaping into the container. He caught her before she collapsed, a subtle glow of amber at her mouth. His grey gaze flicked around the interior, looking. He spotted it, hovering just above him. Bucky took a deep breath in, watching as the bit of light was carried toward him, feeling the warmth as he inhaled it, burying it in his lungs.

Bucky knew it wasn’t enough. The voice he’d heard hadn’t gotten her light, but there was something missing from her now, something empty inside. He could still see that light in her throat, where she’d pulled as much of herself as she could, and the power was still there, inside of her, and just the tiniest bit inside him, now.

He wasn’t sure how he knew what to do, but as he dipped his head and their lips connected, he breathed into her, pouring what extra he had from his mouth, filling the hollow spot within her. When he pulled back, her mouth lit up with a flash of red, then blue, then faded away all together.

Bucky heard Steve skid across the floor behind him, felt the blond’s eyes land on him and the girl he was cradling against his chest. He heard Stark and Banner right behind, could feel their apprehension and worry.
“What are you doing! Don’t touch her!”

Tony’s shout echoed in the interior of the chamber, all three men taking a step back when Bucky looked up at them, his eyes flashing amber.

“She already touched me.” Bucky knew he couldn’t explain it to them, that they couldn’t understand what had just happened, so he didn’t try. He turned his attention to Darcy, watching as she blinked up at him, her hazel eyes filled with worry, and sadness, and exhaustion.

Darcy’s gaze followed the curve of Bucky’s jaw, the bow in his upper lip, the slight divot in his chin. Had she? Had she already touched his soul? Was it hers now? Is that what she felt burning so brightly in her chest, new and shiny and whole?

“Not mine,” she finally breathed, watching as Barnes’ face looked down at her, confusion and concern in the grey of his eyes. Her arm felt impossibly heavy as she lifted it, poking his chest with her index finger. “Yours.”

Steve watched as Darcy slipped into unconsciousness in Bucky’s arms. No one moved, or breathed, too afraid to do anything. He had no idea what had just happened, but when Bucky looked up toward him with worry in his eyes, he took a step toward his best friend. “Buck-”

“We should get her to the med ward.”

Bucky’s voice had been so soft that Steve almost hadn’t heard it. “What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bucky said, swallowing past the lump in his throat. He closed his eyes against the mental onslaught, fighting hard to keep from following her into the darkness and passing out. There were words on the tip of his tongue, words that weren’t his, and he felt lightheaded with the weight of what had changed. “We need to get her to the med ward.”

“What the hell did you do?”

Grey eyes flicked up toward Tony, hearing the harshness in his tone, the accusation dripping in his words. Bucky shook his head, slotting his arms around Darcy’s shoulders and under her knees, lifting her as he stood. Her body was limp as he turned toward the three men, all of them looking at him with differing levels of uncertainty. Not knowing where the words came from, he looked at Tony. “Please get out of my way.”

Steve’s eyebrows lifted at Bucky’s words and the way he’d said them. “Sure, Buck, let’s get her to the med ward.” He could tell something was off, could see it in the way Bucky was looking at them, then glancing down as the woman in his arms.

“There’s a gurney out here.”

Bucky shook his head. “No.”

“You could lay her -”

“No,” he repeated, harsher this time. “I’ve got her.”

Steve took a step forward, cutting off Tony and whatever he’d been about to say to Bucky. “Medical Ward. You got it. We’ll follow you.” He watched as Bucky shifted her in his arms, getting a better hold, before he walked past them and out of the lab.

“What the -”
“Tony, unless the next words out of your mouth are an explanation of what the fuck just happened, I suggest you keep it closed.” Steve watched the retorts fly up Tony’s throat but stop short. Tony breathed heavily, his nostrils flaring, before he turned and stalked after Bucky.

“There was no way for him to know what was going to happen. He tried to account for every variable he could think of.”

Turning to look at Bruce, Steve nodded. “I know you did everything you could.”

“No, not me. Tony. The container, the specifications, all the tech… That’s him. I know biochemistry and nuclear physics, but this goes beyond anything I’ve studied. Even after working on Vision this is… I could tell you why she was different, but anticipating her abilities?. This is new science, something no one has worked on.”

Steve sighed, making his way into the hall, following behind Tony and Bucky at a distance. “Okay. New science. What do we do now?”

Bruce pulled his glasses free, using the bottom of his t-shirt to clean them. “We wait for her to wake up, hope that she has a better explanation of what happened.” He replaced his glasses, pushing them up his nose as he turned to Steve. “I think he likes her.”

Steve’s eyes swung toward Bruce. “What?”

“Tony. He talks about how annoying she is, but you can see it, hear it in his voice. She reminds me of him a little bit. He checked over everything three times. Twice”

He watched Tony and Bucky turned a corner, glancing over at Bruce again. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I may not talk much, but I listen, and I watch. I know things aren’t the best between… ” Bruce looked over at him for the quickest beat before looking back ahead, “trust me, leaving emotions bottled up inside is good for no one.”

The corner of Steve’s mouth turned up at the scientist, blue eyes crinkling at the corners when Bruce gave him a small smile. “That would be your area of expertise.”

“One of them,” Bruce agreed, “it’s definitely one of them.”

“You could have hurt her.”

“I didn’t.”

“What were you thinking?”

“Tony -”

“No. No, you don’t get to call me Tony. Not after what you’ve done.”

Tony came to a stop when Bucky turned toward him, Darcy’s hair swishing through the air as the soldier moved. Again, he wasn’t sure where the words came from, but he found himself voicing them. “There is nothing I can say or do to make up for what happened to your parents. So what would you like me to do?”
He watched Tony blink at him, saw the clench in his jaw as it tightened. Like always, he watched the anger and sorrow fill the smaller man’s eyes, watched it consume him from the inside. But he didn’t speak. Tony glared at him, filled with righteous fury, with no where to aim it.

And then even more words flowed from him, almost like he a stream of consciousness, something he couldn’t control.

“What happened to your parents is unforgivable and I wish I could change it, but I can’t. I wish I could undo a lot of the things these hands have done, but I’ll never be able to wash them clean. So please, Stark, tell me what you’d like me to do.”

Another silence. Bucky could see Steve and Bruce catching up with them, their whispered conversation halting as they felt the tension in the hallway.

“That might be the most words you’ve ever said to me,” Tony bit out, brown eyes still hard as they glared at Bucky.

“I’m feeling a bit more verbose today,” Bucky said. He got a better grip on Darcy, glancing over at Steve once before he turned his back to them and started walking again.

Tony stayed in the hallway, watching after Bucky as he left, his face a mask of confusion. Steve and Bruce came up behind him, the tightness in the air palpable. “Tony?” Steve watched Tony tear his eyes from Bucky’s retreating form, blinking up at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it, turning toward Bruce instead.

“If there’s something wrong with her heart we’ll need to work fast.”

Bruce nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “If she just passed out, hopefully she’ll be able to fill in the details. All of her readings were normal.”

“Until they weren’t,” Steve sighed, scratching at the stubble on his chin. “I’d say this was like Wanda, but on a much bigger scale.”

“Well, it was the mind stone that gave her her powers. Maybe she shares the same genetic anomaly as Ms. Lewis. It would explain why the experiments failed until they got a hold of Wanda and Pietro.”

Tony nodded, his brain turning over the possibilities. “I’ll let you ask Wanda if we can do a genome mapping when she gets back from Wakanda. I don’t think she’ll like me asking her for it.”

“That still doesn’t explain why Bucky was able to touch her.”

Shaking his head, Tony frowned. “For all we know, anyone could have been touching her this whole time and it would have been fine. We were just being careful. For her sake, and for our own.”

“You think since he touched her, it’d be fine for others?”

“Not until we hear from her, see if she can give us any more information.” Bruce sighed. “It’s really hard to know what happened today, if it did any irreparable damage.”

Steve watched Tony flinch at the idea, shoving his hands in the pockets of his slacks, the usual arrogant expression Steve’d come to associate with the man sliding into place, like a mask. “Then I guess we wait to see if our experiment killed her.”

Tony turned on his heel, the sole of his sneaker squeaking against the floor, and followed the
hallway toward the medical ward. Steve sighed, casting a glance in Bruce’s direction, smiling softly when the scientist gave him a small shrug of his shoulders. “So we wait?”

“We wait.”
Chapter Summary

After their experiment went awry, everyone is left trying to pick up the pieces.

Chapter Notes

I don't think I can say this too many times: YOU ARE ALL AWESOMESAUCE! Every comment gives me joy and makes me want to write more and more! I'm so glad y'all are enjoying everything!

Darcy was getting real sick and tired of waking up with a bunch of people looking down at her, concern and a little bit of fear in their eyes. She didn’t want to move, afraid doing so would only lead to her embarrassing herself by throwing up everywhere. Her cheek was pressed against something warm, and she let out a groan as her eyes flicked from person to person.

“Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.”

At her words, she saw the people gathered in the small room breathe a collective sigh of relief. Bruce readjusted the glasses on his nose, pushing them up only to have them fall right back down. Tony gave her a smirk and a roll of his eyes. Steve was looking at her from a chair at her bedside, pretty blue eyes shining, so strikingly handsome, the only man she’d ever loved.

Her brain supplied its own record-screech sound effect.

“Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.”

She let the breath out of her lungs slowly, feeling the love in her chest as Steve blinked, those impossibly long eyelashes brushing against his cheeks. She’d kissed those cheeks before, then followed those kisses with ones that burned along his jaw and kept going south, tongue dipping into his clavicle and biting softly on the muscle of his neck, leaving red teeth marks in her wake.
And she remembered seeing the ‘Wizard of Oz’ in the theater when it was first released, the scent of stale popcorn hanging in the air. It’d been too expensive to buy any popcorn after the twenty-five cent movie tickets, but seeing Judy Garland sing on that screen, watching the colors for the first time… It’d been mesmerizing. The prettiest thing she’d ever seen, second only to the blond man at her side.

But that wasn’t her memory. She hadn’t been alive when it was released, hadn’t been in Brooklyn, hadn’t had to save up every penny in order to buy tickets for herself and Steve. No, those weren’t her memories, they were -

“Bucky,” she gasped, sitting up, eyes widening as she looked for him in the room. She felt movement, her hazel gaze swinging. He was there behind her, dark and handsome, the thing her cheek had been resting on. Darcy saw a circle of wetness on the red henley he was wearing. She’d drooled on him, sweet MamaJama, she’d been drooling on the Winter Soldier. She shifted, pressing her palm against his chest as she tried to turn toward him. Moving so quickly made her head spin a bit and she reached up to grab it. “Owwww…"

Steve had followed Bucky into the med bay, watching as he’d laid back on the cot, pulling Darcy against his chest, arms wrapping around her protectively. He’d watched the expression on Tony’s face, unhappy but resigned, and the tiny bit worried as he’d kept glancing in Darcy’s direction. Bruce had paced the room, messing with the screens showing Darcy’s heartbeat and respiration rates, waiting for her to wake up.

And he’d watched Bucky’s face when she’d finally woken up, relief and softness filling his best friend’s eyes, softer than Bucky’d shown to anyone but him. Steve’s gaze moved from Bucky, his chest tightening at the bare emotion in his lover’s eyes, and focused on Darcy instead. He was only inches from them, sitting beside the cot, but it suddenly felt like miles.

His heart rate slowing, his chest easing with the knowledge that she was awake, Bucky noted her eyes going from person to person in the room, calling his name before that beautiful hazel spun toward him. When her eyes closed and she made a sound of pain, he immediately raised his hand, cupping her cheek, frowning at the way her face had contorted in discomfort.

Darcy jumped when she felt a warm hand on her cheek. She blinked twice, quickly, only getting a glimpse of the color world before she pushed it away. But she’d seen enough to know that Bucky was there, whole and him and with all his soul bits intact. As she looked into his slate-grey eyes, the swell of emotion was visceral, so real, and Darcy threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly.

“I thought I’d taken you, stolen something.” Darcy said against the warmth of his neck before she pulled back, seeing the guarded look in his eyes, the expression making the smile on her face falter.

“I think you did. A little,” Bucky breathed, knowing what she meant.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck! After everything he’d been through, the torture, the years, the pain, every face, every kill, every death, and she’d gone and taken something of his soul. Darcy felt her face crumble, her bottom lip shaking.

He hadn’t meant his words to hurt her, and Bucky’s chest ached knowing he was the reason the tears were welling in her eyes. “Hey, hey now,” he whispered, cradling her face in both of his hands, thumbs running over her cheekbones, ready to catch the tears if they fell. “I think you gave me a little of yours.”

At his words, Darcy blinked and finally saw it; the swatch of crimson that was him, as well as the vein of blue he shared with Steve, but where there’d only been ash, blackish grey at the edges, she
could make out the smallest hint of green, emerald and shining like a jewel. “That’s me?” she asked. She knew he couldn’t see them, the colors that could steal her vision, but somehow he knew what she was talking about. Because he had seen it, just through her eyes.

Bucky nodded slowly, brushing away one of the tears as it rolled down her cheek. “I think so.”

“And you’re…” Darcy watched him nod again, realizing that he was sharing the same effects, the emotion in her chest matched in his own. Oh. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Darce, it wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but it was me.” The look he gave her was one she’d seen in the mirror one too many times. A Darcy Lewis Look™ on his Bucky Barnes face. “I know. I did it, but it wasn’t me. I know. Doesn’t make it easier.”

“I know.”

And he did. He did know. And she knew, because they shared those memories, his and hers, together, all of them. Something in her chest eased at the small smile he gave her, a sigh lifting her shoulders as she leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his.

Steve hadn’t been able to keep up with their conversation, looking between the two of them speaking in a shorthand that time wouldn’t have allowed them to form. When Bucky was holding her face, so careful and gentle, Steve found it hard to breathe. Watching Bucky brush away Darcy’s tears and whisper softly to her, words of comfort and reassurance… he couldn’t swallow past the lump in his throat.

He had no idea what had happened, but Steve felt the first sting of righteous pain in his chest.

“Seriously? Are we just ignoring all personal boundaries now? Hey! Hello, hi!?” Darcy turned toward Tony as he waved his hand near her face to get her attention, feeling Bucky do the same. “Mind letting the rest of us in on your little gab session? We’d like to know if we need to put the base on lockdown.”

Darcy turned back toward Bucky, realizing they’d gone to a whole different place for a moment together, letting out a soft laugh as she attempted to extricate herself from his lap. When she’d settled herself beside him, bodies touching from knee to hip, she tried to think of a way to explain something she didn’t even really get.

“I did what you said. Let my body do what it wanted. And what it wanted to do was to show me souls.”

“Our souls?”

She gave Bruce a look, wishing it was that easy, “All souls. The whole universe. Every sentient being, or the ones that have a soul, I guess. Can a sentient being not have a soul? I don’t fucking know. There was an epic shit ton of souls, okay? And I felt them. Then I reached out and touched one that was close. And that…” she trailed off and gestured pathetically in Bucky’s direction.

“You touched his soul.” Tony said, his voice incredulous. His brown eyes were looking at her as if he expected her to start laughing any second, to give up the ruse. Darcy didn’t laugh though, only nodded at him earnestly, “Ah. Great. Awesome. Totally clears that up.”

“Hey!”
“It’s okay, Buck.” Darcy reached out and squeezed his knee, pulling his hardened grey gaze toward her, his eyes easing as he blinked at her. “There was something there, something there. The stone, I think? And it was hungry, so I had to suck myself back in before I got lost in the blackness, or before something else got in me first. But I’d accidentally already touched Bucky, given him something from me. And then -”

“- I could feel her, the part of her in me leaving room for something else. So I gave her a part of me so that didn’t happen.”

Saying it out loud was somehow worse. Everyone was quiet, looking at her and Bucky with uncertain expressions. Tony still looked like he didn’t believe it, Bruce looked thoughtful. And Steve -

Darcy gasped when she felt a stabbing pain in her chest, the sound covered up by the scraping of Steve’s chair on the floor. She watched him stand, tearing his eyes away from the two of them before he turned, without a word, and left the room. Darcy’s hand pressed to her sternum, feeling like there should have been some wound to cover, something deep and aching and a source for the pain she was feeling. She risked a glance at Bucky, seeing the guilt filling his gorgeous eyes. “Fuck,” she breathed, reaching out to squeeze his hand, “I didn’t mean -”

“I’ll talk to him,” Bucky said, eyes sliding to hers from where they’d been looking at the empty doorway Steve had just gone through. He gave her the tiniest smile, hoping it came across as reassuring, and squeezed her hand quickly before following after Steve.

Feeling more than a little bereft, Darcy turned her attention toward Tony and Bruce, the only two people left in the room. She couldn’t place the emotions on their faces anymore, the colors fading in and out of her vision as her eyes filled with tears. Seeing the look on Steve’s face as he looked at her, cold and hurt and bruised, being held and sharing comfort by the love of his life… She couldn’t breathe around that much pain.

“For the love of Frigga, can somebody get Jane in here?”

Tony and Bruce blinked at her, uncertainty in their faces.

“Like, now?”

Another round of blinking.

“Now! Right now!”

She watched both men flinch as they were finally moved to action at her howl, Bruce crossing to the phone on the desk, Tony not running, but moving quickly, out of the room. Presumably to find Jane, but it didn’t matter. Darcy’s eyes were taken over by the blackness, shapes and swirls dancing, and she buried her face in the pillow to blot it all out.

Once her tears started, they wouldn’t stop. This was too much. Too, too much. She curled up as the sobs came quicker, wracking her body, her stomach turning and twisting, the hurt on Steve’s face like a bullet through her heart.

What did I just do?
Bucky followed Steve at a distance. The last thing he wanted to do was cause a scene, but with the way his best friend was stalking through the halls, everyone having to jump out of Steve’s way or be run over, he figured it was a little too late for that.

“She needs to be inside. It was suffocating, the grey of the walls reminding him of Bucky’s eyes, and how they’d looked at Darcy. Knowing. Caring. Shining with love.

For the first time in years, since he’d come out of that metal tube, his body pumping with the serum Erskine had developed, Steve Rogers felt his chest contract like he was having an asthma attack and couldn’t catch his breath. He needed air. He needed air desperately.

It had been so much easier to chase after Steve when they were younger, when the blond’s gait was stuttered and he’d have to stop when he’d overexerted himself. Bucky knew all the different ways Steve Rogers could pout, but running away had never been one. Until now. “Steven Grant Rogers, fucking stop so we can talk.”

Something in Bucky’s voice, something he didn’t recognize, had Steve turning on his heel, his face a mask of pain. “Don’t fucking do that. Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.”

“Stop running like one and I won’t have to,” Bucky said, his brows furrowed as he watched the pink tint Steve’s cheeks, red and angry and absolutely heartbreaking. “I have to explain.”

“I don’t need your explanations. When I asked, you said you were concerned because she reminded you of me.”

“She does. Steve -”

“The way you were looking at her? How she was looking at you? Touching you? What am I supposed to think?”

“Like we said -”

“We?” Steve’s jaw clenched, taking a step toward Bucky, ignoring the eyes of people in the hall when they swung toward them. “It’s ‘we’ now?”

Bucky frowned, closing the distance between them, lowering his voice. “If you’d let me explain, I could make you see -”

Steve shook his head, his eyes dark cobalt, filled with hurt and jealousy and a mess of emotions he couldn’t place. “I don’t think I want you to explain. I think I’d rather you just let me go.”

Bucky’s glare faltered. “Let you go?” He reached out and wrapped his fingers around Steve’s arm, the annoyance at Steve’s stubbornness replaced with a cold fear at those words. “Steve. Come on.”

“Not right now, Bucky. I need to go. Let go of my arm.”

He was using that voice, the one he used when he was training, when you needed to listen to him or you’d be brought to the mat. Bucky hated that voice, but he hated the look in Steve’s eye even more.
“Steve.”

“Bucky. Let me go. Now.”

Steve’s muscles hadn’t tensed, but Bucky knew if he didn’t let go, something bad was going to happen. Against his heart’s screams of pain and his mind’s acknowledgement that Steve would never hurt him, Bucky pulled his hand back, watching Steve’s face grow colder, more guarded. Bucky watched him snap those steel plates into place around his heart, then watched Steve’s back as he continued down the hallway and disappeared from sight.

Bucky stood there, silent, aching, until the noise of the hallway filtered to his ears. He turned, seeing several people pretend like they hadn’t been listening to every word that had just been said. His glare, familiar on his lips, materialized on his face like a mask, wiping away any emotions he didn’t want to be seen.

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Natasha was there, leaning against Steve’s motorcycle when he entered the garage. She looked at him, that beautiful face giving nothing away as he strode toward her. “Going for a ride?” Her voice was scratchy, raspy, also carefully avoiding any hint of emotion he could pick out except pleasant and friendly.

Steve slipped his jacket over his shoulders as he looked at her, pinning her with his gaze. “Bruce?”

“Tony,” she answered, watching a flash of surprise in Steve’s eyes before it was smoothed out again, returning to their normal sky blue. He was doing a good job of shielding, but it’d been Natasha’s job to read micro-expressions on people’s faces. And she could read her friend like a book. “Said you were upset. Didn’t say why.”

He sighed, trying to keep the anger out of his voice but knowing it hadn’t worked. “And you’re here to... what? Baby sit me?”

“Please. Even I know better. Tony just said -”

“Tony needs to mind his own damn business.”

Natasha laughed, low and deep, shaking her head. “We both know Tony better than that.” She had to get out of the way when Steve threw his leg over the bike and hit the kickstand, keeping it upright with both feet on the ground. She strode forward and laid a hand over his on the throttle. “You’re not going to go and do something stupid, are you?”

His shoulders lifted and fell as he flicked his gaze toward her. For all that she hid it, Steve could see real worry in her eyes, concern for him, an uneasiness for her friend. “Nat, I just need to get away for a bit. I’ll be fine.” She stood there, looking at him, not moving. Finally, convinced of what she saw in his eyes, she took a step back.

“My door is always open. You know that.”

“I might just take you up on that,” Steve said, turning the key and hearing the engine roar to life. He didn’t look back at Natasha, his focus on the green forest on the other side of the glass. The door opened as he neared, and he kept his head down, clearing the bottom of the door by inches.

The sprawling grounds of the compound stretched in all directions, thick and dense trees ringing it.
He left the main road, the modern architecture of the building fading from sight in his mirrors, until he was swallowed by the darker canopy of the forest.

Even with the explanation Bucky and Darcy had given when she woke up, Steve still couldn’t wrap his head about what had happened. All he knew was that he saw the only man he’d ever loved - the one he’d gone to battle for, the one he’d done everything to save, the one he couldn’t imagine life without - with someone else wrapped around him, Bucky and Darcy sharing the glances that only two people who’d known each other forever could share. Comfortable. Familiar.

The look in Bucky’s eyes had said enough.

He’d looked at Darcy, softness in his eyes, the kind of softness only Steve had been able to see. Hadn’t Steve worked hard to open Bucky up, to make him more trusting, to make sure other people saw how good of a man his best friend was? But the looks on Bucky and Darcy’s faces weren’t just friendly. They were something else, something more.

What was he supposed to do? How? What the hell had happened?

Steve’s chest throbbed with pain, and jealousy, and fear. They didn’t know enough about Darcy’s powers to know if this was permanent or temporary. Would it fade? Would that look in his love’s gaze leave after a time? Steve’s mind was awash with too many questions, questions he wasn’t ready to hear the answers to yet, afraid they’d be answers he didn’t want.

Steve had tried hard not to be a jealous man. Growing up there’d been girls falling all over themselves to win a date with James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, and Bucky’d go out with a few of them, sometimes ask them to bring a friend for Steve and make it a double. Steve humored him, going even though he knew nothing would pan out. However, it’d given him time to spend with his best friend, and he’d never get tired of that. Bucky would return, smelling of perfume and sex, but he’d always come home, home to Steve.

Steve had found Peggy during the war, her dark hair, full lips and wit reminding him so much of Bucky that it’d hurt. He’d loved her, given her as much of his heart he had to give, the rest already belonging to his best friend and first love. Losing Bucky, then waking up in a world so changed and without either of them… He’d been lost. It wasn’t until he’d found the others that he started to find his way. Natasha with her deadpan comments and sharp eyes. Tony, stubborn and acerbic but just as committed as him. Clint and Thor, fighters to the core. Bruce, who doubted himself but was there whenever they needed him. Then Sam. And Wanda.

A family, or as close as he could get.

Then Bucky was there, not really himself, but not dead either, and he’d fought so hard to get him back. Months of therapy, months of working to rebuild and uncover his memories, finally finding each other again.

No matter what happened, they found each other. Him and Bucky always found each other. Not time, not space, not even death could keep seem to them apart. The idea that a stone capable of destroying souls would be the catalyst of their downfall would have made him laugh if he didn’t already feel so goddamn helpless about it.

He knew Bucky wanted to explain, make him see how things were but, if he were being honest, Steve wasn’t ready to listen. Not yet. He needed time. Time to think, time to consider, time to adjust. Now that Thanos and the direct threat to the world had been taken care of, he had time. He wouldn’t stay away for long. He couldn’t.
He just needed time.
What Did You Do?

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Bucky experience their connection and everything that comes with it, including the heartache of missing Steve.

Chapter Notes

Guuuuuysssss, trust me when I say that this is hard for me to split up! I have a ton more written but I'm trying to space it out and it hurrrts to leave it like this! Hopefully you don't hate me, but I promise it'll be worth it! (I hope) (Probably) (Maybe)

PageBreak

Hiding behind all of the walls
Running inside, locking the door
Nothing ahead, no one to hurt
You know you can't fall off the floor

I didn't look for you
I didn't ask for this
I didn't need you to pull me apart

What Did You Do? - Gabrielle Aplin

PageBreak

“Explain it again.”

Darcy sighed, crossing her arms over her chest as she laid back on her bed, the grey of the ceiling becoming the only witness to the scowl on her face as she humored Jane and tried, again, to explain to her best friend what had happened the previous day. “While we were trying to see what all I could do with my super awesome world-endy powers, I touched Bucky’s soul.”

“Okay.”

“Not knowing what I was doing, because I’m a fucking idiot, I ended up giving him part of my soul.”

“Got it.”

“Giving him part of my soul opened me up for something bad to fill the part I’d just lost.”
Darcy heard Jane’s hum and the snap of her fingers. “See, I think that’s where you lose me.”

Darcy sat up, clutching a pillow against her chest. “Oh, *that’s* the part that gets you? Is it, Janey? The part where I did something stupid and ended up making things *a metric shit ton* worse?” Seeing the look on Jane’s face made Darcy crumble, falling to her side on the bed, staring frustratedly at the wall.

Jane waited for Darcy to fall silent again before starting again, used to her best friend’s sarcastic tendencies. “So it’s like you’re a cake, right? You have six slices. You gave a slice of you to Barnes...”

“Great now I’m hungry for cake.”

“- and that leaves an empty cake slice open for something disgusting, like a fruitcake, to weasel its way in.”

“But you *like* fruit cake.”

“Shut up, it’s a metaphor.” When Darcy stayed silent, Jane continued, “so the evil fruit cake wanted to fill your slice, but Barnes ran in and gave you part of *his* cake, and since you’d already given your slice to him, he had an *extra* one. So he filled your slot with *his* piece so you weren’t open to being filled in by the fruit cake... monster... stone... thing.”

Darcy looked over at Jane, shoulders shrugging into a sigh and gesturing in the air with her hand. “Something like that.”

Jane nodded, bringing one of her hands to her mouth as she analyzed the problem, biting on a fingernail as she organized her thoughts. “So how do we undo it?”

Sitting up again, Darcy wrapped her arms around the pillow, looking across the bed at her best friend. “I don’t *want* to undo it,” she insisted, eyebrows knitting together, “now that he’s in here? I can’t let him go. I love him.”

“No, Jane. I *need* you to understand this part. I have a piece of him in here,” she tapped on her chest, “with me. I remember things I wasn’t there for, but I *was*. I know what it feels like to be at war even though I’ve never held anything other than a taser gun. I already knew what it felt like to go to bed hungry, but now I know what it feels like to go hungry so *someone else* can eat.”

Darcy reached up and wiped her sleeve across her eyes, catching the tears before they could slide down her face. She was moved to tears so easily now, still sorting through all Bucky’s memories and the emotions that came with them. She could go from a one to a ten on the ‘crying hysterically’ scale in three seconds flat.

“I don’t *want* to undo it. I won’t.” When Jane seemed to accept her words, Darcy felt the urgency sap away, clutching the pillow tighter. “Besides, I am *never* going to try that with the stone again. Ever. I’ve had my fill with fingering souls, thank you very much.”

Darcy watched Jane try and fail to keep the small smirk off her face. “Shut up.” When Jane hid her face in her hands, Darcy hefted her pillow and swung it at the scientist. “Thanks, pal, you’re a real peach.”

“I’m sorry, really. It’s just hard to know that yesterday you were eating poptarts and today you’re in love with someone and have a whole lifetime of other memories in your head.”
Falling to her side again, Darcy pushed the pillow under her head, lips turning down into a frown. “Um, yeah, tell me about it.”

Jane gave Darcy what she hoped was an encouraging smile. “So what happens next?”

Darcy wished she had an answer for her friend, but she didn’t. After Jane had appeared to help console her, thanks to Tony’s quick work at finding where the astrophysicist was, everything had kind of fallen apart. “I don’t know. Buck’s been checking in on me, or letting me check in on him, but Steve hasn’t returned to their room. He’s staying in the other housing wing. With Black Widow.”

Jane laid out next to Darcy on the bed, using her elbow as a pillow, gazing into her friend’s emotion-filled hazel eyes. “And you love him, too?” The look in Darcy’s eyes said enough, and it was written on her face.

“It’s stupid, I know.”

“It’s not stupid.”

“It’s pretty fucking stupid.”

Jane frowned, trying to wrap her head around everything. So much had changed so quickly. “If you have all of Barnes’ memories, and he’s in love with Steve Rogers, then it makes sense that you’d love him, too.”

“It makes sense, but it’s stupid. At least Buck’s going through the same thing I am. All the baggage I’m carrying around? It’s a good thing he’s got that super strength going on because I’ve got quite the set of matching luggage.”

Darcy picked at the drab comforter they were laying on. “I’m waiting for Bucky to come up and wrap you in a giant hug and make sure you eat something every eight hours. He’s caught the ‘my best friend’s an astrophysicist’ STI. Stone Transmitted Infection.” She watched Jane’s eyes widen. “Didn’t think of that? Trust me, I’ve had plenty of time to think of the spiraling repercussions of the stupid stupid thing I did.”

Jane smiled softly at Darcy. “If the stupid thing you did made it so you’re here, talking to me and still my best friend, then I’m glad you did it.”

Darcy’s eyes filled for the eight-hundredth time over the past twenty-four hours. “Shut up, you sappy nerd.”

“He’ll come around.”

“Bucky?”

“No. Steve. Thor always talks about how he’s the heart of the group, how much he really cares for everyone. If he has that big of a heart, then there’s got to be room in it for you, too, right?”

Jane’s words were so sweet, and perfect, and Darcy wanted desperately for them to be true. But the look on Steve’s face when he’d walked out of that room…

Darcy’s eyes screwed shut, shoulders shaking at the memory. She felt Jane move, her friend’s arm reaching out to console her, but Darcy jerked backward out of Jane’s reach, panic filling her eyes. “No! I can’t… I can’t do that to someone else and I don’t know what will happen if you touch me!”

“I could -”
“No. Please, just… Just lay here with me, alright? That’ll be enough.”

Compassion filled Jane’s eyes as she got as close to Darcy as she could, tears pooling in her eyes as she watched her best friend cry with what sounded like a broken heart.

“Barnes!”

Bucky paused in the hallway, turning on his heel to see Jane coming toward him with purpose in her steps. She was doing her ‘science strut’, and he couldn’t help the small smile that turned his lips at the memory. But it wasn’t his memory, it was Darcy’s, and he schooled his features. Jane wasn’t his best friend, despite the swell of emotion in his chest at the sight of her. “Ms. Foster,” he greeted, ducking his head in her direction.

“We can drop that, right? I can call you Bucky and you can call me Jane?” Bucky took in her soft glare, remembering what it felt like to be pinned by it. It didn’t feel right, pretending to be strangers, not with the years of memories he shared now. He nodded. “Good,” she went on, “we should get lunch. Now.”

He felt his eyebrows raise toward his hairline. “Now?”

“Mmmhmm. Right now.” Bucky watched Jane take a deep breath before she reached out and swung her arm through his. It was so familiar, walking with her like this, but also different, as he was a good six inches taller than Darcy. She led them toward the cafeteria. “Darcy tried explaining to me what happened. Am I right to assume that you remember everything from New Mexico and London?”

Bucky nodded, eyes alert as several people in the hallway watched them walk by, arm in arm, with interest. “You’re not wrong.”

“I spent most of the last day consoling Darcy, but I’m pretty sure you know that.”

He glanced in her direction, frowning. “I can’t see what she’s doing now. It doesn’t work like that.”

“I didn’t mean like know know, but you know.”

Bucky did know. The years of shorthand between Darcy and Jane were there in him, too, so he knew. “Yeah. I figured you’d be there with her. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. She’s my best friend.”

“I know,” Bucky said, “but it feels better knowing she’s not alone. Thank you.”

Jane didn’t say much as they moved through the line, and Bucky spent his time glaring at people who were actively looking in their direction. When Steve was gone or his presence wasn’t felt, the natives tended to get a bit restless. And after the scene between him and Steve in the hallway, he knew they had plenty to whisper about.

He followed Jane as she grabbed a table near the window, the salad on her plate piled high and looking much more colorful than his grilled chicken breast. He watched Jane take a sip of her iced tea before she laid her fork on her plate, put both of her hands on the table, and looked at him with lit with intention. “I have questions.”

Bucky nodded, setting his silverware down as well, knowing this was almost certainly why Jane had
sought him out. “Shoot.”

Jane shook her head, unable to keep the mystified look out of her eyes. “It’s so weird to hear her coming out of your mouth. She called me ‘pal’ and a ‘peach’ yesterday. I’m betting those are phrases you use quite a bit?”

He really hoped he’d get better at separating what were his and what were Darcy’s mannerisms. Everything was still so new and he was doing everything he could to keep from going mad with it all. “Less than you’d think, but if she didn’t use them before… yeah, it’s probably me.”

“She explained everything that happened. I get most of it, but there’s a couple things I’d like understand better.”

Bucky looked skeptically at her. “I’ll do my best but I can’t promise I’ll be much help. This is more her area.”

“Of course. Okay. She accidentally gave you a part of her soul, and that’s what made it so you could tell something bad was going to happen to her? Why you ran to her?”

Bucky’d been trying to figure that part of it for days now. How had he known Darcy was in trouble? He’d seen that emerald green, her emerald green, as it hit him, and suddenly he knew where she was, what she was doing, and what was wrong. He didn’t see her, her physical form, but he saw her colors, knew she was missing a part, knew that it was a bad thing. Bucky knew what it was to be missing pieces of himself, knew that feeling in intimate detail. Maybe that’d made the difference. He couldn’t be sure.

He looked across the table at Jane, uncertain how to explain that he’d been broken for so long that he knew when someone else was about to break, too.

“I saw her and knew it. I don’t -”

“That’s okay. That’s not my big question anyway.” Jane leaned forward, freezing him with her whiskey eyes, her gaze filled with analytical fire. “If you knew she needed a piece of soul to keep this big bad stone monster from getting into her, why didn’t you just give her back the bit of her soul she’d just given you?”

It took a moment for Jane’s question to make sense. When it did, Bucky sat back in his chair, lips parting as he slowly let the air out of his lungs.

Had that been an option? It hadn’t seemed like it at the time. He’d been so terrified for her, afraid of what would happen if he didn’t fix it, if he didn’t keep her safe. Was it something he could have done, giving her back what she’d given him? Or was Darcy the only one who could give and take parts of her own soul? If he’d had a choice, would he have chosen to make it all go away?

The second he’d seen that emerald haze he’d been bombarded by images, Darcy’s entire life in the span of a few seconds; every happy moment, every mistake, every bit of violence and abandonment she’d had to endure. It’d all been there, fresh in his memories, his heart gripped with fear as he ran. Had that influenced what he’d done?

Had he been unwilling to become just one more person in Darcy’s life that threw her away without a second thought?

Bucky shook his head. Seeing the hurt in Steve’s eyes was agony, falling asleep without him like torture, and he was terrified to the core at the prospect of losing him, but he couldn’t relinquish what he now shared with Darcy.
“I don’t know if I could have done anything different, but I wouldn’t change anything if I could.”

He watched Jane’s mind move behind those eyes, brilliant and logical, turning over his answer. One of her thoughts must have stuck, because she grabbed her fork and began eating again. Unsure if he’d said the right thing, he let the silence descend over them as they ate.

After what seemed like hours but was probably only five minutes, Jane looked up at him with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical look on her face. “Do you share her taste in music?”

“Hell no,” Bucky said with feeling, frowning around his mouth full of chicken. “Screaming is not music.”

Jane stuck her fork out in his direction, vindication lighting her features. “Thank you!”

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“Ma’am, Boss is outside and he’d like to know if you’re up for visitors.”

Darcy looked up toward the ceiling, still not sure how the whole A.I. thing worked. Could it see everything she did? If so, it’d been witness to countless crying jags over the last three days. And it was a woman’s voice, so was it a she? She supposed the person to ask was outside her door. “Yes, you may let Tony Stark enter my domicile!”

“You don’t have to yell. She can hear you,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes as he pushed through her door and let it fall shut behind him.

“So it is a girl?”

Tony stuffed his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels, gaze looking up toward the ceiling. “Friday?”

“Technically I have no gender, but Boss thought people would be more at ease with a female voice.”

Darcy nodded, watching as Tony made his way around her room. He leaned in to read the titles of some of the books Jane had brought her, then flicked her bamboo plant with his finger. When the silence was breezing toward awkward, she felt compelled to say something. “Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Stark?”

He clicked his tongue as he glanced in her direction. “Come on. I’ve brought you breakfast in bed. I think that puts us on a first-name basis.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I have years of you hating me in here,” Darcy said, putting a finger to her temple and tapping it, “so it’s still all a little new.”

Darcy tried not to flinch as he swung his head to look at her, seriousness in the brown of his eyes. “So you really have everything in there? Full transfer of memories?” She nodded. He let out a huff of air, his chin dropping so he was looking down at his sneakers. “Well that’s…”

“All kinds of fucked up? Yeah.” She sighed, rearranging herself on her bed, setting the pillow aside. “You can sit if you want.”

Tony nodded but made no move toward her and didn’t lift his head. Darcy didn’t know what to do, so she picked at the hole in her jeans, pulling at a thread. She heard him take a deep breath in, almost like he was gathering himself. It wasn’t everyday that someone could unnerve Tony Stark, but she
supposed finding out that two people remembered killing your parents could be bitch to accept.

“Tony, I’m sor -”

“No. Nope. Don’t do that. It wasn’t you.” He looked up at her then, and she could see the emotion in his eyes as he pinned her with his gaze. “I can’t… no. We’re not going to talk about it, okay? I’m putting a full embargo on that right now, you get me?”

Sighing, Darcy nodded her head. It wasn’t like it was a conversation she’d been looking forward to, anyway. And as much as she knew Bucky tore himself up over it, over every life he’d taken as The Soldier, it wasn’t hers to push. The turmoil of emotions when she looked at Tony was hard enough to process; Bucky carried so much guilt and frustration, and when it mixed with her overall friendly feeling toward Tony (aside from the douchey nicknames he kept calling her), it made for a pretty big span of emotions. “I get you, Tony.”

“See? I think that sounds better, don’t you?” He came closer to Darcy, looking out the window beside her bed but leaving his back to her.

Darcy moved so her feet hung over the side of the bed, hands beside her, brushing over the comforter. The blanket didn’t actually comfort her at all, and she had every intention of replacing it as soon as possible. But that would require getting cleared to leave this place, and she didn’t see that happening any time soon.

She remembered what it felt to lose her arm, and then have it replaced with a prosthetic, and even though she hated the blanket, being able to feel the fabric when the fingers of her left hand? It was amazing, but she really hoped she’d get the hang of separating her feelings from Bucky’s. It was all a little much. She glanced up at Tony, who seemed absolutely dead set on making this meeting as awkward as possible. “Are you -”

“How are you doing?” Tony interrupted as he turned, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the window as he peered at her. “I mean physically. Seeing any side effects? You’re not shining like a glowstick at the world’s worst rave anymore, so that’s something.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess that is something.”

She took a deep breath and thought about what he was asking. Had she noticed any side effects? Her emotions had been up and down for the past few days, but seeing as one of the men she loved wanted nothing to do with her, that could pretty much be explained away. She didn’t ache, or hurt, or feel any different. Besides how completely not normal she felt, things seemed to be okay. “I haven’t noticed anything, no.”

“Colors are still there?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And you’ve talked to Banner?” When she shook her head, Tony sighed, pushing off the window. “Really? I thought we talked about this.”

“We didn’t talk. You talked at me. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’ve been a bit preoccupied with things lately, so forgive me if I haven’t gotten around to setting up an appointment with him yet.”

“It won’t get better unt -”

“Please, spare me the lecture, okay? I’m not a child. I know things are fucked and they’re not going to get better without work, but I’d really like to float on my sea of self-loathing for a bit longer, if
that’s alright with you.”

When she watched his eyebrows raise in response to her angry word vomit, Darcy groaned and hid her face with her hands. She could tell some of the frustration was hers, but it was hard to know where her frustration ended and Bucky’s guilt started. “Fuck you both need to work on your issues because it is annoying as shit. Just beat the hell out of each other and get it over with.”

Of course, as those words came out of her mouth, she realized that he and Bucky had beat the hell out of each other and it’d done nothing to help the situation. At all.

Darcy dropped her hands to her sides, head hanging as her shoulders began to shake. This was getting so old, this vascliation of emotions back and forth, digging through his memories and her own, trying to reconcile the rolling sea inside of her. The heartache only seemed to amplify the internal dissonance, leaving her an emotional basketcase.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered in between gasps of air, fingers fisting in the fabric below her.

She felt the bed dip as Tony took a seat next to her. He didn’t say anything, just sat there while she cried. When most of the tears had subsided, she ran a sleeve over her nose, not caring how disgusting she was. It wasn’t like anyone could come close enough to tou -

Darcy’s hazel eyes blinked and turned to look at Tony, the colors taking over; he was black, oil, a sheen of blue and purple, a beautiful shimmering silver running through his middle. Darcy’s non-eyes looked down, not seeing his hand, but feeling the heat of it where it rested on hers, that undercurrent of silver bleeding onto her emerald green.

Shoulders starting to shake anew, Darcy blinked away the tears and looked at him, real and there and looking back at her with actual empathy in his eyes. “Should you be -”

“Probably not,” Tony said, letting out a breath, like he hadn’t been sure what would happen when he touched her, “but we theorized that unless you specifically attempt to use your powers, the whole soul transferring thing would be in a kind of remission. We couldn’t think of a way to test it, so I thought I’d do something stupid, too. Seems to be the theme of the last few days.”

Darcy searched his gaze for a long time, trying to see any kind of ulterior motive. “Why would you risk it?”

Tony looked down at their hands, moving until their palms were pressed together, squeezing softly. “Because you risked it for me. And them. And everyone else. You had no idea what would happen when you touched that stone, but you did it anyway, which was enormously stupid and also kind of amazing.”

“But mostly stupid.”

“So stupid I can’t even explain it in words.” Tony’s smile widened when she laughed softly, squeezing his hand back.

Darcy leaned her body against his, shoulders touching, taking a deep breath in. She hadn’t realized she’d been so touch starved until he’d grabbed her hand. It was such a little thing, simple and platonic, but right then it was exactly what she needed. Simply taking comfort from a friend, or what she thought might one day become a friend.

“So what happens now?”
“Hopefully you take a shower because you look like shit, kiddo. Do you even own a hairbrush?”
When Darcy pulled back to glare at him, his lips curling into a smirk. “Not the answer you were looking for?”

“No, you dick.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders. “My suggestion would be to ask Bruce to sit down with you, explain a little of what he has to do, how he keeps the green guy caged up. Then we go from there.”

Darcy nodded, leaning back against him. “Okay.”

The silence in her room was companionable. Not awkward, just nice. Darcy drunk in the heat from another body, feeling the compassion that Tony kept hidden behind his jagged exterior walls.

“Hey, Tony?”

“Yeah, champ?”

“Can I paint the walls in here? They’re ugly as fuck.”

“Sure, pumpkin. Go to town.”
He’d been checking in on Darcy regularly, knowing how broken up she was about everything, but both of them were afraid to spend too much time together. It seemed wrong, somehow, not having Steve there with them. And Steve wasn’t there, always one step ahead, never staying in one place too long.

Bucky had breezed past ‘sad’, waved as ‘guilty’ went by, and had stopped at ‘pissed the fuck off’. He knew Steve was a good man, the best man he’d ever known, but damn the punk could be stubborn as fuck. He hadn’t been able to utter a word to the blond since Darcy’d woken up in the med ward and they’d tried explaining what had happened. That Steve was refusing to talk to him was so annoying that, even though he didn’t share the same abilities as Darcy, he was seeing red everywhere.

Lifting his metal hand, Bucky knocked heavily on the door, the muscle in his jaw ticking at being clenched so tightly. As the door pulled inward, he opened his mouth, intent on making it clear to Natasha that if she was helping Steve hide from him that they were going to have issues. But it wasn’t the copper-haired spy that answered the door. It was Barton. Bucky tried to look into the room over the blond’s shoulder, but the archer hadn’t opened it wide enough.

“Is Nat here?”

Clint shook his head, leaning against the doorjamb with his shoulder. “On a mission. What’s up?”

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed. “Did she say how long she’d be gone? I wasn’t informed of an Op.”

If Natasha was gone, it was possible Steve was gone, too. Could that be why he wasn’t around? Steve always made sure Bucky knew if he was going on a mission, thought, but he hadn’t said anything. Would Steve being on a mission make Bucky feel better, or worse? Neither. Both.

“Personal errand, no ETA,” Clint answered. He lifted an apple to his mouth and took a bite. “S’thing
Bucky took a few steps away from the door then, against his better judgment, turned back to the blond in the doorway. He’d never liked asking for help, and he wasn’t particularly close with Barton, but he was quickly running out of options. “Have you… seen Steve?”

“No.”

Bucky watched him chew around the apple, seeing the small change behind Barton’s gaze. He hadn’t answered the question, and Bucky’d caught the omission. He knew, Bucky thought, his eyes narrowing at the other man. And if he knows, Natasha told him. And if Natasha knows…

“If you see him, will you let him know we need to talk?” He watched Barton nod, taking another bite of his apple. Sighing, Bucky left him in the open doorway. He’d gotten halfway down the hall when he heard Barton clear his throat.

“Hey, Barnes? If you were to talk to Steve, what would you want to say to him?”

Bucky knew it.; Steve was there, in that room, just beyond where Barton was standing, he knew it with every fiber of his being.

Schooling his voice, not screaming ‘stop being a child!’ like he wanted to, Bucky took careful steps back, standing in front of Barton with cool eyes. “You mean like if he was in the room behind you and could hear my voice?”

Bucky watched the corner of Barton’s mouth turn up into a smirk. “Yeah, that is exactly what I mean.”

A flurry of responses swirled around Bucky’s head, most of them involving vulgar language that would have made even the Howling Commandos clutch their pearls. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I would tell him that we need to talk about what happened, so I can explain better. There’s a lot he doesn’t understand and I want to make sure he doesn’t get things twisted.”

Clint nodded, taking another bite of apple. “That it?”

Sighing, Bucky’s hands fist ed at his sides. He didn’t want to play telephone, and some of the things he wanted to tell Steve - like how he missed seeing him when he woke up, couldn’t sleep without his warmth, felt lost without his touch - he refused to do through Barton. “I’d tell him he knows where to find me when he’s ready to talk. But it needs to be soon. Real soon.”

Bucky ground his teeth, blowing air out through his nose.

“…and that I miss him.”

It was the most vulnerable thing he was willing to say when Steve wasn’t standing in front of him.

Pushing off the doorway, Clint gave Bucky a solid nod. “Sounds pretty reasonable to me,” he said, pointing at the larger man with his half-eaten fruit. “I’ll let you know if I see him, and let Nat know you were looking for her.”

Bucky nodded, watching as the door shut. He swallowed, looking down the nondescript hallway, before he started in the direction of Darcy’s room.
“I take it you heard all that, with your super soldier ears and what not,” Clint said, turning toward Steve with a raised eyebrow as he shut the door to their room.

“Yeah, I heard it. Thanks, by the way, for not saying outright that I was in here,” Steve said, frowning at Clint.

“Hey, I don’t want to get in the middle of your whole thing, but you’re hiding out in our room, so I’m kind of already in the middle of it.” Clint walked until he could lean against his desk, sharp gaze pinning Steve as he sat on the bed.

As much as he wanted to continue glaring at Clint, Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face. “I’m not hiding out.”

“Steve, come on. You’re Captain Freaking America. You’re shit at lying.” Clint watched Steve’s blue gaze focus on him, and it was not an altogether friendly look. “I got the cliff notes from Nat. I don’t entirely get it, but speaking as someone who got fucked with pretty hard by one of those goddamn stones, sometimes they make you do things that you can’t really control.”

Steve looked up at Clint then, knowing that it wasn’t easy for the archer to remember what he’d done when he was under the influence of Loki and the Tesseract. “This is different.”

“How so? One of those pieces of costume jewelry made something happen and now you’re looking at the aftermath. I don’t know Lewis all that well, but I saw her in New Mexico. She didn’t ask to be thrown into the middle of this. We do the best we can, day to day. Some days are better than others.”

Shoulders lifting and falling with a heavy sigh, Steve stood, giving Clint a small smile. He understood what Clint was trying to do, but he just needed more time to wrap his head around it all. “Thanks for… everything.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Steve crossed to the door, listening for any movement on the other side. Satisfied Bucky wasn’t just camping in the hall, waiting for him to leave, Steve pulled the door open.

“Hey Cap?”

He turned, looking back at Clint. “Yeah?”

“He looked rough.”

Looking down at the ground, avoiding Barton’s gaze so the archer couldn’t see the flash of guilt in his eyes, Steve nodded. He didn’t know what to say to that, the feeling of his chest constricting making words impossible, so he left Barton in the room and shut the door behind him.

PageBreak

“Ah. Bruce. We were just coming to see you.”

Bruce’s eyebrows raised as Tony and a frowning Darcy made their way into his lab. He cast a look around, making sure everything was picked up and nothing time sensitive needed to be taken care of. “Uh, yeah. I’m here. Something I can do for you?”
“Yes, there is.”

Bruce watched Darcy pull on her sleeve as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “But only if you’re not busy.”

“He’s not busy, peaches, look at him!” Tony gestured toward Bruce with his hands. “He’s the very definition of not busy, right Bruce?”

Realization dawned on Bruce as he remembered talking with Tony a few days prior. “Um, yeah. I’m not busy.”

“See? Perfect timing.”

Darcy knew when she was being jerked around, and she had half a mind to reach out and punch Tony in the arm. Figuring she had nothing to lose, she did so, earning a yelp of surprise and a glare from the billionaire. “Hey!”

“Ignore him,” Darcy said, gaze swinging back toward Bruce, heat pinkening her cheeks. “I can come back if this is a bad time.”

“No. This is a good time, Darcy, really. Tony said you wanted to sit down, uh, maybe have me go over some of the control techniques I use?”

Pretty sure Tony was playing both of them, even if it was with the best intentions, Darcy nodded at the scientist. “I’m still having trouble controlling when the colors come in and out, and the feeling of dizziness when I think about everything too hard.”

Bruce nodded, sweeping his hands toward the small sitting area tucked in the corner of his space. Darcy took a seat on a couch as he sat in an office chair and rolled until he was facing her, leaving enough space that she didn’t feel crowded.

“You need anything else from me, peanut, or are you good?”

Darcy turned up to pin Tony with a glare at his use of the nickname, but it softened when she realized he meant the words. “I’m fine.”

“Perfect.” Tony squeezed her shoulder, throwing a nod in Bruce’s direction before making his way out of the lab.

It was quiet as the door closed, leaving Darcy and Bruce looking awkwardly at each other. Sure, they’d spent time together when she’d been stuck in the med ward, when he’d been running every medical test imaginable in an effort to figure out what the hell had happened to her, but this was really the first time they’d sat one-on-one with each other without a syringe or the need for a backless hospital gown.

Bruce cleared his throat, squeezing his own knees as he looked at her. “Do you want me to just do an overview, or…”

She shrugged, “I guess? Tony made it seem like you were some kind of guru who could teach me how to use the force, harness my chi, grab the horse by the reins, or some other kind of metaphor.”

Bruce laughed softly, nodding his head. “He would think that. I guess, I should start at the beginning.”

Darcy had never heard the real story about what - or who - lived inside Bruce, and hearing it from
the source himself had been quite the eye opener. She breathed a long sigh outward, nodding at him impressively. “Yeah. I could see how you might need some yoga after all that.”

“It’s not yoga, not really, but it has a lot of the same principals. If I feel my control slipping, if I’m losing myself because there’s too much noise in my head, I shut it out. When you’re at your lowest, you have to shut everything else out. You have to go to the quiet place inside of yourself. When you start trying there’ll be times that you won’t get there, when everything else won’t fade. I still slip sometimes. It’s not an exam, you’re not going to ace every test. You just keep trying.”

Bruce wasn’t sure if he was explaining this right, or if it would do any good for Darcy at all, but he was more than willing to try. “People call it transcendental meditation, but I just think of it as ‘anti-noise’. Choosing to listen to yourself instead of anything else. It’s your body, and while you might not always be able to control it, you can decide how to manage and deal with it as it happens.”

“Choosing to see things on the sunnyside of life?” Darcy asked, raising a wry eyebrow in his direction.

“Not sunny, just realistic.”

She nodded, really trying to understand what he was saying. The idea of everything going quiet sounded amazing, but she’d never found it easy to be still. Literally moving every six months had made Darcy scared when the waters were placid for too long. “Sometimes I have too much in my head,” she tried explaining, “too many thoughts, emotions, memories. I can’t grasp the whole situation until it’s one giant ball of suck and I don’t know how to get past it.”

Bruce nodded knowingly. “You have to unpack. Rip everything apart and lay it side by side instead of a ball of… suck.” When she smiled at him, he gave her a small one of his own. “I have a mantra in my head that I repeat, that centers me when I find myself off kilter.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to say. It’s mine, and I’m the one that gives it strength. You need to find one for yourself. Something that works for you. It might not be a word, it might be a phrase, or a song, or you might start humming.”

Darcy laughed. “Kind of like when they tell mothers in labor to hum through the pain?”

He considered her question. “Yeah. You’re blotting out the noise with something else, letting you focus on what’s inside.”

He’d made it seem so easy, but Darcy didn’t believe it. “Focus on inside?”

“Focus and make all the things easier to see, lay them out one by one. Give it a try. Close your eyes.”

She gave him a dubious look, but as he continued to look at her with that steady, unwavering gaze, she sighed, letting her eyes fall closed.

It took a concerted effort, a force of will, really, to keep the colors away. They were there, on the edge of her vision, but she refused to let them bleed all the way. She was trying to control when they came, be able to harness them for some kind of purpose. Knowing when someone was lying to you was great and all, but there were people out there who could already do that without super soul-stone powers.

She gritted her teeth, trying to listen to herself. Darcy wasn’t sure that was a great idea, though, because her thoughts immediately turned toward the largest additions to her life, besides her new
‘gifts’.

Bucky would come see her, hold her hand, hug her, but neither of them allowed anything more than innocent touches. It wasn’t right, and despite how not innocent she wanted their touches to be, they wouldn’t. Not until they’d gotten it all figured out. Not until their third was there with them.

Their third. Nothing felt right when Steve wasn’t there. She’d only met the man a handful of times, but he’d been there her whole life. She’d grown up with him, fought beside him, loved him, lost him, found him again. Darcy was a mess, and there was no way for her to see where she stopped and they began. Her boys that weren’t hers, not really.

What was she supposed to do? Steve had gone AWOL, a term she now understood remarkably well, and any hope of communication or explanation was gone. She ached in ways she had never thought possible, missed him in her bones. Steve and Bucky were hers. She was theirs. It was so simple, but so unbelievably complicated at the same time.

It was fraught, and frustrating and not okay and she was not coping well at all.

“Uh, Darcy?”

If Bucky didn’t corner him soon, if they couldn’t talk to him and try to explain that she hadn’t meant for all of this to happen and she would never put herself between him and Bucky, make him see how much he meant to her… she was going to explode. Burst into a million little pieces and litter the ground like broken and bloody confetti.

“Darcy.”

And Bucky? He’d been through so much. She remembered it all in horrible vivid technicolor. Every bullet he fired, before the fall and after. The pain of being wiped, the way he’d begin to remember, only for the memory to be stolen once again, frozen and thawed, over and over. It was horrific and she honestly didn’t know how he handled it. How did he not just give into the darkness?

“Darcy!”

Eyes flying open at the sound of her name being shouted, Darcy looked into the very concerned eyes of Bruce Banner, who was standing in front of her. “What?” When he nodded in her direction, she looked down.

She was glowing. She was lit from within by an unearthly amber light, like a star swallowed, like a jewel being lit by the sun. She could see wisps of smoke-like power curling in the air around her. Her heart seized, worried that she’d stayed too long, that she’d go to that place and ruin two more lives. “No. No no no!”

“It’s alright.” Bruce had watched her begin to glow, faint at first but then growing stronger, his mind a mix of worry and intrigue. This didn’t look like it had in the chamber, when she’d formed her connection with Barnes. This looked more like the first day, when she’d woken up after they’d transported her to the compound. He’d hesitate to call it ‘contained’, but it didn’t seem to be a danger, either.

“This is nowhere near alright, doc.”

“Sure it is. Just take my hand.”

“What?! No! I could hurt you.”
Bruce took another step toward her, hand outstretched, “I don’t think so, I think you’re doing just fine. You just need to work on it a little bit. Let me help you.”

Darcy shook her head sharply. “I can’t.”

“Yes you can. Come on, take my hand.”

Hazel eyes, quickly filling with disaster, blinked at him. He looked so calm, so comforting. But he’d have to be, wouldn’t he? The thing that lived inside him, all the time, just under the surface? Darcy knew he’d helped, that they’d willingly and happily fought side by side with the ‘Green Guy’ as Tony called him, but it still scared her. “Are you sure?”

“Trust me.”

Darcy took a deep breath, hand shaking as she hesitantly reached out and placed her hand in his. When she felt no rush, no colors, no barrage of new memories and emotions, she laughed, tinged with stress and relief as a tear leaked out of one eye. “I’m doing it,” she said, her laughter bubbly and slightly manic. “Holy shit!”

Her hands were still shaking, her eyes wide, but as she looked at her hand in his, still glowing but nothing else, Darcy couldn’t help the wave of comfort that his touch brought her.

“And I’m not in love with you!”

Bruce’s eyes widened at the look on her face and her words. “Yay?”

That only made her laugh harder, and she reached out with her other hand, taking both of his, fingers gripping at him. She was giddy, body vibrating with relief, her heart racing. For the first time since she’d come out of that metal tube with Bucky’s memories in her head, she felt a little bit of control.

“Oh, Doc, now how do I turn off the lights?”

“Do you want to be glowing right now?”

“Fuck no.”

“They say ‘no’ and put the light away.”

Darcy snorted. “It’s that easy?”

He shook his head. “Not at all. But you still need to do it.”

The truth in his eyes, that sometimes you didn’t think you could do something but had to do it anyway, put a power in her stomach. She clenched her teeth and nodded. As Darcy continued to look into his kind brown eyes, she thought about the part inside of her that made her glow, that painted her world in colors, the part the stone lived in, and told it ‘no’.

It didn’t listen, so she told it ‘fuck no’.

It wasn’t until she had started on a tirade, with a whole new set of vocabulary thanks to Bucky’s memories and the filth that had been born on those Brooklyn streets, that she watched her skin quiet and the light fade away.

When she was left there, skin the same pasty white it’d been upon entering Bruce’s lab, she let out a heavy breath, her shoulders sagging and head hanging. She felt utterly and completely drained, an exhaustion she could feel in every pore and muscle in her body.
“You okay?” Bruce squeezed her hands, watching her deflate like some kind of balloon.

“I did it,” she whispered, looking up at him through the curtain of dark curls around her face. “And it fucking sucked.”

Bruce smiled when she looked up at him, fatigue in her eyes. “What was that bit about not being in love with me?”

Darcy slowly, feeling like she was swimming through molasses, pulled her hands out of his. “Oh, that thing? Forget it. Not important.”

“Is that what happened with Bar -”

“Friday, do you think you could ring Tony and let him know he can come fetch me now?” Darcy looked back from where she’d been yelling at the ceiling. At Bruce’s look, she shrugged her ridiculously heavy shoulders. “He promised me ice cream and paint. It’s a long story.”

“Seems like you have a few long stories in you.”

“From your mouth to David Bowie’s ears.”
Chapter Summary

While Steve is still radio silent, Natasha checks on Darcy and Bucky.

Chapter Notes

All these comments give me life, guys! Thanks! I promise there is a happy light at the end of this angsty tunnel! ... the longer it takes the sweeter it is? Yeah. I don't believe that BS either, but it's coming!

Reminder: Hover over the Russian with your mouse for the translation!

There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds

Laurell K Hamilton, Mistral's Kiss

Darcy was dreaming. Or remembering. It was hard to tell these days, as everything seemed to blend together in her head. Darcy knew what memories were hers, and what were Bucky's, but the feeling that accompanied them was… heavy. And real. So, so very real.

She was still being avoided, and it hurt. It hurt like fire and thirst. She knew why, and she’d even agree that she’d done something wrong, crossed a line (like she always did), but it didn’t make her ache any less for a man she’d only just met and known for the whole of her life. It’d been almost a week now, almost a week since she’d shared her soul with Bucky, and Steve had been a ghost. She hadn’t seen him on the grounds, or in the cafeteria. It was almost like he was having Friday make sure he was alerted where she was so he wouldn’t run into her.

Was he? Was he doing that? *Fuck*, what if he was? Did he hate her that much? Would she survive if he did?

“Ma’am, Sergeant Barnes is at your door. Would you like me to let him in?”

Darcy blinked at Friday’s voice, gaze sliding from the spot she’d been glaring at the floor and swinging toward her door. She blinked again, this time letting the colors bleed into her world, and there he was. Crimson, charcoal and cerulean, with just a hint of emerald. He hadn’t knocked, content to stand on the other side of the door, most likely glowering at it. He was so very good at
glowering, her Bucky.

“Yeah,” she answered, hearing the metal lock slide open.

She watched him stand there for a few more seconds, no doubt trying to gather the strength to inform her, yet again, that Steve had managed to dodge him. Finally, he pushed the door open, stepping silently into the room and letting the door fall closed behind him.

Bucky hesitated, back against the door. Darcy was sitting on the couch at the end of her bed, legs pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her knees, giant fuzzy socks on her feet. Absently he noted that the walls were no longer the drab grey that the rest of the housing wing consisted of. They were now a deep burgundy. It made the room seem cozier, warmer, more alive.

_Just like Darcy_, he thought, eyes drinking her in, instantly feeling guilt at how his body reacted to her. It still felt wrong, and so right, and it was eating him up.

Darcy looked at him, the darkness and guilt bare in his grey eyes. It wasn’t like she knew his _current_ thoughts, but she knew _him_ and knew he was blaming himself. Just like she was. They were sharing the blame and wading in the guilt, feeling it creep higher and higher over their bodies.

_What a fucking pair we are._

“Come here,” she said, holding a hand out to him. He hesitated (she understood why), then crossed the room, threading their fingers together. The second their skin touched it felt like the air in the room had lightened, like a weight she hadn’t known had been lifted from her shoulders. She knew he felt the same, and that only made her feel more guilty.

“I don’t know how to explain it to him,” Bucky growled, reaching out to push a lock of hair behind her ear where it’d come loose from her braid. It’d only been days, but her touch was familiar, like a balm. Little things; the holding of hands, the brushing of shoulders, the heat of her body against his. It didn’t matter what it was, touching her made him feel better like nothing else could. They were only missing their third.

“I know,” Darcy said, leaning against the side of his body, smelling the cologne Steve had bought for him, recognizing it and, underneath it all, _Bucky_. “I feel gutted. I’m scum. I’m less than scum. I’m the stuff scum people feed their scum dogs.”

He shook his head, eyes falling closed as his hand held hers like a lifeline. Bucky didn’t know how to fix this, and it was driving him mad. He needed both of them, had to have them, both, together. “If I hadn’t -”

“Given me part of your soul so that some giant cosmic force hadn’t taken residence inside of me and used it as a foothold to destroy everything in the universe? Yeah. I know. Still fucking sucks.”

Even though the silence that fell between them was comfortable, it still felt awful. Darcy knew what it was to love Steve Rogers, to know him intimately, to love all of him, his loyalty and stubbornness, his absolute conviction, his desire to do what was right, above everything else. And just as she knew what it felt like to _love_ him, she now knew what it felt like to _lose_ him, too.

“Do we give him space?” she asked, lifting her head to look at him.

“He’s already taken that, doll. Hasn’t been in our room for days.”

“I know.”
It only took an errant thought for Darcy to find him. Steve was in one of the weight rooms in the very east of the compound, as far away as he could get. The first time she’d looked for him after everything, she’d been confused. She’d looked everywhere for that brilliant gold, only to find him in a far flung wing of the compound, muted and muddy. The blue was still there, dark and strobing, but something in him was… not as shiny.

And it was all her fault.

It grew silent in the room, and Bucky let the tumble of thoughts in his head take over, looking at the fuzzy socks she wore, covered in pictures of little fluffy sheep. As his thoughts so often did, they flashed back to what it’d been like before Hydra, before his fall, before the war and his unit shipping out, back to the streets of Brooklyn and the tiny, feisty blond he was constantly bailing out of fights because he didn’t know when to quit.

Bucky’s lips twitched into a familiar smirk. “You remember that time he got so hopping mad he stopped talking to me for over a week?”

Darcy frowned, shuffling between the two lives worth of memories in her head. Finally, her mouth turned upward in a small smile. “It was sweltering.”

“Mmmhhmmm. Brooklyn, disgusting with summer haze, the smell of garbage rotting in the alleys. Nine whole days without a word, filled with righteous fury when I said maybe he wasn’t meant to be a soldier, that maybe he’d be safer just staying home. All because I hated the thought of him being in danger, or getting hurt, or losing him.”

Bucky looked down at their laced fingers, remembering the hurt and anger in Steve’s blue gaze, eyes so big, his heart and courage too large for his small body. “But he came back. He always comes back. The punk’s spent his whole life chasing after me. Maybe it’s time I return the favor, chase after him a bit.”

She nodded, shoulders lifting and falling with a sigh. “I tried explaining to Jane that it’s hard for me to sleep because he’s not there. I don’t…” Darcy pulled her hand from his, running both of hers over her face.

It was too hard to explain that you missed something you never really had.

“I’d say I’ll sleep here tonight…” Bucky said, eyes sliding to look in hers as he trailed off.

“… but neither of us want to be without him, even if it means being together,” she finished, throwing a knowing and sad smile in his direction. “We’re so many levels of fucked up.”

“A hot mess,” Bucky agreed, shaking his head, the words tasting horrible even as they fell out of his mouth. “What a stupid expression.”

They both laughed, leaning against each other, taking comfort. Eventually the laughter faded and they were left there, heartsick and aching. “Tell me this is going to be okay,” she begged, voice pleading, eyes filling with tears as she looked down at her hands, “tell me I didn’t just rip the heart out of three people for no fucking reason.”

“Darce, it wasn’t just you. I did it, all the same.” And he had. If his conversation with Jane had illuminated anything about what had happened, it was that he had made a choice, consciously or unconsciously, and he’d chosen her. “I went seventy years without that man, I’m not going to let him go now. Not now. You believe me? Hey. Look at me.”

Darcy looked at him then, the look in her eyes breaking his heart, watching the first tear roll down
her cheek. “We’re going to figure this out, Darcy. We’ve been through worse. This is just a drop in
the ocean.”

She nodded, sending more tears down her cheeks. Darcy wanted him to kiss her, to whisper against
her lips that everything was going to be fine, her body aching for it until she couldn’t feel anything
but hurt. “I believe you, Buck.”

Bucky’s thumb brushed away another tear, fingers sifting through her hair until he held the back of
her neck, pressing his forehead to hers, taking a deep breath. He couldn’t bear the look in her eyes
anymore than he could bear the misery in his heart. He let the breath out slowly, mind determined on
a plan of action. “I might have done something monumentally stupid.”

She laughed, sniffling through her tears. “Oh, goodie. A play straight from the Darcy Lewis
Handbook.”

The Avengers compound really did have everything. Darcy’d asked Friday where she could wash
her clothes and the A.I. had told her if she put her laundry in the garment bag from the back of her
closet and left it outside her door, it would be picked up and cleaned for her. Arguing with Friday
had been interesting, but in the end Darcy had prevailed, being shown where she could find a washer
and dryer so she could do her own goddamned laundry, thank you very much.

Darcy didn’t have a lot to do these days. She couldn’t leave the compound, though she was this close
to convincing Tony to take her on a walk around the grounds, if only for the change of scenery. She
couldn’t work (Jane was sciencing ‘off campus’ so to speak), didn’t want to just wander the halls
aimlessly, and one could only watch so much horrible daytime and reality TV. She had cabin fever
bad, with no metaphorical light at the end of a metaphorical tunnel.

As she sat on top of the washing machine, legs swinging, the last of her clothes finishing in the dryer,
she swiped her finger against the iPod Jane had given her. The compound was much too quiet for
Darcy, despite the hundreds of people that worked and lived there, and she’d been going insane from
the stillness. Her best friend had provided her with a solution, but Jane didn’t have the same
(amazing) musical taste that Darcy had, so finding something in the library that she liked was proving
difficult.

“Damn it Jane, we’re going to need an intervention for your obviously unhealthy obsession with
Michael Buble.”

Finally, after a good half hour of looking, Darcy settled on Alanis Morissette circa 1995. She folded
her laundry, listening to the music of horrible junior high formals where you had to ‘leave room for
Jesus’ when you danced with a boy. She was more than happy to focus on music and her laundry,
instead of the relentless ache she felt every moment when her mind was allowed to wander.

Darcy threw the last t-shirt in the basket and turned, humming to herself, before she let out a rather
undignified scream. Natasha Romanoff was standing right there, green eyes cool, face immobile and
expressionless. The basket and her iPod hit the ground with a clatter as Darcy’s heart rate raced.

“Паук!”

Even as the words left her mouth, Darcy knew it was a mistake. It was almost imperceptible, but she
saw recognition in Natasha’s eyes, her pupils dilating slightly at the nickname. Whatever knowledge
she could draw from Bucky’s memories was washed away as the copper-haired assassin took a step
toward her.

“No. You don’t get to call me that,” Natasha said, green eyes regarding Darcy coolly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t… I mean I wouldn’t… it just -”

“Stop talking.”

Darcy’s mouth snapped closed with a clack of teeth. She was pretty sure that if she even thought about pulling from Bucky’s memories, Natasha would know and punish her for it.

Natasha waited until the pretty girl’s eyes had filled with enough fear before she opened her mouth. “I saw what happened with the stone. I was there. I know what you did for us. Thank you.” She watched Darcy’s internal struggle on whether she should respond, glad when she thought better of it and said nothing. “Steve Rogers is one of the best men I know, a better friend than I deserve. Bucky is… well, our relationship is complicated.”

Darcy swallowed, nodding her head softly. She did know. Everything that had to do with the Red Room was hazy. If she wanted to, she could draw those memories to the surface, analyze them in more detail, but something kept her from doing so. Perhaps it was naive, even with all the horrible things she knew Hydra had done to Bucky, but the thought of little girls being trained as killers, their childhoods stolen, their bodies used... that was something she didn’t want to know.

Everything after the battle had been chaos, digging through the rubble, taking the tally of dead and injured. Natasha was surprised they hadn’t lost more people than they had. No one expected to make it out of the fight, but they’d all gone anyway. They’d known what the odds were. Darcy Lewis and Jane Foster being so near the front lines wasn’t in the plan, but Natasha knew improvising was a priceless skill in dire situations.

The dark-haired woman in front of her had improvised and saved a lot of lives. Natasha could be grateful, and she was, but it was hard to see Steve hurting. She’d meant what she’d said: being able to count Steve as a good friend, even family, was more than she deserved. It was hard to watch the dimness in his eyes, the slight hunch in his shoulders. She’d been trained to read microexpressions, though she didn’t need special training to know her friend was aching.

…but she could see the same affliction in the woman before her. She’d initially come to watch Darcy, test her, get a better read on her. Natasha got it now, that Steve wasn’t the only one hurting, and the words she’d built up in her head were worthless.

“Steve’s been staying with me,” Natasha said, watching relief wash into Darcy’s eyes. “I just thought you should know that he’s safe.”

A knot in Darcy’s chest loosened at Natasha’s words, her heart rate slowing, her worry and fear easing slightly. It would have been easy to look for Steve again, letting the colors show her where he was, but seeing his colors so muted and lackluster... all it’d do was hurt. So she’d stopped herself; she was already hurting enough. Knowing that he was safe and not alone made her feel the tiniest bit better.

“Bucky?”

Natasha’s eyes did narrow then and Darcy didn’t need super-soldier knowledge to know it wasn’t a friendly look. “I’ll get to him soon.”

Glad she wasn’t on the other end of that conversation, Darcy nodded. When Natasha said nothing else and made for the door, a frown formed on Darcy’s face. “That’s it?”
Natasha paused in the doorway, turning and gracefully quirking an eyebrow toward Darcy. “Is ‘what’ it?”

Darcy’s hands gestured in the air, trying to articulate her meaning. “I figured you’d give me this big speech about how if I hurt Steve you’d made sure I regretted it, that you’d come at me when I’d least expect it and exact your revenge, make me ‘rue the day’... that kind of thing.”

Natasha blinked at her. “Do you plan on hurting Steve?”

Darcy let out a humorless laugh. “You mean anymore than I already have?” When Natasha’s face gave no indication, Darcy shook her head. “Hurting him is the last thing I want to do.”

“Then threats do nothing. You’re already hurting yourself more than I could hope to.” Natasha watched realization blossom on Darcy’s face, watched it bleed into her eyes, the breath she let out as her lips parted.

Darcy was pulled from her inner turmoil when the red-headed assassin left her alone in the laundry room, basket and clothes strewn around her feet in chaos, a billion horrible thoughts running through her head. “Fuck,” she breathed, agony curling in her chest.

Bucky’s jaw ached as he stumbled back, managing to stay on his feet. The kick had caught him unprepared, not expecting such viciousness, but he knew what the game was now, and he was more than willing to play along.

Natasha lunged forward and feigned to her right, knocking Bucky’s fist away from her head and bringing her knee into his stomach. She heard the grunt as it connected, but Bucky was ready and grabbed her leg, using it to swing her forward, throwing her to the mat.

Bucky shook his head, feeling hair stick to his forehead where it’d come loose from the tie holding it back. “Остаться вниз,” he criticized.

She fell back, bracing her neck, her palms pressed against the mat above her, using her legs to flip herself back to her feet. “Вы не мой учитель,” she bit out, voice tight as she advanced. Natasha ran at him, planting her left foot on his thigh, placing her hands on his shoulders. She swung her right leg over, bringing her legs together around his upper arm then throwing herself forward. She followed the momentum, rolling out of his reach, hearing his body hit the mat with a meaty thump. He was up in seconds, his body a blur as he came at her.


It was a dance they’d practiced over years. Natasha would lash out with a leg, Bucky would dodge and follow it with another attack. She yelled when the flat of his hand slapped over her ear. She took several steps back, rubbing at the tender cartilage with a glare in her green eyes, her jaw opening and closing until her ear popped. “Ребёнок,” she growled.

“Why are you fighting?” Bucky asked, arm blocking her punch, taking a step back when she landed a hit in the center of his chest. “Наталия.”

“That’s not my name,” Natasha growled, teeth clenched as she kicked out with purpose, catching the side of his knee with her heel. He went down and she threw herself onto his back, arm wrapping around his neck, legs wrapping around his waist, holding on as she squeezed her elbow.
Spittle flew from Bucky’s lips as he tried to draw in air. His hands clawed at Natasha’s arm as he stumbled and climbed to his feet. Her thighs were closed over his ribs like a vice and he could feel the redness of his face as he went longer and longer without air. When he couldn’t dislodge her, despite the strength he used in his hands, he decided to use his body weight to his advantage.

Bucky bent forward slightly then put all his strength into his legs, jumping as high into the air as he could before he directed their bodies so her back hit the floor, taking the brunt of the impact as they slammed back onto the mat.

The air in Natasha’s lungs was knocked out and she was unable to even grunt in pain as Bucky’s entire body weight and the momentum of the fall left her seeing stars.

Rolling off of her, Bucky climbed to his feet, watching her writhe on the floor in pain. “What did she do wrong?”

Bucky turned to look at the soldiers who were on the side of the mat, watching, their expressions ranging anywhere from shocked to angry. He nodded when one of the soldiers rose his hand. “Fredericks.”

“Romanoff should have followed with a kick to your sternum.”

“No. Rubley?”

“With your size difference she should have stayed low to the ground, using your center of gravity against you.”

“A good idea, but no. Unger?” He looked critically at the sharp features of the woman, already seeing the answer in her eyes.

“She was fighting you with her heart, not her head. She went for pain, not the take down.”

Bucky nodded. “If your role is to de-escalate and neutralize a threat, you should be looking for the best way to take them out cleanly and efficiently. You may be needed elsewhere. Analyze the target, anticipate the way they’ll respond, and take the easiest way to end the fight.”

He turned back toward Natasha, watching as she propped herself up on an arm, back to him and the soldiers. “Alright. That’s enough for today.” He waited for them to shuffle out of the gym and toward the locker rooms before he stepped toward her, sitting on his haunches as he shook his head. “What was that?”

“A good lesson for them, I think.” Natasha glanced in Bucky’s direction, glad she’d caught her breath and looked less than rattled by the time he’d gotten close enough to talk. “Unger caught on.”

“She’s the smartest of them all.” When she glanced up at him, he dipped his chin at her. “Smooth defection of my cross.”

“Thanks. Clint’s been helping me.”

“Even better defection of the real answer to my question.”

“That one I came up with all on my own.”

“Hm.” Bucky stood, holding out his hand toward her. Natasha looked at it before sighing and letting him help her to her feet. “You could have pulled your punches.”
Natasha snorted, rubbing at her shoulder. “When have I ever pulled my punches?”

This time it was Bucky’s turn to snort as he glanced over at her. “Never, Пайк!, you have never pulled your punches.”

“She called me that. Did you know?” When he looked over at her, Natasha’s mouth quirked upward at the look on his face. Obviously Darcy hadn’t told him about their late night meeting in the laundry room. She supposed it was possible Bucky hadn’t seen each her since then. But since Steve was staying with her, she’d assumed that Darcy and Bucky were staying together.

That they weren’t… perhaps it was something Steve needed to know. Natasha filed the information away and continued.

“The first time I’ve met her and she calls me that. The same tone, the same inflection. It was your voice coming from her mouth. It was…”

Bucky nodded. “I almost said the word ‘totes’ yesterday.” He could see Natasha’s grimace from the corner of his eye. “A lot of it is still confusing.”

“But not all of it.”

He looked over at her then, steel gaze noting her soft expression as her green eyes flicked toward him. “No. Not all of it. Some things are clear and solid. There are very few things I am absolutely certain of. One of those is her.”

Natasha stretched her arm over her head, sighing when she heard a pop and felt relief. “And Steve is the other?” She watched Bucky nod, watched him avert his eyes, most likely because he didn’t want her to see the emotion in them. “He’s been staying with me and Clint.”

“I know,” he hummed, “Barton wasn’t exactly covert about it.”

“He’s been out of the game too long.”

“Didn’t he retire?”

“Can any of us really retire?”

“No. No we can’t.”

They were quiet as Natasha stretched the rest of her muscles, already aching in her shoulders, forgetting how solid Bucky was and how much that solid muscle weighed. “He’s alright.” When Bucky pinned her with his gaze, she shrugged her shoulders slightly, ignoring the twinge. “Relatively alright. He might be avoiding you now out of principle, not wanting to make the first step.”

“I’ve tried -”

“I know. I know you have. Maybe you just need to… get creative.”

Bucky’s eyes swung to look at her, seeing the glint in their green depths. “Creative?”

“Yeah. Creative.”

He couldn’t help the slightly mystified expression on his face. “Why are you helping? Didn’t you just try to kick my ass?”
“Completely unrelated. The next time you use the last of the cherry jam and leave none for my tea, expect much of the same.”

He laughed lightly, throwing a towel over his shoulder as they headed toward the locker room.

“Понимал.”
Hands On

Chapter Summary

Tony speaks with Steve about Darcy, Bucky speaks with Friday about Steve, and Darcy is not surprised when Bucky pulls a move straight out of her playbook.

Chapter Notes

You guys are amazing. A M A Z I N G.

Just thought you should know...

“Where exactly do you put your hands on somebody who hurts everywhere?”

— Charles D’Ambrosio

“You and I need to have a chat.”

Steve glanced up at Tony, closing the binder on the desk in front of him. He’d been getting daily updates from King T’Challa, making sure the rebuild of Wakanda was on track. They owed Wakanda so much, and when Sam and Wanda had expressed a desire to assist in T’Challa’s efforts, it’d been the right thing to do, the least they could do.

“I’ve got a debrief in fifteen minutes,” he said, pushing back from the conference table, rising to his feet.

“Then I’ll use fourteen.”

Sighing, Steve nodded. “As long as we’re mobile.” He wound his way toward the door, feeling Tony follow. When they made their way to the hall, he slowed enough so Tony could catch up.

“This about Wakanda?”

“No. This is about Darcy.”

Steve’s steps faltered slightly, but he caught himself quickly. “Did more abilities manifest?”

“No. Banner’s working with her on some ways to center herself, but it’s slow going. Other than some bouts of glowing and her kaleidoscope eyes, nothing new to report.”
Nodding, Steve shifted the binder from one arm to the other. “Is that it?”

“Has it been fourteen minutes already? No. So there’s more.” Tony ignored Steve’s glare, more than used to That Look on the super soldier’s face being pointed in his direction. “We accelerated the testing on her physical proximity and I can confirm that she is able to touch someone without her powers coming out to play. I think we can take the kid gloves off, let her out with the rest of the general public.”

It’d only been a couple of weeks, and despite the tests Tony and Bruce were conducting, Steve was reticent to let her mix with everyone so soon. “Are you sure it’s safe? If something happens like last time...”

“Oh, great, I’m glad you brought that up.”

“I didn’t...”

“It seems like she’s recovered from the incident, but I’m suggesting she continue to work with Bruce, and I’d like her to meet with one of the therapists on staff. I’ve noticed a decline in her mental health. Through our daily visits...”

“Daily?”

“- I’ve been able to ascertain that she’s dealing with some grief and regret. Understandable, really. She’s attempting to cope with it, and I’ve indulged some of her more personal requests, but she’s not where she should be. She cries a lot, seems a bit touch starved. Clingy, really. Weepy. \textit{Lachrymose}.”

Steve stopped walking, letting the air out of his lungs in frustration. Tony took a few more steps before crossing his arms over his chest as he turned to face the blond. “Something I said not sitting well with you, Cap?”

Ignoring the tone in Tony’s question, Steve’s blue eyes flicked up to look at the smaller man. “Why are you telling me this? You don’t need my permission to assign her a therapist.”

Tony took a step toward him, a tight smile on his face. “Just following orders. You said we’d figure this all out, help \textit{her} figure this out. I just want to make sure that’s still the plan. Sure, there’ve been some bumps in the road, but I don’t think it’s \textit{her} fault. We all had some trial and error when everything started, right? No reason to blame her for something she can’t control.”

Steve counted to ten in his head, something he had to do often when talking with Tony. The man loved pressing as many buttons as he could, sometimes to the detriment of the point he was trying to make. He could practically taste the sarcasm dripping in Tony’s words. “No one is blaming her for what happened.”

“Aren’t you, though? Have you seen her lately? Checked in on her? You promised her you’d help her. Have you? \textit{Are} you?” When Steve said nothing, Tony clicked his tongue, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it, Rogers. Bruce and I will make sure she’s alright since you’re too busy. I’ll type up a report and have it on your desk first thing Monday morning.”

Sighing, Steve shook his head as he looked down at the floor. He knew Tony had taken an interest in Darcy, and he knew Tony had no problem challenging him when he wanted to, but this level of needling seemed more personal than was necessary. “I don’t understand why you’re pushing so hard. You barely know her.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I barely know her. Maybe I’m invested more than I should be. But I thought we were working to be stronger, better, to \textit{not} punish someone because of
something they’ve done in the past, something they couldn’t control. Wasn’t that our new team motto?”

Steve felt a hollow laugh rumble in his chest, pinning Tony with a glare, knowing he was using his background with Bucky against him. “Is that what you think you’re doing?”

“Some days are easier than others. I struggle with it. But I’m trying. You’re supposed to be better than me, Rogers. Be better. Do better.”

He watched Tony walk away, disappearing from sight as he rounded the corner, a heavy silence falling on the hallway.

Steve closed his eyes, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly. Tony wasn’t completely out of line, but he wasn’t sure what the man expected of him. It looked like she was being taken care of, between Tony and Bruce and her friend Jane, but was Tony right? Had he been avoiding Darcy?

He was avoiding Bucky, not able to look at the only man he’d ever loved and feel anything other than hurt. Was he blaming Darcy for that? He would love for the answer to be ‘no’ but he’d never been good at lying, even to himself, and some small part of him did blame her. What she’d done to defeat Thanos was stupid and reckless, but he wouldn’t be standing here today if she hadn’t. Hell, the world might not be here.

… but the look in her hazel eyes when she’d looked at Bucky, and the spark of life in Bucky’s as he’d looked at her …

Steve was being unfair to her. Tony was right. Damn it all, but Tony was right. Darcy deserved better than his silence and avoidance. Bucky was a different story - it might take him longer to figure that part out - but Darcy deserved some kind of contact, if only to substantiate Tony’s thoughts on her mental health. If her powers were tied to her emotions, letting her slip too far into a depression might prove to be catastrophic.

Sighing, Steve started toward his next meeting. He’d reach out to her, check in on her, make sure she was doing alright, that she had everything she needed and was settling in. A quick visit. In and out. Easy.

What was one more lie?

PageBreak

“Friday?”

“Yes, Sergeant?”

“Are you allowed to lie?”

A pause.

“Boss has set my deception abilities at a nominal level. He doesn’t enjoy being lied to, even if he wishes sometimes I could.”

“What if it wasn’t a whole lie?”

“Are you wanting me to lie for you, Sergeant?”
A pause.

“No. I need your help.”

“You need to eat something.”

Darcy didn’t look up from the table, even after hearing the ‘mom’ tone Jane had used. She’d been hearing that tone a lot lately and it was starting to bleed into the sounds of everything else. She continued to push the broccoli around her plate, thoughts tumbling in a freefall.

“I thought you hated broccoli.”

Darcy did look up then, hazel eyes widening as she looked at the offending tiny green trees on her plate, a vegetable she detested. “I do hate it. Or I did.” She’d scooped it onto her plate without a second thought. Dammit. She dropped her fork to the plate with a growl, the sound drawing several eyes in her direction from the other tables in the mess hall.

No, not mess hall. The cafeteria. This was a cafeteria and not a place where soldiers had three minutes to chow down on as much military-grade salisbury steaks and imitation gravy before their next patrol began.

Darcy buried her face in her elbow, slumping forward onto the table. This was all a level of fucked up she hadn’t thought possible. Bruce ‘please stop calling me doc’ Banner had tried teaching her some more intradimensional meditation techniques (transdimensional? No, transcendental!) to quiet the new terrifying part of her, if only to ease the symptoms, but she hadn’t quite gotten the hang of it. The first try had been a fluke and she’d been floundering ever since.

“Darce, you’re glowing. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Darcy lifted her head and looked at Jane, then glanced around the room. Everyone was staring at her. She was sure she made quite the show; glowing amber, wave distortions like heat on a highway floating around her body, eyes bleeding from hazel to orange and back again. She pulled her sleeves over her glowstick fingers and crossed her hands over her chest, hiding them in her armpits. “I’m just going to head back to my room. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Are you sure? Do you want me to get Bruce?”

She recognized the worry in her best friend’s eyes, could see it bleeding into the space she occupied, and Darcy wished she could give Jane the answers she wanted, but she couldn’t. She wasn’t really alright, and despite the approval Tony had gotten to let her wander the compound unaccompanied, she still felt out of sorts.

Her life was so out of sorts it was enough to drive her mad.

“I’ll be fine. ‘M Just tired. I’ll eat a poptart later. Promise.”

She knew Jane didn’t believe her, could see the doubt creep onto her face, but Darcy left her there, stares from the other cafeteria occupants making the skin between her shoulder blades itch as she left. She’d walked these halls for months now (no, not her, Bucky, fuck) and she made it to her room without a thought.
Being able to navigate the labyrinth like halls (*Help me, David Bowie, you're my only hope*) without much thought was great, as her mind was too busy replaying the look on Steve’s face in the med ward, watching his lips flatten into a line as he looked at her and Bucky, wrapped around each other, speaking in shorthand and acting like they’d known each other their whole lives, even though it was impossible.

It was the last time she’d seen Steve. Days. *Weeks.*

As she pressed her finger to the lock on her room, she risked a glance over her shoulder at the door that faced hers.

He wasn’t there. Even though she knew he was with Natasha, Darcy expected he’d have to visit, pick up clothes. A toothbrush. *Something.* But he hadn’t. The space was slowly losing his color, like it was hemorrhaging gold the longer he stayed away.

*Me too, room. Me too.*

Darcy collapsed on the couch at the foot of her bed, clutching a pillow to her chest. She looked around at the walls. They’d changed colors again. Painting the walls wasn’t good enough, no. Tony Stark didn’t do anything half-assed. He was an ass, but the man knew how to commit. After painting the plebeian way (his words, not hers), he’d decided to just replace the walls of her room with screens, LED screens, allowing her to change the colors at will.

*To match your wonky eyes,* he’d said with a shrug, throwing her the remote. He’d changed the ceiling, too, but she didn’t care. Darcy’d still asked Jane to get her a pack of the glowing stars, the ones you could stick to the ceiling with poster putty, that would glow when exposed to light. Would Tony like the idea of her tacking things to his most-likely expensive room-sized screen? Probably not. Did Darcy care? A little, but she’d done it anyway.

One of the kids in her third foster home had these little stars above his bed. They’d been from the kid before him, and the kid before him, so on and on, backward for who knew how long. All it’d taught Darcy was that you shouldn’t get attached to a place because eventually you would leave.

You’d always leave.

Looking up at the non-glowing bits of yellow, she had to wonder why it’d been so important for her to have them here. She sighed, pressing her chin into the pillow she was hugging. After allowing herself to wallow for a few minutes (a good, heavy, impressive bit of wallowing, if she did say so herself), Darcy sat up, needing to do *something* about the turmoil in her body. She could practically hear Bruce’s voice in her head: *"When you’re the lowest, that’s when you close everything else out. Go to the quiet place inside yourself."*

The joke was on him, though. She wasn’t sure she *had* any more quiet places inside herself.

Dark curls shaking around her face, Darcy placed her hands on her knees, straightening her back. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes. She didn’t think of the universe, or the threads that tied her to it all, or even the souls in the compound; she thought about her soul. It was so small compared to *all* the others (infinitesimal, really), but it was hers. She focused on it, the glowing nugget of emerald, a vein of crimson jutting through.

Even a month ago, the idea of a soulmate was laughable.

Now? Now she could see the undercurrent of cobalt between all that green and red, and it wasn’t funny at all.
It just hurt.

Everything had gotten so complicated so quickly. But what had Bruce said? “Unpack it. Make it easier to see.”

Right.

Unpack it.

As if it was that easy.

Sigh.

I touched a gem and, because I’m some kind of special snowflake extra non-human, I absorbed the stone. I then used the stone to turn Grape Kool-aid Man into nothing.

The stone made it so I can see all souls. I can see them, trap them, destroy them. I don’t want to do that, but the stone does.

I almost let something bad get into me, but instead ended up sharing my soul with Bucky and he shared his soul with me and now we have some sort of soul bond?

For fucks sake, this is stupid.

I love Bucky, and it should scare me, but it doesn’t. But he loves Steve, and I love Steve but Steve knows nothing about me other than I stole Bucky from him and I am a horrible, horrible fucking garbage person!

Darcy leaned forward, screaming into the pillow. “This is so fucked!”

She jumped to her feet when she heard pounding on her door, incessant relentless banging, as if someone were throwing themselves against it. “Friday?” she called out, voice an octave higher in fear.

“Captain Rogers is outside. He would like to enter.”

She froze for a second, hearing another frantic ‘thud’ against her door. “Fucking let him in then!”

The lock clicked over and Darcy jumped as Steve barrelled into her room, his blue eyes wide with surprise when they landed on her. She stared at him, her mouth open as she gaped. His cheeks were flushed pink, his breathing labored. Where had he run from? Why was he running to her?

Steve glanced around the room in confusion. When Friday’s voice had rung through the conference room, stating ‘Ms. Lewis’ heart is having an episode and requires immediate assistance,’ he’d dropped the report and started running, hearing Natasha call out after him.

As he ran, his head filled with possibilities. Was it Bucky? Had something happened to him? Please, God, don’t let my last words to him be ‘let me go.’ If it wasn’t Bucky, was it her? Had she had another incident? Should they have kept her quarantined? Did she hurt someone? Was she hurt? Had Bruce’s scans missed something? If he hadn’t been avoiding her, maybe he’d have seen something sooner.

If she was hurt, it was on him.

When his fingerprint didn’t immediately open Darcy’s door, he hadn’t even thought, just started
throwing himself at it. If they were hurt, or worse, he would never forgive himself. Finally, he’d propelled forward into the room, looking for the sign of trouble.

Instead his eyes landed on a wide-eyed Darcy, long-sleeved shirt and boxers with hearts on them, staring at him in shock, her skin glowing softly.

“What’s wrong? Friday said something happened. Is it Bucky?”

Darcy blinked rapidly at him, shock quaking through every pore as her heart raced. “I don’t -”

They both jumped when her door slammed shut. Steve spun toward it, taking a step so he stood between Darcy and the door. Bucky had his arms crossed over his chest, t-shirt straining against his muscles, jaw clenched as he narrowed grey eyes at the blond.

Darcy’s breath stuck in her throat. *Fuck. He wasn’t kidding. Monumentally stupid achievement unlocked, Buck.*

Steve stared at Bucky, quickly catching onto what had transpired. His eyes darkened in anger. Seconds ago he’d been praying that the man he loved was alright and now he was filled with indignation at having been played. “You getting Friday to lie for you now?” he bit out, tension in the line of his body being replaced with frustration.

Bucky gave as much annoyance as he was being given, glaring at Steve. “Wasn’t a lie, punk. Something is wrong. And we’re going to talk about it. Now.”

Steve’s chest rumbled with a rough, disbelieving laugh. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

Taking a step toward him, Bucky’s finger jutted in the direction of Darcy’s sofa. “Just sit your ass on that couch, Rogers.”

As the men argued, Darcy tried to make herself look smaller. As their voices raised in volume, it set her nerves on edge. She physically took a step backward when Steve turned toward her with a coolness in his eyes.

“You in on this, too?” It was petty and childish and he regretted the question and his tone the second he said it, but Steve was filled with so many contradictory emotions that it was hard for him to focus, and he found anger was the easiest and most comfortable one to channel.

Darcy shook her head emphatically. She had no idea what Bucky’d been planning, but she knew for a fact this was exactly the type of shit she would pull. Fuck, but she was a bad influence on him. She knew he was no altar boy, but Darcy had to wonder how many of Bucky’s actions lately had been because her hedonistic tendencies had been shared with the soldier.

Bucky’s voice was harsh, watching Steve’s gaze swing back toward him. “Sit. Now.”

Darcy sat down heavily, immediately. When Bucky saw her over Steve’s shoulder, his eyes softened the tiniest bit. “I was talking to him, Darce.”

She could feel heat flame into her cheeks. “Oh.”

Bucky’s attention pivoted back to Steve, the intensity returning to his glare. It felt like there were novels of arguments being written in their silent stares, and Bucky was certain they’d stand there forever, neither wanting to make the first move.

Steve saw the determination in his best friend’s eyes, the quiet steel in their depths. His mind flashed
back to the pang of panic at the thought of Bucky being hurt, or worse, knowing their last conversation was not what he’d wanted it to be. He’d had plans to check in on Darcy, work to bridge the silence between Bucky and himself.

Was he really angry that Bucky had forced his hand, or because he’d allowed it to get to this point of desperation?

Body losing some of it’s anger, being replaced with uncertainty, Steve sat, bracing himself on the edge of the couch, not wanting to appear at ease. He heard Darcy’s exhale of breath, the shift of her body in confusion and worry as she looked between him and Bucky.

Watching Steve take a spot on the couch (as far away from me as he can get), Darcy began worrying her lip with her teeth as Bucky sat across from both of them, perched on the coffee table as he glared. Silence fell and began fitting itself happily around the trio.

Looking back and forth between the two men, Darcy wasn’t sure she’d ever been this completely uncomfortable. She let out the breath she’d been holding.

*Fuck.*
Say It Loud

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy and Steve have the conversation that's been needed for weeks. Darcy gets a reprieve from Compound Arrest. Bucky and Steve make up for lost time. (NC-17 scene)

Chapter Notes

This is it. The first chapter that EARNS the Mature rating! You get some smut, and you get some smut, and you! We all get the smut! *Oprah Yell*

The silence in the room was thicker than Thor’s thighs. Darcy could taste the tension and anxiety on her tongue, choking down the bitter flavor. She blinked at Bucky, who was staring at Steve, who was glaring at his feet. Looking back and forth between them, their faces full of angry lines, set her skin itching. This wasn’t how she’d hoped it would go.

"If you love someone, you tell them, even if you're scared that it's not the right time, even if you’re scared that it’ll cause problems, even if you’re scared that it will burn your life to the ground, you say it and you say it loud and you go from there."

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“Well, this is super fucking awkward.” When both boys looked over at Darcy, she shrugged her shoulders defensively, hand gesturing in the air helplessly. “What? It is!”

Steve took some dark satisfaction that he wasn’t the one to break first. That it was Darcy, and not Bucky, made him frown harder. His eyes flicked up to Bucky’s, locking gazes with his best friend. Bucky’s anger was familiar and he could see it in every line of the other man’s body. But underneath all that righteous indignation, he recognized something else. Sadness.

Was this it? Was this the time? Steve’d seen how they looked at each other. Part of the reason he’d kept his distance was because it hurt to much to realize he was in the middle of the two of them now, and it was only a matter of time until they figured out how to end it. He’d spent so long trying to get Bucky back, then filling every free moment he had with the only man he’d ever loved. What was he supposed to do now?

Steve sighed, his voice soft, blue gaze on his hands as they fidgeted, too afraid to look at Bucky. The last thing he wanted to see was relief in Bucky’s eyes, relief that he was the one suggesting that he step aside.
“I’m sorry that I’ve been avoiding you, Bucky. It just took me some time to accept... everything. I know you couldn’t control what happened, I know you made a choice, and I’m not going to stand in -”

Bucky, who’d been perched on the coffee table between Steve and Darcy, stood up in a huff and threw his hands in the air. “Steve Rogers, the self-sacrificing man who’ll set aside his feelings for whatever he thinks is the greater good."

This. This is why Bucky’d been trying to talk to Steve for weeks. He loved the man so much, but Steve would make up his own mind about what was going on and block out anything that didn’t fit into his narrative. He’d done it as children and Bucky’d known he’d do it here, too.

The punk hadn’t changed in almost a century.

Steve frowned up at Bucky, watching as the man paced from one end of the room to the other. “I know when I’m fighting a losing battle.”

Bucky’s laugh was harsh in the space, bouncing off the pale green walls. “Oh, really?” He crossed his arms over his chest as he glared at Steve. “Steven Grant Rogers, you’ve never backed down from a single fight in your entire fucking life! Ever!”

Unsure of the tone being spat in his direction, Steve’s mouth turned down even more. Why was Bucky making this harder than it already was? “If she’s your soulmate and I’m not -”

“Steve, that’s not -”

Unable to take listening to the two of them argue any longer, Darcy stood up. She was perfectly fine hiding in her bathroom while they growled at each other, feeling their animosity bite along her skin like fire ants, burning and stinging and bringing tears to her eyes.

“Darcy -”

She shook her head, arms crossed over her chest, fingernails digging into her biceps as she glanced back at him. “Buck, it’s fine. You guys can talk and I’ll just -”

“He needs to know -”

Bucky stopped talking when Darcy spun around, curls flying as she pinned him with a look of pain.

“He needs to know what, Bucky? He doesn’t know me! He met me a few weeks ago for the first time! We’ve only had a handful of conversations, and those were civil to polite, at best. It doesn’t matter what I feel, or what I know about him. He has no reason to feel anything toward me but contempt! And he’s right and he should!”

Darcy wasn’t sure when she’d started crying but she couldn’t seem to stop the tears any more than she could stop the words as they fell from her lips, each one dripping with pent up agony, for every night she could feel the loss of their body heat, for every smile she didn’t get to share. She gestured toward Steve but wasn’t strong enough to bring herself to look at him.

“It doesn’t matter that I know his favorite color, or his favorite song, or remember how the light came through the window in the apartment on Leaman and hit him just right that it lit up his hair like holy fire. The threadbare sheets, the terrifying pneumonia, the way his Ma took her tea. That shit doesn’t matter because all he knows is I’m a pushy little lab monkey who hijacked the love of his life!”
She pressed her palm over her mouth, stifling a sob before it could escape, desperate to stop the torrent of memories that only served to make her heart ache. When she watched Bucky flinch at the word ‘hijack’, Darcy felt like an even bigger asshole than before, her face falling further.

“Aw, fuck, Bucky, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

Darcy wanted to close the distance between them, to kiss him until he forgot the memories she’d just brought to the surface, to chase all those charcoal colors away...

…but she didn’t. Instead, Darcy took a heavy seat on the couch, biting her lower lip, fingernails digging into her arms to distract from the pain she’d just caused, the hurt still singing through her blood.

Steve’s thoughts were a tumble of half-finished half-understood fragments. There were things Darcy’d mentioned that he was certain she couldn’t know. Yes, he supposed Bucky could have told her, but it’d only been weeks; you couldn’t cover everything, all those years together, in such a small amount of time.

He didn’t pretend to understand what had happened between Darcy and Bucky, but it was obvious something else was going on. Probably the thing that Bucky had been trying to talk to him about. Steve felt like an idiot. He’d let his own pain and resentment get the better of him, and he’d denied both Bucky and Darcy the opportunity to explain.

It wouldn’t be the first time he’d jumped to a conclusion and assumed. When it came to Bucky, all his wires got crossed, to the point where he couldn’t see straight enough to shoot but still took the shot anyway. Steve’s gaze slid to Darcy, watching her teeth bite her lip anxiously as tears continued to slip down her cheeks. He cleared his throat, feeling guilty when she looked at him with eyes well on their way to broken.

“What do you know about the apartment on Leaman?”

Darcy brushed a tear off her cheek as it fell, sniffling and feeling disgusting as Steve looked at her. “Um, everything? I know that the floor plank right inside the back door creaked and you had to avoid it when you snuck in late. The time the ceiling flooded when Ms. Applebaum forgot to turn off her tub and you woke up soaked to the bone. How it got so cold in the winter of ‘39 you had to burn pages from Sarah’s Gaelic bible to stay warm.”

She didn’t know if what she was saying was helping or making things worse, and watching the ghosts of those memories come to the surface in his blue eyes was a whole new kind of painful. The last thing Darcy wanted to do was come between Steve and Bucky, even if it meant having to take herself out of the situation. It was all her fault anyway, and these two men not being together, after everything they’d been through, was not an option.

“I know that what you and Bucky have is... It’s everything. He loves you so much and it’s killing me to see you’re hurting and if he could fix things, he would, because he’d do anything to wipe the pain from your face.”

As her words filtered through his brain, Steve was forced to sift through them for meaning. His eyebrows furrowed as one thing in particular stuck out. He looked at her then, intent and pressing, watching her face. “It’s killing you?”

Darcy blinked, ice flowing through her veins as she realized her slip up. “Him. It’s killing him, I mean.”
He could tell he was missing something. He knew Bucky was upset, the harsh glare he was currently receiving was proof enough of that, but the pain he saw in Darcy’s eyes, and the way she’d spoke about him in Bucky’s memory...

Oh.

Understanding clicked into place, with crystal clarity, and the reality hit Steve like a freight train. He breathed a long sigh outward, brain still refusing to accept the situation, uncertain how he was supposed to process it all.

“No,” Steve said finally, eyes sweeping to look at Darcy, needing to see the truth of it in her eyes, “that’s not what you meant, was it?”

Darcy worried her lip with her teeth until she tasted copper, shaking her head ‘no’, not trusting herself to speak anymore. While most people understood the logistics of what had happened with her and Bucky, the sharing of their memories and an instant bond being forged, she was almost positive no one besides Jane knew the whole truth. Specifically how she was in love with Steve Rogers, just like Bucky was. She looked toward Bucky with apologies, but his eyes were steady on the man at the other end of the couch.

“She saw everything,” Bucky said, Steve’s gaze swinging to look at him. “Not what she read in a history book or saw at a museum. I was there, so she knows. She knows how I feel about you and feels the same, feels it as real and true as I do. And she saw everything else, Steve.”

The intensity of Bucky’s gaze was heavy, and Steve could almost feel the weight of the words his lover was about to say, felt the importance of them in the air.

“Everything I did, when it wasn’t me. When I was the Soldier. Every mission. Every murder. Every horrible thing these hands have ever done, and she still manages to look at me like you do. No what ifs, no maybes. All of it.”

Unrelenting support. Unwavering loyalty. To someone else it would have been foreign, but Steve understood. His gaze flicked from Bucky to Darcy, watching the truth fill the depths of her hazel eyes. He said nothing for a long time, watching as Darcy’s fingers fidgeted and picked at the fraying bottom of her boxer shorts.

What had happened between Bucky and Darcy wasn’t that they’d fallen in love with each other. Well, it wasn’t just that they’d fallen in love with each other. It was that they’d shared everything, which apparently meant they shared the love Bucky felt for him.

“I’m not sure what to do with all this,” Steve said finally, not wanting to lie but unable to think of anything else true to say.

The slightly manic giggle that bubbled from Darcy’s chest hung in the air. “Yeah? Try waking up and realizing you’re in love with two men who you’ve only known a week. They don’t exactly make how-to guides for shit this fucked up.”

She could have sworn she saw one corner of Steve’s mouth lift upward at her words, but she chalked that hallucination up to the emotionally charged atmosphere in the room. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Steve. I couldn’t.”

“I believe you.” And he did. He didn’t need to have her powers to see she was telling the truth. He was sure there were people who could play that amount of broken, a few of them even lived in the compound, but it wasn’t her, at least not that he’d seen. Steve didn’t know much about her, but he
knew she was truthful, even when it might have been better to lie.

Those three words sent Darcy’s chin trembling again, happy for anything other than contempt. That he’d believe her was more than she could have ever hoped for. “You do?” He glanced up at her and the intensity in those blue eyes froze her heart.

“We can’t change what happened. And if what happened means you’re both here and alive, then I’m glad it did. The stuff we experience on a day to day basis… It’s hard to believe a lot of it. But we deal with it as it happens.”

“What are you saying?” Bucky could tell he’d taken the words right out of Darcy’s mouth, hesitance in his voice as he peered at Steve.

Steve glanced between them both, seeing the small glimmer of optimism in their faces. “I’m saying we take this one day at a time. If Bucky…” he paused, “cares about you, and you care about me… I need to get to know you better. Okay?”

Ecstasy filled Darcy’s chest, despite the careful hesitation Steve’d carried in his voice. He wanted to get to know her better. He didn’t hate her. He knew she loved him, even if he didn’t truly believe it yet, and he still hadn’t run out of the room screaming. This was better than she could have ever dreamed.

“Yes! I mean, yeah, I’m okay with that, Steve. Are you okay with that, Bucky? I think that’s a swell idea. A real swell idea.” She looked at Bucky with widened eyes, the tears still wet on her cheeks, though drying much quicker now.

The look on her face drew Bucky’s lips upward into an encouraging smile, and he couldn’t ignore the feeling of right that settled in his chest when he looked at the two of them side by side. Dark and Light. Steve and Darcy. The two people he loved, in one place. “That’s fine by me, doll.”

“Okay, Steve?”

Steve nodded when her wide eyes turned to look at him, expression filled with so much laid bare hope that it was hard to look away.

“Awesome. Yes. Okay. Yay!” Darcy lifted her hands and and shook them in the air. She watched Bucky roll his eyes at her in her peripheral vision, but she was almost certain a ghost of a smile appeared on Steve’s lips, however small. She felt like she was floating on air.

“The sky’s really pretty today,” Darcy said, face turning toward the sun, a smile curling her lips, “don’t you think?”

Her eyes were closed, so she didn’t see the look Tony shared with Bruce as they strolled along the tree line at the edge of the grounds. It was the first time she’d really been able to walk around outside, and she wanted to take full advantage of it, feeling the crisp autumn breeze as it sent her curls flying.

Tony’s hands were shoved into his pockets, sneakers crunching the leaves that were beginning to turn gold and fall from the trees. “You’re rather chipper this morning, sport. They have the danish you like in the cafeteria or something?”
Darcy snorted, glancing in Tony's direction. "Yeah. Yeah they did, and all those empty calories were
delicious. But no, I'm chipper because I slept the whole night through last night. No nightmares, no
insomnia. Seven hours of solid, uninterrupted zonk."

"That's a pretty big improvement," Bruce said, arms crossed over his chest, looking down at his feet.
"Have you noticed any other, uh, side effects? Power flares?"

She glanced in Bruce's direction, seeing the considering look he was giving her. "Not that I've
noticed. I still glow a bit from time to time, but that's about it. Nothing world endy. I promise you'll
be the first person I'll run to if I start getting a hankering for an apocalypse." When he only gave her
joke a tight smile, she shrugged her shoulders and turned back to the trees.

"What about the non-glowy parts? The 'I can touch and kill every soul in the galaxy' power?" When
Darcy's eyes narrowed in Tony's direction, he gestured in the air with his hand. "Just trying to get the
whole picture."

Sighing, Darcy considered his question. "That part... I don't want to go back to that place. Ever."

"You don't feel the pull? No compulsion to use it?"

"Not really."

"But if you needed to... you could?"

She glared at Tony. "What are you asking, Stark? Yeah, it would take nothing for me to focus and
see souls, to touch them, to snuff them out and destroy everything. But I won't, because that part
terrifies me. Is that what you want to hear? That the idea of going back to that place makes my blood
turn to ice? Because it does. It's fucking awful, and if I never go back there, I'd die happy. That work
for you? Is that what you were looking for?"

He looked away from her, eyes focusing on a group of soldiers as they ran past in formation. "Yeah,
that's about the gist of it, kiddo."

"Are you deliberately trying to piss me off? If so, you're doing a bang up job. Can't I just be fucking
happy? Damn, man." Tony was seriously damaging her calm and she was this close to ripping those
glasses from his face and stomping on them, not caring how childish the thought was.

Tony shrugged his shoulders when she turned her glare away from him. "I'm just making sure that
when we go off-site that you're not going to destroy the mall. It's one of the last places you can get a
Cinnabon." He smirked when Darcy's head whipped back to look at him, her eyes wide and a large,
surprised grin on her face.

"What? I can leave!"

He glanced at her from the side of his eyes. "With conditions, yeah."

"Way to bury the lead there, asshole!" Her eyes shifted to Bruce, seeing that same tight smile on his
face. "Is the asshole lying?"

Bruce cleared his throat, watching the excitement strobe in her eyes. "We've been discussing it, and
as long as we take it easy, and we're there -"

"To make sure I don't destroy the mall? Yeah, yeah. I got that part. You're really letting me leave,
though?"
Tony reached out and softly punched at her shoulder. "Consider it probation. If this goes well, then who knows? Weekend passes. An off-site apartment. Granted you don't go all party rave glow sticks, the sky's the limit."

Darcy grinned to herself as they walked, her mind already running with ideas. "So... the mall?"

"You said you needed some things. Figured that'd be the place to do it."

"Okay. Damn, I'll have to make a list!"

As she began to walk faster, excitement charging through her, Tony looked over at Bruce, his eyes sobering a bit. A silent conversation happened between the men, both of their eyes swinging to Darcy when she turned back to look at them.

"Come on, science nerds, get your asses in gear!"

Bucky woke slowly, fighting it, wanting to stay asleep just a little bit longer. He'd been so tired that he'd passed out the second his head had hit the pillow. He buried his face into the blankets, groaning with annoyance at being awake. When he felt the bed shift beside him, his head jerked up, eyes snapping open. He turned his attention to the other body in the bed with him, hidden by the covers except for a bit of blond hair peeking through.

The memory of the conversation they'd had with Darcy the night previous filtered through his sleep-addled brain, and Bucky laid back down, turning on his side so he could fit himself against Steve's back, throwing an arm over his side and pulling his best friend closer. Bucky had every right to be angry at Steve for dragging the miscommunication for far longer than was necessary; he loved Steve, like air, like sunshine, but the man was as stubborn as a mule when he wanted to be.

Those thoughts were pushed aside, though, by the overwhelming relief Bucky felt to have Steve back in his arms. He'd felt lost and adrift without him. That he was able to wake up beside Steve again was everything. Bucky knew things weren't perfect, that they had a lot of work to do, but if the light at the end of the tunnel was having both Steve and Darcy by his side? He was willing to put in the work.

Steve came to consciousness as Bucky slotted against his back, feeling a warm breath on his neck followed by the press of lips to his shoulder. He hummed, eyes blinking against the light that was streaming in from between the curtains. He shifted, turning so he could face Bucky, the other man's grey eyes much more alert than his own. "Morning."

Bucky shoved one arm under his pillow, the other resting over Steve's side, fingers brushing at the skin of Steve’s hip. "Morning." He wanted to say something more, to address what had been decided last night, but he didn't want break the bubble just yet. Bucky wanted to enjoy the moment, looking at Steve from inches away, feeling the blond's warmth, knowing the anguish he'd felt without Steve at his side was over.

As his best friend blinked lazily at him, the memories from the previous night hit Steve like a bucket of cold water.

Bucky didn’t want to end their relationship.

Darcy wasn’t going to take Bucky from him.
Bucky loved Darcy, and Darcy loved Bucky...

… and they both loved him.

It all seemed impossible, and heavy, and so much to accept. Steve felt the first wave of guilt crash into him, realizing that he’d put them all through hell unnecessarily. This could have been cleared up weeks ago if he’d just let Bucky and Darcy explain.

But even after their explanation, seeing the emotion in Darcy’s face, seeing love fill her as she’d looked at him... it was almost too much to believe. He’d only met her a handful of times, brief visits to check in, to see how she was doing with everything, but now? Now she was in love with him, honestly and truthfully in love with him, and Steve still had no idea what to think.

Last night he’d suggested they get to know each other, but looking into Bucky’s eyes, Steve found himself overwhelmed by the weight of it all, questions sparking in his brain like fire. "Buck..."

"What do you want to know?" Bucky had been watching Steve, reading his best friend like a book. Steve’d never been good at hiding his emotions, especially with when it came to him, and the tint of confused disbelief was flashing in Steve’s eyes like neon lights.

Steve let out a breath, chuckling when Bucky read his mind. They were so used to each other that it was like second nature. Would it be the same with Darcy? Would he feel like he was missing something, watching the two of them interact? All of these questions and more were rolling through his mind and it was hard to focus on just one of them. "So Darcy… knows everything? Everything?"

Bucky nodded, face going solemn. "All of it," he confirmed, the truth of it filling his eyes, "and I know it seems impossible, but it’s true."

That was an absolute understatement, but Steve nodded as he processed the information. "And you know everything of hers?" Bucky nodded at him, a shadow passing behind his eyes. Following that logic, Bucky had all of Darcy’s memories in his head, which meant that if he had any questions about her...

"Can I ask..." He trailed off, hoping Bucky understood his question.

"There will be things I can answer, but a lot of it isn't my story to tell."

Bucky’d had no knowledge of Darcy until she’d grabbed the stone, and even after that, he only knew bits and pieces. Now he had an entire second life in his head, and some of the things in Darcy’s past... he could feel his jaw clench, the memories of abuse causing his chest to contract in anger. It was a different kind of torture, knowing what she'd gone through, knowing he could do nothing to make it better. He was certain she'd say it was nothing when compared to his history, but hers was still horrific.

"Okay." Steve said, digesting Bucky's answer, noting the haunted look on his face. "But you... you feel... for her..."

Bucky's fingers brushed back and forth over Steve's skin, an anxious gesture. He knew what Steve was asking, and Bucky wasn't sure how to say it without causing pain. "I love her," Bucky said, eyes flicking down to watch Steve's adam's apple bob as the blond swallowed hard at his words.

"I know her, just like I know you. Inside and out. All her good traits, all her flaws. I wish I could explain it better, but you have to know, Steve," Bucky said, his gaze sweeping, locking his eyes on Steve’s, "loving her doesn't make me love you any less. Nothing has changed in the way I feel about you. Nothing. Do you understand? Do you believe me? I need you to believe me."
It hurt him to hear the words, but Steve would rather know everything, good or bad, then let anything else go unsaid between them. He could taste the truth in Bucky's words, see the sincerity in his eyes, but Steve wasn't sure if anyone would be happy knowing the person they loved also loved someone else. "I believe you, Buck, it's just..."

Bucky nodded as Steve trailed off, taking a large breath. The pain in Steve's eyes was agony, but if it laid it all out in the open, he'd bleed happily so there were no more miscommunication. "I know," Bucky said, shifting himself closer to Steve, "I know. It's hard to wrap your head around, and we don't expect... we know it's going to take time, but nothing feels good without you there, for either of us." Bucky lifted his hand, pushing at the fringe of hair on Steve's forehead, brushing it back with his fingers. "it's not us against you. It's us with you."

The way Bucky said it made it seem so easy, so effortless, but Steve was still at a loss as how they were supposed to proceed. He'd meant what he'd said to Darcy yesterday, that he needed to know her if she was going to such a big presence in their lives, and it was their lives. All three of them. Together. "So what happens now?"

Bucky couldn't help the grin as it climbed to his lips, heart singing at Steve's words. Once Steve committed to something, he was in, unconditionally, and despite the lunacy of the situation, this was no different.

Bucky closed the distance between them, his lips pressing against Steve's. For his acceptance, for his understanding, for the fact that he was willing to try. It was soft, and drunk with emotion, and when Bucky pulled back, he watched Steve's eyes blink at him, cobalt darkening at the contact. "We date her.

Steve couldn't help the way his eyebrows rose, brain still reacting to the feel of Bucky's mouth on his for the first time in weeks. "Date," he repeated.

"Yes."

"We date her," Steve said. Bucky nodded, corner of his mouth lifting up at the mystified expression Steve knew he was wearing. "And, if something happens with us, with me and her..."

"That's what I'm hoping for, punk. The thought of both of you, pressed together, skin against skin?" Just saying the words had Bucky's body thrumming with desire, and he could feel himself harden at the mental images. "It's like art in my head," he said, scooting closer to Steve, watching the blond's pupils dilate, knowing he was thinking about Darcy now, too. "All her curves, those lips of hers, the way her body moves? Tell me she doesn't do it for you."

Now that he was allowed to, encouraged even, Steve dug up the memories of first meeting Darcy, the day she'd grabbed the stone and saved them all. He'd buried his attraction, filed it away, set it aside; he had Bucky, after all, and that was enough for Steve.

But now? Now he thought of her eyes and how pretty the hazel was, how bright they could get when she was amused or frustrating someone on purpose. Her lips were full, pouting, reminding him so much of Bucky's that at first it'd been hard for him to look away. He'd found his eyes tracking to her mouth, his gaze following the movement of her lips as she spoke.

Darcy called to mind the pin-up girls Steve'd grown up with, the pictures that'd been hung in every soldier's barracks. Dark hair, red lips, curves for days. It'd been the ideal, the very definition of classic beauty, and despite how the times had changed, that was what he'd been attracted to. Was attracted to. Thinking of Darcy, thinking of being able to follow her curves with his hands, the idea of Bucky being right there, too...
Steve's breath came out in a rush when Bucky's hand palmed him, his eyes fluttering closed as his lover's fingers trailed over the fabric of his flannel pajama pants, body reactive. When he blinked to look at Bucky, Steve could see the flash of dark satisfaction in the other man's eyes, a knowing look on his face, happy at the attraction that has pinged through Steve's body as he thought about Darcy.

"She's like a dream, right?" It was too easy for Bucky to slip his hand past the waistband of Steve's pajamas, to wrap his fingers around the hard length of Steve's cock, thumb smearing the moisture that had already beaded at his tip. Bucky moved closer, hand moving up and down at a steady speed, grinning against Steve's mouth as the blond began to breathe heavier, hips chasing the friction.

"Thinking 'bout the two of you gets me so hard that I can't even see straight," he said, tongue licking at Steve's bottom lip, shifting so he was crowding into Steve's space.

Bucky had always known just what to say, knowing exactly where to touch to leave Steve desperate for more. As Bucky's hand neared the head of Steve's cock, he squeezed hard, drawing a moan from Steve's mouth that Bucky immediately swallowed. Steve's hips jerked into Bucky, his hands fisting into the sheets below them as Bucky drove him higher, harder.

The sounds he drew from Steve were like music, and Bucky had practiced this song forever. He held himself up, hand pressed against the mattress to the left of Steve's head, watching the hunger chase from one side of Steve's eyes to the other. His hand was steady, relentless, and when Steve began to repeat his name over and over, Bucky knew the blond was getting close. He'd missed the taste of his best friend, and as Bucky kissed down the planes of Steve's chest and stomach, he had one singular goal in mind.

Steve bit his lip to keep from crying out as the warmth of Bucky's mouth closed over him, feeling the flat of Bucky's tongue licking him from root to tip before he was drawn inside, lips wrapping around him. His hands fist in Bucky's hair, Steve's head lifting to look down at Bucky, watching him work his mouth up and down. When Bucky hummed around him, grey eyes flicking up to watch the expression on Steve's face, the blond's head fell back against the pillows, groaning at the overwhelming sensations.

He was drowning in the taste and smell of Steve, tongue flicking at velvet skin, and it was exactly what Bucky wanted. He held Steve down with one hand, the fingers of his prosthetic splayed over the blond's lower stomach, keeping Steve from thrusting up, wanting to be in control of his movements.

Bucky wanted to hear Steve beg for it, wanted him desperate and frantic and out of his mind. When he felt a tug on his hair, Bucky's eyes swung up to Steve's face, surprised to see how utterly close he was already. He'd known Steve's body had reacted to the idea of Darcy and the possibilities that were in front of them, but he must have miscalculated just how much Darcy rung Steve's bell.

Satisfaction thrummed through Bucky's body, wanting to taste Steve on the back of his tongue, shuddering and jerking as he came. He worked his mouth, savoring, taking his time. Bucky'd missed this, his insatiable desire for this man, and he was going to get his fill, even if it meant slowing down and speeding up, keeping the blond on the edge.

Steve's hands weren't sure where to stay, flitting from gripping and tugging on Bucky's hair, fist and pulling at the sheets below him, scratching at Bucky's shoulders as his lover began to move quicker. Bucky wrapped his hand around the base of Steve's cock and slid until his lips and hand covered the entire length of him, moving in tandem, tongue flicking just right, perfect, and Steve shouted Bucky's name as he gasped.

As Steve came, Bucky froze, letting Steve's hips thrust shallowly into his mouth, hand squeezing, swallowing reflexively. He waited until Steve's body calmed, when everything was almost too much,
too sensitive, before he pulled away, kissing up the blond's chest. Bucky fit himself against Steve's side, aftershocks making Steve twitch. As Steve's breathing slowed and returned to normal, Bucky pressed his lips to the side of Steve’s neck, tongue darting out to taste the salt on his skin.

Steve’s entire body felt spent, like he'd just run for miles, and he savored the feeling as he came back down to earth. He wasn't sure if it was the length of time they'd been apart, the emotions that were laid bare between them, or, most likely, the thoughts of Darcy that Bucky had solidified in his mind, but whatever it was had made Steve come harder and stronger than he could remember. Was that what it would be like if she was actually there? No, Steve thought, it'd be more.

When he felt like he could move again, Steve turned so he could capture Bucky's mouth, kissing him tiredly, softly, the gesture filled with unspoken apologies and silent promises. "That was..."

"Yeah," Bucky said knowingly, grinning at the way Steve still sounded breathless. "Now imagine if she was actually here." He couldn't help the smirk that curled his lips when Steve flipped them, dark knowledge filling the blond's eyes again, the huff of air as he did imagine it.

"You should watch that mouth of yours, jerk," Steve said, head dipping to nuzzle at Bucky's neck.

"How about you shut me up, punk?" Bucky's body surged when Steve's eyes flicked to look up at him, knowing what he was in for and ready for every second of it.
Can I?

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy and Steve try their hand at dating. It’s eight levels of adorably awkward.

Chapter Notes

Just a little schmoop to celebrate Lazy Sunday and to give you something good before Monday comes!

Also? HAPPY HALLOWEEN MONTH!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Can I trust you? Does your smile hide lies?
Can I jump in and close my eyes?
Can you tell me that you'll be here for all the little things?
Can I lay here in your arms?
Can I love you would it be alright?

Can I - Tedy

---

“This is stupid, right? This is so dumb.”

“It’s not dumb.”

“Can you just agree with me for one god damn second?!”

As the words left her mouth, Darcy’s face crumbled. She turned slowly toward Jane, her eyes filled with apologies and regret.

“I’m sorry, Janey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. I’m just so fucking stressed out and I’m this close to pulling a Britney and just buzzing off my hair because it won’t settle down despite the eighteen layers of product I’ve got in it and I don’t like any of the clothes I have, not that that’s your fault, even though you picked them out, but it’s everything and oh my sweet Bowie, I am so sorry.”

Jane’s eyes had grown wider and wider as Darcy had dropped to her knees and crawled toward her, finally taking a heaving breath in as she rested both of her hands on Jane’s knees and looked up at her imploringly.
“That was… a lot.”

The sigh was large enough that it lifted and dropped Darcy’s shoulders, the dark-haired woman leaning down to rest her cheek on Jane’s thigh. “I might have had one of Tony’s espresso blends.” When Jane sifted her fingers through her (completely and utterly stubborn) hair, Darcy practically purred in response.

“Worse than Selvig’s?”

“I think I can now taste in colors, too.” At Jane’s gasp, Darcy looked up at her with an impish smile. “Not really. But that amount of caffeine in that small of a glass should be illegal. Maybe it is. I don’t know. Help. Please, help me. I need to wear something that says ‘I’ve been in love with you all my life but you have no idea who I am and I really need to impress you and make you love me too’. Think we can find something like that?”

“I… don’t know?”

“Fuck.”

Climbing back into her closet, Darcy took a third look at all of her options, none of which had somehow magically become better since the last time she looked at them three minutes ago. She tore off the sweater she was wearing and threw it on the pile she’d started, the pile of ‘no no no, this is not sexy, he needs to think of me naked’ that was quickly getting bigger and bigger.

“Ma’am, Sergeant Barnes is at the door.”

“It’s fine, let him in, Friday.”

“... are you sure, Ma’am?”

“Yes, yes, for fuck’s sake, just let him in!” Darcy’s eyes fluttered closed in frustration. Was it crazy to snap at an A.I.? Did she need to apologize to an A.I. for snapping? Fuck if I know.

Bucky pushed open the door to Darcy’s room, grey eyes taking in the new wall color (a sky blue that he recognized as one closely resembling the cornflower hue of their date for the evening’s eyes), Jane sitting on Darcy’s bed, and an explosion of clothing strewn across the room. “Jane,” he greeted with a nod of his head, eyebrows furrowing. “Where’s...?”

Jane pointed to the closet and then make a twirling motion with her finger at her temple. Bucky’s lips lifted up in a smirk. He’d anticipated the tornado in Darcy’s head and had come to help allay her fears. Obviously he’d expected correctly, though he hadn’t been prepared for the tornado of clothing that seemed to have destroyed the room.

He opened his mouth to say something when Darcy appeared from the closet, wearing a grey pencil skirt and holding out two hangers with soft blouses, as if she was going to ask which one looked better.

All Bucky could see was the stark black lace bra she wore surrounded by pale skin, flushed pink and looking utterly delicious.

“Buck, which one works better? The purple or the blue? I don’t want to overdo it, but I kinda want to overdo it, you know?” She frowned down at the shirts, holding each one against her body for a second before growling in frustration and throwing them both on the ‘no’ pile.

Darcy disappeared back into the closet without ever looking up.
Bucky was pulled out of his shock - *so much skin, perfect, pale, gorgeous, prettiest dame I've ever seen* - when Jane placed a hand on his arm. He turned toward her with widened eyes. He'd been so distracted by the deluge of heated thoughts that he hadn't even seen Jane move.

“She’s in her mode. You know the one. Just... be supportive.” Jane patted him lightly once more before she passed him, the door opening and closing softly as she left.

Swallowing, his gaze flicked back to the closet, not sure if he wanted her to come out in only the bra and skirt, or if he hoped she was dressed from ankle to neck. Yes, they shared memories, but no one ever truly saw themselves the same way others saw them, which meant Darcy’s thoughts on her own body were skewed.

Even the briefest moment of seeing all that skin, the mounds held back by the lace, the stretch of the skirt over her hips… It was enough to make his blood race south. Bucky shifted uncomfortably, waiting for her to come back out, hoping she was dressed while hoping that she wasn’t.

“Do you think this wor…”

Darcy’s eyes had focused on the bed, expecting to see Jane there, frowning when she wasn’t. The question died on her lips as she took in Bucky. His hands were fisted at his sides, his lips parted as he stared at her. There was a tension in his body and Darcy felt her own react to it, a primal knowledge recognizing the heat in his eyes, darkening them.

Bucky took a slow step toward Darcy, the beat of his heart loud as it pounded in his ears. He watched her eyes dilate, the shirt in her hand forgotten, falling to the floor. Watching her body react to him sent a thrill up his spine, knowing the effect he had on her. “That’s a lot of lace, doll.”

Something about those words made things clench low in her body, pulse thudding until Darcy could taste it on her tongue. The look in his eyes was nothing short of predatory and her breathing sped up as he stalked toward her. It was easy for Darcy to forget that this was all new, even though they both felt like they’d known each other their whole lives. Despite all those memories, the years of shared experiences, this was still the first time that Bucky had seen her in any state of undress.

“You know how I love lace,” Bucky said, stopping when there was only a breath between them. He had a good seven inches on her, and the difference in height meant he was looking down the valley between her breasts, every quickened breath lifting and dropping, making her strain against the lace.

Yeah,” Darcy breathed, feeling dizzy with the desire thrumming through her body, “I do know that.” She took a deep gasp of air when he lifted his hand, fingertip running along the lacy border, burning a fiery line as it traced along the fabric.

Bucky watched her eyes flutter closed, her eyelashes brushing against cheeks which were pink with want. He was pressed hard against his zipper and looking at her from this close, so beautiful and reactive and warm, it took everything not to crash his mouth to hers and walk them backward to the bed.

“Wearing something like this around me can be dangerous.”

The way he said ‘dangerous’ made her shiver, goosebumps popping onto her arms, and Darcy let out a shuddering breath. “He’d like it too, right?” When she managed to open her eyes, she could see the knowledge in Bucky’s stare. Steve would like the lace, she knew, and it was one of the reasons she’d chosen the underwear. Choosing lingerie Steve would like was easy. Everything else? Not so much.

Nodding, Bucky hooked his finger on the bit of fabric deep in her cleavage and pulled her even
closer, until she was pressed against the front of his body, her breasts pushed higher, threatening to spill past the lace. “He’ll love it,” he exhaled, watching his breath fan her hair backward. When Darcy looked up at him, the heat in her gaze matching his own, he knew it’d have been so easy to close the distance, to press his lips to hers and finally let his body show how much he wanted her, like breathing, like air.

He had no idea where he gathered the strength, but he took one large step backward. Both he and Darcy took in a deep gasp of air, knowing how close they’d come to crossing the metaphorical line in the sand. “Not until he’s here,” Bucky growled, hating their decision but knowing it was the right move.

Darcy nodded, tongue swiping against her suddenly dry lips. “Yeah,” she agreed, though the tone of her voice made it more of a whine. “Fuck,” Darcy chuckled, looking at Bucky through widened eyes.

Bucky answered in kind, smirking as he took a heavy seat on the edge of her bed.

“Nope, nope,” Darcy grabbed a shirt off the ground - doesn’t matter what it is, just get it over the girls - and pulled it over her head, the tag hanging free at her neckline. She jumped forward and grabbed Bucky’s arm, pulling him quickly toward the door. “Can’t do this with you here.”

“Darce...”

“Hey, no, this is not a discussion. You don’t think I see how tight your jeans are? Please. I see it.” When she pulled her door open, she turned toward him, eyes narrowing when he smirked that Buchanan smirk at her. “Nope, none of that. See? That right there is why. Get your ass moving.”

“If my jeans are tight on the front...”

She pushed him into the hallway. He turned back to her, his smirk widening when her hazel gaze flicked from his ass to his face, the pink in her cheeks darkening when she knew she’d been caught staring at his ass. Bucky watched her internal struggle, blinking in surprise and amusement when the door was slammed in his face.

Hearing his laughter ring in the hallway as she collapsed against the door, Darcy tried to calm her speeding pulse.

“Hey... Friday?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Do not let me let Bucky in here when I’m not fully dressed.”

“That is why I asked, Ma’am, but I’ll be more forceful in the future.”

“That’d be dandy.”

PageBreak

There weren’t a lot of options when it came to ‘first group hang’ in the compound. Darcy hesitated to call it a ‘date’ because she wasn’t sure that’s what Steve would want to call it. This was all so he could get to know her, get comfortable around her. As far as she saw it, there were four different combinations, and two of them were the focus of this endeavor. The relationship between her and
Bucky was solid. She didn’t question it. They both knew what it was and had no problem admitting such.

Though maybe a little rockier than they would have liked, Bucky and Steve’s relationship was solid too, at least now that Steve realized they didn’t want a life without him in it, but wanted him very much in it. All the time. Every day.

That left Darcy and Steve’s relationship with each other, as well as the three of them as a unit. Her relationship with Steve was like starting from the beginning. Even if she was one-hundred percent certain that she loved him, they still needed to work on building everything from his side. He’d said he wanted to get to know her, and that was her ultimate goal. So Darcy didn’t see this so much as a date or a fact-finding mission, it was more of a fact-giving mission.

Yeah. Bucky was right to laugh at that. Sounds ridiculous.

There were lounges for staff scattered throughout the buildings, plus two different cafeterias, but neither of them really gave the ambience Darcy was hoping for. When Bucky had suggested he plan everything, she hadn’t known what to expect. Telling her to be on the roof at 8pm sharp had made her pretty curious, but she’d given him the benefit of the doubt. She trusted him, absolutely.

She squinted up at the stars, trying to remember anything Jane had taught her, but her stomach was tied in so many knots that her brain blanked, not even able to find the big dipper. Get your shit together or you’ll end up -

Darcy spun on her heel when the door behind her opened, trying not to openly gape as both men stepped through. Steve was wearing a pair of dark jeans, folded at the ankle over dark brown boots. His button down was a deep blue, pushed up and cuffed at his forearms. She wasn’t sure what it was about a man with a button down rolled to his elbows, but damn did it leave her breathless.

Bucky was no exception. His jeans had just the right amount of rugged holes, his crimson henley open at the neck, showing a hint of chest hair and well defined pecs. She absently wondered if Bucky had picked their shirts on purpose, both a pretty good approximation of the colors she saw in her head; Bucky the color of blood, the blue cobalt of Steve’s shirt echoing the line that tied the two men, and now herself, together.

“You both look…”

Steve moved forward, guided by Bucky’s hand at the small of his back. He’d frozen when his eyes had landed on Darcy looking like a vision, a background of stars framing the curves of her body. The pencil skirt ended just below her knees, tight and stretched beautifully, the white blouse sheer enough that he could see a dark blue tank beneath. Her hair hung around her face in waves and he wondered if her curls were really as soft as they looked.

“You’re stunning, doll,” Bucky said, leaving Steve in his stupor, smoothly moving until he could pull Darcy toward him and press a kiss to her cheek. He left his mouth near her ear and whispered low. “If Jane picked this top out, I owe her roses.”

“Send them to Tony Stark,” she said, leaving her eyes on Steve as he held back, “Friday helped me pick it out.”

“I’m not sending flowers to a computer,” Bucky said, pulling back with a shake of his head and a soft chuckle. He stepped aside, looking back at Steve, a smirk curling his lips. He knew when Steve was gobsmacked. The blond had always been that way around pretty dames, and here was a beautiful lady looking at him like he was dessert. After their morning together a few days previous,
where Bucky had primed Steve with mental images of the three of them together, he had a pretty good idea what was running through the blond’s head.

“You look… beautiful… tonight.” It was stilted, and awkward, and Steve’s mind sparked with embarrassment, but this was the first time he’d looked at Darcy, really looked at her, and the pull of attraction was strong.

Darcy shifted her weight from one foot to the other, smiling softly as she looked at Steve. “Just tonight?” When his face blanched and he opened his mouth to apologize, she waved her hand at him and took the first step. “I’m joking, Steve. Thank you. You don’t look too bad yourself.” As she neared, she realized Bucky and Steve were the same height, somehow making her feel incredibly small as she looked up at him. “Thank you, again, for coming. I know you don’t have to -”

“I didn’t have to. I wanted to,” Steve interrupted softly. It took him another breath, but he reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her forward. She came willingly, happily, and he felt her sharp intake of breath as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her cheek, just like Bucky had. Her skin was warm, and he felt his own pinken as he pulled back.

The vision of the two of them, bodies pressed closely, had Bucky’s pulse singing, his heart thudding at the picture they made. When they’d stood there for a few beats, Steve’s hand still holding Darcy’s, both of them smiling shyly at each other, Bucky cleared his throat loud enough to draw their attention. He was disappointed when they’re hands dropped, but he gestured with a wave of his arm to an area a little further away.

As Steve rounded a large air conditioning duct, Darcy at his side, his eyes lit upon a makeshift picnic, complete with a basket and camping lantern. A memory from his and Bucky’s past sprang to mind and he opened his mouth to mention it but was beaten to the punch by Darcy.

“Just like that night in Prospect Park?”

“But warmer,” Bucky said with a nod, taking a seat on the blanket he’d spread out. “And the fruit isn’t half rotten.”

Steve watched Darcy and Bucky discuss a night she hadn’t been there for, and for the first time it really hit him that she remembered everything. If Bucky had been there, then she knew about it. He’d been told, and she’d even proved it to him the last time they’d spoke, but having it displayed with crystal clarity was still a shock.

When Darcy and Bucky shifted their attention to him, both of their eyes filled with careful hesitation and a spark of hope, he gave a small smile and moved to sit down on Bucky’s other side. “We got a pretty good deal on them, though.”

“Yeah, a dumpster dive discount,” Darcy said with a wide grin. It faltered slightly when Bucky’s gaze twisted toward her. Her eyes widened impossibly large, realizing that Bucky hadn’t exactly been forthcoming with that information, feeding Steve a line about how the shop owner had only made him pay a fraction of the price, much different than the truth that they were being thrown away and Bucky’d rescued the fruit from the boxes in the alley.

“Oh, fuck, I didn’t -”

The snort that Steve made was heartfelt, and he shook his head as he reached for a grape. “I figured as much. It seemed a bit out of character for O’Malley to give discounts. Everything tasted just as good, even if it was a little bruised.”
“Much like you’d been that night, punk. Who had you fought with that week? The Denney boys?”

Happy to keep her mouth shut so she didn’t shove another foot in it, Darcy grabbed a piece of cheese and popped it in her mouth, smoothing out her skirt as she listened to them reminiscence.

“No, not the Denneys. The Olsons, I think.”

“You’d come home, covered in dirt and mud and your Ma would give you a tongue lashing, always ending with a kiss to your forehead and a long-suffering ‘boyo’.” Bucky watched the memories flow behind Steve’s eyes. He remembered what it was like, watching his best friend lose someone so important. The day they’d put Sarah to rest was the day Bucky’d sworn he’d always watch out for Steve, that he’d always make sure he was taken care of.

“I’d love to hear more about her,” Darcy said, voice soft, trying not to squirm when both sets of eyes flicked toward her.

“Well, I suppose you know most of it already,” Steve said, the ghosts of his past still clouding his eyes.

Darcy gave him a sympathetic smile, reaching out to pat his hand. “I’d still like to hear it from you.”

As she watched the sad happiness fill the blue of his eyes, Darcy felt her chest tighten with unexpressed grief. It was difficult, having memories of Sarah and her loss, but never having really mourned the woman herself. Bucky was good at guarding his emotions, not showing what he didn’t want others to see. Darcy’d learned the same, a child of the foster care system, but seeing the pain in Steve’s eyes made her own fill with tears.

“Only if you want to, of course.” She reached up and flicked the tear from the corner of her eye before it could fall free, giving him the most comforting smile she could muster.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” Steve said, feeling the undiluted compassion from the woman whose hand was so warm on his.

“Start with the Gaelic. It’s the best place.” Bucky reached into the basket he’d brought, pulling out a bottle of red wine. Neither him or Steve would get anything out of the alcohol, but he knew it was Darcy’s favorite, and he didn’t want her to be the only one drinking.

Steve nodded, knowing he’d butcher the Gaelic, unable to fully capture the way his Ma had twisted her tongue and made the language so beautiful. “When she was angry she’d bite out A leanbh*, but most of the time she simply said A thaise¢**…”

The bottle of wine was empty where it laid on the quilt, the boys having given their glasses to Darcy when hers had quickly emptied. She had stretched out, head lifted with her cheek in hand, looking across the space at the two men. Her ribs ached from laughing, hearing them recount their childhood growing up in Brooklyn and the antics they’d pulled. The money may have been tight, but they were rich in so many other ways, and the looks on their faces said as much. A lot of the stories she’d already known, but Steve supplemented familiar stories with new ones.

“But he didn’t duck in time, distracted by a redhead in the front row, so I really did punch him. He was out for a few hours. No permanent damage, just a bruised ego and a new grudge against me.”
Darcy’s smile widened when Steve glanced in her direction. “That was the first thing I said to you, remember? That I knew you’d punched Hitler a few times?”

“More than a few,” Steve corrected, genuine grin on his face. When Darcy smoothed her hand down her skirt, his eyes followed, gaze climbing the peaks and falling into the valleys of her curves. He coughed lightly when he realized what he was doing, eyes flicking back to her face. “It looks like you’ve got the glowing bit under control since then.”

Darcy glanced down at herself and then back up at Steve with a grin. “I’ve been feeling a bit more solid lately. Working with Bruce has really helped. I owe Tony, I guess.” She had no intention of telling the ass that, though, as she couldn’t imagine the amount of gloating Tony would throw in her direction at every available opportunity. “He’s letting me have a ‘supervised field trip’ tomorrow.”

“You’re getting a pass to go off base?” Bucky sat up straighter. He’d been lounged back, watching Darcy and Steve converse, happy to let them navigate while he was just along for the ride. At the mention of her trip, seriousness bled back into him.

“More or less.”

“Has Stark put together a team?”

Darcy’s eyebrows lifted at the focused look in Bucky’s gaze. “I don’t know if that’s necessary, Buck. It’s just the mall. Besides, it’s not like I have a lot of money to blow or anything. The piggy bank I had was destroyed by the evil male version of Violet Beauregarde, so…”

Bucky frowned, watching Steve do the same, neither of them getting her reference.

“Please tell me you’re joking.” They both shook their heads at her. “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory? Gene Wilder? Oompa-Loompas? Neither of you have…?” Darcy’s voice was incredulous, shaking her head in disappointment. “Well that settles that. Looks like our next date will be a movie night.”

Steve looked down at his hands when she said the word ‘date,’ soft smile pulling at his lips. It was strange, sitting next to the love of his life, who was absolutely fine with the idea of them ‘dating’ someone else. One day maybe Steve would get used to the strangeness of their life, but it’d take a little bit more for it all to feel normal.

“You should ask Tony about the per diem.” Steve glanced up at Darcy, seeing the confusion in her hazel gaze. “The stipend we get. You can’t really hold down a normal job as an Avenger so he made funds available for us to use.”

When Darcy’s eyes swung over to him, Bucky nodded his head, answering her unspoken question. “It’s true.”

“But… I’m not an Avenger,” Darcy said, frowning.

“Technically no, but I’m sure you qualify in some respect. Worse case scenario is Tony finds work for you to do around the lab.”

Darcy sighed, her arms stretching along the quilt until her cheek rested on her bicep. The wine had made her warm, and the excitement of getting to go off campus and possibly buy new things left her feeling floaty. “I’m going to be a lab monkey for my entire life, aren’t I?”

“What else would you want to do?” Steve asked, regarding her with soft eyes. “You graduated?”
“High school? Yes. College? Debatable.” Darcy watched Steve’s eyes narrow slightly, the look he got when he was confused but didn’t want to pry. It was adorable and the stupid dopey grin on her face telegraphed as much. “There’s one class I need to finish then, yeah, I’d have my degree. But I don’t know if that’s what I want, you know? Don’t get me wrong, college was great, and getting to meet Jane and Selvig? Best thing ever. But political science? Maybe that wasn’t the right direction for me to go.”

Sighing, she laid back and looked up at the sea of stars above them. “After New Mexico and London things just seemed so much bigger, more important. What’s college when there are eight other realms out there, or aliens that can come from other planets and want to destroy everything? I never thought I’d be in the thick of everything, but even being a spectator seemed worth more than adding formulas on a spreadsheet and looking for trends in public opinion. I want something more than that.”

Bucky watched her eyelashes brush her cheeks before his grey eyes flicked to Steve, watching his lover stare at Darcy. Bucky could tell she was tipsy - she always got philosophical when she was buzzed - but Steve was looking at her with interest and honest curiosity.

“I don’t think you’re much of a spectator anymore, Darce,” Bucky said, smiling when she snorted in response.

“Tony said that once I’m cleared for good that I don’t have to stay here, I could move back to the city, just check in as needed.”

When the reality of Darcy’s words connected in his brain, Bucky looked away, focusing on the darkness of the forest that surrounded the compound. The idea that Darcy wouldn’t be there, at their side, filled him with so many emotions it was hard to filter through them all. Not having her there with him, with them, would be agony.

“Would you… want that?”

The careful hesitation in Bucky’s voice drew both Darcy and Steve’s gazes. He did his best to keep the anguish at the thought of her being gone from coloring his features but, based on both of their reactions, he could only assume he’d failed.

“Aw, Buck.” Careful of her skirt and doing her best not to let her chest break free of its lacy prison, Darcy crawled across the quilt until she was kneeling in front of both of them. Maybe it was the wine, or the tone in Bucky’s voice, but she grabbed both of their hands in hers, lacing their fingers.

“Everything I want is right here.”

Steve felt Bucky let out of the breath he’d been holding as Darcy leaned forward to press a kiss to Bucky’s cheek. He expected her to pull back but was surprised when she turned her head and pressed those red lips to his cheek, too. He took a deep breath and could smell her perfume, citrus and sandalwood, and feel the softness of her hair as it brushed along his neck.

Darcy sat back on her heels, their hands still joined, matching red lip prints on both of the boys’ cheeks. She couldn’t help the possessive smirk that turned her mouth. Steve was looking at her with such honesty, wanting so hard to understand her actions, and it filled her with heat and happiness that he was even trying.

Bucky was floored. Darcy, so close and absolutely stunning, Steve at his right, solid and there. Words slipped from his mind completely. As the Soldier he could never relax; his eyes were always open, always on guard, ready to fight, his only job to complete the mission, whatever the cost.
He’d never been good at staying still. But, here with both of them, he was able to breathe. Bucky was looking past the next mission, the next week, the next month. His entire life had been about Steve: getting to him, keeping him, making up for the time that’d been stolen from them. Now, he wanted to fill all his time with Steve and Darcy. Circumstances meant they’d need to take it slow, to make sure Steve was comfortable with everything, but as he looked at both of them... time meant nothing.

And everything.

Part of Steve felt guilty as his eyes kept trailing to Darcy’s mouth, the red of her lipstick taking his attention, the pout of her bottom lip leaving him rapt. When he thought of a ‘beautiful woman’, Darcy was exactly what he pictured; curves for days, full lips, dark hair in waves, acerbic wit and heavy sarcasm with a can-do attitude, and not for the first time, Steve realized how much Darcy reminded him of Peggy.

It’d put him off at first, how strongly he’d found Darcy attractive, because he was with Bucky and his best friend was more than enough for him. He’d spent his life wanting Bucky in one way or another. So his attraction to Darcy had been fleeting, acknowledged, and filed away.

Now? Now Darcy was looking at him like she wanted to be kissed and he found himself wanting it, too. He could feel the heat of Bucky’s gaze on him like the sun, almost vibrating with desire, his breaths shallow as it seemed like time and space itself was bringing them all together.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be up here!”

All three of their attentions spun toward the bright beam of the flashlight as it illuminated their forms. Steve watched the guard’s eyes widen when he realized who he’d just yelled at. “Oh, man, I’m sorry Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes and your… friend. I didn’t realize, I mean, you’re free to stay up here all night, until you leave, until you want to leave, I mean. Up to you.”

Internally Darcy was screaming. She’d seen it, the look in Steve’s eyes, the one she’d been wanting for. He’d finally looked at her like she was more than the person who’d taken part of his lover’s heart. He looked at her like he wondered what her tongue tasted like and this mother fucker here had ruined it, burst her happy little bubble, and she was Not Amused.

“Yes! Thanks! Thanks so much, sir! Glad to know the roof is safe under your watchful gaze! Who needs the Avengers when there’s someone making sure the roof is safe!”

When he dropped his arm and moved back toward the access door, Darcy wondered if she should feel bad for yelling at him. As she turned back to Steve and Bucky, seeing the delicious sandwich they made and wondering if they’d like her slice of american cheddar pressed between them, she felt positively no regrets.

Whatever spell they’d been under had lifted and she was left looking into the pleasant but ‘not currently thinking about you naked’ face of Steve Rogers. “Were you about to say something? It looked like you were about to say something before we were interrupted?”

Steve’s mouth fell open, the words on the tip of his tongue, but he chose to chuckle softly and glance at his watch. “Just that it’s getting late and we have a debrief at oh-seven-hundred.”

“Is it really that late?” When he pulled his hand from hers, Darcy was surprised she didn’t whine like a four-year-old who’d been promised Disney World but taken to Chuck-E-Cheese. As Steve busied himself picking up and putting everything back in the basket, she gestured wildly toward Bucky.
Bucky watched her hands fly through the air. It was like she was playing charades but was speaking a completely different language. When Steve turned back to them, Darcy’s hands dropped and she smiled guiltily at the blond. All Bucky could do was smirk at her antics, ignoring the glares she threw him when Steve wasn’t looking.

When Steve stood and held a hand out to help her up, Darcy took it happily, needing the help. *Maneuvering to your feet while wearing a pencil skirt should be some kind of Olympic sport,* she grumbled in her mind, though using it as an excuse to hold Steve’s hand for a little longer wasn’t a hardship. “I have a question.”

“Okay.”

“This stipend… how does it work? I mean, you’re not his employee, and I can’t imagine you fall under the Stark business umbrella. You have to be getting income from something else. Maybe licensing rights? Anytime someone buys a ‘Captain America’ lunch box, you get a cut of the back end? Anytime someone uses mascara, Bucky gets a bright, shiny new nickel?”

Darcy could feel the annoyed glare directed at her from Bucky, but everything faded away as the most beautiful sound in the world floated on the air. She watched Steve laugh, the first *real* laugh that she’d seen since meeting him. It was light, and effervescent, and she was pretty sure little cartoon birds would appear and start singing a tune with how perfect and amazing it was.

It felt like the air had been pushed out of Bucky’s lungs. It has been *so long* since he’d heard Steve laugh that he’d almost forgotten what it sounded like. Steve’d chuckled, he’d smirked, he’d snickered like a hollow man when he was annoyed, but a full-body, *slap-a-knee-with-glee-painting-your-face* laugh? He couldn’t remember. Before Thanos. Before Siberia. Maybe even before Germany and his fall. It was gorgeous, seeing the humor fill his cobalt eyes, and it left Bucky feeling euphoric.

Squeezing Darcy’s hand, Steve looked down at her with eyes that were lit brightly with merriment, a little breathless. “I’m not sure how it works, but you could ask Tony tomorrow. You’ll have to let me know what he says.”

“Yes! I mean that Friday works. For the movie. You can come to my place? To watch the movie, I mean. Not for… anything…” Darcy watched a grin turn Steve’s lips, amusement lighting his eyes. “… and you’re just going to let me hang out here, being awkward? No help at all?”

“I mean, I didn’t want to interrupt. Wouldn’t be polite.” The way her eyes narrowed slightly only made the smirk on Steve’s face slant deeper.
“Forgive him. He’s a punk,” Bucky said, coming up to drape an arm around Darcy’s shoulders. “And he’s a punk who’s going to help me walk you to your room.”

“Such gentlemen,” Darcy said, grinning at Bucky, squeezing Steve’s hand until she was pressed between them, “but I worry we’re past my curfew.”

“Better get you home quickly then,” Steve said, pulling open the door and heading back into the compound.

The walk and elevator ride was comfortable, Bucky’s hand squeezing Darcy’s shoulder, Darcy’s fingers laced with Steve’s. She almost wished the elevator would get stuck so they’d be able to spend more time together… and that led to the inevitable ‘elevator sex’ thoughts. She could feel their heat on both sides and she bit her lip, trying to will away the amazingelevatorsexohmygod fantasies running through her mind.

As they neared their doors, she had the distinct impression all three of them slowed, dragging the night out just that little bit longer. When it’d gotten to a snail’s pace, she begrudgingly detangled herself from between them, biometric lock clicking open. “This was…” She shifted from one foot to the other. “I had a great time.”

“I did, too. Thanks for letting me retell stories you already know,” Steve said, reaching up to scratch at the back of his neck, trying to ignore the awkwardness he could feel bubbling inside him. He’d been seconds away from kissing her moments ago but now he didn’t know what to do.

“I like hearing them from you,” Darcy said, smiling softly. “Buck, the picnic was a great idea, I loved it.”

“Figured you’d both like it,” Bucky said, reaching out to tug on Darcy’s hand, leaving the basket by his feet as he pulled her into his arms. He rested his cheek on her hair, swaying softly, fingers brushing over the soft material of her blouse. “Be careful tomorrow.”

Darcy rolled her eyes affectionately as Bucky pulled back and pinned her with his gaze. “I’ve got Iron Man and The Hulk protecting me. I’ll be fine.” When his grey eyes morphed into a darker glare, she pushed him away with a laugh. “Ugh, I promise I’ll be careful. Happy?”

“More and more each day.” He put the truth of that statement in his eyes, watching as she accepted it, smiling at him happily.

Her eyes closed as Steve leaned in, just centimeters away, heartbeat hammering as his lips pressed to her cheek. “We’ll see you on Friday?”

“Probably before that, but yeah. Friday. It’s a date.” This time Darcy didn’t waffle on calling it what it was. A date. Their first date. Second. Their pseudo-second first date.

“Good night, Darcy.”

“Good night, Steve.”

“Sweet dreams, doll.”

“Get some sleep, Buck.”

When Steve turned toward their door and unlocked it, Darcy and Bucky shared an entire conversation, complete with hand gestures and frantically mouthed words. At the end they both nodded at each other, seemingly satisfied with what had been discussed in the silence.
Darcy leaned against the inside of her door, holding a hand to her chest, feeling the rapid heartbeat just below her breastbone. “Friday?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“A-plus decision on the top.”

“Statistically it was the best choice.”

“Statistics didn’t make Steve’s eyes focus downward at the girls when he didn’t think I would notice.”

“No, that wasn’t the blouse, Ma’am, that was you.”

Chapter End Notes

*A leanbh - My Child

**A thaisce - My Treasure
Tony and Bruce take Darcy on a shopping spree that ends in heartache. Bucky and Steve deal with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Everyone, thank you so much for joining me on this ride! I've been trying to make these chapters meaty, and this is definitely one you can chew on! I've created another work where I'll be posting 'Extra's about this and other things. Music that inspires me, trains of thoughts and backgrounds I've been unable to really explore so far. Feel free to come over and chat at me!

<3

Getting into the back of Tony’s car had been a challenge. Darcy hesitated to even call it a car, as it was much more like a sardine can. Sure, it was worth more than she’d ever make in her lifetime and it was gorgeous aesthetically, but he’d known there’d be three people going on their little shopping field-trip and he’d still chosen the smallest car possible.

...and one of the people in the car could turn into a giant green monster, probably bigger than the car in the first place, which would leave her and Tony looking like squashed bugs. Darcy hadn’t actually met the Hulk yet, but she definitely didn’t want to have her first time be in this tiny-ass death trap.

Darcy leaned forward until her head was sandwiched between theirs, Tony driving and Bruce sitting in the passenger seat. “I still think calling ‘Chewie’ counts as calling shotgun.”

“Where do you come up with some of the things that fall out of your mouth?”

“We all have different kinds of genius. Yours is useless robots, Doc’s is his quiet and steely demeanor, mine is verbal wit. We deal with what we were given.” Darcy smiled when she saw Tony roll his eyes, pretty sure he was flouting the speed limit by at least thirty miles an hour. She’d pay good money to watch a cop give Tony Stark a speeding ticket.
Grinning to herself, she turned her attention to the characteristically quiet man on her right. “So, Doc, what are you hoping to experience on this fine fall day? Got a hankering for some Auntie Anne’s pretzels? Perhaps looking for that perfect autumn scent from Yankee Candle?”

Bruce shrugged his shoulders, keeping his focus on the trees flying by. “Both of us signed off on your leave approval and we figured…”

“- if you go crazy ga-ga-bananas and start destroying the mall, we figured we should be the ones to take you out.” Darcy watched Bruce turn his head and glare at Tony, the corner of the driver’s mouth lifting up in a smirk. “So just don’t go bananas.”

Sighing, Darcy sat back in her seat with a frown. “Thanks for the pep-talk, coach.”

Tony glanced at the rearview mirror, the colored lenses of his glasses casting her in a blue hue. “You’ll be fine, kiddo. You got this. And if anything does happen, Bruce’ll tranq you before it gets out of hand.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, casting her gaze out the tiny rear windows. “Well, that’s not worrying at all.”

“Just don’t think about it. You’ll be fine, Darcy. Think about shopping, or nail polish, or whatever it is you’re wanting to buy.”

He’d used her full name, and the shock at not being called a patronizing nickname settled her a bit. If Tony really thought she’d be fine, then maybe she should start believing it, too. “Nail polish isn’t really on my grocery list. A few books. Maybe some clothes. Speaking of purchasing things…” Darcy’s hand appeared in Tony’s vision, palm up and fingers waggling. “Show me the money.”

“Don’t worry about it. You just pick out what you want and we’ll call it even.”

Darcy rose an eyebrow and pulled her hand back, seeing Tony’s eyes flick to hers in the rearview mirror before he looked back to the road. “Call it even for what?”

“Thanos. Soul gem. Saving the planet. Don’t make it a big thing. It’s on Stark Industries.”

“Mmm,” Darcy sat back, grinning softly at how easily he’d downplayed her ‘saving the planet’. “In that case I’ll have to properly express my gratitude -”

“You’re welco -”

“- to Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. She’s being very generous. Do you perhaps have an address so I may mail her a nicely penned thank you letter?” Darcy heard a snort of laughter from Bruce, watching as Tony turned and glared in the scientist’s direction.

A shopping spree? Maybe it was worth grabbing that glowing gem after all. Thinking about the perks since she’d grabbed the stone (and ignoring all the bad parts) immediately had the previous night’s date popping into her mind. Darcy felt like she was still floating on air. It’d gone better than she could have ever hoped, despite her desire to find and murder that guard, and just thinking about the two men had her cheeks heating and her stomach doing little flips.

She loved them, but she was heavy in the ‘crushing’ part of her affections. In the teenage girl’s room in her mind, Darcy’d cut out pictures of Steve and Bucky from the pages of Tiger Beat and pasted them all over the metaphoric walls. Their smiles, their laughter, the way their eyes had lit up when laughing... all of it made her feel like a fourteen-year-old again.
“Can I get a cinnabon?”

“Of course.”

“Can I get a kayak?”

“Why the hell would you need a kay -”

“Can I get a puppy?”

“I’m not listening anymore.”

“Can I get tattoo?”

“Do not make me turn this car around.”

Darcy’s fingers slid from spine to spine as she slowly wound her way up and down the bookstore shelves. The fact that Tony and Bruce were giving her space was appreciated, but she couldn’t help feeling like they were looking at her under a microscope, watching for any wrong move, like a stray glow of her skin, or her eyes turning orange. It was unsettling, but she did her best to ignore them as she browsed.

She added another book to the pile in her arms. Darcy supposed she should feel guilty about the amount of items she’d bought, but it was on Stark Industries, a multi-billion dollar conglomerate, and it wasn’t like she was buying a house or anything. Some clothes. New sneakers. A comforter and pillows that didn’t suck ass. In the big scheme of things, it was cheap.

*I saved the world and all I got was this iPod!*

Snorting to herself, Darcy decided she’d grabbed enough to keep her busy for a bit, looking up for the registers. As she moved toward the exit, she felt the same itch between her shoulder-blades that she’d felt off and on throughout the day. It was a weird feeling, she wasn’t sure what it was, but it kept putting her on edge. She glanced around, trying to be inconspicuous.

Nothing seemed out of place; the other people in the store were browsing, laughing, sucking down their Starbucks. She didn’t notice anyone who looked sketchy, or anyone even slightly odd. She frowned, trying to get her eyes on Bruce or Tony, surprised to find they weren’t trailing her like they’d been. In fact, as she walked down the middle aisle, she didn’t see either of them at all.

Something was up, Darcy could feel it in her stomach, and she placed her books on a table as she passed, doing her best not to freak out.

*You’re fine. Maybe they’re peeing. You don’t know. It’s fine. It’s just the mall. Yeah, sure, Dawn of the Dead was in a mall, but zombies aren’t real. They aren’t. Fuck! Are zombies real?!

“Tony?” Her whisper was harsh, keeping her head high so she could see if his spiky dark hair popped up. “Doc?” She heard nothing, aside from a few snickers as a group of what looked like high schoolers passed the aisle she was in, no doubt laughing as she strained on her tiptoes, attempting to look over the shelves. “Bruce?”

“PUT IT IN THE BAG! NOW!”
Darcy ducked down, eyes widening as she heard a chorus of screams from the front of the store, where it opened into the crowded mall food court. “Shit.” she breathed, the angry yells echoing around the giant room. No, not echoing. There were more screams from the opposite direction, near the exit that led to the parking lot. She clapped hands over her ears when a high-pitched alarm sounded, followed by the metal barriers falling, essentially cutting off any hope of escape for her or anyone else. “Shit shit shit!”

It made perfect sense. *Of course* this would happen while she was at the store. Why would she imagine anything being normal at this point?

*Darcy Lewis: Saved the world, died in a mall bookstore robbery.*

“Where the fuck are you, Stark?” she growled under her breath, quickly moving from shelf to shelf, trying to get a better look at how many bad people there were. If she could only see where they were, she’d be able to -

*Fecking hell, you’re a goddamned idjit, Lewis. Pull it together.*

Her powers were still pretty new and she had only *just* gotten the hang of them, so it really wasn’t all that stupid that she hadn’t thought to use them right away. Darcy blinked, the spines of the books she was crouched next to (‘*50 Shades of Grey*’ *ugh*) being taken over by darkness. She focused, watching as lights popped up all around her. There was an internal struggle, part of her wanting to widen the net to include the whole mall, but that was a slippery slope. She didn’t want a repeat of what’d happened before (not that she regretted it, as she wouldn’t have Bucky or Steve in her life if it hadn’t happened) and needed to keep things local, she didn’t want to push the stone any more than she had to.

*Right. Look for the bad guys. Find the bad guys.*

It was odd, trying to use her powers for a specific purpose. Everyone looked essentially the same in the store, but she realized that almost everyone had dove to the floor or was making themselves as small as possible, *except* for the bad guys. They were moving, darting from place to place, yelling at the person behind the register to hurry up.

The loud one was in the front, the other making his way to join up his *literal* partner-in-crime. Darcy pegged them, following their movements as she made her way up the center aisle. She heard several people hiss at her, telling her to get down, telling her to be careful. She *was* being careful. No bad guys were near them, not that *they* knew that. When she glanced in their direction, she saw their lights pull back away from her, like recoiling in fear. She knew what she looked like and understood their reactions; skin glowing from the inside with an amber light, eyes sparkling, their normal hazel colored orange with smoke and energy.

When she got close enough that she could put real eyes on the the bad guys, she blinked the colors away, watching as one of them stuck a gun further into the cashier’s face. The woman was crying as she stuffed bills into a bag. “Hurry up!” the masked person screamed.

“Well look what we have here, Tex!”

Darcy watched as the other masked person shoved a man forward. The man was already bleeding from the forehead and stumbled when he was pushed, falling to his side as a boot smashed into his back with force. He was wearing a matching smock as the lady behind the register.

“He’s the one who pressed the alarm button.”
“Ah, so we have you to thank for trapping us in here.” Tex’s voice was rough, almost sounding like they were using something that morphed their speech, the electric buzz of the changer surrounding their words. “Are you the only one who can get us out of here, too?”

When the man didn’t speak, masked douche #2 kicked out, catching the worker in his ribs. Darcy winced as she heard the heavy impact and the helpless groan that accompanied it. “Answer his question!”

“No! No, he’s not the only one who can get you out. Please, please, just leave him alone!”

Tex looked up at the woman behind the counter, nodding thankfully at her before lifting the barrel of his gun and pointing it at the man cowering on the floor. “Then I guess we don’t need you anymore.”

“Stop!”

Darcy jumped out from behind the bookshelf, screaming in the masked men’s direction. Before she blinked them from her vision, she saw both of their heads turn toward her, watching as Tex swiveled his gun away from the worker, leveling it at her instead. She didn’t know what she was about to do, but she couldn’t stand by while someone was killed. It wasn’t in her DNA. She drew on Bucky’s calm-under-pressure to keep her from giving into the quaking fear in her stomach.

Their colors were so bright in the darkness that it was almost too easy to push at them, to move them away from the man at their feet. Darcy felt a jolt of energy as her hands physically thrust forward, seeing a wave of power shoot from her and hit their colors an instant later. She wasn’t sure what she’d done, but she heard a scream, then another, followed by the shattering of wood and the clang of metal.

She blinked, looking at what she’d done.

Darcy’d somehow thrown them through the air, that blast of orange energy sending them flying. They were slumped on the floor, one against the metal barrier, the other near a bookshelf that had been destroyed as he’d hit it. She froze there, eyes wide as she stared at them, then down at her hands.

I moved them. I moved them with my mind! The realization hit her quickly, shock filling her brain. That shock was followed by the awareness that she’d used the stone’s powers for more than just a glimpse of color, and that doing so had left her open.

Vulnerable.

A voice in the back of her mind whispered that it’d be just as easy to extinguish them, to rip the soul from their bodies. They were bad people, after all. They deserved to be punished for what they’d done, what they’d been about to do. If she didn’t punish them, who would? No one. They’d get away with it, and then next time they’d start shooting first. She would be helping if she tore their light, absorbed it into herself, feasted on their very essence.

You have this power inside of you, but you choose not to use it. Think of what you could do, how you could clean the world of their filth. What rights should they have if all they do is feed on the powerless? You know you want to see them suffer. Do it, do what you’re meant to, take their souls and -

“Shut up!” she screamed at the voice in her head, hearing it echo off the shelves around her. As it continued to whisper sweet nothings in her ear, eager for the flare of power and destruction she carried inside, Darcy did her best to block it out, but she was struggling.
She dropped to her knees, hands over her ears, shaking her head. Even with her eyes closed, she could tell she was glowing, the power right there and waiting to be used. She needed to focus, to ignore it, to replace it. She began repeating her borrowed mantra over and over again in her head, just like Bruce had said to.

*Til the end of the line. Til the end of the line.*

“Darce?”

*Til the end of the line. Til the end of th -

“Darcy?”

*Til the en -

“Lewis!”

Darcy blinked up at Tony through amber hues, confusion in her eyes as she looked at him. He had both hands pressed to her cheeks, a look of concern on his face, worry in the whiskey brown of his eyes.

“Where were you?” she demanded, heartbeat racing with fear. She’d almost lost, almost believed the stone as it whispered to her, could almost taste their souls on her tongue. She looked over Tony’s shoulder at Bruce, seeing the tranquilizer gun in his hand as he blinked down at her. Just beyond Bruce was a woman in all black, outfitted like the would-be robbers, the copper color of her hair a familiar shade.

“Natasha?”

It was like the light beneath Darcy’s skin was doused with ice water, instantly going cold. Her brain put each piece together, one after another, until it snapped into perfect clarity and she understood what was going on. She wrenched her face free from Tony’s hands, using the closest table to climb to her feet.

“Dar -”

Tony’s words were cut off abruptly when Darcy’s fist slammed into his jaw. She’d planted her feet and focused on a spot on the other side of him, using the years of Bucky’s fight training to make sure she followed through and put as much power into it as she could. She hadn’t expected the blinding pain that seared along her knuckles, her body nowhere near as honed as Bucky’s.

They cried out in unison, Tony falling backward against a table and Darcy spinning with the momentum. She shook her hand at her side, tears forming as the pain throbbed, fingers flexing to ensure she hadn’t broken anything. She turned back to Tony, Bruce, and Natasha, absolute rage in her eyes.

“You fucking *fuck*!” She spat the words as Tony rubbed at his face, a trickle of red at the corner of his mouth. “What the *hell* is your damage?!”

“We needed a real world situation to gauge your control,” Bruce said, eyes apologetic as Tony just stared at her, “putting you into the public without knowing for sure if you could contain your powers was too dangerous. We needed a safer way, a better way.”

Darcy shook her head at Bruce angrily. “So you, what? Bought out the whole fucking mall for some kind of *experiment*?” The look on Bruce’s face was enough to confirm her theory, and Darcy looked
around at all the faces in the store angrily.

She recognized a few of the other “shoppers” now. She’d passed them in the hallways at the compound, seen them in the gyms and weight rooms, walked by them on the grounds. Everyone, every single person in the mall, were soldiers or agents. She’d been surrounded by soldiers the entire time. Hadn’t she thought it weird there were no kids running around?

 Fuck.

When her accusing gaze landed on Natasha, Darcy watched the spy straighten, her shoulders squaring, her voice a rasp. “The risk to the public was too big. We had to know. Better here with us than out there.”

Darcy knew Bucky’s memories were making the words from Natasha sting more than they should, but the whole situation was terrifyingly familiar. It was too difficult to separate her own feelings from his, being filled with helpless anger, forced to be an unwilling test subject.

Again.

Just like HYDRA.

Just like Zola.

Just like The Soldier.

The adrenaline in Darcy’s body was dissipating, surprise and anger being replaced with fear and the bitter taste of betrayal. She couldn’t consider their words or reasoning, not yet, not with the shock of everything still so vivid in her system.

When her eyes landed on Tony, she felt her face begin to crumble. She’d spent so much time with the man lately that she’d started to think of him as a friend. Someone she could trust. He’d helped her, made sure she was comfortable, that she had someone to talk to. He was the whole reason she’d started her sessions with Bruce in the first place, giving her what control she did have over everything. She could see the regret in his eyes and it became too hard to look at him so she turned away, eyes lighting on the nearest “shopper”, recognizing them from the cafeteria line. “Get me back to the compound. Now.”

“Darcy, we could -”

“No, you can’t,” she interrupted Bruce, spinning to glare at him. “You know how scared of this I am, how terrified I am of hurting someone. You should have told me.” Her eyes flicked toward Tony for a second, watching as his jaw clenched, his eyes darting away from her.

Too ashamed to even look me in the face.

Darcy set her own jaw, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from crying as she turned her back to them. “Compound. Now."

Bruce watched Darcy stalk away from them, the glassy-eyed soldier following her at a safe distance. He locked eyes with Natasha, recognizing the expression on her face, sure he was wearing much of the same. They turned in unison to Tony, Natasha’s gaze softening slightly at the look on the billionaire’s face. “Tony, this isn’t on you.”

Tony’s hand dropped from where it’d been rubbing his jaw. “Yeah it is. I was the one who moved the timeline up. Hill wanted to wait, but I pushed and this was the compromise. This is on me.” Tony
darted out of Bruce’s reach when the scientist made to put a hand on his shoulder. “Could you guys make sure her bags get delivered to her? I’m going… I’ve got this thing. I’ll see you back at the base.”

“Tony -”

“It’s fine. Don’t forget her bags.”

Natasha sighed, crossing her arms over her chest as Tony left in the opposite direction of Darcy. When they were both out of earshot, she pinned Bruce with a look. “That could have gone better.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a bit of an understatement,” Bruce said, pulling the glasses from his face, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “You think this was worth it?”

“I think Hill will look at the footage and agree that Lewis had enough control to throw two people across the room with just her hands and a thought. Did we know she could do that?”

Bruce shook his head. “I think there’s a lot of things we don’t know about her abilities. When Wanda gets back I’d really like for the two of them to compare notes. If Wanda shares the same mutant gene and that’s why her and her brother were able to develop abilities from the tesseract, then maybe she’ll have some insights of what else to expect.”

The spy nodded, quiet for a moment. “She’s going to be angry for awhile,” Natasha said with a shake of her head.

“She should be.”

“You think we made the right call?”

“I don’t know if there was a right call to make. There were options, and we chose. Sometimes it’s not as easy as right and wrong.”

The corner of Natasha’s mouth lifted as she peered at him. “You’ve really got that ‘inner-peace’ schtick down, Banner.”

“No,” Bruce sighed, dark gaze flicking up to hers as he shook his head, “I’ve just gotten better at lying.”

“Sergeant Barnes, Miss Lewis has returned.”

Bucky glanced over at Steve, a small grin turning his lips. They’d spent the last hour wondering how much of a dent Darcy was going to put in the Stark Industries bank account. He knew from her memories that she’d never been a huge shopper, almost never having any extra money to waste, but he hoped she’d made a few good purchases. She deserved it.

“How many bags is she carrying?”

“She’s not carrying any, Sergeant.”

Steve looked up from his sketchpad, watching as the smile faded from Bucky’s face. He could see the worry as it bled into Bucky’s eyes, recognizing the tension as it flowed. He let his pencil fall away from the paper. “What is it?”
Bucky glanced up at him, a frown furrowing his brow. “She’s been gone all day.”

“Yeah?”

“If you’d been shopping all day, wouldn’t you have at least one bag?” Bucky left his guns in pieces on the floor, their cleaning forgotten as he climbed to his feet. He called out to the A.I. “Friday?”

“She’s coming down the hall right now.”

“Is she alone?”

“Yes.”

It only took two steps to pull open the door, another one to cross into the hallway. When Bucky’s eyes landed on her, right hand cradled against her chest, face mottled and pink with tears, his suspicions that something was wrong were quickly confirmed. “Darce?”

His voice surprised Darcy enough that she stopped moving, pulled from the war of thoughts in her head. Her shoulders lifted and fell as she shrugged in his direction. “I fucking hate the mall.” When her lower lip started to tremble, she looked up at the ceiling and let out a growl, feeling ridiculous for crying at all. “Fuck.”

Steve stood in the doorway, watching as Bucky closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around Darcy. She buried her face into his chest, and though he couldn’t hear it, Steve knew she was crying. Bucky whispered into her hair, tone gentle and soothing, and whatever he said made her nod, both of them turning toward Steve.

His gaze poured over Darcy. He could see the redness of her knuckles and the pink high in her cheeks. She was upset, and the sight of her in pain didn’t sit well with him at all. Steve took a step back, giving them enough room to move past him and into the room.

Steve was surprised when Darcy threw her arms around him as she passed, pressing her cheek to his chest as she sniffled. It caught him off guard but he recovered quickly, returning her hug, looking over her head toward Bucky. His lover’s gaze was dark and worried, but Steve watched some of it ease as Bucky looked at them.

“Sorry for all the snot,” Darcy said, pulling back and brushing at the soft cotton of Steve’s shirt. She felt disgusting. The trip from the mall with the soldiers had been awkward; no one had said anything as she cried helplessly in the backseat, ashamed at showing so much weakness in front of what amounted to strangers.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Steve assured her, squeezing her in his arms softly. Darcy looked up at him, giving him a watery smile, though he could tell it didn’t quite fill her eyes like normal. “Did something happen?”

Darcy sniffled, nodding as she took another step into their room. This was the first time she’d been in here, and she wished it was under better circumstances so she could snoop. Instead, she was left rubbing her sleeve over her cheeks in an effort to dry them as she took a heavy seat on the couch at the end of their bed. “I went shopping. Kind of.”

“Gonna have to give us a little more than that, doll,” Bucky said as he took a seat next to her, pulling her injured hand into his lap. He’d seen enough bruised knuckles to know her fist had come into painful contact with something recently. He did his best not to let his dark thoughts color his eyes when he looked at her.
“Everything was fine. Bought some things. A dress. New sneakers. Thought I’d jump into a bookstore and get a few things to read. Maybe a coloring book or two. They’re for adults now, did you know?” Darcy said, glancing in Steve’s direction. She was going off topic, but as she didn’t particularly like the topic she was about to discuss, she figured she was allowed a little distraction. “Then someone started robbing the store.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose toward his hairline, feeling the first stirring of protectiveness uncurling in his chest. “You were alone? Where were Bruce and Tony?”

“Oh, we’ll get to them, trust me.” When Steve crossed his arms over his chest, giving her an encouraging nod, she took a deep breath then continued. “I thought I could blink, you know? See how many bad people there were, maybe help get people to safety. I don’t know, I didn’t give it a lot of thought beyond ‘fire bad, tree pretty’. But then they were going to shoot someone so I…”

Bucky frowned when Darcy pulled her hand out of his and gestured with both of hers, thrusting them forward. “You shoved them?”

“Kind of?” Darcy’s hands fell to her lap, struggling with how to explain it to them. “I could see their lights, so picked them out of the group and pushed,” she gestured again, “I pushed them away from the guy.”

“You… Telekinesis?”

“No!” She looked up at Steve with wide eyes, certain that’s not what had happened. “At least… no. Not telekinesis. It’s not like I could pick up that chair and throw it. Just… people.”

Bucky shared a look with Steve, the blond taking a step closer. “You shoved them?”

“I pushed them with my mind.” She blinked at Bucky, her shoulders starting to shake. At first he thought she was crying again, but then he realized she was laughing. Darcy’s whole body was trembling with disbelieving giggles, manic and high pitched. “Oh sweet fuck, I pushed their souls with my mind. My mind, Buck.”

Steve knelt next to her, grabbing her other free hand, eye level with Darcy. “You did what you had to, to stay safe.”

“But I was safe. It was all a joke. A game. An experiment.” She spat the word like it was disgusting, Bucky’s memories making it sound obscene. “They were playing me. The entire place was filled with agents. Soldiers. Bruce. Natasha. They wanted to see if I’d blow up, if I’d self-destruct in a stressful situation, if I’d hurt people. Verdict? I threw two men through the air and had to stop myself from hollowing them out and swallowing their souls.”

Darcy’s eyes sobered as she looked at Steve, desperate to get him to understand what she’d almost done. “I could almost taste them, Steve.” She gripped his hand tightly.”Just a thought away. It would have been easy. And I wanted to. Oh god, I could have killed them and it’d be all his fault.”

Steve watched the darkness and fear as they filled her hazel eyes, “all whose fault?”

“Stark,” Bucky said for Darcy, the muscles of his jaw clenching when she nodded at his explanation. He turned accusing eyes toward Steve, reaching out to rub his hand up and down Darcy’s back. “It was Stark’s idea.”

“When I told him I wanted to get out of here, he said he’d make it happen. Then he was the one who suggested we go to the mall. It was his plan.” Part of Darcy could taste that Bucky’s history with the billionaire playboy was coloring her anger, but another part of her was too afraid to separate her
feelings from Bucky’s, needing his level head to keep from spiraling further.

Darcy felt a shiver travel up her spine, her mind supplying all the horrible scenarios that could have happened. She wrapped her arms around herself, pulling her knees to her chest. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to fight something this strong. It’s inside me. It knows what to say to get me to listen.”

“But you didn’t,” Bucky said, finger curling against her chin and turning her head to look at him. “You didn’t do what it wanted. You were stronger than it was.”

“This time. What happens next time? Or the time after that? All it’ll take is one weak thought, one sliver of doubt.”

“How’d you fight it this time?”

Darcy sighed, turning her head, resting her cheek on her knee as she looked into Steve’s blue eyes to answer his question. “I remembered what I had back here waiting for me.” The soft smile Steve gave her made her chest ache, knowing how close she’d come to giving in and losing everything.

She felt like Bruce; she had a a monster hiding inside of her, ready to escape at any moment, wanting to erupt in violence and death, and when it did, Darcy wasn’t sure she’d be able to come back from it.

Bucky draped his arm over her shoulders, pulling her into his lap. He held her while she cried, resting his chin on the crown of her head. His grey eyes found Steve’s as the blond stood. He watched Steve’s expression settle into stony determination. Bucky nodded, knowing what Steve was about to do and encouraging whatever wrath his lover saw fit to exact.

Absently Darcy heard the door open and close, but she was too weary to do anything but sniffle, afraid to close her eyes and let the colors steal her.

PageBreak

“Stark!”

Tony’s eyes rolled closed when he heard his name called angrily across the lab. He swiped a hand to clear the schematics floating in the air before him, spinning on his stool, a look of exasperation on his face as Steve stalked toward him. “Can this wait? I’m right in the middle of something important.”

The flippant look on Tony’s face made Steve thrill with more anger. “You’re not cleared to conduct in-field training and you damn well know it.”

Sighing, Tony crossed his arms over his chest, chin dipping, brown eyes guarded. “I see you’ve heard about our field trip.”

The flippant look on Tony’s face made Steve thrill with more anger. “You’re not cleared to conduct in-field training and you damn well know it.”

Sighing, Tony crossed his arms over his chest, chin dipping, brown eyes guarded. “I see you’ve heard about our field trip.”

“We agreed that if we were going to make this work, us as a team again, that we’d need to communicate. I should have known the second -”

“Can you throttle back on the self-righteous schtick, it tastes a bit stale.”

Steve’s body was full of tension as he came to stand before the smaller man, the anger in his eyes turning them from sky blue to cerulean. There was a bruise on the right of Tony’s jaw, a small line of blood where Darcy’s punch had split his lip. “Where do you get off making decisions without -”

“It wasn’t my call.”
“If you think -”

“It. Wasn’t, My. Call,” Tony bit out, his glare matching Steve’s. He slid off the stool and turned his back to Steve, circling the work table, putting space between him and the angry blond glaring daggers at him.

He picked up a screwdriver and clutched it in his hand, using it to point in Steve’s direction as he spoke. “Lewis wanted a furlough, so I took the idea to Hill. She said the only way she’d agree was conducting a real-world exercise, to confirm the control Darcy had over of her abilities. Well, consider them confirmed.”

Tony tossed the screwdriver onto the metal tabletop, hearing it clatter as it slid into a half-deconstructed prototype helmet. “The exercise was a resounding success.”

Steve watched Tony lean forward, placing his palms on the workbench and letting out a long breath. He got it now, face softening as Steve realized what had really happened. He’d been so ready to believe Tony had overstepped their agreed upon arrangement that he hadn’t stopped to consider any other possibilities. He’d let his fear and anger on Darcy’s behalf color his thoughts.

Leaning his hip against a table, Steve crossed his arms over his chest with a sigh. “She’s afraid of what she can do.”

“Yeah? No shit.” Tony shook his head as he chuckled darkly to himself. The silence that descended over the lab was heavy, only broken by the sounds of Dum-E and U chirping happily nearby. Finally, Tony pushed away from the table, leaning against the counter behind him, leveling Steve with a worried glare. “Is she alright?”

“She’s with Bucky.” When Tony looked at him with frustration, not happy with the answer he’d been given, Steve nodded. “She’s scared of what she did, but she’ll be alright.” When Tony nodded, Steve’s lips turned downward into a frown. “She thinks you organized it.”

“And I’m sure you leapt to my defense, told her I would never do something so underhanded?” When Steve looked away, Tony nodded to himself, a self-deprecating sneer turning his lips. He knew things would never be like they’d been before, but knowing how little everyone thought of him was tougher to swallow than he would have liked.

“Yeah. Didn’t think so. But hey, it’s better to be mad at me than the system, right?” When Steve’s blue gaze flicked up to him, an argument about to spill free from the soldier’s mouth, Tony shook his head. “Forget it. If she wants to go out again, tell her to talk to Hill. I’ve got to get back to this. Deadlines, feet to the coals, you get it. If we could keep this conversation private, I’d appreciate it. Don’t want to set back her training.” Tony shook his head. He waved his hand, bringing up his schematic, turning his back to Steve.

“Tony -”

Steve sighed when blasting rock music filled the air at a flick of Tony’s wrist, making it all but impossible to continue the conversation. Steve stood there, hands on his hips, watching as Tony took another sip from his mug and dialed back into his work, fingers a flash over the illuminated keyboard.

Casting one more resigned glance in Tony’s direction, Steve left the lab.

When the door hushed closed, Tony’s shoulders slumped forward. He spun on the stool, the blue of the schematic blurring in a stream of color. He stopped when Dum-E wheeled forward, holding out
the screwdriver he’d thrown earlier. Rolling his eyes, Tony took the offering, setting it on the table in front of him. He frowned at the robot before grabbing a rag from the counter and pulling Dum-E toward him, wiping away a smudge of grease on the robot’s arm. “Useless.”
Darcy, Steve, and Bucky have a movie night, Bucky and Steve embrace the flames (NC-17), and Clint Barton introduces himself to Darcy and her foot.

The response to this little bit of wording had been unequivocally amazing, and every comment or kudos puts a smile on my face. The discussions going on make my heart grow three sizes every time. I'm so glad you're enjoying this, so here's a supersized chapter! (Blame the Smut. Always blame the smut for word count.)

:D

I don’t need the stars in the night, I found my treasure.
All I need is you by my side, so shine forever.

- Owl City, Gold

Darcy wasn’t watching the movie, not really. She had it memorized, could probably recite it from start to finish if she were asked, but her focus kept darting toward the two men she was sharing the couch with. She loved Gene Wilder, and growing up Darcy’d dreamt about living in a candy factory and being whisked away from her life by some charming stranger who’d offer her everything she could ever want…

… but that paled in comparison to the prize she had right in front of her.

Sure, she wanted to make sure they laughed at the right parts (like when that whiney little bitch fell down the rotten egg chute), but she was also looking at them because how could she not? They were gorgeous, the light from the TV casting their faces in shadows, flashes of blue and green coloring their skin. Their fingers were laced together, Bucky’s other hand running up and down her calf absently, attention on the screen. Steve leaned against Bucky’s arm, grinning at appropriate times, looking confused at others.

After the shit show that’d been her week (No, nope, nuh-huh, this is a happy time, stop thinking about the people you thought were friends and how close you’d come to killing to two men), being
able to look at something so pretty was like a balm to her. Darcy was able to forget the feelings of betrayal that still stung in her stomach, because looking at Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers was all she wanted to do.

As the Wonkavator flew over the town, Darcy watched Steve’s mouth pull downward into a frown, disappointment in her voice. “You didn’t like it?”

Steve blinked, pulled from his thoughts by Darcy’s question. He considered not answering, but Darcy was looking at him with those soft hazel eyes and he couldn’t help being honest. “It just seemed a bit self-serving.”

Bucky glanced at Steve then turned to Darcy, watching as her eyes widened in shock and then narrowed at the man to his right. Wrong answer, punk, he thought, leaning back so they could argue. Darcy turned her entire body so she was facing Steve with that incredulous look on her face, and Bucky could only imagine the storm of words that was about to descend in her bedroom.

“Self-serving? What are you talking about?”

Steve gestured toward the screen with one hand. “Wonka has been a recluse almost his entire life. His candy is great. Kids love it. Adults love it. The business is going well.”

“Mmmhmm,” Darcy said, nodding, eyes still narrowed at him slightly. “His is the best.”

“So this guy decides he’s going to let people into his factory. Not just anyone, but five lucky kids, putting tickets in the candy.”

“Golden tickets. Yeah.”

“His plan works and his candy flies off the shelves, selling out everywhere. Massive profits, renewed interest in the brand, and the publicity keeps going even after the tickets are found as there’s a media circus outside the factory.”

“Yeah, but -”

“Wonka puts the kids through what some people would call psychological torture in order to find a pure kid, a good kid, who he hands the company to. The kid knows nothing of business and suddenly he’s the CEO of a company with no experience, beholden to an older man with no family to speak of, and living in a building filled with dangers and strange orange men.”

Bucky’s eyebrows lifted as he turned away from Steve, watching the emotions fly over Darcy’s face. Her mouth opened like she was going to argue with him, but instead Bucky could practically see the realization cross her features like a wave, her dramatic exhale making him shake his head and smile.

“Oh my god.”

Steve frowned at the look on her face, knowing he’d put it there. “I know it’s just a movie, but it just seemed a little too farfetched to make sense.”

“Holy mother fucking shit.”

Steve shifted on the couch, feeling guilty. She’d told them how much she loved the movie and he felt like an ass. “I hope I didn’t ruin it for you.”

Darcy shook her head slowly, hazel eyes bright when they looked at Steve. “No. You just made it the best horror movie ever! Creepy man with no family invites five kids into his factory, pits them
against each other and puts them through a series of tests until he’s left with The One, who he will train to follow in his footsteps! That’s fucking awesome!”

Steve’s lips pursed, smile going crooked when Darcy stared at him, face bare with happiness as she gaped in his direction.

Bucky turned his attention back to the TV screen as the credits rolled, well aware of the way Darcy and Steve were looking at each other, feeling their warmth on both sides. “A young blond kid with an inferiority complex signs up to accept a heavy responsibility, one fraught with danger and the possibility of personal harm, without giving a second thought or worry for his own well being. Gee, I wonder why that sounds so familiar?”

Both Steve and Darcy turned toward Bucky at his comment. For his part, Bucky continued looking at the TV, an amused smirk lighting his features.

“How many other hot blonds do you know that agreed to become marvels of modern science and continue to be perfect specimens?” The pink that sprang to Steve’s cheeks made Darcy grin even brighter.

“You’re going to give him a bigger head than he already has, doll.”

“Aw, Buck. Don’t be jealous.” Darcy poked his ribs, laughing when he scooted closer to Steve and away from her fingers. She cackled when he ran a hand over the sole of her foot, making her writhe as she laughed. He knew how ticklish her feet were, but that was fine, since she knew his weaknesses, too.

Steve watched the both of them poke at each other, his blue eyes warming. He very rarely got to see Bucky so carefree, his laugh even rarer, but there it was, ringing through the air. The catalyst of the laughter was attempting to wiggle free of the couch, her dark hair sliding as she thrashed and giggled. The sounds brought a smile to Steve’s face. He knew she was still reeling from what had happened at the mall, and it pleased him that they were able to make her laugh, make her forget everything for a little while.

He had plans to tell her that Tony wasn’t the one who’d planned the thing, that Tony’d been worried and asked if she was okay, but every time Steve thought to bring it up, he could see the edge of fear in her eyes and thought better of it. He would tell her, or at least make sure she knew, but it wasn’t the right time, not now. Steve wanted her to keep laughing for just a little while longer.

As the two continued to struggle, cheeks flushed pink and their breathing heavy, the warmth in his eyes turned heated, unable to keep his thoughts from considering all the possibilities as he watched their bodies move against one another.

“StopohgodJamesBuchananBarnesyoustopthisinstant! Steve! Help!”

“Yeah, Steve. Help.” Bucky looked over his shoulder at his best friend, seeing the aroused look in the blond’s eyes. When their gazes locked, he saw the desire laid bare on Steve’s face, a knowing grin turning Bucky’s lips upward as he watched Steve’s lips part, his breathing speeding. “Hold her feet for me?”

“What?” When Steve’s hands wrapped around her ankles, the strength in his fingers leaving no
option of escape, Darcy sat up, slapping at Bucky’s hands as they jutted into her ribs. She was breathless and panting with laughter. Bucky’s fingers wrapped around her wrists and held them captive, above her head. Glad his digits were no longer sinking into her sides, Darcy’s breath came in short bursts as she recovered, still giggling softly.

The laughter faded as knowledge and want thrilled through her body. Bucky was so close, his arms stretched upward where they were holding hers. She’d ended up sprawled on top of him, her legs outstretched and held at the ankles by Steve. Darcy’s chest lifted and fell as she breathed heavily, eyes darting over Bucky’s shoulder to look at Steve. The soldier was looking at her, his eyes darkened to cobalt, mouth parted the tiniest bit.

There were so many thoughts running through his head that it took effort to filter them. Steve’s eyes poured over Darcy, the way her cheeks were flushed, the pink that trailed down her neck until it was hidden by the collar of her t-shirt. The t-shirt itself was stretched taut over her chest and he watched her breathe, pushing against the fabric, filling his mind with the question of what she was wearing beneath.

When his eyes darted from her lips - so full, pouting, pink and gorgeous - to her eyes, he realized she’d been watching him look at her with less than gentlemanly thoughts. He shifted, patting her legs awkwardly before slipping out from under them and climbing to his feet. “I’ve got to…” Darcy and Bucky were both looking at him with slightly incredulous expressions on their faces as Bucky lowered her arms and they put space between their bodies. Steve nodded, turning on his heel and going into the bathroom.

As Steve pulled the door shut behind him, Darcy let out a frustrated ‘fuck’ and leaned forward to press her face against Bucky’s neck. When Bucky wrapped his arms around her, she shook her head. “Damn it.”

Bucky knew exactly what she meant, and he shifted his jeans so he was no longer pressed uncomfortably against his zipper. “He just needs time.”

“Fuck time,” Darcy said, pulling back to level Bucky with a glare. Seeing the impatience in his storm-grey gaze only made her hotter. “He’s going to drive me crazy, Buck.”

Bucky chuckled softly, shaking his head as he reached out to tuck a wild curl behind her ear. “Welcome to my entire existence on this planet,” he mumbled, earning a smile and a roll of Darcy’s eyes. His fingers ran up and down the soft skin of her thigh, brushing against the hem of her cotton shorts then starting the journey from knee to shorts all over again. When he glanced up at her, Darcy’s eyes were closed and he watched the sigh move through her body until it looked like she shuddered with it.

“Bucky…”

Hearing his name on her tongue made him want to crash his mouth to hers, complete the feeling that was raging inside on him every time they were in the same room. It felt wrong, being this close to her and not being able to show her with his body how much she meant. Bucky knew it was for the best, the decision not to be physical with each other until Steve was on board, but that didn’t make him want her any less or make it any less frustrating.

Reluctantly, Darcy pulled herself from Bucky’s lap and sat on her own cushion at the end of the couch. She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on a knee as she blinked at Bucky, giving him a small smile.

Splashing cold water on his face had done nothing to put out the embers of arousal that still burned
within Steve, and he was left staring at himself in the mirror of Darcy’s bathroom, wondering how they’d gotten to where they were.

He found Darcy Lewis stunning, all soft curves and full lips, acidic sarcasm and quick snark. Steve Rogers wasn’t blind, after all. He did, however, get his wires crossed when it came to Bucky. Finding his best friend again, possibly getting to build a life together, like they’d always dreamed… it was more than Steve could have ever hoped for. Bucky was more than enough for him, and even though Bucky had tried convincing him of the truth, it was still hard to understand how Bucky was fine with the way he looked at Darcy, even encouraging it.

Steve’d known Bucky forever, and he’d gotten good at being able to tell when the other man was lying. He wasn’t. He wasn’t lying about Darcy; not how he felt for her, not how she felt for him, and not how Bucky wanted Darcy and Steve to look at each other as more than friends.

The three of them.

Together.

Even with all that, with everything that Bucky and Darcy were doing to make him comfortable with the idea, it still left him feeling like he was cheating on someone in some way.

Steve wiped his face on one of Darcy’s towels, a pretty pink color that reminded him of roses and her lips, and pulled open the door. They were on opposite ends of the couch now, no longer tangled together, and Steve felt the surprising pull of disappointment in his chest. Acknowledging the feeling and setting it aside to unpack when things weren’t quite so awkward, Steve rubbed at the back of his neck. “Thank you for the movie. It was fun.”

Darcy’s eyes rolled up to Steve’s face, seeing the genuine sincerity in his blue gaze. “You’re welcome. Maybe next time you pick a movie for us to watch?”

He nodded his agreement, matching her bright smile with a slightly dimmed version of his own. “Sounds good. I’ve got training in the morning so I’m going to -”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s fine. I know you’re busy.” Darcy jumped up from the couch, watching Bucky move much slower than she had as he followed suit. When she was standing in front of Steve, looking up at him, she couldn’t help but let her appreciation bleed into her eyes. Gotdamn he’s pretty.

There was a second of awkwardness before Darcy thought ‘fuck it’ and threw her arms around Steve’s middle, squeezing as she took a deep breath in. She wasn’t sure how someone could smell or feel as good as Steve did. Probably something to do with pheromones or the like. Whatever it was, he was delicious and she lingered, sighing softly when he wrapped his arms around her shoulders.

As Steve returned Darcy’s hug, he locked eyes with Bucky over her head, searching for any hint of jealousy, or possessiveness, any sign that proved he was resentful that there was someone else in Steve’s arms.

There was nothing in Bucky’s gaze except explicit arousal, the truth of it darkening his irises to slate, to the grey of a storm. He looked at the two of them pressed against each other and Steve could see the possibilities running through his lover’s eyes. When Darcy pulled back and looked up at him, face glowing and cheeks tinted, Steve found his eyes straying to look at her lips as she spoke.

“Thanks for indulging my movie nerdiness. I hope it wasn’t too much of a hardship.”

Steve shook his head, looking into the warm hazel of her eyes. “Not a hardship, Darcy, I promise.”
Looking up at Steve, she started to get lost in his eyes, watching him begin to glow gold the longer she stared. She took a step back and shook her head to get rid of the colors. Apparently peering up into dreamy blue eyes stole some of her control. Who’da thunk it?

Bucky kept his eyes on Steve as he closed the distance between himself and Darcy, melding the front of his body to the back of hers. He pushed her hair out of the way and pressed his lips to her neck, feeling Darcy’s quick intake of breath at the intimacy of the action. Steve watched it all with a carefully blank expression, but Bucky knew his best friend. He recognized the signs of attraction. Steve’s parted lips. Pupils dilated and shifting from his right leg to his left. The way his shoulders pushed back and his jaw clenched.

Darcy’s eyes fluttered closed at the feel of Bucky being so near, the front of his body like flames against her back, his fingers trailing on her shoulder and leaving a line of fire behind. When he moved toward Steve and away from her, she opened her eyes, watching as Bucky pushed the blond out the door.

When they were gone, she fell back on her bed, staring up at the little stuck-on stars as they glowed dimly, wondering how on Earth her panties hadn’t spontaneously busted by this point

Bucky’s mouth was on Steve’s the second their bedroom door shut behind them. Watching Steve’s face, seeing the way the blond’s eyes followed Darcy when she moved? It was going to rip him apart. He’d gone too long without pressing his lips to Steve’s and after the ramp up in Darcy’s room, he was desperate with desire. His hands were already pulling on the hem of Steve’s shirt, wanting to feel the warm skin underneath.

He could do little else but accept the driving force that was his best friend’s mouth, and Steve welcomed it with a hunger of his own. Absently he considered it unfair that what had happened in Darcy’s bedroom was used as some kind of foreplay for an act she wouldn’t participate in, but the feeling of Bucky’s hands tugging at his clothing blanked everything else from his mind.

Steve’s shirt was thrown over his shoulder, and Bucky took the opportunity, running his hands up Steve’s stomach and chest, feeling every dip of muscles, his thumb brushing over Steve’s hardened nipple and earning a hiss for his actions. It felt like his heartbeat was pumping too fast, his breath short and coming in pants.

Bucky rubbed his face along the stubble of Steve’s jaw, tongue darting out to lick a wet, hot line up the column of Steve’s throat. He could feel the steady thumpthumpthump of Steve’s pulse just below his skin, Bucky’s teeth biting hard, just this side of hurting. His fingers tangled in the soft strands of blond at the back of Steve’s neck, pulling and exposing more skin for him to pay attention to.

When Bucky’s tongue dipped into the hollow at his clavicle, Steve gasped, hands fumbling, grabbing the back of Bucky’s shirt and wrenching it up and over, throwing it to join his somewhere on the floor. “Fuck, Bucky,” he breathed, pulling Bucky’s pouting lower lip between his teeth, sucking once, feeling the shudder go through his lover’s body. “Want you.”

The arousal that was burning in Steve’s stomach only fanned hotter when he felt Bucky’s hands at his belt, freeing the leather, fumbling with the buttons and zipper. It felt like forever had passed before he felt Bucky’s hand – so warm, so strong, so perfect – wrap around the velvet swell of him, both of them sighing at the feeling. Bucky’s hand moved down and back up the length of Steve’s cock before repeating the motion, drawing little gasps and hisses as he pushed them backward
toward the bed.

It was a mad dash, trying to free themselves from the rest of their clothing, but seconds later the full press of skin on skin left them both moaning in satisfaction. “Fuck, you feel so good, Steve, so hard.”

Steve shivered at the growl of Bucky’s voice in his ear, the feeling of the other man’s cock rubbing against his. He fisted his hand in Bucky’s dark hair, capturing his lover’s mouth, crashing. “Hard for you,” Steve said against Bucky’s lips, tongue darting out to run along the seam, curling upward in Bucky’s mouth when he pulled back.

“How about here?” Bucky asked, pupils blown as he looked into Steve’s eyes from inches away, his body thrumming with energy.

He knew what Bucky was asking, and the scenarios Steve had been imaging across the hall sprung back to mind, his cock twitching at the memory of Darcy’s face as Bucky had pressed himself against her back, Bucky’s lips on her neck. Steve didn’t answer, just gasped when Bucky continued to drive them back. Bucky’s hand reached around to squeeze the swell of Steve’s ass, fingers digging in as he ground himself against the blond.

Bucky wanted Steve breathless, moaning and begging, craving and asking for more. He tore his mouth from Steve’s, pushing until the back of Steve’s legs hit the bed, taking a heavy seat. Steve’s eyes were so blue as they gazed up at Bucky, desire clear in their depths, impossibly long eyelashes brushing his cheeks.

Steve scooted back on the bed, heart racing as Bucky crawled up the length of his body, eyes dark and predatory, his pulse racing at the intensity in his lover’s eyes. Bucky settled himself between Steve’s open hips, leaning down to capture Steve’s mouth. He bit hard on Steve’s lower lip when the blond traced his hands up and down his back, fingernails dragging and scratching, squeezing his ass and grinding up into him. “You drive me fucking crazy,” Bucky growled, tongue licking into Steve’s mouth, swallowing the gasp as he wrapped his hand around Steve’s cock again.

Bucky wasn’t the only one going crazy, and Steve struggled to focus on anything except the desire singing through his veins, wanting to feel Bucky against him, around him, inside of him. Every bit of his skin was on fire, every place it rubbed against Bucky’s sparkling like electricity. Bucky laid the full weight of his body on top of him, and Steve had to stop himself from bucking upward, chasing the friction he so desperately wanted. “Want to feel you.”

Steve’s words drew a dark and knowing smirk on Bucky’s lips. “Want me, huh? Want me to do this?” Bucky’s fingers moved up and down, twisting when he got to the top of Steve’s cock, just like the blond liked. “Or this?” Bucky pushed Steve’s knees to the side, slotting himself further between Steve’s legs. “Want me right here?”

Gasping, Steve grabbed the back of Bucky’s neck and jerked him down, needing to taste Bucky, his tongue seeking his lovers, gasping again when Bucky palmed his sack, squeezing softly. “Fuck, yes.”

“How about here?”

“Bucky!” Steve moaned, back arching of the bed as Bucky pressed a finger against his opening, giving just enough pressure to make him breathe heavier. “Yes, fuck, there.”

Bucky leaned down, chuckling softly as he pressed his lips to Steve’s neck, tongue darting out to taste the salt on Steve’s skin. “Want me in you? Fucking you? Making you feel good? Is that what you want?”
Steve wasn’t sure how to speak anymore, the strength in Bucky’s hand on his hip holding him still, only able to writhe against the feeling of his finger and his knuckle as it rubbed over and over. “Yes, Bucky, please, please!”

It never got old, hearing Steve pant his name like that, and Bucky smirked, watching the haze of frenzy settle in the blond’s face as he increased the pressure, watching him take a shuddering breath inward and letting it out in a huff. Freezing, Bucky pulled back long enough to nod toward the nightstand. “Grab it.”

Wiggling a bit, Steve stretched until he could fumble inside the drawer for the slick inside. Turning back to Bucky, Steve couldn’t help the way his pulse raced. Bucky was gorgeous, dark and handsome, looking down with a hunger that Steve matched easily. He’d been in love with this man since they were children and seeing his desire echoed in Bucky’s face was enough to stop his heart. “Come here,” Bucky said, grabbing Steve’s hips and pulling him back down until they were pressed together, hand ghosting down Steve’s leg so he could wrap it around his waist, the top of his cock just teasing against Steve’s opening.

“Fuck,” Steve gasped, eyes fluttering closed as Bucky took the bottle from his hand, hearing the pop of its top seconds later. He opened his eyes to watch Bucky coat his fingers, dropping the slick off the side of the bed before leaning down. Bucky’s left hand was pressed into the mattress next to Steve’s head, leaning down to capture Steve’s lips with his own.

He pressed his fingers against Steve’s hole, sliding softly, running his knuckle softly, drawing gasps and shudders with each movement. Bucky loved watching Steve like this, writhing and jerking, heaving up, fists curling in the comforter. It wasn’t until Steve asked, until the word please was falling from his mouth over and over, that Bucky gave Steve what he wanted, pressing a finger into him, slowly.

The feeling of Bucky’s finger left Steve jerking, feeling wetness as he leaked against his own stomach, fighting the urge to grind himself down and onto Bucky’s finger. He felt Bucky’s exhale outward, eyes opening to see Bucky looking down at him, a fever in the grey of his eyes. He gasped Bucky’s name when a second finger worked its way into him. “Want you, Buck, please, fuck me.”

Bucky ached to be inside Steve, to feel every breath and shudder that ran through his lover’s body, to bring their bodies together again and again, but he wanted it to be good for Steve, too, so he worked quicker, stretching his fingers apart, making sure Steve was ready for him. It wasn’t until Steve gasped ‘now’ and ground down onto his hand that Bucky pushed Steve’s knees further open, fingers wrapping around his own cock, spreading the slick onto it.

Steve gasped as the head of Bucky’s cock pressed against his opening. “Fuck, Bucky, yes, fuck me, now, please,” the last word falling from his lips, sounding pained with barely contained need.

Bucky moved slowly, so slowly, pushing each inch into Steve carefully, letting his lover relax and adjust to the feel of being so full. The desire that’d been vibrating in him since leaving Darcy’s room had him breathless, wanting to crash his body against Steve’s, until he could see nothing but stars and hear nothing but his name falling from Steve’s lips like a prayer. Every ounce of his willpower was tested, until he stopped moving because his hips were settled as close against Steve as they could be.

It was a song they’d been dancing to for years, but it still amazed Steve how well their bodies fit together. It didn’t matter if it was before the serum or after, his body was made to be with Bucky’s and it felt just as right and perfect as always. His fingers dug into Bucky’s bicep, looking up into his grey gaze, lips parting as he breathed heavily.
It was almost torture to keep his body still, especially looking down at the fierce expression of intensity in Steve’s eyes, and as Bucky pulled back, he let out a shuddering breath. Every move was deliberate, watching the flow of emotions over Steve’s face until he was just this side of pulling out completely. Bucky waited, watching the hunger in Steve’s eyes before he thrust forward with his hips, Steve’s nails biting into him, a moan falling from his lips. “Steve, fuck, you feel so good, so fucking good.”

Steve couldn’t keep his hands from flitting from place to place; squeezing the back of Bucky’s neck as he worked in and out of him with steady thrusts, hand gripping at the blanket below them, fingernails scraping down Bucky’s back and arms. His cock was pressed hard against his stomach, tip red and sensitive, wetness being spread with each push forward.

The way Steve ground against him was going to be his undoing, and Bucky’s thrusts became stuttered, speeding up and then slowing down, wanting to skirt the edge before plunging forward. He drew it out, until Steve was babbling, until he was a writhing bundle of nerves below him. Steve shouted when Bucky’s hand wrapped around him tightly, his fist moving in tandem with his hips, knowing what to do to bring Steve with him.

Stretching around Bucky’s cock could have made Steve come by itself, his body already on fire from what had happened in Darcy’s room, but his hips thrust upward into Bucky’s fist, chasing the friction. It felt like agony, delicious and unfair, but Bucky would move quicker, increase his speed, only to slow second later, and all Steve could do was moan, gasp, and fill the room with the sounds of his sighs and Bucky’s name. “Close,” Steve bit out, eyes wide as they looked up in Bucky’s.

“Tell me,” Bucky growled, his head dipping down to curl his tongue into Steve’s mouth, pulling the blond’s lower lip between his teeth, “want you with me.” Every part of him wanted to lose control, to let go and slam his body into Steve’s, but he wanted Steve to fall over the edge with him. “Yes, fuck, Steve, want to come in you, you want that? Want me to come in you?”

“Yes, Bucky, so close, so close, oh, ah, fuck, now! Now! Fucknownownow!”

Watching Steve come, his cock jumping, seeing him spill onto his stomach as his head fell back against the bed and his back arched, pushed Bucky over the edge. He came with a shout of Steve’s name, his hands like vices on Steve’s hips as he pressed himself as far as he could into Steve, wrapped in his warmth.

His body was still jerking with small tremors, feeling full. Bucky’s weight was comfortable and familiar as it pressed down on him, and Steve rode the wave until he could breathe normal again. He opened his eyes to see Bucky’s shoulders hunched, holding himself up on both hands, head hanging as he panted. “That was…”

“Yeah,” Bucky said breathlessly, moaning when Steve shifted underneath him. Everything was so sensitive that each breath sent him into an aftershock, until it was almost too much and he pulled back, letting out a tired and sad sound as his body separated from Steve’s. He collapsed onto the bed with a large sigh, eyes closed, heart still thundering in his chest.

Steve turned onto his side, melting against Bucky like liquid, basking in the afterglow. He knew they’d need to clean up eventually, but he wanted to do nothing else that moment except feel Bucky’s warmth on his skin. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re good at that?” Steve smiled at the sharp snort Bucky gave his question.

“Few people, yeah,” Bucky said, eyes closed and lips smirking up at the ceiling. “Helps to have a good partner.”
“Or partners?”

The quiet hesitance in Steve’s voice made Bucky’s eyes open, and he turned onto his side so he could see into his best friend’s face. There was a heaviness in Steve’s gaze, an uncertainty that Bucky wanted to ease, and his eyes colored with seriousness as he tried to erase the doubt in Steve’s mind.

“My entire life, it’s been you, Steve. Everyone else… they didn’t matter, not like you do. I know it wasn’t always the same with you, I know that you’ve loved someone other than me, but I know that doesn’t change what we have. What we’ll always have.”

Bucky watched the small flinch in Steve’s eyes as the blond’s memories of Peggy floated to the surface at his words. “Nothing will ever make me love you any less, no matter what happens. Do you believe me?”

Looking into Bucky’s eyes, seeing the truth filling them, made Steve nod slowly. “I believe you, Buck,” he said, giving Bucky what he hoped was an honest smile. Bucky’s words were true. Steve had loved someone else. He wasn’t sure he’d have made it through the war and the loss of Bucky without Peggy. His life could have been so different if things hadn’t come together or fallen apart as they had. Steve and Bucky’s history had led them to this moment, however, to where they were and who they were with. Maybe it was time for Steve to stop questioning why and start questioning who.

Who knew all his secrets? Who was able to make Bucky laugh, make him smile with happiness? Who could make everything feel lighter? Brighter? Who’d been willing to risk themselves to save everyone else?

Who loved him?

Steve’s thoughts provided two names, but he didn’t say them aloud, not sure he was ready to commit to what he felt, just needing a little more time. For someone who’d always been in a rush toward peril, Steve considered time as currency, and his pockets had been emptying fast. But the more time he spent with Darcy, the more he got to know her and see her eyes filling with affection he didn’t think he’d earned yet… he felt richer.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Steve said, rolling off his side of the bed.

“That okay.”

As Steve stood, Bucky worried that he’d said the wrong thing, that he shouldn’t have pushed the conversation toward Darcy, but he wasn’t sure what else to do with the fire that was burning within him every time he had to tell her goodbye. He sighed, nodding his head against the pillow.

“You should come with me.”

When Bucky turned to look at Steve, naked and gorgeous and looking at him with that look in his eyes, a happy smile turned Bucky’s lips. “Okay.”

The knock on her door went unanswered as the music in her headphones drown out anything but the beat. Darcy wasn’t a singer by any stretch of the imagination, but she was more than happy to hum along as the red-colored pencil scratched on the page. She wasn’t sure how the A.I. did it, but she was startled when Friday’s voice rang out in her ear, the tip of the pencil breaking with Darcy’s jerk
of surprise.

“Fucking hell!”

“I’m sorry, Ma’am, but there’s a visitor at your door.”

Darcy glanced over her shoulder, pinning the door with a glare. Jane was off sciencing. Bucky and Steve had mentioned some sort of class, or training, or something else? She’d gotten distracted by their tongues and had spaced out. Whatever it’d been, she at least remembered that they weren’t around.

That only left a handful of people in the compound who’d come and talk to her, and though she’d started to get friendly with one of the ladies in the cafeteria (the Labyrinth t-shirt she’d caught sight of under the woman’s apron had sealed the deal), Darcy guessed it was one of the three people she didn’t want to see at the moment.

Her body still burned with betrayal over what had happened at the mall. Part of Darcy knew this was how everything functioned. She’d seen it in New Mexico, and now she was in the literal belly of the beast. S.H.I.E.L.D. loved to push, she’d been watching it on the news for years, so she didn’t know why she was surprised. Because you didn’t think of them as S.H.I.E.L.D., Darcy told herself, you’d started thinking of them as friends. Mistake number one. Mistake Number Two? Not getting a cinnabon before going to the bookstore.

“Who is it?”

“Clint Barton, Ma’am.”

Darcy’s narrowed eyes turned from anger to confusion as she pulled the headphones from her ears and turned away from the coloring book she’d been working on. She hadn’t had many run-ins with the archer, considering he’d spent some quality time in New Mexico when Thor had first arrived, and she couldn’t help but wonder why he was standing outside her room.

She let the headphones hang around her neck, tucking her feet into slippers as she crossed to the door and opened it a crack. “Uh, hi?”

Clint smiled at Darcy, a toothpick clenched in his teeth. “Ms. Lewis. I have been remiss in my congratulations and welcomes. So, congrats on the whole saving the world thing, and welcome to Avengers HQ. I see you’ve moved Stark let you paint?”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose up toward her hairline when the blond pushed his way past her and into her room, standing in the middle and spinning as he took in the soft grey walls, the best approximation she could get to the brilliant slate of Bucky’s eyes.

Her face darkened at the mention of Tony. “Something like that. Before he showed how much of an asshole he really is, Stark was persuaded to be generous.”

“Huh.” Shaking his head, Clint turned back toward Darcy, looking her up and down. “Are those Space Invader leggings?”

Darcy glanced down and then back up, chin lifting defiantly. “Maybe.”

“Well, they won’t work. Put something else on.”

“Excuse me?”
“Welcome to training, Ms. Lewis. I’ll be your teacher and you can call me Professor Barton.”

She blinked at him several times before her she could speak. “One? I will never call you that, and two? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Clint took a step closer, cocking his head to the side. “I saw the footage from the mall. It was a solid punch, but you committed too heavily. Nat said you punched like Barnes, not like someone of your size, and that could be dangerous.”

Darcy tried to keep the anger out of her eyes, she really did, but she saw Clint’s acknowledgement as they they filled with rage. “I know how to punch. One of the advantages of having soldier memories in my head is that I know what he knows. So if you think ow shit!”

Clint’s hand was quick, too quick for her to dodge, and she yowled in pain when his finger flicked hard against the tip of her nose. She rubbed it with her palm, glaring at him behind her glasses. “What the fuck?!”

“Would Barnes have let that hit him?”

“You realize this is the first fucking time I’ve ever really met you, right?”

“Answer the question: Would Barnes have let his nose get flicked by a stranger?”

“No! No, he would have dodged out of the way, done a cute little roll, pulled a knife from thin air and stabbed you to death for flicking his god damn nose.” Darcy pushed her glasses further up then crossed her arms over her chest, nose crinkling as it continued to sting

“So you have his memories and knowledge, but you don’t have his body, or the same center of gravity. If you tried to pull something he could do and fail hard, it could be a broken leg, a broken arm, a broken back -”

She sighed, holding her hands up to stop his words. “I get it, okay? I am nowhere near a perfect soldier specimen and that puts me at risk. Fine. What are you suggesting?”

Clint blinked at her. “You think this is my idea?” He laughed. “No, no no no, this comes from above me. I’m just following orders.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed as she tried to figure out who would have asked that she be trained for physical combat. Bucky? Steve? Thor? Natasha!? “And you always follow orders?” The grin Clint gave her answered her question. “What are they, whoever your mysterious supervisor is, hoping to get out of this? It’s not like I’ll be going off campus anytime soon. Not after what happened.”

“You’re already cleared for leave,” Clint said, noting the way her eyes widened. “No one told you? That’s what the mall was about, more or less. You didn’t kill anyone, so you passed with flying colors. You’re free to go whenever you’d like. This isn’t a prison, trust me, I’ve been in several. But even if you choose to live off site, or even just want to take a weekend pass, basic combat training is a good idea. Just to be safe. It’s not a requirement, totally up to you, but I think it could be a good thing. A very good thing.”

Darcy looked at him, his face pleasant as he waited for her to weigh the pros and cons. She couldn’t really believe that they’d let her leave. She could leave! If she wanted a different kind of ice cream than they served in the cafeteria? Bam! Grocery store. Needed to get a new highlighter? Pow! Office Max.

Not that she had a car. Could she uber from the compound? Probably not. She could ask for a ride...
on Steve’s motorcycle. The thought of wrapping her arms around him as he sped through the woods? Yeah. That sounded pretty fucking neat.

Sighing, pushing the secondary thoughts to the side, not wanting to wallow in anger anymore than she already had, Darcy pinned Clint with a soft glare. “I don’t know if you can tell, but I’ve never really been that great with the whole physical exertion thing.”

“I can work with that. I’m not thinking you’d be in an all out brawl. Maybe you just need to get your point across in a pretty definitive way. Maybe you need to wiggle out of a choke hold. Basic self-defense, that’s all.”

Darcy peered at him, trying to decipher the way he was looking at her. Expectant. The tiniest bit excited? “You watched the video? All of it?” He nodded, chewing thoughtfully on the toothpick. “And you still want to be near me?”

“You threw two men across the room with your hands. Shit like that leaves a pretty big impression.” If only you knew.

If only you knew. “It wasn’t really with my hands,” she said with a frown, “I pushed their souls.”

Clint blinked at her again. “Was that supposed to make it less impressive, or more?”

For the first time since he’d entered her room, Darcy laughed softly. “Not quite sure, really.”

“I won’t pretend to know about powers. There’s plenty of things around me that I don’t get but I’ve learned to stop trying. I tend to just roll with things now.”

Darcy snorted. “Seems like a pretty blasé attitude to me.”

“You’re friends with a Norse god who travels here on a rainbow bridge. You able to explain that?”

“Touché.” He continued to look at her expectantly, and Darcy rose an eyebrow at him. “You mean now? Right now?”

“Yeah, right now. You got some more unicorns to color in or something? Lisa Frank dictating your schedule? Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!”

Darcy glared at him hard when he began clapping at her. Annoyance clear on her face, Darcy crossed to her dresser and closet, pulling out what she hoped would be suitable clothes for fighting. Maybe it’d be good, getting her aggression out, exercising a few of her rage demons. If Barton was willing to offer his own body to vent that anger, who was she to argue?

Before heading into her bathroom to change, Darcy reached out and flipped her coloring book over, hiding the fact that she really had been coloring in a unicorn.

* 

Two hours later, Present Darcy was cursing Past Darcy for ever agreeing to the bullshit that was basic self-defense. It was a joke, she was sure of it, and when she figured out who’d put Clint Barton up to it, she’d make their life a living hell.

“Mother fucker!”

Clint shook his head, holding out a hand, grunting as he pulled Darcy back to her feet. “I appreciate the language, but you’re still throwing your body weight like you’ve got an extra hundred pounds of muscle.”
“So sorry that my super special mutant stone absorption powers are becoming a problem for your training.” Darcy’s words dripped with sarcasm. “It’s a pretty big change for me too, alright? Bucky doesn’t have boobs, it’s kinda a problem.”

“It’s a problem Barnes doesn’t have boobs?”

When Clint smirked at her, it took every bit of self-control not to throw him across the room with her mind. Except, it wouldn’t be with her mind, it would be because of the stone, and she was done using that bitch for anything.

“Show me again.”

Even as he came at her, Darcy could feel Bucky’s training fill her mind, reacting like she had muscle memory, only the muscles in the memory weren’t really hers and she didn’t move as fast.

She was able to stay on her feet this time, surprisingly, and she spun out of reach as Clint tried to wrap his arms around her shoulders. Darcy jumped and let out a whoop of victory seconds before her legs were swept out from under her and she fell back on the mat with a grunt of pain. She rolled to her side, groaning as she writhed.

Once again, Clint came to stand over her. “When you get cocky -”

Whatever words were coming out of Clint’s mouth evaporated when Darcy’s foot darted out and caught him in the groin, shock and pain on his face as he fell to his knees.

“You said ‘kick me in the cocky’, right? Because that’s what I heard.” Darcy wheezed, watching as Clint’s face turned a pretty shade of red. She laughed breathlessly, rising on all fours as Clint glared at her. “We good for lesson one?”

Clint nodded at her, blowing a breath slowly through his mouth as the pain continued to shoot throughout his body. “Mmmhmmm. I’m gonna get you back for that one, Lewis.”

“Bring it, Professor.”

PageBreak
Training Log

Meeting Date / Time: 10/8/19 15:30
Location: Training Room E

Trainer: Clint Barton
Trainee: Darcy Lewis
Type of Training: Basic Self-defense
Total Time Training: 2 hours 15 minutes
Focus: Physical Assessment

Little to no combat training or self-defense
No physical defect
Potential for improvement

Personal Remarks

Physicality:
Lewis has little to no combat training or self-defense knowledge. Her particular circumstances make training more difficult, as she will need to be untrained and then retrained in a style that works for her size and stature. Further lessons will establish a baseline for fitness and increase at a steady pace. Endgame unclear at this time.

Mental Stability:
If Lewis is able to harness the powers she has been shown to possess, further training with someone of like-powered status should be explored. Currently Lewis has no desire to use her powers, for any reason. Pushing too quickly may cause her to shut down completely and care should be given to her hesitance.

Recommendations:
Continue bi-weekly sessions, focusing on building endurance as well as perfecting fight style for her body and abilities.
Almost

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Jane discuss the future, Darcy meets with Maria Hill, and the boys and Darcy have their first fight.

Chapter Notes

This was totally supposed to go up yesterday, but a real awesome bout of vertigo made looking at words impossible. *shakes fist at inner ear crystals* But! But! It is here and ready for your reading eyes!

PageBreak

“Almost.
It’s a big word for me.
I feel it everywhere.
Almost home.
Almost happy.
Almost changed.
Almost, but not quite.
Not yet.
Soon, maybe.
I’m hoping hard for that.”
― Joan Bauer, Almost Home

PageBreak

Jane frowned, tongue licking the bit of ice cream still on her spoon. “They shouldn’t have sprung it on you like that.”

Darcy nodded, biting into another gummy worm as her and Jane watched House Hunters and ate a ridiculous amount of calories. Calories don’t count when you’ve been betrayed by supposed friends. “Oh, I made Banner well aware of the calculated risk they took, because damn were they bad at that math. Telling him that I could have killed two people on their watch seemed to shake his ass awake so he could grasp the reality of the situation.”

Jane’s brown eyes slid over to peer at Darcy, watching as her best friend rolled her eyes. She could tell Darcy was pissed, and once again Jane felt a stab of guilt that she hadn’t been around to comfort
her sooner. “You yelled at him during your last session?”

Darcy shook her head, taking another aggressive bite of candy. “No. Found him in the hall. I’m not really… I think I’ve gotten everything I can out of him, training wise. I’ll be fine.” When she saw Jane cast a look her way, Darcy frowned. “What?” Jane shrugged her shoulders and took another bite of ice cream, avoiding Darcy’s eyes. “Oh no, you don’t just shrug like that and say nothing. If you have something to say, then say it.”

“You’re not going to like it.” Jane shook her head, knowing how close that fine tremor of anger was below Darcy’s skin, ready to explode at any moment. It felt almost like a bomb about to go off, and Jane worried that her opinion might detonate it. She wanted to be here for Darcy, but the logical, rational parts of Jane knew how fraught the situation was, and how tenuous Darcy’s grasp on her powers was.

Darcy knew for a fact that Jane had something contrary to say, could see it in the little crease between her eyebrows as her mind worked. She knew Jane well enough to know when her friend was about to say something that wouldn’t make her jump for joy. “Jane Elizabeth Foster, I’m really not in the mood fo -”

“I don’t think you’re fine,” Jane said finally, her voice soft but fierce. “I think you need to keep working with Bruce, whether it’s awkward or not. You can’t control this on your own, and it’s not because I think you’re weak, it’s because this is so massive that you need all the help you can get. What they did was wrong, but I understand why they did it, however short-sighted.”

A flash of anger bubbled in Darcy’s chest, disbelief in her tone as the volume of her voice rose. “How can you say that? I could have killed those men!”

“Exactly!” Jane set her ice cream down on the coffee table and turned to look at Darcy, seriousness in the whiskey of her eyes. “What would you have done if that wasn’t some kind of simulation, if it had happened in the real world? What if you did hurt someone because you didn’t know the full extent of your abilities?”

The anger shifted to hurt and Darcy’s eyes darted away, unable to look at Jane, glaring at a spot in her carpet. “So you think I should just stay here? Be a prisoner? Never go outside again and live out my days in this room?”

“Of course not,” Jane said, frowning. “I think you should train with Bruce, and anyone else who can help you control this, who can help you learn what you can do!. Look, Darcy, I know it’s scary and you have a good reason to be frightened, but if you don’t know what you can do, how can you be sure, how can you be certain you won’t hurt anyone? I know it terrifies you, but that’s how the training with help. The more you try, the more find out what other powers you have, the more you experiment -”

Darcy climbed off her bed, righteous fire building in her belly, that word making her blank until there was nothing but pain. She spun back toward Jane, waving her arms dramatically in the air toward her best friend. “And there is it! Jane Foster, astrophysicist, willing to experiment on her best friend if the science is good enough!”

Jane flinched back, frowning. “That’s unfair, and you know it.”

“Is it? Because all I know is that I’m terrified of what might happen, and everyone seems hell bent on pushing me toward something I don’t want to do!” Darcy paced across the floor, ignoring the glare Jane was shooting her way.
“What do you want, Darcy?”

Darcy turned to Jane with an incredulous expression on her face. “What do I want?”

“Yes, Darcy, what do you want?”

Darcy’s eyes widened as she looked at Jane, absolute fire in her eyes. “What… I want… *Fuck!*” Her arm gestured toward her door, and the room that was across the hall from hers. "I want to kiss Bucky! I want Steve’s eyes to fill with love when they look at me like mine do when I look at him! I want everything to work out perfectly so we can all be happy!"

She pressed a finger to her temple. “I want to stop hearing the stone talk to me and whisper the terrible things it wants me to do! I don’t want to be able to do anything else, I don’t want any more powers! I want to have friends that don’t lie to me, don’t use me, and aren’t afraid of me!”

Hands clenching and unclenching at her sides, Darcy could feel her anger fading, being replaced with sadness and guilt. “I want to have a normal life. Can’t I have that? Just something normal?”

There was empathy in Jane’s eyes, and Darcy couldn’t explain why, but it was breaking her heart and stealing the air from her lungs. Her voice was so small, nothing more than a whisper, “… I don’t want to hurt anyone else.”

Jane slid off the bed, watching as Darcy’s eyes closed and she turned her face toward the ceiling, lower lip trembling as the first tears started to roll down her cheeks. “I know, Darce.”

“And I want to stop *crying* about every god damn thing! It’s like since Bucky never cries, I’ve become some fucking fountain that goes off every hour! *Fuck!*”

When Jane’s arms wrapped around her shoulders, Darcy pressed her face into her friend’s neck, the tears hot and angry. She’d heard of a study that said tears could be different, depending on the emotion causing them. If that was the case, hers were probably filled with the glass of broken dreams and the reality that ‘normal’ was something she’d never know again.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s fine, Darce. I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner.”

Darcy shook her head against Jane, squeezing her arms around the scientist. “Your life shouldn’t suck just because parts of mine are shitty.” She sniffled, resting her cheek on Jane’s shoulder, taking comfort from her friend, trying to slow the torrent of tears. “I’m sorry I yelled at you, Janey. I’ve just been ignoring how fucked everything is and then you’re here and I’m bitching and something sets me off… I’m sorry.”

Rubbing circles on Darcy’s back, Jane pressed a kiss to her temple. “I know you’re scared. The things you can do… I can’t even begin to wrap my mind around it.”

Darcy sniffled, pulling back and rubbing at her cheeks. “*You?* The most brilliant mind in astrophysics, second only to Neil deGrasse Tyson?” She laughed softly at the look Jane gave her. “What hope do I have if *you* can’t understand it?”

“I’m definitely not the leading expert on superhero powers,” she watched Darcy’s nose crinkle at the word *superhero* being used to describe her, “but luckily there are people here that are a lot smarter than me.”

“But only a little smarter.”

“Yeah, by like *this much,*” Jane said, holding her fingers centimeters apart, glad when Darcy
laughed. Her face sobered a bit as she placed both hands on Darcy’s shoulders. “I know that you’re scared of what you can do, but wouldn’t it better to know? That way you could be sure nothing comes as a surprise?”

Darcy rubbed the soft cotton of her shirt sleeve over her eyes again as she pulled out of Jane’s arms. “What if I steal someone else’s soul?”

“Technically you didn’t steal someone’s soul. You gave someone part of yours and they returned the favor. Hey, don’t give me that face, I know for a fact Bucky would agree with me.”

Darcy shifted from one foot to another. “You talked to Bucky?”

“We’ve had words, yes. Maybe a couple of lunches together.”

If Darcy wasn’t already crying, she’d have started again at the idea of Bucky and Jane forming a friendship of their own. “I could still hurt someone,” she said, heavy, wet eyelashes brushing her cheeks.

“Maybe Thor knows of a way to keep you from doing that, maybe someone in Asgard that could help. I don’t know when he’ll be back next, but when he is, it couldn’t hurt to ask.” Jane watched some of the light return to Darcy’s eyes at the mention of the realm she’d had yet to visit.

“Are you suggesting a field trip, Ms. Frizzle?”

Jane rolled her eyes, used to Darcy comparing her to the cartoon teacher. “I’m suggesting that instead of ignoring the power that you have that you embrace it, learn about it, work with it a little at a time. If you’re prepared, and careful, maybe the stone won’t have as much sway over you. What did you do at the mall to keep from going to the dark side?”

Appreciating Jane’s use of Star Wars terminology, Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “A mantra. Something that Bucky and Steve say to each other. I’ve even stole that from them. Fuck, I’m a horrible person.”

Jane glared softly, pulling Darcy back toward the couch. “You’re not a horrible person, Darcy, and like I said, I don’t think either of them would agree that you stole anything from them. But speaking of them, things are going better, right?”

Darcy had never been in love with her friend more than right then, as she steered the conversation away from the terrifying powers Darcy held inside of her (and the friends who’d lied and put her and everyone else in danger), and toward Steve and Bucky.

“It’s getting… better. Steve doesn’t seem to hold any resentment toward me. We’ve been together, the three of us, for a bit now. Movies. Dinner. Talking. Holding hands. But it’s…” Darcy’s hand gestured in the air, “…complicated.”

Jane reached up to push a wild curl behind Darcy’s ear, unsurprised when it popped right back out. “It’s only really complicated on his side, isn’t it? You love Bucky. Bucky loves you. Bucky loves Steve. Steve loves Bucky. You love Steve. And Steve’s -“

“Fucking gorgeous, and genuine, and funny, and he makes my insides feel like jelly and my knees weak.” Darcy smiled, thinking about the soldier’s cornflower gaze, stunning when he smiled, even brighter when he laughed.

Reaching for her ice cream again, Jane dug the spoon into it. “Maybe that’s what you tell him. You tell Steve exactly how you feel and see what happens.”
“That sounds an awful lot like something that begins with an ‘E’ that we probably shouldn’t use anymore because I have a lifetime of memories that associate the word with nothing but pain and suffering.”

Jane shrugged, sticking the spoon inside her mouth, tongue swirling. “Some experiments are good. Especially ones in college.”

Darcy’s eyes widened, shaking her head at her best friend when she saw no hint that Jane’d meant the double entendre. “I think my idea of college experimentation and your idea of college experimentation are two vastly different things.”

“Mona, are you trying to make me fall in love with you? If so, it’s working,” Darcy sing-songed the last word as the cashier laughed, waving her through the line. The more time Darcy spent with people, the more she was able to relax.

Her conversation with Jane a few nights previous had lifted a bit of weight off her shoulders. The ever-looming ‘what if you hurt someone?’ was easier to accept when she was going to do something about it. Her best friend had been right to push her, she got that now. Darcy realized she’d let her fear dictate how she acted, and that was something she refused to do any longer. She had no idea how she would figure it out, but luckily there were people higher up than her that she could ask for assistance, no matter how awkward it became.

“Miss Lewis!”

Darcy’s eyebrows sprung up toward her hairline at the voice behind her, turning slowly on her heel to look at the familiar man. “iPod thief! I promise, I have no tech of any kind on me right now. Nothing for you to steal, cross my heart.”

Phil Coulson gave her a small smile, his suit just as pressed and black as she remembered it. “I’ve gotta admit, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said with a snort, “I grabbed a soul stone and can kill people with my brain now. You?”

“Died, got brought back, lived in a virtual world for a while. It’s been a weird couple of years.”

“Mmm,” Darcy hummed, nodding at him with a grin on her face, “you don’t have to tell me. Elves in London was pretty neat.”

“I’d love to hear that story sometime. Right now, I’ve been asked to bring you to the director.”

Darcy frowned. “I thought this ship was kind of rudderless. Too many cooks in the kitchen and what not. Division of powers, checks and balances, that kind of thing.”

Phil smiled, gesturing with his arm. Darcy set her tray on a table, tucking the water into her armpit and holding the basket of fries in her hands. She offered some to Phil, but he shook his head politely. “Have to be on a plane in twenty, don’t want it sitting like a lead weight.”

“Ugh. I hate flying.”

As he led her toward whatever part of the compound the director worked from, she stuffed some
fries in her mouth. “So. This director, have I met him?”

“Her, actually.”

“Oh! Progressive! I approve! ‘Bout time there were some ladies leading the world.”

Coulson looked over at her with a small smile, “you’ve obviously never met Pepper Potts. She’s been running things for years.” He wasn’t sure why, but he watched Darcy’s gaze darken at the mention of Tony Stark’s fiance, ultimately deciding it wasn’t his place to question..

“Director is kind of a relative term. She’s the one who we feed to the press, the figurehead, if you will. The structure of the Avengers had to change with the Accords. Ever since Stark’s amendments went through, things have been better, but the governments of the world still want someone to point to and blame when things go wrong.”

Darcy nodded, shrugging her shoulders. “Makes sense. If it’s one thing people like, it’s blaming it on someone else.” She let Phil open doors for her, not because of chivalry (pfft), but because it allowed her to eat as they walked. “Should I be afraid for this meeting?”

“I think it’s more of a meet and greet than anything. Putting in the facetime so she can say she did. I wouldn’t be too worried about it. Hill’s good people. Fair. Exacting.”

Darcy gave Phil a pretty epic side eyeing. “Wasn’t that your job for a while? She outrank you or something?”

“I love my team, wanted to spend more time with them, less time on the bureaucracy.”

“Politics were never my favorite thing either.”

Phil matched her side-eyeing with some of his own. “Wasn’t your degree in political science?”

“Let’s not get caught up in on the details, Coulson.”

“Fair enough.”

Over the course of their journey, Darcy had tried to keep track of all the twists and turns they’d taken. It was impossible, however, and she wondered if it was by design. It’d be pretty hard to get to the director when you weren’t exactly sure how to get to their office. Of course, when Darcy blinked and darkness took her vision, she was able to find her way pretty easily.

“By the way, I feel like I should say thank you.”

Blinking away the colors, Darcy turned to look at Phil with a raised eyebrow. “For what?”

“World saving. It takes a bunch out of you. When you see it happen as much as I do, you get pretty good at recognizing how close armageddon is. We’d been pretty close. So, thank you.”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy threw the empty fry container in a garbage can as they passed. “I’m still dealing with the aftermath of that whole debacle. But, you’re welcome, I guess.” When she bowed slightly, she heard a soft chuckle from the man at the side, a grin turning her lips upward. “She through there?” she asked, pointing to a door down and on the right.

“Yeah. Have you been -”

“No. Never been here before.”
“Is it the eye thing?”

Darcy nodded, brushing her hands on her jeans. “Yep. Like color GPS.”

“That could come in handy in combat situations.”

“Does it look like I’m combat ready?” She looked down at her artfully torn jeans and sweatshirt with a hole near the collar. “In even the slightest way?”

“Never judge a book by its cover, Ms. Lewis. This?” He rose his arm. “Fake hand.”

“No shit!”

“She’ll be waiting for you. You have a good day, Lewis.”

“You too, son of Coul.”

When Phil headed back toward the main part of the compound, Darcy turned and looked at the door to her right. Like all the other offices, the director’s office was nondescript. If what Coulson had said was true, the director probably didn’t spend a lot of time in the office anyway, off dealing with politicians and other country’s governments. Probably shit pay and very little personal time.

_Fuck that noise._

Sighing, Darcy’s knuckles rapped heavily on the door, hearing a muffled ‘come in’ from the other side. She pushed inside, taking in the simple decor and natural light streaming in the windows. Darcy was positive they were in the interior of the building, yet the sun shone in where there was a solid wall. _Neat._

Maria Hill was not as Darcy’d pictured in her head. She was younger, firstly, and secondly she had a fairly bright smile, as well as a charismatic attitude. “Ms. Lewis! I’m glad Coulson was able to track you down.”

“Oh, me and Phil? We go way back.”

“To New Mexico, yeah. I read that in your file.” Maria gestured to one of the seats before her desk, rounding it so she could lean against the gleaming mahogany as Darcy sat. “I’m sorry I haven’t gotten to touch base with you since you arrived. I’ve been waist deep in a domestic and foreign nightmare, picking up the pieces after everything with Thanos.”

Darcy watched the smartly dressed woman cross her arms over her chest, her feet at the ankles, the very picture of cool, calm, and relaxed. It was interesting, then, that Darcy could see the anxiety surrounding Maria Hill in waves of colors when she blinked. “I get it. I didn’t even know you existed until Phil said so a few minutes ago, so I hadn’t known to feel ignored. Guess that was good for both of us.”

Maria nodded, head cocking to the side as she took in the younger woman. “I’ve spoken with Banner and Stark about their reports. Some of your abilities are nominal. A walking lie detector is pretty innocuous. Cool, but nothing to write home about. What happened with Barnes and during the Op at the mall? Those are different stories.”

Bristling at the mention of the mall, Darcy shifted in her chair, darkness coloring her eyes. “I didn’t mean to do anything I did with Bucky. It was -”

“Like I’ve said, I read the reports. What concerns me the most is the potential for public harm. Don’t
know if you’ve listened to the news for past five years, but we tend to be knocked around pretty heavily for collateral damage. And we should be. Our number one duty is to protect the people on this planet from anything that might hurt them, and sometimes that means from people within our ranks.”

The frown on Darcy’s face grew deeper. “You think I’m dangerous?”

“Would that be wrong of me to assume?”

Sighing, Darcy shook her head. “No. But I’m willing to do anything to not hurt people, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m going to talk to Banner about what the next step would be, see if we can figure out what the hell I can do and make it so I can control it.”

Maria pushed off the desk, hands pulling a manilla envelope closer to her, opening it. “I think that’d be a good idea. When Stark approached me about approving your leave, he pushed back against the Op, but eventually he understood that we needed some sort of safeguard. It’s kind of hard to argue to the committee when you don’t have proof of purchase, so to speak. After the footage was shown, it was pretty clear that with a bit more training you’ll be no more a risk than Wanda Maximoff, or The Vision, or -”

Darcy blinked repeatedly at Hill before holding up her hands to stop the woman’s words. She felt like the air was being forced of her lungs with each sound from Hill’s mouth, and she was still trying to wrap her head around the information she’d just been given. “Wait, wait, back up. The mall wasn’t Tony’s idea?”

“No.” Maria closed the file, trying to understand the look crossing Darcy’s face. “When I told him we’d need a test of your control, he didn’t like the idea of a blind Op, he wanted to let you in on it. When I explained that’d skew the results too much, he finally saw reason and eventually agreed, as long as he was there with you. We needed to see what you’d do in a real life or death situation. And, just as Stark promised, you showed ample control. Banner said you hadn’t even known you possessed that ability before using it. If that was the first time you used it, you did it admirably. It opens the door to a lot of possible uses, including....”

She could see Maria’s mouth moving, knew what the director was saying was probably pretty important, but Darcy had stopped listening when it’d become clear that the incident at the mall, in all its terrifying glory, hadn’t been Tony’s idea.

Tony’d argued against it.

Tony’d said she’d be fine.

Tony’d promised the director of the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. that she could be trusted.

“I’m sorry,” Darcy said, hazel eyes darting up to look at a slightly exasperated Maria Hill, still reeling from the knowledge. “You were saying?”

“Barton’s suggested you have at least two combat training sessions a week. I’d like you to do the same with Banner, just to keep up with that part of everything. And, as soon as Wilson and Maximoff return from Wakanda, we’ll see if she’s able to help you with the more… metaphysical aspects of your abilities. As long as we keep the lines of communications open between us, I think you’d be a valuable asset to the Avengers.”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose in shock, eyes blinking rapidly. “I’m sorry, huh?”
“The Avengers. I know you’re not trained now, but if we can fix that, if we can get you full control over your powers? Just imagine the possibilities.”

*Lady, be glad I don’t have full control of these powers, or I’d turn you into fucking pâté* Pretty sure that threatening the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. would be a bad thing, Darcy just nodded her head and hummed a response, pursing her lips as Maria smiled down at her.

“Perfect. I’ll be getting updates on your progress. If you have any questions, just let me know.”

That sounded like a dismissal if she’d ever heard one, and Darcy was more than happy to flee from the director’s office, wanting to put as much space between herself and the *fucker* who’d thought it best to throw her in the deep end when she didn’t know how to swim.

Tony wasn’t an ass. Well, he was most assuredly an asshole, but *not* because he’d plotted an event that’d almost killed two men and resulted in her giving into the stone’s sinister whispers. What had the director said to make him agree to it? That this was normal operating procedure within the semi-evil nazi-historied branch of para-military and they needed to get on board or get out?

Darcy’d never instantly hated anyone, but *damn* was Maria Hill making her blood boil. Not only had she been blindsided, she’d been blaming the wrong people. Okay, no, she could still be angry at Tony, Bruce and Natasha. Even if they’d been *told* not to tell her, they still could have. They could have warned her. *Why didn’t they warn me?*

She scowled. The director of the Avengers thought she’d make a good asset to the team. She’d make a *good* asset to the team. She’d make a good asset to the team. She’d make a good asset to the team.

“Fuck. That,” Darcy growled under her breath as she all but ran from the room. She blinked, looking for the black inky oil slick and silver, feet carrying her toward wherever Tony was hiding.

PageBreak

“Stark!”

Tony’s shoulders lifted and fell with a sigh. “If I could go *one day* without someone yelling my name loud enough for it to echo off the walls, I’d die a happy man.” Turning on his heel, Tony watched Darcy stalk toward him. “Look, Lewis, I don’t -”

Darcy was unperturbed by the look of exasperation on his face, the carefully guarded look in his eyes not fooling her for a second. “Shut the fuck up, will you? I’m trying to apologize.”

His gaze pinned her as she came to stand in front of him in the hallway, hands digging to rest in the pockets of his slacks. “And you start that apology with ‘shut the fuck up’? Not the most inviting of phrases.”

“Really?” Darcy ignored the other people in the hallway, uncaring that they glared at having to move around her and Tony. “You hear I’m trying to apologize and you decide that’s the best time to test me?”

“Pretty sure we established your rules when it comes to tests, and if I remember correctly, I failed pretty spectacularly.”

Darcy peered into his eyes as he looked at her through tinted lenses, trying his best not to give away any true emotion. A mask of sarcasm. Unfortunately for him, she had one just like it. “Yeah, too bad
you didn’t let me know you were cheating.” She watched the side of his mouth twist up in confusion. “That you’d written the answers on your arm?”

“I think we’re done with the test metaphor, princess. How about you get to the point?”

“Fuck, you are an asshole.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you suck at apologizing?”

“I don’t do it very often, so I’m a little rusty. Will you just shut your damn mouth and let me get this out?” When Tony looked at her expectantly, Darcy’s hands started gesturing in his direction. “Hill told me you disagreed with what went down at the mall. I thought you were the one that set it up. That hurt, and I lashed out at you. Why didn’t you just say that it wasn’t you?”

“Would you have believed me? I agreed to it in the long run. I should have told you, but I didn’t, and that’s on me. Besides, if I recall correctly, my jaw was a little sore from the heavy fisticuffs you threw my way. Impressive punch, by the way, but you…”

“Tony, I swear to the goblin king, if you tell me I punched like I was Bucky’s size and not my own, I will burn everything you love with fire.”

The look on Tony’s face was confirmation that those were the very words he’d been about to say, a small smirk twisting his face as he looked at her. “Look, I would love to let you continue threatening me so colorfully, but I’ve got a meeting thing and I’m late.”

“I’ll walk with you then,” Darcy said, ignoring the face he made at her. She wasn’t done talking at him yet, and she wanted to get it all out at once. When he sighed and swept his arm for him to join him, she fell into step at his side. “Next time, just fucking tell me, okay? If someone wants to throw something heavy at me, give me a heads up. Next time I might not be able to keep from destroying the whole galaxy.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, don’t you think?”

“Actually, no, I think that is the exact amount of drama that should be expected. Maybe, in the future, we don’t anger the person who has the abilities to destroy souls.”

“Noted,” Tony said as they walked, glancing at her with a small grin. “Well, you’ve got the all clear, now, in any case. Worth it?”

“Fuck no. I’ve been pissed off for days, most of it toward you, and I know that Bucky’s memories have something to do with that, but… I think I was hurt because I thought perhaps, maybe, in a weird way, unexplainable by any stretch of science or logic, that we were becoming something like friends.”

He hummed, eyes darting to look at her. “You think so?”

“Obviously it’s a mistake on my part, but I think, somehow, you make things a little less scary for me. Mostly because if a horrible fuck-up like you can become a well-rounded and profitable part of society, maybe there’s hope for me, too.”

Tony glanced in her direction as they walked, a single eyebrow raising. “And how are you planning on becoming a societal contributor?”

Darcy frowned, thinking critically about her answer. She’d been so dead-set on finding Tony and apologizing that she’d pushed everything else Maria Hill had said to the back of her mind. She didn’t
want to come close to thinking about being on a ‘team’ of any kind, let alone on the Fucking Avengers, which meant she only have a few paths to take in order to feel semi-useful.

“I’m not sure yet? I’ve never really had an adult job, other than following Jane and Erik around, which was mostly me making sure they ate and that their data was sorted and cataloged appropriately.”

“So you’re looking for a job? Is this a shake down? Are you blackmailing me into hiring you?”

The noise of offense that broke free from Darcy made Tony smirk. “You’re a dick. No, I’m not blackmailing you. I mean, not really. I just know that I need to start figuring all of this shit out,” she gestured absently toward herself, “and sitting in my room for hours on end while everyone else is actually doing something is boring as hell. I need something to do. Let me do something. In your lab. You fucking owe me this, Stark.”

“You’re not touching my tech.”

Darcy rolled her eyes as they pushed through a set of double doors. “No, not the tech, but I’m an A-plus lab monkey. Ask Janey. There’s gotta be something I can do for you until I figure out something else.”

“I’ve already got an intern -”


“I’ve got Friday for that.”

“Fucking hell, Tony, just let me do something! I run errands like a pro. I’ve got mad typing skills, I can work an espresso machine and I’m not afraid to call you on your shit if the need arises.”

Darcy could see the begrudging acceptance building behind his eyes and tried her best not to reach out and shake his shoulders to just give in already.

Finally, Tony ran a hand over his face, stopping in front of another set of double-doors. When Darcy came to stand before him, his eyes rolled up toward the ceiling, closing. It looked like he was asking some deity for guidance, but when his brown gaze pinned her, Darcy could already see on his face that she’d won.

“We still need to work with your abilities.”

She nodded at him. “Definitely. Need to find out what other super special surprises are inside of me.”

“Phrasing.” Darcy sighed and rolled her eyes dramatically, but he continued. “We need to step up the experimenting, push the boundaries so we know what we’re working with. We’ll put better safeguards in place, maybe design some kind of device that can lessen the effects, make them less world-ending.”

“Absolutely. Whatever you say, as long as we’re one-hundred-percent honest with each other from here on out. Like, stupid honest with each other.”

She was just waiting for the inevitable words to leave his mouth, could see defeat in his eyes as he glared softly at her. Darcy gave him an encouraging smile, unable to help the grin widening when he heaved a large sigh.
“Fine.” Tony shook his head when her arm rose in the air and pumped back toward her body, the hiss of ‘yessss’ filling the space between them. “Look, I’ve got someone I want you to meet. Parker and I are going to be working together on a few things and I think he could use a softer touch than mine.”

“Ew,” Darcy grimaced.

“Shut up. If he’s fine working with you, then we’ll figure something out. Just… don’t freak out.”

“Freak out? What do you mean?”

As Tony pushed past the double doors, Darcy followed him. She recognized the room as some kind of lab, but it was a different one than she’d been in before. It made sense that he’d have more than one, but everything in here looked pretty new. Pristine. She took in the tech sprinkled throughout the space, the mass of paperwork that was strewn on every available surface, empty red bull cans piling in the garbage cans.

“Mr. Stark! I finally got my badge and…” Peter trailed off, eyes widening as they landed on Tony and Darcy. “Oh, hi, I didn’t, I mean, I didn’t know we had company. Guests. Hi.”

Darcy blinked at the kid that had turned to look at them. He was tiny, his face too innocent, the pink that blushed to his cheeks too endearingly adorable. The way he moved made it pretty clear who’d consumed the energy drinks. She turned to look at Stark with an amused expression turning her lips. “Your comment about him needing a softer touch is way more creepy now that I know he’s a preteen,”

“I’m not a preteen. I’m… a late teen.”

Tony rolled his eyes at the verbal cartwheeling his protege was attempting. “Peter Parker, this is Darcy Lewis, potential executive assistant. Darcy Lewis, this is Peter Parker. Peter is a recent graduate of the illustrious Midtown School of Science and Technology. I’ve been working with him for… three years now?”

Peter nodded, stepping closer to the two of them, grimacing when he kicked an empty can and sent it skittering across the floor. “Mm, yeah, three-ish years.”

Tony grabbed one of the papers on the nearest table, squinting at the scribbles Peter had written. “Oh!” he said, turning toward Darcy, nodding his head in Peter’s direction, “he’s also known as Spider-man.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped as her gaze swung back to look at Peter. “No fucking way!”

There was no way this kid was a superhero. He looked like she could rip him in two. Bucky’s memories flowed to the surface, finally able to put a face to the spandex suit he’d met in Berlin. She turned to glare at Tony. “You mean to tell me that you brought him into that fight at the airport when he was fifteen?”

“In my defense, he was only there to assist and was told to stay out of the main fight. Besides, no one there was going to kill anyone. It was a… family squabble.”

“You’re full of shit, Stark.” Darcy’s scowl lessened when Peter laughed, attempting to cover the sound with a cough when Tony’s gaze swung toward him. “So you’re Spiderman? That’s rad.”

“Yeah? I mean, yeah. Yes, I’m Spiderman.” He took a step closer to her, chin ducking slightly in embarrassment. “You’ve seen my videos on youtube?”
“Well, that and the news. I hear you’re kind of a big deal in Queens.”

Tony’s gaze lingered on Peter as the younger man fidgeted, grinning sheepishly at Darcy. Peter tore his eyes away from Darcy to look at Tony, who glared in his direction. “Uh, yeah. I try not to just help in Queens, but it’s home, you know?”

“Not anymore, kid,” Tony said with a wave of his arm, “welcome home.”

Darcy’s grin was large. “Oh, sweet. We’re neighbors. If you ever need a cup of sugar, feel free to come and get it from me.”

Peter’s eyes widened slightly, cheeks flaming at her double entendre. He cleared his throat, pointing over his shoulder. “So, you’re going to be an assistant? That’s awesome. I mean, it’ll be nice to have someone else in here with me. Other than Tony. Not that Tony’s not, he’s great, obviously, but someone different. I’m actually working on this thing over here...”

Darcy’s grin kept getting bigger as Peter turned his back and started talking about one of the machines and how he’d always wanted run his webbing through a quantum analyzer and see if he could increase the tensile strength by utilizing magnetic resonance.

He was an adorable little science monkey; just like a tiny Jane, but with boy parts.

Peter was babbling and kept sneaking glances in her direction, none of it going unnoticed, and all of it filling Darcy’s eyes with delight. When Tony glared at her over the top of his glasses, she couldn’t help the shrug of her shoulders and the smirk on her face. It’s not like she was doing anything wrong. He was eighteen, after all. Besides, she had her hands very full with Bucky and Steve, thank you very much. Flirting with the kid to see how many colors he could change would just be good-natured fun.

“As your first assistant duty, why don’t you show Peter around the compound? Maybe you can explain your kaleidoscope eyes to him and see what he has to say.”

“Kaleidoscope, what? You have, uh, kaleidoscope eyes?”

Darcy gestured at Peter, wrapping her arm through his as she waved over their shoulders at Tony. “You see, Pete, It all started with this stone...”

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“So I spoke to the Director today. It’d be bad for me to murder her, right? Right. But fuck do I want to murder her with my mind. Hold on, I gotta pee.”

Bucky stayed at the open door to their room, eyes wide as Darcy darted past him and into the bathroom. Sitting on the bed, sketchpad on his lap, Steve wore the same expression.

“Did she -”

“Say she wants to murder the director of the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D.? Yeah. If Stark has Friday monitoring us for trigger words, they could storm in any second. I know I can break through the wall in the bathroom into the next suite over. Then it’s just two doors and we’re clear of the compound. I have a bag in the forest ready. Passports. Currency. Everything we’d need for at least two weeks.”

Steve chuckled, the sound fading as he realized his lover was serious. “Wait, really?”
“I always have a backup plan,” Bucky said with a shrug. He’d never been comfortable trusting anyone but himself and Steve, and now Darcy. He’d been half joking about Friday listening and monitoring their conversations, but Bucky was deadly serious about the contingencies he’d put in place, just in case.

“I don’t think that’s -”

“Seriously, this Maria Hill. We hate her right? We should hate her.” Darcy looked back and forth between Bucky and Steve, unable to understand their faces. “What?”

“What happened? From the beginning, please,” Bucky said, crossing the floor and taking a seat beside Steve on the bed.

Sighing, Darcy climbed onto their bed, folding her legs under herself as her hands started to gesture wildly. “Coulson came and got me in the cafeteria, said the director wanted to see me, so we went to her office. And we met. And I hate her.”

The frown on Steve’s face was soft, not understanding what Maria could have said to Darcy to make her have such a vitriolic opinion. Unless… Realization dawned on him and he sat back against the headboard with a small nod. “Oh.”

Both Darcy and Bucky turned toward him, the confused expressions on their faces looking eerily similar. “What do you mean ‘oh’?”

“What he said,” Darcy said, hesitance in her voice. His eyes flicked up to look at her and she could see it in his brilliant blue gaze, the knowledge that she didn’t have to explain because he already knew. Her eyebrows rose when she understood, unable to keep the hurt from her tone as her shoulders hunched. “Why…?”

Guilt flashed through Steve’s chest as he looked at her and the pain her hazel eyes. “Darcy -”

“Someone explain what the fuck is going on,” Bucky said, stormy gaze flicking back and forth between them. “Now.”

When Darcy looked at him with a hint of expectation, Steve set his sketchpad aside and sighed regretfully. “After Darcy got back from the mall, I went and confronted Tony. You’d both been so certain that he was the one behind what had happened and I went to find out what he had to say to himself.”

Darcy shifted on the bed, shoulders lifting and falling with a silent exhale of breath. Bucky could practically feel the weight of the air in the room and he made the hair on his arms itch, still not understanding why Darcy looked so hurt and why Steve looked so guilty. “I know that part.”

Steve sighed, lips turning down into a frown as he continued. “When I get there, Tony said that what happened at the mall wasn’t his call. Hill was the one who pushed it.”

The look on Bucky’s face was incredulous, like Steve was gullible for believing anything Tony said, but Darcy’s voice cut him off. “It’s true,” she said, keeping her eyes on Bucky because she couldn’t look at Steve, not yet. “Hill told me herself. Tony didn’t want to do it like it went down, but she convinced him. He agreed, as long as he could be there with me.”

The frown on Bucky’s face darkened. “Then why -”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Darcy did look up at Steve then, voice soft, trying to keep the hurt from spilling into tears down her cheeks.
Steve sat forward, hating the crushed look in her eyes, feeling the weight of regret pressing down on him. “Tony asked me not to, he said he didn’t want you to think the chain of command was the problem. But I was going to tell you, Darcy, I was, but you were so upset, and fragile, and every time I thought about telling you seemed like the wrong time.”

Bucky shook his head, seeing the heartache on Darcy’s face and the contrition on Steve’s. “She doesn’t need you to decide what she can and can’t handle, Steve,” he said, reaching out to squeeze Darcy’s knee.

Darcy tore her gaze from Steve and looked down at Bucky’s hand. He was trying to be comforting, but her sadness at Steve not telling her was replaced with annoyance. Steve had kept something from her in some kind of noble omission, thinking that she was too delicate to handle the truth, and now Bucky was treating her with kid gloves as if she’d break apart. She glommed onto the annoyance, letting go of the hurt and anger. Annoyance could be dealt with swifter and easier. *Pick your battles, Lewis.*

“I don’t need *either* of you to coddle me.” When both Bucky and Steve opened their mouths, Darcy held both of her hands in the air. “Nope. I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen, okay?” Much to her surprise, neither of them argued or spoke, and she took a deep breath.

“I understand that I have made it very clear how scared I am of what I can do, and I love that you’re concerned, but the only one who knows that’s best for me is *me.* So if there are facts that you are keeping from me? Don’t. It’s been brought to my attention that I like to avoid things because they’re hard or scary, but I’m trying not to do that anymore. So both of you, *please,* be honest with me, okay? If you have some information that I need to know, just tell me, regardless of how you think I’ll take it, and I promise I’ll do the same for you. Yeah? Are we good?”

When they both nodded at her, she let out a sigh, bravado waning a bit. “Good.” There was a moment of anxious silence before Darcy’s lips turned up in a wry grin. “Wait, did that count as our first fight? Look at us! Being all adult and shit. First one’s out of the way.”

“The first of many,” Bucky said, smirking at the snort of agreement Darcy made.

“I *am* sorry, Darcy,” Steve said, gaze flicking up to catch Darcy’s eyes, a small apologetic smile on his face, “I should have told you.”

He was angry at himself, angry that he hadn’t learned his lesson after everything that had happened with Tony and the Winter Soldier. Steve had never enjoyed giving bad news to people; sure, telling Darcy that Tony *hadn’t* been the one who’d planned the mall fiasco wasn’t really *bad news,* but Darcy realizing that the approval had come all the way from the very top of the organization wasn’t ideal, either.

Darcy sighed, seeing the truthful regret in Steve’s eyes. “It’s okay. You didn’t tell me, and Bucky fed into my assumptions about Tony.” When Bucky glared her in direction, Darcy pinned him with A Look. “You mean to tell me that your open hostility for each other doesn’t color some of my thoughts about Tony? Please. What’d we just agree we’d be? Huh? Say it with me now: *honest.* That’s right! Honesty..”

“Technically, he’s the one who has a problem with *me* :-(

“Well, you both need to knock that shit out quickly because I don’t have waders tall enough to sludge through all that bullshit.” She ignored the eyeroll from Bucky, laying herself across their bed, head cradled in her hand. “So, yeah, Hill? Not my favorite person. But you know who *is* my new favorite person, besides you two?”
Darcy didn’t miss the look them both sent her way, the corner of her mouth lifting up as she continued. “Peter Parker. Who I will be working with. Him and Tony. Oh yeah! By the way, I am now Tony’s executive assistant.” At their dumbfounded looks, she shrugged one shoulder. “It’s been a busy day.”
In My Veins

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy, and Steve decide to take their relationship to the next level.

Chapter Notes

I am dead tired from a wedding where I was the matron of honor, but you guys are so amazing that I want to get this chapter out to you! I am still blown away from the response and your guys' kudos and comments give me liiiife! Thank you all so much! Hope you enjoy this UST'ing burning chapter!

(Bonus points if you catch the quote from one of my favorite movies! PCU)

PageBreak

Oh, you're in my veins
And I cannot get you out
Oh, you're all I taste
At night inside of my mouth
Oh, you run away
Cause I am not what you found
Oh, you're in my veins
And I cannot get you out
— In My Veins, Andrew Belle

PageBreak

Bucky watched Darcy pace the floor at the end of his bed, head shaking as she went from one end of the room to the other. His grey eyes tracked her movements, taking note of the pink coloring high in her cheeks with anger.

“You’re out of your god damned mind!” Darcy’s gaze flicked to him for a split second before she had to look away. It was taking everything in her not to start screaming in his direction. How had this gone so pear-shaped so quickly?

“Look -”

She shook her head. “No.”
Bucky sighed. “Darcy -”

“Absolutely not!”

“If you’d just -”

She turned to glare at him then, pointing a finger in his direction accusingly. “You, of all people? Do you know how fucked up that is? The only reason I haven’t slapped the shit out of you is because I’m pretty sure it’s the me in you making such a stupid fucking suggestion!”

Bucky knew she was probably right, that maybe this wasn’t so much his idea so much as her idea coming through his mind. It was hard to tell anymore, really. All he knew was that his body was on fire at all times, watching Darcy and Steve interact, and he was desperate to put out the flames. Seeing the two of them dance around each other, shy and new and adorable, was going to break him. If something didn’t give soon, he was worried what he’d resort to. “What if he asked you to?”

Even if Darcy thought it was a good idea (it wasn’t), or thought it’d work (it wouldn’t), she was unwilling to do what she’d done before, even if Steve asked her to. Using her powers to share her feelings with Steve, to connect the two of them like she and Bucky were… She couldn’t. She had a hard enough time making peace with the way she’d attached herself to the soldier sitting on the bed, there was no way she’d do it again, even if Steve were a willing subject. Darcy wouldn’t change what had happened, unwilling to give up the love in her heart for Bucky and Steve, but she’d learned her lesson.

“The answer is no!”

“What answer is no?”

Darcy jumped, spinning to face Steve with a slightly guilty look on her face. “Nothing! Just a friendly disagreement. Between friends.”

Steve looked between Bucky and Darcy, feeling the tension in the room and knowing it’d been a bit more than Darcy wanted to let on. She was smiling at him, sheepishly and sweet, and he couldn’t find it in him to push. Bucky seemed content to let it drop, so Steve pushed the questions aside.

Bucky sighed as the subjects of his every waking thought smiled at each other, Darcy shifting her weight from one foot to the other, Steve reaching up to scratch at the back of his neck. They were ridiculous and Bucky could already feel the electricity racing up and down his arms by being so near to them.

Darcy’d been so busy yelling at Bucky she hadn’t even noticed Steve’s gold sneaking up. Darcy had been meeting with Bruce regularly over the past two weeks, working hard on her control, and she was starting to think his guru-schtick actually worked. She could now easily flip the colors on and off with a blink. It was a little too ‘Samantha from BeWitched’ for her tastes, but she’d take what she could get.

She felt an ache in her body as she looked at Steve, gorgeous and tall and looking like a dream. It wasn’t right that someone she’d never really touched could affect her this much, make the blood pump through her veins so quickly. She knew Bucky’s feelings had a lot to do with it, borrowed and deeper than they should be, but she’d found Steve Rogers hot as fuck before all the metaphysical mumbo-jumbo. Now she just had a wealth of memories to confirm his hotness quotient.

(Hint: It was high.)

Steve tore his gaze away from Darcy’s pretty hazel eyes, glancing over at Bucky and trying his best
to ignore the feeling that twisted in his chest as she smiled at him with affection Steve didn’t think he’d earned yet. “I’m done with training for the day. You guys eat yet? We could get dinner?”

Bucky shook his head, “haven’t eaten yet. Wasn’t sure when you’d get back.”

“Okay. I’ve gotta shower, then we can head down?” Steve turned back to Darcy, frowning slightly when she continued looking at him with a slightly vacant expression on her face. “Darcy?”

Steve’s lips were moving, his eyes looking at her questioningly, and she realized she’d zoned out while thinking of him naked. It wasn’t her fault that Steve Rogers was the poster boy for ‘hot as fuck’ and she was struck dumb at the very sight of him. Darcy felt her cheeks flush and pulled on one of her sleeves, trying to slow her pulse. “Huh? What’d you say?”

“He asked if we wanted to get dinner,” Bucky supplied, one corner of his mouth turning up, not needing to share memories or emotions to know exactly what she’d been thinking about. It was written on her face, in the pink of her skin, and it only helped his fantasies bloom anew, wanting to trace that color with his tongue as it flowed across her body. “I said we’d love to.”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, giving Bucky a soft glare, their argument still fresh in her mind. “Oh, you’re answering for me now?”

Bucky rose an eyebrow at her. “Are you saying no?”

“No!” She heard Bucky snort, then turned to Steve, eyes widening as she realized how that could be interpreted. “I meant a ‘no’ to him, and a ‘yes’ to you. A yes to dinner. With us. Yes.” When Steve smiled at her it was like the sun had shone for her and her alone.

“Alright. I’ll take a quick shower and then we can head down?”

_Shower scene_, the voice in Darcy’s head hissed, unable to come up with any words to say in response. She nodded a bit more emphatically than was necessary and stepped out of his way, studiously looking at her feet as he passed.

As the bathroom door whispered closed behind Steve, both Bucky and Darcy waited until the water turned on before relaxing. “Darce .”

“I don’t think I can be in here while he’s showering, Buck. I only have so much control.”

“Watching the two of you?” He knew his eyes were darkened with lust, and he saw her sharp inhale as he turned all that heat toward her, “it’s like torture.” He stood, his body moving toward hers so carefully, the lines of his body held with tension and barely contained passion. “When is it going to stop?”

“When one of us does something stupid,” Darcy breathed, feeling her heartbeat in her throat as he stopped moving, their bodies separated by less than an inch. She could _feel_ the heat, see it in his eyes, watched his pupils dilate with desire. “So probably me.”

“If that’s what it takes.” He took a breath, Darcy’s scent of citrus blossom and gardenia pulling deep into his lungs, before he nodded at the door. “We’ll come grab you when he’s ready.”

When he took a step back from her, Darcy rocked back on her heels, having been seconds away from giving in and doing what her body wanted her to do; crash her mouth to his, slot their bodies together like they’d been made for each other, _finally_ know what the man who controlled half of her heart’s lips tasted like. That they’d gone _this long_ without doing so had to be worth some kind of award. Perhaps the Nobel Peace prize, most definitely the president’s congressional medal of honor.
Darcy nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She couldn’t keep her fingers from touching him on the way out, caressing his arm as she passed, eyes locking with his, wishing she could match the want in her eyes with the want in her body.

As she left him standing there, she thanked Ziggy Stardust that Steve took quick showers.

Attempting to date someone you’d already spent a lifetime loving, but who knew almost nothing about you, was complicated. An understatement, for sure, but as Darcy wasn’t able to articulate it any better, it’d have to do. She could feel the people in the cafeteria moving around them, laughing and enjoying their dinner, but all she could think about was the two men sitting with her at the table.

Every time she was with them, every dinner or movie night or walk around the compound grounds, every time left her aching for their touch and the feel of their skin on hers. It felt so wrong, being unable to touch them, and her fingers itched to reach out and trace the lines of their jaws, over the stubble that they hadn’t shaved yet, down the long lines of their necks, over the bumps and dips of their collarbones. As her thoughts kept following the route of her imaginary fingers south, she felt the shot of desire blow through her body, breath coming out in a frustrated exhale.

Bucky was being amazing, carrying the conversation when it lulled (had he always talked this much, or was that the ‘Darcy’ in him?) and she was grateful, but she wanted more. She wanted to see dopey smiles on their faces. She wanted to hold hands. She wanted to press her lips to Steve’s when he said something sweet that showed he was really trying in spite of the whole fucked up situation.

But she’d never kissed him, so she didn’t, because she couldn’t.

", could she?

What would happen if she did? She’d already gone and done the stupidest thing she could by grabbing that fucking gem, so what was holding her back? Bucky’s sensibilities, probably. But they didn’t need sensible. They needed stupid, and that was right up her alley.

“We did this all backward.”

Bucky’s story about Rubley’s training the previous day was interrupted by Darcy’s words. There had been a bit of wonder as well as a growl in her voice, and both he and Steve were left blinking in her direction. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes slightly unfocused, but when she finally glanced up at them, something in her eyes made Bucky’s pulse speed up.

Steve felt like he was missing something as he looked back and forth between Bucky and Darcy. They shared a look and he couldn’t help the small stab of jealousy as they communicated without words, feeling left out of the conversation. “What?”

Darcy turned her attention to Steve, the subject of her current thoughts, trying to articulate the emotions that were swirling within her. “Most people learn about each other first, realize they like each other, then it grows organically into something more and, if they’re lucky, bam! Cupid, arrow, the whole shebang. But this -” she gestured between the three of them wildly, frustratingly, “is completely backward. I love you both and it’s fucking weird, but is it any weirder than being buds with a Norse god and being able to see souls? No! So why are we pretending?”

Darcy’d caught the look on Steve’s face when she said she loved them both, but she was on a roll and she didn’t want to stop. She stood up and leaned heavily on her hands, crowding into their
personal space. His eyes were so blue and gorgeous and she wanted, desperately, to see them light at
her with the same lust she was sure hers were lighting with for him. Darcy deliberately lowered her
voice so they had to lean in, too. Drawing them closer. Darcy was skirting into dangerous territory
but she was done with being careful.

“It’s not sudden for me,” she whispered, “it’s not new or untested. I’m not second guessing myself,
not when it comes to you. I have wanted you my entire life and I know that’s weird to hear, but it’s
true, so fuck doing this the ‘right’ way. I want to kiss you, I want to kiss Bucky, and I’d like to do it
soon. Very soon. Now, if possible.”

As she’d leaned into them, Steve had found himself instinctively drawn closer, eyes darting to her
lips as she spoke, mesmerized but their plump movements and the way her voice was just a touch
breathless. Her cheeks were pink with lust and the hazel of her eyes were a thin ring, her pupils large
and so black and it would be entirely too easy to fall into their depths, to give in to their promise.

Her words took a second to filter past the haze of enchantment she’d cast, but his eyebrows rose
toward his hairline when she insinuated that she hadn’t kissed Bucky. It was a surprise, as he’d
assumed the two had been making time with each other since the beginning. He’d held himself back
from her, stinging with jealousy at the thought of them being together when he wasn’t there. But they
hadn’t. Why had they waited?

“You two haven’t...”

Darcy shook her head, seeing Bucky’s same soft movement in her peripheral vision. “Nope. We’ve
been good, and I am shit at being good. So I’m going to stop.” Mind made up, unable to look at him
anymore without knowing the feel of his lips on hers, Darcy reached out and fisted her hand in
Steve’s shirt, yanking him forward and closing the distance between their mouths.

Even with Bucky’s memories, the countless times she’d kissed Steve Rogers, she still felt the thrill of
it being her first. His lips were soft, and he was too startled to respond in any real way, but that was
alright. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and the finish line was definitely not here in the cafeteria.

She was kissing him. Darcy was kissing him, and Steve’s body had gone still with the abruptness of
it all. Her hand in his shirt was still pulling him closer, her lips sliding over his, and he found himself
pinging with desire, feeling it like a lightning bolt throughout his limbs, singing up and down his
arms, making the hair on the back of his neck rise. The scent of her perfume was pulled into his
lungs as he took in a breath of surprise, and Steve was suddenly drowning in flowers and fruit.

Reluctantly, Darcy pulled back, watching the color flush Steve’s cheeks, enjoying the way his eyes
drifted down toward her lips then flicked back up, surprise parting his lips as he breathed out. She
could feel Bucky inches away, intent on them. “I’m going to go back to my room. I’ll be there,
waiting, and I’d really like it if you and Bucky joined me.”

Steve’s eyes followed hers as she pushed back from the table, standing, looking down at him with
eagerness and the slightest hint of uncertainty. Hazel eyes flicked to his left and Steve followed that
look as well, seeing the obvious desire shining in Bucky’s grey gaze. As Darcy began to move away
from them, Steve’s eyes swung to watch her again, feeling Bucky lean into him, his voice nothing
more than a growl in Steve’s ear.

“We’ve waited for you, didn’t want to do anything when you weren’t there. We wanted it to be the
three of us, we needed you. I get that you need time, but look at her. She’s our dream, Steve. Wants
you. Wants me. Wants both of us. A dream.”

Darcy had to force herself away from them, every step taking her further from the men her body was
aching for. When she’d almost gotten to the door, she risked a glance over her shoulder. Bucky was whispering into Steve’s ear, constant and insistent, the blond’s eyes followed her hips as they swung purposefully.

She kept her cool until she was out of sight, then broke into a run toward her room. Please show up! Please show up! Please show up!

“I imagine you pressed between us, our hands everywhere, mouths burning over your skin. I think about it all day. I want you panting and spent, let you catch your breath before we start all over again. Want you, want her, want us to do this together. You both drive me mad and I can’t take it any longer, punk.”

The feel of Bucky’s lips on his ear, voice low and deep and dripping with sex, made it hard for Steve to breathe. His lover had always been mouthy, but the picture Bucky’s words were painting left Steve’s heart pumping, had him straining uncomfortably against his jeans. He took a breath, pulling back to look at Bucky, searching his best friend’s face for anything, but only finding true and honest desire.

The connection Bucky and Darcy shared often made Steve feel left out, like he was on the outside of something looking in. Knowing that they’d held themselves back, that they didn’t do what they wanted to because they wanted Steve to be there, too, made the blond’s heart ache with guilt at having kept them apart.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered, watching as his words quelled some of the flames in Bucky’s eyes. “I didn’t realize.”

“But you know what I mean, jerk.”

“If only it were that easy. “I’m not where you two are yet,” Steve said after a beat, watching as Bucky shook his head.

“We know, don’t expect you to be. This isn’t a little thing, we don’t want to push you, but can you blame us for being impatient? Look at you.”

The beginning of a chuckle made Steve’s mouth turn, the comment sounding unlike Bucky but so much like Darcy. He could imagine the dark-haired woman saying those three words, hands on her hips and a look in her eye of exasperation. Movement caught his eye and Steve looked up to see many of the soldiers in the cafeteria looking at him and Bucky with interest, but quickly looking away when they’d been caught staring.

“The three of us together… how would it even work?” At the look on Bucky’s face, Steve frowned. “You know what I mean, jerk.”

“We make it work for us,” Bucky said, leaning forward, elbows on the table, “make it whatever we want. I love you, that hasn’t changed and will never change and I need you to know that.” Steve glanced at him, sincerity and genuine truth in Bucky’s grey eyes. “Loving her doesn’t make me love you any less.”

Bucky watched Steve’s mind work, rolling over everything, gaze darkening when Steve’s tongue darted out to lick at his lips, leaving Bucky to wonder if he could still taste Darcy, that maybe if he kissed Steve right now he’d also be able to taste her.

No. Bucky wanted his first taste of her to be real.

“Someone that loves you, all of you, no matter what your hands have done, no matter how much
blood is on them. Who knows your regrets and pain but wants you regardless, wants to help chase away the darkness, makes your world brighter, makes you hope and believe there’s light out there waiting. That’s who you are for me, and that’s who she is, too. Having two of those in my corner? A miracle. And she feels that for you, too, even if you’re not there yet.”

Steve’s chest was ready to burst with emotion, and despite the eyes on them, he reached out and gripped Bucky’s hand. He was surprised by the thoughts that had left his best friend’s mouth, and had to wonder how much his connection with Darcy had helped loose the words. He enjoyed Darcy’s company, liked the way she was able to turn a tough situation easier with her snark, appreciated the way she was dealing with everything with strength and character.

He didn’t love Darcy, no, but that wasn’t really what this was about. This was about something baser, something more primal. This was about the slide of skin on skin, bodies fitting together, names gasped in the air and left to echo off the walls. If they went back to her room, it wouldn’t be about love, it would be about giving into desire, admitting he wanted to know what she felt like against him, admitting that part of him wanted to watch her and Bucky move together, even if that thought still confused him.

There was a darkness in Steve’s gaze and it made Bucky’s heart race, he could see the heat and desire in the cobalt of his lover’s eyes. “Darcy wants us to follow her. Do you want that?”

The unspoken words, the promise of what it meant if they went after her, left Steve’s thoughts tumbling. Darcy was beautiful, all lips and curls and soft curves, and the thought of her body beneath him was enough to leave his mouth watering. Thinking of Bucky there, behind him, both of them watching Darcy’s face as they made her fall apart?

Yes.

Yes, he wanted to follow her.

“Cap, you got a sec?”

It took every ounce of Bucky’s will not to turn and scream at the person who was keeping them from Darcy. He saw the soft fall of Steve’s shoulder as the blond turn toward Maria Hill. He didn’t follow suit, glowering at the empty hallway and counting slowly in his head. One. Two. Three. Four.

“Hill,” Steve said, nodding at her as she came closer, eyes cast down at the tablet in her hands. “You realize it’s after five, right? Even if you’re the director, you can still clock out.”

“I’ve never been a good nine-to-fiver, I thought we shared that trait.” Her eyes flicked from Steve toward Bucky, eyebrow raising as the other man stood there, body practically vibrating with tension. “Is this a bad time?”


“It’s fine. What can I help with?” Steve watched her look down and risked a glance in Bucky’s direction. His lover was looking at him, his eyes glowing with anticipation, frustration leaving his hands fistig and unfisting at his sides. Seeing how affected Bucky was only tightened the feeling of careful hesitant hunger in himself, and Steve had to look away before he did or said something he’d regret.
“We’ve got a new pilot coming in to train on Monday and I want to run him through his paces. Since Sam’s out, I wanted to get your opinion on who to send instead. I don’t think Vision is the kind…”

Twenty one. Twenty two. Twenty three.

Steve was trying to listen to Maria, he really was, but once he’d finally accepted that he wanted to go with Bucky to Darcy’s room, it was hard to focus on anything else. He was eager, his body thrumming with it, the flash of excitement more telling than he would have liked. Part of Steve - even when he’d been hurting and letting the jealousy take over, even when he’d kept his distance, even with the sting of seeing them together and thinking they’d already made their relationship physical - part of him had wondered what it would be like with the three of them, together.

He’d tried ignoring it, writing it off as a mind trying to make sense of a mess, entertaining the impossible but finding the impossible entirely too tempting. Steve’d been entranced by the images his mind had supplied, dark hair sliding over pale skin and the sounds of his name on their lips, only to convince himself it was hopeless; in what world would they be able to make that work?

Forty eight. Forty Nine.

“We had to let go of Davison, so I’m interviewing potential replacements next Thursday, and you’re more than welcome to join and give some feedback.”

Steve nodded, hoping that it looked sincere, since he had absolutely no idea what Maria had said over the last minute. His brain was preoccupied and the longer they stood in the hallway, the longer he had to second-guess his decision. He could feel the doubts beginning to crowd his mind. Maybe his decision to follow through was rash. He was letting his body and not his brain call the shots, and he knew better than that.

Fifty nine. Sixty.

Bucky turned slightly, reaching out to wrap his hand around Steve’s wrist, the blond’s gaze swinging to him with the movement. “We’re late,” he growled, pulling softly. “Gotta go now.”

One of Maria’s eyebrows raised at Bucky’s voice, low and insistent. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. If you’ve got somewhere to be -”

“We do,” Bucky said, giving the woman a quick glance before his gave the weight of his gray eyes to Steve, knowing they were filled with desperation. He’d waited so long for this, and he needed to finish what had started in the cafeteria.

“I’m sorry, Hill, we’ve got -”

Maria hugged the tablet to her chest, eyes flicking back and forth between the men, trying to decipher what was going on. “No, my mistake. Go, enjoy your weekend. We’ll talk Monday.”

Bucky tugged on his hand and Steve was almost pulled down the hallway before he could give Maria a wave, seeing the curious look in her eyes before he was forced to turn so he didn’t fall. “Jesus, Buck, slow down.”

“You’re already thinking too much,” Bucky said, happy when a group of soldiers split down the middle as he stalked past them, unwilling to allow anything else to keep them from getting to their destination. “You let thoughts get in the way when you’re given enough time.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Steve asked, his heart beating faster the closer they got to Darcy’s room.
“In this case? Yes. She’s waiting for us.” Bucky’s anticipation was making the blood pump louder in his ears, barely containing the desire to sprint. It’d been too long since she’d left them - ten minutes? Twenty? - and he knew Darcy Lewis, knew she’d be doubting herself, just like time was making Steve doubt his decision.

Steve let Bucky drag him, his thoughts doing exactly what Bucky said they would, until they were standing in front of Darcy’s door. Bucky lifted his hand to knock, but paused, looking over at Steve, giving the blond one more chance to back out. It was hard, and it would kill him, but if Steve truly wasn’t ready, if he’d made the decision against his better judgement, no matter how hard it would be, Bucky would understand.

Even with the anguish of pent up passion turning his grey morning eyes to slate, Bucky still was looking to him for reassurance. That, more than anything else, made Steve nod his head. He trusted Bucky, trusted him to be right about this, despite the apprehension and uncertainty that had dampened the lust he’d been consumed by minutes before, Steve trusted Bucky.

Bucky’s knuckle rapped on the door three times, and seconds later the sound of metal on metal left the door unlocked. As he watched Bucky pushed into the room, Steve took a deep breath before following.
Intertwined

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy and Steve sate the fire that's been raging inside them for weeks. (NC-17)

Chapter Notes

It's here! I've been referring to this chapter as The Smuttening as it's over 6500 words of SMUT, with a tiny little bit of character growth at the end. But it's heeerrreee! And I'm so glad I get to share it with y'all!

Buckle up, grab a fan, and let's do this!!

Darcy wasn’t sure how long she had before they arrived at her door, and she ran around her room like some kind of spastic, horny hummingbird, picking up things from the floor and tossing them into her closet before manic eyes scoured the room again.

Oh my god, I just propositioned Captain America for sex in front of the entire fucking compound. Shiiit!

She brushed her teeth with a finger, swished and spit some mouthwash, then made sure there weren’t anymore dirty clothes on the floor. You just told the man you want to see him naked. I doubt dirty socks are what’s gonna to scare him off. Darcy’s heart was thundering in her chest and the more seconds that ticked by, the more nervous she got.

Had she overplayed her hand? Steve was having to accept a whole lot in a short amount of time and she knew it was fucking nuts. But the guy had signed up for nuts, right? Being a science experiment? Fighting red-faced skull nazis? Aliens?! In the big scheme of things, having someone fall in love with you overnight was pretty mild.

Or, at least, that’s what she kept telling herself as the quiet stretched on. She collapsed on her bed, shoulders slumping, when a half hour had passed. She’d been too pushy, too forward. Doing it in the cafeteria had been a terrible idea. Steve worked with those people. Most of them probably worked for him. She shouldn’t have presumed. She’d fucked everything up, just like she always did.
Good one, Lewis. Loves of your life and you just shut your eyes and dive head first and you didn’t even check to see how deep -

There was a knock at her door. She scrambled to her feet. Darcy was too afraid to blink, scared she wouldn’t see gold and crimson on the other side.

“Ma’am -”

“Open the door, yes, Friday, fucking open it!” Darcy took a deep breath and held it as the door swung open.

She didn’t have to blink to see the determination in the air around Bucky’s body as he stalked toward her. He never hesitated, not for a second, before crashing his mouth against hers. Darcy matched his enthusiasm with her own, moaning against his lips, her body singing with satisfaction at finally getting to know what his lips felt like against hers. It was a release, like a bomb had gone off in her chest. This! Yes! This!

Bucky’s mouth fed hungrily at Darcy’s lips, a low growl escaping and rumbling from his body into hers. Something in his mind clicked, like this, his body against hers, Darcy in his arms, brought one more piece of his broken puzzle back together, fitting perfectly. He’d never been a particularly poetic man, but the way this felt stole every word from his brain except for finally.

Darcy was dizzy. When Bucky’s hands moved down her back, ghosting over her ass then lifting, she was more than happy to follow his lead, wrapping her legs around him, knowing he’d keep them upright. As far as kisses went, this was by fucking far the best kiss she’d ever had. Kissing this man was like coming up for air, like oxygen, feeding her fire and making it burn brighter, hotter. She was certain that no one else, in the history of the world, had ever gotten a kiss that meant as much as this.

She gasped as they pulled apart, every nerve in her body firing at once. Her skin felt like flames, and Darcy was more than happy to burn, welcoming the heat. She blinked as she fell into his eyes, grey and beautiful, and seeing them this close was everything. His lips were swollen and beautiful and she couldn’t look away. “I’ve been waiting to do that -”

“- your entire life,” Bucky finished, giving her a smirk, knowing he was flushed like she was. She’d tasted like mint, from the mouthwash she used, but even under that, Bucky could taste her. Darcy was sweet, like candy, like spun sugar. He wanted another nip and it looked like she did, too.

Darcy bent her head forward to recapture Bucky’s mouth, to continue what they’d waited so long to share, but stopped at a sound behind them, both turning toward the door, more specifically to the man who was standing there, watching them. Steve looked uncertain, insecure, and it broke her heart. All Steve could see was someone, practically a stranger, kissing the person he loved. Shit.

There was a war being waged inside Steve Rogers and even though he was a career soldier, he wasn’t sure how to handle the cannonfire of emotions assaulting him. Watching Bucky and Darcy wrap themselves around each other, the passionate kiss they shared, left him on fire and doused in ice at the same time.

Without a thought toward his emotions, Steve’s body throbbed with attraction. They were beautiful, dark and gorgeous, and the way their bodies fit against each other made his mouth dry and his blood rush, until he felt dizzy.

But the other side of him, the one that wasn’t able to separate himself from his internal melancholy, could only see the man he loved in the arms of another, willing and eager at the attention. It was hard to reconcile the two, though he tried, but when they both looked in his direction, he froze. Steve
wasn’t sure what he wanted anymore.

Darcy unwrapped her legs from Bucky’s waist and he lowered her to her feet carefully. She needed to wipe that expression from Steve’s face, had to make him understand that what she felt for him was real. She loved him, just as she loved Bucky. Darcy’s fingers trailed from Bucky’s as she left his side, coming to stand directly in front of Steve. She looked up at him through her lashes, trying to put everything she felt for him into her eyes.

“You’re here.”

Steve swallowed as she looked up at him, everything written on her face without an ounce of uncertainty. Finally, after his silence had stretched on, he nodded at Darcy.

“Can I kiss you now?”

Darcy watched his adam’s apple bob as he swallowed again, his blue eyes looking over her shoulder at Bucky.

Bucky watched Steve glance in his direction, looking for some kind of permission, or maybe to gauge if this wasn’t what he and Darcy really wanted. The heat and desire that welled in Bucky’s chest burned, and he blinked at Steve, eyes heavy with hunger.

Steve searched Bucky’s face, giving himself one more chance of escape if he saw a hint of indecision, a single shade of doubt. He saw nothing in his best friend’s eyes except heavy need, exposed and raw and so beautiful it stole his breath. As his gaze returned to Darcy, he could see the same truth in her eyes. He gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

It wasn’t enough for him to nod. Darcy needed to hear it, needed to know that he was there for this and wanted it. “Say it. Please.”

Decision made, Steve gave her what she wanted, what he wanted. “Yes.”

“Fucking finally.”

Darcy melted against the front of his body, rising on her toes, pressing Steve back against the door. There’d been no hesitation in Bucky whatsoever as his mouth had crashed against hers, but she could feel Steve holding back. Darcy wrapped her arms around his neck, making desperate noises against his mouth, needing him to know that she wanted this, wanted him, just as much as she wanted Bucky.

She fit against his body differently than Bucky, smaller and more fragile, and all Steve could think about how she wasn’t Bucky, and that it was wrong to be doing this. Then she was pulling at him, small sounds of want whispered against his lips, and he couldn’t help responding, pushing the heavier thoughts aside and choosing to follow through, to let himself have this, have her.

There was a moment of pressure, Darcy could feel the heft of it in the air, and then it evaporated. Suddenly Steve was feeding at her lips, hands on her hips, pulling her closer, finally, finally just giving in. He spun them and Darcy gasped when her back hit the door and he pinned her against it, lips scorching a line along her jaw.

Once he’d allowed himself to begin, Steve couldn’t stop. She was soft, panting against him, his mouth tracing along her jaw and to the shell of her ear, tongue swiping against the skin of her neck. She was writhing against him, her fingernails scraping down the back of his neck and Steve moaned against her, pressing Darcy against the door with his hips, chasing the friction between them.
Everywhere Steve touched was flames and heat, leaving Darcy gasping, her fingers sliding to the back of his neck, humming encouragements as his mouth traveled down the column of her throat, his teeth nipping and biting before moving to untouched skin. “Fuck, fuck, yes, right there, oh god, Steve, don’t stop!”

She knew from Bucky that Steve was no blushing virgin, despite the wholesome image the media and history portrayed, and as he trapped her against the door with his body, she could feel the press of him, hard and hot against her, and it took everything she had not to spontaneously combust right then and there.

Darcy felt more weight press against her and her eyes fluttered open, seeing the swath of Bucky’s dark hair behind Steve, his body sandwiching the blond between them. She both heard and felt the lust-filled moan Steve made as Bucky slotted himself against Steve’s back, in turn pushing Steve tighter against her. When Steve’s hand trailed down her side, brushing against the swell of her breast, down her hip, over the bare skin of her thigh, she helped him and lifted her leg, happy when he hooked it around his hip, drawing himself even closer.

The feel of pressing Darcy against the door, the mewling noises she was making, and the feel of Bucky behind him, the weight familiar and heavy, left Steve gasping for air, tongue darting out to lick Darcy’s neck as he breathed. One of his hands continued to hold Darcy’s leg around him, his hips grinding into her, knowing she could feel him, so close and only separated by a few thin layers of fabric.

Bucky bit the back of Steve’s neck, feeling his lover grow more supple, less rigid, melting like liquid. When Bucky thrust his body into Steve’s, letting the blond know just how much he and Darcy affected him, the chorus of moans only drew him tighter, harder.

Darcy’s desire blew through her like a gunshot, leaving her breathless and aching. Bucky’s mouth was pressed to the bit of skin behind Steve’s ear and she knew it drove the blond crazy. She took advantage of Steve’s gasp to capture his lips again, tongue swiping until he opened to her, feeling his body react as she writhed against him.

Steve was trapped between her and Bucky, two people who knew exactly what made him turn to liquid, where to touch to make his knees weak, and he was willing, so very willing. The doubtful whispers in his mind were quieted as they worked together until he was desperate, pulling on Darcy’s hips, squirming back against Bucky, pressed tight and hard against his ass.

Darcy put everything in her lips against Steve’s, in her fingernails as they scratched the back of his neck, pulling at his hair to expose more skin for her to run her tongue over. He tasted warm and perfect and she was obsessed, addicted. Bucky and her worked in tandem, it was a dance they’d memorized, and it was beautiful to watch Steve react in their arms, body bowing as they hit that spot, the one that made him cry out.

Bucky took a step backward, pulling Steve with him, away from the door and Darcy and toward her bed. Steve was gorgeous, his lips red and swollen where Darcy’s teeth had bit at them, a flush high on his cheeks. Bucky drove the blond back until he could push him, watching as the back of Steve’s legs hit the bed and he fell onto it. Bucky followed him down, pressing the weight of his body onto Steve, grinding his hips, capturing Steve’s lips, tongue caressing, breathless.

Steve was like a taut rubberband, stretched and strained, ready to break. His hands fist ed in the back of Bucky’s shirt, moaning against the other man’s mouth, feeling Bucky’s cock firm against his. The feeling was almost too much and Steve cried out, eyes closing, body bucking upward.

Watching Bucky and Steve together, surging and swelling against each other, left Darcy
mesmerized. She was struck dumb with the reality of it, unable to form any real coherent thoughts. She’d been away from them for too long and she felt the agony of it in her bones. Her feet carried her across the room until she crawled beside them on the bed. When Bucky lifted his mouth from Steve’s, she leaned in and captured Bucky’s pouting lower lip between her teeth. She could hear Steve’s labored breathing in her ear as he watched them kiss from inches away.

Steve blinked, watching Bucky and Darcy’s lips, their tongues swiping and rolling, the dichotomy of emotions falling silent at the pure beauty of it. They were dark hair and pouting lips, swollen and gorgeous, Steve’s mind shorting out at the vision they made. Even while they occupied each other, Darcy’s hand slipped between his and Bucky’s bodies, snaking under his shirt, her nails running over the skin of Steve’s lower stomach, his muscles bunching under her fingers as they flexed.

Bucky tore his mouth away from Darcy long enough to tug his shirt over his head, tossing it behind him without a thought, awe-struck at the sight when Darcy turned her attention to Steve, capturing the blond’s mouth, her breathy sighs against Steve’s lips like the prettiest song he’d ever heard. She was saying Steve’s name, over and over, like a prayer.

Steve was floating on a haze of skin and lips and teeth and breath, his body reacting to both Darcy and Bucky immediately, like they knew exactly where to kiss, where to nip, where to caress and brush and show attention, because they did. They both had years of knowledge at their disposal and Steve was helpless as they surrounded him.

When Darcy’s tongue licked his lips Steve answered her eagerly, his hand sliding through her hair, pulling softly, just enough for her to feel the strength in his hands. Her curls were soft as his fingers tangled in them, using the hold he had to turn her head and pull her down until he could lick along the column of her throat, from her clavicle to the little bit of skin behind her ear that made her gasp so erotically that his hips thrust upward into Bucky at the sound.

She was like putty, happy to mold against Steve and Bucky wherever she could. They both had the thought at the same time, and between her and Bucky, it only took a second for Steve’s shirt to be tossed aside. Finally, finally, Darcy was gifted for the first time (for the millionth time) with the vision that was Shirtless Steve Rogers. She’d loved his body before the serum, when he was smaller and frailer but still a perfect fit against her body (Bucky’s body), but now?

“Fuck,” Darcy gasped, lips parting hungrily as her eyes devoured him.

“I know,” Bucky said with a small chuckle, shaking his head softly, knowing exactly what Darcy meant. “Never gets old.” And it didn’t. Not ever. Bucky had wanted Steve since he’d figured out what wanting someone felt like, since he’d realized that he liked the pretty dames and the tiny blond boy who’d never met a bully he wasn’t willing to bleed for. Pre-serum or post-serum, Bucky’s hunger for Steve had never waned.

Steve could feel the blush blossom in his cheeks and flush down to his chest. The way both Darcy and Bucky were looking at him, like he’d hung the moon, like they couldn’t believe he was real, made him squirm under their longing gazes. He felt uncertain, despite the greediness he could see on their faces.

She’d followed the blush from Steve’s cheeks, down his neck and further south, following the pink as it traveled over his skin. Another curse broke free when Darcy saw Steve’s khakis stretched tight, doing little to hide how hard he was pressed against Bucky. She bit her lip to keep from crying out, gaze flicking back up to Steve’s eyes. He was looking at her, seriousness bleeding in. She watched the tumble of thoughts in his head, flitting behind the cerulean she knew so well.

“Don’t,” she said, leaning to press her lips to his, cradling Steve’s cheeks as she nipped at him,
“don’t think. I want this. I want you.” When she pulled back, he was looking up at her, impossibly long lashes brushing against his cheeks as he blinked, then sought Bucky’s eyes.

Bucky heard Darcy’s words, looking up from where his mouth was pressed against Steve’s stomach. “No trick,” he said, tongue dipping into the divot of Steve’s abs, “just need you, both of you, want to make you feel it, believe it.” He locked his gaze with Steve’s, mouth moving downward when he saw the flash of acceptance in the blond’s eyes.

The certainty in Bucky’s face ripped away whatever doubt Steve had left. His head fell back onto Darcy’s bed, his hands fist in her bright comforter when Bucky rubbed his cheek over the fabric separating him from the part of Steve he wanted, forcing his breath out in a heavy exhale. Steve’s eyes opened when he felt a pull on his hand, looking up into the hunger of Darcy’s face.

Darcy watched Steve’s eyes, darker with lust, follow her hand as she raised it to her breast, feeling the heat of his hand as his fingers flexed against her. She knew the type of woman Steve preferred, knew that she ticked a lot of his boxes, and even if he didn’t feel the way she felt about him yet, she didn’t mind. They’d go backward. Sex first, satisfying the need in their bodies, releasing the tension that had been building for weeks. They’d worry about everything else later.

Steve tugged on the fabric of Darcy’s shirt, happy that words hadn’t been needed to accomplish what he wanted. She lifted the hem and pulled the shirt over her head. She was wearing lace, dark blue, and his eyes followed the curves of her body, drinking her in. Darcy was beautiful, her skin so pale against the color of the bra, and Steve watched the blush tint her cheeks and flow south over the rest of her body.

She was breathing heavy, almost spilling out of the cups, and Steve’s fingers brushed along the hem of the lace, down until he was able to hook his finger in the fabric between her breasts, pulling her body down to him. Darcy’s fingers pulled at his hair when he pressed his lips to the swell of skin above the lace, tongue dipping under the fabrics edge. Steve used his fingers to tug the lace down enough that he could pull one pink nipple into his mouth, hearing Darcy’s gasp, feeling the shudder that ran through her body.

Offended by Steve’s khakis, Bucky popped the buttons on the pants with purpose, wanting to feel the velvet skin and feverish heat they covered. He felt Steve’s sharp intake of air when his cock was freed, so warm and so hard in Bucky’s hand. Bucky glanced upward at Darcy’s sound, so erotic, watching her hazel eyes widen with desire as he looked at Steve for the first time.

Lust flashed through Darcy like lightning as Bucky’s head dipped down, eyes locked with hers, his tongue swiping at the bead of moisture that had glistened on Steve’s swollen tip. “Fuck me,” she whispered to herself, pulse racing.

“Kind of busy right now, but that’s on the agenda,” Bucky said, eyes dark with craving as he glanced up at both of them, a self-satisfied smirk curling his lips when Steve pulled his face away from Darcy’s chest and pinned him with a look of frenzy, eyes wide and pupils so big he could barely see the cobalt around the edge. “He’s a screamer, doll. Make him a mute?”

Darcy was more than happy to keep Steve’s mouth busy, crashing against him, swallowing the moans the blond made as Bucky wrapped his mouth and lips about Steve’s cock, tongue rippling against the skin he knew so well, drawing gasps and curses from Steve every few seconds. Steve was left writhing on the bed, Darcy drawing on Bucky’s memories to know how hard Steve liked his hair pulled, tangling her fingers and pulling, ecstatic when he whispered her name, the end of it turning into a sigh.

Steve’s senses were overwhelmed. The taste of Darcy’s tongue as she licked into his mouth. The
sound of her breathy gasps as she looked down his body to see Bucky working up and down, the feel of lips sliding and hand twisting just the way Steve liked it. His hips were bucking, thrusting up into Bucky, chasing the man’s mouth, wanting him to move faster, wanting more.

Bucky could feel the impatience in Steve’s body, muscles taut, moving desperately. He’d never liked rushing when it came to this, but he was more than a little impatient himself, pressed hard and firm against the bed. He was already leaking, looking up the lines of Steve’s body to see Darcy’s mouth working down Steve’s neck, the blond’s head thrown back, lips parted as he panted. The blue lace of Darcy’s bra was pulled down, exposing a nipple that was already red and taut from the way Steve’s mouth had been rolling it.

They were gorgeous together, so much better than Bucky could have ever imagined, and he was already so close, just from the feel of Steve in his mouth and the vision of Darcy’s body above. Bucky pressed his hand on Steve’s lower stomach, keeping the blond from thrusting upward, wanting to draw this out until Steve was frantic.

“Fuck,” Steve breathed, body humming, jerking upward into Bucky’s warmth. Darcy was like liquid, pressing as much of herself against him as she could. He rolled one of her nipples in his fingers as he kissed her, tongue lapping, teeth biting at her lips. As Bucky began to move faster, lips closing over him and sliding up and down, Steve’s hand snaked down the front of her body, over her curves, until he pushed past the hem of her shorts and the bit of lace he assumed was the same color as the bra. He cupped her, feeling her body convulse at his touch, fingers dipping until he could feel her, slick and so warm. “Darcy.”

She’d become a creature that lived for the sound of her name on their lips, seeking their touch, needing to feel the weight of them. Darcy gasped against Steve’s mouth as his fingers slipped over and over between her folds, each movement making her circle higher, until she could taste her release on the back of her tongue. “Steve!”

Bucky knew Darcy was close, could hear it in her voice as she called Steve’s name, and that knowledge urged him on, until he was taking as much of Steve in his mouth as he could, tongue sliding against the other man’s cock with purpose, Steve’s hips thrusted upward as he tore his mouth from Darcy’s and filled her room with Bucky’s name, over and over. Steve’s hand fisted in Bucky’s hair as he came, his hips stuttering, until Bucky was drowning in the taste of his lover as Steve shuddered with release.

Watching Steve come apart was almost enough to push Darcy over the edge. He was stunning, flushed, his lower lip sucking inward as his eyes screwed close. She watched Bucky swallow, until Steve was left jerking, until he collapsed back against the bed, limbs falling heavily, his hand slipping away from her.

The second Steve fell away from her, Bucky was there, pressing himself into Darcy, her legs wrapping around his waist. He fed hungrily, hips thrusting against her, knowing she could taste Steve on his lips as they kissed, feeling her tongue chase for another hint. His hand slotted between their bodies, pushing past the fabric of her shorts, fingers curling expertly, knowing just how to touch her to make her fall.

She’d already been so close just watching Bucky and Steve, but the feel of Bucky’s firm fingers rubbing right there had her crying his name against his mouth, hands fumbling for him, wanting to feel him spill against her. Feeling frantic, she finally slipped past his pants, wrapping her fingers around the smooth, velvet length, so hard and swollen, thumb brushing over his tip, spreading the precome as he stuttered into her hand.

Her legs lifted higher, until she was able to use her feet to push his pants down, making it easier to
take him in her hands, squeezing with even pressure, her wrist turning at his head before traveling back down and starting the circuit all over again. Bucky was gorgeous, growling her name against her lips, his tongue curling into her mouth, desperate. How had she ever kept herself from doing this? How had she managed to keep her hands off either of them when her desire for them burned within her, scorching the earth in her heart until there was nothing left but them?

It felt like they’d done this forever, as if they’d screamed each other’s names for years, for centuries, for eons. To Bucky, the only people that had ever held pieces of his heart were in the room; the blond laying boneless on the bed beside him, whom he could still taste on his tongue, and the raven-haired beauty laid beneath him, his fingers flexing expertly against her, feeling her warmth, knowing by the way her breath hitched that she was so close, just like he was.

It was perfect, and right, and though they didn’t fit their bodies against each other like he ached to, he was nothing short of breathless at the feel of her body against his, her heel pressing into his ass, other knee open and to the side, giving him better access to her, her hand moving over and over his cock, quicker and with purpose.

Bucky pressed his forehead against hers as his hips pumped faster, desperately, fingers working harder, feeling the first flutter of her walls, body going rigid at the feel. Their shared memories, coupled with the fact that they’d worked together to make Steve fall, had them both seeing white, the sounds of their release echoing off the walls of Darcy’s bedroom.

Darcy couldn’t move, Bucky’s body pressed down on her as they both lay dazed, struck dumb by the weight and strength of their orgasms. She wasn’t sure where she ended and they began. Her eyes fluttered open when she felt fingers thread through hers, turning her head to find Steve’s blue gaze on her, on both of them.

Feeling like rubber, Bucky pressed kisses to the skin of Darcy’s neck, along her clavicle, unable to move but still filled with the reality that she was there, and that he got to touch her like this, and that Steve was only inches away, his breath fanning against his bicep.

When Steve had crawled out of the haze of his release, he’d watched Bucky and Darcy move against each other. Desperate. Wild. Maybe it was because his mind was still reeling from everything, but he felt a satisfaction as they’d rutted against each other, hands seeking, fumbling, success and relief as they’d both come. Darcy’s hand had been the closest, so he’d grabbed it, still wanting to touch them, the air in the room still weighted and charged.

Bucky’s lips peppered Darcy’s jaw before they captured her mouth again, softly this time, not rushed and hungry, but delicate. He pulled back, following her line of sight to find Steve’s eyes on them, heavy and hooded, a careful hesitance in his gaze.

Darcy felt spent, her limbs heavy as she squeezed Steve’s hand. Slowly, Bucky detangled himself from her, legs shaking as he stood up, chuckling softly. Steve watched him move away and toward the bathroom before his eyes fell back to Darcy, seeing the tired smile on her lips as she blinked at him. It was too easy to let the colors bleed into her vision, watching his gold strobe brightly, the swatch of blue shining like a sapphire and beating in time with his heartbeat. She blinked the colors away, glad to see he was still looking at her, beautifully messy. “Hi.”

As his brain began to push past the haze of sex and satisfaction, Steve was left with his thoughts slowly swirling. He didn’t deserve the way Darcy was looking at him, so happy, so fulfilled. He tried to match her smile with one of his own, but he knew it was softer than he would have liked.

She could see Steve’s brain working behind those gorgeous blue eyes, knew that they’d all be coming back down to Earth in different ways. She’d known when she’d invited them that this wasn’t
going to solve anything. It would make things easier, sure, not having to deal with the unending hunger she felt when looking at them, but their issues would still be there, needing to be worked through.

Darcy didn’t want him to think heavy thoughts, not yet, and she wiggled across the bed until she could press her body against the line of his, hand resting on his pec, face nuzzling his chest as she took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her eyes falling closed. “Thank you.”

She couldn’t see his face, but Steve’s eyebrows rose upward at her words, chin dipping as he stared at the ceiling. “It kind of feels like I should be the one thanking you.” He felt Darcy’s body as she laughed, so warm where it was pressed against his skin.

“You didn’t have to come here, but you did. I know this is a lot and I know it’s not easy, but… thank you.” She lifted her head, grinning up at him when he glanced down at her.

“Darcy, it was… I mean, you’re… and the way you…” When she laughed knowingly and pressed her lips to his chest, Steve couldn’t help but smile.

“What the punk is trying to say is that it was his pleasure,” Bucky said, flopping onto the bed on Steve’s other side, grinning at the blond when he frowned. “Tell me that’s not what you wanted to say.”

Darcy felt Steve take a breath to argue, then felt as he exhaled sharply, the chuckle making his chest rumble deeply, laughing when Bucky made a vindicated noise. “You’re adorable” she said, pressing her cheek against Steve’s chest, her fingers tracing circles on his skin, invisible letters and symbols that no one would be able to see.

A comfortable silence seemed to fall over them, and Steve gave himself a chance to enjoy it, the feel of them on either side, warm and tired and languid, but he wasn’t able to push away the nagging doubts at the back of his mind.

Bucky frowned when Steve shifted under their arms, carefully sitting up and slipping off the bed. He watched Steve reach down and button his pants, frowning harder when he saw a flash of insecurity cross Darcy’s face as she groped over the side of the bed for her shirt. He’d known the happy after sex glow would fade, but he’d hoped it’d last a little longer than it seemed Steve was going to let it. “Steve?”

Darcy pulled her shirt over her head, flipping her hair out as she pulled it into place, hiding her body from view. She could see the hesitation in Steve’s body, the rigid way he was holding himself. Reality was beginning to crash around them and all she could hope was that it didn’t destroy everything.

“I don’t regret what we did,” Steve said carefully, watching as Darcy turned to look at him, seeing Bucky’s soft glare at his words. “You two, together… It’s just… I want to know you better, Darcy. I know how you feel about me, and I believe it, but it still feels like I’m taking advantage of the situation, even if you’re alright with it.”

“I understand,” Darcy said, crossing her arms over her chest, biting the inside of her cheek, turning to look at a spot on the carpet near her feet.

“No, I don’t think you do.” Steve moved so he was kneeling beside her, reaching out to grab her hand. When her hazel eyes swung toward him, wet and filling quickly with tears, he squeezed her hand. “I want you to believe it when I look at you, when I want you. I don’t want you to doubt that I’m doing it for myself and not just for you and Bucky. Can you really tell me that you’d be fine not
Knowing if I wasn’t being honest with you? That you wouldn’t doubt it?”

Looking into his eyes from so close, seeing the truth in them, made Darcy really think about what he was asking. Would she doubt it? She knew Steve wouldn’t lie, that he couldn’t, but the idea of looking into his eyes and knowing he wasn’t sure… No. She didn’t want that.

When she shook her head at him, a tear breaking free with the movement, Steve gave her a sweet grin and reached up to brush it from her cheek. “I want to do this right.”

“I know,” she said, sniffing, “because you’re an amazing person. But fuck, how am I supposed to go without now? You’re like a goddamned Greek god, Rogers. Could you not?”

Even with tears drying on her face, Darcy still managed to make him laugh. Steve’s smile was rueful as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her cheek, tasting the salt on her skin before pulling back. “Not sure I have much of a choice there, Darce.”

Bucky’s mouth was curled into a smile, watching the two of them interact, somehow still shy and bashful despite what they’d just done to each other’s bodies. He knew Steve like he knew himself, sometimes better than he knew himself, and it was only a matter of time until Steve saw Darcy like he saw her. He hadn’t lied to Steve in the cafeteria; Darcy was a dream, their dream, and it was a dream he refused to give up on.

“Can I at least, like, hold your hand? Kiss you? I’d promise to stay hands off, but that’s going to be impossible, I’m telling you right now.” Darcy’s lips curled when he smiled warmly at her.

“I think that’d be okay.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“And everything else?” Bucky watched as their gazes swung toward him.

Steve stood. “We continue what we were doing. Spending time together.”

“Dates, Buck. We go on dates. And I make you work for it.”

Bucky rose an eyebrow in Darcy’s direction. “How’s that now?”

“I know you love me, and you know I love you, but I’d still like a little romance from time to time. That charming smile and demeanor will only get you so far,” she said with a grin. When Steve laughed, attempting to cover it with a cough, she watched Bucky glare in the other man’s direction. Her gaze faded from laughter to seriousness as she turned back to Steve. “But that’s just for me, right? You and Bucky will still… I wouldn’t want you to go celibate on account of me.”

Bucky watched Steve sit on the bed, still holding Darcy’s hand, face thoughtful. “We’ve already talked to each other about me and you.”

Steve looked between the two of them. “You already... talked about it?”

Darcy looked down at their joined hands, at the chipped blue nail polish on her thumb. “I mean, yeah, it might have come up. You guys have already missed out on so much time together. I don’t want to come between you like that. Besides, I’m the one bashing into your relationship. Buck and I didn’t do anything because it all felt like it was cheating, not being with you, not making sure it was okay with you first.”

His blue eyes searched her face for any hint of resentment, but all Steve could see was careful
honesty. When her gaze flicked up to his, the smile that turned Steve’s lips was genuine in its affection. How had he gotten this so wrong? Because you didn’t ask, you assumed. He sighed, squeezing her hand, a flash of guilt tightening his chest. “If you feel left out -”

“It’s not… that’s not it, Steve.” Darcy looked up at him, eyes focused as she tried to explain herself. “I don’t feel jealous when you and Bucky are together. I feel happy. I’m happy you’re comfortable enough around me that you don’t worry if you’re touching, that you don’t feel like you have to hide what you feel. I love you, and I love Bucky, and I love you and Bucky, together. Am I… does that make sense?”

It was a little hard for Steve to fully understand, but he nodded, seeing the sincerity in her eyes. “I think so.”

Darcy picked at an invisible piece of lint on her comforter, feeling the weight of his eyes on her. “But hey, if you’re together and you realize you wish I was there with you… then that’d be pretty neat.” When her gaze flicked up to look at him, her lips turned upward into a smirk as he grinned at her from inches away.

“Allright, you guys stare longingly into each other’s eyes, I’m going to order a pizza and pick out a movie.”

When Steve realized how long he had been looking into Darcy’s eyes, a blush chased across his cheeks. He squeezed her hand one more time before he stood. “If you try make us watch Jumanji again, I’m going to institute veto rules.”

“You already used veto this week,” Darcy said, bending over to grab Steve’s shirt and throwing it to him. She crossed into the bathroom, leaving the door open as she pulled a towel from the cabinet.

“I did?”

Darcy laughed, sticking her head back into the room. “Yeah, when he picked Jumanji Monday night.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Steve was grateful that the heavy seriousness in the room seemed to fade in such a short amount of time, like things between the three of them were more familiar, more comfortable. That it was so easy for Steve to be himself around Darcy was more telling than he’d thought.

Smiling to himself, Steve settled onto the couch, grabbing one of the brightly colored throws Darcy had spread around the room. “Buck, there are so many other movies.”

“Maybe I just really like the monkeys.”
Certain Calculations

Chapter Summary

The Science Squad (Tony, Bruce, Jane and Peter) try to find a solution to one of Darcy's problems, and Steve ponders his changing emotions.

Chapter Notes

Once again, you guys are awesome. The comments, whether novels or just *flaily hands*, make me so happy! Hope you enjoy an update on this Quiet Sunday!

There are certain calculations I should like to make with you,
To be sure that your deductions will be logical and true;
And remember, "Patience, Patience," is the watchword of a sage,
Not to-day nor yet to-morrow can complete a perfect age.
— The Old Astronomer, Sarah Williams

“Webhead, do you ever think about the universe?”

Peter Parker’s eyes were wide as he looked toward Darcy, perched on the worktable behind him, legs swinging, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Webhead?”

“I mean, I’ve seen the universe, you know? Okay, maybe not the whole universe but I’ve seen how connected we all are. And we are. Connected, I mean. It’s just... easy to get lost in it when I think too hard, you know?” Darcy blinked at Peter behind her glasses, watching the surprise fill his caffeine-dilated eyes.

“I… yeah. Sure. The universe is… big, it’s real big. Lots of… uh… stars and -”

She cut him off. “What I mean, Spiderguy, is things can get really busy in my mind and -”

“Lewis, am I paying you to make an ass indentation on my table?”

Darcy turned toward Tony as he appeared, her jaw hanging open in blatant offense. “Excuse me, you dick?”

Tony rolled his eyes at her expression. “I meant that you were in that spot when I left for my meeting
and here you are, in the exact same spot, when I return. So I ask again: what are you doing to earn your keep?”

“The kid’s showing me what you’re working on,” she said with a gesture in Peter’s direction, even though that hadn’t really been what they’d been talking about, but Tony didn’t need to know that.

Peter turned back toward the circuit board in front of him. “I really wish you guys would stop calling me ‘the kid,” he mumbled.

Tony gestured in Darcy’s direction with his head as he set his paperwork on the nearest surface. “I call her pumpkin and sweetheart.”

“And sport, and kiddo, and cupcake. It’s super awesome,” Darcy said with a glare in his direction, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“So if you’d rather have me call you one of those, I can -”

“Whatever,” Peter said with a shake of his head. “I think I’m almost done with this, Mr. Stark.”

“I told you to call me Tony.”

“And I told you,” Darcy said to Peter’s back, “to call him ‘World’s Okayest Boss.’” She grinned widely when Tony turned to look at her, watching his eyes work behind the tinted color of his glasses.

“Friday?”

“Yes, Boss?”

“Will you order me a ‘World’s Okayest Boss’ coffee mug?”

“It’s already ordered.”

“Thank you.”

When Darcy and Tony’s verbal sparring ended, she jumped off the table and came to stand next to Peter, passing him the soldering iron when he held out his open hand. “Explain this to me again?”

“The suit Mr. Stark -”

“World’s Okayest Boss.”

“Yes. Sure. Yeah. The suit he made for me originally was great, really, it was, but my senses have gotten stronger the longer I’ve had my abilities. In terms of technology, his stuff is ancient.” They both ignored Tony’s shout and continued on like they’d never heard it. “The data I’m taking in is too much. Have you ever heard of the quietest room in the world?”

“You mean Banner’s bedroom?” Darcy raised her hand in the air, seeing Tony do the same across the room in her peripheral vision, a silent high five between the two. “Never heard of the room, but dazzle me.”

“It’s, um, in Minnesota. At Orfield Lab. They’ve specifically made the room so that there is no sound. Like, no sound. You go in there, and you can hear your stomach digesting food, can hear your blood pumping through the ventricles of your heart.”

Darcy’s nose crinkled. “That sounds horrible.”
“Right? I mean, yeah, horrible. The longest anyone’s been able to stand being in there is, like, forty-five minutes. Anyway, they use it to test how loud things actually are.”

“Okay. Weird room. Got it. And that has to do with this because…”

Peter turned toward her, excitement on his face as he explained. It was times like this that he looked and acted like someone much younger than eighteen. The more time Darcy spent with the recently legalized teenager, the more protective she felt. The fact that she knew Tony felt the same way only gave the tech genius more brownie points.

“The suit helps me filter all that out, helps me control what I hear and what I can see. I mean, there are still times when it’s too much, but this helps. This suit and the board I’m working on make it so things are easier to sift through, so I can focus and not let my senses overwhelm me.”

Darcy nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sounds like when I’m in the blackness for too long, when I can hear the stone and feel all the souls. Like they’re too strong and I can’t ignore them.”

She pointed to the bit of tech and opened her mouth to speak but cried out in surprise when Tony’s chair rolled across the floor suddenly and came to stop right next to her, the man giving her a surprised look. “Mother fuck!”

“Say that again.”

“Mother fuck? Not sure why you’d want to hear it again, but -”

“No, not that, the other thing. The blackness, soul, stone thing.”

“I already tried explaining it to you and Bruce.” And she had, but they didn’t understand and Darcy was running out of ways to describe it. It was frustrating as all hell and only made her angry.

“Not to me. Explain it to Peter, slower and more detailed.”

Rolling her eyes, familiar with Tony’s odd requests by now, Darcy sighed, gaze swinging back toward Peter. “I see colors when I look at people. Someone suggested they were auras, but they’re not. Miss Cleo would say... wait, are you too young to know who I’m talking about when I say Miss Cleo?” At Peter’s blank look, Darcy ran a hand over her face. “For fucks sake, you’re so young. Anyway. They’re not auras because when I see the colors, I don’t see anything else. Everything goes black except for the lights. And those lights are people’s souls.”

Peter crossed his arms over his chest, fidgeting but looking at her with interest. “And the lights, well, the souls, I mean, do they all look the same?”

“Kind of? They’re all about the same size, and I can read the same emotions in each of them pretty easily, those things seem to be universal. Anger’s orange, fear is yellow, red means they’re lying. But everyone has their own color, their soul color. Some might look the same at first glance, but when I really look at them, when I really dig deep into the thick of them, everyone has little things that make them stand out.”

“You can turn it off and on by blinking?”

“I couldn’t at first. Before they’d come and go on their own, even when I didn’t want them to. It’s taken me awhile to get the hang of things. Working with Bruce has helped a lot. I still slip from time to time, but it’s only when I’m upset, or scared. When I feel like I don’t have control.”
Peter nodded, “times when your limbic system is activated.”

Darcy had no real idea, but she’d quickly figured out Peter was crazy smart, just like Jane, and she nodded as if what he’d said made perfect sense. “When I stay too long in the blackness, though, I can feel everything getting bigger, more massive, and it’s harder to draw myself back from there. And the last time I did that did not go well.”

“Understatement of the year, Champ.”

“Fuck you, Tony.”

She could see Peter looking at her, but Darcy had a feeling he wasn’t really seeing her. His brain was working on a puzzle, that same look of concentration on his face that Jane could get. If he suddenly asked for poptarts, Darcy’d be convinced him and the astrophysicist were long lost siblings.

After what seemed like a silence that would stretch on forever, Peter turned toward Tony. “Do you have her scans?”

Tony waved his hand in the air, pulling up the scans he and Bruce had done weeks ago. As Peter and Tony stared at the images, Darcy rolled her eyes and crossed to the small fridge they kept in the lab. She grabbed a water for Peter (the kid could not live on energy drinks alone) and grabbed one for herself, too.

Tony could get his own damn drink.

When she got closer, she watched their rapid fire conversation, only understanding half of what they were saying. Recognizing a word Peter mentioned triggered a reaction in Darcy. “Jane called it that the first time I explained it to her.”

“What?”

“Synthesizer eyes.”

“Synesthesia,” Tony corrected, head cocking to the side as he looked at her, rare seriousness in the brown of his eyes.

“Whatever, yeah. Um… retinal synesthesia.”

“That would make sense,” Peter turned around and pointed at a part of her brain that was lighting up. “Studies have been pretty inconclusive, but if her ability is agitated by strong emotions, it could be centered right there.”

Tony scratched at his beard, spinning slightly back and forth as he considered the problem. “We figured it was the mutant gene that allowed her to hold it all inside.”

“Mutant gene?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed when Peter turned to her with an incredulous look on his face. “You’re really going to act like that that’s a shock when you can climb up fucking walls?” He seemed to consider her question and shrugged his shoulders, turning back to the screen, and Darcy directed her glare toward Tony. “Could you maybe keep that bit to yourself?”

“The kid needs all the info if he’s going to help us.”

Both Peter and Darcy made noises at the same time.
“Help you do what?”

“You want my help?”

“Fresh eyes never hurt,” Tony said, with a nod in Peter’s direction. When Darcy sighed and crossed her arms over her chest, he took her lack of complaining as a sign to continue.

“So let’s lay this out. The first thing you ever really dealt with was the colors, and these only came on after you touched the stone. Because of your genetic mutation, you were able to absorb the stone. No one’s done that, the absorbing part. Yeah, Quill and the rest of the Space Friends were able to keep from vaporizing, but they didn’t absorb the stone. They were just able to handle it.”

Darcy watched as Tony rose and started pacing a bit. She’d gotten used to this part of Tony’s life, him being in a lab and doing his tech guy thing, so she knew that when he started to move around that it was useless to try and stop him. The man could turn that big brain of his off and on, but when it was on, it was really on.

“Right. You said that was likely the alien bit in me.”

Peter’s sound of choking was loud. “Wait, alien?”

“No! Not alien. Mutant. Jesus, Lewis, I’m trying to help and you’re going to bust my balls?”

“I want absolutely nothing to do with your balls, asshat, so please continue.”

Tony took a deep breath before he started moving again. “So the mutation allowed you to absorb it, but that’s just part of your DNA. The rest of you is human, and the stone’s powers had to adapt to your body chemistry, your physiology, your human-ish brain. So it finds a way to interpret into abilities you can understand.”

“So maybe the stone altered her eyes?”

Shaking his head, Tony pointed toward the images still floating in the air nearby. “We ran tests on them, everything looks normal. All the same rods and cones.”

“But if the stone had to adapt physiologically, it might have had to create, um, like, new neural pathways in order for her to comprehend what she was seeing.”

Darcy was looking back and forth between the two of them, hoping at some point she’d understand something they were saying. She pushed a water bottle across the workstation toward Peter. “Drink.” He grabbed the bottle and drained it in one go. Damn but she was an awesome lab assistant.

“Friday! Get Bruce in here. Oh! And Foster.”

* * *

Three hours later, Darcy felt a hand cup her cheek. She blinked sleepily at Steve, who was kneeling next to the couch she’d passed out on, a smile climbing onto her lips at just the sight of him. “I was dreaming about you.” The soft grin he gave her made her stomach flip. Fucking hell, what a gorgeous man you are.

She’d looked so peaceful napping that he’d hated to wake her up, but it looked like the scientists were coming to some sort of conclusion, and Steve knew she’d want to be there for their
explanation, just like he did. That Tony had called him at all was surprising, but he was thankful that the billionaire had sought him out so he could be there with Darcy.

“Don’t know how you were able to sleep through all of that,” Steve said with a nod toward the commotion behind him.

Darcy sat up enough to look over his shoulder. The Science Squad (as she’d come to call them in her head) was arguing quite loudly amongst each other; Bruce was shaking his head, glasses pulled from his face and gesturing toward the screen, Peter seemed to be making shadow puppets of some kind with his fingers (nothing that Darcy could decipher), and both Tony and Jane were speaking loudly at each other.

She turned back to Steve, one of the key players in her dream, eyes warming as she remembered the activities they’d been enjoying in her brain. “Yeah, I’ve gotten pretty good at filtering out the science speak. They start to sound like adults in Charlie Brown after a while.” The way Steve cocked his head to the side, expression curious but unfamiliar, made Darcy’s heart grow three sizes. “Means it’s less words and more random, indecipherable noises.”

“Ah,” Steve said, not sure what he’d done to earn the look of wonder on her face, but happy that he’d been able to make her smile. Darcy had a great smile that filled her eyes when she was truly happy, and Steve found himself wanting to make her do it more. “I don’t really understand what they’re saying either.”

“Shall we find out together?”

Steve stood, grinning down at her as he held out a hand. “Okay.”

His hand was warm as he pulled her to her feet, and Darcy didn’t feel bad when she drew herself as close to him as she could, taking a deep breath as she looked up at him through her lashes. “Such a gentleman. Very different than what Dream Steve had been up to.” When his eyes sobered just the tiniest bit at her words, Darcy couldn’t help the smirk that turned her lips.

She pulled away from him reluctantly, coming to stand before the people who were arguing back and forth. Darcy clapped her hands and watched as the quartet turned to look at her, drawn out of their science bubble. “Okay, nerds. What have you figured out?”

“We’re going to need you to drink the kool-aid.” At Darcy’s slow raise of an eyebrow, Tony’s hand waved in the air before him. “We think if you drink a concoction of peptides, we can track them as they move along the new pathways your brain has created and hopefully that’ll give us a jumping off point on understanding how you access your powers, possibly make it so you can shut everything down before things get out of hand.”

“Like an on-off switch?” Steve had stepped up next to Darcy. Now that he knew how scared she was of what she could do, he wanted to know everything, maybe ways he could help her when it got to be too much. He didn’t know her like Bucky knew her, but he wanted to.

“We’d be able to dial them back down, lessen the effects.” At Darcy’s skeptical look, Tony shrugged his shoulders. “What? I’ve figured out harder stuff than this. I just didn’t put two and two together until you were talking to the kid.” Tony studiously ignored the sigh of frustration Peter tossed his
way at the nickname.

Darcy gave him an incredulous look. “Tony Stark admitting he doesn’t know something?”

“It’s new science,” Steve said from her side. He watched Bruce’s gaze swing toward him, the tiniest expression of satisfaction on the scientist’s face as Steve referenced their conversation from months ago. “She’d be the first to undergo anything like this, right?” At their nods, he turned his attention to Darcy, trying to gauge her feelings. Luckily, she never seemed to have a problem voicing her opinions.

A mutant and a guinea pig? Perfect. Just perfect. Darcy frowned, not sure she understood enough of it yet. “Okay, so this would help me filter the colors, maybe make it so I could see both worlds at the same time?”

“Essentially. You’d have your normal sight, and over that would be laid the colors. It’d be a meld of the two.” At her blank expression, Jane tried to explain in easier terms. “You know how -”

“Instagram filters,” Peter interrupted, gesturing in Darcy’s direction. “It’d be like putting on an Instagram filter, you’d see our world, and the colors, at the same time.”

Understanding bled into Darcy’s eyes. “Oooh, okay. So that way I wouldn’t be blind when I see the colors.”

“Exactly.”

Darcy looked from scientist to scientist. Amazingly, as much as they’d been arguing before, they all seemed to be pretty genuine in their belief that this could work.

“When you look at the colors now, you see nothing but them and blackness. That means you wouldn’t be able to see if someone was lifting a gun and shooting at you. This way you’d be able to use the additional data but still stay alert to your surroundings.”

When Darcy’s widened eyes looked over at him, Steve gave her an apologetic smile. “It’d make me feel better to know you wouldn’t be blindsided if something happened.”

That Steve was worrying about her well-being made emotion swell in Darcy’s chest as she smiled at him. The smile faltered, though, when she turned back to the scientists. “So I drink the kool-aid, you guys work on my dimmer switch and things are rosy. Perfect. Now what about me being able to move souls, feeling all the souls in the universe, and hearing the evil stone that wants me to destroy everything?”

Everyone gathered shared a look between themselves. Finally, and in the most elegant way possible, Tony answered her question.

“No fucking clue.”

“Ngghh,” Bucky groaned, burying his face further into the pillow. He took a deep breath then lifted his head, squinting against the light shining in the window, attempting to focus on the blurred shape of Steve, who was framed in the sunlight at the end of their bed. “So early.”

Turing at the sound of Bucky’s whine, Steve smiled at the unkempt man still in bed. “I went for
coffee with Nat and Clint.”

Shaking his head, Bucky rolled onto his back, covering his eyes with his arm. “You should get back in bed,” he groused, “we didn’t even get to sleep until… three? Four?”

Steve’s eyes lingered on Bucky’s chest, the sheets draped low across the other man’s hips, exposing the long line of his torso. It was a very attractive sight, and Steve took advantage of the moment to run his eyes over every delicious, naked inch of skin. “Three-thirty,” Steve hummed, glancing at the clock, watching it change to six thirty-six.

They’d spent last night in Darcy’s room, and though they’d had the TV on in the background, none of them had been paying attention to Chef Ramsay and his nightmare kitchens. The conversation had been easy, the three of them taking turns telling the other about their week. Between Darcy’s new role as Tony’s assistant and her work with Peter, Steve’s daily debriefs and staff review, and Bucky’s training schedule, it meant they were seeing each other less than they had before.

It was effortless, falling back into each other, and Steve couldn’t help but notice how comfortable he’d become around Darcy. It’d started slowly, once he’d accepted that he wanted to know her better, but it’d grown organically from there; her smile was familiar and he’d gotten well-acquainted with the sound of the laughter and her sarcastic, acidic wit.

…but it was more than that. Darcy would say something and, even though it’d come out of her mouth, it was so undeniably Bucky that he was nothing short of mystified. He’d fallen in love with the charm and charisma that oozed from Bucky, and seeing the same pouring from Darcy was indescribable. It went both ways, and Steve would never forget the face his lover had pulled after using the word ‘basic’ to describe the work ethic of one of his soldiers.

They’d started the night with dinner and before he knew it, it’d been three in the morning and they’d been talking for hours. Steve couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed that much. Darcy was an amazing storyteller, and recounting what she’d been getting up to in Tony’s lab was remarkably funny. Listening to Bucky needle her, knowing just what to say to make Darcy’s eyes narrow dangerously in this direction, Steve had found himself smiling so much his cheeks ached.

“Steve?” Watching Steve return from wherever his thoughts had just taken him curled Bucky’s lips into a grin. “Did you even sleep?” When Steve shook his head, Bucky sat up and flexed his fingers in the blond’s direction. The coffee mug was warm in his hands and he took a long sip from it before pinning Steve with a look. “Something wrong?”

“No. Just have a lot on my mind,” Steve answered, taking a seat at the foot of the bed, taking another drink of the slowly cooling coffee. He saw the frown Bucky threw in his direction, but he let it hang in the air.

He wasn’t sure how to explain to his best friend that he’d been meeting with Nat and Clint at least once a week, peppering them with questions. The answers they’d given were still percolating in his brain and he was doing his best to make sense of them, putting the puzzle pieces in place so he could see the big picture, maybe see the map a little more clearer.

Shaking his head, Steve held the coffee mug back to Bucky. “What do you make of the nano-cinch Tony and Bruce are proposing?”

The frown on Bucky’s face deepened. “I hate it, Steve. I hate the idea of them messing with her brain, even if they say it could help her.”

Bucky knew his particular history was coloring his opinion of what the scientists had come up with,
but he couldn’t help the way it turned his stomach. It wasn’t enough that they were going to perform a procedure that no one had ever attempted before, they were also going to put a device in her brain. Even with everything he’d seen, what he knew what out there and the ridiculousness of it all, Bucky loathed the idea. He’d kept his mouth shut, however, letting Darcy form her own opinions. It was her body, after all, and Bucky had no right to tell her not to do it.

“I know, Buck,” Steve said, scooting closer to him on the bed. His best friend had done a good job of hiding his dislike last night, but Steve had caught it in the tightness of his lips, and the tension in his jaw. “I really think it’ll help. If it can keep her safe, if they can make sure she doesn’t go blind in a dangerous situation…”

Steve trailed off, thinking of the possibilities. Their lives were full of so much violence and fighting. Now that he sort of understood what happened with Darcy saw the colors, he was scared for her. If she went into the blackness in the middle of a fight, unable to see anything but dark and blobs of color, it would leave her vulnerable; weapons were unseen, jeopardies unknown, and though she might be able to see motive, the possibilities for harm were just too great.

He didn’t like the thought of her in danger.

“I know,” Bucky said with a sigh, watching the thoughts tumble behind Steve’s eyes, “I just don’t like the idea of our girl being messed with.”

Steve’s lips curled at the phrase our girl as it fell from Bucky’s worried mouth. “I know. Now get up, let’s go for a run.”

Bucky groaned as he threw the covers aside. “I can’t wait until Wilson gets back so I won’t have to go with you anymore.”

“Did you just say you can’t wait until Sam gets back?”

“Shut up, punk.”
The Stranger The Better

Chapter Summary

Darcy learns some interesting information while training with Clint and she finally meets Pepper Potts and Nick Fury. Steve doesn’t enjoy the topic of conversation with Natasha.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This is a day earlier than I normally post, but I'm still trying to figure out the best days to post so it gets the most traffic. Not that I care about hit counts or anything... <.< >.>

Here’s a few vignettes that needed to happen and so I threw them all in their own chapter!

Love with every stranger, the stranger the better
I fall in love just a little, oh a little bit, every day with someone new
— Someone New, Hozier

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to touch your butt.”

Darcy groaned from the floor, pushing a sweaty piece of hair out of her eyes as she glared up at her ‘physical combat’ trainer. “Apology not accepted,” she groused, rolling onto her knees as she ignored the stinging pain in her ass.

She was also ignoring the ache in her body from when she’d just been thrown around, as well.

Clint rolled his eyes and moved toward her. He hesitated for a moment, then carefully angled the front of his body away from Darcy before he offered his hand to her. “You’re getting better.”

“Liar,” Darcy sighed, grunting as the blond helped her climb to her feet. “You’re tossing me around like a sack of potatoes.”

She brushed her hands over her leggings, pulled her D.A.R.E. t-shirt down, and leveled a glare in Clint’s direction. Part of Darcy knew he was telling the truth, that she was starting to recognize when he would go to his right or left, able to anticipate what his next movement was, but she still didn’t feel she was making enough improvement.
“I literally have no reason to lie to you. You think I enjoy this?”

“Yes. Obviously. You’re a closet sadist and derive enjoyment from other people’s misery.”

“That’s more my thing.”

Darcy jumped at the voice in her ear, so close and raspy. She spun, hazel eyes wide, hands coming up to block an attack, as if they’d do any good when she didn’t know how to use them. She hadn’t even heard anyone coming in, but there was Natasha, looking at Darcy critically, head cocked to the side. “Jesus!”

Clint smiled, crossing his arms over his chest. “She really likes doing that to people. It’s hilarious.”

“More like terrifying,” Darcy growled, trying to slow her speeding heart. She’d thought they’d go undisturbed, but apparently she’d thought wrong. They were working in the gym that was the farthest away from the regular hustle and bustle of the compound; Darcy didn’t particularly enjoy the idea of soldiers who’d trained their whole lives laughing hysterically as she floundered at even basic self-defense.

“...I have notes.”

Snorting at Natasha, Clint made his way to the edge of the mat. “Oh, really? Here to criticize my training? You realize this is my job now, right?”

“Clint’s retired,” Natasha said as clarification to Darcy, the corner of her mouth curling upward, “mostly.”

Darcy rose an eyebrow as she watched the blond take a drink from his water bottle. “How is someone mostly retired?”

“I stay here and help half the time, the other half at home on the farm.”

Darcy was sure the amount of times she’d just blinked was some kind of world record. “Wait. Hold on. You’re a farmer? Seriously?” Natasha nodded as Clint shook his head. Looking between the two, Darcy’s eyes narrowed, her body tensing. “Is this… is this part of the training? You confuse me and then attack?”

A thoughtful look crossed Natasha’s face at Darcy’s question, and she turned to look at Clint with an considering expression. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“I could use it in the next class I teach.”

“Provide a distraction, see how many people ignore their surroundings, take them to the mat.”

Darcy watched the rapid fire conversation between Natasha and Clint with suspicion. They were talking in shorthand, just like she could do with Jane, the type of thing that took years of friendship to cultivate. When Natasha’s shoulder lifted in a graceful shrug and she turned back to Darcy, the redhead pinned her with emerald green eyes.

“You should see him on a tractor.”

The laugh that escaped Darcy’s chest was loud in the room, echoing off the mats and mirrors. When neither of them seemed to join in, she looked back and forth between the pair. “I call bullshit.”

“You call wrong,” Clint said, tossing his water bottle at Darcy. She wasn’t ready for it and fumbled it
between her hands, managing to catch it before it hit the ground. He snorted with laughter. “Anybody ever tell you you’re grace personified, Lewis?”

“You know what, Barton?” He took her comment in stride, shrugging his shoulders at Darcy, a smirk curling his lips. The smirk faded into a grimace as he took a seat. Good. Be sore, arrow-man. Be sore.

“He’s a farm boy, born and raised.” Natasha commented, taking a seat next to Clint on one of the benches that surrounded the mats. Darcy padded toward them as she took a large drink from his bottle, still unsure if they were fucking with her or not.

Clint nodded his head. “Iowa, if you can believe it.”

Darcy’s nose crinkled. “The potato one?”

“No. That’s Idaho.”

“So it’s the one LeBron’s from?”

“No. That’s Ohio.”

Her memory of the continental United States had just been exhausted, so Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “I got nothing.”

“Whatever,” Clint said with a wave of his hand. “We farm, and I helped my dad when I was little. After he and Ma died in a car crash, me and my brother lived in a home before we ran away to the circus. I was just out of high school when S.H.I.E.L.D. recruited me. But I always wanted to have a farm of my own, so when one opened up nearby, I bit the bullet and bought it. My wife and kids live there. There are surprisingly good schools in the area. Very high test scores and ample after-school activities to help pad college applications.”

Darcy had just been hit with so much information that she found herself at a loss, not sure what to ask first. “I… didn’t know you were in the system.”

Clint shrugged. “Briefly.”

Dropping to the floor, Darcy crossed her legs under herself, looking up at Clint like she knew him a little bit better. Kids who’d been in the foster care system tended to be a bit harder by necessity. Bowie only knew where she’d be if she hadn’t gotten used to goodbyes and the art of using sarcasm as a defense mechanism. A healthy assumption of disappointment was always helpful, too.

“I’m gonna table the comments about you being in a freaking circus, but I’ll want to revisit it at a later date. Preferably with alcohol and pictures.”

She watched Clint smile as she held out his water bottle, his fingers wrapping around it before sitting back beside Natasha. “No pictures, sorry.”

When he leaned down to grab a towel, Natasha turned to Darcy and give an almost imperceptible nod of her head. Oh, Darcy thought, there are totally pictures. “Fine. But the rest? Kids and wife and school?”

“It’s not well known, so I’d appreciate you keeping quiet. With everything… I try to keep them as separate as I can.”

Darcy nodded, “of course. I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”
“Thanks. Figured you’d find out soon enough.”

Her eyebrows rose at his comment. “How’s that?”

“You, and Barnes, and Cap.” His words did nothing as an explanation, and Darcy knew a stupefied expression had found its home on her face. “The three of you working as a unit. We have a little experience with that whole situation. Steve’s asked -”

Clint jumped when Natasha’s elbow found purchase between two of his ribs. “Ow.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed slightly as she looked between them, watching an entire conversation in their silence and glares. “What did Steve ask about?”

Another round of looks. Finally, Natasha seemed to relent and turned toward Darcy with an unreadable look on her face. “When Clint is here, he stays with me. When we’re at the farm, we’re with Laura.”

“Oh.” Darcy’s face blossomed with understanding her her eyes widened. ”Oh!” Darcy’s voice louder came out louder than she’d meant it to be, and she looked at the two of them apologetically. “I didn’t realize.”

“Again, not something we really put out there.”

Darcy nodded, sure her cheeks were tinting pink, “and that’s also something that I won’t tell anyone.”

“We appreciate that,” Clint said, flipping the towel so it rested over his shoulder. “Cap’s just been asking questions on how we handle things.”

So Captain America has been talking to Hawkeye and Black Widow about how their trio relationship with Hawkeye’s secret wife works, because he’s in a trio relationship with a mutant and a ex-brainwashed assassin.

*When did your life get this fucked up, Lewis? Oh right. When you grabbed the pretty glowing stone of death in a monumentally stupid moment of naive bravery.*


“You know, I hear you saying that, but somehow I’m not convinced.”

Darcy gestured at Clint, her hand spinning through the air as if she could direct the words so they’d come out correctly. “I know people know about us, the three of us, Steve, Bucky and me, I mean, because we haven’t been exactly clandestine about it, but I’ve been so busy just trying to get Steve to at least like me that I haven’t really worried about anything past that. So I feel bad because he’s being smart about it and gaining real knowledge on how to deal with everything, and the only thing I’ve been doing is trying to get in his pants.”

They were silent, Natasha’s face a careful mask, Clint looking at her with amusement on his lips, and Darcy could feel the heat rising to her cheeks at her verbal vomit. When Clint held out his water bottle to her again, she took it gratefully and downed the rest.

“You good?”

Darcy nodded in Clint’s direction, sarcasm wetting her tongue. “Mmmhmmm, peachy.” She looked between the two ex-spies, the comfort in the way their bodies touched from knee to shoulder. It
wasn’t obvious, but she could see it, and when she blinked again, she saw it in vivid technicolor.

The deep purple of Clint’s soul was like warmth boiled down to a color, like plums and blackberries mixed together. Natasha’s was a deep pumpkin, with the same hints of black on her edges that Bucky had. It made sense, knowing their history. She reminded Darcy of Halloween, like the last warm day of autumn before the whisper of winter blew across your skin. And between them both, just like Steve and Bucky shared cobalt, Natasha and Clint both bled onto each other in buttercream, in a soft yellow that was a contrast to the violet of Clint but a compliment to Natasha. Like silky sunshine.

“You’re glowing.”

At Natasha’s words, Darcy blinked back into the gym, looking down at her hands in alarm, discouraged that all her hard earned control had slipped so easily. Her skin was its same pale pink, however, and she looked up in confusion. “Where?”

“Not where. When. When you talk about Steve or Bucky, it fills your eyes.” Much like their last meeting in the laundry room, something about the redhead’s tone made what she said seem like a warning. Not that she’d do anything to Darcy, but that the love she felt for her boys could be dangerous.

“What Nat is trying to say is that Cap is asking the questions, gathering intel. It’s what he’s good at. And once he has that intel, he’ll be able to plan his next step.”

Darcy was at a loss, surprise lighting her features as she considered everything that had transpired in the last hour, from getting her ass given to her handedly by Clint, to this loveline session with Black Widow and Hawkeye. She shook her head, turning the water bottle in her hands, fidgeting. “This has got to be the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had, and I’ve had to explain toilet paper to Thor.”

Darcy’s eyes were on the tablet in her hand as she leaned back against Tony’s office door, pushing it open with her ass. “Hey, Chrome Dome, the kid says we need more micro-accelerators for the upgrade but from my inventory we have...

Her words faded as she realized Tony wasn’t there. However, there was a very pretty strawberry-blonde in a crisp yellow blouse sitting behind Tony’s desk, her warm eyes glancing up at Darcy as she barged in unannounced. Her voice was soft but commanding as she smiled. “He’ll be right back. He just went to check on something.”

Pepper Potts. This was Pepper Potts. The Pepper Potts. She was meeting the head of Stark Industries while wearing a ratty Sex Pistols tee, spotted with grease from when she’d been cleaning Dum-E. Great first impression, Lewis. Maybe next you could wear one of those fake tuxedo t-shirts to meet the president.

“Ah. Well, I can come back.” She jutted a thumb over her shoulder and toward the door.

Pepper came to her feet, waving her hand softly in Darcy’s direction. “No, it’s fine, really. I’ve been bugging Tony about getting to meet his new intern but he keeps brushing me off.”
“I’m not his intern,” Darcy said, popping the word ‘intern’ like it was a dirty word. Fuck, she was going to kick his shiny metal ass if he told anyone else that she was an intern. Darcy realized the sting her words had carried, definitely not directed at the pretty woman in front of her. And did her best to cover it with an explanation. “Not that you’d know that, of course. I’m his executive assistant. Among other things.”

Pepper rounded the desk, heels clicking smartly on the floor. Darcy blinked. Those we the kind of heels men died for. They probably cost as much as a house. Or a small island. The kind of heels Darcy would have broken her neck wearing, but fuck would they make her a pretty, pretty corpse.

“I’m Pepper Potts, and you must be Darcy Lewis.”

“Oh my better days.” Darcy shifted the tablet in her arm and shook Pepper’s outstretched hand, “and you’re the glutton for punishment that puts up with Stark.”

“Oh my better days,” Pepper repeated, a smile lighting her eyes. She seemed to give Darcy a quick once-over before her gaze softened. “I can’t pretend to know everything that happened, but if what Tony tells me is even remotely true, then I suppose I have you to thank for him coming home after that battle.”

Yet another thing Darcy wanted people to stop saying about her. “People like to exaggerate.”

Pepper pursed her lips as she looked down at the dark-haired younger woman. “Tony said you grabbed one of those stones, and because you’re a mutant, you killed the purple alien that wanted to destroy the galaxy...”

Darcy’s breath left her chest in a huff of laughter. “Okay, maybe he didn’t exaggerate.”

Smiling, Pepper’s eyes filled with compassion. “He also says you’ve been dealing with the aftermath and it’s been a bit touch and go. If there’s anything that Stark Industries can do...”

Rushing to cut off whatever Pepper was about to offer her, Darcy shook her head and gave the taller woman a dismissive wave of her hand. “Trust me, outfitting my wardrobe and buying me a comforter that actually comforts was more than enough for me.”

Confusion colored Pepper’s face at Darcy’s words. “... buying you a what?”

Darcy spun when she heard the door open behind her, pinning Tony with a glare as he strode into the office. “Why are you telling people that I’m your intern?”

“This too?” Tony grinned at Darcy before leaning in to press his lips to Pepper’s cheek. “Sorry. I got it all cleared up so we’re good to go.”

Darcy frowned. “Good to go where? I didn’t know you were leaving. Sounds like something you should have mentioned to your executive assistant.”

Tony sighed, turning his attention back to Darcy. “Contrary to popular belief and the fact that I pay for everything, I don’t actually live here. And it’s the weekend, so I’m taking my weekend. You’re my personal assistant, Lewis. Assist me by getting out of my face.”
“It’s executive assistant, asshole, now sign this so Peter gets what he needs.” Darcy thrust the tablet toward him. Tony glanced at it for a second before his brown eyes flicked up to her again.

“I don’t like people handing me things.”

Darcy blinked once, twice, then let the tablet drop from her hands. It hit the carpet and bounced slightly, coming to rest inches from Tony’s feet. She watched Pepper’s eyes widen before Darcy nodded in Tony’s direction. “Well, hopefully you like picking things up off the ground.”

At his look of surprise, Darcy turned toward Pepper with a genuine smile on her face. “It was lovely to meet you, Ms. Potts. I hope you enjoy your weekend, in spite of the company sharing your time.” Darcy rose a daring eyebrow at Tony before she made her way out of the office.

As the door to the office swung closed, Tony sighed and bent over, grabbing the tablet from the floor. He inspected it for damage, his lips turning down.

Pepper turned to him with a smile on her face. “I like her.”

“Don’t.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong.”

“Good.”

“You’re just… not entirely right.”

Sighing, Steve leaned forward onto the conference table with his elbows, brain still trying to solve this problem. He shook his head, flipping through the file in front of him. “I don’t like it, Nat. I don’t like it at all.”

“You don’t need to like it, Steve, but you have to admit that the possibilities are there, and if we put her on the roster…”

Unable to sit still any longer, Steve climbed to his feet. “Despite the handful of sessions with Clint, she has no formal training. Putting her out there would be dangerous.”

Natasha sighed, keeping her voice even. “We did the same with Wanda and Pietro. They had no training. We gave them training in the field, and after.” Using Pietro as an example wasn’t the best reference, but it was true, regardless of how it’d ended.

Steve shook his head and turned toward Natasha with his arms crossed over his chest. “That was different. They had real powers.”

“So does Darcy,” Natasha argued, able to see the heavy doubt and stubbornness in Steve’s eyes. “Being able to see where someone is in real time? Able to move targets like Wanda? We’ve just scratched the surface of what she could really do.”

“Darcy is not Wanda, or you, or Clint. She’s… softer. She doesn’t think like us. It’s not a battle every day for her, she’s not looking to plan out her next mission. Does everyone we come into contact with have to become a fighter? Some people weren’t made to be soldiers.”

Steve sighed, shaking his head as he looked down at his feet. He remembered having this same
argument with Tony years ago, but somehow he’d ended up on the billionaire’s side of the road. At the time it’d been war, the threat imminent, and they’d needed all the firepower they could get. It was different now. Things were better. There were no battles on the horizon.

Sighing, Natasha sat back in her chair, green eyes softening when she saw Steve lean heavily on the table. She stood, moving slowly until she was standing beside him, close enough to rest a hand on his arm. “It’s harder because you care about her.”

Steve frowned as he looked over at her. “I care about all of my team. I don’t want to see any of you get hurt.”

“I know that. I’ve served under a lot of men, and none of them cared half as much as you do.” She paused, watching as Steve’s eyes flicked over to look at her, judging her words for truth. It was there, in her eyes, and Steve nodded before looking away again. “I’m not saying tomorrow, or next week, or even next month. I’m saying maybe. Maybe she’d want to help.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Steve breathed, shaking his head, casting his blue gaze toward the artificial window and the forest it framed. He’d seen Darcy’s bravery first hand, the day she’d grabbed that stone, the day his entire life had tilted into something different. “If anything happened to her…” He trailed off, eyes flicking back to Natasha. “I don’t know what Bucky would do. The bond they share? It might break him.”

Natasha’s hand dropped from his arm, turning so she sat back against the table, arms crossing. “No more than it would break him to lose you. It’s not ‘you and them,’ Steve. It’s her, and you, and Bucky. The two of them might share a bond, but that doesn’t put them on one side of a line and you on the other. It’s not a competition. It’s an alliance. Don’t make it into something it’s not just because you don’t understand it yet.”

It went silent in the room for a second before Steve’s mouth lifted in a rueful smile. “I thought we’d put a stop to you meddling in my lovelife.”

“And I thought you’d decided to let yourself have something good without worrying about how it was all going to fade away.”

“I guess neither of us are good at following orders.”

“Guess not.”

He chuckled softly before he fell silent again, worry sobering his gaze. It took him a moment, but Steve looked over at Natasha, his eyes doubtful and apprehensive. “She’s not like us, Nat.”

She gave him a light shrug, so graceful and nuanced, a small smile joining the gesture. “Maybe that’s what you and Bucky need.”

“You wanted to see me?”

Darcy’s eyes widened when the person who spun around in Maria Hill’s office chair was not Maria Hill. Very much not her. Like, the farthest from Maria Hill that Darcy could imagine. This man had dark skin and a black eye patch that made her immediately think of a BDSM pirate, considering all the leather he was wearing.
“It seemed like it was high time that I met the woman who defeated the most dangerous creature in the galaxy.”

Darcy frowned at the man. “I really wish people would stop saying shit like that. I didn’t defeat the dick. The stone did. And the more I learn about this fucking stone, the less it seems like I had anything to do with it at all.”

“That’s not what my intel said.”

Her eyes narrowed as she looked around the room. She didn’t know who this was, but he was in the director’s office, and the director wasn’t here. Darcy fingers flexed at her sides, Clint’s voice echoing at the back of her mind to be aware of her surroundings. “I was told the director needed to see me, and you are definitely not Ms. Hill.”

*Especially since I don’t want to murder you with my mind. Yet.*

“Nothing gets past you, does it? I guess you could say that the director and I go way back. She knows I’m in here, meeting with you. No use lying to you, right? You’d be able to tell.”

Sighing, Darcy looked up toward the ceiling. Bowie save her from people who liked to talk in cryptic double-speak. “If you could just tell me who the fuck you are, that’d be great.”

The man circled the desk, coming closer to her. “Why don’t you just draw on the Winter Soldier’s memories? He knows who I am.”

Darcy’s face wiped of any emotion as she blinked at him, a ball of anger beginning to form in her chest at the look on the man’s face. “He’s not the Winter Soldier anymore. You should be careful about throwing that name around. Especially with me.”

The man smiled and held up his hands. “Hey, I’m not trying to start anything. Just getting a read on you. I thought there’d been a full transfer of memories between you two.”

“Your ‘intel,’” she made quotes marks in the air with her fingers, “was right, but I’m testing this new thing where I try not to draw on his memories unless absolutely necessary.”

“That’s smart. He’s done a lot of things that would make even the strongest men’s knees give out.”

The smile that climbed onto Darcy’s lips was not friendly. “Well it’s a good thing I’m not a man, then, isn’t it?”

The man laughed, surprised and deep, before he nodded his head in her direction. “Point made. My name is Nick Fury.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “Shit, really?”

She didn’t need to draw on Bucky’s memories to recognize that name. She’d spent several nights perusing the S.H.I.E.L.D. files (or, at least, the ones she had clearance to read) and this was the man who’d started it all. Well, the man who’d brought the Avengers together before the battle of New York. There’d been no pictures of him in the files though, most likely scrubbed for safety reasons.

“Really.”

“What the fuck are you doing here? Didn’t you retire, head into the undying lands, punch your last time card or whatever it is you guys do when you stop showing up to work?”
“I might not be the director, but I’ve still got interest in knowing what’s going on around here.”

“Do they know that?”

He rose his eyebrow at her. “Which ‘they’ are you referring to? The Avengers? Hill? The government?”

Darcy frowned. “D. All of the above.”

“Hill knows I’m here. I check in periodically with the team, when it’s needed. As far as the government? Let’s say we’re not on really good speaking terms right now.”

“Yeah. It’s been a bit since everything crashed and burned at the Triskelion. Literally crashed and burned. And for the record, that I remember very clearly.”

Any of the memories that involved Steve, whether Bucky’d been himself or the Winter Soldier at the time, were etched in Darcy’s mind with crystal clarity. Those were the ones that she didn’t need to call forth, they were always there, the emotions so pure and strong that it took nothing to remember them.

That particular day, the uncertainty in Bucky, as the Soldier fought to understand what he was feeling, why his hand paused, why he didn’t complete his mission…

“Not exactly something I’ll forget either.” She watched Fury’s eye narrow and fill with a hardness. Not at her, but at whatever he was remembering. I suppose finding out you’d been infiltrated by the enemy all the way up to the top could make someone a little cranky.

When he stayed quiet for a while, Darcy shifted her weight from one leg to the other, feeling uncomfortable. “Cool, nice to meet you, or whatever, did you need something from me, or…”

“No. We’re good.”

“Are you sure? Because, if you need something…”

“We’re good, Lewis. Thanks for coming in.”

Darcy was already gone, the door closing shut behind her before she stuck her head back in. “It just seems… in the narrative of this story, that this meeting was kind of pointless. You’re not my boss, not my boss’ boss, not my boss’ boss’ boss’, I mean I could go on…”

“You know, Hill warned me that you were like him, but I had to see it for myself.”

“Like who?”

“Stark.”

“Ew.” Darcy’s nose crinkled with distaste for a second before she smirked to herself. “Oh, he’s going to hate hearing that. Thank you,” she said to Fury, lifting a hand giving him a mock salute before she disappeared.
Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve do their best to comfort and encourage a very anxious Darcy, Tony and Bruce do their best to comfort and encourage a very anxious Darcy, and Darcy does her best not to kill anyone.

Chapter Notes

This may be the biggest chapter to date. It has some pretty heavy and hefty stuff, so that makes sense. I hope my detail of what transpired paints a picture in you mind, as I tried really hard to make it as descriptive as possible.

As always, thank you so much for reading, and enjoying, and all the kudos, and the comments. You're all amazing and I'm glad we're on this journey together! <3

I know you’re afraid, but being afraid is alright, because didn’t anyone every tell you? Fear is a superpower, fear can make you faster, and cleverer, and stronger.

If you’re very wise, and very strong, fear doesn’t have to make you cruel or cowardly, fear can make you kind.

So listen. If you listen to nothing else, listen to this. You’re always going to be afraid, even if you learn to hide it.

Fear is like a companion. A constant companion, always there. But that’s okay. Because fear can bring us together.

Fear can bring you home.
Fear makes companions of us all.
— Listen, Doctor Who

“We’ve had this fight before.”

“Yeah, but you still refuse to admit you’re wrong, so we’re going to have it again.”

“Darce, help me out here.”

Darcy shook her head at Steve from where she was laid back on their bed, a book in hand as they watched a completely boring game of baseball on the TV. “Oh, no. I’m not going near that with a
“It’s because she knows I’m right,” Bucky said with a smirk, “and she doesn’t want to see you make sad puppy eyes because they make her knees go weak.”

Steve’s lips curled into a smile, reaching behind them to squeeze Darcy’s foot with his hand. She jerked her foot away from his touch with a strangled sound, glaring at him over the top of her book. The knowledge that she was incredibly ticklish along her arches had been a nugget of knowledge he’d discovered a few movie nights ago. “That true?”

“Yes. Puppy eyes. Much sad. How blue.”

When both men just looked at her, Darcy sighed and laid the book down on her lap. They’d had this fight the week prior. It seemed to her like it was a fight neither of them really cared about, that they just liked to needle at each other, like some kind of one-up foreplay. It was hot, so she’d indulge, but in the meantime she’d actually looked up the facts and had them at her disposal.

“The Brooklyn Dodgers faced the Yankees in 1941. The Yankees won,” she rolled her eyes as both boys groaned in anger, “the fourth game because of Hugh Casey’s strike out of Mickey Owens.”

“See?” Steve said with a look of vindication lighting his features as he turned toward Bucky. “Who’s wrong now, jerk?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky said, shaking his head at the blond’s smirk. He glanced over his shoulder at Darcy. “How’d you know the answer, doll?”

“There’s this little thing called the internet. You should check it out. It’s got all this stuff… but, you know, now that I think about it, maybe you’re both too old to understand how to use it.” Darcy grabbed the book from her lap and used it to hide her face - and the curl of her lips - from both of them.

Bucky’s gaze shifted from the now hidden Darcy to Steve, one dark eyebrow raising. “She called us old.”

“We are old, pal.”

“Too old, though? Are we too old, Steve?”

“I’ve still got a little fight in me,” Steve answered with a grin.

They both jumped toward Darcy at same time, hearing her squeal of laughter as they bounced onto the bed on either side of her. The book in her lap went flying as she began snorting with laughter, their fingers digging into her sides. Darcy slapped at their hands uselessly, surrounded by them with no hope of escape. She tried, though, attempting to roll herself over Steve and off the bed. Bucky’s arm around her middle pulled her back and she laughed breathlessly as they worked together to keep her near.

Darcy was all pink cheeks and dark curls, her laughter echoing off the walls, and Bucky couldn’t help the feeling of happiness that settled over him. Her laughter was joined by Steve’s, pitched lower and less manic, but it was there. It’d become so rare that Bucky had almost forgotten what it sounded like, but over the last few months with Darcy - feeling so good, and right and perfect - he’d heard Steve’s laugh with regularity.

He wasn’t sure what it was about Darcy that made everything so light, but Steve couldn’t express how good it felt. She made him have joy, even if it sometimes felt like he’d forgotten how. Having a
tickle fight? It was childish, and juvenile, and if you’d told him a few months ago that he’d be having one with Bucky and a woman who looked at him like he’d hung the moon? He’d have called you crazy. But here he was, looking into the laughing faces of his best friend and the woman who’d become a regular part of his day.

She was sarcastic, and strong, and somehow he was able to ignore the weight on his shoulders and just… be. He’d spent so long fighting, struggling, always ready for the next battle, always preparing for the next fight. He’d thought that was his life, that it’d always stay the same.

…but maybe he’d been wrong.

Thanos was dead. The people he cared about were safe. The world wasn’t about to end. Maybe Natasha was right. Maybe he needed to let himself enjoy something good.

Darcy’s laughter subsided as the three of them became a heavily breathing pile on Steve and Buckys bed, everyone’s hair just a bit askew, cheeks pink with exertion. Sighing happily, Darcy laid out on her side, pulling Bucky’s arm until she could press her back to him and use his bicep as a pillow. She blinked as Steve settled himself, until she could look into his pretty blue eyes from a few inches away. “Did you go to a lot of games?”

“We didn’t go in a lot, tickets were kinda out of our price range,” Bucky said, his chest rumbling against Darcy’s back. He fit his chin against her shoulder, smiling softly at Steve. “But we did get to one that year. Dodgers and the Phillies.”

“Did we win?”

Something about the way she asked if ‘we’d’ won had a smile curling Steve’s lips. If she wanted to, she could pull on Bucky’s memory to know the answer, but she didn’t. Darcy wanted him to tell her. It was endearing, and the expression on his face was sincere. “We did. Five runs in the sixth.”

“Go Brooklyn!”

When Steve laughed, Darcy’s grin grew in size. So much had been happening lately that things were starting to blend together. Between her work with Peter and Tony, the work the Science Squad was doing on her dimmer switch, and the slow work of combat training with Clint, Darcy was feeling stretched thin. She was ecstatic for her down time, as it meant being with the two men sharing the bed with her, and even though they’d been careful not to let things go too far, just being able to touch them calmed the chaotic feeling in her chest.

Steve had seen the ramp up of anxiety on her face over the past week, and seriousness bled into his eyes as he blinked at her. “Are you worried about tomorrow?”

When Bucky’s arms tightened around her, Darcy patted his arm and looked at a spot on Steve’s chest, not wanting him to see the very real fear in her eyes. “It’ll be easy peasy lemon squeezy.” When neither of them laughed at her words, she risked a glance at Steve, seeing the empathy in his beautiful eyes. “I’m terrified,” she whispered, wishing they could have stayed weightless for just a little while longer.

“We’ll be there with you, Darcy,” Bucky said, pressing his lips to her hair.

“What if I didn’t want you there?” She could see the frown as it flowed onto Steve’s face, lips pulling downward, his eyebrows knitting together. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Tony’s ready this time.” His words sounded more confident than he really was, but Steve didn’t like the doubt that had started to bleed into her eyes. He really did believe Tony would do anything to
keep her safe. She may have formed a bond with Bucky, but she’d done the same with the abrasive billionaire genius, *without* the aid of any stone. He didn’t *entirely* understand it, but he could see the care Tony had for her. The same went for Bruce.

… and now that Steve really *thought* about it, *most* of the people Darcy came in contact with seemed to have forged strong friendships with her. Clint, Peter. Even Natasha, in some ways. Absently, Steve wondered if she’d had the same kind of relationships *before* she’d absorbed the infinity stone. Had the stone given her some sort of power? Something inside Darcy that drew people to her, made them *want* to protect her? Was it some kind of defense mechanism of the cosmic gem?

Bucky observed a train of thought pass behind Steve’s eyes, watching as the blond grew more and more serious. He wasn’t sure what had just happened, but he noticed a definite shift in demeanor in the man across from him. Deciding to leave it, Bucky chose to focus on Darcy, her fear, and what he could do to ease it. “If you don’t want us there, if that’s what you *really* want…”

“No,” Darcy said with a sigh, her eyes falling closed, her throat tightening, “I *do* want you there, I do. If I hurt either of you, though…”

Pushing his thoughts about the stone aside, Steve reached out and grabbed Darcy’s hand, threading his fingers with hers. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed but we’re kind of harder to kill than most people.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “Hey, don’t you put that bad juju in the air, Steven Grant Rogers!” When he smiled softly at her stern look, Darcy felt herself smiling in return. “… I just don’t want to lose control. I’m trying this new thing where I reign myself in. I’m not sure if it’ll stick.”

Bucky’s arms squeezed Darcy, pulling her back against him tighter, the lines of their bodies like one. “Sometimes losing control can be a good thing.”

Darcy watched Steve’s eyebrows come together at Bucky’s words. There was something behind his eyes, something she couldn’t place, but she didn’t want to see it taint the gorgeous cerulean any longer. Her hand reached up, thumb pressing lightly, attempting to smooth the frown crinkle between his eyebrows with the pad of her finger. “Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid if something goes wrong.”

“Pretty sure we’re already on Team Stupid’s active roster,” Steve said softly as Darcy’s hand fell away from his face. Looking at both Bucky and Darcy, so close, pressed together, just inches away…

Whatever doubts he’d been thinking about previously seemed to melt away as he peered into their eyes. Hazel and Slate. Warm, and inviting, and so pretty together. All he’d need to do to close the distance between them was lean forward, just a breath away. So close. So simple. Easy peasy, just like Darcy’d said.

“Ma’am, Boss wanted me to remind you about your pre-testing appointment in five minutes.”

*Oh, for the love of Bowie!*

The voice of the A.I. had burst whatever bubble they’d been living in, reality crashing down around them. Steve gave Darcy a small smile before he sat up, then slipped off the bed and to his feet. Darcy deflated against Bucky, feeling the same frustration tense his body, too. Following Steve’s lead, she climbed to her feet with a sigh and began to pull her shoes on.

Bucky stayed on the bed, his head falling back against the pillow. “You think you’ll make it back to
Loving the way that sentence sounded - *back to us* - Darcy gave Bucky a sad shrug. “Not sure how long the tests are going to take. Depends on what they want to run, and knowing Tony? Probably all of them. All of the tests.”

“But you’ll come get us tomorrow? Before?”

The genuine worry of Steve’s question was going to tear her apart, and as she blinked at him, Darcy seriously debated asking them to stay away. As the blond held her gaze, steady and comforting, she couldn’t bring her to do so, even as a large part of her tightened with fear. “Yeah, I’ll grab you on the way.”

Steve closed the distance between them, hesitating for a second before he pulled Darcy in for a hug. She answered immediately, arms circling his waist and squeezing, tight enough that he felt her shoulders lift into a sigh. “We’ll be there for you, Darce. Promise.”

When Bucky’s body pressed against her too, she was left sandwiched between both men, taking comfort in the feel of their bodies against hers, warm and reassuring. Before she could stop herself (or before Steve could stop her), Darcy rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his. It was chaste, and over in a second, but it still left her heart racing and the blood rushing through her body in double time.

Steve’d been caught off guard, unable to respond in any way other than to blink in surprise, and he could only watch as she turned and pressed a kiss to Bucky’s lips as well, longer but not by much. She made a beeline for the door, throwing them both a small, tight smile before she pulled the door shut behind her.

“I’m going to die of exsanguination.”

Tony rolled his eyes as he watched Bruce draw Darcy’s blood. "Oooh, big word. Was it on your ‘word of the day’ calendar?" He ignored the hand gesture Darcy made in his direction. “And that's a bit over dramatic, isn't it? It's just blood.”


"Good thing you're not a real human, mutant."

Darcy’s eyes narrowed at the tech genius. "Then doesn't that make you a cyborg?"

Tony reached up and tapped his chest. "Not anymore, sweetheart."

"A reformed cyborg. You hear that, Doc? A *reformed* cyborg."

Bruce hummed, focus on the needle in her arm and the task he was completing. Darcy sighed and laid back on the table, her right arm squeezing and un-squeezing the stress ball Bruce had given her. As some kind of joke, Tony had tacked up a poster of the universe above the table she was intimately familiar with, including a little post-it note that said ‘you are here’ with an arrow pointing toward the middle of the jumble of stars.
"Are you, uh, worried about tomorrow? Lift your arm and put pressure here."

Darcy glanced over at Bruce as he pulled the needle from her skin. She held the bandage and lifted her arm to stop any residual bleeding, giving him a soft shrug. "Yes. I'm terrified, but that's pretty much par for the course around here, isn't it?"

Somewhere along the lines she'd gotten comfortable enough with these two men that she could admit her insecurities, her fears and hopes. It'd snuck up on her, but she found herself really caring about these people, despite only knowing them for such a small amount of time. She'd always had problems forming lasting friendships with others, a side effect of the turmoil of her upbringing, but these people in this place? It was starting to feel like home.

Giving her a reassuring smile, Bruce crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the side of the table she was laid out on. "If everything goes as expected -"

"And it will," Tony interrupted.

"- then we'll just work on what abilities we know. No, um, pushing it. Just simple stuff,"

"No offense, Doc, but nothing to do with this fucking stone is simple."

Tony shrugged his shoulders and scratched at his chin. "Bruce is right. We're just working with what we know. Your eyes, and now, the newest kid on the block: soul shoving."

Darcy’s nose crinkled. “That’s a horrible name.”

“Soul pushing?” Bruce offered, chuckling when Tony made a sound of dislike from behind him.

“Oh! I thought of something for your eyes,” Tony said, snapping his fingers. Both Darcy and Bruce watched as he rolled across the floor in his chair toward a desk on the opposite side of the medical lab.

“You got the dimmer switch done?” Darcy sat up straighter, a hopeful smile on her face. It faded when Bruce gave her an apologetic shake of his head.

“Not yet. We’re close, though.”

“Harumph,” Darcy said, sighing heavily but giving Bruce an indulgent smile as Tony flew back toward them, stopping short and handing her a sheet of paper. She blinked at it, hazel eyes narrowing as they flicked up to him. “What the fuck is this?”

“I named your power.”

When Bruce reached out to grab the paper, Darcy gave it up happily. “You don’t get to just name my powers, you ass.”

“What, you just wanted to keep calling them your ‘kaleidoscope eyes’?”

“Well, I didn’t before, but now that you think you get to name them? Yeah, I kinda do.”

“It’s not a horrible name for that, uh, particular power.”

Darcy was glad that Bruce at least tried to look sorry that he’d backed Tony’s play. She turned back to Tony with a heavy glare. “Synthwave Inference? Like some kind of early 80s pop vocal duo?”

“Hey, it’s less of a mouthful than ‘retinal synesthesia’,” Tony said with a gesture in her direction.
“‘Oh no, my synthwave is acting up!’ See? So much better.”

“‘Oh, my Hall and Oates always aches when it’s about to storm!’ Same thing, jackass.”

“Fine, you come up with something then. Let’s hear it. So ahead and throw out those million dollar ideas.”

“Maybe I will!”

“Then do it!”

“Okay!”

As Tony crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair and looking at her expectantly, Darcy’s mind ran in circles, trying to come up with something better, something cooler, something that really popped.

After several seconds of silence, Darcy opening her mouth to say something only for the words to die on her lips before they’d even been uttered, she gave him an annoyed glare. “I’ll think of something better, I just need a few minutes to think.”

“Mmmhmmmm,” Tony said, turning his back to her and Bruce as he pulled up the scans they’d taken earlier.

“You know what he’s doing, right?”

Darcy glanced over at Bruce’s soft words, then back to Tony. “Looking at my most recent MRI?”

“Not that. I mean, uh, the whole naming thing.”

“What is: Drive me up a fucking wall for $800, Alex?”

Bruce chuckled as he labeled vials with her information. “He’s trying to keep your mind off everything else. If you’re annoyed at him, maybe you won’t have time to be scared.”

Watching Tony drink another espresso before talking in rapid-fire sentences to Friday, Darcy sighed. She did know what the tech genius was doing, and she was grateful, but Bruce was wrong; she had the ability to be utterly annoyed with Tony Stark while still quaking with fear at the prospect of everything that could go wrong tomorrow.

“You really think it’s going to be easy tomorrow? Just… big badda boom?”

“I have no idea that meant, but no, I don’t think it’ll be easy.”

Darcy turned to him with a knowing look on her face, a small smile at the corner of her mouth. “Not easy but I have to do it anyway?”

“You catch on pretty quick, kiddo.”

Darcy’s head cocked to the side, her hazel eyes narrowing dangerously at the scientist. “Really, Doc? Really?”

Bruce shook his head, looking down at his feet, an unpleasant look on his face. “You know, it felt wrong as I said it, as I heard the words leave my mouth.”

“It was so wrong.”
“But Tony’s always got names for you, I, uh, thought I’d try it out, give it a shot.”

“No. Please be the sane one here, please. It can’t be us, it’s gotta be you.” The small smile Bruce sent in Darcy’s direction made her laugh, smile sobering a bit when he reached out to squeeze her shoulder.

PageBreak

“You’re going to be fine.”

When Darcy’s eyes flicked up, the reassuring smirk on Bucky’s face did little to calm the butterflies that were slam dancing in her stomach. Fluttering? No. The bastards were at a rock concert and were making a pit, complete with a circle of death and elbows being thrown in faces. Mayhem. The butterflies in her stomach were wracking her in absolute chaos.

“We’re going to be right here,” Steve said, squeezing her hand. Her fingers were freezing, but her palm was clammy with sweat. He could feel the slight tremors in her body, see the fear in her eyes, and he wished he knew what to say to make her feel better. He looked over at Bucky, feeling utterly useless.

Bucky pulled on her hand, until Darcy stood directly in front of him. He ran his hands up and down her arms, shaking her a little from side to side. “We’ve been through worse than this, doll.”

“I know.”

“This is nothing compared to everything else.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you even listening to what I’m saying?”

“Absolutely not,” Darcy said with a shake of her head, “never do.”

“Then you’re smarter than me by miles,” Steve said, a thrill of success ringing through him when she glanced in his direction and smiled, even if it didn’t completely fill her eyes.

“Darcy, look at me.” When Darcy’s eyes swung back to him, Bucky dipped his chin, leaning forward so she could see nothing but the grey of his eyes. “I love you.”

“I know.”

“You got this.”

“Okay.”

“You gonna throw up?”

“Yep.”

Darcy managed to make it the garbage before she gagged. When nothing came up but bile (she hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday at breakfast, lying to both Bruce and Tony when she’d said she’d eaten dinner the night before), she sighed, grabbing the napkin when Bucky held it out. After wiping her mouth and taking a large drink of water from the bottle Steve handed her, Darcy took a deep breath.
She was still terrified, could feel the worry and anxiety in her bones, but she knew she needed to do this. She needed to do this. Not working with her powers wasn’t an option anymore. She didn’t want any last minute surprises that would result in her hurting someone, so if that meant experimenting (ugh, that fucking word), then that’s what she was going to do.

“I think I’m good. Let’s do this.”

Bucky glanced toward the large window behind them, nodding at Tony and Bruce. The scientists started moving around the control room, prepping everything. When he looked at Darcy again, she seemed to have settled herself. “We’ll be right there if you need us.”

“Okay.” When Bucky shot her a raised eyebrow, Darcy rolled her eyes and pushed him toward the door. “I’m good. Love you.”

Steve turned to follow Bucky out of the room, but a hand on his arm stopped him. Blue eyes swayed toward Darcy, unable to place the look on her face. It looked like there were unspoken novels in the hazel of her eyes as she stared at him, gaze unwavering.

“I’m sweet on you, you know that, right?” It paled in comparison to the words Darcy wanted so desperately to speak, but when she was there, face to face with him, terror in her heart, she couldn’t let him leave without knowing.

“I know,” Steve said after a moment, unable to look away from her, her expression rooting him to that spot, the full weight of her words heavier than they seemed. “You say stop and we stop.”

“Okay.” She dropped her hand from his arm, watching Steve’s eyes for a second longer before she turned toward the window, seeing that Bucky had already joined Tony and Bruce in the control room. She heard the door whisper as Steve pulled the hatch shut, locks twisting into place.

Her ears popped as the pressure in the room stabilized, and Darcy reached up to rub at them as she opened and closed her jaw. “Last chance to back out, big guy.”

“Never,” Thor said from the other side of the chamber with a shake of his head and a small smirk. “You bested me once. I’d like a rematch.”

Darcy rolled her eyes at the blond and the full Asgardian gear he was sporting. Did her ripped jeans and Bob Ross t-shirt mean she was underdressed? “Oh, so that’s how it is? Trying to get back at me for the taser?”

“Revenge? No. This is for the most noble of causes. Redemption.”

“You mean ego?”

Darcy’s eyes left Thor and flicked toward the control room when she heard the static of a microphone, followed shortly by Tony’s exasperated voice. “If you’re both done reminiscing, can we get to the point?”

“You got my tunes?” She watched Tony’s head hang then shake in a defeated way. She turned her attention to the rumpled scientist at Tony’s side, eyes pleading. “Doc, will you explain to the asshole, again, that I need it?”

Tony took his finger off the microphone button and turned to Bruce with a sigh. “Please don’t.”

“Actually, I’d like to know,” Steve said, gaze switching from where he’d been watching Darcy, leveling Bruce with an honestly curious expression.
“We’ve been working on anchors. She has a mantra she repeats, but we’re hoping to build in a musical component as well.”

“Like your lullabye?”

“Um, yeah, something like that.”

“But you don’t like it?” Bucky asked Tony, arms crossed over his chest as he looked back and forth between him and Bruce.

“Her song choice. It’s just… tacky.”

Steve’s eyebrows knit together, looking to Bruce with a confused expression on his face. “I still don’t...?”

Tony flicked a toggle near his hand. Soft bass began to fill the space and they all watched as Darcy grinned, her spine straightening a bit at the sound.

“The song,” Bruce explained, “it’s, uh, called ‘Amber’.”

“Okay! Let’s do this!” With the song’s beat in her ears, Darcy nodded at Thor one more time. “Are you sure about this?”

“You will not hurt me, Darcy. I trust you.”

Darcy’s arms dropped to her hips, an incredulous look on her face as she glared at the giant blond man. “Really? Really!?” Fucking hell. No jinxes or anything. Fucking! Thor, looking so much like a confused golden retriever that it made Darcy’s heart hurt, glanced toward the control room. “... did I say something wrong?”

Forgetting about the butterflies in her stomach, and the taste of bile still coating the back of her tongue, Darcy’s eyes fluttered closed. She stood there, quieting her body, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, deliberately. She squared her shoulders. “Synthwave transference. Test one.”

Darcy blinked into the inky abyss, swallowing hard as she felt the darkness press against her mind. It took a moment for her to move past the utter vastness of it all, but she focused her thoughts, took another deep breath, and accepted what was about to happen.

“I see blackness,” she said, knowing the microphones in the chamber would pick up her voice. Being able to focus on the steady thump of the bass guitar helped, the laidback sound doing what they’d hoped it would. She was able to keep one hand on the wheel, so to speak, a foot back in the lab even if that wasn’t where she really was anymore.

“Focusing on Thor.”

Carefully, so carefully, Darcy let her breath out slowly, letting her mind walk closer to the edge. As she moved through the dark, she could see a single pinpoint of light, and it was getting brighter and larger by the second. It was a brilliant aquamarine, calm and tranquil, lighter around the edges. As she took another step toward it, she could see gold veining throughout the blue. It shined so brightly, like a star, but she supposed that made sense. Thor was a god, after all.

The fact that she could see lilac, Jane’s lilac, in all that that pretty blue and gold made her smile. “Thor looks like a star,” Darcy whispered, unable to hear any voices (stone or otherwise), just the steady sounds of the song keeping her focused.
“I’m going to try and move him.”

If she had hands, she’d have rubbed them together, but since she didn’t, not here, Darcy just took a deep breath and started.

Even though they’d all seen it several times now, everyone in the control room stared in awe as Darcy floated above the ground, toes just brushing the floor, skin lit from within with amber light. As her hair whipped around her face, a wind of her own making, Steve tore his eyes from Darcy to glance in Thor’s direction. The Asgardian’s head was cocked to the side, looking at Darcy critically, something close to familiarity crossing his features.

Her hands lifted in the air, palms out toward Thor. Everyone seemed to hold their breath.

Darcy focused on the gorgeous, otherworldly light that she knew was her friend, thinking softly in his direction. She wanted that blue to move, wanted it to slide across the floor, backward. Not far, she thought, not yet, just a little. She started pushing slowly. His light wasn’t where she wanted it to be, and it was within her power to move it, so she did. She pushed with hands she couldn’t see, pushed at that pretty aquamarine light, watching it inch away from her.

Bucky took a step closer to the window, watching Darcy’s hands carefully pushing away from her body. His eyes flicked to Thor, watching as the blond tried to keep from moving, his jaw clenched in concentration. It was useless, however, as he was unable to stay where he was, his body driven backward by an invisible hand. “She’s doing it,” Bucky said, hands braced on the console as he watched.

Tony’s eyes scoured the readouts in front of him - her heart rate, her blood pressure, brain wave activity - looking for any hint of her losing control, but everything was well within normal levels. “No anomalies on this side, everything’s green.”

Bruce leaned toward the mic, “Thor, are you trying to stop her?” The frustrated look Thor sent in the scientist’s direction was answer enough. “Darcy, can you hear me?”

Distantly, Darcy heard a voice. It was soft, and kind, but it was going to rip her focus if she responded. She kept concentrating, wanting to see how far she could go. She hadn’t heard the incessant whisper of the stone yet, surprised that it seemed content to let her do this without interfering, but she didn’t want to question it. She was more than happy to push as long as that voice inside stayed away. She’d done this before, and she was doing it now, and wasn’t now the time to push it, when everything was set and safe? Did she really want to question why it was being quiet?

‘Don’t wanna look a gift pony in the kisser,’ came to mind, a phrase her first foster father had liked to say. He’d been a horrible man, done horrible things to her...

… but if she’d had this power then? A manic giggle escaped as she pushed harder.

Steve took a step forward when the sound of Darcy’s laughter filled the room, watching as Thor was driven backward, until the blond’s back was pressed against the wall with nowhere else to go, and still, Darcy pushed.

“Kiddo, you gotta stop now,” Tony yelled, hand wrapping around the mic as he watched Thor struggle against the pressure that pinned him to the wall. Thor’s teeth were grit, the first hint of worry on his face as he looked at Darcy and the determination on her face.

Something was fighting back against her, somehow keeping her from moving that brilliant blue backward. Darcy wasn’t sure what it was, but it was annoying. How was she supposed to know
how far she could push him before she stopped due to exhaustion? And she was exhausted. Focusing so hard was sapping her energy, and she knew she didn’t have much longer. She growled and pushed with everything she had.

Everything happened at once:

- Tony watched as the armor Thor wore cracked and begun to compact around the blond’s chest -
- Bucky ran, yelling at Friday to open the door to the chamber -
- Bruce tore the cord from the stereo, the instrumental music disappearing, the silence sudden -
- Steve leaned into the mic and screamed Darcy’s name -

The second the music stopped and she heard Steve yell her name, Darcy blinked away the colors. She stumbled, dropping the six inches to the floor, hazel eyes wide as she looked toward the control room, trying to understand the expressions on Steve, Tony and Bruce’s faces. “What? What’s wrong?” She followed their line of sight, gaze swinging to look at Thor. The blood in her body ran cold when she saw him on his knees, face red and gasping for air. Oh god! She ran forward, startled when someone flew by her in a blur and reached Thor first.

Bucky slid on his knees, grabbing Thor by the shoulders. Grey eyes flicked along the Asgardian’s body before he reached out with his left hand, the metal scraping along the armor. The blond’s face continued to change to a deeper crimson until, finally, Bucky found what he was looking for. His fingers wrapped around the clasp on the side and ripped downward, tearing the crumpled armor from Thor’s body and tossing it aside.

Thor took a gasping breath in as Darcy threw herself to the ground next to them, hands reaching out to clutch at the blond, devastation in her eyes. “Oh fuck! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, fuck, please be okay, please be okay!”

As Thor coughed, Bucky sat back, watching as the color in the other man’s face began to look normal as he took in huge, heaving gulps of air. “He’s going to be okay, Darcy.”

“What the hell happened?!” She turned toward the control room but saw no one, panicking for a second before she watched Steve, Tony and Bruce enter the chamber, moving quickly but without panic, as if everything was alright. When she turned back to Thor and cupped his face in her hands, all she could think about was how she’d hurt him.

“Synthwave Transference test one was a rousing success,” Tony said, not flinching when the full weight of Darcy’s glare pointed in his direction.

“How in the fuck can you call this a success?!”

“Darcy, I am alright. I swear it.” Thor coughed again, wincing when he reached up to pat Darcy’s shoulder. “Your power is very strong.”

“I could have killed you!”

“Actually, Tony’s right.” Darcy frowned in Bruce’s direction as Tony smirked at his side. “When we removed the music and called your name, you stopped almost immediately.”

“But how did I hurt him?”

“His armor.” When Darcy’s worried gaze swept in his direction, Bucky reached out to squeeze her
hand. “You had him pinned against the wall and when you kept going, his armor started to crush his chest.”

“Oh god, I am so sorry!” Thor moaned in pain when Darcy threw her arms around his shoulders and she pulled back instantly, her face a mask of guilt. “I’m sorry, shit, sorry!”

“I will be fine. You’re not the first opponent to bruise these ribs and you will not be the last. I suppose I should submit that you have bested me in combat twice now.”

When she was certain Thor was telling the truth, that he was going to be fine and she hadn’t done irreparable harm to him, Darcy felt the panicked energy fade until she deflated like a balloon, palms pressing against the floor as she sagged. The panic had made adrenaline race through her veins, but now the reality of what she’d just done, what her body had just done, hit her all at once. Fucking fuck, she was so tired.

Watching Darcy slump to the floor spurred action to Steve, and he knelt down beside her, putting a hand on her back. “You okay?”

It took an insane amount of effort for Darcy to glance up in Steve’s direction, and even then she wasn’t able to do more than just look at him. “Wanna sleep for a week.”

“She’s fine,” Tony said, arms crossing over his chest. “The armor thing was a surprise, but this was a great initial test. Once we get her neural dampener in place, she’ll be able to see what’s going on and it’ll stop her from going too far.”

Darcy’s head swiveled to look up at Tony. “Too far?” Almost killing one of the people she loved was a little more than too far for her liking. She watched all five men share a look between themselves, and under normal circumstances she’d demand to know what it had meant, but she couldn’t make herself do much of anything, let alone argue with them.

Finally, she waved a hand in the air, too tired to do more than frown at their silence. “Someone help.” Both Steve and Bucky were there instantly, helping her climb to her feet. “We’ll talk about this when I’m not about to collapse.”

“This was a good thing, Darcy. Really.”

She smiled softly at Bruce, seeing the truth of it in his eyes. If anyone was going to tell her to the truth without sugar coating it, it was the consistently frumpled scientist. “Good, that’s good.” Darcy turned to Bucky, the grey of his eyes drawing her quickly evaporating focus. “Sleep, please.”

Bucky didn’t hesitate. He gathered Darcy in his arms, feeling her curl against his chest, her eyes already closed. He gave Steve an encouraging smile over her head, then made his way toward the door and then out of the chamber completely.

As they disappeared, Steve held a hand out toward Thor. The Asgardian took it, wincing as he was helped to his feet. “Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

Thor nodded, rubbing at his ribs gingerly. “That armor was forged in Svartalfheim. Other than your vibranium, it is one of the hardest metals known in the nine realms. That she could damage it so easily is a telling sign of the power she possesses.”

“You saw something,” Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked at Thor, “something in her.”

“The golden color of her eyes reminded me of someone in Asgard. Our watcher, Heimdall. His eyes
Steve nodded, looking down at the crumpled metal of Thor’s armor, face thoughtful. Knowing what else they could expect as far as Darcy’s powers went would be priceless, especially if they proved to be as powerful as her others. “The musical cue worked. Whose idea was it?”

“Uh, Darcy’s, actually. I told her about the lullaby, when it worked at least, and she wanted to give it a try. She said it reminded her of a movie with... someone famous? And something about dreaming?”

“DiCaprio,” Tony said, reaching out to squeeze Bruce’s shoulder, shaking his head slightly. “You really gotta get out more.”

Bruce shot Tony a small smile, then nodded at the control room. “I’m going to take a look at the data, see if it can tell us anything.”

“I will join you,” Thor said, dipping his chin to Steve and Tony before he slowly followed Bruce from the chamber.

There were a few seconds of silence before Tony bent down and grabbed the useless armor, checking its weight and balance, finger running over the crack Darcy’d caused. “Have you talked to Romanoff?”

“I have,” Steve said with a frown, “and I don’t like it.”

“Agreed.” When he saw the brief look of shock on Steve’s face, Tony rolled his eyes. “Even with this, with what she can do... she’s not a fighter. Most of us chose this, in one way or another. You literally enlisted. I suppose Bruce is the only one who’s really here against his will.”

“If given the choice -”

“I know,” Tony said, seriousness bleeding into his brown eyes “so maybe we just don’t bring it up. We work on getting her control, and we leave it at that.” A sigh lifted and dropped Tony’s shoulders. Omitting things was just as bad as lying, and he'd sworn he wouldn’t lie to her again, that they’d be ‘stupid honest’ with each other.

Steve wished it was that easy, he really did, but the soldier knew better. “Hill already mentioned something to her.”

Tony’s shoulders fell as he shook his head, glaring up at the ceiling. “Of course she did.”

“For what it’s worth, Darcy hated the idea.”

“Good! That’s good. We let that happen. Let her hate it and never bring it up again.”

“She hated it because she can’t control what she does and could hurt someone. So the more control she gets…”

“The more comfortable she gets with the idea of using her powers as an Avenger. Is this what we do now? We find people with powers, help them, turn them into soldiers, put them in harm’s way? I don’t want that to be our legacy, and I don’t want that to happen to her.”

Steve stared at Tony for a long time, his thoughts from yesterday springing to mind as he saw the other man’s face set with protectiveness for Darcy. “We take this one day at a time, Tony. We can’t
do anything other than that.”

Tony sighed, thrusting the broken armor in Steve’s direction. “I’m a planner, Cap. It’s what I do.”

Holding the surprisingly light armor in hand, Steve watched Tony leave the chamber, hands stuffed in his pockets and head down. Steve’s blue gaze flicked down, following along the crack in the metal, unable to keep from wondering what Darcy could have done to Thor if she hadn’t stopped.
Holy Thrums

Chapter Summary

Darcy gets some bad news. Bucky offers solace. Steve offers his time.

Chapter Notes

It's update tiiiiime! As always, I am blown away by the comments and the kudos. Seeing those notifications pop in my inbox make me so happy, it brightens even my worst days. We're finally getting to see what the Darcy/Steve dynamic looks like, which makes my stomach do little flips! Hope you all enjoy!

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I find my gods in the notes of your laughter.
Something holy thrums in the air when you sing.
I am reminded of cathedrals in your eyes.

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Bucky glared at them over his shoulder, which only succeeded in making Steve and Darcy laugh harder. “Yeah, sure, laugh it up you two. Hilarious.”

Darcy leaned against Steve, both of their shoulders shaking with laughter as Bucky stirred the pot of his Ma’s marinara sauce, pasta bubbling beside it on the stove. They’d staked their claim on one of the staff lounges, making dinner there a few nights a week. Darcy was a horrible cook (there was a reason they’d lived on poptarts in New Mexico), and for the intestinal well-being of all, both the boys picked up where she slacked.

If that meant she was served dinner by two of the hottest people on the face of the planet? She’d gladly bear that burden.

Darcy gasped for air, waving her hand in Bucky’s direction, glee lighting her features. “But did… his face? What’d it look like?”

Bucky frowned, stirring once more before turning to glare at Darcy. “What do you think it looked like? He was pissed! It's your fault, anyway,” he said, pointing in her direction with the marinara sauce covered spoon, grey eyes narrowing.

“My fault? How is this -”

“You think I would have called him ‘Chocolate Odin’ if I didn’t have you floatin’ around in my
Bucky watched both Darcy and Steve erupt in another burst of laughter, leaning against each other. The annoyance bled away from his face, replaced with something that tasted more like happiness. Steve’s arm was slung across the back of Darcy’s chair, his foot on the rungs under her stool, cheeks pink and eyes bright. Steve has always been gorgeous when he laughed, and the blond had been doing much more laughing in the past couple months. Steve seemed lighter than he had in a while, and Bucky knew the reason was sitting right beside him.

Darcy looked over at Steve when his arm brushed against her back. His face was lit up with humor, the deep chuckles still rumbling through his chest, and she could feel her heart squeeze, ecstatic at how comfortable he seemed. There’d been hesitation in him before, the careful pause of uncertainty, but that seemed to be fading away the more time they spent together. Every date night, every late night movie marathon, every second they navigated their relationship brought them closer.

It was the little things that mattered the most. Absently stroking her hair as they watched a movie. The feel of his fingers threaded with hers as they walked around the grounds of the compound. An orange chrysanthemum that had appeared on her doorknob without a note, coupled with the knowledge that it’d been Sarah’s favorite flower.

Darcy could see it in his face when Steve smiled at her. She was wearing him down. Not like a wrecking ball, but more like the way erosion can make a canyon. Slow. Relentless. Spread out over time until you forget that it wasn’t always the way it was now.

Steve reached up to wipe at his eyes, wet from laughter and the slight hint of onion that still hung in the hair. The smell of Ma Barnes’ famous pasta marinara was bringing happy memories to the surface, memories of Sunday dinners, of garlic bread and programs on the wireless, of cheering when Brooklyn got a run and hearing that cheer echoed in the tiny apartments all around their neighborhood.

He wasn’t sure when it’d happened, but more often than not, Steve was thinking about the good memories of his childhood, and not the bad. Maybe it was because there wasn’t a looming apocalypse, no battle on the horizon, no war raging on without end. Maybe he was finally getting to breathe for the first time since he’d been pulled out of that ice. Or maybe, just maybe, it was because of the two people who were looking at him, affection shining in their smiles

When Steve pinned her with a smile, it took everything in Darcy not to swoon. She’d worked hard to get that smile pointed in her direction and damn it all if it wasn’t the brightest thing in her universe. She could see Bucky watching them in her peripheral vision, a smirk on his lips, but she was dazzled by the man who was leaning into her, so close and so handsome, that she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

Sure, there were bad days. Days where she was insecure about everything, second-guessing every word, every smile. Was Steve just going along with it all because he couldn’t let go of Bucky and she was like his matching piece of fucked up luggage? Buy one, get one forced onto you? Was this work of building a relationship just a futile effort, doomed to fail and fall apart in spectacular fashion? Was it useless to try and barge her way into his heart when there was no room?

But even through all of it - through the doubt and hesitation, worry and uncertainty, fear and guilt - Darcy couldn’t believe she was lucky enough to be looking at him, just an inch away, smiling with those big, gorgeous blue eyes peering into hers.

When Steve laughed at her stories, it was like sunshine on her face. When he told her about his day, it was like her favorite song. And when he kissed her cheek before saying goodnight? It was sweeter
than the best piece of cheesecake she’d ever eaten.

Darcy couldn’t think of anything she wanted more than Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers, looking at her and smiling because they felt the same way she felt about them. Steve wasn’t there yet, but that was okay. She was working on it.

When Bucky mumbled ‘Chocolate Odin’ under his breath, they both lost it again, giggling like children. Darcy tore her eyes from Steve’s (it was hard) and toward Tony as he pushed his way into the kitchen. She grinned brightly, waving her hand in Tony’s direction. “Tin Man! Bucky was just telling us about the new nickname he gave Fury. You were there, how’d it go over?”

The laughter in the room quieted then faded completely at the expression on Tony’s face. Feeling like she’d been slapped with reality, Darcy straightened in her chair, seriousness and uneasiness settling in the pit of her stomach. “What happened?”

Tony seemed to hesitate before crossing the space. He pulled a postcard from his pocket and held it out to Darcy. It was stamped and covered in stickers, as if it’d been bounced from post office to post office. “We were picking up the rest of the stuff from Jane’s old lab. Looks like this was sent to a few places before it made it there.”

Darcy didn’t like the serious tone Tony was using, or the way his brown eyes were peering at her with empathy. She grabbed the card from him, frowning at the picture of the George Washington Bridge. She flipped it over, hazel eyes reading the words, then reading them again. “Oh.”

Bucky flipped off the burners on the stove, watching Darcy’s expression as she read the postcard again. “Darce?”

Pulled from her own thoughts at Bucky’s voice, Darcy looked up at him, shrugging her shoulders softly. “It’s Olivia.”

It only took a second for Bucky to flip through Darcy’s memories and know who she was talking about. “She alright?”

“She died. Heart attack.”

Darcy watched Bucky’s eyebrows fall, a flash of sadness lighting his grey eyes. She felt Steve shift beside her, his expression comforting but also questioning. “Olivia was my last foster mom before I aged out of the system,” she explained, “she helped me get into college. She died two weeks ago. Her funeral was Sunday.”

Steve had known that Darcy’d grown up in the foster care system, but she kept most of the stories short and without much detail. He understood why, as it was pretty clear they hadn’t been the happiest memories for her to recall. He hadn’t pushed, but the pain behind her carefully apathetic eyes was there if you looked hard enough. “I’m so sorry, Darce.”

Darcy smiled at Steve’s words, hearing the truth in them, eyes darting down to look at her feet as her thoughts tumbled. She’d gotten a card from Olivia on her birthday, and knew to expect another at Christmas.

… except now that Christmas card would never come.

Tony cleared his throat, drawing her attention. “If you want to go visit,” he said as he shoved his hands in his pockets, and gave her a small, sad smile, “you could take one of the quinjets. Pay your respects.”
She snorted, the sound hollow and self-deprecating. “Like I know how to fly a jet?” When Tony’s chin dipped in her direction and he peered at her over the top of his glasses, Darcy realized what he’d meant. “Oh. Right.”

Bucky took a step away from the stove, Darcy’s sad hazel eyes swinging toward him. He hated seeing that look of pain on her face, knowing how important and influential Olivia had been for her. A battle could be waged every second, fought on every front, but sometimes bad things just happened, and they were like a punch to the gut, every time. “I could -”

“No, no, Buck, it’s fine. You’ve got that thing with Dr. Cho tomorrow, anyway. I already missed the funeral. Really, it’s fine.” Darcy could see that he wanted to argue, but his appointment was important. She’d feel horrible if he missed it.

“I could take you.” Steve watched as her surprised eyes turned toward him. Her face broke into a smile, so true and genuine and heartfelt, in stark contrast to the news she’d just received. Not for the first time, Steve felt like he hadn’t done anything to deserve the way she looked at him. With gratitude. With appreciation. With love.

Of course you’d offer. You’re the kindest, sweetest, most compassionate person I’ve ever met. She reached out, gripping his hand with one of hers, acknowledgment in her eyes but an argument on her lips. “That’s sweet, Steve, really, but it doesn’t need to be a big thing.”

“You should say goodbye,” Steve said, eyes falling down to look where their hands were joined before they flicked back up to her. “You’ll regret it if you don’t. Trust me.”

Watching the shadows move behind Steve’s eyes made Darcy’s chest ache. He’d lost so many people. Too many. She wanted to chase away his dark thoughts, kiss his lips and tell him that she was sorry for the pain he carried by living when others hadn’t.

“Besides,” he continued, smiling softly when he looked into her eyes and saw the first hint of tears, “it’ll be nice, getting to know more about you.”

Bucky’s heart ached, both with sadness for Darcy and the loss she was feeling, but also with happiness as he watched the man he loved offer comfort and time to Darcy. When she looked toward him, so many thoughts in the silence of her hazel eyes, he could only smile and nod his head.

Darcy turned back to Steve, failing to keep the emotion out of her voice. “Thank you.” The look on his face was everything, and she gave him a watery grin when he squeezed her hand again. “I should warn you, though. I get sick on planes.”

“I’ll make sure the plane’s stocked with sick bags,” Tony said, starting toward the door.

“Hey!” Darcy slipped off the stool, padding across the floor as Tony turned back to her with a raised eyebrow. “You didn’t have to -”

“It’s nothing. Don’t -”

“- checking to make sure -”

“- seemed like the right thing -”

“Oh my god, shut the fuck up already!”

She was emotional, and had good reason to be, so when Tony’s eyebrows hit his hairline, Darcy didn’t feel too bad about it. “You didn’t have to tell me yourself, but you did. Thank you.”
“Yeah, well…” Tony rocked back on his heels, tailored blazer stretching as he shrugged. “We decided to communicate better, right? If it was me, I’d want to hear it from a friend.” When the grin on Darcy’s face widened, he rolled his eyes. “Forget I said anything.”


“I heard it,” Steve called, one shoulder shrugging when Tony glared at him over Darcy’s shoulder.

“See? Friend.” Maybe she was focusing on Tony because it was easier than dealing with the knowledge she’d just been given, but Darcy didn’t think anyone could blame her if she was. The biggest female role model she’d had in life (until she’d met and forced Jane to be her friend) had died and she hadn’t been there.

“Don’t let it go to your head. I have hundreds of friends.”

“Is that right? Hundreds of them?”

“More or less.” Tony leaned to the side so he could see around her, eyes locking with Steve as he gestured toward Darcy. “We good? You got her?” When the blond nodded, Tony’s attention flicked back to Darcy. “I’ll make sure everything’s gassed up. Won’t even check the miles when you get back.”

“My hero.”

“Looks like you’ve got enough of those, kiddo. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Darcy watched Tony disappear from sight before she turned to look at her boys. *Yeah,* she thought as she gazed at Bucky and Steve, *I’ve got a few of those.*

“We won’t be gone long. Just a day or two.”

Bucky nodded from the bed as Darcy threw more clothes from her closet into her suitcase before heading into her bathroom. “I know.”

“Quick visit to the cemetery, maybe pop into her place, check in on the locals.”

“Sounds good.”

She crossed back to the closet, digging into it again. “If Steve wants I can show him a few of the old haunts. I’ve lived in a lot of places, so I can’t show them all, but we can hit the biggest ones. There’s a roller skating rink that I used to hate going to. You’ve never known real pain until your fingers have been rolled over by a two-hundred-pound kid while ‘No Diggity’ is playing in the background. Did you guys ever…”

Darcy stopped talking as Bucky wrapped his arms around her from behind, his chin resting on her shoulder. “Take a breath, doll.” She’d been going non-stop since he’d checked on her that morning. He knew she babbled when she was stressed or emotional, but the way she was flitting around like a hummingbird, afraid to sit still… he was worried.

“I’m fine, Buck.” Darcy heard his sound of disbelief and turned in the circle of his arms. “Okay, maybe I’m not fine, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”
“You are doing something about it, you’re going to say goodbye.” he said with a frown, cupping her face in his hands and peering into her pretty hazel eyes. He could see the soft thread of barely-held composure in her gaze, and Bucky had to wonder who she was maintaining it for. If she needed to break, he and Steve would be there to help put her back together.

“I’ve gotten pretty good at those,” Darcy joked, seeing that Bucky didn’t find her words funny at all. She sighed, unable to look in the grey of his eyes, instead staring at a spot on his t-shirt. “I feel bad because I didn’t know sooner.”

“That’s not your fault. With everything that’s happened over the last couple months -”

“Exactly. I’ve been so wrapped up in myself and what I’ve got going on, I barely even thought about anything or anyone else. It’s selfish.”

“Darcy, you are not selfish.”

“No,” Bucky said with a firm shake of his head, “you’re not. You grabbed that stone to save everyone. You kept me from losing a part of my soul and almost lost part of your own.”

Darcy sighed, eyes flicking up to look at his. “Forgive me, but you’re a little biased when it comes to me.”

“Love doesn’t make me biased, it means I see the real you. It’s okay to feel low, and sad, and miss Olivia, but none of that changes who she was for you, or who you are because of her.”

Lower lip trembling, Darcy felt the first hot tear roll down her cheek as she nodded. “It’s just… she’s the first person who looked at me and saw value other than the monthly checks from child services, you know?”

Bucky nodded knowingly. The memories of Olivia were real in his head, too, and he knew how much the woman had shaped Darcy into the loving person she was. Without Olivia, there was no high school graduation, no college, no Jane or Selvig. If Olivia had not taught Darcy to value herself, things might not have turned out so favorably in the battle with Thanos. The impact Olivia Rodriguez had on the world was incalculable.

“I know,” Bucky said, pulling her against his chest, rocking softly from side to side, pressing his lips to her hair. “I could still come, I’d just -”

Darcy pulled back, frowning softly. “You’ve been waiting for this appointment for weeks. I’ll be fine. Besides, I have the world’s largest hunk of American turkey breast keeping me company.”

The corner of Bucky’s mouth turned up at the mental image her words painted. “You should call him that. To his face. And film it.”

Darcy snorted, pulling out of his arms to continue packing. “I’m still trying to get him to like me, remember?”

Bucky sighed, sitting down on her bed, fingers brushing over the soft fabric. “He does like you, doll. You think he’d offer to fly out for just anyone? He wants to get to know you better.”

She paused, looking at her reflection in the mirror as she grabbed her toothbrush. Her face was splotchy, red and warm with tears, and Darcy took a deep breath in. This was going to be the first time she was alone with Steve Rogers and to say she was nervous would be a giant fucking
understatement. “And what if he doesn’t like what he sees?”

“Darcy.” When she stuck her head out of the bathroom door, Bucky knew the look on his face was one of exasperation. “Just be yourself.”

When she laughed and shook her head before disappearing from sight, he had to wonder what he’d done in a previous life to earn two people who didn’t see how much they were worth.

“Don’t forget your deodorant.”

“Shit! I always forget to pack that!”

“Yeah. I know. It’s why I said something. I’ve got years of you forgetting it in my head.”

When she darted out of the bathroom and launched herself toward him, he laughed, falling back against the bed, smiling when she braced herself above him. He could still see the sadness in her eyes, but if he was able to make her smile even through those tears, then he’d succeeded.

Darcy let out a breath, looking down into the gorgeous grey slate of Bucky’s eyes, the very real thrill of love crawling up and down her spine. So many things in her life had come and gone. People. Places. Friends. That she had something real and solid with the man staring up at her… It was everything.

“One day it’s going to get old, you knowing everything about me,” she said, giving him a rueful smile.

Bucky gazed up at her, tucking a dark curl behind her ear, knowing the love he felt for her filled his eyes. “But today is not that day.”

She smiled, heavy and weighted with everything she didn’t put into words. “No. No it’s not.”

“Love you,” Darcy said against Bucky’s neck, arms squeezing him tightly.

“I know. Love you, too.”

“No, like, I really love you.”

“If you’re stalling so you don’t have to get on the plane, it’s not going to work.”

“Fuck,” Darcy groaned pulling back enough to see the amusement in Bucky’s eyes. “I really hate flying.”

“Is there anything I can do to make it better?”

Darcy turned to smile at Steve, seeing the small bag he had in hand as he neared. This was really happening. She was going to be spending the weekend with Steve Rogers. Alone. Unchaperoned. Should have packed flame-retardant underwear. “Is instant transportation one of your super soldier powers?”

“Not one of mine. Yours?”

Her eyes widened at the thought. “Not that I know of, but can you imagine?”
The smile on Steve’s face was enough to make her stomach flip. Either that or she was getting airplane sickness just being near one before it even got in the air. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to Bucky’s, fingers brushing down his arm and squeezing once before she climbed up the bay doors. She needed to find a seat, preferable with no windows and ample barf bags.

As Darcy left him standing there, Bucky turned his attention to Steve. The blond was wearing what amounted to civilian clothes, and there was something about how Steve fit into a pair of jeans that just wasn’t fair. He gave his lover a warm smile, reaching out to squeeze his hands. “She’s going to try and hide her pain, probably with jokes, or sarcasm, or being annoyed at everything. It’s what she does.”

“It’s what you do, too, so I have practice.”

Bucky chuckled softly, nodding his head before looking past Steve, watching Darcy move around inside. “It means a lot to her, that you’re going. That you offered.”

Steve glanced over his shoulder, small grin turning his lips as he watched her try out one seat before deciding it wouldn’t work and stood to try another. He turned back to Bucky, eyes squinting against the bright sun behind them. “I wasn’t lying, Buck. I want to get to know her better.”

“And that means a lot to me,” Bucky hummed, closing the distance so he could press his lips to Steve’s.

Steve’s hand moved from where it rested on Bucky’s shoulder, brushing along his clavicle and then up, cradling the back of Bucky’s neck as he returned the kiss, answering Bucky’s lips with his own.

Bucky pulled back first, tongue swiping along his lower lip, tasting both Steve and Darcy. “You take care of our girl, punk.”

That phrase - *our girl* - stuck in Steve’s mind as he walked backward, the bay doors lifting until they stole Bucky from sight. It reminded him of something Natasha had said. This wasn’t about Bucky and Darcy being on one side of a line and him being on the other, this was about the *three* of them, being together, sharing everything. He knew how Bucky and Darcy felt about him, had stopped denying and accepted it, but the thought that Darcy was *theirs*, Bucky *and* his...

Steve liked how that made him feel.

He liked it a lot.

When he turned to Darcy, he found her already strapped into a seat, one he’d be able to see while flying, but far enough away that she didn’t have to look out a window if she didn’t want to. “You okay?”

“Absolutely not,” Darcy said with blunt honesty, fingers already balled into fists, leg tapping out a steady rhythm on the metal floor. “Nope. I hate flying. Did you know that I hate flying?”

He smiled, sliding into the seat beside her. “You may have mentioned it once or twice.” He reached out and took her hand in his, carefully prying her fingers until they were no longer fist, her foot stopping its anxious dance. “I’m going to fly high and fast, get us there as quick as I can.”

“Good, that’s good.” Darcy looked over at him, at the compassion and encouragement in the beautiful blue of his eyes, and for a second her fear took a backseat to the gratitude she felt for him. “Thank you. This… it means a lot.”

“Of course. You need anything else before we get in the air?”
Darcy thought *'What the hell? It's worth a shot.'* and smiled at Steve hopefully. “A kiss for courage?”

Laughing softly, Steve looked down at their joined hands before his eyes flicked back up to hers with a smile. “I think I can handle that.”

Steve saw her lean in toward him, his eyes dropping to her lips as she neared, and when she pressed her mouth to his, he let himself *enjoy* the feeling. No second-guessing or doubt, no worrying about what came next or questioning how everything was going to work. Just Darcy’s lips pressed to his, the feel of her body, and the smell of citrus and flowers on her skin. When she pulled away, Steve’s eyes blinked open, looking into the hazel of hers, only inches separating them.

Nodding, Darcy closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. With memories of Steve’s lips on hers giving her more nerve, she pulled her hands from his and sat back in her seat, hands gripping the belts over her shoulders, her eyes falling closed. “High and fast. Let’s do this.”

Smiling at the fortitude Darcy seemed to be surrounding herself in, Steve stood and made his way toward the cockpit. When he heard Darcy call his name, he turned back to her. She gave him an uncertain and vulnerable expression.

“If I’m throwing up, please don’t look. I don’t want you to have that mental image. Think of something different. Something better.”

*Blue lace* was the first thing that popped into his head, but Steve wasn’t sure that’s what she’d meant. His smile slanted crooked, moving toward the console and calling over his shoulder. “Remember when Bucky threw up on the swings at Coney Island? I managed to look past that, so I think we’ll be fine.”

Darcy groaned at the memory, glad the engines had turned over loud enough that Steve couldn’t hear how just the *thought* of those swings soured her stomach.
Chapter Summary

Darcy and Steve head to where Darcy grew up so she can say goodbye.

Chapter Notes

Can I just say how happy I am getting to show the Darcy/Steve dynamic? Because I love it so much. I hope you guys like it, too. It's a little bittersweet, but that's life, right?

PageBreak

You know I've never been so lonely on my own
And it shows
'Cause I don't see you like I used to
Now I'm going back on the things that I know
- Waking Up Slow, Gabrielle Aplin

PageBreak

The entire contents of Darcy’s stomach had made a spectacular reappearance. Fuck, but she hated flying. They’d passed through a storm as they neared the airport and the turbulence had been horrific. While Steve moved around the plane, pushing buttons and flipping toggles as the engines powered down, Darcy waited for the wave of nausea to come to an end now that they were on solid ground.

Steve’d heard her sickness throughout the flight, glancing back at her with worry. Darcy sounded miserable, and it’s possible he may have pushed the engines in an effort to land sooner than expected. The rain had been consistent throughout the hour flight, but it’d been joined by thunder, lightning, and heavy wind when they’d gotten closer.

As everything whirred to a silence, he gathered their bags from the cargo cabinet and crossed the plane. “Darc -”

Darcy held up a hand and gave Steve a hard shake of her head. “Nope. Stay away. Don’t even think of coming near me until I’ve brushed my teeth and downed an entire travel-size bottle of mouthwash.” Her hazel eyes flicked up when he chuckled, the sound alone making her feel infinitely better.

When Darcy felt like she was good enough to stand, she climbed to her feet, sick bag in hand. Once they’d climbed off board and walked into the building on the private air strip (I suppose seeing a Quinjet at the airport might have raised a few eyebrows), she left Steve to deal with the rental car
and found the nearest bathroom. She frantically brushed her teeth, gargling with mouthwash for a good five minutes.

Steve leaned against the wall outside of the bathroom, smiling to himself as he heard Darcy gargle over and over. Tony had taken care of everything, from the rental car to the hotel, and Steve couldn’t help but smile, thinking about how quirky Darcy and Tony’s relationship was. It had grown so fast, and fierce, and the way Tony acted around Darcy and Peter Parker was showing Steve a side of the billionaire that he’d not known the other man had.

“Steve?”

Blinking, Steve was pulled out his thoughts when the subject of them said his name. He gave Darcy a small grin, pushing off the wall. “Sorry, you ready?”

Darcy returned his smile, cocking her head to the side. “Where did you go just then? You had a pretty serious ‘thinky’ face going on.”

Steve chuckled, holding an arm out for her. “Just thinking about you.” Darcy’s grin brightened at his words and he watched it fill her eyes. “Rental car’s out front. We can stop by the hotel and then head to the cemetery?” He saw the happiness fade from her eyes, the reminder of why they were there stealing some of her shine.

Sighing, knowing that this was going to hurt, no matter how much she prepared herself, Darcy nodded at Steve, giving him a tight smile as her eyes swung to look out the window, into the dreary grey where rain was still falling steadily. “Okay. Let’s go.”

The hotel was much nicer than it needed to be, and Darcy frowned at it when they drove up. “Tony set this up?”

Steve put the car in park under the overhang, glancing at the marble entryway, a valet standing at the ready. “Yeah, he made all the arrangements. You don’t like it?”

Darcy sighed, leaning back against the seat and turning her head to look at him. “Let’s just say my idea of an acceptable hotel for an overnight stay, and Tony’s idea of an acceptable hotel for an overnight stay are two wildly different things.”

The corner of Steve’s mouth lifted, knowing exactly what she meant. He’d grown up with practically nothing, living on a wing and a prayer, so everything seemed more than what was necessary. “I suppose we should take advantage of it, since he’s not keeping a tab.”

Darcy laughed, looking over at Steve, reaching out to cup his cheek. “Oh, that’s adorable. Tony Stark not keeping a tab?” She laughed again, watching him lean into her hand a bit before she pulled it back. “It’s going to get even darker soon. We can check in, change, and then head out?”

Steve nodded, still feeling the warmth of her hand on his cheek, watching as the valet opened her door and helped her out of the car. Grabbing their bags from the trunk, assuring the valet that he could handle them himself, Steve waited near the opulent sitting area while Darcy checked them in. When he heard her voice rise a bit, he turned to see her grab something off the counter in a huff, the woman behind the desk giving her a bright smile.

“What was that?”
Darcy thrust a keycard out in his direction. “We’re on the top floor.”

Steve raised an eyebrow as he grabbed the card. “And that’s a problem?”

“It’s where the suites are,” Darcy growled, already planning an angry text message to her pseudo-boss. It hadn’t surprised her that he’d gotten two rooms (yeah, she’d expected it, but a girl could hope, right?), but did one overnight stay really require a two room suite for each of them?

The elevator ride to their floor was quiet. Steve could tell Darcy was annoyed at Tony, but he had a feeling she was a little more emotional than normal, considering the reason for their visit. Grief could express itself in a variety of ways; he got quiet, Bucky got angry, and Darcy got annoyed. See, already learning new things.

Her room was ridiculous, way more than what she needed, and she tossed her bag on the bed with a growl of frustration. Fucking Stark. Flashing his money and throwing his weight around. Who does he think he is?

She took a heavy seat on the king-sized bed. It was clad in a million-thread-count sheets and felt like it was made out of a cloud. “Who wants to sleep on a fucking cloud?!!” As she was alone in the room, no one answered her annoyed query. Darcy took a deep breath, trying to crush the wave of emotion that was cresting inside of her.

Darcy looked up, staring at a piece of artwork on the wall, something expensive, and impressionistic, the swirls of colors reminding her of the chaos when she let the stone take her vision. The colors weren’t vibrant enough though, unable to capture the richness of the life as it strobed.

She wondered what Olivia’s colors would have been. Something warm, she was sure. Maybe a chocolate brown, or the pretty green of the forest. Darcy still didn’t know exactly how it all worked, but she couldn’t help but think that maybe her green was like an emerald because of the life Olivia had nurtured, the self-confidence and compassion she’d taught. Was her soul different because of the way Olivia had cared for her?

Yes.

Absolutely.

Without a doubt.

Unsure how long she’d been sitting there, thoughts tumbling, she was pulled out of her haze by a knock on her door. Swiping at her cheeks with her sleeve, Darcy pulled the door open, giving Steve an apologetic smile. “Fuck, I’m sorry, I got distracted. I’ll change really quick.”

“It’s completely fine,” Steve said, noting her tears and the pink tint high on her cheeks, “if you need more time -”

“No, no, come in. I’ll be fine. Just gonna grab my stuff. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

Nodding, Steve watched her disappear into the bathroom with her bag. He walked around her hotel room, an exact copy of the one he had across the hall, and ended up sitting on the couch, waiting. Darcy hadn’t been lying about being quick, as she flashed back into the room in seconds, pulling on a pair of black ballet flats. She’d changed into a simple black dress, her hair loose around her shoulders.
Darcy looked around the room to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything before she actually looked at Steve for the first time. He’d changed out of his jeans and into black slacks, a white button-down and a black tie. The fact that he’d changed at all meant a lot, and as she looked at him, his blue eyes looking at her with such warmth and empathy, Darcy had to stop from throwing herself at him and crying against his chest. She drew on Bucky’s strength inside herself, taking a deep breath before nodded at him. “It’s still raining,” she said, glancing out the window at the grey sky.

“That’s alright. I’ve got an umbrella.”

“Of course you do.”

The car ride to the cemetery was quiet, windshield wipers hushing every few seconds. Everything seemed so surreal to her. They followed the same route she’d taken to high school each morning, catching the bus if she made it on time, or hustling through back alleys and short-cuts when she was running late. As they passed the Mom and Pop bodega she’d stopped at every day after school (mostly to pet their resident cat, Mr. Tumnus, and to get the latest dish on Mrs. Garcia’s telemundo soap operas), Darcy let out a cry of surprise.

“What is it?”

Darcy didn’t answer Steve right away, still in shock at seeing the closed sign and the windows shuttered with plywood. She sat back, looking down at her hands. “I used to go in there a lot, that’s all.”

Steve’s eyes slid from the road to Darcy, watching sadness flit across her face. When she went quiet, he let the silence hang in the air, not wanting to push her into talking.

He knew what it was like to go back to place you thought you knew and have it be completely changed. As much as he and Bucky talked about Brooklyn, he knew it wasn’t their Brooklyn anymore. They were carrying around memories of a place that no longer existed, having changed while they’d stayed the same.

As the wipers slid over the windshield, Darcy let the steady noise calm some of the butterflies in her stomach. She couldn’t change what had happened. She’d grown up, moved on, trying to carve out a life for herself. It’s what Olivia had wanted for her, using every opportunity to make the world a better place. For Olivia, that meant fostering older kids who rarely were picked, the ones who’d bounced from home to home, the ones that had troubled backgrounds and had learned how to be hard, to save themselves the disappointment.

Darcy had been a completely different person before she’d gotten to Olivia’s. She’d been mean, and hateful, a product of abuse and neglect and abandonment. And yet, Olivia’s patience knew no bounds; she’d accepted the screams of anger, the profanity and name calling, the sneaking out and getting in trouble with the law, and she’d done it all with grace and the knowledge that maybe the marble-shelled fourteen-year-old just needed someone to listen.

Those few first months had been hell for Olivia, Darcy was sure. Eventually, though, Darcy realized it didn’t matter what she did or say, Olivia wasn’t going to send her back, and she’d finally started letting herself believe it. Maybe Olivia wouldn’t get tired of it all, of her. Maybe, just maybe, she’d found someone who was going to be on her side.

It didn’t happen overnight, but slowly Darcy began to trust Olivia, and once she’d earned that trust, it
was given back to her in so many ways. Her grades came up, she got a job, learned what it was like to be responsible to someone other than herself. Darcy’d only been with Olivia for five years before leaving for college, but they’d been the best five years of her life.

As Steve slowly came to a stop and killed the engine, the silence in the car was only broken by the steady sound of rain. He watched Darcy stare out the window for a few seconds before he reached out and laid his hand over hers. “Are you ready?”

Darcy’s eyes swung to look at him, at the small encouraging and sympathetic smile on his face, and knew she’d never be able to express gratitude for him being with her at all. She wasn’t sure she’d have been able to do this alone, and just having him there meant everything. The words were there on her tongue, but she couldn’t bring herself to utter them aloud, not with the weight of what was waiting for her outside in the rain.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly before nodding at Steve. “Not really, but let’s do it anyway.”

Somehow the rain seemed perfect as she looked down at the freshly overturned dirt, the smell of wet grass and trees hanging heavy in the cemetery. Normally people brought flowers to graves, but Darcy knew exactly what Olivia would have thought about that.

*Flowers wither and die too fast,* she’d have said, *and I don’t have time for anything that comes and goes that quickly. I’m interested in making things that last.*

Now that she was standing there, feeling the wetness seep into her shoes, Darcy wasn’t sure what to think. She’d thought that once she was standing there she’d be sobbing, knowing that the only person she’d ever really thought of as a parent was a few feet below her, however that’s not what was going through her head. She *had* lost parents before, now.

She glanced over at Steve, rain falling on the umbrella he held over them. Through Bucky’s memories, she’d already lost parents. And friends. And herself. On the heels of those thoughts was the knowledge that Bucky had sworn to be strong enough for both himself and Steve, promising himself that he’d make sure Steve was taken care of. Memories from Sarah Rogers’ funeral floated to the surface, the look of grief on Steve’s face breaking her heart all over again.

Steve was pulled out of his own thoughts when Darcy’s fingers threaded through his, blue gaze swinging to see her looking at him with a small, sad smile, tears in her eyes that hadn’t fallen yet. When she looked back at the gravestone, he followed suit, looking at the soggish dirt.

The last funeral he’d gone to was Peggy’s. It’d been beautiful, seeing all the lives she’d touched, knowing how different the world was because she’d been in it. He felt the stab of guilt he always had when he thought of her, of how he’d promised her he’d be there, that he wouldn’t leave her, that he’d be late, but he’d *be there.*

Fate, or destiny, or whatever else people wanted to call it, had different plans, and he’d been proven a liar. Everything had been different when he’d been brought out of the ice, and he was still just doing his best to navigate in a world that was so different. Finding Bucky, being with him again… Steve knew he would always carry the scars of *what might have been* with Peggy, but he’d finally started to heal.

Everything that had happened since the battle with Thanos had him reeling again, fumbling to
understand where he fit in. It wasn’t just with Bucky, now, but with the woman who was standing beside him, hands clasped, both of them mourning the loss of something or someone that had defined who they were.

Steve squeezed Darcy’s hand and took a step closer to her under the umbrella. He felt Darcy lean against him, taking whatever comfort he could offer, if only for a little while.

Darcy’s eyes traced Olivia’s name in the granite, over and over, her thoughts a free fall of memories and regrets. It wasn’t until the rain began to beat down harder and the sky flashed with lightning that she realized they needed to go. She looked over at Steve, seeing ghosts swirling behind his eyes as her movement drew his attention. “We should get out of the storm.”

“Are you sure?”

Looking into his eyes, Darcy knew that if she wanted to, Steve would stay by her side, drenched and catching their deaths. If he can even get sick with Erskine’s serum pumping through his body. She nodded at him, already feeling the cold in her bones. She cast one more look over her shoulder at the grave marker, one last thank you being whispered into the universe, before they slogged back toward the car.

PageBreak

When Steve suggested dinner, Darcy didn’t argue. She didn’t plan on eating anything, a combination of grief and post-airplane sour stomach, but she knew they needed to stop somewhere. Both Steve and Bucky ate at least six times a day (super soldier metabolisms are jacked, man), and she was more than happy to keep Steve company while he ordered every egg and piece of sausage the place had.

Steve didn’t like the haunted look in Darcy’s eyes, the way her smile dimmed when it was pointed his way, so he kept her talking. She brightened a bit when he asked about her favorite subjects in school, unsurprised to find out she’d been on the speech and debate team. Watching her spar verbally with Tony and Bucky was amusing, to say the least, and it made perfect sense that she’d have taken arguing as an extracurricular activity. He’d laughed as she’d told him about a ‘mock trial’ she’d participated in, somehow getting the prosecution’s key witness to admit that he wasn’t really sure if her client had done the crime.

Even while eating, Steve kept asking her questions about where she’d grown up, what she’d been like in school, anything to keep her talking. It was incredibly sweet and she answered as honestly as she could, his laughter lifting her spirits, the smiles he shot her way warming her bones.

As they shared a piece of apple pie (sharing a piece of apple pie with Captain America? The only way it’d be more patriotic was if we were lighting a firework and it was the fourth of July), Darcy’d told him about New Mexico, and Jane, and Erik, and her first foray into the world of Avengersdom.

“So that’s why he calls you his Lightning Sister,” Steve said, lips turning upward as he took another bite of the pie. He could tell she was mostly just moving it around with her fork and not really eating, but he understood why she wasn’t hungry. He didn’t want to push her, just wanted to chase the darkness from her eyes for a little bit longer.

Darcy nodded fondly, remembering what it had felt like to be exposed to a whole new world, filled with Norse gods and nine realms, and giant death machines that could reduce entire city blocks to nothing but rubble. Everything had changed that first night, her life going on a completely different
path. “I was much more of a ‘taze first, ask questions later’ girl back then,” she said with a grin.

The chuckle that rumbled in Steve’s chest was deep and low, and it felt good to be able to joke with her. “As opposed to ‘grab glowing stone and see what happens’?”

Her laughter drew looks from several of the other patrons of the diner, but Steve couldn’t see them because his eyes were intent on Darcy.

She’d laughed with her whole body, head thrown back, dark curls sliding over her shoulders. Her cheeks tinted pink as she clapped a hand over her mouth, trying to silence herself as the sound had pinged off all the walls. Her nose was crinkled, and when a snort escaped, it only sent her into another round of giggles. Steve found himself laughing right along with her, the lightness and clarity of it intoxicating.

Darcy wiped under her eye, catching the tears of laughter before they escaped. She sighed loudly as she caught her breath, dipping her head in Steve’s direction. “Yeah, well, I can’t argue with you there. At least this time I had a good reason.”

His eyes sobered as he watched her eyes dance with self-deprecation. “You saved a lot of people that day. Including me.” Steve tracked the gravity of his words as they filtered to her brain, could pinpoint the moment she realized the sincerity in his voice. There was something in her eyes that held his, a significance that he didn’t completely understand himself.

“I don’t think I ever actually said thank you.”

“Please don’t,” Darcy said with a shake of her head, holding his gaze.

“I kind of feel like I need to.”

“How about you just pay for dinner and we call it even?”

Darcy didn’t think she deserved the way he was looking at her, like he owed her something. He didn’t owe her anything, not for her stupid decision, or the way she’s wedged herself into his life. She was glad grabbing the stone had saved the day, but she hadn’t done it out of bravery or some kind of heroism.

She’d done it because her friend Jane deserved to be alive, and if grabbing the stone allowed that to happen, then she’d be happy to do the stupid thing. At that moment, one life had mattered to her, more than anyone else, more than the rest of the world. Her friend, weighed against the rest of humanity. That wasn’t courage. It was selfishness.

There was something in Darcy’s eyes, something he couldn’t quite place, and Steve felt like he was missing something important. She didn’t look like she was ready to talk about it, and doing so in a diner in the middle of nowhere probably wasn’t the time or place. “I think it’s worth more than dinner, but it’s a good start,” Steve said, smiling at Darcy before lifting his arm to get the attention of the waitress.
Chapter Summary

Steve and Darcy comfort each other.

Chapter Notes

This, right here, might be one of my favorite chapters. I'm so glad I get to share it with you guys!

PageBreak

*Oh, all my nights taste like gold*
*Yeah, when I'm with you it's like everything glows*
*And all my days, we can lay low*
*Yeah when we're waking up, we're waking up slow*

- *Waking Up Slow*, Gabrielle Aplin

PageBreak

The rain was a nightmare. When a gust of wind wrecked their umbrella, Steve and Darcy were left making a mad dash into the hotel, still managing to become completely drenched by the downpour. The woman behind the desk frowned as they walked through the lobby, dripping water on all that pretty marble.

When Darcy started stomping her feet, the squish of water leaving wet footprints on the carpet, Steve couldn’t help but laugh. As they waited for the elevator, Steve jerked his arms downward, a splash of water hitting the golden doors. Darcy laughed loudly, covering her mouth as she giggled.

It was ridiculous. Steve’s white shirt was sticking to his body, and despite the amusement at the state of their clothing, Darcy couldn’t help but admire the way the wetness left very little to her imagination.

And she had a very good imagination.

His hair was sticking up everywhere and Steve pushed it off his forehead, the rain slicking it back. He watched Darcy kick off her shoes, chuckling when they hit the floor of the elevator with a wet slap. It was soon joined by the rain from her hair as she leaned forward and rung what she could from the strands, her curls still wild where they hung around her face.

As the elevator dinged open, they were both smiling at the situation, Darcy’s soaked shoes hanging from her fingers. She padded barefoot down the hall, shaking her head as Steve’s shoes squeaked
with every footstep. They slowed as she began to dig in her bag for the keycard to her room, then slowed even further as they neared their doors, both of them realizing that the night was about to come to an end, neither of them thrilled at the idea.

“This is me,” Darcy said, thumb gesturing to the door behind her, mentally rolling her eyes at herself. *He knows where your room is, dumbass.*

Steve nodded, looking down at his feet, wanting to stay with Darcy, but not sure it was the best idea. She was vulnerable, the gravity of the day still apparent, and he wasn’t sure how this was supposed to work. Bucky wasn’t there with them, and even though she knew about him and Bucky’s relationship staying physical, he wasn’t sure what was allowed between him and Darcy.

Darcy could see a flurry of thoughts behind the blue of Steve’s eyes, his hair darker from the rain, sticking up in places where he’d run his fingers through it. She could feel the blanket of awkwardness descending over them, the hallway suddenly *too* quiet. Everything had been fine seconds ago, but something had changed, some kind of unspoken weight landing on their shoulders.

The uncertainty was stupid, and Darcy was tired enough that the idea of hiding what she wanted just seemed too exhausting.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight,” she said finally, watching as Steve’s gaze flicked from his feet to her face. She took a step toward him, placing her hand on his wet chest, looking up at him through her lashes. “And it’s not because of why we’re here, or because I’m sad, though I am. I don’t want to be alone because I want to be with *you*, because you make me feel better, just by being there.”

There were beads of rain on the ends of her eyelashes, and as she spoke, Steve could think of nothing except how warm she was, how pretty the hazel of her eyes were, and how he didn’t want her to be alone either.

She let her fingers brush down his chest, grabbing his hand and squeezing it with her own. “I know I’m not what you wanted or would have chosen, and I don’t want you to do something just because you know I want you to -”

“Darcy.” Saying her name successfully stopped the flow of words from her mouth, and Steve lifted a hand to cup her cheek, looking into her carefully guarded eyes. “I didn’t come just because I thought you wanted me to. I came because *I* wanted to be here. For you.”

His words were sincere, genuine, and it caused her chest to ache in the best way. As she tried to stop the tears that were threatening to break free, Darcy shifted from one foot to the other, looking up at him with a soft smirk. “Shut up.”

Steve laughed softly, pulling on her hand until she was pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pressing his chin to the wet hair at the top of her head. When he took a deep breath, he was drowning in citrus, gardenia, and rain. Darcy’s scent was quickly becoming familiar, soothing.

Darcy’s arms were wrapped around his middle, her breath warm as it fanned across the wetness of his shirt, and even though he could have stayed there like that for longer, he knew they needed to get into dry clothes. “I’ll grab pajamas from my room.” He laughed at the sound of sadness she made, pressing a kiss to her wet hair.

“Give me, like, five minutes?” She glanced up at him, not ready to take her arms back yet. “I need to change and attempt to get this hot mess,” she gestured toward her hair, “under control.” When he smiled at her, Darcy felt a matching one bloom on her lips, too.
“Five minutes,” Steve repeated, stepping back and pulling the keycard out of his pocket.

“Five minutes.”

Steve had never been particularly good at speaking with women. He had years of memories filled with sideways glances, disappointment coloring their eyes when he stood next to Bucky, not exactly what they'd expected when they'd agreed to a double-date. He'd like to think he'd gotten better, but when Darcy pulled open the door to her room, words quickly evaporated from his mind.

Her hair was still wild, though drier now, and the boxer shorts Darcy wore showed a wide swatch of pale, porcelain skin. Her t-shirt was baggy, but he knew the curves that hid beneath the fabric. He pushed off the wall, bag in hand, closing the distance between them. She was still in the doorway, one hand on the door frame, the other hanging limply at her side. Steve wasn't sure what to make of the look on her face, and he frowned as he neared. "Darcy?"

Darcy blinked several times in quick succession, torn out of her inner thoughts by her name falling from his lips.

Reminder to self: send a thank you letter to Fruit of the Loom for plain white t-shirts that obviously run small.

"Yeah, sorry, huh? Sorry. Yeah. Come in." She could feel flames licking up her cheeks as she took a step backward, realizing she'd been standing there openly staring at him while blocking the doorway.

Giving her a small smile, Steve moved further into the room. The suite had a large bathroom right inside the door, opening up to a sitting area with two couches and a large flat-screen television. Doors to the right led into the bedroom, a large king-sized bed piled high with pillows sat in the middle of the space. It was large enough to sleep several people, but there weren't several people in the room. It was just him and Darcy, in a hotel room, wearing pajamas. He turned, gesturing toward the couch with his bag. "Can I?"

Hazel eyes widening, gaze flicking up from where she'd been looking at his flannel pajama pants and wondering how soft they were, Darcy nodded emphatically. "Yes! I mean, yeah, of course. Just put it wherever you want to."

She was ecstatic that he didn't have a reaction to what she'd just said, most likely not knowing the dirty connotation, and when he turned to throw his bag on the couch, Darcy took the moment to bite her lip, look toward the ceiling, and beg David Bowie to keep her from doing or saying something stupid.

Steve turned, crossing his arms over his chest, marveling at how quickly he could go from comfortable to awkward in the span of seconds.

"Are you -"

"Did you want -"

They both laughed, the sound tinged with anxiousness. As it faded, Darcy felt the compulsion to fill the silence with words. "I hope you're not going to make me argue with you about sleeping on the couch or something like that. I mean, I'm sure it'd be plenty comfortable, judging by it's flooffiness, but I still think we could both -"
"I'm fine in the bed, if you - "

"oh, yes, totally fine - "

"then bed it is."

Darcy nodded, a small smile quirking her lips as she looked at him. How Steve was able to look so solid but also vulnerable at the same time... it was adorable. Captain America was wearing pajamas in a hotel with a woman and he looked like he was afraid to breathe the wrong way. "This is silly, right?"

"Silly?"

"I mean, it's not like this is the first time we've been in a bedroom together. That time in my room -"

Steve nodded as the memories of that night flashed to mind in vivid detail. "Yeah, but we had a partner that night," he said, "and this is the first time it's just us."

Part of the reason he'd wanted to come, other than to give her comfort, was so he'd get to know her better. The conversation at the diner had started rough, but by the end it was almost easy, the words and stories flowing freely from them both. Somehow, changing clothes and being in a hotel room had shattered that comfort, made it into something heavier.

"I'm not expecting anything from you tonight," Darcy breathed, feeling like it needed to be said, so there was no miscommunication. "We don't even have to touch if you don't want to." She shifted her weight again, looking down at her feet, afraid that she'd look up and see relief in his eyes.

Steve closed the distance between them, lifting her chin so she was looking up at him, so she could see the sincerity in his eyes. "I like touching you, Darcy. Trust me." He watched the disbelief fade from her eyes, their depths darkening as she tasted the truth of his words. He tried to think of what Bucky would say if he were in the same situation, knowing he'd never be as smooth as his lover and best friend, but trying all the same. "I think we should get in bed."

Fuck those words were like music to Darcy's ears, and she nodded as she looked up at him. "Okay."

The sheets were just as soft as she'd imagined they'd be, and as Darcy crawled between them, watching Steve do the same, her entire body tingled and sparked with attraction. They settled, pulling the blanket over their bodies, leaving space between them, both laying on their sides and facing each other. Ignoring the thrills running up and down her spine, Darcy grinned shyly at him. "Is it wrong that I feel satisfied that Tony's having to pay for a room that won't get used?"

Steve chuckled, adjusting his arm under the pillow, shifting so it was easier to see her. It felt intimate, looking at her from this close, and he eased into it slowly. "I'm not sure he'll care."

"Probably not." She couldn't believe she'd brought up Tony Stark while in bed with Steve Rogers, mentally flogging herself for doing so. She didn't want to talk about Tony, or Bruce, or anyone else. Darcy wanted her entire attention to be placed on the man in front of her. "Did it hurt?" At his questioning look, she realized she'd changed the topic without telling him. "When you got the serum, I mean."

"Oh," Steve said, looking at the honest interest in her gaze. "It... it felt like my entire body was on fire. Muscles burning, bones aching. I'd never known pain like that, and I'd gotten into more than my fair share of scraps."

Darcy smiled, Bucky's memories readily available to confirm Steve's words. "Hmm, you getting into
fights with people? This is my shocked face."

His lips slanted at the sarcastic look she pointed in his direction. "You shouldn't trust Buck's memories completely. He always saw me differently than everyone else."

She nodded, moving just the tiniest bit closer to him. "Then tell me something new. Something you haven't told anyone else, even Bucky. Something for just you and me."

Steve looked at her for a long time, trying to think of something that no one else knew. There were things inside him, thoughts and feelings that he'd always been too scared to share with anyone, even Bucky. Especially Bucky. Admitting them to himself was hard enough, and Steve wouldn't have been able to take the guilt in his best friend's eyes as he explained. Somehow, looking into the pretty hazel of her eyes, he didn't feel the same way with Darcy; the idea of something being theirs, a memory shared that she hadn't gotten from her bond with Bucky or from any other effect of the stone… building something with her...

He took a deep breath, deciding to close his eyes and dive in.

"When I came out of that ice, realizing how much time had passed… part of me wondered if it'd have been better if they'd never found me. Everything was so different, I didn't know how I was going to fit in a world I didn't know anymore." He saw the emotion in Darcy's eyes, but she didn't speak. Steve's fingers brushed against her temple, pushing a curl behind her ear. "Everyone I knew was gone. Or, I thought they were."

"When I found out Peggy was still alive, it was like I was that tiny kid again, so nervous, stomach turning. Her eyes lit up when she saw me, and it was like no time had passed, like she'd been waiting for me. Then her memory faded, and her eyes lit up again, looking at me like it was the first time, and it broke my heart."

Darcy watched the pain in the curve of his jaw, in the line of his eyebrows, and she knew there was nothing she could say to make it better, no matter how much she wanted to chase those shadows from his eyes. She moved closer, finding his hand and threading her fingers with his on top of the blanket.

"Peg's life was so full, and even if it wasn't with me, I was happy she was loved, that she had a family. If we'd... if things had been different, if she and I... she wouldn't have gotten that. Being Captain America, leading this life... you can't just clock out at five and go home to your family. She would have missed out on so much if things hadn't gone the way they had."

It was hard to swallow past the lump in her throat, hearing the love and loss in Steve's voice, and Darcy was quiet for a little bit, watching as he felt everything again. She wanted to apologize for asking, for bringing it all to the surface, but he'd shared it with her, and she took the pain and heartache gratefully, knowing it hadn't been easy to talk about, but that he'd done it anyway.

Steve could see the empathy in her eyes, the hazel shining brighter through her tears, and just looking at her made it easier for him to breathe through the pain.

The vulnerability in his eyes made her chest ache, and Darcy was willing to spend the rest of her life earning the look he was giving her right then. Her voice was soft, a little more than a whisper, but not by much. "You know you deserve that, too, right?" She watched his eyebrows come together in confusion. "Being loved. Having a family. Captain America is… it's an ideal, a shield, a symbol. But you? Steve Rogers? You deserve a life just as much as anybody else."

He wasn't sure that was true, but the intensity in her eyes kept Steve from saying so, her grip on his
hand strong and insistent. Her tongue darted out to swipe across her bottom lip, and Steve found his eyes following the motion, gaze lingering on the pout of her mouth. For once he didn’t question it when his body reacted to her.

The air in the room was emotionally charged, like ozone, like electricity, and when his eyes flicked back up to look in hers, he could see the same desire written on her face as well. “If I kiss you right now, it might be hard to stop.”

“I know,” Darcy said, unable to help the small bit of disappointment that sounded in her words.

“No, you don’t.” Steve shifted in the bed, lifting onto his elbow, crowding into her space, looking down at her as her pupils dilated. “I’m going to kiss you, I just wanted to warn you that there’s the very real chance that my willpower won’t hold up.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t so much a word as it was an exhale of breath as Darcy blinked up at Steve, her heart racing at the hunger in his cobalt gaze. “I guess we won’t know until we tr -”

The words were still falling from her lips when his mouth crashed against hers, swallowing her sigh as Steve’s hand cupped her chin, fingers sliding through her hair until he cradled the back of her neck. His weight on top of her was delicious, and her hand reached out and shoved at the blanket, pushing it away so he could fit between her legs.

Steve slotted himself against her, one hand sliding down her curves, moving until he could lift her knee and hook it around his hips, hearing Darcy moan against his lips as he pressed himself against her. He pulled away long enough to press a kiss to her forehead, both cheeks, then recaptured her mouth.

Everywhere Steve touched her was on fire, heart thundering in her chest, beating as if repeating his name, over and over. Steve. Steve. Steve. Darcy heard it, then, falling from her lips as if she’d needed to make it real. Her fingernails bit into his back, sliding down as his mouth blazed a trail along her jaw. He felt so right, fitted against her like this, and Darcy was having a hard time breathing as his body moved against hers.

Her soft moans and sighs were going to be his undoing, a groan rumbling in his chest when she dug her heel into his lower back, pulling him even closer. Steve’s hands wanted to be everywhere on her body; on her neck, her ass, the inside of her knee, thumb brushing against her nipple as he palmed her breast. She cried out and arched her back, pressing herself more fully into his hands, his tongue licking at her lips and demanding entry.

She wasn’t sure how long they’d been kissing - minutes, hours - but Darcy’s entire body thrummed with need, melting against him, urging him on with her teeth, and nails, hands finding purchase wherever she could. She was like putty in his hands, chasing his skin, wanting to feel more of it pressed against her. Fingers pulled at the bottom of his shirt, exposing more skin, their bodies only separating for a second for his shirt to be removed and thrown over his shoulder.

Darcy’s mouth left his lips and moved down the curve of his jaw, the stubble he’d grown rubbing against her cheeks as she nuzzled the side of his neck, taking a deep breath of him, a sigh slipping free as his hands gripped her hips and pulled her closer. The hard feel of Steve pressed against her, coupled with the knowledge that he wasn’t wearing anything under the flannel bottoms, had her eyes screwing shut as she fell back to the mattress, body overwhelmed by the want singing through her.

Now that he’d started, Steve wanted everything. He wanted her to open for him, to curl his fingers into her warmth, wanted to taste her, wanted to connect their bodies until every movement made her scream, until her nails dug bloody furrows into his back as he made her fall apart, again and again
and again. It wasn’t until his fingers had dipped into the waistband of her underwear and he felt her shudder against him that his thoughts sobered enough to make him pause.

When Steve lifted his body from hers, holding himself up on his forearms, Darcy blinked hooded eyes at him, a question on her lips.

She was gorgeous, pupils blown, lips swollen and red, pink in her cheeks, and Steve realized in that moment just how much willpower he truly had. He waited until his breathing had evened out, until he was sure he could dip his head and kiss her without letting it spiral further out of control.

Darcy could tell that he was holding himself back, and she wasn’t sure where he pulled his endless amount of patience from. Her body was protesting, wanting to finish what they’d started, but she knew they couldn’t. She didn’t want their first time to be without Bucky, and she knew Steve felt the same.

Steve pressed his lips to hers once more, savoring the feel and taste for a second longer, before falling back to his side, stretching his arm up and under his pillow. He looked across the space, seeing the same internal war that was raging in him echoed in Darcy’s eyes. He chuckled, letting his breath out in a huff. “I’ve faced some pretty bleak odds, but stopping myself with you looking like that? Closest I’ve ever come to failure.”

“Pretty words from a pretty mouth,” Darcy said with a grin, reaching out to pat his cheek. He caught her hand first, though, and pulled until she was cradled against him, one arm wrapping around her shoulders, the other hand holding hers to his chest. “You’ll be able to sleep like this?” She heard his humming answer, grinning as it rumbled against her ear. “Okay.”

*

Even though her body had been like a livewire minutes before, the overwhelming feeling of exhaustion hit Darcy like a freight train, her eyes fluttering closed as the gravity of the day pressed over her. She must have fallen asleep, because the next thing she remembered was the dipping of the bed as Steve slipped from it. “Mmm?”

He’d hoped to be back before she knew it, but when he heard her hum of a question, Steve looked over his shoulder at her, seeing her sit up in the bed with sleep filled eyes, narrowed as she looked for what had woken her.

The grin that climbed onto his face at the sight of her disheveled hair disappeared when darkness fell in the room as he flipped the light switch. The moon was shining through a crack in the curtain, a single line of light illuminating enough to he could make his way back to her.

“Sorry, just shutting off the lights,” he whispered. She made no real acknowledgment at his words and Steve was almost certain she wasn’t really awake. When he slid back beneath the sheets, Darcy immediately returned to his side, draping one knee over his leg and settling herself under his arm. Somehow her body seemed to fit perfectly against his, and Steve was left wondering how both Bucky and Darcy could accomplish the same comfort when their bodies were so vastly different.

He laid back, pressing a kiss to her hair, listening as her breath evened out and she fell back to sleep in no time. It took Steve longer, his mind overturning the events of the day, but it was almost too easy to let Darcy’s warmth soothe him, her weight at his side an anchor as he fell after her.

PageBreak
Waking up next to Steve Rogers was everything she'd thought it be and so much more. At present, the blond's arm was draped over Darcy’s stomach, the rest of him curled against her back, and the grin on her face seemed like it'd be there permanently.

She knew Steve usually woke early, getting a run in while everyone else was still sleeping, but after the emotional day they’d shared, she figured he was due for a lazy Thursday morning. His breathing was even, calming, and Darcy's fingers brushed against his forearm, enjoying his warmth and smiling contently to herself.

She was being spooned by Steve Rogers.

She was being spooned by Steve Freaking Rogers.

When Steve sighed, arms pulling her closer, face burying itself further into her hair, Darcy just enjoyed the moment.

Once they got back to the compound, bursting the bubble that this trip seemed to surrounded them in, they’d have more work. Figuratively and metaphorically. Darcy felt like she and Steve had really come together over the last twenty-four hours, in spite of the horrible circumstances that had necessitated the trip in the first place. Things weren't perfect, there were still moments of awkwardness between them, but those could be overcome easily since they both wanted the same thing, and that's all that mattered.

She knew the moment Steve woke, feeling the small stiffening in his body as his brain tried to remember where he was, and who he was with. Darcy kept her fingers brushing against the hair on his arm, grinning even though she knew he couldn't see it. "I was this close to downloading 'Reveille' and playing it for you," she joked, "but wasn't sure whether you'd find it funny or hate me for it."

Steve smiled to himself, taking a deep breath through his nose, still able to smell the citrus and gardenia on her skin and in her hair, as if the rain hadn't washed it all away yet. "I wouldn't hate you," he breathed, letting his eyes close again, "but I might have furrowed my brow."

Darcy made a ‘tsk’ sound, clicking her tongue and shaking her head in mock disappointment. "Oh hell, the furrowed brow? That's a low blow, Rogers. Totally unfair."

Humming, Steve pressed his lips to her shoulder. It was an intimate gesture and part of Steve wondered if he’d gotten to that point with Darcy, or if he should feel embarrassed that he’d done it so easily. Remembering the night previous, the way they’d kissed, her words about him deserving some happiness… he pushed the hesitance aside and decided to stop questioning himself, at least for a little while. “Do you know that you snore?”

The noise Darcy made was strangled, and she turned in the circle of Steve’s arm, disbelief on her face as she blinked at him. “I do not snore!”

"Yeah, you do." Steve grinned sleepily as she continued giving him a shocked face.

Pushing down the embarrassment (I fucking snore, so hot, so sexy, perfect), Darcy’s eyes narrowed at him. “How dare you, sir!” As he continued to smile at her, blue eyes lighting with amusement, she turned her humiliation into thinly veiled compliments. “Yeah, well, we can’t all be perfect specimens like you and Bucky, can we?”

Steve reached out and pushed a lock of wild hair behind her ear. “Not much wrong with you from where I’m sitting, sweetheart.”
It was corny, and sentimental, and sounded more like something Bucky would have said than Steve, but the grin that climbed onto Darcy’s lips was crooked and dopey. She could feel the heat spreading over her cheeks, happiness thrilling through her body, and she reached out to cup his cheek. “Except for the snoring?”

He smiled, seeing the light in her gaze as she peered at him, the warmth of her hand against his skin comforting. “It was a small price to pay for getting to wake up beside you.”

Steve wasn’t sure where the words were coming from, put together and presented much smoother than usual when talking with members of the opposite sex, but maybe it was her. Maybe Steve was able to say things without stumbling because, somewhere along the line, being with Darcy had become easy.

Darcy was sure her heart was going to explode with happiness, bursting into a million little pieces, like candy from a pinata. A heart happiness pinata. He looked so lazy, so comfortable, and the light in his eyes warmed her like a supernova. “Play your cards right, Rogers, and you might wake up next to me more often.”

His grin brightened at the playful look on her face. “Are you flirting with me, Ms. Lewis?”

She beamed. “Doing my damndest, yeah. Is it working?”

Steve chuckled as he watched the wattage on her smile turn to an eleven. “Yeah,” he breathed as he leaned forward, “it’s working.”

Darcy saw the heat as it lit into his eyes, her gaze flicking down to his lips as they came closer. Part of her wanted to stop him so she could brush her teeth before they kissed, but the other much larger part of her wanted his lips on hers immediately, despite any morning breath concerns.

Her lips were soft against his, the affection easy. Delicate. It wasn’t like it’d been the night previous - desperate and filled with hunger - but Steve took his time, feeling her smile against his mouth, his arms pulling her closer. He laid back, pulling until she was half-sprawled on top of him, her hair a curtain around their faces.

Laughing against his lips, Darcy held herself up above him, one arm sweeping her hair over her shoulder as the other one pressed into the mattress beside his head. She blinked down at him, smile on her face and lightness in her voice. “Is it bad that I kinda don’t want to leave?”

Steve smiled up at her, watching her eyebrow lift slightly at her question. “No, I know what you mean,” he said, feeling her hair as it brushed against his chest, “but think about who we get to go home to.”

He’d said the exact right thing at the exact right time. It had to be some kind of new superpower, Darcy was sure of it. “Between you and Bucky? I’m one lucky son of a bitch.”

His grin widened. “We both are.”

*

An hour later, Steve was hefting both of their bags into the trunk of the rental car, looking up at Darcy with a question as he heard the tinkling of glass from her tote. “What’s so heavy in your bag?”

“Oh,” Darcy paused, hand on top of the car as she turned toward him with a devious smirk, “I took everything out of both mini-fridges. It’ll probably be, like, $400 extra added to the bill.”
When Steve’s laugh echoed in the air, it took Darcy everything had not to swoon.
Back To Me

Chapter Summary

Steve and Darcy return from their trip but don't get a moment of rest. As her boys are needed in Wakanda, Darcy does her best to ignore the ball of worry in her gut.

Chapter Notes

For those of you who read this story when it was just a 15k collection of drabbles, this is where that plot left off. Everything from here on out is totally new, which is equal parts 'yay!' and scary. Getting to share the next story arc is exciting and I hope I did everything justice.

Oh! Also! The time has come where posting twice weekly might not be feasible. I am currently writing chapter 30, but I'm feeling the time crunch. I'm a perfectionist and like to write stuff, then go back and poke at it several times over the coarse of a week. Logistically, I don't think that'll be what happens anymore, not if I continue posting like I have. So, that leaves me with two options.
1) Continue posting twice weekly, but with half as many words (1500-2500words instead of 3500-5000words)
2) Post once a week, 3500-5000words
Gentle Readers! Which do you think would be best? :D

PageBreak

Just come back to me
That’s what I ask every time I look up at the stars

PageBreak

Darcy’d taken the entire bottle of dramamine (well, not the whole bottle, but enough) and was happy that she hadn’t needed any of the sick bags on the flight back to the compound. It’d been close, though, and she suspected Steve had flown faster for her sake. Not passing through a storm had helped, but she’d still taken Steve’s hand happily when he stood next to her, waiting until she was sure her stomach had settled before moving.

She moaned, the sound sad and miserable, and Steve’s fingers tightened on hers as he watched her run a hand over her face, head still between her knees. Even though he knew it was just motion sickness and that it was temporary, he still didn’t like the idea of her not feeling well.

Steve didn’t like it at all.
His gaze swung when he heard the steady rhythm of feet hitting pavement, then the metallic crunch as those feet ran up the cargo bay doors and into the jet.

“Captain. It’s Wilson and Maximoff.”

Darcy’s eyes squinted open when she was certain she wouldn’t throw up, not recognizing the man in uniform, his face a bit pink from exertion. It looked like he’d come running from somewhere, a slight thread of panic in his voice, and it was pretty obvious something was wrong.

“What happened?”

Steve’s voice had lost the softness he’d used with Darcy, replaced by what Bucky liked to call his “captain voice”. It was very apt, as Darcy couldn’t help but think about Steve Rogers fading away and being taken over by the Star-Spangled Soldier. The fact that she’d gotten to spend two whole days with Steve Rogers and not Captain America felt like some kind of dream, one she hoped would re-occur often.

The man opened his mouth to talk, then noticed Steve’s hand and the woman who was attached to it. “I’m sorry, I didn’t -”

“What happened,” Steve repeated, with more force in his tone. He could tell Riggs was hesitating because Darcy didn’t have the proper clearance, but Steve didn’t want them to waste any time. When Riggs glanced one more time in Darcy’s direction, the frown on Steve’s face deepened and that seemed to do the trick.

“We’ve tried reaching them on comms for an update but it’s been radio silence since Monday.”

Sam and Wanda had been in Wakanda for over three months and nothing had seemed out of the ordinary that whole time. They’d been getting daily updates, debriefs on the recovery effort, no new threats to worry about. His gaze flicked back up to Riggs. “Satellites?”

“Stark says they’re disabled and he can’t get them back up. The team’s getting ready now.”

Steve nodded. “Refuel, we’ll be wheels up in five.”

Darcy watched the man turn and run from the jet, face already set and preparing to follow Steve’s orders. She’d found out pretty quickly that most of the soldiers on base were Captain America’s men, through and through, and they rarely questioned his directions. Following a leader had never been her strong suit, but she supposed if Captain America asked a soldier to do something, they trusted him.

But Darcy? She trusted Steve Rogers.

Steve watched Riggs run back inside before he knelt in front of Darcy, fingers squeezing, glad she looked less green than she had a few minutes prior. He gave her a wan smile, seeing the look in her eyes, like she knew the words that were about to come out of his mouth. “We’ve gotta go.”

Darcy hadn’t met Sam or Wanda in the short time she’d been at the compound, but she knew from Bucky’s memories that they were important to Steve, which made them important to her, too. As she stared into the cerulean she loved so much, Darcy could see the first hint of uncertainty in Steve’s gaze. “Should I be worried?”

“I’d be surprised if you weren’t,” Steve said, reaching up to brush a piece of hair behind her ear, “but you’ve got Bucky in there,” he tapped her temple, “so you know the mission and the risks that come with it.”
She sighed. Darcy did know the risks, more intimately that she would have liked, and she also knew her men. They would go, risk being hurt or worse, because it was the right thing to do. Yeah, Sam and Wanda were friends, but that wouldn’t matter. If they could help, they’d go. It was brave, and terrifying, and it was one of the reasons she loved them.

“I suppose asking to go along would be out of the question?” The look Steve gave her said more than enough, and Darcy laughed softly as she shook her head. “Yeah, yeah, I figured. How about just promising me that you’ll be safe and do everything you can to come home to me?”

Steve smiled at Darcy. Come home to me. It was such a simple phrase, just four little words, but they were heavy, weighted with meaning, and Steve felt it in his chest. “That I can do.” he said, closing the distance between them.

He kissed her, lips lingering, and Darcy’s stomach flipped with careful hesitation. It was soft, and sweet, and perfect, and she sent up a silent prayer that it wouldn’t be the last time she got to feel him against her.

When he pulled back, Steve could see uneasiness in her eyes, worry turning the hazel darker, and he wanted nothing than to wipe the anxiety from her face. He straightened, fingers squeezing hers, compartmentalizing his own feelings and focusing on the mission. “I’m sure Buck’s suitting up. You should be able to find him before we leave.”

Darcy nodded, hearing him slip back into the Captain and knowing that she was only making things harder on herself by lingering. She stood experimentally, happy when the wave of nausea seemed to have passed. She threw her arms around Steve’s neck, the toes of her boots scraping the floor. His arms closed around her and squeezed, and she took a deep breath inward; his scent was familiar, and comfortable, and she pressed her lips to his neck before pulling back.

She didn’t look back at him, not even pausing as she grabbed her bag. She made her way down the ramp and out of the jet without a second look, too afraid that she’d start crying, knowing that right now she was the last thing he needed to worry about.

She was happy for a distraction, smiling as one of her favorite people headed in her direction. Thor’s face broke into a wide grin at the sight of her, and the expression helped push away some of the dark clouds she’d felt closing in. Thor Odinson, Norse God and resident therapy puppy-dog.

“Lady Darcy! You’ve returned!”

Darcy wasn’t able to brood, not while the smile on the giant blond’s face was pointed at her. “I have indeed. And you’re heading out, I see.”

Thor’s face sobered a bit and she saw the soft hesitation light in his eyes as he nodded. “We are all hoping it is a miscommunication, nothing more.”

You know what they say about hoping, Darcy’s brain groused, trying hard to push aside the wave of anxiety that was starting to build in her stomach. “Well, Big Guy, will you do me a favor and keep an eye on my boys?”

Thor dipped his head in her direction, giving her an encouraging smile. “I swear on Yggdrasil that I will do what I can.”

Darcy had no idea what IggyPopDrizzle was, but she could see the determination in Thor’s face as he pinned her with his pretty blue eyes. “I suppose that’s all I can ask.” When he held out Mjolnir toward her, she bumped it with her fist, smiling at the weapon, somehow feeling better that it’d be
right there with her boys, too. “Be safe, myuh-myuh.”

“That’s not it’s name,” Tony said as he strode by Darcy without looking at her, not even slowing as he made his way onto the plane. He wasn’t wearing his armor, and she half-hoped it was because they weren’t expecting trouble. But if Thor was there, hammer in tow, she couldn’t help but think they were planning for worst case scenario.

Bruce gave her a nod of his head as he passed and it wasn’t hard to see that the scientist wasn’t particularly excited with the prospect of going somewhere that might induce his magic transformation. She tried to give him large smile, hoping it’d lift his spirits. “Hopefully your intradimensional yoga helped the Green Giant!” she called out to him.

“Also not what that’s called!” She heard Tony yell as he took the pilot’s seat, the engine whirring to life a second later.

“You’re finally back and we’re leaving,” Bucky said into her ear, voice dark with feeling. When Darcy turned and smiled at him, it hit him just how much he’d missed having both her and Steve at his side.

Like torture.

Like agony.

He’d only made it through with the help of Natasha and a well timed appointment with Dr. Cho which had involved being put under for several hours. If their distance had been hard on him, it was going to be infinitely harder on Darcy, especially knowing their mission could involve violence.

Darcy pressed her palm to his skin, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. “Ships in the night and whatnot,” she breathed, drinking in the sight of him, stomach churning with a mix of worry and desire. She knew this was their job, but that didn’t make it any easier. “You’ll be careful?”

He gave her small smirk. “Always am, doll.”

Darcy gave him a look, one that said she wasn’t buying any of his bullshit, despite the smoothness of his deceit. “Even if I didn’t have your memories in my head, I’d know that was a lie.”

Bucky’s lips slanted as he closed the distance between their bodies, pressing his lips to hers, putting meaning into the gesture that he couldn’t speak aloud. She was warm, and smelled like citrus and the tiniest bit like Steve, and he took a large breath inward, drawing her into his lungs as deep as he could.

She pressed her lips to his neck, squeezing her arms tightly. When she heard the plane’s flaps being tested, Darcy knew they didn’t have much time left. She pulled back, eyes sweeping along his jaw, the bridge of his nose, the curve of his eyebrow, committing it all to memory as if she didn’t already have it memorized a million times over. “Come home to me, okay? I’ve got plans and they involve you and that large hunk of beef over there, and you know how I hate waiting.”

Bucky laughed, shaking his head warmly. “Yeah, sweetheart. I do know that about you.”

She nodded, swallowing past the lump in her throat. Darcy had memories of them leaving on missions hundreds of times, but this was her first, and she was scared. She was scared for him, and Steve, and the rest of the ragtag team she’d come to know and care for. Yeah, it was their job, but it sucked. It sucked a lot, but she needed to let them do their job. “Then you also know that I love you.”
He smiled at her, seriousness bleeding into his slate eyes, emotion making them darker. Her hair began to whip as the plane’s engines surged to life, and he closed the distance between them, lips brushing along the shell of her ear. “Yeah, doll, I know that, too.”

She nodded, drawing on his strength that now lived in her body, stepping aside and watching Bucky climb into the plane. Before the bay doors stole them from sight, Darcy could see both of them, both of her men, standing side by side, looking back at her. Darcy waved, fear and love singing through her. She watched as the plane grew smaller and smaller, until it disappeared into the clouds.

She sighed, turning back to the empty hanger, feeling a bit lost. The two halves of her heart were on a jet headed toward a far flung country in the heart of Africa, not knowing if they were flying straight into a battle or ambush.

“Darcy! Where… they already left?”

Darcy blinked at Peter, head cocking to the side as her gaze shifted down toward the bag in his hand, then back up to his face. “Did you think you were going with them?”

“What? Um, no. Not… Barnes said something about needing to carry a bag, and I, uh, I guess he meant -”

He grunted when Darcy’s bag was thrown at his chest, quick reflexes catching it before it could hit the ground. The sound of glass hitting glass came from inside, but Darcy was fairly certain nothing had broken. She’d wrapped all those twenty-dollar mini-bottles of booze in her clothes, along with a few towels and a robe she’d taken, as well.

“My bag. Pretty sure he was talking about helping me carry my bag back to my room. Did you really think they’d let you go on a real mission?”

“Well, yeah. I was in Berlin -’

“Totally different scenario, spiderling.”

"Weren't things supposed to get better after the last planetary cataclysm was avoided?"

Steve glanced in Tony's direction, watching as the billionaire set the quinjet on auto-pilot and spun in his seat to face the rest of them. "We don't know that anything's wrong," Steve said with a frown, "it could just be communication issues."

"It's not like a satellite goes off-line for no reason," Tony said over the top of his glasses, "we run maintenance on them regularly and it was fine three days ago."

"Any solar anomalies? Something that could have, uh, fried a board or something?" When Tony leveled his glare in Bruce's direction, the scientist shrugged his shoulders. "Is it so wrong to hope it's nothing?"

"'Hope for the best and prepare the worst' always seems to go in one direction for us."

As Bruce and Tony's voices hushed near the front of the jet, Steve turned his attention to the tablet in his hands, going over the last report Sam had sent him. The soldier hadn't mentioned anything unusual. They were so close to being complete, cleaning up the damage left over from the battle with
Thanos and his armies. Steve couldn't think of any reason why things had gone down. He'd tried being hopeful, but part of Steve couldn't help but agree with Tony; things so rarely went their way and if this was like any of the other times, they were in for a fight.

Bucky watched Steve frown at the screen, taking the seat next to the blond. "So."

Steve’s gaze flicked in Bucky's direction, seeing the small grin curling his best friend's lips. "So what?"

"Don't 'so what' me, punk. How did things go? Darcy looked... good. Solid."

Steve set the tablet aside, turning to look at Bucky with a raised eyebrow. "You mean good for someone who returned from visiting the grave of a loved one?"

"You know what I mean," Bucky growled, lowering his voice, glad that Tony, Bruce and Thor were arguing amongst themselves, "I meant she looked happy."

Thinking about Darcy brought a smile to Steve's lips and he looked down at his hands. "It was nice," he said, eyes swinging up to Bucky's, seeing the satisfied smug look on the other man's face. "What else do you want me to say?"

"Absolutely nothing," Bucky said with a grin, seeing the tint of pink coloring Steve's cheeks. "That was your time and I'm glad you've got something that's yours, now."

It still amazed Steve that neither Bucky nor Darcy seemed jealous, but he was still learning how all of this worked. Natasha and Clint had been more than helpful, answering his questions and being brutally honest. When this had started, he'd struggled with his own jealousy, thinking that Bucky and Darcy were together when he wasn't around. It'd hurt, the idea of them having something he wasn't a part of, but Steve was starting to get it. Bucky wasn't angry he and Darcy'd had a weekend to themselves, he was happy they'd had that time.

Would he be happy, knowing Bucky and Darcy were together when he wasn't around?

Steve thought back to being with Darcy in the hotel room. He hadn't felt like he was doing something wrong when he'd kissed her, because Bucky knew that something could happen. There was no hiding, no lying, no covering up what they'd done. Everyone had gone into the weekend knowing the possibilities. That's what Clint and Natasha had stressed to him: this wouldn't work if they didn't communicate openly and honestly.

Would it hurt him to know Darcy and Bucky were together without him? Thinking about it hard, Steve realized it would hurt him, but not in the way he'd expected. It'd hurt him because he wasn't able to be there, not because he wasn't wanted. And that's what it was about. They all wanted each other, no matter what iteration, and if they could be together, then that was amazing. If Steve wasn't able to be there, it made him feel better knowing neither of them would be alone.

Bucky watched thoughts tumble behind Steve's blue gaze, his fingers fidgeting, his cheeks tinted pink. He knew they were still navigating everything, but he hoped that the time Steve'd spent with Darcy had settled something in the blond. He could see it in Steve's eyes, the affection he felt for Darcy, and it made Bucky smile seeing the shy grin turning Steve's lips.

He reached out and threaded his fingers with Steve's, earning him a soft smile from his best friend. "But things were good?"

"Yeah," Steve said, blue eyes lighting with honesty, "things were good. How'd your appointment with Dr. Cho -"
"Rogers! We have a plan of attack or are you wanting us to improv?"

Steve glanced in Tony's direction, seeing the expectant look on the other man's face. He turned back to Bucky, watching the soldier bleed into the gray of his eyes, the uncertain anticipation turning his gaze harder. He stood, feeling Bucky do the same at his back, crossing the cabin and coming to stand around the projection of Wakanda that was floating in the air. "Best plan would be to approach here..."

Darcy pushed into the lab, damp hair hanging around her shoulders, eyes cast down at her phone. She'd gotten nothing - no emails, no calls, no texts - in the three hours since everyone had left, and she was trying her best to believe that no news was good news. *I mean, they're probably still flying. Who knows how long it takes to get to Wakanda?*

"Six hours, ma'am."

As Friday's voice filled the air, Darcy froze, glancing up at the ceiling with widened eyes. "Did you just read my mind?"

"No, you asked how long it takes to get to Wakanda."

Darcy blinked at Peter. "Out loud?"

"Um... yeah, yes, you said it out loud. That's how I heard it, too."

"I know how speaking out loud works, kid, I just hadn't realized I had said it out loud."

"Well... you did."

"Yes, thank you, Parker, I got it now." When his brow lowered at her tone of voice, Darcy took a deep breath in and let it out slowly, eyes closed, doing everything she could to keep the stress from turning her stomach. She didn’t mean to snap at Peter, but it was hard not to growl when she was already so close to the edge. "I'm sorry. I've got a lot going on in my head right now."

Peter nodded, slapping a screwdriver against his palm as he looked at her. "I know. I heard about your... I'm sorry you lost someone."

When Peter gave her a small sad smile, Darcy felt even more guilty for snapping. He knew all too well what it was like - losing someone important - and despite how awesome his aunt was, Darcy imagined the hurt of losing parents who actually gave a damn was something you never really got over. "Thanks. She was a pretty awesome lady."

"She'd have to be, right?" When Darcy blinked at him, Peter rushed to fill the silence with words. "I mean, since you're, you know, *you*, how you are, and she probably had a lot to do with that? I mean -"

"I know what you mean," Darcy said with a soft laugh, reluctantly putting her phone down and smiling across the table at him. If she was looking for a distraction, giving the pint-sized baby scientist her attention was as good as anything else. She’d try her best not to freak out over the fact that a jet, full of people she loved, was winging toward an uncertain future. "Hey, what do you say we get dinner before we dive in? It's on me."
"Isn’t, the food, I mean, isn’t it free for residents and employees?"

"Let’s not get caught up in semantics, kid."

“Was it always this hard?”

“Yes.”

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better, or is it the truth?”

“Can’t it be both?”

Maria Hill sighed, leaning back in the chair, feeling her spine crack as she stretched. She brought the beer bottle to her lips, taking a long drink as she glared across the desk at her mentor. “You know,” she said after swallowing, wagging a finger in Fury’s direction, “when I took this position you said it would be rewarding.”

Fury snorted at her, raising an eyebrow. “Are you saying it’s not rewarding?”

“I’m saying you’re full of shit. I get it now, why you wanted to step back. Heavy is the head, right?”

“Things were easier before.”


“Compared to Thanos and that gauntlet, everything else was a cakewalk.” Fury took a drink from his own bottle, squinting at the artificial window and the moonlight that was streaming in. “Now you’re in the build-up stage. Something new will be on the horizon soon enough. There’s always something, Hill, if I taught you nothing else, I at least made sure you knew that.”

“Any idea what it’ll be?” When Fury’s eye pinned her with A Look, Maria took another drink.

“I can guarantee people will get hurt. Innocents. Friends. Family. It’s the same story. But that’s our job. To narrate it all. To make sure the team is secure, that they’re strong together.”

“But they’re not all together, are they? Barton and Romanoff are off base. Parker and Lewis are here, but everyone else is in Wakanda.”

Fury sighed. “That’s not what I meant by together, and you know it.”

Nodding, Maria stared up at the ceiling as she spun a bit from side to side. “Yeah. But it was funny when they weren’t trusting you, because I knew what the score was, knew what was really going on.”

“And now that they hate you?”

“Hey. Hate is a very strong word,” she said, eyes narrowing at Fury.

“I’m just saying, it’s harder when it’s your name they utter in disgust. But it’s better. It’s better it’s your name and not someone else serving with them side by side. Heavy is the head.”
“But we’re not wearing a crown.”

“No, Hill. No, we’re not. We’re the helmet that all the shit is raining down on, but we do it to take the hail of bullets because it gives our men the distraction they need to do the real work.”

“If you had told me, when you first hired me, where I would end up? I’m not sure I’d have taken the spot.”

Fury laughed, shaking his head as he brought the bottle back to his lips. “Now who’s lying?”
Chapter Summary

Darcy annoys Peter and misses her boys. Steve and Bucky return to Wakanda and meet with friends.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to 'Here And Where You Are' Wednesday! I had the WORST day at work, and the only thing that kept me going, was getting to update this! Hope you enjoy it!

PageBreak

_It doesn't take a comet, a burst of fire_
_To make you realize you love him_
_What it takes is the way his touch soothes your soul_
_The way your heart screams when you're forced apart_

PageBreak

"I don't see anything out of place," Tony's voice crackled over the ear piece, "looks like everything’s good on the ground."

"Roger. Setting the bird down."

The dust kicked up by the quinjet swirled on the other side of the window as Steve landed on the airfield just inside of the borders of Wakanda proper. As the engines powered down, Steve made his way to stand next to Bucky, Thor, and Bruce, the bay doors opening and letting in the hot, humid air that always seemed to hang over the land.

"Just because Tony didn't see anything doesn't mean things are fine. Everyone be on guard -"

"What took you so long?"

Steve's lips quirked upward at the booming voice, his feet carrying him down the metal steps. It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the bright sunshine, but when they did, they were greeted by a widely beaming man in jeans and a t-shirt, a small bird emblem on his chest. "You don't call, you don't write, if I didn't know better I'd say you'd gone AWOL."
Sam Wilson laughed, reaching out to clap Steve's hand with his own, pulling the blond in for a quick hug. "Man, when you're in paradise there's no reason to go anywhere else." His dark eyes flicked over Steve's shoulders, watching as Bucky, Bruce, and Thor joined them on solid ground, giving each of them a nod in turn. "We figured you'd show up sooner or later. Had a bet pool going and everything."

They all turned as Tony landed next to them with a hush of air, metal helm pulling back to expose his face. "And? Who won?"

"I did," Wanda said, landing softly on the dirt, red energy crackling around her hands and feet. She nodded at Steve, a grin lifting her lips softly. "Three days."

Steve smiled at Wanda, glad to see that some of the color had returned to her skin, happy that the dark bags that had found almost permanent placement under her eyes were gone. His chin dipped in Sam's direction, one eyebrow raising. "What'd you have?"

"A week. At least. Consider me surprised. Figured you must've had a bunch of other stuff keeping you busy."

The look Sam gave Steve was filled with the promise of a conversation and Steve chuckled softly to himself as they started walking toward a couple of jeeps waiting next to the small airplane hanger. "Just had a little R&R, that's all." His mind turning back to the issue at hand, Steve glanced in Sam’s direction. "Comms have been down since Monday?"

The other man nodded. "Yeah, not sure why. T'Challa's people were looking into it but -"

"But they don't compare to my level of technological intelligence or sparkling personality? Got it. See you there." They all watched Tony's mask fall back into place before he rocketed toward the dense jungle.

"He knows how the shit he says aloud sounds, right?"

"Oh, he knows," Wanda said with a frown, her accent singing with annoyance. It was clear to Steve that she still wasn’t Tony Stark’s biggest fan, with fair reason. "It's why he does it. He is insecure he doesn’t have his fingers in their science."

Steve grunted, nodding. "He signed the agreement, all the same."

Bucky frowned. "He just likes being the smartest person in the room."

“He usually is,” Bruce said, ignoring the glares that were sent in his direction, “but that’s not the case in Wakanda.”

“No,” Steve said as his eyes tracked the gold and crimson suit until Tony was out of sight, “not here.” When Sam fell into step next to him, Steve’s gaze flicked over, squinting against the bright sun. "Nothing else? Increased activity? Missing people?"

"Not that we can tell. T'Challa's increased the guards, just in case, but everything else has been quiet."

"Silence isn’t safety," Bucky said, eyes narrowing softly when Sam bent around Steve's head to glare in his direction.

"No one said we thought it was safe, just said it was quiet," Sam said, words a bit clipped. Steve closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. He'd come to expect the back and forth between Bucky
and his friend, but it seemed time and distance hadn't changed how much they liked to needle each other.

"We'll let Tony take a look at what he can then go from there."

"Sounds good. Cap, how 'bout you ride with me, the rest can go in the second jeep?"

Bucky's mouth turned down into a frown at the suggestion, glancing between Steve and Sam. "There's five seats in that jeep."

"Yeah. So you, Thor, Banner and Wanda will fit just fine. Glad we all agree."

Steve couldn't help the wry grin that climbed onto his lips, squinting in Bucky's direction. "We have a few things to discuss."

Bucky itched to tell Steve that he didn't want to leave his side, not until they knew everything was safe, but he let his mouth fall closed, his concerns unvoiced. He didn't nod, simply walked toward the other jeep, expression dark.

Steve could tell Bucky wasn't happy with the arrangement, but he gave in and made his way toward the other jeep. Steve turned to Sam, giving the other man a knowing look. "Was that really necessary?"

"Hey, he's the one glowering, not me." Sam jumped into the driver's seat, waiting for Steve to throw his shield in the back before sliding into the passenger's side. As Sam started driving into the dense treeline, he glanced over at Steve with a raised eyebrow. "Okay. Start talking. I hear things from Clint, sometimes from Nat. They're careful, but I know something's up. You gonna just tell me, or are you gonna make me pull it out of you?"

Steve sat back in his seat, flipping the air vent so cooler air blew out toward him. "You know, one of these days that swagger of yours won't work anymore."

Sam laughed lightly, a smirk taking residence on his face as he glanced over at Steve. "But today's not that day. This swagger is killing it, and you're going to tell me what's going on because you're my friend and I haven't seen you in months. Why fight me about it?"

The certainty in Sam's voice made Steve shake his head, a slightly mystified expression on his features. Steve ran a hand over his face, sighing. "Sam, I.. I don't even know where I'd start."

"Well, we've got an hour's drive ahead of us. Best place to start's gonna be the beginning. I take it the girl that saved all our asses woke up?"

"Yeah, she woke up," Steve said, chuckling softly, "and then everything changed."

Sam glanced in Steve's direction again, eyes searching the other man's face for some kind of explanation. "Man, judging from the look of it, something big went down."

Steve snorted softly to himself. Sam has always been easy to talk to, friendly and open, and even though he knew the other soldier had seen more than his fair share of unbelievable things, this was a whole different level of strange. He took a deep breath, diving in, turning toward Sam for what was bound to be an interesting conversation. "After she grabbed the stone..."
As the jeeps pulled up in front of the royal palace, the group made their way toward the grand steps that led to an immaculately constructed structure, beautiful and opulent, the style and architecture singularly unique to Wakanda.

Sam was laughing as he fell out of the jeep and into the heat and humidity. When his eyes landed on Bucky, his laughter only raised in pitch and volume, bending at the waist and clutching at his stomach. Bucky’s frown deepened. "What's so funny?"

Reaching up to wipe a tear from his eyes which, were dancing with mirth, Sam leveled Bucky with a smirk curling his lips. "You have the memories of a being a teenage girl in your head. That's the funniest shit I've heard in a long time. Does that mean you know how to braid hair? Do you remember reading the Baby-Sitters Club? Who's your favorite American Girl Doll?"

Bucky glared daggers at Sam as a new round of peeling laughter fell from the other soldier, then turned his unhappy eyes to Steve, pinning him with a narrowed eyes.

Steve, to his credit, shrugged a shoulder and gave Bucky a wan smile. "He asked what's been happening since they left." He could tell his lover didn't find it particularly funny, but he could see a small grin on Bruce’s face over Bucky’s shoulder, as well as a curious expression on Wanda’s.

"What is a Babysitter's Club?" Thor asked, eyes flicking from Steve, to Sam, to Bucky, none giving an answer to the Asgardian’s question; Sam was still laughing as he made his way up the palace steps, Bucky was glowering at everyone, and Steve was trying his best not to join Sam’s laughter because he knew it would be a bad idea to laugh when Bucky’s eyes were a disgruntled shade of charcoal.

The group made their way up the marble steps, pausing as the immensely large doors opened, a man walking toward them into the sun with several statuesque women behind him. T’Challa moved with grace as he came to stand before Steve, holding out his hand to the other man. "It is good to see you, my friend."

Steve smiled, shaking T’Challa’s outstretched hand. "It's good to see you too, your Highness." He nodded at the women behind the King of Wakanda, watching as they returned the gesture. He knew several of the Dora Milaje by name and had enjoyed their company when he and Bucky had been here after Siberia.

T’Challa’s expression was warm as he looked down at the blond, "please, Steven, call me T’Challa."

One of Steve’s shoulders raised softly as he pulled his hand back. "Old habits."

"Really old. Almost a century, actually." The group looked when Tony landed on the steps, the metal piece hiding his face lifting, his lips turned up into a rueful smile.

Stepping out of the armor, Tony pressed a button on his watch and the device rocketed in the air and toward the treeline. He ignored the look Steve was giving him, bowing his head slightly toward T’Challa. When the king returned his nod, Tony took a step closer. "One of your positioning devices was Waco'd."

The phrase of speech was easy enough to decipher, and T’Challa frowned, feeling his guards behind him shift with uneasiness as well. "What could have caused such damage? We were unable to pinpoint the exact problem."

Tony sighed. "From the look of it? An EMP of some kind, something I didn’t recognize. Friday’s running diagnostics on it now. Is Menzi still around? I didn’t entirely hate him the last time we
worked together.”

Turning his head slightly, T’Challa shared a look with Okoye, the head of the Dora Milaje. She nodded and made her way back into the palace. His gaze swung back to Tony. “I am certain Menzi would be more than pleased to assist you with anything you may need in the morning. Until then, please feel welcome in our lands. My people will show you to your rooms.”

Bucky watched Bruce, Sam, Thor, Tony, and Wanda follow T’Challa’s guards inside, disappearing into the dark interior. He took two steps forward, holding his arm out toward Wakanda’s king.

T’Challa returned the gesture, clasping Bucky’s forearm, smiling warmly at the soldier. “It is good to see you, Sergeant. You seem well.”

“I am,” Bucky said, a small smile crawling onto his face, “and I’m sorry I wasn’t able to stay and help you rebuild.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. Ms. Maximoff and Mr. Wilson have helped in untold ways. What happened to my country was not your fault, and if you had not risked everything, we would not be here, enjoying the sun on our faces and the wind at our backs.”

“That’s a pretty ‘thank you’ that I’m not sure we deserve,” Steve said, coming to stand beside Bucky and T’Challa, squinting against the sun. “The help you and your people provided –”

“Was what was called for, and what was needed. Wakanda had been in the shadows long enough, letting the weight crush others while we kept our hands clean and our memory short. It was time we stood with our brothers and sisters against the darkness. No war is without damage, no fight without sacrifice. Wakanda will continue, as I hope the rest of our friends will.”

Steve nodded, reaching out to squeeze T’Challa’s shoulder. “I’ve missed the way you string words together.”

“Then come, friends, let me use more of them. I have questions about what has happened in the months since we last spoke.” He saw the look that passed between Bucky and Steve, one eyebrow gracefully raising at their expressions. “Have I missed that much?”

Bucky chuckled, shaking his head as he fell into step with Steve and the King. “I guess you could say that.”
Tony: Why the hell did I just get a room service bill for $340?

Darcy: We didn’t order room service

Tony: My bill begs to differ
**Tony:** Cap can’t even get drunk

**Darcy:** Oh! Right. Yeah. I cleaned out the mini fridges in both our rooms. Might have taken towels and a robe, too.

**Tony:** What the hell

**Darcy:** I was sad, okay?

**Tony:** Are you seriously guilt tripping me right now?

**Darcy:** That depends. Is it working?

**Tony:** I hope the little bottles were worth it

**Darcy:** They’re hidden around the lab. Happy Hunting.

---

When the opening chords of ‘Stay With Me’ began to sound from Darcy’s phone, Peter pulled one of his earbuds out, eyes glancing in all directions to find Darcy’s mass of dark curls. Not seeing her anywhere, he hesitated for a second before grabbing the phone and pressing the flashing green button. When Bucky’s face filled the screen, Peter did his best not to appear surprised and put off-guard; he’d expected a phone call, not a face-to-face meeting.

“Oh. Hey, Barnes. Sergeant Barnes, I mean. Sir. Darcy’s… not here?”

Steve glanced in Bucky’s direction, watching as the other man’s lips turned down.

“Is that a question? You don’t know for sure that she’s not there?”

“No! What? No, I know she’s not here. I just, I mean, I’m not really sure where she is.”

“But she was there before?” Bucky’s grey eyes flicked from the phone in his hands and toward Steve, who was sitting against the headboard in their room, an eyebrow raised in Bucky’s direction. “Peter lost Darcy.”

Peter’s slightly panicked voice sounded from the device in Bucky’s hand. “What?! No! I didn’t lose her. I’m not her keeper!”

“I specifically gave you that order before I left.”

Peter’s eyes on the screen widened. “No you didn’t!”

“I said to keep an eye on everything!”

“You told Peter to keep an eye on Darcy?” Steve asked, smirk deepening when he saw the hint of bullshit in Bucky’s eyes. His lover had always had a bit of a wicked streak, but he suspected that Darcy’s sarcasm and flair for the dramatic had taken Bucky’s penchant for jokes up to an eleven.

Bucky turned back to the phone screen, wiping anything but disappointment from his eyes. “If one hair on her head is out of place…”

“Her hair? Have you seen it? It’d be easier herding cats!”

“There was a mythbusters episode on that, and it is definitely impossible to herd cats,” Darcy said, pushing her way into the lab, arms laden with paperwork. When her eyes landed on Peter, red-cheeked with his mouth hanging open, her phone in his hands, Darcy’s hazel gaze narrowed. “You
answered my phone?”

Peter held it out toward her. “You’ve been staring at it for the past twenty-four hours! I didn’t want you to miss their call!”

Darcy dropped her papers and snatched it from his hands, taking a menacing step toward him. When she was only inches away, looking up into his wide brown eyes, she darted forward and pressed her lips to his cheek. “Thanks, kid.”

Peter’s eyes somehow grew even wider.

“Did you just kiss him?!”

Darcy lifted the phone, looking into Bucky’s face, her nose crinkling. “Ew! On the cheek, Buck, I kissed him on the cheek.”

Bucky grinned at her, moving so he could sit on the bed next to Steve, holding the phone out in an attempt for both of them to be in frame. “We leave for a day and your lips are already strayin’.”

“Hey, you’ve got a nice pair of kissable lips to your right, so I think you’re better off than I am. Speaking of those lips: lemme see them, Rogers.” Darcy made her way toward the small sitting area at the rear of the lab, falling back onto the couch and holding the phone over her face, grinning.

When Bucky turned the phone so Steve’s face was the main feature, the blond shook his head, his cheeks tinting, rolling his eyes. “Hi, Darcy.”

“Hey, Steve. Is it warm there? I bet it’s warm.”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, reaching out to take the phone from Bucky so he could see her better, “it’s warm here. Really humid, though.”

“Ugh,” she said, a sound of disgust falling from her lips, “I’m much more a fan of fall and winter. Sledding, cocoa by the fire, big sweatshirts. That’s more my jam.”

“… your jam?”

“It means she likes it!” Peter yelled in their direction.

“Are you listening to my phone call?!”

“Is there a reason you can’t go in the hall?”

Darcy smirked up at Steve, hazel eyes filled with amusement as she lowered her voice. “Pete’s getting the brunt of my sarcasm since Tony’s there with you. How is the ass? He fix everything yet?”

“We’ve literally been here for a couple of hours.”

Her eyes rolled at Bucky’s voice. “So he’s failed. I’ll keep that in mind. But everything is… okay? Safe?”

Steve smiled at the thread of worry in her voice. Darcy was putting on a lot of bravado, but he knew better now that she tended to be more caustic when she was scared or upset. She was doing a good job trying to hide it, but after the weekend he’d spent with her, Steve was able to spot it a little better.

Bucky shifted Steve’s hand so he could see Darcy. “We’re currently in a room bigger than the whole apartment building we grew up in, with a tub that’s more like a swimming pool, and a bed big
Darcy sighed dramatically. “I didn’t need those mental images, Buck, but thanks for rubbing it in that you’re currently in paradise. Why do I never get to go to the cool places? Asgard? Wakanda? What, you guys going to Disney next so you can just *really* turn the knife a little more?”

Steve turned the phone so he could see her face. “Both of us would rather be there with you, Darce, I promise.” The smile that bloomed on her face was sweet, and his expression lit up to match hers.

“Yes, yes,” Darcy hummed, her chest tightening when she could see the truth of it in Steve’s eyes. “You’ll get back here as soon as you can?”

“Nothing we want more than to come home to you, doll.”

Darcy grinned at Bucky’s charming words. “Mmmhmm. Well, you keep your lips busy kissing Steve and I’ll do my best to keep mine away from Spiderboy.”

“Hey!” Peter yelled from the other end of the lab.

Darcy’s tinkling laughter sounded from the phone, filling Steve and Bucky’s bedroom with her giggles, thousands of miles separating them but making it feel closer than they were.


“I love you too, Darce.”

“Try and get some sleep,” Steve said, smile widening when she blew a kiss toward the screen before the call ended. He looked over at Bucky, watching the light and easy expression fade the tiniest bit. “You didn’t want to tell her about the EMP?”

“No until we know for sure there’s something wrong. No use worrying her.”

“But you’re worried?”

“When have our lives ever been easy, punk? Ever?”

“Maybe that’s changing, Buck.”

Bucky’s stomach flipped at the optimism in Steve’s voice, seeing something like hope filling the blond’s eyes for the first time in a while. He couldn’t help but think that the gorgeous dame they’d just finished talking to had quite a bit to do with Steve’s newfound confidence for the world. “Yeah, Steve. Maybe it is.”

*  

At the Avenger’s compound in upstate New York, Darcy dropped her phone to the sofa and turned so she could scream her frustrations and worry into the pillow under her head. She took a deep breath, blinking up at the ceiling as her heart rate slowed. She’d seen it in Bucky’s eyes, knowing him more than he wanted to believe, and the small uncertain tinge had been plain to her.

“Friday? Is there a way to *watch* them in Wakanda?”

“No, ma’am. They were able to get cell service back, but Boss hasn’t figured out the rest.”

“Oh!” She took another deep breath before climbing to her feet, frowning as she padded across the lab toward Peter. “What are you working on, kid? Give me something to do, please. Something that
will keep me busy. The more mind-numbing, the better.”

“You could -”

“Not that.”

Peter pointed toward the quantum analyzer. “Or you might like -”

“Not that either,” Darcy said with a shake of her head. “Come on, genius, use that big brain of yours.”

“Music.”

Darcy rose an eyebrow. “Music?”

Peter nodded, turning back toward the microscope he’d been looking through. “I think we need a new working playlist. Maybe something with a lot of bass?”

Darcy reached up and ran a hand through her hair, considering his request. “I think I could do that.”

“Good.” Peter glanced over his shoulder at her, watching as determination flowed on Darcy’s face, replacing the lost expression she’d been wearing moments before. When she left the lab, presumably to go get her laptop and music collection, Peter smiled to himself.

“Sir, you already have a music playlist for the lab. Several of them, actually.”

“I know.”

Bucky’s knuckles rapped sharply on the door, his head peeking in a second later. “Dr. Chaas?”

“One moment, please, I will be... right...”

Standing into the doorway, hands clasped behind him, Bucky cast his gaze around the office, familiar with the way the occupant of the room could trail off mid-sentence when his mind was busy with something. The office was modern, clean, with a large window showing the sprawling metropolis on the other side of the glass. For as neat and tidy as it appeared, every surface was covered with picture frames.

Pictures of babies. Pictures of children. Pictures of men and women, smiling, shaking the hand of Wakanda’s most esteemed physician. Dr. Masa Chaas’ walls were plastered with degrees, ranging from biotechnology to sociology, and Bucky knew for a fact there hadn’t been enough wall space, so several diplomas and accolades had been shoved in drawers to make room.

The doctor had never really cared about flaunting his education, more interested in the people he assisted, and Bucky counted five diplomas that had been removed and replaced by pictures, like Dr. Chaas holding a baby and grinning brightly at the camera.

“I apologize, that took me… ahhh!”

Bucky’s grey eyes crinkled at the corners with happiness when Masa climbed to his feet, the doctor making a noise of surprise and elation as he rounded his desk, pulling Bucky into his arms and squeezing tightly. “It’s good to see you, too, sir.”
“None of this ‘sir’ speak from you, my friend,” Masa said, pulling back and placing his palms to both of Bucky’s cheeks. “I was not aware you would be visiting!”

“It’s an unplanned trip.”

Masa nodded, taking a step back, his eyes looking at Bucky from top to bottom, a considering look in his eyes. “Yes, I suppose they would have called you when communication was lost. Please, let us put that on hold while we catch up. Come, sit, I was just about to have some of that tea that you enjoy.”

As Masa set himself to work, grabbing another teacup and pulling the pot from the instant heater, Bucky took a seat, hands resting in his lap, glancing out the window. He’d gotten used to that view during his time in Wakanda. He’d spent a lot of time in this room, talking with Masa, discussing his progress, planning on next steps. After Thanos had attacked, everything had stopped. There’d been the battle, the stones, and Bucky had stopped worrying about going back and picking up where he’d left off with the good doctor’s help.

Pushing a cup toward Bucky, Masa smiled, his eyes shining behind his glasses. “How are you, my friend? It has been some time, but you have been on my mind, of that I can assure you.”

Bucky wrapped his hands around the earthenware mug, enjoying the way it warmed his fingers. He’d still never figured out how it could be so hot and humid outside, but in here it felt like a early spring day back in Brooklyn; a crisp breeze making you lift your collar against the cold, but being able to sense summer and it’s sweltering heat just around the corner.

“I’m good,” Bucky answered, lips lifting into a smile. When Masa peered over the top of his glasses, pinning him with a look, Bucky chuckled softly, shaking his head. “Today I will tell my truth -

“- unafraid and prepared to live it,” Masa finished for him, shaking his head emphatically. “Yes, yes. Do not forget so easily what you had built here, Sergeant Barnes. Has so much really changed since I saw you last?”

When he opened his mouth to answer, Bucky couldn’t find the right words to explain the multitude of what had happened since he’d left this country and returned to Steve, to defeat Thanos and his armies. He chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I don’t even know where to begin, Masa.”

“I have found that the beginning is the best place, but that is up to you.”

Nodding, Bucky blew delicately on the tea before taking a small sip, testing the temperature. The drink was special, medicinal, and Masa was fond of using it during sessions as a way of grounding. For Bucky, it signaled a safe place, and a person who had never looked at him like a monster, but as a man, even after he’d recounted every horrible detail.

“I can’t remember the last time I had a nightmare.”

“That is wonderful news, James. Have you been seeing someone since we last spoke?”

Bucky shook his head, body singing with satisfaction when the man across from him clicked his tongue, just like he’d thought he would. “There have been things… I’m not even sure how to explain it.”

“You should not be afraid to doubt here. Just tell an old friend what has happened, without fear of judgment. You know this of me, James.”

Nodding, Bucky took a deep breath. He did know that about Masa, and he did his best to recount
everything that had happened since Thanos had been destroyed. Masa was focused, asking clarifying questions when it was needed, never making a sound of disbelief, taking everything Bucky said at face value.

He was unsure how long he’d sat there, but when he finished explaining that Darcy and Steve had spent the weekend together, he could see that the sun in the sky had set and twilight had begun to spread over the city and the jungle beyond. Masa nodded, taking another sip from his tea, the second pot he’d made over the hours.

“Do you believe that Darcy is one of the reasons you have found balance? Why your dreams are less haunted?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“And your foundation with Steve is as strong as ever?”

Nodding, Bucky leaned forward. “It was rough at first because he was too stubborn to let us explain it to him, but I think he’s starting to believe it.”

“Then this is wonderful news. I am happy for you, James. I always knew you had the strength to be happy in you.”

Bucky waited, expecting more words from the physician, but they never came. Eyebrows furrowing, he couldn’t help the hint of confusion in his storm-grey eyes. “That’s it? You don’t have any more questions?”

“It is your truth,” Masa said, one shoulder lifting gracefully, unperturbed as Bucky continued looking at him with hesitance. “I have no reason to question how you feel. If you believe you are doing better, can prove it with your own memory, then there is nothing that myself or anyone else should say, else to be grateful that you have found some peace.”

Letting out a long breath, Bucky sat back in his chair, reaching up to run a hand through his hair. “Is that what this is? Peace?”

Masa smiled, his eyes warm. “I know you have not known much peace in your time, but I would hope you know to hold onto it with both hands and to not let it go. We take peace where we can. Sometimes it is the feel of a cool breeze on a hot day. Sometimes it is the sound of children’s laughter, floating on the air. But mostly it is when you realize you deserve to be happy, are allowed to be happy, and accept that happiness without letting your fear dampen it.”

Bucky felt the smile grow brighter on his face as he looked into the calming brown eyes across from him. He did feel peace; he felt it when he heard Darcy make Steve laugh, when they managed to throw each other soft glances only to blush and look away, when he could see Steve falling for Darcy, when he saw the happiness in Steve’s eyes. It had grown slowly, like it’d needed to, and watching the two people he loved beginning to love each other… It was everything.

So that’s what it feels like.

“I have enjoyed catching up with you, James. Once our communications are back online, I would love to check in on you from time to time. You are on my mind quite a bit.” As if to prove his point, Masa reached toward a frame on his desk and spun it for Bucky to see.

Bucky leaned forward, squinting at the small picture that had been stuck in the frame of a larger photo. It was him, his new prosthetic arm gleaming brilliantly in the light, Masa’s arm thrown over his shoulder, a warm and welcoming smile on the other man’s face. When his eyes flicked up to look
at Masa, Bucky could see that same friendly glow in his deep brown eyes. “I would like that.”

“I apologize for cutting this visit shorter than I would like, but Efia is bringing my grandchild by for dinner and -”

“Oh, I’m sorry, of course. How is Arko?”

“Growing like a fizic weed and being a terror to his mother,” Masa said, pride shining on his face.

Bucky watched the doctor gather his things, happy to walk with him out of the medical building, only a few blocks down from the royal palace, the proximity of great importance for the King’s personal physician. “I’m glad we got to catch up, sir.”

“It was wonderful to see you, James, truly. Give my regards to Mr. Rogers. And James?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Do not let yourself lose the peace you have found, if it can be helped. You deserve much happiness. Truly.”

Not he knew how to respond, Bucky nodded, shooting the older man an emphatic node and a smile. “Have a good night, Dr. Chaas.”

“You as well, Sergeant Barnes.”
Darcy attempts to navigate her day without her boys. Steve and Bucky, thousands of miles away, court battles.

As always, gentle readers, you've made my week with all the comments and kudos. Each and every one of them brings a smile to my face, without fail. I'm hard at work, hoping my muse continues to flow through me over the holiday. I've got plans to write, and write a lot, and my only hope is that you all keep enjoying what I'm putting out! <3

My dear, you've suffered quite a bit
   Throughout this life of yours
   Your body’s back from battle
   But your soul’s still stuck in war
Hello Darcy

???

This is Sam Wilson

...

Steve's friend

...

The Falcon?

Oh, right. Yeah. Hi. Sorry.

Hello Darcy

Did something happen

Are they okay?

Yes! No, everything is fine

Fuck, man. Don't do that

I didn't think saying hello would freak you out

My level for freak-out has changed *dramatically* over the past few months

So I've heard. I've been talking with Banner and he mentioned something about you wanting to see a therapist

No, thanks

No.

You're Steve's friend

And an Avenger

You shouldn't also have to heft around all my baggage on top of everything else

Because my shit is heavy AF

I was just going to suggest someone

Oh

Sorry

Shit

I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or anything
Sam: Hello Darcy

Darcy: ???

Sam: This is Sam Wilson

Darcy:...

Sam: Steve's friend

Darcy: ...

Sam: The Falcon?

Darcy: oh. right. yeah. hi. sorry.

Darcy: DID SOMETHING HAPPEN

Darcy: ARE THEY OKAY?!

Sam: No! No. everything is fine.

Darcy: Fuck, man. Don't do that

Sam: i didn't think saying hello would freak you out

Darcy: My level for freak-out has changed *dramatically* over the past few months

Sam: So I've heard. I've been talking with Bannnder, and he mentioned something about you wanting to see a therapist

Darcy: No, thanks

Darcy: No.

Darcy: You're Steve's friend.

Darcy: and you're an Avenger.

Darcy: You shouldn't also have to heft around all my baggage on top of everything else.

Darcy: because my shit is heavy AF

Sam: I was just going to suggest someone

Darcy: OH

Darcy: sorry
“I’m not asking to run naked through your files, I just need to know enough to figure out why this positioning device in particular was targeted. If you need to ask T’Challa for permission -”

“We do not need our King’s permission to grant you what you seek,” Shuri said as she made her way into the lab. She smiled warmly at Tony, nodding her head in greeting. “Is it good to see you again, Mr. Stark.”

Turning at her voice, Tony took a step forward, a large grin lighting his face. “Shuri, how is it you’ve become more beautiful since the last time I saw you? Impossible, yet here we are.”

“Yes. Here is where we are. I’m told that you are requesting access to our systems.”

Tony stepped aside, nodding toward a computer terminal over his shoulder. “I’m not asking to take the wheel. Someone went out of their way to damage that device instead of the others sprinkled around this country, and the only way for us to know why is to find out the what.”

Shuri took a step closer to the computer. “You believe they damaged the device to gain some kind of advantage?”

“Either that, or they wanted to make you blind to a specific type of attack. If that tech was the hub for anything, it might give us a clue.” When Shuri’s arms crossed over her chest and her face turned thoughtful, Tony took a step closer. “My A.I. says the EMP that took it out was different: It didn’t just fry the electronics, it melted them. It microwaved the insides until it was nothing but a lump of metal and then they took that lump and left its casing all over the field. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what’s at the heart of all your tech.”

“Vibranium,” Shuri said, mouth turning down in a frown.

“Bingo. That’s why Thanos attacked here in the first place.”

Shuri shook her head, expression going dark. Thanos had done such harm to their country that thinking about him still set her skin itching. “The Mad Titan is dead. My brother saw him vanish in ash and dust.”

“Oh. I remember. Vividly. I’ve been dealing with all that mess back home. But now? Now we need to figure out what that device was in charge of.”

Shuri crossed to the terminal, lifting her hands until they were poised over the glowing technology. Tony watched with interest as the display lit up with a soft blue light, the screen flashing with
symbols too quick for him to follow. He wanted nothing more than to watch, to learn, to study the amazing machine in front of him, but Tony glanced down at his feet.

The deal between Stark Industries, the Avengers/S.H.I.E.L.D., and Wakanda had been agreed upon by all parties, and the treaty was crystal clear. Now that Wakanda was in the global spotlight, it meant the natural resources they guarded were well known. If those natural resources - namely their vein of vibranium - were seized by someone with less than friendly intentions, it could spell utter devastation. Thanos had planned exactly that, and they’d only just been able to fight him and his army off.

If the villain had managed to get his hands on any of it? The war would have turned out very differently.

Letting Thanos focus his attack on Wakanda had been a power play so the Avengers had enough time to find the final infinity gems before the purple bastard could get his hands on them, and for its trouble, the capital city of Wakanda, Birnin Zana, had suffered heavy losses. It was the reason Sam and Wanda had stayed to help; to rebuild, to reach out, to show gratitude.

Without the aid of T’Challa and Wakanda, the planet wouldn’t be making another circuit around the sun.

“There,” Shuri said, pointing to a line of code that floated in the air in front of them, twisting and turning as it glowed. “That positioning device relays all transmissions via the Kimoyo bands.”

Tony frowned, taking a step forward, looking at the display and the foreign symbols. “Your AV devices?”

“They are not just audio and visual devices,” Menzi the engineer answered, a self-satisfied tone to his voice. His eyes widened, however, and he looked over at Shuri. “Princess, forgive me, I know our technology is propria -”

Shuri smiled softly, nodding at the man to stop his words and verbal backpedaling. “It is alright, Menzi. Mr. Stark is here to help. Share whatever knowledge is necessary.”

Tony rose his eyebrow at Menzi before his mouth turned down into a frown. The Wakandan engineer looked a little too smug for Tony’s liking, but he supposed it wasn’t everyday you got to explain how your technology was far superior to Tony Stark’s to Tony Stark.

“The Kimoyo bands are used for national broadcasts and messages, yes, and they can be used in a manner similar to what your people use mobile phones for -”

“Emails, messages, internet, yeah, I got that. Tell me something I don’t know.”

Menzi looked annoyed at being interrupted, but continued on. “Each Wakandan is given a bead when they are born. This bead stores an entire life’s worth of medical data. Blood type, past surgeries, allergies, all this information is stored on the Prime Bead.”

Tony scratched at his chin. “We’ve toyed with a similar idea in the states. Microchips that have medical info, next of kin and emergency contacts for children, storing credit info. It never really goes far because most people see it as an invasion of privacy. A way to track people.”

“And in a country where your government has tried on many occasions to wrestle power away from the people, I can see why that would be a problem.”

The smirk on Menzi’s lips made Tony’s frown deepen. Now he remembered why Menzi had stood
out in his memories of the last time he dealt with Wakandan tech: Menzi was an arrogant asshole. 
*Takes one to know one* “I hear there have been more than enough uprisings here in your fair country, Menz, so how about we cut the bullshit and work the problem.”

Menzi looked to Shuri, who gave him another simple nod, speaking volumes while not saying a word. The engineer’s face wiped of its righteousness and he continued. “Besides the Prime bead, other beads offer a wide variety of uses - ”

A lightbulb went off in Tony’s head and he took a step forward, crossing his arms over his chest and pinning the engineer with a glare. “Let me guess. One of those shiny beads helps with personal and professional security?”

The engineer gave Tony a tight nod. “One of them, yes.”

“Right. So what you’re telling me is that,” Tony crossed to the schematic, pointing to the glowing bit that signified The Great Mound, where the vibranium mines could be found, “this is now free game?”

Menzi looked at Tony with confusion. “How -”

“They’ve targeted your satellite by destroying the positioning device that helps regulate the flow of information on your Kimoyo beads. This makes it harder for different cities in Wakanda to reach each other, particularly to raise alarms should something go down, as the beads are your main form of communication. The positioning device also acts as a server for the data that is held on your beads, which includes medical data.

That medical data most likely lists profession, as well as home addresses. So, if I were a bad guy, all I’d need to do is look through the medical records, cross reference with people that work in the mines and have unrestricted access, find this person, force and *or* kidnap this person, then use their nifty bracelet to get at the only known reserve of the most advanced and precious metal on the planet? Please, Menz, tell me I’m right.”

When Menzi looked at Shuri with wide, panicked eyes, Tony shook his head, turning his back on the other man, his brown eyes deadly serious as he looked at Shuri. “We need -”

“I know.”

Tony watched as one of the most brilliant minds he’d ever known turned her entire attention on the console, her hands a flash as they hovered over the glowing technology.

“Princess Sh -”

Tony stepped closer to Menzi, blocking his view of Shuri, his face clear of any hint of smugness or ego. “I need you to find a way to warn Mena Ngai, now. They need to increase security immediately. If they’re coming for the vibranium, they won’t wait long to strike.” When Menzi just looked at him, Tony started clapping his hands. “Go! Go! And tell Cap he needs to get there ASAP!”

When the engineer ran out of the room with an appropriate amount of haste, Tony took up station behind Shuri, doing his best to follow the graceful motions of her hands. “Did I overstep?” He looked up to gauge the Wakandan’s response, seeing her glance at him over her shoulder.

“Would you apologize if I said you had?”

“Maybe. Try it out. We’ll see.” Tony couldn’t help the small smile that curled his lips when she
turned her attention back to the screen.

“This is something that should have been safe-guarded against,” she answered with a sigh.

“I have a hard time with control issues, so I get it. I’ve been told, repeatedly, that the safest hands are our own. I can’t pretend to know what it’s like being a princess, or royalty, or the damisa-sark, but I know an innovative mind when I see one. Maybe you need to get your hands dirty every now and again. You’re smarter than all of these goons.”

“Those goons are the brightest minds in Wakanda.”

“But not the brightest,” Tony said with a nod in her direction as he leaned a hip against the console, watching her hands gesture with rapid, precise movements.

“No,” Shuri said, lips curling into a satisfied smile, “not the brightest. You are wrong about one thing, though, Mr. Stark.”

“Oh? Just one?”

“I am not damisa-sark anymore. My brother is now The Panther.”

Tony exhaled sharply. “Is that what it means? I just thought it meant the best. I’ve been calling you that in my head for years.”

Her laugh was light and soft, and she let it sit on the air for a moment, biting her lip as she worked. “Do you really think they will be going for the vibranium?”

“It’s what I would do.” When Shuri looked over her shoulder at him, Tony held up his hands. “If I were evil and wanted vibranium for myself, which I don’t. That was always my dad’s gig, not mine. Besides, I like knowing there’s something to compare my genius to.”

“If you are insinuating we are in some kind of competition, I regret to inform you that you are losing.”

Tony smirked at the tone of her voice. “I may be lagging a bit behind, but you got a head start. Besides, the race isn’t over yet.”

“No. No it is not.”

As Darcy pushed into the lab, her hazel eyes narrowed. She’d slept fitfully, unable to catch more than a half-hour at a time. She’d turned her walls to pure black, not even the little glowing stars casting a light in her room, but still sleep had eluded her. She’d tried listening to white noise. She’d tried rolling waves on a beach (which only succeeded in making her pee every forty-five minutes). Not music, not podcasts, not even counting fluffy Thor-sized golden retrievers could do the trick.

Insomnia, maybe, but she had a feeling it’d had more to do with the two halves of her heart being thousands of miles away, worried enough that she’d been able to see it in Bucky and Steve’s eyes.

So, with a lack of sleep, Darcy’s jaw clenched as she saw Peter hunched over at his work station, very obviously wearing the same clothes he’d been wearing the day before.

Which meant he hadn’t left the lab.
Which meant he hadn’t slept.

Which meant Darcy was cranky and had found a target for all that useless frustration.

Darcy crossed to the small fridge, pulling out a bottle of gatorade (blue, because that was Peter’s favorite). She set the drink down, then made a show of dropping her tablet on the metal table behind him.

She was satisfied when Peter jumped off his stool, pulling a earbud out in alarm as he spun to face her. “What? Oh. Hi. Darcy. Good morning.”

“You didn’t sleep.”

“Mm? No. I mean, yes. Yes I did.”

“You walk-of-shaming it?” When his eyebrows knit together, the spark of intelligence dimmer than normal, Darcy gestured toward him. “Those are the same clothes you had on yesterday. Did you get lucky with one of the bots?”

“Ew! No. I just didn’t, I just didn’t change. But I did sleep.”

“In your bed?” Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, one hip jutting out as she glared at him.

“You’ve fallen asleep on the couch in here before. Look, I just was in the middle of something and didn’t want to stop. I mean, I’ve been pulling double duty for years, several, actually, and I still managed to be valedictorian while being Spiderman, so I’m fine, really.”

She didn’t believe his bullshit for one second. In the short time Darcy’d come to know Peter, she’d grown fond of the nerd. Maybe she just had a thing for forming friendships with scientists, but she could see it in his eyes that he was exhausted. Bowie save her from people who couldn’t be counted to eat or sleep without someone forcing it on them.

Darcy blinked, watching as his blue strobed dimly in the blackness. It was usually brighter, a pretty robin’s egg with flecks of yellow, but his colors had faded to something more grey than blue. It wasn’t unlike the color of Bucky’s eyes, and she felt her heart seize at the reminder of how far away his beautiful eyes were.

She blinked back to the lab, watching as Peter frowned at her. He followed her hand with his eyes as she wrapped her fingers around the bottle and pushed the blue drink toward him menacingly. “Drink this. You need the electrolytes.”

“There’s, Darcy,” his chin dipped in her direction, disbelief in his gaze, “come on, there’s no way you could tell that just from looking at me.”

“You really want to tell me what I can and can’t see?” Of course he was right, she couldn’t diagnose any kind of medical problems using her powers, but that didn’t mean she’d back off. He needed something, and if he wanted to fight about it, she was game. “Drink it.”

“I’m fine,” Peter said, the words clipped as he turned back to his worktable.

“Drink the gatorade, Peter. You need it.”

“I’m fine, Darcy.”

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she grabbed the drink bottle in her hand, gauging it’s weight,
figuring out how hard she’d need to throw it. “*Drink the fucking thing!*”

Peter turned, catching the bottle as it flew through the air at him. Darcy had both hands braced on the table, her breath coming out in angry bursts as she glared at him. “You threw that at my head!”

“I fucking knew you’d catch it, because I know *you*, so drink the fucking blue sugar water like a good little boy and .-.”

“I am not a *child*!”

“Then stop acting like one!”

“Just stop!”

There was a bite in his tone that Darcy hadn’t heard before, and she rocked back onto her heels, her arms crossing over her chest as she continued to glare. Peter’s face was flushed, his body vibrating with barely held constraint, and even if he looked like he was ready to blow, Darcy wasn’t afraid for herself; this had been building up for weeks and she was ready for this particular bomb to explode, because tiptoeing around it had gotten *exhausting*.

“I get it, okay?” Peter dropped the bottle to the table, letting it clatter onto its side. “You, and Tony, and the babying? I know. *I know*, seriously. If I’m going to be a part of this, of this team, then you need to *stop* treating me like I’m some kind of *child*. I’ve *earned* that, at least. No more ‘kid’ or ‘Spiderboy’. My name is Peter, Pete’s okay too, but everything else goes away, got that?”

His glare at her was harsh, but when she didn’t say anything, just letting his voice ring in the lab until the silence fell on them again, Peter shifted, fidgeting, uncertain.

Finally, after she let out a long exhale, Darcy nodded. “Yeah. I get you, Pete. Fuck, it took you long enough.”

Peter’s face tinted with confusion. “W-what?”

Darcy leaned forward and grabbed the drink, twisting the top off and taking a large swig, grimacing at the aftertaste. “You don’t get respect in this world until you take it. I’ve been waiting for you to tell me off for weeks.”


She rounded the work table, jumping up so she could sit on it, leveling him with her gaze. “Look, when you grow up like I did, you have to be solid, you know? No one was going to give me anything that I didn’t demand, so I learned to be pushy really early. It didn’t really work in my favor when it came to friends and authorities, but I didn’t let anyone push me around, not once I was old enough to stop it.”

Darcy twisted the bottle in her hands, watching the blue liquid swish from one side to the other. “Maybe I see a bit of myself in you, alright? Orphans unite and all that jazz.”

Peter frowned, leaning back against his workbench, looking down at her feet as they swung. “I don’t know if I count as an orphan. Aunt May .-.”

“- is a very lovely woman who I’ve been emailing with semi-daily, giving updates and assuring her that I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you, which includes dehydration, so don’t make me a fucking liar, Pete.”
Shaking his head, Peter crossed his arms over his chest, one side of his mouth turning up. “You’ve, you and... you’ve been talking with May?”

“I talk with a lot of people. You want my appointment calendar so you get all their names?” When Peter snorted, Darcy smiled, hands gripping the table of either side of her thighs. “My job in this lab is to keep you alive.”

“Is it, though?”

“Don’t tell me what my job is or isn’t, Parker. Have you learned nothing?” When he rolled his eyes in her direction, Darcy continued, “so when I tell you to drink something because I don’t want you to keel over when your cells have been depleted of water -”

“- that’s not how -”

“- don’t fucking argue and just let me do my job. You’re the top dog when it comes to the sciency-stuff. I’m the king when it comes to keep you alive. We good?”

It took him a minute, but he nodded, brown eyes flicking up to look at Darcy. “We’re good.”

“Good, because I’m fucking exhausted and don’t want to have to yell at you anymore. I didn’t sleep at all last night.” Darcy ignored his sound of unfairness and crossed to the espresso machine, rubbing at her eyes. “Let’s work for two hours, then we’ll have a midday siesta, return bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and rock the shit out of the science stuff, okay?”

“Okay.”

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Steve had a tight grip on the handle above the passenger door in the jeep, trying his best to ride out the bumps, curves, and divots that marred the dirt road. Sam was pushing the vehicle to its limits in the jungle as they rushed to *Mena Ngai*. Steve grit his teeth when they hit a particularly deep rut and he was pulled out of his seat by the drop, hearing the bottom of the jeep scrape and groan in protest. "Wakanda communications rely on their Kimoyo beads. Since the satellite's down, it's almost impossible for them to contact each other from city to city. If an attack is coming, there's no way to warn them."

"This seems like a failing of their systems," Thor said from the backseat, folded in on himself in an effort to fit in the jeep, "to leave themselves open to such an attack."

"Most of their enemies are from within the country," Sam said, the wheel spinning in his hands as the trees whipped by, more of a green blur that anything else.

"That’s, uh, great, but it didn't answer my question," Bruce said.

Bucky frowned beside Thor, pressed against the door, seeing Bruce in the same position on the Asgardian's other side. "Stark's working with Princess Shuri to get the satellite back on line. We can’t fly there in case they’re watching. They might think they have the element of surprise still. If we can get set before they attack, we’ll have better odds."

"They only just got put on the map, most of the world didn’t even know Wakanda existed until a few years ago," Sam clarified, "so the risk of anyone messing with the satellite from outside of the
"Was low," Bruce said with a frown, looking out the window, closing his eyes as they continued to be thrown from side to side. He was beginning to look a little green around the edges, but he was glad it was due to the rough ride and nothing more.

"Once the satellite's back up, Tony and Wanda will meet up with us. As it is, we're the first line of defense."

Steve glanced into the backseat, catching Bucky's eyes and holding them. They'd spent months in Wakanda, after the battle in Berlin and then longer while Bucky worked with the Wakandan physicians to erase the triggers Zemo had put in place. They knew the people in Wakanda, considered many of them friends, and it was hard to think of them being in danger.

When Thanos and his armies had attacked, Wakanda had lost a lot of people and the vast majority of the capital city was left in ruin. If some group was readying another attack, Steve wasn't sure Wakanda could weather it without crippling themselves further than they already were. Their vein of vibranium was priceless, and there were a lot of people who would murder to get their hands on some, but this didn’t feel like a simple smash-and-grab operation to Steve; since Wakanda had been thrust into the spotlight, they'd worked to ensure their security measures were comprehensive.

Obviously they’d neglected the idea that someone might understand how their computer and communication systems worked. They’d anticipated an armed-forces power grab, not one that targeted their tech. Their agreement and treaty had kept Tony and Stark Industries’ assistance to a minimum. Steve now wondered if that had been the wrong call.

Bucky's metal hand gripped the handle to his left, his jaw clenching as they were tossed back and forth. "What did Stark say about the beads?"

"He said medical data is stored on them, and that the attackers might have stolen the data to find someone with access to the mines."

"That makes sense," Sam sighed, "even Wanda and I were given beads to gain access to places we needed."

Bruce frowned, "but our cell phones work here. Why didn't -"

"They only started working when you guys got here," Sam interrupted, his voice tense, his eyes focused on the road. "Wakanda's go-to move is shutting everything down until they figure out what's wrong. That's why we couldn't call you."

Steve nodded. "All of our debriefs were via secure messaging, passing through firewalls to keep it covert."

"If I have learned anything during my time on Midgard, it is that the leaders of your realm need to communicate better."

Sam frowned, eyes flicking up to look at Thor in the rearview mirror. "Didn't your dad keep the fact that your brother wasn't really your brother a secret, which basically led to the battle in New York and the alien invasion?"

Thor shifted in his seat. "... I did not suggest Asgard was any better."

Silence fell over the jeep, the only noises the grunts as they were tossed around, and the groaning of the jeep as Sam did his best to keep it on the road.
"What are walking into, Steve?"

Steve looked over at Sam, recognizing the tension in the other man’s face, as he could feel it mirrored in his own. “I don’t know.”
Absence

Chapter Summary

The Avengers in Wakanda are surprised by a lack of activity while Darcy and Peter hold the fort down at home. That all changes, as things do, in the blink of an eye.

Chapter Notes

GUYS. GUYS. GUYS. Please tell me you've watched the Infinity War trailer?!? *flies into the sun* I was sobbing at work today. If you follow me on twitter, let's just say that I have theories and DEFINITELY should have called in because I wasn't able to focus at all after watching it. I was useless, all day, texting/gif'ing/dying with friends who love this rag-tag group of nerds like I do.

Everything's happening, guys. Everything's happening!

... so I promise I had NO idea that the trailer would come out on the day *this* chapter goes off. Marvel really should have checked with me first so we didn't throw too many feels at you all at once...

<<.>>

If you have a tumblr, give me a follow (goddessvicky) b/c I'm about to go NUCLEAR and reblog all the things on there for the rest of time.

And, as always, thank you SO MUCH for all the kudos and comments! It helps fuel my writing and hooooooooooy I just outlined a vast majority of the scenes I need.... guys. It's a lot. This thing's gonna be a beast.

Anyway! ENJOY! <3

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder;
All it did was make mine more yours.

“There,” Tony said, sweat dripping down the side of his neck as he shimmied out from below the newly rebuilt positioning array, taking Shuri’s offered hand as he climbed to his feet. “Everything
should be good to go.”

Shuri crossed to the portable device, an advanced laptop that ran the same systems as the one in her lab, her fingers flying as she ran the diagnostics. “It will take a few moments to reboot.”

“We’ll make sure that everything is back up, then run a program to check for any back doors that might have been shoved in your systems. If Friday was in there -”

“Consider me your non-virtual assistant, Tony,” Shuri said with a smile, using the name he’d insisted upon. “I have a program that will analyze for any leaks.”

Tony rose an eyebrow at her. “Why didn’t you use the program before?”

“Because I wrote it two hours ago.”

Chuckling, Tony ran a hand over his brow and glanced down at the grass beneath his feet, a rueful smile curling his lips. “Of course you did.”

“There. Rebooting now.” Shuri took a step back from the console, shielding her eyes with a hand as she squinted up at the positioning device and server. Tony made his way next to her, watching as the device powered up, the sounds of gears grinding making the billionaire wince.

The dish whipped around in a circle before it settled, pointing due west. Tony shut one eye and used his arm to eyeball its direction. “That looks right. Are you getting anything yet?”

“No,” Shuri answered, voice hesitant. “Perhaps I made an error in the code, I wrote it so quickly -”

“Just give it a minute.”

“We do not have the time -”

“Shuri, if I trust anyone in this country to not be wrong, it’s you. The system’s just taking a little bit to adjust, as soon -”

Shuri’s fist pumped into the air, jumping and crying out with a sound of happiness as data began streaming across the screen at a dizzying pace. She held her fist out toward Tony, who knocked his knuckles against hers with a grin on his face.

“Run your program. I’m gonna call Cap.” Tapping his earpiece, Tony listened to a burst of static before he was connected. “Cap? You guys okay? Where are you?”

“We’re in the cafeteria.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, turning to look in Shuri direction, the woman engrossed with what was coming through her tech. “They attacked the food first?”

“Nobody’s attacked.”

“What do you mean nobody’s attacked?”

“I mean,” Steve said, blue gaze sliding to where he could see Sam and Bucky eagerly tearing into their sandwiches, the quiet cafeteria filled with his echoing voice, “that we’ve patrolled the whole place from top to bottom. There’ve been no unauthorized entries, no security breaches. No one’s even called in sick. Thor and Bruce are making another pass now.”
“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I know.” It didn’t feel right to Steve, either, but they’d run their checks several times. No one could find anything wrong, not with tech security, personnel security, or physical security. Everything was running exactly as it should. “Any luck getting back online?”

“Everything’s up. I’ll have Shuri send a test message before she opens it up country wide. Tell security it’s on the way.”

“Roger.”

“Evrtinoka?” Sam asked around his mouthful, glancing up at Steve, a glob of sauce on his chin.

“Shuri and Tony got it up.” Steve turned to the head of security for the mine. “They’re sending you a message, will you verify you received it?” The man nodded, leaving them in the empty mess hall. Steve pressed on his ear piece. “Security’s on hold for the message now.”

“Got it. I’ll get back to you in a few.”

Steve sighed, running a hand over his face, still able to feel the jostling jeep ride vibrating his bones, his brain still working through the confusion from their arrival. They’d poured out of the jeep at Mena Ngai with the expectation of chaos, ready for battle, weapons drawn, eyes alert....

… and had been met by confused workers who were going about their day like normal. The group had been stopped by security, puzzled expressions on their faces as Steve explained that they’d been sent by T’Challa to thwart a possible attack. The mines had been aware of communications being down, but when no alarms had been raised they’d seen no reason to believe anything nefarious had occurred.

After Steve asked to speak to the head of security, the group had stood baking in the hot sun, bodies readied for a fight but finding nothing but citizens acting like it was any other Friday. Finally, they’d been led inside and taken down a complicated set of corridors; the mine’s security office was outfitted with the best technology Wakanda had to offer, and Steve had gathered early on that they’d been anticipating an attack that hadn’t happened.

Or hasn’t happened yet, Steve thought, mouth turning down into a frown.

Bucky’d been watching the tension tighten Steve’s shoulders over the past six hours. He could tell his lover wasn’t letting the lack of a battle dull his awareness, the blond’s anxiety and uncertainty keeping him on edge. “You should eat something,” Bucky said around his sandwich.

“I will, just waiting on Tony,” Steve sighed, eyes glancing up at the door the head of security had left through.

“Oyar got the message. Looks like everything’s back up,” Tony’s voice said over Steve’s earpiece. “We’ve run Shuri’s code through several times. Whatever they did, it’s gone now.”

“I don’t like it, Tony.”

“I don’t like it either, Cap. I think -”

“Yeah, we’re going to stay here tonight, just in case.”

“I’ll stay here with Maximoff, keep us in two spots, cover more ground. Whoever did this, it looks like they failed pretty spectacularly.”
Steve hummed, his eyebrows knitting together as his brain turned the problem over. “They targeted the satellite for something, Tony.”

“Look, I’m as pessimistic as they come, but maybe they just wanted the vibranium in the device. Even the little bit they took is worth a nice paycheck. Maybe we got lucky and it’s petty criminals. I think we’re due for some good luck, Steve. We keep on guard for the next few days, leave Wakanda in T’Challa and Shuri’s very capable hands, and go home.”

“Just let me know if you find out anything. We’ll bunk here, call you in the morning.”

“Got it.”

Sighing, Steve sat back in the chair as the static in his ear went quiet, rubbing a hand over his tired face again. When he felt someone standing by his side, he blinked up at Bucky, his blue eyes shining up at his lover, doubt in their depths. “I don’t like it.”

“Here,” Bucky said, thrusting a plate with a sandwich at Steve. “Just like the war: you chow when you can, kip when you’re able, but keep your eyes open. Nothing more we can do.”

Steve took the plate, reaching out to thread his fingers with Bucky’s. “We both died during the war, Buck, not sure that’s the greatest example.”

Bucky shook his head, chuckling softly. “Neither of us actually died, and most of our memories are war, punk. Not much else to draw from.”

Steve nodded, taking a bite of the sandwich, hand dropping from Bucky’s. “We’ll coordinate with the security here, keep someone on patrols, double up. If something’s coming, I want to see it.”

Sam brushed his hands on his pants, coming to stand next to Bucky. “I’m go find Oyar, get everything set up, find a place for us to bed down. I’ll fill in Thor and Bruce, set up a schedule, then send them in for food.” When Steve nodded at him, Sam made his way out of the cafeteria.

Bucky fell into the seat beside Steve, leaning back, crossing his hands over his stomach. “If they were taking the communications down for a coordinated attack, they’ve lost the element of surprise. Now that everything’s back up they know security is going to be tighter. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Tony said maybe they just wanted the vibranium in the device, that’s all that was taken.”

“That’s reason enough,” Bucky said with a nod. “Worth a lot on the black market. Small, easy to transport. If they try to sell it anywhere it can be tracked, so they’d need something in place to keep the sale anonymous, possible dark web, but there’s always a trail. I’m sure T’Challa and his people know how to handle this.”

Steve finished the sandwich, glancing over in Bucky’s direction. “I don’t want to make them vulnerable by leaving too soon.”

“I get that, and I agree, but we can’t be everywhere all the time, Steve. We stay until we’re sure we’ve done all we can, then we go, trust that Wakanda is able to protect themselves, and if they need help, they’ll ask.”

“You sure that the person waiting for us back home has nothing to do with your rush to leave?”

The smirk Bucky sent in Steve’s direction was tinted with disbelief. “You saying you don’t want to get back to her as soon as possible?”
Steve rolled his eyes at Bucky’s expression, looking down at his hands. “No, jerk, that’s not what I’m saying. I’d just rather get back to her with the knowledge that we helped our friends thwart an attack instead of fearing that we left too soon.”

Bucky nodded, his shoulders lifting in a sigh before he climbed to his feet, holding a hand out toward his best friend. “Then let’s get to work.”
Bucky: I hope you haven’t forgotten about us, doll
Darcy: New phone. Who dis?
Darcy: Kidding, kidding. I've been lost without the two of you, the wind knocked out of my sails, adrift in a sea of pain. That what you were looking for, handsome?

Bucky: That'll do.

Bucky: We're hoping we'll wrap up here in the next day or so, then we'll be heading home.

Darcy: Just stay safe. Please.

Darcy: Oh!

Darcy: And get me a shirt that says "My boyfriends went to Wakanda and all I got was this stupid t-shirt!"

Bucky: Boyfriends?

Bucky: Is that we are?

Darcy: No. Nope. Not going to do this over text. It'll have to wait until you get back.

Bucky: It's going to be one hell of a conversation

Darcy: Well, nothing in our lives has been particularly easy, so what's one more thing piling on top, right?

Bucky: I miss you

Darcy: Miss you too.

“I’m almost positive it’s right through… Oh! Yep, there he is! Thank you so much for the directions, soldier, you’re so sweet. You really didn’t have to walk me.”

“May?”

“Thank you again, really, but I’m sure I’m good now.” May turned her attention away from the soldier and toward her nephew, who was looking at her in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. “Peter! It’s really a maze getting back here, isn’t it? Look at all of these machines! You must be in heaven.” May’s eyes widened as she looked around the lab, turning as she took it all in. “Peter! This is insane. I know Stark’s loaded but wow.”

“May, what? What, why, what are you, um, doing here? I didn’t know -”

“Aunt May!” Darcy pushed her way into the lab, an apologetic smile on her face, “I’m so sorry! I totally meant to meet you at the front but they took forever to get your badge printed with my specifications. It’s a great picture though. Look at it!”

“Darcy, using my graduation photo? I knew I liked you. Come here!” May wrapped her arms around Darcy’s shoulders, squeezing her tightly, eyes shining behind her glasses. “Nice to put a very pretty face to the name of the person who’s been putting up with my constant stream of emails.”

“Pfft, it’s fine, I actually look forward to talking to someone who doesn’t speak ‘science’ every other word,” Darcy grinned brightly.

“May, what -?”

May gestured to the room at large. “You really weren’t kidding when you told me how cold it is in here.”

“Right? I expect 2001: A Space Odyssey to happen at any moment, despite how outdated and slow the bots are. No offense, Dum-E,” Darcy said, nodding in the robot’s direction. The bot chirped at
her happily, oblivious to the slight.

“Darcy!”

May spun toward Peter, a frown on her lips. “Peter Parker, that is no way to talk to your boss.”

“I’m not his boss,” Darcy said, leaning into May, a smile on her face.

“I thought -”

“Technically Tony Stark is his boss.”

“Does he talk to Tony Stark like that?”

“No, but I’d love it if he did. Tony needs a little insubordination from time to time. Keeps him on his toes.”

Peter held up his hands and both women went silent, small smirks on their lips, as he blinked in rapid succession. “I don’t, uh, what, why is this happening? Is something wrong?”

“‘Is something wrong’, he asks,” May said with a shake of her head. “Something has to be wrong for me to want to visit you?” She clicked her tongue and made her way across the lab to Peter, folding him into her arms. “Maybe I wanted to make sure you working here was real. You know, since the last time you told me you were working with Tony Stark was a giant lie.”

“You shouldn’t lie to your aunt, Peter.” Darcy chastised, the glare Peter shot her over May’s shoulder only making her smirk grow larger.

May pulled back, hands on Peter’s shoulders, leaning in to peer at his eyes. “You look tired. Doesn’t he look tired, Darcy love?”

“So tired. We had a conversation about it yesterday. Then we took a nap.”

“She didn’t…” Peter’s words faded as he shook his head, exasperation lifting his shoulders before he mumbled. “May didn’t need to know about the nap.”

“Oh, so you’re going to keep more things from me?”

Peter’s eyes widened, brown gaze flicking up toward his aunt with a look of guilt. “May, that’s not -”

“I know, I’m just giving you a hard time. Ooh, that looks like a very expensive tanning bed…”

As May walked off toward the bit of tech that was definitely not a tanning bed, Peter rushed toward Darcy, his voice low and insistent. “What the hell? You invited May without telling -”

“ - said she wanted to visit and -”

“ - would appreciate it if - “

“ - just worried about you and you should - “

“ - didn’t we just talk about you respecting - “

“Peter!” Darcy’s growl stopped the flow of words from both of their mouths and she took a step closer to the younger man, resting her hands on his shoulders.
“Look, she wanted to visit and maybe with everything going on… I think we could both use the distraction. Most of this stuff can wait until Tony gets back. Besides, would you rather have Stark here when she visits? C’mon. We’ll show her around, get some food, then send her off with good memories and proof that you’re flourishing under Tony’s tutelage.”

Her nose crinkled when she realized what she’d just said, watching Peter as he did the same.

“This thing’s flashing red! Is that bad?”

“It’s fine, May!” Turning back to Darcy, Peter’s frown returned. “Fine, but I need you to make me look good, okay? May worries, and the last thing she needs to be worrying about is me.”

“Agreed.”

“Quick tour, none of the dangerous parts, dinner, then she’s on her way back to Queens.”

“Sure.”

“And you say you’re my assistant.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed dangerously at the younger man. “Excuse me?”

“You already told her you’re not my boss! I think she’d like the fact that I have an assistant. Or, like, that Tony and I, uh, share an assistant.”

Her expression didn’t change. “You fucking with me?”

“Did you really invite my aunt here because you miss your soldiers and have inserted yourself into my life without my approval?”

The fact that Peter had said all that without a hint of hesitation, more than anything else, made Darcy’s glare soften. “I’m the lab assistant and since you’re in this lab, I’m your de facto pseudo-assistant. Final offer.”

“Deal.”

The two shook hands, then turned toward May, smiles splitting both of their faces.

Darcy clutched her tablet to her chest. “I hope you’re hungry because it’s lasagna day in the cafeteria and I’m friends with one of the cashiers so we totally get the friends and family discount.”

“I sleep better when it’s hot and humid. Reminds me of summer days in the boroughs.”

“He says that as if the freezing cold doesn’t remind him of the boroughs, too,” Steve said with a shake of his head, blue eyes seeing the smirk that turned Bucky’s lips. “It was either real hot, or real cold.”

“And then there’d be that one week, right between spring and summer, or between summer and autumn, where everything was perfect.”

The memories of running up and down the Brooklyn streets when he was a kid always had a way of making Bucky homesick and nostalgic. He couldn’t help the way his eyes scoured over Steve,
remembering the little blond spitfire who swore in Gaelic and wasn’t afraid to stand up to guys twice his size. His lover was different, but that was all physical. That’s not the reason Bucky had fallen in love with Steve. Not the only reason, Bucky mused, taking another sip of his beer. The alcohol wouldn’t do anything because of his increased metabolism, but just tasting it was enough to bring back memories.

Sam grunted an agreement, a small smile chasing across his lips. “When we were in the sand, you’d sort of forget there was ever a time when it wasn’t blistering. Riley and I would joke about how we’d be wearing parkas when we got home and when people would question it, we’d just tell them that it was a ‘dry heat’.”

“We had to deal with the mud. I’d never seen anything like it,” Steve said, Bucky nodding in his peripheral vision. “Tank after tank getting stuck, only covering a few hundred feet a day. You fell asleep with the smell of it in your nose and the feel of it on your skin and even if you did manage to grab a shower -”

“- which was rare -”

“ - you could never get it all the way off.”

“Until it froze the further north we got,” Bucky added, hearing Steve’s agreed humming.

It was quiet for a few moments, the three soldiers remembering the battles from their pasts, before Sam took the last drink from his bottle and reached for another. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the commiseration,” he said in Bucky’s direction, “but how much is your talking with me because of the vulcan mind-meld you’ve got going on?”

“Upwards of ninety-five percent.” His answer made Sam snort, and Bucky smiled softly as he brought the bottle to his lips.

He saw Steve sit up straighter, the easy camaraderie in his gaze disappearing and being replaced with focus. “What is it?”

“You hear that?” Both Sam and Bucky froze as Steve slowly got to his feet, turning an ear, trying to place the sound. It sounded like -

“Glass.”

All three flinched when the lights above their heads grew from dull glow to blinding, hearing the filament pop before the bulbs sparked and exploded. A mechanical noise hummed in the air for a second then seemed to fade away.

Sam reached up and pressed the release on his wings. There was no reaction from the tech. “EMP.”

A barrage of gunfire sounded from outside, joined by the screams of miners and guards. The hair on the back of Steve’s neck stood at attention when he heard the familiar yell of the Hulk and the whistling of Mjolnir as Thor took flight. Steve was headed toward the door as a flash of lightning lit the windows.

“I hate it when you’re right,” Bucky said with a growl at Sam, both of them rising to their feet and chasing after Steve.

Darcy’s hazel eyes glanced toward her phone when it chirped at her. She put her book down on the
table, casting a glance toward Peter, who was passed out on the couch in the lounge, limbs akimbo and snoring softly. When she hit the little green button, she was greeted by the expectant expression on Tony’s face.

“You screening my calls? Took you long enough to answer.”

“Shhh, you’re going to wake the kid,” Darcy said as she grabbed her phone and frowned at Tony, her voice a hush.

“I thought we decided we’re not calling him ‘the kid’ anymore.”

Darcy snorted. “We’re not calling him that to his face. Big difference.”

“How’s my tech. You break it already?”

“You have a receipt for the spectrum analyzer, right? We might need to check on its warranty and possible liquid damage, unless you think blue gatorade will improve it’s analyzing abilities?”

“Haha. Funny. Anyone every tell you you’re hilarious? Probably not. Tell me you’re at least doing your job? Are you working on Dum-E’s spatial and fine-motor skills?”

Darcy glanced down at her feet, where the robot was very carefully painting her toenails a vivid shade of blue. When the bot heard Tony say his name, it dropped the brush and bottle, the blue oozing out onto the tile floor. Her eyes widened slightly, but she managed to keep much of her expression the same. “...yep.”

“We’re almost done here. Got the satellite back up, communication’s restored. Not sure what they were planning, but it went boom pretty fast.”

“You don’t know what they were planning? Aren’t you supposed to be some kinda genius?”

Tony rolled his eyes and set the phone down on his end, pushing his chair backward, fingers typing against a laptop in a very minimalistic but swanky office. “Shuri wants me to update a version of Friday into her files, see if maybe having my A.I. system can keep this from happening again. I’ve got to take her down on your side, too. You running anything on the machines?”

Darcy glanced in Peter’s direction, then back at Tony. “No, he got all his homework done before naptime.”

“Perfect. Should only take a second. Let me know when she’s down.”

“Mmmhmm,” Darcy hummed, leaning her elbow onto the table, chin in hand, holding her phone out so she could watch Tony work. She looked up when a tinny voice came over the speakers in the lab.

“Friday. Powering down.”

“You’re all good on this side,” Darcy said, covering her mouth with a hand as she yawned. “How are my boys?”

“I’m going to ignore you called them that. They’re not here.”

“What do you mean they’re not there?”

“They’re here, but not here. Different city. We’re going to head -”

Darcy frowned when Tony stopped mid-sentence, pulling her attention from where she’d been
inspecting the polish on her feet. “Stark?”

“There’s somethi -”

The very distinct sound of gunfire echoed from Tony’s side of the screen and Darcy watched as he climbed to his feet, peering out the window he was seated next to. He turned toward his phone, his mouth moving, yelling, but all she could hear now was silence. “Tony!?”

In horror, she saw a flash of bright light, followed by the screen going black. When the words *Lost Signal* strobed at her, she looked up in a panic, fear gripping her heart. “Peter! We need to get to Wakanda!”

Peter skidded to her side in seconds, eyes wide, the last bit of sleep in their depths fading instantly. “Wh-what?”

Darcy turned toward him, fingers gripping his upper arms. “I was talking with Tony and something happened. The line went dead, but I heard gunfire and saw a flash -”

“Darcy, are you sure -”

“Yes, I’m fucking sure!” She said, emphasizing it with a shake, “we have to get there!”

Brown eyes looking lost, Peter shook his head, voice uncertain. “I don’t, I have no idea how to get there! Friday! Can you -”

“She’s down,” Darcy said, her voice rising in both pitch and volume, realizing how cut off from everyone she and Peter seemed to be. “Tony was taking her down when all this started!”

“Then how -”

Darcy’s eyes widened and she looked at Peter with a triumphant expression. “Clint! And Natasha!”

Peter frowned. “They’re not on base, remember?”

“Fuck!” Darcy yelled, running a frantic hand through her hair, pulling on it slightly, leaving it only more wild than it’d been before. She closed her eyes, mind running over everything she knew, trying to figure out what to do. Her feet took her in a quick circuit around the work table before she paused then spun around to pin Peter with a harried look. “Do you know how to drive?”

“W-what? No! I’m from Queens!”

Fuck. *Fuck!* What other option do we have? “Well, buckle up, Pete, because you’re about to learn. Come on. Grab your suit.”

“You should grab yours, too.”

Darcy had been running for the door when she skidded to a stop, turning to look at Peter with an incredulous expression on her face. “My *what?”

Peter didn’t answer her, dashing toward one of the large cabinets that housed their tools. He pulled out a case and slid it across the floor toward her as he began rooting through the drawer at his workstation, pulling out cartridge after cartridge of webbing. “Tony made you a suit. He was going to give it -”

“Less talking, more running,” Darcy panted, grabbing the case and holding it under her arm as she waited for Peter to grab his stuff. “We’re gonna hotwire a car -”
“-hotwire? -”

“- then you’ll be driving.” She finished, knowing how insane it sounded, even as it fell from her lips. The panic coursing through her body made her feel like there was electricity in her blood, like she was humming with power. When she glanced down at her arms, she saw the palest bit of amber light shining under her skin.

 Fuck. No. Not now. Calm down, Lewis. You can’t lose it now. You gotta control this. You have no other option.

“This is a horrible idea,” Peter said as he ran up, backpack thrown over his shoulders. “I don’t know how to drive! We don’t even know where Clint and Natasha are!”

Darcy let out a deep breath, closing her eyes, still able to see the soft glow through her eyelids. She took a deep breath and blinked amber eyes at Peter. “Leave that part to me.”
Shattered

Chapter Summary

Battles are being fought on multiple fronts, with no guarantees that everyone escapes unscathed; Steve and Bucky fight outside the Great Mound in an effort to protect the Wakandan vibranium mines, and Darcy fights a much different adversary at home.

Chapter Notes

Things are dark, gentle readers, and I apologize in advance. This is rough, and painful, but I will softly point out that one of the tags on this little bit of wording was 'angst'...
Hugs! Hugs for everyone!

PageBreak

It’s hard, isn’t it?
Living with a shattered heart.
You breathe in
and hope the shards don’t pierce your lungs.
But, eventually, they will.
There is no escape from it.
You will bleed.
You will gasp.
And you will scar.
But what matters in the end, darling
is that you will survive.

PageBreak

“How did you learn -”

“I’m in possession of a large skill set,” Darcy grumbled, pulling out a knife as she crouched under the steering wheel of Tony’s fastest car. She wasn’t actually sure if it was the fastest car he had at the compound, but it was pretty, and most ridiculously fast cars were pretty. It could also seat four, which is what they’d need; if Peter and her survived the drive out to Barton’s Secret Farm, the younger man would definitely not be driving on their return. With any luck the agents had taken a quinjet to the farm and they’d be able to fly back.

Her stomach flipped at the idea of flying, but Darcy pushed the nausea down. She already felt like
throwing up - out of fear, and anxiousness, and uncertainty - and her phobias would need to take a backseat to every other emotion turning her belly.

“So that means you know how, I mean, you s-stole cars?”

Darcy’s fingers were shaking so badly that she made a yelp of pain as the blade sliced against her finger, already feeling the sting as blood began to pool. “Fuck,” she shouted, clenching her jaw as she grabbed the knife with renewed, anger-laced purpose.

“No, Peter,” she said, focusing on the wires and her task, using the conversation to ignore the fear and doubt welling inside her chest, “I know how to hotwire cars because my second foster father showed me, Because he stole cars and my hands were smaller. which meant he kept me until I grew bigger hands, until I wasn’t worth keeping around anymore.”

She heard Peter shift uncomfortably behind her, heard his exhale of breath. “Darcy -”

“Yes!” The rumble of the engine was loud in the garage and she crawled out of the floorboard and to her feet. There was a look of surprise on Peter’s face, tinted heavily with uncertainty. “You’re going to be fine,” she assured him, “driving isn’t that hard. This is an automatic, so once you have the gas and brake pedal figured out it’ll be easy. I can’t believe you’re, like, the smartest kid alive but don’t know how to drive.”

“I know how to do it in theory, but I know how to do a lot of things in theory. But real life?”

“Well, this is real life, and we really need you to pull this off.” Darcy left him near the open drivers side door, crossing to the passenger side and climbing into the car. Peter threw his backpack and her case into the backseat, climbed in, and shut his door.

The car was quiet for a long second as they both dealt with the flurry of thoughts in their heads. Finally, Peter turned to Darcy, brown eyes wide. “Why can’t you -”

Darcy shook her head, cutting off his words, her voice rushed and trembling. “I’m going to go into the blackness, focus on Clint’s purple, and direct you.”

Peter looked at her, eyes widening even further. “That, the stuff, the blackness you go into, how -”

“I know what Clint’s soul looks like. If I focus, I should be able to find him.”

“Should be able to?”

Darcy sighed, looking over at him with fear in her eyes, too. This was probably a mistake, putting them both in this danger, but the desperation to do something was screaming louder than her fear. “I haven’t done it before, not like this. Avoiding Tony when I’m annoyed with him, sure, but I never went farther out of the compound. I stayed local.”

“And this place might not be local?”

“I didn’t think asking Clint how far away his secret farm with his secret family lived was an appropriate question to ask at the time, Pete.” When Peter nodded, his hands gripping the steering wheel, Darcy reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Right pedal is gas. Left is break. You switch gears here. When we get out of the garage, play with the pedals. Find out how much you have to press to go, how much to stop. Stay in your lane, use the signal here to switch lanes or take turns. I’m hoping we won’t get a lot of traffic, considering where we are.”

“Why don’t we find the director? Or grab another soldier?”
“Hill’s not here, I checked for her. I don’t want to grab just any soldier in the hallway, in case this goes south. None of them will know where Wakanda is, anyway. We’re getting Clint and Natasha because they’re our best shot at getting what we need, getting to Wakanda, then helping everyone. We gotta do this, Peter. Please. Can you do this?”

She wasn’t sure where the abundance of composure was coming from, but she had a feeling it was coming from Bucky, from his years of combat missions and training in high-stress situations. Darcy thought about drawing on his memories to fly one of the quinjets, but first? The thought of throwing up while flying didn’t seem like a really good idea. Second? She wouldn’t be drawing from Bucky’s memories, she’d be drawing from The Soldier’s, and she tried to stay as far away from those memories as possible.

Peter’s brown eyes softened as they looked at her, seeing the ‘barely held-together’ look on Darcy’s face. He knew things were bad, and he could see in her eyes how scared she was. He gave her the most reassuring smile he could muster. “I can do it, Darcy.”

Her smile was small and tight, but she was about to do something she’d never wanted to do: Pushing with the stone, in an uncertain environment, without the safety of Tony and Bruce, or her music, or her mantra... She’d be in the black for longer than ever before. When her stomach turned, she grit her teeth and pointed toward the garage door. “Warp speed, Mr. Sulu.”

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The sounds of gunfire and fighting grew louder as Steve ran down the hallway, skidding to a stop just outside the main entrance to the mine’s administration building. His eyes took in the battlefield. It looked all too familiar, like some horrible case of déjà vu; the creatures attacking weren’t terrestrial, a mish-mash of alien races, mercenaries for hire, what was left of Thanos’ army. S.H.I.E.L.D. had done their best to round them all up, but some had simply disappeared and trying to track them had been fruitless..

"Steve!"

Steve turned at the sound of Bucky's voice, watching as he and Sam ran toward him, focus and battle already coloring their gazes. "Thanos' muscle," Steve offered, "alien weaponry. Need to get the civilians to safety first. Best to have them barricade themselves inside, a place with no windows and minimal entry points."

"On it," Sam said, darting away on foot, his wings out of commission due to the EMP.

"They waited," Bucky growled, "why'd they wait?" He ducked as a flash of green flew over their heads, sizzling with heat and crackling with energy. It hit the stone building behind them, carving out a good-sized chunk of the facade.

"They were testing when they took down the satellite, seeing if it would work," Steve bit out before he lifted his shield, deflecting a beam of light, watching as it ricocheted to the ground harmlessly near their feet. "We won't be able to reach Birnin Zana by comms. We're on our own out here."

Bucky shook his head, gun in hand and firing, calling to Steve over the roar of fighting and the screams of civilians and creatures alike. "They planned this. They're probably attacking the capital right now, waited until our forces were split."

"Well, it worked," Steve said as he tossed his shield, knocking an alien away from a woman who
was prone on the ground. The disk flew back toward him and he caught it easily, watching at the woman ran toward the buildings and relative safety. "We have to stop them here. We need a solid mass of soldiers in front of the entrance to the mines. It's what they're here for. Don't let them get it."

Bucky’s grey eyes slid to Steve, sharing a look that was heavy with words unsaid. They'd danced this dance forever, longing gazes as bullets rained around them, chest pounding in fear for the other, even as they put themselves in harm's way. It didn't get any easier, would never be easy, but it was their job, and people would get hurt if they didn't push their own feelings aside and focus on the mission. "Don't make me kick your ass for dying, punk."

Steve thought about yelling something back at Bucky, but ended up just watching him sprint away, toward where the majority of the security forces had centralized. He shouted as a bit of purple glow hit his upper arm and pushed him back several inches, his skin sizzling where it’d burned through his suit. His eyes narrowed, looking up at the creature who'd hit him. Its skin was blue and when it opened his mouth, Steve saw several rows of jagged teeth.

The scream from the fighter as it charged was nothing short of unnerving, high pitched and loud, and Steve grunted when it hit his shield at full force, pushing Steve across the dirt until his back was pressed against the wall. Dodging to the right, Steve avoided a hard punch that decimated the stone behind him. His fist connected with what he assumed was the creature's snout, earning a howl of pain and a second to retaliate. Steve fell to his side, reaching out to grab the fighter's discarded weapon, firing two quick blasts into the alien's stomach, watching as it crumpled to the ground and didn't get back up.

A flash of green across his field of vision and Steve watched as the Hulk threw himself into a group of three creatures, all of them shouting with pain as Hulk brought his large fists down on them, again and again and again. When he was satisfied with the amount of alien goo on his hands, Hulk jumped away, finding another target.

“On se revoit.” We meet again.

Steve’s blue eyes narrowed as he recognized the voice behind him. He turned slowly, vindicated when his gaze landed on Georges Batroc. The last time he’d faced the man was on the deck of the Star of Lumeria. He’d gotten intel that Batroc had thrown his allegiance and fought with Thanos’ army, but it’d all been rumors, nothing confirmed. More than just rumors, now. Confirmed. Very confirmed, Steve thought to himself as his jaw clenched.

“Thanos a payé assez pour vous garder fidèle même après sa mort?” Thanos paid enough to keep you loyal even after his death?

Batroc smirked at Steve. “Je suis une personne très loyale, si le prix est juste.” I am a very loyal person, if the price is right.

Steve shook his head and pointed to the dead alien just feet away, keeping his eyes on Batroc in case he made a move. “Ces choses veulent détruire notre planète.” These things want to destroy our planet.

“Comme nous le savons maintenant, il y a beaucoup d'autres planètes.” As we now know, there are plenty of other planets.

Fingers flexing in his gloves, Steve placed his shield on his back, squaring his shoulders at the other man. “Je te donne une chance, Batroc.” I'm giving you one chance, Batroc.
Batroc flew in the air, his kick blocked by Steve's arm. Steve used Batroc's momentum, flipping backward, raising his shield and blocking another well placed kick. Steve looked up in time to see Batroc stay low, his leg sweeping, trying to catch Steve off guard.

Steve spun to his feet, grunting when Batroc landed a kick to the middle of his chest, arms cartwheeling as he was push backward by the force of it. Steve rolled out of the way as Batroc's heel pounded into the dirt where he'd just been, the mercenary's eyes wide as he spun, leg lashing out.

**Kick. Jab. Jab.**

The flurry of blows was quick, relentless, and Steve blocked just as many as he took, his chest and arms already pulsing with pain at the weight behind Batroc's punches and kicks. When the other man gave him an opportunity, Steve hit him hard with his shield, knocking him backward and to his ass on the ground. It only took a second for Batroc to flip back to his feet, his eyes narrowed before he shot forward again.

The sound of Batroc's fists and feet as they hit Steve's shield sang through the air. When Batroc left himself open, Steve darted forward and grabbed the other man's shoulders, bringing his knee into Batroc's gut, once, twice, and again. The mercenary grunted in pain before breaking contact, ducking to avoid a right hook Steve aimed for his chin.

They advanced and retreated, blows landing, blows glancing, dodging and weaving, for a minute neither having the upper hand. A well-placed elbow caught Batroc off guard and he stumbled backward. Steve took advantage, using the momentum to toss his shield, watching as it hit Bartoc in the stomach. Steve jumped and used both feet to kick the shield, driving Batroc to the ground with a groan of pain. Steve kicked the edge of the shield, springing it back onto his arm.

Steve only had a split second to see the flash of silver before Bartoc was shooting. He rose his shield, deflecting the bullets, waiting for a pause in the firing. When it came, Steve's head darted up, blue eyes widening. He chuckled his shield with a growl of power, watching the blur of red, silver, and blue as it flew *over* Bartoc's head and crashed into an alien creature who'd been about to make a killing blow on a Wakandan security guard.

Steve shouted as several of Batroc's bullets hit him in the chest, his suit keeping them from embedding in his skin, but still able to feel each of them like a hard kick to the gut. He fell to one knee, bracing himself before he ran at Bartoc, tackling the man to the dirt. They scrapped, trading blows, rolling, faces bleeding as fists and elbows connected.

Steve's arms took the brunt of the impact when Bartoc lifted both fists and brought them down like a hammer. His knee connected hard with Bartoc's groin, and Steve watched as the other man's face turned red. Steve was able to flip them, his punches raining down hard. Batroc was dazed, Steve could see it in his eyes, and he lifted his fist to take Batroc out of the fight.

Steve grunted in pain before his punch ever had a chance to land, the world whizzing by in streamers of colors as he went flying through the air.

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PageBreak

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“Wilson!” Bucky's volley of gunfire took out the alien that was about to tackle Sam from behind, an oversized and jagged sword as black as night falling uselessly to the ground, the creature’s orange
blood pooling in the dirt.

“What the hell!” Sam had ducked as the bullets flew over him, punching the creature he’d been squaring off with one last time before he rose to his feet with a glare in Bucky's direction, "you could have warned me!

Bucky ran up to the other man, gray eyes scanning the battlefield, cataloging each fighter as friend or foe. "I yelled your name, jackass!"

"Jackass? I’ve never heard you - *look out!*" Sam tucked his neck and dove at Bucky, taking them both to the ground as a barrage of green flashes flew over their heads, killing two of the aliens behind them.

"We need to protect the mines, Steve wants the security centered there." Bucky rolled to his side, coughing on the dust as he climbed back to his feet. He held a hand out to Sam and helped him up.

One of Sam’s hands pressed into his side, the other shifting its grip on his gun as he winced. "He think they’re after the vibranium?"

"You know any other reason why they'd attack here?"

"You mean, *besides* the fact that half of the Avengers are here? That ain’t good enough?"

"*Oyar!*" The head of security jogged toward them, his head down, an advanced Wakandan weapon in his hands. Bucky placed a hand on his shoulder, pulling the man in closer so he could be heard over the fighting and gunfire. "We need your people at the entrances to the mines!"

Oyar nodded at Bucky, then motioned to two of his men, drawing them closer. He barked orders and the soldiers ran off in separate directions, faces determined. "Our comms are down."

"They used an EMP. We can't rely on others coming to bail us out. It's us and them," Sam said with a shake of his head.

"We are outnumbered three to one."

"I think that sounds about right. That sound right to you, Barnes?" Sam looked over at Bucky with a challenging look on his face.

"I guess I'll have to pick up your slack then," Bucky said, giving Sam a smug look before he sprinted away with Oyar.

"I still fucking hate you," Sam growled to himself, rolling his eyes before he chased after Bucky.

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You won’t be able to hold this for much longer.
I’m impressed you lasted this long.
I know you, I know what you’ve been through, I know your strength.
It’s waning.
You can feel it, can’t you? You’re losing your grip.
Just a few more minutes and you’ll slip away and I’ll be able to take over.

“West.”
The word from Darcy’s mouth was said through her teeth, and Peter glanced over at her with worry. Her skin was pale, even while lit from within by that unearthly glow, and she was covered in a sheen of sweat. He watched her chin wobble, another tear sliding down her cheek. “We should stop, give you a break.”

Darcy shook her head, wet strands of hair sticking to her forehead and neck. “Can’t.”

Everything hurt. She was aching in her bones, agony in every muscle, and the stone’s voice was right; Darcy wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep this up. They were close, she could tell, but if they didn’t get there quickly she wasn’t sure what would happen. Would it be like the stone said? Would she slip away? Would it take over?

She was on the precipice of something bad and the taste of fear on her tongue was thick. Only her grip on the door handle kept her grounded enough to hear Peter, and even then his voice sounded like she was underwater, muted and faded. She was losing. Fuck everything, but she was losing.

“If we don’t get there soon -”

“Left! Go left!”

Peter reacted immediately, turning the wheel sharply, the rear end of the car drifting to the right before he corrected, trees flying by as they sped through the forest. If there hadn’t been a road there, he wasn’t sure what he’d have done; he knew Darcy couldn’t see anything but blackness, but he’d had to backtrack several times already to get where she directed him.

When they got back, Peter was going to redouble his work on her neural dampener. He wasn’t really sure if it would help with this particular power, staying in the dark and searching for a specific soul, but anything had to be better than what she was having to do now. “Darcy, we can’t -”

You’re so tired. If you just let go, you’ll rest.
All the pain, the worry, the doubting… it’ll all go away.
You’ll be happy, sleeping, it’ll be like all of this was just a nightmare.
You’re the only one who can do it, the only one who can end it.
Wouldn’t it feel so good? To finally rest?
You’ve been struggling your whole life.
Wouldn’t it be a relief just to give in?

“So close, his purple, her orange, it’s right there,” she sobbed, blind eyes seeing nothing of what was flying past the window. Darcy’s fingers curled into fists, more tears leaking from the corners of her eyes as it took everything she had not to pass out, not to give into the voice.

I’ve been playing nice until today, girl.
You can fight all you want, but you will give in, I will win.
I was offering comfort and rest, but if I need to, I will take it with pain and suffering.

Darcy shook her head, in too much pain to speak, agony stealing her words. Before the black took over, she screamed that she wasn’t giving up, that she’d never give up, even if the stone killed her, she’d take it down with her, if that’s what she had to do.

“Where, Darcy? I don’t see -” Movement in his peripheral vision drew his gaze, and Peter’s eyes widened in a panic as he watched her body begin to seize. “Darcy! Hey! Darcy!”

He felt the car shudder and shouted as the wheels left the road, jerking the steering wheel, hearing the groaning and protests as he managed to get it back on the road. He risked another glance at
Darcy, his heart plummeting as she was still shaking, her skin glowing brighter and brighter. Peter’s eyes widened with familiarity and he slammed his foot on the brake, the gravel road making the car screech as he fishtailed to a stop. He threw it into reverse, glad that Darcy’s seatbelt had kept her in her seat.

Peter pressed his foot on the gas, flying past the purple mailbox with a giant black arrow on the side, glancing over at Darcy every few seconds, his face in lines of worry and anxiousness. She’d stopped seizing but he knew she wasn’t alright, she was nowhere near alright.

He skidded to a stop in front of a large farmhouse with a big front porch, throwing the car into park and scrambling out of the drivers side. “Barton! Romanoff!” He flew around the car, pulling open Darcy’s door and leaning in to unbuckle her. He shouted their names again as he tugged Darcy out of the car and laid her on the ground beside it.

Natasha appeared at Peter’s side within seconds, kneeling on the grass next to him, her green eyes looking over Darcy’s body for visible wounds. “What happened?”

“She was in the black for over two hours, trying to find you guys, then she started seizing.”

“What happened?” Clint said running up to them, bow in hand, his eyes widening when they landed on Darcy, pale and sweaty, her body limp.

“Everyone’s in Wakanda, something went down. We need your help.”

“Clint? Tasha? What’s going on?”

“Laura, get your bag!”

Peter glanced up to see a woman with dark hair dart back into the house, then his worried eyes swung toward Natasha. “We have to get back to the compound.”

Clint shook his head. “Not until we get her stabilized.”

“But everyone -”

“Will agree that we needed to make sure she was safe before we did anything else,” Clint interrupted, looking up as Laura ran back down the porch steps, a large yellow bag slung over her shoulder.

“She was seizing, then this,” Natasha offered, watching as Laura dropped to her knees and unzipped the bag.

Laura’s voice was calm and professional as she pressed fingers to the side of Darcy’s neck, glancing up at Peter. “What do you know about her? Any allergies? What were her symptoms?”

“No allergies,” Peter said with a shake of his head. Darcy’s scans and blood work had been seared into his brain from reviewing her file, he probably knew her body better than she did, “she has new neural architecture that opens and dilates as she uses her powers.”

“Good is open?”

“Good is closed.”

“Got it. Here,” Laura instructed, handing Natasha a small foil package, turning her attention back to the bag. Natasha grabbed the neckline of Darcy’s baggy sweatshirt and pulled it down, exposing her
upper arm. She ripped the package open and rubbed the alcohol wipe on Darcy’s skin, then moved back out of the way.

Laura leaned over Darcy, penlight in hand, and lifted one eyelid to check for pupil dilation. She made a surprised sound when she saw the amber color that had taken over Darcy’s entire eye, still glowing, though much dimmer than before. She glanced up at Clint. “Is that normal?”

“More or less,” Clint said, sharing a look with Natasha over Darcy’s body, “it’s part of her powers.”

Nodding, Laura checked Darcy’s other vitals before she reached back into the bag, pulling out pre-loaded syringes, obviously hunting for one in particular. Her fingers ripped open the packaging when she found what she was looking for, tearing off the guard tip and pressing lightly on the plunger to rid it of any air bubbles.

Peter shook his head, leaning his body over Darcy’s protectively. “W-wait, hold on, you don’t know what that’ll do to her, what if it -”

Both Clint and Natasha’s moved in unison, arms pushing Peter back, holding him, giving Laura enough room to work. Nimble fingers injected Darcy’s arm and Laura pulled back, warm brown eyes lit with concern as she waited for any changes. She bent over Darcy, pressing her ear to the other woman’s chest. “No heartbeat, starting chest compressions,” she bit out, teeth clenching as she pulled back and started pressing on Darcy with practiced hands.

“What happened?” Clint demanded again, pinning Peter with a glare.

“She, I mean, Darcy was talking with Tony, they were video’ing, and something happened, gunfire, and then the phone went dead and she was screaming and Hill’s gone and you guys were here and we needed to find you.”

“Why did you let her do this?” Clint’s words held a thread of accusation as they looked at Peter, who rightfully looked taken aback. Seeing Darcy lying pale on the ground dug at Clint, unable to help feeling protective of the woman he’d known for months and had come to care for.

“Hey,” Natasha said, green eyes following Laura’s precise movements before they flicked up toward Clint. She was well used to Clint attaching himself easily to the people he worked with, but protective paternal tendencies would do nothing to help the situation. “It’s not Peter’s fault.”

All three of them looked over when Laura stopped compressions and pressed her fingers to the side of Darcy’s neck. “Still nothing.” She frowned, mentally working through her checklist. When an idea brightened her eyes, she looked at Natasha. “Tasha, in the bag, I need the blue pen for -”

“Got it,” Natasha said, hands already digging. She held out what looked like a thick pen and Laura’s slim fingers took it, bringing it down immediately into Darcy’s bare thigh, thumb on the plunger, pushing.

Everyone watched Darcy’s chest, waiting for it to rise and fall.

When it didn’t, Laura cursed and began looking through her syringes again, eyes focused, ready to try the next thing.

“Hey!” Peter shouted in alarm when Natasha’s closed fist came down on Darcy’s chest with a heavy thud.

Immediately, Darcy took a deep, shuddering breath inward. Peter sagged with visible relief, leaning back against the side of Tony’s car, body deflating. Clint and Natasha shared a small, tight smile over
Darcy’s body, eyes softening with relief.

Laura nodded, taking charge. “Clint, grab her legs and hold them up. Tasha, run inside and grab some blankets and water.”

Peter watched Natasha move instantly, disappearing into the house. He turned back to Laura, brown eyes wide, then looked down at Darcy with concern. She hadn’t opened her eyes yet, but the glow had returned to her skin. “Is she, you know, is, is she going to be okay?”

“Peter. It’s Peter, right?” Laura could tell the younger man was worried, his face still pale, his hand clutching Darcy’s. When he nodded, she tried to smile at him as reassuringly as possible. “You did great, getting her here. Now, I need you -”

“Пожар в моих венах.”

Peter frowned then leaned forward, unsure if he’d actually heard the words come from Darcy or if he’d imagined them. Even with his superior hearing, he wasn’t sure. “Darcy?”

“Пожар в моих венах.”

“Пожар в моих венах.”

Peter frowned then leaned forward, unsure if he’d actually heard the words come from Darcy or if he’d imagined them. Even with his superior hearing, he wasn’t sure. “Darcy?”

“Пожар в моих венах.” Fire in my veins. Darcy repeated. Her eyes stayed closed, but her face contorted as if in pain, her voice nothing more than a breath, nothing more than a whisper.

Natasha appeared as if by magic, brows knit together, eyes focused with a flash of familiarity, as she looked down at Darcy. “What did she say?”

“Пожар в моих венах.” Where does it hurt?


“теперь ты в безопасности, Дарси.” You’re safe now, Darcy.

“Черный. Не могу выбраться. Пойманный в ловушку.” Black. Can’t get out. Trapped.

“Кто у вас в ловушке? Где?” Who has you trapped? Where?

Clint watched the conversation between Natasha and Darcy with wary eyes. He only had a rudimentary knowledge of Russian, mostly the curse words Nat would use when frustrated, but he could understand Natasha’s expression and the softness in her voice. Something was wrong. “What?”

His mouth snapped closed with Natasha held up a finger in his direction, feeling Laura lay a hand on his arm to silence him. Darcy’s lips were barely moving as she spoke, her voice so soft and sounding completely unlike the Darcy he knew.

“Камень. Он не знает, что я говорю, а не мои воспоминания. Не Баки. Солдат.” The stone. It doesn't know what I'm saying, not my memories. Not Bucky's. The soldier.

“Можете ли вы следовать моему голосу? Ищи меня, Дарси. Найди меня.” Can you follow my voice? Look for me, Darcy. Come find me.

“Я знаю, что ты устал, и скоро ты скоро отдохнешь, но мне нужно, чтобы ты нашел меня прямо сейчас, хорошо?” I know you’re tired, and you’ll get to rest soon, but I need you to find me right now, okay?

“Так темно” So dark.

Peter pressed a hand to Darcy’s cheek, worried, her skin hot to the touch. A steady stream of tears were leaking from her eyes and sliding into her hair. He looked up at Clint with a helpless expression, seeing the concern in the other man’s gaze as well.

“Я знаю, но я здесь. Все, что вам нужно, это найти меня.” I know, but I’m right here waiting. All you have to do is find me.

“Если я не вернусь, если что-то еще возьмет -” If I don’t get back, if something else takes over -

“Ничто не захватывает, вы собираетесь найти мои цвета, следить за светом и вернуться к нам. Я не хочу, чтобы ты рассказывал своим мальчикам, что мы тебя потеряли. Поэтому вам нужно вернуться сюда. Теперь.” Nothing is taking over, you’re going to find my colors, follow the light, and get back to us. I do not want to be the one to tell your boys that we lost you. So you need to get back here. Now.

There was nothing but blackness, stretching out in every direction. Darcy’s heart was racing, and if she had a neck here, the hairs on the back of it would be sticking straight up. She was in trouble, that much she knew. The stone, its voice, was here, lurking, looking for her. She'd been able to sneak away, using the Soldier to confuse it. It didn't know how to handle or follow the Soldier, seeing as he was a memory but essentially an entirely different person at the same time. It gave her time to hide, something to shroud herself in, so the stone couldn’t find her.

She knew it would be bad - if the stone were able to find her with her being as weak as she was - but Darcy was lost. There was nothing, an utterly void expanse, no lights, no souls, just black. She was so tired, on the verge of collapse, but she couldn’t give up. They needed to get to Wakanda, they needed to help the people she loved. All of them. Not just Steve and Bucky, but Tony, and Bruce, and Thor. They needed help and she was wasting time that could be spent finding them, saving them.

Despite the weight and exhaustion, Darcy focused. She focused on Natasha, on the warm, autumn pumpkin color of her soul, tinged with the same darkness that Bucky carried. The history between Natasha and the Soldier was long and complicated, and she used that part of her mind to seek her hue, used the Soldier’s tracking skills to find their way. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the tiniest pinprick of color, like a light at the end of a tunnel.

“Я вижу вас!” I see you!

“Отлично, хорошо, приходите ко мне. Я здесь, ты просто должен -” Great, good, come to me. I’m right here, you just have to -

Everyone jumped as Darcy gasped, amber eyes glowing as she sat up, hands grasping for something, anything solid, needing to know it was real. Natasha took one hand as Clint took the other, clapping hers tightly as Darcy looked around with wide eyes, their color slowly changing back to their normal hazel hue. “Блядь. Боже, было так темно. Я так устал. Я все еще говорю по-русски? Почему я все еще говорю по-русски?” Fuck. God, it was so dark. I’m so tired. Am I still speaking Russian?
“Just give it a few minutes,” Natasha said, watching as Clint rubbed a hand on Darcy’s back, Darcy’s pulse jumping under the skin of her neck.

“Я не знаю? Да? O, черт возьми, мы должны to Wakanda, something happened and they’re in trouble and we have to get there!”

All four pairs of hands pushed her back to the ground when she tried to stand up.

“Whoa there.”

“You shouldn’t be moving.”

“You almost died!”

Darcy blinked at all of them, closing her eyes for a second as the ground seemed to tilt underneath her. “Don’t... worry about me. They’re in Wakanda, and they’re under attack! Friday is down. You’re the only ones who know where Wakanda is,” she opened her eyes and peered into Clint’s face, eyes imploring, needing him to understand the danger, clutching at his t-shirt. “We have to go help them!”

“We will,” Clint said with a nod, eyes flicking up to Natasha, who ran into the house. Turning his gaze back to Darcy, he gave her a small smile. “We’ll get there Darce, promise, but first you need to sit right here and let Laura check you out.”

Blinking and turning her head, Darcy’s eyes finally focused on the pretty brunette in front of her. She was smiling so sweetly, reassuring, and despite the heaviness of her eyelids, Darcy pushed at the exhaustion she could feel circling her, not wanting to give in. “You must be Laura.”

“I am,” Laura said, giving Darcy a helpful grin, reaching out to press two fingers to the inside of Darcy’s wrist, counting in her head, “and you’re Darcy, the person my husband’s been beating up.”

Slowly, like they were moving through jelly, Darcy’s eyes swung to pin Clint with a glare. “Hey.”

“Don’t hey me,” Clint said with a shrug of his shoulders, “in this family we don’t keep secrets.”

“Even when we should,” Natasha said, dropping two bags by the side of the car as she rejoined them. “We have to go,” she said to Laura, watching as the nurse continued her exam, shining her penlight in Darcy’s eyes now that they’d returned to normal.

Only frowning slightly, Laura nodded up at Natasha, pulling more supplies from her bag. “I’m going to check a few more things but when you gets back to base, you have to get her checked out. I don’t know what...”

“What? No! I have to go with them! I need to -” Darcy tried to stand but fell back on her ass, groaning as the world spun. She felt Peter pull her back against him, holding her still with a strong arm wrapped around the front of her body, supporting her. He was warm at her back, and despite trying to keep her eyes open, Darcy’s lids kept falling closed as if they were weighted. “When we get back... When...”

Peter looked up at Laura with alarm when Darcy sagged against him, body going limp. “Is that, is it okay for her to sleep? Should she stay -”

“She doesn’t have a concussion. Rest and sleep is what she needs. I’d tell you she needs to stay here
but my bag isn’t really outfitted for enhanced people’s needs and the doctors on base are going to have better equipment.”

“Is she stable?”

Laura looked over at Clint, frowning softly as she wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Darcy’s arm. “From what I can tell? Maybe.”

“Maybe’s not reassuring, Laur.”

“It’s the best you’re going to get from me. She’s breathing and her body doesn’t appear to be in distress anymore, but I don’t know her and I don’t know her powers. I wish I could tell you more, Clint, but other than saying that I’m not immediately worried about her…”

“Then what do we do?” Peter asked, his voice softer, his arm tightening around Darcy.

“I’m going to check what I can, then we’ll need to get her loaded up.”

“You guys should go,” Natasha said, nodding in Clint and Peter’s direction, “get back to base, get the quinjet ready.”

“No! I don’t… I should stay with her,” Peter said, shaking his head at Natasha, arms still wrapped protectively around Darcy’s shoulders.

“You did a really good job getting her here, Parker, but I could use your help when we get back,” Clint said, using a softer tone in his voice as he spoke. “Nat’ll bring Darcy as soon as Laura’s done with her and we’ll rendezvous back at base. The more info I get from you, the better. Okay?”

After a moment of hesitation, Peter nodded, watching as Clint rose from the ground. “Okay.”

Laura took Natasha’s offered hand and climbed to her feet, nodding toward Clint’s jeep. “Why don’t we get her set up in the back seat and then you guys can head out?”

Clint and Peter managed to transfer Darcy to the backseat of Clint’s jeep, then took off in Tony’s car, speeding toward the compound to ready a quinjet. Darcy was semi-conscious as Laura finished taking her vitals once more.

The nurse flipped her stethoscope over her shoulders, and shook her head at Natasha, mouth pulled down into a frown as they took a step farther away from the jeep. “She’s dehydrated from the sweating and her heart rate’s still elevated. She’s not running a fever, but she’s hot to the touch. Best I can tell, she was having some sort of anaphylactic attack.”

Natasha nodded, arms crossed over her chest as she watched Darcy shift in the backseat. The glow had faded from Darcy’s skin and she was left looking pale and pallid. The redhead sighed, eyes swinging back to Laura. “She’s going to fight us about going.”

“I know, but I don’t know what kind of lasting effects she’s looking at. Her heart stopped, she wasn’t breathing, and who knows if she’ll break down again. Her best option is getting fluids and sleeping. She’ll probably have a headache and feel like garbage for a day or so. Considering everything that happened, that’d be best case scenario. Now if you want to talk about worst case…”

“Let’s not think worst case,” Natasha said, eyes sliding from Clint’s jeep then back to Laura. “I’ll figure out how to keep her on base, make sure she gets checked on, even if we have to strap her down.”
“... didn’t you guys say she can throw people through the air?”

“Fine, I’ll have Clint be the one to strap her down.” Natasha’s lips twitched, seeing the flash of amusement in Laura’s eyes. “We’ve got to go.”

“I know. Be careful, please. All of you.”

Natasha leaned forward, pressing her lips to Laura’s quickly. It only took three turns of the key to get Clint’s jeep started, gravel crunching under the tires as she pulled away from the farmhouse and Laura.

Steve hit the dirt hard, groaning in pain. He couldn't take in a full breath, most likely fractured or broken ribs, judging by the sharp pain in his side. He didn't have time to hurt, though, as another kick sent him flying once more.

Back hitting the side of a building, he dropped to his side, shield clattering against the rubble that used to be a guard shack. Steve climbed to his knees, lifting his head, eyes widening slightly as they landed on the being looking down at him with scorn.

He'd faced this creature before, in the final battle for the soul stone. It'd fought at Thanos' right hand: its skin was mottled, every bit of it rippling with muscles, dense enough that no weapon had pierced it. It was heavy, impossibly heavy, and the teeth in its maw were sharpened to points.

It'd disappeared in a flash of light once Thanos had been destroyed, they’d assumed back to wherever it'd come from, but there’d been no way to know for sure. The battle had been chaos, and Steve was certain there were a lot of beings that had gone unaccounted for. They should have worked harder to ensure all of Thanos’ legion had been found.

Steve didn't have time to reflect on 'what might have been' when the creature charged at him, screaming in rage. The axe in the alien's hand was massive, and he brought it down with a bone-rattling fierceness. Steve's shield diffused much of the force but not all of it, and he could feel the strength of the hit ringing through his bones. The creature was giant and Steve used that to his advantage, rolling out of the way as the axe carved deep into the ground. This didn't seem to do much, as the mercenary yanked it free and turned, giving what Steve assumed was a satisfied smirk.

He dodged another blow, stumbling when a blistering kick sent him backward, using the momentum to pop up to his feet and throw his shield as hard as he could. The alien caught it in his hand, and Steve's eyes widened as the creature curled his fingers, the shield denting slightly. Steve only had a split second to duck as it went buzzing over his head, only missing him by inches, embedding into the solid brick behind him. Steve tried to pull it out, but it was too far in and, despite several quick attempts, he wasn't able to pull it free.

The seconds he’d taken attempting to wrench the shield free had cost him, and Steve screamed when teeth dug into his upper arm, the white flash of pain freezing his mind for a second, followed shortly by searing agony as the teeth ripped away and he was struck in his lower back. He stumbled, body protesting, feeling the blood falling from his nose and mouth. His arm felt numb, useless at his side, possibly from venom or poison in the bite, but he couldn’t be sure.

Steve ducked when both of the alien's fists whipped out, hearing the building behind him erupt into jagged pieces as the mercenary's metal gauntlets hit, chunks of stone falling to the ground. Another kick and Steve was airborne, crumpling at the feet of two startled Wakandan security guards. They
gave him a look of fright before their gazes lifted to look at the creature.

The steady *brrt brrt brrt* of assault rifle sounded in Steve's ears as the guards advanced. He waved his hand emphatically for them to stop, unable to talk as the air had been forced from his lungs, but they didn't see him. He flinched, climbing to his knees as the alien made quick work of them, tossing their bodies aside like they were inconsequential.

It reminded him so much of what Thanos had done.

_They'd done their best, given the fight everything they had, but it wasn't going to be good enough. They were going to lose, and as he'd stared into the hate-filled eyes of Thanos, seeing his death in them, Steve'd made his peace with it._

_Then Thanos' attention had been drawn away and Steve had flown through the air, like a ragdoll, rolling to his side in the dirt as he watched a dark-haired woman begin to glow, hovering over the ground and looking unaffected as Thanos dove at her, screaming his rage, only to be destroyed in a puff of orange electricity, ashes on the wind that were carried away._

... but Darcy wasn't here to save him this time.

Darcy was back at the base, thousands of miles away, and all Steve could think was...

*Good.*

It was good she wasn't here, that she was safe. Steve was happy she wasn't at his side, that she wasn’t in danger. Thinking of her being hurt, or worse, stole the breath from his lungs and made his chest ache. She was soft, and kind, and funny, and the thought of her getting hurt was... _unbearable._

Steve shouted as a fist connected with his face, throwing him to his back, unable to breathe through his nose, certain it was broken. He could already taste blood on the back of his tongue, and the next punch that connected with his face was harder. His right eye squinted, already swelling, as blow after blow rained down on him.

*Bucky,* Steve’s thoughts tumbled, _get away. Get safe. You’ve got to… If I don’t…_

He was on the edge of consciousness, unable to focus on anything but the pain, and his brain was alternating between visceral clarity and fog. *Bucky,* his mind continued to repeat, *Bucky, take… don’t let…*

Steve’s body went numb as black began to circle his mind. He was in a tunnel, black and long, looking up at a face that was slowly losing focus. He was being pulled downward, and Steve was running out of strength to fight the darkness back.

His ears were throbbing with his heartbeat, slowing and growing sluggish. He blinked when a beam of white-blue light hit the body of top of him, sending it flying and outside his narrowing field of vision. He blinked one good eye up at Tony as the man yelled something at him, but he couldn’t make it out over the searing pain and fog that was taking over.

Steve tried to hold on but he couldn’t. He was so tired, in so much pain, and he knew it would all go away if he wanted to. He could let go, give in, welcome the black. The quiet. The peace. He’d once thought he’d welcome death with a warm smile, having made a hushed agreement that, when it was his time, he’d go calmly and placidly.

*Grey Slate.*
Faces flashed into his mind and Steve wasn’t calm, or placid, or willing to go quietly. It wasn’t like it’d been before, not anymore. He couldn’t give up. He had things to do, things to say, things he hadn’t even realized he felt so deeply and powerfully until that second. He started fighting, clawing his way back toward the pinprick of light. He was desperate, frantic, violent in his frenzy to hold on.

No! Not yet!

It was no use. The blackness was taking over. Steve had a second to wonder if this was what Darcy saw: an endless, vast sea of darkness, too large to comprehend, too cold to fight. He understood now, what it was like to fight darkness. It was futile. Hopeless. Hollow. His body was meant to take damage but this was too much, even for him.

I didn't get to -
Lose You

Chapter Summary

Grief overwhelms.

Chapter Notes

This one... hurts. It's also the largest chapter yet. Because...

...I'm sorry.

ён

(Originally this was going to be split into two chapters, but due to characters in my head ((and not wanting to give you guys another cliff hanger)), I mashed it into one!)

Somewhere out there, there’s a strand of fate with our names written in gold,
And when that string is spun, we’ll be happy.

But for now we must find courage in the other’s heartbeat,
For buried in our bones is the knowledge that we belong together.

And every time you speak my name there’s a whisper of a plea:
“Don’t take this one from me”
And every time I touch your skin there’s a vow etched in:
“I will not lose you”

Because the stars are jealous creatures, they don’t seek to be replaced,
And they know that if we were given even the tiniest bit of time:
We’d get monuments proclaiming our devotion

Darcy groaned, waking as they hit a particularly heavy rut in the road. Sluggishly, she sat up in the back of a jeep, blinking at Natasha and the woods flying by. Her head was throbbing, her tongue like sandpaper in her mouth, and she felt like she’d been hit by a truck. A very large, very heavy truck.

“What... what happened?”
Natasha glanced over her shoulder at Darcy, the redhead’s mouth in a tight line. “You don’t remember?”

Struggling to pull her scattered thoughts together, the massive headache she had at the base of her skull making it infinitely harder, Darcy frowned. “Peter and I were finding you because of Wakanda.” Her eyes widened with panic, hands flashing out to grip the seat in alarm. “Wakanda! We have to -”

“Barton and Parker left before us so they can ready the jet. It’ll be ready when we get there,” Natasha interrupted, seeing the brief expression on relief that found its way into Darcy’s hazel eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Darcy struggled, maneuvering her body from the back and into the passenger seat. She made a noise of discomfort as she settled, trying to keep from throwing up from the way she’d jostled herself. She hummed, waiting for the nausea to pass before opening her eyes. “I hope Tony restocked the sick bags in all of the jets.”

Natasha’s gaze flicked toward Darcy, a frown darkening her features before she looked forward again. “You’re not going with us.”

“What?” Darcy snapped, watching as Natasha kept her green eyes on the road, not even looking in her direction as her shout rang through the jeep. “Steve and Bucky are there! Tony might be hurt! I’m going with you!”

“No, you’re not,” Natasha repeated with a shake of her head. “You almost died getting to us -”

“- I think that’s a bit over dramatic -“

“So until you get cleared by a doctor, you’re not going anywhere.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, her chest singing with righteous indignation. Natasha looked over at her with a look of finality in her eyes, but Darcy didn’t care; her blood was already pumping so loudly that she let the anger warm her from the inside, feeling the pink as it bloomed in her cheeks. “You have no right to tell me what I can and can’t -”

“You outrank me, Lewis. If I say you’re grounded, you’re grounded. End of discussion.”

“You outrank me? I’m not a soldier!”

“You’re right. You’re not a soldier. And you know who doesn’t go on rescue missions? People who aren’t soldiers. Barton hasn’t cleared you for combat duty, Hill hasn’t signed off on you being active roster, and despite how much you want to help Steve and Barnes, all you’ll do if you go with us is jeopardize their safety.”

“That’s unfair!”

“I don’t care what you think is fair and unfair, искра, you’re not going with us.”

Darcy flinched at hearing the Russian fall from Natasha’s mouth, Bucky’s memories reminding her that when the beautiful spy used her first language, it was never a good sign. “Well then what the fuck am I supposed to do? Twiddle my thumbs and take up knitting? I have to do something!”

Natasha took a fast corner, the wheels skidding and screeching as the jeep flew down the road at dangerous speeds. She saw Darcy grip the door handle as the movement forced another sound of pain from her lips. “You did do something, Darcy. You got to me and Barton. Was that the longest you’d ever spent in the soulscape?”
Darcy knew Natasha was changing the subject, ignoring the argument and forcing her to think of something else, and if Darcy’d had her full faculties about her she’d probably fight her on it, but even now, frustrated and bitter at being put in her place, Darcy’s strength was waning. She was so tired. Blinking, Darcy sat back in her seat. Soulscape, she repeated Natasha’s word to herself. It was as good a name as any for the blackness that she’d nearly lost herself in. “Yes.”

“Your heart stopped beating. Laura had to give you CPR and two injections before you came back.”

Darcy reached up and rubbed at her chest. It ached a tiny bit, like she’d been hit with something hard. “It was so dark,” she whispered, for a second seeing the flash of blackness in her vision before she pushed it away, feeling her world tilt on its axis. Her nostrils flared as she took in another deep breath, nausea crashing into her like a wave, swallowing thickly. She let her head hang between her knees, feeling her mouth fill with saliva, hand gripping the handle to her door.

Natasha’s gaze flicked toward Darcy. She could tell the other woman was not in the best shape, but she was staying conscious and that was something. “Laura said it looked like you’d gone into anaphylactic shock.”

Pressing the back of her hand to her forehead, Darcy gave a tiny shake of her head. “I’m not allergic to anything.”

“I’m not sure they’re set up to check for an infinity gem allergy.”

Darcy was quiet, her thoughts in a freefall, vacillating between desperate, clawing fear and useless, uncertain worry. “Tony said that he wasn’t with Steve or Bucky, that they were in a different city. I… I don’t know where they were, any of them. How are you supposed to find them and help if you don’t even know where they are? I can help with that, you know I can. I’d be able to tell you.”

Natasha gave a quick shake of her head. “Neither of them would want you to go back to that place, not after what happened. Not for as long as it’d take us to find them. They’d hate you going at all. Barton and I will find another way.”

“How?”

“If I was attacking Wakanda, it’d be for the vibranium. We’ll start at the mines and go from there.”

Darcy frowned, swallowing roughly, hazel gaze swinging toward Natasha. “That’s not good enough.”

“It’ll have to be.”

They’d only had to stop the car twice so that Darcy could dry heave out the door, her stomach rolling with nausea as well as worry. She was looking less green than before, but Natasha was still worried. They had no idea what to expect when they got back to the compound. Natasha knew Clint would do what was needed, but she had to wonder if they’d be fighting with Darcy in the next few minutes.

Darcy’s grip on the door tightened as they took the last turn toward the compound, sitting forward, her voice pitched high with worry. “Why are they standing outside? Nat? What’s wrong? Why isn’t the jet ready?”
Natasha slowed the jeep from it’s frantic pace, coming to stop before the garage doors. Tony’s car was parked, blocking their way, and even from a distance she could see the look on Clint and Peter’s faces. She glanced over at Darcy, watching as the other woman pushed her door open with shaking hands and tumbled out.

Clint felt Peter take a stop toward Darcy when the dark-haired lab assistant fell to her knees in the gravel, but stopped when she clawed and climbed back to her feet, sprinting toward them. “What happened? Why isn’t the jet ready? You have to go get them! Clint? Peter?” Darcy had never felt anything like the icy fear that gripped her as she struggled toward them, trembling hands reaching out to clutch at Peter’s shirt, the younger man helping her stay on her feet. She was terrified and neither of the men were talking, only forcing her hysteria closer and closer to the surface.

When Natasha caught up, Clint nodded at both of them, his voice even. “Communication with Wakanda has been restored. There were attacks on multiple cities. Looks like the last group of Thanos’ army tried to take the mines and destroy the capital. They failed.”

Peter had a split second to grab Darcy before her knees gave out, a cry of relief ripping free from her mouth. The scientist held her against his chest, keeping her upright, rubbing a circle on her back, looking over her shoulder at Clint with a frown on his lips.

“Are they on their way back?” Natasha could see it in Clint’s eyes, something else, something he hadn’t wanted to say first. She knew him so well, and she knew he was holding it back in some kind of effort to ease the pain it was going to inflict on the panicked younger woman.

Clint sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. “They’re waiting ‘til Cap’s stable.” Darcy’s hazel eyes were wide and bloodshot as they looked up at Clint sharply, wet cheeks already streaked with tears of relief. He watched fear replace the relief like a light being shut off. Sudden and jarring.

“What? What do you mean stable? What happened?”

“We’re not sure,” Peter said, looking into her eyes when she pulled back enough to look up at him. “It sounds like he got hurt pretty bad before they were able to stop the fighting.”

“But he’s okay, right?” Darcy’s eyes flicked to each of them in turn, judging the expressions they were giving her for any kind of information, good or bad. When they said nothing, she could feel her chest tighten. “But he’s going to be okay, right?” she repeated, the volume and tone of her voice rising with panic.

“Darcy, what do you say Peter helps you get to the medical wing. Nat and I’ll find out more info and meet you there?”

Darcy looked at Clint, an argument on her tongue, but when Peter stretched his arm across her shoulders and she looked up into his worried brown eyes, she swallowed her questions. She was so tired. Steve and Bucky were alive; she’d have fought with Natasha at being left behind, but now they weren’t going either.

There was nothing she could do but wait for her boys to get home.

Her eyes flicked to Clint, seeing the carefully neutral mask he was wearing. Under normal circumstances, she’d have pushed against him, but with the tsunami of emotions crashing inside of her, Darcy couldn’t find the strength to fight the archer. “The second you hear something...”

“You’ll be our first stop. Promise.”
Blinking at Natasha, anger still pricking at her from the conversation they’d had in the jeep, Darcy let Peter steer her away and toward the door. They heard him ask Darcy what she thought of his driving skills as the door hushed closed behind them, leaving Natasha and Clint in the cool early winter air.

“She going to be alright?” Clint asked without preamble.

Natasha shook her head. “Laura said it was like she had an allergic reaction to the stone, that she needs to get checked out by a doctor to make sure nothing was damaged or harmed irreparably.”

“From what Cap’s said, she had no idea what would happen, staying like that for too long.” He’d never seen Darcy’s actual powers, besides the soft glow appearing beneath her skin and in her eyes, but he’d heard enough from Bruce and Steve to know they were formidable, as well as unpredictable.

“She almost died,” Natasha said, mirroring Clint’s posture, folding her arms over her chest and leaning back against Stark’s car.

Clint snorted, giving her a side glance. “I nominate you’re the one that breaks that news to Barnes. I like my bits where they are currently, thanks.”

Sighing, Natasha shook her head. “She fought me, wanted to go with, wanted to help.”

“Of course she did. You remember what it was like when we left for the first time, after Laura.”

Memories of that first mission after the three of them had become the three of them replayed in Natasha’s mind, her mouth turning down. “She’ll probably -”

“Mmmmmhmm,” Clint hummed, “I figured as much. They’re not going to like it.”

This time it was Natasha’s turn to snort softly in agreement. “Of course they won’t, but they don’t have much of a choice, do they? She could throw them across the room if she wanted.”

“Or worse.”

Natasha’s eyebrows knit together. “Going to the soulscape for that long almost killed her. What will it look like as a weapon?”

“Soulscape?” Clint asked, turning to look at Natasha with a small smirk on his lips.

Natasha’s shoulder lifted and fell gracefully. “Better than what Tony’s been calling it.” She shifted, a toe kicking at a piece of gravel, squinting against the setting sun that filtered through the trees. “Is Steve going to be alright?”

Clint sighed, his voice softening. He knew how much Steve’s friendship meant to Natasha, and he was able to pick out the undercurrent of worry in her tone. He cared for Cap, too, but for Natasha… it was something more. “He’s still unconscious,” he answered, “the bastard almost beat him to death. Ten broken ribs. Fractured occipital bone. Broken nose. Liver lac. Bruised kidneys. One hell of a concussion.”

“Even for Steve, that’s a lot,” Natasha whispered, her fingers tightening against the leather jacket she wore. “What the hell happened?”

“Guess we’ll have to wait to find out.”
When the door slid open, Bucky’s grey eyes glanced up at the person moving into the room. He rose to his feet, his gaze harsh as they stared at the strange man. “Who are you? What are you doing? Where’s Dr. Chaas?” He watched T’Challa follow the man into the room and frowned at the King. “I asked for Masa,” he said, his voice more growl than anything else.

T’Challa’s head dipped forward at the emotion in Bucky’s voice, knowing the sharp words from the other man were not meant to offend. They’d all been dealing with an inordinate amount of stress and short tempers were understandable. “Sergeant, I know you are upset, but I assure you, Dr. Gembe is highly qualified. His care of Mr. Rogers will be more than adequate.”

“I don’t want adequate,” Bucky grunted, glaring at the doctor who rightfully looked a bit uncomfortable, “I want Dr. Chaas.”

T’Challa sighed, sweeping his arm toward the open doorway. “Perhaps you could join me in the hall for a moment?”

Bucky frowned at the look on T’Challa’s face, eyes flicking down to look at Steve’s battered and bruised body. He didn’t want to leave Steve’s side, not even for a second, but the steady gaze of the other man weighed on him until he relented. He’d watched T’Challa’s people taking care of Steve since the moment they’d arrived at the mines. Bucky knew he was being irrational, but he wanted the best care, and the best care would come from Masa Chaas.

He didn’t speak as he stalked into the hallway, letting T’Challa close the door softly behind them before spinning to glare at the king. “With all due respect, your highness, I asked -”

“Dr. Chaas was killed during the attack on Birnin Zana, Sergeant Barnes.”

Looking at the other man, Bucky searched for any hint of uncertainty in T’Challa’s eyes. There was done. The breath in Bucky’s lungs left him in a rush, his hands coming to rest on his hips as he looked down at the floor, shoulders tightening. A few hours prior he’d been drinking tea in Masa’s office, looking at the smiling faces of his patients and family, bearing his heart and insecurities to his friend. He knew he should probably have gotten used to losing people by now, but the sharp knife of hurt was still just as painful.

T’Challa watched the grief fill Bucky’s eyes, his expression soft as he looked at his friend. “I am very sorry, James, I know you and Masa were close.”

Nodding, Bucky schooled his features, his jaw tightening as he looked up at T’Challa. “His daughter. His grandson. Are they…? I mean, did they -”

“They are safe and will want for nothing,” T’Challa answered, seeing the very small flash of relief that colored Bucky’s charcoal eyes for a split second before the guarded look returned.

Bucky nodded, not looking up, avoiding eye contact as he processed the news. “His funeral?”

T’Challa took a step toward Bucky, his arm lifting to rest on the other man’s shoulder. He felt a slight flinching, but after a second the soldier’s body relaxed. “He will receive passage to the next world and dwell in the halls of our ancestors. His light will join the heat of the sun and his family will feel his warmth on their faces until they are reunited.”

It was a pretty thought, but Bucky had never put much stock in an afterlife, not with all the horror
he’d seen, but if any man was worthy of that kind of everlasting peace, it was Dr. Masa Chaas. T’Challa’s fingers squeezed once more before his hand dropped from Bucky’s shoulder and he took step back.

“Are you sure I can not convince you to stay longer, let our physicians watch over Steven until he is healed?”

Bucky shook his head, glancing up at T’Challa with a small, grateful smile. “No. We need to get home. We’ve got -”

“Your Darcy,” T’Challa interrupted with a smile, seeing the truth of his assumption in Bucky’s eyes. He could see so many changes in the other man since they’d battled side by side, and T’Challa knew enough to see where the changes had originated. “I am sure she is just as anxious for your return as you are.”

Sighing, Bucky’s grey gaze focused back on T’Challa, hands itching to return to Steve’s side. He remembered the worry in Steve’s words, that they would leave Wakanda before it was safe to do so, and Bucky knew he needed to make sure everything was alright before they left. He’d never hear the end of it if he didn’t make sure. Steve would give him hell when he woke up.

If he wakes up.

“You’ll let us know if you need anything else?” Bucky asked, pushing the dark thought from his mind as he peered at the Wakandan leader.

“The might of your strength helped us greatly. Mr. Stark has worked closely with my sister to see that an attack like this will not happen again. I am sorry that Steven was harmed, but I know him as a very strong man. He will recover and be more determined than ever before.” T’Challa closed the distance and shook Bucky’s hand, smiling softly. “If Wakanda can assist you in any way, you only need ask and we shall provide.”

Nodding, swallowed harshly and unable to speak past the lump in his throat, Bucky left T’Challa in the hall and made his way back into Steve’s room, mentally preparing himself for the doctor’s report. He wanted to be in the air asap.

PageBreak

Sighing, Darcy followed the penlight with her eyes. “I’m telling you, I’m fine. Just a headache.” So tired but can’t sleep. Need to be here when the boys get back.

The doctor looking at her frowned as she took a step back, crossing her arms over her chest as she peered at Darcy. “Mr. Parker advised me that your heart stopped, as did your breathing.”

Closing her eyes before they rolled, Darcy nodded. Fuck, just let me go, I’m fine. “It was an allergic reaction, that’s all. I came back when they injected me.”

“And this allergy, you didn’t know you had it before?”

“No,” Darcy said, her voice exasperated even as she tried to keep it from rising in frustrated anger, “is that abnormal?”

The doctor seemed unmoved by the tone Darcy had. “It’s not unheard of, but unless it’s something you haven’t come into contact with before, which is unlikely -”
“This was her first time,” Peter said helpfully, ignoring the glare Darcy threw in his direction. “It’s… she’s never come in contact with this… substance… before.”

Darcy watched Peter struggle through his words, unsure what he could tell the doctor. Tony had wanted to keep the details of her ‘condition’ under wraps as much as possible, his normally suspicious nature forming a bubble around Darcy, where many of the people in the compound didn’t really know what she could do.

_I don’t even know what the fuck I can do_, Darcy groused while Peter continued speaking with the doctor.

When he’d insisted on staying by her side, she’d assumed it was so he could ensure she stayed here and didn’t escape without being released. She was too tired to argue with him about shadowing her, just hoping he’d expedite everything so she could get out as quickly as possible, because _fuck_ did she hate the med ward.

The doctor looked at Darcy for a long moment after Peter went quiet. Eventually she signed, seemingly relenting to Darcy’s desire to wrap this up. “Well, your heart and lungs sound fine. You’re dehydrated and need rest, and you shouldn’t be on your feet for the next day or so. It doesn’t appear you’ll have any consequences from what happened, but I’m giving you several epinephrine pens to keep. If something like this _does_ happen again, hopefully you’ll be able to head it off before it becomes something more.”

“Could you, uh, give me a few as well?” At Darcy’s look, Peter gestured toward the doctor as if that alone was all the reason he needed. “What? You don’t think it’d be _good_ to have some around the lab? I mean, we spend so much time there, and if something, like, if you go glowy and your eyes -”

“Okay, jeez, fine, Pete, yeah, let’s grab a few for the road.”

“I think it’d be beneficial to have some on hand, just in case. You two work side by side a lot?”

“You could say that,” Peter said, looking over at Darcy with worry, seeing the unfocused look in her hazel eyes.

While the doctor explained to Peter how to use the pretty blue pens, where the inject it and what symptoms to look for, Darcy’s leg beat out a steady rhythm as she fidgeted. She’d bitten her fingernails to the quick, until they’d started bleeding; one of the first things the doctor had done was wrap Darcy’s fingertips in hot pink band-aids in an attempt to keep her from doing it continuing. She’d tried to explain to Darcy that it could lead to an infection, but Darcy had already been fluxing from focused to absent at that point, brain too full to take in the new information.

_Steve’s hurt. Steve got hurt. Steve got hurt enough that he needed to be stabilized before coming home. Steve got hurt but Bucky’s okay? No. Bucky’s not okay, not if Steve is hurt. Steve is hurt and he’s not here, and I’m not there. I should be there. I want to be there._

“Darcy?”

Blinking, pulled out of her thoughts by Peter’s face when it appeared in her field of vision, she glanced over his shoulder at the doctor. “Are we good here? I can go?” The doctor nodded and turned back to her tablet and Darcy’s medical records.

“You should try and get some sleep,” Peter said, seeing the weary look on Darcy’s face.

“That’s not going to happen,” Darcy said with a hollow laugh and a shake of her head, “not until they’re back.”
Peter took a step closer to her, his frown intensifying, his voice filling with a bit more steel. “We don’t know how long that will be, the flight time alone from Wakanda is -.”

“I don’t care.”

“Darcy -”

Darcy jumped down from the table, every emotion rolling in her stomach taking the offer of focus and targeting her frustrations at the younger man. “Peter, I don’t want to yell at you, so you need to back off. I’m fine.”

Peter absently recognized that the doctor had slipped out of the room when they’d started arguing, but he gave the full weight of his stare at Darcy, his nerves already shot enough that he could feel the hairs on his skin rising to attention. “No, you’re not. If you went to sleep I’d wake you the moment they get back.”

She shook her head. “Look -”

“No, you look!”

The volume and tone of his voice made Darcy’s eyes widen, her mouth closing at the look on his face. She thought she’d seen Peter angry before, but this was something new, something different. It wasn’t anger, she realized, but worry. His hands were shaking at his sides and his eyes were flashing with pique.

“You told me that I’m in charge when it comes to the science stuff and your job is to keep me alive, but right now you’re the one at risk of hurting themselves and I’m not going to stand by and watch you hurt yourself! You can hate me for it and decide you don’t want to work with me anymore, but you need to stop! I really don’t want to have to tell Barnes or Rogers that you died while on my watch! And you almost did! You almost died!”

Peter’s voice cracked on the last word, and Darcy stood there, looking at him with wide eyes and a shocked expression. They stood there in silence as his shout rang and faded in the room, until Darcy swallowed past the lump in her throat, seeing the pink high on his cheeks and the welling in his serious brown gaze. “I’m sorry,” she finally whispered, unsure what else to say.

“Don’t be sorry, just listen to the doctor and try and rest.”

The emotion on Peter’s face made Darcy’s chest ache worse than it already was. She knew she could be hard-headed and unyielding, but what happened had scared the younger man enough that he was willing to fight her about it. “I don’t think I’ll be able rest until they’re home with me,” she said, hating how vulnerable her voice sounded.

Peter’s eyes softened and he let out the breath he’d been holding. “Let’s try. We’ll go to the lab, sit on the couches, put in a movie and wait. There’s nothing we can do to make them get here sooner. We’ll try and keep you distracted, make the time go by faster.”

Peter was using a lot of ‘we’ in his speech, and Darcy’s eyes filled with tears. Of all the things she could cry about, the amount of worry in the younger man’s eyes should have been one of the last, but here she was, heart breaking because she’d scared him. Until Jane, Darcy’d never known what it was like to have a sibling, someone who would be there for you no matter what, and especially when you were being stupid. Had her and Peter gotten there without her realizing it? She’d always felt a pull of protection for the scientist, but looking into his face, she knew it was true; somewhere in the months they’d been working together, they’d formed something, something strong, and the reality hit
Darcy didn’t hesitate, closing the distance between them and wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He was stiff at first, unsure, but she felt him give in and hug her back, squeezing tightly. “I’m sorry, Peter, I’m sorry,” she said against his neck, her breath hitching as the first tears began to fall, “I’m so scared and I don’t know what to do.”

Resting his chin on her shoulder, Peter nodded. “I know, Darce, I’m sorry. Hurting yourself isn’t going to help anyone. We’ll go back to the lab and wait for Dr. Foster to get here.”

Darcy pulled back, a watery surprised expression on her face. “You called Janey? She’s all the way in Argentina, how...?”

“I called her when Clint and I left the farm.”

“How is he?”

Bucky glanced upward as Tony came to stand next to him in the back of the quinjet. His gaze swung back toward the bed Steve was strapped into. Steve’s face was mottled with bruises, cuts and scrapes on the skin that wasn’t discolored, his right eye swollen completely shut. He was kept in the bed with straps over his lower legs and upper chest, all in an effort to avoid putting pressure on his abdomen and the broken ribs and other internal injuries he’d sustained.

“He still hasn’t woken up,” Bucky said, re-adjusting his grip on Steve’s hand, needing to feel his warmth, unwilling to part from him, “but they said he might not for a couple of days.”

Tony nodded, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “He’s come back from worse.”

Bucky didn’t need to be reminded. The last time he’d seen Steve so hurt was when he’d done it, as the airships crashed around them at the Triskelion, when it’d been Bucky’s hands that came down again and again. Not you, Bucky could almost hear Steve’s voice in his head, Wasn’t you, Buck. Wasn’t you.

“When we get back, he’ll have the best doctors.” Tony watched Bucky shift at his words, remembering what T’Challa had explained before they’d taken off. His eyes closed behind his glasses, realizing what he’d said. He let the air out of his lungs, feeling the pain in his left arm intensify as he moved. “I’m... sorry. About your friend.”

Bucky nodded, not sure what to say. He felt like he was being pulled apart inside. The grief at losing Masa was overshadowed by the uncertainty of Steve’s injuries, not knowing when - or if - his best friend would wake up.

He glanced up at Tony, realizing the other man was still standing there, an uncomfortable look on his face. Bucky cleared his throat, looking down at Steve, his eyes following the blond’s black and blue jawline. “T’Challa said a lot more people would have died if you and Wanda hadn’t been there,” Bucky said, his voice low. “And Steve...”

“It’s fine, we don’t have to -”

“And Steve,” Bucky repeated, more forceful this time as his grey eyes slid to look up at Tony, “would be in a lot worse shape if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”
Tony took in a deep breath, looking over his shoulder to see the rest of the plane in quiet conversations amongst themselves. He fidgeted, grimacing when he pulled his arm awkwardly and it stung with pain. “Yeah, well, we’re a team, right? Gotta watch each other’s backs.”

The small smirk that curled Bucky’s lips was more incredulous that anything else, and he couldn’t help the soft snort of disbelief. Part of him knew this entire conversation was facilitated by Darcy, even though she wasn’t here; neither Tony or Bucky would have said the things they were if it wasn’t for the relationships they had with her. “Is that right?”

A flicker of humor lit into Tony’s eyes. “Most sports analogies are lost on me, but since we have a captain, it stands to reason we’re some kind of team. A unit. A squad? Are we a squad?”

“We’re definitely something,” Bucky agreed, gaze shifting back toward Steve, sobering slightly. He knew he’d never be friends with Tony Stark, too many things were in rubble between them, but maybe they could find some middle ground. Or at least less animosity.

“Besides,” Tony pushed on, whiskey-colored eyes falling back to stare at the pale man strapped in the bed, “the person who could destroy souls is kind of connected to this guy, and I do not want to be on her naughty list.”

Giving a small nod, Bucky adjusted his grip on Steve’s hand. “Yeah. There is that.”

Jane pushed through the double doors to the lab, brown eyes searching for the mess of dark curls she knew so well, a hint of panic in her voice. “Darcy? Darcy?!”

“Shhhhh,” Peter hissed, lifting a hand to place it over Darcy’s exposed ear, “you’ll wake her up.”

Running across the lab, Jane skidded to a stop when she made it to the lounge area, eyes wide as she took in the scene. Peter was sitting upright on the couch, a very asleep Darcy passed out on his shoulder, a line of drool at the corner of the lab assistant’s mouth. Jane’s eyes scanned her entire body, looking for wounds she knew weren’t there. “Is she…?”

“She’s fine. She passed out, uh,” Peter glanced at the clock on the wall, “five hours ago?”

Jane knelt in front of the couch, reaching up to push a lock of Darcy’s hair behind her ear, watching it pop back out immediately. Laying against Peter’s shoulder, Darcy’s face almost looked peaceful, if not a little pale. Jane’s gaze flicked up toward Peter. “But is she alright?”

“More or less. The second we sat down she was gone. Could you, I mean, my arm is asleep and I really have to pee.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. Here.”

Peter and Jane managed to shift Darcy from his shoulder to hers, and Jane watched him speed from the room like he was wearing rockets on his feet. Jane reached out and laced her fingers with Darcy’s, thumb brushing back and forth over best friend’s skin. Eventually, Peter returned, looking much less panicked, and grabbed a rolling chair, moving across the tile until he faced Jane.

Satisfied with where she was and that Darcy was well and truly zonked, Jane gave Peter focused eyes. “What happened? Everything, all of it.”
Twenty minutes later, Jane was left staring at Peter, tear tracks drying on her cheeks, her heart still beating a thousand miles a minute. *I can’t believe I wasn’t here.* “But the doctor said she’d be fine, right?” Her voice sounded desperate, matching the tightness in her chest.

“She said as far as she could tell,” Peter corrected with a sigh, rushing forward when he watched Jane’s face begin to fall, “b-but it’s not like there are medical journals or studies on what’s going on in her body, right?. Everything’s just a best guess.”

Nodding, more to herself than to Peter, Jane’s hand tightened its grip on Darcy’s, “and they’re on their way back now?”

“Mmm, yeah. They left Wakanda…” he glanced up at the clock again, “four hours ago. We have about another four before they land.”

“Okay. We’ll let her sleep for three, I’ll help her take a shower and get changed, then we’ll be up and ready when they arrive.”

Peter nodded, running a hand over his tired face. He sighed, letting all the air from his lungs leave before he gestured toward Darcy. “Do you, you’ve, I mean, you’re good with her, right? I can, I need to -”

“Go,” Jane said with a small smile, watching Peter look at Darcy with fondness and worry. She’d seen that look before: on Erik’s face, on Thor’s face, and Jane knew it had taken up permanent residence on her own face, too. Once Darcy Lewis latched onto you like the barnacle she was, you were already lost. “Take a nap, eat, do whatever you need. I’ll be fine right here.”

Shoulders sagging, Peter took a deep breath inward and stood. “Thanks.”

Peter had almost gotten to the door when Jane called to him. “Hey Peter?”

He turned, tired eyes blinking in Jane’s direction. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. For.. If I couldn’t be here… I’m glad she had you.”

Smiling softly, Peter waved a hand toward her before he disappeared through the doors.

Darcy was warm. Warm and languid. She’d felt like this before, once, several months ago. Like she was in a spa, surrounded by hot towels, and being massaged by a guy named… What had his name been? Gaston? No, that’s *Beauty and the Beast.* Fabio? No! It’d been... Claude! Claude and calorie-free cheesecake, she remembered now.

When she’d woken up from her faux spa dream, it was after she’d grabbed the stone on the battlefield and destroyed Purple Kool-aid Man. When she’d let the amber gem take her over completely in an effort to save Jane, and by extension, the rest of the world, too.

But why was she here now? What had she done? Her body felt great, if a little tired, but her brain was a bit fuzzy with it all. She remembered that’s how it’s been the last time, too, before all those memories came flooding back in. Darcy knew there was something, something important but some part of her didn’t care. It wanted her to stay where she was - warm and calm and feeling great - and that part of her seemed to be winning out.
Would it be so bad, staying here? No. It was nice here, after all, and she didn’t feel the crushing weight of everything on her shoulders. Stress-free and lazy. *It sounds great, if only I could bring -*

“Ngh!”

Darcy sat up in a rush, the haze of feeling great instantly evaporating, replaced by a pounding headache and dry mouth so bad that it felt like she’d gargled with glass. Her eyes felt heavy, lids feeling like sandpaper as she blinked, her heart hammering in her chest. *Steve! Steve's hurt! Battle in Wakanda. Blackness and the stone!* The tranquility of her dreams was replaced with panic, an overwhelming sense of worry and anxiety.

“Darcy, hey, it’s okay, take a breath, you're okay.”

Darcy turned to look at Jane who was sitting beside her on the couch, worry and concern in the chocolate whiskey of her eyes. Her best friend, who Peter had called, who'd rushed - from how far away? - to be at her side. “Janey?”

“Darcy, I'm sorry I wasn't here soo -”

The astrophysicist grunted when Darcy threw herself forward, arms circling Jane’s shoulders and holding her in a vice-like grip. Tears were already flowing from Darcy's eyes as she mumbled what sounded like nonsense into Jane’s hair. Patting Darcy’s back, Jane waited until the flow of words stopped before she spoke. “I didn’t get any of that so you’ll have to repeat it.”

Pulling back, Darcy shook her head, shaking more tears loose as he hands clutched Jane’s. “I’m so scared, Steve’s hurt and I don’t know...” she trailed off when her crying became too heavy to talk through anymore.

Jane pulled her back in for another hug, holding her tightly. When it seemed like the heaviest bit had passed, she lifted her hand and placed it on Darcy’s cheek, smiling softly at her best friend. She pushed a wild curl behind Darcy’s ear, an empathetic expression on her face. “I know, honey. I'm sorry.”

She needed to be touching Jane, needing to know she was real and here, so Darcy thread their fingers together, holding tight. “How long -”

"You were asleep for at least six hours," Jane answered, knowing what Darcy's question was before it’d even left her mouth.

"And how long -" 

“They should be here in, um, two hours? Give or take. I mean, headwinds and storms might make them later, but soon. Real soon.”

Darcy turned to blink at Peter, who'd answered her question just like Jane had, somehow anticipating what she'd been asking. He was sitting on the other couch in the lab, papers spread around him and near his feet on the floor, a look on quiet determination on his face. He looked stressed, not like his usual self, and Darcy's mouth turned down in a frown.

She was asking the question before she’d really thought it out, making sure he was alright a habit by now. “Have you slept? Eaten anything?”

Peter looked up at her, papers held in both hands, his expression incredulous. “You’re worried about *me* right now?”
“No. Yes. Maybe.”

“Peter’s fine,” Jane said, smiling softly when Darcy’s eyes swung back in her direction, squeezing her hand, "you’re the one we’re worried about.”

Taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly, Darcy sat back on the couch, pulling Jane’s hand until it rested in her lap, an anchor to keep her from floating away. “The doctor cleared me,” she said, the words sounding weak even to her own ears.

“I know, but we’re still worried. Are you sure you’re alright? You’re not hearing any voices? Feeling weird?”

“Of course I’m feeling weird, this whole thing is fucked.” When the words came out sharper than she’d meant, Darcy looked at Jane with an apologetic look. “Sorry. I didn’t... it’s not you, it’s -”

“You don’t think I’m used to you snapping after all this time?” Jane said, one eyebrow quirking up. "This is classic Darcy Lewis. Deflect, dodge, and disarm. The three Ds of Darcyism. I've got a PhD in dealing with you.”

“You couldn’t have warned the rest of us?” Both girls turned their attention to Peter, Darcy narrowing watery eyes and Jane giving him a softly slanted smirk.

Turning back to Jane, Darcy actually considered the astrophysicist’s question. Did she feel weird? Yes. Was it because the stone? Maybe, but she wasn’t sure. She tried to answer the best she could, trying to explain something she didn’t fully understand herself. “I have a headache. My eyes hurt. My body feels... tired? But I’m not hearing the stone anymore. It’s almost like it’s gone... quiet.”

“Explain.”

Darcy’s snort of laughter made her head ache even more, but she’d anticipated that exact word coming from Jane’s mouth in that exact tone, knowing her best friend too well. “Whenever I use the stone and hear the voice, it takes everything in me to pull back. It’s exhausting, but I think… I think it’s the same for the stone. It’s like there’s a chunk of time where I can use the powers without worrying about it. Like… I’m not explaining it right.”

“It, uh, uses energy to fight you, just like you use energy to fight it.”

“Yes!” Darcy said, snapping her finger and glancing at Peter, shutting her eyes as the sudden movement made her temples throb. “Exactly, Peter, yes. It’s like there’s a break in the fighting for a bit, like the stone has to gather itself before it attacks again.”

“Like some kind of remission?”

“Maybe. Yeah. Like the voice... ebbs a bit, and I’m in complete control of the power while it’s quiet.” Darcy gestured helplessly, at a loss as to how to explain it better.

“Do you know how long it lasts? How long ago since you last lost control?”

Darcy frowned, trying to remember. "Um... the last time I almost lost it was at the mall.”

“That was three months ago,” Jane said with a considering expression. “And when was it before that?”

“Uh…” Darcy ran a hand over her face, “when I connected myself to Bucky, I think.”
“And before that was the battle,” Peter added, the papers in his hands forgotten, his face sharing the same determined look as Jane’s.

“If we put that on a timeline…” Jane rose from the couch, pulling at a giant white board shoved in the corner and dragging it closer. Darcy watched her work, the blue dry-erase marker moving with purpose. “So if we plot the times you lost control with the length of latency..."

When Jane stepped back from the board, all three blinked at the graph: the blue lines rose and fell, but it appeared like there were larger and larger intervals in between each spike. "The time between each episode is getting longer. You’ve been training with your powers, using it on a daily basis instead of avoiding it, and it looks like you’re gaining more control the more you use it.”

“Really?”

Jane shrugged her shoulders at Darcy’s question. “In theory.”

Sitting back against the couch, Darcy brought her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “So the more I use it, the better, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Again, in theory, yeah.”

“And,” Peter barked, earning wide eye looks from both of the girls. Darcy watched him rummage through the paperwork strewn about, shuffling in a frenzy until he found what he was looking for. He shook the paper before holding it out toward Jane. “Once we get the neural dampener completed, that’ll give you even more control, and training with it will be easier.”

Darcy blinked at him, her attention then spreading to the papers he was buried in. She realized the mess he’d made around himself was her file; brain scans, blood work, EKGs and ultrasounds... all hers. Peter'd been working on her stuff since they’d got back. Like he had a mission. Like it was the most important thing. Darcy’s chest ached as she looked into his earnestly worried eyes.

Jane lifted her gaze from the paper he’d handed her. “How close are we?”

“Probably, uh, an hour, now?” When Peter looked up at Jane, he realized she hadn’t been asking about the plane coming from Wakanda, but how long until the neural dampener was ready. “Oh! Right, um, maybe a week or two? I’ve been working with Friday in simulations to make sure we didn’t miss anything. Once Tony’s back and we get Friday back online...”

Nodding, Darcy let out a sigh, eyes falling closed, her head falling back against the couch. In a week or two, she might be able to use these powers without being terrified by them. Maybe she’d actually be able to use them for something good, something worthwhile.

“Darce, how about we go back to your room so you can shower and change. By the time you’re done, they should be landing.”

Jane made it sound so simple, but thinking of Steve and Bucky arriving filled Darcy’s stomach with anxious fear. She had no idea the extent of Steve’s injuries, or what he’d look like when he got here, let alone not knowing how Bucky was doing with it all. Horrible, she was sure, just like she was. “Janey…”

Knowing that tone in her best friend’s voice, Jane crossed the space, sat next to Darcy and wrapped her arms around the other woman’s shoulders, squeezing tightly. “I know. It’s not easy, it’s never easy.”

“How do you do this with Thor?” Darcy asked against Jane's neck, voice soft and unsure. "How are
you not terrified every time he goes out?”

“I am,” Jane said, pulling back and pressing her palm to Darcy’s cheek, “I’m terrified every time he’s out there, putting himself in danger, running toward the fight instead of away from it. At some point you either start to process the fear, or you decide it’s not something you can cope with.”

Darcy’s voice was small when her eyes flicked up to Jane’s. “And what if it’s not?”

Sighing, Jane rubbed her hands up and down Darcy’s arms, chin dipping in her friend’s direction. “You know the answer.”

It was something Jane had said to Darcy often. Anytime Darcy asked a question, Jane almost never gave her a straight answer. Jane was a scientist, after all, and that meant the journey toward the answer was almost as important as the answer itself. Jane would make her plot it out, giving her little nudges along the way until Darcy discovered the answer herself.

**Question:** What if the fear wasn’t something Darcy could cope with?

**Answer:** She’d need to get rid of the source of the fear.

**Question:** What was the source of the fear?

**Answer:** Bucky and Steve.

**Question:** Could she get rid of Bucky and Steve?

**Answer:** No. Never. Not even for one second.

Darcy couldn't fathom her life any longer without having both of them at her side. They were hers. She was theirs. The fear, the frustration, the worry and heartache... She'd have to learn how to function with it, because if the alternative was walking away from her boys? She'd choose them every time.

Every. Damn. Time.

“Shower and a change of clothes,” Darcy said softly, voice sounding a bit more like herself.

“Then we’re right back, plenty of time before they get here.”

“Okay.”

“And I’ll be right here,” Peter said, standing and carefully tiptoeing around all the papers at his feet. "I’ll get you if anything changes, I promise.”

Darcy reached out and clutched Jane’s hand in her own, taking comfort from her friend, steeling herself as they started toward the door. Her stomach was in knots as they moved and Darcy tried to remember all the garbage cans around the compound in case she needed to stop and dry heave, seeing as there was nothing in her stomach. Darcy stopped before they left the lab completely, attention turning back toward Peter, who was standing near his work station. "Hey Pete?"

He turned, giving her a small smile. "Yeah?"

“Thank you.”

He waved his hand dismissively. "It’s nothing.”
“No, it’s *not* nothing,” Darcy insisted with a frown, eyes serious where they held his. “If you hadn’t...”

“Hey, no, I know. Of course, Darcy, I mean, you’d do the same for me. Seriously. You don’t have to thank me.”

“Well I am, and I did. So... too bad.” His grin turned a bit crooked, waving as Jane draped an arm around Darcy's shoulders and led her away.

“PageBreak”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I hate how often I’ve said that recently. You’re going through these huge things and I should be here.”

Darcy was standing under the spray of water, arms feeling like they were eight-hundred pounds. She hadn't shampooed, hadn't used her pouf, she'd just... stood there, thoughts tumbling as she watched the water circle around the drain. “That’s not...” She shook her head, knowing that Jane couldn't see her. "We’ve already had this conversation, Janey." 

Jane frowned, picking at a thread from the towels in her lap, unwilling to let the apology drop, the guilt still eating at her. “I’m supposed to be your best friend -”

“You are my best friend.”

"- but I’m out there -"

"...Doing your job..."

"- my head full of numbers and data and it's selfish -"

"Janey."

"- if I didn’t get so wrapped up in my own stuff -"

"*Shut the fuck up, okay?!*" Darcy wrenched the shower curtain back, her voice still ringing off the tiled walls.

Jane blinked impossibly wide eyes, words successfully stopped by Darcy's outburst. Darcy stood there, unconcerned by the fact that she was naked, hair hanging in wet strands and sticking to her skin, cheeks red with emotion. "You don't get to talk to me about being selfish, okay? I've got that game cornered, I'm the heavyweight champion, and if you want to go a few rounds, you'll lose."

"Darcy -"

Roughly snatching the towel that Jane held up for her, Darcy shook her head, wrapping it around herself, her movements shaky and stilted.

"I saw all that fighting, knew that they were losing, and you know what I thought about? How *I* didn't want the world to end because you're my only real friend, and if the world was destroyed, then you'd leave me too, just like everyone else, and I couldn't *have* that. Fuck the other eight billion people on this planet, I grabbed that stone because *I* didn’t want my life to change in any way." 

"Darcy -"

Quiet descended in the bathroom, only broken up by the sounds of the faucet dripping and Darcy's harsh breathing. Jane's eyes were still wide, this time with a soft disbelief. "You saved the world..."
"Yes," Darcy snapped, crossing her arms over her chest, giving Jane a defiant look.

Another quiet second.

"And you say that as if I'm supposed to agree that it was selfish for you to do?"

The tone in Jane's voice made Darcy shift, toes flexing against the porcelain below her feet, uncertainty tinting her response. "... yeah."

"I love you, I do, but do you know how fucking stupid you sound right now?" Jane stood up, snapping her fingers when Darcy opened her mouth to argue. "No, you're going to listen to me because you had your turn and now it's mine."

"Jane -"

"Apbupbupbup! What did I say? My turn." When Darcy's mouth remained closed, Jane took a step back, taking in a deep breath. "You, Darcy Anne Lewis, are infuriating. You talk over people, you change topics without telling anyone, you hold grudges, and you get frustrated too easily. Your sarcasm is so sharp and sometimes you say things without caring if they hurt someone. You're loud, and crude, and you swear way too much. But you're not dumb, so you need to suck it up and actually hear what I'm saying. Are you listening?" Jane paused, an eyebrow raising. "Answer me! Are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm fucking listening, jesus!"

"Good, because this is important: you were willing to put your life in danger to save me. Hear that difference? You're putting the emphasis on you, I'm putting it on me. You were willing to die for me, so that I didn't die, so that I had a chance."

"But everyone else -"

"I don't give a shit about everyone else. You almost died for me. Please, for the love of science, tell me you understand how not selfish that is."

"Fine, okay? I get it. Fuck." Darcy glared at a spot on the floor. The quiet hung in the air until the anxious bite of it forced Darcy to speak. "I think that's the most I've heard you swear when you weren't drunk," Darcy said, one corner of her mouth quirking up when she glanced up at Jane.

Jane crossed her arms over her chest. "Yeah, well, when someone is faced with that much stupid coming out of one person's mouth... see, this is why I'm not a teacher. I don't have the patience for it. I'd call everyone an idiot."

Darcy snorted softly. "And suddenly I know why no one else applied for your internship."

"You regret applying?"

Darcy felt the small grin climb onto her lips. "Not for one fucking second."

"Good," Jane’s face softened and she sat back down on the closed toilet, grabbing the extra towel she’d thrown to the ground. “Now actually wash that rat's nest on the top of your head so we can get you dressed and ready."

The fight with Jane had been a welcome distraction, but now that it was over, Darcy's stomach
flipped with fear. How bad was Steve? Eight hours of flight time was a lot. What if something had happened in route? Were they prepared for that? Why hadn’t be woken up yet? Was Bucky alright? Was he hurt too, but not bad like Steve? What about everyone else? Tony? Bruce? Thor? It was all so much and her mind was running like a gerbil on a wheel, dizzy with every horrible possibility. "Jane..."

"One thing at a time, Darcy," Jane said, her tone warm and reassuring, “that's all you can do right now. One thing at a time. Shower now, everything else later.”

Letting out a breath, Darcy nodded. Pulling the curtain closed, she draped the towel over the shower rod and flipped the water back on. She repeated those words over and over, until they sounded like white noise and could drown out everything else. *One thing at a time. One thing at a time. One thing at a time.*

It took everything Darcy had not to run up the cargo bay doors the second the quinjet landed. She rose on her tiptoes, trying to see inside, chewing heavily on the inside of her cheek as her stomach flipped with fear, anxiety, and apprehension. The first person that materialized from the dark interior was Bruce, frumpled and looking like he was ready to sleep for a week. She reached out and squeezed his shoulder as he passed, giving him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. He looked like he might have tried to say something, but thought better of it and passed by her without a word.

Thor appeared next, Mjolnir held loosely in his hand as he walked to solid ground. As he neared, Darcy felt Jane run up to her side, her best friend vibrating with relief. She watched Jane throw herself at Thor, arms wrapped tightly around his neck. The Asgardian patted the astrophysicist’s back, pulling back to press his lips briefly to hers.

The look on his face made Darcy’s stomach fall, chest tightening when Thor bent down and kissed her forehead before draping a tired arm across Jane’s shoulder and leading her away.

When Darcy’s gaze swung back toward the jet, she watched Tony slowly make his way down the metal steps, his left arm in a sling and several cuts on his face covered by butterfly bandages. Darcy swallowed hard as he came to stand in front of her, not sure what to make of the expression on his face.

"I'm -"

Tony grunted when Darcy threw her arms around his waist, doing her best not to jostle his bad arm. She pressed her face to his chest and babbled. "I heard the gunfire when we were on the phone then saw the flash and you went flying and then the signal died and I wasn't sure if you were hurt, or worse, and I didn’t know what to do because Friday was down and *fuck* I'm glad you're not dead."

Right arm lifting to hug her back, Tony pressed his cheek to the top of her head, his breath coming out in a short burst as he rocked them softly from side to side. "Would have avoided it if I could, Lewis."

She pulled back to look at him, caught off guard by him using her actual name, her eyebrows knitting together in worry as she tried to understand the look in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I couldn't... that I wasn't..."
Realizing what he was trying to apologize for, Darcy shook her head and glared at him. "No, nope, shut the fuck up, Stark. Guilt's not a good look for you, okay? So shut the fuck up." When he snorted softly, Darcy nodded her head over her shoulder, back toward the compound. "The kid's inside, waiting for you. I think he likes you or something, so you might want to let him know you didn't die, or whatever. You look beat to hell."

Tony gave her a wry grin, reaching up to press his knuckles to her jaw before pushing softly, turning her head. "Whatever you say, cupcake."

As the billionaire moved past her, Darcy's eyes peered into the dark interior of the jet, waiting, feeling a thread of panic when a few seconds passed with no exits. She was moments away from sprinting inside when two figures walked toward her. She knew who they were, but this was the first time she'd met them. Doing her best not to appear dismissive - it wasn't like she didn't care, it was just her mind was singularly focused on Steve and Bucky - she nodded at both of them. "Hi."

Sam smiled at the pretty dark-haired girl, having heard enough about her from Steve to peg her as The Darcy. "So we finally meet. Cap's been talking about you non-stop. It's kind of annoying."

"He's awake?" Darcy's eyes widened, her heart speeding up, a relieved smile lighting her features. "Not yet," Wanda said with a shake of her head, frowning softly, "but it's only a matter of time."

Darcy nodded, disappointment curling in her stomach. The thread of fear grew taut as she was left to wonder just how hurt Steve really was. Shaking away the dark thoughts, she turned back to Sam and Wanda, realizing she'd been standing there in silence, staring past them. She opened her mouth but Sam cut her off. "Hey, it's fine. We'll talk later."

Nodding, not trusting herself to speak, Darcy bit her lip as they moved around her and toward the compound. There were people behind her from the med ward, wearing their pretty blue scrubs, waiting and ready, and she tried her best not to think of them as vultures, waiting to pounce at the first sight of Steve. More movement in the dark froze her heart and she watched as the foot of a hospital gurney came into the light.

Darcy took a deep, shuddering breath inward as her eyes took everything in, trying to process it but having a hard time. Steve's face was nothing more than a swollen bruise, almost unrecognizable if it weren't for the blond hair at the top of his head. Bucky's memories of times before the serum flashed through her head, when Steve had been younger, vulnerable, and frailer, when Bucky had worried that Steve might not make it through the winter. Her stomach dropped knowing that, despite Bucky's memories, nothing would have prepared her for this.

"Oh my god."

She rushed forward, coming to the side of gurney, hearing the running of feet behind her as the doctors and nurses followed. Darcy's hands hovered over Steve, wanting to touch him but afraid to at the same time, afraid to hurt him worse. Hazel eyes looked at him up and down, a small sob falling past her lips at the sight, hearing her heartbeat in her ears as she looked at him in heartbroken disbelief. When she saw hands wrap around the rails of the gurney, she shook her head and gestured frantically for them to back off. "No! Wait! Not yet!"

"We need to get him inside."

"Just fucking wait!" The shrillness in her voice made everyone freeze, and Darcy turned back to Steve, taking one last, long look at him before she closed her eyes.
When she opened them, her vision was stolen by blackness, the same darkness she'd almost gotten trapped in hours ago. Even after hearing Jane's hypothesis of her powers being 'safe' for a while as the stone gathered its strength back, Darcy was still terrified to be in the blackness. But it wasn’t because she feared losing control, but because she feared using her powers and not seeing that glittering, gorgeous gold that was Steve's soul.

The wail that broke free from Darcy's mouth hung in the air as her knees gave out. She never hit the ground. Bucky gathered her in his arms, cradling her to his chest as he sat heavily on the ramp, pulling her closer. "It's okay, shhhhh," he murmured, his heart breaking as she keened, "it's okay, shhh, we're here now, we're home."

Bucky watched them wheel Steve away, grey eyes following until they were out of sight. He could hear Darcy whispering something against his neck, over and over, the words too soft to make out. He pressed his lips to her hair before he pulled back enough so he could see her face, cupping her cheeks in both of his hands, watching the tears rolling down them. "Darcy..."

"He's still there. He's still there. He's still in there, Bucky," Darcy said, louder, hazel eyes blinking at Bucky, wave after wave of relief crashing over her and forcing more tears down her cheeks. "He's still there! His gold, it's still there, Buck, he's still in there!"

Bucky pressed his lips to hers, his voice stolen by emotion, unable to swallow past the lump in his throat. Some part of him must have been waiting for her to say those words, for her to see Steve and know that he was still there under the injuries and bruises, that he still had that brilliant gold and cobalt inside of him. He squeezed Darcy hard, feeling her cry against his neck, even as her shoulders were beginning to shake with relieved laughter, too.

"He's still in there," he repeated, pressing his cheek against the top of her head, a grin on his lips even as his first tears slipped free.
Love Me Louder

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Darcy maintain vigil at Steve's bedside while they interrogate Batroc for any information he may have.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This is going up a little later than normal, but Here and Where You Are Wednesday is still a thing!

As always, thank you guys so much for all the kudos and comments. They make even the worst days at work even better. To all my Jewish friends out there, happy last day of Hanukkah! And happy winter solstice tomorrow!!

PageBreak

I need you to love me a little louder today

PageBreak

After Bucky and Darcy had recovered from their anxiety-relieving breakdown, they’d overseen the transfer of Batroc from his shackled-seat in the quinet to his one room cell in the prison wing. Darcy hadn’t even known they had a ‘prison wing,’ but she supposed she’d never really asked what all was hidden in the compound’s labyrinth-like building.

She was positive she’d never seen that look on Bucky’s face, but she remembered it from the Soldier’s memories; the man she loved was imagining a million different ways to kill Batroc, making it slow and deliberate, stretching it out over days, until he was begging for the sweet release of death.

Darcy had never instantly hated anyone, save Maria Hill, but watching the smirk climb onto Batroc’s face made her realize what real hate felt like. It didn’t matter that Bucky’d told her the mercenary wasn’t the one who’d done the extensive damage to Steve, the fact that he’d been on the same side as the thing that’d hurt Steve was enough to fill her with white hot rage.

“No one talks to him until I talk to him, you got that?” The guard posted at the door nodded at Bucky, giving him a quick ‘yes sir’ before standing back at attention. Satisfied the agent would follow his order, Bucky turned back to Darcy, seeing the flash of anger in her eyes, glaring at the door and the man on the other side.
Darcy turned her narrowed eyes to Bucky, her expression softening the littlest bit. “You’re going to interrogate him?”

Bucky wove his arm with Darcy’s as they walked away, nodding at her question. “I want to know everything he knows. If he knows where the rest of Thanos’ army is, we’ll get it out of him.”

“I want to be there when you question him.”

“Darce -”

Darcy held up her other hand, stopping his words as her hazel gaze swung focused on him. “Let’s ignore the argument you’re about to spew, and instead look at this from a metaphysical angle, okay? I’ll be able to tell if he’s lying, or not telling us everything he knows, and maybe a woman who floated in the air and turned his former employer into dust will terrify him. I want to be there,” she said, more forcefully this time, eyes steady as she looked at him.

Bucky sighed, recognizing the determination in her eyes. There was no talking Darcy out of something when she’d given her ‘resolve face,’ and part of him understood why she wanted what she did; his fingers itched to rip Batroc limb from limb for even touching Steve. He wanted to hear the man scream in pain, to see the fear creep into his eyes when he realized he was looking death in the face.

“Okay.”

Darcy hid her surprised expression by looking forward, not wanting to question the why of Bucky’s agreeing, just happy that they hadn’t had to fight about it. She was so tired and didn’t think she had the energy to fight anymore. She wanted to curl up with her boys, because under all those horrible bruises and the swelling, Steve was still in there, and that’s all that mattered.

Bucky and Darcy walked arm in arm down the hallway, neither willing to put space between them, needing the physical comfort of the other. “So, tell me,” Darcy said, glancing at Bucky. “are you okay? Really okay? And not just saying you’re fine because Steve is worse off than you so you don’t want anyone to bother worrying about you? Because if that’s what you’re doing -”

“You kiddin’? You just got done telling me how you’d know if someone was lying, you think I’d try to challenge you right now?”

“Uhhh, yeah. Yeah, I do think that’s something you’d do.”

A small smirk lifted Bucky’s lips, and he shook his head softly. “I’m fine, doll. Really. Just a few bruises, scrapes here and there. Promise.”

“Alright,” Darcy said, choosing to believe him, too exhausted to blink and make he sure wasn’t just saying what she wanted to hear. She leaned into him, tucking herself under his arm as they walked. “So tell me about Steve.”

“The doctors -”

Darcy shook her head. “They’ll tell me in all the technical terms what’s broken and what’s bruised, but they don’t know him like you do. They don’t know how he heals. You do. So I’m asking you. What are we looking at?”

Bucky sighed, grey gaze focusing on the tiles beneath their feet as they walked. It was too hard, thinking about how hurt Steve really was; he’d been unconscious for almost twenty-four hours, and every minute that ticked by felt like agony to Bucky, like his heart was in a vice.
He knew the battles Steve had been a part of, even if he hadn’t been there for all of them. The battle in Manhattan had been bad structurally for the city, but other than Stark’s wormhole journey, almost all of the Avengers had gotten out of it unscathed. Sokovia? Again, relatively unhurt. Even in the final battle with Thanos, Steve had never lost consciousness.

…the only thing that Steve’s current health could be compared to was at the Triskellion, when The Soldier had taken him down. The serum pumping through his veins meant that Steve Rogers could take a pretty heavy beating and, for all intents and purposes, shrug it off. That the blond still hadn’t woken up filled Bucky with fear. Darcy’d been able to lessen that fear, seeing and confirming that Steve’s gold was still shining, but he’d be on edge until he saw those beautiful blue eyes again.

Bucky stretched his arm, pulling her closer. “He’ll survive.”

Sighing, Darcy nodded, a frown turning her mouth down, not liking the answer but knowing there was nothing else they could do. “So we just wait for him to wake up?”

“We wait.”

_Ugh. The worst._ “I hate waiting.”

Bucky snorted. “I know.”

Darcy glanced over at him. “But, like, _a lot._”

“Mmhmm,” Bucky hummed.

“I’ve been told I am not a very a patient person.”

“You? Really? Now why on earth would anyone say such a thing?”

Darcy’s hazel eyes slid to look up at Bucky, the smirk on his face settling something inside of her, something she’d been missing since they’d both left her side. All of the fear, all of the anxiety, and all of the turmoil with the stone melted away for a little while when she looked into the gorgeous grey eyes of the man at her side. “Fuck, I missed you.”

Grinning, Bucky pressed his lips to her temple. “Missed you too.”

“Tony?”

Tony turned at Darcy’s questioning tone, leather jacket creaking as he nodded toward Steve. “I checked on the kid. He’s fine. Just wanted to make sure Cap’s all set before I leave.”

Darcy felt Bucky hang back by the door as she crossed toward the billionaire, her breath still catching a bit when her eyes landed on the blond in the bed. “The Dick is in his room.” When Tony looked toward her with an eyebrow raised, she shrugged her shoulders. “The French guy.”

“Batroc,” Bucky said, leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, “his name is Batroc.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck _what_ his name is, I’ll be referring to him as The Dick, and _The Dick_ is in his windowless box, where he will stay until we get to question him.” When Tony shot her an
incredulous look at the use of the word ‘we’, Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“... nothing.”

“What?”

“It’s just...” Tony gestured at her with his one good arm. “I wouldn’t exactly call you the poster child for intimidation.”

“One? I’m not a child, you asshole. Two? I can be intimidating,” Darcy said, a hand on her hip as she glared.

“Yeah? Got nerves of steel?”

“When they need to be, yeah!”

“Good, because I just got done talking to Barton and Romanoff.”

Feeling like the air had been punched out of her lungs, Darcy’s shoulders dropped, her eyes looking down at the white sheets covering Steve. *Shit.* “Oh.”

“What ‘oh’?”

Grimacing, Darcy slowly turned toward Bucky, who was looking at her with singular focus. “After the call with Tony got dropped and it was clear something bad was happening, I might have hot wired one of Tony’s cars so Pete and I could find Clint and Natasha.”

“And?”

Darcy’s eyes rolled up toward the ceiling at Tony’s needling, begging Bowie for strength. “And I had to use my powers because neither of us knew where Clint’s Secret Farm was located.”

“And?”

She spun toward Tony, wishing she could have avoided this conversation for just a little while longer. Was it Tony’s goal in life to make everything as difficult as possible? “If you want to tell the fucking story, then fucking tell it, jesus!”

“What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that some of the people I love were in danger and we needed to find someone who could help them!”

“I know your ‘boys’ have both died and come back, but it’s not normal for the rest of us mortals, and most smart people avoid dying when possible.”

“Says the man who took a one-way trip into *space* while holding a *nuclear warhead!*”

“It is not your job -”

“- if my family -”

“- you’re lucky they were able to -”

“Hey!”
Both Tony and Darcy turned their glares at each other toward Bucky, whose voice was still bouncing off the walls, looking between both of them with an unamused look on his face. Darcy did her best not to fidget under the weight of his stare.

“What is he talking about, Darcy?”

Sighing, Darcy put both fists on her hips, looking down at the floor, her cheeks already heating. _Fuck_, this was going to be bad, she knew it. Just an hour, one quiet hour with Bucky and Steve, that’s all she’d been asking for, but even that was too much. “Since we didn’t know where the farm was, I was in the blackness for, like, two hours.”

Bucky heard the hesitance in Darcy’s voice, could see the red creeping up her neck and tinting her cheeks with shame. Tony was still looking at her, his jaw clenched, obviously upset. He’d tried to keep up with their argument but he knew he was missing something. “And?”

Darcy felt her eye twitch when Bucky repeated the word Tony had already beaten her over the head with. “I had an allergic reaction to the stone. Things got dicey.”

“Dicey? Dicey?! You had a seizure and your heart stopped! They might not have got you back! We left you and Parker here so you wouldn’t get hurt!”

“I know, okay? I know!”

“Obviously you don’t!”

“Hey!” Bucky clapping his hands at them seemed to do the trick, forcing both Tony and Darcy to look in his direction again. He wasn’t sure how he’d become the mediator of this conversation, but he could feel the nagging bite of worry going up and down his arms. The things Tony was saying had begun to form a hard nugget of apprehension in his stomach. He could tell Darcy was holding something back, something she didn’t want to admit, something she knew he wouldn’t like. “Stark? Let her talk. Darcy? Everything. Now.”

Sighing, ignoring the hard glare Tony was still pointing her way, Darcy grabbed one of the chairs and pulled it closer to the bed. She reached up and clasped Steve’s hand in her own, needing to feel his warmth, taking comfort from the blond even if he wasn’t awake.

“The stone… tried to take me, or, tried to, _fuck_, I don’t know, hollow me out? Take control? It took a lot to fight against. I was in the dark for so long and having to concentrate that long… I slipped. I tried not to, but I was so tired. Peter says I was shaking, then my heart stopped. When we get to Clint’s farm, they gave me something and I came back.”

Bucky exhaled slowly, seeing the creeping fear as it slowly filled Darcy’s eyes. He knew she could cast a shield of bravado that hid her insecurities from view, but he knew her, and he could tell it’d scared her.

The mental images of her having a seizure, of her heart stopping, of her not breathing… It grabbed his heart and squeezed. Her abilities were so powerful, so chaotic, the fact that she’d put herself in danger to help them only confirmed what he’d been suspecting for a while. Fear of losing her crested and crashed inside himself and he did his best to keep the dread off his face “That it?”

Darcy shrugged her shoulders, leaning against the rail on Steve’s bed, frowning. “Mostly.”

“I didn’t ask for mostly, doll. All of it. Please.”

“I spoke Russian,” she said, earning a raised eyebrow from Bucky. Her fingers were rubbing against
the back of Steve’s hand, over and over, an outlet for her nervous fidgeting. “When they brought me back, I was still lost in the black, hiding from the stone, and I realized that it, that the stone, it didn’t… it doesn’t understand the Soldier. He’s like this whole other thing. There’s my soul, and your soul, but the Soldier doesn’t really have one, so it’s like the stone can’t see him. So I hid in the Soldier.”

Glancing down at his feet, Bucky took in a deep breath. He knew she had all the memories of what he’d done when it wasn’t him, when it was the Soldier, but he’d never really stopped to consider what it was like for her, carrying those memories, knowing what the Soldier knew, like having a completely other person in her head, too.

Robotic.

Cold.

Systematic.

"But it's not... I almost didn't get back. Natasha pulled me out of the darkness, but I don't know what would have happened if she wasn't there. The Soldier heard and recognized her voice and it helped guide me out of the black." She risked a glance up at Bucky, seeing the worried expression on his face. "I'm sorry," she finally breathed, reaching up to wipe the tear from the corner of her eye before it could fall, "I thought you needed help and it was the only thing I could think of. Please don't be mad."

"Darcy, that's..." Bucky crossed the floor, coming to kneel in front of her. He grabbed her hand that wasn't wrapped up with Steve's, giving her a slightly crooked smile, peering up into her watery eyes. "Does it terrify me that something bad happened to you? Yes, of course it does. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you or Steve. The two of you seem to love throwing yourselves in the middle of a fight, regardless of how pear shaped it could go, and it drives me crazy. But I'm not mad at you, Darcy."

When she gave him a small nod, the movement pushed a tear down her cheek, and Bucky reached up with his thumb to wipe it away. "Still don't know how the hell I fell in love with two self-sacrificing punks..."

"Just lucky, I guess," Darcy replied, a smile ghosting onto her lips as she gripped Bucky and Steve's hands in her own. When Tony cleared his throat she jumped, so tired that she'd forgotten he was there, that he'd been the one yelling at her in the first place. "Tony, I'm -"

"Supposed to be on the practice squad," the billionaire interrupted, brown eyes pinning her from behind his glasses, "but now you're looking to be on the active roster, that what you're saying?"

"Uh..." Darcy blinked quickly, looking away from Tony and back at Bucky.

_Did _she? Did she want to start working toward using her powers as more than just a neat party trick? The thought alone caused her stomach to cramp with fear, but there was something else there, too. She'd never really considered herself a _fighter_, even though she'd gotten in her fair share of tussles growing up, and she _knew_ she'd never be as physically strong like Bucky or Steve, but she couldn't ignore the fact that maybe she was _meant_ to be helping. She had to have the mutation and abilities for a reason, right?

Darcy couldn't punch someone as hard as Steve, but she _could_ throw someone across the room. She couldn't fly through the air and shoot energy blasts from her hands like Tony, but she'd be able to know if there were anyone trapped in a building. She couldn't terrify people by being a giant, green
rage monster, but she'd be able to tell where the bad guys were hiding, and how many of them there were. She'd never be a spy like Natasha or Clint, but she'd be able to lead civilians to safety. She couldn't throw a magical hammer made from the metal of a dying star, but she could stay on the edges, out of the main fight, giving backup where and when it was needed.

... like a lab monkey, but for the Avengers.

Darcy’s eyes slid to look at Steve, bruised and beaten and bloody, and a memory came to the front of her mind, so clear and vivid and filled with emotion that she swallowed hard. It was of Steve, before the fall, before the serum, the night before Bucky had shipped out. They’d been arguing about Steve trying to enlist, the fear so thick on the back of Bucky’s tongue that it’d been hard to breathe. 'Bucky, come on. There are men laying down their lives,' Steve’d said, tone soft and determined at the same time. 'I got no right to do any less than them.'

Bucky let out a resigned sigh when Darcy’s eyes swung from Steve and connected with his. He’d suspected this day would come, sooner or later, and had done his best to prepare Steve for the inevitable. He knew Darcy so well, as well as he knew himself, and he’d known that once she got enough control over her powers, she’d want to help. Bucky’d hoped they’d have more time to adjust to the idea, but as he looked into her eyes, hazel and wide, he knew she’d already decided.

Despite the thread of terror tugging taut in her heart, Darcy turned toward Tony, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. "Get me a jersey, I guess."

“We'll get you training wheels,” Tony said with a soft shake of his head and an eye roll, heading for the door.

“Hey?”

Tony sighed, leaning against the open door, raising an eyebrow as Darcy climbed to her feet and came to stand before him. “Yes, princess?”

“Peter said you made me a suit.”

“Did he now?”

“Yes.”

“Did you open it?”

“Not yet. But did you know?”

“That question’s a bit vague, mind pinning it down for me?”

“Yes you dick, did you know that eventually I’d want to, you know, go out and ‘be all that I can be’?”

“I made an educated guess. And with seven PhDs I’m pretty fucking educated.”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, eyes narrowing. “So the yelling at me? Calling me dumb? What was all that for?”

Tony sighed. “Maybe I was hoping it'd scare you enough to change your mind.”

“But why?”

Tony’s face didn’t change. “I hate looking for new employees.”
A small, knowing smirk curled Darcy’s lips. “Liar.”

“Let me know when Cap’s done with his beauty rest. We’ve got a few things to discuss.”

“You liiiike me, asshole,” she sing-songed, “you really liiiike me.”

“Forget it. You’re fired. Your resignation has been tendered and accepted.”

“Nope, I’m your friend.” When Tony rolled his eyes and made his way into the hall, Darcy followed him, calling his name from the doorway. He disappeared from sight and she turned back to Bucky with a smile on her face.

It dimmed, the small bubble of normalcy popping when her eyes landed on Steve, battered and bruised, and Bucky, who looked so tired. Darcy knew her eyes held the same exhaustion, emotionally drained from the past forty-eight hours, and the only thing that would make her feel better was basking in their warmth.

“I was so scared,” she said, slowly making her way toward him. When Bucky held out his open arms, Darcy curled into him, legs hanging over the side of his chair, pressing her face into his neck. She took a deep breath, thoughts in a free-fall.

The people she loved had been attacked. She’d almost died. Steve was still unconscious, and she’d just agreed to become a pseudo-Avenger. To be a pre-Avenger. More like… Avenger Adjacent. It was a lot. A lot.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Bucky said, lips pressing against her forehead, eyes sliding to the left, the familiar sting of pain singing through him as he looked at Steve. “Seeing him on the ground, pale, face covered in blood…” He felt Darcy shudder in his arms, her sharp exhale fanning against his collarbone, her hands tremoring against his skin.

“I can’t even imagine,” she whispered, chest aching at the thought. The room was quiet except for the random beeps that sounded from the various machines surrounding the bed. “Do you… the thing…”

“Disappeared,” Bucky answered, his voice a growl, like gravel, “a flash of purple light and he was gone. Left Batroc behind without a second thought.”

“Evil alien dudes don’t have high morals and a strong sense of loyalty? I’ll make sure to tell The Dick that I am ‘tres surprised’,” Darcy said, doing her best attempt at a french accent. The small chuckle it received from Bucky made her smile against his neck. “We’re staying in here, right? Until he wakes up?”

“I’ve got no plans to be anywhere but right here, with the two of you.”

Darcy shifted so she could see Steve on the other side of Bucky, watching the blond’s chest rise and fall in deep, even breaths. “He’ll wake up soon, Buck,” she assured him, her voice more certain she was inside, but knowing she needed to stay strong for Bucky.

“I know.”

“…when he does, will you tell him about my almost dying and getting lost in the blackness bit for me?”

“Not a damn chance in hell.”
Bucky could feel the throbbing of his heartbeat in his ears, his knuckles white from being formed into fists for so long under the table, and so far, all of it had resulted in nothing. Georges Batroc had done nothing but stare at Bucky with a smug, self-satisfied expression on his face. He appeared aloof, uncaring, like this was all a game.

Though Bucky’s face was impassive, inside he was boiling with rage.

Darcy, who was sitting behind the one-way glass, twisted the ring on her hand, foot beating out a dizzying rhythm, fidgeting as her anxiety grew stronger and stronger. The mercenary had given Bucky nothing, and Darcy could see the frustration building in her love, watching it tighten his shoulders. From their shared memories, she knew that there’d be a tension headache starting at the base of his skull and moving upward.

So not only did The Dick help hurt Steve, but now he’s hurting Buck, too.

The flat, bored look on Batroc’s face was filling Darcy with white-hot ire, while an annoying nag at the back of her mind kept scratching at her as she stared at the evil son of a bitch. What was it she couldn’t remember? “Can we hurt him? Would it help?” She looked over her shoulder at Natasha and Clint, frowning.

“No,” Natasha answered with a shake of her head.

“Yes,” Clint said at the same time, shrugging his shoulder when the redhead turned to glare at him.

“Yes, it would help, but no, we can’t.”

“So we let him rot here and say nothing because we have to be the good guys and that means we don’t hurt people who hurt people?” When no one answered her, Darcy turned back to the glass, frowning at the silence on the other side.

Bucky shifted in the metal chair across the table from Batroc and leaned forward, something itching at the back of his thoughts as he looked into the egoistic green of the frenchman’s eyes, something familiar in their depths. “You know how this goes,” Bucky said, earning a nod from the other man, “and you know what’s at stake. You help us know what the next move is, and, per the Accords, you can petition to have the death penalty taken off the table.”

“Mmm, a nice, minimum-security prison with outdoor privileges and pudding on Fridays?” Batroc’s accent managed to sound condescending, as did the look on his face. “I do not believe that is on the table, is it, Sergeant?”

“You’re on FBI and Interpol most-wanted lists, have worked with known fugitives and beings who wish to destroy the planet. If you think minimum-security prisons and pudding is in your future, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“There is nothing you can offer me that will get you what you want. We have spent hours together in this room, but you still hope for something. Why? You waste my time and yours.”

Darcy let out a large sigh, rising from the chair she’d been sitting in and crossing to the glass, laying her palm against it. It was cold, and she realized with a start that she’d never been on this side of the glass before. Sure, she’d been where The Dick was, handcuffed to a table and wondering if stealing
the loaf of bread was worth it, but she’d never been on the good guy side.

It felt a bit weird, if she was being honest, and as she glared at Batroc, she couldn’t help the darker thoughts that bubbled to the surface.

This man - whether he’d dealt the blows to Steve that had landed him in the hospital or not - was complicit in trying to destroy the world. *Destroy. The World.* It was unfathomable to think about and went against everything that Darcy could believe. Yes, people could be evil, but humans tended to have some kind of connection to Earth that would stop them from wanting its outright destruction.

“Does he have a family?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at Clint.

The blond shook his head. “Not that we know of.”

“But it’s not entirely unheard of, right? Having a secret family that no one knows about, Barton?” At Clint’s shrug of concession, Darcy’s hazel eyes swung back to The Dick, looking into his eyes, trying to really see him. Did he have anyone? A wife? A girlfriend? Boyfriend? Kids? A frumpy aged yellow-tabby cat that hated taking baths? Did Georges Batroc have anything that could be considered a worldly attachment?

“You’re looking at life in prison here in the states, at best. At worst? We return you to Wakanda and they try you for war crimes. Wakandan justice? It’s a bit cleaner than ours. Quicker. And if you think you’ll be avoiding time at all, or that someone’s going to come save you? You’re wrong. The only kind of leverage you have right now is what you know happens next.”

Batroc cocked his head to the side, looking at Bucky critically. “You have no idea what horrors lie around the corner. You talk to me of justice, but that is what you will face next. Justice, for all the horrible things you have done. We are not so different, you and I, Sergeant. Is my face so easily forgotten?”

It was like a lightning bolt, the recognition cementing in her mind, and her breath left her lungs in a huff when she remembered why Batroc’s face looked so familiar. She spun toward Clint and Natasha as realization dawned on her, followed quickly by panic. “Get him out. Now.”

“Now, now! Get him out!” Darcy screamed, hoping it took longer for Bucky to remember, that they could get to him before he realized what Batroc was talking about.

Of all the memories of the Soldier, this was the worst. Just the thought of it turned Darcy’s stomach, and she looked back at the glass with horror. With all the stress, the worry about Steve, she hadn’t remembered either. She recognized Georges Batroc now. She remembered that night. The blood. A teddy bear. She saw it the moment Bucky remembered too, saw him rise to his feet slowly.

She ran out after Natasha and Clint.

“You were quite the professional through it all, Soldat. I learned a lot from you on that night.”

Bucky’s vision was red, the only sound the beating of his heart. He struggled, wanting to fight his way toward Batroc, the memories of that night assaulting his mind in vivid, sick technicolor. How had he forgotten that Batroc had been there, too? Bucky’d come so far, separating himself from the Soldier, but some memories were horrible enough that he would slip, lose the barrier that separated them. This memory was one, something he was going to work on with Dr. Chaas, but now Masa was dead, and this man had something to do with it, and all he could feel was the coldness of the
Soldier as it began to bleed into him.

Darcy stood in the doorway, watching as Clint and Natasha held Bucky back, Batroc laughing from his metal seat. Natasha was whispering in Russian, low and insistent, and just like it’d been able to bring Darcy back from the blackness, she watched Bucky refill his eyes, pushing the Soldier away.

After another second of tension, Bucky’s arms fell limply to his side and he let Natasha lead him out of the room. Darcy had a hand pressed to her chest when his grey eyes looked over at her, haunting and heartbreaking. She let Bucky and Natasha pass, uncertain what she could say to make it better. The Soldier’s memories were not ones she spent much time in, and even if those memories might have saved her life a couple days prior, being reminded of the savagery that had happened at the Soldier’s hands…

She looked up when Clint wrapped his fingers around her upper arm. “Hm?”

“You alright?”

Darcy nodded, looking over Clint’s shoulder and toward the man still sitting there, chained to the table, humor and smugness in his eyes. “I’m good. Just… not a good memory.”

“So it is true. They had said, but I did not believe them.” Both Clint and Darcy turned to look at Batroc, their eyes cold. “You truly remember everything he did.”

“Who told you,” Clint asked, hand still resting on Darcy’s arm, “Thanos’ men?” When Batroc went silent, enjoying the moment a little too much, Clint turned back to Darcy with a shake of his head. “He’s just trying to stir you up.”

“What do you know?” Darcy asked, teeth clenching, stomach turning at the thought of what Batroc might know, and who would have told him.

“As I told your other half, there is nothing you have for me.”

Darcy glared, anger lighting in her narrowed eyes. “Is that right?”

“Darcy -”

“There’s no one on this planet that means a thing to you?” she asked, seeing absolutely no reaction on his face. How was someone so removed from humanity that he would willingly help his planet, and the eight billion people on it, be destroyed? It wasn’t right. He had to have someone, some reason.

Batroc shook his head. “Not a soul.”

“Funny you use that word…”

Darcy’s eyes fell closed and when she opened them, she could see and feel the lavender, plum purple of Clint at her side. And right in front of her, almost blending in with the black itself, was a dull, grey spark. She’d never seen a soul this dark, but she supposed she’d not met many mercenaries with no compassion for anyone.

She looked harder at his soul, focusing, looking for something.

_Come on, you son of a bitch, show me what you have._

“You have no one? No one you care about?” she repeated, still feeling Clint’s hand on her arm,
using it as an anchor like she’d used her song before. “I think you’re lying,” Darcy said with a click of her tongue, taking a step closer to him.

“There is no —”

_There_. “What about that bit of pink? It’s so faint, buried under all that grey, but it’s there. Like cotton candy.” It was close enough now that Darcy lifted her hand, as if she could touch it.

Clint watched the amber bleed into Darcy’s skin, the glow of her eyes as she looked at Batroc, but not, all at once. She took another step forward, fingers outstretched toward the mercenary, and Clint would see real fear begin to fill the other man’s eyes.

“Arrêtez,” she heard from the Frenchman, distant and muffled.

“It looks like a little girl.” Darcy wasn’t sure where this information was coming from, but it was _right there_ in the color, deep, but she coaxed it out slowly, almost beckoning it closer with a curl of her finger. “Pretty eyes. Your blond hair. Maybe… five? No, six. Starting school soon, then.”

“You do not know -”

“Oh, but she’s sick. The oxygen tank. Therapy. The medical bills are astronomical and... they still don’t know how to help your Lottie. But he… he offered you what you needed. A cure, something off world, something that would help her, heal her, make her like new.”

“Darcy -” Clint warned, trying to pull her back.

“That’s why?” Darcy blinked the blackness away, realizing how close she’d come to Batroc, hands pressed flat against the table that was bolted down in the center of the room as he leaned back in his chair, putting space between them. “You sided with that purple asshole because he promised to make your little girl better? Does she know? Does Charlotte know that her Daddy was willing to kill the entire world on the hope that an insane madman would follow through on his promise of a cure? What would happen if she found out that her Daddy was a murderer? Think she’d blink those gorgeous green eyes at you with anything other than disgust in them?”

“Non,” Batroc said with a firm shake of his head, rising to his feet, pulling on the chains that held him captive.

Clint was pushing at her arms, trying to get her out of the room, but Darcy fought to stay there. “You’re going back to Wakanda and they’re going to fry your ass! She’ll _never_ hear from you again! She’ll grow up knowing her Daddy was an evil, horrible man, and wonder if she’s got a core of evil festering in her, too!”

“Non!”

Clint had all but thrown Darcy over his shoulders by this point, but she threw her hands in Batroc’s direction. “This is your last chance! Why did they want the vibranium?”

“They did not!”

Darcy’s mouth fell closed, feet hitting the floor softly as Clint put her down and turned toward Batroc, the sudden silence in the room making his ears strain. “What do you mean?”

“They were not there for the vibranium,” Batroc said, pulling on his chains, a small vein of fear in his eyes as he glared at her.
Good. You deserve to be afraid, after all the things you’ve done. Darcy’s eyes narrowed further. “Then what the hell were they there for? Why’d they attack Wakanda?”

The Frenchman shook his head. “I do not know.”

“Don’t lie,” Clint growled.

“He’s not,” Darcy said, blinking quickly, glancing at Clint. “He doesn’t know what they were there for.”

“What else do you know?”

Darcy watched Batroc consider Clint’s question before he carefully and calmly slid back in this seat. “I believe there was mention of an agreement. I will take my chances at best.”

She continued to glare at Batroc over Clint’s shoulder as the blond pushed her into the hallway, the door closing and blocking off their view of the interrogation room. Clint’s blue eyes pinned her as she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, feeling cold and feverish at the same time. Between the memories from the Soldier and whatever ability she’d just used in there, Darcy was feeling more than a little off-kilter.

“What the fuck was that?”

“I. I don’t know? I could see it? I guess? It was there, if I looked...” She trailed off, not sure how she could explain that once she’d asked for the information, it was there if she looked hard enough.

Clint crossed his arms over his chest and pinned her with unimpressed eyes. “The last time you did that for an extended period of time blew up pretty spectacularly, if I remember correctly.”

“I guess I’m in remission,” she said with a shrug. When he gave her a confused look, she frowned. “It’s a long story.”

“My report is going to be an even longer story. How the hell do I explain what happened in there? That you looked at him and he was hit with a lightning bolt of conscience?”

Darcy’s nose crinkled. “That’s a horrible name. And lightning is more the Big Guy’s thing.”

“Hulk?”

“No! Thor. Thor is the big guy.”

“Hulk is bigger than Thor, literally by a ton.”

“Are we really having this fight right now?”

“Yes because your eyes are still glowing and I need to get your mind off the shit that just went down.”

“Oh,” Darcy said, looking down at her hands, which were glowing with soft amber light. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then squinted one eye open, satisfied when she saw that the glow had disappeared. She looked up at Clint with a raised eyebrow, accepting his nod.

“You’re getting the hang of it,” he said, with a considering nod.

“Getting there,” Darcy said, sighing. Her face turned more serious as she began chewing on her bottom lip. “If they weren’t there for the vibranium -”
“Why don’t you let me and Nat worry about that. I think Barnes might need you more right now.”

Oh. If she was feeling horrible about the Soldier’s memory, she couldn’t even imagine how Bucky felt. Actually, she knew exactly how Bucky felt about it, and her heart constructed in her chest.

“Fuck, how do I help him? Everything with the Soldier -”

“You tell him that he’s not that person, that it’s not his fault, and you hold him. Sometimes that’s all you can do.”

“Speaking from experience?” Darcy watched Clint shrug his shoulders nonchalantly. For all the airs Barton put on, she could tell how serious the archer could be when it was needed. Knowing his history with Natasha, and Bucky’s history with Natasha, she knew better than most how truly gifted Clint was as taking care of others who carried a bit of darkness inside of them.

“It comes up every once in a blue moon.”

Darcy nodded, taking a deep breath, steeling herself. “What’s going to happen with him?” she asked with a nod to the room, and the captive mercenary inside.

“If you’re certain that he doesn’t have any more information, then he’ll probably bargain to say stateside, and like Barnes said, if he’s lucky he might get a life sentence with the death penalty off the table.”

“And if that doesn’t happen?”

Clint whistled, rocking back on his heels. “With his record and all the horrible things he’s done? Not sure I’d lose sleep over it, Darce.” When she continued to frown, Clint’s face shifted a bit as he took a step closer to her, realizing why she carried that look in her hazel eyes. “Hey, Darcy, that stuff, with his daughter -”

“It’s fine,” Darcy said, waving her hand dismissively, not able to take the way his tone had softened as he neared.

“No, it’s not fine.” When she gave him an apprehensive look, Clint reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. “I know. I get it. Trust me, I do, but we didn’t make him do the things he did. It’s not like Barnes. If his daughter grows up without her father -”

“It’s okay, Barton. Really. I’ve got to go check on Bucky. I’ll send Nat back your way.”

“Darcy -”

Looking after Darcy as she quickly disappeared, Clint heaved a large sigh, hands on his hips, before he looked up at the ceiling. “Just once. That’s all I’m asking for. Just once don’t make me beat it out of someone, is that so hard?”

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Natasha had apparently steered Bucky far enough away that the risk of overhearing things was close to nil. Darcy’d had to blink and search for the ruby and crimson color swirl in order to find them. They were in a lounge area, several vending machines lined against one wall, a sitting area with couches and armchairs near the back.

Does someone really come and restock vending machines in the Avengers compound? How does
that even happen? ‘Oh, yeah, your next stop is making sure Thor, Asgardian god and altogether cool dude, is stocked up on sour cream and cheddar potato chips’?

That Darcy was thinking about vending machines and not the man sitting with his head between his knees spoke volumes. Had Batroc really rattled Bucky that much? Had he really rattled her that much?


Darcy watched Natasha rub one last circle on Bucky’s back before she stood, soft leather boots soundless as the redhead crossed toward her. “Is he… I mean, did it…”

“He’s shook,” Natasha answered, keeping her voice low. “I assume a memory from -”

“The Soldier, yeah. A bad one. Really bad. Did he -”

“No, and I wouldn’t want him to. I’ve got enough horrors in my head, trust me. But you can help.”

Darcy bit her lip, hazel eyes flicking over Natasha’s shoulder, her heart breaking to see how much Bucky’d been thrown. “He’s been doing so well lately.”

“I think it’d be fair to say that he’s been dealing with a lot of stress lately,” Natasha said with a small quirk of her lip. “And you? Are you alright?”

“Me?” Darcy asked, her expression incredulous. “Why would I -”

“Because you have those memories up there, too.”

“Yeah, but they’d not mine. Or his. It’s the Soldier. That’s not him.”

“Maybe you remind him of that,” Natasha said, nodding at Darcy once before sidestepping around her.

Darcy let the air out of her lungs slowly, deliberately, focusing her thoughts. Over the past few months, Bucky had been so solid, so here, that she’d taken the quiet easiness for granted. She remembered the horrible nights, the nightmares, worse before Bucky had found Steve again, then slowly improving over time. She’d gotten complacent, thinking everything was fine.

But everything wasn’t fine. Those memories were still there, and despite no longer being triggered with specific words, Darcy knew that the littlest things could pull those dark memories to the surface. Just thinking of the things the Soldier had done made her feel slimy, made her taste bile on the back of her tongue. If she was having that visceral of a reaction, Bucky had to be feeling infinitely worse.

Bucky felt the couch at his side dip, senses on overdrive, able to make it out as Darcy from the flowering citrus smell of her shampoo. His mind was full of darkness, faces flicking through his thoughts like a sick photo collage, each in hues of black, white and red. He remembered them all, every life his hands had taken, and Batroc’s words had brought one of the worst to the surface.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said, voice thick, a lump in his throat, “I didn’t realize what he was talking about before it was too late.”

Darcy frowned, turning so she could see him more fully. “You have nothing to apologize for, Bucky.”
“If I saw that memory, then you -”

“I saw the Soldier’s memory.”

“It’s mine, too.”

“You are not the Soldier. You are not the things he did. You’re a victim, just as much as any of the other lives he stole”

Bucky looked up at her, eyes bloodshot, wetness on his cheeks. “How can you say that? Knowing what these hands’ve done?”

Darcy reached out and gripped his hands with hers, holding firm when he tried to jerk them away. “No, Buck, you did not do those things. The only thing I’ve known from these hands is love. Your love for me. And do you feel this?” She lifted her hands and cradled his face. “These hands only know love for you. Unconditional. You know that. You know how much I love you, every part, even the dark parts.”

“How?” Bucky said, voice thick, unable to stop the tears from cascading down his cheeks.

“Because... my love for you... it’s louder than any darkness you can throw at me. Things are really hard right now, I know. It’s heavy. Olivia. Dr. Chaas. Steve. It’s all so fucking heavy, and horrible... but you need to give me some of the weight, okay? I’ve got two more shoulders that can help you carry it. Let me carry some of it.”

Bucky took a deep, shuddering breath inward, watching Darcy’s hazel eyes as they looked at him unflinchingly. Everything in him was screaming, and it could be so loud, too loud, but looking at her... it made it less piercing, less sharp. He did see it in her, her unconditional and whole-hearted love for him, and once again he could feel his heart in his throat, unable to find words that properly expressed what it was like to know, despite the blood that had covered his hands, thick enough to drown in... Darcy loved him. Darkness and all.

Darcy pulled his face toward her, pressing her lips against his forehead and taking a deep breath before sitting back, a small, slanted grin on her face. “We are in a downward suck of horrible right now.”

The chuckle that growled through Bucky’s chest was deep, and he couldn’t help the shake of his head. “Anyone ever tell you you’ve got a way with words?”

She reached out and wiped at his cheeks with the sleeve of her shirt, darting in to press kisses to the moist skin. “Things are bad now. And everything is up in the air, and we still don’t know enough, but there is one thing I do know.”

“Mm? What do you know?”

“I know that there is a fine ass specimen of a man in a room across the building that needs us to be there when he wakes up, and as much as we want to wallow in the despair, we don’t have that option. We’re going to pull ourselves up by our bra straps and suck it up for him.”

“Boot straps.”

“What?”

“It’s ‘pull ourselves up by our boot straps’.”
Darcy frowned, giving him a disbelieving look. “That doesn’t make any sense. Bras have straps. Boots don’t. And bra straps fall down *all the time*. It’s kind of what they do.”

“Why are we talking about bras?”

“Because I wanted to chase a little bit of that darkness from your eyes. Is it working?”

“Yeah, doll,” Bucky said with a small smile, reaching out to grip her hand, “yeah, it’s working.”
How It Burns

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Bucky navigate their lives while Steve remains unconscious.

Chapter Notes

_Ho Ho Ho!
You get a chapter early!
It's not the easy-bake-over you asked Santa for, but I hope it'll do!

Happy Holidays from this very grateful writer!!
"I think I found something when I first met you
The world fell quiet and the stars shined a little brighter

Darling, I found the pieces of me I'd given away
The parts of my heart that stopped fitting

And the first time you said my name
Oh, it was like my atoms finally slotted into place

You've got the universe in your soul
And I like how it burns

"Darcy?"

"Hmmmwhat?" Lifting her head from the mattress of Steve’s hospital bed, Darcy blinked blearily into the room for the person who’d said her name. She reached up and slapped at the paper that was sticking to her face courtesy of a puddle of drool from the corner of her mouth.

Sam’s lips quirked into a slant as she wiped at her face, obviously trying to wake up from an unplanned nap. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Sorry. Hi. I’m Darcy.” Shuffling the lab reports she’d been reading (sleeping on), she gave him a tired smile. “...but you already know that.”

“I do,” Sam said, coming into the room further, letting the door hush shut behind him. He had the distinct feeling of déjà vu, remembering Steve being in a hospital bed in an eerily similar way after the Triskelion went down. “If this isn’t a good time -”

Darcy shook her head, waving a hand at him. “No, really, I’m good. I forced Bucky to go take a shower, and apparently going over data about tensile strength is like super melatonin.”

“You slept much since we got back?”

She watched Sam pull up a chair on the other side of the bed, smiling warmly at her, and Darcy found herself smiling back. She knew his past with Bucky wasn’t an overly friendly one, but she’d heard enough stories from Steve to know Sam Wilson was a caring and loyal friend, one of the best soldiers the blond had ever known.

“I’ve got enough,” she answered with a shrug, “once he wakes up, it’ll be a lot easier. I’d crawl up in the bed with him now but I don’t want to hurt his ribs anymore than they already are.”

Sam nodded slowly, an empathetic look on his face. “Ribs hurt like a bitch.”

“Sadly, I know the feeling. I once got thrown into a van whose side had a painting of a skeleton on fire, riding a giant motorcycle, and swinging a chain.”

“Wait, during that last battle?” At her nod, Sam chuckled and sat back in his chair. “I thought that’s what it was, but I figured it was a hallucination. Who actually pays to have that done?”

“I know, right? So tacky. I hope a well-placed explosion took care of it.”
A companionable quiet fell over them, the beeps of machines the background noise, and Darcy felt herself relax a little more. Sam’s presence was calming, but that made sense, knowing the work he did with veterans. “How was Wakanda?”

Sam rose an eyebrow at her. “You mean, when he -”

“No, no, I heard about that from Bucky so I’m a-okay on the logistics of all that horribleness, I mean everything else. The cities, the people... I have a habit of not getting to visit cool places, so I have to live vicariously through others.”

“Asgard, right? Steve might have mentioned that you’re pretty good friends with Thor.”

Darcy’s mouth curled into a smile when she glanced toward Steve. She was almost certain she’d only complained about not getting to go to Asgard once, but he’d remembered it, enough that it’d come up in conversation. She felt a swell of emotion and reached out to grip Steve’s hand in hers. “Yeah, the Big Guy’s a friend.”

Sam’s brown eyes watched as Darcy all but glowed when she looked at Steve, which he’d been told she could actually do now with the powers she had, but this glow wasn’t from anything metaphysical or magical. It was real, and solid, and honest. “Wakanda is warm, and sticky, and if you think Stark’s tech is next level?” He whistled, shaking his head softly. “Stark ain’t got nothing on Princess Shuri.”

An hour later, when Bucky pushed his way into Steve’s room, he hit a solid wall of Darcy’s high-pitched giggles. She had her face pressed to the mattress, shoulders shaking as Sam clapped his hands, obviously having just finished telling a story. When Sam’s gaze swung his way, Bucky watched the other man’s face sober a bit, though a good deal of amusement still shined in his expression.

Reaching up to swipe at her eyes, still chuckling, Darcy smiled widely at Bucky. She held out her hand, and when he crossed to clutch it, she pulled him close and pressed her face to his side, taking a deep breath. He was wearing one of the shirts that he and Steve wore interchangeably, and she pulled the scent into her lungs as far as she could. “Hey.”

Bucky ran his fingers through her soft curls, looking down into her hazel eyes, still lit with humor. “You should eat.”

Darcy frowned, glancing in Steve’s direction. “But -”

“Cap’ll be fine,” Sam said, giving Darcy an encouraging grin when she looked his way, “he’s not going anywhere. And think of what he’ll sound like when he finds out you weren’t eating.”

Grimacing, Darcy shook her head. “Ugh. The furrowed brow.”

Bucky smirked. “Disappointed justice.”

“Mmmhmm,” Sam hummed, “the absolute worst.”

Sighing, Darcy climbed to her feet, watching Sam do the same. “Do you have a cafeteria preference? I think it’s Italian day at west. They have that really good lasagna with all the crunchy bits on top.”

Sam looked taken aback, eyes widening softly. “I don’t want to intrude if you two.”

“Are you kidding? I’m always down for more embarrassing stories. Besides, it’s nice, having the distraction, laughing.” She watched his eyes flick to look at Bucky, and she felt the man at her side
give a small shrug of his shoulders.

“Lasagna sounds great.”

Bucky glanced one more time at Steve before he slid his arm across Darcy’s shoulders, following Sam out of the room. When Darcy launched into the story of their ongoing ‘Jumanji’ battle, Bucky couldn’t help the sigh that lifted his shoulders or the roll of his eyes toward the ceiling.

Darcy looked between the scientists as they babbled nonsense. She was in the presence of some of the brightest minds the Earth had to offer, and here they were, squabbling like tiny, angry babies.

“Being in the soulscape for that long -”

“We don’t even know if the dampener will help with that!”

“If we’re going to cut her open, we should only do it once.”

“I think we’ve had enough brain trauma for a while, or did you forget Phil Coulson and his lovely visit to Tahiti?”

“That’s different.”

“Is it? Is it?”

“Then what do you suggest, Stark? The dampener has to be put in somehow. Don’t tell me we spent all the time on it only for you -”

Sighing, Darcy leaned back against Bucky’s chest, warming as his arm circled her shoulders and held her tight. The science squad had returned to the compound with a renewed sense of urgency. After everything that’d happened, at home and in Wakanda, everyone seemed to be in agreement that getting Darcy’s neural dampener finished was a priority. Tony and Peter were pushing particularly hard, but Bruce and Jane seemed to have reservations, wanting to act cautiously.

Darcy was happy they were working so hard for her, but she couldn’t find it in herself to really worry about it all. Steve was still unconscious and until he woke up, everything else seemed secondary and less important.

Bucky pressed his lips to the crown of Darcy’s head, feeling the anxious energy that seemed to have surrounded her. Neither of them had been sleeping well since Wakanda, Steve’s hospital room feeling more and more familiar, and he could see the same hesitance in her body that he felt in his. They didn’t like being away from Steve’s side for too long, wanting to be there when he woke up.

“And he will wake up,” Darcy had insisted whenever doubt crept into Bucky’s eyes, her voice so certain, somehow drawing from an unending pool of faith. It was hard to argue with her, especially when her eyes were filled with such fire. His lips found her temple and he kissed her, taking comfort from her warmth, trying to believe as strongly as she did.

When the scientist’s voices rose in volume again, Darcy tapped Bucky’s arm softly before climbing to her feet. “Alright, Science Squad, huddle up.” She saw several of their faces quirk at the name, but no one interrupted her, which she found pretty damn surprising. She knew they were treating her
with kid gloves, were worried about her in adorable ways, but she was too tired to deal with it all right now. “We’re going to table this for the time being.”

“After everything -”

Darcy’s hands rose in the air, stopping the words that had started to flow from Tony. “I get it, you’re all wanting to help me, and it’s amazing, but I have absolutely no plans to use my powers for the time being. I haven’t heard the voice or had troubles when I just don’t use the abilities, so I’m going to stay radio silent as far as the stone goes.”

“That’s not a solution.”

She smiled at Bruce, his voice soft but resolute. “I know. I’m not looking for a solution right now. My heart and mind are focused in the med ward, and I’m in no shape to be making decisions or going under the knife while Steve’s still out. So until he wakes up, I’m shutting this thing down.”

Jane took a step forward, reaching out to put her hand on Darcy’s arm. “Darcy, I doubt Steve would want -”

Darcy laughed, shaking her head. “Oh, I know exactly what Steve would say about me putting this on hold for him. But I’m stubborn, so I’m gonna do it anyway.” Bucky rose to his feet, coming to stand behind her, resting his hands on Darcy’s shoulders. She turned her head, smiling at him. “I’m not saying forever. I’m just saying until he wakes up. Then we can talk about it again.”

Her gaze swung back to look between the scientists, eyes narrowing, daring anyone to say what she was sure was on all of their minds.

What if Steve doesn’t wake up?

Satisfied when no one said the phrase that seemed to hang in the air between them, Darcy nodded her head. “Stark, I’m going to need to call in for the next few days.”

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically, setting the tablet in his hands on the counter. “You’re running pretty low on PTO days, princess, you sure?” His eyes sparked when she lifted her middle finger in his direction. “If I need you, I know where to find you.”

Everyone watched as Bucky stretched his arm over Darcy’s shoulders and the pair of them left the lab. Tony leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest, looking over at Jane. “If your theory about her remission is true, she’s already getting better at control. It took longer for Wanda.”

“Her powers came from the tesseract, the mind stone. The soul stone is… it’s a different animal.”

“Sergeant Barnes didn’t have a lot to say about the dampener,” Peter said, frowning.

“Yeah, can’t imagine why he wouldn’t want to get in on a conversation about messing with someone’s brain,” Tony said, peering over the top of his glasses at Peter.

“O-oh, right, yeah, makes sense. Of course.”

“The best thing we can do is make sure the dampener works, that our vision for it’s complete.” Tony looked sharply in Bruce’s direction. Bruce shifted, eyebrows knitting together. “What?”

“Nothing, just a thought. Okay squad goals, it’s like Bruce said. Let’s get to work.”
“You should come to the farm for Thanksgiving.”

Darcy glared up at Clint from her spot on the ground, breathing heavily. “What?”

“Thanksgiving. Laura invited you, in case you didn’t have plans.”

Rolling onto her side with a groan, her body covered in sweat and cooling in the winter air, she came to all fours and glared at him some more. “You save that ‘til now? After you try to murder me?”

“You’re fine. Running helps with anxiety.”

“I was happy with my anxiety, thank you very much.” When Clint held out a water bottle in her direction, she snapped it from his hand harder than she needed to.

“If you don’t keep up your training, it’ll slip. You’ve busted your ass with me, I don’t want to see all your hard work go away.”

“It’s only been a week,” she groused, sucking the water greedily then tossing him back the empty bottle.

“Exactly. Do you know how hard it is to get back? Even as little as a week shows lowered performance, you gotta keep on top of it.”

Darcy ran an arm over her brow, then reached to tighten her ponytail. “Can’t we, like, switch it up? Do pilates or yoga half the time? Staying limber is a good thing, isn’t it?”

Clint reached up to scratch at his chin. “Not a bad idea. I’ve read the research. Let’s do it. We’ll add it to everything we’re already working on.”

“Add in? Dude, that’s stupid. I meant instead of the running.”

“I know what you meant. I took your suggestion to heart, thought about it long and hard, and made my decision. You wanna argue about it some more? I’ve got a six-year-old at home. You don’t scare me.”

“You know I could rip the soul from your body if I wanted to, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a badass. Everyone knows it.” Clint held out a hand toward her, snapping his fingers. “Get up. We’ve still got a mile to go.”

Darcy’s glare was colder than the breeze that ruffled through the trees around them. “Come on, man! I thought we were friends!”

“We are friends. Did you not get the invitation to Thanksgiving I just gave you before you started bitching?”

“Mmmhmm,” Darcy hummed, taking his offered hand and using it to climb to her feet with a groan. She kicked a toe in the ground before glancing back up at him, uncertainty in her hazel eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t want to intrude on a family thing. Besides, me and the boys...”

“They’re invited, too, of course. Steve’s been by several times and I think Barnes has been to a dinner or two. Look, Laura is really looking forward to cooking for everyone. And I don’t think I
have to remind you what happened the first time she saw you. You kind of owe it to her.”

Darcy looked Clint up and down, her mouth dropping open softly. “Wait… are you dad guilting me?”

Clint frowned at her, mouth turning down on the ends. “What the hell does that mean?”

“The disappointed look, the sigh, the hands on your hips.” She gestured toward him, watching as he looked down and realized he’d been standing like Peter Pan. “You are! You’re ‘dad guilting’ me!”

His hands dropped from his hips. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mmmhmmm, says the ‘Avenger Dad’.”

Clint’s nose crinkled. “Ugh, that’s horrible. Don’t ever call me that again.”

“I give no promises of the sort,” Darcy said with a smirk, seeing the halfway point marker in front of them. She started jogging half-heartedly, Clint falling into step beside her. Her feet made the brittle fallen leaves crunch underfoot as a bird sung in the distance. It was quiet, and tranquil, and she begrudgingly admitted that she was feeling better that she had in the last few days. Not that she would tell Clint, or he’d up the length or pace of their runs.

“Thank you,” she said after a few seconds, head turning to look at him with a small smile on her lips, “for talking about Steve like he’s going to wake up.”

Clint glanced in her direction, giving her an encouraging smile, knowing the belief in her eyes was matched in his. “I’ve worked with Cap for a while now, and we’ve seen some pretty amazing comebacks. It’s just a matter of time.”

Darcy nodded, breathing out heavily as she turned back to the path they were running. It’d been tiring, holding enough faith and belief for both her and Bucky, despite the small nagging doubt in the back of her mind, and it made her feel better knowing she wasn’t the only one who was working hard to believe it.

“Alright, Lewis. Let’s finish this one strong. Get that ass moving.”

Shaking her head as he darted forward, the moment they’d been having broken by his relentless enthusiasm for physical fitness, Darcy chased after Clint with a growl in her chest. “Fuck.”

Darcy was laughing when she pushed into Steve’s hospital room, looking over her shoulder at Bucky. “That’s not fair!”

“Ain’t about fair, doll, it is what it is.”

“It’s most definitely not and I will be taking it up with Hill, immediately.”

“She’s not here.”

“Then I’ll send a harshly worded email, alright?”

Steve’s hospital room looked much different than the other rooms in the med ward. His looked lived in. Bucky had covered Steve with the quilt that usually took up residence at the foot of their bed,
adding a bright pop of color to the normally sterile white environment. Darcy’s lab data, her laptop, and her iPod were scattered around, as well as a few books Bucky’d brought, stacked neatly on a table. They’d drug some of the more comfortable, leather chairs from the lobby across the compound and placed them next to the bed. *The last thing we need are ass callouses,* Darcy had argued, and Bucky hadn’t found it in him to disagree.

Five days had passed since the quinjet had returned from Wakanda, and the doctors weren’t sure why Steve hadn’t woken up yet. It was frustrating, to be sure, but Darcy was doing her best to stay optimistic. He was in there, after all, his gold steady, the thread of cobalt as bright as ever, and something about seeing those colors made her calm, assuaged her fears.

Bucky watched Darcy lean over the bed and press her lips to Steve’s cheek, warmth lighting in his chest at the sight. She’d been amazing since they’d gotten back, convincing him that everything was going to be fine. The longer Steve stayed asleep, the harder it was for Bucky to keep his head high. He missed his best friend, and even with Darcy being everything he needed her to be since they’d returned, Bucky could feel the ache of it in his bones; he’d gotten used to hearing Steve laugh over these past few months, and having it go silent hurt more than he thought it would.

Darcy pulled back from Steve, hazel eyes flowing over his forehead, along his impossibly long eyelashes, over the bruising above his left eye, and then down the line of his jaw. She frowned at a cut across his right cheekbone. “Does he look better than the last time we saw him?”

Bucky dropped himself into one of the chairs, hands reaching for the book he was in the middle of. “You mean before we left to get lunch, a half hour ago?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you’re wanting him to look better, and if wantin’ and wishin’ could cure him alone, doll…”

Eyes narrowing, she glared at Bucky over her shoulder, seeing the corner of his mouth quirk upward in a smirk. “I’m serious. That bruise,” she said, lifting her hand to point near Steve’s jaw, “right there. I think that’s lighter than it was before.”

“Darcy…”

“No! I’m not joking. I think that cut there’s already closed!”

Bucky closed the book and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Darcy love, you’re seeing things.”

“No, she’s not, jerk.”

There was a moment of silence before the room rang with the sound of Darcy’s screaming. “Oh my god! He’s awake! I fucking knew it!”

Bucky came up behind Darcy, looking down at Steve with wide eyes while Darcy practically vibrated with relief. “Steve?”

“Mmm,” Steve hummed, his right eye squinting open against the bright lights. “Loud.”

“Fuck, shit, I’m sorry, fuck, are you okay? How are you? How do you feel? Steve,” Darcy said, words falling from her mouth in a steady torrent as her hands hovered, not sure where she could touch without hurting him.

Steve’s tongue clicked, his mouth dry after so long. “How long was I…”
“Eight years,” Darcy answered automatically.

“What?”

“Darcy!”

Bucky’s gasp of her name, tinted with disbelief and shock, forced the peels of nervous giggles free. “Sorry! Fuck! Sorry! I’m kidding, I don’t know why I said that, that was horrible of me, I’m sorry, you’ve only been out for a few days, but you’re awake now!” Laughing through her tears, Darcy finally settled with grabbing his hand in hers and pressing her lips to his palm over and over again. “You’re okay, are you okay? How do you feel?”

While Darcy couldn’t seem to stop speaking, Bucky’s voice had been stolen by a wave of emotion. His gaze was intent on the brilliant blue of Steve’s eyes, watching them flick from Darcy to him and back again. Bucky’s hand reached out to grip Steve’s calf, leaning forward so the blond didn’t have to strain to see them both. “Took you long enough, punk.”

“I enjoy making an entrance,” Steve said, hearing Darcy’s laugh against his hand, feeling the warmth of her tears. He opened his mouth but was cut off when the door to his room was thrown open and a swell of nurses and doctors ran inside.

Bucky grabbed Darcy by the shoulders and pulled her away from the bed, a small sound of disappointment slipping past her lips as her hands lost contact with Steve’s. “We gotta let the doctors make sure he’s okay, doll.”

Darcy lifted her arm and gripped Bucky’s hand on her shoulder, watching the medical staff as they worked. Having Steve back and not being able to touch him was like an entirely new form of torture, and it took everything she had not to push them out of the way, drape herself across his body, and growl until they retreated.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the doctors left, ready to inform everyone else that Steve was awake. Bucky and Darcy returned to his side, their eyes shining with unspent tears, grins wide and happy. Steve shifted in the bed, grimacing softly when his ribs protested the movement. “Hey, whoa,” Darcy’s hands pushed at his shoulders, “should you be moving already?”

“I’m alright,” the blond answered, sitting up with a pile of pillows behind him. One of his eyes was still swollen, and he could feel cuts and bruises on his face as he spoke, but Steve gave them what he hoped was an encouraging smile. Their faces had been the last thing he’d thought of and seeing them again filled his belly with fire. “Hi.”

“You hear that, Buck? He’s taken a five day nap and he wakes up and says ‘hi,’ can you believe it?” Wrapping his hand around both of theirs, Bucky nodded, smirking at his best friend. “Yeah, that’s something I can believe.”

“Are you… I mean, I know you told the doctors you felt okay, but are you? Really? Okay, I mean, really?”

Steve nodded at Darcy, betting he looked worse than he felt. He was sore all over, but the ache was something he could deal with. He knew it would only take a couple more days before everything faded - Erskine’s serum increasing his healing ability to an unreal scale - but that he’d been out and unconscious for five days told him how hurt he’d actually been.

“I’m sore, but I’ll be okay. I tend to heal faster than other people,” he answered with a soft grin, seeing Bucky roll his eyes and Darcy shake her head with a sigh. “Besides,” he continued, “I made
some promises before we left, and I didn’t want to break them.”

“Mmm,” Darcy hummed, lips turning up as she remembered their conversation before they’d left to Wakanda, “that so?” When Steve just nodded at her, she bit her lower lip. There was a look in his eyes that she couldn’t quite place, but she couldn’t find it in herself to push, not with the relief and love that was coursing through her. “Can we… I mean, it’s not going hurt you, is it, if we…?”

Steve held his arms out to her and watched a second of hesitation flash over her face before she began climbing onto the bed. She was careful, slow, but managed to lay beside him, his arm wrapped around her shoulder, her face pressed against his neck.

Darcy took a breath in, drawing his scent into her lungs as deep as she could. He was warm, and familiar, and she let her eyes fall closed, feeling them fill again with tears of happiness. “I’m so glad you’re okay,” she breathed against his skin, lips pressing before she buried her face closer.

Her hair was soft against his lips and Steve could make out the smell of her shampoo as she carefully hugged him. When his eyes opened to look at Bucky, the other man was looking at them with something akin to wonder on his face. “Buck?”

Nothing in his life had ever come close to the feeling in Bucky’s chest as he looked down at the two people in the bed, heart in his throat. Steve’s blond hair mixing with Darcy’s dark, their limbs tangled and entwined, the happy and relieved expressions on their faces... It was beautiful, more than he could have ever hoped for, and it was real. It was actually there, in front of him, and it stole whatever breath he’d had in his lungs.

When Steve called his name again, Bucky was pulled out of his thoughts, reaching up to brush at his eyes, tears threatening to spill onto his cheeks. “Hm?”

“I said there’s enough room for you, too,” Steve said, smiling despite the pain from the cut on his lip splitting again at the expression. The look Bucky had, the spark of emotion in those slate grey depths, made Steve thrill from his toes all the way to the tips of his ears.

“I don’t -”

“James Buchanan Barnes, you get in this bed right now or I will fight you.” Darcy said, face lifting from Steve’s neck enough to pin him with a glare.

“She used my whole name.” Bucky said, a smirk on his lips which he pointed Steve’s direction.

That was one thing Bucky’d come to love and expect from Darcy: when things were heavy, when the weight of it all was too much, Darcy Lewis would say something with enough humor and enough energy to defuse the situation. She brought a levity to his and Steve’s lives that he hadn’t realized they’d been missing.

“Best not to make her angry,” Steve conceded, grinning knowingly at Bucky as he came to the other side of the bed.

After a few moments - and only two grimaces of pain as Steve moved quicker than he should have - the three of them were all in the little hospital bed, a warm pile of limbs and breath. Darcy grinned across Steve’s chest at Bucky, unashamed of the tears that were still leaking from the corner of her eyes.

“They need bigger beds,” she said, carefully shifting so she could have the whole line of her body pressed against Steve’s, holding Bucky’s hand on Steve’s chest. “I mean, what if the Hulk needed to be in one of these? There has to be Hulk-sized beds somewhere.”
“I’m hoping I’m not in here long enough to have it be an issue,” Steve said, fingers from one hand sifting through Darcy’s hair over and over again.

Bucky pressed his lips to Steve’s shoulder. “At least a couple more days, just to be safe,” he said, “then you’ll be free.”

Darcy nodded. “The med ward’s not my favorite, either, but better safe than sorry.”

Steve hummed, not agreeing but acknowledging that he had some time before he’d be cleared to leave. For the second time in less than six months, he’d seen death staring him in the face, and for the second time in less than six months, he’d gotten lucky. No, he corrected himself. It wasn’t luck. Whatever it was - fate, the universe, a higher power - Steve was taking the experience and learning. “We’ll have to find a bigger bed.”

“Right!?” Darcy said, shaking her head sadly, “what kind of med ward doesn’t have a bed big enough for someone on the team? Think we can have Tony requisition one? I’m sure Bruce would appreciate it. I’ll ask him.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, pressing his lips to Darcy’s temple, “but I meant for our room.”

Darcy craned her neck so she could give Steve a look of confusion. “You need a big bed in your room for the Hulk?”

“Not for the Hulk, Darce,” Bucky said with a grin, watching when the realization dawned on her face. The way her hazel eyes lit up with understanding only made his expression brighten.

“Oh!”

At her sound of surprise, Steve frowned, a thread of uncertainty lacing his words. “I’m sorry, I don’t want to presume -”

Darcy propped herself up on her elbow, giving Steve wide eyes. “No! It makes sense -”

“- don’t want to assume you’d want -”

“- obviously want it, too, but -”

“- I think it’d be better -”

“- Yes. Me, too. Yes.”

“Okay.”

Bucky’s grey eyes were lit with amusement, watching the two people he loved dance around each other, his chest heavy with happiness. How they both managed to be bashful and shy after all this time filled his heart and, not for the first time, Bucky wondered what he’d done in a past life to earn them, considering the horrible things he’d done in this life. “Do I get an opinion?”

“Of course,” Steve said.

“Absolutely not,” Darcy said with feeling, though her eyes sparkled with mirth when he glared at her.

“I guess I’m okay with it,” Bucky said with a small shrug, enjoying the look that Darcy leveled at him.
Heart threatening to beat out of her chest, Darcy snuggled further into Steve’s side. “I’ve got one question, though.”

“Oh?” Steve asked, his eyes closed, a grin on his face.

“Who gets to be the big big spoon?”

Bucky reached out and brushed a lock of hair from Darcy’s forehead, seeing the grin that curled her lips. “I think we’re equal opportunity spooners.”

“Sometimes it’s nice being the little spoon,” Steve added, tightening his hold on them, “depends on the day.”

“I’m just trying to imagine myself being the big spoon to either of you, and I’m not sure if it’s physically possible.”

“Won’t know until we try.”

Darcy grinned at Steve’s words, a repeat of something she’d said to him when they’d been in the hotel room, before he’d slotted himself against her, feeling so perfect and right that it’d felt meant to be. “Guess not.”

The room went quiet, the three of them breathing, taking warmth, happy with the decision they’d just made. There would be more things to work out, a multitude of decisions and problems to sort through, but that was for later, once the relief had faded. Steve’s eyes stayed closed, and the small, satisfied smile that curled his lips appeared to be staying there permanently.

Before the black had taken Steve in Wakanda, he’d thought that, no matter what happened to him, he was glad that Bucky and Darcy would still have each other. Now? As he accepted their happiness and felt the coil of it in his own body, he was just glad he’d been wrong, that he was still here, and that he’d get a chance to say the things he hadn’t gotten to before.

“How long do you think we have until -”

The answer to Bucky’s question arrived as a flood of people pushed their way into the room. Grinning softly, both Bucky and Darcy slid from the bed, watching as their friends surrounded Steve and filled the room with the sounds of their relief.
Chapter Summary

Steve focuses on getting healthy and being sprung from the medical ward while Darcy is given a crash course in what being on the Active Roster really means.

Chapter Notes

Holy f*ck it's friggin' 2018!
BLACK PANTHER!
AWESOMECON!
INFINITY WARS!
I don't know if my Marvel-Loving heart can take it!
We're back on our normal Wednesday posting schedule, so here is it!

P.S. - *sing songs* Shamless self promotion!
Me and my Writing Wife posted a thing! It was, originally, a story for the Stucky Big Bang, but we had a little bit of Plot Creep and the story went WAY outside the lines (We started it as WinterShieldShock, parred it down in size and scope and that's what we posted) but now we've edited the first part (OF AT LEAST THREE!) and you can find that bit of wording right here: The Great Design Unfinished
It's a Covenant!AU with magic and fun and serial killers and porn, oh my! If you would be so kind and are looking to bite into a series that will end up at 200K words or more, it's all there for your enjoyment!

My wisdom comes from experience.
My passion comes from pain.
My confidence hides my insecurities.
My weakness makes me stronger.
My past does not define me.
My strength is an illusion.
My calm hides a storm.
My innocence is not ignorance.
“You’re pushing yourself too hard,” Natasha said with a frown. “If you pull your stitches…”

“I pulled them out last night.” When Natasha leaned heavily on her quarterstaff and leveled a glare in his direction, Steve ran his hand over his upper arm, feeling the stretch of skin. He could still feel the ghost of the alien’s teeth as its jaw had locked, the hum as the limb had gone numb. He lifted the arm and moved it in a circle, making the muscles work. “My skin was healing over them, Nat, it’s almost closed anyway.”

Rolling her eyes, Natasha took a step back and bent low, stretching her calf muscles. “I know it’s hard to accept you’re not ready to get back out there, but you’ll do more harm than good if you go out there at less than one-hundred percent.”

“We’re almost never at a hundred percent.”

One of Natasha’s shoulders lifted gracefully as she straightened. “True, but it’s still not ideal. Hill’s taking this pretty seriously. If you want to get out there and hunt these guys down, you have to prove to her you’re good.”

There was nothing Steve wanted more than to find the creatures that’d attacked Wakanda and make them face justice. He wasn’t sure what that would look like, exactly, but that wasn’t on him. His only goal was to get healthy, find them, and bring them in. Everything else was beyond his control.

“Come at me again.”

Natasha’s face cleared of anything, her hands tightening on the staff the only indication before she leapt toward Steve. She pushed him around the mat, making him strain, watching his face for any hint of grimace or pain. It was there - in the stretch of his arm, his back when he bent too low, his chest when she hit hard enough - he was doing a good job shielding, and if he were trying to fool anybody else it might have worked.

To Natasha, who’d worked with Steve so much in the past few years, it was as clear as crystal.

“Damn it,” Steve growled at himself, pulling back from a rather vicious knee to the ribs. He walked barefoot along the edge of the mat, breathing heavily, still feeling the ache in his side. He glared up at Natasha as he paced but she appeared unaffected by the dark expression.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” Both Steve and Natasha turned toward the voice, watching as Tony strode toward them, a large bag slung over his shoulder.

“Just taking this centenarian through his paces,” Natasha said, padding to where she’d thrown her towel. “You need something?”

“Just a chat with Cap. But only if you’re finished with him, of course.”

The corner of Natasha’s mouth quirked up at his words and the wave of Tony’s hand in her direction. “I don’t know, Steve,” she said, green eyes sliding to her sparring partner, “am I done with you yet?”

“Yeah, Romanoff,” Steve answered with a small, tight smile, “you’re done with me for the day.”

“Same time tomorrow?” At Steve’s nod, Natasha grabbed her things and headed toward the locker room, squeezing Tony’s shoulder as she passed.

As the doors hushed shut behind her, Tony took a step closer. “Looks like you’re bouncing right back.”
“Does it?”

“No, but that’s what you wanted to hear, right? A little birdy told me you’re itching to get sprung from the med ward. It’s funny, I vividly remember someone else fighting that isolation but being told it was ‘for their own good.’”

Steve frowned at Tony, well aware the engineer was talking about Darcy and how Steve’d insisted she stay in the ward until they were certain she wouldn’t hurt anyone. He didn’t appreciate the comparison, though he couldn’t really argue with Tony’s point. “I’ve never been really good at following doctors orders.”

“How?” Tony hummed, dropping the bag on the mat by his side, “what a contradictory character flaw.”

Shaking his head, Steve grabbed the hem of his shirt and lifted it to wipe at his brow. “There something I can help you with?”

Tony moved closer, dragging the bag across the mat. “Just returning something to you. Wasn’t sure if you knew you were missing her. She’s a little beat up, but T’challa and his people were kind enough to give me the means to set her right.”

Steve watched as Tony pulled the red, white and blue circular shield from the bag. The last memory Steve had of it was watching the creature’s fingers dent into the metal before it was lodged into the brick side of a building. As he carefully took it from Tony’s hands, Steve realized it’d been worked on; the familiar scratches and divots were still there, but they’d hammered out the dents the alien had caused.

“I wasn’t sure…”

He trailed off, looking down at the symbol. He’d dedicated his life to this shield, to the name of Captain America, and to the very real responsibility he felt for keeping people safe. When it had failed to keep him safe, he’d felt… betrayal was a stronger word than the emotion that had settled in his chest, but it was close. He’d spent so much time behind the shield that it had become a part of his identity.

…but maybe that was wrong. He wasn’t just the shield, or Captain America, or some ancient bastion of justice that was immune to exhaustion. Something had shifted in how he viewed himself in the past few months. Steve saw himself as deserving… more. The shield, after keeping so many others safe, had left him bereft and vulnerable. He’d been inches away from death and it wasn’t the super serum running through his veins, or the suit and kevlar he wore, not even the emblem that he’d been given.

It’d been Tony, the man looking at him with a calculated expression. The blast from Tony had sent his would-be killer flying, stopping the creature’s assault and no doubt saving his life. At the end of the day, Tony had been his shield. Unbidden, a memory climbed to the forefront of Steve’s mind.

*That shield doesn’t belong to you*, Tony had said, bloodied and left prone on the ground, the light from the arc reactor on his chest dimmed by the beating it’d received. *You don’t deserve it.* And then, with more feeling: *My father made that shield!*

Steve could feel the ache of that fight in his chest, the heft of the words as they’d been shouted at his back, while he’d been cradling a broken Bucky against his side. Steve’d turned his back on his teammate, regardless of what had happened between them, and he’d let the shield drop, leaving it there with Tony in the cold, Siberian air.
The shield had appeared near his door one morning, after they’d realized they couldn’t fight Thanos and win unless they were united. The weight of the shield - not the actual weight of the metal, but the weight of what it meant, and the weight of who was giving it back to him - made Steve’s chest ache. “Tony -”

“I mean, if you’re picky you can give her back and I can fix the little scratches and what not, make her like new. I kinda like the weathered look myself, but I know my tastes and yours are different. I’ve been told I can be rather ostentatious.”

Steve’s lips slanted with amusement, Tony apparently content to let whatever gratitude Steve felt go unvoiced. “I’ve got no idea why anyone would think that about you, Stark.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Tony said, head nodding in the shield’s direction. “I’ve been thinking of putting a tracker in her, so you don’t lose her again. She’s an heirloom, after all. Kinda like you.”

As Tony trailed off, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his slacks, Steve held him in his gaze, trying to suss out the other man’s expression. He and Tony failed to see eye-to-eye on a great many things, but it’d become clearer and clearer that they both cared for their team in untold, silent ways. It was never easy, having two leaders with sometimes warring views on how to run things, but at the end of the day, they both thought of the other as family.

“Thank you, for making sure I got it back.”

“Her,” Tony corrected Steve, seeing the blond look down at his feet with a smile curling his lips. “Don’t worry about it, Rogers. I’ll just say…”

Steve looked up, once again trying to decipher the look and quiet hesitation in the other man’s face. He could see the fight inside Tony, like he wasn’t sure if he should say what he was about to.

“... you should take care of your important… the important things,” Tony finally managed, his eyes sharpening when they looked up at Steve, whiskey-colored gaze holding cerulean.

It didn’t take nine PhDs to know that Tony wasn’t talking about the shield or any of Steve’s other equipment. He’d heard the disfavor in the engineer's use of the word things, certain that wasn’t the choice he’d have preferred, but Tony didn’t do anything halfway, and that included seeing a thinly veiled allegory to completion.

“I’m going to do my best.” Steve held Tony’s eyes for a few quiet, comfortable moments before something seemed to satisfy the other man and he broke the silence, gesturing to the shield with his hands.

“So, are you going to give her back, or…?”

“No, no, you’re right. I like her a little weathered.”

Tony snorted. “Well alright. Look at us, agreeing about something. Who’d a thunk it?”

Steve hummed in agreement, reacquainting himself with the weight of the shield, seeing if the dents had effected it. It didn’t appear so, and when he looked back up at Tony to tell him they’d done a good job, the billionaire was already pushing through the doors to the gym, leaving Steve in the silent room alone.
“There’s a difference between being brave and being stupid, you know that right?”

The sound that tore itself from Darcy’s chest was dripping with righteous indignation. “Oh, really, Buck? Really? You’re going to lecture me on what’s stupid? Did you forget the whole ‘grabbed a glowing gem for shits and giggles’ schtick I’ve got going on? We’re way past the ‘don’t be stupid’ lecture. Miles away. I waved at that point as we passed it going a hundred miles an hour.”

Bucky shook his head at her side, a small grin curling his lips. “Not a lecture, doll, I promise. I just don’t want you to feel pressured into doing something you’ll regret. I know us leaving on missions is hard, even worse when we get hurt, but that doesn’t mean you have to be out there with us. There are other ways to help.”

Darcy sighed. “That’s not… did it suck, not knowing if you guys were okay? Seeing Steve hurt so badly? Yes, it fucking sucked and I’ll always wish I was at your side, but…” she lowered her voice as they passed by a gaggle of soldiers, each of them nodding in Bucky’s direction. “There’s got to be some reason I have this mutation, right? The things I can do are terrifying and feel so big, but I have to believe it’s meant for something good.”

“Even if you’d been out there with us, I don’t know if it’d have made any difference,” Bucky said, eyes sliding toward her, watching the determination set in lines on her face. He knew, better than anyone, just how stubborn Darcy could be when she made up her mind about something. He wasn’t trying to talk her out of it, not really. He knew better.

It didn’t change the fact that thinking of her in danger made the blood in his veins run cold, constricting his heart with the endless amount of possibilities where she ended up hurt or worse. His chest had been tight since they’d returned, his body holding onto the tension that’d built, not wanting to let it resolve on its own. He pushed it aside, needing to be there for Darcy and Steve, but seeing that determination in her eyes made his tongue thicken with fear.

“It’s not about last time. It’s about next time. I’ve got no reason to do any less than you and Steve.”

Bucky’s arm lifted, his fingers wrapping around her upper arm softly, stopping her forward momentum. His grey eyes were focused intently on her face, a ghost of a memory flashing through his mind. “What?”

Darcy looked down at their feet, her shoulders falling slightly. “I can’t be useless anymore, Buck. I couldn’t help in New Mexico. I couldn’t help in New York. But now? I don’t know how to sit on the side of a battle anymore and just watch when I know I can help.”

The sound of emotion in Darcy’s voice softened his eyes and Bucky tugged until he could wrap his arms around her shoulders. He pressed his lips to her temple and held on tight, rocking slowly from side to side. “I know, love,” he said, resting his chin on the crown of her head, “I’ve got experience dealing with someone who feels they have to rush into battle.”

“I’m not rushing,” Darcy murmured against his chest, “I’m walking forward very carefully, like sneaking out after curfew. Don’t want any floorboards to squeak.”

Rolling his eyes, Bucky pulled back, running his hands up and down her arms as he gave her a soft smile. “It didn’t work great that one time.”

“See? Bringing up that one time wasn’t brave but monumentally stupid of you.” Her eyes widened
for effect, though her lips twitched when he didn’t look the slightest bit guilty. “Like Tony said, we do baby steps. I’ll be in the debrief with everyone today, see what the plans are, then start working harder on my control, step up my training with Clint.”

Bucky was aware of her segue and didn’t fight her on it, continuing their path down the hall. “How’s that going, by the way?” He already knew the answer, of course, having cornered Barton in the hallway and demanded he be updated on her progress, but Darcy didn’t need to know that.

“Better. I think I’m getting better.”

Darcy let out a startled squeak when the toe of her sneaker scuffed along the floor, arms cartwheeling as she began to fall. Luckily, Bucky’s reflexes were quicker, and he managed to keep her from falling, fingers wrapping around her upper arm again. She looked over at him with wide eyes. “Okay. Maybe I need to work on my coordination a bit more.”

“I think that’d be a good idea.”

To say that Darcy was nervous would be an understatement. As she sat around the large conference table, the room filled to the brim with Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D agents, she couldn’t help the anxious dance her leg was making under the table. When Steve’s hand reached out and rested on her knee, she turned her eyes toward him, knowing they were a bit wider than normal.

Steve gave Darcy an encouraging smile. He’d found out early on that she fidgeted as a release for the nervous energy she had inside. Her fingers would tap on a table, her leg would bounce in a frantic rhythm, she’d bite her lip; all of them were impossibly endearing.

He could admit to himself that he had a bit of tension in his stomach, too. This was his first Coor meeting since he’d woken, able to feel heated gazes between his shoulders as people stared at him. He’d been able to convince the department head of the medical wing to let him attend, with the compromise that he’d return as soon as the meeting was over.

*The possible stress on your body could derail all the improvements you’ve made,* Dr. Gregory had said with a frown. Steve knew the rate of his healing was hard to predict, and that the doctor was just being cautious, but every night he spent in the med ward filled him with restless frustration. He had things he needed to do. This meeting would be the start of one of those things. The other…

Darcy’s head tilted a bit at the look on Steve’s face. She couldn’t decipher the thought behind his gorgeous blue eyes and raised an eyebrow at him. When all he did was squeeze her knee and turn back toward the front of the room, Darcy shared a look with Bucky over the blond’s shoulder.

Bucky had always hated these meetings, much happier to be near the back, silent and observant, but neither he nor Darcy wanted to leave Steve’s side when they weren’t forced to, so he’d taken the seat on the blond’s left. The doctors weren’t letting him and Darcy stay the night in the room anymore now that Steve was awake, so their days revolved meeting for meals, walking the grounds (*it’s good for his endurance,* Darcy had told the doctors with a voice that begged them to argue with her), and trying not to feel bereft as they returned to their room without him each night.

The Coor briefing was just a reminder that the people who’d hurt Steve and who’d killed Masa were still out there. When Darcy gave him a questioning glance, her hazel eyes swinging toward Steve then back at him, Bucky gave her an almost imperceptible shrug. He knew Steve hated that he was still being held in the med ward, and that was a good enough reason for the tension that seemed to be
between the blond’s shoulder blades.

Darcy opened her mouth to ask Steve what was really wrong, but the door opened and Maria Hill stalked toward the front, everyone going quiet at her entrance. “Communications?” the director asked without preamble.

“All communication with Wakanda is online and functional. Mr. Stark has worked with Princess Shuri to ensure that there is a failsafe built into their systems so the same exploit cannot be used again.”

“Stark?”

Tony sat up when Maria turned toward him. “The EMP they used to take out their system is proprietary tech, recently filed with the patent office.”

“By who?”

“Stark Industries.”

When almost all the eyes in the room pinned him, Tony’s hand gestured vaguely in the air. “Ms. Potts assures me that she is running a full investigation to see how the plans were acquired. I’ll keep the team abreast of any more information.”

“Anything else to add on the comm front?”

“Mmm, yeah. We’ll be doing a full sweep on the compound and all personnel. It appears that someone with high level access relayed a message to this group and informed them when my A.I. powered down, and chose that moment to attack. So, pucker up, everyone, we’ve got a leak in house, too.”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose, as several people in the room fidgeted at that bit of information. Coupled with the information that Batroc had heard from someone on base that she and Bucky had shared memories, it was pretty clear a mole was hiding amongst them. Again, her mouth opened to speak, but when she felt Steve’s hand on her knee and saw him give her a small shake of his head, she sat back in her chair and said nothing.

“Got it. Training and team coordination?”

“We’re working on making a full roster of people who’ve been vetted and are willing to relocate to Wakanda for the short term while they continue to shore up their defenses,” Clint said, his voice clipped and serious, light years away from how he usually sounded. Darcy had never seen him in full agent mode, and she had to admit that it was impressive.

“Okay. Wilson?”

“These are photos from Wakandan security forces.” Sam stood, a clicker in his hand. “Two separate attacks, one in Birnin Zana, the capital city, the other in Mena Ngai.”

“Do we know why these two locations were chosen?”

Steve’s eyes flicked up to the face of the agent who’d asked the question, arms crossed over her chest, focus on her face. Natasha gave Bucky a raised brow, an expression as close to impressed as the spy could muster lighting in her green eyes. Steve glanced around the room: for most of the agents, this was the first real information on the African nation they’d ever received.
“Birnin Zana is the capital city. The royal palace and a vast majority of the people in Wakanda live there. Mena Ngai, also known as the Great Mound, is where their mines for vibranium are located.”

“Was this the real target?”

Sam shook his head, answering the agent’s question, “no, aside from the vibranium that was stolen from the satellite positioning device and server, the attack did not attempt to breach the mines.”

“So why attack at all?”

When Agent Unger’s question hung in the air, no one answering, a haze of tension descended heavier in the room. Darcy frowned, still not able to understand that bit either. Bucky had wondered it aloud over the past several days, the uncertainty of the attack not sitting well with him. She could tell it was the same with everyone else in the room, too.

She’d been so worried about Steve waking up and then healing that she hadn’t really given it much thought, especially since her single contribution was getting Batroc to talk, and that hadn’t amounted to much at all, either. Darcy had never been a good strategist, and she knew better than to assume she understood anything about the machinations of super villains.

“Casualty totals?”

Sam’s shoulders deflated a bit at Hill’s question. “One-hundred-three killed, four-hundred-sixty-two hurt and wounded in the capital. Forty-four killed, two-hundred-eighty hurt and wounded at the mines. Fifty-seven still unaccounted for between the two.”

Steve felt Bucky’s anger like it was something he could touch on his left side. When Bucky had told him about Dr. Chaas, Steve’d hated the look in his best friend’s eyes; it’d been so hard for him to open up to anyone after they’d brought him out of cryostasis. Masa Chaas was a great man, and a great doctor, and he’d managed to reach Bucky when so many others had failed. He could tell that Bucky wanted revenge, to hunt down and destroy the doctor’s killers, but Steve worried what it would do in the long run. They’d both lost so many people that it felt like the same story, over and over and over again.

“Next steps?”

“King T’Challa and his people are scouring their video surveillance, checking for anything that can be used to track how the force infiltrated and crossed their borders without being detected,” Natasha said, voice steady, “though we’re aware they’ve used portal devices in the past.”

When Tony’s hands twitched on the table, it drew Darcy’s eyes. She watched a darkness pass behind his glasses, saw his hand shake for a fraction of a second before he pulled them back and placed them out of view. She vaguely remembered a swirl of darkness on the edge of that final battlefield, the crackle of energy that sparked through the air before Thanos and his army began pouring out of the black void.

Even from the fringes, it’d been terrifying and had made her stomach clench in fear. Darcy supposed if she’d been right there like Tony, her hands would shake a bit at the mention of a portal, too.

“Batroc?”

“The prisoner has signed a plea deal that will allow him to be extradited to France instead of Wakanda. Per the Accords, he’ll be held without bail and has agreed to cooperate with every demand. Should he break the deal, he’ll be taken to Wakanda and face justice there.”
Maria closed the folder in front of her, eyes sweeping through the room, the weight of her stare heavy with purpose. “An attack on our ally is an attack on us. Whatever this force is after, we’re going to ensure they don’t get it. We’ll work on the ground, follow every lead. If you find something you think is important, pass it up the chain. Like Stark said, we’ve got a leak somewhere and we will find it and deal with it swiftly and efficiently. I’ll have individual assignments sent by end of day. Let’s get to work, people.”

When Hill made her way out of the room, no words needed to convey that the briefing was over, everyone seemed to follow suit, filing out of the room in waves. Once the additional soldiers and agents had cleared out, only the core members of the Avengers team remained. The atmosphere was tense, with good reason, and Darcy could feel it biting up and down her skin. She rubbed her hands along her jeans, giving Bucky a small smile when he looked over at her.

This was her first ‘coordination’ meeting and the bright and shiny had dimmed a little bit after realizing they were no closer to finding out what the evil sons of bitches had planned than they’d been before. Batroc didn’t know where they would have gone to, and he hadn’t known why they attacked Wakanda, only that it was for a specific reason. Which does absolutely fuck all, Darcy complained in her head, seeing that tension in the faces of the people surrounding the table. “Cool team meeting guys,” she said, needing to say something when she thought the silence had gone on for too long. “Thanks for letting me sit in on it.”

She studiously ignored the smug look that climbed onto Peter’s lips. This wasn’t his first time meeting with the others in an official Avenger capacity and it appeared he was rather happy having some kind of seniority over Darcy. When she turned and pinned him with a glare, his smirk faded slightly but didn’t disappear completely.

“Was it everything you’d hope it would be, Lewis?” Clint asked, sitting back in his chair and putting both hands behind his head.

“Everything and more, Barton,” she answered easily, giving him a wide, shit-eating grin, “thanks for asking.”

“Did you want to open your present?”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose at Tony’s question. “Present?”

“You left this in Cap’s hospital room,” he said, pulling a silver briefcase out from under the table. “Julie in environmental services returned it to me.”

Bucky frowned, sitting forward in his chair. “Why’d she return it to you?”

Silently, Tony turned the case over so everyone could see the large Property Of Stark Industries on the bottom.

“What is it?” Natasha asked, though the tone of her voice said she had a pretty good idea what it was, especially since Clint had relayed that bit of information with glee the night after he dragged Darcy from Steve’s bedside and forced her out for a run.

“For the newest member of the team. Well, prospective new team member, barring a physical, psychological evaluation, combat training preparedness test, eye exam, lengthy paperwork, a meeting with the lawyers to sign NDAs and DNRs -”

“Tony?”
Accepting Steve’s expectant gaze, Tony slid the case across the table toward Darcy. “Mazel Tov.”

Grinning with excitement, Darcy rose to her feet and flipped open the latches on the case, lifting the top. A look of surprise lit her face, which quickly turned dark and stormy. Darcy looked up at Tony, hazel eyes narrowing. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Tony feigned an aghast look, bringing a hand to press to his chest. “What do you mean? I slaved over that design for hours, cupcake. Hours.”

Her expression didn’t change. “You’re a fucking asshole, you know that? Hey, Big Guy, punch him in the arm for me?”

Tony yelled when Thor’s fist lashed out immediately and without hesitation. The blond looked over at the smaller man with a dazzling smile on his face, unperturbed by the glare the billionaire was directing at him. Turning back to Darcy, Thor leaned on the table. “If the armor he created for you is inadequate, I can reach out to someone in Asgard…”

Uncaring that all the eyes in the room had swung to look at her with expectation, Darcy pulled the fabric from the fancy silver briefcase and held it against her body.

It was a white t-shirt, much like the Fruit-of-the-Loom undershirts she greatly enjoyed Steve and Bucky stuffing themselves into. Except this one had three words on the front in large, black block letters.

World’s Okayest Intern

The noises in the room were split pretty evenly down the middle, half laughing and half making unintelligible exasperated noises in Tony’s direction. When Bucky and Steve hid their grins behind their hands, Darcy turned her glare from Tony to them. “Et tu, boys? Betrayal.”

“Darcy,” laugh, “you have to,” laugh, “you gotta admit,” laugh, “it’s pretty fucking funny.”

Darcy’s eyes widened a bit at Clint who was making no effort to hide his obvious joy at this turn of events. “Oh yeah, Barton? Think this is funny, do you?”

“It’s not his fault, Darcy,” Tony said, sitting back in his chair, still rubbing his arm where Thor had punched him, “some people’s senses of humor are just better than others.”

“I’m going to murder you in your sleep,” Darcy said, balling up the t-shirt and throwing it at Tony. When it hit him in the face, the room erupted in laughter again, this time everyone joining in. Darcy sat back down, pushing the case away from her with a smile.

It was good, after everything, to hear the team laugh. They’d just got done outlining their mission to hunt down the creatures who were responsible for so much death and chaos, and it felt good to laugh, to get a brief respite from the horrible possibilities that lay ahead. Even if it’d been at her expense, Darcy was glad the tension in the room had been broken.

“Press the left latch three times to the right,” Tony said loud enough for Darcy to hear, the rest of the room trying to explain to Thor what an NDA was.

Taking a few more seconds to glare in Tony’s direction, Darcy followed his instructions, hearing a secondary lock open, watching as a secret compartment revealed itself. She lifted the top, this time her eyebrows raising in honest, impressed surprise. “This is…”

Darcy ran her fingers over the fabric. It was lightweight but armored, like Steve’s suit. The black was
so complete, almost blending into the case, but in the light she could see a shimmer of gold stitching throughout, rippling over in a sheen of color.

“This is actually Mark VII. I replaced the one I had in there before. Shuri helped me a little with the materials while we were visiting. When I explained who it was for… let’s just say that Wakanda expresses their gratitude for knocking off Thanos in a clean, efficient, and expedited manner.”

She looked up at Tony. Slowly, a smile climbed its way onto her lips, followed quickly by shoulders shaking as she began to giggle. The first snort was loud and she clapped her hands over her mouth when everyone turned to look at her.

Clint’s eyebrow rose toward his hairline. “Stark, I think you broke her.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised it took you this long,” Natasha said with a small smirk, sharing a warm look with Clint across the table.

“It’s just… the Black Panther. *Black Panther* helped you make me a cat suit.” She devolved into another set of giggles, hearing Bucky and Steve chuckling at her side.

Sam’s hand shot in her direction, turning his amused eyes toward Steve. “See?! I’m not the only one who wonders about the cat thing!”

“I wouldn’t call it a cat suit,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes, once it seemed Darcy had started to collect herself. “This is what you wear *under*… whatever it is that you want to wear. Cargo pants? Cargo shorts? Cargo boots? Whatever. That’s not important. What is important is that Parker and I made it as strong as possible.”

Darcy’s eyes lit up with a jolt, shock clear as her mouth dropped open. “All that data I was collecting for you guys? The tensile strength, and combustion studies, and alloy vibrations… That was for this? But I’ve been working on that since the beginning!”

Tony’s shoulder shrugged. “This was me paying it forward. Or getting paid back by having to work with you. Forget it. At least now, if you’re going to go out there, we won’t have to worry about you. Worry less. We’ll worry *less* about you.” Darcy watched Tony grow more and more uncomfortable as she stared at him in silence, finally gesturing at her with frustration. “Hello? What’s this? What’s happening?”

Her grin widened. “Buck, you remember that thing I said before?”

“I forget, Darce,” Bucky said, small smirk turning his lips, knowing where this was headed. “What was it?”

“Oh! I remember now! This nerd *likes* me!” The unamused look on Tony’s face only made it all the sweeter. “You see him? Worried about my well-being and what not! It’s adorable. You see it, Big Guy?”

Thor nodded earnestly. “It *does* appear he carries an affection for you, Lady Darcy.”

“You know what? I’ve got real work to do.” Most of the room made sad noises as Tony stood from the table and made his way toward the door.

“Stark! Hey! Stark! Where’s *my* new suit? Stark?!” Clint yelled at Tony’s back as he pushed through the door, “I thought we were friends, man!” He turned back to the remaining people in the room, shaking his head forlornly. “If you give someone a treat you should make sure you have enough for the whole class. That’s school basics 101.”
Mouth still lifted in a smile, Darcy looked at the people that remained. “Who wants to shoot at me and see if this thing actually works, eh?” When everyone shook their head and gathered their things, Darcy sat back in her seat with a sigh.

Eventually, the only people left in the room were Darcy, Steve, and Bucky. Closing the top of the case, she spun her seat so she could see both of them, leaning on her elbow, chin in hand. “So are these meetings always that cheerful?” When Bucky’s lips twitched upward, Darcy accepted it as a badge of honor that she’d been able to make him smile, even after all the darkness they’d just waded through in the briefing.

“No,” Bucky said with a shake of his head, reaching out to grip Steve’s shoulder, “sometimes they’re worse.”

Darcy snorted, not sure how it could get much worse than ‘people died and we have no idea why.’ “So what’s our next step? Good ol’ detective work? I’ll have to dig out my comically large magnifying glass and a trench coat. The tan one. My black one is for more… fun occasions.”

When Bucky looked over at her with a smirk, Darcy felt a matching one start to turn her lips, but she stopped when she saw the look of seriousness on Steve’s face. “Steve? You okay? You tired? Need us to take you back?”

Steve blinked, tearing his eyes away from the silver case on the table, gaze flicking to Darcy and the worried expression she wore on her face. “You almost died trying to get to Nat and Clint.”

Sitting back in her chair, Darcy’s breath huffed out of her. This was definitely not where she’d expected this conversation to go and she felt a little bit of whiplash as she tried to organize her jumbled thoughts. “I didn’t… I didn’t know what else to do. You guys were in danger -”

“No,” Steve said with a shake of his head, “that’s not -”

“Because from where I’m sitting, you got pretty close to dead that day, too.” Her words were a little more defensive than she wanted them to sound, but she couldn’t help it with the way he was looking at her. Like she was fragile. Like she was made of glass. “Buck, help me out here.”

Bucky shook his head. “You’re both…” When both Steve and Darcy looked at him with dual confused expressions, he found himself unable to sit any longer, climbing to his feet and pacing the length of the table. The tightness he’d been carrying returned to his chest as he peered at both of them. “Did either of you stop to think what would have happened if you’d both died?”

The gravity of his question pressed down on both Darcy and Steve, neither one able to look at him, and Bucky crossed his arms over his chest. “My entire life has been a battle, in one way or another, so I understand duty and responsibility. I would never ask either of you to stop doing something you believe in, but if I lost either of you…"

Unsaid words hung in the air as Bucky leaned his hip against the table. Steve’s mind flashed back to those last moments before the darkness had dragged him down. He’d thought of Bucky, and Darcy, and how he was glad that if he died, they’d at least they’d have each other. Thinking of Bucky’s words, realizing there’d been the very real possibility that he might have lost both of them in one fell swoop… it pained Steve to even think about.

“Are you asking me to not to do this, Steve?”
Steve’s cerulean gaze flicked up to Darcy, seeing the carefully guarded look on her face. It was hard to imagine that a little over three weeks ago they’d been in that hotel room, both grieving people but finding comfort and strength in the other’s presence. It seemed like so much longer, like oceans of time had passed, and as he looked at Darcy, he couldn’t help the small smile that turned his lips. “No, I would never ask you to stop doing something just because it frightened me.”

Darcy watched the truth of his statement pass over his face, seeing the fear - fear for her - in the depths of Steve’s eyes. She nodded, looking down at her hands, smiling softly. “Good, I’m glad we don’t have to have that fight. It would have been ugly as fuck.”

Mouth quirking up at her words, Steve reached out and grabbed her hand in his. “You remember what you made me promise before I left?”

Darcy glanced up at him, smiling softly. “That you’d be safe and come back to me if you could,” she answered, staring into his cerulean.

“Think you can keep that promise to us, too?”

It took Darcy everything she had not to immediately say ‘yes,’ if only to help that look on fear drain from his eyes. She knew better than that now, though, not after what had happened over the past three weeks.

“I promise I’ll do my best to not be stupid, and I promise to do everything I can to come home to you, every time.” She paused, frowning softly. “But I also promise that I have no plans to jump in the middle of everything. I’m more of a ‘hang on the fringe directing traffic’ kind of person, anyway. Low key dangerous, that’s my sweet spot.”

He heard Bucky snort behind him, and Steve felt a smile climb onto his lips. “I suppose that’s the most I can ask for.”

“Oh, no, you can definitely ask for more. I kinda have a weakness for super soldiers, not sure if you’d figured that out yet.” When she saw both of their smiles, Darcy couldn’t help but wear a matching expression, her heart flipping in her chest.

Bucky sighed, pushing away from the table. “Alright, punk, let’s get you back to the med ward before they send a search team and add an extra week onto your sentence.”

Darcy watched the sigh that lifted and dropped Steve’s shoulders. She closed the distance between their bodies, legs fitting between his knees, his eyes lighting with surprise as they looked up at her. She laid her hands on his shoulders and bent so she could press her lips to his.

Steve felt his body go quiet, all his frustrations pushed to the side as he focused on the feel of her mouth against his, her hands warm on the skin of his neck as her fingers slid and gripped the hairs at his nape, melting a bit against his body. His hands lifted to hold her waist, wanting to keep her close, wanting her to linger, to draw it out just a little bit longer. When she pulled back, he blinked up at her, feeling heat and desire pinkening his cheeks.

“Alright, handsome. Now you can go.”
At Second Sight

Chapter Summary

Darcy frets about moving in with her boys, Vision proposes a solution, and Steve experiences quite the homecoming.

Chapter Notes

I know the last chapter was a bit heavy (for me, too! *breathes into paper bag*) but the next few chapters are much lighter. Not all good things last forever (and it's the MCU so almost NOTHING lasts forever), but I can say that the next few chapters are some of my favorites. And looooooong, so yay! More words!

As always, all the comments and kudos brighten my days! If you see a sunray shining in the distance, it's me flashing a goofy ass grin into the sky! <3

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There’s a Japanese phrase that I like: koi no yokan.

*It doesn’t mean love at first sight.*

*It’s closer to love at second sight.*

*It’s the feeling when you meet someone that you’re going to fall in love with.*

*Maybe you don’t love them right away, but it’s inevitable that you will.*

- The Sun is Also a Star - Nicola Yoon

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“Thurd mehd wochted termeve ib?”

Bucky, glanced over at the door to the bathroom, brows raising in question at the garbled voice that had emanated from inside. “Come again?”

Growling, Darcy finished brushing her teeth and spat into the sink, sticking her head out to look at Bucky, who was already in bed and reading. “Should I have waited to move some of my stuff in here? I should have waited, right? I should have waited.”

Bucky cast his grey eyes around the room, trying to look for any signs of the woman in the space. “Darcy, you’ve only got your pillow, glasses, and a toothbrush in this room. People in a hotel have moved in more than you have in here. It’s fine. Besides, Steve was the one who suggested it,
Looking at herself in the mirror as she swished her mouthwash, Darcy wasn’t exactly calmed by Bucky’s words. She ran her hand under the faucet and rinsed before drying her hands on the towel and flicking off the light. “But he’s not here, and I know we all agreed it was a good idea -"

“It is a good idea.”

“- but i don’t want him to get home and -”

“Darcy, come here.”

Tossing the paperback onto his night stand, Bucky turned the full weight of his attention to Darcy. She’d been flitting around the space for days, like she was afraid to touch anything, as if worried Steve was going to be upset to find her fingerprints on his things. When Darcy hesitated, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, an uncertain and vulnerable look on her face, Bucky flipped back the covers and held out his arms to her. “Now. Get over here.”

With a sigh, Darcy crossed the floor and crawled onto the bed, maneuvering the sheets until she was beneath them. They both shifted, trying to get comfortable. Darcy ended up resting her cheek on Bucky’s prosthetic bicep, feeling the cool metal against her skin. When she’d realized he shied away from touching her with it, she’d made a point to show him it didn’t bother her in the slightest, choosing it when given the option, watching each brush chase a bit of the darkness away from his eyes.

“I know it’s stupid.” When Bucky didn’t say anything, Darcy frowned. “This is usually the part where you say ‘No, Darcy, my precious doll, it’s not stupid’ and then I’d feel better.”

Bucky snorted at the glare she gave him when he let the silence hang in the air for longer than she wanted it to. “But Darcy, my precious doll, it is stupid.” He watched the righteous indignation cross her features, reaching out to press his palm to her cheek, pausing the words that had been about to spill past her lips. “You’re worrying about nothing, just because you’re used to worrying.”

“You know, before I met you and Mr. Fourth of July Fireworks, I was basically worry-free.” She frowned at the slow raise of Bucky’s eyebrow in her direction. “What? It’s true!”

“Giant robots with death rays and Norse gods. Dark Elves and world ending black monoliths. Making sure scientists ate at least once a day, showered at least three times a week. You never worried about any of that?”

A defiant look lit Darcy’s eyes at the tone in his voice, suddenly not wanting to give him an inch. “Not a bit.”

“Did you know that when you lie, your forehead wrinkles right here?” He laughed when she swatted his hand away, pulling her closer and holding her against him when she struggled half-heartedly. After a few seconds, Darcy heaved a large sigh and settled against Bucky’s chest, burrowing against him for comfort, twining her legs with his. “You couldn’t have just lied to me?” she asked, voice low, lips mumbling against his neck.

Bucky shook his head, pressing his lips to her hair. “We don’t lie to each other.”

“Even if it’d make me feel better?”

He snorted. “Especially if it’d make you feel better.”
Darcy’s lips pulled downward. “That’s pretty shitty.”

“You have this habit of doubting if people are being honest with you, mostly because people you trusted in the past to tell you the truth lied to you instead. I’m not gonna to do that. You’ll never have to doubt I’m telling the truth because I will never lie to you. Even when you want me to. So when I tell you that everything is going to be fine, you should trust me.”

She could taste the truth of his words and, even if right then it was annoying, Darcy knew that she’d begin to rely on his truth in the coming months. She was going to need someone to give it to her straight, especially once she started training harder in order to get cleared for missions. If she wasn’t ready someone would need to tell her, and she knew Bucky would be that person for her (even when she didn’t want him to be).

“There’s a flaw in your logic,” she breathed against his skin. “You tell me that everything is going to be fine. In reality, you’re being truthful because you believe everything is going to be fine, which is not the same as everything actually turning out fine. Anyone can tell the truth if they believe it enough. Remember that kid in that place on 7th? The one who swore she was the lost princess Anastasia? If you gave her a lie detector, she’d have passed it. Still doesn’t make her a princess.”

Bucky’s eyes had fallen closed as she began rambling, recognizing her nervous tendency to drown out her worries with words. Any other time, he’d be struck with happiness at the fact that he knew her so well, that she was lovingly predictable and adorable, but all he felt now was exasperation.

“You are deliberately making this harder and more stressful than it needs to be.”

“I know!” Darcy sat up with a growl of frustration, watching as Bucky rolled onto his back, slipping both hands beneath his head as he looked up at her. “I know this isn’t as bad as I’m making it, but the fact remains that you’ve only known me for less than a year, only a few months, really, and now I’ve inserted myself into your lives both figuratively and literally and maybe I’m a little overwhelmed that everything hasn’t blown up yet, okay?!?”

When her breath came out her nostrils in a pant, Bucky continued giving her same look until she rolled her eyes at herself and laid back down beside him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, feeling her snuggle into his side and settle after a few moments. “You alright now?”

“I don’t like… I don’t like sleeping without him.”

“I know. I don’t like it either.”

“But it’s dumb for me to think that because, technically, I’ve only slept beside him once.”

“And most of your life.”

Darcy heaved a large sigh, her breath warm on his neck. “Yeah, Buck, thanks, thanks for that, really.”

Bucky smiled, knowing she couldn’t see the expression. “Just shut your eyes, doll. The sooner you fall asleep, the sooner tomorrow comes.”

“And the closer we are to having him here.”

“Exactly.”
“JesusMotherFuck!” Darcy jumped, fists held up just like Clint had taught her, eyes wide as she looked at the person who’d appeared at her side in the hallway. She dropped her hands to her sides, letting her fingers unclench. “Don’t fucking do that!”

The man dipped his head in her direction, his voice apologetic. “I’m very sorry, Miss Lewis, it was not my intention to frighten you.”

Heart still thundering in her chest, Darcy nodded at the multi-colored form, a yellow gem glowing softly on his forehead. “It’s okay. I’m just a little jumpy lately.”

“Yes, there have been many reasons for your level of tension. I do not wish to add my presence to that list. My name is –“

“Vision. The Vision. Is it The Vision, or is just Vision okay?”

“You may call me whichever you find more comfortable.”

Darcy snorted to herself. When had beings with all-powerful stones animating them become her new level of comfort? “Alright,” she said with a nod in his direction, “Vision is it. And I know who you are. I’m surprised I haven’t seen you around before now.”

Vision nodded, falling into step beside her. “I was told that you’ve had a full transference of memories from Sergeant Barnes. The impetus of which is why I have not introduced myself to you before now.”

Darcy’s steps slowed and she turned toward Vision with a confused expression on her face. “Huh?”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, this,” he touched the gem on his forehead, “is what gives me life. I feared being near someone who is also tied to an infinity stone may prove to be… unpredictable.”

She nodded as she considered his words. Two stupidly powerful stones being in close proximity to each other might not be the best idea in the world. “Yeah, I could see that being an issue. But you’re not… you’re not feeling anything right now, are you? Hearing any voices?”

Vision turned to look at her, his head cocking to the side. “Voices?”

“Yes, mine…it has a voice. Yours doesn’t?”

“…not that I am aware of.”

“Well, fuck, I guess I’m the lucky one, right?” Sighing, Darcy took the next left, pushing through a set of double doors. “So, you were avoiding me and my super awesome stone powers. What changed?”

“Mr. Stark informed me of the neural dampener they are creating for you. I must admit, it’s a rather elegant solution for an inelegant problem.”

Darcy frowned, glancing over at him. “Those are pretty words for saying my mutant abilities need a leash because I could kill everything in the galaxy if I wished it.”

“I understand how that could be a heavy burden for one to carry on their shoulders.”
Snorting, Darcy looked over at him, trying not to stare at the beautiful glow of the stone on his face. “Yeah, well, if I could do it all over again…” She trailed off, shrugging her shoulders.

“Would you change how events transpired, were you given the opportunity?”

Her frown deepened. “No, that’s not… Realistically I know what I did was stupid, and reckless, and could have turned out much much worse than it did, but if I think about the alternative… no. I wouldn’t change it.”

“It is hard to give up what you’ve gained, despite the method in which it was obtained.”

Lips curling, she glanced over at him. His presence at her side was calming, soothing, and she couldn’t help but peer into his eyes, seeing what looked like mechanics behind his gaze. She knew what he was and where he’d come from, but it was still amazing to look at. “I guess you could say I’ve grown attached to certain outcomes.”

“And yet you seek to quell some of your abilities?”

She shook her head. “Not quell, per se, I just want more… control.”

“You wish to control a power that is unrivaled in the universe because you fear what you may do if you lose the ability to control it?”

Snorting again, Darcy blinked amused hazel eyes in his direction. “Uh, yeah, that’s about the gist of it.”

“That is the precise reason I’m here.”

“How so?” She paused in the hallway, looking at him with a curious expression. She felt like she was missing something, confused why he’d introduce himself after such a long time avoiding contact - and for a pretty damn good reason, if you asked her.

“Mr. Stark believes I can be of help. The plan for insertion of the dampener involves a surgical means of placement –“

“Yeah, brain surgery, not the most fun idea I’ve ever considered, but not the least, either.”

“Myself and Mr. Stark believe that the neural dampener deserves to be placed in a likewise elegant way. We believe I could place the dampener without requiring the use of a scalpel and without the risks that would accompany such a procedure.”

Darcy blinked at him. “What?”

“The stone I wield allows me to phase into and through solid objects. I could place the dampener in your brain. It would only take seconds, and -”

Her hands lifted, cutting off the flow of words from his mouth. “Whoa, whoa, hold up. You want to reach inside my head, and put something in my brain!”

“It would be better ag –“

“You want to reach inside my head and put something in my brain!?”

“I take it from your tone and the volume of your voice that you do not find this an acceptable course of action?”
Darcy took three steps away from him, shaking her head. The prospect of brain surgery wasn’t all that appealing in the first place, but the idea that an infinity stone-powered super being would phase into her brain and place a piece of science that had never been tested before was a whole new level of crazy.

Brain surgery.

From The Vision.

She frowned, her breath passing her lips sharply before she spun to face him. “You were the only who brought me here, right? After the final fight, after I’d gone all ‘grr’ and killed that son of a bitch. That’s what Jane said.”

Vision nodded. “After you destroyed Thanos, it was decided that you would need to be escorted to the compound using a… less traditional mode of transport.”

One of her eyebrows raised. “You mean you bamf’d me here instead of flying in the jet with everyone else.”

“I’m not particularly familiar with the verb bamf, but I brought you safely here, yes.”

“And obviously I got here in one piece, so that went okay.” Darcy’s eyebrows knit together as she considered what he was offering. No risk of infection, no needing to shave her head, little to no recovery time. Brain surgery without the surgery part. Her hazel gaze flicked up to pin him. “Tony thought of this?”

“He expressed concern that the risks associated with surgery were too great, as was the recovering time and possibility of human error. He is confident in the work and device they’ve developed, but I believe he fears for your well-being.”

Darcy laughed, shaking her head. “Don’t let him hear you say that, he likes to pretend he has no heart.”

“The shrapnel that threatened his life for years would argue against that narrative.”

“You say that as if Tony’s never been one to relish an argument.” When Vision simply nodded in her direction, Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, looking at him for a long moment, the hallway going quiet. Finally, her arm waved in his direction. “So you’d take the dampener, put it all up in my brain, then get out. No fuss, no muss, no coconuts?”

He hesitated, looking at her with a curious expression. “I believe I could place it without endangering your life and with minimal risk of harm, yes.”

“An elegant solution to an inelegant problem, eh?”

“That is our hope.”

Darcy looked down at the floor, considering her options. Did the idea of having someone mess around in her brain fill her with warm, fuzzy feelings? _Fuck_ no, and that was regardless of all the memories of Bucky being tortured and wiped. Darcy didn’t like the idea of anyone doing anything to her brain, but if it meant she could control these powers, make her less afraid to use them, to push them to the limits and _not_ worry about that fucking voice pulling her under… it was the only thing they’d been able to come up with, and it was her best shot.

“Are your hands steady? Can you promise I won’t wake up with a creole accent and believing I’m
the queen of France?”

“The French do not recognize an acting Queen, and there are currently at least four different men claiming the title of King.”

“Neat info, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“I believe it would be wrong to promise something when there are still variables, but I can conclude with ninety-nine-point-two percent certainty that you will not wake up speaking differently and believing that you are non-essential royalty.”

“‘Non-Essential Royalty’ would be a badass name for a band.” When Vision continued to look at her, Darcy’s brain rolled with her thoughts, weighing the pros and cons. “I’ll need time to consider it. I’ve got a lot going on right now, and until Steve is released, he’s my priority.”

“I understand, Miss Lewis. It is just an alternative for you to consider. Only you can decide what will work best, it was simply an idea. I will be available for you, whatever choice you make.”

“Okay. Cool.” When the silence in the hallway seemed to drag on, she gestured to him again as she started moving, looking over as he fell into step beside her. “It was nice to finally meet you, anyway. I like the color scheme you’ve got going on,” she said with a wave of her hand, “very... maroon-y.”

Vision looked down at himself then back up at her, a small smile curling his lips. “I find it visually appealing as well.”

“I’ve got a pair in my room, just hold - Oh!” Darcy’s eyes widened as she pulled open the door, almost walking straight into Steve, whose hand had been reaching for the knob. “Steve! Steve?”

She turned and yelled over her shoulder at the man who she’d left at the sink in the bathroom. “Fuck, Bucky! He broke out! We’ve got a fugitive on our hands!” Turning back to Steve, one corner of her mouth lifting up, Darcy made a tsk’ing noise with her tongue as she shook her head sadly from side to side. “You can’t just leave the hospital, handsome. Believe me, I tried that shit and it did not go over well at -”

Her words ended in a small sound of surprise when Steve’s arms wrapped around her waist and lifted her, spinning her backward into the room. Her laughter was a bit breathless as he grinned up at her, a bit of the stir-craziness fading from his eyes. Darcy slapped at his shoulders to put her down, though her voice was clearly amused as she gasped his name. It was easy to forget how strong he was until he was practically bench pressing her. “Steve!”

“I didn’t escape,” Steve said, setting her feet on the floor, heart beating quickly in his chest.

He’d been going mad, stuck in a room that he didn’t think he needed to be in any longer, and he’d finally had enough. He knew the doctors and nurses were just doing their jobs, and Steve respected them, but he also knew he was different than their usual patients. If someone looked at him today, they’d have no idea that less than a week ago he’d been covered in bruises and cuts, with several broken bones. Steve Rogers healed differently, healed better, and the specifics of his case had worked in his favor when they’d relented. “I was released.”

“Really?”
Steve turned toward Bucky at the other man’s question, watching as the dark-haired soldier leaned against the door to the bathroom, raising an eyebrow as he dried his hands on a towel. He could see the doubt in Bucky’s eyes, and his mouth turned up at the skepticism in his best friend’s expression. Bucky knew better than most that Steve was known to push against an answer he didn’t like, sometimes fine with ignoring the answer completely. “Yes, really,” he breathed, holding Bucky’s grey gaze, “I’m almost completely healed, no reason to keep me any longer.”

A little of the light dimmed in Darcy’s eyes. “They cleared you for duty already?”

Steve turned his attention back to Darcy, with her beautiful hazel eyes and full lips, and he was able to make out the small bit of disappointment in her voice. The longer he looked at her, the easier it was for him to see what she was trying so desperately to shield: fear. Darcy was afraid. Afraid of him going back out there and getting hurt again.

His hand seemed to move on its own, reaching out to cup her cheek with his palm, expression softening when she pressed her face more fully into his hand, lashes brushing the tinted skin as she closed her eyes. “Not yet,” Steve said, thumb rubbing along the curve of her cheekbone. “Hill convinced me to take a few days. Said something about having earned it.”

Even if Darcy knew she didn’t hate Maria Hill like she’d thought she had - not like she truthfully hated Georges Batroc and the rest of Thanos’ army that were still alive - the fact that she wasn’t ‘allowing’ Steve to go back into the field (not that anyone allowed Steve Rogers to go anything) made her dislike the director a little bit less. “So you’re getting a little R&R, is that what you’re saying?”

“I’ve got a few days with no plans,” Steve agreed, smiling when the wattage on Darcy’s grin turned up.

“The ‘man with a plan’ without plans? I’m not sure the world can handle a bored Steve Rogers,” Bucky said with a smirk, throwing the towel as he left the bathroom doorway and crossed so he could fist his fingers into the front of Steve’s shirt and yank the blond closer. He used his lips to show Steve how much he’d been missed, an eager sound falling from his lips into the other man’s mouth.

Watching Steve and Bucky kiss made things low in Darcy’s body clench, until she shifted from one leg to the other, pulling her lower lip between her teeth and biting softly. It was gorgeous, watching their mouths move with practiced ease, the knowledge of each other’s bodies having formed over years, and even if she wasn’t a physical part of it, just seeing them together was enough to make her mouth go dry.

Steve heard a sound to the right and he pulled back from Bucky, eyes blinking slowly, seeing the lazy, heated smirk that had climbed onto his lover’s lips. The weight of his gaze swung toward Darcy, watching as her toes curled into the carpet, one arm behind her back, the other holding it in place as her hazel peered at them.

She looked at them with pink in her cheeks and Steve found his eyes following her tongue as it swept along her lower lip, then drew inward as she inhaled deeply. The slightest hint of uncertainty tinted her features and Steve wanted nothing more than to wipe that look from her face. He held out his hand to her. When she hesitated, frowning at him, Steve grinned softly. “I’m not going to break, Darce.”

Bucky watched Darcy pause for one more second, her eyes attempting to gauge the sincerity in Steve’s voice. Finally, something in the blond’s cerulean gaze confirmed something for her and she crossed the carpet, placing her hand in Steve’s and allowing him to pull her near. Bucky watched, his
heart in his throat, as Darcy and Steve stared into each other’s eyes from inches away.

Somehow, through everything, they still managed to look surprised they were allowed to be this close, to touch this much, to act on the feelings they shared. Seeing Steve and Darcy grow more confident, little by little, only made Bucky’s pulse quicken. It was there, he could see it, but he said nothing, knowing they needed to come by it honestly, needed to choose it for themselves.

He didn’t wonder about his own feelings; Bucky was already gone, completely and utterly in love with both of them, and more than anything he found watching them fall in love only deepened everything in his heart until it was almost too much, almost too real. He didn’t care about the incalculable odds and the journey that had led them to where they were, all Bucky cared about was making sure he didn’t let this go.

Days ago, Bucky had told Steve that most of their life was war, a battle in one way or another. But despite the war, despite the fighting, despite every ugly and filthy thing that he’d experienced, he’d found peace, here, with them. Masa had been right. Peace. He’d found peace in the love that shone in their eyes, his own reflecting the same.

Darcy blinked up at Steve, lashes brushing her pinkened cheeks, watching as his lips parted the tiniest bit, able to feel the fan of his breath on her skin. His eyes were so blue, so pretty, and it felt like she was drowning in them, uncertain how long she’d stood there just looking into them. The panicked fear at almost losing him was still fresh, the agony of it like a bruise that refused to fade, but as Darcy stared into Steve’s eyes, all of that took a backseat to her suddenly desperate need to show him how much he meant to her.

They moved toward each other at the same time, Darcy’s arms wrapping around Steve’s neck as he held her close, lips pressing against hers with purpose, with drive. Darcy fed at his mouth greedily, like she’d been in the desert for days and he was her first drink of water, like she needed him to survive. She did need him to survive, and she put all of it into her body against his, breathing the truth of it against his lips.

Steve responded to Darcy’s frenzy with his own, hearing a soft moan of want, realizing it’d come from him. He wrapped an arm around her waist, feeling Bucky move closer to them. He wasn’t sure where Bucky’s lips pressed, but he felt Darcy’s exhale of breath and her quick gasp inward, and Steve took the advantage and swept his tongue into her mouth, caressing, tasting.

Between Steve’s mouth against hers, and the press of Bucky’s lips to the side of her neck, Darcy was already close to falling apart. Her hands were shaking as they grasped the hairs at the base of Steve's neck and pulled, feeling the shudder run through his body. "Steve," she gasped into his mouth, shivering when Bucky's hand snaked its way under her shirt, his fingers ghosting over her ribs. She knew there were a multitude of things they still needed to discuss, logistical questions that needed answers, but Steve was home, he was safe, and he was here, and for the moment, that was all Darcy could focus on.

Bucky lifted his head when Steve's fingers grabbed his chin and tugged softly, accepting Steve's kiss as Darcy's lips moved down the blond's neck and across his collarbone, pulling the soft cotton aside to expose more skin. Not content to just stand there, Steve walked them backward toward the bed, pulling on their clothes, the blue of his eyes focused as they followed. There were words in his head, things he needed to say, but all higher thoughts vanished as Bucky and Darcy climbed onto the bed and crawled up toward him.

This wasn't how Steve'd envisioned his return to their side going, but he'd stopped trying to plan for what was next with Bucky and Darcy. Everything that had happened between the three of them had been a surprise, something Steve would have thought impossible a few short months ago, and he'd
finally learned that fighting against his feelings was futile and useless, in the best way possible.

Even though Steve had assured her he wasn't hurt any longer, that he was healed (or healed enough), Darcy still wanted to be sure. He didn't argue when she grabbed the bottom hem of his shirt and lifted it with Bucky's help. As the soldier tossed it over the side of the bed, Darcy ran her hands over the places she knew Steve'd been injured. There'd been a bit of charred flesh on his right bicep where one of the alien weapons had singed him. It was completely gone, the skin it's normal ruddy color, like nothing had ever happened. His ribs were still bruised, but so much better than they'd been when he'd first gotten back. The pads of her fingers lifted and fell into each dip of his ribs, his abs, his lower stomach.

She turned her attention to the bite high on his left arm, frowning at the small indentations that still marred his skin, where the alien's teeth had pierced and then shook from side to side, making the wounds more jagged, uneven and painful. She moved forward, Bucky's hand on her lower back, leaning over Steve's body to press her lips to the marks, knowing it was juvenile and ridiculous but following through with the action regardless.

Steve watched her head dip, felt the warmth of her mouth on his skin, and his arm lifted so his fingers could sift through her hair, eyes falling closed. The weight in his chest only increased as she moved up his body, over his clavicle and his jawline, pressing a kiss to each of his cheeks then pulling back.

Darcy watched Steve's eyes open, saw the question in them as she grew still, looking down at him, heart in her throat. She would have loved to say something, to express with words the flurry of emotions swelling within her, but she bit her tongue, staying silent.

Something the stone had said to her, surrounded by the utter blackness of the soulscape, had stuck in her mind and refused to go away.

*You've been struggling your whole life,* it had said, voice like velvet and silk, and Darcy had realized it was right. She *had* been struggling for so long, drowning, even as she smiled and played it off with quick wit and sarcasm. She *was* always fighting, *always* clawing, never getting to rest and appreciate what she had because as soon as she did, it'd be stolen away from her in one way or another.

Her parents - whoever they'd been - had been stolen by addiction and violence. Her childhood innocence had been stolen by the hands of her foster families. Her belief in fairness had been shattered by the ambivalence of a system that allowed those horrors to happen, despite her screams and insistence that it was true and not just a cry for attention. Her hope had faded each time she’d been abandoned, every time she’d been left behind, until her hope was gone, until she'd grown cold, and bitter, and antagonistic. It'd taken years (and the love and support from Olivia) for Darcy to believe she was worth something more than just pain and darkness.

Even when things got better, when she'd met Jane and Selvig, carving herself from the bleak landscape of her childhood, things had continued to go wrong. New Mexico. London. Anytime she had something steady, it was taken away.

Maybe it was *her.* Maybe she wasn't *meant* for happiness and comfort. Maybe she'd always been meant to grab that stone. Maybe there was a *reason* why her life was filled with battles and war.

And yet...

Through all her doubt and insecurities, through all the fear and struggle and panic... she'd found these two men, these two *soldiers,* who'd struggled and fought battles and wars, too. All three of them ravaged, torn apart and put back together. Used. Abused. But they made her stronger, made her
believe again. And it terrified her. She was terrified to be happy, to believe that this would last.

Darcy Lewis' whole life had been a struggle, and she was afraid she wouldn't survive it when they were taken away, too.

Bucky watched an ocean of thoughts crash behind Darcy's hazel eyes, pooling with tears as she looked between both of them with devastation on her face. When the first tear rolled down her cheek, he reached out and threaded his fingers with hers. "Hey," he said, drawing her gaze toward him, "it's okay."

"I know," Darcy said, mentally pushing her thoughts to the side, hiding it all behind a self-indulgent smile and a roll of her eyes. She laughed softly, swiping at her cheeks, nodding at Bucky. "I know." She turned back to Steve, seeing the question in his earnest blue gaze and giving him a watery smile she hoped was reassuring. "I'm just really, really glad you're okay."

Steve reasoned that something more than happiness was behind the weight in her eyes, but he couldn't find it in him to push her. Instead, he sat up, cradling her cheeks in his hands, pressing his lips to Darcy's carefully, truthfully. He'd probably never know her like Bucky did, but Steve didn't need a soul bond to know she was telling the truth, that him getting hurt had been scary and that she was happy he was safe. Soon, he'd be able to put words to the feelings in his chest, but for now he worried about calming her tears.

Bucky mirrored Steve, pressing his lips to hers when the blond's mouth trailed down Darcy's jaw and the side of her neck, sliding her hair out of the way with a sweep of his hand. He could feel the weight of Darcy's thoughts in the hesitation of her body, and if she wasn't willing to share everything, the least he could do was make her forget it for a little while. They were here, they were safe, and that was enough.

Darcy gave over to the press of their bodies against hers, the way her skin sparked and sang with satisfaction when they touched. She was over thinking everything, too far in her own head, letting her heart and her fears dampen what should be a happy reunion. She stopped worrying, burying everything deep, letting them soothe away the dark thoughts that had been circling.

The rest of their clothing came off in a hurry, hands fumbling, fingernails dragging over skin, gasps and sounds of want echoing off the walls. It was still so new, the three of them moving against each other, but they pushed through the awkwardness with breathless laughter and embarrassed smiles. The end of Darcy's laughter shifted to something huskier when Bucky palmed her sex, sucking her bottom lip into his mouth and biting softly. When he pulled back, Darcy could see his pupils were ringed with charcoal, a hungry expression on his face. "I want..."

Bucky's lips moved down the side of her neck, feeling Steve at his right, lips surrounding one of her nipples and sucking. "What do you want, doll? Name it."

The first time she tried to answer Bucky didn't work, and she had to really focus to put words to her thoughts. "I want..." She cried out when Steve's teeth bit softly, his blue eyes rolling up her body, a satisfied look on his face. "Fuck!" She shifted away from their mouths, cheeks heating as they both straightened, sitting back on their knees in front of her. She tried, she really did, but Darcy's eyes followed the lines of their bodies down, taking a deep breath inward as she looked at both of them side by side, so gorgeous, hard and swollen and waiting for her.

"I think you broke her," Bucky smirked, hand trailing down the back of Steve's body, fingers digging into the flesh of the other man's ass. He redirected his smirk toward Darcy, head cocking to the head as he watched her stare at them. "Use your words, love. What do you want?"
Darcy's eyes flicked north, flashing a bit when they saw the curl of Bucky's lips and the knowing expression in all that grey. "I want to wrap my mouth around him," she said with a pointed finger toward Steve, "and I want to see his lips around you."

Steve shivered at the look on Darcy's face - challenging, determined, and sexy - before looking over at Bucky. He didn't trust himself to answer, his mouth already watering at the visions Darcy's desires had put in his head. When Bucky's heavy gaze swung toward him, he saw no arguments in his best friend's eyes.

In a matter of seconds, Steve was laying on the bed, a mound of pillows beneath his head and shoulders. Darcy was between his knees, eyes hungry and pouring over every inch of his exposed skin. The bed dipped and his cerulean flicked to the right, Bucky's hard cock inches away, and Steve could feel the heat and desire in the other man's body as he positioned himself.

"Feels like you're getting the short end of the stick, Darce," Bucky hummed, watching as her hazel eyes tore themselves away from Steve's body to look at him.

"You're kidding, right? I mean..." Her hands gestured in vague helplessness in both of their directions. "This is exactly what I want, Buck."

"Are you su -" Steve's question became a groan when Darcy's hand wrapped itself around his cock and squeezed tightly, his head falling back against the pillows, his eyes screwing shut.

"Your mouth should be too full to talk," Darcy breathed, thumb spreading the bead of precome across Steve's tip as she leaned forward, eyes rolling up to see the blond look down at her, his pupils blown wide.

When fingers slid through his hair and tugged, Steve turned his head, feeling the strength in Bucky's hands. His mouth opened, the feel of Bucky's cock heavy on his tongue as the other man pushed forward. Steve shuddered, making a small sound around Bucky's cock when Darcy followed suit, her lips working down his length, her mouth warm and wet and amazing.

Bucky's eyes were in a constant circuit. He watched Darcy, her skin flushed, her eyes closed as her cheeks hollowed, taking as much of Steve into her mouth as she could, her hand wrapped around his base, moving to meet her lips then separating as her head bobbed up and down with purpose. When Steve moaned, mouth full of his cock, the humming feel forced Bucky's face toward the ceiling, unable to help the way his hips bucked into Steve's mouth. Whenever Darcy's tongue hit that spot, Steve would moan and take Bucky deeper, forcing a matching grunt of desire from Bucky's chest.

Darcy had a lifetime of memories, knowing how Steve felt in her mouth both before the serum and after, but those weren't her memories, and those memories paled in comparison to the real thing. Steve was so warm, so responsive; every change of pace resulted in a shudder, a shiver, a tiny thrust of his hips forward. Darcy found herself chasing those movements, wanting him to lose control, eyes rolling so she could see Steve's perfect lips wrapped around Bucky. Her body responded to the reality of it all, feeling her stomach clench, a low hum of desire rumbling against Steve as she let him fall from her lips, hand moving up to squeeze his head and twist, satisfaction singing through her when he swallowed reflexively around Bucky, his groan muffled.

Bucky's breath was coming in thick pants, his hands in Steve's hair urging him at a steady pace, in and out, in and out. He heard a sound and Bucky's eyes swung and connected with Darcy's. There was a weight to her gaze, an urging, and Bucky gave her a nod, knowing what she wanted without needing her to voice it. When her head dipped, lips stretching beautifully around Steve, Bucky's grip tightened, moving with purpose.
Between the two of them - the feel of Darcy's mouth around him, the feel of his mouth around Bucky - Steve could do nothing but moan, feeling himself rise closer and closer. It was just this side of overwhelming, being pushed and pulled in both directions, and the only thought that kept repeating, over and over in his head was 'yes yes yes'. When Darcy's pace increased, lips meeting her hand quicker, drawing him deeper, he bucked upward, hips moving reflexively. The faster Darcy moved, the faster he moved against Bucky, arm wrapping so he could flex his fingers against Bucky's ass, pulling him closer.

"Ah, Steve, yes, fuck, feels so good," Bucky panted, his chin dropping to his chest, looking down at Steve. The pace quickened even more, the three of them humming and moaning with satisfaction. As the frenzy built, Bucky could feel the heft of it in the air, a release that all three had been needing. He gasped Steve’s name, then Darcy’s, looking at the two people he loved working together to fall apart.

It was beautiful.

He was close and he could tell Steve was too, a steady hum vibrating from the blond's mouth around him, tightening his balls and making his hips buck faster. He knew the second Steve came, felt the strangled cry from Steve as he pushed forward, Bucky's cock hitting the back of his throat, but still Steve pushed. Bucky gasped, hips thrusting, fingers gripping Steve's hair, holding the blond still so he could pump himself in and out of Steve's mouth. It only took a second more for him to break, coming with a shout.

Steve swallowed, his senses overwhelmed, drowning in the taste of Bucky and still falling himself, twitching as Darcy continued to move against him. He cried out when Bucky retreated, Steve's hands sifting through Darcy's hair to pull gently. He shuddered once more when he fell out of her lips, her hazel eyes rolling up to look at both of men as they panted. When her tongue darted out to lick her lips, Steve's eyes screwed shut and he let himself fall back against the pillows with a sigh.

Darcy watched Bucky's head hang as he sat back on his heels, utterly spent, his chest rising and falling rapidly. She felt a heaviness in her body, echoes of her earlier melancholy returning as she looked at them. They were sexed out and stunning and she couldn’t look away, something freezing her eyes on them, afraid to blink.

Sighing, Bucky chuckled deeply to himself as he opened his eyes, gaze drawn toward Darcy. Her skin was the color of peaches and cream, flushed with pink and looking entirely too delicious, and he felt his mouth go dry just looking at her. When his eyes connected with hers, Bucky could see the ghost of something behind the hazel.

He wasn’t sure he’d have made it through everything without her. Even when things had been dark, when Steve had still been unconscious, Darcy had made sure he stayed optimistic, assuring him Steve was fine, that he’d wake up, that it would only take time. She’d taken all his worries, all his uncertainty and doubt, and all but forced him to hope. She’d been a pillar of strength, strong enough for the both of them, but looking into her eyes, it was clear she’d had plenty of her own insecurities but had buried them deep, for his sake. Now that Steve was home, however, the dam holding it back seemed to have broken.

“Hey, c’mere,” Bucky said, lifting his hand and holding it out toward her.

Eyes blinking open at Bucky’s words, Steve lifted his head, chest tightening at the look on Darcy’s face. She was looking between the two of them, eyes wide, breathing fast and shallow. She lifted a shaking hand and allowed Bucky to pull her, managing to slide between them, both men turning so they could see her face.
She was ecstatic that she’d been able to stop the tears before they’d fallen, screaming to herself that it was stupid to cry because Steve was safe. All her worries from the past two weeks should have been soothed by the fact that Steve was here, he was safe, and he was right where he belonged, by her and Bucky’s side. But something, some dark little voice at the back of her mind, told her it was too good to be true, that she needed to hold herself back and ready herself for the utter disappointment that was sure to come. It wasn’t the stone’s voice, but her own darkness, and now that she was able to breathe fully again, she wasn’t able to push it back like she’d been able to before.

Shaking her head at herself, she ran her hands over their skin, taking their warmth and using it to drown out the voice. “That was…”

Steve hummed, pressing his lips to her shoulder as his arm draped across her waist, his fingers brushing against Bucky’s side. “You’re amazing.”

Grinning, Bucky blinked grey eyes at Steve’s words, seeing the blissed out look on his lover’s face. “Was it the homecoming you expected?”

“Mmm, better.” Steve felt like his body weighed a ton, mentally assuring himself that he was just tired from the great sex and not because he wasn’t at full health yet. But, even as tired as he was, the softness of Darcy’s skin pressed against his was enough to open his eyes and fill them with heat. He was spent, and he could see the same in Bucky’s eyes, but he wasn’t done yet.

Something about these two, with their dark hair and plump lips and beautiful eyes, gave him a confidence in the bedroom that he was left marveling at. He hungered for them, words falling from his lips that he couldn’t imagine saying to anyone else, and even if he was tired, he would never be finished before Darcy gasped his or Bucky’s name as she tumbled.

When Steve’s hands began to wander, Darcy shifted against the comforter. She was already pulled taut from what they’d just done, but it appeared that Steve’s healing factor also had an effect on his refractory time. She turned her head, intent on telling him that she was fine, more than satisfied by their activities, but Steve didn’t give her the chance, capturing her lips and leaning his body over hers, coming up on one elbow so he could kiss her more thoroughly.

Bucky’s breaths were coming faster, watching Steve and Darcy from only inches away, hearing the surprised and utterly erotic sounds coming from both of them. He turned onto his side, arm sliding beneath the pillow under Darcy’s head, moving so his body touched the whole side of hers. His hand echoed Steve’s, blazing a trail down the front of Darcy’s body, starting at her neck and moving south. He palmed her breast, fingers rolling one erect nipple then ghosting over her ribs, then her hip, then inner thigh. It was clear Steve wanted to take control, to explore Darcy’s body for himself, and Bucky was all too happy to help, his hand pulling her legs apart at the knee, giving Steve more room to work.

Steve swallowed her gasp when his fingers slicked between her folds, a dark satisfaction at the way her body shuddered between them. Her nails found purchase in his bicep, panting against his tongue as it curled into her mouth. He slid one long finger inside her heat, feeling her hips shift, body tensing and shivering. When she turned her head, a moan falling from her lips, he watched Bucky’s lips work against hers, letting his own mouth wander until he could pull one pert, hardened nipple in his mouth.

Darcy’s back arched off the bed, a sound she was almost certain she’d never made echoing off the walls as she felt overwhelmed by both of them, writhing when Steve added another finger. Bucky continued to kiss her, sucking her lower lip and biting it softly between his teeth, whispering against her mouth.
“So beautiful like this, gasping, wanting more. Never seen anything so gorgeous,” Bucky said, seeing the teetering frenzy in Darcy’s eyes before they screwed shut and her head fell back against the bed. His gaze flicked to Steve, watching as the blond’s face tightened with focus, learning what Darcy liked, what made her moan, what made her grind down onto his hand. Just watching Steve work his fingers in and out of her, watching as she circled higher and closer, made Bucky’s pulse race, his breathing fanning against her neck.

Every movement he made forced an equal reaction from her, and Steve lost himself in the study of her body, tongue swiping against suddenly dry lips, eyes widening as she gasped his name, repeating the motion, until his name babbled from her lips in a steady stream of 'SteveSteveStevefuckStevevesocloseyessSteve!'

It only took one more second before she came apart in their arms, Darcy’s last shout of Steve! ringing through the room before he stole her breath with his mouth, kissing her as her body quaked beneath him, until she was panting for air and twitching. He laid back beside her, pressing his lips to her shoulder, watching her pulse beat heavily at her neck, her lips parted as she came down.

Darcy’s skin felt like it was lava, on fire and blazing, an open flame that the men at her sides had successfully stoked. She felt weightless, boneless, like a balloon that threatened to blow away at the slightest breeze. Both men’s arms rested over her stomach, holding her still and peaceful and entirely sated. Her breath hitched on the way in and she managed a soft laugh at how completely satisfied she felt.

Minutes ago her thoughts had been dark and terrified, but at their touch and under their attention, all of that seemed to fade away, replaced by warmth and contentment. Darcy knew it was a temporary respite, that those doubts and insecurities would still be there later, but for the moment she allowed herself to enjoy the bliss and not wonder when it would all evaporate. “I’m not going to move for a week,” she managed with a laugh, feeling Bucky burrow into her back, hiding his face in her hair.

“Ditto,” Bucky agreed, voice muffled.

“Good thing I have the next few days off then,” Steve said, watching the grin that turned Darcy’s lips, her eyes still shut and peacefully looking up at the ceiling, “because I don’t plan on going anywhere either.”
The Hell You Have Survived

Chapter Summary

Tony and Peter help Darcy test her suit... sort of. Steve confides in Sam. Darcy has her first psych eval, and Bucky deals with the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Hello and Happy Wednesday! I have to thank y'all AGAIN for the kudos and comments and follows! I love getting to interact with all of you guys in several different ways and the outpouring of love never ceases to amaze me! HEART EYES, guys, HEART EYES!

PageBreak

“Your scars are a warning to all future monsters, of the hell you have survived before them, every demon you vanquished, and every battle you won.”
- Nicola Yoon

PageBreak

Peter sighed as he looked across the space at Darcy, his face colored with annoyance, arms crossed over his chest. “Tell me again why you can’t have your literally super-strong boyfriends help you test the suit?”

Darcy shook her head at him, pulling on her hair to tighten her ponytail, dark curls sliding across her shoulders. “One? We don’t have a label yet. Are they boyfriends? Lovers? Olympic-medal winning sex experts?”

“Ugh!” The face Peter made was comical and she heard Tony’s snort of disgust from behind them.

“Shut up,” Darcy said without missing a beat, “Two? Neither of them would be able to shoot at me, are you kidding? Even if it was in the name of science, they’re both incapable of hurting me. Physically. At least, not when I haven’t asked them to do it for... other reasons.”

Mind replaying every gasp and touch that she’d shared with the boys since she’d begun staying in their room, Darcy felt her cheeks flush with heat, shifting her weight from one foot to another as she let her thoughts wander. When she realized Peter had been calling her name, Darcy clawed out of
those very happy memories to look at the younger man. “Hm?”

Rolling his eyes, Peter’s hands dropped to his sides. “They can’t hurt you, but you think I’d be able to?”

Darcy gestured in his direction, “uh, yeah Peter, considering you made the suit. If I die because your shit isn’t up to par, if should be you dealing the killing blow, don’t you think?”

Tony sighed, shaking his head at their antics as his fingers flew over the illuminated buttons in front of him. “You’re going to give the kid an ulcer.” At Peter’s shout of offense, Tony’s eyes rolled toward him. “Right, sorry. You’re going to give Pete an ulcer. Cupcake.” He didn’t specify who the ‘cupcake’ comment was directed toward, but all three knew it was for Darcy.

Darcy put her hands on her hips and leveled her glare in Tony’s direction. “Fine then, old man, you do it. Blast me with one of your... repulsive thingamajigs.”

“Repulsors,” Peter corrected.

“Um, no. He’s repulsive so that makes them repulsive weapons,” Darcy argued, giving him an incredulous look, “that’s how English works. What were they teaching you at your superschool?”

Tony spun in his chair, dipping his chin and looking at her over the top of his glasses. “If you’re trying to goad me into shooting you: keep going, you’re almost there.”

“Come on!” Darcy’s voice rang through the lab as she threw her hands in the air, frustration pinging through her body, “you guys are scientists! I thought you all loved a little experimentation!”

“Again, ew.”

“Again, shut the fuck up and shoot me already!” Darcy’s voice had hit peak pest level and she was more than ready to press her luck, hoping for a reaction. “Why the fuck did you pad this entire corner if you aren’t going to use it?”

Peter came to stand beside her, eyes looking up at the red mats that covered the corner’s floor and walls. “These are totally unrelated. We needed a viable test area for some of the other things we’ve been working on. If we were going to shoot you, which we’re not,” he said with emphasis, “we wouldn’t do it in here. We’d go to one of the gyms. It’d be safer.”

“That’s dummmb,” Darcy growled, rubbing her hands over her face, “why would you make a suit, work on it so hard for months, specifically for me to use in a fight, then not even make sure it -”

The electrical discharge from Tony’s gauntlet sung through the air, the blast hitting Darcy square in the chest. She went flying backward, Peter’s shout of surprise ringing in her ears. Her back smacked the mat with a weighty thump, before she dropped to her knees, then again onto her stomach.

“Hey!” Peter screamed in Tony’s direction before he slid toward Darcy.

“Ngghh,” Darcy moaned, rolling onto her side, still feeling the impact in her bones. “Owwww...”

“Darcy, are you okay!?”

Tony rolled his eyes, pushing off his desk and sliding his wheeled chair closer to the pair. “She’s fine,” he said, the flippancy in his voice almost convincing, “I only hit her with a one-percent blast. Nowhere near enough to actually hurt her. Romanoff flicks her finger harder than that.”
Peter looked up at Tony with a glare, his expressions stony. He swung his gaze back toward Darcy when she shifted, helping her climb to her feet. “Did it hurt? Are you, are you hurt?”

Darcy ran a hand over her chest; the t-shirt she’d been wearing over the suit had a hole near her sternum, the cotton singed, the black and gold of her suit visible beneath. “Did it pierce the suit or burn me? No. Does getting thrown against a wall hurt? Fucking yes,” she said, pointing in Tony’s direction. “You could have fucking warned me!”

All in all, Darcy was impressed. She’d felt the impact of hitting the wall, but it’d been much less jarring than she thought it would. She knew the impact testing they’d done previously, as she’d worked the data (not that she’d known it was for a suit of her own), and other than the shock of being thrown against the wall, she still felt great. Much better than the time she’d been thrown into that tacky-ass van.

Tony rested his elbow on the counter, grinning at her, the gauntlet over his hand whining softly as it recharged, “oh, is that not what you wanted, princess? You wanted to get shot, you got shot! And hey, would you look at that? You’re not dead. Does the suit pass your muster?”

Darcy’s lips parted as she took in a deep breath, about to lay into Tony with a tirade of epic proportions, the likes of which had never been seen (even though he’d done exactly what she’d wanted), when she felt Peter’s hands pressing softly on her boobs. Her eyes widened and she turned to see him bent in front of her, fingers poking at the suit experimentally. “See something you like?”

“The vibranium weaving didn’t even move. We’ll have to do a full-scale test to make sure the heat doesn’t transfer, but I’ll want you in a helmet, just in case.” When Peter glanced up at her, both hands pressed to her chest, he frowned at the look on her face. She quirked an eyebrow at him before he followed her gaze down. “Oh!” Peter practically flew backward and broke the contact between them, cheeks instantly flaming pink. “I-I’m sorry, that was, I didn’t mean, I wasn’t -”

Darcy rolled her eyes at Peter, hazel eyes filled with affection for the bumbling science baby, before she turned and padded back toward Tony, leaving the younger man to push through his embarrassment. “Big deal. So it’s good for repulsive blasts -”

“- repulsor -”

“- but what about real bullets? Where do we get a gun?” Tony’s bark of laughter at her question made her eyes narrow in his direction. “What? I’m gonna need something when we go out!”

Tony lifted one dark eyebrow, then glanced over her shoulder. “Hey, Pete, remind me… did you get a gun your first time in the field?”

“At the airport? Uh, no, not a gun, I mean, that first time it wasn’t like anyone was gonna shoot me -”

“So I just go out there without a way to protect myself?” When Tony spun in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, Darcy’s hand flung out toward him. “What? What’s that look for, asshole?”

Tony climbed to his feet in one swift movement, sneakers squeaking on the floor as he grabbed his phone from the counter. “You remember this?” With a tap of his finger, a video of Darcy and Thor from weeks ago hung in the air before them. She watched as Thor was pressed back against a wall as she floated in the air nearby, arms raised in front of her. The distinctive sound of crunching metal grated in her ears, making her grimace.

“Okay, yes, fuck, I remember it,” she said, hand waving emphatically until he swiped the image from
the air and the lab fell silent. “So, what are you suggesting? I just throw people around?”

“Not just,” Tony answered, scratching at his chin, “Wanda’s able to turn anything into a weapon, but yours only works on people.”

“Only works on souls,” Darcy specified, watching as Tony raised an eyebrow at her. “Don’t give me that look. People doesn’t include other creatures who may have souls.”

“I didn’t say human, I said people.”

“That’s not —”

“Hey! Let’s not get hung up on the semantics, okay?” Peter came to stand by Darcy, hands up like he was trying to soothe two angry animals. Darcy and Tony shared an amused look, lips lifting at Peter’s tone. “If she can only move souls, then that still leaves her vulnerable.”

Darcy’s eyes widened as big as saucers. “Unless I throw souls as a weapon!” When both the men’s faces swung toward her, a matching confused expression in their brown eyes, she shrugged her shoulder. “Thor told me about this thing he did with his brother… you know what? It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I still need a way to protect myself.”

Tony’s face turned thoughtful and he leaned back against the counter, gaze unfocusing slightly. “I think our first step should be finishing the dampener. Then, once it’s placed, we can see what other abilities might be hiding in that mutant body of yours. We can really try pushing you. I mean, you got Batroc to talk, which I still don’t understand. You just… knew things about him?”

Darcy sighed, hands on her hips as she looked down at her feet. “I don’t know how to explain it. It was like… I asked a question, and his soul told me the truth. The thing I wanted to know was… revealed. Like he couldn’t hide it.”

“So you know when someone’s lying and you can peer into the pretty lights and know what they’re hiding? Remind me never to play poker with you.”

“Thor called it the ‘cold light of truth,’” Peter hummed, shifting when both Darcy and Tony pinned him with their eyes. “What? I talk to people.”

“He has time for friends?”

“We’re obviously not working him hard enough.”

“Hey!”

Sharing another look, Darcy grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it away from her body, peering at the hole in the fabric. “Fine. So I set up time to have my mind messed with by Wanda, Vision bamfs the dampener in place, then we see what else my mutant genes and this stone can do. Awesome. Neat. There’s absolutely no way anything in that plan could go wrong.”

“You just brushed off a repulsor blast. Other than gravity and momentum dynamics, I’d call today a success.” Tony ignored the rude hand gesture Darcy sent his way. “Now get out of my lab. Don’t you have a psych eval to get to?”

Darcy’s hazel gaze widened when she glanced up at the clock. “Shit! Yes! Do you think I should change? No. Yes. Is it bad to wear a shirt with a hole in it fired at you by your boss? Gotta change. Wish me monsters!”

Peter’s call of “Monsters?!” went unanswered as she flew from the room.
Grunting, Sam sat heavily on the ground, trying to catch his breath. He debated taking off his sweatshirt, but knew better; he was hot right now, sure, but soon enough the cold winter air would breeze over his sweat and he’d find himself shivering. He squinted up at the blond in front of him, who barely looked winded. “Man, you almost died two weeks ago. Shouldn’t you be slowing down? You training for a marathon or something?”

Steve shook his head, chuckling softly. He took in the sunlight filtering through the treeline, hands on his hips as he brought air in and out of his lungs deliberately, feeling his heart slow, keeping it under control. Sam’s question was particularly funny, considering the thoughts that had been on Steve’s mind lately, not that the soldier at his feet would know that.

Growing up, Steve had always been almost dying. The list of illnesses and conditions he’d had before Erskine’s formula were a part of history now. Heart arrhythmia. Stomach ulcers. Scarlet fever. Rheumatic fever. Asthma. Anemia. Chronic fatigue. Scoliosis. Partial deafness. The list went on and on, until it seemed like a miracle he’d made it through the night, let alone to his eighteenth birthday.

If anyone was a poster boy for ‘Almost Dying,’ it was Steve Rogers.

He’d never considered slowing down. Once he’d come out of that metal tube - taller, stronger, healthier - he’d never stopped running. He’d run after Peggy. He’d run after Bucky. He’d run toward death and accepted his fate, only to wake up seventy years later to start running all over again. Steve had started to believe that’s all his life was; one long marathon with no end in sight.

Part of Steve knew he was still dealing with the result of his most recent injuries, that he’d looked death in the face and had come out the other side, but that wasn’t the whole story. Steve Rogers was used to facing down death. He and the specter of the reaper had become like old friends, recognizing each other intimately.

No, this wasn’t just a post-traumatic response to almost dying. The tumble of thoughts in Steve’s mind were about living, an idea that there could be something more for him, that he deserved something more than sacrificing his entire life to being Captain America. Yes, Darcy had said exactly that in the hotel room weeks ago, but it’d been building within him for years.

Loki and the scepter. The Winter Soldier. The Accords. Thanos. Everything since he’d been pulled out of that ice had been a struggle and he was ready. Ready for what happened next. Ready for the next chapter. Ready for what came after Captain America.

“Steve?”

Pulled from his thoughts, Steve gave Sam a small smile. “Sorry. Did you -”

“Ask what the hell you were thinking about? Yeah. You were miles away. Something wrong? You know I’ve got you if you want to talk, right?”

Steve’s arm raised to rub at the back of his neck, nodding. “I know.”

After a quiet moment, Sam climbed to his feet. “You gonna make me pull it out of you?”

Giving the other man a fond laugh, Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “You remember when I visited you at the VA? Saw the end of your therapy group?”
“I vaguely remember you blocking most of the doorway with those shoulders, yeah,” Sam said with a smile.

“You told me that I could do anything I wanted. Did you mean that?”

Something in Steve’s voice clued Sam into the fact that this wasn’t just some throw away comment. There was a look in Steve’s eyes, something only half-formed, but there regardless. “Hell yes, I meant it. You think you found something you’d like to do?”

Steve sighed, looking down at the ground, “…more like something I don’t want to do.”

Sam’s eyebrows lifted, surprise filling his eyes before his lips curled, a chuckle falling free. “Oh, so it’s like that?”

“Like what?”

“You look tired, Steve.” When the blond looked at him, Sam shrugged a shoulder, eyes empathetic as he smiled at his friend. “I’ve seen it for a while. Hard not to. I’d like to think I know you pretty damn well after all these years and I’ve seen the way it weighs on you. I joke about your shoulders being large, but the tons you carry around…” He gave a low whistle. “You’re not Atlas, Cap. It might feel like it sometimes, but you don’t have to carry it alone.”

Steve couldn’t help the smirk that lifted one corner of his mouth. He did know Sam well, and he’d known how Sam would react to his admission that the weight of the shield and being Captain America was starting to get too heavy. “You think your shoulders are as strong as mine?”

“Hell no,” Sam said with a laugh. When Steve continued to look at him, Sam’s arms fell to his sides. “Wait, are you serious? You’re thinking about turning in the shield?”

“Not turning it in,” Steve said with a shake of his head, “passing it to someone else.” He watched the realization as it crashed behind Sam’s eyes, the soldier’s breath leaving his lungs in a huff.

“Me? You want me to… to take over as Captain America?”

The incredulous and disbelieving tone in Sam’s voice made Steve frown, unsure why it would come a such a shock. “You’re one of the best and most loyal men I know, an amazing leader and teammate. You bring out the best in people. You’re not just a good soldier, but a good man, Sam,” Steve said, hearing Erskine’s voice in his head saying those exact same words, “and you’re the only one I’d feel comfortable giving the shield to.”

Sam looked at the ground, trying to wrap his head around what Steve was suggesting. He sighed, glancing back up at Steve with a considering look in his dark eyes. “You told anyone how you feel yet?”

Steve shook his head, shrugging softly. “Not yet. It’s just a thought, I wasn’t sure… I wanted to see if it… if it was an actual possibility.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? If it was possible to step away from being Captain America, to give the mantle and title to someone else… what came next? “I guess I’m not sure who I am without the shield anymore.”

Sam heard Steve’s words, taking a step closer to the blond so he could reach out and squeeze Steve’s shoulder. “You’re Steve Rogers, the man who’s put his life on the line for his country. Hell, who’s
put his life on the line for the whole planet. You’re still that, even if you don’t strap a shield to your back or squeeze into that red, white, and blue suit.”

Chuckling, Steve threw Sam an amused expression. “Hey, hold on, I didn’t say anything about giving up the suit.”

“Man, if that’s for some kinky ass reason, I don’t even want to know,” Sam said with a rueful shake of his head, hand falling away from Steve. He’d earned a laugh and it made him smile, his dark eyes flicking to take in the slightly-less burdened friend at his side. “What would you do, if you weren’t Cap anymore?”

Steve heaved a large sigh. “Hadn’t given retirement much thought, really. Clint has a farm. Tony tinkers. Maybe I follow suit. Learn a skill. Lease a car. Get a mortgage. Learn how to mow the lawn. Didn’t have many of those in Brooklyn and they didn’t really cover it in Basic.”

“I think you’d be a pretty good personal trainer. Or a life coach. Stay-at-home dad.” When Steve’s gaze sharpened over at him, Sam held his hands up in mock surrender. “Hey, there are a lot of possibilities out there, that’s all I’m saying.”

Darcy stared at the psychiatrist in front of her.

The psychiatrist stared right back.

Sighing, Darcy ran a hand over her face, sitting back farther on the couch. “Look, I know what you’re doing, but I promise you that I’ve made peace with the way I grew up, okay? It was bad, a lot of it sucked, some people can be real horrible scum-of-the-earth types, but overall, I had it lucky.”

“Darcy, you’ve shown the tendency in the past to make rash, sudden decisions that can affect a large number of people. I’m just asking that we discuss what you went through in the system. If there are unworked through traumas -”

“Unworked through traumas? My entire life has been trauma! But I’m still here, obviously, so my decisions can’t have been all that rash and sudden. Did I go to sleep hungry some nights? Yes. Did I worry that the chair propped against my door wouldn’t keep people out of my room when I was sleeping? Yeah. But when I turned thirteen, when Olivia took me in, that all changed. I’ve grown. I’m independent and strong. I’ve dealt with my shit.”

“What did you feel when you found out she had died?”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, head turning to the right as her eyes took in the scene on the other side of the window. She knew the window was a fake, that it wasn’t softly snowing outside, but she glared at the white flakes anyway. “It hurt.”

“That’s not very descriptive. Could you explain it better for me?”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy looked back at the man, with his yellow legal pad full of notes and his ridiculously expensive looking pen. What kind of a name is Kevin, anyway? “Olivia was the only mother I ever knew. I wouldn’t be here without her. I feel guilty that I didn’t visit her more often. I feel sad that I’ll never get to introduce her to my kids, if I end up having any. It sucks that no one else will get to experience having her as a mom in the future. So that’s me being guilty, and sad, and hurt. Descriptive enough for you?”
She knew she was acting irrationally, but she hated psychiatrists. She didn’t want to talk about her life. Darcy figured her and Kevin - no, really, what kind of psychiatrist is named Kevin?! - would talk about her powers, how she wanted to use them for good, determine that she wasn’t coocoobananas, and give her the all clear. The questions he was asking were nowhere near what she’d expected.

And she was getting angry.

Kevin’s pen scribbled something on the paper before he glanced back up at Darcy, his face friendly but not too friendly. He was calm, his voice even. “Do you think her death influenced your desire to become a field agent?”

Darcy’s tongue darted out to wet her dry lips, letting the man’s question ping around in her head. She’d been chalking up her desire to be Avenger Adjacent to Steve and Bucky; she wanted to be there to help them, to make sure they came home, to protect them and her friends if it could be done.

… but was that desire to do something, to help whoever and whenever she could, spurred on by the person who’d had the most impact on her young-adult life? A woman who’d gone out of her way to save the unsaveable?

“Yeah,” Darcy said, shrugging her shoulders, arms still crossed, face still stormy, “of course. She helped so many people, kids who would have been lost in the system if she hadn’t been there. Of course I’d want to be like her.”

Another scribble. “Do you think she’d be proud of you?”

Darcy’s facial expression turned toward Kevin and froze, giving him the deadest eyes she could. “What?”

“You talk about how Olivia was a great person, helpful and always looking out for others. Do you think she’d be proud of the things you’ve done with your life so far? Or do you think she’d be worried that you’re taking on too much responsibility, throwing yourself into something that you aren’t ready for, all due to some false sense of duty?”

“It’s not a responsibility or a duty,” Darcy said, voice cold, her head filling with white noise. She wanted to reach out and wipe that perfectly pleasant smile off his face. With a chair.

“Then why do you want to get out there so badly? Why do you want to put yourself in harms way when it’s not something you have to do?”

Her leg had been fidgeting non-stop since she’d stepped foot in the carefully decorated office, but now she felt like she needed something for her hands to do, too. Darcy grabbed the pillow next to her and started picking at the beads that hung from the edges. “It’s not about having to do it, it’s about wanting to do it.”

“You want to do it because you think your powers have to be used for something good. Isn’t that a duty and a responsibility?”

Darcy tossed the pillow aside, unable to help the growl that accompanied her climbing to her feet. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the fake window with its fake snow and its fake grey sky. “I’m not…” She ran a hand through her hair. “It’s not about that.”

“Then explain to me -”

“It’s about fear, okay? Fuck!” When she spun, eyes wide, his perfectly pleasant face held no hint of
alarm, despite the volume her voice had ascended to. “It’s because they scare me! The things I can do with these fucking powers... I can grab the light people have inside, grab it and then rip it to shreds, hollow them out until they’re just a shell, until there’s no one left. Or I can kill them by... \textit{fuck}... I could throw them into the air, high enough that it got too cold, until they couldn’t breathe. Hold them under water. I could find out their worst nightmare, look deep enough inside that they can’t hide anything, then use it against them. All it would take is a thought, one errant wisp of a thought and \textit{poof}, just like that. Gone.”

“And that scares you?”

“Are you \textit{deliberately} not listening to what I’m saying. \textit{Yes it fucking scares me!}” When he looked down at the pad on his knee, pen scratching something in the column, Darcy’s eyes narrowed.

She’d had to do court ordered therapy when she was younger, after trying unsuccessfully to shoplift, but she’d been sent to see a state psychiatrist, a man who’d been so burnt out and apathetic that it hadn’t mattered \textit{what} Darcy had said. It didn’t matter that she was telling the truth, that she could show him the bruises, that she could describe in vivid detail what she’d been put through. \textit{Sometimes people just don’t care.}

“What? Didn’t like my answers? One meeting and you already know everything you need to?”

Kevin gestured toward the couch, “please, Darcy, have a seat.”

Feeling defensive, her steel walls snapping into place around her, Darcy slowly made her way back to the couch, holding the pillow against her chest as she glared at him across the coffee table. He was quiet for a long moment, just looking at her, waiting until a bit of the pink had drained from her cheeks and her breathing had slowed.

“This is not going to be just \textit{one} meeting between you and I, Darcy. If you’re certain you want to be in the field -”

“I do,” Darcy said, even as the knot of fear in her stomach made her flinch.

“Then we’ll be seeing a lot of each other. The things you’ll see in the field can be… there are a lot of ways a person can be triggered. If your powers are tied to your emotions, then there’s always the possibility that you could lose control, perhaps in a way that harms others.”

Darcy frowned. “So you were deliberately \textit{trying} to make me angry?”

“In a way. My job is to make sure that if you \textit{are} triggered, your response is tempered and appropriate. I’m here to help you process your emotions in a healthy way. I know admitting vulnerabilities can be difficult, but the only way this will work will is if you’re honest with me \textit{and} with yourself.”

Darcy sighed, sitting father back on the couch. She wanted to stay angry. The anger was familiar, like an old friend, and she’d backed herself into it so easily that she hadn’t even wondered \textit{why} she was so ready to hate this man. Her past experiences were more than enough, but it wasn’t just \textit{her} experiences she was working with. It was Bucky’s, too.

Bucky, who’d just lost the only person who’d ever really helped him deal with the trauma of what had happened to him, the only doctor he’d ever respected and let inside his head. \textit{Oh.}

...\textit{Fuck}.  

She ran a hand over her face, taking in a deep breath and then letting it out slowly. When she opened her eyes again, Kevin was looking at her like he’d seen what had just happened. “I’m sorry. I’ve been an asshole. I know you’re just trying to help.”

“I just want to make sure you’re fully aware of the risks you’re taking. If you go into this thinking you’re doing it so your abilities don’t scare you anymore, you’re going to find out pretty quickly that the fear never truly goes away. Fear is ingrained in humans for a good reason.”

“Technically I’m not a human,” Darcy interrupted, “I’m a mutant.”

Kevin gave her a smile and a soft nod of his head. “Your powers scare you, and that’s fine. Using your abilities because you’re scared of them is a mistake, but using your abilities because you refuse to let that fear define you? That takes real strength. And you’ve shown me your strength today.”

Darcy snorted. “You count yelling at you as a strength?”

“No, but I count you glowing with anger but not using your powers to... what did you call it? ‘Hollow me out’? That I count as strength.”

Eyes widening, Darcy glanced down at her hands, seeing the soft amber light shining like a gem beneath her skin. “Damn it.” She closed her eyes tightly, slowing her heart beat, waiting until she could feel the quiet take over. When she opened them again, her skin was back to its normal pinkish-porcelain color. “I’m sorry.”

He laughed softly. “Don’t be sorry, Ms. Lewis. I knew what I was getting myself into when I took you on.”

“Now who’s making rash and sudden decisions?” When he chuckled and shook his head, Darcy’s lips turned up into a smile. “So is that it? You’re clearing me for duty?”

“I think we need to have a few more meetings before I feel comfortable enough to do that. However, I’m not the only one who’s yet to sign off. You’ve got a few other hurdles to leap.”

“And my vertical jump is absolute shit,” Darcy said with a sigh, dropping the pillow beside her on the couch, “but you’re not saying no?”

“No.”

“And you’re not saying yes?”

“Yes.”

“That’s pretty damn confusing, you realize that, right?”

“I’ll see you next week, Ms. Lewis.”

When Darcy pushed into Steve and Bucky’s bedroom after her first meeting with Dr. Fisher, she’d been expecting an empty room, and the blissful possibility of a nap. It was late afternoon, and both of her boys tended to fill their days with training sessions, security briefings, or other miscellaneous Avenger activities.

Darcy’d expected an empty room. She hadn’t expected Bucky to be standing in the middle of the
space with a tote in his arms, giving her an empathetic smile. She tugged her earbuds out as the door clicked shut behind her. “What…”

When he’d heard the electronic lock flip over, Bucky had climbed to his feet, readjusting the tote in his hands, expression soft. With help from Natasha, he’d filled the tote with all the things Darcy liked when she was upset. He’d mentally prepared for the worst, ready for the angry, venting tirade that his love always carried in her chest. He’d prepared for a post-battle debrief.

He hadn’t prepared himself for a calm, serene and smiling Darcy Lewis.

Darcy watched confusion fill Bucky’s eyes, her hazel gaze traveling back down to the items he held in his hands. From what she could see, there was an assortment of chocolates, a pair of fluffy socks, a can of rediwhip, the latest US Weekly (with Oscar Isaac on the cover), and a voodoo doll of some kind. Her eyebrows rose toward her hairline when she looked back up at him. “... is all that for me?”

Bucky laid the tote on the bed, looking back toward her with uncertainty in his eyes. He held his hand out to her, skepticism in his tone. “I expected your meeting to go -”

“Horribly horrible with a side of infuriating?” At his soft nod, Darcy’s face broke into a wide grin, unable to keep the saccharine sweetness out of her voice. “Awww, Buck,” she said with feeling, closing the distance between them and wrapping her arms around his waist, “that’s so fucking adorable I can’t stand it.”

He could feel her smile against his lips, but none of it did enough to explain why she hadn’t arrived to their room with murder on her mind. Bucky pulled back, patting at a wild curl that had escaped her messy bun. “I got your favorite things,” he said, eyes warming as they looked down at her, “I just figured you’d need some comfort after it went bad. Obviously it didn’t go as bad as I thought.”

“As bad as we both thought,” Darcy admitted, unable to erase the smile as she blinked up at him. She rose up on her toes and kissed him again, savoring the feel of his body against hers, heart flipping at his thoughtfulness. She took a leap toward the bed, bouncing on her ass as she grabbed a box of Snocaps from the tote and tore the box open. “There were a few moments of tension but I think it ended on a good note.”

Hesitating, still trying to reconcile his expectation of a murderous Darcy with the woman who was happily smiling in his direction, Bucky crawled onto the bed, laying on his side as he watched her pop the little black-and-white chocolates into her mouth. If everything had gone well, then why was his chest still tight with trepidation? “That’s… surprising.”

“Given our track record with psychologists? Yeah. Surprising is an understatement.” Darcy’s eyes widened and she stopped chewing, her eyes instantly filling with regret. For fuck’s sake, Lewis. “Buck, I didn’t mean that.”

Masa. He felt his chest constrict at the thought of his friend. In the time since they’d returned from Wakanda, Bucky had thrown everything he had into being by Darcy and Steve’s sides, making sure they were alright. He hadn’t had time to mourn his friend, still feeling the grief like a weight in his chest, a tension between his shoulder blades. He’d been feeling it build for weeks, growing heavier and heavier.

“I know,” Bucky assured her, knowing she hadn’t meant to bring that pain to the surface. He reached out and squeezed Darcy’s knee, giving her a small, sad smile. Dr. Chaas had been an exception to the rule, but the rest of his experiences with psychologists and doctors had gone badly. Just like all of hers had gone badly, which was why he’d expected the worst. “This guy you saw -”

“Kevin.”
Bucky frowned. “What kind of a name is Kevin?”

Darcy’s eyes widened and she pointed in his direction, mumbling past her mouth of candy. “Eh sab bath zact thurth!”

He felt another tightening in his lungs when she looked at him, hazel eyes wide and dramatic, cheeks flushed as she chewed. She was gorgeous like this, lit with a fire from inside and so animated that he could watch her hands gesture for days and not get bored. He didn’t know what he’d do if he lost her. He swallowed harshly, pushing at the dark thoughts as they seemed to hover in the air around him. “But he cleared you?”

Darcy’s laugh was high pitched and just a tint manic. “Fuck no,” Darcy said after she swallowed the sweets, shaking her head, “but he’s not the only one who’s got to clear me anyway. I’ve still got Clint for my physical, Bruce for my vision, and I still have to meet with Wanda…”

Bucky nodded, watching her lips move, doing his best to hear what she was saying but struggling to focus. He’d been feeling it for a while now, like he had a tether wrapped around his waist and it was pulling him further and further away. He couldn’t explain it to himself, so he’d said nothing to Steve or Darcy. The last thing they needed was to worry about him, not after everything they’d just been through.

“… not to mention getting my dimmer switch inserted, not that I’m looking forward to having someone root around in my brain…”

Darcy saw the slight shift in Bucky’s body, the almost imperceptible flinch at her mention of the switch the science squad was close to completing. She tipped the end of the candy box up, a new handful of sweets falling into her palm. “I know you don’t like it, Buck. It’s not ideal for me either, but I’m willing to try anything if it’ll give me a little more control.”

There it was. That word. Control. One little word holding so much meaning. He’d been trying to gain control since that day on the bridge years ago, when Steve had called his name and the ties binding him had begun to slacken. He’d fought for every inch, scrambling and scraping until he could pull himself from the wreckage that Hydra had made of him. Before that day they’d controlled him - like a machine, like a tool - and he’d been powerless to stop it.

It’d taken being put in cryo and the concerted efforts of the Wakandan medical community to destroy what they’d left in his head, but even now, he could feel the soldier’s cold hand on his shoulder, waiting; something in his head that someone else had put there. It was different with Darcy and her switch, logically he knew that, but logic had little to do with the icy worry that filled his veins. The frozen feeling was all too familiar, and he reached out to grab her hand when he felt his heartbeat speed up.

Darcy’s eyes widened when Bucky reached for her. She tossed the candy aside as she climbed to her knees and scrambled closer to him. Something was wrong, she could see it in the way his pulse beat beneath the skin of his neck and in the lack of color in his cheeks. “Hey! Buck, hey, it’s okay. You’re fine. We’re fine.” His eyes were screwed closed when he nodded, but she wasn’t sure he was actually hearing her.

Her hands were steady where they cupped his cheeks, his skin suddenly feverish, and he felt the sweat as it broke out on his brow. Bucky’d reasoned away the dread in his chest as something fleeting, an emotional hangover from the loss of a friend. But this wasn’t just grief over losing Masa. This was everything, all at once.

Steve almost died.
Darcy almost died.

Masa died.

All of it had coalesced into a ball of anxiety, hot and heavy, like an anvil resting on his chest. He’d been so wrapped up in taking care of Steve and Darcy that he’d ignored the signs in his own body that telegraphed the impending panic attack.

Darcy watched his chest rise and fall rapidly as he took in gasping breath after gasping breath, his hands squeezing hers tightly, like a lifeline. With all the stress he’d been under, she should have seen this coming; they’d been focused on getting Steve back to healthy that they’d ignored themselves completely. Steve’d almost died. She’d almost died. His friend had been killed. Why hadn’t she realized how close to falling apart Bucky was?

A startling sense of déjà vu flooded through Darcy’s mind, singing up and down her arms. She lifted her hand, placed her palm to his sternum, and pressed against his chest with force. “Breathe. In and out. Good. Again. That’s it, just like that, in deeply, out slowly. Yes. Again.”

His eyes were closed tightly, nodding on reflex, following her directions. She remembered the terror of her first panic attack, that day in the med ward when she’d felt like the walls were closing in around her and she couldn’t suck enough air into her lungs. He’d been there, like an anchor, keeping her grounded. Darcy pressed her hand harder to his chest, giving him more to focus on, just like he’d done for her. She drew on his memories, from those first days when he’d been pulled from cryo, when only Masa had been able to help. She knew she was no replacement for Dr. Chaas, but she used his words and their sessions to draw him back from the edge.

“Your name is Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. You were born and raised in Brooklyn. Your mother’s name was Winifred and your father’s name was George. Your favorite color is the blue of Steve’s eyes. Your favorite song is *Blue Orchid* by Glenn Miller. Your name is Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes...”

She repeated it three times, slowly, before the tension began to drain from his body. He took in a deep, shuddering breath, then another, and another. She stayed there, watching his shoulders lift and fall, his brow beaded with sweat. The pounding of his heart rate in his ears quieted, replaced by Darcy’s soft whispers. “That’s it, Buck. You’re okay. We’re okay. Just breathe, that’s all you’ve gotta do. I’m right here. I’m here with you, not going anywhere, you just breathe. In and out.”

Darcy’s hand was warm where it pressed against his chest, her voice breaking through the fog until it was all he could hear. His eyes blinked open, staring into Darcy’s concerned hazel gaze. He let one more deep breath pass his lips before he nodded lamely in her direction. “Been a while since I had one of those.”

Relief flooding through her body, Darcy sat back on the bed, still holding his hands tightly in hers. Her tongue swept along her bottom lip, looking into his tired eyes with guilt. “I’m sorry, I should have been looking for the signs, been more observant. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own stuff, I haven’t been paying close enough attention. After the shit show with Batroc, I should have -”

“Hey,” Bucky said with a shake of his head, tugging on her hands and pulling her closer, “this isn’t on you. I’ve been feeling this weeks. I should have said something instead of ignoring it or pushing it aside.”

“I’m still sorry I didn’t see it. What the fuck good is this bond if I can’t see you, if I can’t help you feel better?”
He sighed, looking down at their entwined fingers. “I didn’t let you see it. With everything....”

“Buck.”

“No, Darcy, I need to say this. And maybe I need to hear me say it, too.” He looked back up at her, a bit of steel in the grey seriousness of his eyes. “I’m stronger with you and Steve at my side. I’m stronger because of you. You know things weren’t easy before, but since this, since you and the bond... I think you’re helping me heal in ways doctors can’t. But that doesn’t mean everything is fine, and I need to remember that.”

He reached up, tucking an errant curl behind her ear, watching as her lips parted, her breath warm against his skin. “I just wanted to be strong for both of you.”

“You are strong,” Darcy said, leaning forward so she could cradle his cheeks in her hands. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. But ignoring yourself isn’t going to help anyone, okay? If you feel like that again, like everything is dark and closing in, talk to me. Not that panic attacks aren’t the best, but I think we’d be better off avoiding them if we can.”

“Sometimes you don’t know that’s what it is,” Bucky said with a heavy sigh. “I thought it was just Masa.”

Darcy’s eyes softened as she looked at him. She’d never met the man, but she felt like she had. All those sessions in his office, all that time spent working together. If she focused hard enough, she could taste that tea he made on the back of her tongue, could feel it warm her throat as she swallowed. “I’m sorry, Buck. He was...”

Bucky nodded, squeezing her hands. “Yeah. He was.” He gazed into Darcy’s beautiful hazel, letting the cool color calm him. “I have a list of names he gave me, people he suggested for me when I came back stateside. I just never got around to it. Maybe it’s time.”

“Yeah, Buck,” she said, voice soft, “I think that sounds like a swell idea.”

Hearing the turn of phrase from her mouth - the same mouth that dropped curses like she was a bawdy sailor - made his lips turn up into a smile. Their bond was strong, their shared memories, and Bucky could point out countless ways her traits had translated to himself. When he saw something from him pass through her, it sparked warm in his chest, replacing the icy cold that’d been there moments before.

Letting the heavy moment pass, Bucky slid off the bed and dropped to his knees, shrugging at Darcy when she threw a raised eyebrow in his direction. “If we don’t get the candy off the floor, we’ll have to listen to a three-hour lecture on how hard it is to get chocolate stains out of the carpet. I like watching Steve’s mouth move, but not enough to sit through that.”

Rolling her eyes - but knowing Bucky was one-hundred percent correct about the lecture - Darcy joined him on the floor. “That furrowed brow is going to be the end of me. He’s such a fucking boy scout. Wait. Did they even have boy scouts in the 1930s?” The huffed laughter from the man at her side made her grin, even as she scoured the floor on her hands and knees to find every last one of those damned black-and-white candy pieces. She did not need a lecture from the world’s oldest boy scout.
A Home In Your Soul

Chapter Summary

Steve voices the feelings that have been building in his chest for weeks. He, Darcy and Bucky take their relationship to the next level.

Chapter Notes

As always, I'm blown away from your comments, and kudos, and the reblogs/shares on tumblr. When my fitbit buzzes, a grin climbs onto my face, knowing someone out there liked my words enough to say something. <3<3<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PageBreak

You asked me once what I am afraid of.
The answer is you. You not staying. You not fighting.
My greatest fear, even after all this war, is losing you.

It is not dying. I feel I’ve died a thousand times before this morning.
It is not you dying either, because yes I would shatter. I would splinter.
But you dying would be your choice, in a burst of fire and ruin.

But I couldn’t survive losing you to circumstance, to fear.
I’d become hollow, chest empty, gravestone written with traces of you
If something other than the stars succeeded in threatening us.

Because we have enough tragedy growing on our bones.
We have enough of an inferno raging in our hearts.
That the constellations have already started charting our story.

But I don’t tell you this. I don’t break the sunlight and make it storm.
I just tell what used to terrify me before you burrowed inside my heart.
Before I made a home in your soul.

PageBreak

"You're doing it again."

Darcy groaned, lifting the book she'd been pretending to read and covering her face with it. Steve had pointed out, several times now, that her feet were tapping out an anxious rhythm against the bed,
but she just couldn't seem to keep the nervous movement from happening. "I know, I'm sorry. I'm just... I want everything to go well."

"It will," Steve said, dropping his pencil and reaching out to squeeze Darcy's calf, giving her a soft, reassuring smile when she glanced toward him with nervous hazel eyes. He was laid out beside her, his head at the foot of the bed, his toes dug beneath the pillows next to her shoulders. "Dr. Cho's work is groundbreaking."

She sighed, giving up the charade and tossing the book aside. Darcy had read the same line over and over, as her mind kept wandering toward the reason behind the tension in her stomach, hoping for good news. "I know. Tony said she's healed all of you guys at one point or another. And, you know, made a whole new being in that cradle of hers."

Steve watched her face, seeing the worry as it turned her lips down at the corners. It was clear the bond she and Bucky shared was keeping her at a higher level of anxiety. She knew intimately how Bucky truly felt, so it made sense. That she cared so much settled something solidly in Steve’s chest. Her love for his best friend was staggering in its fierceness and strength. "If it's possible, she'll be able to do it, Darce. It's going to work."

Darcy let her head fall back onto the mound of pillows, her eyes falling closed, the warmth from Steve's hand on her leg keeping from fidgeting like it wanted. "I've never been that great at waiting for things to happen. Don't know if you've figured out that bit about me yet."

Steve's smile tilted into something more like a smirk, blue eyes crinkling at the edges. "You know, I might've noticed it a time or two."

"Mmmhmm," Darcy hummed as she glanced at him, the humor in his expression warming her and chasing a bit of her unease away. She heaved a large, dramatic sigh and rolled off the bed, padding barefoot across the floor before closing the door to the bathroom behind her.

Steve's eyes followed her as she moved, then glanced down at the sketch he'd been working on. Darcy was detailed in the strokes of his pencil; the curve of her jaw, her teeth worrying her lip as she tried to focus on the words in her book, her brows curling with the slightest bit of exasperation, dark eyelashes and soft cheeks. Despite how much he tried, he was never satisfied, unable to capture the life that lit her eyes, glowing and bright. It was impossible to put that much truth onto the page.

But that was Darcy. She was the most alive person that Steve had ever met. She threw herself into everything, barreling through life, clumsy and headstrong. Even the most skilled artists would have trouble getting her features right and doing her energy justice. She could fill a room, just by being in it.

SpeaKing of rooms...

Steve frowned, climbing to his feet, casting a glance around his and Bucky's room. Over the past couple of weeks, Darcy had been staying in their room every night, and it only took a moment for him to find signs of her hidden amongst his and Bucky's things; her laptop was next to Bucky's paperbacks on the desk, sitting on top of data that she was compiling for Tony; an extra pair of her glasses rested next to the alarm clock on his nightstand; a picture of her and Clint, sweaty after a run, her face contorted in feigned pain as Barton stood next to her, a hand pressed to his chest as he laughed; a single sock with the phrase 'darn it all to heck' surrounded by knitting needles was on the floor, it's partner nowhere to be seen.

He and Bucky had been fine fitting into the space, years of practice living side by side in small confines, but with the addition of Darcy, things were getting tight. Steve had been considering
suggesting they move to a larger room, possibly even off base, but with everything going on - Darcy's training, Bucky's appointments with Dr. Cho, his constant debriefs as they searched for what was left of Thanos' army - it'd fallen to the wayside. He was able to see moving somewhere with more space was a more immediate need now, and when the bathroom door opened, he nodded toward the bed with a frown. "I don't think you moving in here is going to work."

Darcy froze at his words, hands stilling where they'd been wiping on her jeans. Steve wasn't looking at her but was instead glaring down at the bed, and she felt his words like a punch to the gut. "W-what?"

"You, me, and Bucky. I've been thinking about it, and it's just... we need space."

Oh.

Darcy felt her heart plummet toward her feet, the air leaving her chest in a rush. After Steve had gotten released from the medical ward, the three of them had settled into a familiar pattern. It'd felt good, and she'd been happy, but she realized part of her had been waiting for this particular shoe to drop. Everything had been so up in the air after he'd been hurt, so uncertain, and Darcy'd been unable to quiet the voice at the back of her mind whispering that once everything evened out, it would only be a matter of time before Steve regretted his suggestion of them living together.

Now that it was here, now that he'd come to his senses, Darcy couldn't think of anything except how much it hurt. Steve kept his back toward her - he doesn't even want to look at me - and she nodded where he couldn't see, accepting what was being said and compartmentalizing her feelings. She shrugged her shoulders, steel doors shutting around her heart, burying the hurt behind indifference. This wasn't the first time that she'd been happy only to have it ripped away from her, and Darcy had years of practice tempering her disappointment. She'd gotten comfortable too soon, and it was her own fault for assuming that what she had with Steve was more solid than it really was.

"Right. I get it. You’ve just had a near death experience, and that’s enough to make anyone say things without really thinking them out."

Steve frowned, turning to Darcy with confusion in his eyes. The way she was talking, mechanical and flippan at the same time, didn’t sit right with him and he wasn’t sure why. She was looking down at the carpet, pink tinted high on her cheeks, avoiding his gaze, and he didn't understand the tension she was suddenly holding in her shoulders. “Darcy, what-”

“- and things are strained because you’re not at your best and that’s frustrating for you, and I get it -”

What did she get? She kept repeating that phrase, over and over, and Steve very much did not get what she was talking about. His eyes widened suddenly when he realized how Darcy’d taken his comment, taking a step closer to her, shaking his head. “Darcy, no, that's not -”

“- so I get it, that this, with me, here, isn’t what you want -”

“Darcy!”

Hazel eyes widened when Steve used his Captain’s voice on her, Darcy’s body reacting immediately to his tone, her mouth snapping shut. Steve put both hands on his hips, sighing as he shook his head, chuckling to himself softly. “It’s hard to get a word in edgewise with you, you know that?” Steve watched her gather herself, her chin jutting out defensively, and he saw her eyes steel themselves, lighting with the first hint of indignation.

It was beautiful, watching her walls snap back in place around her. Steve knew he shouldn’t be
amazed by her ability to shield her feelings, but he was. In the time he’d known Darcy Lewis, she’d been equal parts frustrating and captivating; he was charmed by the way she threw herself into her emotions. If she was angry, she was filled with fury. If she was sad, she was wrapped in sorrow and melancholy. Darcy didn’t know how to do anything halfway, and Steve found himself bewitched by her. It’d snuck up on him, slow and steady, and as Darcy’s mouth opened, beautiful hazel eyes lit with righteous fire, Steve knew he was already doomed.

Darcy’s eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring as she took in a deep breath. “Sorry if I’m too much for you, Rogers. You might be used to people who bow down at your stupidly hot feet, but I’m not that kind of person, and if you can’t handle –”

Steve crossed the floor in the space of a second, hands wrapping around Darcy’s upper arms, successfully stopping the diatribe that’d been dripping from her tongue. He watched surprise light her features, pupils blowing wider, her lips parting. He knew better than to try and talk over her, having learned quickly that it was an impossible feat, so he was forced to enact a different strategy. “Will you, please, let me say what I need to say, preferably without interrupting?”

He’d spoken softly, the complete opposite of what she’d expected, and it caught Darcy off guard. Steve was close enough that she could smell him, the scent of cedar and cotton that’d become familiar to her, his eyes filled with such focus. When he was quiet, looking at her expectantly, she realized she hadn’t answered him. Not trusting her voice, Darcy nodded softly, feeling the warmth of his hands through the thin sleeves of her shirt.

Her hair slid across her shoulders as she nodded and Steve smiled softly, the words on his tongue a voice to thoughts he’d had for days, trying to find the right way to put them so nothing was misunderstood.

“You’re right.” Steve couldn’t help the smile that grew on his lips when he saw something like shock rocket into Darcy’s eyes, followed quickly by confusion, tinged with uncertainty. “Near death experiences can make people do and say a lot of things that they’re not sure of, but that’s not…” Steve sighed, reaching up to push her hair back over one shoulder, his hand running softly along the exposed skin of her collarbone.

“I saw you. You and Bucky. I saw your faces, and your eyes, and heard your voices. You were the last things I thought of before it all went black. I thought about you, and all the things I’d never get to say, all the things I’d never get to do, and I realized how much I wanted to say and do those things. I could lie and say I’d stopped myself before because I wasn’t sure, but that wasn’t it. It was fear. I’ve loved exactly two people in my life, and I lost both of them, one after the other, and adding someone else to that list terrifies me. By some miracle, I got Bucky back, but opening my heart up like that again…”

Steve’s eyes watched her pulse speed under the skin of her neck, beating heavily. Her chest lifted and fell as she breathed. Darcy’s lips looked dry, and when his gaze finally lifted and connected with hers, careful hesitation was evident in the hazel depths. She was guarding herself so solidly, so cautiously, and Steve knew he needed to get to the point. “You were there, in my thoughts, and I regretted the things I’d never got to do and say, and I don’t want any regrets, not if I can help them, and if this is my second chance, I’m going to take it.”

Her heart had frozen at his words, trying to process them all as she blinked up into his gorgeous blue eyes, and he was so close and looking at her with such emotion that her mouth opened before she’d considered what would fall out of it.

“I think technically this is your fourth or fifth chance,” Darcy breathed, immediately hating herself for saying anything. The beautiful man in front of her had just admitted her face had been one of the
last things he’d thought of, and she’d just corrected how many times he’d almost died.

Steve laughed, the sound warm and hued with relief. It was such a completely and utterly Darcy thing to say that his chest ached with overwhelming affection, cradling her face in his hands. She was so good at that - breaking the tension, bringing lightness to a heavy situation - and it was one of the reasons -

“I love you, Darcy. I do. I love you.” He watched the recognition light into her eyes at his words, following the disbelief as it slowly shifted to something else. He wanted to chase the doubt from her mind. “I’m not afraid of loving you anymore, Darcy, I’m only afraid of going another day without you knowing that I do.”

Darcy swallowed harshly, heart in her throat, trying to queue her thoughts in a straight line so she could work through them quickly and wasn’t left staring at him with a dumb expression on her face. “W-why?” When Steve opened his mouth, Darcy shook her head and powered through before he could answer. “No, no, I’m not… I’m not looking for a list of reasons you love me, that’s not… I’m just… are you sure? Like, really sure? Because if you’re not…”

Her doubt was swallowed by his lips as Steve closed the distance between their mouths, his hands on her cheeks acting as an anchor, keeping her grounded. It took a monumental amount of strength, but Darcy broke contact, pulling back enough that she could look in his eyes, searching their stunning depths for any shred of doubt or uncertainty. “Are you really really sure?”

Rolling his eyes, Steve leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers, chuckling softly. “Shut up,” he said, using a phrase Darcy enjoyed so much, smiling against her lips.

Her mind supplied endless retorts - ‘aye aye, captain’ or ‘captain’s orders’ or ‘sir, yes sir’ - but all Darcy could manage was a weak ‘okay’ before she crashed against his mouth like a starving, hungry thing. He only had the hint of her body freezing for a split second before she jumped, legs wrapping around his waist. Steve caught her easily, one hand cupping her ass, the other one curling around her shoulders and holding tight as he kissed her fiercely.

The bed - the piece of furniture that’d sparked the entire conversation, the one Steve thought was too small for the three of them - was now an active participant as the blond navigated them toward it, his eyes closed and his mouth busy feeding at Darcy’s lips. It was too easy to lay her back on it, feeling her gasp when his weight pressed against her. The room felt like it was electrically charged, heavy, and the importance of this moment wasn’t lost on him.

“Say it again,” Darcy breathed against his mouth, fingernails digging into his back and shoulders as he ground himself down into her, the request ending in a sigh.

Steve’s lips ghosted over her cheeks, her forehead, both of her eyelids, pressing kisses to her skin as he repeated “I love you” over and over. Now that he’d said it aloud, it wasn’t enough that she heard it, Steve wanted her to feel it, too. He wanted to shatter whatever doubt might still be hidden in her chest. Darcy guarded herself so fiercely and he knew, somewhere in all the insecurities she carried, was a careful thread of disbelief, something that would fester, waiting for this to burst like so many other hopes she’d had. He wanted to erase those doubts from her mind.

Darcy felt each admission of love like an electric shock, singing up and down her spine, body feeling like a live wire. Steve was kissing her with reverence, with care, and she felt the first tear leak out of her eye and slide into her hair as he peppered kisses along her jaw. She closed her eyes tight, begging the universe to let this be real, unsure if she’d survive losing this, losing him. Her entire life had been a struggle, a disappointment, fighting until she was exhausted and broken, but if it’d led here, if it’d led to this man and Bucky, all the pain was worth it.
She pulled his face toward hers with both hands, lips seeking his, her thighs squeezing his hips tighter, taking a sharp inhale of breath when she could feel him pressed against her through the thin fabric of her sleep shorts. “Steve.”

When she rolled them, Steve felt his heart jump in his chest, his skin heating with warmth, the pool of desire low in his body getting deeper. Darcy’s hair was like a curtain around his head, and he felt her body shudder on top of his, then felt something wet hit his cheek.

Eyes fluttering open, Steve could see the tears slipping down her cheeks, feeling the droplets, hearing her involuntary sniffle. A swell of affection crashed over him, and he reached up to wipe away the tears with his thumbs, looking into the watery hazel of her eyes. “Oh, sweetheart, don’t cry.”

“Shut up, I’m not crying, you’re crying,” Darcy said, cheeks heating with embarrassment as well as arousal. Steve laughed, fingers sweeping against her skin, and Darcy smiled, feeling happiness fill her body at the sound. She pressed both hands to his chest, fingers splaying, unable to look away from his eyes. “Say it again,” she asked, wanting to see it, wanting to watch his lips form the words.

“I love you,” he repeated, watching her eyes refill with tears, even as she smiled down at him, sniffling. She laughed, forcing more tears to slide down her skin, before bending forward to capture his mouth again. The happy kiss was soft, careful, but it soon grew into something heavier, weighted with meaning. Steve’s fingers sifted through her hair, curling into the strands, tugging the smallest amount, rewarded by a moan that passed from her lips to his.

Darcy’s tongue swept across the seam of Steve’s mouth, greedy and passionate, and the sound of desire was followed by another, then another, her body moving against his on instinct. With Bucky’s memories, she knew how Steve liked to be touched, pressing her lips to the skin behind his ear, taking a deep breath of him into her lungs before pulling her earlobe between her teeth.

Her breath was hot, her skin soft, and when Darcy’s teeth bit down softly, Steve’s hips thrust upward as a reflex, his hands finding her hips and holding on tightly as he bucked into her.

A whispered fuck was not enough to explain what he was doing to her, but it was the only word that fell from Darcy’s mouth as she pulled back, his lips crashing against hers with biting and teeth and tongue. Her body felt like a rubber band, taut and stretched, and everywhere their skin touched was on fire.

Darcy sat up, grabbing the hem of her skirt and pulling it over her head in one fluid motion, tossing it over the edge of the bed. Steve was struck dumb at the sight, the deep maroon color of the lace against all that white skin stealing the breath from his lungs. She was flushed pink, gorgeous, and he looked up at her with stars in his eyes.

Both of their heads swiveled toward the door when they heard the electronic lock flip over. Bucky pushed his way inside the room, eyes cast down at the phone in his hand. Steve watched his best friend’s face when he looked up. Bucky’s expression shifted from shock, to surprise, to arousal, all within the span of three seconds.

The scene before Bucky was like a work of art. Darcy, with her dark curls and porcelain skin, wearing sleep shorts and lace, lips parted and eyes drowning in heat, straddled Steve. Steve was beneath her, his hair messy, his lips plump and swollen so beautifully. There was a heft of emotion in the air, and Bucky felt it pressing down on him. He inhaled sharply, the phone in his hand forgotten.

He tried to speak, he really did, but for all his charm and charisma, Bucky could find absolutely no words that would do his desire justice. When Steve and Darcy’s hands swept toward him in unison, waiting, wanting, his feet moved of their own accord, phone dropping to the carpet, toeing his shoes
off before he climbed onto the bed, taking their waiting hands.

Darcy tugged Buck forward, lips finding his, feeling the shiver that went through his body at her touch. She turned into him, both hands trailing along his jaw and beyond, sifting through his hair and gripping hard, pulling just the way he liked. She cried out when Steve’s hips thrust up into her again, breaking away from Bucky’s mouth, turning to see the hunger unhidden and bare on the blond’s face. His pupils were wide and when his hips moved into her again, Darcy couldn’t help the way her eyes fluttered closed, fingers tightening their hold on Bucky’s hair.

Bucky was strained uncomfortably against his jeans, watching the focus and want on Steve’s face as he peered up at Darcy like she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. It was gorgeous, almost religious in its adoration, and Bucky knew something had shifted between the two. His ecstatic thought of finally was quickly replaced with hunger when Steve’s hands balled into the front of his shirt and pulled Bucky’s mouth roughly toward his.

As Bucky and Steve kissed - stunning, beautiful, brilliantly mesmerizing - Darcy’s fingers lifted the hem of Bucky’s shirt up and over his head, hearing an echo of disappointment from both boys when their mouths were separated. Letting his shirt join hers on the floor, Darcy pressed her lips to Bucky’s back and shoulders, her fingernails running down Steve’s chest and abs, feeling him shudder beneath her.

Steve’s body was on fire where it was pressed against them, his skin sliding against theirs. When Bucky and Darcy both tugged at his shirt, it only took second to toss it aside, followed quickly by his sweatpants and Bucky’s jeans. Shifting on the bed, Darcy sat herself back against the pillows, pulling Bucky until his back was cradled between her legs, fingers rising along his neck and into his hair, tugging so she could set her lips against the side of his neck.

He was in awe at the vision in front of him, and Steve knew it was telegraphed on his face. Bucky’s eyes were hooded, the slate grey darkened to charcoal, watching as Steve’s fingers hooked into the waistband of his boxer briefs and tugged them down over his hips, sighing audibly when his cock, hard and thick, was finally exposed.

Darcy’s teeth bit into the meat of Bucky’s shoulder, a reflexive reaction as she looked down at the length of his body to see Steve sit back, cobalt eyes drinking everything in. She watched his breath leave him in a sharp exhale, Steve’s tongue sweeping over his lips, and when Bucky shifted against her, the lace rubbing just so against her hardened nipples, her body trembled.

Bucky swallowed harshly, watching as Steve dipped his head, the blond deliberately fanning his breath over his swollen, untouched length. When his blue gaze swung upward, Bucky watched the small, slanted grin that turned Steve’s lips. “Darcy, sweetheart,” Steve hummed, drawing her gaze, watching it darken, “hold him still for me, love.”

Wrapping an arm around Bucky’s chest, her thighs tightening their grip of his hips, Darcy was all too willing to obey Steve, watching as his fingers circled the base of Bucky’s cock, squeezing. Bucky squirmed under the ministration, his heart racing, feeling the warmth of Darcy at his back, his eyes following Steve’s mouth.

Steve could already feel the shallow thrusts of Bucky’s hips, knowing that his love had never enjoyed being teased. He worked his hand up and down Bucky’s cock, lips parted, watching Bucky grow more and more impatient. Every writhe of Bucky’s body forced a moan from Darcy’s lips, and he knew she was rubbing herself against Buck’s back, drawing her closer, higher.

Bucky’s head fell back against Darcy’s shoulder, his eyes screwed closed as an impatient keen rumbled from his throat. Steve climbed up the length of Bucky’s body, capturing the other man’s
lips, tongue dipping and tasting, his hand continuing its rise and fall.

Darcy’s foot lifted, toes resting on Steve’s shoulder, and she gave him a glare darkened with heat. She wanted to see his lips stretch around Bucky, and if she was impatient for it, she couldn’t even imagine how wound up the man between them was. She pushed Steve softly, sending him back down Bucky’s body, catching the knowing glint in his eye as he purposefully let Bucky’s cock bump against his chin. The pained gasp from Bucky was wild, his head lifting from Darcy’s shoulder, looking at Steve with wide eyes.

Both Darcy and Bucky made noises when Steve positioned himself on his knees, tongue darting out to lick the bead of wetness on Bucky’s tip, the sounds of their relief singing like music. His mouth ran up and down the velvet skin, years of knowledge at his disposal, and Steve knew just where to flick with his tongue to make Bucky thrust upward involuntarily, Darcy’s arm keeping him still.

She was going to come apart just by watching them, even though neither of them had even touched her yet. Steve was making a show of it, his ass sticking in the air as he took in as much of Bucky as he could, cheeks hollowing as he worked up and down, large hand squeezing tightly at the base of Bucky, lips sliding to meet his fingers then starting the circuit over. Darcy vibrated with arousal when Steve let Bucky slip from his lips, tongue running along the whole length as he kept his eyes fixed on hers. It was erotic, and filthy, and her moan joined Bucky’s as he shifted against her again.

Eyes fluttering open, Bucky looked down to watch Steve press lips to his lower stomach, pink tongue running over the dips and valleys of his abs, tracing around one nipple and then the other. Bucky happily accepted Steve’s mouth, hands lifting to pull the hairs at the nape of Steve’s neck, exposing the long column of his throat. He bit and sucked at Steve’s skin, knowing he would leave marks, ecstatic at the idea that someone would see his marks on Steve, feeling the swell of blissful possessiveness.

Darcy sighed against Steve’s mouth when the blond straddled Bucky’s hips, their cocks rubbing against each other, Steve’s lips swallowing her moan of pleasure. She was shaking, her body overwhelmed, her brain having trouble processing the amount of arousal surging through her. Bucky was caught between their bodies, writhing, grinding his hips upward into Steve, every movement like a pulse against her. “Fuck,” she gasped into Steve’s mouth, sucking his lower lip into her mouth and biting softly.

“I want, mmm, want him in you,” Steve breathed, Bucky’s tongue tracing along his collarbone.

“And you in him,” Darcy added, the spark that lit up Steve’s eyes clenching things low in her body.

“Yes, that, yes.” The idea alone was enough to make Bucky’s eyes roll back in his head, and when Steve lifted himself, Bucky turned, crashing his body against Darcy’s with an insatiable need. The lace of her bra rubbed against his chest and he dipped his head, sliding down to pull one nipple into his mouth through the fabric.

A litany of curses fell past Darcy’s lips as Bucky pulled at the lace, devouring each bit of skin as it was exposed, bunching the garment under the mounds of her breasts, forcing them higher. She lifted her hips and he pulled at the sleep shorts she wore, fingers sliding over the soft skin of her legs before tossing them aside. Her bottoms matched the bra - maroon lace, stretched over her curves in the best way - and he felt his mouth go dry at the sight of her.

When Bucky’s fingers hooked into the waistband, Darcy bit her lip, watching him as he lowered them down her body, eyes drinking in every inch of her, until she was treated with the sight of her naked and gorgeous against the pillows. “You’re fucking stunning, doll,” he breathed, knowing the truth of it filled his eyes.
He laid himself on top of her, recapturing her lips. Darcy hooked one leg around his hip, pulling him closer, both of them sighing when he pressed against her, impossibly warm and hard. Darcy’s sigh became a moan when Bucky slipped a hand between their bodies, one finger sliding through her folds. “You wet for me, Darcy?” She shuddered beneath him when he brought his finger to his mouth, tongue darting out. “Taste so good.”

It was Bucky’s turn to quake as he felt the other man slot against his back, Steve’s length pressing against his ass. “Is she sweet?” Steve asked, resting his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. When Bucky lifted his hand, Steve sucked the entire digit into his mouth, tongue circling, watching the flush that filled Darcy’s cheeks as a look of pleasureable torment crossed her face.

Darcy’s head fell back against the bed, her breath already hitching, certain she was going to shatter into a million pieces before they even got to the good stuff. Her back arched, a sob passing her lips when Bucky slid a finger into her, sudden and swift. Her hands clawed at his shoulders, wide eyes recognizing the dark rapture in his. She’d wanted this, wanted him, more than anything. Between him and Steve, she was completely and utterly helpless.

Bucky froze at first testing press of Steve’s finger. While Bucky had been busy keeping Darcy on edge, Steve’d grabbed the bottle of slick out of the night stand, coating himself. He applied more pressure, hearing Bucky’s heavy pant as he pushed past the tight ring of muscle. Darcy made a sound of surprise when Bucky added another finger, curling into her warmth and forcing another curse from her lips.

“Beautiful,” Steve hummed, looking at Darcy over Bucky’s shoulder, her curves soft, her cheeks pink, lips swollen. He could tell Bucky was treating her right, making her gasp and mewl, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever seen something as radiant. He took Bucky’s cue and joined his finger with another, pushing slowly, making sure Bucky was comfortable.

“A—another finger,” Darcy gasped, fingernails digging into Bucky’s biceps, eyes wide and pleading, “then you.”

When Darcy ground herself onto his hand, Bucky’s head felt back against Steve’s shoulder. “Same, punk. Wanna feel you.”

Steve was already wound so tight after watching them move against each other that he didn’t need to be told twice. He added a third finger, feeling Bucky’s body finally release, making sure he was coated and ready. Steve wrapped his hand around himself, spreading the slick, positioning himself.

Darcy watched the emotion flit across Bucky’s face, something more than lust in his expression, deeper than happiness. Love. It was love, truthful and honest. Love for her. Love for Steve. Love for them both, working together to tear him apart. It was delicate, important, and seeing it on his face stole the breath from her lungs. “James...”

“I know,” Bucky said, hand cupping her cheek, leaning down to press his lips to hers. It was more than a kiss. It was an admission, a novel detailing everything they knew, all they felt, the years and memories between them leading to this, to the three of them together. He moved forward slowly, torturously, every inch deliberate, pushing into Darcy, unable to do anything but breathe as their bodies became one.

They were beautiful, and for a moment, Steve was awestruck at the sight of them. He knew how long Bucky and Darcy had waited for this, waiting for him to come to the decision on his own, giving him the time he needed to accept everything. They’d waited for him, and looking down into Darcy’s face, eyes closed in ecstasy, Steve was willing to spend the rest of his life earning them.
Darcy took a shuddering breath inward, hazel eyes opening, looking up at Bucky. His eyes were closed, lips parted, a look of rapture on his face. Darcy blinked slowly, focusing on the cobalt of Steve’s eyes over Bucky’s shoulder. She lifted her arm, wrapping her fingers around the back of Steve’s neck. “Steve…”

The sound of his name falling from her lips moved him to action. Steve pushed forward, carefully, feeling Bucky’s body go rigid at the first stretch. A second later the other man’s muscles relaxed, still so tight around Steve but accepting, and he felt the tremor move through Bucky’s body, forcing a sound from Darcy’s throat as Bucky was pressed further and deeper into her.

Bucky was trapped between them, the feeling of Darcy’s slick walls around him, his body stretched and full of Steve, overwhelmed and on a razor’s edge. It didn’t take them long to find a rhythm. Every buck of Steve’s hips meant a thrust of Bucky’s into Darcy’s, a chain of arousal that filled the room with their heavy sighs and desperate gasps. None of them knew how long they’d been like that, crashing against each others bodies like it’d been choreographed for millennia, but it felt like forever and like no time at all.

She wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be able to keep from falling apart. Darcy was already at a ten, the gravity and knowledge of the moment like a weight in her chest, and looking up to see both of their faces so raw and tender had her crying out, clinging to Bucky as his hips pumped into hers, over and over.

Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky’s chest, thrusting forward, teeth biting hard enough into his shoulder that he heard Bucky hiss in pain. He was well aware how much Bucky could handle, leaving marks in his lover’s skin that would ache and stretch for days, was just another layer he craved. Steve snapped his hips, drawing a shout from Bucky, hearing it echoed from Darcy.

“You both… feels so good… I’m close… gonna…” Bucky was babbling, affected and wild, surrounded by them, feeling them on his skin, their taste still in his mouth, all his senses drowning. His thrusts became more stuttered, frantic, and his fingers dug into Darcy’s hips, pulling her closer, hearing her gasp his name.

Steve slowed his movements, letting Bucky take control of the tempo. His arm around Bucky’s chest tightened, a sheen of sweat on their skin, his words strong and insistent. “That’s it, Buck. Show her how good she feels. Beautiful, spread out below you, wrapped around you so deep. Make her scream for me.”

Darcy felt every word from Steve’s mouth into Bucky’s ear, crying out as he slammed into her, unable to do anything more than hold onto him as he thrust, chasing his release. Just when she thought it’d be too much, when the line between pleasure and pain was blurring, Bucky shouted her name, hips moving into her shallowly, his face going slack as he came.

The sound of his heartbeat throbbed in Bucky’s ears, matching the white noise that had taken over his thoughts, his breathing labored as he returned to earth. When Darcy squirmed beneath him, his grip on her hips tightened again, attempting to hold her still. “Don’t… I need… “ He heard Steve’s dark chuckle in his ear, writhing backward, still feeling the stretch and pressure of Steve’s cock. “Ah ah, too much, Steve…” He moaned as Steve shifted backward, slipping out of him, the feeling of loss sharp and immediate.

The sweat on Bucky’s skin was slick and Darcy’s fingers ran up and down his arms, nails digging in just enough. The sounds of a package opening flowed to her ear, but she was still keyed into Bucky’s release that it meant nothing to her. When Bucky shifted and fell to his side on the bed next to her, Darcy barely had a chance to mourn the loss of contact before Steve was there, forcing a scream from her chest when he slid his hands under her legs, jerked her forward, and buried his face.
against her. “Fuck!”

Steve’s tongue lapped at her, tasting both her and Bucky, and the grip she had on his hair was pulled just tight enough to make him hum. There was a flurry of words coming from her, but Steve was focused on breaking her apart, wanting to feel her walls flutter around his fingers and tongue. She was already close, judging by the way her body danced against him, but he didn’t want her close, he wanted her there.

Back arching off the bed, Darcy cried out when he curled two fingers into her, his tongue pressing over her clit again and again, until she was left trembling, shivering, so close that she could taste it on the back of her tongue. “Fuck, yes, shit, I’m gonna come fuckrightthereohgodohgod, Steve! Yes! Steve! Yes!”

She went silent, her body tensing, and Steve licked her from top to bottom once more before she came, taking in a gasping breath as she twitched, the hands she’d had fisted in the comforter releasing. Steve gave her no break, desperate and leaking and aching, and he climbed up her body, giving her no warning before he buried himself into her as deep as he could.

Darcy felt lightheaded, like she was floating, still riding the high of her orgasm, her heart racing like she’d just run a marathon. Every buck of his hips forced another tremor through her body, every bit of friction kept her teetering on the edge. Steve’s hand ghosted over her ass, getting a different angle, hitting her in all new spots as he hooked her leg around his waist. He was focused, determined, face lit with frenzy, a noise like a growl building in his chest as he crashed into her faster.

“OmgohgodohgodohgodohgodStevefuckyesSteve!” The weight of Darcy’s chest bounced with each drive forward, her bra still pushing her breasts high, and she cried out when Bucky’s warm hand palmed her, rolling one of her nipples between his fingers. She turned her head, looking into his grey eyes, which were sated and satisfied. When Steve hit a new pace, Darcy took in a heaving breath, not sure if it was another orgasm or just a continuation of the previous one that had never really ended.

Feeling Darcy’s walls convulse around him sent Steve over the edge, pushing into her with one last, deep thrust before he came. His shout was something baser, more primal, and he did his best to breathe past the racing of his heart, head hanging heavily as he held himself above her. When his arms started to shake with fatigue, Steve fell to the bed on the other side of Darcy, both of them groaning as they disconnected. He slipped the condom off, falling back against the bed with a sigh.

Darcy was panting, hand pressed to her chest, her body already aching in the best ways. She wouldn’t be surprised if her hips were colored with matching bruises from both of their hands. Just knowing that it was a possibility thumped satisfaction through her body, filling her with warmth. When her breath caught on the way in, she realized tears were sliding from her eyes, slipping down her skin and into her hair. She was shaking, trembling, and it seemed both Bucky and Steve realized it at the same time, scooting closer and gathering her into the circle of their arms.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Steve whispered, fingertips running along her eyelashes, pressing a kiss to her shoulder, hearing her breath hitch, “it’s okay.”

“Did we…” Bucky’s arm thrown across her stomach hugged her tighter, “we didn’t hurt you?”

She laughed, forcing more tears free, unable to keep from shivering, even as her shoulders shook with giggles. “No, no, I’m not… I promise I’ve never done this before.” She felt Steve go still on her left side and turned her head to look at him.

His eyes were wide, a look of worry on his face. “You mean, you’re a, or you were a -”
Both Bucky and Darcy erupted in laughter, Darcy’s lilting with giggles, and she rolled onto her side toward Steve, cupping his cheek in her palm. “Oh, fuck, no, you’re fucking adorable. I meant I’ve never cried after sex before,” she explained, seeing a wave of relief crash behind his eyes, quickly followed by a pink flush building in his face.

“None of us came into this as blushing virgins,” Bucky said, fitting himself against Darcy’s back, knowing they needed to clean up but not wanting to move and disrupt the afterglow, “but you’ve definitely got the blushing part down, punk.”

“You know, I was a pretty innocent kid before you decided to corrupt me,” Steve groused, Darcy’s thumb tracing soft lines over his cheekbone.

“You regretting it?”

“Not for a fucking minute,” Steve answered, enjoying the slight burst of heat that rose into Darcy’s eyes. He didn’t curse much - though he knew plenty considering his life in Brooklyn and then in the army - but he liked the way Darcy reacted to the words. Maybe he’d have to do it more often. A lot more often. As he looked into both of their faces from inches away, he could already feel his body reacting, desire pooling anew in his belly.

Darcy leaned toward Steve, pressing her lips to his. She could taste herself and Bucky in his mouth and she hummed happily, feeling Bucky bury his face in her hair and take a deep breath in.

“We should clean up,” Bucky sighed from somewhere in her mass of curls.

“Think the shower’s big enough for all of us?”

Darcy grinned brightly at Steve. “Only one way to find out.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm stupid happy with this chapter. You don't know how long I waited for this to happen, and it's just a relief to quench the slow burn, getting to the relief so the real relationship work can start.

For other musically inclined people such as myself, I felt this song went a long way to improve the scene's atmosphere as I wrote it.

The Words - Christina Perri

All of the lights land on you
The rest of the world fades from view
And all of the love I see
Please please say you feel it too
And all of the noise I hear inside
Restless and loud, unspoken and wild
And all that you need to say
To make it all go away
Is that you feel the same way too

And I know
The scariest part is letting go
’Cause love is a ghost you can't control
I promise you the truth can't hurt us now
So let the words slip out of your mouth

And all of the steps that led me to you
And all of the hell I had to walk through
But I wouldn't trade a day for the chance to say
My love, I'm in love with you

And I know
The scariest part is letting go
'Cause love is a ghost you can't control
I promise you the truth can't hurt us now
So let the words slip out of your mouth

I know that we're both afraid
We've both made the same mistakes
An open heart is an open wound to you
And in the wind of a heavy choice
Love has a quiet voice
Still your mind, now I'm yours to choose

And I know
The scariest part is letting go.
Let my love be the light that guides you home

And I know
The scariest part is letting go.
'Cause love is a ghost you can't control
I promise you the truth can't hurt us now
So let the words slip out of your mouth
Here's To The Nights

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy and Steve celebrate Thanksgiving with the Barton/Romanoff family.

Chapter Notes

This whole chapter was just a joy to write. I loved getting to see how the Barton/Romanoff household works, and getting to see Clint and Nat with their kids? Amazing. I hope you all love it as much as I do! Welcome to what I've been calling A Very Barton Thanksgiving, which also happens to be the longest chapter yet, which puts this little bit of wording over 200K. *is ded*

And all those comments/kudos/shares on tumblr and messages!? 

<3 *HEART EYES* <3

Page Break

Here's to the nights
That turned into mornings
With the friends
That turned into family

Darcy let out the breath she’d been holding, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "I don't think I made a great first impression the last time I was here."

Bucky's gloved knuckles rapped quickly on the door to the large farmhouse, taking a step back to stand next to Darcy, seeing her breath fan in the winter air. "Oh? You mean the last time you were here? That time when you died?"

"Almost died," Steve corrected, lips quirking up as both Bucky and Darcy turned to look at him, Darcy's gaze appreciative, Bucky's amused.

"Did you ever think that maybe I just wanted to get another stamp on your 'Almost Dead' punch card? 'Six almost deaths and your seventh one is free'?" Darcy was rewarded with vindication when she heard Steve snort with laughter behind her left shoulder. She threw Bucky a shit-eating grin as she reached back to wrap her arm around Steve's waist, his arm easily spanning across her back, his fingers digging into Bucky's shoulder on her other side.
"Laura's pretty used to strange by now," Steve said with a smile, feeling Darcy snuggle further under his arm. It was cold on the porch and all of them were piled in layers, scarves, hats, and gloves; it hadn't snowed in the past week, but it was threatening now, the sky cast in hues of grey, reminding him so much of Bucky's eyes that he had to look over at his best friend and mentally compare them.

Bucky's eyes won.

"Were you almost dying the first time you met her?"

Steve thought back to the first time the team had learned about Laura Barton and the secret family Clint had hidden from all of them except Natasha. It'd been after South Africa, when Wanda's powers had dug into their minds, pulling forward their dreams, their fears, rattling the team in a multitude of ways. They'd all been on shaky ground, still dealing with the aftermath, and the normalcy of the Barton home had centered them all, allowing them to regather their strength and plan their next steps. "I don't think any of us were doing that well the first time."

Darcy glanced over at Steve, seeing the ghosts flutter behind the cerulean she loved so much. She hadn't meant to bring up dark thoughts, and she opened her mouth, ready to say something she hoped would lift his spirits, when she was interrupted by the door being pulled open. Her immediate thought was 'those are Clint's eyes' as she smiled at the blonde girl standing in the doorway.

"Daddy says you can tell me what color I am on the inside. I'm Lila. My brother says I'm probably brown on the inside, but I think I'm pink. Am I pink?"

Eyes widening, Darcy blinked at Lila, words failing her. "Uh…"

"Lila Rose, at least let them get in the house before you start pestering them with invasive questions. Have we taught you nothing?" Clint wrapped his arms around his daughter’s stomach and lifted her over his shoulder, her squeal of delight echoing in the hallway. “Sorry, we’re still working on manners. Come in, come in.” Taking a step further inside, Clint welcomed them with a wave of his arm, beckoning them inside. He grunted as he bent to put Lila back on her feet, pushing her toward the living room.

Darcy smirked as it took a second for Clint to straighten his back, hearing his groan of protest at the movement. Overwhelmed by everything, she moved further into the hallway, peeling off her scarf and gloves as her focus was pulled in a million different directions. The house was warm, both literally and figuratively.

There were photos on almost every open bit of wall; caught fishes being proudly displayed, an auburn-haired boy showing off the hole where his front tooth used to be, Clint gazing down at a tiny baby with wonder on his face, Natasha’s arm draped over Laura’s shoulder as they shared the swing Darcy had spied on the porch. There was life in this house, in its bones, and she couldn’t help but look around in awe. “This is…”

“A work in progress,” Clint finished for her, frowning as he looked around the interior with his hands on his hips. “Pretty soon we’ll need to add on addition. I’d love to -”

“He’s already started, hasn’t he?” Laura shook her head at her husband as she made her way from the kitchen, giving Clint a long-suffering look before her smile brightened, eyes landing on the three new arrivals. “I’m so glad you guys were able to make it!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been able to say no to one of your invitations, Laura,” Steve said, bending forward to press his lips to her cheek, “couldn’t imagine starting now.”
“That’s good, because I don’t take rejection very well,” Laura grinned, accepting Bucky’s careful hug before she turned her attention to Darcy. “You are looking much better than the last time I saw you, honey.”

Darcy couldn’t help the heated embarrassment that she felt light into her cheeks. “Yeah, definitely not one of my better days, that’s for sure.” She let out a sound of surprise when Laura pulled her into a hug, hazel eyes looking at Clint over the other woman’s shoulder. The blond agent was looking at both of them with a familiar smirk curling his lips, as if he’d expected this easy show of affection.

“I’d appreciate not having to resuscitate anyone tonight, if at all possible.”

“Depends on if you force anyone into a food coma, Laur,” Natasha said, appearing from the kitchen, a toddler balanced comfortably on her hip. “Your pies are known to have a negative impact on alertness.”

“Like criminal melatonin,” Clint agreed with a nod, “it’s felled many an agent.”

Laura flipped the towel that was draped over her shoulder and snapped it in Clint’s direction. He dodged out of harm's way with a laugh. “One of these days you’ll be slow enough that I can catch you.”

“Now that’s something I’d like to see,” Steve said with a grin, hanging his coat on the stand by the door, toeing off his shoes, watching Darcy and Bucky do the same.

Clint’s eyes narrowed at Steve, though the corner of his mouth lifted upward. “We’ll see how you feel after dinner, Cap. Maybe we can go a few rounds, burn off the calories from the stuffing.”

The call of “Mom said no fighting in the house!” came from the living room, followed by the sound of a thump and almost immediately the high-pitched wail that Darcy had only ever heard from girls under the age of ten.

Shaking his head, Clint looked down at his feet in exasperation before glancing up toward Laura. His wife shook her head emphatically. “Oh no, it’s your turn. I told you not to let them have that extra cookie. This is all yours, my love.”

When Clint’s gaze crossed to Natasha, the redhead said absolutely nothing, but turned around and headed back into the kitchen without a second look.

“Well, Rogers, Barnes, you wanna help me wrangle some sugared up kids? Maybe you can scare some good behavior into them. Threats are fine.”

“Clint!”

“Correction, threats are not fine,” Clint relented at his wife’s shout from the kitchen, eyes sparking with humor, “but I’m sure the three of us can come up with something,”

“Darcy, honey, would you come help Tasha and I in the kitchen?”

When Laura disappeared in the same direction as Natasha, the expression on Darcy’s face - shocked with the tiniest bit of fear - made the smile on Steve’s face brighten considerably. “If Laura asks you to help cook, do your best not to poison us, yeah?”

Eyes narrowing in Steve’s direction, Darcy shot him an unamused sneer, following him with her eyes as he shadowed Clint into the living room. Bucky seemed to linger in the hallway, and Darcy frowned at the look on his face. “Hey,” she said, reaching out to thread her fingers with his, pulling
his grey eyes toward her, “you okay?”

Bucky nodded mechanically, gaze softening when Darcy leveled him with a look that said she wasn’t buying it. He cast a look around the room, eyes lingering on the pictures of the kids. “It’s…”

“Yeah,” she agreed, pulling him closer and lowering her voice. Darcy could see the uneasiness in his eyes as he glanced around the house.

There were three kids under the roof. Neither of them needed to say it, but both of them dealt with the memories that bubbled to the surface; they were dark, and horrible, and Bucky felt guilty that he could see his horrors reflected in Darcy’s eyes. The incident with Batroc was still fresh in his mind, the dark reminder of what he considered the worst thing he’d ever done, and he gave Darcy a look that said he was still shaky about it all.

Since his panic attack, he’d been hyper-aware of his emotions, looking for any signs that pointed toward another one. Bucky knew if something happened at the compound there were plenty of people would could stop him, neutralize him, mitigate any harm he might cause. There was no one little at the compound. But here? “I’m not sure -”

“Then it’s a good thing I am sure,” Darcy interrupted with feeling, fingers tightening around his. She knew him, knew what he was reliving, and it broke her heart that he’d doubt himself being around Clint’s kids. “It’s safe here. You’re safe here, Buck. The only thing those kids have to fear is how easily you’re going to kick their asses at Go Fish.”

Looking into her eyes, the hazel darker and filled with such certainty, loosened something in Bucky’s chest. If Darcy could look at him with that much trust, carry that much faith in him... he couldn’t find it in himself to do anything other than believe it, too. He gave her a smile, watching as a matching grin blossomed on her face. Bucky tugged her closer, his kiss full of words he didn’t trust himself to voice aloud, wanting Darcy to know how much her trust meant to him.

Steve made his way back to the hallway when he’d realized Bucky hadn’t joined him and Clint in the living room. His body warmed at the sight of Darcy and Bucky pressed together, the air in the hallway weighted with some importance he didn’t fully understand. When they broke apart, he cleared his throat, knowing his eyes showed how much they affected him. “Everything okay?”

“Right as rain, punk,” Bucky said, darting forward to press his lips to Darcy’s one more time before he made his way toward Steve and the living room.

Darcy shared a look with Steve over Bucky’s shoulder, feeling the blond’s gaze like the sun on her face. When he and Bucky disappeared around the corner, swallowed by the sounds of the TV and the bustle that only children could make, Darcy turned toward the kitchen. She jumped, a sound of surprise tearing free from her chest as she found Natasha in the doorway to the kitchen, looking at her with a considering thought in her green eyes. “Jesus!”

“You say that to me a lot.”

“I’m going to get you a damn belled collar, Romanoff, just you wait and see.” Darcy’s hands smoothed down her sweater as she followed the redhead.

There was something about Laura Barton, some kind of sorcery or wizardry, and Darcy was left
wondering how the mother of three and wife of two super-agents did it. She moved effortlessly around the kitchen, able to multitask preparing an entire dinner for six adults and three children, while also carrying a conversation that was both funny and captivating. She was warm, and kind, and self-deprecating, but never in a false way. To say Darcy was in awe of the woman was an understatement and it must have shown on her face because Laura cocked her head to the side and pointed at Darcy with a spoon, a question on her face. “Are you feeling okay?”

Darcy straightened, feeling the soft warmth of embarrassment on her face. “What? No, yeah, I’m fine. Just trying to figure you out, that’s all.”

“Figure me out?”

“Mmmhmmmm,” Darcy hummed, tracking the dark-haired woman as she crossed to the fridge, filled Nate’s sippy cup with apple juice, handed it to Natasha, then turned back to the stove, all without breaking her eye contact. “What’s your superpower?”

Laura laughed, the sound light and easy but not belittling. “I think I might be the only one in this house who doesn’t have any powers. Even the kids seem to run circles around me.” When Natasha snorted, Laura turned toward the other woman with narrowed brown eyes. “What?”

“She doesn’t see it, does she?” Darcy asked, leaning forward on the table with her chin in her hand, gazing at Laura like she was some kind of beautiful unicorn.

“No, she doesn’t,” Natasha agreed, deftly grabbing Nate’s cup before he threw it to the floor.

Darcy sighed dramatically. “I think I’m a little in love.”

“Hands off. It’s bad enough I have to share her with Barton. Besides, I’m sure you have your hands full.”

Hazel eyes swung toward Natasha, one of Darcy’s eyebrows raising in question. There was a knowing tilt to Natasha’s smile and Darcy wondered if the redhead had been able to suss out how her relationship with Steve had changed. “You think so?”

“I mean, I’m a very happily married woman, but I wouldn’t mind hearing a little bit more about how all that,” Laura gestured vaguely in the direction of the living room with her spoon, “happens.” When Natasha pinned her with a look, Laura shrugged her shoulders defensively. “What? I can look at the pretty things in the windows, it doesn’t mean I’d like to buy anything.”

“No sliding when there’s stuff on the stove, little dove,” Natasha said, the phrase sounding automatic, like it’d be repeated more than a few times.

“Daddy wants me to ask how much longer it’s gonna be for food,” Lila said as she flew into the kitchen, sliding across the smooth wooden floors on her socks.

“No sliding when there’s stuff on the stove, little dove,” Natasha said, the phrase sounding automatic, like it’d be repeated more than a few times.

Lila has the grace to smile guiltily at Natasha. “Sorry, Mama.”

“You can tell your father that the food will be ready when it’s ready and not a second before,” Laura said with a sigh.

“I told him you were gonna say that, Mommy, but he said to ask anyway.” Lila rose on her toes to watch Laura’s movements at the stove before turning back toward the table. Her eyes lit up with recognition when they landed on Darcy, crossing the floor quickly and climbing onto Darcy’s lap without a hint of hesitation.
Darcy sat back in her chair, eyes widening when the little girl moved around her with practiced ease, settling herself before peering into Darcy’s eyes from centimeters away. “Your eyes don’t look any weirder,” Lila said, tilting her head this way and that, her tiny face full of analytical consideration that seemed to be older than her years would have allowed.

“Lila Rose,” Laura whispered, her voice stern, hiding the grin on her face by turning back to the stove.

“Lila, what did we say about using people like a jungle gym without their permission?”

The girl pulled back, frowning slightly. “Sorry, Mama. Miss Darcy, would it be okay if I looked in your eyes to see if they’re weird?” Darcy’s laugh was louder than the dual groans that sounded from Laura and Natasha, and Lila’s face broke into a wide grin. “See? She’s okay with it,” Lila said, sticking her tongue out at Natasha.

Darcy hid her shock when Natasha mirrored the girl, tongue darting out in Lila’s direction, amusement lighting her green eyes. When Lila turned back to her with the expectation of an answer, Darcy couldn’t help the conspiratorial sound to her voice. “I’m lucky because I can hide my powers when I don’t want people to know I have them. Watch this.”

Closing her eyes, Darcy focused on the pull that was always inside of her, blinking into the blackness, hearing Lila’s gasp as her skin and eyes glowed with amber light.

“Oooooh, that’s so pretty,” Lila said with wonder, and Darcy had the odd experience of being surrounded by darkness but still able to feel when small child-sized hands cupped her cheeks. Lila moved Darcy’s head from side to side, and the sweet smell of the peppermint bark the little girl had eaten earlier floated on the air.

When Darcy let the colors bleed into her vision, she was struck by the brightness of Lila’s soul being so close, only inches away. She was the color of spring, the softest green of new grass, the possibility of new growth and a new season.Digging deeper, Darcy recognized the plum color of Clint, as well as the autumn orange of Natasha. There was something else there, too, a brilliant azure blue, like the shiniest aquamarine, and Darcy turned to look at Laura, unable to help the small gasp that fell from her lips.

Laura was glowing like a pulsing radiant sapphire, her gorgeous hues pushing away the darkness that normally surrounded Darcy in the soulscape. It was stunning, utterly breathtaking, and Darcy was at a loss trying to explain how it warmed her from within.

Darcy let go of the colors when Lila turned her face, amber eyes fading back to hazel as she blinked at the little girl whose eyes were filled with a knowing fire. “Your mommy is blue like a summer sky.”

“And me? Am I pink?”

She considered lying to Lila and telling the girl what she wanted to hear, but Darcy had a feeling the sweet face would know she wasn’t being truthful. “Not pink,” she answered with a soft shake of her head, her voice holding a hint of regret, “but a pretty green, like sea glass.” Darcy watched a spark of disappoint light in Lila’s eyes. “I’m green too,” she said with a smile, “but darker, like the jungle.”

Lila’s face lit up. “Green like Oz?”

“We’re reading The Wizard of Oz before bedtime,” Laura explained, hip leaning against the counter, watching Darcy and Lila with warm eyes.
“Like Oz, yeah,” Darcy hummed, turning back to Lila, “bright and shiny.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. It’s not pink, but I like green.”

“I like it, too.”

Lila looked happy that Darcy agreed with her, face brightening. “I’m gonna go tell Daddy that I’m green like you.” She climbed off of Darcy’s lap and started toward the living room before stopping and turning back to Darcy with a frown.

“What is it, love?” Laura asked, watching Lila look at Darcy with a sharpness in her face.

“It’s just… why would you want to hide your powers, Miss Darcy? It’s what makes you special.”

The words had been said from the viewpoint of a child, with conviction and as if it was baffling to even consider, and Darcy felt her heart constrict at the honesty in Lila’s face. Shrugging her shoulders, her question left unanswered, Lila turned and slid her way across the floor, socks carrying her into the hallway and toward the living room.

When Darcy turned her eyes back toward the women in the kitchen, she saw them sharing a look, lips curling upward, eyes crinkling at the corners. “What?”

“Nothing, Miss Darcy,” Laura said with a smirk, opening the oven and pulling out the sweet potato casserole.

“It seems you’ve got a fan.” Natasha breathed, rubbing circles on Nate’s back.

Smiling to herself, Darcy sat back in her chair, ignoring the self-satisfied expression Natasha was pointing in her direction.

“Darcy, honey, would you grab the marshmallows out of the pantry? Third shelf up, on the right.”

As Darcy crossed toward the pantry, Laura’s eyes found Natasha’s, her smile brightening. Her face morphed to exasperation when she heard another thud come from the living room. “Boys! What did I say about wrestling in the house?!”

“We’re going to eat at the actual table?”

Clint’s eyebrows knit together at the sound of disbelief in Darcy’s voice. “Uh, yeah Lewis, that’s traditionally the way it goes.”

“Don’t bullshit with me, Barton.”

Lila made a strangled sound and leaned into Natasha, her voice in a whisper loud enough that everyone could hear. “She said -”

“Yes, Little Lila, I heard what she said.”

Darcy’s cheeks filled with heat when Natasha pinned her with narrowed emerald eyes. Her immediate reaction was to say ‘fuck’ but she managed to hold it in. It was easy to see the smirk on Clint’s face, the archer shaking his head softly, and she tried to make herself as small as possible against Steve’s side on the couch.
Steve’s eyes shone with affection as Darcy burrowed herself next to him, watching as Natasha raised an eyebrow in his direction. He returned the expression, watching her lips purse and her gaze sharpen. He had practice reading Nat’s microexpressions, able to see the amusement on her face, cheek resting on the top of Lila’s head while the little girl played on a tablet.

It still struck him how comfortable Natasha was when she was here, and not for the first time, Steve marveled at how Clint, Laura, and the kids could bring out a completely different side of the redhead. Over all the years they’d worked together, this was the Natasha he’d come to know she was at her core. Everything else - her covers, the personalities, the blasé, hard shell she projected - was nothing but a front.

Smiling as Lila babbled to Natasha, explaining the Barbie app she was using, Darcy’s gaze flicked around the room, her mouth turning down in a frown. “Where’s Buck?”

Clint looked up from the floor, Nate, coloring books, and what looked like eight-hundred crayons spread around him. “He’s with Coop outside.” At Darcy’s head tilt, he shrugged his shoulders. “We needed firewood and Cooper wanted to tag along.”

He’d said it without a hint of hesitance, and Darcy smiled brilliantly at Clint. There was no way for him to know the specifics of why Bucky had been so worried about being around the children, but she’d come to find that Clint, with some uncanny sixth-sense, knew what people needed without it being said out loud.

Darcy craned her neck so she could look at Steve, smiling up at him. “I’m going to go check on them. Ten bucks says Bucky made it into some kind of competition.”

Steve’s smile was happy and he nodded, lowering his head enough to press their lips together. It was chaste, soft, but both of them came out of it with grins on their faces. Darcy groaned as she extricated herself from the couch that had apparently tried to kidnap her ass, tiptoeing around Clint and Nate’s artwork and padding toward the front porch.

“Take them out some hot chocolate!” Clint called, watching as Darcy crossed from the hallway and into the kitchen, appreciating his suggestion.

“You like her.”

Steve’s eyes swung toward Lila from where they’d been following Darcy’s exit, a soft grin on his lips. “I do,” he agreed, seeing no reason to lie to the girl. He’d learned pretty early on that the Barton children had inherited a multitude of abilities from their parents: Clint’s sense of humor, Natasha’s quiet strength, Laura’s incomparable warmth. They were whip smart, and Steve could see the little girls’ eyes light at his agreement.

“You like her like Daddy likes Mama and Mama likes Mommy,” Lila continued, smile growing bigger when Natasha snorted behind her. The girl had recently gotten in the habit of using the word ‘like’ an obscene amount and it was something they were working on.

“Hear that, Nat?” Clint said, his eyes sparkling as he grinned at Natasha. “I like you.”

“Mmhmm,” Natasha hummed, one corner of her mouth quirking up.

“Ugh, fine, I meant you love Mama and Mommy. And Mister Rogers loves Miss Darcy, right?”

Even as Clint laughed at Lila calling him ‘Mister Rogers,’ Steve felt the full weight of his and Natasha’s gazes when they swung to look at him. He shifted on the couch, taking another sip of the apple cider Laura had passed around earlier. Unsure what those particular looks were for, Steve
nodded his head in Lila’s direction.

“See? I knew it. I’m very smart.”

“Yeah, baby,” Clint said, smiling at the grin that’d lit his daughter’s face, “you’re wicked smart.”

“Hey, голубка, why don’t you go wash up for dinner and work on your list of things you’re thankful for?” Natasha pressed her lips to Lila’s cheek when the girl nodded, dropping the tablet on the couch and making her way out of the room. Natasha waited until she heard footsteps going up the stairs before looking at Steve with an expectant expression. “Got something you need to say, Steve?”

“No particularly, Romanoff. Your kid might be able to weasel things out of me, but you’ve still got some work to do on that front.”

Clint clicked his tongue and shook his head dramatically. “That’s all Hydra needed to take you down? Throw a few kids who asked too many questions in your direction and you’d have given them anything they wanted?”

“Not a very effective weapon. Think of the upkeep.”

“One after another saying they need a glass of water before going to bed.”

“Something sticky on every surface.”

“Not knowing what the stickiness is…”

Natasha and Clint shared a look, a silent language built up over years worth of time being around each other, and Steve rolled his eyes while taking another drink. “Yes, you’ve found it, my secret weakness is children.”

“No, Steve. It’s not children. It’s that look, the one in your eyes, right now.”

“That’s not a weakness,” Clint disagreed with a frown.

Natasha’s gaze swinging toward him with a delicate eyebrow raised. “Don’t pretend to be naive. You know better than that.”

Steve watched the back and forth between the two of them, feeling like he’d been brought into the middle of a fight that spanned years. Slightly uncomfortable, he set his drink on the coffee table and rubbed his hands on his jeans. “I think…”

“No, no, Steve. Stay.” Clint held up a hand in Steve’s direction, even though his eyes hadn’t left Natasha’s. “This is good. It’s good that you hear this. We’re not fighting.”

“No, Nat, we’re having a disagreement. One that keeps coming up, over and over. But do you see this?” Clint gestured to the house around them with a wide sweep of his hand. “We still have this, even though we’ve never seen eye to eye on this particular subject. Do you know why?”

“Yes, we are.”

“No, Nat, we’re having a disagreement. One that keeps coming up, over and over. But do you see this?” Clint gestured to the house around them with a wide sweep of his hand. “We still have this, even though we’ve never seen eye to eye on this particular subject. Do you know why?”

“Because of love?” Natasha asked with a roll of her eyes, as if she already knew the answer about to leave Clint’s mouth.

“But because of love,” Clint said in dramatic fashion. “Love is not naive, and it’s not a weakness. This house is here because of love. The love allows us to work through the hard stuff because there’s something bigger than being uncomfortable, something that keeps you fighting even when you know
you might lose.”

Steve’s eyes flicked from Clint to Natasha, watching the redhead digest Clint’s words with carefully shielded eyes. He’d been on enough missions with the pair to know they’d never been afraid of arguing, neither scared to take the other to the mat if it was necessary. It was a dichotomy, and one Steve hadn’t understood at first. Most people were unwilling to put in the work, to fight and rage but still end the day on the same side, but it was obvious that wasn’t the case in the Barton/Romanoff household.

“Hm. Self-help book?”

A self-satisfied grin curled Clint’s mouth at Natasha’s question. “Yes, actually, thank you very much.”

“The one Laura got you last Christmas?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Interesting. I might have to borrow it.”

“It’s in the drawer in our nightstand.”

“Maybe you two should teach the new recruits about argument de-escalation,” Steve suggested, smiling when the pair looked in his direction with the same considering look on their faces.

“Not a bad idea.”

“They’d learn how to keep up in a conversation.”

“Maybe throw in a threat of violence.”

“Honestly, Nat, is it your goal to have every rookie terrified of you?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s good,” Bucky said, yanking the ax and pulling it free of the wood where it’d gotten stuck, “you’re just hitting the angle wrong.”

“I tried this with Dad already,” Cooper said with a threat of exasperation in his tone, grabbing the ax when Bucky held it out to him, “but I can never split it in one go.”

Bucky hummed, grabbing another log and positioning it. “It just takes practice. Here.” Bucky took the glove off his prosthetic and used a finger to dig into the wood, making a large ‘X’ indentation. “First, just try to hit the middle. Don’t worry about halving it, just worry about the precision.”

Cooper’s arms dropped to his sides, the ax momentarily forgotten. “Did that hurt?”

The brows over Bucky’s grey eyes lifted slightly. “What?”

“The thing you just did, uh, with your finger. Did it hurt?”
Bucky looked down at his metal hand, his fingers flexing. When he realized he’d gone quiet for several moments, he looked up at Cooper with a shake of his head. “It’s… hard to explain.”

“My teacher talked about you in class, during current events,” Cooper said, his weight shifting from one foot to the other as Bucky stared at him. “Some of the other kids, they didn’t know if it was like a regular fake arm, or if, if you could, you know, feel things with it. I thought maybe I’d ask you the next time I saw you. Not that I’d tell anyone. Dad, and Mom and Mama make sure we know not to say anything, to keep us safe. I just wondered for myself. It’s okay if you don’t want to answer.”

Looking into the boy’s face, Bucky struggled to find the best answer. It was difficult to put into words what the arm was, what it felt like to him. It was a reminder of when he’d been nothing more than a weapon, missing parts easily replaced with new. Interchangeable. Designed for maximum damage. How was he supposed to explain to a nine-year-old what it was like to hate a part of yourself because it’d been forced on you without your approval? Was that even something he should explain?

“It’s cold,” Darcy said, one travel mug of cocoa held in the crook of her arm, two more in her hands.

“We have coats,” Cooper said, frowning.

“No, I meant his arm. The metal is strong, but have you ever grabbed a railing in winter without a glove on? How the cold can linger even after you’ve gone back inside? It can feel like that.” They took the cocoas that she held out to them, and she took a sip from her own as Cooper seemed to be considering her answer.

“It’s cold all the time?”

“Mmm, not all the time, no.” Darcy took a seat on a large log, burrowing a little further into her coat as she watched the two of them. “Have you ever had fillings?” At Cooper’s nod, Darcy’s eyes flicked toward Bucky, trying to understand the expression on his face. “You know how they numb you up? You can still feel your cheeks and lip, feel it when something touches them, but it doesn’t hurt, it just feels weird?”

“It’s like that?” Cooper’s eyes flicked toward Bucky, the question hanging in the cold air.

Bucky could see Darcy out of the corner of his eye, watching him as she sipped her cocoa, hazel eyes shining behind her glasses. “Yeah. It’s heavier, so I have to compensate for the difference. I shoot differently with it than I do my other hand. Certain guns grip better in it, too.”

Cooper’s eyes widened the slightest bit at the mention of shooting, and Bucky had a split second to wonder if he shouldn’t have mentioned anything. Two-thirds of the kid’s parents were part of a global safety paramilitary organization, though, so it was unlikely he’d never heard about firearms. Especially with Natalia as a mother.

Talking about shooting people probably wasn’t the best idea around a kid, but the fact that Bucky was willing to elaborate was enough for Darcy to bite her tongue to keep from laughing. She watched Cooper nod, absorbing the information before he set his mug on the ground and picked up the ax.

It took a few swings, but Cooper seemed to get the hang of hitting the ‘x’. Her remark of ‘you’re going to be better than your dad, just you wait’ seemed to satisfy the boy, and Darcy enjoyed just watching Cooper and Bucky form a formidable tower of freshly-cut firewood. When the blond kid with eyes like Laura’s and a smirk like Clint’s ran inside to get ready for dinner, Darcy turned her attention to the man whose cheeks were red, though she couldn’t have told you with certainty if it
was from exertion, the cold, or the conversation they’d had earlier.

“Come ‘ere,” she said, breath fogging as the fading sunlight shone in the yard.

Bucky finished stacking his and Cooper’s work and crossed the hard ground toward Darcy, fingers wrapping around her outstretched hand. “It’s pretty cold out here, doll,” he said, rubbing a gloved hand over her hair, smirking to himself when the static electricity made several strands stick straight up.

“Then you better keep me warm, soldier,” Darcy murmured, looking up at him with a large grin on her face. He took the invitation, bending at the waist so he could press his mouth to hers. His lips were cold, but soft, and Darcy hummed happily, able to taste the cocoa he’d just finished. “Mmmm, yeah, that’s better.”

Grinning, Bucky straightened, one eyebrow raising. “Did you come out to help?”

Darcy laughed, the sound incredulous. “Me? Swinging an ax?” She chuckled again, dark curls sliding over her shoulders as she shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d probably cut off a finger. Or a toe. I’m not the most graceful person.”

As a very vivid memory of her tripping over absolutely nothing while walking down the hallway came to mind, Bucky could only snort in amusement. “It’s not that hard. You should try it.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Come on, princess. Give it a shot.”

Her eyes narrowed as he continued to look at her with expectation. “Princess?” she asked, her expression darkening.

“You’ll be fine. Just a swing. I dare you.”

You smooth mother fucker, Darcy’s brain grumbled, even as her heart started to race a little faster at the playful look in his eyes. “You dare me? What are we, twelve?”

“Look, if you’re not up for it…” Bucky let the words hang in the air while he turned back to the house. He counted steps in his head - one, two, three - before an annoyed burst of sound trumpeted from behind him. He tempered the smirk on his face as he turned, knowing she wouldn’t have been able to pass on the dare.

“You’re lucky you’re so goddamned charming, Barnes, or you’d have gotten absolutely nowhere in life with that smug look of yours,” Darcy groused, leaving her empty mug on the ground, crossing to him with a gloved hand outstretched. “Gimme the fucking thing.”

Bucky’s eyes danced with laughter as he held it out, suppressing a laugh when she almost dropped it, not expecting it to be as heavy as it was. “All you have to do is grip it and swing.”

“That sounds like the title of a sex tape.” His bark of laughter made Darcy’s heartbeat quicken, hearing the sound echo in the trees that surrounded the yard. She made a show of peeling off her gloves and stuffing them in her pockets; the last thing she needed was to swing the thing above her head, only to have it fly through the air and cleave into someone.
Still chuckling to himself at her comment, Bucky grabbed a smaller bit of wood and set it up for her. “Just focus on hitting it in the center. It’s heavy enough it’ll stick even if you don’t hit it perfectly.”

“Jesus, I feel like if *don’t* get it right that I’m setting women back hundreds of years or something,” she said with a shake of her head. Darcy glanced over at Bucky with a glare, waiting until he put his hands in the air and took a step backward.

“You’ll be fine. Just swing away.”

Her mind immediately flashed back to that movie with aliens at the turn of phrase, but Darcy pushed it aside to focus on the task at hand. She took a deep breath, lifted the ax above her head, then brought it down on the wood. It embedded itself *next* to the log, well off it’s mark, and she frowned down at it like it’d offended her.

“Note number one? Maybe keep your eyes open when you swing it.”

“I did *not* close my eyes!”

“Yeah, you did, but it’s fine. Just try it again.” His laughter returned when she tried to pull the ax free, ending up with one foot next to the ax as she groaned and struggled. “Here, here,” he said with a chuckle, taking her spot and wrenching it free.

Darcy was now bound and determined to do this thing, no matter how long it took. Luckily, with tips and pointers from Bucky, she got better, able to hit the middle on a consistent basis. Skin heating, she shrugged out of her coat, letting it drop to the ground. She had the tiniest bit of sweat on her neck and when the wind hit it, she shivered slightly. “So now I just pretend I’m Thor and bring down myuh-myuh for a death blow?”

Arms crossing over his chest, still confused about her pet name for Thor’s weapon of choice, Bucky dipped his head, watching her turn back to the log with purpose. It was intoxicating, seeing her put her mind to something and following it through to completion. His ‘I dare you’ had been said in jest, and she’d probably agreed to it out of spite, but no matter how she’d gotten there, Darcy was in it, wholly and fully. It reminded him of Steve - not knowing how to do anything halfway - and the affection he felt for her filled his chest with warmth better than any mug of cocoa could.

Nostrils flaring in determination, Darcy lifted the ax above her head, body stretching, wanting to bring it down with as much strength as she could muster. “For Asgard!” she shouted, the yell hanging in the cold air, followed quickly by the sound of a piece of wood splitting in two. “Holy shit!”

Bucky’s eyes had widened, sending his brows toward his hairline. He grunted when Darcy launched herself at him, laughing loudly in his ear as her arms wrapped around his neck, her legs circling his waist and squeezing tightly.

“I actually fucking did it!” She pulled back, palms pressing to Bucky’s cheeks, feeling the chill of his skin. She crashed her mouth to his, riding the adrenaline that was coursing through her body, still feeling the jar of the ax striking true as it rang up and down her arms.

“Told you could you could do it, doll.” Darcy pressed her mouth against his one more time before he lowered her to her feet. “Wanna try it again?”

“*Fuck* no,” Darcy said with a laugh, grabbing her coat and mug from the ground. “Let’s go gorge ourselves on carbs.”

He held a hand out toward her, the smile on his face honest and heartfelt. “Okay.”
“Coop, you want to start?”

“No, make Lila start.”

“I’ll start!” Lila said, sitting up in her chair next to Darcy, happily waving her sheet of paper in the air.

The words on it were large, the letters loopy, and they’d been written in purple ink. When Clint’s eyes swung from Cooper to Lila, he shrugged his shoulders. “Sure, baby, you go right ahead and start.”

Darcy’s eyes widened when they flicked to Bucky on her left side. He was sandwiched between Steve and Darcy, each of whom were holding his hands in theirs under the table. “Were we supposed to…?”

“Oh, no, Darcy honey, you’re fine. It’s just a family tradition we started when the kids were younger. We make a small list of things we’re thankful for and read them aloud before we eat,” Laura said, grinning with warm eyes on the other side of the table. “Don’t feel pressure if you don’t have anything.”

“Ahem ahem ahem!” Lila’s words were loud in the room, not actually clearing her throat, but literally saying ‘ahem’ aloud until everyone quieted. “I, Lila Rose Barton, am thankful for butterflies, and Mommy’s cookies. I like the way Mama hums to my little brother when he’s upset, and how Daddy laughs watching golf. I’m thankful for the color pink, the Wizard of Oz, and the way our family keeps growing. Thank you.”

When Lila sat back in her chair, grinning with self-satisfaction, all the adults in the room gave her a small round of applause. “That was wonderful, baby,” Clint said with a large smile. He turned his eyes to his oldest. “How ‘bout now, Coop?”

The nine-year-old pulled a folded piece of paper from under his thigh, pulling it open. His voice was soft as he read the words slowly. “I’m thankful for, to be closer to Dad’s and Mama’s job so they, so we can see them more often. I’m thankful for the treehouse Dad and I are going to make, that we’re going to build next summer. I’m happy for my tude, for my tutor, who is helping me read better, and that Mom will stay there with me, even when it runs long.”

Steve’s eyes softened at they looked at Cooper, whose cheeks had filled with pink at having to read aloud. He’d spent many post-mission flights home talking with Natasha about how her son was struggling with reading in school. Steve had grown up partially deaf and with bad eyesight, wanting desperately to keep up with his fellow students, so he understood how frustrating it could be to lag behind. Medical help for the ailments he’d had were astronomically better than they’d been when he was younger, and when Cooper had been diagnosed with dyslexia, it looked like they’d found a way to help. He’d heard the pride in Clint’s voice when his son’s grades had started to improve, and seeing him reading aloud made Steve’s grin widen as the table clapped for him just like they’d clapped for Lila.

“Mama, it’s your turn!”

Natasha was ripping apart a homemade yeast roll and tearing it into little piece for Nate, who was happy eating them as fast as she could set them in front of him. “I’m thankful for your little faces,
stories at bedtime, and the love of my family.” It was simple, and to the point, but when Laura and Clint smiled at her, Natasha’s eyes filled with emotion and she turned back to Nate.

“Well, I’m thankful for,” Clint said, grinning as everyone turned to look at him at his booming voice, “cedar hardwood floors, Laura’s coconut pie, Lila’s singing, Cooper’s soccer team, and Nat’s right hook.” The Bartons and Natasha laughed at that last thing, and Darcy found herself, Bucky and Steve laughing along with them. “Laur? You’re up.”

“Oh, I don’t know, all your guys’ were amazing, I’m not sure I can follow any of them.”

“C’mon Mom, give it a shot,” Cooper said, smile brightening when Laura focused her attention on him.

“Okay. Today I’m thankful for family. The family that we have, the family that we make, and the family that makes our house a home. I’m thankful for friends who help keep my family safe, who deserve happiness and love, who are welcome at our table any time. And lastly, I’m thankful for my children, who make everyday worth it.”

“Even when Nate wakes us up in the middle of the night?”

Laura laughed at Lila’s question, pointing a finger in the little girls’ direction and earning a giggle. “Yes, little love, even when Nate wakes us up.”

“Wait, what about Nate?” Cooper leaned onto the table so he could see his little brother, mouth full of bread and grinning. “Nate? What do you like?”

“Trucks!” Nate managed, raising both hands in the air triumphantly. The table laughed, clapping their hands as the little boy preened under the attention.

“Alright, feel free to dig -”

“Wait!” Lila said loudly, interrupting Clint, blonde curls swinging as she turned toward Darcy with purpose. “Miss Darcy, you can’t think of one thing you’re thankful for? It can be anything. Leaves. Puppies. Mouthwash.”

Darcy let out a laugh. “Mouthwash?”

“Yeah, you can be thankful for mouthwash! Is that what you’re thankful for?”

Hazel eyes flicked around the room. Clint was grinning smugly, leaning on the table with his chin in his hand, blue gaze amused as he looked at her. Laura’s expression was warm, expecting, but with no hint of pressure. Cooper, bright and caring, had both eyebrows raised, waiting, as did Natasha.

A quick glance to her left showed Steve and Bucky. Steve was looking at her with happiness in his eyes, something deep, and true, and she could feel her heart in her throat, body still thrumming with the knowledge that he loved her, just like she loved him.

And Bucky? Bucky’s stormy gaze was softer as he looked at her, an expression she knew he’d been too afraid to show anyone, fearing how it would get used against him, knowing that Steve had been the only one allowed to see it before she’d barged into their lives. Now, here he was, that expression in his eyes, plain for the entire table to see, comfortable enough, now, to let it shine.

Darcy thought about where she’d been last year at this time. Jane had been in Connecticut with her family, Erik had been away on a sabbatical tracking some kind of radio waves and their effect on polar magnetism, and she’d been alone, ordering Chinese takeout and watching a marathon of
Golden Girls reruns.

Her life was so different than where she’d been, and Darcy found it was hard for her to put into words exactly what all of this meant to her. “I…” She could see Laura straighten, ready to insist that she didn’t have to answer Lila, but Darcy pushed on before she could. “I’m thankful for everyone here. I’m so happy I know you all.”

“And the emerald you have inside you, like Oz?”

Grinning, Darcy reached out to pinch Lila’s cheek. “Yeah, that too.”

“Okay then!” Clint boomed, rubbing his hands together, “let’s do this!”

Three hours later, after everyone had gorged themselves to the limit then somehow still made room for pie, Steve found himself drying dishes with Bucky as Clint washed, the ladies having gone upstairs to help the kids prepare for bed. There were footsteps above them, and Steve couldn’t help the smile that turned his lips at the sound. “It’s like a herd of elephants.”

“You have no idea. And when Laura was pregnant with Nate? Twice as loud.” Clint laughed, then glanced over his shoulder at the stairs. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

Bucky snorted, stacking the plate in his hand and reaching for another dish. “It’s weird to think about you here,” he said, towel damp but drying all the same, “with everything else. Kids. Wife.”

“Wives,” Clint corrected with a smirk, glancing over in Bucky’s direction. “Plural. Obviously not legally, but other than that piece of paper? Yeah. Married in every sense of the word.”

“What did you do before you were married?” Steve asked, the gravy boat in his hands taking a little more attention to dry.

“That’s kind of a personal question, Rogers, don’t you think?” Steve’s amused blue eyes swung to give Clint The Look, and the archer shrugged his shoulders, turning back to the sink. “We dated. All of us. Together. Moved in together, paid rent together, killed people together. Me and Nat killed people, anyway, then we’d come home and Laura would patch us up. It was a little weird having two girlfriends. They could gang up on me, which wasn’t fun. Wasn’t always fun,” Clint corrected, eyes flicking up to look at the ceiling with a smirk on his face.

“And that’s what you called each other?”

Steve looked over at Bucky, trying to understand the look on the other man’s face. His question had been soft, almost a little embarrassed, and it was such a far shade from the confidence Bucky usually carried that Steve was left wondering what it was about this house that had stolen that charisma. He’d been darker since they’d arrived, having highs and lows; one minute he was laughing loudly, the next he was introspective and quiet. Something about the house and the atmosphere had affected his best friend.

“Hm?”

“They were your girlfriends?”
Clint shrugged a shoulder as the sponge scratched at the baked in green beans on the glass casserole dish. “Couldn’t think of a better name for them. Lovers. Best friends. Goddesses. Any of those would have worked. Why?” Bucky’s face was unreadable when Clint glanced over in his direction. The last time he’d really had a conversation with the soldier was when Steve had been hiding in his and Nat’s room. He knew a lot of things had happened between Barnes, Cap, and Darcy since then.

“Darcy texted once, before everything went down in Wakanda, and said we were her boyfriends,” Bucky said, his voice carefully level, no obvious sound of emotion in the tones, “said we would talk about it when we got back.”

Sticking his hands into the sink and searching for the silverware at the bottom, Clint nodded. “Yeah, I could see how that got pushed to the side.”

“You never told me that,” Steve said, a small frown on his face as he caught Bucky’s eyes.

“Didn’t seem like it was that important at the time.”

“But now that your life’s not on the line, you’re wondering what the next step is?” When Bucky looked over and gave Clint a nod, the blond reached up and rubbed at a spot on his face with the back of his hand. “Depends on what you want, doesn’t it?”

Immediately, Steve’s thought turned to the conversation he’d had with Darcy in the hotel room, about deserving to have a family and a life of his own, separate from the weight and responsibility of being Captain America. She’d said it with such certainty, like it was an inevitability, her eyes lit with righteous belief. It had been so long since he’d thought about life after the shield, but her words had lit something inside of him, a flame of hope that had long since gone cold. Yet she’d stoked the flames, made it brighter, warm and reassuring.

Could they? Could they make a life like Clint, Natasha and Laura had? A house? A family? Just the thought sped Steve’s heart, chest feeling tight with the possibility. It’d felt impossible before, but now? Could he let himself hope?

“Alright, you both went radio silent there for a bit. You okay?”

Bucky was pulled out of his own thoughts - visions of Darcy wearing a ring on her finger, matching bands on him and Steve, her body swollen, beautiful and glowing, a child with cornflower blue eyes and dark hair - his blood running cold with abject fear. “Fine,” Bucky offered, grabbing for another dish, towel drying it in smooth, easy motions.

“How does Laura handle it, you and Nat going on missions, the uncertainty?”

Clint gave Steve a tight smile. “She’s quiet about it, mostly, just making us promise we’ll be as safe as we can. It’s hard, going out, knowing the Laur and the kids are here, waiting for us to come home. But you do it, because your life means more with them in it, and you have a job to do, to keep them safe.”

Steve smiled softly, pinning Clint with an impressed glint in his eyes. “I never counted you as a sap, Barton.”

“It’s true. I love my life, wouldn’t change it, and if that’s what you guys are looking for with Darcy, you should let her know.”

“Just that easy?”
Clint snorted at Steve. “Easy? Shit. Not easy at all. But ask yourself why you’re holding back. Is it because you’re not sure, or is it because you’re scared? If it’s the previous? It’s good you hesitated. You need to be sure about something this monumentally big. If it’s the latter?” Clint whistled, turning back to the sink. “If you let fear control what you do, then that’s on you.”

The archer’s words stuck in Bucky’s brain like a bramble, and his thoughts were loud as he dried, the repetitive motion automatic as his mind was filled with anxious imaginations. When he heard his name called, he looked up at Steve and Clint, surprised to see that the dishes had been completed without him even noticing. He gave the dish to Clint, whose outstretched hand plucked it carefully. “Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Clint said with an easy smile. “I think the kids are probably in bed now. Ladies should be coming down soon. Beers in the living room while we watch the Lions get creamed?”

“Sure,” Steve said, watching as Clint crossed to the fridge. His blue gaze turned back to Bucky, watching a shadow pass behind his lover’s eyes, a look of quiet contemplation on his face. “You okay?”

Bucky’s eyes focused on Steve and he gave the blond a soft smile and a small nod. “I’m good.”

“You sure?”

Reaching out, Bucky wrapped his fingers around Steve’s wrist and squeezed. “I’m sure.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Steve’s, hoping the affection would soothe the thread of worry in the other man’s eyes. “Let’s go wait for our girl.”

That little girl of yours sure is…”

Laura laughed, grabbing a shirt from the laundry basket and folding it before adding it to her growing pile. “You’re not wrong, she definitely is.” Her eyes sobered a bit, glancing at Darcy with a bit of worry. “I’m sorry if she put you on the spot or made you uncomfortable. I’ve heard things from Clint, about how you grew up.”

The next sentence was there, but Laura didn’t continue. Darcy understood. It wasn’t an easy thing to talk about for most people, the reality of how horrible people could be to the most vulnerable section of the population, but she knew Clint understood. Since he’d talked about being in the system, he’d shared more about himself, little by little, and Darcy was glad she could commiserate with him without making it seem like she was looking for pity. It wasn’t about pity; it was about talking the truth so it didn’t fester inside and make everything blacker, like ash.

“She’s fine, Laura, really. I just haven’t been around a lot of kids. I didn’t like other kids, even when I was one. But Lila… she’s not like other kids, not really, but in a good way. Growing up with everything, all the avenging, the world like it is… She’s an amazing kid, Laura.”

A happy smile curled Laura’s lips as a pink princess nightgown slid into her hands. “I can only accept one-third of that credit.”

“I’d beg to differ,” Natasha said from her spot leaned back against the headboard, a sleeping Nate curled against her chest. “You’re here with them twenty-four seven. You do most of the parenting,
“Lately you’ve been here more. A lot more.”

“Still not one-third. At least… fifty-nine percent.”

“Forty.”

“Forty-six.”

“Deal.”

Darcy watched the back and forth of the two women with a smile on her face. She’d been well aware of the easy shorthand Clint and Natasha could share, the quick barbs and witty remarks flying back and forth with years of practice. It was the same with Laura and Nat, it seemed, and Darcy was left wondering how it all worked.

“Is it okay if I ask a question? I know Steve’s been talking with Clint and Natasha about stuff, and I’d totally understand if you wanted to keep your privacy, so feel free to say no.”

The bark of laughter from Laura was loud, and the dark-haired woman slapped a hand over her mouth, looking toward Nate with wide eyes. Happy when he didn’t stir from his slumber, she laughed again and shook her head. “Oh, honey, trust me, there is nothing you could ask that would make us uncomfortable. We have a nine-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter. We’ve seen and heard it all.”

“Not everything,” Natasha corrected, grinning when Laura pinned her with a soft glare.

“Fine, but when that happens, I am not going to be the one explaining things to Coop.”

“We’ll make Clint do it.”

“Works for me.” Realizing they’d deviated from Darcy’s question, Laura ducked her head in the other woman’s direction. “Sorry, love, go ahead. Ask away.”

Darcy bit her lip, trying to figure out how to phrase what she wanted to know. “I know… Clint was with Nat for a long time, just her. Does it… is it hard to know they have a history that you’re not a part of?”

When Laura’s held tilted slightly, a question still in her eyes, Darcy’s hands gestured as if it would help the words come out decipherable. “It’s… I have Bucky’s memories, I know almost everything there is to know about him. Even though we haven’t really known each other that long, it feels like it’s been forever. I know everything he did, both as him and the Soldier, but he and Steve… they have years, too, and I’m left wondering which of us is the Nat and which of us is the Laura.”

“Explain.”

Darcy turned toward Natasha, frowning slightly, struggling with her words. “Laura came into something that was already built between you and Clint. Both Bucky and I and Steve and Bucky have that lifetime of history. Does that make me the Laura, coming in late, or does that make Steve the Laura, since I know Buck so intimately?”

Laura’s hands paused in their folding, considering Darcy’s question. “I don’t think it’s a matter of time. You might know things about Bucky that Steve doesn’t, but that doesn’t make his relationship with Bucky any less, and that goes both ways. You’re never going to have the same history, but
that’s what makes it stronger.” She paused for a second, turning a sock inside out and searching for its match. “I might not know exactly what to say to make Clint feel better after a bad mission, but Tasha does, and Tasha is going to understand how I feel about things better than Clint would. It’s a give and take. A partnership, even though there are three people instead of two.”

“And you don’t get upset?”

The corner of Laura’s mouth lifted up and she gave Darcy a sad smile. “I’m not going to lie to you, honey. Some days it’s hard. We had to work a long time on our trust issues, and we’ve dealt with some tough times, but that’s not any different than a quote-unquote “traditional” relationship. It’s three people who have differing opinions on parenting, or acceptable extracurricular activities, or what type of peanut butter is best.”

“Crunchy,” Natasha said, earning a glare from Laura.

“Anyway,” Laura said, her eyes softening as they turned back to Darcy, “you love each other, and you make it work, whatever that means for you. Love should be an opt-in decision, not an opt-out.”

For probably the hundredth time since setting foot in the farmhouse, Darcy was left in awe by the woman who nonchalantly shrugged her shoulders and grabbed another tiny sweater to fold. She heard Natasha made a noise and her hazel eyes swung toward the redhead, a knowing glint in the agent’s emerald eyes.

“Yeah,” she said as she slid off the bed, Nate passed out in her arms, “that’s how I look at her most of the time, too.”

Darcy watched her round the bed and press a kiss to Laura’s lips, soft and meaningful, before heading toward the door and to Nate’s room.

“You’re fucking amazing, Laura Barton, did you know that?”

“Mmmm,” Laura hummed, eyes warm as they crinkled at Darcy, “and you’re sweet. Grab a shirt and help me fold, would you?”

“Of course,” Darcy said, though she mentally cringed. Her folding skills were no where near as good as Laura’s, and her hands moved very carefully, attempting to mirror the other woman’s movements. “I feel like I need to ask about your job, or we’ve severely failed the Bechdel test.”

“I’ve always been horrible with tests,” Laura said with a smile.

“Okaaay,” Darcy laughed, “aren’t you, like, a nurse? Doesn’t that require quite a few tests?”

“Less than you’d think.” When Darcy’s eyes widened, Laura laughed again, the sound hanging like music in the air.

"You're going to have to roll me inside like the blueberry girl in Willy Wonka," Darcy groaned, leaning back in her seat as they drove through the darkness, the headlights catching the soft flakes as they began to fall.

"Didn't they send her to the juicing room?" Steve asked, looking to his right, squeezing Darcy's hand
where he'd been holding it. He could tell by the dashboard that her eyes were closed, her face content. Eyes flicking up to the rear view mirror, he caught Bucky's attention. His grey eyes were darker in the back of the car, his face in shadows. He'd been quiet since dinner, expression distant, dealing with whatever thoughts had been brought to the surface during their conversation with Clint. Steve gave his best friend a small smile and was rewarded with a small nod from the other man. The nod was Bucky saying he was fine, but that he didn't want to talk about it right then, and Steve couldn’t find it in him to push the issue.

"Yeah, I know, but saying 'take me home and juice me' didn't sound that good in my head," Darcy replied, eyes opening so she could see the grin when it turned Steve's lips.

"I don't know, I could see us putting it on the agenda for when we get back." The snort and nose crinkle from Darcy only made Steve's eyes shine brighter, glancing up at Bucky in the mirror, the smile slipping when his words received no reaction. He looked over at Darcy, nodding toward the backseat. "We're only ten minutes out. Why don't you keep Bucky awake?"

Something in Steve's voice made Darcy think his suggestion wasn't just because he liked the idea of watching them make it in the backseat. Nodding, she turned, resting her chin on the seat, blinking softly as she turned her attention toward Bucky. “Carb coma?"

Bucky reached out, holding his palm to Darcy’s cheek. “Something like that,” he hummed, eyes warming when she nuzzled his hand, pressing a kiss to the muscle below his thumb. When she smiled at him, feeling the weight of her gaze like an anvil on his chest, he pulled his hand away, letting it drop to his lap. “I’m good, doll.”

His attempt at comfort only made it clear that something wasn’t good, and it spurred Darcy to motion. She knew being around the kids had been tough for him, but after spending time with them - helping Cooper with the firewood, playing a round of ‘Pretty Pretty Princess’ where Lila had completely owned all three men - she thought he’d gotten more comfortable.

Darcy grunted as she hauled herself onto the seat then maneuvered until she could climb from the front and join Bucky in the back. Steve pressed his hand to her ass and pushed in what she was certain he’d classify as ‘help’, but after a few seconds, she’d managed to take up the seat next to the dark-haired soldier, shrugging out of her coat. "I can’t believe you’re still vertical. I’m almost positive you finished that peach pie all by yourself.”

“I’d have tried the other flavors but someone had to play with the stereotype and keep the apple pie all to himself,” Bucky said, watching Steve glance up at him in the mirror.

“Guilty as charged, but not repentant at all,” Steve said with a grin.

“Per usual,” Darcy said with a shake of her head. When Bucky fell quiet, the corners of her mouth turned down as she looked at him, concern sparking in her chest. She drew her legs under herself, reaching out to grip his hand. “You okay? Overwhelming?”

“Just haven’t been around a lot of kids.”

“And those kids were a lot of kids,” Darcy said with a smirk. “I get it. The house. The kids. Laura. Pretty sure that was the most traditional Thanksgiving dinner I’ve ever had, and that’s saying something.”

“It was good,” Bucky said, flexing the fingers on his prosthetic, squeezing her hand in his. “I’ve just got a lot on my mind. But I’m fine. Really.”
“We’d understand if you weren’t,” Steve said from the front seat, turning his head so Bucky could see the truth of it in his eyes.

“Lots of thoughts,” Darcy hummed. “Thoughts you want to stay in or thoughts you want a distraction from?”

Bucky’s eyes flicked back toward Darcy, seeing the careful, considering look on her face. Somehow she’d known which choices he needed. If he wanted, she’d let him stay there in the dark, a cloud around his head as he mulled over what was constricting his chest. He’d be quiet, and brooding, but if it’s what he wanted, then she’d give him the space.

… or, if he wanted to push that darkness aside, she’d be there, with those lips and that smile and he could lose himself in her, and in Steve, and have a reprieve from the heavy thoughts as long as that skin was on his. It was exactly what he’d needed to hear, and yet again, Bucky was left in awe that this woman was there, knowing what he needed and giving it willingly and without expectations.

Bucky’s hand lifted, pushing a piece of hair behind her ear, unsurprised when the curl popped right back out. “I’m sweet on you,” he said, chest warming when she grinned at him, “you know that, right?”

“Yeah, that’s something I know,” Darcy said, leaning forward so she could press her lips to his. His lips were soft, and warm, and she could taste just the hint of peaches and whipped cream on his tongue. The kiss started sweet, and chaste, but in the span of seconds it morphed into something heavier.

When one of Bucky’s hands tangled in her hair and pulled her closer, Darcy went immediately, melting against him. She’d have been content to stay there like that for hours, just enjoying the slide of his skin on hers, breathing their shared air, showing him with her mouth what he meant to her. It seemed he wanted a bigger distraction, however, so when his hands gripped her hips and pulled her so she straddled him, she had no plans to give him anything but what he wanted.

Steve swallowed harshly, doing his best to keep his eyes on the road, but he couldn’t help glancing up at the mirror, watching as Bucky and Darcy moved against each other. He could hear their small gasps and moans, his pulse racing. He’d suggested she go back there, but now he wondered why he’d put himself through all this torture. Being there, but unable to touch, set his skin itching with desire. If he pressed the gas just a little more, flouting the speed limit, Steve didn’t think anyone could blame him.

Darcy’s sweater came off as some point, thrown toward the floorboards, the tank top she’d been wearing beneath giving Bucky ample skin to press his mouth to. Her fingers tangled in the strands at the nape of his neck, tugging softly, gasping when his teeth bit into the skin above her collarbone. “Buck…”

Bucky pressed his hands to the small of her back, lips and teeth and tongue travelling over every inch that was exposed. When Darcy’s head fell back with a moan, he traced the line up her neck and along her jaw before capturing her lips again. He groaned into her mouth when she ground her hips down into his, knowing she’d done it on purpose.

Steve hit the brake, realizing he’d almost missed the unmarked turn for the compound, only a mile or so away from home. It was going the be the longest mile of his life, and his right foot pressed harder, the trees streaming past them in the dark.

She wanted nothing more than to pull the clothes from Bucky’s body, her appetite for the man
pressed against her insatiable, but she pulled back with a growl, pulling his lower lip between her teeth as she did. “Steve?”

“Thirty seconds,” Steve said, the gravel crunching beneath the tires as he sped.

“Hurry,” Bucky grunted.

Darcy’d gotten distracted herself while she distracted Bucky, gasping in surprise when the backdoor was wrenched open, a disheveled and obviously turned-on Steve looming large as he peered inside. He took her hand when she held it out, pulling him into the backseat, the door slamming shut echoing loudly in the garage.

*  

As they walked down the hallway toward their room, Darcy couldn’t help the giggles that shook her. Bucky’s arm was thrown over her shoulder, Steve’s around her waist, and she had her hands shoved into the back pockets of their jeans. “Do they have cameras in the garage?”

“Mnhmm,” Steve said, his lips curling into a smile.

“No one’ll believe it.”

“Why’s that, doll?”

“As if the two of you could fit in the backseat, let alone -”

“Do what we just did?” Bucky finished for her, grinning when she just laughed harder, watching Steve shake his head with a smile on her other side.

“Thank Bowie for dark tinted windows.”
**Chapter Summary**

Bucky and Steve discuss discussing things with Darcy. Wanda attempts to help Darcy with controlling her powers.

**Chapter Notes**

*heaves a deep sigh* Sometimes, I'm floating high on the happiness of the previous chapter that I forget there's an actual plot under all this UST and Smut, and when I remember, it makes me sad.

This hurts, but it's also necessary. Hopefully when we get to the end of this thing (!?!?!?) it'll all make cohesive sense. *snort*

But in any case, thank you all for hanging around! Knowing eyes are reading my words and building their own mind-movies based off them... it's amazing. And I'm so thankful.

And now? This.

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**PageBreak**

*Sorrow found me when I was young.**  
*Sorrow waited.**  
*Sorrow won.**

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Blinking awake, blearily glancing over his shoulder, Steve tried to pinpoint what sound had roused him from sleep. He felt Bucky shift in the bed beside him, feeling the metal of his best friend’s prosthetic, warm where it was slung over his back. He stretched his arm over Bucky, reaching with his fingers to brush at Darcy’s side. When his hand found nothing but cooling sheets, Steve rose higher on his elbows, blue gaze sweeping around the room for Darcy’s mass of dark curls. “Darce?”

“Barton,” Bucky mumbled into his pillow, Steve’s superior hearing allowing him to make it out despite the low volume and mouth full of cotton.

“What?”

“She’s training with Barton,” Bucky said, turning his face toward Steve, grey eyes squinting against the bathroom light that Darcy’d left on. *Again.*
“This early?” Steve laid back down as he glanced at the clock on the bedside table. 4:45 was early, even for him, and as his head fell back against the pillow, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “I didn’t think she got out of bed before seven unless there was a large cup of coffee and a cheese danish waiting.”

“Venti.” When he felt Steve’s head turn, knowing the confused look that had to be on his lover’s face, Bucky shrugged his shoulder. “It’s not a large, it’s venti, and she’s been waking up earlier and earlier. She’s taking this training thing pretty seriously.”

“Good,” Steve said, a small sigh slipping past his lips as he shoved his hands behind his head and blinked at the ceiling. “Has he been working on her endurance? She’s going to need enough stamina to run, enough strength to hold her powers steady. I know it takes a lot out of her, but if it’s anything like Wanda’s abilities -”

“They’re working on all that.”

“Are you sure? If she gets cleared too soon -”

“Steve.”

At his name, Steve turned to look at Bucky, seeing the other man's sleepy and exasperated expression. Steve ran a hand over his face. “I know. I just…”

“You want her to be ready.”

“Yeah.”

“And safe.”

“Yes.”

“Barton’s the number one trainer. He knows what he’s doing. He’s been working with her for months. Ever since we got back and she’s decided she wants to be in the field, he’s been pushing her harder than ever.”

“I know,” Steve said, sighing again, turning onto his side. It was pretty clear neither of them would be getting back to sleep and he’d been having the slight flutter of fear in his stomach for weeks now.

Since they’d joined the Bartons for Thanksgiving, Steve had felt a shift in himself, and he’d seen something change in Bucky’s eyes, too. The conversation they’d had in the kitchen while washing dishes was still fresh in his mind, his thoughts turning back to them over and over; the possibilities entertained in his quiet daydreams were gorgeous, and he found it hard not to want what his mind envisioned.

Between the conversation with Barton, and his talk with Sam, Steve was left wondering if it could actually work. He still had no idea what he’d do if he handed off the shield; he’d never gone to college, had barely even graduated high school (due to the myriad of health issues he’d grown up with), and being Captain America was the one and only job he’d ever had. He doubted he was even qualified to work the checkout counter at the grocery store.

Bucky looked at Steve expectantly, but not pushy, waiting for him to verbalize what had caused that look in his cerulean eyes. Bucky’d seen Steve become more introspective than normal over the past few weeks, a glint in the blond’s eye that was both exciting and scary. He could make out self-doubt (something Steve seemed to have in spades), a healthy smattering of fear, but beneath all of that, buried deep in Steve’s beautiful blue eyes, was desire.
The desire wasn’t just the *heated* kind, though there’d been plenty of that over the past few weeks, too. The three of them never seemed to tire of stoking that fire and letting it burn, and despite not having super serum flowing through her veins, Darcy had done a remarkable job at keeping up with both of them and their endless appetite for her.

No, the desire that was in Steve’s eyes was something deeper. Bucky had felt it growing stronger each day, watching it expand the more and more time they spent with Darcy. It was something solid, something real, and while Steve seemed to light up with it, Bucky found his heart constricting in a very different way.

Bucky saw the way Steve looked at Darcy, the way she could brighten even the darkest moments, the hope of a future in Steve’s eyes… and it *terrified* him.

He’d never really imagined having a family. Growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930s wasn’t an altogether *accepting* time, especially for people that lived outside the tradition heterosexual relationship, and he’d never found a girl he could actually consider marrying, let alone having kids with. But even with the possibility of marrying Darcy and starting a family, their histories and profession made it was even *less* feasible. It wasn’t possible to have what Natasha had with Laura and Clint. It just wasn’t.

…but Steve looked at Darcy like he *wanted* that life, despite how impossible and dangerous it could be, and when Steve turned that look toward him, Bucky couldn’t help but feel ice filling his veins. They’d both lost so much already. The thought of losing Darcy, let alone *children*, because of the world they lived in… It stopped his heart and plunged it into ice.

Steve’s eyebrows furrowed, watching the uncertainty cross Bucky’s face. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

Eyes darting to lock with Steve’s, Bucky pushed his darker thoughts aside with a shrug of his shoulder. “I was just thinking about what Barton said.”

Eyes widening, Steve rearranged himself on the bed. Bucky had always been able to read his mind, and it appeared he’d just done it again, able to suss out the thoughts that were pinging around in his head. Taking a deep breath, he peered into his best friend’s eyes. “Yeah?”

“We’ve never really had *that* talk with Darcy. Maybe we should.”

“Y-you’d want that?” Steve tried to keep his voice even as he looked in the slate grey of Bucky’s eyes, but his heart beat faster as he attempted to control his breathing.

“I mean, she was the one that mentioned it in the first place.”

Steve blinked, disbelief and confusion sliding onto his face. “She did?”

“Yeah, in her text. She called us her ‘boyfriends’ but said we’d need to talk about it when we got home.”

Steve’s breath passed his lips slowly, blinking as he continued to look at Bucky. He remembered that now, the way Bucky had asked Clint about the ‘titles’ he’d had with Natasha and Laura, and he realized that it was entirely possible that the idea of what came *after* being an Avenger had never even crossed Bucky’s mind.

“It seems like such a stupid thing,” Bucky pushed on, ignoring the pain in his chest when he saw disappointment light into Steve’s eyes, “I mean, we’ve never had that discussion, either, and we’re doing fine.”
“We come from a different time, pal. It was enough to say think that you were my guy and I was yours. End of story.”

“Then why can’t that be what it’s like with Darcy? She’s our girl, we’re her guys. Simple.”

“Maybe it is that simple, but we won’t know until we ask.” The conversation hadn’t gone where he’d hoped, but it was still a step in the right direction. Steve’d been thinking so far ahead that he’d ignored the rest of the stuff that came before it; the talk of commitment, actually moving in together... Those were the next milestones, but Steve had already moved on to the white picket fence. That Bucky was considering the future and titles at all was enough to fan the fire of hope Steve held inside.

Bucky watched happiness replace the disappointment in Steve’s eyes, and he relaxed a bit himself at the change in his love's expression. “So we, what? Write ‘Will you be our girl? Circle yes or no’ on a piece of paper and hand it over?”

Steve chuckled, slipping his arm beneath his pillow, looking across the space at Bucky. “Maybe something a little more romantic.”

“Like what?”

Fingers reaching out to pass lightly over Bucky’s cheekbone, Steve’s voice was soft. “We could go off base. Take her somewhere nice, with real tablecloths and napkins. Maybe go dancing.”

Bucky’s eyebrow lifted, a look of disbelief crossing his face. “Steve, do you have any idea what qualifies as dancing these days? No way I’m doing that in a crowd.”

“Then we do it here,” Steve said, thumb swiping over Bucky’s plump lower lip, “get all gussied up, us in slacks, Darce in a dress and stockings. Don’t have to do it with anyone else around. Just us and some music.”

The weight of feeling in Steve’s words pressed against his skin, Bucky’s mind already supplying him with visuals. Darcy’s curves reminded him so much of the pin-ups they’d grown up with, and imaging her wearing lined hose with heels filled him with instantly with hunger. “Not sure I know how we’d all dance together.”

“We can figure it out,” Steve said with a heated smile, blinking softly, knowing the effect it would have on Bucky. “We seem to be doing a pretty good job so far.”

“You think so, punk?”

“Yeah, jerk. I do.”

“Guess I’ll have to pay more attention next time.”

“You need to relax,” Wanda said, her accent soft, her smile encouraging. She’d spent very little time with Darcy since they’d returned from Wakanda, but she found herself liking the woman who’d found her way into Steve’s heart. If she could help in any way, Wanda was happy to do so.

Darcy’s snort was heartfelt. “Easier said than done. Between my memories and Bucky’s, it’s like a
minefield in there. Every step’s a risk.”

“I will not be pushing, just… visiting.”

“And the hope is that you’ll be able to help me figure out what else I’ve gotten hidden inside of me, like one of those horrible pastel easter eggs?”

Wanda’s head tilted and she gave Darcy an amused grin. “What?”

“For Easter. They fill these plastic eggs full or candy or toys and hide them, then they make kids hunt for them. Which is essentially what you’re doing, right? Hoping there’s not a nine-foot tall killer bunny hiding eggmines in my head that could explode any second?” When Wanda just stared at her, lips twitching, Darcy gestured uselessly in the air. “Sorry, I tend to ramble when I’m nervous, and like I said, I’ve got Bucky’s memories up here and neither of us really enjoy having someone rooting around in our heads, and with Vision’s plan to get all up in there, I’m having a little anxiety about it all. If you can’t tell.”

“You should not be nervous, I promise. I’m much better at this then I was before.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I’m joking,” Wanda said with a soft laugh, rubbing her hands on her tights, crossing her legs on the bed across from Darcy, “just close your eyes and breathe.”

Looking at her for one more long moment, Darcy let her eyes fall closed. She could feel the comforter under her hands - using her bedroom had been Wanda’s idea, somewhere quiet and familiar - and could hear the soft hum of the heat pouring from the vents. Wanda was so quiet that Darcy squinted one eye open a fraction, making sure the other woman was still there.

“Eyes closed,” Wanda instructed, watching Darcy’s sigh lift her shoulders. Once she could see the tension drain from Darcy’s body, Wanda lifted her hand, red energy swirling around her fingers as she brought it to Darcy’s temple and closed her own eyes.

* 

The room was small, only enough space for the twin bed and a small dresser. There was almost nothing in the drawers: two pairs of pants that were much too large and a handful of ratty t-shirts. She didn’t dare leave anything on the floor, as she’d been instructed that if she made a mess, they’d punish her.

They were always punishing her.

Darcy stared up at the faintly glowing stars on the ceiling above her. She lifted the flashlight into the air, pushing the button, watching the room illuminate. After a few seconds, she flipped it back off, seeing the stars brighten and emit a fading green light.

The doorknob to her room rattled, heavy footsteps on the other side. She sat up in bed, heart racing, holding in the scream that threatened to break free. She clutched the flashlight to her chest, pulling the scratchy blanket higher, hazel eyes wide as she watched the chair she’d braced against the door begin to shake.

The woman - ‘call me Mommy’ - yelled something. His voice was loud on the other side, yelling back, words slurring. He tried in vain once more, his drunken state and her makeshift lock working together to keep him out of her room. Tonight, at least. She would never be sure about tomorrow. She was never sure about tomorrow. As he clamored back toward the living room and the yelling
began anew, she rolled onto her side, pulling the blanket over her head.

Tomorrow she started third grade. Tomorrow she’d get lunch. Tomorrow would be better.

*

“Частота сердцебиения?” Heart Rate?

“Шестьдесят три.” Sixty-three.

“Температура?” Temperature?

“Девяносто девять.” Ninety-nine.

“Кровяное давление?” Blood pressure?

“сто семь лет старше восьмидесяти.” One-hundred-seven over eighty.

One-hundred and seven. He knew that number. One-hundred and seven. Why did he know that number?

“Rapport de mission?” Mission report?


“Des témoins?” Any witnesses?

“A petite fille. Mais votre soldat est bon. Il a pris soin du problème.” A little girl. But your soldier is good. He took care of the problem.

One hundred and seven.

“What did I tell you? Did I tell you he’d get the job done, or did I tell you he’d get the job done?”

“Yes, yes. Your dog is trained very well. The money has been wired to the instructed account. I trust our involvement with your organization will remain hidden?”

Alexander Pierce smiled, his arms sweeping in front of him. “Hidden until my plan comes to fruition, of course.”

“Hail Hydra.”

“Hail Hydra.”

“The one-hundred-and-seventh infantry regiment is a tactical team.” The Soldier’s voice was broken, rusty. It didn’t sound right, and the accent was wrong.

“What did he say?”

“The one-hundred-and-seventh infantry regiment was a tactical team. Several members of the division were caught and held behind enemy lines.”

“Wipe him.”
The Soldier caught the arm of the nearest doctor and knocked the mouth guard out of his hand, pushing him backward with a hard hit to his sternum. He jumped out of the chair, ducking beneath a baton that had been aimed for his head. His voice was raised as he continued to fight. “The one-hundred-and-seventh infantry was rescued by -”

“More!” Pierce watched as several guards moved forward, grabbing the Soldier’s arms and pushing him back into the seat. “Now! Now! Wipe him!”

There was no mouthguard, no rubber hose, nothing to stop the screams that tore their way from the Soldier’s throat and filled the room, over and over, as quickly as he could draw breath.

*

“I know it’s not much, but it’s home.”

“It’s New Mexico,” Darcy said with a shrug of her shoulder, casting a glance around the building. It wasn’t anything special, but she could make out little hints of the life she was signing up for. The garbage cans were almost overflowing with coffee cups, and not the nice ones from Starbucks. No, these looked to be to-go cups from the internet cafe down the street.

“Oh! Here we are!” Jane gestured toward the tall man that had just made his way into the building. “Erik Selvig, this is, um…”

When it became clear that the older woman hadn’t remembered her name, Darcy jumped forward and put out a hand. “Darcy Lewis. New intern. You can call me Darcy.”

“Your name is Darcy. Why would I call you anything else?”

Darcy blinked up at him. “No idea. Your buttons are off.”

“What?”

One finger, with chipped green nail polish, pointed toward the front of his shirt. “Your button right there, it’s off,” Darcy explained, glancing back up at him with a smirk, “you’re flashing a bit of skin. But hey, if that’s your thing, feel free. No judgment from me.”

Erik looked over at Jane, who gave him a small, amused grin. She shrugged her shoulders and turned back to Darcy. “I’ll show you where you can put your stuff. I hope you don’t mind sharing a room.”

“I hope you don’t mind me sleeping naked.” When she heard a strangled laugh from the astrophysicist she was following, Darcy couldn’t help the way her lips twitched upward.

*

It never became easier, even after everything they’d seen. No one understood war unless they’d been there, on the front lines, seeing the faces of dead or dying men. Children, some of them. Bucky would never forget any of their faces, and he knew it would be the same for Steve. That, more than anything, pained him.

He’d feared Steve enlisting, silently thanking the Lord every time he was turned away. He was too good, too pure, and the thought of something tainting his shine was something Bucky couldn’t take. He needed to know that Steve was okay, that he was safe, that he was alive. And, suddenly, there he’d been, changed and different, but with that same sweet smile and those damned blue eyes.
It was impossible, still hard to wrap his head around, but the little boy Bucky had grown up loving had become a strong man, the strong man, and Steve had pulled his ass out of the fire, and saved a couple hundred others along the way. It wasn’t until they’d gotten to camp, had some food and climbed into their tent that he’d let himself ask his questions. Steve had answered them honestly, giving as much information as he could, as much as he was allowed.

“So, what, you outrank me, punk? That it?”

“Guess some things have changed after all, Buck.”

“Some things? From where I’m sitting, looks like more than just some things, Rogers.” The look on Steve’s face destroyed the easy atmosphere in the tent. Bucky swallowed hard, his fingers tightening on the metal frame of the cot. “We should get some sleep.”

“When they said the hundred-and-seventh had been captured…” Bucky glanced up, somehow still seeing the tiny, angry blond that he’d saved from so many scraps looking back at him, blue gaze uncertain, voice filled with emotion.

“Hey, I’m fine, Steve. You got me out.”

“What would have happened if I wasn’t there? Buck…”

Bucky was moved to motion, crossing the small tent and taking a spot beside Steve on his cot, knocking his shoulder into the blond’s. “Turns out I have my own personal superhero science experiment. Not many guys can say that.”

“Well, you played bodyguard for me enough times, figured it was time to pay back the favor.”

When Steve looked over at him, gaze heavy with words, Bucky looked down at the dirt, heart in his throat. His body was lined up against Steve’s from knee to shoulder, and he could feel the other man’s heat, even through their clothes. “She’s real pretty, Steve. A knockout. I see why you like her.”

“Buck -”

“Did she know you? Before the serum?” His words were light, even to his ears, but he knew Steve could see right through that. The blond had always been able to call him on his shit, even when he’d just been eighty-pounds of wiry limbs with breathing troubles.

“Yeah. She knew me before.”

Bucky nodded, letting out a sigh. “Good. That’s good. Means she saw the real you. Not that this you isn’t great. I don’t think I’ll be bailing you out of any brawls anymore, but if she saw you when you were still just a punk kid from Brooklyn, then I guess that’s alright with me.”

When Steve’s hand closed over Bucky’s on the edge of the cot, grey eyes swung to find Steve looking at him, the same look he’d fallen for so many years ago. “The outside might have changed, Buck, but I’m still me. I haven’t changed. Not who I am, not how I feel, and not who I love.”

The disbelieving laugh huffed it’s way out of Bucky’s mouth before he could stop it. It wasn’t that he doubted Steve - his best friend would never lie to him - but after everything that’d changed, he didn’t see how there was any way to think things would stay the way they’d been at home in Brooklyn.

“They couldn’t have given you a few more smarts up there? Maybe then you’d realize there’s no reason to be hung up on someone else when you’ve got a pretty dame looking at you like that.”
“Bucky.”

Grey eyes falling closed, emotion swelling in his chest, Bucky shook his head softly. He’d made peace in that compound, peace with the idea that he’d never hear his name falling so sweetly from his best friend’s mouth again, but here Steve was, using that voice and saying his name.

“Buck, come on, look at me.”

It took him a moment longer, but Bucky turned to look at the blond, trying to keep his expression neutral. The look on Steve’s face was enough to tear him apart and put him back together again. “Yeah, Steve?”

“Did you mean it? When you said you were with me ‘til the end of the line?”

Bucky could hear the whoosh of blood in his ears, the hairs on his arms lifting like he’d been shocked with electrical current. He’d never been able to look into those gorgeous blue eyes and say anything but the absolute truth, and even in the middle of a war on a completely different continent, nothing had changed. His tongue swept along his suddenly dry lips and he nodded. “Yeah, punk,” he said, voice cracking with emotion, “I meant it.”

“So did I.”

*

It wasn’t romantic, or heartfelt, or anything that could be considered loving, but it was quick, and satisfying. And really, that lined up pretty much exactly with what she’d been looking for. They’d survived; the giant black monolith had been destroyed, the dark elves hadn’t invaded and killed everyone on Earth, and the nervous energy that had filled her body had exploded outward searching for a release, and Ian had been there.

Darcy grimaced when one of the floorboards beneath her creaked, her head spinning, wincing as she waited for Ian’s head to lift from the pillows. When it didn’t, she let out a sigh of relief, bending down to grab one of her boots and her shirt. She gathered her clothes, tiptoeing out of his room and toward the bathroom. Carefully closing the door, she dressed quickly, wanting to be gone before he woke.

It hadn’t meant anything, of course. Almost dying was known to have an aphrodisiac effect and it made sense that she’d looked for an outlet for all those ‘OMG we didn’t die’ feelings. It’d be awkward tomorrow, sure, but after that it’d be fine. If she didn’t talk about it, he wouldn’t talk about it, and that’d be that.

She stuck her head out the door, curls wild and going in every direction, blinking into the hallway, ears straining for any movement. Satisfied when she heard nothing, she moved quickly down the hallway, grabbing her bag and running toward the door. The sound of her name being called hit her ears and she sped up, pulling the door closed and tromping down the stairs.

Jane was never going to let her have another intern.

*

Wanda blinked, the sound of an alarm in the distance making her wince. It was familiar, that wail of the siren, and she cast her green gaze into the fog, trying to place it. She heard soft voices, the smell of powder, a hesitance in the air that reminded her of something. Or somewhere. A cry, that of a little girl, floated into her ear, and Wanda’s heartbeat began to race in her chest.
What was this?
Where was she?


“Nu te mișca, pești mici. Ne vor găsi.” Don’t move, little fish. They will find us.

“Trebuie sa mergem. Dacă noi -” We must go. If we -

The sound of rubble shifting made them both gasp, and she could feel Pietro’s hand wrap around her shoulders and hold her still. “Nu. Stăm. Ne vor găsi. Cineva ne va salva.” No. We stay. They will find us. Someone will save us.

“But no one found you, did they? You stayed there, like that, waiting for death.”

Wanda turned at the voice, watching as Darcy appeared from the haze and dust of destruction, the remnants of the house she and Pietro had lived in as children crunching beneath her feet. “Darcy? I do not understand. What -”

“Your hate was so delicious. You used it, you channeled it, you made something with it. Why did you stop? All that power and you waste it.”

“Who are you?”

“We’re not that different, Wanda. You, and your brother, and me. The only difference is that I will accept my power, and I will use it as it was meant to be. A millennia of space and time created us, curled the strands of our DNA into something stronger, something better. You’ve worked that out, right? The reason we’re able to contain the power from the stones? Mutants, the lot of us. We’re as good as siblings, you and I, and seeing as you’re down one of those…”

Wanda shook her head, taking a step back, red energy crackling around her hands as she stumbled over a brick. “You are not Darcy.”

“Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Once I listen to the voice, once I accept what I was meant to be, you’ll understand.”

“She will fight you.”

“And I’ll lose,” Darcy said, her hand sweeping outward.

Wanda cried out when piercing screams filled the air, covering her ears with her hands, squinting as she looked for the source. There, on the ground around her feet, were bodies. Broken bodies strewn in every direction. The sun was blocked by the heavy plume of destruction, the dust and debris of buildings littering the landscape, stretching out into the horizon.

She tried to focus on the faces of the dead, but they were lost, blurred and hidden, recognizing no one. Just piles of faceless, nameless bodies. Wanda turned toward Darcy, watching the dark-haired woman hover in the air, her eyes still lit with a glowing, otherworldly amber light.

“The method of your powers was rudimentary. Not your fault, of course, but it neutered you, weakened you. For all your strength and horrible abilities, you lack what I’ve found. Purpose. A guiding hand. Someone to show me what I am truly capable of. You felt one, once, but you blanched at the end game, and you suffered for it. Your brother suffered for it. But there’s hope, Wanda.”
Darcy’s feet hit the ground softly, effortlessly, before she held out a hand toward Wanda, a cold grin on her face. “You could join me, help me build this galaxy, shape it as it was meant to be. With you, with your power, the possibilities are endless. A vast, unending sea of power, of souls, that could be ours.”

“No.”

“Why? Because you have something or someone holding you here? This planet is just one tiny speck of rock and dust. It’s nothing. Infinitesimal. I’m thinking large scale here, fishie. I get that your brain can’t comprehend the multitude of creation, but I could show you. I could show you how to find someone, harness their memories, use their skills for yourself. We were meant to be the dominant species. The things you could do with that mind and those powers, Wanda. Tell me you haven’t heard it calling to you?”

Wanda shook her head, taking another step backward. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You can’t fool me, Wanda. I can see it. I know you’ve heard it calling. The power. It’s in your blood and as much as you might wish you weren’t tempted, I know better. It’s why you went to Wakanda, it’s why you’re trying as hard as you can to be good, because the bad is right there, under your skin. This world’s definition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is flawed. Once the humans realize they are not the dominant life form, they will turn on you.”

Turning, Wanda began running down the rubble that was left of her childhood home. When she hit the ground she tripped, falling to her knees in the dirt, feeling rocks and sharp debris cut into her knees. This wasn’t like before, like what she’d seen in everyone else’s minds. This was real, too real, and she was left wondering if this was from her powers... or Darcy’s.

“It will be bad, little fish,” Darcy’s words carried to Wanda’s ears, even though she couldn’t see the other woman. She could feel warm breath fan against her cheeks. “It will be sharp, and painful, and everyone will bow before I deliver you all to Death.”

“Let me go!” Wanda screamed, looking up to a sky that was slowly changing from war grey to black. “Darcy! Release me! Now!”

*D*

Darcy gasped as her eyes flew open. She’d been pulled out of the darkness so suddenly, so quickly, and she wasn’t sure what had happened. She lifted a hand to her face, brushing at the wetness on her cheeks, looking at the tears with confusion. “What -” She shouted when Wanda fell backward off the bed. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and rushed to Wanda’s side. She held a hand out to the other woman, surprise and worry on her face. “Are you okay?”

Jumping to her feet, Wanda scrambled backward, away from Darcy’s outstretched hand. “No, do not touch me!”

“Wanda -”

“You,” Wanda said, bracelets chiming against each other as she held up her hands, fingers still surrounded by red swirls pointing in Darcy’s direction, “you…”

Darcy froze, eyes wide, watching the fear take residence in the cool green of Wanda’s gaze, seeing the other woman glance over her shoulder and toward the only available exit. “What -”

“There is a... darkness in you. Such pain. It’s not... your blood sings with it.” Unfocusing on the room, Wanda watched the air around Darcy shimmer, like heat rising from hot asphalt. It was
beautiful and awful, and it filled Wanda with terror. “Devastation at your hands. So much death.”

Heart beating impossibly fast, Darcy held up her hands in a placating gesture. “Whatever you saw, it’s not me.”

“It is you,” Wanda argued, taking a step closer toward Darcy, her hands lifting higher, “that voice inside of you, the darkness.”

“That’s the stone! That’s not me! I don’t want to hurt anyone! That’s why I need your help!”

Wanda shook her head heavily. There were things that Darcy had known, impossible things. Thoughts and memories that Wanda had shared with no one. This was so much more than anyone could have imagined. How was she supposed to explain what she’d seen? What she felt. Even now, with the fear coursing through her veins, Wanda took another step closer, yearning to reach out and touch Darcy.

She stopped herself, fists curling at her sides. “No one can help you, you are… you are secerător, you bring death and destruction. You bring ruin.”

Darcy’s emotions were in a free fall, the tears slipping quicker down her cheeks. This was supposed to help, Wanda was supposed to help her, but the other woman was looking at her like she was evil incarnate. She couldn’t help the panic that was beginning to settle in her chest. “No! I don’t want any of that! You need to help me! I don’t want to hurt anyone! I just want to control this! Help me not hurt anyone, like you did with your powers!”

“I have seen this before, this power. It took my brother, I will not let it take me. I can not help you. I am… my powers, combined with yours, should you turn me.”

“Turn you!? Wanda, please -”

Wanda shook her head. “No, no. This will not happen. Please, do not ask to speak to me again. I can not help you. No one…” Keeping as much space between herself and Darcy as possible, Wanda made her way out of the room without a second glance.

Standing in the middle of the room, Darcy stared at the door as it fell shut, her hands at her sides. She wasn’t crying now, not really, even though there was a steady stream of tears sliding from her eyes. She was… cold. Numb. She didn’t know what Wanda had seen, but whatever it’d been was bad, bad enough to cause her to literally run away, putting as much distance between them as she could. Darcy wasn’t sure how long she stood there, feeling numb and panicked and a million other emotions, all at once.

Devastation at my hands. So much death. I’m going to hurt someone. I’m going to kill someone. None of this matters. Training with Clint. The dimmer switch. Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter what I do. Why did I grab that stone? Why did I let this happen? Someone… someone’s going to have to…

“I need help,” Darcy whispered to the empty room, voice breaking as she fell to her knees, fingernails digging into her palms. She went on all fours, her stomach turning, clenching.

“Ma’am, if you’d like me to call someone for you, I can.”

Friday. Darcy looked up toward the ceiling, eyes falling closed as the first sob ripped its way free. “I need…”

“Just tell me who you’d like me to call, or I can use your emergency contact. Ma’am, just tell me who to get for you.”
It shouldn’t have been that hard of a decision, but Darcy hesitated. Her breathing was becoming labored, her chest tightening, her limbs feeling like they were heavy. She swallowed heavily, almost choking on her tongue as it seemed to grow in size. “Whoever… closest…” She was taking in deep heaving breaths, fingers clenching and unclenching on the carpet. Wanda had called her something, a word, and it took way too long for her to pull from the Soldier’s memories to translate.

*Reaper.* Wanda had called her a Reaper. Bringer of death and destruction. She was going to hurt someone, *kill* someone, and Wanda had said no one could help her. This was too much, too big, she couldn’t handle it, her body wasn’t big enough to contain it. The panic in her chest was familiar, Bucky’s history manifesting in her body, and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath. “Help.”

“I’m here, Darcy, I’m here. Just breathe,” Clint said, panting from the sprint he’d just taken from the gym, “keep breathing, that’s it. You’re doing great.”

Darcy blinked at the voice, the edges of her vision grey and tunneling. Had she blacked out? She’d lost time somewhere. She hadn’t heard anyone enter the room. She clutched at Clint’s forearms like they were a lifeline, the panic keening from her chest in labored hums. “Ngghmmmm can’t breathe.”

“Yes, you can, just gotta take in air, you’ve done it all your life, just focus on the air going in and out. Here, feel my chest.” Clint lifted one of her hands and placed it to his chest, covering it with one of his own. “Feel that?” He took a deep breath in, chest expanding, before he blew it out. “See? Just breathe with me, okay?”

Head shaking, Darcy’s curls hung around her face, strands sticking to her temples and brow where she’d begun to sweat. “Ngguhhh gonna pass out I can’t -”

“No, Darcy, you’re not going to pass out, you’re going to start breathing with me, come on. Take a big breath in, okay? Just one breath in.”

Darcy’s eyes slipped closed too easily, lids feeling like they were weighted. She blinked them open when a slap hit her cheek and she drew in a deep, shuddering breath. When she exhaled, the breath carried through to a full sob, loud where it echoed off the walls. “Clint.”

“I know, I know it’s hard but you have to take one more, okay? Breathe in, come on. I know you can do this. You’re strong. Can’t have one of my recruits passing out, now can I? I’ll be the laughing stock of the program, so fill those lungs, kiddo. A big breath in.”

It took everything, every tiny piece of strength she could find, to follow Clint’s instructions and take a deep breath in. His fingers were like fire where they pushed at her hair, sliding it away from where it’d plastered to her skin, lifting the strands and holding them off her neck at the back of her skull. “You’re amazing, but you gotta give me one more.”

The breaths were coming easier now, but her chest still felt like it was in a vice. Everything hurt, everywhere, and Darcy couldn’t stop the crying that shook her shoulders or the tears that burned in her eyes. “I don’t want to hurt anyone. Don’t let me hurt anyone, please, Clint, you’ve got to stop me from hurting someone, oh god, I can’t, don’t let me kill anyone, please, stop me before I kill someone…”

Clint pulled Darcy against his chest as she began to sob, her body heaving with the cries that rocked her shoulders. “You’re not going to hurt anyone, Darcy.” He pressed his chin to the top of her head, rubbing comforting circles on her back and squeezing her tightly. “All you have to do is breathe and we’ll figure the rest out, okay? You’re okay. We’re all going to be okay.”
True Strength

Chapter Summary

Clint asks Wanda for an explanation. Steve and Bucky help Darcy with the fallout. Tony gives Darcy what she needs.

Chapter Notes

I'm still feeling the emotions of the last chapter, and based on the comments you lovely people have left, you're right there with me. As a writer, that makes me happy! As a human? I am so sorry. This one is better and ends on a happy note, so I hope that makes all the pain (glorious, glorious pain) worth it. <3 Thank you for all the kudos, and the comments, and the tumblr reblogs! It warms my heart. <3

PageBreak

What is strength? Is it physical power? Yes. But what is true strength?
It's when you break and break, and break, until you have nothing left, And then you get back up and keep fighting. That is true strength.

PageBreak

“Wanda.”

Green eyes glanced up at the figure in the doorway. Wanda shook her head and crossed back to the dresser, hand shaking. She grabbed the clothes from the top drawer and turned back to the bed, stuffing them in the open bag. “I have to go.”

“What the hell happened?” Clint took a step further into the room, watching Wanda shove more of her belongings into her luggage. “Darcy just had a full melt down, asking me to stop her before she killed someone. You’ve gotta give me something to go on here. What happened?”

Wanda closed her eyes, still able to hear the wailing in her ears, still able to smell the dust and sulphur in the air. She wasn’t sure how, but the stone inside Darcy had pulled her memories. There were things it shouldn’t have been able to know, not without reaching into her mind first. And if it could reach into her mind…

“I looked in her,” Wanda said, hands tremoring as she paused in the middle of the room, trying to
work through her fear, “and I saw death and destruction.”

“Her worst fears.”

“No, Clint. I did not just see her fears. I saw her, standing over ruins, bodies at her feet.”

Clint shook his head. “Why was that any diff-”

“Clint.” The tone of Wanda’s voice made Clint fall silent. She had never felt this much fear, not since she saw what Ultron had planned for the world. Destruction and ruin, and she’d helped it begin. She would not repeat that mistake. “There is a… darkness in her. It’s waiting. Waiting for the right moment, and it will strike when we are the most vulnerable.”

Letting the air out of his lungs slowly, Clint reminded himself that he would never understand all the metaphysical mumbo jumbo that the others accepted so easily. His eyes flicked up to Wanda, seeing the haunted look in her eyes. It was obvious whatever she’d seen was enough to freak her out, and he knew her. Wanda wasn’t the type of person who overreacted, but that still didn’t explain why Darcy had flipped or why the woman in front of him appeared to be running away. “You think she’s going to hurt someone?”

“It is what I saw. I don’t know when, and I don’t know who, but the power inside of her… I can’t stay here. I must get as far away from it as I can.”

“You’re that scared?”

Wanda wasn’t sure how to explain the terror that was still heavy in her chest. “The gem that gave me my powers, the one that turned your heart? I can still feel it inside of me, and it… it wants me to stay at Darcy’s side, to listen, to help. The stone’s power has whispered to me before. I cannot stay here. It’s too dangerous.”

Clint shook his head, fists on his hips, his brain turning everything over. “We don’t run from each other. We help each other. You’ve got to help us with this.”

“I am helping. Perhaps, if I go away, if I am not at her side… Perhaps it will not gather the power it needs.” Space. Space was the only thing that ensured the stone inside Darcy would not be able to turn her heart, too.

“How do I help her, Wanda? We can’t just abandon her! If what you’re saying is true, if she has that darkness inside of her, we have to help her fight it. We’ve gotta, I don’t know, neutralize it somehow. Vision is supposed to put her dampener in later this week!”

Wanda nodded, pulling the zipper shut on her bag, heart in her throat as she looked up at Clint, apologies in her eyes. “I hope that it helps, that it changes what I saw.”

“You think it will?” When she said nothing, Clint nodded, her silence answer enough. Sighing, he looked back up at her, a sadness in his eyes. “You just got back.”

“I know,” she said, moving closer and grabbing his hands in her hers, “I know. I was already planning to return to Wakanda, this just moved my time of departure. I don’t know… I’m sorry, Clint. I wanted to help. I really did. Is she… is she okay?” Wanda hadn’t meant to make things worse, but the fear had been so real, so visceral that she’d reacted on instinct.

Clint nodded, squeezing her hands. “She’ll survive. She’s a tough cookie. Bounces back pretty fast. It looked like a pretty nasty panic attack. It’s not her first. Friday was finding Steve.”
He could see the fear behind Wanda’s green eyes, could feel the slight shaking of her hands. He
didn’t know how he was supposed to make this better. How would he train Darcy to fight against a
force he didn’t understand himself? Wanda was supposed to be the one. Who did they turn to now?
“Tell me what I can do.”

Wanda sighed, looking down. “Once Viz puts in the device, he should stay as far away from her as
possible. He has the whole stone in him, though, that might make a difference, I do not know. I hope
I’m wrong, Clint, I really do. If she does not want to hurt anyone, me leaving is the best decision. For
everyone’s sake.”

He could tell her mind was made up. Clint knew that home was a relative term for Wanda; she’d
been in so many different places over the last few years that she’d never really planted roots. Since
Pietro died she’d been like a leaf on the wind, going wherever she was needed. If she needed to not
be here, he understood.

Natasha had always criticized him for getting too emotionally attached to the people he trained, but
he didn’t know how not to. When you spent so much time with someone, fought battles beside them,
tended to each other’s wounds… that was a bond that was hard to break. “I’ve got a transport of
soldiers heading out in five hours with supplies,” he said finally, his face showing his begrudging
acceptance. “How do I explain this to Cap? To Stark?”

Grabbing her bag off the bed, Wanda considered his question. She had spent so little time with Steve
since they’d gotten back that it felt like they were still oceans away from each other. “Tell Steve…
that I hope I’m wrong and that I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“He’ll know that. Darcy’ll know it, too.”

Slipping her bag over her shoulder, Wanda wrapped her arms around Clint, squeezing him tightly. “I
will go speak with Maria, let her know that I’ll be heading back to Wakanda.” She pulled back,
pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. She paused in the open door, turning back to him. “Would you be
able to, Clint?”

He turned to her, head tilting at her question. “Able to what?”

“Stop her? Before she killed someone?”

Clint look down at his hands, tongue darting out to lick his lips. He’d been neutralizing threats for so
long that it’d become second nature. What would he do if that threat was one of the people he
considered family? His thoughts turned to Nat, who’d brought him back from the brink by refusing
to kill him, by doing everything she could. Would be able to do any less for Darcy? He glanced back
up at Wanda. “If I said no?”

“Then I pray it does not come down to you.”

The electronic lock on Darcy’s door flipped open as Steve neared, Tony’s A.I. not requiring him to
voice his needs. Pushing open the door, he was struck by how quiet it was. The way Clint had called
him, worry and concern tight in his voice, had fanned a flame of anxiety in Steve’s chest.

Just days ago, he and Darcy had walked the grounds of the compound, discussing Bucky’s most
recent panic attack. Growing up, Steve had watched Bucky battle with them; after his parents had
died and his sister had been sent to live with family out of state, Bucky had spent many nights shaking in Steve’s arms with the weight of it all, his breath heaving, his nerves frayed.

His best friend had always been strong, strong enough for the both of them, but that Bucky’d felt comfortable enough with Steve to let himself fall apart and be put back together again… it’d shown how much he trusted Steve, trusted him enough to comfort and look after him, even if it was just for a little while. But, like always, that same charming smile would crawl onto his face and Steve knew he was okay.

"Did you have any panic attacks before the stone?"

Darcy shook her head. “No. I’d get upset, and yell, and fume, but nothing like that. Not until I’d grabbed the stone. And then after, when Bucky and I connected, things… I get it, now.”

“I’m sorry it’s hard,” Steve said, draping his arm over her shoulders and pulling her closer as their boots crunched on the new snow.

“It’s not that it’s hard. It’s just… I should have seen the signs. They were there, I just wasn’t watching close enough.”

“We weren’t.” When Darcy looked over at him, a small smile turning her lips at his use of ‘we’, Steve looked down at the snow, cheeks pinkening with more than just the cold. “We’ll just have to watch each other closer now. Look for the signs.”

“And if we don’t see the signs?”

“Then we’re there to pick up the pieces.”

Walking into Darcy’s bedroom was like a horrible case of deja vu; she was on her side facing away from him, her arms wrapped around a pillow. For a second, Steve wondered if she’d fallen asleep, but she shifted on the bed, her voice sounding hollow.

“So… I guess you heard my meeting with Wanda didn’t go that great.”

Making his way further into the room, Steve toed off his shoes and climbed onto the bed, curving his body against Darcy’s back, reaching up to brush the hair from her neck and shoulder. It was still damp from sweat, and he could feel the cold, clamminess of her skin. “Clint called me.”

“Remind me to send that man an edible arrangement,” Darcy said, the joke sounding nothing like she normally did. It was automatic, robotic, and even with the sarcastic tint, it lacked the life she normally carried.

“Do you want to talk about happened?”

“Not particularly.” She knew Steve wouldn’t push her if she didn’t want to talk. He’d lay there, by her side, as long as she needed him to. Even though she was almost positive she’d cried or sweated out whatever moisture she had left in her body, Darcy’s eyes stung with new tears. “She said when she looked in my head that she saw death. Death and destruction. Because of me.”

Mouth turning down at the corners, Steve shifted closer to her. “She sees possibilities,” he murmured against Darcy’s hair, “not the future.”

“She ran from the room, Steve. She ran and told me not to talk to her again, that I might turn her to the dark side, that I’d use her, that I’d kill everyone.”
Steve was quiet for a moment, the only sound in the room that of Darcy’s irregular snifflies. When it seemed like she’d settled, he pressed his lips to her hair then smoothed it down with his hand. “Wanda sees possible futures, what people are afraid of. You’re the only person tied to an infinity stone that she’s ever used her powers on.”

“But Vision…? She never…”

“Not that, no. And he’s not… I don’t actually know if that power would work on him. You have a stone inside of you. That alone could have changed how her powers reacted.”

Darcy knew Steve was trying to make her feel better, and she loved him for it, but the look in Wanda's eyes when she’d held her hands up, defensive, afraid to come closer… the fear in Wanda’s eyes caused white-hot terror to run through Darcy’s veins.

She thought she’d done pretty good, all things considered, reacting to the monumental changes that had taken place over the past six months. She’d survived the final battle with Thanos and ultimately been the one who’d killed him. She’d absorbed an infinity stone and its power. She’d adjusted to the changes in her own body, like being a fucking mutant, and jumped around in the minefield that were her abilities. She’d tied herself to Bucky. She’d convinced Steve she loved him and had finally, finally heard the words that meant he loved her, too. She’d even decided to suck it up, push past her fears, and try to use her powers for good.

But all of that had meant nothing when Wanda had looked at her and spoke about what she was capable of.

Pain.

Ruin.

Destruction.

Death.

“She was so sure, so scared. Steve, the way she looked at me…”

“Hey,” Steve said, pulling on her upper arm. It took some shifting, but Darcy turned in the circle of his arms. Her face was pale, her eyes still rimmed with red, and the defeated look on her face made his chest constrict. Darcy, the woman who seemed to have a knack for making things better, for making them bearable, was looking at him like she was well on her way to broken. That her light had dimmed so much filled him with sadness. “I know it’s scary, trust me. The things we’ve fought against, the horrible odds… I know how terrifying it can be. But the only thing we can do is our best.”

“Every time I think I’m getting the hang of these powers, that I’m going to be okay, something like this happens. If something goes wrong with the dampener -” Darcy stopped when the door opened again, Bucky’s broad shoulders taking up the span of the doorway.

Bucky paused, eyes taking everything in. His heart fell at the look in Darcy’s eyes, the obvious pain that was there in their hazel depths. “What happened?”

“Bad day,” Darcy said, knowing it was an understatement but unsure she’d say any more words without bursting into tears. Before she’d grabbed that stone, she’d gone years without crying. Now it appeared she at a consistent nine at any given moment. It was annoying, and frustrating, and she hated how vulnerable it made her feel.
“Looks a little more than just a bad day, doll.”

Closing her eyes, Darcy nodded, letting her head fall back to Steve’s bicep. His arm was warm against her cheek, and she let his heat soothe her as much as she could be soothed. It didn’t surprise her when Bucky climbed onto the bed behind her, leaving her sandwiched between both men.

Bucky shared a look with Steve over her head, a volume of thoughts and info passed between them with no words. “It’s going to be okay,” Bucky said, kissing her neck and molding his body against hers, his arm draping over her waist and stretching until it could rest on Steve’s hip. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

“You don’t know that,” Darcy said, blinking her eyes open, looking into the beautiful cobalt of Steve’s. “Neither of you know that. The dampener might not work. Wanda might be right. What if this stone wasn’t meant to be used? What if it was supposed to be destroyed? What if -”

“My entire life has been a series of ‘what if’s,”’ Steve said, voice soft as he reached up and pushed a curl behind her ear. “What if I don’t make it through this winter? What if I catch tuberculosis, like Ma? What if I can’t make it through basic? What if the serum doesn’t work? What if I’m not strong enough?”

“What if I get triggered and the Soldier takes over?” Bucky continued. “What if I lose you? What if I lose Steve? What if I’m not strong enough?” He repeated Steve’s last worry, a question and doubt that always followed him around, too.

“The only thing we can do is keep trying,” Steve said, giving Darcy an encouraging smile. “That’s all anyone can do. It’s okay to be afraid. It’s smart to be afraid. But we don’t give up, we keep fighting, and that’s what you’re doing. You’re working so hard, Darcy. Everyone can see it. Besides, I’ve been told you’re pretty stubborn.”

The snort from the man behind her, lost somewhere in her hair, made Darcy’s lips twitch upward. Steve was looking at her so honestly, so genuinely, that she had to blink back the tears again. Like a fucking fountain, for fuck’s sake.

“We’re all going to be here for you,” Bucky said, pulling her closer. “Me. Steve. Banner. Parker. Jane.”

“Tony. Clint. Natasha,” Steve continued, “we’ll help you get through this, whatever you need, because that’s what we do. We’re family.”

If her heart hadn’t already been filled close to bursting, their words would have pushed her over the edge. She nodded, feeling the hot tears slide down onto Steve’s bicep, sniffling. “Do you mean it? You’d help me with whatever I need?”

“Absolutely,” Steve said, without hesitation.

“Anything,” Bucky echoed.

“Even if it means stopping me?”

The strain in her voice made Bucky’s body go still. He was afraid to breathe, hoping she didn’t mean what her question had insinuated. His grey eyes flicked toward Steve’s, seeing the recognition in the blond’s gaze as they shared a look. “What do you mean?”

Darcy licked her lips, forcing her eyes to stay steady on Steve’s face, making sure he heard and understood her. “If something happens, if this power gets too much, too big, and I’m not me
anymore, I need to know you’ll make sure I don’t hurt anyone.”

“Darcy -”

Pushing away from their bodies, Darcy came to a sitting position, seeing the worry and concern on both their faces as they looked at her. Light and dark. The sun and the moon, pulling at her tides with ebbs and flows. “If the stone is stronger than I am, if it wins, if I’m too tired to fight it anymore, I need to know you’ll stop me.”

Both men shared another look, heavy with uncertainty and questions. They both straightened as well, sitting across from her, their faces pulled into serious lines. “You’re not going to hurt anyone, Darcy.”

“You don’t know that,” Darcy told Bucky with a shake of her head. “You worry about hurting people all the time! You were worried about hurting Clint’s kids, worried about hurting me, or Steve. If you were going to hurt someone, you can’t tell me that you wouldn’t want someone to stop you, too.”

“You’re not going to hurt anyone,” Steve repeated, stronger this time, with more conviction. “You’re going to learn how to use the powers, how to control them.”

“Yes,” Darcy said with a nod of her head, “and the only way that’s going to work for me, the only way that I’m not going to be terrified out of my mind everytime I use these powers is if I know there is a failsafe, a control-alt-delete that will stop me before anything bad happens.”

Bucky could see the emotions warring behind Steve’s eyes, seeing the same battle in Darcy’s hazel that he was sure reflected in his grey. He knew what she was asking, but he still had to ask, to know what she was meant. “Stop you how? You think we’d be able to… that we’d -”

“You’d do what you have to do to neutralize the threat,” she said, voice growing more strained by the second. “Even if that threat is me. Whatever it takes, you’ll do it. I need to know you’ll do it.” Darcy’s voice cracked, hands shaking as she reached for them. “I need to know you’ll do what you have to do. I’m asking you, please. Please tell me you won’t let me hurt or kill anyone. Buck. Steve. Stop me before I do something I can’t live with. Promise me.”

“Darcy, it’s not going to come to that.”

“Then you shouldn’t have any problem promising me,” Darcy told Steve, her eyes wider as she tried to beat the fear and panic back. “Promise me you’ll do what you have to. Please, Steve I need to hear the words.”

One more whisper of please fell from Darcy’s mouth before Steve threaded his fingers with hers, nodding. He chose his words carefully, deliberately. “I promise we’ll do anything we have to, anything to keep you from hurting someone.”

Darcy’s shoulders sagged, her chin dropping to her chest as she let out the breath she’d been holding. “Okay,” she said, letting herself believe his words, “okay.”

“Come ’ere,” Bucky said, tugging on her hand, pulling until she was laid between them again, her body shaking softly, allowing the tears she’d been holding back to fall. It wasn’t until she’d stilled and gone quiet into an exhausted sleep that Bucky broke the silence with his whisper. “Do you know what you just promised, Steve?”

“The same thing I promised you,” Steve whispered back, hand smoothing Darcy’s hair again and again, over and over. “But it won’t come to it, Buck.”
“How are you so sure?”

“Because there’s two of us watching out for her now. Two of you watching me. Two of us watching you. And there’s Tony. And Peter. Clint and Nat. Banner and Thor. I’d take those odds.”

When Steve looked back to Darcy, Bucky watched the certainty turn Steve’s eyes a deeper, darker cobalt, colored with confidence. It was there - love, loyalty, and faith - all plain to see in Steve’s gaze. His best friend didn’t make promises he couldn’t keep, but Bucky wasn’t sure it would matter. Despite the carefully agreed to terms that had been said, there was no way Steve would be able to hurt Darcy, Bucky was certain. Just like he knew he couldn’t either.

Feeling helpless, Bucky listened to Darcy’s steady inhales and exhales, hoping when she woke up that things were better.

PageBreak

Darcy pulled one of her earbuds out, looking around for the source of the noise that had caught her attention. Her ears strained and she was just about to write it off when she heard another knock at the door. She hit pause on her music and rolled to a seated position on the bed, frowning at the door. “Who is it?” she asked Friday, keeping her voice low in case it was someone she didn’t want to see.

“It’s Boss, ma’am.”

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Darcy’s face pulled into an expression of pain. She scrubbed at her cheeks and ran a quick hand through her hair, absolutely sure she looked like a hot mess. She’d finally convinced Bucky and Steve that she was fine to be left alone - to wallow, of course, but they hadn’t needed to know that, and had been kind enough to let her believe they didn’t know it, too - but she’d hoped everyone else would give her space.

She should have known better. In the short time she’d lived at the Avengers Compound, she’d come to realize these people weren’t just coworkers. Putting your life on the line, with the same people, over and over, forged something stronger, something... more. If someone in your group was hurting, you did what you could to make them feel better.

But Darcy wasn’t sure anyone could make her feel better. All she wanted to do was listen to her stupidly melancholic music, stare into space, and ruminate on the fact that tomorrow someone was going to be sticking their hands all up in her brain so she could, somehow, have more control over her powers. Asking to control a power unrivaled in the universe. You know. Simple stuff.

It was a lot. She wanted space. She wanted so much space.

“Ma’am? Boss wants me to inform you that he could override the lock on your door in a heartbeat. His words, not mine.”

Darcy’s eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. “Fecking hell, just open the damned door!”

She watched Tony push his way into Bucky and Steve’s room. He was sporting a Ramones tee beneath a gray blazer, his sneakers finishing what Darcy had come to call his 'cool nerd' persona. She was studiously ignoring the fact that she had the same t-shirt tucked away in a drawer, not wanting to puzzle out how much her tastes lined up with the billionaire’s. His dark eyes quickly scanned the room. For all Darcy knew, this might have been the first time he’d ever been in the space. He took a moment longer to inspect everything before his whiskey-colored gaze settled on
"You look like shit, kiddo."

"Where'd you learn your bedside manner? Kevorkian?"

"Did you want me to lie and say you looked great?"

"No."

"Then you've kinda tied my hands, cupcake."

"Is there a reason you came to assault me with your wit?"

Tony walked along the walls of the room, fingers reaching out to straighten a picture frame before he picked up one of Bucky's paperbacks from the desk and thumbed through it. "Just thought I'd check in with you about tomorrow. Wanted to answer any questions you might have."

Darcy sighed, crossing her legs and watching as he continued his circuit. "You and Bruce pretty much answered everything earlier today, when you took up your favorite pastime of vampirism."

His dark eyes rolled and looked over at her. "Routine tests."

"There's nothing routine about any of this, Stark."

"I know."

"Are you sure this is the best way?"

"It's less invasive -" She let out a heavy snort. "- less recovery time, less chance of complications. It's the best way. The science squad is in agreement."

Darcy's lips twitched at his use of her nickname for the gaggle of nerd scientists that she found herself surrounded by wherever she went. "So I've been told."

He continued his slow journey, and as she watched him look around with interest, a memory floated to the surface. He'd visited her like this once before, when she'd gotten settled in her own room, after she'd bonded herself to Bucky and was dealing with the fallout. He'd been there to check up on her, see how she was feeling. It'd been sweet, speaking to the early friendship she'd formed with the richest man in America. It was more than that now, she knew, and it wasn't hard to see he was there for something more than just pre-op questioning on his mind.

Darcy rolled her eyes, feeling a warmth of affection curl in her chest at his thinly veiled task of checking up on her. "I'm fine, Tony. I'm ready for everything. After -"

"Did you know Maximoff got in my head once?" His words successfully stopped hers, and Darcy looked over at him, hazel eyes blinking as he leaned against the bathroom door, arms stuffed in his slacks, trying his best to appear nonchalant but failing miserably. "We were recovering Loki's scepter. I got inside first, found where they were hiding it. She caught me when my back was turned, used her powers, pushed into my mind, found what I feared most. You know what it was?"

She'd heard Steve talk about being whammied by Wanda, before she and her brother had come to
the Avenger's side to fight. He'd said none of them were doing that great, that she'd reached inside and pulled out their hopes, their dreams, their nightmares, anything to put them off their game. Steve hadn't gone into detail what anyone had seen, not even what he'd seen, so she had no idea what Tony had dealt with. Darcy shook her head softly.

"I saw the team. All of them dead, or dying, at my feet. Because I couldn't save them, because I hadn't tried harder. They were broken and bloody and all I could feel was helpless. Helpless with a mountain of guilt. I tried to stop it, tried to change what I'd seen, tried to avoid it happening for real. Not really my best executed plan, I'll admit. Hindsight being 20/20 and all that. We got Vision out of it, so it wasn't all bad."

Darcy knew better than to interrupt. Not that she wouldn't - she had no problem stopping Tony when he was on an asshole roll - but the look in his eyes told her he needed to get this out. She nodded again, watching as he pushed off the wall and crossed the room toward her.

"I'd seen my friends, my team, my..." Tony stopped, gesturing in the air with his hand, as if he was too afraid to say the word family aloud, though it was obvious that's the word he wanted to use, "I saw them dead, killed in a war that I hadn't been able to stop. That image haunted me, night after night, and when we were done, when Thanos was right there, poised to take the belt... something happened. Something changed. You were there, grabbing that stone, taking him on alone. I couldn't save them, I couldn't even save myself, but you did. My worst nightmare and you erased it, made it like it had never happened. Do you have any idea what it's like to have the darkest thoughts in your head just evaporate? Poof and all that anxiety, all that fear, the dreams and nightmares and panic attacks... gone."

He was standing there, Tony’s eyes so focused on her face, his words heavy with emotion, and it left Darcy speechless. She didn't deserve the look he was giving her, the importance he seemed to be projecting onto her. She shook her head, glancing away, feeling burdened by the weight of his gaze. "Tony..."

"I know what you asked Barton to do. He won't be able to. That man's heart... he'll flinch. I figure you've probably made Rogers and Barnes promise the same. They won't either."

Darcy frowned, assuming it'd been Clint who'd told him what she’d asked. She knew Tony and Steve were on better terms now, but she doubted they'd have opened that much. "Steve's made the hard choice before. When you went into that wormhole, he said he made the call to close it and leave you -"

"Come on, sweetheart. That was me. This would be you. Even if you were begging him, it doesn't change who he is and what he's capable of. Would he jump onto a grenade to save someone? Without hesitation. But to hurt someone he loves? You're not that naive."

She shook her head again, chest burning with an emotion she couldn’t describe. Part of her was angry he’d call Clint, Steve, and Bucky liars. The other part couldn’t help but agree with him. It was horrible, holding onto a lie because accepting the truth was too hard, and she turned her annoyed eyes up toward Tony. "So you've come here to tell me the only thing making me brave enough to go through with all this is a lie? Why? What possible reason -"

"I'll do it."

Her gaze sharpened on his, Darcy's head ticking to the side as she stared at him, the silence in the room deafening. "You'd do it," she repeated slowly, like she didn't believe him. Because she didn't. She didn't believe him for one second. For all that they barbed each other, annoyed each other, for every curse word and dick nickname... Darcy knew that she'd become important to the man in front of her,
just as he'd become important to her. He wouldn't be able to hurt her, not like that. "Do you know what -"

"You want someone to take you out if you go dark side. To keep you from hurting people. It's a pretty simple request."

"A simple... you think me asking you to kill me is a simple request!? Are you -"

"But it wouldn't be you, would it? You're scared that the dark little voice in your head will take over. If that happened, if the stone took over, it wouldn't be you anymore. It'd be the stone in a Darcy suit."

Heart speeding up at just the thought, Darcy took a deep breath inward, trying to imagine what it'd be like, looking out of her eyes but having no control over her actions. Would it be like one way glass, where she could see and hear but be unable to communicate? Like being stuck in a box at the bottom of the ocean, screaming and screaming with no one to hear? There was no way the stone would give her an inch; if it took over, really took over, she'd be locked out. With the stone's power, already knowing what it wanted her to do... no. It wouldn't be her. It'd be the stone.

And suddenly, like a tsunami wave, it crashed into her with perfect, crystalline clarity. It was the Soldier. It was her soldier.

Bucky had spent years locked inside the Soldier, seeing every horrible thing his hands did when he wasn't in control, remembering the face of every single person he tortured and killed. It hadn't been perfect, of course, as wiping his memories had been needed more often as thoughts began to surface. It'd taken seeing Steve again - the face of his best friend and first love - before he was able to claw himself out of the wreckage, and even then there were still triggers in his head, ways he could be temporarily pushed aside. But the stone... it controlled souls. There would be no halfway, no fleeting glimpse of her being brought back from the abyss, absolutely no option of her returning. She'd be lost. Well and truly lost.

Tony was right. If Steve and Bucky thought there was even the slimmest, smallest chance that she could be brought back, they'd hesitate. She loved them with all of her heart, but she knew they'd stay their hand in hopes of her return.

But there'd be no hope. She'd be gone.

Bucky would argue with her, she was sure, but if he'd been given the choice after he fell, if he'd had to choose between dying instead of becoming the Winter Soldier... he'd have wished for death. She knew it with every fiber of her being, because she knew him, better than anyone. Darcy knew Bucky would have chosen death over being the Soldier. And that was exactly what she was asking them to do for her... but they wouldn't.

She lifted her gaze to Tony’s, her hazel meeting his whiskey with focus. “If I ask you to, if you see me fading -”

“I'll find a way to take the stone down.”

Something in her body was still waiting, like the deal hadn’t been done yet. “You promise me, that you’ll save me from letting the stone take over and stop me before I hurt someone?”

“I swear.”

The breath Darcy had been holding left her chest in a huff, her fingers tightening on the comforter, the weight of what they’d just agreed to filling her with the dichotomy of warmth and ice; happy that she’d be stopped before she could hurt anyone, terrified that it’d come to that in the first place.
“Should we pinky swear on it, pumpkin, or are we good?”

Snorting, Darcy glanced up at Tony with a shake of her head. “Fuck, you are such an asshole, did you know that?”

“Well, you’re the one who just put their life and death in the hands of an asshole.”

“Believe it or not, I’ve been doing that since the moment I got here.”

“How unbelievably stupid of you.”

One of her shoulders lifted and dropped in a shrug, a small smile on her lips.

There was something in his eyes, some kind of acceptance, but after a long moment of quiet, both of them grinning softly at each other, he pointed over his shoulder at the door, thumb jutting in that direction. “Good. Now that we have that out of the way…”

Darcy watched him head back toward the door. “Wait, that’s it? You came here to say you’re a-okay with killing me then just saunter away?”

Tony stopped and turned in the doorway, seriousness bleeding into his expression. “I didn’t say I was okay with killing you, Darcy,” he said, the use of her real name a clear indicator of how honest he was being, “just that I’d do what you need me to if the time comes. And I’m leaving because I’m going to go make sure that it never comes, just like you did with my nightmares. So shut up, get some sleep, and we’ll never have to talk about this again, capiche?”

Not sure she’d be able to speak past the lump in her throat, Darcy nodded at him. As the door hushed shut behind him, she took in a deep breath and straightened her spine. His promise had settled something in her chest. It wasn’t going to be easy, pushing past the fear she could still feel every time she used her abilities, but it felt like she was falling with a net below her now. She could breathe a little easier. They’d all work as hard as possible to get things under control, but if something bad happened, she knew Tony would do what was needed.

“Ma’am?”

“Yeah, Friday?”

“Boss just released a suite in the family wing for you, Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes. I’ll forward you the information. He also wanted me to read a message.”

Darcy blinked in the empty room. “Uh, yeah, read the message.”

“These walls you paint by hand.”
Chapter Summary

Vision attempts to place Darcy’s "dimmer switch".

Chapter Notes

GUYS! Your comments on the last chapter... I love you all so much! The last few chapters have been pretty heavy, so I can happily say these next two are light and fun! A REPRIEVE! *grin*

The comments, the kudos, the sharing? You guys are friggin' amazing!

<3 <3 <3

PageBreak

You are human. You are not weak for feeling things. So get angry.
Make people regret ever wronging you. Be happy.
Smile so bright that the sun is jealous. Be sad.
Crack, cry, crumble until your heart is no longer heavy.
The world will try to convince you that feelings make you weak but fuck that.
Never let this cruel world steal your spark.

PageBreak

“Are you nervous?”

The high-pitched, manic sounds of Darcy’s giggles made Bruce raise his eyebrows. She clapped a hand over her mouth to stop the noise she was making. Was she nervous? Yes. Really nervous? Fuck yes. Had that nervousness and anxiety started to manifest in giggle fits interspersed with dry-heaving the non-existent dinner she’d had the night before? Fucking. Hell. Yes. “I’m sorry,” she gasped out, knowing she looked like a mess, “I can’t stop laughing.”

“I know,” Bruce said, reaching out to squeeze her knee reassuringly, “everything’s going to be fine. This really is the best way to do it.”

Darcy nodded, pursing her lips to keep the giggles in, stomach flipping like she was on the roller coaster at Coney Island. Which she’d never ridden, but Bucky’s memories provided plenty of comparisons. She glanced up at the glass to her right, seeing her own reflection but knowing that Steve and Bucky were just on the other side, watching. She gave them a half-hearted thumbs-up,
before giving Bruce her arm to take her blood pressure.

“Tony -”

“Yes, Rogers, I’ve checked everything three times. If there was a single iota of data that said this was riskier than any other procedure, we wouldn’t be doing it.”

“And -”

“We’ll know right away if there’s any problems.”

“But -”

Tony spun in his chair, glaring up at the blond who was standing there with a concerned expression on his face. “If you’re going to have a problem being in here, maybe you should go outside and wait. There’s a reason they usually don’t let family stay in the room during procedures.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Bucky said from Steve’s side, his arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his face. He’d worry about how Stark had just referred to Darcy as family at another time.

“I get that you’re worried about her, it’s adorable, but we wouldn’t have pushed for this method if I wasn’t sure it was the best chance she’s got, okay? I wouldn’t put her in danger if I could help it.”

Steve’s blue gaze swung from looking at Darcy, focusing on the engineer in front of him. He could see the truth in Tony’s eyes. He could tell Tony really wouldn’t put Darcy in harm’s way if it could be avoided. He really did care about Darcy, fiercely, and it helped calm a little of the nerves in Steve's stomach. “I know you wouldn’t,” he breathed, giving the other man a nod.

When Tony turned back to the monitors in front of him, Steve looked over at Bucky, seeing the anxiety on his best friend’s face. He knew this couldn’t be easy, knowing what his lover had gone through in his past, and Steve completely understood the fear he could see in Bucky’s storm-grey eyes. “Hey,” he said, smiling softly when Bucky turned to look at him, “everything’s going to be fine.”

Not trusting himself to speak, Bucky nodded at Steve, eyes flicking down to his feet before they focused on Darcy again. His thoughts were dark, but he was doing his best to push them aside, to drown them out with white noise, anything to keep from running into the room and telling Darcy that this was wrong. No one should be in her head. Not after what they knew. Not when they knew what it felt like to be pulled away, to be erased with a few words and well-placed electrodes. It wasn’t worth this risk. He was scared that the Darcy that came out of the other side of the procedure wouldn’t be their Darcy, but a watered-down, bad copy. Just like he’d become.

It was hard for Bucky, remembering what he'd been like before his fall, before Hydra had tainted him. He’d been dealing with issues of his own before being shipped out - a swell of righteous rage, anxiety and panic attacks, an overwhelming desire to prove himself - but after Hydra he was different. Less himself. He’d mourned the lost bits of himself years ago. When he thought about Darcy being changed after this... it terrified him.

Steve could see the slight tremor in Bucky’s hands, the tension between his shoulder blades, the way his jaw was clenched tight. He grabbed Bucky’s hand and threaded their fingers together, earning a look from the man at his side. “I know, Buck. I know.” Even as the words fell from his lips, Steve knew there was no way he’d able to understand what was running through Bucky’s mind, that was something only Darcy would know. But Steve knew it pained Bucky, and that was enough for him to give comfort and to keep optimistic for the both of them.
When the door to the small room opened, Darcy’s heart began to race. Vision gave her a small smile and an encouraging expression, but her mind was filled with so many fight-or-flight hormones that it did very little to calm her nerves. She made a concerted effort to appear at ease, knowing it was a paper thin veil that anyone would be able to see through. “Hey,” she said, her leg beginning to bounce with pent up nervous energy, “you ready to get all up in this head of mine?”

Vision nodded, eyes darting toward Bruce as the scientist made space in front of Darcy for him. He stood before her, his eyes careful and soft, exuding an air of comfort. “Are you certain that this is the method of placement you would like?”

The fact that Vision was willing to back down after everything, that he’d be perfectly fine with ignoring all the build up and just canceling this all together, filled Darcy with a spark of certainty just when she needed it most. “No fuss, no muss, no coconuts, right?” When he smiled at her words, Darcy found herself smiling back.

Her hazel eyes flicked toward Bruce and his gloved hands. He was holding a petri dish filled with a pink solution, moving very slowly, as if it was extremely fragile. Or dangerous. Or both. Darcy squinted at the pink but, for the life of her, couldn't make out anything in the liquid. “Are you sure it’s actually in there?”

“Yes.”

“I guess I expected it to be… bigger. Maybe less pink.”

“The liquid is a mixture of your red and white blood cells. It'll help prevent any kind of rejection.”

“So that’s why you took all the blood in my body,” Darcy said with a soft, forced chuckle, her hands aching from where they were clutching the table below her so tight, her knuckles white. Vision’s hand rose under the dish and Darcy watched as his limb crackled like static on a bad TV, until he was left looking at the tip of his finger, where she assumed the device was sitting. If a shudder traveled up and down her spine at just the sight of it, Darcy didn’t think anyone could blame her.

Vision turned to face her. “Alright, Ms. Lewis, I need you to relax.”

“Yeah. Sure. Like it’s the easiest thing in the world, right?”

“Yeah. Sure. Like it's the easiest thing in the world, right? “You’re going to be feeling my brain in a few seconds, I think we’ll be familiar enough that you can call me Darcy.”

“As you wish, Darcy.”

She let out a huff of laughter at his words. “Are you quoting Westley on purpose?”

“I’m sorry?”

Darcy felt a rush of fear course through her, hard enough that it clenched her stomach into knots, her eyes screwing shut. She swallowed hard, mouth opening before she could stop the torrent of words. “Westley, from The Princess Bride. Kept saying ‘as you wish,’ over and over, because it meant he loved her, but Buttercup didn’t know it until it was too late. Then there were pirates, a six-fingered man, Inigo Montoya, and ‘does anybody want a peanut?’ and a torture scene using the Wilhelm scream on repeat, not to mention the R.O.U.S., which are ‘rodents of unusual size.’ Obviously. It’s a great flick, we should watch it sometime.”

When the being in front of her grew quiet, Darcy squinted an eye open. Vision was standing there, the beautiful mechanics whizzing and whirring in his eyes, head tilted softly to the side. She frowned, gaze swinging to look at Bruce, who was wearing an equally tight expression. “Okay, sorry, yeah. I ramble when I get nervous.”
“Do you feel alright?”

Darcy’s frown deepened. “I mean, other than someone who’s about to have non-surgery brain surgery, I think I’m sitting at alright, I guess. We should just do it, make it as quick as possible. But not too quick. Efficient but perfect. Think we can manage that?”

She heard a crackle of static over the speakers and turned to look at the glass. “What Bruce meant to say, pumpkin, is that Vision already did the thing and we want to know how you feel.”

Her laugh was disbelieving as she shook her head and turned back to look at Vision and Bruce. “What?” When they both continued to look at her with carefully neutral expressions, her eyes widened. “What?”

“He put the thing in your brain area -.‐.”

“Yeah, I got that part, asshole!” Darcy yelled at the glass.

“Darcy?”

Her hazel gaze flicked back to Bruce and his chocolate eyes, using them as an anchor, knowing that he wouldn’t lie to her. “Yeah?”

“No obvious verbal issues. Do you feel any different? Any pain? Your vision is good? Can feel all your fingers and toes?”

Darcy blinked, focusing on Bruce's questions. She didn’t feel bad. She didn’t feel great either, but she hadn’t eaten anything in the past 36 hours and she’d gotten shit for sleep the night before. She definitely didn’t feel different, but she supposed that was the point, right? Her gaze darted over Bruce’s shoulder, seeing the same pretty maroon skin when she looked at Vision. She released her death grip on the table and wiggled her fingers, then her toes in her shoes. “Affirmative. Eyes normal, can move all my little piggies.”

“And your powers?”

Blinking, Darcy looked over at the glass again. She hesitated, one last thread of fear pinging in her chest before she blinked deliberately, accessing her abilities. Her laugh was bright as she watched the swirl of colors in the small room to her right. Tony’s was silver and inky black, with that sheen of oil in blues, teals and purples. Bucky was there, in crimson and cobalt and the tiniest bit of green she knew was her. That’s when she saw it. She hadn’t used her powers since everything had gone down, since she’d verified that Steve’s soul was still in his body and when she’d pulled the information from Batroc. She’d been too afraid, not wanting to push it, not wanting to tempt something so recently strained. But it was there. The steady beautiful gold that was Steve Rogers, and the gorgeous dark blue cobalt he shared with Bucky. And then, inside the stunning swirl of colors, was the bright, emerald green she knew was her. When a sob tore itself from her throat, both Steve and Bucky were moving before the first tear had a chance to fall. By the time they’d made it into the exam room, both Vision and Bruce had moved to make themselves as out of the way as possible. They both skidded to a stop when Darcy held her hands out, her crying having turned to laughter in seconds. “I hate crying so much!” she called, gesturing wildly at them to come closer.

When they were within reach, she threw her arms around their shoulders, squeezing tightly. “I’m okay, I’m okay. Everything’s fine. Fuck that was so easy!” She pulled back, a wide, watery smile on
her face before she pressed kisses to both of their cheeks then hugged them again.

Surprise rocketed through Bucky’s body, quickly followed by disbelief. He’d watched Vision raise his hand toward Darcy, then he’d seen the hand go through Darcy’s head as she continued to speak, then it was like nothing had happened. She hadn’t even missed a beat. When she pulled back, Bucky gave her an encouraging grin, glancing over at Steve with wide eyes.

The procedure had worked, judging by the happiness that was oozing from Darcy, and the smile on her face was enough to make the fear drain from Steve’s body. Everyone gathered seemed to be of the mind that things had gone alright, and even if Steve didn’t understand one-hundred percent of the science, he knew if anything had gone wrong, Bruce and Tony would have been right there, working to make it right

“Easy?” Tony said, coming in behind Steve and Bucky, making the small room seem even smaller. “We’ve been working on that thing for months!”

Darcy tapped on both Steve and Bucky’s arms, sliding from the table when they took a step back. “Would it be so bad to just let me have a moment before you start taking credit, you asshole?”

“Me? Not taking credit?” It’s like you don’t even kn -” Tony oofed when Darcy threw her arms around his neck, pressing her lips to his cheek before he could argue. There was a moment where she was sure he was going to push her away, but then she felt his arms wrap around her shoulders, holding her just as tightly as she was holding him. “You’re okay.”

“I know,” she said against his neck, “you made it work, you really did.”

“Told you I would.”

She felt like they were both talking about something different now, and her hazel gaze translated as much as she pulled back to look into his whiskey-colored eyes. “I know. Maybe you made my nightmares go poof, too.”

“Maybe,” Tony said, pressing his knuckles to her chin and pushing softly.

“And you!” Darcy cried, spinning toward Bruce. She crooked her finger at him, watching him grin softly and shake his head. “Uh-uh, this is happening, this hug, do you feel it? I can feel it. Here it comes!” She didn’t care that she was acting like a child, jumping from person to person. She was elated. For the first time in a long time, she felt good. Yes, they still needed to test the dampener to see if it actually worked, but all that was secondary to the fear she’d had of something going wrong in the placement, the fear of someone literally being inside her head.

She pulled Bruce into a hug, pressing lips to his cheek, before turning and doing the same to Vision. She was surprised that he felt warm to the touch (though she’d never really had thoughts about whether he’d been warm one way or another) and pulled back to look at him with a wide smile. “How was my brain? Suitably mutant-y?”

“It was… interesting.” Vision answered, “though I admit I don’t have much to base that conclusion on.”

“I’m going to assume it was mutant-like and squishy and leave it at that.” She swept her arms open wide and gave the five others in the room an incredibly large smile. "Guys! We did it! Brain surgery without the surgery! It’s a thing!"

“We should tell Peter the good news.”
Darcy’s eyes widened at Tony’s words. “Peter!” She turned toward Bucky and Steve, seeing the small smiles that were turning their lips. “Do you guys mind? He’s probably in the lab, biting his nails off and worrying. I should tell him everything’s good, yeah? Then I’ll meet you guys later?” At their nods, Darcy darted forward again, pressing her lips to their cheeks before she ran from the room.

“Should we be worried about that?”

Steve’s eyebrows rose as he looked over at Tony, the smaller man staring at the door as if he expected there to be a Darcy-shaped hole in the wall. “About her finding Peter?”

“How about her being that excited. Is that normal? Barnes?”

Bucky blinked, gaze flicking to Tony, who was looking at him expectantly. “She goes from one to ten pretty quickly.”

“So you wouldn’t classify this is abnormal? Not a possible side-effect?”

“No,” Bucky confirmed with a shake of his head, “she’s just hasn’t had a lot to celebrate lately.”

“She should now,” Vision said, taking a step forward. “I’m very pleased we were able to complete the procedure. I am sure Mr. Stark and Mr. Banner will keep their eyes on her, ensuring she suffers no ill effects, but it is time for me to say goodbye.”

“You’re saying that as if you’re leaving,” Steve said, blue gaze sharp as he looked at Vision. Something about the way those words had been strung together made it seem like it was more than just a ‘see you tomorrow’ kind of parting.

“Before she left, Wanda approached me about what she’d seen in Ms. Lewis’ head. I have to agree that it may be best for me to keep my distance.”

Tony’s face swung toward Vision, his eyes narrowing. “You’re jumping ship?”

“I believe placing the neural dampener was a necessity, and I was more than happy to assist, but I think it is in everyone’s interest for those tied to an infinity gem to minimize contact with Ms. Lewis for the time being.”

“For how long?”

Vision gave Steve an apologetic nod. “I cannot say.”

“Running away is not a plan,” Tony said as he crossed his arms over his chest, “it’s cowardice.”

“I do not see myself as running away so much as preemptively mitigating any possible disastrous outcomes.” When Tony simply shook his head, Vision’s head cocked to the side, looking at the smaller man. “Mr. Stark, have you asked yourself why you feel drawn to protect Ms. Lewis?”

“You mean besides the fact that she saved the entire planet and the eight billion people on it?”

“You’re saying you think the stone has something to do with the relationships she’s formed with the team?” Steve asked, his gaze focusing on Vision.

“I believe there are forces at play that we cannot begin to understand.”

Bruce took off his glasses, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “You’re insinuating that the stone itself is amplifying our protectiveness toward Darcy?”
“I am simply positing that in an effort to maintain stability, that the stone may, due to its very nature, draw and surround itself with strong individuals as a means of survival.”

“So?” Tony shook his head. “Does it really matter? Even if it is the stone, it’s still Darcy. So the stone pulls people in. Neat. Doesn’t change who she is. Barnes, you have her memories. Did anything fundamentally change with her when she grabbed the stone?”

Bucky looked up, surprised Tony was asking him anything. “No,” he answered, automatically and without hesitation, “she’s always been who she is, stone or not.”

“I did not say that I believed she was trying to fool us or is doing so deliberately,” Vision said, his voice even and tone serene, “just that the idea merited thought. I sincerely hope you are right and my hesitation is unwarranted. I will keep in touch.”

Steve watched Vision as he left, his figure disappearing through the wall. Hands on his hips, Steve stared at the floor, taking in the conversation. He’d had thoughts in the past, wondering if there was something about the stone that had caused them to form such strong attachments with Darcy so quickly. More than anything, he was aware of how his feelings for Darcy had formed.

It hadn’t been instantaneous. His attraction to her, maybe, but falling in love with her hadn’t happened at all once. It’d been built over time, over hours spent together. Late night movies. Reminiscing about times she wasn’t there for, but knew intimately. She carried a piece of Bucky inside of her, and while that might have been what drew him initially, it was her. The way she could make him laugh when he thought nothing could seem funny. The way she was the polar opposite of and exactly the same as his best friend. The absolute focus she would give him when they talked, like his words were the most important thing in the universe.

Those were the reasons he’d come to care for Darcy, not because of some otherworldly gem. Because of who she was, at the core. “He’s wrong,” Steve said, his voice soft but certain. “I get why he’d be worried, but he’s wrong.”

“You agree with me?” Tony asked, one dark eyebrow raising in disbelief.

“I agree that I don’t care how it happened. She’s here, now, and she needs our support. None of us are tied to a stone, which means we help her, whatever she needs.” Steve watched a shadow pass over Tony’s face then disappear just as quickly. “What?”

Tony looked up at Steve, pulled out of his thoughts. “Nothing. Just thinking what the next step is.”

“Full scale tests,” Bruce said, pushing his glasses back on. “We need to see what she can do. If the dampener is working, she should be able to use her powers without worrying about pushing too hard. We need to find out the full scope of her abilities.”

“I’ll set something up,” Tony said with a nod, making his way out the door.

Steve watched him go before leaning into Bucky. “I’ve got…”

Bucky nodded, giving his lover a dismissive wave. “Go.”

Jogging slightly, Steve made his way into the hall, only taking a few seconds to catch up to Tony. The billionaire already had his phone up and was typing furiously. “Tony?”

Tony stopped then turned on his heels to face Steve, his normal mask of bravado easily slipping into place. “Hm?”
Coming to stand before the smaller man, Steve let out a sigh, trying to figure out how to broach the subject without it being blown into something bigger than it was. The look on Tony’s face had stuck out, and he needed to know what had gone through the engineer’s mind. “What you said, about helping Darcy, with whatever she needed. Did you -”

“I told her pretty early on that we’d get her squared away. That includes helping her control everything. I hate being made a liar. Why? What were you...”

“Nothing, nothing,” Steve said, letting out a huff of air as his hands rested on his hips. “Just making sure we’re all on the same page.”

“Same page. Same paragraph. Same sentence, even. We’re good.”

“Are you sure?”

The smirk on Tony’s face grew crooked. “Like I said, I hate being made a liar.”

“Parker!”

Whirling around at the sound of his name being bellowed from the entrance to the lab, Peter blinked wide brown eyes at Darcy as she pushed open the double doors and skidded to a halt about a hundred feet away. While she'd been the exact thing he'd been thinking of, he hadn't expected to hear anything about the lab assistant so quickly, let alone her running into the lab and shouting for him. “Darcy?”

“You!”

Peter took a step backward when she pointed in his direction then began to stalk toward him. He’d seen determination in her eyes before, but this was a whole new expression. He’d done everything to keep himself busy, knowing what was happening in the med ward, and had settled with testing his new webbing in the corner, building an impressive overlay that seemed to have the tensile strength he’d been looking for. “Did it, are you, I mean, you look -”

Darcy decided that throwing herself at people was the theme of the day. She took a running leap at Peter, knowing he’d catch her. She was proven correct when he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and spun them so he’d take the brunt of the impact. They never hit the floor, however, as they fell and bounced onto his webbing, which felt like the world’s springiest trampoline. She gave a surprised bark of laughter as the web threw them this way and that while still maintaining to keep them stuck fast. When they’d somewhat settled, Darcy cradled Peter's face in her hands, punctuating her words with kisses to his cheeks.

“You are” kiss “no doubt” kiss “the best science baby” kiss kiss “a girl could ever ask for!” Ignoring the way he was scoffing at her show of affection she beamed her brightest smile down at him. “It’s been placed, it’s working, and I am, so far, voice free.”

Peter’s pink cheeks shifted toward a look of relief, his eyes widening as he pushed away the embarrassment of her kissing him and accepted the thread of happiness that she sent his way. “It’s in?”

“Phrasing, but yeah. It’s in.”
“Darcy! That’s great!” Peter reached up and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, squeezing her tightly. He pulled back, brown eyes looking askance as his shoulder lifted. “I mean, really, it was Tony -”

“Noope, uh-huh, I already thanked Tony. This is me thanking you, so no brushing it off like you didn’t do anything and it was all him.” Darcy was vindicated to see that's exactly what he’d be about to say. “He helped, but all of you worked on it. You, and Bruce, and Janey. You all helped me.”

“Sure, yeah, of course, but are you sure it works? Have you done a full scale -”

“Parker! Just accept the happiness for a few minutes, okay? Let’s just celebrate that a super Infinity-stone-jacked being was able to take the device you guys built and insert it into my head! Damn! Just take the fucking win, man!” Darcy rolled from where she was on top of him, her clothes sticking to the webbing as she stretched out beside him.

Peter grinned at her, seeing the brightness in her eyes and matching it with some of his own. “Okay, okay. I’ll take the win.” Her enthusiasm was infectious, and Peter stretched an arm above his head, turning on his side so he could face her, uncertain he’d seen her this carefree before. It was a good look. “So what comes next?”

“Full-scale tests, I assume,” she said, grabbing a piece of lint from his shirt. Somehow it fell from her hands and was sucked into the webbing, almost like it was magnetically pulled to it. “I see what else I can do. See how we can make it work in a combat situation, though I’m not really thinking I’ll be near the combat so much as on the edges, directing traffic.”

“When you have those light up stick things they use at airports?”

“Obviously,’ Darcy said with a grin, able to feel the adrenaline slowly drain from her system. She was still happy - ecstatic, really - but that crazy energy was beginning to fade. “I’ll train with Clint, learn how to use the powers in the field. So many little things I didn’t think were possible before that are, now, thanks to you.”

When he tried to wave his hand dismissively, she grabbed it with hers and held it tight. “Peter, I know feelings are this whole thing, and we shouldn’t have to go into them, and normally I’d be right there with you, okay? Feelings, right? The worst. But you… you brought your fresh eyes and had the idea about the road.” At his blank look, she shrugged a shoulder. “The… the road, the neutral pathway thingy!”

“New neural architecture?”

“Yes. That. That was you. You started this whole thing rolling.”

“I was just trying to help,” Peter said.

“Well you did. You helped a lot. For all we know, you might be the only thing that keeps us away from total global annihilation.”

His eyes widened comically. “What?”

“Figuratively speaking, I mean.” Though Darcy knew it wasn’t just figurative, not after what Wanda had seen. But now, maybe it was figurative. If the dampener did what they hoped it would, Peter might have literally come through with the thing that saved the future. “You changed my life.”

“I think that’s overstating things a bit,” Peter said, rolling his eyes at her softly while his cheeks reheated at her words.
“I don’t.”

Peter’s brown eyes held her hazel, seeing the genuine and honest gratitude in her gaze. He couldn’t look away, but when she gave him a soft smile, he gave her one of his own. “I’m glad I met you, too.”

“What? Ew! No. Come on, now, Pete! Why’d you have to ruin it with something like that? Talk about putting a dampener on the moment.”

The grimace on Peter’s face was deep, his nose wrinkling. “Ugh. That was horrible.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The roll of Darcy’s eyes was playful, though her grin dimmed slightly when she tried to pull herself off the webbing and realized she couldn’t. “What? How -”

“Oh! I tried something new. This’ll stay up and hold anything until an electric shock is introduced at a certain amperage. See?”

When Peter’s fingers wrapped around a strand of webbing, Darcy felt the small shock lift the hairs up and down her arms before they fell the two feet to the ground, smacking against the red mats with matching grunts. “Neat,” Darcy managed, looking over at Peter when she lifted onto her elbows. “But what are you gonna use that for?”

“Dunno, but I’ll think of something.”

“Of that, Spiderman, I have no doubt.”
Melody Of You

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy and Steve spend a night out.

Chapter Notes

So... this is THE largest chapter I've written to date. And fuuuuuuuck do I love it. I don't write fluff. Seriously. Angst and plot? I'm your girl, but fluff? Happy, serene, bubbly fluff?
*Eyes*
All this to say I hope you like it!
<3

PageBreak

There’s no life for me that doesn’t involve you,
*Because you walked in, all burning rage and ruthless hope,*
And I found myself orbiting you like the moon orbits the sun.

And you, you have shaped me, and changed me,
*There’s nothing of me left that doesn’t somehow ring with your touch,*
And the heart that pounds in my veins cries out with your name.

I once thought that I could conquer the stars by myself,
*But now I realize, it would so much more with you holding my hand,*
Because I am the pieces of me that you chose to believe.

And the cracks of the universe, the echoes of ruin,
*Seem less loud, less daunting,*
When I have the melody of you providing a soundtrack to me.

PageBreak

“Is it too much?” Darcy leaned closer to the mirror to check her hair then took a step backward, turning so she could see the way the navy blue dress flowed over her curves. “I’m worried it’s too much.”

“From the research I’ve done, you bear all the hallmarks of what was considered the height of fashion in the 1940s.”
“I guess so,” Darcy sighed, picking at a bit of curl that refused to stay where she wanted it to. Luckily, retro and vintage dresses were back in style - *Did the fact that Captain America had been found alive have something to do with the resurgence?* - and she’d found just the silhouette she’d been looking for. “I just want to look good.”

“I think they’ll be pleased, ma’am.”

“Yeah?”

“I am not programmed to lie.”

“Well, thank Stark for that.”

Darcy took a step out of the bathroom then paused, retracing her steps so she could turn off the light. She’d been horrible about it in their rooms and Bucky always made That Face at her when she forgot. It was new, living with someone who wasn’t as absent-minded as Jane, so it was taking her a little bit to adjust. But she was happy about it. *Fuck* was she happy.

Retreating to her old room across from Steve and Bucky’s so she could change, Darcy was hit with just how much had changed since the last time she’d slept there. Steve had been hurt then healed. She’d almost gone to the edge with her powers and back. She’d had brain surgery without the surgery, and going on a week now, she wasn’t seeing any ill effects. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

...which was why, of course, her stomach was twisting and turning in apprehensive knots. Darcy wasn’t used to *calm*. Hectic? Yeah. Frustrating? Almost constantly. But serene? It was a whole new ballgame, and *damn* did she hate sports. She could almost hear Jane’s voice in her heard, telling her to shut her eyes, breathe, and count to ten. Following the ghost of her best friend’s advice, Darcy did just that.

*One*

It had been an entire week since Vision had placed the neural dampener in her brain, and despite several batteries of tests, nothing seemed to be out of place. They’d wanted to give her time; time to adjust, time for her body to adapt to the new device, time to really feel comfortable before diving in again, so she’d kept her abilities in her back pocket, pretending they didn’t exist until they were ready.

*Two*

Come Wednesday after Christmas, she had a date with Tony to push her powers, to really see what she was capable of. There was so much she still didn’t know, and since Thor had gone AWOL - *with Jane, to Asgard, the place it seems I will never get to visit* - they were kind of fumbling in the dark. But that was okay. Darcy was used to fumbling.

*Three*

While they’d taken a break on testing her new powers, Clint was *all over* her with the other training. The physical training. Less scary, sure, but also a *lot less enjoyable*. It was one of the reasons she was worried about the outfit Friday had helped pick out. Her body was changing. Not in crazy ways; Darcy had made peace with the way her body was shaped *ages* ago, but she could tell there were changes. Her legs were leaner, more toned. Where she’d had no upper body strength before, now she could see definition. She was less winded when they ran, less stiff after they’d sparred. Slowly but surely, Clint’s training was working. Darcy had even landed a punch three days ago, the look of
surprise on the archer’s face something she wanted to sear into her memory.

Four

Fuck! I left a load of laundry in the washer. Fuck!

Five

Natasha had begun talking to her about knives. Real, actual, ‘will cut your finger off, no don’t grab it like that unless you want to lose a digit’ knives. No one was on board with her getting a gun, it seemed, and blades were the next best thing. Could she dig into Bucky’s memories and pull up more information about weapons than she ever wanted? Probably. Was she going to do that? No.

Six

Steve snored. And not, like, a little bit, but, like, a lot

Seven

She loved that she knew Steve Rogers, Captain America, ‘Mr. Red, White and Blue,’ snored.

Eight

Despite what Friday had said, Darcy was still worried she’d overdressed. This was her first real date, out of the compound, with her boys, as a Them, with a capital T. She was nervous. Excited. She was excitedly nervous.

Nine

Steve had emerald in his soul. Her emerald. She’d seen it. She was in there now, buried deep, glowing and glittering in all that gold.

Ten

“Ma’am, Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are waiting outside the door for you.”

Darcy’s eyes blinked opened slowly and she let the breath out of her lungs deliberately. Even from fucking realms away, Jane was making her feel better. Smiling to herself, Darcy grabbed the clutch she’d dropped on the bed and crossed to the door. When she opened it, she took in another deep breath, this one reflexively at the sight that greeted her. “Wooooooow...”

Steve felt Bucky go still beside him. Not the stillness that came over him when he was lining up a shot with his sniper rifle, but near enough that it took Steve by surprise. He followed Bucky’s line of sight, feeling his own body go quiet as they both blinked at Darcy in stunned silence.

Darcy looked like she’d just stepped out of the 1940s. The navy dress she wore hugged her body, dipping into each hill and valley, accentuating her best features which, Steve happened to think, were all of them. Her hair fell and slid across her shoulders in shiny waves, the perfect red of her lips making the hazel of her eyes shine brighter somehow. His gaze lingered on her mouth, darting up when she shifted her body weight, noticing the pink that was blossoming on her cheeks as she looked back and forth between him and Bucky.

“Darcy… you… I mean… you look…”

Bucky watched Darcy’s pulse beat beneath her skin of her neck, strong and getting quicker. He didn’t have to be behind her to know the stockings she wore were lined up the back, the heels on her
feet giving her an extra two inches of height, meaning he’d have to bend less to press his lips to hers, smearing that beautiful red all over her skin and his. His mind tumbled, imagining other places the smudges of red could be transferred.

If she was struck blind in that very instant, Darcy’d be fine if her last visual memory was of the two men in front of her. Steve, though she knew he preferred blue, was wearing a grey button down, stretching taut in all the right places and looking soft to the touch. When her eyes flicked to Bucky, she realized the grey was a close approximation to the normal color of his eyes, though they were darker now, like charcoal, his pupils dilated and blown wide.

Bucky didn’t wear blue that often, but when he did, he wore the *fuck* out of it. His sweater was a darker color than the cobalt that tied them all together, but the the lighter blue button down underneath was somewhere closer to Steve’s eyes, and not for the first time, she had to wonder if they planned wearing things that would short-circuit her brain.

That she’d done the same thing wasn’t lost on her, and when Bucky offered his hand, she took it, feeling ridiculous that there was a real possibility her knees would give out with just how goddamned pretty they both were. When Bucky pulled her flush against him with one fluid motion, her breath gasped out at the rush, heartbeat speeding up at the hungry look in his eyes, his gaze lower, centered on her mouth. “You…”

“You both need to learn to finish your sentences,” Bucky growled, the strain in his voice indicating how affected he was. He leaned forward, his lips hovering over hers but not touching, taking a deep breath inward, drawing the scent of citrus and blossoms into his lungs. He wanted nothing more than to push her backward, drag Steve behind them, and show her just how good he thought she looked, but Darcy had been talking about this for weeks now. Dressing up. Going out. Eating food that hadn’t been prepared onsite. After he and Steve had suggested it, she’d been focused on it, excited, using it as something to look forward to, an event after having the dampener placed, a future where everything had gone well enough that dinner and being out was even possible.

And if he was being honest, he’d been looking forward to it as well. Steve had been everything he’d needed over the past few weeks; he’d been reassuring, and confident, insisting that everything was going to be fine, believing it enough for the both of them. Between Darcy being a rock while Steve was unconscious, and Steve being a rock while Darcy underwent procedures on her brain, Bucky had been buoyed alongside them both, neither letting him drown.

If going out made both of them happy, then that’s what they’d do.

Darcy’s breath hitched when Bucky’s lips pressed to her cheek, lingering for a few seconds before he pulled back, not relinquishing his hold on her hand but giving her enough space so she could draw in a quick gulp of air. “You both look…”

“You’re absolutely stunning,” Steve said, his voice even, though his heart beat quicker in his chest at just the sight of her. He moved closer, his hand resting on her hip, the material of her dress soft beneath his fingertips as he mirrored Bucky, pressing his lips to her other cheek, reluctant to pull back.

“I wasn’t sure if it would be too much,” she admitted, her voice breathy even to her own ears. When Steve shifted and she was able to read his expression, she felt her worries vanish: she hadn’t done too much, but she might have done *just enough*, if the look on his face was any indication. While Bucky’s expression promised heat and gasps and the feeling of fingernails digging into skin, Steve’s was filled with lips pressing for hours, the roll of a tongue and the slow, torturous building of flames. “You both… yes. The both of you. Very nice. Like, *stupid* nice.”
Steve’s low chuckle at the utterly Darcy-esque turn of phrase was warm, and he grabbed her other hand in his, letting it hang in the hair between them, not ready to break physical contact with her yet. When he’d looked at her for another long moment, none of them in any rush, Steve took the initiative and cleared his throat, pushing past the embers of desire that pulsed within his chest. “So… are we hungry?”

“Oh yeah,” Bucky said, enjoying the way Darcy’s lips parted at his words and the not-at-all-veiled insinuation in his voice, “real hungry.”

When she was sure she could take a step without embarrassing herself with the way her knees felt like jelly, Darcy nodded. “As long as one of you drive. These heels weren’t really made for pressing pedals.”

Walking between both of them, their hands warm on the small of her back, was like some sort of test, Darcy was sure of it. They walked with ease, confidence, and she tried her best not see every darkened room or hallway as a possible pit stop where they could disappear, where she could show them just how fucking hot they were making her. The feeling both excited and frustrated her, and she wasn’t sure how she was going to make it through the night without shoving them into a shadow and hoping no one snapped a photo of Captain America and The Winter Soldier having their clothes torn off by a curvy brunette with zero qualms about public sex.

That thought alone was enough to sober her. It’d been a worry, of course, going out in public, considering who the boys were. She was nobody, and for the first time, Darcy was happy no one knew who the forgettable lab monkey with the dark hair was. She had a shield of anonymity that they didn’t, but they’d done their best to accommodate that fact.

Asking Natasha for help hadn’t been an easy conversation - that woman could ask some very weird questions - but in the end, she’d been able to provide them with a restaurant that would seat them out of direct eyesight, and a club so dark that no one would know the difference. Their stop in between? Well, that was a part she’d kept from both boys, wanting to have some kind of surprise.

As they made their way into the enormously large garage, she shot Steve an expectant look. “So, what are we taking? Something fast? Something flashy? Something proprietary? An uber?”

Steve heard Bucky’s snort on the other side of Darcy, and he looked over at his best friend with a curl of his lips. “We thought we’d go with something a little more familiar. We’d take the bikes, but it’s a little cold out.”

The idea of wrapping her arms around one of their waists as they flew through the forests surrounding the compound sent a shiver up her spine, but Darcy knew he was right. Christmas was less than a week away and the cold had hit New York pretty heavily. When it got warmer, though? That would definitely be on her list of things to do. “Okay, so what do we have?”

Hazel eyes followed the sweep of Steve’s hand, brightening when they landed on their target. Darcy’s gasp and hop of excitement made the smile on Bucky’s face grow, seeing the recognition light in her eyes as he gestured toward the shiny black 1940 ½ ton Chevy pick-up. “Figured we’d take you out in style.”

“Isn’t this the same kind -”

“That Doc Fromm drove?” Bucky finished for her, watching as she stepped on the runnerboard and peered inside. “It is. Restored, of course. Stark had it just sitting in a garage somewhere.”

“And let me guess,” Darcy said, stretching an arm above the door and turning to look at both of them,
with a chagrined look on her face, “when you told him you wanted to take me out, he said he’d give you something ‘you could handle’ or something along those lines?”

“Did that dampener give you mind reading abilities too, doll?”

“No, but my ‘asshole ESP’ is off the charts,” Darcy said with a smirk, her heels clicking as she jumped back to solid ground. “Can I ask why you wanted something other than what he had here?”

“One reason,” Steve said, leaning around her so he could open the door, a grin on his lips, “bench seating.”

Darcy’s eyes warmed as he stayed in her personal space, closing the distance between their mouths for a quick, chaste press. “Have I told you that I like the way you think, handsome?” she asked, reaching up to run her thumb over his lips and swipe at the smudge of red she’d left behind.

“I won’t say no to a reminder,” Steve breathed, tongue darting out to lick his lips, tasting her.

“You keep calling him ‘handsome’ and he’s gonna get a big head,” Bucky said, arm slipping around Darcy’s waist, spinning her away from Steve so he could lean into the blond himself. “Punk’s already too sure of himself as it is.”

She grinned as she watched Bucky capture Steve’s mouth with his own, heart still skipping a beat as she saw the easy comfortability they defaulted to around her. In public they were professional, never letting their touches linger, keeping everything personal inside the doors of the compound. But here, with her, they didn’t worry about any of that. And that confidence was sexy as fuck.

Steve pulled back, eyes filling with heat as Bucky blinked at him from inches away. He’d been nervous about something so formal just minutes ago, but here, with Bucky and Darcy, he was more at ease than he’d been in a long time. There was no pressure, just the promise of a good time with his guy and their girl.

Darcy hated to do it, but she cleared her throat, watching as both men turned their attention to her. “I believe we have a reservation.”

“Right,” Bucky said, taking a step away from Steve, tightening his grip around her waist so he could spin her, the skirt of her dress billowing slightly, her gasp of surprise curling his lips into a smirk. “Wouldn’t want to be late.”

Pulling the keys from his pocket, Steve slid into the truck, hearing Darcy’s giggle as Bucky continued to twirl her, until she finally shouted his name and something about getting dizzy. Steve stretched across the seat, pushing the door open for them. “Being punctual is -”

“Being respectful,” Darcy and Bucky said in unison, both of them laughing as they climbed in.

Darcy smoothed her dress down her legs, but not quick enough for Steve to miss the peek at the top of her stockings, which were being held up with what he could only assume was a garter belt. He could feel the pool of desire stoke hotter in his stomach, his mind supplying him with so many different scenarios that his mouth went dry. Steve knew the heat in his eyes was obvious, but he wanted her to know where his thoughts had gone. Darcy had picked that garter specifically for him, and he knew it; he’d always had a thing for lace and stockings, and though he didn’t know if she’d gleaned it from Bucky’s memories or if they’d had a discussion about it, but the reason behind the choice was the same.

Darcy shared a small, knowing grin with Bucky, the fact that they knew Steve so well pinging through her chest with satisfaction. She turned to look at Steve, hoping he hadn’t taken their ribbing
the wrong way, but the look on the blond’s face made her warm from her toes to the tips of her ears. There was something in that cerulean she loved so much, something deep and dark, and she couldn’t help the shiver that tingled up her spine.

“You going to try your hand at being late?” Bucky asked, looking over Darcy’s head at Steve. His best friend was looking at Darcy like he was seriously debating closing the distance between them and saying ‘to hell with dinner’. Bucky held his breath, waiting to see what would happen, part of him hoping that Steve’s strength slipped. When Steve turned the key, the engine growling to a start, he saw a glint in the blond’s eye that sped his heartbeat.

“We’re not in any rush,” Steve said, voice like velvet as he watched Darcy’s breath pass her lips in a huff.

When she felt Bucky lean around her, Darcy tore her eyes from Steve, hearing the click of her seatbelt as it was secured. Bucky stayed in her space, looking up her body, charcoal gaze telling her exactly what he was thinking.

“Safety first.” Bucky said with a smirk before straightening.

Certain she was going to spontaneously combust - how could anyone be between these two and not burst into flames?! - Darcy sat back in the seat, closing her eyes when they each rested a hand on one of her knees. “Yep. Always gotta be safe. Safety is the best. I’m feeling super safe, for sure.”

Sharing a look with Bucky over her head, Steve threw the truck into drive.

"Могу ли я получить что-нибудь еще в данный момент?" "Can I get your anything else at the moment?"

"Нет, мы хорошие." "No, we're good."

Darcy heard the easy roll of words from Bucky's mouth, cheeks warm with laughter and the red wine she'd enjoyed with her meal. It'd made perfect sense that Natasha had suggested the restaurant. It'd become clear pretty early on that the people who frequented the establishment were the type who didn't ask a lot of questions and were going to give them the privacy they’d been looking for. The meal had been delicious, filling, and she was only slightly worried they'd have to roll her out of the booth when it was time for them to leave.

They weren't in any rush, just like Steve had said earlier, and she didn't mind spending more time where they were. Darcy put her chin in her hand and grinned at Steve, elbow on the soft burgundy-fabric topped table. "But what did you think about them? Not what others told you, but how you felt?"

"I didn't think they were that bad," Steve said with a shrug, pushing past the snort of derision Bucky made in his direction. "We grew up with color changing horses and flying monkeys, so I guess seeing a bumbling alien was still fresh and exciting to me."

"He completely ruined the films," Bucky said, the arm draped across the back of the booth, stretching so he could squeeze Steve’s shoulder with his hand.

"I know science fiction was always your area, Buck, but -"
"But nothing, punk. I think you've wet your feet enough in the world of science fiction, you literal science experiment."

"Takes one to know one," Steve said with a knowing smile, watching the smirk curl the lips of his best friend.

"Science fiction was never my favorite. I'm not even totally sure we landed on the moon like we say we did." Darcy sat back when both their eyes shifted to her, Bucky's expression one of disbelief, Steve's more considering. "What? There's still some controversy about it all, that's all I'm saying."

"Darcy."

"Don't 'Darcy' me, Bucky, I know what I said."

"You killed an alien being."

"I'm aware."

"Darcy."

"Hey, I'm not saying we didn't get there eventually, but that we might have faked the first one to beat Mother Russia to the punch, then ended up getting there later, NASA's equivalent of posting 'FIRST' on a message board."

"Darcy," Bucky said with a shameful shake of his head. "Darcy. No."

"Maybe she's ri -"

"Steve! No! Don't encourage her!"

The amusement in Darcy's eyes was plain for Steve to see. She was arguing just for the sake of arguing, looking to get a reaction from the man at her left. She'd worked with Jane Foster. There was no way her best friend would put up with that kind of talk.

Steve's hand found her knee under the table, pushing the dress further up so he could run his fingers over the silk stockings he'd spied earlier. He kept his eyes on hers, watching as her body tensed slightly before relaxing, her lips parting slightly. He shifted his gaze to Bucky, leaning onto the table, his voice even as he asked the other man about something that had happened in training earlier in the week.

All the blood in Darcy's body was throbbing; she could hear the whoosh of it in her ears, pumping heavily, Steve and Bucky's conversation sounding so much like white noise. She felt her cheeks flame with heat, biting her lip to keep from making a sound as his fingers continued their northerly journey, all the while pushing the skirt higher, baring more of her legs. She writhed slightly, feeling a hum of desire between her legs, a clenching low in her body making the air in her lungs huff out softly when he hit the lace high up her thigh, fingers searching and rewarded when they passed over the garter belt holding the stockings up.

"What do you think, Darce?" Steve turned his attention back to her, seeing the pink in her cheeks, watching as her tongue swept along that full lower lip. The fact that he affected her so much by doing so little sent a thrill through his body, the knowledge giving him a dark satisfaction. "Hm?" he hummed, watching when she realized he'd asked her a question.

"Huh?" she gasped, eyes widening when Steve's hand disappeared from her leg, feeling the loss of contact like a slap. The smirk that turned his lips reminded her more of Bucky than Steve, still
surprised at how aggressive he could be when he wanted something. And the mouth on him in bed. That's something they didn't teach in American History, she thought to herself as she grabbed for her wine glass and finished what was in it.

"He asked if you were ready for the next part of the night, whatever that is," Bucky said, dropping his napkin onto the table. He knew Darcy had gone out of her way to keep parts of the evening a surprise, but he found himself anxious about not knowing where they were headed. When they went outside of the compound, he liked to do recon, make sure he knew where all the exits were, find out where to avoid bottlenecks, and other defensive preparations he took seriously. She'd assured him that Natasha had vetted each place carefully, and he trusted Павел to cover all aspects, but he still felt the unease biting up and down his arms.

"Right," Darcy said, taking a deep breath, pushing through the heavy desire still pinging in her chest, ignoring the way Steve's cerulean gaze was centered on her. "I've never been a big fan or anything, but Clint assured me the pool hall in the back is one of the best in the city. I mean, we don't have to go if you aren't interested -"

"There's a pool hall in the back?" Steve asked, eyes flicking from Darcy and toward the darkness at the back of the room.

"It might not be entirely legal," Darcy said with a wince, wondering if that would cause a problem, "but Clint said he and Nat know the owner and that he'd helped them in the past and would make sure no one bothered us."

Darcy was less worried about someone trying to hurt them, and more worried that people would be coming up all night for autographs and to snap pictures. Having to explain why Captain America and the Winter Soldier were slumming it with her didn't sound like the kind of situation the PR team for the Avengers would enjoy. She knew Clint and Natasha hadn't always worked for S.H.I.E.L.D. and that they might have done some below-the-board work once upon a time, but both had vouched for the owner personally, and that was good enough for Darcy.

"I haven't played in," Bucky whistled low, "decades."

"There's a lot you haven't done in decades," Darcy said with a roll of her eyes, yelping loudly when his finger dug into her side. She scooted closer to Steve, turning the weight of her glare toward Bucky, hand raising as she pointed at him with a finger. "Hey! Keep your hands to yourself, sir."

"Can't promise that, doll," Bucky said, eyes darkening when he watched Steve wrap an arm around Darcy's waist and pull her into his lap. He moved closer to the two of them, watching her pupils dilate, her lips parting in surprise. "That alright with you?"

She wasn't sure if they'd planned on making her heart speed in intervals all night long, but so far they were both doing a fucking bang-up job of it. Darcy could feel the strength of Steve's arm around her stomach, as well as the swell of him against her ass, pushing hard through the jeans he wore. When Bucky's fingers grabbed her chin and pulled her forward, she went more than willingly, allowing him to press his lips against hers. She knew her lipstick was gone since they'd eaten, and the fact that they didn't need to worry about smudges seemed to encourage Bucky. He took advantage, kissing her deeply, thoroughly, until she was melting against him, pressed between the two of them.

Steve pressed his face into her hair, taking a deep breath before his nose nudged against her neck, feeling her jaw shift as she kissed Bucky. When they parted, his gaze slid to Bucky's, his best friend's lips pink and plump. When Bucky leaned in, Steve accepted his lips greedily, fingers brushing against Darcy's dress, hearing her soft exhale as she laid her forehead on Bucky's shoulder.
Darcy didn't want it to end. She would have happily stayed in the booth with them, letting their hands wander, her own running over every inch of skin she could get to, but while it felt like they had privacy, she knew they didn't. When Bucky and Steve pulled back from each other, it took a concerted effort not to capture Bucky's mouth again. She attempted to speak, but only managed a high-pitched squeak. When both Bucky and Steve chuckled, the sound like velvet and silk on her skin, she shook her head. "We should..."

"Mmhmm," Bucky said, charcoal gaze holding Steve's before sliding out of the booth. He pulled money from his pocket, dropping it on the table before holding a hand out to Darcy. Helping her leave Steve's lap was unfortunate, but he took a moment to pull Darcy against his body as she stood, hand brushing down her side to rest on her hip, peering into her hazel eyes as she blinked up at him. "Did you enjoy it?" When her head tilted in confusion, one corner of his mouth tilted upward. "The food," he elaborated.

"Oh, yeah. It was -" she gasped when Steve pressed the length of his body against her back, pressing his lips against the side of her neck again.

"Delicious," Steve breathed against her skin, eyes flicking up to lock gazes with Bucky, enjoying the way his best friend's expression turned darker.

"Yeah," Darcy managed lamely, "what he said."

She felt both men tense, not in alarm but in recognition that someone was approaching. She'd been so wrapped up in the feel of them that she'd blocked out everything else.

"Very observant, Lewis. Can't let that happen in the field."

Bucky turned slightly, putting himself in front of Darcy but not doing so in an obvious way. It was clear the man saw it, thought, and he gave them a small nod of his head and lifted his clearly empty hands.

"I hope you found your meal enjoyable, Ms. Lewis." His accent was thick, his voice low, but the friendly smile on his face took some of the bite from his words. "Romanova spoke highly of you when we talked, and she instructed, in no uncertain terms, that you were to be treated as family. I hope you can report to her in the affirmative."

Darcy smiled, feeling Steve's body like a piece of warm marble at her back. Immovable. Solid. Bucky was no different, and Darcy actually took a step out from between the men, feeling their eyes follow her as she reached out to shake the man's hand. "It was incredible," she said, grin widening when he brought the back of her hand to his lips. "You'll definitely be getting a five-star review on Yelp and a glowing report to our mutual redheaded friend. I feel like I'm at a disadvantage since you know my name but I don't know yours."

"Oh, where are my manners? My wife will have my head. I am Anatoly, and this is mine," he said with a wave of his hand, gesturing to the room at large, "as is the hall in the back. Normally it is members only, but we have made special exception for you and your men."

Darcy smiled, feeling Steve's body like a piece of warm marble at her back. Immovable. Solid. Bucky was no different, and Darcy actually took a step out from between the men, feeling their eyes follow her as she reached out to shake the man's hand. "It was incredible," she said, grin widening when he brought the back of her hand to his lips. "You'll definitely be getting a five-star review on Yelp and a glowing report to our mutual redheaded friend. I feel like I'm at a disadvantage since you know my name but I don't know yours."

If the phrase 'your men' was unfamiliar to him, he'd done a damn good job of making it seem normal. "Thanks for that. I've got half a mind to show these boys how much of a shark I can be on the felt."

Anatoly's mouth turned up at her words, expression clear that he didn't believe her bravado for a second. "Have you ever played Russian Pyramid?" At the shake of her head, he took a step forward, holding out his arm. "Come, I will show you how it is a far superior game."

Grabbing her clutch from the table, she shot Steve and Bucky a wink as she took the larger man's arm and let him lead her toward the back. She'd grown up around shady people - sometimes those were the only people around - and she'd gotten good at navigating swarmy seas filled with possibly
unscrupulous characters. Besides, if the owner had to answer to Natasha should anything go wrong? Darcy assumed he knew better than to court that particular disaster.

If anyone recognized Steve and Bucky, they didn’t show it. They’d earned a few glances when they’d been shown in, but gazes didn’t linger for longer than a second or two, just to make it known they’d been seen. Coming in on the arm of the owner went a long way to giving them privacy. Anatoly had even shown Bucky where the exit to the alley was located, assuring him it wouldn’t be needed as he’d made sure his men were alert and ready to throw out anyone, they need only ask.

Darcy held up her finger as she finished what was left in her glass, grimacing slightly as the vodka burned all the way down, already feeling the three other drinks she’d had over the last two hours. “Oh god, that’s horrible. So bad. Ummm… the red one, in that pocket,” she said, pointing toward the corner farthest away from her, “and the blue one, over here.”

Steve winced dramatically, weight on one leg as he chalked his stick, feigning pain when Bucky glanced in his direction. “I don’t know, jerk, I don’t think you’ll be able to give the lady what she wants.”

Bucky’s grin slanted crooked as he raised an eyebrow in Steve’s direction. “I haven’t heard her complain yet, right Darce?”

Darcy raised her hand toward the bar, catching the man behind it’s attention, signaling she’d take another of whatever he’d suggested before. “Mmmmm, whatever Barnes,” she said, turning back to Bucky, “I believe you’ve got some balls to show attention to.”

Steve snorted into his beer, spilling some of the amber liquid as Darcy’s grin pointed in his direction. He set his glass on the drink rail, tongue darting out to catch the drops on the back of his hand, coming to stand beside Darcy. They both took a moment to appreciate Bucky’s ass as he lined up the angle. “Are you deliberately choosing shots that make us bend over?”

“Just caught onto that now, didja?” Darcy asked, laughing when he darted in to press his lips to her neck, slapping at his shoulders lightly.

She wasn’t sure what kind of fog had lifted, but Darcy couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard either man laugh so much. Things had been so heavy lately that just getting through the day had been a slog, something to fight, a darkness to claw out from. It felt good to be with them, unconcerned about the world ending, or losing friends, or second guessing every decision. She wasn’t naive. Darcy knew there were harder times on the horizon, but that’s why they’d needed tonight. Getting to just enjoy each other’s company, appreciating the time they could spend together. One happy, full night with her boys.

It felt amazing.

Yeah, sure, the drinks helped as well. For her, at least. The super soldiers wouldn’t get anything out of the beers they’d been drinking, but it didn’t appear they minded. Things were lighter, easier, and as she slipped from the stool, she couldn’t help the stupid grin on her face. When Bucky moved his stick back and forth, trying to gauge how hard he’d have to strike, she made her way behind him, leaning down so her face was next to his, her arm draped over his back. “What would you say if I wanted to make this interesting?”
Smirk on his lips, Bucky turned just his head, taking a deep breath in as he blinked at the devious look on her face. “What did you have in mind?”

“If you make the shot, we’ll find some dark corner and I’ll work you over so good your toes will curl. But if you miss? You don’t get to touch me for the rest of the night unless you ask first and I give my permission.”

Her voice was warm against his cheek, her words painting a picture with detail, and the confidence in her tone set Bucky’s heart beating faster. He could smell the vodka on her breath - high end, imported from Russia - mixed with the sweetness of fruit, and he wanted nothing more than to steal her lips and say to hell with the game at all.

“You realize I have perfect aim, right?” he asked, darkened grey eyes blinking at her with self-assurance as he straightened, face a mask of bravado.

“Then I guess you don’t really have a reason to say no, right?” Darcy said with a soft shrug as she leaned back with a raised eyebrow, waiting for his acceptance, knowing it was only a matter of time.

“I hope you’re prepared to lose,” Bucky said with a confident shake of his head. He bent back down, lining up the shot, mind already supplying him with visions of what was to come once he sunk it. Movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention, and his eyes swung to the right, lips parting slightly.

Darcy had sat back beside him on the edge of the table, lifting one leg so her knee pointed toward him. The position caused the skirt on her dress to pull higher, revealing the lace at the top of her thigh-high stocking. She shifted, hands between her legs, the fabric bunching and showing so much of her pale pink skin. A dark red lacquered nail brushed back and forth over the lace, scratching, drawing his sole attention.

“Go ahead,” Darcy breathed, watching his eyes follow her finger, drawing him in, deliberate in her movements. All night the pair of them had kept her taut like a rubber band, pulling at her until she’d been ready to snap. Being able to turn the tables excited her, sent a shiver up her spine as she watched the heat in his charcoal gaze grow hotter. “Take your shot.”

Bucky knew he was doomed. He’d agreed to the wager, but he hadn’t expected her to play so dirty. He should have known better. Darcy was most comfortable in boxer shorts and a baggy sweatshirt, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t turn it to an eleven when it suited her. Like now, when she wanted so desperately to win. He cleared his throat, tearing his eyes away from all that gorgeousness, trying to focus on the task at hand. It was just one shot. It’d be over in a second, if he could just focus.

His arm drew back.

Darcy flicked at one of the clasps holding the stocking up, the ’pop’ as it snapped sounding as loud as a gunshot in his ear.

Bucky missed the cue ball entirely, the end of his stick scratching into the felt and leaving a good-sized gouge.

“Fuck,” Darcy gasped, sliding from the table as she clapped a hand over her mouth with wide eyes. Had she been trying to make Bucky miss? Yes. Had she meant there to be physical damage to Anatoly’s property? Not really. Her eyes darted up toward the security guard standing by the door. He hadn’t given any outward shock at the turn of events, though she thought she saw a small curl of his lip before his face blanked back to ‘standard bouncer’ mode. “I’ll pay for that,” she called out, though no one really paid her any mind.
The alcohol still burning in her chest had made her clumsy and now she was going to, literally, pay for it. Cheeks heating with embarrassment for pushing too hard, Darcy gave Bucky apologetic eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean… I will, I’ll pay for the table. If anyone asks. I’m going to… I’ll be right back.” She darted forward, left hand grabbing her clutch while her right snagged a few pieces of ice from her empty glass before she ran toward the back and the bathrooms.

Steve took up the space next to Bucky, the lines of their bodies touching as they watched Darcy’s quickly retreating form. “She played you.” Steve said, a husk to his voice, while still sounding shocked at the turn of events.

“Yes,” Bucky agreed.

“Now you can’t touch her without asking permission.”

“Nope.”

“What are you going to do?

Bucky’s gaze swung to his left, pinning Steve with heat. “Guess I’ll just have to tell you where I want her to be touched.”

Darcy pressed the home button on her phone, waiting for the vibration that meant the bit of tech was listening. “Friday, how much does it cost to refelt a pool table?”

“On average, it costs three-hundred dollars to refelt a billiards table, though if it was personalized, it may cost considerably more.”

“Fuck,” Darcy said, pressing the pieces of ice to the back of her neck. Between the show she’d just put on, the pleasant haze that horrible vodka had her sifting through, and now the price tag her efforts had cost her, Darcy’s skin felt heated in three different ways. She’d loved pushing Bucky, taking control and using her body to pull him apart, but she hadn’t realized how hot the process would make her, too.

A costing double-edged sword. Like a fucking fancy katana or something.

Flushing, Darcy pushed out of the stall, set her clutch on the counter, and ran her hands under the cool water. She let her head hang heavily as she breathed, feeling the hair at the nape of her neck sticking to her skin, bracing herself before glancing at her reflection.

The bathroom didn’t have the best lighting, the dark red walls coloring everything in hues of yellow and orange, but the blush on her cheeks was clear, as was the darkness of her eyes. Knowing what she’d be returning to in the other room sped her heartbeat and made her knees weak. Maybe one day she’d get over the shock that she got to be with Steve and Bucky, but that time hadn’t come, and she was still stuck dumb at the reality that she was theirs, they were hers, and the three of them loved each other.

Feeling like a teenager, rolling her eyes at the way her stomach flipped just thinking about them, Darcy reached down to re-snap her garter, smoothing her dress down over it before she leaned forward, reapplying her lipstick. She popped her lips together, satisfied that she’d look semi-normal when she returned to their sides, and crossed to the door. She let out a gasp of ‘oh!’ when the door
was pushed inward, stumbling back so she wasn’t hit in the face. “Sorry, I -”

Steve stopped whatever words had been about to fall from Darcy’s mouth next, arm wrapping around her waist as he drove them backward. His hand braced against the wall to the side of her head, stopping before her back smacked painfully. Watching what she’d done to Bucky had caused a frenzy in him, too, and he showed her how much with the way his mouth fed at hers. Greedily. Thoroughly. Not stopping until she melted against him, crying sounds of desire against his tongue.

Bucky leaned back against the door, pushing it closed so he could turn the lock with a satisfying ‘click’. Darcy was almost hidden by Steve’s body; her hands were visible at the blond’s neck, and one leg hooked over Steve’s hip, wrapping around his waist while her other foot barely brushed the floor. Bucky knew what the game was now, and he was ready to show her that it didn’t matter how the cards were stacked, he was going to come out on top.

During the war, he and Steve had perfected the skill of fading into shadows, finding time for each other anywhere they could have a semblance of privacy. The back of a tarp-covered jeep. The mostly destroyed ruins of an old farmhouse. It’d been rushed, more often than not, rushed and hectic, a hurricane of hands, and tongues, and skin sliding over skin. It’d been in those crazed moments that they’d both realized that the rush of getting caught only made everything better. Getting the opportunity to do it with Darcy added to the fire inside, fanning the flames hotter.

When Steve finally pulled back, Darcy was left gasping, every nerve in her body firing at once. She was pressed against the wall by his body, strong and solid, her feet not even touching the ground. His forehead came to rest against hers, his breathing just as ragged. “Fuck,” she breathed, lips curling into a smile when it earned a dark chuckle from the man pressed against her.

"Thought you'd be able to pull that stunt out there and get away with it?” Bucky watched as Steve eased back from Darcy, her hazel eyes finding his as she was lowered to the floor. He saw a flash of annoyance in her gaze, and it only made the smirk on his face grow larger. "Played kinda dirty, wouldn't you say?"

Whatever embarrassment Darcy’d had at her little show faded when she saw That damned Look crawl on his face. She stepped around Steve, coming close enough to Bucky that she had to look up, blinking her lashes, giving him a faux innocent look. "Now, James, don't be a sore loser. I just evened the playing field a little, that's all."

"Oh, is that all?" At the challenging raise of her eyebrow, Bucky's eyes flicked over her shoulder, locking with Steve's. He gave a small nod of his head in the blond's direction.

Steve couldn't help the hungry look on his face as his hands closed over Darcy's hips and lifted her into the air, her gasp of suddenness loud in the small confines of the room. He set her on the counter, pushing until she was leaned back against the mirror, his body between her spread knees. The dark heat in her eyes, tinted with surprise, made his lips turn up, watching as her gaze swung back and forth, not sure where to look. "Like that, Buck?"

"Yeah. Just like that."

Darcy's heart was racing, the matching looks on Bucky and Steve's faces doing things to her body that left her breathless. She licked her lips, trying to regain that false feeling of control that she'd had in the other room. "Uh-huh, Buck, you don't get to touch me unless you ask and I say yes."

"Oh, I know the rules, doll. I just don't think you really thought them through."

"Yeah?"
"Steve, I think we should start on her neck." The confusion on her face was delicious, and Bucky knew his face looked like he was enjoying every second, because he was. Bucky watched Steve lean into Darcy, hands on the counter to either side of her knees, nudging her hair out of the way with his nose before pressing his lips to her skin. "That's perfect," he breathed, coming to stand behind Steve. His hands found Steve's hips, gripping them hard before snapping his body against the blond's ass, earning a moan, hearing it rumble through the air.

Steve's mouth worked at Darcy's neck, feeling her fingers dig and curl into the shirt at his shoulders, back arching and pushing her body against his. He traced his tongue from her clavicle upward, ghosting along her jaw until he could pull her earlobe between his teeth, hearing her breathy sigh as he nuzzled into her hair. "That what you wanted?"

"Yes," Darcy gasped, eyes blinking open when both men chuckled. She realized Steve hadn't been asking her that question, that it'd been meant for Bucky, and her eyes widened slightly when it all clicked, when she realized what their game was. She guessed Bucky was right - she hadn't really thought this through like she should have. When Steve's hand gripped her thighs and pulled her tight against the front of his body, her legs spreading to accommodate the width of his hips, she couldn't find it within her to regret her decisions, not if they'd led her to this.

"The dress looks so soft. Is it as soft as it looks?"

Steve grinned, straightening his back, hands coming up to cup Darcy's breasts. Her nipples were hard beneath the fabric and he ran his thumb over them, the shudder in her body sending his blood south. Between the way Darcy was responding to their game, and the feeling of Bucky at his back, hard and pressed so tight against his ass, Steve's jeans were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He knew Bucky's plan wasn't over, though, so he took a deep breath, wanting to see this through. "Just as soft as it looks," he confirmed, seeing Bucky's smirk in the mirror behind Darcy.

"How about those stockings? Real silk?" Bucky took a step back, giving Steve more room to work. As Steve gracefully dropped to his knees in front of Darcy, Bucky's fingers tangled in Steve's blond hair, tugging just enough to ease a groan from his best friend. Charcoal eyes locked with Darcy's, knowing his gaze was dark with intent, desire pumping though his body at the look on her face.

The coolness of the glass behind her did little to lessen the flames inside that were threatening to burn her alive. Steve rubbed his cheeks against her knee, fingers torturous and slow as he pushed the hem of her dress up, baring more of her thighs, forcing her legs further apart. His teeth grazed over her skin, biting her flesh slightly, not enough to leave a mark but enough that she could feel the wet outline of his mouth on the silk. "Fuck," she gasped, brain unable to form a more articulate thought.

"Real silk," Steve said, resting his cheek on Darcy's thigh, looking up the line of her body and catching her eyes, seeing the breath that passed her lips in a rush, the blush that traveled up her neck and dusted over her face. "So soft."

"Mmmm," Bucky hummed, blinking slowly at Darcy as his fingers sifted through Steve's hair over and over. "Do me a favor, punk. Check what color lace she's wearing for us?"

Steve was spurred to action, pushing at the skirt of her dress until the black lace of her panties and matching garter were displayed. "Beautiful." Steve pressed his lips to her knee, then the middle of her thigh, then the bit of bare skin between the lace tops of her stockings and the lace covering her sex. "She smells so good."

"Bet she tastes just like spun sugar," Bucky said, voice husky, the first hint of strain coloring his tone, "bet she's real warm, too."
"Want me to check?"

"Yeah, Steve, Make sure she's wet for us."

Darcy's eyes screwed shut, her head falling back against the mirror, still shocked at the dirt and filth that fell from their mouths so easily. She'd never been with anyone who talked as much as they did, words dripping with sex and keying her higher, time after time. Her eyes flew open as she felt the pressure of Steve's mouth pressing over her, tongue lapping at her through the lace. "Steve!"

"I love it when you say his name like that," Bucky said, drawing Darcy's eyes, his own smoldering with heat.

She shouted when Steve pushed the lace aside, one of his fingers slicking against her before it was replaced with his tongue, licking her from bottom to top in one long, slow movement. As he passed over her clit, Darcy's body shook involuntarily, hands fumbling until her fingers ended up tangled with Bucky's in Steve's hair. "Fuckfuckfuck," she babbled, crying out when Steve pushed one long finger inside her heat, sinking until his knuckle brushed against her.

"Yeah, I think she likes that, punk. Do it again." Primal satisfaction flooded in Bucky's chest as Steve pulled out and pushed back into her, watching as Darcy writhed, grinding her hips against Steve's hand, chasing more. "Again."

Darcy bit her lip, scared that they were making too much noise. Well, scared she was making too much noise. When Steve leaned forward, his tongue flicking against her as his fingers worked in and out at a steady pace, Darcy panted, keening with every breath. Her eyes locked onto Bucky's, seeing his carefully maintained composure. She could tell he wanted nothing more than to give over to the flames and scorch along with her, but it was a matter of pride now, she supposed.

The bond they shared was strong, unbreakable, and Darcy knew him so well that sometimes it was hard to separate her emotions from his. Having all that history at their fingertips was a catch twenty-two in a lot of ways; Bucky knew what to say and do to make her feel better like no one else could, but he was also aware of what to say to light that flame of stubborness in her chest, to push at her until she snapped back. She'd had an inkling her penchant for ornery refusal to bend had infected him as well, and the look in his eyes all but confirmed it.

Darcy'd gotten Bucky’s calm under pressure and level-headed pragmaticism. He’d gotten her dogged persistence and unending argumentative behavior. *What a pair we make.* It was good, then, that they’d found a temper in Steve, someone to even them out when they tilted, the best reason to yield when they were deadset on pushing forward.

She only had a second more of clear thought process before Steve’s fingers were moving against her *just right*, hearing his name fall from her lips, her grip tightening on his hair and Bucky’s hand tangled with hers.

Steve was a quick study, and he’d taken his time over the past weeks learning how to touch Darcy, figuring out what she liked, what made her gasp. He’d committed it all to memory, mapping her entire body until he could sketch every dimple, every freckle, every gorgeous dip and curve. He was surrounded by her - the taste of Darcy on his tongue, her scent filling his lungs, her breathy moans in his ear - and Steve wanted nothing more than to make her fall apart.

He knew Bucky and Darcy were locked in a battle of wills, but from where he was sitting - well, kneeling - *he* was the one who’d won. He curled his fingers inside of Darcy’s heat, feeling her shudder, grinding herself into his hand and against his face. She was close, judging by her constant shifting, but when he was sure she was *just* on the edge, Bucky pulled hard on his hair, breaking the
contact between his mouth and Darcy’s body.

Darcy felt the removal of Steve’s heat like a slap in the face, the utter let-down of being seconds away from coming then being interrupted so thoroughly. The sound of her whine was high-pitched and helpless, hazel eyes snapping open. Bucky’s hand in Steve’s hair pulled enough that the blond’s back was bowed and arched, a whimper of pleasurable pain breaking free from Steve’s mouth.

“Ask me.”

Bucky watched the fire glow brighter in Darcy’s eyes as his two-word demand filtered to her ears. He eased his hold on Steve’s hair just enough to give his lover a break, taking a step closer to the counter and Darcy, his charcoal gaze hard and drowning. “Ask me,” he repeated, upping the ante and feeling a dark satisfaction sing through his body as he watched her steely resolve crack the longer he withheld contact.

Part of Darcy wanted to dig her heels in. She’d started this game, after all, and she wanted to fight him, to win, to assert some kind of dominance over him… but she was keyed so high that it didn’t matter whether he relented or she did, none of them were walking out of this room unsatisfied. Had her plans for the night included fucking both of them in the women’s bathroom of a most likely illegal pool hall owned by a Russian who most likely had ties to the mafia and KGB? Absolutely not. Would she complain about the predicament she found herself in?

Fuck. No.

Bucky saw her lips move, but even with his superior hearing, her words didn’t carry to his ear. “What was that, doll? You’ll have to speak up.”

Darcy closed her eyes, shaking her head from side to side, tongue darting out to lick her lips. “Please,” she breathed.

“Please what?”

“Fuck me, James. Please.” The smirk that grew on Bucky’s face was dark, and satisfied, and Darcy wanted to swipe at it with her hand but she was already too far gone. “Fuck me.”

He’d been seconds away from giving in, nerves already thin and frayed from watching Steve’s mouth working against her, so when Darcy was the first to crack, it was like a levee breaking. Bucky crashed against her, arm wrapping around her back, pulling her flush against him. She answered him in kind, fingers reaching up to tug on his hair as their lips warred, continuing to fight with their bodies even though they’d called a truce.

Steve climbed to his feet, waiting for a moment then diving in when their mouths lost contact, stealing Bucky’s lips and showing him how much he’d liked being directed, how hot Bucky’s words had got him.

Bucky could taste Darcy on Steve’s lips and he chased the flavor with his tongue, grunting when Darcy’s fingers dug into his chin and turned his head roughly so he was left looking in the heated hazel of her eyes, so dark in the low light. She shifted, lowering herself until her feet hit the floor. Her hands were warm as she deftly flicked at his belt, loosening it before capturing his lips again, working on his button and fly as they kissed.

When her hands focused on him next, Steve accepted Darcy’s mouth without hesitation, breathing heavily, already worked up at just watching their battle. He groaned when her hand dipped past his jeans and wrapped around his cock, impossibly warm, his breath rushing past his lips. “Darce.”
Darcy’s eyes fluttered closed, the swell of Steve in her hand heady, the feel of Bucky pressed against her side like an anchor. When she felt lips on the side of her neck, she melted into Bucky, his hand splayed wide on her ass before his fingers dug in, the strength of it drawing a low whine from her chest. She hissed when he let go, feeling him shift so he was behind her, hands on her hips, feeling the heat of him pressed against her.

“Steve was so good with his mouth for you, love. You should return the favor.”

At Bucky’s words, Steve watched Darcy’s eyes open, gazing up at him with fire shining in all that hazel. She bent at the waist slowly, so slow, until she could push at his jeans, tugging them down his ass so she could see and reach everything. His attention was pulled toward Bucky as he saw his best friend lift the skirt of Darcy’s dress to pool at her lower back, baring the beautiful black lace of her panties and garter set, the color so stark against her pale porcelain skin.

“Fucking stunning,” Bucky groaned, gripping her left hip with his hand as his right teased her, pushing the lace to the side, feeling how wet she was, how ready. “Same time, doll,” he instructed, watching Steve’s head fall back as she squeezed him in her hand, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“Same time,” she agreed, turning back to Steve, eyes on the flesh she held in her hand, soft like velvet and stretched so tight. Her thumb brushed at the bead of precome he’d leaked, hazel gaze rolling up to find him looking down at her with widened eyes, dark enough that she didn’t know where his cobalt ended and his pupil began.

At the first feel of Bucky pushing into her, Darcy mirrored his movements, taking the head of Steve’s cock in her mouth, tongue flicking along his head, feeling the twitch as she brushed past the sensitive spot that made him writhe. She tried to match Bucky’s pace, but he was taking his time, drawing it out, savoring the moment. Darcy was much less patient and she whimpered, hand wrapping around the base of Steve’s cock, slipping her lips down his length as far as she could, meeting her hand so he was surrounded completely.

Darcy was being pushed and pulled between them, her body becoming one giant bundle of nerves. She’d never been afraid of public displays of affection, but the whole night had been like hours of foreplay, every heated glance and brush of skin lifting them higher. Steve and Bucky taking control, not caring that everyone in the other room very likely knew exactly what was going on behind the locked door... It was incredibly erotic, seeing them so unconcerned about the consequences but unable to help themselves, needing to sate the desire that’d been burning in all of them.

Bucky found himself transfixed by the picture of Steve pumping his hips toward Darcy, her beautiful lips smudged with red, seeing a ring of color around the base of Steve’s cock. His gaze flicked up to Steve, seeing the focus on his lover’s face, able to tell how close he was in the way he bit his lip, the drowning heat in all that cerulean. When Steve's eyes locked with his, the look between them was electric, like a jolt straight down Bucky's spine. The sound of Darcy's moan spurred him into motion, rolling his hips into her, fingers digging into her skin as he moved with purpose.

Steve wasn't going to last much longer, not with the way Darcy's mouth felt, or the trail of flames he could feel every time Bucky's eyes traced over his skin. Sharing Darcy was amazing, so beautiful, more than he could have ever imagined, but he didn't want to fall until he was certain she would as well. "Buck, you should... fuck Darcy, your tongue... Buck, make her fly," he finally managed, seeing the understanding light in Bucky's charcoal eyes, watching the determination set in the other man's body as he leaned down, his hand disappearing from view. Steve knew what he was about, though, when Darcy’s moan of pleasure hummed around him, her body shaking with a tremor.

She was so wet, it was almost too easy for Bucky to brush against Darcy with his fingers, passing over and over the place that made her writhe, grinding down with her hips when he hit her just right.
There were a steady stream of incoherent noises falling from her mouth, struggling to continue showing Steve the same attention but vibrating with frenzy. Bucky waited for her cries to raise in volume and pitch, until she was desperate, a creature that craved the release only him and Steve could give her, that's when his hips began crashing into her, over and over, feeling the moment the wave washed over her, the shudder running through her body where they were connected, traveling up and forcing Steve's eyes closed.

He felt her scream around him, Steve's hand lessening its grip. His eyes flew open, a shout ripping from his chest when Darcy took him deeper, until he could feel the back of her throat. Her hand wrapped around his body so she could dig her fingernails into his ass, pulling him impossibly closer. Steve grabbed the back of her head, thrusting into her mouth, seeing Bucky's hips stutter, his best friend's eyes locked on Darcy's mouth, working over him. It was too much and perfect and there was nothing Steve could do but groan as he came, thrusts going shallow, head hanging as wave after wave crashed over him.

Darcy swallowed reflexively, feeling like she was floating. The orgasm had shorted her brain, making her body forget that she had a gag reflex, allowing her to pull Steve deeper, drowning in the stretch of her lips and the taste of him on the back of her tongue. Bucky was still smashing into her frantically, seeking his own release, his hips beautifully brutal and Darcy let Steve fall from her lips, unable to keep from crying out with each crash, gulping in air as he continued relentlessly, her body feeling like a balloon. "Fuck, Bucky, fuck, yes!"

Hearing Bucky's growl of relief made Steve's eyes blink open, heavy-lidded as they watched the blissed out look take residence on Bucky's face, his jaw slacking, features smoothing out as he pulled Darcy toward him, this time with less insistence but still so strong. Steve could see his hands still dug into the skin at Darcy's hips, the flesh flushed and pink, and a shiver ran up Steve's neck when he hoped that bruises of Bucky's fingers would color her skin. Bucky seemed to collapse at the waist, his upper body dipping until he could wrap an arm around Darcy's stomach, pressing his lips to her shoulder.

Writhing against Bucky as he moved, Darcy tried to catch her breath, feeling boneless and warm and satisfied. When Bucky straightened, her eyes rolled up to Steve, noting the color in his cheeks, watching as he grinned softly at her before pulling up his jeans and working at his belt. When Bucky shifted again, Darcy let out a groan, hand reaching to cup herself, letting out a sigh as their bodies disconnected.

The clip of her heels was loud on the tile floor, and Bucky watched as she closed the stall door. His attention was drawn when a much more pulled together looking Steve stepped into his space, lips pressing and tongue swiping. Bucky'd been the architect of the whole affair in the bathroom, but he found himself affected just as much as both Steve and Darcy, his heart still beating fast, the fire that burned inside sated for the time being. The desire would be back, though, because he just couldn't seem to get enough of either of them. "I should tell you what to do more often," Bucky breathed against Steve's lips, his own curling into a smirk.

"Don't get used to it," Steve said, reaching out to grab a few of the towels from the counter and holding them out to Bucky. While Bucky cleaned up, Steve leaned back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, eyes falling closed. He'd been keyed up all night, watching them barb and snark with each other, and having a release for all that delicious energy had filled him with a happy quiet. His eyes blinked open when the flush of a toilet filled the small room, the stall door squeaking open.

"Boys, boys, boys. Did you not read that this is the ladies room? Or did you just not care?"
Grinning, Steve reached for Darcy's hand, pulling her close so he could wrap his arms around her shoulders and press his lips to hers. "Just didn't care, sweetheart," he answered, looking into her beautiful hazel eyes when she blinked up at him lazily. "You in that dress and those stockings and garters? Could you blame us?"

"You realize that everyone outside is going to know exactly what we just did, right?"

Bucky made his way over to them, pressing his lips against Darcy's cheek and drawing her gaze. "That's part of the fun," he said, flashing his most charming smile. "Besides, if they didn't hear, they'd know it by the state of your lipstick."

"What?" Darcy pulled out from the circle of Steve's arms, clicking toward the mirror and frowning at the smudges of red on her cheeks and chin. "Honestly, it's like I can't take you two anywhere," she said with a rueful smile and a small shake of their head. "Well, I'd planned on going dancing after this, but what do you gentleman say to getting some frozen yogurt and just heading home?"

"I think that sounds like a brilliant plan. What do you think, punk?"

"Yeah, Buck, that sounds good to me, too." Steve crossed to Darcy, brushing her curls over a shoulder so he could press his lips to the soft skin just below her ear. "I'll settle the bill, and we'll meet you out there?"

Darcy nodded, grinning at him when he pulled back an inch, taking a deep breath as she stared into those beautiful eyes. "Love you."

"Love you too, sweetheart," Steve said, feeling the spark up his spine as the words fell easily and truthful from his mouth, seeing her light up at the words, too.

"Don't take too long, doll."

"I'll take exactly how long I take, not a second more, not a second less." Darcy grinned widely at Bucky in the mirror, knowing the turn of phrase had been a favorite of his mother's. The look on his face was worth it, warmth and affection in his gaze as he flipped the lock on the door and pulled Steve out behind him.

If anyone had heard them in the bathroom - and Darcy was pretty fucking sure they had, with the way Steve and Bucky had made quick work of her - they'd been nice enough to pretend they hadn't; partly because the men that frequented the billiard’s hall weren't the type to pry, but Darcy liked to think no one had said anything because they were all just happy that Captain America and the Winter Soldier were getting laid.

When she'd said as much to Steve and Bucky, neither of them could keep the smile from their faces.

Frozen yogurt was a disaster. They'd hoped going out so close to the holidays meant they'd be less likely to run into people who recognized Steve or Bucky, but apparently the venn diagram of people who liked Captain America and people who loved fro-yo was just a circle. Bucky had managed to sneak away to grab the truck and bring it around so they could escape, but Darcy watched Steve pose with several people who were taking pictures with their phones.

"Are you a... friend of his?"
Darcy blinked, the amused smile on her face sliding a bit as she looked over at the older woman standing next to her, who was watching the circus with a critical eye. "Uhhh, yeah. Sure am. Friend. Coworker. Coworker friend. Work coworker friend."

"Ah," the woman said with a nod, taking a bite of the sweet in her bowl. "You must be close."

"Huh? W-why?"

"The way he keeps glancing over at you with that smile."

Eyebrows lifting, Darcy watched as Steve pointed his face toward the phone, grinning when he was told to smile. He blinked quickly as the flash faded, blue gaze connecting with hers, giving Darcy a softly apologetic smile, eyes warm and filled with light emotion. "Mmmhmm," Darcy hummed, unable to stop the small curl of her lip the longer she stared at him, "close friends."

"He's also wearing your lipstick on his neck."

Darcy's eyes widened as the woman moved away, waving her hand at what looked to be her grandchildren, coaxing them away from Steve with a beckoning gesture. "Shit." Darcy shoved her clutch under her arm and grabbed both of their bowls, grinning brightly at the people still crowded around the blond as she approached. "Mr. Rogers, we should... we gotta get back. Lots of... duties. Avenging duties and what not."

"It was great to meet all of you," Steve said, using the voice he always used when people recognized him. Bucky'd called it his 'Captain's Voice' and he wasn't wrong. Captain America was sure, and strong, and confident. Steve Rogers, though, could feel more than just patriotic pride. He'd been distancing himself from the very public persona of Captain America for a while now, knowing that the image - the 

shield
- was more important than the man behind the mask. "Stay in school!"

When he turned toward Darcy, he gave her a look filled with gratitude, reaching out to grab his bowl and then the door, hit with the blast of cold as they escaped. "Christmas is two days away, why are there so many people out?"

"Not everyone worships Santa," Darcy said with a shiver, eyes narrowing as she looked up and down the street, looking for Bucky and the truck.

Steve's gaze slid over to Darcy, seeing her shift her weight as the wind blew her hair around her head. "C'mere," he said, holding open his arms.

Darcy shook her head, frowning softly. "I think that lady was onto us. Don't want to give them more ammunition."

"Darcy, it's freezing. Get over here." He watched her hesitate for one more second before relenting, shuffling until she was pressed against his chest. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I don't care what they say."

"You say that now, but wait until our pictures are plastered on the front of every gossip rag at the supermarket. 'Captain America and mystery woman seen sharing fro-yo and red lipstick! Is this the future Ms. America?'' Darcy gasped, looking over at Steve with a smile. "Miss America,' get it?"

She laughed at her own pun, shaking her head, glad when she saw Bucky round the corner a block down. "If they don't use that line they're useless. It's gold."

Steve pulled her tighter against his body, not giving voice to the thoughts tumbling in his head. He was hit with a barrage of mental images, just like the night they'd spent Thanksgiving with the Barton's; Darcy in white, a glitter of gold on her hand, Bucky wearing a matching ring, feeling the
cool metal of his own against his skin. Taking care of each other, day after day, building a life. Darcy'd said it as a joke, a throwaway comment that didn't mean anything, but once again, visions of what could be took hold in his chest and made him squeeze her harder.

Bucky's eyes were dark as he pulled up in front of the shop, seeing Steve wrapped around a very cold-looking Darcy. He could see a gaggle of people with their faces close to the glass, their phones up and snapping pictures. He frowned softly, hating the visibility Steve had to maintain. It was one of the reasons they tended to stay on base. They didn’t have to worry about prying eyes if there were no eyes around to pry.

Darcy tiptoed around the dirty snow pushed up to the sidewalk, pulling open the door and all but throwing herself inside the warm interior. “It’s colder than the underside of a penguins ballsack out there!” she gasped, righting herself and making sure her ice cream didn’t spill all over the seat.

Steve’s bark of laughter was loud and carried on the night air before he pulled the door shut. He’d never get over the way Darcy strung words together. He’d never met anyone like her before, and every day he thanked the universe that he’d wisened up and just given in to the reality that he loved her, and that it didn’t feel right when she wasn’t there. “Home?”

Bucky nodded, taking a bite off Darcy’s spoon when she held it out for him. “Hrrm,” he agreed around the mouthful, smiling when both Steve and Darcy laughed.
Absolutely Real

Chapter Summary

Christmas is celebrated at the Avengers Compound.

Chapter Notes

Did I use a quote from my BFF and birthday twin, Guillermo del Toro, as a nod to his recent Oscar wins?
Yes. Yes I did.
And all of you beautiful, gorgeous people... you're all amazing. If I can hand out awards for the best readers, they'd go to you.
For all the kudos, and comments, and shares... for every time you mentioned this story to one of your friends and they found their way to this little world... Thank you.

*** For those of you interested, a link to the song mentioned in this chapter is linked in the end notes ***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PageBreak

Love is real – absolutely real – and like water is the most gentle and powerful force in the universe. It is free and formless until it pours into its recipient, until we let it in.

– Guillermo del Toro

PageBreak

“Peter, what in fluffy hell are you still doing here?”

Peter spun at Darcy’s voice, his phone slipping out of his hand. He juggled with it for a second before finally grabbing it, stuffing it in his back pocket, cheeks filling with pink like he’d been caught. “I’m leaving in a few seconds. Just wanted to wrap this up before May got here.”

“Oh! Good! You’ll be able to give her this then.”

Eyes widening when Darcy set a basket on the table in front of him, Peter scratched at the back of his neck, his mouth falling open in soft bewilderment. “Darce, she wasn’t, you didn’t have to, she’ll...”
Darcy hopped onto the counter next to the basket, gesturing dismissively in his direction. “I know, I know, and I know, okay? Just indulge me. I don’t get to give a lot of gifts and I might have gone overboard. But you’re all reaping the benefits.”

“What benefits?” Tony asked as he pushed through the doors, eyes cast down and fingers tapping quickly on the tablet in his hands.

“Dental and health, obviously. When do we get some?”

“If you’ve got a loose tooth, just come grab me. I’ll pull it out.”

“See, this is why we keep you around, Stark,” Darcy said with a shake of her head.

So much had been going on lately that it was hard to believe Christmas was already here. Darcy had never been partial to the build-up - growing up without presents and seeing everyone so happy had filled her with such bitterness - and it wasn’t until Olivia that she’d even acknowledged the holiday at all. But things were different this year. Vastly different.

Darcy watched Peter and Tony move around the lab, a haze of anticipation in the air as her feet dangled. It made perfect sense that they’d be here on Christmas Eve. She’d never seen either of them relax since they’d all started working together. Their work ethic was ridiculous. They always had something going on, whether it was a new invention or improvements on something they’d already completed. She could see it starting, the fog as they got distracted by their work, and she knew that if she didn’t yell at them, they’d lost track of time.

Darcy hadn’t had to lab-monkey-attack Jane or Selvig in so long that she felt a thrill go up her spine as she jumped from the counter and clapped her hands loudly. “Pete! Wrap it up man, May is waiting! Stark, don’t you have a hot-ass strawberry-blondie waiting for you somewhere? Learn to prioritize! Go do normal human-y type things!”

“Awwww, Parker, now don’t be jealous. Here, I got you a little something, too.” Bending down and plopping her bag onto the table, Darcy reached inside and pulled out a gift wrapped in newspaper. She thrust it in the younger man’s direction with a large grin on her face.

Peter gave her an uncertain side glance before slowly taking it from her hands. “I didn’t -”

“Open the goddamned gift, Peter!”

At Darcy’s shout, Peter tore into the paper. His hands slowed as he freed a bundle of white cloth. He let it unfold, brown eyes widening: It was a standard lab-coat, like all the ones he’d ever worn, but this one was embroidered - by hand, if the shaky lines were any indication - and the blue thread spelled out Dr. Peter Parker across the left chest, a red-threaded Avenger’s ‘A’ on the right. His gaze flicked to hers, noting the wide grin on her face. “Darcy, this is, you realize I’m not -”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t have seven doctorates like Stark -”

“Eight.”

Darcy frowned and rolled her eyes toward Tony. “Really? Pretty sure you told me you had seven,
like, just a few weeks ago. Are you just adding more and more on each time?” At his gallic shrug, she turned her attention back to Peter. “Anyway, I figure it’s only a matter of time. So you’ll have it when you’re ready.”

“Did you do this yourself?” Peter asked, fingers running over the jagged threading.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t believe how often Jane would put holes in hers. Learned how to do it pretty good, right? I’m a regular Martha Stewart!” At Tony’s snort of laughter, Darcy stuck her middle finger in his direction, not missing a beat. “So, yeah. Just put it in your closet and when you get that big shiny diploma, you’ll be set to go.”

“Darcy, this is great. Thank you so much.” Peter closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, squeezing tightly. He practically heard the roll of Darcy’s eyes and could imagine the feigned look of exasperation at the physical contact. He didn’t let go, through, waiting until she relented and hugged him back.

“Yeah, yeah, I like you too, you big nerd. Now get out of here and say ‘hi’ to May for me.”

“I will.” Peter released her when Darcy patted his back lightly. “I’ll be back in two days.”

“Take five,” Tony said, giving the younger man a shrug when Peter glanced in his direction. “It’s Christmas. This place kinda clears out, anyway. Our stuff can wait.”

“Are you -”

“Get the fuck out of my lab, Peter.”

“Okay, okay, jeez. I’ll see you guys later. Merry Christmas!”

Both Darcy and Tony watched Peter grab his bag, draping the lab coat over his arm before hefting the large basket and pushing through the doors.

“What’d you get May?”

“Spa set and a gift card to her favorite vintage clothing store. What’d you get Pepper?”

“A maserati.” When Darcy’s gaze snapped over at him, the beginning of a tirade behind those hazel eyes, he rolled his own and crossed back to his tablet. “I don’t have to tell you what I got her. To be honest, I think we’re all getting a little too touchy-feely around here.”

“Mmmm, is that right?”

“What are you here for?”

“This is my home.” When Tony turned to look at her with an eyebrow raised, Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “Look, I’ve had worst homes, okay? This one isn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I’ve got you, and Pete, and Friday.”

“Friday’s not real.”

“Hey! How dare you, she’s a nice lady!”

“Darcy -”

“Shut up. I just… I wanted thank you for your help. For Steve’s gift. It’s -”
Tony waved a hand at her, turning back to his tablet. “Can we skip our Hallmark moment? Like you said, I’ve got a hot-ass strawberry-blond waiting for me.” He grunted when Darcy’s body crashed into his from behind, her arms wrapping around his waist. Sighing, he patted her arms lightly. “Yeah. Yeah. Merry Christmas. Now, do like Peter did and get the hell out of my lab.”

“Tell Pepper I still think she’s slumming it with you.”

“Trust me! She knows! I remind her every day in a myriad of ways!” Smirking to himself, Tony glanced over his shoulder, satisfied to see the lab doors swinging shut behind Darcy. He frowned at the small, wrapped package she’d left sitting on the counter. Tossing his tablet aside, he grabbed the gift, rolling his eyes at the word ‘Dick’ scribbled in black sharpie on the front in Darcy’s trademarked loopy handwriting.

When he ripped away the paper, a genuine smile climbed onto his lips. The picture frame was like something straight out of first grade. It was made with popsicle sticks, painted pink. Around the edges were purple painted pieces of hard macaroni and bolts. Across the bottom, in purple, glittery, puffy paint, was the word ‘family’. The photo had been taken in the lab, Peter and Darcy’s smiles wide, their arms thrown around Dum-E and U.

Tony stared at the picture for a long time, shaking his head softly, unable to keep the heft of emotion from growing in his chest. He was pulled out of his thoughts when Dum-E rolled over to him, chirping happily. “This your idea?” he asked the robot, raising an eyebrow at the bit of tech when its claw opened and closed questioningly.

“Boss, Ms. Potts’ plane just landed.”

“Yeah, I’m on my way.” Tony crossed to his work station and set the frame against one of his monitors, looking at it for a minute more before leaving.
Nat: Anatoly says the next time you visit, you can use his office. It’d be much more comfortable
Darcy: OH MY GOD NO
Darcy: PLEASE DON’T TELL CLINT
Nat: Too late
Darcy: FUCK

PageBreak

“You’re not going to die, okay?”

“Darcy,” Bucky said, his voice amused, “I love every part of your body from your toes to the tips of your ears, but you cooking us a Christmas meal has got to the be worst premeditated murder ever.”

Turning to stand in the doorway, blocking it with an arm, Darcy spun to glare at both Steve and Bucky, who were wearing matching smirks. “You know what, if you boys -” Her words ended in a loud laugh when Steve darted forward and wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her off her feet and propelling them back into the lounge they’d commandeered for themselves.

Steve grinned at her squeal, loving the way her nose crinkled when she was really happy and laughing. As always, he found himself craving the sound, wanting to fill his days with her laughs and Bucky’s smiles. He could feel Bucky following them in, knowing he’d be shaking his head at their antics.

Bucky watched Steve spin Darcy around before setting her down. Both of their laughs sounded in his head like music, the most beautiful tune he’d ever heard. Since walking in on the two of them the night everything had changed, when Steve had finally confessed his love for Darcy, Steve had been lighter than Bucky’d ever seen him. It was like all the darkness faded away from the brightness of his
smile, and everything felt like it would turn out alright.

Even after the darkness that had come from Darcy’s disastrous meeting with Maximoff, the three of them had settled into a period of calm, filled with smiles, and skin, and happiness. It was new, and perfect, and though he knew it wouldn’t always be like this, Bucky was going to enjoy it, and keep himself from worrying how long they had before it all fell apart.

“That looks like a very Darcy Lewis expression on your very ruggedly handsome Bucky Barnes face,” Darcy said when she came to stand in front of him, cheeks still filled with pink from her laughter. “Are you -”

Bucky stopped her words with his mouth, cradling her face in his hands and taking his time, kissing her with the weight of happiness still heavy in his chest. When he pulled back, Darcy’s eyes stayed closed, a smile on her lips. When he finally caught sight of the hazel he loved, she blinked at him slowly. “What was that for?”

“Figured I’d need one last kiss before we died of poisoning.” When she slapped out at his arm, Bucky dodged her, crossing toward Steve, who was looking back and forth between then with a grin.

“It actually smells pretty good,” Steve said as Bucky came to stand beside him. He reached out and twined their fingers together, giving the other man a satisfied smile. They stood near the island in the kitchen, watching Darcy approach the oven and press one of the buttons. When she turned toward them with a raised eyebrow, Steve leaned closer, looking at the oven in anticipation.

Both men’s laughs were loud when she pulled open the oven door to reveal five boxes of pizza, the smell of the cheese and sauce wafting out. “What did I say, eh? I said you weren’t going to die and, for my troubles, you mock me. See if I do anything for either of you ever again.” Darcy bent down and grabbed the boxes, hefting them toward the counter. She pulled one in her direction and pushed two at each of them, hoping it’d be enough for their super soldier metabolisms.

Steve’s face changed from laughter to surprise, blue eyes wide when they flicked up toward Dacy. “Are these from Totonno’s?”

“Mmmhhmmmm.”

“I didn’t know they were still around,” Bucky said, sliding onto the stool next to Steve, pulling a box toward him.

“They are indeed still open, and just as good as I remember. Well, as good as you remember,” Darcy said, flipping open her box and taking a deep breath inward. She’d never had the pizza before, but she had a lot of memories of the place thanks to the bond she shared with Bucky.

“Do you remember that one year Ma got us a pie?” Steve asked.

When Darcy glanced up, assuming Steve’s question had been directed toward Bucky, she was surprised to see Steve looking at her, waiting for confirmation. She nodded, not finding words to explain the pull in her chest as he looked at her. She’d always felt like she was on the outside of their shared memories of growing up in Brooklyn - she knew about them, but they weren’t hers, not really. The way Steve was looking at her though, like she was included, meant more than she could express.

“She’d saved up for months, a few cents here and there, until we came in from the cold and it was there on the table. I’d never tasted anything like it before.”
“I mean, it’s no Lombardi’s,” Bucky said, earning an eye roll from Darcy. Just like baseball, this was another one of Steve and Bucky’s long-running bits of needling. She bit into her pizza, shaking her head at both of them as she chewed, a smile on her face. “Lombardi taught Totonno everything he knew, so really -”

“Buck, he improved on Lombardi’s recipe, which was good, sure, but every time you add something new, you get something better.”

“That right, punk?”

“It’s something I’ve learned recently,” Steve said, his eyes swinging to look at Darcy with a large grin on his face.

“Oh my god, Rogers, you’re such a fucking sap,” Darcy cried as she grabbed her pizza box in hand and rounded the island. When she got close enough, she leaned into Steve so she could press her lips to his, chaste but full of meaning.

“You like that I’m a sap,” he said, the glint in his eye meaning he knew he was right.

“Yeah, I do like that about you.”

“And what about me?” Bucky asked, the pathetic pout on his face one that she knew all too well.

“You think Lombardi’s is better than Totonno’s, so you have to work your way back into my good graces,” she said with a grin, turning her back on them and making her way to the living room set-up, hearing Bucky’s bark of offense.

“You know, her memories are my memories, so she should like Lombardi’s better, too,” Bucky said, following Darcy’s lead and grabbing his boxes. “Which means she’s just agreeing with you because she doesn’t want to see your sad puppy face.”

Sad puppy face falling from Bucky’s mouth made Steve’s lips quirk, knowing it was a phrase of Darcy’s and not something his best friend had ever said before. “Is that supposed to make me happier or sadder?” Steve asked, giving Bucky a raised eyebrow as they crossed to the couches in front of the TV.

Bucky’s steps slowed, his face thoughtful as he looked at Steve and Darcy, sitting side-by-side on the couch, both of them giving him a questioning look. “Why are we fighting again?”

“Not fighting. Just a disagreement. If you think me calling you out is us fighting? Fuck are we going to be fighting a lot,” Darcy said with a shake of her head, flipping open her box and grabbing another piece.

“You don’t mind getting into verbal altercations,” Steve said, practically inhaling his first slice.

“Oh, you caught onto that? Took you long enough, handsome.” Darcy grinned brightly at him, the goofy smile on his face as he chewed constricting her heart and filling her with warmth. “Speaking of disagreements, let’s just get this out of the way now: we are about to watch the best Christmas Movie of all time, and I don’t want to hear anything contrary to this obvious and well-documented fact.”

“You’re calling an opinion a fact?”

Darcy glared in Bucky’s direction. “Are you deliberately trying to piss me off? It’s fucking Christmas Eve! Jesus!”
Bucky’s lips twitched when Steve glanced in his direction, amusement sparkling in the cerulean gaze of his best friend. “Alright, alright. Just get it playing.”

“I’ve heard people say ‘Miracle on 34th Street’ or ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ are the best Christmas movies,” Steve said, chuckling at The Look Darcy pointed in his direction.

“Pfftthhhbbbt, no, those are classics, maybe, but best movie? Nah. I need something with pizzazz! With pop! With Bill Murray! Steven Grant Rogers, get ready for the best and far superior Christmas movie: Scrooged!”

* 

“That was…”

“Wasn’t it?!” Darcy said, sighing and falling back against Steve’s side, her feet draped across Bucky’s lap. “It has everything. Angels. Singing. Bobcat Goldthwait! Tell me that isn’t the best movie you’ve ever seen.”

“It’s no Jumanji, that’s for sure.” Bucky caught the pillow Darcy threw at his face, a groan of disgust coming from both other residents of the couch. “What? It’s true!”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy pulled her feet from Bucky’s grasp and climbed to her feet with a groan. Her legs were still a bit weak after everything they’d done to each other’s bodies over the past twenty four hours, and she couldn’t help the grin as she remembered the marks in the shape of fingers that were painted across her skin. “Well, in spite of your unhealthy obsession with that movie, I suppose I’ll still give you your presents.”

Steve looked over at Bucky with wide eyes, panic in his gaze. Surprise thrummed through Bucky, watching Darcy cross to the closet. She’d never been big on Christmas gifts, not in the environments she’d grown up in, and he’d assumed just watching a movie and having dinner with each other would be enough of them celebrating. “Doll, we didn’t -”

“Shut up, I know. I’ve just...” She turned toward both of them, hands on her hips as she looked down at the floor. Darcy couldn’t explain why she’d needed to do what she had. She was deliriously happy, despite all the darkness that had happened with Wanda, and she felt like she needed to freeze herself in the moment, take advantage of the happiness while it was here.

She let out a sigh, gaze flicking up to look at both her boys on the couch. They were looking at her expectantly, like she was going to be able to explain what she felt when it was hard enough to explain it to herself. “It’s not a lot and I really didn’t expect you to get me anything. I know we didn’t talk about it, so it’s absolutely fine. All I need is you two, and I’m happy.”

When Darcy looked up at them, emotion filling her hazel gaze, Steve could practically feel the heat turn up in the room. “Oh my god, Lewis, you’re such a fucking sap.” The spark in Darcy’s eyes as he parroted her words back to her was bright, and Steve felt the large smile on his face echo the one on hers.

“You keep swearing, Rogers. See what happens,” Darcy said, turning her back to them, reaching up to wipe at her eyes before she pulled open the closet door. She retrieved the two gifts she’d hidden there earlier. While she was fine spending money on their gifts, she’d never understood the thought process behind wrapping paper. Throwing away dollars on paper that was going to get ripped anyway? Useless.

“These are for you, Buck. We’ll have to do a little traveling for Steve’s, so you’ll go first.”
Bucky accepted the gifts with a sigh. “Really, doll, you could have told us.”

“What’d I just say?” Darcy said, falling back on the couch and grinning when Steve pulled her against his side, draping an arm over her shoulders. “Just fucking take it, Barnes.”

“I think I remember saying something like that to you last night, jerk,” Steve said, the smirk on his lips going crooked as Darcy giggled, shoulders shaking.

“Yeah, yep, I remember that, too.” Darcy laughed harder when Steve pressed his fingers into her sides, having found out quickly where to poke to make her gasp his name. “Steve! Stop stop! Too full of pizza!”

Pulling her closer to his side, Steve pressed his lips to her hair, giving Bucky a large smile and a nod of his head. “Well, go on then.”

“Big one first, or flat one?”

“Big one,” Darcy said, stomach flipping a bit in anticipation.

Bucky ripped at the newspaper, revealing the box beneath. He looked up at Darcy, a confused expression on his face. “A record player?” He was aware that vintage and retro things had become popular again, but he’d heard Darcy yammer on and on about how much she loved her iPod.

“Open the other one. It’ll make more sense.” She watched as Bucky set the record player on the ground and reached for the much skinnier gift. Darcy knew he’d have figured it out that it was a vinyl record by now, but she still hoped he was surprised. It’d taken a little bit to get one in good shape, but Friday had made quick work of it when she’d finally asked for help.

When Bucky looked up at her, surprise in his slate grey eyes, Darcy’s smile grew. “Do you like it?”

“Darce, this is…” Bucky ran his hand over the cover, tracing the letters on the front with his fingertip. *Blue Orchids* by Glenn Miller. His favorite song, the one that always reminded him of Steve and those ridiculously gorgeous blue eyes. He glanced back up to look at them, the owner of those eyes and the only person in the world who knew how much it would mean to him.

“Let me see?” Steve grabbed the record when Bucky held it out. The spark of a memory came to the front of his mind as he tried to place the song. “I remember this. Wasn’t this the song they played that night in camp?”

“Yeah, punk, the very same.”

The Howling Commandos were always good for a laugh and a game of cards, but even with their strong camaraderie, it’d been hard to forget they were trench-deep in the middle of a war. When they’d had a night of rest, still exhausted but finally managing to catch a breath or two, Dum Dum had found one of the only still operating record players in all of occupied France.

When everyone else had fallen aslep, Bucky and Steve had danced together, the music floating on the cold air though neither of them had felt the chill. It was hard to think of lighter things when so much death and destruction surrounded them, but for those scant few minutes, Bucky had been able to forget all the darkness and focus on the man in his arms. His best friend. The only person he’d ever loved.

“Do you like it?” Darcy asked again, biting her lower lip. When the weight of Bucky’s eyes pinned her, her chest tightened, feeling her heartbeat in her throat. There was so much in that grey gaze, paragraphs of thoughts, a work of art in the way his eyes looked at her. He didn’t have to say a word.
for her to know exactly what he thought of her gift.

“We’ll have to clear off a place on the desk,” Steve said, already planning where they could put it in their room.

“Yeah, about that…” Darcy climbed to her feet again, nodding toward the door. “Let’s go see your gift.”

Bucky insisted on bringing his gifts with them, his fingers running over the record sleeve, humming softly under his breath. Darcy glanced up at Steve, his arm warm where it draped across her shoulders. Bucky had an amazing voice but very rarely sang anywhere outside the shower. That he was comfortable enough to do as they walked made her heart pump harder.

Darcy had walked into the bathroom one day, quietly leaning in the doorway as she listened to Bucky hum, interspersing words when he wanted, the sound echoing off the tile and filling the room. He’d known she was there but he’d kept going regardless; she supposed once you knew the deepest darkest secrets a person had, singing in front of them wasn’t an embarrassment.

Steve’s face turned more confused as they neared the living wing where Clint and Nat’s rooms were. He glanced over at Darcy, a questioning look coloring his expression. Darcy pursed her lips and looked forward, eyes amused, seeing if he’d put it together before they arrived.

Taking a breath when it hit him, Steve blinked as they turned a corner, seeing a string of Christmas lights taped on the wall, perfectly framing a doorway. “Is that -”

“Ours? Yeah. I mean, it’s bigger, and it means I won’t have to run back and forth between yours and mine to get clothes. A closet big enough for three,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders. She felt Bucky come up behind them, his hand coming to rest at the small of her back. “Go ahead,” Darcy said with a nod at Steve, “your present’s inside.” The look on his face when he turned to her made her smile turn watery as tears filled her eyes.

“This isn’t my present?” Steve asked, doing his best to keep his voice even, though his heart was already beating faster. At the shake of her head, Steve turned back to the door, reaching out to pull one of the lights into his palm, looking as the red bulb winked out then back on. “This would have been enough.”

“I may have a problem reigning myself in,” Darcy said with a shrug, turning to give Bucky a soft glare when he snorted behind her. At his shrug, she turned back to Steve, smiling at the look of disbelief on his face. “Seriously, handsome, open the damn door.”

Taking a deep breath, Steve pressed his thumb to the biometric lock, hearing the buzz of electricity as it opened. He pushed forward, taking a step past the threshold, feeling Bucky at his back. His eyes swung to catch everything.

They had their own kitchen, an island with grey granite sitting in the middle of the space, a row of stools tucked below. A wooden dining room table was off the kitchen, a step up and banked by windows showing the softly snowing forest that surrounded the building on three sides. The living room was plush, styled in the same silver and grey that was the default decorating in the compound, but even as plain and neat as it was, Steve could easily imagine their things brightening everything up. There were doorways here and there, one leading to a bathroom and the other to the bedroom and ensuite

He turned to say something but the words died on his lips as he caught sight of the wall next to the front door, the one Darcy stood next to, looking at him with uncertainty. The air he had in his lungs
rushed out, hands resting on his hips as he took a step closer toward the beautiful, ornate frame.

It’d been so long since he’d seen his mother’s face. He swallowed past the lump in his throat, feeling his breath hitch as he swallowed harshly. Sarah Rogers was stunning, the white nurse’s uniform she was wearing seemed to make her glow, and even though the photo was in black and white, it was like her eyes were lit from within, just as warm and empathetic as he remembered. Her eyes were blue, the same as his and though you couldn’t see it, Steve knew her blonde hair held a hint of red when the light hit it just right.

Steve had never seen this picture of his mother, smiling down at a patient, pushing at an errant piece of hair that had fallen into her eyes. “Where did you get this?”

“A photographer had been dispatched to take photos of some of the hospitals who were treating TB patients,” Darcy said, weight shifting as she watched him stare at the picture. “It never got published, but it was put in the government archives. We ran facial recognition and got a hit.”

“We?” The look on her face told Steve all he needed to know, and he turned back to look at the picture, getting lost in the lines of his mother’s face, the way he could almost hear her accent lifting, louder when he and Bucky would get too ornery. Talking with Winifred Barnes over tea while the kids played nearby. The soft lullabies as she dabbed at his feverish head with a rag, promising that tomorrow would be better. The picture brought a wave of emotion that crashed over him with each memory, and Steve was unsure how long he stood there looking, tear tracks on his cheeks and wetness rolling down his neck.

He blinked when music began playing behind him. Bucky had pulled his record player from its box. The vinyl sound was scratchy, just like he remembered, and the sound of a big band full of instruments filled the room. Steve watched Bucky approach Darcy, who was still looking at him with a face of worry and apprehension. Bucky bowed low at the waist, drawing her gaze.

Darcy rolled her eyes, the movement making the tears that had pooled in her eyes while watching Steve break free. She reached up to wipe at her cheeks before accepting Bucky’s hand, allowing him to pull her close, a soft hand on her waist, the other cradled to his chest. She’d never been particularly graceful and rarely danced - besides bopping along to music in the lab, or limbs flashing in every direction when her and Jane had needed a destresser and moved like a fork stuck in a blender - but she let Bucky sway her back and forth to the music.

_I dreamed of two blue orchids_
_Two beautiful blue orchids_
_One night while in my lonely room_

Steve watched Bucky and Darcy as they danced, heart so full he felt like it wasn’t real. The man in front of him had been his best friend for as long as he could remember, and his first love once he’d admitted that he liked Bucky more than just a friend. He’d grown up next to Bucky, had lost him to the war, found him, then lost him again.

_I dreamed of two blue orchids_
_So full of love and light_
_That I wanted to possess each tender bloom_
_Then my dream took wings_
_And through a thousand springs_
_Blue orchids seemed in a world apart_

When Bucky’d been found again, still him but not, Steve thought it was nothing short of a miracle. He knew it wasn’t that easy, that God hadn’t reunited them just because their love crossed times, but
that’s how it felt. It felt like God had decided they’d both endured enough, that they’d been destined to find each other again.

A love to challenge the heavens.

And then there was Darcy. A stranger, but who looked at Bucky like he was the most beautiful thing in the world, like she belonged to him and he belonged to her. And it had hurt. It’d hurt more than he could imagine. Steve had fought it, his inner thoughts of miracles disintegrating as he saw the way Bucky’s slate grey gaze looked at this new person, like he loved her, a look that, up to that point, had been solely for Steve.

But when I met you
Something pale and blue
Came stealing from the meadows of my heart
I saw my two blue orchids
My beautiful blue orchids

But she hadn’t just looked at Bucky with that expression, she’d looked at him, too. A lifetime of love shining behind eyes that were foreign. A pretty hazel with a spark of Bucky’s spunk, yes, but still so unknown. Getting to know her, getting to see who she was at the core… Steve should have known from the beginning that he’d fall.

Had he ever imagined his life to turn out like it had? Absolutely not. There’d been so many miraculous and utterly unexplainable things that had happened, Steve should have known that this would be just one more inevitability, to fall for the woman who’d been there all along but hadn’t. Every day convinced him more and more that finding Bucky again wasn’t the only miracle.

He’d found love, carved out of time, in the hearts of the two people dancing slowly in front of him.

Darcy startled when she felt Steve’s warmth behind her, having gotten lost in the song lyrics and all the memories replaying in her head as she and Bucky had swayed. One of Steve’s hands rested on her free hip, the other circling her and resting on Bucky’s. When he leaned his cheek against her hair, Darcy melted back, safe and warm, happy and nostalgic.

Last night and what a sweet surprise
When you looked at me
It was plain to see
Blue orchids only bloom in your eyes

When the music faded out, the three of them kept swaying, none of them wanting to break apart. Finally, Darcy blinked open her eyes and grinned at Bucky. “Home?”

Somehow Bucky knew she wasn’t talking about going back to their room, but instead talking about this place and, more importantly, the people that would be living in it. He nodded, a warm smile on his lips. “Home.” His gaze shifted to Steve, cheek pressed against Darcy’s dark hair, his face serene as he blinked those beautiful blue eyes at him. “Home?”

“Home.”

Darcy groaned softly, squinting at the bright lights streaming through the windows. She fumbled to
grab her glasses from the nightstand, feeling Steve's body molded to hers from behind, Bucky's arm draped over them both. It wasn't often that she woke up before the boys - at least, not when she didn't have training with Clint - but she supposed sleeping in on Christmas morning was a good enough excuse all on its own.

Sliding her glasses on, she tried to figure out what had woken her in the first place. She grabbed her phone, and while there were a flurry of texts from their friends wishing them a Merry Christmas, that hadn't been what had stolen her from sleep. Darcy let out a high pitched yell of surprise when she heard the clearing of a throat from the doorway. She grabbed the sheet on the bed and whipped it over her body, alarm in her face as she spun toward the sound. "What the fuck!"

The man who stood there had the grace to look apologetic, his dark eyes soft, but sharp. He was wearing a rather elaborate outfit - complete with a motherfucking cape! - as well as a large piece of ornate jewelry dangling around his neck. His facial hair reminded Darcy so much of Tony's that it took her a minute to push through the surprise. "Steve! Bucky!"

"They're not... they can't hear you, Ms. Lewis."

Not taking her eyes off the stranger, Darcy slapped at Steve and Bucky, shocked they hadn't been alerted to the man the second he'd stepped foot in the room. When they didn't respond, she risked a glance at them, her eyes widening. The boys' faces were slack in peaceful sleep, her slaps not rousing them at all. She turned back to the stranger, lifting her arms, feeling her skin begin to glow. "What did you do to them?!

The man looked up at the ceiling, holding his hands up to show he was unarmed. "I'm very sorry, I didn't mean... you might want to lift your sheet. You're..."

"Naked? I am very aware thank you! You have three seconds to tell me what the fuck you're doing in here and what the fuck you did to them!"

"I promise they're unharmed and I will answer all your questions, as much as I can. I'm not lying, but if you would like, feel free to check."

"How?"

Darcy watched as he started to swing his gaze toward her but stopped at the last moment, realizing she still wasn't dressed. "I believe you've been working with your powers by now, so I would assume you'd do that."

Jesus fuck, Lewis, get your shit together! She'd not used her powers since Vision had placed the dampener, and she really really hadn't planned on her first time being to tell if the strange man that had broken into their room was telling her the truth, but Darcy supposed there wasn't much she could do about it now.

She blinked, readying herself for the blackness, but was surprised when she could see the man in front of her just as she'd been able to do before... except this time there were shimmering colors around his body. His blue was so dark it was almost black, a navy that seemed to pulse in the air. But, on top of all of that was an almost blinding glare of green, the light centered on the piece of bling wrapped around his neck. Doing her best not to squint as the green began to hurt her eyes, Darcy asked her questions.

"Did you hurt them?"

"No."
"Will you hurt them?

"No."

"Are you here to hurt me?"

"No, I'm here to give you something. A harmless something. I mean, it's not tangible so it's not really something so much as it is a... word."

"Will you stay there so I can get some clothes because I am very, very naked?"

"Take all the time you need. Truly. I say that with little to no irony."

Darcy glared at him for a second longer before she moved quickly, grabbing any article of clothing she could get her hands on. She pulled on one of Steve's t-shirts and a pair of Bucky's boxers, sliding out of the bed. She kept plenty of distance between herself and the man, but he'd been honest before, and he wasn't here to hurt her. Or them. So what the fuck was he doing there? "It's Christmas fucking morning. What the fuck?"

"I know," the man said, risking a glance at her, relaxing when he saw that she'd dressed. "I'm sorry. I didn't... it's getting harder to get it right."

"Get what right?"

"Time jumps. Everything is shifting and changing every second. It's rather... inconvenient."

"Time jumps? Who the fuck are you?"

"Oh, right. Of course. We haven't officially met yet. I'm Doctor Stephen Strange."

"Great. Awesome. Name means nothing, what did you do to my guys?"

Stephen gestured toward the bed and the sleeping men still in it. "I needed to speak with you. Once we're done, it'll be like this never happened. Well, mostly. You'll remember this when the time comes, and that will be enough. I hope."

"I don't..." Darcy tried to wrap her head around what he was saying, but the adrenaline running through her body was making it hard to work out what he meant. "Is this the first time I'm meeting you? Why do you know my name? Why do you know about my powers?"

"Yes, it must be. And now that I'm here and we're meeting, whatever memory I had of our last first meeting is gone. I can't even remember it. Everything is in flux and I'm finding it hard to keep straight. I can't understand why. In any case, I left myself a note to talk to you. Because you needed to know something."

"Something?"

"A word."

Darcy sighed, wiping a hand over her face but keeping one palm outstretched at him, doing her best
not to look at the green light directly. "Look, guy, I really don't know what's going on, but you've seemingly appeared in my room like some magic elf on Christmas morning ."

"Again, I apologize that it -"

"I get it, okay, I've had to deal with a metric shit ton of stuff lately so this is kind of rolling off my back. I'm okay now that I know you're not here to hurt me or them, but if you could relay whatever ghost message it is you have for me, that'd be great. You said it was a word. What's the word?"

"The Bird. Trashmen. 1963."

Darcy blinked at him. "That's the word?"

"No, 'the bird is the word'."

"What bird?"

Stephen held his hands up, shaking his head as, somehow, this verbal sparring felt familiar. "The word I came to tell you is 'Papaya'."

Darcy blinked at him, waiting for him to laugh. When he didn't, her eyes narrowed. "You fucking with me?"

"No, that's the word. It was important enough to travel through time to come find you, Ms. Lewis."

"Did you... are you sure?" She tensed the slightest bit when he took a step toward her, but he pulled a bright yellow post it note from his pocket and held it out. Written on the note, in what could only be described as barely legible chicken scratch, were the words Darcy Lewis - Avenger Compound - Papaya.

She glanced up at him with a skeptical expression. "Are you sure? You don't know why it's important and you don't know why you had to come here and tell me?"

"No."

Rolling her eyes, Darcy let her hands fall to her sides. "Okay."

Stephen frowned at her acceptance with a hint of exhaustion. "Okay?"

Darcy shrugged her shoulder, letting out a sigh. "Sure. Whatever. Why not, right? It's not enough I have to have a talking stone in my head, along with the memories of a decades old super soldier, why wouldn't time travel and mysterious words be a part of the package? Seems to be pretty on brand for my life."

"I really am sorry for the date and time of this meeting. I saw your name, this note, and knew I needed to get here to you. I hope it's useful in the future,"

"Yeah, me too." She cocked her head to the side as she looked at him, confusion on her face. "Can I ask... what is that?"

Stephen looked down at his chest before glancing back up at her. "This is the Eye of Agamotto. It controls time. It allowed me to come here today. Why?"

"It's an Infinity gem?"

"Yes."
Darcy’s arm lifted, one faintly glowing finger pointing toward the door. "Get the fuck out of my room."

Stephen gave her a confused expression. "Ms. Lew -"

She shook her head, moving closer to him, ushering him toward the door. "Nope! Leave. Do your little thing, say the magic words, whatever, but get out. I’d apologize for being rude, but seeing as neither of us will really remember this, according to you, I don’t really care if it’s rude or not. I’ve had it up to here with Infinity Stones, so if you and your green glowing beacon of death could get out of my room that’d be great. I got the message. Papaya. Great. Thanks."

“When you know what it means -”

“You’ll be the first person I talk to, ‘kay?"

As he was being pushed from the room, Stephen gave her a slightly exasperated sigh. “Why does this feel so familiar?"

“You’re the time lord. Use your stone to solve the timey-wimey issues. Not my division. Goodbye, Mr. Strange.”

“It’s Doctor Stra -”

Darcy shut the door, her arms falling down to her sides as she looked at it.

“Darcy?” Spinning, Darcy blinked. Steve and Bucky were sitting up in bed, the sheets pooled at their waists as they looked at her in concern. “Are you okay?”

Turning back to the door, Darcy frowned. She couldn’t remember climbing to her feet. “I don’t… I think I might have been sleep walking.”

“Worried about the test with Stark?”

“I guess so?” She pulled at Steve’s shirt, frown deepening when she saw the light glow of her skin. It only took a stray thought to douse the amber, and she turned, hazel eyes blinking at both of them, a small smile climbing onto her lips. “Merry Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

Here is the link to Blue Orchids by Glenn Miller and his orchestra:

Blue Orchids
Outside Yourself

Chapter Summary

Tony helps Darcy test her new powers for the first time since having her neural dampener placed. Bucky and Steve decide to grab a bite with Peter.

Chapter Notes

Happy Pi day! Here is a chapter that is way more than 3.14 words long!
Thank you so much for the comments/kudos/shares! I love getting to put this out to you each week! <3

There is nothing outside of yourself, look within. Everything you want is there – you are That.

Darcy nodded once more at Tony before looking down at her hands. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

The metal helm protecting Tony’s face lifted, the man inside the armor rolling his eyes. “For the billionth time, I’ll be fine. This is the plan, and it’s a good plan, because it’s my plan. If anything goes wrong, Friday drops the hammer and you’re asleep before you even hit the ground.”

“I know, I know,” she groused, having heard him say the same thing over and over. Darcy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was still nervous, even if she knew the paralytic and anesthetic Friday had loaded would work on her, and she could feel the flip in her stomach when she looked back up at Tony. If you had told her in June that she’d be trying to beat up Iron Man by New Years?

Darcy laughed at herself, shaking her head.

“What?”

Hazel eyes blinked open to look at Tony with an amused smirk on her face. “Just thinking what my life was like six months ago compared to now.”

“Look, if you’re not going to take this seriously, I’ve got better things -”

“Jesus, hold your armored undies and give me a second, okay? Fuck.” Darcy took one more deep breath in, slowing her heartbeat like Steve had taught her.
When she opened her eyes, the world was painted with the colors she knew so well, but in new, beautiful ways. She could see Tony, in his red and gold armor, but hovering in the air around him was the oil slick and silver of his soul. It was just like Peter had said: It looked like a moving and shifting Instagram filter had been placed over him. “It’s so pretty,” Darcy hummed, taking a step toward him, her hand raising as if she’d be able to touch the colors.

“Right, so I take it from your starry-eyed expression that you’re seeing what we hoped?”

Darcy nodded, biting her lower lip, her eyes going glassy as happiness bubbled in her chest. The Science Squad had promised they’d get this done for her, and her friends had come through. She didn’t hear the voice, she didn’t feel the fear, she felt in control, and it was overwhelming.

“Are you having an Emotion, princess? How about you put a pin in it and focus on the matter at hand?”

No one had ever been able to move her from gratitude to anger as easily as Tony Stark, and Darcy’s face fell until she was glaring at him. “Are you wanting me to throw you across the room?”

“Yeah, actually, that is the plan, or have you forgotten?”

“I didn’t forget, asshole,” Darcy said with a sigh, shaking her hands at her side as she bounced on the balls of her feet. It was a habit she’d picked up from Clint - he did it every time before they sparred, though he liked to thrown in a few lunges as well - and something Natasha pointed out every time she came to watch their training sessions. She lifted both of her hands, seeing the soft glow beneath her skin grow brighter as she focused. “So what do we want to start with?”

“How about you move me around like you did Thor? Not crush me,” Tony added quickly, gauntlet hand gesturing in her direction, “but just move.”

Darcy nodded, tongue licking at her dry lips. She zeroed in on him, watching as his helm lowered, stealing those dark whiskey-brown eyes from her sight. She inhaled and held it, pushing him backward. She hadn’t used her powers in so long that it took a moment, but slowly, and with a lot of focus, she pushed at his soul, wrapped in all the silver and black. There was a growl of metal on concrete before the suit of armor travelled back several inches. She let out a laugh, dropping her arms. “It worked!”

[Behind the faceplate, Tony watched the stream of information cross in his eyesight. Friday was analyzing everything - temperature, blood pressure, air pressure, electrical wattage - and relaying it all.

“Boss, Miss Lewis pushed you back nine inches.”

“Her heart okay?”

“It appears to be elevated slightly, but is still within acceptable range.”]

Tony held up his gauntlets toward Darcy, their repulsors glowing softly. “Okay. Do that again, but I’m going to do everything I can to stay where I am.”

“That didn’t work for Thor,” Darcy reminded him, knowing the expression on her face was colored with smugness. She could remember the terror of that moment - coming out of the blackness to the sound of her name, looking at Thor and seeing him red-faced and gasping for breath - but now that she could see while moving souls, it made everything else seem a bit lighter.

“Yeah, yeah, put up or shut up,” Tony growled, pushing his arms backward, helmeted head giving a
nod in her direction. “Turn it up.”

Inhaling deeply, Darcy lifted her hands again, focusing on the color undulating around him, willing it to move backward. She watched as Tony was pushed backward by a few inches, jumping slightly when the repulsors on his hands lit up with blue light, propelling the armor forward. Gritting her teeth, Darcy pushed harder.

”You’re at thirty-five percent propulsion, Boss.”

“Take it up to fifty.”

Darcy shouted when he flew toward her, gaining several feet of ground before she stopped him, feeling the first thrum of vibration in her chest as she took a step toward him. He moved in tandem; for each step she took forward, he moved backward correspondingly. He wasn’t coming forward, but she wasn’t pushing harder, either. He seemed to float there, held steady by her power.

”Fifty percent.”

“How’s she holding up?”

“I’m not entirely certain.”

“Why?”

“There appears to be some kind of interference with my diagnostics. Her heart rate, blood pressure and brain activity are fluctuating too quickly for me to do a full assessment.”

”Darcy?”

“I can go harder!” Darcy said, her brow breaking into a sweat as she held him steady, her hands shaking in the air..

“Are you sure?”

“Turn it up to an eleven, remember?”

At the regurgitation of his words from so many months ago, Tony nodded. “If you start to feel weird...”

“This whole thing is fucking weird but I wanna keep going!” Darcy yelled back, her voice wavering slightly as she grit her teeth.

[“Take it up to seventy-five. The second you get a reading of something alarming, you shut it down.”

“Got it.”]

Tony’s armor pushed forward, the repulsors on his boots kicking on as well, and Darcy planted her feet, feeling her hair begin to float around her head in a wind of her own making. Before, the blackness had stolen the ability to see what she was doing, but the way it was playing out in front of her was like some scene right out of a movie. A movie she would have happily paid premium IMAX luxury-lounger leather seating prices to watch.

Iron Man, arguably the most advanced and powerful suit of armor on the planet, was being held prisoner by a five-foot three-inch brunette who only had a poly-sci degree and was allergic to shellfish. The thrumming in her chest was stronger now, the tremble in her hands more pronounced. Darcy knew it was something she needed to keep an eye on, but despite how tired she was getting,
she was elated.

She was pushing her powers farther than she ever had, but still that voice was silent. There were no calls for her to give in, no internal fighting, no struggle over keeping control of her own body in case the stone took over. This was her, all her, and she was finally beginning to accept that this was something she could actually use. There was a tightness in her chest, but it didn’t scare her. It was like it was waiting, poised if she reached out, but she didn’t need to, so she didn’t.

"My readings are going in and out, but from what I’m able to glean, her heart rate is still holding steady."

"You suggesting we go further?"

"I’m suggesting that if you’d like to realize the full extent of her abilities, now would be the opportunity."

"And you’ll knock us out if we need?"

"In a metaphorical heartbeat."]

“I’m gonna come at you with everything I’ve got, Princess. You ready?”

"Put up or shut up, old man,” Darcy parroted, giving him a strong nod. When Tony rocketed toward her, pushing his suit to its maximum, her eyes flew shut and she had a split second to worry how bad it would hurt when the armor slammed into her... but it didn’t. Because he hadn’t hit her at all.

Squinting open one eye, Darcy was startled to see the blue slits of the Iron Man armor just a foot away, hovering in the air in front of her, the blue exhaust from his gauntlets and boots burning brightly as he attempted to continue moving forward. Again, she felt the pull of something down deep, but she ignored it, happy when it appeared to subside.

[“I said give it everything!”

“Is she -”

“From what I can ascertain, all her levels are normal. Heart rate. Blood Pressure. Brain activity. The readings are going in and out rapidly, but it appears as if she’s suffering no ill effects.”

Tony let out a surprised trumpet of air. “Well, will you look at that.”]

Darcy took a deep breath, feeling the first cold slide of sweat as it cascaded down her spine. She flexed her fingers, feeling the ache of holding them still for so long. Moving didn’t seem to be a problem, so she took a step back while holding her focus, keeping Tony’s armor where she wanted it.

But it wasn’t the armor she was holding back, not really. She was holding Tony. And if she could hold him... She let out a laugh when she lifted her right arm, watching as the armor went where she directed it. She pushed the armor around the room as if she had it on a string. Darcy winced when the thrust from his boot burned a black smudge across the concrete wall. “Sorry!”

“Forget it! Just see what you can do!”

Darcy frowned. She let her left hand drop to her side, Tony’s armor only moving a few inches before
she stopped him. She noted how she felt before adjusting, letting her left hand take the brunt of the work. As she’d guessed, it was harder to control him with her left hand. Since she was a righty, it made sense, but it was actually easier to hold him than she thought it’d be. “Appears I’m pretty ambidextrous. Think we go for speed next?”

“Do it.”

Nodding, Darcy planted her feet and brought both hands up. When she was certain she had in a good hold, she swung her arms to the left quickly, watching as the armor went flying through the air. The movement made her the slightest bit dizzy, and she shouted when she couldn’t stop him right away, the crunch of the metal on the wall ringing through the space. “Oh! Sorry! Still getting the hang of this thing.”

[“No irreparable damage.”

“Vitals?”

“Holding steady.”]

Tony lifted his arm, shooting toward the ground at her feet with a blast of blue energy.

“Fuck!” Darcy dodged out of the way, a smudge of black on the ground inches in front of her. When she looked up, she only had seconds to stop the armor before it crashed into her. When she caught him and wasn’t in fear of having her face bashed in, she glared daggers at him. “What the fuck, Stark?”

“It’s not just their momentum, Darce, you have to make sure they can’t hurt you in other ways. Like this.” The bits of metal at his shoulders lifted, small rockets appearing from the suit. They fired in quick succession, the whistle as they flew toward her loud in the air.

Crying out, Darcy ducked behind one of the concrete road dividers that had been sprinkled throughout the room. They hit the concrete with pops, and it was only when the last one had struck that she realized they were nothing more than glorified bottle rockets. Darcy rolled her eyes, jumping to her feet. “You asshole! What -”

Her voice caught in her throat when she was tackled around the middle, the strength of Tony’s armor holding her tight as they flew backward.

When they got close enough to the mats at one end of the warehouse-like chamber, Tony dropped her from six feet up, hearing her grunt as she landed and rolled to a stop. “You took your eyes off me.”

Darcy glared up at him, rising to her knees. “You shot at me! I couldn’t stop the rockets so I had to hide!”

Tony hung in the air above her, the slits on his helmet somehow managing to look smug and judgemental even though it had no expression. “You have to find a better way. You think you’d be able to hold me without looking at me?”

Letting the tension that had thrummed through her body ease, Darcy thought about his question. Could she hold him if he wasn’t within sight of her? “Only one way to find out,” Darcy said, nodding up at him.

This was exactly what Darcy had needed; the rush of adrenaline was strong and the anxiety was being focused on the only other person there, who happened to be the one person she knew wouldn’t
pull his punches. She *needed* an asshole who would play dirty while pushing her to her limits, and that was Tony Stark’s main impact on her life. He pushed her to be better. “Let’s give it a shot.”

Darcy made her way around the barrier, both hands raised, holding Tony where he was. She ran at him, another set of rockets appearing along his arms, the sizzle as they flew toward him raising her heartbeat, pulsing through her veins and throbbing in her ears at the pretend danger. Her *body* didn’t know it wasn’t real, and she felt the first rise of panic bubble in her chest.

She drew on Bucky’s memories, the horrible trenches of Europe, the singing of artillery fire cascading overhead. Darcy took a steadying breath, focusing on the danger and what she needed to do about it. She slid on her knees behind another barrier, and even though she couldn’t *see* Tony anymore, she knew where he was. She felt the pull of his soul in her stomach, something primal and real, and she ducked behind the safety of concrete.

The thickness of the barrier was nothing compared to her powers, and she had the odd experience of seeing the colors of Tony’s soul hovering in the air, though she saw nothing *real* except the dull, drab gray of the barricade. “Try me!”

[”We have anymore blanks loaded?”

“We’ve got a few more stunners.”

“Flash?”

“Those too. But they’d blind her, Boss.”

“Do it.”]

Darcy heard a popping noise, frowning. It was familiar, somehow, and the second she heard something hit the ground next to her, she realized what it was. “Shit.” The strobe was bright enough that it left her seeing spots, her vision going white and flashing. “Son of a bitch!”

Despite her disorientation and her sight being stolen by the flash grenade, Darcy was able to keep a tab on Tony’s soul. It’d been released in surprise, but she caught it before it could get to the exit. Back in the darkness, the one she’d grown used to, she was able to focus on that roll of silver and oil, coaxing his soul back toward her. “That was a dirty little trick, dick.”

She shouted when Tony rocketed toward her again, thrusters in his hands and feet pushing with everything they had. He was only able to close the distance between them by ten feet before she caught him, swinging him from side to side quickly, hearing the grinding of his armor as she shook him in the air like a ragdoll. Darcy lifted her hands up, hearing the crunch as he hit the ceiling, then the floor, then back to the ceiling.

He was like a marionette doll in her hands and she threw him this way and that, growing more confident over time. “Like the zipper at the state fair, huh?” She curled and rolled her hands, hearing his groan as she corkscrewed him in the air.

[Tony closed his eyes and grit his teeth as he was spun through the air in a hundred horrible ways.

“Boss, your blood pressure is rising toward suboptimal levels.”

“You think?”

“You’ve dealt with pressure like this before, but you’re dangerously close to losing consciousness.”]
Tony waved his arm, though it did little more than flap around as Darcy continued to pitch him up, down, and all over. “I’m gonna cut the thrusters, don’t crush me when I do!”

Holding her breath, Darcy waited for the pressure against her to ease, only letting Tony move slightly as he lowered the amount of force he was pushing at her with, until he was frozen six feet into the air, those blue lights looking down at her but held stuck. “You okay in there?”

The metal helm lifted, Tony’s face a careful mask of indifference, though she could see a bit of green in his expression. “That was an eleven?”

“I think so,” Darcy said, hands shaking as she continued to hold him. “I mean, I could feel something in my chest, but it wasn’t scary or anything. Just… weird.”

“Weird is our wheelhouse, cupcake. You didn’t want to carve out my soul and devour it?”

“Not today,” she answered with a tight grin, “but the jury’s still out about tomorrow.”

“Hm,” Tony said, rolling his eyes as she slowly lowered her hands and allowed him to land on solid ground. “Friday said she had some sort of interference going on. Your levels were going in and out.”

Darcy nodded, dropping her arms to her sides, happy when the limbs were given a break. “I could feel the power, but it was inside of me, in my chest. And it was… waiting? It was there if I needed to go further, but I knew I didn’t, so I let it be.”

Tony frowned, taking a deep steady breath as he stopped the roll of his stomach at the jostling she’d done to him. “The whole point of today was to see what you could do, Darcy, and you held back?”

The way he’d used her name - twice now - showed more than anything else that he was taking this seriously. Darcy didn’t want him to think she was ungrateful, but she couldn’t entirely explain the pull in her chest, either. “I know, Tony, I do, but this… that wasn’t for today. I don’t know how I know it, but I do.”

“That’s not very comforting.”

“Yeah, well, it’s the best you’re gonna get out of me. But hey! I can move you around like a creepy-ass marionette!” Darcy jumped when the suit around Tony’s body peeled backward and allowed the man to climb out of it. “Ugh! You coming out of that thing is like a hermit crab transferring to a new shell!”

Tony rolled his eyes, breezing past her and toward the control room. “Let’s look at the footage and the data and see what we’ve got.”

Darcy sighed, looking down at her feet. “If I’d known there would be homework I’d have called in sick.”

“Yeah yeah, your life is so hard. Get your ass in here and help me.”

Tired, but not exhausted, Darcy lifted her hair off her neck and curled it into a high bun, securing it with an elastic as she followed him out of the test chamber. “Fine, but you’re buying me something with a metric-shit ton of carbs.”
"Maybe he worried it was nothing," Bucky said with a shake of his head, pushing into the lab with several pizza boxes in his arms.

"I just couldn't understand why he wouldn't have said something about it. I told them all on day one that if they found anything, anything, no matter how big or small, I wanted to know about it."

"It's sort of hard to approach Captain America about something that could turn out to be absolutely unrelated. You tend to intimidate people, punk, figured you'd have realized that by now."

The frown on Steve's lips softened slightly when he realized Peter was looking at the two of them with apprehension on his face. "Hey Peter, you eat lunch yet?"

Peter blinked, gaze flicking from Steve, to the pizzas in Bucky's arms, then back again. "Uh, is something, did something happen? Something bad?"

"What did I say?" Bucky said with a smirk in Steve's direction. "Intimidating."

"Nothing's wrong," Steve said, ignoring the look on his best friend's face, "we just thought it'd be nice to eat with you." When the younger man's face continued to be wary, Steve pushed farther into the room, making his way toward the lounge set up in the corner. "We got enough for all of us, just in case."

Peter trailed behind Bucky, confusion tinting his features. "Are those from Uncle Paul's?"

"They are." Bucky set the five pies on the coffee table before crossing toward the fridge. "You want a drink?"

"Like a drink drink?" Peter asked, eyebrows lifting as he looked at Bucky, surprise on his face.

"Uh," Bucky checked in the fridge, head popping over the door, "you've only got water, red bull and some green concoction that looks like it has actual grass in it."

Steve fell back on the couch, grabbing one the boxes and pulling it toward him. "He's not old enough to drink anyway, Buck."

"What?" Bucky walked back over to them, three bottles of water in his hands. "Jesus, that's right. Seems pretty stupid, if you ask me. You can send eighteen-year-olds to die in a war but heaven forbid they drink before the age of twenty-one." He threw one of the bottles at Peter before taking up a spot next to Steve on the couch.

It took another minute before Peter set himself on the edge of a chair, fingers fidgeting with the label on the water. "You guys, I mean, you really didn't -"

"We know," Steve said, looking at Peter, kindness in his blue eyes, "but we kinda feel like we owe you."

Peter's eyes widened at Steve, then flicked to Bucky. "You, what? Uh, owe me? Why?"

"Do want cheese? Pepperoni?"

Peter set his water on the table, gesturing toward the boxes. "Sure, I mean, whatever you don't want. I'm not picky."

"Darcy said this was your favorite place," Bucky said, pushing one of the boxes toward Peter. "You're from Queens, right?"
Only slightly impressed that Darcy had made a note of his favorite pizza - she seemed to hoard little personal trivia about all of them like some kind of niffler - Peter nodded, pulling the box closer. "Yeah, that's right. Queens, born and raised. And you're Brooklyn? I mean, from Brooklyn? Like Captain Rogers?"

"You can call me Steve, Peter," Steve said with a small smile, grabbing another slice. He watched Peter open the water bottle and take a long drink. Steve vividly remembered Darcy lamenting over the fact that she had to practically force-feed the scientist water or he'd live on energy drinks alone. "Yeah, Steve. Right."

Bucky's lips twitched at the pink that filled Peter's cheeks. He could see why Darcy held so much affection for the kid. If he was a little more wan and a little more pale, he'd remind him of Steve before the formula; a small, awkward kid who felt like he had something to prove and would put himself in danger if it meant helping someone. "Yeah, I'm from Brooklyn, too."

"Darcy told me a few things. Nothing bad of course, just... stuff."

"She's told us a lot about you," Steve said, smiling softly when Peter's eyes flicked up to his, widening slightly, "and something things she didn't say, but we know anyway."

Peter fidgeted under Steve's steady gaze. Darcy had joked with him before about the weight Steve's eyes could carry, and she hadn't been kidding. "Whatever it is."

"You were there for her, when we weren't." When Peter looked over at him, Bucky's expression didn't waver. "You got her where she needed to go, made sure she was safe until we got back."

"It was nothing."

"Peter." Steve watched the younger man take a breath in before Peter's brown eyes looked up. He waited, his smile warm, until Peter seemed to settle. "You did what you did because you care for her, and she was able to count on you when she needed it the most."

"You were there when we couldn't be," Bucky continued. Being forthright with his feelings hadn't always been easy, but between Darcy and Steve, it was becoming easier. "And that's not nothing."

Peter looked down at his hands, grinning softly. He wasn't sure what to say. Captain America and the Winter Soldier were thanking him. He couldn't wait to text Ned. "She doesn't know you're here, does she?"

Steve chuckled softly. "She doesn't not know we're here, if that's what you mean. She's training with Tony."

"She told you not to be there, so you needed something to keep you busy?"

Bucky's lips curled into a smirk, leaning forward to grab another slice, wondering when he and Steve had gotten so bad at hiding their true motivations. "Something like that."

"She's gonna be fine," Peter said, no hesitation in his voice. "Tony wouldn't hurt her, or let her get hurt."

"Tony shot her into a wall," Steve said, lips turning down slightly. Hearing about it from Darcy had been hard enough, and his brain had been providing him with likewise upsetting scenarios all day long.
"She was wearing her suit and the walls were padded, and to be honest, she was literally begging him to do it. And I mean literally asking for it." Peter explained, hand gesturing toward Steve softly. "Tony wouldn't do anything that would really hurt her."

"So everyone keeps telling us," Bucky grumbled. He knew his history with Tony Stark was strained at best, but he begrudgingly admitted that Stark seemed to have Darcy's best interests at heart.

"They invited me to watch, to help sort the data, but I... I didn't."

"Not easy watching someone you care for being in danger?" At Peter's nod, Steve couldn't help the smile that flowed onto his lips. "Yeah, I know how that feels." When Bucky's gaze leveled in his direction with one dark eyebrow raised, Steve knocked his shoulder into his lover's. "Don't give me that look, jerk."

"Don't let this man fool you," Bucky said with a shake of his head, grey eyes swinging back to Peter, "his blood decorated almost every alley between Sheepshead and Greenpoint."

"Darcy might have said something along those lines, yeah."

When Bucky laughed, Steve shook his head, reaching for a second box. "Is that so?"

"Like it's some kind of national secret? Pretty sure that's a story kids get taught in history now, punk."

"In either case," Steve said, shaking his head at Bucky before looking back at Peter, "I get why you couldn't be there. And we figured since you couldn't be there, and we couldn't be there, that maybe we couldn't be there together."

"And you realized if anything went wrong, Tony would call me first."

"And we realized it anything went wrong, Tony would call you first," Bucky confirmed, reaching for his second pizza box as well. "But you don't really look like you're worried."

Peter considered his question, chewing thoughtfully. "For what we've seen, the dampener's working. This might be the first full test, but she hasn't had any side effects yet. Assuming our design was correct, things should get better for her. And if they don't, we go back to the drawing board, keep working until we get it right. But we got it right. I mean, I think we got it right."

Steve watched determination light behind Peter's eyes. He knew the younger man could be shy and awkward, but when he was in his element, any hint of that self-doubt disappeared. "I've got faith in your work," Steve said, seeing the surprise flow over Peter's face at his words. "Darcy trusts you, and on the whole, she's a pretty good judge of character."

"Yeah, I mean, she got you two." When both Steve and Bucky looked at him, Peter's cheeks flamed. "I mean, not got you, you know, I meant, you're there for her. In a totally platonic way. Not just platonic, but she's never mentioned -" Bucky laughed when Peter reached for his water again, taking a large drink, "you're fine, Peter. I think we're both well aware of the type of things Darcy says that wouldn't be considered appropriate for a work-place or laboratory setting."

"I've actually been wanting to ask you about her suit. She said it absorbed a lot of the impact when she was hit with one of Tony's repulsor blasts. My shield does the same thing, but it's made entirely out of vibranium. How did you make that work in a suit?"
"Oh, that's the coolest part! Hold on, let me grab the specs. Tony worked really hard, he kept making calls..."

As Peter bounded away from them, talking animatedly as he began digging through things on his workstation, Steve looked over at Bucky with a grin. His best friend was already looking at him with a small smirk, though, and it caused Steve's eyes to narrow slightly. "What?"

"You already grilled Tony about that suit."

Steve shrugged his shoulder. "Nothing wrong with a second opinion."

Rolling his eyes, Bucky grabbed another slice, watching focus and attention return to Steve's face when Peter returned with a stack of paper and began babbling about vibranium viscosity and tensile strength.
A Mirror

Chapter Summary

Bucky, Darcy, and Steve move in together and have a discussion.

Chapter Notes

Ooooh, I hope you've all been to the dentist recently because this bit of sugar fluff is gonna give you cavities!

So. Much. Fluff.

As always, thank you everyone who reads/comments/leaves kudos/shares on tumblr. You're all amazing and I don't deserve you, but thanks for sticking with me anyway!

The next few chapters are big guys with lots of words. Yay!

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People think a soul mate is your perfect fit, and that's what everyone wants. But a true soul mate is a mirror, the person who shows you everything that is holding you back, the person who brings you to your own attention so you can change your lie.

A true soul mate is probably the most important person you'll ever meet, because they tear down your walls and smack you awake.

A soul mate’s purpose is to shake you up, tear apart your ego a little bit, show you your obstacles and addictions, break your heart open so new life can get in, make you so out of control that you have to transform your life.

---

Darcy carefully placed the last of her pajamas in the dresser, shutting the drawer softly. Everything had been arranged and folded neatly, and she said a silent prayer of apology to David Bowie because it would probably never look like this again. She wasn't big into folding her clothes and most things tended to get stuffed into whatever drawer wasn't full, something which she knew drove Bucky crazy.

Darcy smiled softly to herself. Bucky would yell at her about it. Because they were living together. She, Bucky and Steve were living together. In the same space. In the same bed. All their things were here and they were their things, now, because it was their bedroom. If she did a little dance in front
of her temporarily-organized dresser, she didn't think anyone could blame her.

Only feeling slightly ridiculous for dancing in an empty room because she would get yelled at by one of the men she loved, Darcy crossed to the ensuite bathroom, another box full of her things to be put away.

Steve brought the box of odds and ends into the bedroom, pulling out their alarm clocks and setting them on the nightstands. Despite the ability for their phones to handle it, Steve and Bucky still preferred the method they'd grown up with. He knew it frustrated Darcy - 'there is absolutely no reason to keep living in the Stone Age! Come to the present, we have flu vaccines and valet!' - but it was familiar, and he and Bucky appreciated that feeling.

"Hey Friday?"

Blue eyes glanced toward the bathroom, its door ajar. Steve could hear Darcy moving around inside, no doubt putting away all of her numerous and varied toiletry products; he wondered if all girls had that many items, or if Darcy was the outlier and enjoyed hoarding a vast collection of scented gels and goops. He crossed to the doorway, leaning against the wall with a small smile on his face.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Will you send Jane Foster a text from me?"

"Of course. What would you like it to say?"

"Um... 'Janey, when do I get to smoosh you next? You've been gone too long. I miss your face. There are things! With a capital T and an exclamation mark!'"

"Ma'am, do you want the message to read 'With a capital T and an exclamation mark', or do you want me to capitalize the T on 'things' and add an exclamation mark to the end of the text?"

"Now I remember why I don't have you send texts out," Darcy said with a sigh. "It's fine, Friday. Ixnay on the exttay. I'll do it myself."

Steve shook his head in amusement, crossing over to the bed and taking a seat on the end of it. Darcy stayed in the bathroom for a few more minutes, and he could hear the sounds of drawers opening and closing as she found a home for all of her things. When she finally pulled the door open, her curls flying around her face, he gave her a bright smile and a raised eyebrow. "There are 'things' that you need to tell Jane?"

Darcy's heart had skipped a beat when she opened the door and saw Steve sitting on the bed. On their bed. The light in his eyes was playful, and she felt the smirk on her lips as she put both hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at him. "Now, I know your Ma told you it was rude to eavesdrop, Steven Grant Rogers," she drawled, watching as he glanced down at his feet.

Lips curling, Steve stared at the carpet for a second longer before looking up at her, feigned chagrin on his face. "You're right. I'm sorry. What can I do to earn your forgiveness?"

"Just off the top of my head? I can think of a few things," Darcy answered, the first blush of heat crawling onto her cheeks.

The sight of Darcy moving toward him with purpose sped his heart, but before he could stop himself, he pointed a finger over her shoulder. "Light."

Darcy's steps faltered, a grimace crossing her features at the reminder that she'd forgotten to turn the
light off. Again. "Shit!"

"Don't worry about it," Steve said with a warm smile, watching her return so she could flick off the light, using a little too much enthusiasm to do so, "it took forever for it to become a habit for me, too."

Blowing a stray curl out of her eyes, Darcy turned back to him, shaking her head. "Part of me thinks I'm doing it subconsciously just to mess with him. Don't tell him," Darcy said, coming to stand before Steve, fitting between his open knees and laying her hands on his shoulders, "but he gets pretty cute when he's annoyed."

The grin on Steve’s face grew heated as he looked up at her, so close. He lifted his hands and rested them on her hips, pulling her even closer. "I won't tell him, sweetheart, I promise," he breathed, his voice deepening with desire and knowledge, "nothing'll pass these lips."

"Speaking of lips..." Darcy closed the distance between their mouths, her lips sliding over Steve’s, softly and slowly. She had nowhere to be for the rest of the afternoon, and she knew Steve’s last meeting for the day was done. There was no rush in their movements, no desperation or press of time, just the enjoyment of skin on skin. When his hands tugged, Darcy followed his lead, straddling his thighs with her knees while maintaining their connection. Steve’s hands traveled up her back, pulling her hair lightly so the line of her neck was exposed, his lips trailing from hers to pass over her jaw, then to the bit of skin just below her ear.

Darcy’s soft moan was like music and Steve moved to capture her lips again. The way she smelled and tasted was so different from Bucky, but just as addicting, and his tongue swiped at her full lower lip, sighing into her mouth when she opened for him, her body melting against his. They had so much left to do until they were officially moved in, but Steve didn’t care. He couldn’t think of anything else he wanted to do right then except show Darcy how happy he was to be taking this next step, how happy she made him, just by being there.

She hummed against his mouth, pulling his lower lip between her teeth and biting softly, tongue soothing a second later. It was still hard for her to believe how different her life was compared to just a year ago. The reality of her everyday - attempting to become an Avenger, having powers, living with and loving Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes - was like some kind of cheesy young adult novel, where the heroine was thrust into a world different than her own, somehow earning the love and trust of the dangerously handsome boy who had a dark past and that fate itself had brought into her life.

Which was absolute bullshit, the more she thought about it. In her story, Darcy had her own dark past, and yeah, she’d gotten the love and trust of the handsome boys, but she knew better than to assume there was a ‘happily ever after’. That sounded incredible jaded, and she knew it, but that’s why the moment was so sweet: Steve was there with her, perfect and whole and full of love, and fate had absolutely fuck-all to do with it. It'd been work, and struggle, and tears, and they'd earned this little bit of happiness, and she was damn-well going to enjoy it.

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When she shoved at his shoulders, he laid back against the bed, her body molding to the front of his, dark hair forming a curtain about their heads. Steve was drowning in the scent of citrus and spring blooms, and he tried to put how much she affected him into the grip of his hands at her hips, bucking into her and chasing the friction between them.
Darcy gasped into his mouth, hoping his fingertips left marks on her skin, grinding her hips against him, earning a hiss and a tug on her hair. "If this is your apology for eavesdropping, consider yourself forgiven," she breathed.

Steve chuckled, feeling her smile where it pressed against his lips. He let his head fall back against the bed as she straightened her spine, both of her hands splayed against his chest and holding herself up. His body was still thrumming with desire, heated and anticipating, but just like before, he was in no rush to finish what they’d just started. “I’m sure there’ll be more for me to apologize for later.”

Raising an eyebrow, Darcy traced a pattern in his t-shirt with her fingernail, loopy symbols that held no real meaning but gave her hands something to do. “You plan on making me angry a lot?”

“Not planning on it, no, just acknowledging that it’s an inevitability.”

“Like the look Buck gets on his face when he sees I left the bathroom light on? Again? Despite his many, many reminders?”

Steve grinned, tucking both his hands behind his head, looking up at her with amusement in his eyes. “Yeah. Just like that. I’m sure you’ll find something I do that annoys you.” At her snort, his head cocked to the side. “What’s the snort for?”

“You’re sure I’ll find something? You assume I don’t already have something?”

Blinking innocently, Steve schooled his face to show utter disbelief. “I have no clue what you’d be referring to.”

“Oh really? No idea?” At the challenging shake of his head, Darcy lifted her hand, counting off on her fingers. “One? You leave your work-out sneakers under the bed, and some days all I can smell are your feet. Two? I’ve had to physically fight you because you steal the covers in the middle of the night when you're asleep. Do you have any idea how much your muscle weighs? It's stupid. Three? When you can’t to sleep, you rub your feet together, over and over, but always for an even amount of times, never odd. Four?”

Darcy laughed when Steve’s arms reached up and pulled her to his chest, shouting in surprise when he flipped them, laying the top half of his body on hers. Her shoulders were still shaking with laughter when he pressed his lips to hers, smiling against her mouth, hand brushing up her side. He pulled back, pushing at a stray curl near her forehead. “All those things and you still want to move in with us?”

The shrug she gave him was small, nonchalant even, but the longer he looked down at her, the softer Darcy’s eyes became. “Yeah, Steve. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted something more in my life.”

There was something in Darcy’s gaze, a heaviness in all that hazel, and it sobered Steve’s expression. She was telling him the truth, not placating him or dampening the statement so it wasn’t as real, and a swell of happiness crashed in his chest. His thumb brushed across her cheek, swallowing past the lump in his throat.

There was no way for her to know the images that had been assaulting his brain for weeks now, daydreams that had taken up his every waking moment. He and Bucky had meant to talk to her when they’d gone out for dinner before Christmas, but the night had been so perfect that neither of them had broached the subject. Then the holidays had come and gone, and she’d begun testing her powers with Tony and training harder than ever with Clint, and suddenly it’d been weeks and the topic still hadn’t come up. Steve couldn’t explain the anxious flutter of his stomach, even after what she’d just said, and he found himself opening his mouth before shutting it again, words dying on his
Darcy frowned up at him, unsure why he’d gone quiet. The look in Steve’s eyes hinted at something, but it seemed like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to reveal the thoughts behind that cobalt gaze. “Hey, whatever it is, I’m here. Not going anywhere.”

“I know,” Steve managed, pressing his lips against hers chastely before pulling back. “I know.”

When he said nothing else, Darcy brought her hand to his face, one fingertip smoothing the wrinkle between his brows. Whenever Steve thought too hard, or was too worried, she’d see that crease emerge. She didn’t want him to be thinking too hard or worrying about anything, because they were moving in together and it should be light, and fun, and it meant so much to her. Between him and Bucky, and the rest of the ragtag team she’d come to care about, she didn't know how she'd have survived all of this without them.

Darcy erased the wrinkle with her finger and lifted her head so she could kiss him, lips lingering, hoping to wash away whatever doubts or uncertainties were floating in his head. She'd have her own moments of disbelief in the future, knowing herself and the ebbs and flow of her emotions, but for the time being she wanted to embrace this big, happy change, and she wanted him to feel it, too.

Steve returned her kiss, drinking in her warmth, wondering if she had any idea what she did to him. He'd always felt his heart was cleaved into large pieces. One part would always belong to Bucky, his best friend, his first love, the man who belonged at his side. Part of it had belonged to Peggy, too, with her sharp wit and caring nature and her ability to demand respect because she deserved it. He understood, now, that Darcy had claimed what he had left to give. He didn't know how to explain the lightness and life she’d brought to his world or the way she made him think that there was something more out there for him. And, more than just that, Steve had found that he couldn't imagine a future where she wasn't there, at his and Bucky's side.

Pulling back, Steve ran his hand over her hair, attempting to calm the dark mass while also knowing it was an impossible feat. "You remember the night a few weeks ago when Bucky and I took you out?"

She snorted softly, an eyebrow raising at his question. "Oh, you mean the night you and Bucky barged into the bathroom, which was amazing, don't get me wrong, but now is something both Clint and Natasha know about? The night that could be brought up for future blackmail material? That night?"

Chuckling, Steve nodded his head. "Yeah. That's the one."

"Then yeah, you could say I remember that night. Vividly."

"Well, Buck and I -"

"Were you two planning on christening the new bed without me?"

Both Darcy and Steve's gazes swung toward Bucky to find him standing in the doorway to the bedroom, his training uniform sticking to his chest with sweat. Darcy would have laughed at the way she sucked in a breath at just the sight of him, but she'd felt Steve do the exact same thing. "There were no plans of christening, right Steve? Just making out with one of my guys. Can't blame a girl for that."

"Do you know that when you get caught, your words come out with just a hint of Brooklyn?" Bucky asked, grin slanting when he realized both occupants of the bed were still looking at him with
hunger plain in their eyes.

"And whose fault is that?" Darcy countered, rising up on her elbows when Steve sat back, pulling his warmth away. "You missed all the heavy lifting."

"I was in the gym, so I most definitely did not miss all the heavy lifting. Besides, all your stuff could fit in one large box." Bucky grabbed the hem of his tee and pulled it up and over his head, chest thumping with satisfaction when he saw both of their eyes focus on him, their lips parting slightly as they breathed.

"She had three boxes, actually," Steve said, shaking his head and tearing his eyes away from Bucky.

"Yeah," Darcy nodded, uncaring that her face telegraphed every little thing that was running through her mind at the sight of Bucky’s naked chest, "I've acquired things."

"Is that so? What kind of things have you acquired?"

"I think this is where I'm supposed to say that 'you know how much emotional baggage I carry with me,' but it seems too cliched, so we can skip it. Instead, Steve just asked me if I remembered the night at Anatoly's."

Bucky rose an eyebrow in Steve's direction, his face sobering slightly when he saw the look behind the blond's eyes. "That was a good night," he said carefully, crossing the carpet until he was near the edge of the bed, looking down at a thoroughly-kissed Darcy and Steve. "We should do it again."

Darcy smiled, nodding her head, brain already forming images of them actually getting to the dance club Natasha had found, losing themselves in the darkness and moving against each other as the music pounded. "Mmm, yes please."

"Was there some particular reason why you were talking about that night?" Bucky asked Steve as he sat on the bed. He had a perfectly good idea why Steve had brought up that night, and the weight in Steve's gaze meant that they were about to have A Conversation. Bucky supposed he should feel caught off-guard, but he knew his best friend. Now that things had settled down, the entirety of Steve's thoughts had been focused on the words they hadn't managed to have, and it appeared he had no desire to wait any longer.

Gaze flicking back and forth between the two men, watching the silent conversation they seemed to be having with only their eyes and expressions, Darcy's lips turned down into a frown. She shifted on the bed, grabbing a pillow and clutching it to her chest, feeling a heft to the air that hadn't been there seconds ago. "What's going on?"

Unsurprised that Bucky would make him start the conversation, Steve took a deep breath in and turned to Darcy. He hated the look on her face, like she was waiting for bad news, but he was having trouble picking the right words, and Steve desperately wanted his words to be right. He'd bungled up his confession of love by saying something that had been misconstrued, and he did not want to repeat the same mistake. "When we went out that night, we wanted to talk to you. About us. The three of us. Together."

"Okaayyy," Darcy said, uncertain why her heart had sped up at Steve's words. She'd just been thinking about how she was going to enjoy what she had with Steve and Bucky, and that she wanted Steve to feel the same happiness she did. She berated herself for immediately going to the worst case scenario and stubbornly refused to acknowledge the threat of despair on the edges of her mind. "What about us? I assume it's not about us moving in together, because I don't if you realized it, but it's too fucking late now."
"That's not it," Steve said, his peripheral vision catching the smile on Bucky's lips at Darcy's comment. "I've just... I've been thinking about titles and what they really mean. Titles can be heavy. They can weigh you down, until you're not sure where the title ends and you begin."

Memories of the night she and Steve had shared in the hotel room floated to the front of her mind. She'd heard Steve's worries, the way he felt about being Captain America. He hadn't mentioned it since then, but she knew it was something that continued to press on him. She understood, still in awe at the amount of responsibility he felt and accepted. "I get that. 'Heavy is the head' and what not."

Steve smiled, nodding when it seemed she was following what he was saying so carefully. "Right, but other times, a title can lift you up, hold you to a better standard. It can be something you wear with pride. It can help define who you are, the things you want to exemplify, the thing you want to be known as."

Trying her best to keep up with Steve’s train of thought, she cocked her head to the side and looked at him. "This isn't you, like, wanting to pick out a code-name for me now that I'll be on the A-team, is it? Because I'm -"

"That's not it," Steve said, reaching out to squeeze her knee.

"Though we do need to figure that out, too," Bucky said, shifting on the bed so he could face them both.

"Not tonight."

"No," Bucky agreed with Steve, "not tonight."

"Then what the hell are you guys talking about? Because you're starting to freak me out." Darcy saw another look pass between the two men and clutched the pillow tighter.

Sighing, Bucky realized that Steve didn’t want to come out and say it, or say it wrong, so he turned back to Darcy, deciding that there’d already been enough dancing. "We want to know what we are to you, doll. And what you are to us."

Steve took in a deep breath, glad that Bucky had managed to put it out there clearly and without any possible double-meanings. His blue gaze swung toward Darcy, eyebrows knitting as he waited for her to put two and two together.

They were both looking at her so intently, focused and quiet, and she did her best to understand what Bucky had meant. It took a second for Darcy to decipher, but when she did, she took in a deep breath as her eyes widened. "Oh! You want to have The Talk."

"Yes," Steve said, letting out the breath he’d been holding.

"The ‘what does it all mean’ talk," Darcy said with a wave of her hand.

Bucky nodded, watching some of the tension bleed out of Steve’s shoulders when she understood what he’d been saying. "You mentioned us being your boyfriends before, and if that’s what you still want -"

"It’s not."

She’d seen them go from one to ten on the ‘high alert’ scale before, but the way they froze at her words was something else entirely. When their stillness began to unnerve her, Darcy threw her hands
in the air, frustration tinting her voice. “Boys, seriously? We just moved in together. Literally today!”

“Yeah, but if we’re not -”

“Stop it. Look. I’m saying it’s not enough. Roommate. Boyfriend. Manfriend. Partner. Main squeeze. Beau, boo, bae, or anything else a ghost or sheep would say... None of those do this,” she gestured wildly between the three of them, “any justice. You’re not just my boyfriends. You’re more. You’re… my heart. My loves. My…”

Both of them were still looking at her, confusion in their expressions, and she could taste the words on the back of her tongue, about to spill out despite her ridiculous desire for them not to. Darcy lifted the pillow to her face and screamed into it, the absolute absurdity of what she was about to say making her cheeks burst with embarrassment. “You’re my soulmates, okay? Mates. My soulmates. And it’s fucking cheesy as shit, and I hate that I’m actually saying it out loud, but there it is. Soul. Mates. You. Me. You. Us.”

Despite what the timbre and volume of her voice would suggest, Darcy’s words hit Steve’s chest like a punch. The verbage was quintessential Darcy speech, unlike anyone he’d ever met before, and the knowledge that she felt as strongly about things as he did filled his body with electricity.

“Soulmates?” Bucky asked, the nonchalant expression on his face belying the internal crush he felt inside. It was something that he’d thought about, the word ‘soulmate,’ but he’d been too afraid to use the term. Yes, his soul was incontrovertibly mixed with hers, but it didn’t seem right, not when Steve was there, too. He’d hesitated using such a loaded term.

… but she was right. He’d always considered Steve his soul mate, and now part of his soul belonged to Darcy as well. And even if they didn’t have a metaphysical soul bond, he knew Steve felt that way about Darcy, and vice versa. It was a mixture of all of their souls, intermingled, and using a plural form of the word, somehow, seemed to explain it all perfectly (regardless of how often the classic platitude was bandied about and Darcy’s personal distaste for the word).

“Yeah, Buck,” Darcy said, her eyes narrowing but a smile blossoming on her lips. “Soulmates. You want to fight me about it? I said what I said. Deal with it.” They kept staring at her, soft grins on their faces, and she shifted on the bed. “Look, if anyone pushes the issue, it’s fine to say we’re boyfriends and girlfriend, because we know the difference. And if they won’t leave it alone, tell them to mind their own goddamn business.”

Bucky had decided he’d just turn and walk away if someone asked, but he liked Darcy’s idea of telling them off much better. “So boyfriend or girlfriend in public, but it’s more than that.”

“Of course. Did you miss the whole embarrassing ‘Soulmates Speech’ I just made? I’m your girl, you’re my guys, and that’s all that matters. Why are you guys making such a big deal out of this? Did I do something to make you think I had doubts?

“No! Of course not. Like you said, we live together now,” Steve assured her, “but it might have come up in conversation a time or two.”

Darcy’s chin dropped to her chest and she glanced over in Bucky’s direction. “Nat?”

“Nat,” Bucky confirmed, one corner of his mouth lifting up.

Steve shook his head. “It wasn’t just Natasha. I had to approve a change of residence -”

“What?! They made you file paperwork just to switch rooms?”
The incredulous look on Darcy’s face made Bucky snort. He wasn’t sure how she was still surprised at all the bureaucracy Steve was forced to be a part of. “Which means he had to put down a reason for the change,” he explained, turning toward Steve with a raised eyebrow. “What did you end up putting down?”

“I checked the box that said ‘change in relationship status,’ left it on the counter and got out of there before anyone could ask questions. But we have another form we have to fill out anyway.”

Recognition dawned on Darcy’s face, her eyes widening in horror. “No!”

“It’s protocol,” Steve sighed, seeing pink blush over Darcy’s cheeks, this time from annoyance. “Everyone’s had to do it..”

“What are you talking about?” Bucky asked, a frown on his face, somehow guessing he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“We have to fill out a DER form,” Darcy said, letting out a sigh and running a hand over her face. “What the hell is that?”

“It stands for ‘Declaration of Emotional Relationship,’ and anytime team members’ relationships move from friendship to something more, it requires a form to be filled out. It’s for good reasons -”

“But I’m not even on the team yet!”

“You still fall under Hill’s purview.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going to stick my foot so far up her purview...”

“I don’t remember signing any form,” Bucky growled, “pretty sure I’d have told them where they could put it.”

“We were grandfathered in,” Steve said with a shrug. The bark of laughter that trumpeted from Darcy made his eyebrows raise toward his hairline, and he turned toward her with wide eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s nothing,” Darcy wheezed, before devolving into another fit of giggles, shoulders shaking as she hid her face in the pillow. When Steve asked her again, she shook her head, reaching up to swipe at her eyes.

“It’s because you said we were ‘grandfathered’ in,” Bucky said, rolling his eyes at the fresh peal of laughter that sounded from the dark-haired woman on his right. “Our girl has a habit of laughing at inappropriate times.”

“This isn’t an inappropriate time, Buck. I just got done explaining that you’re my soulmates and Steve had to sign a form legitimizing our relationship, a form that will be read by the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., because two super soldiers and a mutant have moved into a family suite on the Avengers compound. This is an extremely appropriate time for hysterical laughter.”

When Bucky turned to Steve, looking for some commiseration, he was disappointed to find his best friend chuckling right along with Darcy. “Great. Now I’ve got two of you to deal with.”

“Yes,” Darcy said, sharing a sideways glance with Steve, lips quirking up.

“Looks that way, jerk.”
“I’m getting as far away from you two as I can,” Bucky said, sliding off the bed.

“That’s not really that far!” Darcy called after him, watching as he disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Eyes still lit with amusement, she turned toward Steve with a smile. “You see that? Cute when he’s annoyed, just like I said.”

“He’s not the only one,” Steve said, shifting to his knees and stalking across the comforter so he could drape his body over hers again.

Darcy sighed as his body weight pinned her, loving the feeling of being trapped and held fast, a thrill racing up her spine. “I’m not cute when I’m annoyed. I’m a gorgon who turns people to stone.”

When Steve opened his mouth, she narrowed her eyes at him, a finger poking him in the chest. “If you’re about to say something about me making you ‘hard,’ I suggest you think of a better retort, because that’s pretty low hanging fruit on the innuendo tree.” The laugh that fell from his mouth made it clear that’d been exactly what he’d been about to say, and Darcy couldn’t help the thump in her chest because she knew him.

She knew Steve Rogers, and the corny jokes he’d make just to see her smile, and the mouth he had on him in bed when it was just them, and the care he paid to her and Bucky and every other facet of his life. Darcy was over the moon that the man looking down at her felt the same way she did, and she was in awe that she could have this happiness.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend before,” Darcy breathed, dragging her nails across his scalp, watching his eyes flutter closed at the feeling. “Not really, anyway. I moved around so much that even if I did like someone, there was never enough time for it to become real. Then when I got to Olivia, I was too angry to care about anyone else. So I find it kinda poetic that my first boyfriends are also my…” She rolled her eyes, not able to say that word again.

Steve nodded, curling a piece of her hair around his finger. He felt much better after their conversation, but the images from his brain over the past few weeks were still fresh in his mind. “And you’re happy with that? Being just boyfriends and girlfriend? You’ve never wanted, I mean, the idea of being something more, you wouldn’t…”

A hint of confusion colored Darcy’s face as Steve tried to get the words out, stumbling over them, cheeks pinkening. When she realized what he was really asking, her eyes widened. His gaze was focused somewhere lower on her face, avoiding direct eye contact and she took the moment to school the shock in her expression. “Oh! No!” He looked up at her sharply and she realized the way her words could have been taken. “Wait. No, I don’t mean ‘no I’d never want that’. I want. I would. That’s… it’s there. It’s a thing that’s there. I’ve just never… There’s never been, you know…”

As Steve’s gaze locked with hers, focus and attention and the tiniest sliver of hope, Darcy couldn’t help but wonder how this man managed to steal the words on her tongue. She’d never had a problem expressing herself, using a wide variety of words and curses, but something about Steve Rogers made her lose her bravado. He could draw that vulnerable side she hid so well to the surface, and completely tear her apart.

Her words carried to ears and Steve held onto them with a steel grip, repeating them over in his head. I want. I would. Four little words, but filled with such weight that he felt the pressure on his heart. If the situation was any different, he knew he’d be thinking too far ahead, jumping past so many other steps to get where he was, but their lives were unconventional. He’d only known Darcy for a handful of months, but he’d known her forever, too. And Bucky? Their love spanned decades. It felt right, it felt true, and it felt now.
All Steve knew was that when he looked at Bucky and Darcy he saw his future, and he was anxious to start really living it. He’d spent so much time existing for someone else that it was time to exist for himself and the people he loved.

There was an emotion in Steve’s eyes that made Darcy’s heart race. He looked so serious, thoughts whirling behind the cerulean she loved so much. It was clear his thoughts had taken him somewhere else, somewhere further, and while she loved the idea he was thinking of the future - especially after their talk in the hotel room and his thoughts about not being able to be more that just Captain America - she knew it was best to take this step by step, if for no other reason than to be absolutely sure this is what they wanted.

…but Darcy was sure. She had entire lives worth of memories, stolen kisses, struggles and surges, and she had no doubt in her mind that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Bucky and Steve. It was as simple as that. Nothing else would be enough. And while she knew her own feelings were written in stone, Steve had experienced a lot of big changes in his life recently and she worried it was too much, too fast.

Darcy looked up into his earnest blue eyes and smiled, chest constricting with love and happiness. “I love you, handsome man, but maybe we wait until you realize how often my hair clogs the shower drain before we contemplate that next step, yeah?”

Steve considered it a good sign that Darcy hadn’t run from the room screaming, and the grin on her face pulled one from him as well. “I’m already used to Bucky’s. I think I can handle yours, too.”

She laughed, the sound real and full, shaking her head in disbelief. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Pushing a curl behind one of her ears, the bit of heat in Steve’s eyes flamed anew. “Makes sense to conserve water and just shower together. We did get pretty sweaty carrying all those boxes.”

“Best thing for the environment, really,” Steve agreed. He slid from the bed and held out a hand for her. Darcy took it and he pulled her to her feet, tugging hard enough that she smacked against the front of his body, looking up at him with pinkened cheeks. “After you.”

Breath leaving her chest in a huff, Darcy took that sexual tension and funneled it into her movements. She grabbed the hem of her t-shirt and pulled it over her head, the pink lace of her bra revealed as she side-stepped around Steve, the lace hitting the ground a second later. It was nothing to step out of her shorts, then hook her thumbs into the fabric still around her waist and slip the matching lace to the floor. She cast a glance over her shoulder at him as she pushed the door open, the steady hum of Bucky’s singing floating on the air.

Steve’s eyes were glued on hers, watching as one dark eyebrow raised in his direction. He freed himself of his own clothing and crossed the floor with purpose, pushing the door closed behind him.
Like Teeth

Chapter Summary

After a short time-jump, we find Darcy, Steve and Bucky learning to love and live with each other. Darcy pulls Feelings out of Tony.

Chapter Notes

GUYS! Guys! Guyyyyyys!
Let's do the time warp agaaaaain!
Without the help of the time stone (Doctor Strange is so neeeeeddy!) we're jumping a little bit ahead!
It's like every action movie where someone is training. Imagine cheesy 80's music and dramatic sighs of frustration.
I'm currently in D.C. and are we going to go pretend to be Steve and Sam running at the reflecting pool?
Yep. That is exactly what we're going to do!
But before I vacation the heck out of this place, here's the latest chapter!
Hope you all enjoy!!!!

Not all love is gentle.
Sometimes it’s gritty and dirty and possessive, sometimes it’s not supposed to be careful or soft at all.
Sometimes it’s like teeth.

2 weeks later

“Alright Lewis, better than your last time but we need to shave ten seconds off, okay? Come on! Don’t laugh at me! Hey! I’m talking to you!”

*

Four weeks later

"There's eight people in the building."

"Are you sure?"
"Yes. Eight people."

"If you're not sure -"

"Barton! There are eight people in that fucking building!"

*

Six weeks later

“I get it. You’re tired. Suck it up, buttercup, because I need another half-mile. No! Don’t you fucking dare! Darce! Let me down! Darcy! Not cool! No using powers with me! I’m straight human, remember! I’ll tell Laura! Ow. Fuck. I knew the Laura card would work."

*

Two months later

“I’m gonna tell Laura!”

“Laura said it was fine!”

“Shit!”

*

Four months later

“Yeah. Sure. You go run ahead. I’m just gonna… I’m gonna wait right here.”

Six months later

Darcy sat outside Maria Hill's office, biting her nails, her leg bouncing anxiously. She'd started the day with bright pink polish on her fingers but she'd picked almost all of it off. She could practically hear Steve's voice in her head, assuring her that everything was going to be fine and that there was a perfectly good reason why the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. would be calling her into her office. However sweet his attempt was, Steve's words did very little to calm her nerves.

She felt like she was getting called into the principal's office, and she knew intimately what that felt like, as she'd had that exact thing happen to her numerous times throughout her adolescence. She knew Tony had been sending reports on her progress to the director, as had Clint, but Darcy couldn't think of anything that would have warranted a visit. Five days a week with Clint and three days with Tony had been the routine for the past six months, and while she wanted to be further along than where she was, she didn't think she was doing that bad.

The neural dampener had done everything she and the Science Squad could have hoped and more. Since the day Vision had put it in, she'd heard nothing from the stone. No whispered threats, no nagging sound in her ear foretelling death and destruction. The fear that had gripped her heart at Wanda's visions had all but disappeared after going so long without so much as a peep from the stone, and she'd thrown herself headfirst into pushing her powers. The stability she'd found was
amazing and Tony had pulled out all the stops, creating as many real world scenarios as he could.

They'd discovered, for some unknown reason, that her powers didn't work on or through vibranium. Tony and Peter had spent weeks trying to figure out why, but they'd come up empty handed. Luckily, other than Steve's shield and her suit, vibranium was still rare anywhere outside of Wakanda. Shuri had tried to help but had come up with nothing either, and from the way Tony spoke about the princess, if she couldn't figure it out then no one could. It was a minor blip in a sea of pleasing outcomes; Darcy was able to tell how many people were in a building from a half-mile away, and while she knew she could have pushed it farther, they'd all agreed that even though the dampener was working it was better to only use what was needed. So she worked, and honed, and didn't stop until she was confident in her abilities.

Over the past six months with Clint, Darcy had seen her endurance improve so much that she'd started joking about signing up for a 5K. She still hated running - hated it with the fiery anger of ten thousand suns - but it'd become easier and that's all that mattered. She sincerely hoped she never had to run in the field for as long as she could, but at least she knew she could, should it come down to it. Her knife work with Natasha had tested her dexterity like crazy, but slowly she'd found it easier to hit a target. She'd never be as good as Nat or Bucky, but that was fine. The knives were there as protection, not as a primary weapon, and Darcy felt confident that if she had to, she'd be able to defend herself.

Even after all her training, she hoped she'd stay on the outskirts of any fight. She was there for backup, to facilitate civilian protection and evacuation, to verify that the bad guys had all been taken care of. 'Adjacent to the action' was her goal, and that's where her training had focused; being able to throw her opponents through the air went a long way toward her goal, and she was pretty happy with where she was. It'd taken time, and practice, and having Bucky and Steve at her side had meant everything.

Luckily, other than a few peace keeping missions, everything appeared to be quiet on the Thanos’ army front. She knew how frustrated Steve was that neither hide nor hair had been seen of the group that had attacked Wakanda, but it'd been over six months now, and everyone was starting to wonder if they'd gone back to whatever far-flung corner of the universe they'd hailed from. Did that mean that they'd given up? Not in the slightest. But until there was a lead of some kind, they were stuck in a holding pattern.

Hazel eyes darting toward the door when she heard movement, Darcy's hands left her mouth as she climbed to her feet.

"Darcy," Maria said as she pulled the door open, "thanks for waiting."

"Sure," Darcy said, giving a small shrug of her shoulder. "I figured you had some important 'Director Duties' or something like that."

"You don't know the half of it. Come in, please."

Darcy followed Hill in to the office, hearing the door fall closed behind them. She watched Hill round the desk and take a seat, gesturing for Darcy to do the same. There was nothing particularly intimidating about the director, but Darcy's heart sped up the tiniest fraction as she sat, fingers drumming against her knees as Hill opened a folder in front of her, dark eyes glancing down at it.

"I've been kept up to speed on the progress of your training. Barton says you've been a good trainee. Focused and confident. Stark says the same. I know Maximoff expressed concerns, but I've seen nothing in the reports that substantiates her worries."
Sighing, Darcy nodded and looked down at the carpet. It'd taken some time, but she'd finally figured out why Wanda had reacted so viscerally. Darcy was terrified that the stone would use her to cause chaos, death, and destruction. Wanda feared the same thing, only she was afraid what the soul stone would make her do, too. Wanda's comments about being 'turned' had stuck in Darcy's head, and through it'd taken weeks for her to push through her own fear, she could finally understand why Wanda had wanted to get as far away from her and the stone as possible. Had she reacted in the best way? No. But fuck, could Darcy really blame anyone else for being scared of the exact same thing she was terrified of?

No. She couldn't. And as much as Wanda's words had hurt and shaken her confidence, Darcy had used those worries as motivation to ensure whatever Wanda had seen never came to pass. Like most of Darcy's life, she'd decided to do the opposite out of spite, turning that fear into inspiration, doing everything she could to prove the other woman wrong. And maybe, looking back, she'd be able to see Wanda's reaction as a good thing, a fortuitous bit of pain that she'd come out better for.

"I've done my best," Darcy finally said, gaze flicking back up to Hill. "I've worked really hard."

"I know," Maria said, pushing a folder across the desk toward Darcy. "I need your signature on these. One is a request for a change of job duties. Essentially, you're agreeing that your job with Stark and Parker will be dependent on your other duties, along with a difference in pay scale and other assorted benefits. You'll be required to submit to monthly health reviews, as well as continuing your therapy sessions. We don't have to do a change of residence form since Rogers took care of that before, and these forms are so..."

The longer Hill spoke, the less Darcy listened. Her hazel eyes were focused on the packet of papers, gaze flicking from word to word, trying to make sense of what was in front of her.

*Hazard pay.*

*Military and security clearance.*

*DNR and POA and FOIA.*

"You're approving me for active duty?" Darcy blinked rapidly, looking up at Hill with an incredulous look on her face.

"For a probationary period, yes. After that, we'll revisit and see if we, mutually, want to make it permanent." When Darcy continued to look at her, Maria raised a dark eyebrow. "This is what you've been training for, right?"

"Yes! I mean, yeah, I just... I didn't expect it to happen so quickly."

"I'd say eight months of a hard work isn't that quick," Maria said, leaning back in her chair. "For someone with no military background, your progress is pretty incredible. When I mentioned adding you to the team that first time we met, your face pretty much said I was certifiable to even think about you in the field."

Darcy thought back to that first meeting and found that Hill was absolutely correct. She'd thought Maria Hill was out of her god-damned mind to even suggest such a looney tunes idea. And yet, just like with Tony, Hill must have seen something in Darcy that the lab-monkey hadn't seen herself. "So this is real? I'm an Avenger?"

"For a probationary period," Maria repeated, watching Darcy glance down at the paperwork again. "It's a big step and we need to make sure it's the right one. You can't flinch out there. Some people
just aren't made for it and they'll burn out pretty early. If that happens, you just go back to what you were doing, helping Stark and Parker in the lab."

"You wouldn't throw me into a dungeon and throw away the key?"

"Like I said, some people just aren't made for it. However," Maria said, leaning on her desk, her face serious, "you're not out there alone. You're on a team, and that team will be expecting you to have their back. You've got a pretty good reason to do your best out there, but if you freeze, someone might die. You need to be absolutely sure you're ready. I might have all the reports in the world singing your praises, but if you go through with this when you know you're not up to it, that puts everything on you."

Darcy took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. It took nothing for her to blink, letting colors bleed into her vision. The space around Hill curled and swirled in a cardinal yellow, but it was what was on the edges that caught Darcy's eyes and made her thoughts heavy.

She recognized the brilliant gold of Steve, and the deep crimson of Bucky. Clint's purple plum and Natasha's autumn orange. A flash of steel and silver like Tony, and a faceted aquamarine like Thor. All of the team's colors tinted Maria Hill's soul. It was beautiful and heart wrenching, and Darcy understood why the person in front of her was so intimidating. She had the weight of not only her own soul on her shoulders, but everyone else's as well. Darcy wondered if it was heavy, holding that much responsibility for that many lives, but she knew the answer without having to ask.

Blinking away the colors, Darcy focused on the papers for another second before glancing back up at Hill. "Can I take these to read? Bring them back in on Monday?"

"I think that's a great idea."

When Hill rose to her feet, Darcy followed suit, clutching the folder to her chest. She let Maria grab the door and hold it open, passing the other woman before pausing. Darcy's hazel eyes swung toward Maria, taking a long second to look at the other woman. "I'm not going to let you down."

The shake of Maria's head was small, her eyes lighting. "It's not letting me down that you need to worry about."

PageBreak

The second Darcy walked through their front door, she threw the folder on the ground and popped the button on her jeans. She peeled the denim down, looking up at Steve and Bucky who were sitting side by side on the couch, trying to pretend they hadn't been waiting for her to return. "I think Hill likes me."

Steve watched Darcy reach behind her back and, with some kind of dark magic, managed to remove the black lace of her bra while keeping her shirt on. The offending article of clothing was thrown in the direction of the bedroom, and he watched Bucky flinch slightly in his peripheral vision as it hit the ground. His lover had never liked mess, but after living together for the past six months, Bucky had learned to pick his battles.

That Darcy was wearing only black lace panties and a Sex Pistols t-shirt took a backseat to her comment, and one of Steve’s eyebrows raised. “I thought you didn’t like her.”

“She’s grown on me,” Darcy said with a shrug, bending to grab the packet of papers from the floor.
“She’s intimidating as fuck, that’s for sure. But I didn’t say I liked her, I said she likes me.” She straightened, blowing at a curl that had fallen into her eyesight. “She gave me some paperwork to look over.”

“Paperwork?”

As she passed the couch, Darcy dropped the packet onto Bucky’s lap. “Here. I’ve gotta pee.”

Steve looked over their shoulders, watching as Darcy hustled into the bathroom. “You know, if you put a hamper in the living room -”

“Then she’d throw her clothes near the hamper,” Bucky said, grey eyes pinning Steve before they were cast down at the folder, his face losing some of the annoyance and sobering significantly as he read. “Steve.”

“What?” Steve took the papers when Bucky held them out. He thumbed through the packet, taking stock of everything inside. He knew these forms. He’d helped draft some of these forms. His eyes flicked up, trying to gauge Bucky’s reaction. It was immediately clear that his best friend was struggling with what the papers meant, and he reached out to grasp Bucky’s hand in his.

They’d talked about this eventuality time and time again, in a myriad of ways and with more or less enthusiasm, but at the end of the day, despite what they’d done and said, both Bucky and Steve were unprepared. The past six months had been like a reprieve, the longest span of peace that either man had experienced, and Bucky found that he didn’t want to burst the happy bubble they’d all been floating in. “Did Clint say anything about clearing her?”

Steve shook his head. “His reports just say that she’s made steady improvements. Tony’s though…” His eyes had noted the words ‘extraordinary’ and ‘battle-tested’ in the engineer’s reports, and while he could accept the idea that Darcy had nearly mastered her abilities, he had to wonder if Tony was padding his check-ins. He wouldn’t do it deliberately; Steve knew Tony would never put Darcy in danger, and other than him and Bucky, she’d spent more time with Tony, Peter, and Clint than anyone else. If she wasn’t ready, they’d have said so.

Faced with the reality that Hill was ready to give Darcy the green light created a ball of tension in Bucky’s gut. Talking in probabilities and ‘what if’s had been hypothetical. Now it was real, and Bucky felt the first wave of fear wash over him. Everything had been quiet for months now, despite the constant search for what was left of Thanos’ army, and Bucky knew it was foolish to hope it stayed that way. But he did. He hoped, and wished, and prayed that Darcy wouldn’t see any action, that the three of them could spend the rest of their days training for battles and wars that would never come.

Darcy emerged from the bathroom, wiping her wet hands on her shirt, her steps slowing when she felt the tension in the room, like she’d walked through some kind of magnetic field, the hairs on her arms raising. When both men turned to look at her, their faces made her heartbeat speed up. “What?”

“Did Tony or Clint say anything to you about getting cleared for combat?”

Blinking at the robotic tone in Bucky’s voice, Darcy’s arms fell to her sides. “Not particularly. They’d said encouraging things, though. Why? Something wrong with the paperwork?”

Steve wisely kept his answer of ‘the problem is you having this paperwork at all’ to himself, instead rising to his feet and rounding the couch, leaning back against it as she came closer. “We just didn’t think you’d be getting clearance this quickly.”
“That’s what I said! I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad the work’s paid off because I’ve been busting my ass, but I thought there’d be a little more fanfare, you know? Not like I was expecting to walk across a stage and shake hands with her while holding some kind of ‘PhD in Ass Kicking’ diploma, but I’d have liked something. All I got were tax forms and organ donation releases.”

“You don’t have to sign these, you know.”

“I’m already an organ donor,” Darcy said to Bucky with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’d say you should be, too, but seeing as your organs are all super-soldiery, I doubt the government would want your body falling into enemy hands and oh my god, you weren’t talking about organ donation, you meant going active in the first place.”

“That’s not what he’s saying,” Steve said, trying to soothe the pink tint crawling across Darcy’s cheeks.

“Yes it is.”

Steve’s eyes fell closed and he took a deep breath, turning a soft glare in Bucky’s direction. “No, that’s not what you’re saying, Buck. It’s what you want to say, but you know better.”

“Well, obviously not, since that’s exactly what he said.” Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, eyes narrowing at Bucky. “You knew what I was training for. This was the end goal! This shouldn’t be some kind of shock because I’ve been actively talking about this day for months!”

“I know!”

“Then why are you acting like this?”

“Because I’m scared!” Bucky jumped to his feet, feeling righteous indignation bursting from his body, knowing it was Darcy’s trait manifesting through him. “I’m scared to think of you out there in danger. Steve has years of training and the serum running through his veins. We heal better, we come back from things that would kill most people. And you’re most people. Except you’re not, not to me, and thinking about losing you feels like being frozen all over again!”

The look in Bucky’s eyes had taken some of the wind out her sails, and Darcy watched as he moved toward her, empty hands at his sides, emotion making his eyes brighter. “Buck -”

“These last months with you and Steve had been the happiest I’ve ever been and the thought of you getting hurt or worse… I don’t know if I’d survive it.”

Bucky stood there in front of her, breathing heavy, color high in his cheeks, and Darcy didn’t have it in her to be angry at his fears. “I know,” she said, crossing the floor, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He was stiff at first, but after a moment he seemed to gather himself, holding onto her and squeezing tight. “I know, Buck. I know what that feels like, because I feel the same way.”

Darcy pulled back so she could see his face, cradling it in both of her hands. “When you and Steve go out, it kills me until you come home. The uncertainty, the worry… At least this way I’m out there with you. And no, I might not have super serum running through my veins, but you know what I do have?”

She lifted her hand, keeping her eyes on Bucky but tugging at Steve’s soul, pulling him until he was at their side. “I’ve got powers, and more training than most police officers, and I’ve got Clint, and Natasha, and Tony, and Bruce, and Peter, and you two.”

When Steve looked at her, eyebrows raised, Darcy shifted so she could press her palm to his cheek
as well. “I’m not a betting girl, but those odds are pretty fucking good. So I’ll do what I promised when I started down this road: I’ll do my best to stay safe, I’ll do everything I can to try to return to you guys, no matter what. And I’m going to do good and feel useful and maybe even save your asses for a change. I know it’s not going to be easy, but it’s what I want to do. Can you at least understand that?”

Steve looked at Darcy, fierceness and resolve on her face and in her voice, and he felt his heart constrict. He’d made the exact same argument to Bucky, every time he tried to enlist before Erskine had found him. He’d just wanted to help, to prove to himself that he could, to lay his life on the line like so many people already had. While it warmed him to recognize the reasons behind Darcy’s desire to help, he glanced over at Bucky, seeing the war on his best friend’s face.

Logically, Bucky knew Darcy was already ahead of most people. Barton had no abilities or super healing factor. Stark, other than his armor, was minimally trained in combat. The Howling Commandos had stayed alive by the skin of their teeth. He trained every day with men and women who were willing to put their own safety in jeopardy for the sake of others.

... but this was Darcy. This was one half of his heart. The only person who knew him better than Steve. Not waking up beside her wasn’t an option anymore. He hadn’t been lying when he said that the last six months had been the best of his life. Spending time with them, laughing, and loving, and becoming comfortable with each other… it meant everything to him. The prospect of losing that froze the blood in his veins.

Even with the fear of being without her, he knew her being in the field was going to happen, whether he liked it or not, and what needed from him was support and not a fight. Bucky lifted his hand and held it over hers, pushing his fear aside and giving Darcy what he hoped was an accepting smile, however begrudging. “You’ll wear your suit?”

“Every time we leave the compound,” Darcy assured him, “and I won’t leave without at least four knives on me.”

“Ten.”

“Five.”

“Six.”

“Deal.”

Steve grinned, watching the smiles grow on both Darcy and Bucky's faces. None of this was going to be easy, for any of them, but nothing worthwhile in life was easy. Everything was a game of chance. At Thanksgiving - which seemed like so long ago now - he’d asked Clint how the Bartons dealt with the uncertainty. Laura might not be an agent with S.H.I.E.L.D., but she courted danger every time she went to work at the hospital; the adolescent psychiatric ward she worked in was dangerous in its own ways, but just like when Clint and Natasha were on missions, they made it work.

And that's what he, Bucky and Darcy had been doing every day since they'd moved in together. They'd taken a crash course in learning each other's habits and behaviors. It'd been awkward at first, but over time they'd figured it out by not being afraid to talk about the painful and harder stuff. Steve had been witness to several tiffs between his loves, had partaken in a few himself, but because they were all willing to put in the work, they'd navigated the rough waters, learning how to compromise.

Seconds ago Bucky and Darcy had been looking at each other with anxiety and tension, but after a
discussion, they were grinning at each other. Their feelings and fears had been heard and acknowledged, and neither felt like they were being ignored. It was a delicate balance, and one Steve thought they'd been handling pretty well.

"I still don't know why I can't carry a gun," Darcy said, putting her hands on her hips.

"Barton doesn't have a gun on him most of the time," Bucky argued. "Neither does Thor."

"Why train me on how to use them but not give me one? Clint at least gets to use them. And Thor is a little-G god and has Myuh-myuh!"

"Still not a gun."

"But -" Darcy's words were cut off when Bucky darted forward, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her in the air. She slapped at his arms, closing her eyes as he twirled her. She wasn't sure why it was one of his go-to moves, but she did her best to keep her lunch down. "Stop manhandling me!"

Bucky set her on the granite of the kitchen island, crowding into her space, pushing her knees apart with his hips. "As you wish."

Darcy rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, knowing he was quoting one of her favorite movies in an effort to soothe her annoyance. It only slightly worked. "You know, if you were holding all that inside, you could have just mentioned it sooner, Buck. We could have avoided all that drama."

"I never cause drama." When both Darcy and Steve laughed at him, a scowl appeared on Bucky's face. "What? The only drama I ever have is because of you two."

"Mmmmhmmm," Steve hummed indulgently, fitting himself beside them, right hand resting on the small of Darcy's back, left lifting to clamp on Bucky's shoulder. "Like you weren't to blame for the ‘Rottman’ incident."

"We agreed to never bring that up again, punk."

Despite the flash of warning in Bucky's slate gaze, Steve shook his head and looked over at Darcy. "I don’t remember ever saying such a thing. Do you remember if I said something along those lines?"

"Nope," Darcy said, popping the ‘p’ as she grinned, “I don’t think you ever said that."

Bucky's hand lifted to tangle in Darcy’s dark hair, pulling softly, just enough to widen her eyes and hitch her breath. “Using my memories in your head is cheating.” Bucky growled, satisfied when heat blushed into her cheeks. “Goes for you, too,” he said, eyes flicking toward Steve, the look on the blond's face steamed and simmering.

“What are you gonna do about it?” Darcy asked, rewarded when that gorgeous grey she loved so much swung back to her, a shiver thrilling up her spine at the challenging glint in Bucky’s eyes.

Over the space of ten minutes, he’d managed to force her though a battery of emotions: Excitement. Anger. Sadness. Happiness. Heat. She still marveled at the way Bucky pulled her, like the tides, ebbing and flowing, caught between his moon and Steve’s sun. As they both closed in around her, Darcy stopped thinking about anything other than these men and letting herself be happy.
“Harder!”

Darcy grit her teeth, focusing on keeping Tony’s suit of armor at least a hundred feet away from her. She dodged something that was thrown at her from behind, dropping to her knees and feeling the wind as it sailed over her head. She shouted when his armor moved forward a few feet, managing to catch it before it’d made any more ground. She found it easy to keep a person frozen without her eyes being on them, but when she had to divide her attention to avoid other attacks she found it harder. That she was holding Tony still when the engineer was using all his thrust power was a remarkable improvement over what she’d been able to do just a few weeks ago while having her attention split.

She felt something hit her back, something small and packing a punch, but her suit absorbed the impact, the gold thread flashing for a second before it dissipated. Darcy turned to glare at Dum-E, who was holding a glorified b-b gun in his clamps. “Really?!” Her yell made the bot drop the weapon and chirp at her apologetically.

“Heads up, cupcake!”

Darcy spun around at Tony’s voice, yelling when one of his repulsor blasts hit her square in the chest. She brought both arms up as she flew back, knowing his strike was a test to see how much she could take being thrown at her and still maintain her hold. She hit the side of a barrier, dropping to her knees in the dirt, groaning. She coughed, running a hand over the suit, unsurprised that it appeared perfectly fine.

She felt her hold slip, knowing that Tony was rocketing toward her. Giving a yell, Darcy lifted both of her hands at once, locking onto Tony’s soul. He was moving toward her impossibly fast, like a bullet, but Darcy was confident in her powers after this much time. One of her hands lifted straight into the air and she watched him thrust upward, thrown into the sky just like she’d wanted.

Tony’s shout in her earpiece was beautiful, and she couldn’t help the smirk that turned her lips. Her victory was short lived, however, when she felt something flying toward her from his direction. In seconds, the net he’d thrown over her body tightened, pinning her arms to her sides and taking her to the ground. She felt the distinct buzz of electricity lift the hairs on her arms, making her eardrums vibrate. Despite how much she struggled, she couldn’t seem to free herself and, more than that, any time she attempted to use her powers, she couldn’t. “What the fuck is this, Stark?”

“Like that, do you?” Tony returned to the ground beside her, the blue exhaust at his boots shutting off as he landed. The front of the suit peeled away and he took a step out of it, smirking down at her. “It’s brand new, made just for you. Other people would be happy being bestowed with such a gift.”

“Well you can take this gift and shove it up your -”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m terrified, truly.” Tony rolled his eyes and hit a button on his watch, turning off the electricity and letting the net untighten enough that Darcy was able to pull it off of her.

She threw the net to the ground before brushing the dust off of her suit. She blew a piece of hair that had fallen into her eyes out of the way, giving Tony a soft glare. “What did you mean it was made just for me?”

“The kid and I have been doing some tinkering. We found out your body’s base frequency, manufactured a net that upsets that frequency, and what do you know? It negates your powers, most
likely only temporarily, but still. Pretty slick.”

“Why would you -” When Tony turned to look at her, one dark eyebrow raised in her direction, it came together in Darcy’s head. “Oh.”

“Just a failsafe, kiddo. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Yes! Yes, that is what I wanted,” she said, giving him a firm nod. “Seemed to do the trick, too. Didn’t hurt.”

“And hey,” Tony said, pulling on his armor, freeing the gauntlet the net had been fired from, “if I don’t use it for you, it’s still a pretty badass net.” He reached down and scooped up the net before balling it in his hands and starting back toward the compound.

“So it’s got double duty.”

“Your favorite, or so I hear.”

The noise that tore itself free from Darcy’s chest was indignant. “Oh, fuck no, never again, Stark. You hear me?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, pumpkin,” Tony said, pushing open the door and holding it for her.

“Mmmhmmm,” Darcy hummed, not believing his innocent schtick for a fucking second. “Is that where we are now? We can talk about our sex lives with each other? If that’s the case, does Pepper top you, or…”

When Darcy looked over at Tony, her mouth slanting in a smirk and expecting to be rebuffed hard by the engineer, she was surprised to see his brows knit together, a look in his brown eyes that she couldn’t name. He recovered quickly, looking over at her with that same mask he always wore in public, the one that portrayed him as nothing more than an egomaniac asshole.

He was that, too, but Darcy knew him better than most people. He’d become a fixture in her life, someone she could count on, someone she considered family. And family could tell when something was wrong. She waited until they pushed into their lab, knowing she’d have gotten nothing from him if she’d asked in the halls where anyone could overhear. For everything Tony displayed, she knew he valued his privacy when it came to Pepper. “Something wrong?”

“I need to get the launch of the net quicker. I wanted to make sure it worked before tweaking the mechanism.”

“That’s not what I meant, ass, and you know it.” When Tony glanced over at her, the look on Darcy’s face made it clear that his explanation hadn’t satisfied her in the least. She blinked at him, letting the colors filter in. His chrome was bright and shimmering, the oil sheen of colors reflecting.

“Hey, I know what you’re doing. Using your powers on me is cheating.”

“I’m not using my powers on you,” Darcy lied, seeing his silver flash with disbelief.

“You know I can tell, right? Your eyes do this thing,” he gestured vaguely in the air, “and it’s pretty obvious you’re looking at the colors floating around. You should be more careful when you do it.”

“Thanks for the notes, coach,” Darcy said with a roll of her eyes. She hopped up on the counter, watching as he clunked the gauntlet on the work table and began disassembling it. The longer she
looked at him, the easier it was to see the anxiety bleeding off on him in oranges and umbres. Something was bothering him, that much was certain, and she frowned softly. “So are you going to tell me what it is, or am I going to have to tear it out of you?”

“Wow, gonna pull out all your powers? Little overkill, don’t you think?”

Darcy closed her eyes and let out her breath slowly. She’d learned that when Tony was uncomfortable, he could hold onto that snark and never let go (just like she could). It was an act (just like hers), and most people would have just labeled him an asshole and moved on. But she wasn’t most people. And Tony wasn’t most people to her. “You know what I meant, dick.”

“Yeah, I know what you meant, princess.” When Tony looked over at Darcy and saw that she was willing to wait forever for him to start talking, he rolled his eyes, dropping the gauntlet on the worktop and grabbing a screwdriver to hold in his hand. “I didn’t know we did this kind of sharing... thing.”

“Really? You’ve let me cry on you, several times, but we ‘don’t do this’ type of thing? Shut the fuck up and start talking.”

“That doesn’t make sense. You want me to shut up and talk?”

“Are you seriously doing this?”

“Maybe I don’t want -”

“Stark!”

“She wants to set a wedding date.” Darcy’s mouth snapped closed, looking at him with expectant eyes, softly imploring. Tony let out a sigh, tapping the screwdriver into his palm, looking down at his hands. “Pepper. Obviously.”

“That’s great!” When Tony’s whiskey-gaze flicked up to her, Darcy could practically feel the anxiety begin to creep up her arms. Her face fell, confusion in her eyes. “That’s not great?”

Tony shook his head, avoiding her eyes. “We’d talked about it. There’s never been anyone for me but her. I asked her before the final push against Thanos. I made it real.” He raised his hand when her mouth opened. “I didn’t just ask her because I thought we were going to die, and she knows that. I made that abundantly clear. I asked her because if we lived I didn’t want to spend another minute without her being my better half. After everything, the rebuilding, the drafting of treaties, and contingency plans, and world councils... it got pushed aside. But everything’s been quiet for so long that it seems like it’s time.”

He trailed off, focusing on some part of the floor as his brain worked. Darcy watched Tony, watched the worry and apprehension in his eyes, saw the tension in the man’s neck. He fidgeted with the tool in his hand, a nervous outlet that she understood so well. “...but you’re afraid.”

Tony glanced up at her, frowning. “Hey, I said no using your powers on me.”

“I didn’t.”

The truth of it was there in his eyes, and he signed before nodding. “Yeah. The quiet’s not going to last. Something new’s gonna show up and it’ll be life or death, all over again. No marriage certificate is going to keep her safe from this life. If we do this, if we go through with this, she’ll have an even bigger target on her back.”
Darcy’s eyebrow raised slowly, watching him focus on the large windows showing the early summer forest that surrounded the compound. “How is that any different than how it is right now? It’s not like people don’t know you’re with her.”

“Marriage makes it different.”

“You just said that a marriage certificate won’t keep her safe, so -”

“It’s not the certificate,” Tony said with a firm shake of his head, “it’s the… everything else. Getting up in front of everyone and vowing to be with each other until death, to be there, for better or worse -”

“Pretty sure she’s seen you at your worst, boss.” When Tony glared at her, Darcy raised a shoulder, shrugging softly.

“I’m supposed to protect her. What if I can’t? What if I’m the reason she gets hurt? I don’t think…”

Tony trailed off, looking down at the floor, his fingers gripping the screwdriver tightly. “It’s real now, and I don’t know if I can do it.”

Darcy watched Tony struggle, swallowing harshly, gaze cast toward his feet. She’d seen Tony emotional before, but this was something else. This was vivid and painted in his eyes, the anguish as he feared being the reason the love of his life was hurt. She understood his fears, she did, but she knew better than to sugarcoat things for the engineer.

They didn’t lie to each other. Even if they wanted to.

“Listen here, you beautiful, unendingly frustrating dick. I’m gonna drop some knowledge on you. You listening?” When Tony’s head rolled up to face her, annoyance in the whiskey of his eyes, she held firm. “You’re right. The world is horrible. Bad people do bad things all the time and we can’t always protect the people we love. It sucks balls, yeah? But you know what happens if we let that fear decide what we can and can’t do?”

Tony rolled his eyes at her. “We’d be letting them win?”

“Fuck no. No. I know that’s the boilerplate line people will throw out, but it’s bullshit. It’s not about them winning. It’s about you losing out on something that could be amazing because of a possibility of hurt later down the road. Have you ever lived your life based on what you’re afraid of? You’re Tony fucking Stark! You went after the entire weapons industry because you were sick of people being unaccountable, and they’re the people with the weapons!”

“Still doesn’t make her any safer.”

“You’re right,” Darcy said, jumping off the counter, righteous fire in her stomach, “but that’s why you put safeguards in place. You get car insurance in case you get in an accident, but you still drive the car. You learn how to swim so you don’t drown, but you still jump in the pool. You’re going to marry Pepper because you love her and it’s what you want, and you do everything you can to keep her safe and you live your life because you deserve it.”

Darcy was on a roll now, not sure if she was only talking about Tony and Pepper, or if she was saying it aloud so that she heard it, too. “And more than all of that, you’re not giving Pepper enough credit. She’s decided that the risk of danger is worth it if it means she gets to be with you. You should respect her enough to accept that and give the woman what she wants. And what she wants is you. So stop being a whiny asshole and give the lady what she wants!”

Tony looked at her for a long moment, silence descending over the lab. It stretched on long enough
that Darcy worried she might have crossed a line. Not that she cared if she had, just that she might've. She stood by what she’d said and if Tony wanted to be upset about how she’d put it out there? So be it. Their relationship was not the kind where either of them would pull punches, and she didn’t want them to start doing so now.

Finally, Tony nodded and reached for his gauntlet again. “Okay.”

Darcy watched him turn his back to her, mouth dropping open before snapping closed again, her eyebrows furrowing as he returned to his work. She’d never seen Tony accept something so quickly and was immediately suspicious. She glared at his back, wondering what game he was playing. “Okay?”

“Yeah, I said okay,” Tony said over his shoulder.

“I know. I heard you say it. I’m just not sure why you said it.”

Tossing the gauntlet back on his work table, Tony spun toward her, crossing his arms over his chest. “You made good arguments about the situation and I couldn’t find any flaws in your logic. Your thoughts were relevant and concise and I understood where you were coming from. Because of your myriad of reasons I was able to see that my own hesitations, though still valid, were misguided. Therefore: okay.”

Darcy’s suspicious expression didn’t change. “I don’t believe you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re you! And I’m me! And, as annoying as it is, we’re more alike than either of us wanna admit! We’re both stubborn! Neither of us give up that easily when we think we’re right! So what the fuck are you saying?!?”

“Are you really yelling at me about me saying you’re right?”

“Yes!”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No!”

“Fine. What’s it gonna take to prove it to you? A raise? A promotion? Bonus? You wanna be in the wedding? Would that do it?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed further at him, her head tilting dangerously. “Yes.”

“Bridesmaid?”

“Groomsman. In a tux.”

“Done.”

Darcy stared at Tony, her body practically vibrating with annoyance. Their staring contest was broken by Peter pushing through the lab doors, his cheerful voice already in the middle of a conversation as he neared. His words died out as his steps faltered, eyes looking uncertain as they flicked between Tony and Darcy, who were both wearing scowls on their faces. “Are you, you guys okay? I can go if -”

“No, Pete. You’re fine. I was just heading out. The neural net worked great, by the way. We can go
over it after lunch.”

Darcy’s hazel eyes followed Tony as he left, clapping his hand on Peter’s shoulder on his way out. The doors were still swinging when Darcy let out a loud squeal of frustration, miming punches at an invisible foe, imaging it was Tony’s face. She shadowboxed for a few more seconds, using it as an outlet for the annoyance pinging through her body.

Peter’s eyebrows raised in surprise at her display. “Did I miss something?”

“Don’t wor -”

Darcy cried out when Friday’s voice sounded loudly from the speakers, requesting all on-duty personnel to report to the debrief room immediately. She looked up in time to see Tony push back through the doors, his face all business.

Shit.
Darcy experiences her first combat mission.

I have vacationed. Much fun was had. And now I return to this story and all you beautiful people!
As always, thanks for the comments/kudos/shares/kind words. I keep saying it, but I really mean it: I am blown away by all the joy you guys toss my way!
<3

Anxiety happens when you think you have to figure out everything all at once.
Breathe.
You're strong.
You've got this.
Take it day by day.

Steve’s focused blue gaze swept over the people gathered in the room, each of them sharing the same determined and anxious expressions. His eyes lingered on Darcy more the others, his swell of protective worry stronger than he'd expected but not all together surprising. She was nervous, but doing a good job of hiding it. The clench of her jaw and the wideness of her eyes, however small, read like a novel to him; Steve knew her well enough by now that her tics were familiar.

He wanted to stop, to ask her if she was ready, to say there was no shame in wanting to sit this out, but he didn't. She'd made it abundantly clear that she wanted this, wanted to be here, and Steve knew his job was to respect her choice, despite how the fear of losing her plunged his heart in ice.

Darcy looked up when Maria entered the room, her face stern and the light in her eyes muted with focus. She let the door hush closed behind her, crossing her arms over her chest and leaning back against it. She gave Steve a nod, and Darcy's attention went to the lectern and the man she loved standing behind it, seriousness in every pore of his body.

It still amazed her how he slipped so easily into the persona of Captain America, especially knowing how heavy the shield was for him these days. Steve Rogers knew the world needed Captain
America, and he'd never been able to stop giving everything he had, even when he was ninety-pounds soaking wet and begging for a fight he knew he'd lose.

“One of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s holding facilities has been breached and there are guards and staff being held hostage,” Steve said, his voice calm and demanding. “So far we know of at least six hostile entities inside, but there may be more. Communication was taken offline an hour ago. We have reason to suspect they’re attempting to free a specific prisoner, but we can’t say with certainty which one.”

“Which facility?”

Steve's eyes flicked toward Natasha, frowning softly at her question. “The Vault.” He felt several people in the room shift in surprise.

“I thought that wasn’t in use anymore,” Clint said, leaning onto the table with his elbows, blue eyes narrowing slightly, “that it was decommissioned along with the Raft.” Nobody commented on how tight Clint's voice got at the mention of the floating prison that he'd spent some time in, along with Sam, Wanda, and Scott Lang.

“After Thanos and his army attacked, it was reopened for high profile prisoners.” If she felt the weight of their stares when everyone turned to look in her direction, Maria didn’t show it. “Just a holding place until we could find someplace better and farther away from civilians.”

“Where is this place?” Darcy asked, belatedly wondering if she was allowed to ask questions. Seeing as they hadn’t throw her out of the room she assumed she was okay. She doubted they'd just let her sit in on this super secret mission brief for funsies, which meant she was actually part of the team. The thought alone caused her stomach to flip with at least seven different emotions.

“Colorado. In the Rockies.” Natasha answered then turned toward Maria, one delicate eyebrow raised in the Director's direction. “How many staff?”

“Fifty-two agents, twenty-eight assorted civilians.”

“How many unaccounted for?”

“Five agents, twenty-two staff. Besides the new hostiles, there’s a cache of other prisoners that were unrelated to Thanos' men but wanted to get in on the action, too. With communications down, we don’t know for sure how many.”

Steve pressed a button on a remote and a schematic of the building floated in the air over the table, everyone leaning forward to get a good look. “There are three possible exits, one side built into the mountains itself. Barton, Romanoff, and Lewis: you'll each take one side. Herd any civilians or hostages behind the line here, where we already have agents stationed. Contain and detain anyone trying to escape that shouldn't. Wilson will provide eyes in the air. Barnes, Stark and I will breach the third floor here, take out the leaders, and free as many hostages as we can. Everyone clear?” When everyone looked at him and nodded, Steve straightened, purpose in his eyes. “Good. We're wheels up in five.”

"Knife one. Knife two. Three. Four. Five. Six." Darcy said under her breath as she patted her body, counting the weapons she had on her. The belt wasn't made of the same material as her suit, but it wasn't like she was going to send it back to Wakanda with a note that says 'Hey! Thanks on the
whole impenetrable super suit and what not, but you know what I think it needs? Accessories!
Between the belt, thigh-holsters and her boots, she was as weaponed as she could be. Her eyes
widened when two very sharp, very nasty looking chopsticks were shoved in her personal space.
"The fuck?"

Bucky watched Darcy's hazel roll up to look at him, surprise on her face. "I got you something."

Convincing herself she was just imagining her hands shake, Darcy reached out and grabbed the
metal death sticks from him, raising an eyebrow when she glanced up at him again. "Uh, thanks?"

Sitting down in the seat beside her, Bucky adjusted the straps on his armor and grabbed one of the
sticks back from her. He pushed slightly on her shoulder, directing her to twist in her seat and give
him her back. He carefully shoved the stick through her bun, the metal almost disappearing into the
mass of her hair. "From our friend in Wakanda," he explained, reaching out for the other one, "Shuri
said these won’t show up on metal scans. Natasha told me a lot of people don't think to check
women's hair for weapons. If they take your knives, at least you'll still have these."

Darcy reached up and felt for the tiny needle-like sticks he’d placed in her hair, a smile on her face.
Her friendship with the Wakandan princess had formed almost instantly. Shuri had been calling to
check up on Bucky, something she liked to do at least monthly, and Darcy had been on the other end
of the couch, painting her toenails. When Bucky didn’t understand a meme the tech savvy teenager
referreded, Darcy had filled him in. When he still didn’t get it, the laughter from the two girls had
been enough for him to shove the computer in Darcy’s lap and mutter something about 'young
people these days.’ Since then Shuri and Darcy had become fast friends and talked through text and
social media pretty much daily.

That their mutual friend had been able to keep this little gift secret was a surprise. Darcy smiled
warmly at Bucky, reaching out to grip his hand in hers. “So this had nothing to do with our argument
about how many weapons I have to keep on me at all times? Not a way to arm me with two more
pokey tools of death?”

“No. Definitely not.” When Darcy rolled her eyes and pushed at him with exasperation, Bucky
grabbed her hand and held it against his chest, her amusement sobering the longer he looked at her
with concern. “You’re going to be careful, yeah? Safe?”

“Super safe,” Darcy assured him, seriousness bleeding back into her expression. “Just watching an
exit for people to come out. Bad guys get thrown around, good guys get ushered to safety.” When he
nodded, eyes closing as he took a breath in and let it out, Darcy took the moment to watch him,
feeling the warmth where he was pressed against her side. “And what about you, huh? You and
Steve, running into a building that’s basically a pinata filled with horrible, rancid armed candy. You
gonna tell me that’s super safe?”

Bucky shook his head, a grin on his face as he looked down at her fingers in his. “Anyone ever tell
you that you can really paint a picture with those words of yours?”

Despite the fondness in his voice, Darcy knew a deflection when she saw one, especially when it
was coming from the man in front of her, who she knew better than she knew herself sometimes.
“That didn’t answer my question.”

“I know,” Bucky said, glancing back up at her, giving her a soft smile. “You know we’ve been in
worse muck. This'll be a breeze.”

Darcy snorted with disbelief, gripping his hand tighter when the doors to the small waiting area
opened, revealing a quinjet powered up and ready for them. She’d been so preoccupied with making
sure she had all her things that she hadn’t put two and two together that they had to fly to get to this place. “Fuck,” she said, stomach flipping.

Bucky watched her face pale and take on a sickly green hue at the same time, her pupils dilating as she let the air out of her lungs, the curse word hissing past her lips. “Hey,” Bucky said, drawing her gaze and tightening his hold on her hand. “It’s going to be fine, you wanna know why?”

When Darcy looked at him, her expression making it clear that she didn’t think getting on the plane would be anywhere near fine, he pulled her forward, until their noses were almost touching. Bucky looked into her eyes, confidence in his grey gaze. “You’ve jumped out of planes plenty of times. You’ve been pitched back and forth inside a plane made of glorified aluminum foil. This is nothing. Remember the drop outside Rhine? Nothing is gonna be worse than that. This’ll be cake.”

It was the mention of food that pushed her over the edge. Darcy stood up quickly and motored to the nearest garbage can, emptying her stomach of everything she’d had for breakfast. Bucky, to his credit, followed her, eyes filled with guilt as he rubbed circles on her back and attempted to make her feel better.

He glanced up and noticed almost everyone in the room staring in their direction, expressions ranging from empathetic to downright amused. Glaring at the look of humor in Natasha’s gaze, he shared a heavy look with Steve before kneeling next to Darcy and whispering in her ear that it’d be better once they get in the air.

“She’ll be fine.”

Tearing his gaze away from Darcy and Bucky, Steve glanced in Tony’s direction at the smaller man’s words. “I know,” he said, swallowing the emotion in his throat as he turned and started toward the jet, “she just hates flying. Motion sickness.”

“Wasn’t talking about that,” Tony said, hands in his pockets as he followed Steve up the gangplank and into the darkened interior, Clint brushing past them to take the controls and prepare for departure.

“I know,” Steve said, storing his shield and beginning his pre-mission checklist in his head.

“If she wasn’t ready, she wouldn’t be on this plane, regardless of what Hill thinks. None of us would put her in that kind of danger.” When Steve only glanced up at him then returned to his task, Tony sighed, leaning his shoulder against the wall. “She’s made of stronger stuff.”

“I know what she’s made of, Tony.” Steve did his best to keep his frustration out of his voice, but he could see by the look on Tony’s face that he’d failed. Steve set his tablet down, letting out a breath as he placed his hands on his hips and looked down at their feet. “I’ve seen the training footage with you. I’ve read the reports from Clint. But, more than all that, I know she wouldn’t be here if she thought she’d be a liability. She’s too worried about hurting people to let her pride get in the way.”

“Definitely not a lesson she learned from me,” Tony said, smirking at the small chuckle his words drew from Steve.

They both grabbed onto something solid as the plane lifted. Their faces turned in unison to glance in Darcy’s direction; Bucky was in the seat beside her, gripping one of her hands and whispering things into her ear. Whatever he said seemed to make her erupt in strained laughter, her head shaking a second later.

Tony reached out and clapped Steve on the shoulder. “As far as first missions go, she’s getting an easy, underhand lob,” Tony said, letting his arm drop back to his side, “Parker’s first day involved
him taking on more than half the people in this jet.”

“I notice he’s not on the plane,” Steve said, raising an eyebrow when Tony turned toward him and gave him a gallic shrug.

“Don’t need the B team for this.”

“That make us the A team?” Sam asked as Tony passed him.

“Something like that.”

Steve grabbed his tablet, thumb brushing over the screen, taking another look at the schematic of the building so he knew exactly where they were headed. He didn’t see so much as felt when Natasha appeared at his side. “Something on your mind, Romanoff?” When he glanced up at her, there was an unreadable look on her face. After years of working with her, Steve prided himself on knowing the agent better than most. That she was shielding this hard, even from him, made him pause.

“Did you know the Vault was still an active facility?”

He’d known the second she’d asked her question in the brief that they would be having this conversation. Steve let out a sigh, giving up on his checklist all together. “After what went down in Wakanda and the knowledge that we had a mole, Hill made me aware that she’d initiated a rehab so we’d have a place to put whoever we tracked down. Keeping it off the grid was necessary to keep it from being targeted.”

“Doesn’t seem to have worked,” Natasha said, her words chosen carefully, a razor edge of sarcasm clear in her tone.

“Actually, it did. We floated several different locations to different departments. Since the attacked happened at the Vault and not the Cube or the Raft -”

“You’ll be able to narrow down the suspect pool. Tricky. Bold move, Rogers.”

“You work day in and day out with one of the world’s best spies and you tend to pick up a few things,” Steve said with a grin, watching the corner of Natasha’s lips lift upward. “After we get this handled, you up for a little ‘good cop/bad cop’?”

“Only if you let me be bad cop.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

PageBreak

Darcy took in several deep breaths and let them out slowly. Bucky’s grip on her hand during the flight had been strong, almost to the point of pain, and exactly what she’d needed to keep from embarrassing herself further. No one had said anything about her gastrointestinal pyrotechnics, but she figured a challenging death glare from the super soldier attached to her might have had something to do with it.

When she opened her eyes, nausea from the plane being replaced with nervous jitters for her first combat mission, Darcy climbed to her feet and pulled herself together. She let go of Bucky’s hand, giving him a firm nod to let him know she was okay.
The second they separated, Bucky’s spine straightened, tension building in his body, pushing his own feelings aside and focusing on the mission. He followed the rest of the team down the bay doors, jogging toward the small contingent of agents that had set up behind some concrete barriers.

“What do we have?” Steve asked as they neared, pegging the older woman bent over a blueprint as the person in charge.

If she was surprised to see Captain America leading the Avengers from the jet, she didn’t show it. Instead, she pointed to the diagram. “There are a few pockets of fighting on other floors, but the focus is here, on third. They’re using some kind of torch to free the prisoner in cell six-one-six.”

“The cells on floor three start with a number six?” When everyone glanced in her direction, Darcy coughed softly. “Just wanted confirmation, that’s all.” The small smile on Clint’s face in her peripheral vision made her feel infinitely better.

“Any other info you can give us?”

“They cut the cameras. We aren’t sure where everyone is.”

“Sounds like you’re up, Lewis.”

When Darcy realized they were all looking at her again, her eyes widened. She’d been so thrown off by Tony using her real name that it hadn’t actually connected in her brain. “Oh! Shit! Yeah, that is definitely something I know how to do, yes. Umm…”

Turning toward the building, Darcy focused on the lights inside, the bright colors that signified the beings they needed information about. She scanned it all carefully, not wanting to give any incorrect positions. “They’re spread out on the first three floors, staying as close to the middle as possible. Probably so they can’t get sniped through the windows, which I just realized the building doesn’t actually have.”

“Darce?”

“Yeah, right. So, there are thirty-three people on the first floor, eleven on the second, eighteen on the third.”

“Can you tell who’s friend and who’s foe?”

Darcy shook her head, frowning. “Everything is a mix of fear and anger. Too hard from this far away.” She blinked back, an apology in her tone. “Sorry.”

“It’s more than we had before,” Steve said, earning a tense smile from Darcy. “Alright. Plan stays the same. Barton, Romanoff, and Lewis at the exits. Stark, Barnes and I go straight to three.” He glanced up at the woman and the other agents spread out behind her, some of them hurt and bloodied from the initial breech. “We’re going to flush out as many people as we can. Get the civilians to safety behind the lines. Your people should be ready to give med aid if it’s needed.”

The woman nodded, moving at Steve’s orders, talking into a mic on her shoulder and pointing in several directions.

“Wilson, mind making us an entrance on third?”

“You got it, Cap.”

Darcy watched Sam launch into the air before looking back toward Steve and Bucky. She’d thought
looking into their eyes before separating would be terrifying and heart wrenching, just like it felt when they’d left her behind at the compound, and while she was worried about them, mostly she felt just… determined. She had a job to do and that needed to be her focus. She’d been training for this moment for months.

*Time to put up or shut up, Lewis.*

Bucky watched Darcy give them a firm nod before she jogged toward Clint and Natasha, having a quick conversation on who would be going where before they separated as well. His eyes followed her until she was stolen from sight, glancing over at Steve, his eyes speaking volumes without words. He tensed when Tony stepped up behind them, grabbing their armor and holding tight.

“Elevator to three. Going up.”

The rubble from the hole Sam had blasted in the side of the building was still falling when both Bucky and Steve were thrown inside, Tony right behind them. There was a loud alarm sounding in the interior and the flashing of emergency lights lit the hallway they’d entered in strobos and crimson. Eyes quickly adjusting, Steve motioned with his fingers, holding his shield in front of him as they advanced. Darcy had said the targets were near the center of the building, but he didn't want to take any chances.

Bucky followed inches behind Steve, gun up and eyes focused. They cleared each room that they passed, making sure they weren't leaving anyone on their six. The shrill scream of the alarm made it hard to hear anyone approaching them and Bucky only had a split second of warning before the blur hit Steve, who then ricocheted into him, sending both of them to the ground before the blur disappeared around a corner.

"We've got enhanced in the field," Steve growled, static in his ear as he de-tangled himself from Bucky. He grabbed his shield and climbed to his feet, the *brepp! brepp! brepp!* of gunfire filling the hallway as Bucky took aim at the hostiles running toward them. While Bucky squared off with an alien whose skin seemed to absorb the light in the hallway, Steve drove past and took on the next, blocking the swing of an axe before it connected with his head, the song of metal on metal vibrating up and down his arms.

Tony launched forward, intent on taking on the last non-terrestrial but stopped when the blur knocked him out of the air. He hit the floor and slid several feet, armor grinding and sending up sparks. Grunting, Tony glanced up, trying to see where the speedster had disappeared but having no luck. He heard an insistent pounding and looked to his left. Huddled and bound together, he spotted at least five people shoved into a room, eyes wide and expressions imploring. "I've got hostages here. Cap?"

"Buck, we gotta push these guys in," Steve ground out, tossing his shield at his target and sending him flying, careening over Tony's head and further into the interior of the building. He ducked when he heard the rush of air, the black alien crashing into two more that tried to run forward, all of them scattering to the ground.

Bucky darted ahead, gun swinging into the room with the hostages. A well-placed kick knocked the rifle out of his hand and he ducked to avoid the follow-up of a knife that had been meant for his chest. Blocking the downward swing of the prisoner's arm, Bucky pushed him further into the room,
past the hostages. "Stark! Lead them to Wilson!"

With the path open, Tony straightened, the armor at his shoulder lifting to reveal a red laser. The beam cut through the hostages zip ties, freeing their arms and legs. "Wilson! We've got five coming your way!"

As they ran past, one prison guard grabbed Tony’s arm and nodded toward the doorway. "I saw at least three prisoners join up! We've still got friendlies in there!"

"We've got it! Get to safety!"

Steve threw his shield again, the disc bouncing back to him off the chest of one of the creatures who screamed as it tumbled over the railing and fell from sight. The interior of the prison had an open, multi-floor atrium lined with cells; some of the cells were open, several were still closed, but the most activity was centered on a small room that seemed to have just been breached. Steve rushed forward, the echoes and screams of prisoners still in their cells filling his ears with white noise. It was hard to make out anything over the clamorous din.

Bucky traded blows with the prisoner in the room that had held the hostages, avoiding the knife aimed at him and producing one of his own. The flashes of silver were hard to follow, appearing that both men were comfortable using blades. It took several exchanges before Bucky was able to get the upper hand, plunging his knife into the shoulder of the man, earning a howl of pain that cut off abruptly when Bucky’s fist connected with his jaw, sending him to the floor, unmoving.

He grabbed his rifle from the floor and dashed out of the room, toward the screams of combat.

Crouching, Steve held his shield over his head then vaulted into the air like a spring, knocking into the body of a man wearing a bright orange jumpsuit who'd been flying through the air at him. He heard the crunch of bones as the man was pinned to the ceiling before he fell to the ground at Steve's feet. He didn't have much time to breathe, though, when a non-terrestrial tackled him around the middle and they both tumbled over the guardrail and fell into the open middle. Steve shouted, arm reaching out, fingers wrapping around the metal railing of the second floor, denting it. He had a split second to grab his shield as it fell too, swinging it behind his back and securing it. Steve planted both feet on the railing and jumped up, pulling himself back to the third floor. He could see Bucky and Tony in his peripheral vision, fighting their way through the enemies gathered.

Rushing toward the breached cell, Steve skidded to a halt just inside the door, shield held up defensively. He counted two people in the room, neither of which appeared human. They both looked up at him, the one in a jumpsuit giving him a small smirk, while the thinner, purple-skinned being saluted him. In a blink, the purple creature disappeared, leaving Steve alone with the non-terrestrial who seemed to be the center of the whole situation.

"We've got a transporter," Steve said into his ear piece, eyes pinned on the creature standing serenely in the center of the room. He could still hear the sounds of fighting outside the cell, but he wasn’t going to risk losing track of the foe in front of him, not when it was obvious he held some kind of importance. “You might not understand what I’m saying, but you’re not getting out of this cell.”

Steve watched a ripple of energy pass over the creature’s skin, his body inflating, adding several inches in height. Blue eyes widening, Steve lifted his shield a little higher, gripping it tighter.

“I have no desire to leave this prison,” the alien said, voice like sand and glass, “but if I did, you would not be enough to stop me.”
“Okay. Okay. You’re fine. This is fine. You got this.” Darcy jumped up and down, shaking out her arms and legs, stretching her neck from side to side. She tried to keep her limbs nimble, her eyes trained on the dark interior. It took nothing to blink, to let the colors wash over the surroundings. She could see lights spread throughout the building, a flurry of activity on the third floor. Steve. Bucky. Tony. That’s them in there.

The moment she thought it, she realized she could make out their hues. The gold, crimson, and chrome moved quickly from place to place. She held her breath when she saw the sheen of Steve’s soul somehow drop from one floor to another, eyes widening, not sure what to do with the information she was seeing.

“Nope, focus. Gotta focus. Hey! Hey! Over here!” Darcy turned her attention back toward her exit, watching as three lights ran from inside, appearing out of the darkness like ghosts. She could practically taste their fear like a tsunami wave as they came closer. “This way!”

Darcy shouted when she felt a fizzle of energy miss her head by inches, ducking just in time to avoid being hit. The trio of prison staff screamed, gripping one another as they stumbled but kept running. Straightening, Darcy lifted both of her hands, jaw clenching as she glared at the literal green ET who’d shot in their direction.

This was going to be the first test of her powers being used in a combat situation. She had a terrifying split-second thought - Oh mother **fuck** is this even going to work on aliens? Do they even have souls!? - before she decided she didn’t have a choice. Her hands thrust toward the creature, fingers forming claws as she clutched at his light. If it wasn’t a soul, it was close enough, and Darcy knew the exact moment her powers took hold. Whatever energy was animating the alien seemed to pause, and she watched the shock ripple across its face before she brought her hands higher, then thrust them straight toward the ground.

An invisible power lifted the creature into the air then slammed it into the dirt. Then again. And again. Its weapon had been dropped long ago, its body limp when Darcy finally let it drop to the ground. It didn’t move, and Darcy was surprised at the sick feeling in her stomach when she realized she might have killed it. She waved the three workers past her line, hearing the agents stationed behind the line of defense lead them to safety.

Darcy’s swell of relief was short lived when she heard an explosion at the entrance in front of her. There was a burst of something, moving incredibly fast, and Darcy screamed as her hands raised defensively, attempting to prepare herself for the impact and pain.

It never hit her. Just like they had with Tony in the lab, her abilities stopped the body before it crashed into her. Darcy’s eyes flew open, blinking at the blond man who was suspended in the air, inches away. He looked shocked, probably just as much as she was, and she couldn’t help the small laugh that rolled out of her mouth.

“You didn’t see that coming?” she asked, uncertain where the words came from. Darcy was slightly out of breath as she held him still, hands trembling with the effort; it was harder than Tony’s armor, but she’d never really tried with someone who could move this fast before. She glanced over his shoulder and toward the entrance she was supposed to be guarding...

... except it wasn’t there any longer. Whatever burst of energy the asshole’d used had left the door in a folded heap of scrap metal on the ground, the concrete of the surrounding walls collapsed in so it
was no longer a viable route of escape for the people still trapped inside. She could see more lights on the other side of the wall, but they seemed to turn away, desperate to find another avenue to safety.

“Uh, do we have somewhere I can put this speed demon?” Darcy shouted, voice shaking the tiniest bit as she maneuvered the guy up and over her head in the air, carefully walking in the direction of the agents behind her. “Something that’ll be able to hold him?”

“We’ve got a containment pod right over here for Mr. Saunders,” one of the agents said, directing Darcy toward a large, white box that seemed to be put there for just this reason.

She waited until the door was shut all the way before releasing her hold. She bent at the waist, resting her hands on her knees as she panted. “Fuck that guy. Seriously.”

“How did you know he went by Speed Demon?”

Darcy’s eyes flicked up toward the agent, disbelief on her face. “Did he really?! Fuck! What a fucking cliche.” She reached up and tapped her earpiece, hearing a brief moment of static before she spoke. “My exit’s collapsed. Romanoff? Barton?”

“Romanoff’s got her side under control, but it looks like Clint could use some help. Head in that direction, Lewis.”

“You got it, Mr. Eye in the Sky,” Darcy said, saluting Sam as he flew overhead. She took a deep, steadying breath before sprinting toward Clint’s position.

PageBreak

When Steve had disappeared into the cell and not returned, it'd taken every ounce of strength in Bucky's body not to follow his best friend and make sure he was okay. Ever since he'd had to bail Steve out of trouble in every back alley in Brooklyn, the swell of protection for the blond had been stronger than any other emotion he'd ever felt. It was that protection, that desire to keep Steve safe, that he suspected was able to break through Hydra's programming. His love for Steve Rogers wasn't just in his brain, but his very soul, something too deep to be wiped.

Having to ignore that swell of protection was made easier by an alien with teeth like needles who was attempting to rip into his flesh. Bucky spun, raising his metal arm and holding the beast at bay while he slipped a blade from his waist and plunged it into the creature's abdomen over and over, his hand coming away soaked in neon green goo. He placed his boot against its chest and kicked hard, watching the body go up and over the railing before tumbling out of sight.

The screech in his ear, high and piercing, made Bucky flinch, twisting to get eyes on the next target. He slipped his toe under the rifle at his feet and kicked it into his hands, but as the creature vaulted toward him, Bucky knew he wasn't going to be fast enough. Planting his feet, he braced for impact.

Tony rocketed into the alien from the side, carrying him up and over Barnes' head, into the center atrium where another creature with wings like a dragonfly was hovering. As they crashed against each other, Tony lifted his arm and shot them with a small ball, reducing them both to viscous yellow slime. Darting in front of Bucky, Tony's armor was sprayed by the gore, the metal beginning to smoke and corrode as acid ate away at the suit. When Tony turned back to Bucky, his faceplate lifted to show his bruised and bloodied face. "We're missing some!"
"Next floor down," Bucky yelled, slipping the strap of his rifle over his shoulder as he took several long steps back. He watched Tony's helm fall back into place as the armor spun, hands lifting when two creatures stepped out of a dark hallway and toward the center atrium. There was the telltale sound of electricity charging before two blasts shot from Tony's repulsors. Growling, Bucky ran full tilt and jumped, flying over the open expanse, prosthetic catching the railing on the floor below.

Bucky vaulted over the railing and tackled one of the stunned creatures around the middle, taking him to the ground and into one of the open and empty cells. He felt all four of the alien's fists beat against his back with force, the air in his lungs rushing out from pain. The strap on his rifle broke and the weapon slid across the floor, out of reach. The blade appeared in Bucky's hand like magic, slicing deeply into the creature's thigh, the mercenary's howls echoing in the small room.

When he was pushed away, Bucky stumbled to his feet, flipping his knife from one hand to the other, trying to anticipate how the next attack would come. When the creature lunged at him, Bucky dropped to his knees, feeling the blade bite into flesh as the alien crashed into him. They fell backward out of the cell and Bucky grunted when his back hit the railing, the heavyweight of the creature pinning him to the ground. He could feel viscera fall from the wound he caused as it hit his face, grey eyes widening, waiting for the burn of acid. He was happily surprised when there was no pain, just an overwhelming stench as the creature opened its mouth and screamed at him.

A blast of blue energy blew the alien off of Bucky, its body flying through the air and taking out the second creature who'd been rising to its feet. Bucky grabbed his rifle and shot several volleys of fire in their direction until their colorful mixture of blood decorated the walls and floor. His weapon swung toward Tony as the engineer’s armor landed, pieces of it beginning to fall and litter the ground.

"Iiiiichemama," Tony gasped, shaking off the smoking remnants of his boots and gauntlets, giving the remains of his armor wide eyes. He turned those wide eyes toward Bucky, surprise on his face. "Good thing that stuff didn't get on yo -"

Bucky saw the ripple of air current as it slammed into Tony's chest, sending him into the railing, which crumpled under the force. Tony's shout was loud, and Bucky threw himself after the other man, metal fingers wrapping around Tony's wrist, other hand grabbing hold of what railing remained and holding tight. Tony dangled below him, brown eyes filled with shock as they looked up at Bucky. Grunting at the effort, Bucky managed to lift his arm, Tony's hands grabbing onto the railing next to him.

Another air ripple hit to the left of Bucky's head, a large chunk of concrete blasting away and falling to the floor below. Grey eyes looked up at the man in an orange jumpsuit, a smirk on his face as his hands lifted again. At the sound of gunfire, both Bucky and Tony ducked their heads, uncertain where it was coming from. The prisoner crumpled to his side on the ground, a pool of blood slowly growing around his body. When a hand was thrust in his direction, Bucky looked up at the agent in black.

"Are you one of Thanos' men? Seems like an awful lot of trouble just to get in here for you," Steve said, tension coiled in his body, ready for a fight. The alien was standing there so serenely, without a care in the world, and Steve had learned long ago that comfort in a hostile situation was never a good sign. Most people wouldn't go down without a fight, and if they weren't fighting, then they'd already gotten what they wanted.
People with nothing left to lose were the most dangerous.

"It wasn't about getting to me," the creature squealed, voice making all the hairs on Steve's arms lift, "it was getting what I now know... out."

"Whatever you think you accomplished, there's no way you're getting out of this cell."

Somehow, the alien took in another big gulp of air, its body gaining another three inches of height and six in width. Steve's gaze flicked around the cell, making sure there were no other ways that the prisoner would be able to get past him. Something wasn't right, and Steve could feel it like a lead weight in the pit of his stomach.

"To die in the service of our Titan is an honor and a privilege. When Death is rained down on your planet, your people will beg for mercy but they will die slow, and painful, and it will be glorious. It is just too bad you will not be there to witness it."

Steve's brows knit together as he saw a flash of color pass like a red and orange wave beneath the alien's skin. The creature began to laugh, the unsettling sound scraping across the inside of Steve's skull, almost painful with its tone. There was only a second between when Steve realized what was going to happen and the time it took him to raise his shield, and when the mercenary exploded, Steve felt the blast send him airborne.

"What was that!?!" Darcy screeched into her comm as she felt a massive explosion from inside the building.

"They've got it handled," Sam's voice insisted in her ear piece.

"Lewis, I've got a lot of people streaming out over here," Clint said, strain in his voice, "could use some help!"

"I'm on my way!"

The explosion on the third floor was deafening. Despite the strong prison cells being practically bomb-proof, the concussive blast from the alien's apparent implosion was enough to propel Steve out of the cell and fling him into the middle of the atrium. Ears ringing, unable to hear anything other than a high-piercing squeal, Steve fumbled to grab something to stop his fall. He shouted when the back of his armor was grabbed, his body jerking with the change in speed and trajectory. When his blue eyes rolled up, he was able to see Bucky's metal hand holding him tightly, his best friend's other hand clutching Tony's, who was being held by three other men in a crude human chain.

Bucky was calling Steve's name, but it didn't appear Steve could hear him. He glanced over his shoulder and nodded at Tony and between the five men, they were able to drag everyone back, collapsing on the concrete of the second floor.

It sounded like he was underwater. Steve shook his head roughly, trying to shake off the ringing.
Slowly, the sounds of screams and shouts finally broke through and Steve looked over at Tony and Bucky, both of them breathing heavy. "Hostages?"

"Cleared third floor," Tony said, climbing to his feet, "guards say this floor is clear, too. Most made it downstairs before the attack."

"What about him?" Steve asked, nodding at a man wearing one of the orange jumpsuits and had a large bump on his forehead.

"He's a janitor. Got knocked out when it all went down and woke up in his underwear."

Bucky looked over at Steve, expression dark. "We've got a prisoner pretending to be a hostage."

As Tony held his hand out to Bucky, Steve pressed on his ear piece. "Barton, Lewis, Romanoff, you've got a escapee heading your way dressed in staff clothing. Lewis? Barton, do you copy?" His blue gaze swung toward Bucky. "Your comms working?"

Shaking his head, Bucky helping Steve climb to his feet, his jaw clenched tightly. "You okay?"

"I'll be fine. We've got to get outside."

"Barton, I’m seeing at least ten people almost at your location,” Darcy said, glancing to her right. She was doing her best not to think about how long it’d been since anyone had heard from the three men who were still inside.

“Friend or foe?"

“Jury’s out,” Darcy replied, hearing Sam streak above her in Natasha’s direction.

“Hey, why don't you put the gun down, yeah?"

Darcy could hear Barton's voice over the comm, but she had a feeling he'd just left the channel open. He wasn't talking to her, that much was clear. "Barton, you okay?"

"No one else has to die, okay? Just put it down. Fine! Fine, look, I'm putting it down, alright? Just like you want. Now let them go."

When Darcy rounded the corner of the building, she could see someone in a guard uniform running toward Clint, another man in an orange jumpsuit holding a gun pointed at the archer. Clint's bow was on the ground in front of him, his hands empty and open to show he was unarmed. Darcy blinked at the scene, trying to see if anyone else was left inside near the exit. Confident they weren't expecting anyone else, but not wanting to disrupt what Clint was very carefully dealing with, she jogged to a stop behind a barrier. She watched Clint's purple strobe in waves, calm and collected, as if he'd done this a million times before.

The man in front of him, wearing orange and pointing a gun at Clint, was a red so dark it was almost black. She expected the agent-turned-hostage to be lit up in fear, but he wasn't. In fact, he was even darker than Orange Jumpsuit. It was like time slowed to a stop as everything happened at once.

Clint took a step closer to Orange Jumpsuit, voice calm as he tried to talk the man down.
The agent/hostage ran ten feet past Clint before he reached into his waistband and pulled out a gun, pointing it at the back of Clint's head.

Darcy screamed Clint's name as her hands lifted, throwing the man about to shoot Clint, as well as the man in the orange jumpsuit, into the air.

Both guns fired and Darcy heard them hit harmlessly in the dirt. Clint's shout of surprise when the two men had been tossed into the air was loud, and he turned to look at Darcy with wide eyes. Heart still pounding - she didn’t think she'd ever felt that much fear, watching as someone took aim at Clint - Darcy smashed her hands together, making both shooters slam into each other. When they both continued to move, she did it again, harder, satisfied when they both went limp.

"Did you just kill them?" Clint asked incredulously, bow back in hand as he ran toward her.

"No," she said, hazel eyes darting to look at him before her attention went back above their heads, "they're just knocked out."

"What happened?"

"That guy was gonna shoot you!"

"I know!"

"No, not this guy," she said, making the man in orange shake wildly in the air, "but that guy!" When Clint looked over at her, eyes widening slightly, she gave him a hard nod. "I know, right! What a fucking douche!"

"Anyone heard from Cap?"

When Sam's voice broke over their comms, Darcy's immediate reaction was to turn her attention toward the building. Doing so, however, made the bodies in the air drop several feet before she caught them. "I can't check," she said, strain in her voice, desperately wanting to scan the building and make sure everyone inside was still shining.

"Lewis can't verify. We may need to push in," Clint said into his earpiece, eyes on Darcy as sweat began to bead on her brow.

"Can someone please take these assholes from me?!" Darcy screamed, bobbing the bodies in the air as she turned toward the forces gathered behind the combat line. She followed the waving arms of guards toward containment pods like they'd used on the other side of the building, letting the bastards drop unceremoniously into the interior before they were locked inside. Letting out a deep sigh, Darcy turned and ran back toward Clint, eyes focusing on the building. Her heart sped when she didn't see the colors she wanted inside. "They're not inside. Where -"

"They're over here," Natasha's voice rasped.

Darcy's head spun away from the building and the mountain it was built into, and spotted the bright gold and dark crimson several hundred feet in the opposite direction. Her shoulders sagged in relief, the breath she'd been holding huffing out. She felt Clint's hand clap her on the back and she looked up at him with tired eyes. "I don't see anyone else inside moving more than a few feet, so I assume they're in cells."

"Cap wouldn't have left anyone in there without making sure they were secure first." When Darcy just nodded at him, Clint reached out and ruffled the hair on the top of her head before letting out a yelp. He pulled his hand back and looked at it, seeing blood begin to well from a cut on his palm.
"What the hell?"

Grinning, Darcy straightened, shaking her head. "This is why you don't touch women's hair. You never know what they're hiding in it. Could be full of secrets."

"Or super sharp needles," Bucky offered, rounding the barrier Darcy and Clint were standing behind. When Darcy's tired face broke into a giant smile, he couldn't help the turning of his own lips.

"Why did it cut me, but was perfectly fine bumping around in your hair when you ran? What kind of sorcery do you hold, Lewis?"

"A very dark, very sensual black magic, obviously." When Clint rolled his eyes and started toward the rendezvous point, Darcy wanted nothing more than to take a running leap and attach herself to the front of Bucky's body. She didn't, though, knowing joking about sex on a mission was fine, but that ripping every stitch of clothing from her lover's body and having her way with him was a whole different thing altogether. "I take it whatever stupid things our boyfriend did turned out okay?"

Bucky snorted as he closed the distance between them. He didn't reach out and touch her, not with this many eyes around, but his skin ached to press against hers. His grey eyes poured over her body. He didn't see any marks on her, but he could see the exhaustion in her face. Using her powers with Stark in a test scenario was nothing like being in combat. As far as first missions went, this was probably one of the best for her to experience. Yes, he'd been worried about her and Steve the whole time, but knowing that she'd held her own unclenched the ball of fear he'd been carrying in his stomach. "Yeah. You know how he is."

When Bucky's hand reached up to cup her cheek, Darcy's eyes closed happily, turning her face into his palm and pressing her lips to his skin briefly. "Yeah, I do know that."

Having given himself something to tide them over, Bucky's hand dropped, her hazel gaze blinking up at the loss of contact. "We're handing everything back to the guards and heading home. We'll have a debrief when we get back."

"Spiffy," Darcy said with a shrug, falling into step at his side. "You don't look too worse for wear. Piece of cake in there, or something?"

Her turn of phrase make his lips curl, and Bucky's eyes flicked to her, filled with warmth. "Of course. Nothing we couldn't handle. Why? Wish you were inside or something?"

"Fuck no," Darcy said with feeling, earning a bark of laughter from the man at her side, brightness filling her at the sound. "Directing traffic, remember? That's my comfort zone."

"From what Wilson says, you did a little bit more than that." Darcy seemed content to downplay her role and Bucky let her brush her impact aside. It would all come out in the debrief, anyway, so he didn't feel the need to poke it further.

As they walked up to join the rest of the group, the smile on Darcy's face grew when her eyes landed on Steve. There was soot covering parts of tac suit, but aside from some bruises and small cuts on his cheeks, he appeared perfectly healthy. Since she'd seen him beaten to hell and in a coma, her judgment for "Injured Steve Rogers" was pretty skewed; she'd take a few cuts and scrapes over those memories any day. He took a moment to smile in her direction before turning back to the agent in charge, the woman nodding as he spoke.

"So," Darcy said with a wide sweep of her arms to the group gathered, "who's hungry? I could totally go for some pizza right now."
"Isn't that usually your line, Stark?" Natasha said, giving Tony a sideways glance.

"I've learned to share." The scoff and laughter Tony's words prompted were brushed off with a wave of his hand.

"Where's your armor?" Darcy asked, eyebrows knitting together as she actually looked at Tony, noticing the dust and small tears in his under suit. When Tony's thumb jutted over his shoulder, Darcy bent around him to see bits and pieces of the gold and crimson armor in a large, black bin. "Few screws loose, huh?"

"Acidic alien blood."

"Fuck, really!?"

Steve finished talking with the head of security, rejoining the group who seemed content to let Darcy and Tony inspect his disassembled suit out of hearing range. "Report?"

"Three non-terrestrials, no civilian casualties," Natasha said, green eyes sharp as they looked over at Steve.

"Barton?"

"Seven aliens and one prisoner. Well, two prisoners. We had one that was dressed like a agent and 'being held hostage'" Clint said, fingers making air quotes, "but Darcy took care of them both."

"Wilson?"

"She did good. Dropped you guys off and returned to back her up if she needed me. She didn't. Took out two herself, helped several to safety, then joined Clint when her exit collapsed. Didn't take my eyes off her until Nat needed me," Sam said, watching Bucky's eyes swing toward him. "She did good, Cap."

Sam's words seemed to settle something in Steve and he shared a meaningful look with Bucky before Darcy and Tony made their way back to join the group. "Looks like we got out of this with no casualties."

"Woot! Way to go team!" Almost everyone looked over at Darcy and her shout of encouragement, amusement on their faces as she let her arms, which had been raised in celebration, drop to her sides.

"I lost the teleporter, though," Steve said, self-blame clear in his tone. "They got some kind of information out. The creature in the main cell said he was still working for Thanos."

"Thanos. The dead guy. The one this shrimp killed?" Tony said, a thumb jutting toward Darcy at his side.

"Yeah," Darcy asked, "the very dead purple kool-aid man?"

"It talked about dying in the service of Thanos. He might be dead, but his people are still fighting under Thanos' flag."

"Well, if this isn't the only place we stashed his people, it might be a good idea to put extra guards on the rest of these jackasses. When everyone turned to look at her, various states of amusement and pride in their gazes, Darcy felt her cheeks heat. "Or not. I mean, what do I know, right? This was my first mission."
"You heard the princess. More guards."

"Stark, unless you want to find yourself super-glued into your suit next time, I suggest you call me Lewis in the field."

Tony looked at her for a long second before turning back toward the jet. "You heard Princess Lewis. Let's get some pizza."

"No civilian casualties, but there's about to be one casual, severely dead engineer in a few seconds," Darcy growled, pushing the sleeves of her suit up her forearms and stalking after Tony.

Bucky watched the rest of the group follow, until it was just him and Steve left in the fading light. "You had Wilson shadow her?"

Steve shook his head. "She's on the team in a probationary status. Hill wanted to make sure there were eyes on her when they could be. Sam would have left if he was needed elsewhere, like he did when he left to help Nat. We'll do the same if or when Parker joins the team. I did the same thing with Wanda when she was here."

If Bucky's eyes cooled slightly at the mention of Wanda's name, he didn't feel bad about it. "Sounds like you're trying to convince me she wasn't being babysat."

"She wasn't." When Bucky raised a dark eyebrow at him, Steve frowned. "Is that what it sounds like?"

"No, I get why you did it. I just don't know if it'll sound the same to her."

Sighing, Steve put both hands on his hips and looked down at the ground. "Would it be cowardly to make Hill tell her it was her decision, even if it was?"

"Yes."

"Would you still have her tell Darcy?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," Bucky answered, tasting one of Darcy's famous exclamations as it fell from his tongue.

"Barnes! Rogers! Get your asses in gear! Hungry mutineers are already plotting your overthrowing!"

Both men shook their heads in Darcy's direction before looking over at each other. "Home?"

"Home."
Rise Again and Shine

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Bucky have a lazy morning in. Steve and Natasha ask questions. Later, after a mission, Steve and Darcy have a conversation. Finally, Darcy and Jane spend some quality best friend time.

Chapter Notes

There be plot in this here chapter, ladies and gents! I promise it's there, you just gotta look between the fluff and smut. Not an easy feat, but none the less. *grin*

A big big big 'thank you' to all of the beautiful people who have left comments or given kudos! Thanks are also due to the lurkers who feel too shy to say something! I see you lovely people out there and I'm happy you're spending your time here with us!!

And to the people who've followed me to tumblr and reblogged? THANK YOU! I post so many random things there so it's a little eclectic, but I've got some quality Stucky/WinterShieldShock/General Marvel stuff on the regular. Oh! And I've started giving sneak peaks on Sundays of the new chapter going up Wednesday! Come join me in the fandom funland!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Mmmmmm, that smells good."

Bucky glanced over his shoulder at Darcy's sleepy rasp, smirking as she padded barefoot across the floor toward him. She was wearing an incredibly faded shirt with the word D.A.R.E. across the front, her legs bare, curls in a wild mess on the top of her head. She was a vision like this, comfortable and calm and unworried, and Bucky looked his fill as she neared. "No training this morning?"

"Uh-huh," Darcy said with a shake of her head, slipping onto a stool at the island. She bent over,
Pressing her cheek to the cool granite and blinking in his direction. The flannel pants Bucky wore hung low on his hips, baring all the muscles that slid under his skin as he moved. The dimples he had on his lower back, the ones right above his ass, were a particular favorite of hers and she knew exactly how they felt under her tongue. "Nate's getting tubes put in his ears today and Clint wanted to be there for it. Steve already leave?"

"Meeting with Nat then doing some recon with Wilson."

"You know you can call him Sam, right? You've known him for years now."

Turning back to the stove, Bucky focused on the eggs he was making. "Not everyone has to be friends with everyone else," he said with a sigh.

"You guys need to get over whatever it is you have. You're stronger, he's prettier, just bury the hatchet already." When Bucky flipped a towel over his shoulder and glared at her, Darcy snorted, sitting upright. "Fine. You're both pretty."

Bucky rolled his eyes, flipping off the burner before slipping the omelet onto his plate. "You hungry? I could make something for you, too."

Darcy gestured dismissively in his direction. "No, I'm fine. Not hungry yet. I've got a meeting with Tony and Pete in the city later and I was promised dinner."

Bucky slid his plate and glass of milk across the island before crossing to the sink to rinse the pan. "You know when you'll be back?"

"Not really. Hopefully not late. I'm trying to look at it like a field trip and not like me being there just to take notes." When Bucky sat beside her, Darcy stretched her arm across the island, half-laying on her side, watching as he dug into his breakfast. "What about you? Training?"

Bucky shook his head, talking around his mouthful of eggs, "not 'til six. Night drills."

"Well, well, well, Mr. Barnes. Whatever will we do with ourselves since we have an entire morning with no plans?" The expression that crossed Bucky's face was full of a different kind of hunger and Darcy felt the thrill of it travel up her spine, grinning at him, unable to keep the excitement off her face.

She knew Bucky wasn't used to downtime. The soldier was more comfortable doing things with his hands, focusing on an objective, having something to keep him busy. It was a trait he shared with Steve, that unending drive to be improving - whether that manifested in improving themselves or the situation of others. It was one of the reasons he was training the agents; Bucky knew what it was like to be helpless and if he could help anyone from feeling the same, he would.

Darcy's eyes followed him as Bucky moved around the kitchen, putting things away. In the months she'd lived with him and Steve, she'd probably only opened the cabinets that held the pots and pans a handful of times. And one of those had been so Bucky could show her where he'd hidden a Beretta 84FS. 'Just in case' he'd said. When she'd asked 'in case of what?', he hadn't answered, but she knew what he meant.

In case someone attacks. In case we're breached. In case you have to protect yourself and we're not there.

She twisted on the stool so she could face him, her knees spreading so he could fit his hips into her space, lifting her arms and running her fingers through his hair, nails digging into his scalp. His face smoothed at the touch and she grinned to herself, doing it again, watching his body twitch. "What
Bucky's grey eyes blinked open, a smirk slanting his lips as his gaze filled with a dark knowledge. "I'd say I'm way ahead of you, doll." His hands on her hips tugged her closer and she let out a soft gasp when he was pressed warm against her, the only thing separating their bodies two thin layers of fabric.

It had been some time since he and Darcy had spent time just the two of them, and while he wouldn't give up the time he was with Darcy and Steve for anything, it was nice to know he could give his whole attention to the woman who carried part of his soul. Their connection was unlike everything he'd ever felt and Bucky never got tired of looking into her beautiful hazel eyes, or kissing her pouting lower lip, or sliding his hands down her curves.


Darcy hooked her leg around Bucky's waist, arms wrapping around his shoulders, lips seeking his. She shouted when he pulled her off the stool, an arm under her ass as he carried her toward the bedroom. "I can walk, you know," she groused, letting out a 'meep' as he adjusted her in his arms.

"Not after what I plan to do to you," Bucky said, the sound of her laughter making him grin, foot kicking the bedroom door shut behind them.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Steve's gaze flicked up from the report he'd been pretending to read, biting down the anger that boiled just below the surface of his skin, like lava, waiting to erupt. "Yes, Agent Pulse, please come in." He watched the man's eyes glance around, uncertainty coloring his expression before he took a step into the small interrogation room. Steve had expected Pulse to be anxious walking in.

It wasn't every day Captain America called you into his office, let alone a room in the prison wing.

Pulse took a careful seat at the metal table, caution in the way he moved. His hands came up to brush over the metal table, his lips quirking up nervously as he peered at Steve. "New office?"

"They're doing some work in mine," Steve said, the lie rolling easily off his tongue, "something about mice."

"No, not mice," Natasha said, slipping into the room before the door had a chance to close completely. When Pulse turned in his seat and glanced over his shoulder at her, Natasha's expression remained cool and composed, inwardly enjoying the way his eyes widened slightly. "A rat."

Pulse turned away from Natasha and looked back to Steve, his eyebrows raising. His voice held the slightest waver, another sign of his anxiety as it began to ramp up. "What's going on?"

"You took the words out of my mouth," Steve said, tone carefully even despite the swirl of emotions in his stomach. He flipped open the folder in front of him, eyes flicking back and forth across the page. "Robert Pulse. Graduated top of your class. NYPD for six years. Was on the ground during the Battle of New York. I've read the character commendations and letters of support when you applied to become an agent for S.H.I.E.L.D. You even passed your background check."
"A very thorough background check," Natasha stressed, arms crossed over her chest as she leaned against the wall. Pulse turned to look at her again, eyes flicking to the weapons that were visible on her person before turning back to Steve.

"Spent the last five years rising through the ranks and was recently given level seven clearance and a promotion," Steve said, drawing the man's attention back toward him. Steve shut the folder and looked up at Pulse, his eyes cold. "All that correct?"

"Yes, sir," Pulse said, tongue darting out to wet his lips, eyebrows knitting together in confusion. "I don't... why am I here?"

"We know it was you," Natasha said, pushing off the wall. When Steve gave her a nod, she slipped a knife from her thigh holster. Pulse made to turn toward her but froze when he felt the blade press against the side of his neck. Natasha stayed there for a long second before reaching down and unclipping his weapon. She pulled it from its holster, tucking it into her waistband. She circled the table and came to stand behind Steve, body tight, expression clear that she was waiting for him to make any move she deemed questionable.

Pulse cleared his throat, reaching up to rub his neck. "Sir, I still don't -"

"You've been passing information to the enemy," Natasha rasped, her words flat of affect, certainty and danger in her gaze.

"What?" For his credit, the disbelief in Pulse's tone sounded genuine as he shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "What... are you talking about?"

"People died in Wakanda. Good people. Civilians. Children." Steve's jaw clenched as he stared at the surprised man. Steve remembered the pain he'd felt, demanding to be shown the photos of the destruction in Wakanda, seeing the rubble and ruin Thanos' men had wrought. More than that, he remembered Bucky's face when he'd explained that Dr. Chaas had been among the casualties. He knew how much the man had meant to his best friend, and the pain in Bucky's voice had broken his heart and gifted him with a steel resolve to find the people who'd caused that pain and hunt them down.

That one of the men under his command had been the person... Steve's eyes were cool as they regarded the traitor across the table.

"I couldn't. Captain Rogers, I was here when that happened. I wasn't -"

"We know," Natasha said, almost able to taste the anger in the air around Steve. "You weren't on the ground in Wakanda. You were here, like you said. On base, letting them know when Stark's tech was down so they could coordinate their attacks."

"That's -"

"We had a list of suspects, agents who would have had the clearance and ability to know what was going on in Wakanda, and who knew we were holding high-ranking prisoners in one of S.H.I.E.L.D's old bases. Hill fed each of you a different location. You were told about the Vault."

Natasha gave the agent a slight nod of her head. "Care to guess which location was attacked yesterday?"

Steve watched Pulse blink at Natasha before his brown gaze flicked back toward him. "We had minimal staff on site, just in case. Luckily there were no casualties."
"For our side, at least," Natasha said, watching as a bit of the color in the agent's face began to fade.

Pulse shifted in his seat, hands rubbing sweaty palms over his knees. His tongue darted out to lick his lips again, the movement only further confirming what they already knew. "Anyone who worked there could have -"

The sound of Steve's chair scraping across the floor was loud in the small room and Pulse's eyes widened as the blond rose to his feet, both hands pressing against the table as he leaned toward the other man, knowing his size was intimidating and using that intimidation to its fullest. "Why? What possible reason could you have to hurt those people?"

"I didn't -"

"Are you one of Thanos' men? Hydra?"

Pulse sat there, looking back and forth between Steve and Natasha, his heartbeat racing under the skin of his neck. He made several noises of offense, but none of them made Steve or Natasha flinch in the slightest. His eyes were wide, his chest rising and falling with labored, anxious pants.

Finally, Pulse sat back in his chair, his breath leaving him in a rush. He looked down at his feet for a second, almost like he was collecting himself. He rolled his shoulders, and when his eyes swung back to look at Steve and Natasha, whatever personality had been in them before was erased completely. As if at a flick of a switch, an entirely different person was sitting in front of them.

Pulse cocked his head to the side, the expression on his face smoothing into something uncaring, something cold. "Working with them was a means to an end," Pulse said, voice even. "Did I believe in their goal of global domination? No. Full control of anything is a fool’s folly. But with everything that’s happened? I've already gotten what I wanted."

Steve stayed standing, feeling Natasha take a step closer to him at his back. "And what was that? Money? Power?"

Pulse laughed, the first truthful sound he'd made since entering the room. "Money. Power. Rank. Status. It's all the same, Captain Rogers. Useless."

"What did you get out of the attack on Wakanda?" Natasha asked, hands at her sides, staying on the balls of her feet, prepared. She'd seen someone this cold before, like a brush of a memory at the back of her mind, and it made the hairs on her arms lift.

Pulse’s eyes rolled up to pin Natasha, blinking slowly at her. "Bedlam. Disorder. Turmoil. Pain and carnage. The only honest things in this world."

"You're telling me you helped kill almost a hundred people because you're some kind of sociopath?"

"Tsk. Captain Rogers," Pulse said, chin dropping toward his chest in feign disappointment. "I figured you'd be up to date on your terminology. It's now called 'antisocial personality disorder'. Not that I agree with that diagnosis for myself, but you lead a section of the population that is rife with mental health issues. I expected more from you."

Steve's spine straightened, tension bleeding into his stance. "You've spent years integrating yourself into this program in order to get the clearance you have. What could your group hope to achieve by throwing in with Thanos' men?"

"I am a part of no group," Pulse said, placing both of his hands on his knees, giving them both a serene smile. "Attachments are only a distraction from the natural truth."
"And what truth is that?"

"Hydra. Aliens. The Avengers. You're all the same. Clamoring for power and the moral high ground. There is no high ground. No laws. No justice. No true power that someone can possess. There is only chaos and the enjoyment of anarchy. Just pain and pleasure and nothing in between."

Natasha shook her head, disbelief in her voice. "An anarchist. An anarchist that became a police officer and an agent in the largest counter-terrorism force on the planet, for what? Just to watch the world burn?"

Pulse's smile grew more crooked the longer he looked at Natasha. "The cleansing fire is enough of a reason. You should know better than most, Romanova, that sometimes burning something to the ground is the only way to set the scales right."

Steve felt Natasha go still at his side, as solid and motionless as marble. "You want to cause pain."

"It's something you won't be able to understand, Captain. Your whole life has been about what you think is right or wrong. You seek answers in a world where there are none. There is no meaning. No peace. It's just an illusion you've been brainwashed into believing to keep your base human desires in check. You feel your fight is righteous, that you are the only thing standing between the darkness and humanity, but humanity is darkness. You fight for a world that will never accept the bonds of right and wrong. You're a pawn in a system that is destined to fail."

The utterly comfortable way that Pulse was speaking didn't sit right with Steve. Everything in his head was screaming danger, but the man didn't appear to be threatening in the slightest; if anything, Pulse appeared relieved that he didn't have to hide his true intentions any longer. "You're not going to be able to hurt anyone else."

Pulse leaned forward onto the table, unconcerned when both Steve and Natasha took a step closer to him. "That's where you're wrong. I'm an educated man. I knew the second I stepped through that door that it was possible I wouldn't be leaving this room alive. I've made my peace with it. However, I don't have to be alive to hurt anyone. Take you, for instance."

Steve's gaze did not waver, the intensity in his eyes at Pulse's words only sharpening.

"When you leave this room," Pulse continued, "you're going to suspect everyone you meet, everyone you work with, everyone you love. I spent years earning the trust I have. It was easy to stay hidden, to keep my head down, to make people believe I was their friend or lover. How many people do you count as a friend, Rogers? How many people do you love? How many do you trust implicitly? You don't think there are more out there like me?"

When Steve's expression darkened, Pulse smiled and snapped his fingers, the sound loud in the room. "There. That look right there. That fear and uncertainty? That doubt? That's the greatest gift you could have ever given me, sir. I love that it's going to be the last... thing... I ever..."

"Hey!" Steve shouted when Pulse began to shake, his body jerking and falling from the chair. Steve circled the table and dropped to his knees, feeling Natasha poised above him, gun naked in her hand. He'd seen Hydra agents with cyanide caplets before but this was something different. Pulse's eyes stayed open, malevolence in his dark eyes as they glared up at Steve. Through the clacking of his teeth, he managed three words.

"Call... Me... Chaos..."

Pulse went limp in Steve's arms, life fading from his face, blood seeping from the corner of his
mouth. When his fingers pressed against Pulse’s neck, not feeling a beat, Steve looked up at Natasha, his expression stormy, jaw clenched as he tried to process the information they’d been given.

"How?"

Natasha knelt next to the body, hands carefully checking his pockets and patting down his legs. She removed one of his shoes and then the other, letting out breath when she spotted a small bit of blood on the sock over his toe. "Poison dart. I've seen something like this before. Something about what he said… it was familiar. I'll reach out to my contacts, see what I can shake free."

Steve climbed to his feet, looking down at the man who’d had the upper hand for the entire conversation, even controlling when and how he'd die. "We need to run new background checks on everyone, Nat. Everyone."

"We wouldn't have caught this, Steve." Natasha glared at the body, as if the dangerous look itself would give them the answers Steve wanted. “This took planning, years of deep undercover, building an entirely separate life... It's not as easy as it seems."

He knew better than to argue with Natasha about being undercover and what it took to live that life. "We have to do something. If there are others like him out there..."

Natasha reached out and squeezed Steve’s arm, trying to be comforting, not certain she’d succeed. "What you're feeling right now is exactly what he wanted."

Blue eyes swung to pin Natasha, uncertainty in Steve's gaze. "Pretty effective last words."

"I've heard better." At Steve's look, one of Natasha's shoulders lifted and dropped. "We tighten up, run more checks, look for signs of any other... agents of chaos, but it doesn't change our objective. We find what's left of Thanos’ men and boot them off our planet." Both of them went still as a call came over the speakers, directing all active agents to report to the hanger. "Speaking of objectives..."

PageBreak

Steve grunted when his back hit the tiled wall, just managing to keep his head from smacking against it painfully. He caught Darcy when she launched herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist, lips crashing against his. The steam from the shower was already filling the room, but somehow she was even hotter against his skin. He brought his hands to her ass, hitching her higher on his body, turning and switching their positions.

Gasping into Steve's mouth when he ground his hips into hers, Darcy's fingernails scratched down his back, the fabric of his suit bunching. The adrenaline from their last mission was still running through her veins, and the second they'd crossed the threshold to their rooms she had thrown herself at him. This was one of the first times she'd seen him in action and even though he'd been in no real danger - a bogus tip about some suspected alien tech that turned out to be a group of drug dealers who hadn't wanted to come quietly - and Steve'd looked like poetry in motion. Her fear for his safety had still been there, heavy and real in her chest, but Darcy couldn't help marvelling at the confidence he fought with. Steve knew what his body could do, how hard he could push himself and his abilities, how to take his opponent down in the quickest and most efficient way possible. He'd been athletic, and strong, and if they hadn't been on a plane (and thus dealing with her intense motion sickness), she'd have attacked him on the ride home. Luckily by the time they'd made it back to their rooms her stomach had settled and she could do what she wanted to the man, without
offending the rest of the team's delicate sensibilities.

When Darcy began pulling at his suit, Steve took a step backward, lowering her to her feet. He shrugged out of the top portion of his suit, her small hands helping peel it down his arms and chest. Steve's eyes fluttered closed when she leaned forward and ran her tongue up the side of his neck, the sound of his sigh swallowed by the slap of the water hitting the tile. His fingers traced up her skin and sifted through the hair at the nape of her neck, gripping and pulling her mouth from his body, capturing her lips with his and feeding at them hungrily.

Darcy's fingers trailed down the front of Steve's body, nails digging into each hill and valley of his abs, feeling them bunch under her touch, dipping past the fabric that hung loosely around his waist. Pushing further, her hand wrapped around his length, feeling the shudder as it ran down his spine, looking up to see his eyes screwed closed, his lips parted. Darcy loved knowing she could affect Steve this much, that she could shatter that resolve he gripped so tightly, that she could pull him apart with just her hands, teeth, lips and body. She would never get used to the thrill it gave her to see him so undone. She lowered to her knees, uncaring that the water was creeping closer to her as she knelt.

Steve groaned when he felt Darcy's lips wrap around his cock, impossibly warm and so, so soft. He tangled one of his hands in her hair, the other pressing against the wall and holding him upright. Darcy's fingers hooked into the waistband and pulled his suit down, letting it pool at his feet as the skin she wanted was bared. Her hand gripped the base, strong and sure, as the flat of her tongue lapped at him, curling at the end, hazel eyes opening to look up the line of his body. Steve's hand in her hair tightened, pulling snugly, letting her know he loved every second of what she was doing.

Even after all this time at his side, Darcy still couldn't believe that this was real. As she moved her lips up and down, over and over, she felt each moan that slipped from his lips, heart speeding with every whispered sound. She knew him; Darcy knew what Steve liked, what made his eyes cross, what made his knees weak and his hands shake. She used that knowledge to work him over, squeezing her hand the way he liked, other hand wrapping around his body so she could dig her nails into his ass, hard enough that she knew there'd be the imprint of her nails in his skin, little half-moon marks that he'd wear with pride until they faded and were replaced anew.

The hand in her hair tightened again and Steve held her head still, taking control of the movement, slowly pumping himself in and out of her mouth. There was something about this - Darcy trusting that he wouldn't push farther than she'd want, but still letting him set the pace - that filled him with a heated satisfaction. As her cheeks hollowed, tongue sliding over him, Steve could feel the tension in the pit of his stomach, the fire as it traveled through his blood. The look on Darcy's face as she took his cock was almost enough to make him fall, but Steve didn't want this to end here.

As Steve pulled himself from between her lips, Darcy's hazel eyes blinked open, looking up at him through her lashes, body immediately reacting to the heat and abandoned that colored his expression. When he pulled on her arms she went willingly, gasping at the strength in his hands as he pulled her to her feet and spun her around, her palms spreading against the tile when he pushed on her back, bending her over in front of him. Steve's fingers pulled on the zipper of her suit, inch by inch of her back being bared so slowly it was almost torture. Hungry noises fell from her lips, knowing where this was headed and wanting it to happen quicker.

The small desperate sounds that fell from Darcy only made him harder. Steve peeled her suit down, licking a line up her spine, biting softly into the skin of her shoulder and earning a hiss of pleasure. It took nothing to push the fabric the rest of the way from her body, kicking both of their suits aside with his feet. He bent at the waist, molding his body to the back of hers, hands reaching so he could palm her breasts, heavy and full as he rolled her nipples between his fingers. "God, I want you all the time. The things you do to me, sweetheart, you have no idea."
The sound of his voice in her ear was *everything*, and Darcy bit her lip to keep from crying out. She had a very good idea what she did to him, because he did the exact same thing to her, every second of every day. Darcy cried out when one of his hands left her breast and pressed against her sex, fingers seeking her heat and slicking through her folds.

Feeling how wet she was, just from what she'd been doing to him and the little he'd done to her, made a self-satisfied chuckle rumble through his chest. "This what you want? Want to feel me slide into you? Give it to you so good you're seeing stars?"

Even as his words forced a shudder of desire up and down her body, Darcy glanced up at him over her shoulder, her eyes drowning with heat and challenge. "Put up or shut up, Rogers."

The wolfish grin Steve gave her was *just this side* of predatory and she gasped at the first touch of his cock at her opening, the sound changing to a moan as he pushed forward. He entered her slowly, taking his time, deliberately drawing it out as long as he could. It was a battle of wills, testing who would make the first move of impatience, who would be the first to decide that playing wasn't enough.

Neither had to accept defeat as it appeared they both broke at the same time, Steve snapping his hips forward into her as Darcy pushed against the tile and drove herself back to meet him. When he was filling her, their bodies connected in the most intimate way, they both froze, drinking in the heady feeling, satisfaction at *finally* being as close as they'd both wanted. When he began moving again it was without any of his prior hesitation. Steve's hands gripped her hips tightly as he slammed his body into hers over and over, the sound of skin hitting skin washed away in the sound of the water slapping the tile.

He'd stolen the air from Darcy's lungs, her eyes screwed shut, overwhelmed by the sensation as he met her body, the speed and strength of it too much to even moan at. She took a deep gulp of air inward, feeling like she was floating. The way Steve was moving made it clear that she wasn't the only one who'd felt the adrenaline coursing through their body and needed to find a satisfying outlet for the energy. There was a low keening sound in the room and Darcy realized it was her, unable to properly vocalize how *amazing* it felt. It was hard, rough, and perfect. Her fingers wanted to dig into something but all she felt was the tile beneath her palms, and when Steve thrust forward at a different angle all she could do was scream as the first wave of her orgasm crashed inside of her.

Steve knew when Darcy fell, feeling her legs shake as her shout echoed in the room. He could feel the sweat bead on his brow, heat from his actions as well as the steam filling the shower, but Steve didn't slow. He could feel his own release on the back of his tongue and redoubled his efforts, hissing when Darcy reached one hand back to claw at his side, nails finding purchase in his skin. The mix of pleasure and pain was all it took until he was spilling himself into her, eyes screwing shut, moaning loudly as he came.

Darcy panted, the warm air filling her lungs as she took in oxygen, face slack, still riding high. She was glad Steve was supporting her weight because she wasn't sure if she'd be able to stand on her own yet. She hummed happily when he bent his body over hers, pressing his lips to her shoulder. "Mmmm. Yes. yes to all of everything you just did. Anyone ever tell you you're very good at that? Because you are."

"Only been with two people, but they might have said something," Steve said with a grin, slipping from her body but being careful to hold her until she was steady.

"'s a shame they don't write about *that* in the history books." Darcy stood on her own legs experimentally, happy when her knees didn't immediately buckle. Darcy turned, wrapping arms around his waist and pressing her chin to his chest as she blinked up at him tiredly. "I wonder if we'd
be able to test the impact force of your hips."

Steve's eyes widened, face coloring with worry when she looked up at him. "I didn't hurt -"

"No, Steve," Darcy said with a soft roll of her eyes, a grin on her lips as she pushed him backward into the shower, "you didn't hurt me. I mean, don't get me wrong, some positions are a bit dicey, but that's because of size, not strength. Peter, Tony, and I have been testing how hard I can throw people, and I just wondered if I can throw people harder than you can thrust your hips."

Laughing, Steve tipped his head back under the spray, running his hands over his hair. "And you think you'd be able to pose this hypothetical question and they'd go along with it?"

"I wouldn't tell them. Ew. No. I'd just steal a few sensors and do the experiments here at home."
Darcy grinned when he turned them, water the perfect temperature as it ran down her body. When Steve's finger bumped her chin, she leaned back into the water, face smoothing as she relaxed. She heard the click of a bottle opening, smelling her shampoo when Steve filled his hands with it. "Since you love washing hair, have you ever considered becoming a beautician? Another thing you're very good at."

Steve smiled as he ran his hands through her hair, working up a good lather, scraping along her scalp with his fingernails. His hands were careful as they sifted through the strands. The serene look on her face calmed him, satisfied knowing that she appreciated what he was doing. When she hummed happily under her breath, he leaned forward to press his lips to hers before pulling back again.

"There were times growing up when I was too weak to wash my hair myself, so Ma would do it for me. She was so careful, never getting soap in my eyes, even when I was shivering uncontrollably or coughing. It was some of the only peace I got in those days. When she passed, I tried to do it myself but there were still times when Bucky had to help. I guess... I just like doing it for the people I love."

When Steve tipped her head back under the spray, Darcy was glad that the water would hide any moisture leaking from the corners of her eyes, letting them run down the drain with the rest of her shampoo. These were memories she knew of, but having Steve describe them was something else entirely. She knew it was silly to feel like she was imposing on him, thinking back to the time he and Bucky had spent growing up, but every once in a while she felt the pang of guilt, regardless.

Steve's hands slipped from her hair and she felt him take a step backward. Darcy's eyes blinked open, lips curling when she saw him attempt to pull her hair from between his fingers. She laughed as she watched him struggle. "Remember that conversation we had a few months ago? About waiting to make any decisions until you knew how much my hair clogged the drain? How're you feeling about that now? With my hair literally tangled in your fingers?"

Hands freezing, Steve glanced up at Darcy, the amusement bleeding from his gaze, replaced with seriousness. "I remember that talk, sweetheart."

He did. He'd carried that conversation in his mind, her answers held fast in his chest, the possibilities becoming more and more real the longer they were together. Time seemed irrelevant, especially when it came to his feelings for Darcy, for Bucky, and for the future he wanted to build with them. Steve didn't care that he'd only known her a year, and been with her even less, all he knew was that he didn't want to be anywhere but at her and Bucky's side. "What if I told you nothing's changed for me?"

The weight in Steve's gaze made Darcy hold her breath in her lungs as she pushed past the heavy beat of her heart. She watched him come closer, movements careful and specific as he entered her space, blue eyes beautiful and full. Their conversation had taken a serious turn and she swallowed as
she felt the heft of importance in the air. "I'd say you're a bit of a masochist," she answered, tongue swiping along her lower lip.

"If I said I can't get it out of my head?"

She could feel the whoosh of blood in her ears as she peered up at him, unable to look away, not wanting to even if she could. "I'd call you a sap."

"And if I said I think you've been thinking about it, too?"

Darcy swallowed hard, feeling her heart in her throat. "I'd say you're not wrong."

She saw the confirmation and recognition light in Steve's eyes, watching his lips part as his breath slipped past them. Darcy didn't see any reason to lie to him, not when he was completely right. She had been thinking about what came next. Everything had been so good lately that it was hard not to look forward, seeing what was on the horizon. Her training and probation were going smoothly, she felt in control of her powers, and living with Steve and Bucky was everything she'd hoped for and more. She was happy, really fucking happy, and Darcy wasn't ashamed to say that she'd let her mind wander from time to time and imagine what could be. Visiting with Laura and seeing the life Clint and Natasha had built with her made it easier to see how it was actually possible.

A home.
Marriage.
Children.

It was real, or it could be, depending on what they all wanted, and the truth of it was there in Steve's eyes as he looked at her, steam framing his beautiful face. Darcy lifted her hand and pressed her palm to his cheek, grinning softly, unable to explain why there were tears pooling in her eyes. When he closed the distance between them, lips meeting hers with purpose, Darcy let him drive her backward until she hit the tile again, water cascading over their bodies.

Steve kissed her with hope in his chest, with electricity in his veins, with fire in the beat of his heart. When he was breathless, pulse racing, Steve pulled back and pressed his forehead against hers, knowing there were no words in the English language that would do the heavy feeling of happiness in his body justice. He breathed in the scent of her on the air, the orange blossom of her shampoo that seemed to stain her skin, and let the emotion thump inside of him.

They both opened their eyes, soft grins on their faces, feeling the confirmation and certainty like an invisible line stretched between them. But Darcy knew it wasn't invisible. She knew that if she wanted to, she could blink into the colors and see the cobalt line that connected them, the band of blue that meant she was his, and he was hers. Even more than that, she knew that if she focused hard enough, she'd be able to follow that line and know where Bucky was that second, the strand tying them all together like a map that she could navigate.

Some quiet part of Darcy thought it was crazy to be thinking about any of this stuff. She'd never really considered herself the marrying type before she'd tied herself to Bucky and Steve. Darcy'd had a distinct lack of successful marriages in her life growing up, let alone successful adults, and it'd been a concept so foreign that she'd never even entertained the thought. The last year had challenged everything she thought she knew, and this was just one more change. A future with Bucky and Steve. She couldn't imagine it any other way.

Darcy opened her mouth to say something but was cut off when Bucky pushed open the door to the
bathroom. Both Steve and Darcy turned to look at him, Bucky's eyebrows raising in their direction as his hand swept through the steam. "I really hope you guys didn't use all the hot water."

"Wouldn't be the first time you've had to take a cold shower, jerk," Steve said with a grin in his best friend's direction. When Bucky began undressing, Steve turned and pressed his lips to Darcy's again, his eyes full and weighted, the promise of an unspoken understanding in his gaze. His smile brightened when he could see the same thing reflected in her hazel eyes, a smile on her lips. "Not sure running out of hot water is possible."

"Knowing Tony? No," Darcy said, heat filling her when Bucky stepped into the shower, coming to stand directly behind Steve, his arms reaching around the blond so he could pull Darcy closer, his hands tugging at her hips until the three of them were pressed together. "But maybe we should find out. For science."

"That sound good to you, science experiment?"

Steve smirked, watching the amusement light into Darcy's eyes. "Yeah. That sounds good to me."

"Jane, you know how much I love you, right? So when I say this, I say it with all the love and adoration I have for you."

"If this is about the music -"

"It is June! There is absolutely no reason to be listening to Mannheim Steamroller in June!" When Jane pulled her foot out of Darcy's grasp, the lab assistant snapped in the air until the astrophysicist gave it back. "Remember that one time in New Mexico when we actually convinced Selvig it was December in August?"

Jane snorted, grabbing another handful of chocolate-covered pretzels as she looked at Darcy's work closely. "Time is a construct."

Darcy's hazel eyes rolled up to Jane, giving her best friend a look of exasperation. "I'm not talking to Theoretical Scientist Jane Foster, I'm talking to the Jane Foster who helped me put up a Christmas tree when it was one-hundred-balls-sweat degrees out." Darcy did her best not to smear the bright orange polish over Jane's toes when the other woman laughed.

"You know, I don't think it even mattered," Jane shrugged, grin staying on her face. "Selvig didn't notice it until December anyway."

"Yeah," Darcy said with a grin, carefully brushing the polish over Jane's nails. "He's in Oslo, right?"

"Mmmmmmmmm, working on an article. He sounded tired."

"That's because neither of you have a lab assistant making sure you eat and sleep. I'm surprised you even remembered that I live here now."

The offended noise from Jane’s mouth drew Darcy’s amused gaze. "Okay, fine. I’ll just be happy you’re here."

"I’m sorry I’ve been gone so much," Jane said, a hint of regret and guilt in her voice, "I’m going to be here more, I promise."
“I get it. Have I missed our Darcy/Janey time? Of course. But it’s not like I haven’t had a lot of my own stuff going on.”

Jane rolled her eyes, nose wrinkling softly. “Yes, thanks for that bit of oversharing. Not sure I’ll be able to look at Steve Rogers ever again without blushing.”

“As if you didn’t explain in detail how godly the Big Guy is.”

“You asked me to!”

“Semantics. Besides, you’re the only person I can talk to about that stuff. Am I supposed to talk Natasha or Clint about that thing Bucky does with his tongue? Or about Steve and how fucking amazing that man’s dick is?”

“Darcy!” The cackle from the woman near her feet made Jane shake her head, lips turning up in a smile once she got over the shock at Darcy’s lack of tact. “Maybe not put it like that,” she suggested, taking another handful of pretzels.

Still laughing, Darcy bent to give Jane’s toes a critical look, using her thumb to brush a bit of orange from her best friend’s skin. “Nah. I’ll just keep sending you lewd texts.”

(Of course you will. I’d expect nothing less.”

“Good,” Darcy said, groaning as she rolled on the bed and came to her feet. She gathered the tools and polishes in her arms and leaned over the bowls of sweets, chips, and candy that surrounded them on the bed. She let out a loud gasp when she realized one bowl in particular was empty. “Jesus! Janey, how the hell did you finish all the chocolate? That was the economy size bag!”

At Jane’s shrug, Darcy shook her head and headed into the bathroom, calling over her shoulder at the astrophysicist. “I should warn you that I don’t have any feminine hygiene products in this room, so you’re shit out of luck if your uterine lining is making its monthly escape attempt.”

Darcy opened the linen closet, shoving all of her manicure and pedicure supplies in the messy tote. She couldn’t help the small smile when she noticed Bucky and Steve’s things in their normal places. They were neat, and tidy, and looked so different compared to her things that she still felt the flip when she realized her stuff was home next to theirs.

“If you ate all the Swedish Fish, we’re gonna brawl, you get me?” Darcy left the bathroom - Bucky’s voice ringing in her head as she flipped off the bathroom light - and froze when she found Jane standing in the middle of the bedroom, as still as a statue. “Janey?”

Jane turned toward Darcy, phone in her hand, skin pale and brown eyes wide. Darcy felt the first stab of fear clench her stomach. “Jane? What happened? Who called? What’s wrong? Is someone hurt? Is it Thor?” When Jane continued to say nothing, Darcy crossed the floor toward her in a panic. “Jane!”

“I didn’t… It never even occurred…”

Darcy took Jane’s phone when it was thrust in her direction. Heart frozen with apprehension and worry, Darcy’s hazel eyes poured over the screen, fearing what words she was about to read, confusion on her face when she wasn’t sure what she was looking at. “A calendar. What? Did you miss an appointment?”

“I’m late.”
"For what? I don’t see…” Darcy blinked several times, finally realizing what she was looking at. Her eyes widened as she put it all together, swallowing harshly before her eyes flicked up to Jane’s in shock. “What?!"

“I mean, after everything, him coming and going, I didn’t… we were being careful, but… “

Darcy threw Jane’s phone on the bed, grabbing her best friend’s upper arms and shaking her slightly. “Hey, Jane, look at me so I know you’re doing alright, okay? Jane!” When Jane’s impossibly large eyes blinked at her, Darcy felt the first flutter of worry. “Are you okay?”

“I’m… I mean, I could be…”

“Pregnant,” Darcy finished for her, nodding, “you could be pregnant.”

“Yeah,” Jane said, blinking, sending a tear cascading down her cheek.

“Okay. How late are you?”

“I’m not sure I’ve even logged anything in a while, and with the moving between realms, how time moves differently with each shift, I don’t…”

Darcy reached up, cupping Jane’s cheek before putting hands on her best friend’s shoulders and steering her toward the bed. Jane’s knees seemed to give out as she fell onto it, Darcy sitting beside her, grabbing and holding both of Jane’s hands in her own. “Okay, so we need to get a test. I’m almost positive we have some in the medical ward. You going to be okay while I go get them, or do you want to go with?”

“I want… I’ll wait. Here.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, seriousness and resolve thick in her voice. “Give me ten minutes.”

*  

A half hour later, Darcy knocked on the bathroom door then pressed her ear against the wood. “You okay in there?” When the door was pulled open, Darcy’s eyebrows lifted toward her hairline. She thought she’d seen Jane frazzled before, but this was on a whole new level. “Janey?”

“It says I have to wait three minutes.”

“Okay. Then we wait three minutes. It’s just two-hundred and thirty seconds. That’s not that long. Come on, we’ll sit.” Darcy tugged on Jane’s hand, leading her to a stool at the kitchen island, knowing her best friend was out of it when she hadn’t corrected how many seconds were in three minutes. “I know it’ll seem like the longest three minutes of your life, but we’ll get through it together.”

“Have you… have you done this before?”

“Waited for a pregnancy test? Yeah,” Darcy answered with a snort. ”Not my most favorite memory, but yeah. Those three minutes were the worst.”

“Was it -”

“Me?” Darcy sighed, squeezing Jane’s hand. “Yeah. One of my successful shoplifting experiences. I waited in that Walgreens, feeling like I was going to throw up. Finding out it was negative… I can’t even describe the relief. I was an ecstatic thirteen-year-old, crying on the tile floor of a pharmacy
bathroom, deciding that I needed to get help.

So I went to the local clinic, and they ran a second test just to verify the first, then helped me get on birth control that couldn’t be seen or tampered with. Or, as it had been in my case, flushed down the toilet in front of me while I was told that ‘only sluts need birth control’. Never mind that her husband was the reason I needed it in the first place. But the clinic staff listened to me, really listened, and because they were mandatory reporters they called DHS and I was out of that home that day. After that I was placed with Olivia and the rest, they say, is a horrible Lifetime Channel movie.”

Jane squeezed Darcy’s hands, face a mask of pain and empathy. “You never told me that before.”

“It’s not the type of thing that comes up easily in conversation. But I told you that story because you need to know that whatever you decide to do, I’m here for you, no matter what. Also, the three minutes are up so we can go check.” Darcy watched Jane swallow then reach up to swipe at her cheeks with her sleeve. “You good? You ready to do this?”

Jane nodded at Darcy, sliding off her stool, turning toward the bathroom like she was moving through fog. She threaded her fingers with Darcy’s, looking over at her friend with a small smile, tinted with uncertainty. “I don’t know how to feel.”

“You’ll know when you look,” Darcy assured her, tugging on her hand lightly. She stood in the doorway, hazel eyes steady as Jane crossed to the small stick she’d set on the counter, examining it with a critical eye. Jane lifted it toward the vanity, as if needing the confirmation that it wasn’t just a shadow or a trick of the light. Darcy felt the first flip of nervousness in her stomach the longer Jane was silent.

Jane stood there frozen for a few more seconds before turning back to Darcy, tongue swiping out to lick her dry lips. “It’s positive.”

Darcy’s eyebrows rose, blinking, waiting for some kind of emotional reaction from her best friend, needing to know if she should be excited or if she should be comforting. “And this makes us…?”

“It makes me pregnant and makes you an aunt.”

The first quiver shook Darcy’s lower lip. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant. Oh my god, I’m pregnant!” Jane’s voice was thick with surprise, dropping the test to the counter, clapping hands over her mouth as she started to cry, shoulders shaking with both tears and laughter.

“You’re pregnant, Janey!” Darcy wrapped her arms around Jane’s shoulders, laughing happily and jumping up and down.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Jane gasped, leaning onto the counter when Darcy let her go. “No, not gonna be sick. Oh god. Oh god, what happens now? What do I do now?”

Darcy reached out and gripped Jane’s hand tightly, more than willing to be the rock Jane needed. “First thing we do is use another test to be sure. Or two. I stole a three-pack so we’ve got two more to confirm. Then you go see a doctor and find out how far along you are. And I guess at some point you let the Big Guy know he’s going to be a daddy.” Darcy reached up to wipe at her own eyes. She watched the color drain from Jane’s cheeks, the happiness in her eyes dimming softly. “What is it?”

“What if he’s not happy? What if he doesn’t -”

“You shut that gorgeous mouth right now, okay? I’ve seen his soul. Literally. He loves you and I can
see it in him. All of your color, buried deep and at his core. He’s going to be thrilled. And if he isn’t, once I’m done beating the everloving fuck out of him, we’ll get through whatever happens, because I’m not going to leave your side.”

Jane nodded, looking up at Darcy as a wide grin split her face. “Thank you. If you hadn’t… if you weren’t here -”

Darcy rolled her eyes and pulled Jane against her in a tight hug. “What’s a best friend for if not to hold your hand as you pee on a stick? I think that’s in the Ten Friend Commandments or something.” When she pulled back, she brushed a lock of hair from Jane’s forehead. “Think you can pee again?”

“Gonna need a bit.”

“Okay. Let’s get a drink. Well, not a drink drink, obviously. Water. Or milk? Oh! Orange juice! Gotta get you chock full of folic acid!”

“Ugh. Can we retire the phrase ‘chock full’ for the next few months?”

“Yeah!”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this has come across in my writing, but in case I’ve been too subtle, I am a huge proponent of women’s rights. Unfortunately, the story Darcy tells Jane is all too common. If you or anyone you know has experienced birth control sabotaging or reproductive coercion, know you are not alone. If you find yourself in a similar situation, there are resources out there where you can get help. I encourage you to find and tell someone who can help. <3
Mountains Tremble

Chapter Summary

Darcy metaphorically (and literally) holds Jane's hand. Steve and Bucky contemplate the future. Darcy meets with someone who might be able to shed some light on her situation.

Chapter Notes

Ooooooh, man. I've got some crazy stuff going on in my life (including busting out a Death Chapter™ which is currently sitting at 15k words! O.O Eeeeee!) but it's like a zen moment, sitting down and making sure this posts correctly. Who knew this would be my de-stresser?!

If you haven't heard it today, allow me to: I am so glad you are here, that your eyes are open, that you're taking in breath despite everything else going on in your life. That you give me the gift of reading this thing I've poured my heart into.. thank you. Thank. You. I am so glad you are you. <3

PageBreak

Hold onto me if you start to fall apart.
I will catch you, and I will not let your pieces scatter.
You think I cannot see the bags under your eyes?
Or the way that your hands quake?
You think that you have to be strong, like a mountain,
But even mountains tremble and move.
And even they grow weak.
I see the way that you wake up at two AM,
Shaking, the way that I do.
And I know, my love. I know.
We are shaped from tragedy, born and bred.
Our tale is not one that is meant to be told.
That is why I reach for your hand at night,
And why I hold you close.
You are all I have. You are all I want.
So hold me.
Cling with your nightmare-clammy hands.
I won't fall again, and I won't let you, either.
“It’s going to be fine. It’s fine. It’s the Big Guy! He’s a golden retriever in a cape! It’ll be fine.”

“You keep saying ‘fine’ over and over. It's starting to sound like you’re worried.”

“I’m not,” Darcy said with feeling, fingers tightening around Jane’s, giving her best friend a bright smile. She wasn’t sure if it was normal to have someone else there when you tell your baby daddy that he’s going to be a baby daddy, but Darcy’d stopped worrying about normal an infinity stone and two jacked super soldiers ago. “I’ve just never had this conversation before.”

“Give it time.” When Darcy made a noise somewhere between offense and disbelief, Jane’s lip quivered softly. “I’ll be there if you need me. We can make it our new thing. You’re here for me when I tell Thor, I’m there for you when you tell Steve and Bucky.”

Another noise tore itself from Darcy’s throat as she blinked rapidly. “That’s not… we haven’t even…” When Jane glanced over at her with a watery smirk, Darcy knocked her shoulder against the astrophysicist’s. “Yeah, yeah. Sure. Use my situation as a distraction. I guess that’s okay.”

“Hey, you were talking about Captain America’s dick an hour ago.” Jane’s mouth snapped closed when a gaggle of soldiers passed in front of them, their eyebrows raising. As they made their way into the building, it was obvious what the skuttlebutt around the S.H.I.E.L.D. water cooler was going to be.

Darcy took in a deep breath then let it out slowly. “If you weren’t carrying my future niece or nephew, I’d take you to the floor for that.”

“Baby’s already good for something,” Jane said, reaching up to swipe at her cheeks. “Happy tears?” Darcy asked, smiling at Jane’s nod. “I guess those are okay.”

Jane was saved having to respond when the familiar bright, rainbow kaleidoscope colors hit the ground with a crack of thunder. Both of them took a step backward, shielding their faces from the glare and wind. It was gone a few seconds later, the dark marks that were seared into the ground the only remnants of Thor’s unique mode of travel.

“Jane! Darcy! Heimdall gave me your message. Is something wrong?”

Darcy glanced over at Jane when her friend made no movement toward the Asgardian. Jane looked like she’d frozen, almost as still as Bucky and Steve could go. Almost. When she still hadn’t moved, Darcy gave Jane a push forward, ignoring the glare that was shot in her direction over the scientist’s shoulder.

Jane approached Thor, pulling her sleeves down over her hands. Knowing her friend as much as she did, it didn’t matter that Darcy couldn’t hear the words, she had a good idea what the conversation would be like.

Jane shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Thor, I have to tell you something,” Darcy said under her breath in her best impression of her best friend.

“What news do you bring me! Good tidings?” Darcy aped, though she thought she had Thor’s speech pretty spot on.
“That depends,” Darcy said, voice higher watching as Jane shifted again.

“If the news comes from you, my love, it can never be disappointing. You are the brightness to my life, the sun that makes my hair this gorgeous, glowing gold!” Darcy laughed when Thor hung Mjolnir on his belt and closed the distance between himself and Jane, clapping two large hands on the smaller woman’s shoulders.

“I’m not exactly sure how, well, I do know how, and I know we never spoke about the possibility...”

“Jane, my beautiful Jane. Whatever weighs on your heart, allow me to carry it, for I am very big and strong and mighty!”

“I’m pregnant.” Darcy said, biting her lip as she watched Thor’s hands drops from Jane’s shoulders as the much larger man took a step backward. Her heart froze for a split second in worry, holding the breath in her lungs as she blinked. When she opened her eyes, she was blinded by aquamarine and lilac, so vivid and pulsing that she felt it like the sun on her face, warming her from inside then all the way out.

Eventually the glare began to clear and she could see Thor close the distance and wrap his arms around Jane. His laughter was loud and booming, the happiness floating in the air around his form like heat waves on a summer highway. Several people in the landing bay had stopped and looked at the sound, uncertain what would have made Thor, Asgardian and god of lightning and thunder, laugh with such joy.

The tears were already flowing freely down Darcy’s cheeks as she watched Thor stop their spinning, cradling Jane’s cheeks as if she was the most precious thing in the world to him. Darcy could see that it wasn’t just a line of bunk her mind had supplied, but the honest, vivid technicolor truth. He whispered something to Jane, who nodded then kissed him again.

Darcy’s eyes widened when Thor glanced up in her direction suddenly, his face sporting the biggest grin she’d ever seen. “Hey Big Guy,” she said as he stalked toward her, Mjolnir swinging from his belt, “I hear congrats are in order. Are you -” She shouted when Thor lifted her off the ground too, his arms like a vice grip around her shoulders. “Hey! Breakable person here!”

Thor set her on the ground but didn’t let her go far, looking down at her with brightness shining in his eyes, but giving them both enough room to breathe. “I am to be a father!”

“I’m aware,” Darcy said with a laugh as Jane fit herself against Thor’s side, her cheeks pink and eyes peaceful as she blinked at Darcy. “Not sure what an Asgardian baby shower looks like, but here on Earth there are balloons and crepe paper and diapers filled with chocolate candy bars.”

Thor’s smile faltered the smallest amount. “I’m... not familiar with any of what you just said.”

“That’s okay,” Darcy said, “we’ll figure it out. I mean,” she looked to Jane, “if I get to plan those things? Maybe your mom will -”

“Oh, no. No please. You. Of course you,” Jane said, smiling when Darcy’s face split in a grin. “I mean, if you don’t have anything else important going on. Like being an Avenger.”

“Oh?” At Thor’s question, Darcy’s shoulder lifted and dropped in a shrug. “We are lucky to have such a formidable warrior in our midst! You must regale me with stories of the battles you’ve already won. It appears I have missed several important developments due to my absence.”

“Maybe over a drink,” Darcy suggested, holding up a hand in mock surrender when Jane glared at her softly. “I didn’t say alcoholic, Janey.”
“It was implied.”

“Yes. Yes it was. Still didn’t say it.” At Jane’s eyeroll, Darcy gave Thor an amused expression. For his part, Thor nodded in her direction, a silent conversation passing between them over Jane’s head. “Well, if we’re not going to drink, can we at least get lunch? I’m starving.”

“Yes, and my lady is now eating for two. Or three. Our bloodline has several cases of multiple births.”

“What?!”

“Oh yes. It is not uncommon. It goes both ways. It is rumored that Heimdall himself had nine mothers!”

Darcy’s eyes widened at Thor’s words, her brain attempting to work out how having nine different mothers worked. When she reminded herself that she was talking to a mythical god who could travel on a rainbow, she realized she was thinking about it too hard. Some things would just never not be weird.

“Lead on, my lady,” Thor said, rushing forward to open the door for Jane.

Darcy followed, and almost crashed into Jane’s back. “Jane?”

“Bathroom,” Jane said, holding a hand to her chest. “Nearest bathroom!” When Darcy pointed to a doorway at the end of the hall, the astrophysicist ran toward it, pushing through the door and disappearing from sight.

Darcy reached out and grabbed Thor’s arm when he tried to follow Jane. “I’m pretty sure she doesn’t want you to see her throwing up, Big Guy.”

“If she is unwell she should see a healer.”

“We already did,” Darcy said with a shrug. “Everything is fine. It’s just morning sickness.”

“But it is nearly afternoon.”

Darcy gestured in the air with a wave. “They just call it that, but it can happen anytime. Or not happen at all. Pregnancy is crazy.” She leaned against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest. Thor seemed to grapple with himself before he too found a spot on the wall, glancing toward the bathroom every few seconds with worry. “How are you doing?”

“Me? I am… happy. Very happy. I did not know someone was capable of feeling this much joy. I feel like it may erupt from me like lightning.”

“I highly doubt Stark would appreciate having to rebuild this entire wing just because you’re happy you get to use a ‘#1 Dad’ mug, so let’s keep the weather shenanigans to a minimum.” Thor chuckled at her words, looking down at his feet then the door when they heard a flushing sound. “We’re not going to need to have The Talk, are we?”

Thor’s blond eyebrows knit together as he looked over at Darcy. “What talk?”

“The whole ‘if you hurt her I’ll kill you’ talk. I know you’re not going to hurt Jane.”

“I would never do so willingly.”

“I know. That’s why we’re not having the talk. Plus, she can more than take care of herself. She’s
spunky.”

“Yes, it is one of the things I love most about her.”

“Besides, I don’t need to tell you I think of her like a sister. The only real sibling I’ve ever had. Best friend. Reason I’m still alive. You know all that already.”

“I do. I am glad you are in her life, as well as mine.”

“Good. That’s good. Because, yeah, we both know what I’m capable of. The threat of ripping your soul out of your body doesn’t need to be said aloud. We can both just imagine what it’d be like, and I think both of us are happy to just not talk about it. We can just imagine it, and that’s enough. Right, Big Guy? We’re good.”

“Yes. We are very good, Darcy. Threats would be meaningless between us. Especially when I will do everything to keep from hurting Jane or our child.”

“See? This is why I love you so much. You just get it.” Darcy pushed off the wall, reaching up to pat Thor’s cheek. “You’re going to be an awesome dad. That’s one lucky kid. Trust me. I’d know.”

She turned toward the door when Jane pushed it open, giving Darcy and Thor a sheepish smile. “I hope that part doesn’t last very long.”

“Still hungry?”

“Strangely yes.”

“You heard the lady, Big Guy! Let’s get the mother of your child and or children some food.”

Steve's hands moved in even strokes, dragging his pencil across the paper. He knew it was impossible to capture the beauty of Bucky on the page, but Steve had spent years of their youth trying anyway. He was carefully tracing the line of his lover's jaw, the way it was flexed in concentration as Bucky sat at the false window seat of their bedroom, the lush green of the forest a contrast to the soldier as his grey eyes flashed across the pages of a beat-up and worn paperback sci-fi novel. Bucky looked comfortable, carefree, and the look of peace on his face was intoxicating. Steve'd immediately pulled out his sketchpad and began trying to catch the moment before it passed. His finger brushed at the darkness of Bucky's hair, blurring the lead, making it softer, loving the way it hung over his ear. Steve took his time, working until he was as satisfied as he was going to get. He felt languid as he set his sketch on the nightstand, stretching out on his side so he could watch Bucky reading.

He didn't get very many quiet moments like this, where he wasn't in meetings with Hill or working with Natasha on tracking down any leads she'd gathered about Pulse and his non-organized organization, or when Bucky wasn't training new recruits, making sure they knew how to protect themselves, especially now that there was a new threat. Getting to just look at his best friend seemed like some kind of gift.

"You're staring," Bucky said, lips quirking up slightly as he acknowledged the way Steve's eyes had been on him. He'd felt that cerulean gaze on his skin like a ray of heat, warm and radiating.
"Can you blame me?" Steve asked, giving Bucky a grin when he glanced his way. "How many times have you read that one?"

"I think I've lost count." Looking at Steve stretched out was better than the book in his hands, so Bucky marked his page and left it on the window seat. He crossed the floor toward the bed, watching Steve's eyes pour over his naked chest, then further south toward the flannel pants that hung low on his hips, body reacting to the bare desire that colored the blond's expression. The bed was a king, much more comfortable for the three of them than the queen in their old room, and Bucky crawled across it toward Steve.

Steve stayed on his side as Bucky closed the distance between their mouths, their lips sliding against each other's with no sense of urgency. Darcy had texted earlier, saying Thor was arriving and that she wanted to be there for Jane, in case anything went badly. (Not that it will. The Big Guy is gonna be so happy. I'll tell you all about it when I get home. Love you!) The news of Jane's pregnancy was sudden, but it appeared everyone involved was happy.

"You think Thor'll be good with everything?" Bucky asked when he pulled back, trying to hide the worry from his eyes. It was odd, having memories of Jane in his mind, a deep feeling of friendship for the woman that he felt he hadn't earned. They kept in touch, texting when they were able, but even if she wasn't his best friend like she was Darcy's, he still worried about her like she was.

"I think so," Steve with a nod, reaching up to push Bucky's hair behind an ear. "He's a great guy. They've been together for so long. It'll probably be a bit of a shock, but I think he'll be happy."

Bucky nodded, grabbing a pillow and tugging until he could bunch it under his head, grey eyes tracing across Steve's face. "Lunch?" The three of them had made plans, but after Jane's news, neither he nor Steve expected Darcy to be home soon. It was just a text, but Bucky knew Darcy was ecstatic. There'd been a large swatch of happy emojis at the end of her message, a clear sign that she was Feeling Something. When she went quiet and gave one word answers? That was the time to be worried.

"After what we did an hour ago? Yeah. Food would be nice." Steve watched a satisfied grin lift Bucky's lips, both of them replaying the lazy morning sex they'd woken up with. It'd been slow, and full, and other than their bodies being different, it'd reminded Steve of their first apartment, when they'd been free to show the affection they'd always felt. They'd lived there in between those four walls, but it was Bucky who'd been his home.

"You nervous about Monday?" His question made some of the light in Bucky's eyes fade and Steve reached out to press his hand against Bucky's cheek.

The shrug of his shoulder did little to ease the worry in Steve's gaze, but Bucky didn't elaborate, trying his best to stamp down the feeling of fear in his stomach. Ever since he'd been experimented on, had his bodily autonomy taken by Hydra, he'd hated the thought of going under the knife, even if it was by his own choice. He couldn't seem to shake that dread in his heart, even if he believed that between Helen Cho and Shuri the procedure would be able to give him what he wanted.

"I'm sorry I can't be there," Steve said, his voice thick with his apology, "if you need me -"

"Darcy'll be there, Steve. I'll be fine. Your thing is more important anyway."

"Not to me. Nothing is more important to me than you and Darcy." Checking on the other S.H.I.E.L.D. prison facilities to make sure what happened at the Vault didn't happen elsewhere was necessary, and Steve wanted to be by Hill's side when they met with the architects for the new prison. He had quite a few demands when it came to safety and humane care, especially after seeing
what 'prisons' like the Raft were like.

Bucky gave Steve a small smile, pushing past the rise of fear Steve's question had made surge inside of him. "Despite how much I'd like it not to be, Darcy has my memories in her head. She'll be able to get me through it because she knows, you know?"

"Yeah, Buck," Steve said, his voice warming, "I know. She makes everything a little brighter." He let the weight of that truth thump in his chest a few moments before adjusting the pillow under his head. "Speaking of Darcy..."

The snort that trumpeted from Bucky's mouth was heartfelt. "You have a shit pokerface, Rogers, you know that? I've been able to see those three words tumbling 'round in your head for days." There wasn't a face Steve could make that Bucky wouldn't recognize. His knowledge of Steven Grant Rogers had been enough to rip through everything Hydra'd built inside of him, and watching his best friend chew on a thought was so familiar that he'd been waiting to see how long this particular conversation simmered before Steve couldn't take it anymore.

"You could have just asked me, you jerk."

Bucky laughed when Steve reached out to push at his chest, humor lighting into his eyes. "You weren't ready to talk about it yet, so I waited." As the laughter faded, he watched a steel determination light behind Steve's eyes, recognizing it for what it was. Once Steve had decided something, there was little anyone else could do. The look in Steve's eyes made Bucky's pulse pick up its pace, whether from fear or excitement he wasn't sure. "Seems like you're ready now."

"I am," Steve said, confidence in his gaze as he peered across the space into Bucky's eyes. "I am ready. I'm ready for what comes next."

"What do you think comes next?"

"The rest of our lives. My life, with you and Darcy. The next step." The insinuation in his words formed an idea in Bucky's head, and Steve blinked as his best friend realized exactly what was being put on the table. "What about you?"

Steve's question was enormous, large and complicated and so, so serious. Bucky took the moment to search his own thoughts. What did he think came next? They loved each other, had confessed that love and made their relationship official (as far as S.H.I.E.L.D. was concerned). They'd moved in together and been living with each other for months. He was happy, happier than he thought he'd ever been, and he knew that was because of Steve and Darcy. None of that was a question in his mind. It was true, and solid, and real.

But Steve was thinking past that. He wanted to take The Step forward. The one that involved rings and a proposal and a wedding. It wasn't that Bucky hadn't thought about it, because he had, he just wasn't sure how to organize his feelings. There was happiness there, visions of Darcy walking toward them, a shine of silver on her finger and matching ones on theirs, the promise of a life spent together. Past that initial burst of happiness was fear. The life they lived was dangerous, every mission could be their last, and that uncertainty was hard. Even past that, though, was the idea that someone could target Darcy because of her connection to them. Would he be able to live with himself if he was the reason she'd gotten hurt?

"I can't imagine my life without you and Darcy at my side," Bucky said after a long, quiet moment, "but it also puts a larger target on her back. If -"

"Buck, the tabloids already ran pictures of her with us. Me and her before Christmas. Her arms
wrapped around you on your bike. Hill says the PR team has been working on it for months. So far nothing has happened and that was six months ago. I think we're old news by now."

Bucky sighed. He hated that pictures of them had hit the papers, especially after he'd done as much pre-planning as he could to avoid it. With technology these days, it was almost impossible to plan for everything; there was a no-fly zone above the compound and the surrounding woods, but step outside that barrier and anyone with a drone could snap pictures from the sky and sell them to any rag. Darcy seemed to have taken it in stride - "I don't care what they say as long as it doesn't hurt you two" - but Bucky hated that they were so public.

"So we get married and live here on base? I don't see how we can build any kind of life while we're still active duty."

"Nat and Clint make it work," Steve said, already knowing the objections and worries Bucky would raise, having planned his arguments in advance. "We follow their example. Get a house nearby, go on the retired reserved roster. Emergencies only. Darcy can still work with Tony and Peter. I can still consult and supervise, you can still do your training. We turn this life into a job. We can finally do something for ourselves." When Bucky raised one dark eyebrow at him, Steve pushed on. "I'm not naive, I know it'll be hard, but I think we both deserve a little happiness, and my happiness involves having a life with you and Darcy. A real life."

"And you'd be able to just give up the shield?"

"I'll need both hands to be able to hold you and Darcy's. Can't do that while holding a shield, Steve answered, seeing Bucky's disbelief. "Besides, I wouldn't be giving it up, not really. I'd be passing it on to the next Captain America, giving someone else a chance."

"Giving someone else a chance," Bucky repeated, a thread of suspicion in his voice. It sounded like Steve already had an idea whose shoulders could hold the weight, which meant he'd been thinking about stepping aside long enough to make a list of succession. "Like who?"

"Sam."

"Really?"

Steve ignored the disbelief in Bucky's voice and expression. "Sam is a good man. He knows what comes with the job, he's reliable and honest. He's not afraid to speak his mind, and he has experience leading a team. I'd give it to Nat, but she's overqualified."

Bucky chuckled, agreeing one-hundred-percent with Steve's thoughts about Natasha, even if it'd been said in jest. He let Steve's words sit in his brain, taking his suggestions seriously. For as much as he liked to banter with Wilson, the man was dedicated to the job and he could agree that of all the people they knew, he was the best person to take on the shield. His grey eyes flicked up to Steve, seeing the determination in his best friend's eyes. "And you think you could do that? Give up the shield and be happy on the sidelines?"

"Before it was just an idea, but now that I have you and Darcy? Yeah. Absolutely. As long as I have both of you, I've got all the excitement I need." His eyes followed Bucky's lips as they curled upward, the grin making his stomach flip with emotion. "But if we do get bored and need a good challenge, we can always take that next step."

"And what step would that be, punk?"

"A kid with your smirk and Darcy's eyes."
The vision Steve's words painted solidified in Bucky's mind with startling clarity. Spending Thanksgiving with Natasha's family and their children had made the idea of having kids more real somehow, but his thoughts had followed in the same vein as the ones with marriage - would he be able to bring life into this world only to have it stolen because of who he was or what they did?

Steve could see the worries stacking in Bucky's grey eyes, wanting to erase the dark thoughts that were beginning to form. "I'm not saying now, or even soon, but can you imagine it? A girl we could call Sarah who somehow looks exactly like Becca when she smiles. A boy named George, who has my mom's empathy and Darcy's laugh. You can't tell me you don't want that."

"It's not that I don't want it, Steve," Bucky said, seriousness in his expression as he blinked at the man across from him, whose eyes were lit with fire and meaning, "I just never figured it was a possibility. Not with who we are and what we do. Wasn't an option."

"I know, Buck, I do." Growing up there'd been no way to be together and also have a family. With Peggy, the possibility of a family had been there, but that all went away when he plunged into the ice. Now? After seeing the life Natasha, Clint and Laura had created? A happy home for them, and their children? "But that's not how it is anymore. We could actually do this, have this, with Darcy."

"I think you're jumping ahead there," Bucky said, watching the hope in Steve's eyes dim slightly at his words. "I imagine Darcy will want a say in the names of our children, punk."

The smile that grew on Steve's lips shifted crooked. "I think she'd be fine with Sarah Olivia. George Anthony sounds pretty nice, too."

"If one of our children is named after Tony Stark we'll never hear the end of it."

"Yeah, but it'd be a small price to pay to make Darcy happy." Steve could feel his heartbeat in his ears, pumping heavy at hearing the words our children fall from Bucky’s lips. It sounded right, and good, and like a dream.

Bucky continued to look at Steve, the unrepentant joy in the man's eyes tightening things in his chest. Their lives growing up had been tough - between Steve’s illnesses and their looked-down upon relationship - but there’d been glimpses of this kind of happiness when they’d laid quietly together in their apartment, hints of what could be in Steve’s blue eyes. That he was getting to see it now was a miracle Bucky still marveled at.

Out of all the years of hardships, unimaginable pain and darkness, torture and chaos and suffering, they’d somehow found their happiness here, with the only woman who’d be able to understand what it meant to them.

Bucky could see it all in Steve’s face and he found himself transfixed by the other man's expression. "You really, really want this." Steve’s face sobered slightly, wanting to make sure Bucky could see the truth of it in his eyes. “I’ve never wanted anything more than this.”

Just when the emotion felt too heavy, when he could feel it pressing over them like a warm blanket, Bucky nodded his head. “Okay.”

Eyebrows raising toward his hairline, Steve’s breath came out in a rush. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, Steve,” Bucky said, Steve’s grin the largest he’d ever seen, unable to keep from smiling himself, “she’s ours already, but let’s ask her and make it official. Well, as official as the government will let us. The PR team is going to be working overtime.”
Steve shifted until he was draped across Bucky, a smile on his lips as they kissed, his heartbeat loud in his ears. “I don’t care about them. Just you and her.” He slanted his lips over Bucky’s again, but this time with no rush, just a swelling of happiness in his chest. He broke contact, taking a deep breath in as he rested his forehead against Bucky’s. “You gotta admit, Darcy Barnes has a nice ring to it.”

“So does Darcy Rogers,” Bucky said with a shake of his head. “If she even wants to take one of our names.”

“Darcy Barnes-Rogers. Alphabetically.”

“Again, Darcy might want a say in all this.”

“Of course we’ll let her decide. But you want this? Really, truly want this?”

Bucky rolled his eyes, fingers slipping against Steve’s skin, fistling in the hairs at the nape of the blond’s neck and tugging. “Did I stutter?” The words were completely Darcy’s, but they’d fallen easily from his lips as he blinked up at Steve, showing him just how much he wanted this in his slate eyes.

"Just a minute," Darcy yelled at the door, stuffing her toes into her sneaker while hopping on one foot. Finally sliding it past her heel, she grabbed the knob and opened the door.

Her eyes grew exceptionally wide at the man who was standing there. He was covered in a mass of robes with his hair hanging down his back in dreadlocks. Darcy’s immediate first thought was how fucking hot the man was. It wasn’t until she locked eyes with him that she took in a deep breath. His eyes were amber, the same color that her eyes flashed when she was using her powers. It was startling to see it on someone else and Darcy tried to keep her heart from racing. "Um, hi?"

"It is good to see you, Ms. Lewis. My name is Heimdall, of Asgard."

Darcy’s heart jumped in her chest, spurred from her inner thoughts at the sound of his name. "Oh! Right! You’re here. Really here. Yes, uh, come in, of course."

She left him in the doorway, flitting around the living space and trying to grab the clothes she’d left scattered around the floor. She gathered everything in her arms, hazel eyes scouring the room for a place to hide them. Desperate, she threw it all in the dishwasher before turning back to him with a smile. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting company."

Heimdall entered the room and let the door fall shut behind him, casting a glance around before his golden gaze stopped on Darcy. "Thor has spoken very highly of you. He enjoys telling the tale of your first meeting and the way in which you rendered him unconscious."

"He tells people about that? Wow. Figured he wouldn't appreciate the fact that an Earthling was able to take him down."

"That is precisely why he tells it. There are people in Asgard who wrongly think themselves more important than others in the nine realms. That a Midgardian was able to accomplish such a feat goes a long way."
Darcy laughed lightly, shrugging her shoulders. "Well, it's a good memory. He flopped around a lot."

Heimdall's lips lifted in a small smile. "Yes. It was amusing."

"Right! Because you saw it, and you can see all. Which is why Thor suggested we talk. Because you have the amber eyes and I've got the amber eyes. You've got the 'all seeing' bit, sorta like me. There are definite reasons for the two of us to talk." As Heimdall continued to look at her expectantly, Darcy rolled her eyes at herself and gestured toward the couch. "Sorry, yeah. We should sit. Unless you don't think it'll take long? No. Sitting would be good."

Heimdall moved with hesitation before following her toward the living area. "I am sorry if I've done anything to make you nervous."

"What? Naaah, it's not nerves. Well, not because of you." Darcy sank to the couch heavily, grabbing a pillow and wrapping her arms around around it as Heimdall’s kind eyes looked at her. "I've just been pretty happy with the Infinity Gem bits recently and I don't want to poke the bear, you know what I'm saying?"

"You are afraid to discuss something which you hope has been brought under control."

She pointed her finger in his direction, unsurprised that he’d find a better, more succinct way to summarize what she’d meant. "Yes! That. A lot that. Since I had the dampener switch inserted I haven't heard a single peep from the stone. It's silent, finally, and I think I'm in a good place with my powers."

Heimdall took a careful seat on the edge of the couch, nodding solemnly at Darcy. "I am glad you've found a way to temper your abilities, but I must warn you that just because something is quiet does not mean it is gone."

Darcy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as she nodded. "Yeah. Hard to stay worried when I haven't heard from it in a while. Is it naive to hope it stays like this?"

"Wishing for peace is not naive, though it can be dangerous if it blinds you to risks and consequence."

"That sounds ominous," Darcy said, gripping the pillow tighter. When Heimdall gave her a small nod of acceptance, she spent a second looking in his eyes, so familiar but also startling. "Your eyes. Your sight. Did it come from the soul stone?"

"It did. My mothers -" Darcy’s jaw dropped, a strangled surprised sound breaking free. "Thor wasn't kidding about you having nine moms?!"

"He was not. My mothers worked together to bend the soul stone to their whim, but even their combined powers were not enough to hold it for long. They imbued me with Sight and Sound, allowing me to see every being in the nine realms, to hear their calls. I used these gifts to protect Asgard, to see threats before they arrived, or prepare for the battle when that arrival could not be altered."

"But you don't hear it speak to you?"

"No. I believe my Asgardian lineage allowed me to siphon some of the powers, but not all of them. Thor has explained that you can see past the nine realms, to every soul. That you can touch those
souls and manipulate them."

Darcy shifted on the couch, uncomfortable with the truth of his statement, leaning toward him.
"Yeah, but not by choice. It's nice to know when someone is lying, or knowing that there's
somebody already using the bathroom stall I was headed to, but the manipulating thing is not one of
the powers I enjoy. I've already made a mess of that."

"That you were able to connect yourself to another is not a small thing to be diminished in
importance. Battles and wars have been won by bending another to your whim."

Darcy shook her head. "No. I'm sans-whim. I don't want to do that to anyone, not even an enemy.
It's wrong. It feels dirty. And where does it stop? I do it to an enemy to stop a war, sure, but maybe
the next time I do it so my boss gives me that PTO that I really want, or get a car salesman to give me
a sweetheart deal. It's a slippery fucking slope."

Heimdall looked at her for a long moment before nodding. "I may not be able to see the truth of your
statement in color around your body, Ms. Lewis, but I can hear the honesty in your heart."

An awkward silence fell over the pair, Darcy picking at the pillow in her arms, Heimdall not
pushing her into conversation. "How do you do it?" she asked after a quiet moment, her voice soft
and uncertain. "How do you have all those people in your head? Their lights? Their life? The one
time I pushed too far nearly cost me everything. How do you ignore it all but the parts you want?"

"It has taken me centuries to hone my skills. You have had your abilities for such a small amount of
time. Would you expect to master chemistry in six months? Become the greatest chess player after
only a handful of games? You should not feel discouraged that you are still learning how to harness
your gifts. From what I have seen, the speed at which you are improving is impressive."

"I'm still afraid I'm going to hurt someone. I know I'm doing better, loads better compared to where I
started, but that fear is always there."

"Fear is one of the most useful emotions we have. You should listen to that fear whenever possible.
It can help you know which path to take. It can tell you when your apprehension is warranted, or
when you should slow down. Yes, there will be times that you need to push past that fear, but that,
too, is a lesson and necessary. Fear is good, Ms. Lewis, especially if that fear keeps you from doing
something you will regret."

Darcy nodded. Steve had said something similar after her disastrous meeting with Wanda, about
seeing her fear as a good thing, but it was still easier said than done. "So you're able to see me when
you're in Asgard, right? You'll be able to keep an eye on me?"

"I could do that, yes."

"Good. Because the more eyes watching me to make sure I don't screw up, the better."

"I think you are not giving yourself enough credit. People endowed with gifts such as yours do not
always choose the brighter path. Power can corrupt just as easy as it can strengthen. That you are
actively worried where your powers may lead is commendable."

"That's what they always called me. 'The Commendable Darcy Lewis'."

"I do not need to have powers to know that is a lie."

"Yeah," Darcy said with a shrug, "but maybe they can start now."
"I also believe I have not said anything to you today that you have not already heard from multiple people."

Darcy nodded. "Yeah, well. I'm a data person. We like large sample sizes. Besides, you get things in a different way than everyone else. You've seen it and felt it. Shared experiences go a long way. Besides, you have no personal stake with me, no complicated relationship that'll make you blind to what I do."

"That is where you are wrong, Ms. Lewis. Everyone in the nine realms and beyond has a stake in you, now."

Her hazel eyes widened, his words sinking like a weight in her stomach. "Is that supposed to make me feel worse or better?"

"It is supposed to make you feel the weight of their lives. If you start to feel too light, like the choices you make do not matter, you should remember that force, that heaviness on your shoulders. It's only when that weight is gone that you should be worried." Heimdall stood, giving her a small nod. "I am glad we were able to speak today. I have been watching you with interest for some time now."

Darcy climbed to her feet, throwing the pillow on the couch as she followed him to the door. "Yeah, I keep wanting to visit Asgard but the timing never works out."

"Maybe one day I will be able to walk you though the great halls and show you the tapestries that announce the exploits of Thor and his men."

"His men and Sif," Darcy said, pulling open the door. "Gotta represent those ladies." Heimdall laughed at her words, and Darcy couldn't help but smile at the sound. It was a bit rusty, like it hadn't happened in a while, and she couldn't help but preen at the knowledge that she'd been able to make Asgard's All-Seeing Guardian chuckle. "Thank you for coming and seeing me. Really. It means a lot knowing there's someone out there who understands what it's like."

"You may not find someone who knows what it's like to see souls through the realms, but you are surrounded by people who feel the weight of responsibility on their shoulders, just as you do. You are not the first person to fear their abilities, or worry that they may hurt someone. When you feel lost, look to the people around you, for they may be the support you seek."

Smiling, Darcy leaned against the open doorway. "Anyone ever tell you that you have a very calming way about you?"

Heimdall smiled, giving her a small nod. "I look forward to meeting you again, Ms. Lewis. Call my name and I will hear you, should you need my assistance."

"Any time of night or day?"

"Time is a construct."

"No wonder you and Jane get along."
Chapter Summary

Darcy and Tony celebrate an anniversary. Bucky takes back some control. Steve comes home.

Chapter Notes

I feel like the whole MCU fandom is on the edge of a precipice and we're all just trying to stay afloat. I'm scared, and excited, and want it in my eyeballs noooooow! I've got tickets for tomorrow at 8PM and I'm bringing an entire box of tissues. I hope it's enough. But that's the great thing about fanfiction, right? We can just FIX IT! You're all amazing. I'll see you all on the other side! <3

PageBreak

They forced poison under your skin and your veins started glowing with starlight. They left bruises on your heart and yet it still kept beating. They dragged you into the darkness and you came out shining.

Darcy frowned as she looked up at the elaborate building, feeling Tony and Peter step onto the curb beside her. “This is where our meeting is today? You sure? Looks a bit fancier than I was expecting.”

“I’m sure. Come on, don’t want to be late,” Tony said before leaving them and striding forward.

Sharing a sideways glance with Peter, Darcy and the scientist fell into step behind Tony, Happy Hogan trailing after them. They walked into the opulently rich interior, watching as Tony approached then shook the hand of a man in a very expensive looking suit. They talked animatedly with each other out of earshot, giving Darcy a chance to move closer to Peter, her voice low. “Do you know what this is? Did he tell you what the meeting was about?”

“Something about evolving security tech,” Peter said with a shrug, “but he didn’t elaborate.”

“And why is Happy here? No offense, Happy,” Darcy said, leaning around Peter to grin in Happy’s direction.
“None taken.”

“Happy is here to help, just like the two of you are,” Tony said as he rejoined them, hands stuffed in the pockets on his slacks.

“With the meeting?”

“This is the meeting.”

Peter cast a surprised look around. “I don’t, uh, what are we helping with?”

Eyes narrowed, Darcy’s voice held a bit more suspicion than Peter’s. “You had to kidnap us in order to get our help?”

Tony’s brown eyes flicked over their shoulders toward their driver for the day. “Happy, did I kidnap them?”

“No, they got in the car under their own power.”

“Under false pretenses,” Darcy muttered, rolling her eyes.

“No kidnapping,” Tony said with a sound of exasperation and a roll of his eyes. “Figured you’d be happy with a field trip. Look, I just need your eyes. And brains. Well, Peter’s brain and your eyes.”

Darcy shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest as she pinned Tony with a glare. “If they end up in a jar with other organs, I’m going to be very put out.”

The expression that crossed Tony’s face was a mixture of both confusion and disbelief. “Why are you like this?”

One of Darcy’s shoulders lifted and then dropped. “That’s a fair question.”

“I’m sorry,” Peter cut in, everyone’s eyes swinging to look at him, “but what is it you need our help with?”

“This is the place. Pepper’s place. This is where she wants our reception.”

“Your wedding reception?”

“No, her bat mitzvah. Of course our wedding reception.” Peter’s eyebrows raised toward his hairline at the tone of Tony’s words, and the engineer took a deep breath in and let it out slowly, gaze cast down at the marble floor. “This is what she wants, and I need to make it happen. So, I need another set of eyes and some good ideas on how to keep everyone safe. Mainly her, but tangentially everyone else, too.”

Darcy’s eyebrows knit together as she looked around the tastefully decorated interior; she could count as least five different entrances and exits, and several places that would bottleneck in the case of an emergency. She frowned at Tony. “If that’s what you’re needing, why didn’t you bring Steve or Bucky? They’d be able to put together a game plan. Natasha would be way better than Pete or me.” She ignored the sound of indignity Peter directed her way.

“I’m not looking for a literal battle plan, okay? I’m looking for tech, something without a risk of human error, something that Friday can monitor. Since Pete came up with the idea for your dampener, I wanted to see if lightning would strike twice.”

At Tony’s words, Peter’s eyes widened. “Me? Really?”
“Sure,” Tony said, sweeping an arm around. “Take a look, tell me what you see.”

Darcy watched the younger man wander away, his mind already turning at the task. She knew Peter pretty well by now, and she could see his ‘intense focus’ expression take residence on his face. While he went along the edges of the room, producing a pad of paper and pen from the messenger bag slung over his shoulder, Darcy turned back to Tony, an eyebrow raised. “And I'm here because...?”

“I trust your judgment.”

His words alone had been enough to surprise her, but coupled with the very serious look in his eyes, Darcy found herself a bit flabbergasted by the billionaire. “...why?”

Tony’s tongue clicked, stuffing his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his heels, annoyance in his voice. “Are you going to question everything I do and say, or are you actually going to help me? I can have Happy take you back to base if you think this is below your pay grade.”

“Why is Happy toddling your ass around, anyway? Isn’t he head of security at Stark Industries? Spending the day as a glorified valet seems like a bit of a demotion.”

“I don’t know what I would do without your constant disapproval, kiddo. Truly.”

“Just show us around, okay? Fuck.”

**

Standing on the front steps of the Cipriani, the New York summer heat oppressive surrounded by all the brick and stone buildings, Darcy listened with wide eyes as Peter read off the scribbles of notes he’d made. Tony’d given them a tour around the venue, pointing out places of concern. While Darcy’d pointed out how a change in flooring could be a tripping hazard, Peter’d drawn a fucking diagram showing how a multilayered field generator could disrupt any kind of timed device (her screech of “like a bomb?!” had gone ignored).

Feeling useless, Darcy gestured vaguely in the air when Peter finished. “I could do a sweep, too. Make sure you don’t have any party crashers. At least any with nefarious plans. I mean, you’re Tony Stark. People are going to want to sneak in just to snap a pic so they can pretend they know you. I’ve heard stories of people using it as a pick-up line.” When Tony’s gaze swung toward her, Darcy shrugged.

“That’s a good idea,” Peter said, earning looks from the rest of them. “Not the pick-up line,” he clarified, “but I could design a pin that could vibrate at a specific frequency, something Darcy would be able to see in color. We could give one to each of the guests and whatever employees are approved to be here, and you’d know right away if someone’s crashing. It’d cut down on the risk, at least.”

“Kind of like security badges,” Happy added, “but fancier.”

“I'd basically be a badge reader,” Darcy said, seeing Peter smile in her peripheral vision, “I could even make the little ‘boop boop’ noises.”

Tony scratched at his chin, a considering expression on his face. He opened his mouth to respond when a shout of “Peter!?!?” sounded from behind them. The four turned toward the voice, a variety of alarm on their faces as they watched a smiling guy rush in their direction.

“Ned?!”
“Hey man!”

As Peter embraced the new comer then began what looked like an unnecessarily intricate handshake, Darcy took a step closer to Tony. “He has friends? Like, real actual people friends?”

“Guess everybody’s got one.” Sharing a small smile with Darcy, Tony raised his hand in the air, pulling Peter’s attention with his shout. “Parker! You’re still on the clock!”

“Oh! Right! Guys, this is Ned. Ned, this is Tony, Tony Stark, obviously, and this is Darcy. And you already know Happy.”

“Mr. Hogan,” Happy corrected Peter, giving Ned a small nod of his head.

“Wow. Tony Stark. You’re real. I mean, here. Right here. And Darcy! Peter’s told me all about you.” Ned’s elbow jutted out, catching Peter in the side as he leaned in and lowered his voice, talking out of the corner of his mouth. “She’s so much prettier than the picture you sent.”

The grin on Darcy’s face amped up by several watts. “So you’re the famous Ned,” she said, watching Ned’s eyes widen slightly as she said his name. “Peter said you have an internship this summer?”

“Wow, yeah. I do. That’s something you know about me. Okay. It’s actually right down the street. I was headed to meet a few people. There’s a new bar that’s got a LAN party set up that we wanted to try out. Peter, MJ is gonna be there.”

Peter’s head swung toward Ned, his eyes widening in surprise. “What? Really? She’s, she’s back in town? I didn’t -”

“Who’s MJ?”

“He has another friend,” Tony answered Darcy’s question, smirking when Peter’s cheeks pinkened. “Did you want to come with?”

Even though he knew the question hadn’t been directed at him, Tony answered before Peter had the chance to. “You know, I’d love to, but I’ve got a few things I still need to do, Ned.”

Ned reacted to Tony’s answer with a high-pitched giggle, then a cough to lower his voice. “Of course, Mr. Stark. Mr. Tony. I mean, you’re definitely invited, but I’m sure you’ve got enough… on your… plate. Uh, Peter? Did you want…?”

“Oh, I know better than to leave this man to his own devices,” Darcy said, thumb jutting in Tony’s direction, “but thanks for the invite. You should come by the compound! We can show you around the lab, show you a
few things we’re working on…”

The look of elation on Ned’s face was indescribable. “Are you kidding? That would be awesome!”

“We’ll set it up. Go have fun with your land party!” She ignored the snort from Tony at her side, giving them a large wave as they piled into the backseat of the town car. As they pulled away, she couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. “You know, he’s so smart that sometimes I forget he’s only eighteen.”

“Nineteen at the end of this month,” Tony said absently, turning so he could look up at the exterior of the building. “His idea of about the field generator and the pins is pretty good, but it’s going to be hard for you to stay inconspicuous using your powers while you’re standing up in front of everyone.”

“Why would I be standing up in front of everyone?” Darcy asked, confusion in her voice. Her eyes widened slightly then narrowed as she looked over toward him. “You’re not wanting to be to get ordained so I can marry you two, are you? Not sure the church of mammals will accept a mutant minister.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. You'll be standing up there as a groomsman,” Tony said, waving his hand vaguely in the air, “in a tux, as per our agreement.”

The bark of laughter from Darcy’s mouth made several people on the street glance in their direction. When Tony looked over at her, the expression on his face cut through the laughter. “Wait, what? You were serious?”

“Of course I was,” he answered, one dark eyebrow raising, “you weren’t?”

“We were fighting!” Darcy said, voice still tinted with disbelief. “I thought you were just fucking with me!”

“That’s what you get for thinking, Lewis.” They both stared up at the building’s facade, seeming to go quiet for a second as both of their minds turned over the conversation. Finally, Tony looked over at her. “Are you saying you don’t want to -”

“No! No, I do. I will,” Darcy said with feeling, shifting her weight from one leg to the other, “I just... no. Yes, Tony. I'll stand up there with you.” When he nodded at her acceptance, her lips quirked upward, hazel eyes flicking back toward him. “I just didn’t know we did this sort of thing,” she said, an echo of a previous conversation they’d had ringing through both of them. “Did you pass this by Pepper already? She knows I’m one of your guys?”

“I don’t make a move without her direction,” Tony said, glad when it seemed the awkwardness between them had shattered. “She’s much better at planning parties than I am. Me and tech? That I edge her out on. But only by a smidge.”

“Mmmmmm,” Darcy hummed, rolling her eyes softly. “So what’s next? You have more wedding things you need to kidnap me for? Perhaps a cake tasting?”

“You know, now that you mention it, you hungry?”

“Yes. Food, please. I’m starving.”

**
**Bucky:** hey doll?

**Darcy:** Yeah?

**Bucky:** Why are their clothes in the dishwasher?

**Darcy:** LOL

**Darcy:** Had to hide my bras and underwear from an Asgardian god

**Bucky:** explain

**Bucky:** He saved your life?

**Darcy:** Absolutely. If he hadn’t been there, I would have died. No question about it.”

Darcy gave Tony an impressed nod of her head she she took another drink of wine. “Explains why you love him more than me and Peter.”

“No, I like him better because he’s more useful to me than you two.”

“Is he going to be wearing a tux and standing up in front of everyone, too?”

“No.”

“Pepper said ‘no robots in our wedding’?”

“… yes.”

Darcy’s eyes rolled in amusement, sitting back in her chair, a smile on her lips. She was full of ridiculously expensive food and wine, but since Tony was picking up the tab, and he also happened to be one of the richest men on the planet, she figured he could afford to spring for the fancy stuff.
She watched Tony as he sipped his drink, dark eyes cast out the windows at the city outside, something like contentment in his expression. Darcy wasn’t sure exactly when it’d happened - after he’d let her cry all over him? When she’d started to enjoy the wide variety of nicknames he called her? After he’d promised to kill her if it came down to it? - but she’d come to think of Tony Stark as a friend. A good friend. A good enough friend that he wanted her to be there, at his side, when he married the only women he’d ever loved.

Despite all the ways they needled at each other, the name calling and exasperated sighs, the frustrated yelling and useless posturing, they’d found a comfort in each other. Kindred spirits, maybe. A bit broken, covered in plenty of scars, but that was probably why they worked so well together. He got it, the fear of opening up to someone new, but somehow it’d happened anyway.

For someone who didn’t have an extensive list of people she’d call a friend, Darcy’d found herself surrounded by a support system, people who actually cared about her. It was new, and important, and too big for her to focus on, too enormous to put into words.

“Do you know what tomorrow is?”

Tony’s question pulled her out of her own thoughts and she hummed, finishing what was in her glass. “Wednesday,” Darcy answered, grinning when he dipped his chin in her direction, pinning her with a look. “Uh, the ninth, I think?”

“You’re horrible at this game. No, it’s -” he made a sound, glancing over her shoulder and waving his hand, “- perfect timing.”

Darcy turned in her chair, confusion knitting her brows together when she spotted a man walking toward them with some kind of a dessert, a hand cupped around the lit candle to keep it from going out. She turned back to Tony, an eyebrow raised. “You know it’s not my birthday, right?” Tony said nothing as the ridiculously decadent-looking chocolate cake was set in front of her.

Tony clapped the waiter on the arm as he passed, leaving them alone again. He sat back in his chair, enjoying the look of confusion on Darcy’s face as she looked suspiciously at the cake then up at him. “Do you remember what you were doing a year ago?”

“Uh, statistically speaking, probably yelling at Jane for eating the last poptart.” As Tony continued to look at her with expectation, Darcy frowned, thinking back. Realization dawned on her face, and she looked up at him with surprise. “Fuck, really?”

“Happy one year anniversary of killing an alien dictator hell bent on Earth’s destruction,” Tony said, watching the emotions flow over Darcy’s face. “I remember the night one of my robots saved my life, and you don’t think I’d have this date seared in my brain? Call me sentimental, but when someone averts the apocalypse I think of it as a red-letter day, semi-worthy of celebration.”

“Mmm,” Darcy hummed, swallowing past the lump in her throat, not trusting herself to speak.

One year ago, she’d been laying in bed, playing mahjong on her phone, insomnia keeping her from sleep. Later, Jane had crawled into bed beside her, both of their eyes open in the dark.

”Maybe when all this is over, we can take a vacation,” Darcy said, her voice soft, “someplace weird.”

“Weird how?” Jane asked.

“I don’t know. There’s a place in Japan where there are hundreds of deer, and they’re so used to people that they just walk up to you. And another place where there are rabbits. And an island with
“Yeah, that’s weird.”

“I’m just saying, we’re do for some down time. They have cafes with robots, and entire malls dedicated to claw machines.”

“Are all your places in Japan?”

“Yep.”

“Where you watching something on the travel channel?”

“This hotel doesn’t have a large selection of channels,” Darcy said, shifting onto her side, as if she’d be able to see Jane in the dark. “We’ll fly first class, in the seats that can fold down into a bed. We’ll wander the streets, get lost, butcher the language and eat way too much ramen.”

She felt Jane turn toward her, able to hear the smile in her best friend’s voice. “There are a few libraries I’d like to check out.”

“Great, now you’ve ruined it. I said vacation, Janey. That does not involve books.”

“What about horrible harlequin romance books?”

“I guess I’ll allow it,” Darcy answered, grinning in the dark. “And we can watch the Big Guy tower over everyone, asking ridiculous questions. We’ll take billions of selfies, and eat all the crazy flavors of kit-kats, and go to the hot springs. They have a train station where the mascot is a cat and it wears a little outfit and the train cars are all cat themed. It’ll be great.”

“A weird vacation,” Jane said, letting out a sigh. “I think that’d be nice.”

“When all this is over,” Darcy repeated in the best, most confident voice she could muster, “we’ll go and have the weirdest time. It’ll be amazing, just you wait.”

Twelve hours later she’d wrapped her fingers around that amber-glowing stone and everything had changed. “It’s been a bit of a year,” she finally said, voice thicker with emotion than she would have liked.

Thankfully, he didn’t say anything about the way her eyes shined a bit as she blew out the candle, watching the smoke curl through the air. After she’d taken the first bite, Tony grabbed his own fork and stole a bite for himself. “Figured it was a good enough excuse for cake.”

Darcy paused, her fork freezing in the air halfway to her mouth. “Wait. Did you have this all planned? Running into Ned? Happy driving them so it’d be just us for dinner?”

“Of course not. As I said before, Pepper is way better at planning things than I am. Peter’s friend showing up was just a brush of kismet.”

Darcy snorted, eating the bit of cake on her fork before spearing another piece. “Not sure if one of Peter’s friends seeing him on the street counts as some kind of fate or destiny.”

“Sometimes the universe gives us what we need when we need it,” Tony hummed around a bite of cake.

Like so many things, Darcy could tell that Tony’s words weren’t just meant for their current conversation, but building on things they hadn’t even discussed yet. “Didn’t take you as a
philosopher, Stark,” Darcy said, somehow making room for the desert even though she was still full to bursting after their dinner. Tony’d gone out of his way to plan this, so it felt wrong not to appreciate his efforts.

“Like you said, it’s been a bit of a year.” Tony set his fork down and grabbed his drink, watching Darcy as she finished the rest of the cake, a smile on her face as she chewed. He sipped his scotch, spinning the cube of ice with a twist of his wrist. He looked back out the window, seeing the large A of the tower across the skyline. “Barnes goes in on Monday, right?”

The smile on Darcy’s face faltered as she wiped her finger across the frosting left on the plate, a small thrum of nervousness ringing through her stomach at his question. “Yep. Has to be there by six in the morning.”

“Cho does good work and Shuri’s never found a problem she couldn’t solve.”

“I’m not worried about their work,” Darcy explained, “I know they’ll be able to handle everything. It’s him I’m worried about. It was hard enough on him to see me get my dampener. I know how he feels about going under again.”

“Having something like that done to you against your will…”

Darcy’s eyes flicked up to Tony at his voice, hearing the strain in it, seeing the conflict on his face. She knew what had happened to him in that cave, what he’d had done to him. She’d overheard him talking with Peter one day, explaining the way he’d created his own device, the thing that powered his first suit, the way he’d escaped.

“You know why it took so long for me to get this fixed?” He tapped his chest, brown eyes swinging back to hers. “I didn’t want anyone I didn’t trust touching me. Pepper, of course, but giving anyone else that power? I wasn’t ready. It took years. What he had done to him is…”

“Unimaginable,” Darcy finished for him, the disjointed memories of Hydra’s experiments flashing through her mind.

“If he’s choosing this, it’s because he’s ready. Doesn’t take away the fear, but means he’s claiming it for himself now. I get it. I get why. I hope it helps.”

The smile on Darcy’s lips grew and she ignored the roll of his eyes. “That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said about him.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. Blame it on the cake and the alcohol.”

“That’d be a great title for your autobiography.”

Darcy had long since picked all the purple nail polish from her fingers, the nail beds ragged and worried by her teeth. Her pacing had become second nature now and she did it without really seeing her surroundings. Back and forth, she walked from one end of the waiting room floor to the other, her thoughts tumbling and scattered. Both she and Bucky had assured Steve that they’d be fine, that what he was doing with Director Hill was important, and if it led to any more clues locating the rest of Thanos' army or to the identities of any other sleeper agents, that was where he needed to be.
But, regardless of what she’d said, Darcy could have really used Steve's calming presence. Hazel eyes flicked toward the clock on the wall then back toward the door that led to the operating suite. She felt the vibration of her phone before she heard the text alert tone, and she pulled the phone from her back pocket.

**Steve: Any word?**

Her fingers typed quickly.

**Darcy: Not yet.**

Seconds later she felt it vibrate again.

**Steve: Keep me posted.**

She'd been getting texts all morning from their friends. Laura had sent a picture of Lilah, holding up at card she'd made: a rainbow and what could only be described as a half-unicorn half-robot cyborg and the words 'You can do it!' written across the front in slanted writing. Bruce had checked in on her after the first hour, bringing her a coffee and a danish from the cafeteria. He must have memorized her order when they'd spent so much time together at the beginning, and even if she hadn't been able to touch the pastry, the coffee had been a brief respite from her thoughts.

Darcy felt another vibration, unsurprised to see the name pop up on her screen. Smiling softly, she pressed the accept button and brought the phone to her ear. "It's gotta be close to the middle of the night there," Darcy said, her tone strained and worried, but warm.

"I did not know you were tracking my bedtime," Shuri's voice hummed, and Darcy could hear the smile on her face. "I wanted to check in on my favorite patient."

"He's still in surgery," Darcy sighed. "I didn't think it would take this long."

"It is a complicated procedure. What I made him was never supposed to be long term. I improved upon my design and when it’s incorporated it with Dr. Cho’s cradle you are looking at a -" 

"'State of the art, never been done amputation repair'," Darcy parroted, recalling the words that both Helen Cho and Shuri kept using over and over. "I know."

"He's the first to receive this treatment. If it works? It will be revolutionary, and I do not use that word very often."

"No, but it sounds awful pretty coming out of your mouth."

Darcy had a sinking suspicion that one of the reasons Bucky had agreed to this procedure was because he was uniquely qualified to have this procedure be a success, and if it worked for him... The amount of people who could benefit from such a surgery? It'd be life changing. He was willing to push his fear aside and make a go of it, hoping it'd improve the lives of countless others.

"He is strong, Darcy. Stronger than even he knows. I will expect a call and a full report when he is released, do you hear me?"

"Yeah, Shuri. I hear you."

"Good. I will talk to you soon."

"Bye."
As the call disconnected, Darcy collapsed into one of the seats, dropping her phone onto the chair next to her and running a hand over her face. Her foot beat out a dizzying rhythm on the floor for a few minutes before she stood up, full of restless energy, restarting her pacing. After what seemed like a lifetime, but was probably only another hour, she heard soft voices. She came to stand before the doors, watching as Helen Cho made her way down the hall toward her. She was still wearing her scrubs, her hair tied back from her head and hidden behind a surgical bonnet.

Darcy tried to ignore the nausea that welled in her stomach, trying to decide if Dr. Cho coming to see her while still gowned meant something good or something bad. She bit her lip, opening a bit of skin she'd already worried, feeling the sting and the sharp copper taste of blood. The doctor had barely walked into the room before Darcy bombarded her with questions. "Is he okay? Did it work? Are you done? When can I see him?"

Helen blinked softly at Darcy, her lips turning up in a serene smile. "He is stable. We have completed the replacement, but he is asking for you."

"Okay, but did it work?"

"Please follow me, Ms. Lewis."

Darcy wanted to grab the woman and shake her. Nothing the doctor had said was particularly reassuring, and it appeared demanding answers wasn't going to get her anywhere. She trailed behind Dr. Cho, trying to calm herself down. If anything had gone wrong, they would have told me. They'd have told me, right? Of course they'd have told me. It's fine. He's stable. That's good. This is good."

"If you would let my assistants dress you, I'll take you to Sergeant Barnes."

The process of being wrapped in a surgical gown and having her curls hidden behind a scrub cap was tedious, and as they scrubbed her hands, Darcy couldn't help trying to see around them and into the operating room. She had no idea what they were doing this for, but if doing this meant she got to see Bucky, she'd let them scrub her hands to the bone. Finally, it appeared they were satisfied that she was clean, and led her into the suite.

There were more people inside than she thought there would be. A man sat behind Bucky's head, monitoring his anesthesia. There were three nurses waiting by trays of wicked looking instruments, as well as monitoring the steady beat of Bucky's heart and his blood pressure. Another doctor was already standing next to Bucky, his head bent low, voice audible but just barely. Dr. Cho led her closer until Darcy could see Bucky's head move, his grey eyes swinging to look at her.

"Hey, doll," Bucky said, giving her a subdued smile.

"Hey, Buck," Darcy managed, her breath hitching on the way in, eyes filling with tears. "How are you feeling?"

"That's actually why you're here." At Darcy's look of confusion, Bucky nodded her closer. "They did their bit and now's the time they want me to find out if everything's working the way it's supposed to."

"And you wanted me to be here with you when they checked?" Darcy asked, following Dr. Cho as she was led toward Bucky's left side, a bit of the table jutting out and covered by a cloth. She was directed closer to the table, coming to stand beside him, leaning over his left arm which was hidden from sight.

"I wanted the first thing I touch to be you," Bucky said, his smile brightening when he could see her
"Oh," Darcy said, feeling her chest constrict with emotion, wanting to wipe her tears but being afraid it would somehow contaminate her and she'd be hurried away. "Yeah, okay," she finally said, giving him a watery smile as he blinked up at her, "let's do this."

"Yeah?"

"I mean, if it's okay?" She looked hopefully up to Dr. Cho, who gave a nod of her head and smiled warmly.

One of the nurses moved closer, grabbing the end of the cloth covering Bucky's arm and pulling it away. The gleaming chrome had been replaced with a sheen of dark gray, the metal familiar except for the color. There was a vein of cobalt at the seams, tracing each individual plate, the same deep, dark blue that connected Bucky, Steve and her together. On his upper arm, where there'd once been a red star, the symbol was now gold, a gold so bright and shining that it reminded her immediately of the strobing vibrancy of Steve's soul. In the middle of that gold, glittering like an emerald, was another star. For her.

"Oh, Buck," Darcy gasped, tears flowing freely now, sniffling as she took in a ragged breath. "It's beautiful."

"Shuri helped with the design," Bucky explained, watching her hazel eyes pour over every inch; there was no revulsion or pity in her gaze, no worry of pain or hint of fear. Darcy looked at his arm like it was something stunning, not something signaling darkness and death. He'd always struggled with the complicated feelings he had for his prosthetic. That he'd been able to design this, to make it into something he was proud of instead of guilty and ashamed...

He'd discussed the possibility with Dr. Chaas at length but it had never seemed like the right time. After the Wakandan doctor’s death, Bucky thought of moving forward with the procedure as a tribute to the man who'd helped him heal. Getting to choose what he wanted it to look like was just one more way to take back that feeling of control, to anchor the arm as something he'd decided for himself, something that showed what was important to him.

And nothing was more important than Steve and Darcy and the way they were all connected.

"Okay Sergeant Barnes, go slowly and let us know if anything pinches, or feels uncomfortable, or if anything feels numb. It might take a moment for your nerves to catch up with the new pathways we've built. Slow and easy."

Bucky nodded at Dr. Cho's words, taking a deep breath in before his head turned to the side, looking down the line of his arm as he moved his fingers experimentally. His fingers twitched, each digit giving a small wave. He twisted his wrist, the sensation familiar and also not. It didn't feel particularly different than the last prosthetic, but it was what was inside his fingers and arm that mattered the most. Bucky's grey eyes flicked toward Darcy, seeing the carefully hesitant look on her face, and he gave her a smile. "You ready?"

She didn't trust her voice at all, so Darcy only nodded, eyes widening as Bucky lifted his arm. As his hand hovered centimeters away from her skin, she took in a deep breath and held it, not certain what to expect. When his palm - his warm palm - pressed to her cheek, the gasp that fell from her lips was loud, the end of it turning into a laugh. Darcy's arm lifted, holding her hand over his, shoulders shaking as she cried with happiness.

For the first time in years, Bucky could feel the heat of skin through his fingers, feel the moisture of
Darcy's tears as it slid across the metal. He closed his eyes, the motion forcing tears of his own to break free and slide into his hair. When he opened his eyes, the lightness in Darcy's expression was matched with his own, surprise and happiness filling him until his own laughter filled the air. "I can feel you."

Darcy turned her head, pressing her lips to his palm, eyebrows raising when she looked back at him. "And that?"

Bucky nodded, the grin on his face wide. He shifted his gaze toward Dr. Cho, seeing the pleased look on her face. "I feel everything."

"No pain? No numb points?" At the shake of his head, the smile on her lips grew. "We'll want to do a few more thorough tests, of course, and we've still got a bit of work before we're done here today, but this is very promising."

"So what's next?" Darcy asked, keeping his hand pressed to her cheek, not wanting to let go yet.

"We finish up here, take him to recovery, and if everything goes well, he'll be able to be released later tonight. There'll be some physical therapy, but I don't think it's anything Sergeant Barnes can't handle."

Bucky looked back into Darcy's eyes, running his fingers over her skin, so soft and warm pressed against him. "You'll tell Steve? Let him know everything's okay?"

"Are you kidding? I'm telling everyone!" At Bucky's laugh, Darcy leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, grinning as she kissed him. "You're amazing, you know that?"

"Go tell our guy that he can stop fretting, will ya? I'm sure the punk’s worrying himself sick."

Darcy pulled back with a nod, sniffing. "I can do that."

"I'll see you in a little bit?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

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He and Hill had traveled to the other S.H.I.E.L.D. prison facilities, making sure they were safe after the attack on the Vault. Everything appeared to be secure, but Steve'd given some ideas for further safety protocols, just in case. Meeting with the designers of the new facility had been great, making sure that the mistakes made with the Raft weren't repeated. Steve made it clear to Maria that even if the world council and S.H.I.E.L.D. didn't think the Geneva convention applied to them, he'd make their lives a living hell if he found out they weren't abiding by it.

Regardless of how important the day was - all the meetings, the plane rides, the useless introductions and bureaucracy - his real attention had been centered here, at home, with Bucky. Steve knew how important this procedure was to his best friend, how nervous Bucky had been whenever he or Darcy had asked about it. Despite Darcy and Bucky assuring him that they understood why he couldn’t be there, he felt the weight of guilt in his chest as he made his way to them.

Darcy's text of Everything went perfectly. He's starving so we're getting dinner. We'll have something in the fridge for you when you get home. Be safe. Love you!, had calmed some of his
worry, but Steve knew it would take actually laying eyes on Bucky before he would feel better. He pressed his thumb to the door, pushing through, eyes widening with surprised when he found Bucky awake and sitting on the couch, one of Ma's quilts thrown over himself.

Bucky's eyes swung toward the door, smiling softly at Steve where he'd frozen in the doorway. "Hey, punk."

"Hey, Buck," Steve said quietly, glancing toward the bedroom door.

"She's asleep," Bucky said, knowing that's what Steve had been wondering. "I think she got less sleep last night than I did."

"Our girl's a worrier." Steve dropped his tac bag by the door and toed off his shoes, body full of tension as he came to stand next to the couch, looking down at Bucky, concerned and wondering why he'd hidden himself below the blanket. "She said everything went well. Are you... You're not in pain? If you need -"

"I'm fine, Steve. Really." He watched Steve take a seat on the couch, uncertainty on his face. "Darcy tried to tell me we should have this big thing where I show you would it looks like. She said something about 'gender reveal' parties being all the rage but I talked her out of it. Apparently she’s already planning one for Jane."

Steve's lips turned up at the story, believing one-hundred percent that Darcy would want to make a production out of it all, some over-the-top gesture. "Sounds like Darce," he said, affection in his voice. "Why would she think it needs a reveal?"

Bucky sighed, shrugging his shoulder. "I think some of her sentimentalism might have infected me. I made a few changes to the design."

Eyebrows raising slightly, Steve blinked at him. "Like from one of your sci-fi novels?"

A chuckle at Steve's question and the look on his face rumbled in Bucky's chest, his head shaking softly. "No, I don't have attachments or weapons hidden inside. Maybe next time."

When Steve still continued to look at him with a hesitant expectation, Bucky pulled the quilt from his body, baring the limb and holding it out to Steve for inspection.

Steve's eyes took in everything slowly, gaze sweeping over the prosthetic and taking notes of what had changed. Cobalt sparkled in the gaps between the plates, which were now a darker metal color. When he saw the stars, one gold surrounding another of emerald, he felt the breath huff out of his chest. "Bucky, it's -"

Bucky lifted his arm, thumb brushing along Steve's jaw while the rest of his fingers wrapped around the back of Steve's neck. The words that had been about to fall from his best friend's mouth were stolen by the movement, and Bucky swallowed thickly, still overwhelmed by the new sensations the arm allowed him to feel.

His sharp intake of breath broke the silence that had descended over them, Steve feeling so many crushing emotions that it was hard to know where to begin. He could feel the heat in Bucky's hand, in the fingers rubbing over his skin, and that alone was enough to make tears pool in his eyes. He reached up and wrapped his hand around Bucky's bicep, feeling that same flush of warmth, brushing upward until he could run his finger along the skin where Bucky's shoulder ended and the prosthetic began. "No more pain?"

"No more pain. No more coldness, or headaches, or pinching nerves. No more Zola." Bucky
watched Steve's eyes flash in anger, remembering the scientist who'd been the one to experiment on Bucky... "This isn't him, or Hydra. It isn't the Soldier. It's Shuri and Dr. Cho. It's you and Darcy."

"And you," Steve said, eyes flicking up to pin Bucky, the movement pushing the tears down his cheeks. "This is you, Bucky. You chose this. Nobody but you. It's amazing. You're amazing."

"You're warm," Bucky said, another laugh breaking free, this one joined with Steve's, too. "I keep rubbing my fingers over the quilt. It's so soft."

"Be careful with that, it's probably considered an antique by now." The grin on Steve's face was bright, his chest tight with happiness and the affection for the man across from him.

"I've got news for you, punk, so are we."

Steve laughed, pushing on Bucky's shoulders so he could get a better look at the stars. "The gold's for me, right?"

"No. Stark. Why?" When Steve's eyes narrowed and he pulled his face back to glare at him, Bucky rolled his eyes. "Yeah, the gold's for you. The green's for our girl. And the blue -"

"The lines that connect us," Steve finished for him, marveling at how Darcy could just close her eyes and see these colors in all of them. "Beautiful."

Bucky would have never accepted the word 'beautiful' when it came to what Hydra and Zola had given him. But now, wearing the gold, emerald and cobalt, knowing what it signified? 'Beautiful' sounded just about perfect.

"Have you tested it out yet?" When Bucky raised one dark eyebrow at him, Steve's couldn't help the huff of laughter at the look on his lover's face. "Shut up."

"We were waiting for you," Bucky said, the smirk on his face dark and wolfish.

"Well, I'm home now." Steve stood, holding his hand out for Bucky's left arm.

"Yeah. Yeah you are."
On The Horizon

Chapter Summary

Darcy has lunch with Natasha and Laura, Bucky and Steve go on a mission, and Darcy finally hears *That Word*. The six letter word. You know the one.

Chapter Notes

How's everyone doing out there after the events of Infinity War? Broken? Utterly devastated? Yeah. Me too. *commiserating fist bump*

Here's something soft and shiny. Well, mostly soft and shiny. I'm grimacing at myself on behalf of all of you.

You're all amazing. The comments and kudos and shares blow me away every time. This little bit of wording is about to hit 300K words. What Even. It's nuts. The fact that you're willing to sit through all of that is mind-boggling awesome. Thanks. Truly. Writing is how I de-stress so my S.O. and cats thank you as well!

<3<3<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
We used to be so strong.  
Now things, things are all wrong.  

- The Storm by Elenowen

Darcy looked up when she heard Laura coming down the stairs, the mother’s movements slow and deliberate. It was obvious she’d come to memorize every slat of wood that would have creaked, all in an effort to not wake the fussy four-year-old that she’d just put down for a nap. “Is that another one of your mom super powers?” Darcy asked, grinning when Laura’s eyes swung toward her, filled with amusement, “being able to move silently through the house?”

“Clint said we don’t refinish the floors until everything else is done first,” Natasha answered, hands wrapped around her mug of tea, “which means we’ve learned to adapt.”

“Not that you needed any help moving silently,” Laura said to Natasha, taking the seat to the left of her wife and accepting the steaming tea when it was pushed in her direction.

“Yeah, I had some skills coming into the relationship, but they took years to get. You got them overnight.”

The snort of disbelief from Laura was heartfelt, the look in her brown eyes equally offended and entertained. “Overnight? Try thirty-six hours.”

Darcy’s hazel eyes widened impossibly large, both hands dropping to the table as she stared at the older woman. “You were in labor for thirty-six hours?!”

“Mmmmhmmm,” Laura hummed, sitting back in her chair, glancing at Natasha when the assassin-turned-agent stretched to hook her foot on one of the rungs below. “You ever notice Clint favoring his right hand? That’s because I broke two of the bones in the left from squeezing so hard.”

“Fuck,” Darcy hissed, immediately glancing around to make sure tiny ears didn’t hear the curse before remembering that the older kids were at one of Laura’s brothers’ houses for the weekend. “That’s pretty impressive.”

“Don’t let the tough-guy routine fool you. Clint Barton is a giant marshmallow.”

Darcy’s lips curled up at Laura’s words, imagining a fluffy white marshmallow wearing an obscene amount of purple and trying to shoot an arrow, but being unable to do so because the circumference of his body. “Well, I know what I’ll be calling him the next time I see him.”

“You’re training tomorrow, right?” At Darcy’s raised eyebrow, Laura pointed to the wall over Darcy’s shoulder. “We keep everything up there. Kinda hard with all of us, but we’re giving it the ol’ college try.”

Her interest piqued, Darcy climbed to her feet, bringing her hot chocolate as she studied the very intricate, very colorful dry erase board on the door leading into the pantry. Each family member had their own color and the surface was rainbow-hued and busy; she could see ‘Training with Darce’ in purple blocky handwriting she recognized as Clint’s, an ominous ‘recon’ was written in tiny red script, and Laura’s perfect penmanship was spread across the month in blue with things like ‘dentist appt’ or ‘farmer’s market’ and their assigned times in each of the little boxes.
“There’s so much going on,” Darcy said, trying to figure out how it all worked, “you make it look so effortless.” The bark of laughter made her spin, the sound of mirth coming from Laura making Darcy laugh, too. “What?”


“That is what she said,” Natasha mused, green eyes sparkling as she watched Darcy make her way back to the table.

“What? Like I haven’t already confessed my complete and utter adoration of you,” Darcy said, rolling her eyes. “I just don’t know how you do it all.”

“I have help,” Laura said, face still turned in affectionate humor, eyes sparkling as she watched Darcy blink. “Even when Clint and Tasha are out I know I can always call backup if I need it. The kids are getting old enough that they can help with Nate. Groceries can get delivered now. And Amazon? So much easier than going to the mall.”

One of Darcy’s eyebrows raised in Laura’s direction. “So you credit the internet with the amazing way you juggle all these balls?”

Natasha matched Darcy’s raised eyebrow with one of her own. “You can’t just ask someone how they juggle all their balls, Lewis.”

“You know what, Romanoff?” Darcy asked, earning a small smirk from the Russian across the table before she turned back to Laura. “My question about ball handling still stands.”

Laura took a small sip of her tea, grinning as she set her mug down. “The internet helps. Smart phones. Shared google calendars? So great. And having Friday here just in case makes me feel better about it all.”

“Wait, you guys have Friday here?” Darcy glanced up at the ceiling with lifted eyebrows. She knew Friday didn’t actually live in the ceiling but it had become a hard habit to shake.

“Only for emergencies,” Natasha clarified, reaching out to squeeze Laura’s knee. “If Laura or the kids need any kind of help, they can have Friday alert us at the compound. Just another failsafe.”

“After Clint brought the group for the first time, Tony felt the need to make sure we were covered.”

“How uncharacteristically magnanimous of him,” Darcy joked, knowing full well that it was the exact kind of thing Tony would do. She wouldn’t put it past him to have added some additional safety measures that they didn’t know about. She’d have to dig through his files when she got back to work.

Pushing the thoughts of her purposefully emotionally distant boss to the side, Darcy settled her eyes back on Laura. “So ‘Many hands make light work’? That’s what you’re going with?”

“Six hands are better than four, as I’m sure you know very well...” When Darcy’s face fell into scandalized lines, Laura laughed under her breath. “I’m just saying that we find where the cracks are and shore them up before they become bigger problems.”

“It helps that Laura is wife enough for two people,” Natasha said ignoring the eyeroll that Laura sent her way. At Darcy’s look of confusion, Natasha sat her mug on the table and leaned forward. “She hates the antequetainted insinuation of what a ‘wife’ is or isn’t, but forgetting where feminism and real life problems coincide, Laura is able to run this house like a well-oiled machine. Clint might be good with his hands and able to do the dishes, but laundry? Forget about it.”
“Not that you’re any better,” Laura said, earning a small smile from Natasha.

“Exactly. I used to buy new packs of underwear instead of washing mine. I’d just throw them out.”

“That sounds ridiculously expensive,” Darcy said, trying to imagine how much money she’d be literally throwing away if she did the same with all her lace and silk.

Natasha shrugged her shoulder. “I had enough in the bank from jobs that it didn’t matter. The things Clint and I struggle with are things Laura can do in her sleep.”

“And there are things Laura can’t do?”

“She can do everything, but wanting to do them is a different story.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped dramatically and she looked over at Laura in feign shock. “What’s this then? Things you won’t do? I don’t believe it.”

“Yardwork.” Laura said, nose crinkling in distaste. “I hate mowing or raking. I don’t shovel in the winter. That used to be Clint’s job but he’s started foisting it onto Cooper. I like gardening but can’t stand weeding. I love getting groceries but clothes shopping? No. I loathe buying new clothes.”

“Clint and I don’t mind shopping for you.”

“Yes, and if either of you came back with anything other than black and lacy and far too racy for the next PTA meeting, I’d let you do it all.”

“That last black lace thing we bought was meant to be worn in the house, preferably when the kids are already asleep and we’ve got some time to ourselves.”

“When was the last time that happened, Tasha? Two years ago? We’ve got another fourteen years before this house is empty. You think that black lacy thing is still going to fit me in fourteen years?”

Darcy leaned on the table and put her chin in her hand as she watched the play between the two women, grin growing larger the longer they threw barbs back and forth. Somewhere in all the time spent with them, Laura and Natasha had come to trust Darcy, opening up their lives, showing with example what a healthy, balanced relationship looked like. It wasn’t conventional but it worked, and it worked because they put in the time it took to keep it that way.

When Laura had starting inviting her to lunch every other weekend, Darcy hadn’t expected Natasha to join them as often as she had. The agent had been quiet at first, content to let Laura and Darcy steer the conversation, only chiming in when Laura asked for confirmation or to clarify something Darcy had said about her training. Over the past few months, though, it’d become clear just how comfortable Natasha had become. She wasn’t afraid to show physical attention toward Laura and Clint, she smiled much more than she had in the beginning, and Darcy would swear that she’d heard the ex-assassin snort with laughter once.

It was easy to forget how hectic life was outside of the sunlit kitchen that smelled like tea and cherry jam, sitting at a table whose surface was covered in a lifetime’s worth of nicks and gouges, and watching two people who were utterly in love needle each other as only those who were utterly in love could.

When she realized they’d said something to her, Darcy straightened, cheeks heating softly with embarrassment when she’d gotten caught staring. “Hmm, what?”

“I just asked how the jump from training to being in the field was going,” Laura said softly, seeing
Natasha take a long sip of tea in her peripheral vision. “You were pretty jumpy about it before. How’s it feel now that you’ve got a few missions under your belt?”

“Good! Yeah, good. Very good. I’ve been out a few times now. Nothing big. Well, that first time was big. Everything else has been pretty quiet. Not that I’m complaining at it being quiet,” Darcy said in a rush when she saw Natasha’s eyebrow raise, “but I know Steve’s been anxious about it. Well, anxious about something, anyway. I know you’ve been working pretty closely with him, Nat. Has there really been no movement on the Dead Asshole Army front?”

Laura snorted as Darcy’s question, brown eyes swinging toward Natasha questioningly. “Dead Asshole Army?”

“If we had any intel on where Thanos’ army had gone, we’d be headed there now. First time something shakes, we’ll be ready to move.”

Darcy leaned forward on the table, an over exaggerated expression of frustration on her face. “Gosh, it’s kind of like you have this web that would vibrate when it snares something. That’d make you a… fuck, why am I coming up blank?”

“You’re talking about Spiderman,” Laura offered Darcy, shrugging her shoulders when Natasha pointed narrowed eyes in her direction.

“You know, you’re right, Laura, I was totally thinking about someone else. My bad.” Darcy shared an amused look with Laura before she grabbed her cocoa and took a sip.

“At least I have an alias,” Natasha said, smirk curling her lips, “what was it they called you in that last article?”

“Mmmm,” Darcy hummed, setting her mug on the table, face screwing up in fake consideration, “pretty sure they referred to me as ‘other assorted agents’.”

“Well, they can’t all be winners, honey,” Laura offered, hearing a snort of laughter from the woman at her side.

“Trust me, we won't be followed where we're going.”

Steve could feel people trailing behind them, hearing the little shutters on their phones and cameras snapping as he and Bucky made their way down the street. There’d have been more people, he was sure, but he’d planned this as much as he could, doing his best to upset the normal paparazzi routine; it was mid-afternoon in a part of the city that tended to only get crowded after dark, there was a S.H.I.E.L.D. press conference currently happening downtown that he and Bucky had been scheduled to attend, and both of them were wearing hats and hoodies despite the summer heat.
Steve knew it wasn't their most inconspicuous mission, but this was probably the best chance they'd get. As they approached the front door, his eyes focused on a large man in black standing beside it, his arms crossed over his chest, black and gray tattoos covering his skin. When his eyes spotted Steve and Bucky, he pulled the door open then stepped in front of the small group of people that'd been following them, making it clear that, unlike Steve and Bucky, they would not be welcome inside.

Bucky's eyes adjusted from the bright sunlight summer day to the dark and dim interior of the restaurant. He pushed his hood back, casting his calculating gaze around the room. "Here? We're meeting the contact here?"

"Здравствуйте, Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, it is good to see you again."

Smiling, Steve moved forward and shook Anatoly's outstretched hand, "good to see you too, Anatoly. Thanks for letting us use your place for this."

"Of course. I am more than happy to assist a friend in need, and when that need is as noble as yours? I hope you don’t mind, but I told my клецка, my wife, about this meeting. She was most helpful with suggestions. I hope you are pleased."

Anatoly’s accent was thick and made the words crisp but weighty. Steve chuckled, casting his eyes toward the ground, pink embarrassment in his cheeks and anxiety in his voice. "Good, because I think we can use all the help we can get,” he said, unzipping his hoodie then peeling it off.

“I was very nervous when I was sharing your shoes. No jitters about my decision, no, but worried that I would choose wrong.” At Steve’s small nod of agreement, Anatoly took a step forward and lowered his voice. “Do not worry. If she is the right woman, it will not matter what you bring her, it will only matter what you ask.”

“How long have you…"

“It will be our thirty-third anniversary this year. We married when we were young. So young. But also so much in love that everything seemed possible, even the idea of travelling to America and making a new life. I would be nothing without my клецка.”

“Any pointers?” Bucky asked, pulling his hat off and throwing it on the table.

Anatoly laughed, reaching out to cuff Bucky’s shoulder. “Ah, I wish it was so easy. I am a good businessman, but matters of the heart are much more dangerous. When it comes to my Mishka, I live only to serve her, to love her more than she loves me. If you do it right, out-loving each other will take all of your lifetime. It is the only game where even if you lose, you still win.” His dark eyes were shining as he grinned, gaze flicking over their shoulders as someone emerged from the back room. “Ah, here he is. The man with the goods.”

Steve and Bucky both turned toward the new man. He was older, his hair grey and wispy across his scalp, his button-down held flat by suspenders, a leather bag under one arm. “I’m sorry I’m late. I made sure to park a few blocks away, as per your instructions. I’m not accustomed to these type of cloak-and-dagger scenarios.”

It didn’t surprise Steve in the slightest that Natasha had told the jeweler to be careful being seen. The last thing he wanted was an errant picture giving everything away. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us under such odd circumstances. We’re just trying to be as careful and discreet as possible.”

“I will leave you to your business,” Anatoly said, reaching out to shake Steve’s hand again. “Let me
know if you need any further assistance. Take all the time you need. We will make sure you leave without risk.”

Bucky watched the Russian businessman make his way toward the back of the building, past the pool hall to where he ran his enterprise. He’d been told by Natasha that Anatoly had commissioned a new piece of art for his office after their first visit that night before Christmas. There was a large piece of ripped felt surrounded by a frame on the wall. Below the shredded fabric was a small sign that read ‘Доказательство Зимние солдаты пропустили’. (Proof The Winter Soldier Misses)

“If you’d give me a minute, I can show you what I brought and we can determine what kind of piece you’re looking for.”

At Steve’s nod, the man set to his task, laying down a piece of black velvet before pulling several small racks from the interior of his bag and setting them in the light. Steve’s eyebrows raised as rings of all shapes, colors, and sizes were displayed. He’d had no reason to do something like this in the past, and the large variety of options were enough to make his head spin. “Wow.”

Bucky followed the man’s movements with his eyes, sliding from bauble to bauble, sizing them up. There were plenty he knew immediately weren’t going to work; Darcy didn’t wear much jewelry, but when she did, it was almost never yellow gold, which nixed almost half of what the jeweler had set out. “No yellow gold,” Bucky said with a shake of his head.

The jeweler looked up at Bucky, giving him a long blink before nodding. “Very well. I will only show you white gold and platinum bands. Is yellow in general not her color, or would yellow diamonds be acceptable?”

“Yellow diamonds?” Steve asked, uncertainty coloring his voice.

“Oh yes. Yellow and pink diamonds are on trend this year. They’ve dipped recently but we’re expecting them to make a comeback. How about I spread out what I have, grouped by color and type, and we’ll start there?”

The next half hour was spent learning more than they’d ever expected to know about purchasing engagement rings. The multitude of styles, and bands, and gem shapes… Steve was completely out of his depth, and judging by the hazy look in Bucky’s eyes, his best friend wasn’t faring much better. “I don’t think we’re interested in the solitaries.”

Bucky was only half-listening to the spiel the man was feeding them. He didn’t care about carats, or clarity, or any of the other ‘c’ words the jeweler was talking about, he just wanted to find something that would make Darcy happy. Ever since he’d agreed with Steve that proposing was the next step, he’d found himself thinking about it constantly. The fear was still there, but the worries he’d been focusing on before had slowly been eclipsed by excitement.

He couldn’t help imagining Darcy’s face, the way her jaw would drop, how her eyes would grow impossibly wide. She always complained that she cried so easily these days and Bucky knew there’d be tears on her cheeks. Even if this was a surprise, it was an inevitability, and now that the decision had been made, he wanted to see all of it. He wanted it to be perfect.

Or - just like with the three of them - the nearest to perfect they’d ever get.

Bucky ran his prosthetic finger over the velvet, enjoying the softness that he could feel with the digit,
still wrapping his head around the sensations Cho and Shuri had managed to achieve. A glint of white and blue caught his eye, winking brightly from the inside of a drawstring bag. He hooked his dark-metal finger in the silver band and freed the ring, lifting it into the light. “Steve.”

Steve shook his head at the jeweler who’d been showing him something with diamonds around the entire band. “I like it, but I’m not sure it’s her style.”

“Steve.”

“Do you have anything -”

“Steve!”

At Bucky’s insistent tone, Steve tore his slightly-overwhelmed gaze from the table full of sparkle and toward his best friend. “What?”

“This one,” Bucky said, fingers carefully holding the bit of silver and shine toward Steve, nodding his head. “It’s this one. This is the one.”

Steve took the ring from Bucky’s hand, eyes pouring over the stones that seemed to glow. The ring didn’t look like any of the others, somehow looking older that the bands they’d seen so far. There were soft engravings on the sides, something akin to leaves but more fragile looking, more delicate. The diamond in the middle was a unique shape, each of the eight sides flanked by a blue gemstone, giving the entire ring a particular look and feel.

“Ah, that. Yes. It’s not really what’s currently in style. I suppose you could call it vintage. It’s Art Deco, from the 1930s. You think she’d appreciate something from that era?”

Bucky’s eyes swung toward Steve, a smirk crawling across his lips. “She sure as shit better,” he said, eyes bright when Steve looked up at him with a smile.

“What can you tell us about it?” Steve turned toward the jeweler, holding the bit of metal and gem between his fingers as if he could break it by moving too quickly.

“Well let’s see here.” The man flipped a bit of tech over his eye and leaned forward, looking at the ring with a critical expression. “Like I said, it’s an art deco piece from the 1930s. You can see the scrolling and detail down the sides, which was the popular style at the time. The band is white gold, the larger stone a diamond, weight under half a carat. The blue gems are sapphires, but it’s hard to know for sure the carat weight and dimensions since it’s already placed in the setting. I’d hazard a guess at under half a carat for the stones total.”

“It was actually made in the 1930s?” Bucky asked, one dark eyebrow raising.

“Yes. It arrived from overseas. This one’s known as the Stark’s Ring, named after the man who brought the ring into the country. Whoever he’d had it made for obviously didn’t accept it, because it’s been in our warehouse for almost ninety-years.”

“The Stark’s ring?” Bucky asked, eyes narrowing at the jeweler, uncertain if the man was screwing with them.

The look on Bucky’s face must have spoke volumes because the man’s hand slowly stretched out toward him, the ring catching the light and sending it around the room in sparks. “We keep records on our vintage pieces and I can provide you with a much more detailed history, if that’s what you’d like.”
Steve took the ring, blinking as he turned it this way and that, watching the way the sapphires seemed to pulse with color. While he’d never seen the blue that tied the three of them together, it was clear from Bucky’s reaction that something about this ring in particular was special. “You sure this is the one, Buck?”

When Steve looked up at him, the question hanging in the air between them, Bucky took in a deep breath, grey eyes shifting toward the piece held carefully between Steve’s fingers. Nothing else they’d looked at spoke to him the way this ring had. Despite the lifetime of Darcy’s memories being there for him to draw from, she’d never even considered what type of engagement ring she’d want, so he wasn’t able to rely on her memories or feelings. Bucky could only guess at what she’d like, but somehow he knew that this was the thing they’d been looking for, despite having no clue what they’d been looking for in the first place.

“I can’t believe we’re proposing with a ring designed by Howard Stark, but yeah, punk, this is the one.”

Steve looked at Bucky for a long moment, seeing the certainty in Bucky’s gaze. When his best friend’s grey eyes slid up to look at him, Steve couldn’t help the smile that made its way onto his lips, turning toward the jeweler with a nod. “Looks like we have a winner. How much are you looking to get for it?”

The man took the ring back, looking down at it then back up at Steve and Bucky, a considering and shrewd expression on his face. “This particular ring is ten-thousand dollars.”

“Jesus,” Bucky hissed, watching Steve’s eyes blink quickly as the blond continued to look at the jeweler. “You hear that, Steve? We could have bought the whole damn apartment building back home for that much!”

“Things cost more now, Bucky,” Steve said, still trying to accept the price himself.

“No that fucking much. That’s cold stone robbery,” Bucky said, crossing his arms over his chest. “We’ll give you five.”

“... the prices aren’t negotiable, sir.”

“The hell they’re not! This is your business, right? You’re the boss?”

“Yes, but -”

“Then that means you set the price.”

The man glanced back down at the ring in his hands. “Seeing as it is vintage, and since all the gems are real and weren’t grown in a lab -”

Steve’s head cocked to the side at the man’s words, the idea of bartering with the prices like a talent he pulled from his back pocket, remembering the fish markets they’d grown up with and the colorful game of negotiating. If Bucky wanted to turn the screws on the jeweler, Steve was more than willing to get on board. “What, you have something against things that were made in a lab?”

The jeweler’s eyes widened as he looked back and forth between the men. “That’s not -”

“We’ll give you seven,” Steve said, more forceful this time, willing to do anything to get this ring but not willing to let the jeweler know it.

“And, if anyone asks where we got it, we’ll point them in your direction. Don’t know if you know,
but this punk here is kind of a big deal.” When Steve glanced over at him, Bucky shrugged a
shoulder, saying without words that he wasn’t above using their publicity if it meant something good
for a change.

“Seven and we have a deal,” Steve said, practically seeing the wheels turning behind the smaller
man’s eyes, knowing he was on the verge of agreeing.

“That’s the best you’re gonna get. Like you said, it’s been sitting in your warehouse for ninety-years.
We’d be doing you a favor buying it.” He was probably laying it on a little thick, but Bucky wasn’t
willing to back down now.

Another long moment passed before the jeweler nodded, letting out a deep sigh. “I can accept those
terms.”

Bucky’s lips slanted in a smirk, satisfaction beating in his chest when Steve looked over at him with
a bright smile, a feeling of victory in his best friend’s eyes. He knew the visions of Darcy wearing
this sparkle on her left hand was flashing in Steve’s head just like it was flashing in his, and damn if
he wasn’t excited to make it a reality.

PageBreak

“I’m just saying that if you did wear a wire for me that you’d be paid handsomely.”

Darcy rolled her eyes at Clint, hand coming up to block his right hook before she took a large hop
back, avoiding the leg he’d kicked out with seconds later. She kept her hands up, bouncing from one
foot to the other, waiting for his next lunge. She’d never felt comfortable going on the offensive, but
she’d gotten good at judging what was going to be aimed at her next.

“I know this whole spy business is your bread and butter,” she said with a growl, bending back to
avoid a jab, “but I will not tell you what me and your wives talk about. You know if they knew you
were trying to wring it out of me that they’d kick your ass right?”

Clint laughed, a sharpness to his eyes as he circled her on the mat, happy when she mirrored his
movements, not dropping her gaze or relaxing. “Oh, trust me, I’m well aware that the loves of my life
could strangle me in my sleep, but as it hasn’t happened yet, I’m pretty sure this wouldn’t be what
pushed them over the edge.”

“The edge is kinda your home by now, Barton,” Darcy said, dropping when a well-place kick flew
over her head, spinning her leg and managing to catch Clint off guard. He shouted as Darcy’s leg
connected, sending him to the mat. She yelled when his arm lashed out and caught her in the back of
the knee, taking her to the ground, too. She didn’t have a chance to rest as he immediately rolled onto
her, straddling her stomach and attempting to hit her face. Darcy did what she’d been taught, using
her legs to buck against him, arms up and guarding her eyes.

When Clint pulled back to bring an elbow to her chest, she lashed out with her hand, colors bleeding
into her vision. Darcy pushed his purple off of her and watched him fly backward, separating their
bodies before climbing back to her feet, letting the colors bleed away.

Clint groaned, rising to his knees as he took in a deep breath, hand pressed to his chest. He gave her
a considering look before getting to his feet. “You’re getting better. Like second nature. That’s
good.”
“I wish I didn’t have to use them at all,” Darcy grumbled, reaching up to tighten her ponytail. She’d been working hard with Tony on her powers, but when it came to physical combat, Darcy wanted to hold her own. She didn’t want to use her powers until it was absolutely necessary. She wanted to be able to protect herself, abilities be damned.

“Like I said, you’re getting better, but you shouldn’t worry about using your powers.” His eyes widened when they looked over Darcy’s shoulder, hand raising to gesture in the air as someone slipped into the gym. “Nat! Tell Darcy using her powers isn’t a bad thing, because she’s obviously not wanting to listen to me today.”

Natasha shrugged her shoulders at Clint as she took a seat on a bench next to the mat. “I understand where she’s coming from.”

“See?” Darcy said with a wave of her hand in Clint’s direction. “Vindication!”

“I said I understand, not that I agree.”

Darcy put both hands on her hips, looking down at her feet with a sigh. “Just one fucking time, Romanoff. That’s all I was looking for. Just one time!”

“I get why you want to protect yourself without using your powers, but you’re handicapping yourself for no reason.” When Darcy continued to give her a look of dissatisfaction, Natasha climbed to her feet and padded over toward them. “You see using your powers as a crutch, but they’re not. I have my guns and knives, Clint has his arrows. They’re just more weapons in our arsenal. Yeah, sometimes it’ll come down to hand to hand combat, but you should never feel bad for using whatever tools you have available. Hesitation could mean injury. Or worse.”

Clint nodded, looking at Darcy with a weighty, heavy gaze. “If you learn nothing else from me, let it be this: You use whatever weapons you have to so you come home at the end of each mission. Whatever it takes. You feel me?”

Darcy sighed, rolling her eyes at the expressions on both of their faces. “Yeah, I feel you. Metaphorically speaking,” she said, eyes brightening when they shifted toward Natasha. The redhead snorted softly, shaking her head as she went back to her bench.

“Why the snort? Would it be so out of the realm of possibilities for someone other than you and Laura to find me attractive?”

“My dancing card is a little full right now,” Darcy said, catching the towel Natasha threw her way, dabbing at the sweat on her brow. “Besides, it’d be… just wrong. On so many levels.” At Clint’s noise of offense, she waved her hand in the air dismissively. “It’d be like… kind of like…”

“Like family?”

At the pointed look Clint was sending her, complete with a raised eyebrow, Darcy growled and threw her damp towel in his direction. “Like a creepy uncle, yes. The one who lives all alone and sends you chain emails that talk about chemtrails and how the flouride in the water is turning us all into automatons.”

“Chemtrails?” Natasha asked, one corner of her mouth turned up as she watched Darcy and Clint be Darcy and Clint.

“It’s a thing. If you ever want to go down a wikipedia rabbit hole, type in ‘chemtrails conspiracy’ and prepare for craziness. Though, I suppose you’re a woman of action. You might go down to the governor’s office in New York City and threaten them to reveal the truth.”
“Somehow I don’t see that happening,” Clint said, though he couldn’t help grinning at the mental image. “It has been a while since we’ve been in the city, though.”

“Maybe we take the kids next weekend. It’s suppose to be nice out.”

“Maybe,” Clint agreed, dropping himself onto the bench next to his wife. “If we do go, we have to stop at Gray’s Papaya. I haven’t been there in ages.”

**Papaya.**

It felt like the air had been punched out of Darcy's lungs. *That Word.* It was important, but she couldn't figure out know why. What was she trying to remember? Why had her palms gotten sweaty? She wasn't sure she'd ever even eaten the fruit, so why was her heartbeat suddenly racing?

"Darce?"

Hazel eyes blinking, Darcy’s gaze swung toward Clint, whose expression had changed from light and friendly into something different. "Papaya."

"Yeah,” Clint said, voice hesitant, “Gray’s Papaya. Hot dogs. They’re the best. The next time we're in New York -"

"The doctor said that. Papaya."

"What doctor?"

"The doctor! He was here, and he said something about time and flux and he looked nothing like Doc Brown, but he said it! He said *papaya* when he was there in our room, watching us sleep!” Memories were beginning to come back now, like a flood of images. His colors. His facial hair. The gem he wore around his neck. No, not just a gem on a necklace. Another *infinity* stone. Fuck. *Fuck!*

"Doctor Who?"

"No, not Doctor Who. Doctor..." Darcy’s hands moved frantically, trying to get the jumble of thoughts in her head to make sense. "Doctor Weird? No! Doctor Strange!"

Natasha's body went still at her words. "Doctor Strange came to see you?"

"On Christmas morning!"

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't remember it until right now! He said... he said things are out of flux and he's having trouble keeping it all straight, but that he'd written himself a note, and it had my name on it, avengers compound, and the word *papaya*! I don’t…” Darcy looked up at the two of them. “What does that mean?"

"I don’t know," Clint said with a shake of his head, looking over at Natasha.

Natasha’s expression had turned serious, her green eyes lit with focus. "If he came to her it was for a reason."

"But what?"

"A warning."
"Something's wrong at the sanctum," Clint said, tension straightening his spine, carefully coiled energy in his arms. He nodded at Natasha, who ran for the door without another word. He turned back toward Darcy, seeing the panic and confusion on her face, the fear in her eyes. He gripped her shoulders, giving her the full weight of his attention "Doctor Strange guards the New York Sanctum. He helped us fight Thanos."

"Okay, but why would be come to me?"

"I don't know. Maybe the stone he has was able to find you easier, seeing as you're tied to one, too. But whatever it is, it's not good."

Darcy's eyes widened. "What if it's the rest of Thanos' army? We've been searching for them for months! Why would they attack there? Why now?"

"I don't know, but we need to go. We’ll have to grab everyone else. Suit up," Clint clapped her on the shoulder one more time before sprinting toward the door.

"Clint!" Darcy watched him pause in the doorway, body already preparing for a fight as he turned toward her, apprehension in his gaze. "What are we walking into?"

"Don't know, but it doesn't matter, does it?"

The memory of the last time he'd said that to her ghosted through her mind, and Darcy's teeth clenched, pushing at the fear that had threatened to swell. "No," she agreed with a nod, "it doesn't matter."

Chapter End Notes

Nickname Anatoly calls his wife: клецка - My dumpling

ALSO. ABOUT THAT RING:

When the boys decided they needed to get a ring. I sat down and actually had to look for one that would work, which was new for me. I never got an "engagement ring". I got a $10 claddagh stainless silver ring from Spencer's on our 6 month anniversary. 17.5 years later and it's the one I still wear. ANYWAY.

Shopping for rings when you have a guy in your head, who has a girl in HIS head, and neither of whose taste you match 100%... it was An Experience.

So I'm scrolling and not finding anything I like and then I click on 'vintage rings' and FUCKING BAM. A ring that is fucking perfect looking. I click on it and am like "yes. Yes. This is the OMG WHAT THE FUCK IT'S CALLED THE STARK'S RING!?!?"
My jaw. Meet the floor.

I couldn't believe it. Still don't. Life is funny.

Here's the link, just in case you didn't click it in the text:
https://www.brilliantearth.com/The-Starks-Ring-White-Gold-BRR72101/
Withering Echo

Chapter Summary

The Avengers visit Doctor Strange and Wong at the New York sanctum.

Chapter Notes

I just... I know. I know. I'm here, and I know.

<3 <3 <3

PageBreak

In my sleep I can hear a voice,
A call,
A withering echo,
And it sings,
It sings all-knowing words,
But ones I can’t understand,
Like water slipping through my fingers

PageBreak

Darcy stood in the middle of the Quinjet, chewing on her thumbnail and watching Clint get the plane ready. Her eyes were on his hands as he moved on muscle memory, using his quick and confident actions to quiet the quell of alarm in her stomach. She jumped when a hand gripped her shoulder from behind, yanking her from her dark thoughts, a gasp falling from her lips as she turned with raised fists.

"Easy there, tiger," Tony said, concern on his face as he recognized the nervous, haunted look in Darcy's eyes. As her hands dropped uselessly to her sides, realizing she wasn’t in any kind of danger, Tony stepped into her personal space and placed both hands on her shoulders, his brown gaze filled with worry. "You met Strange?"

"Apparently," Darcy said, dry tongue clicking in her mouth. She fist ed and unfisted her fingers, nervous energy sparking in her body as she tried to remember every little detail of the new memory, scouring it for any clues to why anxiety was pooling in the pit of her stomach. It wasn’t enough that a man she’d never met had appeared in the bedroom she shared with Steve and Bucky, but remembering the looks of worry on Clint and Natasha’s faces as she explained what had happened
had been enough to set her on edge.

"When?"

"Christmas morning. He was in our room. Said the word 'papaya' was important, said I'd remember when the time came. Guess time's up."

"But you don't know why?" At the shake of Darcy's head, Tony frowned, "then why are you so freaked out?"

"He has an infinity stone."

"And?"

She dipped her chin in his direction, a look on annoyance on her face. "A man who controls time with an infinity stone, who traveled through time to get to me… He came for a reason, and I've got a pretty good guess it won't be good news. It's not like he just popped in to hand-deliver his colorful, glitter-overloaded Christmas cards. Something's wrong. Wrong enough to do what he did."

Turning away from the controls, Clint turned his attention to Tony and Darcy. "I can't reach Strange or Wong."

"See?" Darcy said, hazel eyes flicking up toward Tony with thinly-veiled fear. "Not good."

When she looked over her boss' shoulder and saw Steve and Bucky making their way into the plane, Darcy practically sagged in relief. Something about this whole thing - suddenly remembering a meeting with someone she'd never met, a memory that'd been erased from her mind, that the man had an infinity stone, and that her connection to the soul stone might have been what brought him to her - had filled her with ominous dread.

"Hey," Steve said, blue eyes focused as he climbed the bay doors into the darkened interior of the jet, wrapping his arms around Darcy when she reached for him. "Nat said you got a message from Doctor Strange?"

"Not a message. He was here," Darcy said with a shake of her head, reaching out to grip Bucky's hand when he neared. "He was in our room, months ago. I only just remembered it."

"Did he say why he came?" Bucky asked, noticing that Darcy's pupils were wide, her breath shallow. It was obvious whatever this was had affected her more than she wanted it to, and as he watched her quickened pulse beat below the skin at her neck, he felt the first thread of worry curl in his stomach.

"Even he didn't know why he was there," Darcy said with frustration. She took a step away from both of them, knowing she needed to get her fear under control. This wasn't the first time she'd been worried or scared before a mission, but something didn't feel right about this, and it was turning her stomach over and over. The ambiguous nature of Strange's visit did little to calm her nerves, and though she was trying, Darcy couldn't seem to shake the cloud of apprehension closing in around her.

Steve watched Darcy cross her arms over her chest, the vibranium threading of her suit catching the light as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. It'd been a while since she'd looked this nervous before a mission, but he couldn't blame her, not with the scant details she could give them. She seemed to be taking a moment, so Steve looked at Bucky, the two of them sharing a silent conversation before they both nodded. He watched his best friend head toward the weapons locker as he crossed toward Clint, who gave him a stilted 'still unable to reach Strange' in greeting.
Darcy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling fractionally better than she had a few seconds ago. She could feel everyone else moving around her, doing their mission prep, and she knew she needed to be doing the same. She turned, eyes widening when she saw Natasha make her way out of the building and start toward them, a familiar person trailing after her. Darcy closed the distance between herself and Tony, hand wrapping around his forearm. "What the fuck?"

Tony's eyebrows furrowed as he followed her line of sight, watching Natasha and Peter make their way into the jet. He turned back to Darcy, an eyebrow raising softly at her. "If something's wrong at the Sanctum it's gotta be all hands on deck."

"Not his hands!" Darcy hissed, turning her back toward Peter and lowering her voice. "If we're headed into some bad shit -"

Moving slowly, seeing the fear in her eyes and hearing it in her voice, Tony carefully pulled his arm out of her grip, not wanting to court her anger when she seemed to be teetering on the precipice of something. "The kid's been training longer than you have. He wants this. And despite what he looks like, he's an adult. An adult with superhuman speed, strength, and reaction time. And those webs he's always tinkering with? They've got the ability to tie up the bad guys."

"Stark -"

"I get it, okay, I do, but I promised the kid we wouldn't leave him behind next time something like this went down. I've made you a few promises too, and I don’t want to be a liar. Don’t think you want me to be one either, Lewis."

Darcy stared into Tony's whiskey eyes, her chest aching with fear for the younger man she thought of as a little brother, as well as acceptance of Tony's words. She was relying on Tony's word, relying on the things he'd promised her, and as much as she hated the idea of Peter getting hurt, she knew how much it stung to be left behind when you were certain you could help.

Taking in a deep breath, Darcy let it pass her lips slowly, focusing on calming the flux of emotions that were vacillating inside of her. She gave Tony a sharp nod of her head. "If something happens to him, I'm holding you responsible."

"That'll make two of us."

The plane trip from the compound to 177A Bleecker street was thankfully short, and Steve was glad that Darcy's breakfast had not made a miraculous reappearance. It appeared whatever fear she'd felt had been replaced with a steely resolve, her jaw clenched tightly as they made their way into the bright summer day. He squinted up at the Victorian brownstone, ears straining to hear any sounds of fighting from inside, Darcy’s palpable worry still fresh in his mind and making him cautious.

"Whoooooa," Darcy said, blinking at the brick rowhouse, mouth falling open as she stared. She felt the sun’s warmth on her face, but her entire focus was on the building in front of them. "What the fuck is this place?"

"What do you see?" Bucky asked, familiar with the look on her face, knowing it meant she was seeing more than the rest of them were.

"It's... glowing. The whole thing is glowing like a fucking Christmas tree." The colors seemed to roil
and roll through the air, sometimes looking like a thick liquid, other times like smoke curling. It was in a constant wave, a rainbow kaleidoscope of hues that seemed to warm her face with their brightness. She took a step closer, wondering if she’d be able to feel it if she put her hand out.

"Strange said something about ley lines and how this is one of the most mystical places on Earth," Tony said, coming to stand on Darcy's other side. "There might have been mention of dragons."

Darcy looked over at Tony sharply, expecting to see a smirk on his face, caught off guard when his expression was completely serious. "You’re not joking? He really said dragons?"

Tony shrugged, gaze sliding back toward the building. “We’ve fought aliens. What’s a few dragons between friends?”

"So, are we just gonna stand out here baking in the sun or are we going to ring the doorbell?" Clint asked, bow already in his hand, Natasha silent and thoughtful at his back.

Peter came up behind the group, everyone seeming to take a moment to stare up at the building with varying degrees of impressed wariness. "Does this place, uh, even have a doorbell?"

Steve shifted his shield from his right arm to his left, not hearing anything from inside but knowing better than to let his guard down. He climbed the stairs, casting a look over his shoulder at the group before he lifted his hand to knock.

The door was pulled open before his knuckles could connect with wood. An Asian man stood there in an apron, a bowl and whisk in hand, looking at Steve with tempered surprise. “Captain Rogers,” Wong said, leaning to the left to look at the motley group spread out behind Steve, “and… guests.”

“It’s good to see you, Wong. You… don’t appear to be in any distress,” Steve said, blue eyes flicking over Wong’s shoulder and attempting to see into the open foyer, expecting to find mess and ruin but only seeing well-cared for hardwood floors and an opulently decorated entrance.

Darcy flinched when a loud crack of thunder crashed around them, followed by the rainbow lightshow that accompanied the first Avenger she’d ever met. Thor strode toward everyone, Mjolnir in his hand, seriousness in his gait. “I was told there was a problem and you needed my assistance.”

“To be fair, I said there might be a problem,” Natasha rasped when everyone turned to look at her, one shoulder lifting delicately. “Figured it couldn’t hurt to have the backup.”

“It’s not that we don’t appreciate you guys visiting us,” Wong started, “but we try to keep this place low profile, unlike having a large skyscraper that dominates the skyline with our names written on the side.” He deftly ignored the look Tony sent his way.

“Maybe we don’t touch the glowing thing yet,” Darcy said with a gesture of her hand, waving vaguely toward the building as she took another step forward, her feet moving of their own accord. She stepped onto the first stair, momentarily forgetting anything except the pretty colors that were dancing in front of her eyes, drawing her closer.

Steve lifted his arm, stopping Darcy’s forward momentum, keeping her from coming into contact with whatever she was seeing. The spell she’d been under seemed to evaporate and she looked at Steve with wide eyes, mouth snapping closed. “Maybe we don’t touch the glowing thing yet,” he offered, happy when she didn’t argue and simply looked toward the man in the doorway.

“Maybe we don’t touch the glowing thing yet,” Wong said, voice tight, “unless she’s a practitioner of the mystic arts. Are you?”
Darcy’s laugh was immediate and tinted with nervousness, knowing she was completely out of her depth. Mystic arts? She hadn’t even mastered finger painting. She opened her mouth to respond but the words died on her lips as a man descended the stairs inside, cloak swirling around his body. “You!” she shouted, finger coming up to point accusingly in Stephen Strange’s direction.

Stephen waved his hand, feeling the protective barrier that surrounded the building fall away. He watched the woman duck under Rogers’ arm and sidestep Wong, making her way inside with an expression of annoyance on her face, hazel eyes flashing. As she neared, he could see a wave of color shimmering in the air around her. He only had a split second of warning before it crashed into him.

When Darcy stretched her arms out toward him, a storm in her eyes, Stephen darted forward, catching her as she stumbled, gripping her forearms and keeping her upright. “You always miss that step,” he said, a small smile on his face as she blinked impossibly wide eyes at him. The gravity and knowledge of what had just happened hit him and his face sobered, realizing what her appearance at the sanctum meant. “If you’re here then they’re coming.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Darcy asked, the hairs on her arms raising, feeling the weird sense that she’d been here but knowing she hadn’t. “Who is coming? What’s going on?”

Stephen glanced over her shoulder, watching the rest of the team make their way into the room, Wong standing by the door with an unamused look on his face as they filed past him. When he felt a tug on his arm, Stephen looked down, his eyes rolling softly. He reached up toward his neck, flipping open the clasp on his cloak and setting it free, the brush of a new memory reminding him that the cloak had always had an affection for the dark-haired stone bearer. “It’s a long story, Ms. Lewis, but I’m afraid we don’t have the time.”

“Doctor Strange, I hear you made a visit to us around Christmas,” Steve said as he stepped up toward the sorcerer, “though I would have enjoyed knowing about it before today.”

Stephen watched his cloak float toward Darcy before it curled around her shoulders, causing her hair to stand up from static electricity as it rubbed itself against her body, her muffled sounds of alarm lifting one corner of his mouth. As Bucky helped to free her from the fabric, he turned his attention back to Steve. “I didn’t remember it either until she stepped through the doors. Like I said, we don’t have time. What’s left of Thanos’ army is going to attack any second. They’re here looking for a way to bring him back.”

“What?!” The cloak seemed to be startled by Darcy’s screech, returning itself to Stephen’s shoulders and settling into place. She took a step closer to the man with facial hair that reminded her of Tony, though he was significantly taller than the billionaire. “What do you mean they’re trying to bring him back. He’s dead! I killed him over a year ago!”

Bucky took a step toward her, hearing the thread of panic in her voice. “Darce -”

She spun toward the soldier, eyes wide with disbelief. “No, Buck. This can’t be happening! This is just like Wanda warned. They’re going to find a way to bring him back and it’s going to destroy everything!” Darcy’s hands were shaking as they reached out reflexively, needing something to hold onto. Months of quiet and training, thinking that she’d moved past the fears, but now they were suddenly back, stronger than ever.

Bucky was there, gripping her hands hard enough to make her teeth grind, distracting her with the pain. “That’s not going to happen because we’re here and we’re going to stop them. Thanos is dead and there’s no way to bring him back.”
“Actually…” All the eyes in the room turned to look at Wong, looking distinctly out of place in his apron and holding a bowl full of muffin batter while the rest of them were suited up and ready for a fight. “That’s not entirely true.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, voice instantly sharp, taking a step toward the sanctum caretaker.

“If they got their hands on the the Time Stone, it wouldn’t bring him back so much as give them a second chance to come at you, knowing what they know now.”

Darcy took a step closer to the man she’d never met. “You mean, go back in time knowing that I’m a mutant, and that I grabbed the stone before he could, and used the stone to kill him? Like they could try to kill me before I ever have the chance to be there? That what you mean?” she asked, the sarcasm in her voice making the words more acidic than she’d meant them to be.

Wong looked at Darcy for a long second before nodding. “Yes. That’s exactly what I meant.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Bucky said with a shake of his head, stepping up next to Darcy, steel in the grey of his eyes when she glanced at him. “No one’s touching you.”

“I mean this as delicately as I can, but it’s not Miss Lewis that needs to be protected.” When Bucky’s eyes swung toward him, danger in all that storm, Stephen coughed lightly before continuing. “They’re here trying to get the Time Stone. If they get their hands on it, it’d be -”

“’Game over, man, game over,’” Darcy quoted, head swiveling back to Bucky, squeezing his hands, forcing him to look at her again. “You’ve gotta protect it. The stone. That’s the mission. That green glowing bitch is the only important thing in this building right now.”

“..also not entirely true.”

Darcy let out a strangled sound, turning to pin Stephen with a glare. “Seriously!? Can’t you just spit it all out at once? Come on!”

“It would be bad if anything in this building were to fall into the wrong hands. The library on the third floor is filled with objects of power, relics and books containing very old and very powerful magic spells.”

“Magic spells, Nat. You hear that? Magic spells.” Clint looked over at Natasha, eyes bright with disbelief, remembering a conversation they’d had years ago about being surrounded by gods, and soldiers with super strength, and people with supernatural powers. The spy leaned toward her husband, her voice too low for anyone else to hear, though his lips curled into a smile at her words.

“Alright,” Tony said, clapping his hands then rubbing them together. “Infinity Stone that can mess with time and an entire library full of magic. Anything else hiding in these walls that we should be wary of?”

Stephen turned toward Tony, mouth opening to answer then closing without a word, a look of contemplation on his face. “There are a lot of things in these walls, not to mention the walls themselves, but nothing as important as the stone or library. If we let them overrun us then the wards go down. If the wards go down… let’s just say they’re here to keeps things in as much as they’re here to keep things out.”

“That’s not ominous as all,” Peter said under his breath, earning an amused grin from Thor, the younger man jumping when the Asgardian punched his shoulder.

“Do not worry, young Parker, we have overcome bleeker odds than these.” At Darcy’s bark of
‘really?’, Thor pointed a grin in her direction. “Just attempting to lift our spirits.”

Everyone looked up when a loud crash sounded from the back of the building followed by a chorus of otherworldly screams. Steve took a deep breath in, steadying himself before turning to the group. “Buck, you and Strange are priority number one. Find a place to hide and stay put. Wong, you and I’ll head upstairs, we’ll cover the library. Everyone else fan out and take out as many as you can, keep them from finding the stone or making it to the third floor. They’re not going to give mercy, so not give it right back. Darce, how many are we looking at?”

Swallowing hard, Darcy took a step away from Bucky and turned toward the back of the house, the sounds growing louder by the second. She blinked into the colors, heart speeding as she saw so many faded bits of light that it was hard to get a true count. “I… I don’t… a lot. Fuck, a lot.”

“Six pack? Twelve pack? Need more to go on.”

“At least twenty, maybe thirty,” she answered, looking over at Clint. “They’re so dark.”

“That’s cause they’re the bad guys.” The archer said while reaching over his shoulder and knocking his first arrow, “which makes us the good guys.”

As the first of Thanos’ army crashed their way into the foyer, Darcy shared a long look with Bucky before Strange created a portal in front of them, orange sparks circling in the air before they both jumped in and disappeared from sight. Chest tightening, her eyes sought Steve’s, looking at his back as he ran up the stairs, Wong right behind him. As Steve hit the landing, he turned and looked down at her, his eyes filled with so much that she had to tear her eyes away.

She tried to tell herself that this was just like every other mission, but somehow Darcy knew that wasn’t the case. Before they separated, she looked down the line at her friends, the ones standing with her against an army of aliens.


“This is going to sound really stupid, but have any of you asked if they’d just give up and go home?” When they all turned to their left to look at her, Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “Just an idea.”

“Hey alien assholes! You guys wanna forfeit and just go home?” Clint shouted toward the screams and crashing. He let out a yelp as a blast of purple whizzed over his head. An arrow was singing in that direction less than a second later, felling the first alien that emerged from the dark hallway. Clint's blue eyes swung to give Darcy a tight smile and a shake of his head. "Guess not."

Bucky stepped out of the portal, looking over his shoulder and catching the first bit of fighting in the foyer before the hole closed into nothing but glowing embers that scattered then disappeared on the ground. His rifle was up and pointing, grey eyes sweeping the room, cataloging entrances and exits. There were no windows, so he assumed they were somewhere underground, hopefully somewhere the army wouldn't be able to breach. "Basement?"

Stephen looked over at Bucky before nodding. "One of the lower levels, yes. I'm almost positive we'll be safe here."

"Almost positive?" Bucky asked, glancing over at him with a questioning expression, attention
swinging toward the ceiling when a *boom!* sounded from upstairs, dust wafting through the air.

"I can't know what type of creatures have attacked."

Bucky frowned. “So you knew they were going to attack, you knew they were Thanos’ army, but you don’t know how many or what kind?”

“Time travel is much harder than they make it seem in the movies.” When Bucky just continued to look at him with confusion, Stephen pointed toward the door. “If any of them are transporters, we may have a problem.”

Bucky's rifle dipped lower as he looked away from the door and back toward the sorcerer. "Why would that matter?"

"There is a room which connects this sanctum to the others in London and Hong Kong. The room is guarded, but for someone who could disregard warded walls -"

"They have a transporter. Steve saw him in the prison. The thing managed to get in and out with information from one of the prisoners."

Stephen took a deep breath in, shaking his head. "No doubt that's how they managed to figure out how to get here. We have to go."

"Wait! Hey!" Bucky watched Strange's hands move as they started to make another portal. "Keeping that stone safe and out of their hands is priority alpha. If this is the safest place, we need to stay here."

Hands dropping, the sigil he'd been working on fading from sight, Stephen turned to Bucky as he shook his head. "The other sanctums were recently rebuilt. If these creatures are able to jump to the other two, there's no telling what else they may be able to destroy. The three sanctums are responsible for protecting the earth from metaphysical and magical attacks. You want to leave two hubs of otherworldly power for the enemy to take over?"

Bucky ground his teeth, grey gaze flicking down toward the talisman hanging from Strange's neck. "Fine," Bucky said finally, tone making it clear he wasn't happy to be straying from the mission. "Get us there and then we get back." He watched Strange turn back, his movements confident before another mirror portal was created and they jumped through.

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The close-combat fighting was something Darcy hadn’t really experienced, not with this many people and in this tight of a space. The electric current of Natasha’s stingers hissed through the air, arrow after arrow fired from Clint’s bow finding their targets. A whiz of blue repulsor blasts flew over her head, followed quickly by Tony’s armor, tackling an impossibly-muscled alien around the middle and crashing through a wall. Aside from all the soul colors she knew so well that corresponded with her friends, Darcy was surrounded by a sea of muted greys, some almost impossible to perceive. They were like shadows at the corner of her eyes.

As she grabbed two of the lights with her hands, fingers forming claws, Darcy saw a flash of red and blue swing by her, white webbing helping Peter chase after an alien that had run up the stairs for places unknown. Chest tightening with worry, she turned to see Thor knock an alien through a wall, his hammer swinging easily in his hand. "Hey, Big Guy! Sending you a few hardballs, you ready?"
Thor's blue eyes narrowed as he nodded at her, a small smile on his lips as he spun Mjolnir in his hand, light on the balls of his feet. Darcy grunted as she threw both of the things she'd captured in his direction, thoroughly satisfied when Thor connected with both of them, a bolt of lightning joining as they flew straight into the air, smashing through the staircase that led to the third floor.

She only had a second of satisfaction before she was flying backward, something heavy and packing a punch having connected with her chest. Darcy slammed back into a wall, leaving a large dent before falling down to her knees. Her suit absorbed the impact but she reached up to rub at the back of her head. Bucky had always joked about getting her a helmet, but as she shook her head to clear the spots from her vision, Darcy thought it sounded like a great future addition to her uniform.

When the alien who'd hit her with its axe ran at her, Darcy's left hand waved dismissively at the creature, sending him flying back the way he'd come. She heard Clint's shout of her name as she climbed to her feet, only swaying softly before she got her footing and ran back into the foyer. The mass of bodies and fighting was like a living thing, rolling through the space in chaotic waves. "Barton!"

Clint loosed his arrow as she ran up to him, grabbing her forearm and tugging her down as his arrow exploded in the air above them, the winged creature he'd targeted becoming a green mist that rained down on all of them. "We're bottlenecked here!" he screamed, nodding his head toward the rapidly destabilizing staircase. "A few got by us and headed upstairs! Thor! Grab Darcy and take 'em out before they get to Cap and the library!"

Darcy only had a second to prepare herself before Thor wrapped an arm around her waist and swung Mjolnir, the flip of her stomach at the sudden motion filling her mouth with saliva. They were only airborne for a few seconds before they skidded to a halt at the mouth of a hallway that lead toward what looked like living quarters. A group of creatures stopped at the entrance to a large room, their fangs baring as they growled at the newcomers.

"I'll take the ones on the right, you've got the ones on the left?" Darcy asked, glancing to the man at her side.

"That sounds like a wonderful game," Thor said, giving her a bright grin that seemed completely out of place for the circumstances but that, for some reason, made Darcy feel infinitely better.

They began moving at the same time, Thor spiraling through the air with a crack of thunder as Darcy pulled two of the armored creatures toward her. She threw their bodies from side to side, crashing them into each other, the walls, a marble column, anything that could hurt them. She shouted when one of the walls to her right was hit with something that had been aimed at her, Thor quickly taking out the alien that had fired it. Darcy shouted again when the wall began spewing water, a pipe having been broken in the blast.

"Cold! Cold! Fucking cold!" Darcy said, darting out of the spray and making her way toward Thor, slipping on the floor but being saved by a quick grab of his hand.

"Are you injured?" Thor asked, pulling her closely to examine a cut that was bleeding over her left eyebrow.

Darcy pressed a hand to her forehead, frowning when her fingers came away bloody. "Must have gotten hit by something in the wall when it exploded," she groused, a scream from behind her making them both look up in alarm. Four aliens appeared at the other end of the hallway. Though the spitting of the water, Darcy could make out that they were armored like the others, nasty-looking weapons bare in their hands.
At their scream of fury, Darcy glanced over at Thor, ignoring the sharp sting as she raised her eyebrow at the man. He seemed to know what she was suggesting without words, both of them turning to look at the creatures with smirks on their faces. "Hey, you ugly bastards!" Darcy yelled, hands cupped around her mouth so her voice carried, "you fucks ready to play the fighting round? It's where you fight lightning!"

They moved in unison: Darcy grabbed all four creature's dim souls and yanked them so they were standing in the water as Thor lifted Mjolnir and called a flash of lightning from the weapon. Darcy shielded her eyes as she heard a *ffzztt* of electricity discharging, followed by the screams of the aliens as they were electrocuted. When she thought the coast was clear, she dropped her arm, eyebrows raising as all four creatures were on the ground, small tendrils of smoke spinning in the air over their bodies. "Well. Hot damn."

"To the next?" Thor asked Darcy, lifting his arm and holding out Mjolnir toward her.

"Damn skippy," Darcy answered, her knuckles reaching out to bump the hammer softly before following after Thor as he ran down the next hallway.

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Steve followed Wong down the multiple hallways and corridors of the building toward the library that was their objective mission. Running away from the sounds of fighting was harder than he thought it would be, and as they finally climbed the last set of stairs, Steve slowed to a stop, eyes widening at the bookshelves and glass cases that held a wide assortment of items.

"The books are the most important," Wong said, walking with purpose toward the locked and chained manuscripts, the ones that were his responsibility to protect. "The things they could do with what’s within these pages…"

Steve noted the entrances and exits toward the room, seeing a shimmer of color over the large window near the stairs, most likely another layer of warding. "Wouldn’t they need to be one of you to get them to work?"

Wong’s fingers moved through the air, the sling ring forming a small portal which he began stuffing books through. "What we consider mystical arts might be something innate in certain dimensions or worlds. Much like the Asgardian’s power and abilities look magical to us but are just science to them."

"Right," Steve said with a nod, not certain he followed Wong’s train of thought but knowing the man knew far more than he did. Like much of the mystical/magical part of their work, Steve just accepted that some things were just too hard to wrap his head around. "Where are you putting those?"

"Mirror dimension," Wong answered, "nothing that happens there is affected here and vice versa. They will be safe there."

Steve could hear the sounds of fighting growing closer, thoughts tumbling as he hoped his team had everything under control. "Why not just throw Strange and the Time Stone in there, then? Wouldn’t he be safe, too?"

Wong’s frantic movements faltered at Steve’s question, seeming to consider the suggestion before he shook his head. "If we’re going to succeed, we need Master Strange’s help, and taking the stone
away from him would do us no good. As long as your man keeps him safe, Strange’s hands are the safest.”

The screech of an alien from the floor below set Steve’s stomach on edge, shifting his shield from one hand to the other. “How did he get a message to himself, and then Darcy, without either of them remembering it? How did he know the word ‘papaya’ would work? Why was it her name and not mine or Tony’s?”

Opening the latch on a glass case holding what looked like a rattle with demon heads on either end, Wong glanced over at Steve then returned to his task. “Master Strange has studied the magics of Agamatto for years, but the concept of time travel and protecting the space-time continuum is hard to master. Paradoxes and causal loops are just one side-effect and in an effort to avoid causing any, he may have cleared both their minds until it became impossible to do so. This is why we were warned of the army’s arrival before they broached our wards.”

“But Strange took the wards down to let us in, isn’t that why they were able to breach the wards?”

Steve’s question made Wong freeze, arm disappearing into the portal, the crystal ward hovering carefully on the other side. “Causalities are a casualty of time travel,” Wong said finally, giving Steve a small shrug as he began moving again. “As for the word papaya, can you think of another word that might not come up in conversation until the perfect opportune time? One that would trigger a recall of memories?”

At the shake of Steve’s head, Wong stood, the embers of fire from his portal falling to the ground at his feet. “As for reaching out to the woman instead of you, if she is indeed connected with the Soul Stone, that connection is most likely what allowed Master Strange to reach her more easily. Now, if she touches any of the other stones, it would be -”

Steve dodged the obsidian spear as it flew past his head, destroying a glass case over his shoulder and impaling itself into the wall behind. Bringing his shield up, Steve threw it as hard as he could as the creature climbed up the stairs, sending it stumbling backward and into the two others behind, their armors clamoring against the stairs as they fell.

The shield rebounded into his hands and he glanced in Wong’s direction, nodding at the books left on the shelves. “Might wanna move faster,” he said, grunting when a flash of green tore across his left shoulder, singeing his suit and pushing him backward.

Wong moved quickly, unclasping several more books and shoving them through the portal before climbing to his feet, hands gesturing through the air as a shield of glowing orange mystical light appeared before him. He lifted the shield and deflected a blow as he crossed toward the stairs, taking on the next creature to climb into sight. Wong sent it back down the stairs, jumping back as one launched itself forward and over the railing, punches and kicks a flurry of blows.

There was a lull in the stream of aliens, Steve making sure the ones piled at the bottom of the stairs were down for the count before running over to Wong and helping him dispatch the two he’d been engaged with. Satisfied that the immediate danger had passed, Steve’s eyes were drawn to a larger case, a wicked looking sword floating in midair behind the glass. “Would any of these weapons be good to use?”

“Absolutely, if you’re fine unleashing a virtually indestructible blade that can be used against us by the enemy in a myriad of ways. Letting that sword out would be a catastrophic mistake -”

Wong’s words were silenced when a creature with black wings suddenly appeared and crashed through the case, shattering the glass and sending the sword skittering across the ground and out of
A flash of crimson and gold followed, Tony’s boot exhausts cutting off as he landed, turning back toward Wong and Steve as his helm lifted.

“They’ve overrun the first floor and are making a mess of the second. If they find another entrance, we’ll be -” Tony was thrown backward when a being seemed to materialize out of thin air, its large axe causing sparks as the metal hit metal, Tony’s armor crashing through several bookshelves before he came to a stop.

Bucky’d known better than to hope he and Strange would be able to pop into the room, secure it, and pop back to safety. When they'd dashed around a corner, Strange assuring him it would only take a minute, they’d run headfirst into a hallway full of creatures who seemed to be headed toward the same place they were. His ears were still ringing from the *brrepp! brrepp! brrepp!* of his rifle in the small corridor, managing to hold the alien who was attempting to take a bite of him at bay with his arm. "Strange!"

Stephen turned, his orange-glowing mystical whip lashing out, wrapping around the warrior's ankle and pulling it away from Bucky, who grabbed two pistols from his thigh holsters and put it down for good. He looked up, taking four quick shots over Strange's shoulder and catching two more creatures before they could touch the ornate wooden door that was their objective. "They keep coming!"

Stephen nodded, opening his mouth but freezing as something slithered into the hallway behind Bucky, scale armor and large, dripping fangs. Bucky turned slowly, both eyebrows raising at the giant creature. "How -"

Both Bucky and Strange ducked as a loud thunderclap nearly deafened them, the hallway flashing a brilliant white as a bolt of lightning caught the snake in the side, sending him to the floor. When the illumination cleared, Thor stood over the creature, a large smile on his face.

"A lamia!" Thor said, his blue eyes bright and wide, "they had a lamia! We've heard of such in Asgard but of all the foes I've felled, this is my first!"

"Congratulations?" Stephen watched as Thor stalked toward them, hammer swinging in his hand. "I need you both to guard me while I get rid of this door."

"If it just needs destroying, I am more than happy -"

"*No!*" Stephen darted in front of Thor, who'd raised Mjolnir above his head. He let out a breath when Thor cocked his head to the side and lowered his weapon. "I don't need it gone, I just need to remove it."

"I do not see the difference?"

Thor shared a look of confusion with Bucky as they both watched Stephen approach the large, carved doors. He moved with practiced ease, red symbols floating in the air in front of him before they melted into the wood itself. Strange took a step back, all three of them watching as the door seemed to disappear all together. When it was gone, looking like any other normal wall in the building, Stephen pressed his hand against the wood so he could recall it later.

"There. One less problem -" Stephen had barely gotten the words out of his mouth before a volley of rapid gunfire filled the air from another hallway, the corpse of a dead alien appearing at their feet,
Natasha following a second later.

"We've got a problem," Natasha said, tongue darting out, licking at the blood at the corner of her mouth. "We're hemorrhagic, can't find where they're bleeding in from, need to stop the flow."

"The transporter," Bucky said, looking over at Strange. "How would he have been able to get in?"

Strange's eyes unfocused before they snapped up with a nod. "It's gotta be the nexus."

"Nexus?"

"A room of permanent portals," Strange answered Natasha, "it'd be one of the only ways in."

"We gotta shut it down," Natasha stressed, "or they're gonna overrun us."

Everyone looked up when a small cadre of creatures appeared at the other end of the hallway. Thor turned toward them, nodding his head as he lifted Mjolnir. "Go, I'll hold them back. Find the breach and seal it."

Not staying to argue, Strange turned and ran, Bucky and Natasha at his back.

"Where do they keep coming from?" Darcy screamed, a bit of yellow energy hitting her shoulder and spinning her backward. Eyes widening as she careened toward the broken stair railing that opened to the first floor, Darcy shouted, grabbing for anything to keep from tumbling head first over the edge. Her arms cartwheeled before her forearm was grabbed, stopping her momentum and keeping her upright. Her head whipped around, laughing when she saw the unimpressed look Clint was giving her. "Anyone ever tell you you've got perfect timing?"

“How about we hold off on falling to our doom until the mission is complete, yeah?”

Nodding, Darcy turned back toward the mass of creatures that seemed to never end. She pulled two of them back from where they’d been running up to the third floor, making them crash together in the air before she brought them down hard onto the ground. “Here!” she yelled at Clint before she held their limp bodies into the air, two arrows piercing their hearts before she let them drop unceremoniously to the first floor. “We’ve gotta cut the pipeline somewhere!”

Clint grunted, ducking to avoid a flash of blue, hearing it hit the wall behind him with a sizzling sound, "Nat went to find Barnes and Strange and figure it out. Where's Thor?"

"Followed a snake-looking bad dude down a hallway. Tony?"

"Haven't seen him in a bit. Could really use him right about now. If you head that way, I can grab - get down!"

Darcy oofd when Clint threw himself at her stomach, tackling her to the floor. They slid across the floor several feet before the dead body of an alien stopped their motion. A barrage of wicked looking spikes flew inches above their head and she looked over Clint’s shoulder, spotting something that looked like a porcupine on steroids. She coughed as she rolled to her side, Clint cursing softly when he realized his bow was several feet away and out of reach.
As the creature turned back toward them and screamed, Darcy looked over at Clint with wide eyes. "Arrow!"

"I don't have my bow!"

"Just throw it!"

Without hesitation, Clint pulled an arrow from his quiver and threw it toward the alien. Darcy lifted her right arm and yanked its soul as fast as she could, letting out a celebratory shout when her plan worked and the alien's body impaled itself on the arrow, mouth opening and closing uselessly before it fell dead to the ground. She climbed to her knees, hazel eyes widening when she spotted one of the spikes she thought they'd avoided sticking out of Clint's back. "Fuck! He got you!"

Clint attempted to look over shoulder but the spike was out of his field of vision. He shook his head then nodded at Darcy. "You're gonna have to pull it out."

"What?!"

"Can't leave it in me, gotta pull it out."

"They always say to leave it in! What if you start bleeding?" Darcy shouted. "What if it hit an artery!?"

"Both of those would be bad, yeah," Clint said, coughing, "but keeping it in's gonna be worse."

"I don't want to hurt you."

The archer laughed softly, turning so he could grip Darcy's shoulder with his hand, sweat starting to bead on his brow. "You got this, Darce. It'll be over before you know it. You got this."

Darcy blinked at him for a second longer before sliding so she could see his back. The spine had pierced between two pieces of leather on his armor and Darcy had no way to know how deep it went. Gritting her teeth, she placed her left hand on his back and wrapped her right hand around the spine, taking a deep breath before yanking it out. She dropped it to the ground at their sides, putting a hand over the wound as Clint yowled in pain. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Fuck. Are you okay?"

Clint took a deep breath in and let it hiss on the way out, moving gingerly before grabbing his bow and letting Darcy help him to his feet. "Good work, Darce. I'm proud of you."

Eyebrows furrowing, Darcy opened her mouth to say something when she heard a scream from down a hall to their right. Both Darcy and Clint turned at the sound, watching Peter attempt to web-up an alien who kept slicing free with a scimitar looking blade. "I'll go -"

"No," Clint said, taking a step in front of her as she began to run toward the younger man. "I've got Parker. I haven't heard anything from Stark. Last I saw he was blasting toward the back of the building. We need his firepower. You find him, I'll help Parker."

"But I can -"

"Darcy." Calling her name did the trick and she closed her mouth, hazel eyes looking at him with worry. "You're doing great, but I need you to listen to me, okay? Go find Stark. We'll rendezvous later."

It took another second before she nodded at him, jaw setting with purpose before she turned and ran, making her way down a hallway and away from the entrance. He waited until she rounded a corner.
and disappeared from sight before he nodded, swaying on his feet before catching himself on what was left of the stair railing. Clint coughed again, taking a shuddering breath inward before starting in Peter's direction.

"We can close this, you should go help everyone else," Bucky shouted, keeping up with the sorcerer as he navigated the labyrinth-like walls.

"Help everyone else, or help Darcy?" Natasha asked, looking over Strange’s shoulder and firing off a round, satisfied when she hit the creature in the chest and sent him toppling to the ground, jumping over it a second later. When Bucky looked over at her with a frown, Natasha shook her head and hurried to close the gap that’d formed between them and Strange. "I think Darcy's proven she can take care of herself. You can't spend the whole mission worrying about her or you'll get sloppy, and when you get sloppy, you get other people hurt. Keeping that stone out of their hands is the mission."

The chiding tone in Natasha's voice was familiar, Bucky having gotten used to her barbing over the years they'd known each other. "I've seen you and Clint in the field. You stay close, keep each other in sight when you can."

"Sometimes you can't. Sometimes all you can do is remind yourself that they know what they're doing and they're going to come out the other side like they always have."

"And if they don't?"

Natasha looked over at Bucky, seeing the worry in the grey of his eyes, knowing the fear that gripped him because it always gripped her, too. "Finish the mission, break down after."

Stephen shouted as Bucky and Natasha nearly ran into him, all three of their eyes widening when they saw a hallway filled with creatures, pouring out of an open doorway, the dense vegetation of a jungle visible behind the seemingly unending flow of creatures.

Darcy was almost certain she was headed toward the back of the building, but nothing looked familiar. Even when she turned and ran back down the corridor she'd just come from, everything looked new. "Why does this place look bigger on the inside?!" she yelled, throwing herself through a set of doors, skidding to a stop before she tumbled through a large hole that seemed to come up from the floor below. She leaned over the opening, hearing the sounds of fighting from all sides but not seeing anyone.

Just like you, Lewis, getting lost in the middle of a battle, she thought, mentally berating herself as she pushed back into the hallway. She froze when a door farther down the hall opened, a creature that seemed to take up the entire width of the hallway turning to look at her with jet black eyes. Recognition pinged through her body, certain that she'd seen this alien before but unable to place where.

Just as her eyes widened in knowledge, his seemed to narrow in satisfaction before taking a step in
her direction. "Hey!" Darcy said, raising both of her hands, surprised when he stopped moving. She hadn't expected it to work, so when he stayed still, looking at her in what seemed like anticipation, she cleared her throat and took what she hoped like look a menacing step toward him. "You guys should have stayed in whatever black hole you came from."

She didn't know if the thing could even understand English, but she supposed it didn't matter. Despite the fear heavy in her gut, Darcy knew she couldn't let this thing out of her sight. He was huge, covered in muscle and sharp, jagged looking skin. When she blinked, colors bleeding into her vision, she expected to see a dull, gray light, just like all of the bastards she'd fought so far.

Darcy's mouth went dry the longer she stared at the creature, the tiniest sliver of his soul color strobing in and out erratically. She could feel the color drain from her face, realizing that her powers might not be able to help her.

Fuck.

PageBreak

Steve’s shield knocked the axe out of the alien’s hands, earning a hiss before the creature disappeared. Blue eyes widened before he was struck in the chest, pushed backward by the force before dropping to his knees. He wasn’t sure if it was a fist of a foot, but he felt pain blossom across his cheek, spinning his body, teeth grinding as he came to a stop. “He can cloak himself,” he managed to breathe, looking over at Tony’s armor in concern.

Wong hesitated for a moment before his hands gestured, a spray of orange sparks erupting from his fists, floating through the air before fading away from sight as they fell to the floor. He repeated this several times until movement gave away the creature’s position. Instead of advancing, Wong’s hand flashed out, a ring of bright mystical energy appearing like a handcuff, wrapping itself around of the alien’s limbs and holding tight.

His victory short lived as Wong was thrown backward through the air, crashing down the flight of stairs before disappearing. Steve climbed to his feet, eyes tracking the frantic movements of the cuff, sure the beast was attempting to free itself but realizing it was no use. Steve heard the scream before he felt the rush of air in his direction, lifting him arm and blocking the blow that had been meant for his head.

Fingers wrapping around something, Steve lashed out with his fists, and knees, landing jabs and punches and taking a few himself, his strength hampered by needing to keep a hold of the thing with one hand, handicapping himself in the process. His chin sung with pang, his ribs sore as he panted, but Steve knew he needed to end it now, before he lost hold and his advantage was gone.

Steve jumped, wrapping his legs around the creature, squeezing tight, pinning the thing’s arms at its sides. It took a few seconds, but he managed to find the things head, screaming when needle-like teeth bit into his hands. Gritting his teeth, Steve took hold and twisted his hands in a wrenching motion, falling to the ground as the alien went limp, dead weight hitting the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Watching the thing’s corpse slowly appear on top of him was a singularly unique experience, its face still contorted in rage, open eyes dead and staring. Steve pushed out from under it, climbing to his feet, clutching at his ribs. He watched Wong approach Tony’s armor, the slits on his helmet dark, no movement whatsoever from the engineer.
The sound of a repulsor powering up then discharging was loud enough that Steve ducked at the blast, watching Wong fly backward through the air, hitting a wall before slumping down, coming to rest and not moving. Steve turned back toward Tony, hearing the crunch of glass as the armor climbed to its feet, straightening to its full height, looking at Steve, emotionless.

Shadows of a memory pulled at Steve’s mind, seeing Tony stand like this before him, a promise of pain and hurt hanging in the air between them. “Stark?” The man’s name did nothing, but the steady build of energy whined up, the blue on the suit’s gauntlets glowing brighter. “Tony?” Again, nothing.

Steve took in a deep breath then let it out again, lifting his shield up quick enough to block the first blast, the second catching him in the chest and sending him backward.

PageBreak

When his ammo ran out, Bucky had resorted to his blades, cutting a swath through the group, carefully avoiding blasts of non-terrestrial weaponry and blows meant to take his head off. He watched one of Nat’s stingers get knocked out her hand, the creature diving toward her with its teeth bared. “Паук!”

Bucky’s shout of ‘spider’ was enough for Natasha, her hand jutting in his direction. His placement was perfect and she caught the hilt of the knife then shoved it into the alien’s neck before it could sink its teeth in, its bodily fluids spurting on to her before she pushed it aside with a grunt. “Heads up!”

Stephen’s cloak had stopped his movement forward, keeping him safe as the knife flew past his nose by millimeters, looking toward Bucky with wide eyes. “Close quarters!” When the cloak uncurled from his shoulders and wrapped itself around an alien who’d gotten past them and began running down the hall, Stephen lifted his hands, shields materializing around them as he squared up for the next fight.

Ignoring the sorcerer’s yell of indignation, Bucky threw himself at the next creature, the glint of silver in his hand comfortable, his movements careful and measured. He could tell they were making a dent, at least enough to plug up the portal the aliens were using to get in, slowing their numbers.

He fought with efficiency, making sure those he put down stayed down before moving on, his muscle memory taking over, seeing nothing but the next target, the white noise of The Soldier in his ears. It was different now, letting his memories bleed into his actions, and he kept advancing until he’d made his way toward one of the doors, able to see a line of creatures making their way forward.

“How do I close this?!” Bucky shouted, looking over his shoulder at Strange.

“Turn the dial then destroy it!” Stephen yelled, avoiding a bright green axe as it was thrown at him, watching it ricochet off his glowing shield and planting it in the back of an alien nearby.

Bucky turned back to the door, grey eyes staring at the dial before he reached out, spinning it. He watched the dense jungle be replaced by flashes of other locations, all of them foreign and most of them barren. His prosthetic slammed the dial, the view going from an arctic wasteland to nothing but a black square.

He only had a second of warning before he was grabbed by the upper arm and shoved backward, pinned against a wall by a warrior with four arms. He grunted as an elbow was thrown into his solar
plexus, the air in his lungs rushing out. Eyes wide, he watched a wicked looking blade appear in one of its hands, trajectory aimed at his chest.

Natasha tackled the enormous alien around the middle, throwing him off balance enough that he cartwheeled back and through one of the other doors, breaking the glass and disappearing into the chaotic waves that were visible on the other side. Natasha managed to stay on her feet, turning to look at Bucky with a small smirk.

Stephen ran up, shields that had been glowing around his hands fading from sight. “Haven’t found the transporter, as long as he’s still -”

The unsettling screech in their ears caught them all off guard, Bucky ducking his head and lifting his shoulders, the piercing sound bouncing around his skull, his teeth grinding. The scream only stopped when the creature crashed into both Stephen and Natasha, the three of them tumbling through the door and sinking beneath the rough waves.

Bucky dove, trying to get a hold of them but coming up with nothing but air. He pulled his hands back when he heard a pop! to his right, eyes flicking up toward the being that had appeared suddenly at his side. Sliding back across the floor, the vicious kick he’d just been dealt leaving him see stars, Bucky looked on in horror as the transporter’s arm lashed out, destroying the dial to the side of the door.

“No!” Bucky screamed, clawing until he was on his feet, fists lashing out, unable to land a solid punch before the alien disappeared, reappearing at his back, a volley of heavy kicks sending Bucky back to the floor. He could feel blood in his mouth and spat it on the floor, looking over at the destroyed doorway and the black void inside.

The transporter’s laugh was high-pitched, its triple set of eyelids flashing at Bucky as it neared. Bucky looked on as the transporter paused, bending down to grab one of the pistols on the ground, lifting it to point down, a smirk on its lipless mouth. Grey eyes not blinking, Bucky glared defiantly at the alien, his jaw setting.

The click of the empty gun seemed to surprise the thing and Bucky took that moment to move, throwing himself forward, plunging a blade into the alien’s thigh, earning an angry howl of pain. He ripped the knife out and meant to bring it down again but the creature vanished, Bucky yelling his frustration to the empty air.

He took a large step back when another pop! sounded, a mass of red fabric writhing at his feet. Bucky fell to this knees, bringing the knife above his head before slamming it down. The cloak moved out of the way, revealing just enough skin for Bucky to wound while still holding the alien fast. The twitches and shouts of pain quieted, until the cloak spun, depositing the dead creature on the ground.

Grey eyes slid to the cloak at his side, Bucky looking at the accessory with a suspicious gratitude. The thought of thanking it crossed his mind before he dismissed it outright, running toward the last remaining doorway. He looked down at the dial, carefully turning it, feeling the cloak hovering behind his shoulder and watching it all. Finally he found the same rolling mass of waves that Natasha and Strange had fell into, maneuvering to his knees, bending over the opening. “Romanoff! Strange!”

His voice was lost in the crash of the water, looking for any dot of color, any sign of his other teammates. Finally, Bucky spotted them, bobbing around 100 yards away. He screamed but they couldn’t see him, their bodies lifting and lowering with each wave. He was still trying to figure out what to do when the cloak flew by him and into the grey sea mist. The enchanted fabric wrapped
itself excitedly around Strange’s shoulders and began tugging him and Natasha toward the opening.

Bucky kept one hand on the doorway and reached out with his other, grabbing a hold of Stephen’s hand and pulling as hard as he could, screaming with the effort. He was able to pull Strange free, the sorcerer collapsing on the floor, coughing and soaked to the bone. Bucky did the same for Natasha, kicking the doorway shut once they were all safe, the smell of brine heavy in their noses.

The sudden silence was deafening and the three of them laid on the floor, breathing heavy, the portal Thanos’ army had used as a means of entrance now closed. Bucky looked over at Natasha, both of them exhausted, neither of them ready to move. They shouted, shielding their face when Strange’s cloak lifted then spun in the air, wringing itself out, uncaring where the water landed.

“We’ve got to find the others, take care of the aliens that are still inside,” Stephen said finally, climbing gingerly to his feet.

Bucky took Stephen’s outstretched hand, letting the sorcerer help him to his feet. His eyes widened, finger jutting in Strange’s direction. “The necklace. The stone. Where is it?”

Stephen looked down, heart stopping, hand reaching to clutch at the area where the Eye of Agamotto normal hung. “Did I - I could have lost it here, or -” Both men looked back toward the door, hearts sinking, knowing that if it’d fallen off in the sea it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

“You boys, you’re always dropping your things,” Natasha said as she came up beside them, the ornate talisman dangling from her hands.

Stephen took it back as he heaved a sigh of relief, returning it to its place around his neck. “You’re pretty amazing, you know that?”

“Tell that to my husband when this is all over,” she said, corner of her mouth quirking up before she started down the hallway, Strange and Bucky coming up right behind.

Darcy knew the hallway was too narrow to fight in, that it’d limit what she could use to help herself, so she darted back into the room she’d just left, skirting around the large hole as she felt the thundering steps of the alien following. She’d just gotten to the other side of the hazard when he threw its shoulders against the door, splinters flying in all directions.

She’d hoped his momentum would have carried him forward, possibly tumbling down the hole and saving her needing to face him alone, and while he did begin to fall through, the creature was wide enough that he could put his arms and legs out like some kind of fucked up starfish, large black eyes blinking at her as he pulled itself back to his feet.

While he was distracted, Darcy tugged at him with her powers experimentally, eyes widening in surprise when she caught hold of something and managed to shove him into the wall on his right, crashing him into a very expensive looking vase and sending it shattering to the floor. When she attempted to throw the alien to the other side of the room, she had the unique sensation of suddenly holding onto nothing. It was as if his soul had evaporated into air, sifting through her fingers like sand.

He seemed to realize it, too, giving a menacing growl at her as he closed the distance between them, forcing her backward. Darcy tried to grab his soul again but there was nothing there to grab, grunting
when the back of his hand slammed into her stomach and sent her airborne, smashing through a set of french doors and into the next room over, sliding across the floor which had become a sea of glass.

She pushed through the pain, feeling tiny shards cutting into her hands as she climbed to her knees. She attempted to throw the creature backward again but felt the same thing as before, only this time she had the luck to roll out of the way when he brought his foot - which was almost larger she was - down on the ground where she'd been seconds before.

Her shout of alarm was stolen from her lungs when he kicked out again, this time too fast for her to dodge. Darcy knew her suit was helping absorb the impact, but he still packed a wallop, and she struggled to pull air into her lungs. She hit the ground on her ass and slid across it, finally able to pull in a full breath, the scream from her throat loud as she shoved both hands in his direction, finally able to latch onto his intermittent soul, watching as he crashed into and took out the four-poster-bed that'd been sitting in the middle of the room.

Darcy managed to climb to her feet, grabbing another vase - how many fucking vases are in this fucking place!? - and tossing it as hard as she could at the creature. It was destroyed the second it hit the alien's hard, rock-like skin. Rolling her eyes at herself, Darcy lifted her hands again, only to be thwarted when there was nothing for her to pull. She had a split second to wonder if it was an issue with the neural dampener before she was flying through the air again, this time toward a window that led outside. She screamed, grunting in pain when she wasn't thrown completely through the glass and down to the street below, a wrought iron gate covering the bottom half of the window saving her.

Vision streaming in colors, feeling the tacky, sticky blood pull the hair at the base of her skull, Darcy groaned when his fist wrapped around her ankle and began pulling her across the floor. She rolled onto her stomach, hands reaching for something, anything, as she screamed. When she found nothing, she twisted back onto her back, kicking out at its arm, trying to get him to drop her. She stared up at the creature's back as she kicked, finally managing to knock a bit of dark, black metal from around his wrist.

All at once, as if a switch had been flipped, the dull gray of the alien's soul blinked solidly over Darcy's vision. She had a split second to realize it'd been the metal messing with her powers before she lifted her hands and tossed the alien as hard as she could across the room. She remembered too late that his fingers were still wrapped around her ankle and ended up arcing through the air with him, crashing through a wall. She landed hard, rolling across the ground.

Darcy'd hit her head one too many times and as she struggled to get to her feet, she knew she wasn't going to be able to do this much longer. Suit or no, her body could only take so much. When the creature launched itself in her direction, she stopped him with a raise of her hand, leaving him floating in the air before her, blinking tired hazel eyes as he stayed frozen.

"You're not getting... that stone," she gasped, left arm wrapping around her stomach, remembering what bruised and broken ribs felt like, expecting she had more than a few. She felt a wave of nausea wash over her, stumbling at the sensation. "I'm not gonna... let you."

She moved slowly, tasting blood at the corner of her mouth as she crossed to a desk and grabbed a chair that had somehow made it through the fight unscathed. She drug it toward the alien, managing to pull herself to stand on it, until she was able to look him in the eyes, the black void reminding her of what she'd seen before the dampener had been placed. An endless sea of inky nothing. It was almost familiar, really. Poetic, in a way. "I'm gonna stop you before you can hurt anyone else."

If the creature was frightened, he made no outward sign of it as Darcy leaned forward, hand curling
into a fist near her stomach, gripping his soul like the dark pebble it was. "What were you planning? What do you think you can do?" She pushed at him, at his mind, staring into him like she had with Batroc. She'd thought digging through the French assassin's mind had been bad enough, but it was nothing compared to this creature. A torrent of images assaulted her mind, a disjointed collection of memories that she couldn't understand, not with her brain and its limits.

A gasp tore from Darcy's chest, her eyes watering as a scream started low in her stomach and grew in volume, until she was sure she'd never stop screaming, watching as the alien's eyes filled with recognition, then surprise. In the reflection of his eyes, like a calm, cool lake of perfect black, she saw her own eyes flash with amber before she was falling.

Darcy hit the ground with a thump, feeling like her limbs had turned to iron. Too tired to move. Too tired to think. Too tired to breathe. She knew she wasn't safe, that none of them were safe as long as this thing was still out there. She needed to stop him, but when she rolled toward him, lifting her hands to take him out, it threw a small ball at its feet. The flash of brightness stole her sight, but Darcy'd trained this exact scenario with Tony before. She reached out not with her eyes, but with her powers, trying to latch onto that gray soul...

... but it was gone. She tried to focus, to seek it out, but it must have put the metal band back on its wrist because she was unable to follow the path it took.

The sound of a screech filled the rooms and halls of the sanctum, followed shortly by the trumpet and echo of the rest of the aliens still alive in the building. A call of retreat, if the heaving footfalls were any indication. That's right, fuckers, Darcy thought as she laid on the floor, staring up at the cracked and flaking ceiling, trying to think past the throbbing in her head, you better run.

This is his fault. He wants a war. He’s always wanted a war. Couldn’t wait to sign up, to be a soldier, to make other soldiers, too. He’s never satisfied unless he’s the leader, unless it’s his way. Infallible. Untouchable. Unquestionable.

Tony stalked across the floor toward Steve, both hands up in front of him and firing. The soldier was quick, staying just ahead of the blasts, ducking behind bookshelves and cases which Tony reduced to smoldering ruins as he hunted.

Steve threw his shield, Tony sidestepping to avoid the projectile. Tony took a step forward only to be knocked off balance when the shield hit him from behind, clattering to the ground. Steve took advantage of Tony’s distraction, diving at the armor, tackling it and taking it down. When Tony’s arm lifted and connected with the side of Steve’s head, Steve wrapped his fingers around the gauntlet, squeezing hard enough that he heard the metal begin to crunch, the bit of glass over the repulsor cracking.

Tony grabbed the back of Steve’s suit and flung him away, the blond arcing through the air, hitting a wall and denting it before dropping. Steve squinted up at Tony, watching the methodical way the armor moved. He’d spent years in the field fighting next to Tony Stark, and this was not Tony Stark. He rolled quickly to avoid a rocket, grabbing his shield as he passed, pulling it up just in time to block another well-placed missile.

“Tony! Snap out of it!”
He puts everyone in danger. You should have known better than to trust him again. If he was willing to turn his back on you once, to lie to you, there’s no telling what else he’d be willing to do, just as long as it means he’s the hero.

As Tony continued toward him, Steve tried to stay on the defensive. Every move was countered, attempting to deflect the most damage, taking what he could, dodging what he couldn’t. Tony Stark didn’t like losing, and that he’d gone silent spoke volumes. This was someone else. This was something else.

Steve grunted when he climbed to his feet, only to be tackled around the middle, feeling an immediate stabbing pain of his ribs, knowing for certain now that they were broken. It was hard for him to draw in a full breath, lungs unable to expand, tasting blood on the back of his tongue. He grit his teeth against the ache, letting out a shout when they hit the wall, feeling the wood give way.

He’s going to get everyone killed. Someone needs to stop him. You need to stop him.

Tony rocketed to his feet, one of his boots lifting, barely missing Steve’s face as the soldier rolled out of the way and back to his feet. This foot smashed through the wood floor and he tried to free himself from the cracked planks, but found himself stuck. Steve ignored the agony in his chest, punching and kicking Tony with everything he had, doing what he could to take the suit of armor out of the fight.

“Tony, if you keep this up, someone is going to get hurt.”

Even now he’s mocking you. He thinks you’re weak. He makes everyone else think you’re weak, too. How much longer until he drives everyone away? How long until you lose everyone like before? How long until he takes them down with him?

A litany of sounds fell from Steve’s mouth as he pushed his body, using his elbows and knees, hands clawing at Tony’s suit until he was able to wrench a gauntlet away, tossing it aside, followed by one of his boots, then the other. Steve was bleeding from several wounds now, his suit torn and singed, but still he dug in, ridding Tony of his weaponry. Finally, just when Steve’s energy was beginning to wane, when he could feel his injuries more as his adrenaline faded, he tore the helm from Tony’s face.

Tony’s eyes were a pale, milky white color and he glared unblinkingly up at Steve, who was almost relieved that he hadn’t been wrong. Someone was here, someone was forcing Tony’s hand, using him as a pawn. Steve brought his fist down hard on Tony’s forehead, knocking the engineer out, needing time to find and neutralize the cause of Tony’s violence before one of them was killed.

“You are so tired, Captain Rogers. I can taste it in the air, thick and heavy.”

Steve saw the movement from the corner of his eyes, spinning toward the tall, willowy alien, kicking his shield and catching it, holding it in front of him. “What did you do to him?” Steve demanded, moving slowly, keeping the creature in his sights.

The alien walked with a careful, graceful gait. He did not look concerned with his own well-being, like he had control of the entire situation, no fear in his white eyes. “I helped Mr. Stark process emotions he’s ignored. A beautifully cathartic eruption of hated he feels for you.”

“Tony doesn’t hate me,” Steve said, head dipping toward his shoulder, a high-pitched whine in his ear making him grind his teeth together. He didn’t know what was causing it, but when he looked back up at the alien, it had advanced by several feet.
“Of course he hates you,” the alien said, taking large, sweeping steps forward. “You are everything he is not.”

Steve mirrored the creature, moving back, keeping space between the two of them. He didn’t appear to be in a rush, almost drawing this out. Like he was waiting for something. Or someone. He was being stalled. Steve had no idea what the alien could be waiting for, but he knew it’d be bad, whatever it was. This needed to end now.

He glanced down quickly when his heel hit something metal, blinking at the sword he’d asked Wong about before, being told in no uncertain terms that it was too powerful to wield. When another stab of pain in his head dropped him to his knees, Steve accepted the consequences before wrapping his fingers around the hilt. The instant he held the weapon, the probing scratching in his brain was gone.

Blue eyes flicked up toward the alien, Steve’s face a mask of stony defiance.

The surety in the creature’s expression faltered slightly, watching as Steve climbed to his feet. “He will never be your friend. He will always envy and despise you. You know this deep down. Why deny it?”

Even though he could feel the thing attempting to breach his thoughts, Steve was able to close the distance between them, pushing off the alien’s powers, only hearing his own voice in his head. Something was helping him repel the thing’s abilities and Steve didn’t care how, just that he needed to kill this thing before he could turn anyone else.

The first thread of real fear flashed in the alien’s eyes, completely unprepared for his powers to be neutralized. “How are you -”

Steve stopped the disbelieving flow of words, plunging the sword as far as he could through the thing’s chest. The alien wrapped its hands around the weapon, mouth opening and closing, a gurgle of dark blood bubbling down his chin as he fell to the ground. Steve looked down at the thing for a moment before he heard a groan from behind him.

Tony rolled onto his side, doubling over as he coughed, eyes wide as he looked around the room in alarm. “Is it dead?” Whiskey-brown eyes looked down at his chest, raising a hand to the bits of his suit that still clung to his body, blinking up at Steve as the blond neared. “Is. It. Dead?”

Hissing past the pain in his body, Steve wrapped an arm around his ribs and shuffled toward Tony, nodding down at the engineer. “It’s dead. You okay?”

Taking a second to assess, Tony nodded up at Steve, tongue dragging across split and bloody lips. “I feel how you look, which is shit,” Tony said, rising to his knees. He watched Steve near, a small smile on the other man’s face. “Where’s Wong?”

“Let’s go find him,” Steve managed, holding a hand out toward Tony. He paused when he heard a noise behind them, turning his head to see a small, silver ball roll across the floor toward them, a series of lights on the side blinking. He traced it’s path back toward the dead alien's body. Eyes widening, Steve looked back toward Tony, the other man’s suit spread across the room in pieces, most of his body exposed. He was moving before he’d put the thought together, bringing his shield up, using it to cover Tony's head and chest.

The device went off with a deafening blast, though no explosion accompanied the sound. Steve saw the shockwave move toward them in slow motion, the air vibrating with power before it slammed into him, sending them both flying backward. He felt it all - every break and fracture, every shallow breath in, every single agonizing pain - as he slid limply across the ground, unable to groan or
grimace. Steve forced his eyes to find Tony, even as his vision began to go dark, needing to know the other man was okay.

Tony’s painful ‘uggghh’ reverberated through his chest and he rolled onto his side, coughing heavily, certain his body was going to be covered in bruises from the fight when he’d been in the passenger seat. He rose to his knees, brushing at his chest and the bits of glass and dirt that stuck to his shirt. When he glanced up, he watched Steve’s lips twitch once before the blond gave a deep breath out then went still, blue eyes open and unseeing. “Rogers?” When there was no response, the expression on Tony’s face fell. “Steve?”

PageBreak

Darcy stumbled and fell to her knees in the hallway, casting a concerned look at the ceiling when a blast emanated from somewhere on the third floor. The walls seemed to vibrate from the sound, the lights hanging above her swaying dangerously. She was tired - so tired - but she still needed to find Tony like Clint had told her to.

Worried that he might have been near the location of the blast, she blinked back into the colors, looking for the silver oil slick that was Tony’s soul. Searching outside of what she could actually see was a completely new experience. Something about this building wasn’t right, and trying to reconcile the curls of colors and sigils with what she knew to be geographically possible didn’t mesh. Darcy knew the building was only three stories tall and the same size as the other brownstones on the street, but that was not what she saw when she used her powers.

There were rooms upon rooms, some she wasn’t sure were even in this dimension, if the otherworldly glow was any sign. She pressed her hands to the floor beneath her, still on all fours from falling. Darcy used the floor to ground her, trying to pull her mind back from the endless sea of colors that had threatened to overwhelm her senses. She was just looking for one light, one soul she’d come to know extremely well. Pushing her mind, she looked up at the next floor, waiting for that glint of chrome. It took another second before she zeroed in on it, mind pausing at the emotions pouring in colors from Tony’s soul.


What had happened? Why was Tony wrapped in a cloak of heartache? She could almost hear his whispered words of remorse and sorrow in her ear, a brush of mourning. Darcy widened her focus, trying to get more information, trying to understand. She lifted her head as if it’d allow her to see more, to interpret why her boss was close to breaking.

Darcy almost missed the fading bit of gold, moving away from Tony slowly, like a feather on the lightest of breezes.

She knew that soul. She knew it intimately. She knew its every glint, every shine.

Where was it going? Why was it hemorrhaging color, becoming lighter and lighter?

No.

“Oh god,” Darcy choked out, dark knowledge stealing the heat from her veins, “no no no!”

It took her two tries to climb to her feet, body still aching from the fight, a tightness in her ribs that had nothing to do with the fear that was gripping her chest. She ran down the hall, eyes looking up at
the bit of gold, trying to navigate her way to it, desperate, afraid that if she looked away it would disappear.

When she skidded around a hallway, she was met with a dead end. “No! Come on!” She ran back the way she’d come, taking a different hallway, glancing over her shoulder constantly, trying to find a different way upstairs. Yet again she was unsuccessful, unable to find any path to where she needed to be. “Fuck!”

Darcy tangled her hands in her hair, pulling as she tried to slow her speeding pulse, tried to push back at the fear threatening to overtake her. The brush of a memory at the back of her mind made her eyes widen, trying to remember exactly what Strange had said.

“There are a lot of things in these walls, not to mention the walls themselves…”

He’d talked about the walls as if they were a thing, something sentient, with a mind of its own. Darcy blinked, glancing at the wood paneling and elaborate wallpaper, hazel eyes filled with desperation. “Help. Please help me. I need to get to the library. Please. As quickly as possible.” Her hands were shaking as she lifted them toward the wall, fingers splayed open, resting her sweaty forehead against the surface as she whispered “please” one more time.

Darcy was falling. Or climbing. She was moving, no matter how it was happening, and had to grit her teeth to keep from screaming as the sensations crashed over her. When she felt like she couldn’t take it anymore, like the pressure on her body was going to burst and she was going to pass out, she stumbled through an open doorway and fell to her knees, feeling rubble cut into her skin, ending up on all fours. She shook her head, trying to clear the cloud of confusion from her mind before she squinted her eyes open.

If this had once been the library, it’d been turned into nothing more than torn pages and ruin. Bookshelves were toppled, some of the books smoldering, tendrils of smoke curling in the air. What had to have been tables were now like splinters, littering the ground with chunks of wall and ceiling. Twisted pieces of metal, crimson and gold, were also spread around the room. Absently, her mind realized it was what was left of Tony’s suit, but it was all secondary when her eyes landed on two bodies on the ground.

“No.”

Whatever aliens had managed to make their way into the Sanctum were beginning to become sparse as Bucky, Natasha and Steven made their way down the winding corridors, running toward what sounds of fighting they could still hear. The blast they’d heard had shaken the walls around them, making the lights above them dim before they returned to normal, increased activity drawing them toward the main foyer.

The crack of thunder made it clear Thor was in the middle of the fray, and his loud shout of alarm sped their feet. The three skidded to a stop when they arrived, eyes trying to assess the damage and danger, the chaotic scene before them like a puzzle they had to put together. The stairs to the upper levels were nothing more than ragged planks of broken wood, some of them black and still smoking. Holes dotted the walls and floors, dark openings that led to the lower levels and whatever evils they’d held hidden.
The carcasses of aliens and creatures were strewn about the open area and at Thor’s feet. He looked toward them, hair in sweaty strands around his face, skin covered in dirt and blood from the battle. “Is it safe?” When Stephen motioned to his chest and the amulet, some of the concern in Thor’s face faded. “Then we have succeeded.”

“Where’s Darcy?” Bucky asked, eyes darting around the room.

“I am not certain,” Thor answered, glancing toward the ruined stairs and the floors beyond. “We were separated earlier and -”

“*Help! Someone help!*”

Bucky ran as fast as he could, the panicked screams speeding his heart, hearing the footfalls that meant the rest of the team were at his back. When he entered the large ballroom, his brain tried to make sense of the battlefield, gaze darting around the rubble, finding landmarks he could understand. Just like the foyer, the ground was covered in debris and bodies, so many different colors and sizes that Bucky had to force himself to look away, eyes darting up when another shout sounded.

“Help! He just, he came in and saved me and then he just collapsed and I don’t, I don’t know, he’s not breathing, someone -”

The wave of relief when he realized the body in Peter’s arms wasn’t Darcy or Steve only lasted a second, shame replacing it quickly when Bucky recognized the blond hair on the body Peter had in his lap. He blinked, looking to his right, grey eyes pained when he saw the truth of it light in Natasha’s eyes, her lips parting as her breath escaped.

PageBreak

Tony jumped at the sound of a voice, glancing over in alarm. When his eyes landed on Darcy, bruised and bleeding and trying to climb to her feet, his grip tightened on the hand he held in his. “Darcy.”

“What happened?” She made it to her feet only to slip on something wet and sticky, her mind refusing to acknowledge that it was someone’s blood. She splayed across the ground for a second before finding her footing, running as quick as she could toward Tony and the body on the ground next to him.

“The blastwave hit him,” Tony said, dropping Steve’s hand so he could lift his arms and catch Darcy when she fell toward them, fingers gripping her forearms and stopping her slide. “He threw his shield -”

“Steve? Hey, Steve, talk to me, okay?” Darcy placed one hand to his chest, the other to his cheek, leaning over his body as her eyes looked for wounds.

“I can’t find a heartbeat,” Tony uttered, voice strained, emotion making it thick. “He’s not breathing.”

“Hey! Steve! Don’t do this, okay? No, you gotta breathe. Steve. Steve!” Darcy slapped at his cheek, his head turning limply, blood oozing from the corner of his mouth and crusting inside his ear.

“Darcy -”
“No, no, you’re gonna be fine. You’ve been through worse, right? Hard to kill, remember? That’s what you said.”

“Darcy, he’s gone.”

Darcy shrugged off Tony’s hand on her shoulder, leaning over Steve’s body, pressing her lips to his, heart stopping when there was no movement, his skin cool. She pulled back, tears falling from her eyes and landing on his face, sliding through the dirt on his cheeks. “Steve, come on!”

When Tony tugged at her arm again, Darcy shook her head, voice harsh. “No!”

“He’s gone.”

“No! He’s gonna be fine!”

“Darc -”

“No!” Her scream was joined by a wave of her hand and Tony was no longer at her side, having been thrown back and away, crashing into the remnants of a bookshelf. Darcy placed both hands on Steve’s chest, feeling no rise or fall, no intake or exhale of breath, no steady beat under her fingertips. Her hazel eyes blinking up at the ceiling, looking for what was left of his gold.

“Stop,” she demanded, voice broken and nothing more than a rasp. The glint was so faded, almost impossible to see, but it seemed to freeze at her command. It hovered there, not coming closer, but not moving farther away, either.

“Come back.” When it stayed where it was, Darcy looked back down at Steve, his face slack. She shook her head, tears slipping free, refusing to accept that he was gone. Just a few weeks ago they’d been talking about taking the next step, starting a real life together, discovering what the next chapter of their lives looked like.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She’d killed Thanos, she’d been willing to give her own life it if meant Jane got to live and, in the process, her entire life had changed. Darcy wasn’t willing to give that up, she wasn’t willing to give him up. Not yet. Not now. Her eyes rolled back up, glaring at the flash of gold as if she could intimidate it back into his body.

“Get back here,” she growled, begging, “you don’t get to just float away. To leave. You’re not done, he’s not done, so you get back here.” When it didn’t move, a sob ripped free, her voice desperate.

“Please, I can’t lose him, not now, please, oh god, just come back, you’re his and I need him and I need you and you can’t just… please, please don’t do this...”

Darcy collapsed against Steve’s chest, heart breaking, feeling helpless. How was she supposed to do this without him? All their plans? What could have been? What was going to be? What good was this stone, the ability to see and take souls, when she couldn’t even save one of the people she loved? All this pain and power and it was for nothing? All for nothing?

No. This wasn’t how this was going to happen. She’d grabbed that fucking stone for a reason and she wasn’t going to let this be how Steve Rogers died, not if she could help it.

Darcy sat back on her knees, grabbing both of his hands in hers, face turning up toward the ceiling. Her eyes fluttered closed, tears sliding, focusing on the gold she’d know anywhere. The bright metal glow of Steve’s soul. She felt it, reached for it, focused on it while surrounded by the blackness that was familiar.
"Bring it back," she said to the black, her voice stony. "Bring his soul back now."

She felt the hiss of wind in the darkness, brushing against her cheeks, lifting the hair from her neck. Darcy had forgotten how cold the vast sea of inky obscurity was when she stared into it.


It’d been quiet for so long that the whispered voice was low, almost too quiet for her to hear, her ears staining to make it out.

"It’s already gone," it breathed, like the brush of a spiderweb. "Already gone."

"Bullshit," Darcy spat, "it’s right there. I can see it. Bring. It. Back!"

"Why would I? You don’t want my help. You shut yourself off from me, from what you could be, from what I’ve offered. You’ve made your choice."

"What do you want?" Darcy asked, refusing to take her eyes off Steve’s soul as it hovered just out of reach, waiting.

"You’ve done this before. That first time you realized the power you held."

Darcy shook the head and hissed through her teeth, neither of which she had here. "Not again, not like that. I can’t. I won’t."

"... And if I say that’s the only way?"

Heart tumbling, Darcy silently screamed into the black. She couldn’t do that, not to Steve, not like she had with Bucky, even if it meant bringing him back. He wouldn’t want her to do it, not for him, regardless of it meaning his death. She couldn’t. She couldn’t do that, not again. Darcy stared into the darkness, thoughts in freefall, remembering the day she’d given Bucky a piece of her soul, remembering what had almost happened. "...it’s not the only way. It wasn’t the only way then, and it’s not the only way now. What do I have to do? What do I have to give?"

Silence, stretching on and on, feeling like madness. Then, a voice right at her ear, as warm as velvet. "You know the cost. A piece of you, for all of him. It’s a pittance. A token. Nothing to be missed. You won’t even know its gone."

"I don’t believe you."

It’s voice was sharp. Bitter. Tired. "You’re not in a position to bargain, girl. That is the cost. What are you willing to do to bring him back? What are you willing to sacrifice for him?"

Darcy thought of Steve, of what he’d already sacrificed for the world, how he was willing to die to keep it safe. He’d always been willing to give his everything if it meant saving just one soul. His smile. Those blue eyes. His giant heart. The world needed Steve Rogers. Bucky needed Steve Rogers. She needed Steve Rogers. What was she willing to give to get him back?

"Everything."

Her word was an agreement and she heard it ring in the darkness like the peel of a bell. The wind
began whipping around her, hair blowing, coldness traveling up her arms, into her chest, seizing her heart and stealing her breath.

“Good girl.”

Freezing in the black, Darcy heard the sound build, from nothing more than a breath to the heavy, satisfied laughter of someone who’d just come out ahead. She didn’t care, though, when she saw the gold of Steve’s soul flash brightly before it began to lower, floating back down, shimmering brilliantly and growing nearer by the second.

Blinking out of the black, Darcy cried out at the sudden change, the feel of heavy pressure in her head making her body sway where she knelt. She caught herself on her hands, slowly blinking at Steve’s body, still and pale and lifeless. Darcy held her breath, lungs burning, waiting. Waiting for him to move, waiting for a sign that it had worked, waiting to know that she hadn’t made a deal with the devil for nothing.

Her vision was narrowing, like a tunnel, growing dimmer and dimmer, like she was looking through a telescope at something far away. Not yet, she screamed at the blackness that was threatening to take her away, not yet.

Steve’s eyes flew open, gasping for air like he’d been drowning, heart thundering in his chest as the bitter taste of blood coated his throat. It took a second for his eyes to focus, to push past the haze of unconsciousness, his mind trying to put all the broken pieces together again. When his thoughts cleared, he looked up at Darcy, her eyes flashing amber before fading back to their normal hazel. He blinked past his heartbeat, unsure of the emotion in her gaze. “Darcy?”

The sound of her name on Steve’s lips was enough to lift her heart, seeing his cerulean again worth whatever price she’d had to pay. She felt her eyelids flutter, the darkness circling, hearing him call her name one more time before she gave in and let the black take her.
Not Coming Back

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the battle at the New York Sanctum.

Chapter Notes

Oh jeez, guys. Chapter 50. This is insane! I can't believe how long this is getting. Do I think it's crazy long? Yes. Do I have any idea how much is left? Once the people in my head get it in order, I'll let you know!
This is a dark bit here, so I offer my apologies, virtual cookies, hot cocoa, and hugs!
I heart you all!
<3

Trigger Warning: This chapter deals with major character death (non-graphic). The story does have a happy ending. Protect your mental health if this will negatively impact your mental health.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PageBreak

"He's not coming back," said my head.
“He has to,” sobbed my heart.

PageBreak

The sound of laughter haunted her dreams. Darcy searched in the darkness, trying to find where it was coming from, unable to navigate in the inky blackness, lost and cold and afraid. She felt the pull of consciousness like a rope tied around her waist, tugging her back toward the light. She knew it wouldn't be safe, leaving the laughter there, lurking at the back of her mind like a tumor, like a bit of cancer hidden away and waiting to replicate. Darcy clawed, struggling against the grip, unable to stop the momentum, trying to hold onto the memory as she surfaced.

Eyes feeling like sandpaper, matching the dryness in her mouth, Darcy hummed a painful moan. Her ears sounded like they'd been filled with cotton and when she opened her eyes, everything was blurry and surrounded by halos of light. "Nngghhh..."

Bucky jumped to his feet, leaning over the bed as he gripped Darcy's hand, watching her blink, face screwing into a grimace as her hazel eyes focused on him. "Hey, doll."
When Darcy tried to respond, she did little more than rasp before she began coughing. The pain that exploded in her body left her seeing stars, a stabbing feeling in her chest stealing the air from her lungs, which was fine because she couldn't take in a deep breath anyway.

"It's okay," Bucky said, rubbing a hand down her wild curls, seeing the alarm and ache in her eyes. "You've got some badly bruised ribs. They wrapped them pretty tight. Do you want a sip of water?" When she nodded, Bucky grabbed the small pitcher and poured her a glass, holding the straw out toward her lips, her eyes watering as she drank. "Better?"

Her nod was slow, eyes falling closed as the ache in her ribs faded but didn't go away. Darcy let her breath out through her nose, trying to keep her body as still as possible. When the pain had mostly subsided into an annoyance, she opened her eyes, gaze sweeping around the room. Her expression grew more panicked as memories began to break through her unconscious haze, bits and pieces of what had happened coming back, heart freezing when she remembered Steve's unseeing eyes staring toward the ceiling. "S-Steve?" she managed, throat burning, voice harsh.

"He's safe," Bucky assured her, "he's in the next room getting discharged. He had a few more breaks and bruises than you did, but he's already back on his feet. He'll be fine."

Darcy collapsed back in the bed, hand coming up to press against her ribs. "What happened?"

"We're not sure. Tony said you were already hurt when you found him and Steve. You've got six bruised ribs, a sprained left knee, and a bunch of cuts and scrapes. Since you made it out, we're assuming the thing that did this is either goo or ran off."

Darcy thought on his words, flashes of memory filling in the gaps. "Big guy. Ugly fucker. Ran away," she said, coughing again, grateful when Bucky helped her get more water. When she didn’t feel like she was going to hack up one of her lungs, she laid back against the bed. "Looked like a rock with black, beady eyes."

"That sounds familiar."

At the sound of Steve's voice, Darcy's eyes swung toward him, relief washing over as he smiled softly at her. She focused on the blue of his eyes, drinking in the life that lit them, replacing the terrifying memories of them being vacant and empty. "Still handsome," Darcy said, lifting her arm and holding out her hand.

Steve wrapped his fingers around hers, leaning down to press his lips to her forehead before pulling back gingerly, the lingering ache of his broken ribs still tender. "How are you feeling?"

"Ribs hurt like a bitch," she said, lips quirking up in a grin when Bucky snorted, feeling him run his thumb across the back of her hand over and over. "Don't know about my knee yet, trying not to move."

"Good plan," Steve said.

"You okay?"

Blue eyes lifted to look at Darcy, eyebrows raising as she blinked at him. "Me? I'll be fine. Took a beating but I'll pull through."

Darcy watched the ghost of a smile flit over Steve's lips, frowning when it didn't meet his gorgeous eyes. "Tony okay? From what I remember his suit looked like it asploded."

Steve looked down at their clasped hands, clearing his throat before nodding. He was still sorting
through his own memories of his fight with the engineer, not certain what was real and what were lies his mind had supplied to have it all make sense. "Yeah, Tony's okay. Suit's another story, but he's fine."

"Good," Darcy said, laying back against the bed, a sigh passing her lips as she closed her eyes, "that's good. The first real order Clint gives me in the field and I almost fucked it up. He'd never let me live it down." She'd only been awake for a few minutes but she could already feel the tiredness trying to pull her back under. It'd been a hell of a battle and that she'd made it out at all was a miracle.

When neither Bucky nor Steve said anything, Darcy opened her eyes, seeing Steve and Bucky share a look, their expressions carefully guarded, tension in their body language. "What?" Both of them turned to look at her, their grips on her hands tightening. "What?"

Bucky could see the pain in Steve's eyes, watching as the blond swallowed harshly, emotion making his eyes shine. "It's Clint," he said, voice thick. "He got hurt during the fight."

Darcy knew every inflection of Bucky's voice, could read paragraphs of information from a single sentence, but part of her refused to analyze what she was hearing, fearing what truth she'd find. "I know. I helped pull a wicked looking spine from his back. That's when he told me to find Tony. He told me to find Tony and he ran off to help Peter."

"He did help Peter," Steve said, "the kid says he saved his life."

Darcy heard the words, eyes tracing Bucky's lips as he formed them, but the truth of it didn't make sense. It couldn't be. "But he was fine," she said, voice insistent, the memory of them splitting up replaying in her mind, like a bad movie she couldn't turn off, "when we separated he was fine."

"I know."

"Are you sure?" Looking at his face, Darcy knew her question was useless, but she asked it again, slowing everything down, searching her mind for every detail she could remember. He'd tackled her to the ground, in the process getting speared with one of the alien's spikes. She'd pulled the spike free at his insistence, worried about the pain she'd caused.

Good work, Darce. I'm proud of you.

Darcy shook her head more forcefully, “no. No! If he…” She felt details of what had happened at the sanctum flood back, things she hadn't noticed before. As she'd looked over her shoulder at him, she'd missed the ooze of green liquid from the discarded spike. He'd been coughing, telling her what a good job she was doing...

You've got this.

Memories folded in on themselves, each worse than the one before. Denial took hold. “If I… I brought Steve back. If Clint's still there, his colors, then I can -” Both Steve and Bucky darted forward, pressing back on Darcy’s shoulders, keeping her from attempting to climb out of the bed. "If it's like what I did for you -"
"You can't bring him back."

"Yes I can!" Darcy said, squeezing their hands, needing to make them understand what she could do. "Steve was gone, he was gone and I, I mean, I brought him back!" she argued, ignoring the stabbing pain her ribs as she struggled against them. "If Clint's soul is still there, I can just -"

"It's been two days, Darce." Bucky explained, watching the realization dawn on Darcy's face, her eyes widening and filling with tears. "There's nothing you can do."

"But, if he's still... I can try..." Darcy shook her head, the crowd of emotions in her head thick enough to drown in, the ache in her chest having nothing to do with her injuries. Two days. She’d been out for two days. "He can’t be... he can’t just leave. He can’t just be gone!"

"Darcy -"

"He has things he needs to do. He and Cooper, they're going to build a treehouse. He’s going to refinish the floors. He’s not..." Nothing made sense in her head. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t true. "He’s a good dad," she said, gasping through her tears, "and a good dad isn’t supposed to leave!" Darcy pulled her hands from both of theirs, pressing them to her chest as her breathing sped up, her cheeks wet and hot. "What about Laura? Natasha? What are they, how, he’s not..."

The first tears slipped from Steve’s eyes as Darcy covered her face with her hands, body shaking as she sobbed, the words and arguments indecipherable. He draped his arm across her shoulders, pressing his face to her hair, whispering words he knew would be no comfort. Steve looked to Bucky, seeing the pain in his best friend's eyes, sharing the ache. There was nothing they could do except hold Darcy as she cried her grief.

PageBreak

The ground made squishing noises as her wheelchair was pushed through the grass, the heavy, dark gray clouds still threatening but momentarily quiet. The stillness of the cemetery was in strict opposition to the storm in Darcy’s chest as Bucky directed them toward the grave site, following the line of people who’d filed out of the black Lincoln town cars marked with purple flags and white crosses. It wasn’t a large crowd, S.H.I.E.L.D. security being what it was, but they were all people she knew, which somehow made it worse.

Bucky glanced to his left, Steve's blue eyes cast down at the ground, the black of his suit making his skin look paler than normal. The broken ribs and other fractures had already healed but his best friend still looked wan, the loss of a teammate and friend making the lines of Steve's face more noticeable, the pain in his eyes more apparent.

"We should have grabbed the umbrellas," Steve said, gaze flicking over to Bucky, lips thin, doing his best to keep his voice even. "In case it starts raining again."

"I can run to the car if we need them," Bucky said, tone soft. He glanced over his shoulder, the handful of people following them looking down at the earth, none of them talking, all dealing with their emotions in their own way. Bucky turned and focused on pushing Darcy's chair through the sodden grass.

Darcy could hear Steve and Bucky talking behind her, but as they crested a hill, her sole attention was drawn to the five people standing next to the open hole in the ground.
Natasha's hair was pulled back from her face, her expression stoic, holding Nathaniel in her arms. The suit the four-year-old was wearing looked out of place, his blond hair bright as he tiredly rested his head on her shoulder, Darcy knowing that the morning's activities had cut into his regularly scheduled nap time. Lilah and Cooper were gripping Laura's hands with theirs, eyes red-rimmed from crying, their breathing haggard as crying hiccups lifted and dropped their shoulders. Laura Barton wore no makeup, her cheeks dry, hair in a ponytail and trailing over her shoulder. She looked over at the priest, a worn bible in the man's hand, and gave a firm nod before looking up toward the group approaching.

The feeling of tightness in Darcy's chest was unlike anything she'd ever felt. She looked at the Barton/Romanoff family and felt all of their pain pressing against her heart, threatening to stop it. She hadn't meant to, but when she blinked past the tears, the colors bled into her vision, showing her in vivid technicolor just how deep their grief was.

Natasha's autumn orange was muted, the grays that usually clung to the edges of that orange more pronounced, fading in and out like a strobe light. Lilah's summer green was dim, as was Cooper's cardinal yellow. Nathaniel's was the least affected, his firetruck red still bright but tinted with confusion, unable to understand completely what all this meant.

It was Laura, though, that broke Darcy's heart. The brilliant, bright azure color that had amazed her from their first meeting had faded so much that it was hard to know where her soul ended and where the gray skies started. The lump in Darcy's throat was impossibly large and she had trouble swallowing past it. She brought a hand to her chest, eyes screwing shut, a gasp of pain when she took in a deep breath.

"Darce?"

When Darcy opened her eyes, filled with tears and bloodshot, Steve was kneeling next to her, a concerned look in his gaze. "Are you okay? Is it -"

"I'm fine," Darcy said, tone robotic.

Steve didn't believe her for a second, but it was clear her pain wasn't from the injuries she'd sustained in the battle, and despite how much he wanted, he knew he couldn't help her with the other pain she was feeling. When he straightened, he shared a look with Bucky above her head, both of the men feeling a sharp helplessness. Since Darcy had woken, her fluctuating emotions had been rough yet entirely understandable.

Bucky knew Darcy had lost people in the past but almost none of them, save Olivia, had been due to death; for all the people that Darcy had lost, almost everyone had left by their own choosing. Watching her go through this process was difficult, and he knew neither he nor Steve would be able to help her deal with the tumble of emotions she was feeling.

Even as her heart beat heavily in her chest, Darcy berated herself for feeling this broken. Her pain was worth nothing, not compared to what Laura, Natasha, and Clint's children were feeling. She had no right to focus on her loss, no right to let it affect her as much as it was. What did her feelings matter, when Clint's entire family would feel his loss for the rest of their lives? Her pain was a drop in the ocean. It was nothing. She was nothing.

As they neared, Natasha whispered something into Nathaniel's ear, whatever she'd said making his eyes slide toward Steve, a small smile turning his lips. The preschooler lifted his fist and did an approximation of a wave, grinning brighter when Steve returned the gesture, then burying his face against Natasha's neck when the blond came closer.
“Is here okay?” Bucky watched Darcy glance up at him, eyes lingering for a second on his face before she looked straight ahead and gave him a nearly imperceptible nod, choosing not to speak. Wishing he could make her feel better but knowing he couldn’t, Bucky crossed to Natasha, reaching out to grip her free hand. “You guys need anything?”

Natasha shook her head, watching as Steve pressed his lips to Laura’s cheek then bent down and said something to Lilah, who nodded then laughed softly, reaching up to brush at her eyes. Cooper didn’t look at Steve when the soldier spoke to him, simply nodded and continued looking down at the recently turned dirt.

“How are you feeling?”

Darcy waited a long moment before her eyes slid up to look at Tony, cataloging his dark glasses and charcoal gray suit. Pepper stood beside him, her black dress neat and flattering, her face pulled into sad lines. As the rest of the group surrounded the burial site, Darcy looked back toward the ground. “I’m fine,” she said, the phrase familiar, the words automatic.

She saw Tony open his mouth in her peripheral vision before he closed it, glancing over at Pepper, seeming to take whatever wordless advice she gave him and staying quiet. Darcy stared into the darkness of the hole, the complicated web of grass roots and the random grey color of rocks mixed in with the soil. Everything was mud and wet and she couldn’t help but wonder if that would make things easier for the gravediggers. Would it be easier shoveling mud on the casket instead of giant heaps of dirt? Would it matter? Would it be quieter?

Darcy understood the quiet. She’d gotten used to it. Looking at the dark, deep brown of the mud, so close to black that it was hard to differentiate the two, she felt her thoughts slip away into white noise. It was easy to go into that darkness, to let it clear her thoughts, blank and emotionless. It was better there, without the weight of loss and grief and pain making her heart heavier. It was easy to retreat into it, avoiding it all.

She jumped when hands came to rest on her shoulders, looking up in alarm, seeing the expressions of worry on Steve and Bucky’s faces. “Sorry,” she mumbled, pulled back into the world around her and the heartache that surrounded them.

Sharing another look with Steve, Bucky pushed his worry aside as the priest began speaking. It was a simple service, so many aspects of Clint’s life going unremarked upon due to the nature of his work, but it was heartfelt and moving, and when Steve reached out to grab his hand, Bucky took it gratefully, squeezing back fiercely as he watched Natasha hold herself together for the children.

Steve watched Laura, seeing the agony and anguish in her eyes while managing to stand stalwart and strong. He’d known that the nurse was the backbone of the family, but watching her here, when part of her world lay at her feet, still unbelievably resolute… it was incredible. Heartbreaking.

The priest finished, giving the mourners a nod and checking with Laura and Natasha before he left Clint’s friends and family. It was quiet, the distant roll of thunder and the random sniffle the only thing that broke the silence. It wasn’t until Nathaniel began fussing in Natasha’s arms, wanting to be let down, that the group was moved to action.

Steve crossed toward Natasha, smiling at the little boy and drawing his attention, distracting him so the agent could focus on the rest of her family. Laura bent beside Cooper, whispering to him, the boys stiff jaw making it clear how close to falling apart he was, his mother trying to coax him away from the edge.

“Miss Darcy?”
Blinking, Darcy looked over to Lilah, who’d appeared at her side, little face pale and blue eyes - *Clint’s eyes* - full of questions and devastation. “Yeah, Lilah?”

“What color was my daddy?”

The wave of emotion that crashed over Darcy knocked the air from her lungs, her chin wobbling as she watched Lilah look at her so earnestly, that one question threatening to break through the shield Darcy was holding so tenuously around herself.

“Lilah, honey, I’m sure Darcy is tired,” Laura said, making her way toward her daughter, voice soft but insistent. “We’ve all had a really long day and -”

“It’s fine, Laura,” Darcy said, surprising herself with how even her voice sounded, considering the hurricane throwing things around in her head. She turned her hazel eyes toward Lilah, reaching out to drag a finger down the little girl’s forehead, then nose, then chin. It was something she’d seen Clint do so often that she’d done the gesture automatically.

“Your daddy was a perfect purple, like grapes in the sun, warm and deep and like the juiciest plum.” She watched Lilah’s lower lip tremble, the tremor forcing tears to well in Darcy’s eyes, too. “He was like a warm summer night, after the blue has faded and it’s not quite black yet, but the sky picks a color in between, just so the stars shine a little brighter.”

When Lilah blinked her large eyes, the cascade of tears broke free and slid down her cheeks as she nodded, reaching out to hold Darcy’s hand. “Do you think, when you’re feeling better, that you can come over and help me find the right crayon for him? That way I can have his color with me all the time?”

Darcy had never considered it before, but it seemed wrong that the sound of a heart breaking was silent. Not the sobs that come after, or the tremors that shake your body due to the release of emotions, but the *exact moment* that something inside of you snaps and you’re not sure how to keep breathing, when you forget how to pull air into your lungs and push it out, when every single thought is nothing but agony and time seems to stop in that crystalline moment of pain.

Biting on her lip, Darcy nodded, knowing that if she opened her mouth to respond, the hysterical, keening wail that had been threatening all day would be freed and she *desperately* wanted to avoid it. Not here. Not now. Not when she could see Clint’s family and knew that she was the reason they were in pain.

“Come on, honey,” Laura said, holding her hand out for Lilah, the confusion on the little girl’s face being soothed with a soft smile from her mother.

Darcy wanted to look up into Laura’s eyes, to tell her that she was sorry, that she should have been more careful, that he’d trained her better than this and she’d ruined everything, but none of it came out. She screwed her eyes closed and tightened her jaw, breathing past the ball of anguish until she could feel everyone move away, heading back toward the cars and out of the light drizzle that was starting.

Steve leaned into Laura, giving her a hug, cerulean filled with sorrow as she pulled back and pressed her hand to his cheek. “You’ll come for Sunday dinner sometime soon?”

“Absolutely,” Steve said automatically, the smile on his lips not matching the pain in his eyes. “I’ve never been able to turn down one of your invitations.”

“I’m glad,” Laura nodded, reaching out to grip Bucky’s hand when he extended it in her direction.
“We’ll see you soon.”

“If you need anything from us,” Bucky started, grey eyes flicking up to hers, “anything at all, just let us know.”

“I will. Promise.” Laura nodded at them one more time before she started toward the waiting cars, Lilah looking over her shoulder and waving at them as they passed.

“I’ll be in Monday,” Natasha rasped as she took Laura’s place next to Steve and Bucky, Nate’s face hidden in the crook of her neck.

“Nat.?”

“I know,” Natasha said, cutting off Steve’s argument, “but I’ll be there anyway.”

“Паук,” Bucky said, his nickname for the copper-haired assassin filled with words unsaid.

Natasha looked at Bucky for a long moment before she spoke, her lips barely moving, her voice little more than a whisper on the wind. “На миру и смерть красна.”

Bucky nodded at her and she followed after Laura. Halfway to the car, Nate’s head peeked over her shoulder and he gave another shy wave in Steve’s direction.

After waving back, Steve looked over at Bucky, noting the pain in his best friend’s eyes. “What did that mean?”

“With company, even death loses its sting,” Bucky answered, letting the emotion linger before he reached up and ran a hand over his face, wiping away the tears that had slipped down his cheeks, knowing that rain would mask them if anyone noticed. He took a deep breath and crossed back to Darcy. “You ready?”

Darcy was pulled from her dark thoughts as Bucky leaned down to look at her. “Yeah,” she said, her voice once again robotic and automatic, the white noise of grief having returned to fill her head.

“Саша?”

Bucky nodded as he pulled the door to their bedroom closed. After the funeral, Darcy has returned to the med ward and started shoving her things in a bag. When the doctor had come in, advising her that it would be better for her to stay one more night with them, the glare she’d pointed his way was enough to quiet his objections.

The look in her eyes had worried Bucky. He knew the grief of losing Clint was still fresh, that all of their emotions had been on a tilt-a-whirl for the past few days, but the bare seething hatred in all that hazel had paused his breath, part of him concerned that if the doctor hadn’t gotten out of her way that she would have reached out with her powers and made him move.

Steve followed Bucky with his eyes, watching nimble fingers pull at his tie, loosening it before pulling it over his head. “I’m not sure Natasha should come in on Monday,” he said, having waited to have this conversation away from Darcy, not wanting to burden her with anything else. “She should take time to be with Laura and the kids.”
The breath in Bucky’s lungs huffed out as he collapsed next to Steve, draping his arm across the back of the sofa. “You know Nat. She needs the work. It’ll help.”

“It’ll just be a distraction away from the pain,” Steve argued, “but it’ll still be there when she goes home.”

“Sometimes distractions are a good thing. She’s dealt with loss before. She’s not hiding, but she knows better than to feel it all at once. That’s how you drown.”

Digesting what Bucky had said, Steve’s eyes slid until they landed on the bedroom door, his concern for the woman on the other side something real and full in his stomach. “I’m worried about her,” he said, blue gaze flicking back toward Bucky. “Some of the things she said…”

“She said a lot of things.” Bucky watched as Steve looked down, deliberately avoiding his eyes. “What happened?”

The last three days had been spent in a flurry of activity - making sure Darcy was healthy, dealing with her grief, reaching out to Natasha and Laura, offering their help in whatever way was needed, confirming that the army attacking the sanctum had left without the time stone or any other relic that could aid them - and the details of that day had been pushed aside, too heavy to work through.

As Darcy was wrapped in emotionally-exhausted sleep, there were no more excuses to avoid having this conversation. Even as he knew it needed to happen, Steve didn’t want to voice the bits and pieces that he’d remembered from the fight. “I got to the library with Wong, watched his back while he stored some of the more dangerous books and weapons. Tony crashed in.”

“She said it looked like his armor had exploded.” Bucky could tell there was something Steve wasn’t saying, though he didn’t know why. The worst thing that could have happened did. They’d lost a teammate, one of their own. There was nothing worse than that.

“Something…” Steve ran a hand over his face, unable to shake the image of the Iron armor throwing Wong across the room then turning toward him, the emotionless helmet somehow looking malevolent as it stalked closer. “One of the aliens got in Tony’s head, turned him against me and Wong. I didn’t know what was happening at first. I deflected as much as I could, but eventually I had to take the armor out of the fight.”

The emotions chasing across Steve’s face read like a book. Uncertainty. Denial. Resignation. It was hard to see Steve at such rough ends, unable to express himself correctly, frustrated that he didn’t have better answers. “You tore the suit apart.”

“I didn’t know what else to do. When I ripped that helmet off and saw his eyes… I knew something else was going on. I knocked him out, mitigated the risk of either of us getting hurt further, until I could figure everything out. Then the alien stepped out, spoke to me, tried to get into my head, too.”

“One of Thanos’ goons?” When Steve nodded, Bucky’s fingers squeezed the blond’s shoulder, giving him a focused look. “But you fought him off.”

“At first it was like a scratch in my ear. His voice was so calm, so sure. It was hard not to listen, not to feel the truth of his words. It was easier believing them then fighting against it. Somehow I managed to grab one of the weapon’s Wong had been trying to save. A sword. The second I wrapped my fingers around it, it was like the thing’s voice lost all its power. They were just words, and he was just another threat that needed neutralizing.”

Bucky was following Steve’s story, understanding the exasperation at trying to explain what it was
like to hear another voice inside his head. Bucky got it. He got it more than most people probably would. “Then something happened.”

“Yeah, Buck. Something happened.” Steve’s head lollled back against the sofa, eyes falling closed. The flashes of memory had filtered into his brain, thoughts and pains that didn’t make sense by themselves, but when gathered with everything, painted a pretty clear picture. “Tony came out of it, asked if it was dead. I heard a noise and I watched a silver ball roll across the ground toward us. I was moving before I knew what was happening. I lifted the shield in front of Tony to protect him, then the thing went off.”

It didn’t surprise Bucky in the slightest that Steve’s immediate reaction was to protect someone else, even if that meant protecting the person who’d been hellbent on killing him not three minutes before. “You saved his life,” Bucky said, feeling Steve’s eyes swing toward him, an argument on his best friend’s tongue. “Then what?”

Sighing, too tired to argue with Bucky about his comment, Steve blew his breath out slowly. “Then I died.”

Bucky searched Steve’s face, trying to gauge the width of that exaggeration, surprised when he saw the absolute truth of it in the other man’s face. “You died,” he said, the words tasting like ash on his tongue.

“I think so. I felt the pain of it, an explosion without the explosion, and then I landed and slid across the floor. Everything went cold, then numb, and then I could do nothing but stare at Tony, wanting him to move, needing to know he was alright. He coughed and then… nothing.”

“You could have just passed out,” Bucky said, unable to keep the disbelief out of his voice. He knew that they both had a habit of over exaggerating how unkillable they were, but when it came down to it, it was true. Neither of them had actually died. They’d been close, so close, but death was one journey that had gone untravelled.

“I can’t explain it,” Steve said, looking down at his hands, eyes following the curves and wrinkles of his palm. “But I feel it.” He looked up, pinning Bucky with his stare, willing him to understand. “I felt myself fade away. I didn’t have time to be scared, or to fight against it. It was happening and I couldn’t do anything about it.”

Bucky held Steve’s gaze, believing what Steve was telling him while denying it. Steve had died. Steve had died. He felt his heart skip a beat, then another, then his breath rushed out. “Steve,” he said, blinking past the enormity of what he was being told, “how?”

“It was her. It was Darcy. I heard her, telling me to come back, calling my name.”

“Wait, she -”

“No,” Steve said, knowing the question that had been about to fall from Bucky’s lips, “it’s not like what happened with you and her. I don’t…” He shook his head. “I don’t have her memories, I don’t think she has mine. She said something, did something, and I was pulled back.”

“Pulled back from where?”

“I don’t know, Buck. I don’t know how, I just know I heard her and then I was back. The pain was still there, but my heart was beating in my chest and she was looking down at me like I was… like she’d -”

“Like she’d fought for you,” Bucky finished for him, “like she’d saved you from the black.”
Steve nodded, reaching up to brush at his eyes, dealing with the truth of those words for the first time. “She brought me back. How is that something I know? People don’t get brought back from the dead. It’s not right. It’s not possible.”

“It’s not possible,” Bucky agreed, “but she still did it.”

“By the time I was able to move, she was already unconscious. Tony and Wong managed to carry her to everyone and that’s when we realized…”

Bucky nodded, not needing to be reminded of the scene they’d come upon. It was burned into his memory, the pain still too real to think on.

*Peter cried on the ground, arms wrapped around himself, face pressed into his knees. Natasha sat beside him, Clint’s head in her lap, her hand smoothing his hair over and over. Her voice was low but Bucky was able to make out a few of the words in the Russian lullabye, knowing it was one she’d always used to soothe Nathaniel when he was fussy.*

*Bucky, Strange, and Thor turned at the same time, weapons raised and ready to attack whatever had appeared at their back. Blade clattering to the ground, Bucky rushed forward when he saw Darcy in Tony’s arms, her body limp, cheeks pale.*

“She’s alive,” Tony said, looking over Bucky’s shoulder, his eyes locked on Natasha and the man in her lap. “Is he -”

“There are a lot of injuries,” Stephen said, taking a step toward Steve, waiting until the soldier’s blue gaze tore away from Clint’s body to look at him. “Are you hurt?”

Steve heard Strange’s question but it took several tries before he could talk past the lump in his throat. “I’m fine. We should…” He looked away from the sorcerer and back toward Natasha, seeing the blank expression in her eyes, watching her lips move as she whispered. He was pulled back when Stephen rested a hand on his arm. Steve looked down, as if he didn’t expect to be able to feel his arm at all, gaze swinging up until he was looking in the other man’s eyes. “Is it safe?”

“They didn’t get the stone,” Stephen said, knowing the success meant little and not worth the price they’d paid. He gestured toward an orange portal in the foyer, the grey, minimalistic walls of the compound visible inside. “You should all get checked out by medical. If you need my assistance -”

Steve shook away the memory, feeling the keen pain that accompanied it stick in his throat. “If she’d been there with him instead of me -”

“Hey,” Bucky said, squeezing Steve’s shoulder, drawing the other man’s gaze, “don’t do that. We don’t know if she’d have been able to bring him back.”

“She brought me back,” Steve argued, his voice weak even to himself.

Bucky shifted closer, resting his hands on Steve’s knee, dipping his head so Steve had to look at him. “Your body could take more damage than his could. There’s no way to know for sure that she’d have been able to do anything for him.”

“That’s not a good enough answer.”

“I know, Steve, but it’s the best we’re going to get. That guilt will eat you up if you let it.”

Steve couldn’t help the small snort that broke free at Bucky’s words, looking into the grey of his best friend’s eyes as he could practically feel the shame biting up and down his arms. “Not sure I know
how to stop it.”

“We lost a teammate. He was a good husband, a good father, and a good man. And I don’t think he’d want you or Darcy blaming yourself for what happened.”

Knowing Bucky was right, but unsure how to shrug off the chains of blame that had tightened around his heart, Steve looked down at his hands, biting his lip as the tears began to slip down his cheeks, accepting Bucky’s arms as they wrapped around his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

You. Yes, you reading this. I know that sometimes the darkness feels so deep and heavy that you feel like drowning. I’ve been there. There are times when no words can make it feel better. If you or anyone you know needs help, if you feel like there's no light, please know there are people who can help. Visit the Suicide Prevention Lifeline Website or give them a call at 1-800-273-8255.
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Darcy grieves. Bucky, Steve, Peter, and Jane worry.

Chapter Notes

Have I mentioned how much I love all of you? Something about that last chapter (oh, gosh, what could it have been?, she says while sobbing) hit a nerve. So hello to all those new readers! Hello to the people who commented for the first time! Hello to the OGs who have stuck with me from the beginning! If you told someone about this, or reblogged something on Tumblr, or if you enjoy these words while eating cheetos with a pair of chopsticks: YOU. ARE. AMAZING. <3

You know what they always say... it's gotta get worse before it gets better...

I can wade grief.
Whole pools of it.
I'm used to that.

Steve pushed his way into their rooms, throwing his tac bag by the door as he toed off his shoes, glancing over to see the lump of blankets on the couch shift slightly, the only real sign that there was life within. “Darcy?”

“Yeah,” Darcy answered, pressing the remote button, watching the channels flip, aimlessly changing while knowing she wasn't really paying the TV any attention.

“You eat lunch yet?”

“Not hungry.”

Over the past month, one or two word answers had been all he and Bucky could coax from Darcy. They’d given her the space they thought she needed, but it was becoming clear that while her grief over Clint’s death was still being felt deeply, there was something else going on. Besides her lack of verbal conversation, it wasn’t uncommon to find out she’d told Tony she wasn’t feeling well, doing nothing all day besides sitting on the couch or not leaving the bed at all.
The life that had coursed through Darcy’s veins, one of her most beautiful qualities, the likes of which Steve’d never seen, had been replaced with apathy. Bucky kept assuring him that she would be fine, that this was her first real loss of a teammate and they just needed to let her deal with it in her own way, but Steve had started to see the doubt creep into his best friend’s eyes. This wasn’t just grief, it was guilt, and Steve knew all too well how that felt.

Even though by some miracle he’d gotten him back, Steve’s memories of Bucky’s fall from that train were still there, in all their guilt-inducing glory. He’d never forget the responsibility that fell on his shoulders, the knowledge that Bucky would have never even been there if he hadn’t been following his best friend into the jaws of hell. He’d paid that price, felt that blame like a ton of bricks in his chest, and Steve could see that same weight on Darcy’s conscience. He could recognize it, and though he didn’t know her like Bucky did, he knew that feeling intimately. “Did you go into the lab today?”

“For a little bit,” Darcy answered, finger pressing the button and flipping from the food network to some show about renovating a house. She wasn’t sure stopping to grab mail counted as ‘going into work’, but she’d at least made the effort. Tony had stopped expecting her to come in, and while Peter always looked excited when she entered, by the time she left the happiness had faded entirely.

She didn’t mean to snap at Peter or question Tony’s every sentence, but something inside of her was looking for a fight. Every comment was a gauntlet being thrown, just another thing to pull her useless anger to the surface. She fed on each of them greedily, telling herself that they had no reason to question her, that she was fine, that she just needed more time and once she had it she’d be back to normal.

But she wasn’t normal. She wasn’t anywhere near normal. Her ups and downs even left her wondering what would set her off next. The most innocent of words and she was yelling, once even throwing a mug across the room as she’d stormed from the lab. She’d come back the next day to find Tony’s ‘World’s Okayest Boss’ mug glued back together, the cracks filled with a golden resin, sitting on her desk.

She’d turned on her heels without a word, making it in their front door before she collapsed in racking sobs, terrifying Bucky who’d rushed toward her thinking something had happened. How did she explain something she didn’t even understand? How did she explain that she felt like she was going crazy? She could practically see the creeping gray darkness at the edges of her vision. She hadn’t looked in the mirror for some time, afraid that if she saw her reflection and let the colors take over, the emerald hue of her soul would be gone, replaced by the blackness of self-hate and guilt.

“You need me to get you anything?” Steve sighed when her response never came, her lack of communication speaking volumes on how she was feeling. He pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it on his bag before crossing to the couch. He tugged on the edge of her blanket, revealing her face, watching as her eyes swung from the TV to look at him.

Darcy could see the question in his eyes - *Are you okay?* - and she could taste the annoyed response on the tip of her tongue, but she never had a chance to voice it, instead letting out a shout when he tipped himself over the couch and on top of her. “Fuck, you’re so heavy!”

Steve wiggled and shifted them, heart soaring when she let out the first real laugh he’d heard in weeks. Finally, he was laid back with her draped over most of him, the couch not big enough for both of them to lay side by side. He looked at the small smile still playing on her lips, her eyes brighter than he’d seen in days. “Hi.”

When Steve reached up and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, Darcy let her eyes fall closed, letting out her breath slowly, feeling his warmth soothe her. “Hey handsome,” she replied, blinking
“Nothing else on my schedule but you, sweetheart,” he answered, smiling when she nodded and bit her lip. Steve closed the distance between their mouths, moving hesitantly. He didn’t want to push her to do more than she was comfortable, but his body ached for hers in ways he couldn’t put into words. When she deepened the kiss, shifting so she was straddling his hips, Steve returned in kind, fingers sifting through her hair, humming his desire against her lips.

The feeling of not wanting to be touched by anyone had given way to an almost crazed hunger for Steve to be pressed against her, craving the feel of his skin sliding over hers. Darcy accepted the sudden change in her own emotions, hands running over as much skin as she could, reaching between their bodies to wrap her hand around him through his sweatpants, feeling him pressed hard, and so warm, and fuck did she want him.

Darcy pulled her mouth from his long enough to straighten her back, throwing aside the t-shirt she’d been wearing, not giving him enough time to catch his breath before she was pressed against him again. Her hands pushed past the waistband of Steve’s sweatpants and boxers, swallowing the gasp that tore from his mouth at her frantic movements.

Logically, Steve knew that they needed to take this slower, that he needed to be certain this was what Darcy wanted and that she didn’t feel pressured into doing anything, but logic had left his brain when she began mewling his name, pushing at his clothing so there was nothing between them except skin. With Darcy’s legs wrapped around his waist, it took nothing to roll them from the couch, laying her against the carpet, dark curls framing her face as she looked up at him, lips pink and plump from their kissing, cheeks flushed, chest rising and falling as she breathed heavily.

For the first time in weeks, he saw a light in her eyes that he recognized, a glimmer of the life he knew she held inside returning to the hazel he loved so much. She was there, blinking up at him, and it filled him with such relief that he had to swallow past the emotion that lodged in his throat. “Hi,” he said again, remembering the first time he’d seen her like this, when he’d given into the desire he held for her, accepting that she had a place in his life beside Bucky, though none of them were sure how to make any of it work.

He’d been so stubborn, fighting against a situation he didn’t see working, refusing to believe that the woman professing her love could really mean it. Looking down at her, desire in the heat of that hazel, Steve wondered how he could have ever doubted it. They moved at the same time, hungry for the other, showing it with their lips and hands, in the slide of skin on skin. His thumbs hooked into the waistband of her panties and she lifted her hips to help pull them down. Steve tossed them somewhere over his shoulder, forgotten.

As his head dipped down to nuzzle her jaw, sucking on the bit of skin below her ear, Darcy’s fingers tangled in Steve’s honey strands, breath leaving her in a rush when he continued his path south, tongue laving at her clavicle before kissing down her chest, pulling one of her nipples into his mouth. God, she wanted him. Darcy’d never wanted anyone more than she wanted Steve and Bucky. Her blood sung with it, a ravenous, insatiable appetite for the two men who’d taken over her heart.

Nothing was right when they weren’t at her side. The world didn’t make sense if they weren’t there, holding her hands, facing whatever life could throw at them.

And yet.

Every brush of skin was a reminder that she’d stolen this from Natasha and Laura. She’d taken their love, their husband, and she’d gotten him killed. They would go to bed each night with an empty space where Clint was supposed to be. She’d taken that warmth, that light, that part of them that
could never be replaced. But it wasn’t just them she’d taken him from.

Clint would never seen his children grow up. He wouldn’t be there for Lilah’s next dance recital, or Cooper’s next soccer game, or Nathaniel’s first day of kindergarten. There would be no more birthdays, no more Christmas’ or holidays, no more unnecessary remodeling of their house. Her inexperience and sloppiness had stolen all those moments from them, and it didn’t feel right being happy or allowing herself to experience pleasure, not if it meant having to ignore the clawing guilt that threatened to tear her apart.

She didn’t deserve happiness or pleasure, even as she starved for it, desperate to feel anything besides the pain and shame.

As his tongue circled her nipple, Steve felt her breath hitch on the way in, hands slipping from his hair. His lips curled into a smirk against her skin, loving the way her body reacted to him, pulling back, blue eyes filled with satisfaction that he could tear her apart so easily. His expression was replaced by worry and guilt when he saw her covering her face with her hands, shoulders shaking not with hunger but with tears. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to push you. If you’re not ready -”

“No, no,” Darcy said, shaking her head, cradling his face in her hands as she rose up to kiss him, ignoring the waver in her voice and the tears flowing freely from her eyes. “Don’t stop. Please. I’m fine, I want you, I want this, please.”

Steve knew what she was saying but he could see the stifled sobs she barely held at bay, and even as she tried to pull him down again, he knew it wasn’t right. “Darcy -”

“No, Steve, please. I do, I want this. I want you. I want to feel normal. Help me. Help me feel normal, please, Steve, please! I don’t know what’s wrong but I need to feel normal. I can’t… I’m lost and I can’t…”

It was obvious this had been building in her for some time, the heaving cries shaking her body, what words she attempted indecipherable as she wept. Steve pulled Darcy to his chest, trying to comfort her, feeling utterly helpless to stop the pain that seemed to seep from her pores. He ran his hand over her hair and rubbed circles on her back, telling her that she was fine, that she was safe, and that he would take care of her. He knew better than to tell her he’d make everything better because it’d have been a lie.

When she quieted, single involuntary sniffles shaking her periodically, Steve reached up and pulled the blanket over them, shifting so she could rest her head on his bicep. He continued to stroke his hand over her hair, until her breaths evened out and she fell into an exhausted sleep. Uncaring that his arm had long ago gone numb, Steve watched her eyes flick back and forth as she dreamed, hoping at least in sleep she could find some peace.

Hours later, when the door was pushed open as Bucky returned home, Steve raised his arm so Bucky could see where they were. Thankfully, Bucky could tell that something was wrong and he approached silently, grey eyes taking in the scene before he spoke.

“What happened?”

“Help me get her to the bed?” Steve took his arm back, Darcy only stirring slightly as he moved, grabbing his boxers and pulling them on before he bent, Bucky helping him lift Darcy from the floor, the blanket wrapped around her. He carried her to the bedroom, feeling Bucky mirroring him like a shadow, worry and concern in his best friend’s steps.
Bucky watched Steve place her on the bed, making sure her face had smoothed back into comfortable sleep before he nodded toward the door. Bucky exited the bedroom, hands hanging limply and uselessly at his sides. When Steve pulled the door shut then leaned back against it, Bucky looked at him expectantly, watching the blond swallow harshly, Adam's apple bobbing. "What happened?" he repeated, crossing his arms over his chest.

"She broke a bit," Steve said, letting his breath out slowly, blue eyes opening to look at Bucky. "She's not getting better."

His immediate response was to tell Steve that she'd be fine, but Bucky wasn't able to lie to himself any more. Something more than just grief had taken hold of Darcy, some dark depression that she couldn't seem to move past. The years of her memories told Bucky that she'd experienced this kind of angry bitterness in the past, culminating after years and years of physical and verbal abuse. It had affected her, but with help from Olivia and unwavering support, she'd been able to carve herself from the blackness, accepting what had happened but refusing to let it become the thing that defined who she was.

"I don't know what to do," Bucky said, the helplessness in his voice matched the emotion in Steve's eyes, worry for their girl having become an all too familiar feeling. "Who do we talk to? Who can we talk to? She's still going to her therapy appointments, right?"

"She leaves for an hour here and there, but I haven't followed her to make sure she's going."

"Do we do that? Follow her around?" Even saying it aloud filled Bucky with a useless anger. He wasn't angry at Darcy, of course, but at the entire situation. He knew he'd never been particularly good dealing with rough emotions in the past, but gaining that bit of Darcy's soul had steadied him in ways he couldn't have predicted. That he was entirely incapable of doing the same for her when she needed it... Shadowing Darcy to make sure she was actually going to her appointments felt wrong, like a breach of trust, but he'd run out of ideas.

"What about Jane? She'll be here permanently soon, right?"

"Later this week," Bucky answered, leaning his shoulder against the wall, sighing as he blinked at Steve, knowing his best friend was feeling the same uselessness as him. "Janey's always been able to break through to her when she needed it."

Hearing Darcy's nickname for Jane fall so easily from Bucky's mouth made Steve's lips twitch upward in a smile, reaching out and squeezing his lover's hand in his own. As horrible as watching Darcy in pain was, it was easier knowing he wasn't alone. "We'll see what Jane suggests and go from there." When Bucky just nodded, Steve leaned forward to capture Bucky's lips, the kiss slow but full of meaning. "We've just got to be here for her, Buck. That's all we can do."

Bucky’s eyes flicked toward the door at the soft knocking. He looked over to Steve, raising an eyebrow when he didn’t look like he’d been expecting anyone, either. Setting his report down, Bucky climbed to his feet frowning at the door as he neared. “Friday?”

“It’s Mr. Parker, Sergeant Barnes.”

Steps quickening, he pulled the door open, concern on his face. “Parker? Is it Darcy? Is something wrong?”
“Yes,” Peter said, stumbling when he saw Steve jump to his feet over Bucky’s shoulder. “Oh! No, yes, I mean, yeah, something’s wrong and it’s Darcy, but nothing’s wrong with Darcy. She’s… she went to out shopping with Dr. Foster. Do you think, uh, would it be okay if I came in?”

Bucky looked at Peter for a long moment before he took a step back, letting Peter inside. He watched the younger man give him a small smile as he passed, though it was obvious it didn’t reach his eyes.

Steve watched the teenager stuff his hands in his hoodie pocket, brown eyes sweeping the room. When the younger man’s eyes came to rest on him, Steve gave him a wan smile. “Everything okay?”

Peter looked down at his feet, toe scuffing along the carpet. “It’s been a rough couple of weeks,” he said finally, pulling his hands from his pockets and crossing his arms. “With everything that happened, with Mr. Barton, at the sanctum… it’s been a lot.”

Bucky watched Peter shift, glancing up at Steve. The boy had been there when Clint collapsed, had watched the archer pass in his arms. He knew that Peter had dealt with loss before - Darcy had told them all about how Peter’s parents and uncle had died, and that he was being raised by his aunt - but having someone die in your arms was something else entirely. “Have you seen anyone?”

“Yeah. Yes. I’m okay. I’m not okay,” Peter clarified, looking up at Bucky with a small smile, “but I’m talking with someone regularly. I’ve got people. I’m alright. I didn’t come to talk about me.”

Leaning back against the couch, Steve crossed his feet at the ankle, eyes soft as they looked at the boy. “You’re worried about Darcy,” he guessed, watching Peter nod in confirmation.

“It’s just… even when things were bad, she was light, you know? You could tell her powers scared her, but that got better and then she got better, and she got knocked down a few times, but she always got up. But now, after everything, I don’t… It’s bad. When she comes into the lab, she’s not really there. She’s not eating. She’s had to run out of the lab a few times because she was sick. I’m worried. I’m really worried. I’m worried about her.”

The truth of Peter’s concern was there in the timbre of his voice and in the deep brown of his eyes. “She’s been meeting with her therapist several times a week.”

“Okay. Good. That’s good. Mine’s helped me, but I’m not, uh, sure it’s helping her as much. I think it’s been getting worse.”

“Worse how?” Steve asked, watching Peter’s gaze swing toward him.

“It’s like you can’t talk to her about anything without making her mad. We try to make plans, set up appointments to get some of our new inventions out there, but she cancels everything last minute. It’s not…” Peter shook his head. “We never pressure her, and we understand -”

“We?”

Peter looked up at Bucky’s question, shrugging his shoulder. “Mr. Stark. Tony’s been really understanding. When she says she has to leave, he tells her to do what she needs. But he’s different after she leaves.” At both of their looks, he shook his head, eyes widening. “I mean, he gets quiet. Worried. I’ve heard him asking Friday to let him know that she got home safe. He’s like me. We’re both just… worried.”

“That’s because you’re a good friend,” Steve said, smiling at Peter as Bucky went quiet, his eyes screwing up in contemplation. “We’re worried about her, too.”

“Can you think, I mean, is there anything we can do? Something she needs? Something she doesn’t
“She said she doesn’t feel normal.” Steve looked over when Bucky’s gaze snapped up toward him. “A few days ago. She kept saying she doesn’t feel normal.”

“I don’t think any of us feel normal anymore,” Peter mumbled, looking down at the carpet, a sigh lifting and dropping his shoulders.

“Maybe that’s all we can do,” Steve reasoned, “the only thing we can do is treat her like normal, knowing it’ll take a while to get there. Not everyone grieves the same.”

“Are you sure that’s it? That this is just grief? I know they say it takes time and I get that, I do, but it’s just…” Peter shook his head, glancing up at Steve then back at the ground. “I just miss the way things were. I want to help her feel better.”

Steve let out a breath, watching the worry in the younger man’s eyes. He crossed the floor, clapping Peter on the shoulder. “We all do. The fact that you care and you’re here is enough. We wait until she tells us what she needs. She’ll let us know. It’s not an easy answer, but all we can do is be here when she asks, let her know we’re waiting for her and we’re not going anywhere.”

“Maybe being out with Dr. Foster will help,” Peter said, looking up at Steve with a hopeful smile. “I hope so.”

Peter took a deep breath and then let it out, nodding his head before looking from Steve to Bucky. “If there’s anything I can do to help -”

“We know you’re there, and she does, too.” Steve held his hand out, smiling slightly when Peter took it and gripped it, passing by Bucky with a nod before he made his way out. Steve watched the door fall shut before he looked toward Bucky, some of the optimism fading with his eyes as he watched Bucky’s face grow darker. “Buck?”

“We’re missing something here, Steve. We can say it’s grief and guilt all we want, but we know what those look like. This is something else.”

Steve nodded, letting his breath out slowly. “Let’s say that it is. Does the plan change? We’re here for her when she needs us, we stay ready to help if she asks. If it’s something other than guilt and grief, do we do something else? Pick a fight with her? Try to pull it out of her before she’s ready? That’ll just do more damage.”

“I don’t know, but looking at her when she’s broken and having no idea how to put the pieces back together… I can’t just sit by and do nothing. We can’t lose her to this, Steve. We can’t lose her.”

“Hey, we’re not going to lose her, okay?” Steve placed his hands on Bucky’s shoulders, looking into the storm grey of his lover’s eyes. “She’s here, we’re here for her, and we’ll do whatever it takes to get through this.”

Bucky wished Steve’s optimistic words stirred up certainty within him, but he still felt hollow when he thought of the dim in Darcy’s eyes. “Yeah,” he said with a sigh, “whatever it takes.”
“Are you okay?”

Darcy blinked, pulling her attention from the street and back toward Jane, who was looking at her with worry in her brown eyes. “I really wish people would stop asking me that,” she said with a sigh, wrapping her fingers around the mug of coffee, drinking the last bit before she pushed it toward the end of the table.

“Everyone’s just worried about you,” Jane said, frowning softly as she sipped her orange juice. “Is that so wrong?”

Picking at the ragged cuticle on her thumb, pulling a bit of skin enough to feel a scratch of pain and watch blood pool, Darcy shook her head softly. “No. I know. I’m just… I’m not ready to talk about it yet.”

“But you are talking about it, right? To your therapist?”

“I see him three times a week,” Darcy said in lieu of an answer to Jane’s question, carefully avoiding the need to lie.

The truth was that, while she was sitting in Therapist Kevin’s office three times a week, she was doing very little talking. Darcy didn’t know how to explain the darkness that sat in her gut like a cancer, black and creeping and taking over most of her waking thoughts. Everything reminded her of what they’d lost, and the hand she’d had in it.

“I know grief is difficult. You’re not the only person who’s felt responsible for the death of a teammate. It’s actually very common.” Kevin watched the blank emotion remain on Darcy’s face, her eyes looking out the window in his office and toward the lush green trees of the forest. “I know it can feel heavy, but I want you to know that you’re not alone.”

When there was no outward sign that Darcy had heard his words, Kevin set his legal pad on his knees and sat back in his chair, blinking slowly. “If you’re not ready to talk about it yet, I’m not going to force you. You should take however long you need. We can work through your emotions when you’re ready.”

“But you won’t sign off on me going back into the field until I do, right?” Darcy turned toward him, her voice cold, her eyes dark.

“You know I can’t,” Kevin said, voice even, careful not to appear confrontational.

Darcy looked at him, wanting him to say something to pull her rage to the surface, to react, to give her something to explode against. When he did nothing, she turned back toward the window, letting the wave of green leaves take her attention, willing the next fifteen minutes to pass quickly.

“Darcy, if being in public is too hard, if you’re not ready to be out—”

“No, Janey,” Darcy said, leaning forward to clutch at Jane’s hand, fingers tight on her best friend’s, “really, I want to be here. I want to be with you, shopping, and thinking up funny names, and imagining all the ways I’ll be spoiling my future niece or nephew. I want to be here. This is exactly where I want to be.” Anything that might help me feel normal again.

Jane looked at Darcy, searching her hazel eyes for something. Though she hadn’t found what she wanted, Jane smiled anyway, grinning softly. “Okay then. Let’s go cry over stupidly small shoes.”

As Jane grabbed her things, Darcy cast a glance over her shoulder, gaze darkening as she spied the handful of people with cameras waiting outside the front door. “Don’t worry about them,” Jane said
Cheeks heating with anger, Darcy clenched her teeth as Jane twined their arms together, giving the astrophysicist a tight smile as they left. She might have been able to ignore them before, but keeping her anger in check had become harder and harder recently.

The second they breached daylight, the sounds of clicking and a rush of people assaulted them.

"Dr. Foster! Dr. Foster! Is it true that you’re expecting? Is it Thor’s baby or someone else’s?”

"Ms. Lewis! Can you confirm that Clint Barton, otherwise known as the avenger Hawkeye, was killed recently?"

“What is it like in bed with Captain America? Are wedding bells in the future?

“When will the Avengers finally face justice for the reckless loss of life that happens whenever they’re around? Who’ll be the next to die?"

Darcy’s steps faltered, those words ringing in her ears. She heard Jane call her name, tugging on her arm softly. Hazel eyes swung toward the man who’d asked that last question, his query surprising even some of the other reporters and making them fall silent.

She noticed the patch on the man’s shoulder, realizing he was with one of the Anti-Avenger websites that had gotten national news recently after a series of articles accusing the Avengers of war crimes and calling for their immediate arrest, regardless of the changes that had been made to the Accords.

“What did you say?”

“Darcy, ignore him,” Jane urged, reaching out to put a hand on Darcy’s arm, “a reaction is what he wants.”

“Clint Barton is just another in a long line of people who’ve been killed because the Avengers go unchecked. Who’ll be next? You were there when a New Mexico town was destroyed. Then New York. Then Sokovia. What’s next? An entire continent?”

Darcy watched him take a step forward, dropping his arm holding the tape recorder, no longer pretending he was there for just a sound bite. She could feel her face wiping of any kind of expression, unable to explain the speed at which her rage rose. It felt like flames at the corner of her thoughts, looking for an accelerant, wanting him to make a move so she could punish him.

How dare he say that name. What right does he have? They’re leaches, sucking on the pain, bloating and feeding on someone’s life just to earn money. They’re disgusting. Despicable. How could the world lose someone like Clint Barton but this waste of resources yet draws breath.

“Darcy, he’s not worth it,” Jane said, drawing Darcy from her dark thoughts, a plea in her brown eyes. “Let’s just get -” Jane grunted when the man pushed past her, using his elbow to knock her aside, the smaller woman losing her footing and falling to the sidewalk.

#

“Darcy!”

“You’re gonna break my arm!”

“Darcy!”
Blinking, Jane’s voice cutting through the waves of white noise that had crashed in her head, Darcy pulled back from the darkness that had taken over her vision. Her hazel flicked from person to person, trying to figure out what had happened.

The crowd that had formed around them was helping Jane to her feet, though several were still standing, cameras and phones filming. The leftovers from their lunch were strewn across the ground where Jane had fallen.

“Let go of me!”

Darcy looked down. One of her hands was pressed to the reporter’s shoulder, the other one was bending his arm backward, his elbow hyperextended, a thread of fear and pain in his voice as he called out again. She dropped her hold and took a step back, mouth falling open, shock rocketing through her body.

The reporter grunted, cradling his arm against his front, looking at Darcy over his shoulder with a look of dark satisfaction on his face. “Oh, you have no idea what you just did, sweetheart. I’m gonna sue your ass!”

“Wha- I didn’t -”

“You’re not suing anyone, asshole,” one of the women in the crowd yelled, lifting her hand higher so he could see the phone in it. “You pushed that lady to the ground and her friend was just protecting her!”

“Yeah! And the lady you pushed is pregnant!”

“She oughta sue your ass!”

“...Jane?” Darcy rushed toward Jane, eyes wide and panicked, desperate to know her best friend wasn’t hurt. “Are you okay? He didn’t hurt you, did he?!”

“No, it’s fine, I’m okay.” Peering into Darcy’s eyes, Jane’s realized there was more than just fear in her best friend’s eyes. “Really, Darce, I’m fine. We should -”

“We called the cops on the douche,” the woman from before said, coming to stand beside them, “but we all saw it. He pushed her to the ground and you were just like bam!”

Darcy jumped at the woman’s animated sound effect, heart racing at the sound.

“Are you sure you guys are okay? Maybe you should wait in the restaurant until the cops get here?”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Jane said, threading her fingers with Darcy’s and tugging her toward the door. “I need to use the bathroom.”

The manager at the cafe was more than happy to lead them toward the bathroom, telling them he would let them know when the authorities arrived. As the door closed, Darcy had just enough time to make it to her knees before the lunch they’d just had made a violent reappearance. She felt Jane by her side, pulling Darcy’s hair back from her face as she groaned, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

When she was done, spitting bile and trying to breathe, Darcy felt a cool cloth being placed on the back of her neck, a hand rubbing circles on her back. “Just like that night after dinner at Los Agaves,” she croaked, hazel eyes sliding to look at Jane.
“The lead up to that bathroom session was a lot more fun than this one was,” Jane said with a smile, watching as the light that had climbed into Darcy’s eyes dimmed once more. “Are you okay?”

“You’re the one he pushed. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Jane said with a shake of her head, reaching into her bag and pulling out a bottle of water. She twisted the top and handed it to Darcy, watching as her friend rinsed her mouth then spat it into the toilet, reaching up to flush before sitting back on the floor. “He said things he knew would get a reaction. It’s like he was wanting you to hurt him.”

“They do. Those people, the ones from his website. Steve told me that they have people all over the world, waiting for a mistake, using it as propaganda. It’s loathsome.”

One of Jane’s eyebrows raised. “Loathsome? Someone get you a ‘word-a-day’ calendar? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use that word.” Darcy sighed, shaking her head as she leaned back against the tiled wall. When she went quiet, Jane let it linger, watching as the color returned to her best friend’s face. “What happened to you out there?”

When Darcy opened her eyes, the concern in Jane’s expression made her throat tighten. “I don’t… I don’t know. I saw him push you and then you were falling and I just… I reacted. I don’t even remember moving. He could have hurt you and I heard…” she took a deep breath, still tasting bile on the back of her tongue, “my instincts must have kicked in.”

“You moved so fast, I almost didn’t see you until you already had the guy on the ground. And your face…”

Darcy looked at Jane when her voice faded, something in their whiskey depths forming a vice of fear around Darcy’s heart. “What?”

“You looked like…” As Jane stared into Darcy’s eyes, seeing all that horror in her best friend’s gaze, she couldn’t say the words that were on the tip of her tongue, worried they would only shake Darcy further. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Darcy. You just made sure he couldn’t hurt anyone else.”

Even as the words fell from Jane’s lips, Darcy could taste the distrust in them. Something was wrong, that much was sure, but she just didn’t know what.
There Is A Light

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky discuss their worries for Darcy with their friends and family. Darcy breaks a little more.

Chapter Notes

I've had a rough 24-hours, but knowing I got to come home and post this made everything a little bit better.
As always, thank you so much for the kudos/comments/reblogs and all the other amazing things that you awesome people gift me with every day.
<3

PageBreak

Your life is your life.
Don’t let it be clubbed into dank submission.
Be on the watch.
There are ways out.
There is a light somewhere.
It may not be much light but it beats the darkness.
Be on the watch.
The gods will offer you chances.
Know them.
Take them.
You can’t beat death but you can beat death in life, sometimes.
And the more often you learn to do it, the more light there will be.
Your life is your life.
Know it while you have it.
You are marvelous.
The gods wait to delight in you.

- The Laughing Heart - Charles Bukowski

PageBreak

As the grainy cell phone footage wiped from the screen and the news anchors moved on to the next story, Steve turned his back to the television, leaning against Maria Hill’s desk with his arms crossed over his chest, a scowl on his face. “She was protecting Jane.”
“I know what she was doing, Steve,” Maria said, turning off the TV and setting the remote aside, “and there’s enough footage that if he does try to press charges, he’ll lose. That's not why I called you in.”

Steve’s jaw clenched with carefully contained anger. He’d seen the video several times now, from a variety of angles, and in every one of them, Darcy’s reaction came only after Jane had been pushed and fell to the ground. Darcy’d been reacting out of danger to her friend, a justifiable fear, especially considering Jane was pregnant. It made sense that Darcy had neutralized the threat in the most efficient way possible. There was no fault in what she’d done. He’d have done the same.

…but her eyes.

He’d spent hours looking at the hazel that dominated her gaze, every empathetic glint, every turn of green and blue. He’d seen them run the gamut of emotions, from utter despair to a passion so deep that it’d stolen his breath. They could light with laughter and dim with uncertainty and doubt. She felt everything so much, and it was all there, plain and bare for all to see.

The look in Darcy’s eyes as she’d put pressure on that man’s arm, the expression as she pressed harder, earning another yelp of pain… Steve had never seen her that cold. If you’d have asked him, he’d have told you that she wasn’t capable of enjoying someone’s pain. And even as his mind tried to reason that it was Jane and that was all the explanation anyone needed, he knew it wasn’t that. It wasn’t her.

Maria rounded her desk, pinning Steve with her eyes, her voice demanding but warm. “Tell me she’s alright, Steve. Make me believe it.”

“She’s been through a lot, Maria. Clint was important to her. She’s hurting. That man could have hurt Jane and she reacted out of instinct.”

“We’ve worked pretty close together these last couple of years. I’d like to think we’ve earned each other’s trust. If you tell me there is nothing for me to be worried about, I’ll believe you, because you know what would happen if she went out and wasn’t fit for duty.”

“She’s not asking to be back in the field yet,” Steve argued, watching Maria sigh at his deflection. He dipped his chin to his chest, letting his own breath out slowly. “It’s only been a few weeks. She just needs more time.”

Maria looked at Steve, a considering expression on her face, before she nodded. “Okay. PR and Legal are already on it. We shouldn’t have any problems. I’m not grounding her to the compound, but I’d have her be careful when she goes out. There are always people wanting to make a point by doing something stupid. Don’t let her be gasoline on a fire.”

PageBreak

The restaurant was off the beaten path, down a side street and away from the shining lights of downtown New York City. The heat reminded Bucky of summers in Brooklyn, when air conditioning wasn’t an option, when everything you owned was drenched in sweat and the only relief was sleeping on the roof at night. He and Steve had spent whole weeks up there, pointing out constellations, talking about what they’d do when the fall came.

It seemed like a lifetime ago now. Their lives had been anything but simple, but the responsibilities on their shoulders had been much lighter. Everything had gotten so dark so fast. Losing Clint.
Darcy's depression. The peace that it'd seemed they found was gone. It was getting harder to remember better days. Bucky was worried about Darcy. And Steve. Natasha. Laura. Everything had gone so pear shaped and he felt the anxiety in a multitude of ways.

“That looks like Darcy’s ‘contemplation’ face,” Jane said when she returned from the bathroom and slid into the seat across from Bucky. “It’s usually followed by an escape plan or a spew of curses toward the person who’d caused her crankiness.”

Bucky smiled, looking down at his hands, running his fingers over the condensation on his water glass. “No escape plans or curses,” he assured her, grey eyes flicking up, eyebrows raising slightly. “How’s everything going?”

At his vague gesture toward her stomach, Jane ran a hand over the bump that was becoming more and more prominent every day. “Everything?”

His chin dipped in her direction. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Jane said with a smile, watching the chagrined expression spread across his face, “I know what you mean. Pregnancy is... weird.”

“I’d ask ‘weird how’ but I’m not sure I want to know.”

“You don’t. You really really don’t,” Jane laughed, taking a drink of her orange juice, eyes sparkling. She set her glass down and let out a sigh. “Everything’s fine. It’s growing like it should, no random issues due to its Asgardian DNA. My afternoon sickness has gone away but I have to pee what seems like every twenty minutes. Thor’s started a list of possible names. They’re... not ones you’d find on a top ten list of common baby names.”

Bucky tried to remember some of the other Asgardian name he’d heard from Thor. Frigga. Nertha. Eir. Solveig. Something that sounded like ‘tire’. “I can’t even imagine,” he said, watching Jane’s lips curl upward. “Have you heard any you like?”

“I didn’t think the name Fiske was too bad, until he told me it meant ‘fish’. I suspect whatever we choose will still get him or her teased at school.”

"It'll be Thor’s kid, though," Bucky said with a small shrug of his shoulder, "so it'll be three times as large as everyone else. Not sure they’ll be able to pick on a giant.” The look on her face made him grimace softly. "Part of me wants to say 'I'm sorry' about that.”

“Yeah, that’s the Darcy part, realizing what’ll happen when that giant baby comes out.” Jane sighed, pulling the napkin from her lap and putting it on the table. "Speaking of baby, I’ve got to go to the bathroom again. I’ll be right back. If the waiter comes while I'm gone, you know my order.”

Bucky turned in his seat, watching as she made her way toward the back of the restaurant and disappeared. He did know Jane's order, and gave it to the waiter when he stopped by their table. Now that Jane was back at the compound, they'd started eating together at least once a week, giving them both a reason to get out of the base. He ran the pad of his index finger over a divot in the wood of the table. It was an anxious action, partly because the sensation in his prosthetic was still new, partly because he needed an outlet for the nervous energy he felt in his chest. The need for constant movement was something he’d received from his bond with Darcy, knowing that it was hard for his love to stay still for too long under normal circumstances.

Nothing was normal circumstances, though, and movement at the corner of his vision brought that point home in telling fashion. He frowned, looking at the mass of people gathered on the other side
of the window. The paparazzi had begun following Jane everywhere, waiting for something new to happen, wanting to be the first to sell the footage to TMZ or some other celebrity gossip rag. He’d learned how they operated, certain that by this time tomorrow there’d be a story splashed across the front pages and trending on social media.

‘Winter Soldier caught cheating with Jane Foster! Is her baby daddy really Thor Odinson or is all a hoax?!’

His stomach turned with anger, the footage of Darcy protecting Jane playing through his mind again. Jane had texted him after it all happened, giving him the heads up, wanting him to be there for Darcy when they returned. He’d done his best to assure Darcy that he would have done the same thing if he’d been there, but that hadn’t seemed to erase the fear and guilt in her eyes. Things were getting worse, and he wasn’t sure how to help her. It’d become a constant topic of conversation between him and Steve, throwing out ideas only to shoot them down. Bucky could feel the tension building in Darcy, knew that they were approaching some kind of breaking point, and it made his jaw tense with uncertainty.

“So I take it you know why I wanted to meet a few days early,” Jane said when she returned, sliding onto her seat with a serious glint in her brown eyes.

Bucky opened his mouth to respond but went quiet when the server dropped off Jane’s salad. He watched the mother-to-be dig in, spearing the lettuce with gusto. “You mean this wasn’t just a visit so we could talk about the Nugget?”

Jane’s lips quirked upward at the name Darcy had dubbed her kid. ‘It’s gender neutral,’ Darcy had argued, ‘and it’s cooking. It was in an egg. Thus: nugget.’ It made sense that Bucky and Steve would use the term, too. “That’s not the only reason,” she answered, chewing and setting her fork aside before she leaned toward Bucky, worry tinting her expression. “I need you to be absolutely truthful with me. What’s going on? I know about Clint. Is that it?”

Sighing, Bucky reached for his water again, needing to do something with his hands. “She’s not taking it well. She snaps a lot. Darcy’s always been sarcastic, but now it’s not just that. The things she says are meant to hurt.”

“She’s pushing everyone away,” Jane said with a frown, sitting back in her chair. “It’s her go to move. She can’t get hurt by anyone if there’s no one around her.”

“It’s not just that,” Bucky said with a shake of his head, wishing it was that easy. He knew Darcy’s habits, knew how she would withdraw back into herself when she felt sadness. This was something different. “She feels responsible for what happened.”

“It’s not her fault.”

Bucky nodded. “I know. I’ve told her. We’ve all told her. I hoped going out with you would have made things better for her, but I was wrong. It just made things worse.” He watched the memory of her lunch with Darcy flash over Jane’s face, the younger woman’s expression filling with worry. “Did she say anything? After?”

Jane was quiet for a moment, replaying the conversation she’d had with Darcy in the bathroom after everything had gone wrong. “She didn’t say anything, but she pretends. She likes to coddle me, even now. Especially now. But the look on her face as it was happening, as she was making him hurt? It was like it wasn’t her.”

The memory of Darcy’s face in the footage, the cruelty as she made him squirm… Bucky shook his
head, shoulders slumping forward, useless worry bitter on his tongue. “I don’t know what to do, Janey.”

When Darcy's nickname for her fell from Bucky's lips, Jane was able to tell just how worried he was. It was a lack of concentration on his part, letting the familiarity with her take over, not fighting against the memories that weren't really his but looking for any comfort Jane could give him. She looked at him another long moment before she leaned toward him and lowered her voice. “You don’t owe me anything, Bucky,” she said, his grey eyes flicking up at her words. “I know you have her memories in your head and that’s confusing, and I understand why you’d feel like you do, but you don’t. Regardless, I need you to promise me something.”

Seriousness had bled into Jane’s person, her whiskey-colored eyes steady as they held his. Bucky could see the worry on her face, and even without all of Darcy’s memories feeling like he owed the woman in front of him his loyalty, he wouldn’t have been able to say no. He reached for her hand, fingers wrapping around hers and squeezing. “Okay.”

“I need you to make sure Darcy’s okay. I don’t care what it takes. I won't be able to do this without her. I need her. Darcy is family and I can’t lose her. I can't. So if that means you have to yell at her, if it means you have to fight, even if she storms out, even if she says the most hurtful things she possibly can, I need you to stay there and look after her.”

Bucky nodded, feeling the small tremble in her hands as she pleaded. “I know.”

“It’s not going to be easy. She knows how to make things hurt. She’s always been quick with the insults and the barbs, and sometimes her words aren’t chosen carefully. I don’t care. I need you to not care, either. Can you do that?”

He could see the tears pooling in Jane’s eyes, filled with sincere worry. Her breath hitched on the way in, like she was trying to hold back sobs, and Bucky felt his own throat tighten. She’d said he didn’t owe her anything, but the love she felt for Darcy was more than enough for him to owe her everything. “Of course. I’m not going anywhere. I won’t leave her.”

“Yeah?”

Bucky shifted in his seat, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a small velvet bag. He slid it across the table toward Jane, aware of the cameras on the other side of the window, doing his best to conceal the item. She took his lead, pulling it closer, making sure not to flash it in the open.

Jane’s small gasp as her eyes landed on the engagement ring made Bucky smile. They’d been talking about protecting Darcy and making sure the darkness didn’t get her seconds ago, but with the addition of a sparkly ring, everything seemed a bit brighter. Bucky watched her gaze at it, spinning it this way and that before looking up at him with tears in her eyes, this time for a better reason than fear.

“It’s beautiful,” Jane said, rubbing her thumb over the main stone. “She’s going to love it. The blue’s for the three of you, right?”

At Bucky’s nod, she examined the scrolling on the side, tracing it with a finger. Bucky frowned when she hunched over and made herself into a ball, hiding what she was doing. His eyebrows rose toward his hairline when she made a grunting sound before she straightening, giving him a sad shake of her head. “My fingers are so swollen it won’t even go past the second knuckle.”

Laughing at the look on her face, Bucky drank in the first blush of brightness he’d had in days. He’d realized early on that lunches with Jane weren't just so they could talk about Darcy, but because he
appreciated the astrophysicist as a person. Jane was warm, and kind, and though he didn't always understand what she was trying to explain, the passion that she spoke with was infectious. The fact that she felt like family made it easier for him to talk to her. Bucky knew it was probably insane for her to accept that he knew everything that Darcy knew, but so far she'd taken everything in stride. Granted, she was carrying the baby of a god who was over a thousand years old, so some level of concession had to be made.

Jane slid the ring back into the bag and pushed it toward him. She froze halfway, eyes growing incredibly large. “When did you get this?”

The look on Jane's face made Bucky frown. He could tell something had just occurred to her, and it was obvious it wasn't a good thought. “Uh, a month and a half ago? Maybe two?”

“Was it before or after Clint?”

“Before. Right before. Why?”

Gone was the excited best friend of someone who was going to be proposed to, or a mother-to-be lamenting about the changes happening in her body. Instead Bucky was sitting across from a person who'd looked into the future and seen something to fear. “Listen to me very carefully, Buck. It would be a very bad thing if Darcy found this now, do you hear me? Even though you bought it before everything, even if you told her that, it'll be bad. Okay? You hide this. Hide it somewhere she won’t look, where she can’t find it.”

The gravity of importance in Jane's expression was enough that Bucky felt it weighing on him like a ton of bricks. He nodded, arm coming to rest on the table before pulling the velvet bag toward him. "I'll hide it." He watched her shoulders lift and fall with a sigh before she seemed to brighten again. She grabbed her fork and dug back into her salad, and he couldn't find it in him to ask the questions her comment had brought to mind. He knew she had more than enough to worry about and didn't want to burden her with anything else.

"So, is there any specific reason you were asking how everything is going with the Nugget?"

"No," Bucky said with a shake of his head, leaning back when the server arrived with their meal, "nothing specific. Why?"

Jane looked at him for a beat before she grinned. "Why indeed."

Steve's knuckles rapped against the door, arm reaching to push at the honey-hued fringe that had fallen onto his forehead. He glanced to the left, looking toward the porch swing that he'd spent more than a few evenings on, beer in hand and laughing. It sat still, no breeze rattling the chains, Steve's heart constricting the longer he stared. He was pulled from the memories by the door opening, the woman in front of him paler than he was used to seeing her. "Hi Laura."

"Hey Steve," Laura greeted, opening her arms and accepting the soldier's strong hug.

He pressed his lips to her cheek before pulling back, blue gaze looking over her shoulder and into the darkened interior of the home. "The kids?"

"Staying with my brother," Laura explained, patting his chest softly before gesturing him forward,
closing the door behind him. "I didn't want them to be here for this."

Steve nodded, wishing there was something he could say to make it easier, but knowing there was nothing. He looked up when he heard feet on the stairs, watching as Natasha descended, lingering on the last step. The normal rust color of her hair was gone, replaced by a shock of white-blonde, somehow making the green of her eyes darker. He took a step closer, her placement on the stairs making her eye level.

"Thanks for coming," Natasha said, lips pulled into a tight line.

"Of course," Steve said, empathy shining in his eyes. "I meant it when I said I'd be here for you, whatever you need." He was able to see the relief in her face, micro-expressions that he'd come to know over the years of working at her side. When she shifted her weight, Steve closed the distance between them, gathering her in his arms and holding her tight. The memory of her being there for him at Peggy's funeral sat heavily in the chest and he had to swallow past the lump in his throat. "Whatever you need, Nat."

When Steve pulled back, Natasha reached up and swiped away the tear that had been trailing down her cheek, her attention flicking to his side when Laura stepped up beside him. "Okay," Laura whispered, holding her hand out to her wife, "let's do this."

Steve followed the women up the stairs and toward their bedroom, empty cardboard boxes lining the hallway, Natasha and Laura each grabbing one as they passed. They stood in the doorway, hands gripped tight, a hesitation in the air. Feeling like he was somehow intruding, Steve hung back in the hallway, giving them space. He couldn't imagine what they were going through, how hard it was to return to a home where it always felt like something was missing. He glanced up when Natasha looked over her shoulder at him and gave a small nod.

Most of the next hour was spent in silence, pulling clothing out of dressers and closets and making piles. Then those piles were split into piles. Stuff to keep. Stuff to throw. Stuff to donate. Steve listened to the women recall memories as they recognized t-shirts, sharing the stories with him.

He found out that one of Clint's habits was collecting clothing from countries they'd traveled to for missions. A t-shirt that read 'Kiss Me, I'm Dublin Drunk-ish' while in Ireland. A hat with Hello Kitty on it from Seoul. Socks covered in Kangaroos wearing boxing gloves from Perth.

"I tried to explain that these were confidential missions and keeping anything was a risk, but he always paid in cash, insisting that nothing could be traced back to him." Natasha shook her head, blonde hair sliding over her shoulders as she looked down at the muscle tank that read 'Daytona Beach Body Rescue' across the front.

"You know why he did it," Laura said from her spot in the closet, giving Natasha a small smile when the other woman looked up from the floor. When Steve glanced toward her, the grin on Laura's face grew. "He bought something everywhere so he could bring it home. If he had something to bring home, it meant he'd come home."

Steve smiled and looked down at the shirt in his hands, folding it carefully before putting it in a box to his right. "I think I remember him buying a t-shirt in New York, after the battle. We ended up in this tiny shawarma place -"

"Because Tony suggested it?" At Steve's nod, Laura laughed softly. "I remember. Hold on." She disappeared from sight, the sounds of hangers clicking as she dug through the closet. She reappeared with garish green t-shirt in hand, holding it out toward Steve.
Steve took the hanger, lips curling at the cartoon camel on the front, the restaurant's name and address scrawled below. "That was our first real mission together," he said, glancing over at Natasha. She nodded, eyes darting away, busying herself with stuffing things into a garbage bag. Not wanting to push her, Steve turned back toward Laura and held the shirt out to her.

"No. You should keep that one," Laura said with a warm smile. "Like you said, it was the first time the team was all together."

He pulled his arm back, looking down at the fabric, memories of the day flashing through his mind. Steve knew that the only reason they'd made it through that fight was because they'd all been able to work their strengths. Natasha on the ground, slogging through anything that came at her, ready to improvise when needed. Tony and his weapons, watching the skies and taking the risks without question. Thor and his hammer, the lightning he wielded making quick work of things ten times his size. The Hulk, using his size and strength, Bruce realizing that though he hated the change, it'd been a necessary sacrifice.

And Clint. Clint Barton with his fearlessness, and his eye for detail, and his ability to know what needed to be done. Yes, his accuracy and bow made the archer a formidable opponent, but it was his uncanny sixth sense that had shone that day, calling out the field to everyone, preparing them for what was headed their way. His vast knowledge of strategy and tactics made things less chaotic, however impossible it seemed.

Saying the man was not a superhero because he didn't have any enhancements or powers was a mistake. Clint Barton didn't need powers, or fancy gadgets, or super serum to be a hero. He was a hero because he still ran into the fight despite having none of those things. And he did it time and time again.

Steve pulled the shirt from the hanger and took his time folding it, setting it on the ground near his feet, not wanting to leave it behind. When he turned his attention back to Laura, he watched her bring one of Clint's button-up shirts to her face, taking a deep breath inward before rubbing her hands over the fabric then placing it back in the closet. He felt dirty seeing something so personal and intimate, a wave of grief crashing against him as he looked away.

"How are you?" Laura asked, watching Steve's head swing to look at her, his eyebrows raising slightly.

"Me?"

"And everyone else. I haven't heard what's been going on since..." Her words trailed off, brown eyes flicking up to see Natasha's shoulders tighten. "Since everything." Laura finished, eyes directed back to Steve.

"It's been hard," Steve answered, knowing she wouldn't want to be lied to, not sure he'd be able to even if he wanted to. "He's missed. Everyone can feel it. He always made things a little brighter. I miss having him in my ear." The small, knowing smile that climbed onto Laura's face made his heart ache. "The trainees miss him a lot. They don't particularly like the interim trainer."

“I’ll be taking over the training when I get back.”

Steve’s gaze swung toward Natasha at her words, seeing the thread of steel resolve in her eyes. The look she was giving him was almost defiant, wanting him to pull at the thread. “Nat -”

“I’ve been in the field for a while, Steve, and to be honest, I’m not sure I can do it anymore. If something happened to me, Laura and the kids would be alone. I can’t risk that.”
He looked at her, at the soft clench of her jaw and the way her hands had fisted at her sides. Steve knew that when Natasha’s mind was made up about something, it was almost impossible to change it. Besides, he couldn’t really blame her from wanting out of active duty, could he? He’d been thinking the same thing for months. He nodded at her, voice thick. “Of course. Whatever you need.”

Laura watched Natasha and Steve share a look, feeling like they’d just had an entire conversation without words, some sort of understanding passing between the two. When they both seemed to move on, Laura tucked a sweater under her chin and began folding it. “And Darcy?” When Steve turned toward her, eyebrows knitting together, she gave him a worried frown. “I was hoping she’d be here for lunch like normal, but she didn’t show. She didn’t call or text either.”

Steve knew it was unusual for Darcy to go radio silent, always making the effort to respond in some way, but so much had changed over the past few weeks that it’d left Steve dizzy. She loved Laura and Natasha, and had always looked forward to their girls’ lunches, so he completely understood why her lack of contact would be a concern.

“Darcy is…” he struggled with what to say, worried that she’d think him talking about her would be some kind of invasion of her privacy, but this was Laura. Deciding to risk Darcy’s anger, he let out a sigh. "She’s taking it really hard. This is the first loss she’s had.” He frowned, shaking his head. “Well, she’s lost other people but this is -”

“I know,” Laura said with a soft smile, stopping Steve’s explanation. “I know what you mean. That’s why I want to make sure she’s okay. You can lose people but not really lose them, and if this is her first…”

“Buck and I are doing everything we can, but it’s hard. Nothing we do seems to help, but we’re doing our best.”

“Oh, honey, I know you are.” Laura set aside the sweater in her arms and crossed to him, putting a hand on his shoulder, seeing the pain in his eyes. “Of course you’re doing your best. That’s all any of us can be expected to do right now. I’m just worried about her.”

Steve covered Laura’s with his own, squeezing her fingers, unsure how she could be this composed after everything that had happened. He supposed it was out of necessity; her kids needed her to be strong for them, to tell them that it was alright to hurt but that drowning in the sorrow helped no one. Her ability to work through her grief was superhuman and he couldn’t help but be in awe.

“She hasn’t been sleeping well,” Steve confessed, worry coloring the blue of his eyes. “She has nightmares and wakes up screaming. When I first got Bucky back he did the same thing, but this isn’t like that. Once he realized it was just a nightmare, he’d be able to pull himself out of it, but Darcy…”

He thought of the haunted look in her eyes, the hazel filled with terror, her skin pale and sweaty as she breathed past her heartbeat. It was something more, something different. “They stick with her. She looks around like she expects the monster to still be there. She looks into every shadow, waiting for it to jump out.”

Laura pressed her palm to Steve’s cheek, concern on her face, worry in her eyes. “Maybe I’ll stop by soon. It’ll give me an excuse to get out of the house.”

Steve wanted to tell her that Darcy would like that but he wasn’t sure. She’d retreated so far into herself that he wasn’t certain she wanted to talk to anyone, especially the widow of a teammate whose death she blamed on herself, but maybe that’s what she needed. Maybe seeing that Laura didn’t blame her for Clint’s death would help. It was worth a shot, in any case, and he gave her a
hopeful smile.

“Besides,” Laura said, moving toward another set of drawers, “I need to drop this off at the shelter and it’s on the way.”

Quiet fell over the bedroom, each of them returning to the work. Plenty of pieces had been saved, ready to be put into storage for the kids to have later, or packed away until the pain wasn’t as sharp and it didn’t hurt to look at them. However, there was a growing pile of boxes to be taken away, with the hope that someone else would find use in what was left. Another way Clint Barton was helping people even after he was gone.

“Tasha told me you bought a ring.”

Steve’s eyes flicked up toward Laura, brows lifting at the small smirk on her face. When he turned his accusatory expression toward Natasha, the agent shrugged her shoulder. “What? We don’t have secrets in this house.”

Part of him felt like having this conversation was wrong, especially considering what they were doing, but Steve understood why Laura was asking. Doing something that hurt always felt better when you could focus on something happier, bringing a little light into a dark situation. If Laura wanted to talk about something else, he wasn’t going to stop her. “Yes, Bucky and I bought an engagement ring.”

“What’s it look like?” When he’d finished describing the ring, Steve had explained the shocking bit of trivia that tied the piece of jewelry back to Howard Stark. Both Natasha and Laura were left in stitches, laughing to the point of tears, gasping for breath. “Does Tony know?”

“No, and Bucky made me promise to never tell him,” Steve said, grinning at the two women, happy that his story had brought some much needed levity. “We have a certificate of authenticity signed by Howard. I tried to do some research but I couldn’t find out who he designed the ring for.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter,” Laura said, shoulders still shaking softly as she wiped at the tears on her pinched cheeks. “All that matters is that it ended up where it was supposed to.”

A sad smile climbed onto Steve’s face and he looked down at the carpet. It might have taken a long, strange trip, but more and more it seemed like him and Bucky finding that ring for their girl was nothing short of fate. “I think you’re right,” he said, gaze swinging back toward Laura’s smile.

“When are you planning to ask her? Tell me you have something big and elaborate planned.”

The light that had brightened in Laura’s eyes warmed him enough that he desperately wanted to tell her something that would make her happy, but Steve couldn’t lie to her. “I don’t know. We’ve thought about it and with everything that’s happened…” he shook his head, rubbing his hands on his jeans, the worry returning to his chest. “It just doesn’t feel like the right time.”

“Oh, honey.” Laura climbed to her knees, moving until she could kneel next to him, resting a hand over his, her tongue clicking softly. “It might never be the right time. If we waited until everything calmed down, no one would get anything done. Perfect moments don’t just happen. They’re made. We need the brighter stuff to help chase away the darkness. We can’t wait for it to fade on its own. You can’t stop moving forward. She’s the one for you, right? You know it for certain?”

Steve nodded, no doubts in his mind at all when it came to wanting to spend the rest of his life with Bucky and Darcy.

“Then don’t wait too long, Steve,” Natasha said, coming to stand next to Laura, squeezing her wife’s
shoulder as she leveled serious green eyes in his direction. “Life’s too short to waste any time that you could be spending together.”

There was so much behind their eyes, so many raw emotions, that it was hard for Steve to breathe. Weeks ago they’d lost their husband, their partner, the person they were supposed to spend the rest of their lives with, and here they were, right in front of him, telling him not to waste any more time.

The helplessness he felt when he thought of how hurt Darcy was made his heart ache and he was left trying to swallow past the lump in his throat. “I know,” he said, the warmth in Laura’s eyes bringing it all to the surface, “I promise we won’t wait too long.”

Laura reached out and patted his cheek, giving him a watery smile. “Good. That’s good. Now we’ll just have to help you plan something ridiculous and over the top and you’ll be all set.” At his laughter, her grin widened. “Preferably with costumes.”

They’re all looking at me. Waiting for me to snap. They want me to break because it’d make them feel better, showing them some kind of weakness. But they’re the weak ones. The pity in their eyes is disgusting. I don’t need their pity. I need them to leave me alone. I’m used to alone. They just need to -

"Darcy?"

Hearing the noise behind her made Darcy's shoulders tighten and she spun toward the voice, annoyance and anger in her tone. "What?" she snapped harshly, face falling when she realized who'd called her name. She pulled on her ear buds, tearing them away and throwing them on the counter. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize -"

"It's okay," Laura said, taking a step further into the lab. She glanced around, eyebrows raising impressively as her gaze flowed from machine to machine. "When you and Clint mentioned the lab, this is definitely more than I could have ever imagined."

Chest tightening at Clint's name, Darcy slid from her stool, swallowing hard. "Yeah," she said, afraid to breathe too deeply, feeling the guilt begin to darken the edges of her thoughts. It'd become a constant struggle, pushing at the guilt and shame that threatened to overwhelm her at any moment, but the absolute last person she needed to be short with was the woman who was giving her a soft, unearned smile.

"You've been ignoring my texts." Laura set her purse down on a worktable, hands gripping each other as she looked at Darcy, her eyes warm.

Darcy's cheeks paled, heartbeat speeding. "I'm sorry, I've just been... busy. Ever since... We've been dealing with things. It hasn't left me with a lot of time."

Laura nodded, taking another step closer, the first hint of strain shaking her words. "I understand. The kids have been asking about you. They want to know why you don't visit anymore."

The breath in Darcy's lungs rushed out, guilt heating her cheeks, avoiding Laura's eyes. "Like I said, I've been really busy." When Laura didn't respond, Darcy risked a glance up, pinned by the considering look in the mother's brown gaze. There was something there, something Darcy didn't recognize, and she couldn't help but wonder if somehow Laura had figured out why Darcy hadn't
reached out.

"Are you... okay?"

The disbelieving laugh that tore from Darcy's throat was hollow and sharp and she looked toward Laura with shock. "Am I okay? This isn't... you shouldn't..." Darcy shook her head heavily, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. "You shouldn't be worrying about me, Laura. You've got more than enough to worry about."

The second the words left her mouth, Darcy's eyes widened and she looked up apologetically, eyebrows knitting together, self-loathing already pinging in her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"

"I know what you meant," Laura said softly, successfully cutting off the flow of Darcy's words. When an uneasy silence descended over the lab, she took another step toward Darcy, watching the other woman stiffen at her approach. "I didn't get to talk to you much during the funeral. Tasha told me we were hurt pretty badly in the fight."

"I'm fine," Darcy replied automatically, the words so familiar that they fell from her lips immediately and without thought. She felt like she'd been caught off guard by Laura's arrival. She wasn't ready to be having this conversation, and she felt the panic begin tightening her chest, feeling like she needed to look for a way to escape.

"Tash said you've been having trouble sleeping."

It didn't take Darcy long to put two and two together, realizing that she would have gotten that bit of information from either Bucky or Steve. Part of her roared with anger that they thought it was alright to share that without her knowledge, while the other part railed against the notion that either of them thought that what Clint's widow needed was to be worrying about anyone other than her family. "That's not really any of her business."

"She's worried about you. The kids are, too."

"I'm fine," Darcy repeated, hazel eyes staring at a spot on the floor, wishing for some kind of emergency. "You don't have to worry about me, Laura."

"But I do. I'm worried about you, Tasha's worried about you, and Clint would be worried if he was still here."

"Yeah, well, he'd still be here if he worried about me less." The words hung in the air between them, the only sound Darcy's harsh breathing as the weight of what she'd just said pressed down on her. She wanted to freeze time, to go back, to erase what she'd just done, but a tiny part of her was glad she'd said it. It was the truth, wasn’t it? Didn’t Laura have a right to know why her husband had died?

"Clint didn't die because of something you did, Darcy," Laura said, breaking the silence.

Ignoring the way Laura's tone sounded - like she was speaking with some child, careful and soft - Darcy shook her head, hard eyes looking up toward the older woman, feeling the acid burning her tongue. "The poison that killed him, from the spine that buried itself in his back? That was because of me. He died because he was keeping me safe. If he'd have paid less attention to me and more to getting himself home to you, maybe he wouldn't have been killed."

Laura paused, giving Darcy a long stare. "Are you saying it's his fault?"

"Of course not," Darcy spat, though she could feel the contradictory statements like a bad taste in her
mouth, "I'm blaming myself for putting him in that position."

"He wouldn’t want you to blame yourself. He knew he could get hurt every time he went out. We all knew it. This wasn't your fault."

"Do you know what I did that day? Steve died. Did you know?" Laura's expression didn't change, the softness in her eyes a kind of weapon that Darcy felt like a spear through the heart. "He died, and I found his soul, and I forced it back into his body. Clint was dying because of me, and I was in another room, oblivious and bringing someone else back from the dead. I could have saved him. I could have saved him!"

If Darcy's yelling alarmed her in any way, Laura didn't show it. She stared unblinkingly into Darcy's pain-filled eyes, watching the anger and grief trail down the other woman's cheeks. When Darcy broke eye contact, glaring at the floor as spontaneous sniffles shook her shoulders, Laura crossed the floor until only inches separated them. "You have to stop blaming yourself."

"Did you hear what I just said?" Darcy asked, tears cresting and breaking free as her eyes swung up to look at Laura. "I'm the reason he's gone. He died protecting me."

"Then he did his job." Laura watched her words hit Darcy like a bullet, the other woman taking a step backward as if she'd been physically hit. "Clint loved you and he did nothing less than what he'd have done for any of our family."

You're not their family. You don't have any family. You're alone.

"I'm not your family," Darcy whispered, as if her words could fight the truth of it.

"Yes you are. Clint thought you were. The man could do incredibly stupid things, but saving your life by giving his own was not one of them. He died protecting you because your life was worth dying for."

Feeling each word like a slap, Darcy shook her head heavily from side to side, voice breaking. "I'm not worth that."

"You were to him."

Darcy's chest was tight enough that it was hard to take in air, a lump in her throat that she was unable to swallow past. She pressed hands to her sternum, expecting to feel a blade sticking from it, causing all the pain and heartache. "I can't. It's... that's too heavy to carry."

"Then don't," Laura said, her own cheeks wet as she laid her hands on Darcy's shoulders. "He wouldn't want you to. He'd want you to take what he taught you and put it to good use. He'd want you to grow, and learn, and help others like he helped you. He'd want you to check in on his kids and tell them stories about what kind of man he was, and he'd want you to stop avoiding his wife because she could really use your support right now."

Face flinching, Darcy flicked drowning eyes up toward Laura, the pain in her voice like a living thing. "Oh, god, Laura. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry." She closed the distance between their bodies, wrapping her arms around Laura's waist, burying her face against Laura's shoulder, her body shaking as she sobbed.

When her legs gave out. Laura lowered them both to the floor, whispering against Darcy's hair that she was family, that it wasn’t her fault, that they missed her and they loved her. The dark thoughts that'd invaded Darcy's head since that day faded into the background, Laura's warmth and compassion pushing at the shadows until they had no choice but to flee.
“You’re going to be okay,” Laura said when she pulled back, cradling Darcy’s face in her hands. “It won’t hurt like this forever.”

“It feels like it will,” Darcy sniffled, “I miss him so much.”

“Then come visit. We can talk about him and cry and we’ll lean on each other. I think we could both use all the help we can get.”

Once again, the shame and guilt clouded Darcy’s mind. “You lost your husband. You shouldn’t be worried about how I’m taking it. I should be worried about you.”

“We can both be worried, can we do that? Be worried for us both?” At Darcy’s nod, Laura’s smile brightened. “Can you do me something else?”

“Of course,” Darcy said, running a hand over her nose, nodding emphatically.

“Can you wash your hair? Because, to use one of Clint’s favorite terms, you look like a hot mess.”

Darcy laughed through her tears, feeling brighter than she had in weeks. “You know I taught him that, right?”

“Oh yeah. I have you to blame for Lilah using it every day. You owe me big time for that.”

“I owe you big time for a lot of things,” Darcy said, pulling Laura into a tight hug.

“Shower first. Everything else later.”
Behind The Trigger

Chapter Summary

Behind hazel eyes, Darcy realizes how far she's gone.

Chapter Notes

Oh, all you beautiful, beautiful people out there. This chapter came down to the wire. I've focused on my story for the Captain America Reverse Big Bang for the past few weeks and so HaWYA was pushed to the side for a little while. This was fine, in theory, because I had several weeks worth of chapters already finished. Lo and behold, Monday rolls around and I only had an outline for what's posting today.

Eeeeeeek!

But I did it! I did the damn thing! There are words below that were literally typed out today, so forgive me for any typos/editing issues. I hope it doesn't feel too rushed.

Thank you for all the comments/kudos/reblogs and everything else you beautiful people gift me with every day!

<3

Oh! If you want to check out my piece for the RBB (a wonderful Steve/Bucky/Natasha story with absolutely stunning artwork), you can find it Right Over Here!

PageBreak

Sometimes before it gets better,
The darkness gets bigger.
The person that you’d take a bullet for is behind the trigger.
    Oh, we’re fading fast.

PageBreak

Bucky: Do you know where Darcy is?
Steve: No. Thought she went into work
Bucky: Checked. She's not there. I texted but heard nothing.
Steve: Is she with Jane?
Bucky: Checked with her. Not in lab, not in mess hall, not in training rooms or lockers. looked
Steve: Let's not overreact. She looked better after talking with Laura

Bucky: She can't just disappear like this

Steve: I'll be back in a couple hours. I know you're worried, just wait until -

Bucky looked up from the phone in his hand when he heard the front doors lock buzz open, watching as Darcy pushed through, headphones in her ears and gaze toward the phone in her hands. Relief immediately flooded through him, knowing that she was safe, but on the heels of that relief came annoyance. He'd been texting her for the past few hours with no response, and she'd obviously had her phone on her. That she'd purposefully ignored his texts was maddening. When she looked up at him, Darcy seemed to freeze, seemingly surprised to find him there.

"You're alive," he bit out, trying hard to quell the storm of irritation but failing.

Darcy reached up and pulled the buds from her ears, letting them hang around her neck. "Huh?"

"I texted you."

Blinking, Darcy looked back down at the phone in her hand, frowning softly. She couldn't remembering hearing the notification, but assumed that she'd been so wrapped in her own thoughts that she'd lost track of time. In fact, she'd lost hours. Feeling slightly mystified, she looked up at him with a shrug. "Must have missed them."

"Are you okay?"

The frustration in Bucky's tone made Darcy's eyes narrow, the question swinging her mood from pleasant ambivalence to instantly defensive. She took in a deep breath and then let it out slowly, trying to rein in the emotional whiplash in her own head. It'd been a week since she'd broken down in Laura's arms and she found herself unsure what to do with the knowledge that Clint's widow didn't blame her for what happened.

She'd expected the guilt and resentment to fade, but besides a temporary twenty-four hours reprieve, darkness still turned her thoughts. The self-loathing and culpability had transformed into irritation. Clint had been a great man, a good father and husband, but none of that had mattered in the end. It wasn't like he'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time; they'd all rushed toward the sanctum thinking they could fight Thanos' army back, that they could save the day.

They'd been wrong.

All they'd done was delay the inevitable. The longer Darcy thought about the situation, bleak and impossible, the more jaded she became. She could feel the irritation biting up and down her arms, a uselessness and bitterness she couldn't shake. She went through the motions each day, apathy and exhaustion fueling everything she did, giving the bare minimum in all aspects of her life. She felt aimless, and lost, and despite knowing that Clint's death wasn't on her hands, Darcy couldn't drudge up the energy to move forward. She was tired, and more than anything else, she was sick of people asking if she was alright.

"I'm fine," Darcy said with a shake of her head, hitching her bag higher on her shoulder, wrapping her headphones around her phone as she headed toward the bedroom.

"Where were you?" Bucky asked, stepping in front of her and lifting a hand to rest softly on her shoulder, worry in the storm-gray of his eyes.

Darcy's gaze slid from Bucky's hand to his face, her expression smoothing into something colder. "I
took a walk."

Bucky could see Darcy shutting down, annoyance and defiance tinting her hazel eyes. He knew that she was increasingly sensitive to the way people were looking after her - she'd always been incredibly independent - but he had a damn good reason to be concerned. After everything that had happened at the Sanctum and how hard she'd taken it all, Bucky couldn't help but feel a ball of apprehension in his stomach when he saw her struggling. Things had been better after she'd spoken with Laura. They'd had dinner together and Darcy had seemed like herself again, making jokes and laughing, and they'd spent the night together in each other's arms. Bucky'd shared a smile with Steve after Darcy had fallen asleep, feeling like there was finally a light at the end of the tunnel.

When they'd woken up in the morning, it was like the light was flipped off again, her eyes dim and actions slow and sluggish. Bucky knew intimately what her past was like, and despite all the horrible things that she'd grown up dealing with, she'd always bounced back. Spite was a hell of a motivator, and it was one Darcy fed on. Tell her she couldn't do something and she'd do it just so you knew how wrong you were. The darkness just lingered around her now, despite what he and Steve did or said, and they both missed her. "By yourself?"

"Yeah, by myself," she said, her words sharp. "That a problem?"

"I was worried when you didn't respond to my texts and no one knew where you were."

Eyes narrowing, Darcy took a step back from Bucky, his hand falling away as she put space between their bodies. The anger bubbling just beneath her skin at all times seemed to boil at his words, unable to explain why his worry immediately put her on edge. She'd been struggling to explain any of her emotions lately. It was like she was at a constant eight on a ten-point scale, seconds away from blowing up. The littlest things would set her off, make her seek solitude. She knew her relationships were suffering, but she couldn't seem to do anything to bite her tongue, even when she knew she was wrong. It felt like she was self-sabotaging everything good in her life, but couldn't stop herself from doing it. "I just missed your texts, okay? It's not a big deal."

"But where were you?"

"Like I said, I took a walk," Darcy explained, exasperated that he wasn't accepting her answer. She'd needed quiet, a dark silence, tired of everything being so goddamned loud all the time. She'd found an abandoned conference room in one of the unused wings of the compound. Darcy tossed and turned all night, an insomnia that kept her from finding sleep pressed between Bucky and Steve and it seemed like the only rest she could get was when she found a place for herself, somewhere she wouldn't be bothered, where she could close her eyes and drift away. She had a driving desire to get away from everyone's eyes, and between Bucky and Steve, she was always being watched.

Bucky knew he needed to push past her prickly words and not let her anger get under his skin, no matter how hard Darcy pushed back against him. "Jane says she hasn't heard from you in a few days."

"You talked to Jane about me?" Darcy asked, her voice rising softly. The last thing her pregnant best friend needed was people giving Jane the third-degree about where she was. Jane wasn't her keeper, either, and she felt anger light into her cheeks at the idea that Bucky had reached out at all. Why wouldn't everyone just leave her alone?

"I was worried," Bucky said, lowering his voice and trying to mollify her, "and you didn't answer -"

"Your texts, yeah, I get it. I'm so sorry I don't keep you abreast of my every move. I have to pee, do you want to come hold my hand while I do that or do you want to just stand outside the door?" She
felt a stab of guilt at her words and the expression on Bucky’s face, but that guilt evaporated in a second, replaced with resentment at the idea that she was being coddled.

Frowning, Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, breathing out through his nose to keep from snapping back at her. It felt like she was looking for a fight, like she wanted someone to raise her ire, and he wasn’t going to let her bait him into saying something they would both regret. This was Darcy. He knew her better than anyone. She wasn’t acting like herself and he struggled with helplessness at not knowing what to do or say to make this better. "Darce -"

"Just forget it," Darcy said with a shake of her head, cheeks heating with pique, brushing past him. She could feel him following her and it only made her shoulders tighten further. She hated the worry on his face, hated the way they all looked at her. No one understood. No one. Their savior complexes were going to be the death of them.

"I just wanted to know you were safe," Bucky sighed, arms hanging uselessly at his sides as he watched her stalk toward the bedroom.

"Why would I not be safe here?" Darcy said, spinning to face him, anger in the hazel of her eyes. "It's the Avengers' compound! This is the safest place on the whole planet right now. What do you want from me? You want me to wear a tracking bracelet? Want to know where I am at all times? I'm sure Stark has an app for that."

"I was worried -"

"Stop worrying about me!" Darcy screamed at him, watching her words hit him like a slap in the face. She took a step backward, bringing a hand to her chest, uncertainty and confusion flashing in her eyes before she tightened her jaw and her expression morphed into something harsher.

Bucky's eyebrows knit together the longer he looked at her, not recognizing the person who was looking back at him. The longer he stared, the more the worry in his stomach grew. "I'm not going to do that. I'm always going to worry about you."

"I went AWOL for a few hours and you're acting like a broke curfew or something. I'm pretty sure you're aware that I don't have a dad, so I'd appreciate it if you'd stop treating me like I'm a child."

"That's not what we're doing, Darce."

Darcy shook her head, curls sliding over her shoulders, a sneer on her face. "You, and Steve, and Tony. You're all acting like you need to save me. I'm fine. I'm not some damsel in distress that you need to save. I can save myself."

When she crossed into the bedroom, Bucky followed. "You disappear and can’t be found. You haven’t been eating, you don’t go into work, you won’t respond to texts. What are we supposed to think?"

"I don’t owe any of you anything, okay? If I need space, then I get space. If I want you to leave me alone, you're going to leave me alone. You're not my shadow, Barnes. I don't need you to save me. I need you to back off."

Bucky's scowl darkened at her use of his last name. Since the day that they’d been bonded together, she’d never called him Barnes. They were closer than that. They meant more than that. He watched her begin to stuff things into her bag, her movements stilted and unsteady. "Where are you going?"

"Did you not hear what I just said?" Darcy snapped, zipping her bag closed and throwing it over her shoulder. "I need to get some air."
"Please, Darcy, can we just -"

As she passed him in the doorway, Bucky's hand reached out for hers. Darcy jerked her body away and lifted her hand. *Don't touch me!*

Bucky flew backward, his back hitting the bedroom door, the wood splintering with the force. Darcy's eyes widened, the air in her lungs rushing out as the reality of what she'd just done hit her like a ton of bricks. The hurt in his eyes was enough to stop her heart. Disbelief rocked through her body, a shame so deep she tasted the bitterness on the back of her tongue, contrition making her mouth open. She wanted to say she was sorry, to run into Bucky's arms and beg for forgiveness, but something held her back. Something *always* held her back.

Bucky looked up in shock, unable to catch all the emotions that crashed across Darcy's face. There were *so many things* behind her hazel eyes. A tableau of pain and hurt, defiance and stubbornness, contempt in her gaze. The surprise seemed to be replaced quickly enough, Darcy's chin jutting out before she turned on her heel and ran toward the door. "Darcy -" Calling her name did nothing and Bucky was left staring at her dark curls as she disappeared from sight.

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Darcy pushed into the ladies bathroom, chest heaving, hands in fists at her sides. She barely made it, falling to her knees on the tile before she gagged. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten, so nothing came up but bile, burning up her throat. She draped an arm over the toilet, pressing her forehead into the crook of her elbow, feeling her blood pounding in her ears. It felt like the world was tipping on its axis, like the floor was at a slant and she was falling beneath the ground.

*What did you just do? You could have hurt him. He was just worried about you. They're all just worried about you. He loves you. Bucky loves you! How could you do that? What are you doing? Why? What is happening?*

She leaned forward spitting the saliva that had pooled into her mouth, groaning at the pain and throbbing in her head. She couldn't explain what she'd just done. Her hands shook as she leaned back against the stall, her head falling back as tears rolled from the corner of her eyes. She felt like she was going mad. The strangling feeling on her heart didn’t go away anymore and she felt like she was fading. Darcy looked down at her hands, scrutinizing them like they weren’t hers anymore. She’d raised a hand toward one of the people she loved. That thought alone turned her stomach again and she scrambled toward the toilet as she dry heaved.

Darcy had experienced abuse. She’d been yelled at, called horrible things, teased and bullied. She’d been hit, slapped, kicked, and assaulted. She’d been screamed at, jerked by the arm causing fractures, fingers slammed in car doors.

*Used.*

*Abandoned.*

*Doubted.*

*Accused.*

The fact that she’d just hurt someone she loved deepened her depression, until she was sobbing, face buried in her hands.
Oh god. Something's wrong. Something is **fucked** and you need to fix it. Now. Get off the floor. Go find someone. Tell someone what’s happening. They’ll help you! You know they will! Just **get up**!

Her body didn’t move. She screamed at herself, to do **anything**, to save herself, but nothing happened.

It was there in the background, hiding just beyond her abilities. Her thoughts had been so loud lately, bitter and filled with hate and anger, that it’d been able to sneak up without her realizing. Terror flooded her veins, suddenly remembering the other times she’d got lost in the darkness. How had she forgotten this? The absolute fear that gripped her heart? It was like waking up from a dream, the weight of recognition like a lightning strike that burned across her skin.

She was forgetting. She was being **made** to forget. Something feeding on her anger, pulling it to the surface, alienating her from everyone. For a moment, she remembered **everything**. All the times she’d slipped away. The times she’d woken in empty rooms, not remembering how she got there, hours having passed in what felt like seconds. The acrid taste of horror on her tongue. It was the same fear she’d felt every **other** time she remembered before forgetting again.

But this… this felt different. It felt worse.

*This is bad. This is so bad. Why didn’t you tell them? Why didn’t –*

Darcy’s eyes widened, watching a blush of amber-orange light strobe beneath her skin, knowing what it meant. She fumbled with the phone in her hands, pressing on the message icon, navigating to Bucky’s name. All his texts were there, the ones she’d not seen because she wasn’t there, when it wasn’t **her**. She stared down at the phone, fingers hovering, screaming at herself to type. She glowed brighter.

*No. No no no! Not again! Fuck! Get up Lewis! Go get –*

Darcy froze, shoulders stilling. When she blinked, what tears still pooled in her eyes slipped down her cheeks then stopped, her face void of any emotion. Her breathing slowed until she laid there like a doll, expression wiped clean, the fear and terror fading away like it had never happened. She sat there for minutes, doing nothing but breathing in and out, a war happening in her head. Finally, she climbed to her feet, flushing the toilet then crossing to the sink.

She stared at herself in the mirror, brows furrowing at the tear tracks down her cheeks. She flipped on the water, splashing it on her face then wiping it with a paper towel. Her cheeks were pink, eyes bloodshot.

*It's fine. It's fine. You're fine. It doesn't matter. None of that matters. You don't need them. You're fine. Everything is fine. It'll all be over soon.*

Darcy blinked when the phone in her pocket chirped. She pulled the device free, irritation lighting her eyes when she saw the mass amount of texts Bucky had sent. She flicked away from her messages, navigating toward the new email she’d received. Darcy scrolled, her gaze darkening as she read. When she got to the end of the message, she lashed out with her fist, punching the mirror, glass shattering around her feet and skittering along the tile as she flew out of the bathroom.

*Oh god. What's happening?*
Bucky: Get home
Steve: What happened?
Bucky: Get home now

“Stark!”

Tony turned at the sound of Darcy’s shout, a single eyebrow raising as she pushed her way into the lab through the double doors, her face a mask of anger. “You bellowed?”

“What the fuck is this?” Darcy slammed her phone on one of the metal work tables, the loud bang! making Peter nearly fall from his seat, ripping out his earbuds as he turned in alarm.

Slipping from his stool, Tony moved slowly toward Darcy, lips thinning as she continued to glare at him. He glanced down at the phone before his eyes flicked back up at her. “It’s a link to paperwork for the Family and Medical Leave Act. I was advised by HR -”

“What are you playing at?” His answer only stoked the anger pooling in her stomach, the static sound loud in her ears.

The level of aggression in Darcy’s tone was acidic, her words sharp, and Tony took a long moment before he responded. “When I turned in my reports on how many hours you’ve worked in the past two weeks, I was advised that this would be a good idea for you to fill out.”

Darcy straightened her spine at his explanation, her eyes narrowing further. “You tattled about me missing work?”

Tony’s expression smoothed into one of detachment, distancing himself from the poison that dripped from her lips. “It was out of my hands.”

She sputtered incredulously, cheeks heating with anger. “Out of your… are you fucking kidding me? I know I’ve called in a few times -”

“- fifteen days out of the last twenty-five, actually. And you left early the other ten.” When the brunt of Darcy’s rage focused on him, Tony showed no outward reaction, the apathetic mask he was so comfortable behind falling into place. “This is for your benefit, peanut.”

“Bullshit,” Darcy spat, venom in her gaze. “If you want to fire me then just have the balls to say so.”

Peter had walked toward Darcy and Tony, worry pooling in his brown eyes. He could tell something was wrong, the hairs on his arms lifting at the expression on her face. “Darcy, that’s not -”

Darcy spun toward Peter, the younger man actually taking a step back when she turned her attention in his direction. “Was I talking to you, Parker? No, I wasn’t, so why don’t you mind your own goddamn business.” The righteous indignation burned in Darcy’s chest like something real, like flames and heat, imagining that her skin would split and curl from the blaze. She tried to push it away, to douse the fire, but she couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but watch in
horror as she had no control over her actions.

Stop!

Tony’s voice cut through the lab. “Hey! Don’t talk to him like that!”

Darcy directed her glare back toward Tony, a sneer of derision curling her lip. “Oh, really? Tony Stark is going to lecture me about how to talk to people? How fucking hypocritical of you.”

Tony saw Peter deflate in his peripheral vision, sitting heavily on his stool as he looked at Darcy with wounded eyes. He took another step toward Darcy, putting himself slightly in front of Peter. “If you came here looking for a fight, congratulations, princess, you just found one.”

Darcy shook her head, a hollow laugh rattling in her chest. “That’s all we’ve ever done. We fight and yell at each other. You call me demeaning, pedantic nicknames and assume you’re the smartest one in the room. Your self-importance would be hilarious if it wasn’t so fucking sad.”

“My self-importance? You’re the one who came in here complaining about something that was supposed to help you.”

“I don’t need your help. Or your pity. I’m doing just fine.”

Tony’s snort was empty and acerbic. “I’ve never met someone who could live in three stages of grief at the same time. Denial, depression and anger? Hold on, let me get you a first place blue ribbon. You think you’re the only one who misses Barton? You’re not.”

Darcy nearly growled, taking a shaky step toward him, hands clenched into fists at her sides. “Don’t you dare bring him into this.”

“This is him, sweetheart. Ever since that day you’ve been drowning. I’ve seen Steve and Barnes try to help you, I know Foster and Peter have reached out. We’re here, throwing out lifesavers, and you’re cursing us for trying to pull you out of the water.”

“You want to talk about that day, Stark? Good, yes, let’s talk about what happened that day because I’ve got a few questions.”

Tony took in a breath through his nose, his chin lifting toward her. “Sure. Perfect. Let’s have a chat.”

“I heard that it took one thought, one tiny little push to get you to turn on Rogers. A whisper and you were ready to kill him. You would have killed him if he hadn’t figured it out. Do you hate him that much? Is the dream of killing Captain America so bare in your subconscious that the Maw knew exactly which thread to pull to unravel you?”

Tony frowned at her easy use of Thanos’ goon’s name, crossing his arms over his chest. “He got in my head. It’s what he does.”

Darcy moved carefully around the table, focus on Tony, chin dipping as she stalked. “He saw every insecurity you have inside when it comes to Rogers. The only child of Howard Stark, always coming in second, weighed and found wanting. Your entire life’s been built on proving daddy-dearest wrong. So when the opportunity struck, you didn’t fight it, you just gave in. You would have killed Rogers and done it with a smile on your face and a song in your heart.”

No. Tony. Please.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony said, refusing to move when she came to stand
right in front of him.

“Don’t I, though? It’s so pathetically clear to anyone who looks hard enough. Your fears, your short comings.” Darcy lifted her hand, letting it hover over the glowing blue symbol on his chest. “You think you built a shield around yourself so it keeps you from getting hurt, but it’s really there because you know what people would say if they saw who you really are, and that terrifies you.”

“Yeah? And what is it you see, kiddo?”

“I see you, Tony. The real you. The petty jealousy. The vindictive baiting. The hero complex that never pans out. If I were you, I’d look in a mirror and feel nothing but disgust.”

Stop!

“Is this making you feel better, Lewis? Getting all this anger out?” Tony asked, taking a step closer, until her hand was resting over the device in his chest. “Keep going. There’s nothing you can say that I haven’t already heard before. You think you’ve got some secret way to see my deepest and darkest fears?”

“Don’t test me, boy, or I’ll show you exactly how deep and dark I can see.”

A look of disbelief crawled into Tony’s face. “Did you just call me boy?”

“Hey.”

Darcy ignored Peter. “You think you know anything? You think you’re a hero? You’re nothing. Just a loser trying to make up for all the fucked up things he’s done in his pathetic life.”

Oh-God:

“Hey!”

Darcy’s gaze swung to Peter. She clicked her tongue and snapped her fingers in his direction. “Nope, uh-huh, the grown-ups are talking.”

Peter stepped up next to Tony, a stony look on his face. “You need to leave.”

“Excuse me?”

Please-no!

“I said you need to leave!” Peter watched Darcy’s eyes widen at his shout, his eyes hardening. “You don’t know what you’re saying and you need to get out of here until you can calm down!”

“And if I don’t want to leave?”

“I think you’ve made it abundantly clear that you don’t want to be here,” Tony said, his words clipped,

“You know what? You’re right. I don’t want to be here anymore.” Darcy reached out and snatched her phone back before reaching into her back pocket. She threw her badge across the table at Tony. “I quit.”

Don’t let me go! Stop me! Please don’t do this!

When Peter took a step toward Darcy’s retreating form, Tony reached out and laid a hand on the
younger man’s arm, stopping him from chasing after her. Peter turned hurt eyes toward Tony, his mouth hanging open in shock at what had just happened.

Tony tapped a button his watch before spinning toward his desktop, his fingers flying over the illuminated keyboard. “You get that, Friday?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“You know what to do. Don’t let her leave the compound. Get Barnes here. Now.”

Peter stood at Tony’s side, watching him pull up footage of the lab. “What? W-what was Friday getting?”

“Proof.”

“What happened? Where is she?”

Tony and Peter both spun toward the door as Bucky pushed through them, concern in the tightness of his expression and warning in his gaze. “She just quit,” Tony answered, watching the soldier’s steps falter, his face coloring with confusion.

“What?”

“She quit,” Peter repeated, arms crossed over his chest, chewing on his lower lip anxiously. “She came in, said some really mean stuff, then quit.”

“Where did she go?”

Tony stood, reaching out to grip Peter’s shoulder and squeezing softly. “She’s still in the compound. Friday’s making sure she doesn’t leave. Something happen between you two? She came in here positively glowing with umbrage.”

The last thing Bucky wanted to do was tell Stark that he’d had a fight with Darcy, but he was out of options.

His memories kept flashing back to the war, recalling the times where everything went quiet. It was like the battlefield took a deep breath in and held it, birds stopping their calls, even the breeze seemed to pause. Then the bombs would begin to rain and it took everything you had not to bite through your lip in fear, wondering if the next shell landed on you. They'd all been living in an emotional minefield with no hope of crossing Darcy without losing a limb. Or worse.

“She disappeared. I couldn’t find her. When she came back she was…”

“Different?” When Bucky nodded at his description, Tony turned back to his work station. He made a few clicks then waved his hand, the visual hovering in the air before them. “This was from about fifteen minutes ago,” he explained as the footage began, the image of Darcy storming her way into the lab.

Bucky watched the video, a scowl darkening his expression as he watched her wave her hands through the air, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up when he saw the darkness in her eyes. “What’s she saying?”
“Unimportant,” Tony said with a shake of his head, ignoring the glare Bucky sent in his direction, “but this?” His finger swiped through the air, the footage seeming to switch from actual picture to a mess of colors. “This is important.”

Peter took a step closer, scrutinizing the screen. When he realized what he was looking at, his eyes widened and he turned to look at Tony, shock on his face. “This is wrong.”

“Bingo.”

“I don’t get it,” Bucky said with a shake of his head, squinting and trying to see what they were talking about.

“We were all working on some security upgrades for my wedding,” Tony explained, flicking a small silver object in Bucky’s direction, the soldier easily snatchng it out of the air. “This is a pin that guests would wear. It emits a specific frequency, something that Darcy would have been able to detect with her powers.”

“It was to keep out wedding crashers,” Peter said, “or bad guys.”

Bucky looked down at the silver ”S” and the elaborate scrolling on the the metal. “What does this have to do with Darcy and what happened today?”

Tony leaned back against his stool then pushed off the table, wheels carrying him backward. As he slid, he kept his arm in the air, several more videos popping into existence, date stamps across the bottom. “When we first started our testing, we established what frequency humans vibrated at.”

“All humans give off electromagnetic radiation,” Peter said, walking along the wall of videos, peering at each one with a frown on his face, “but it usually depends on -”

“Temperature. You’re talking about thermal radiation,” Bucky said, overlooking the open surprise on the other men’s faces. “I’ve read about it.”

“Color me impressed.”

“Stark.”

“Right. Most humans are in the infrared region, somewhere around twelve micron. Easy peasy, right? We just tack these little suckers on people’s lapels and we don’t have to worry about wedding crashers, of the human or otherworldly variety.”

“Get to the point,” Bucky growled, dread in the pit of his stomach.

“As I’m sure you can recall, our Darcy is not full human. She’s a mutant, and as it turns out, her body vibrates on a whole different frequency.”

“It’s one of the things we did in the testing stage. See,” Peter said, pointing at a screen, “this is during one of the earliest tests. Tony and I are lit up a yellow-orange, turning to a darker purple where we’re clothed. But Darcy…”

“She’s white,” Bucky said, watching the video of her jumping around, a brilliant bright light in a sea of black. “She’s glowing.”

“It was a neat discovery, but not too surprising. We already knew she was different, her DNA told us as much. But take a look at this.” Tony gestured, one of the screens growing bigger. “This was taken the first time she returned to the lab after Clint’s funeral.”
Taking a step closer, Bucky watched Darcy’s hazy outline move, shadows and darkness having bled into her, surrounding her in a bubble of gray. “She’s dimming,” he breathed, wondering how many times he’d had that exact thought. The light in her eyes, the brightness she brought to his and Steve’s world. It’d been fading, slowly but surely, and here was definitive proof that something had changed.

“And today? Just minutes ago?” Tony’s jaw clenched, turning his whiskey-gaze toward the footage from earlier. He let it play like normal video for a few seconds before switching its view. Gone was the interior of the lab, replaced with black. Tony and Peter were both visible, looking mostly like they had on that first day, if not a tiny bit warmer due to the conversation. Darcy, though, had faded so much that she was just a small, gray circle of light, almost indistinguishable in the sea of darkness.

“It’s like she disappeared. You can barely see her,” Peter breathed, turning toward Tony with widened eyes, his voice full of concern.

“What could do something like that?” Bucky asked, pinning Tony with his stare.

The engineer was quiet, eyes intent on the screen, lips turned down into a frown the longer he watched. “I have no idea. Nothing good.”

“Then what -”

“Boss, a plane is approaching the hangar and requesting clearance to land.”

“It’s Steve,” Bucky said, his body flooding with relief. Steve would know what to do. They’d figured it out together.

“I’m sorry, Sergeant Barnes, but it’s not Captain Rogers. This jet is carrying Ms. Maximoff, NCO Wilson, and several medical casualties. They are flying with a distress signal and indicating a medical emergency.”

Tony and Bucky shared a look, a struggle in both of their eyes, dread weighing heavy. Bucky gave Tony a nod, watching as the engineer waved his hand and all the screens vanished from sight. “Alert the med ward. We’ll meet them on the hangar.”

“What about Darcy?” Peter asked, looking shaken, shrugging out of his white coat and throwing it on the table.

“Friday?”

“Ms. Lewis has returned to her quarters, Boss.”

“If she leaves, let me know immediately.”

“Of course.”

“Wait! Guys! Shouldn’t we make sure she’s okay? We’re just going to ignore what we found out?”

“Pete, if Maximoff is coming back here willingly, it means they’re in deep shit. Darcy is, for all intents and purposes, grounded. We can only put out one fire at a time.”

Bucky clenched his teeth. It was taking everything not to sprint back to Darcy, to ignore it all and find her, help her, keep her safe from whatever was happening. He knew better, though. He hated to admit it, but Stark was right. Wilson and Maximoff’s emergency took precedence. “Steve’ll be here any minute. He’ll go wait with Darcy, keep her safe. Then we’ll get this all figured out.”
Despite the thread of disbelief in his chest, Peter nodded at Bucky, squaring his shoulders before he followed the other men out of the room.
The Devil Within

Chapter Summary

Darcy falls deeper as revelations create havoc.

Chapter Notes

Everyone, let's all take a collective deep breath, okay? Alright. 
Breathe in. Good! Breathe out.
Awesome. I needed that. I hope it helps you gorgeous people, too.
Things are about to pick up speed and there are nuggets in this chapter that have been hidden for months. Hopefully you're able to see them and go "OMG I had no idea whatttttt?!!" and my background plotting can be seen when you look/read back.
That is not to say that sometimes my fingers type something and my mind goes "WTF, people in my head, HOW DID I NOT KNOW THAT?!!" because I 100% have had that happen before, but the majority of the stuff in this chapter has been highhandedly glued in place in previous chapters with the hopes you couldn't see the drips and see outright what they were hinting at.
<3<3<3

I will keep quiet, you won't even know I'm here.
You won't suspect a thing, you won't see me in the mirror.
But I crept into your heart, you can't make me disappear.
Til I make you.
I made myself at home, in the cobwebs and the lies.
I'm learning all your tricks, I can hurt you from inside.
I will be here when you think you're all alone.
Seeping through the cracks, I'm the poison in your bones.
My love is your disease, I won't let it set you free.
Til I break you.
You'll never know what hit you.
Won't see me closing in.
I'm gonna make you suffer.
This hell you put me in.
I'm underneath your skin.
The devil within.

PageBreak
Darcy threw her phone across the room, the device shattering against the far wall as the door slammed shut behind her. Blinking heavily, realizing her body had reacted to her thought to get help and had taken that option off the table, she fell to her knees. It felt like her body was on fire from the inside, her mouth opening in a silent scream as she pressed her forehead to the carpet.

Fractured. She felt like she’d been fractured down the middle, split into two warring factions that were both struggling for control. She didn’t understand how this was happening. It was her voice, her feelings, her memories, but almost none of it was really her. The darkness was pulling her thoughts and vomiting them out as if she was a puppet, trying to inflict the most damage possible, seeking to break any connections she had.

With no control, it was as if the worst part of her personality had been highlighted and unleashed. Was this was she’d be like if she’d let her past make her bitter? Curling ugliness around herself like a shield? Too hard and horrible to accept anyone’s love or give her own? The absolute worst of her was on display, using her own memories to spew hatred and disease while she could do nothing but watch as she hurt the people who meant the most.

It was bad. It was so bad. Darcy was like a passenger, seeing what was happening but having no way to fight back. She’d been split in two and her conscience - the part that knew better than to voice the twisted, impossible thoughts that haunted her darkest nightmares - was blocked from acting against the path she’d been set on.

Disarm and destroy.

Ruin everything that tethered her to the world.

Break her down, piece by piece, until she completely faded away.

The darkness was like a cancer, multiplying and replicating maliciously.

“Please don’t do this,” she whispered, the first words she’d been able to speak of her own since flying from the room after she’d used her powers against Bucky.

Bucky. Just thinking his name forced a wave of agony to crash inside her chest, heart breaking when she remembered the look of shock and disbelief on his face. Her stomach turned at the use of her powers against one of the men she loved, the familiar taste of bile on the back of her tongue. And what about Tony? And Peter? She’d said such horrible things, watching the hurt and pain color their eyes as they witnessed her become a thing of poison.

*They’re going to hate you, now. They’ll never be able to look at you without remembering the way you spoke to them. You’ll be all alone. It’ll be better that way.*

She shook her head against the carpet, refusing to believe that Tony and Peter would write her off for what she’d said. They were her friends. They were *family*.

*No. You’re wrong.*

Darcy straightened her back, blinking at the pieces of her phone strewn across the floor, a dent in the wall where the projectile had hit. She needed to tell someone, to call them, to get help. She attempted to stand, intent on walking out the door and finding someone who could help her, but her body didn’t respond to her demands. She needed to figure out what she could and couldn’t do, she had to find a way to get help.
Slowly, thinking only of climbing to her feet, Darcy was able to do so. She hadn’t thought anything past that single desire. Stand. As standing didn’t go against what the stone inside of her wanted, she wasn’t stopped. She looked at the pieces of plastic and shattered glass on the ground, fingers drumming against her thigh. Fix it.

Her feet didn’t move. She sighed, frustration biting up and down her arms. It was like a game of Red Light Green Light. She was testing how much she could push, how she could manipulate the rules to her benefit. And she’d always been good at finding loopholes and workarounds. She glanced up toward the ceiling. “Friday?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Could you -”

Her words stopped, the thought dying on her lips. She’d been about to ask her to find Bucky, hoping he’d look at her and see the struggle inside. It appeared calling anyone that could help would be impossible. She had to find another way. She opened her mouth again, but nothing came out.

“Ma’am?”

Grimacing, mental wheels spinning and looking for purchase, Darcy let out a sigh. “What’s the weather like outside right now?” Her eyes closed at her question, head shaking in dismay.

“It’s 98.9 degrees outside right now.”

Frowning, Darcy glanced up, squinting as she tried to formulate the next sentence. “It would be... a great time to take a vacation to... somewhere colder, eh? ...to get away?”

“I suppose if you do not like the heat, going somewhere cooler would be nice.”

Darcy wasn’t sure why she’d been able to suggest she wanted to leave, but she was slowly starting to string things together. As long as she didn’t specifically state the true reason why she wanted to get away, she was able to make the words happen.

It would be better to leave, to get as far away from people as possible. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt the people she loved.

Leave.

Shocked when her feet started moving toward the door, Darcy reached out to grip the doorknob, trying to reason out what her next step would be. When her wrist twisted, there was no give in the handle, no sounds of the lock turning over. She rattled it harder,griting her teeth as her annoyance piqued.

They’ve locked you inside. You’re an animal they need to keep caged. Do you see how they treat you? You’re a prisoner.

Darcy screamed in frustration, both her own and the stone’s, and spun on her heel. She grabbed the heavy salt shaker from the table in the dining nook and threw it as hard as she could at the window. A sheen of blue electricity crackled at the impact, but the glass did not break.

Trapped. Trapped!

She needed something heavier, something more substantial. Darcy crossed toward the kitchen, ripping open cabinets and throwing their contents to the floor. The sound of glasses and plates
shattering on the ground was oddly soothing, hearing something break other than her own mind. She growled as she bent and dug into the pots and pans, remembering that there was a particularly weighty cast-iron skillet Bucky’d used to make bacon on more than one occasion.

As she pulled out pans, Darcy’s frantic searching paused when she heard something knock around inside a large silver pot. Standing, she set the kitchenware on the counter, pulling off the heavy lid to find a small velvet bag inside. Frowning, Darcy pulled it out and tugged on the ribbon cinching it shut. She up-ended the bag, letting the contents fall into her palm.

Shock rocked through her body. It was a ring. It was a gorgeous silver ring with a brilliant diamond framed by a group of blue stones. Darcy’s heart stopped, the air in her lungs freezing. It was a ring. Why was there an engagement ring hidden among their pots and pans?

Oh god. Oh god!

It had to be Bucky and Steve. This was an engagement ring. This was from them, for her. She thought back to the conversation she’d had in the shower with Steve, when they’d both confirmed that they were where they wanted to be, that there were no doubts about what came next.

It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then. Darcy had no idea he and Bucky had -

They bought the ring after Barton died. They didn’t care that the father of three was gone, they were already moving on, and trying to make you move on, too. They only care about themselves.

“No,” Darcy said with a shake of her head, fist clenching around the ring, refusing to believe the lies the stone spewed. “That’s not true.”

“What’s not true, ma’am?”

“Stop listening to me!” Darcy screamed at the ceiling, her cheeks heating with anger.

They already had a plan for your life. They didn’t care how much pain you were in. All anyone ever cares about is themselves. They just want to control you, to dim your powers. Unleash them. Show them all how powerful you can be.

You’re wrong!

Darcy looked up when she heard the electric lock on the door flip open, heart leaping in her chest. She didn’t know why the door was open, just that it was, and her feet pushed her in that direction. She froze when the door was pushed inward, Steve’s blue gaze cast around the room before it landed on her. His eyes softened, his lips parting as he let out a sigh of relief.

“Darce?”

“What the fuck is this?” Darcy demanded, opening her fist and flashing the ring in Steve’s direction.

Since the second his plane had landed, Steve had felt an air of apprehension surrounding the compound. Natasha had radioed stating that Sam and Wanda had arrived with a convoy of injured Wakandans that were being taken to the med wing. Steve, she’d said, Natasha’s voice careful and even, giving nothing and everything away, Bucky needs you with Darcy. She’s in your rooms.

As he’d sprinted down the hallways, dark scenario upon dark scenario had played through his mind, each worse than the one before. The level of worry in Bucky’s texts and now the sudden arrival of Wanda and Sam didn’t sit well in Steve’s stomach, and he’d gritted his teeth against the wave of fear that came with not knowing that was waiting for him.
Pushing his way into their rooms only to find a haggard looking Darcy, broken glass and porcelain strewn around her feet, had plunged Steve’s heart into ice. His gaze flicked down to her hand and the ring she held out, then back up toward her face. There was a darkness in her eyes, the hazel almost completely gone, her pupils blown wide enough that it looked like blackness had taken over. “Darcy -”

“You thought the best thing to do after Barton’s death was to get me a ring and propose?”

Steve, look at me. This isn’t me. You know it isn’t.

Steve took another step in her direction, lifting his hands and showing her his palms, moving slowly and without threat. She was breathing heavy, her body nearly vibrating with energy. Darcy looked like a scared rabbit, ready to run at the first sign of trouble, and he was afraid what would happen if she did. “Bucky and I got the ring before what happened at the Sanctum,” he explained, watching her lip curl up in an ugly sneer, a look utterly foreign on her face.

“Liar!” Darcy threw the ring at Steve, unsurprised when the soldier plucked it out of the air. “You and Barnes probably thought slipping that thing on my finger would make me someone that could be controlled. Poor Darcy Lewis, needs to have her men keep her in line.”

Look at me, Steve. You know this isn’t right. Don’t believe me.

“We would never think that about you,” Steve said, taking in her entire body, noting every bit of tension, every quiver of her lips. Her eyes shifted back and forth, like she wasn’t sure where to focus, like she was looking for some kind of escape. He could tell something was wrong. This was worse than what they’d already been dealing with.

“Oh, I know exactly what you think about me, Rogers. You think I haven’t seen the doubt in you? The way you’ve looked at me since Barton died? I’m not some wounded animal you have to nurse back to health. I’m strong enough on my own.”

“Darcy, you are one of the strongest people I have ever met. I know you can take care of yourself. We just want to be beside you when you do.” Steve watched a wave of emotion flash in her eyes, her mouth dropping open slightly as she took in a deep breath.

Steve

“Steve,” Darcy said, eyes widening when she was able to say what she wanted. Her teeth clacked as her mouth snapped shut, surprise rocking through her body. “I-” The words on her tongue stopped when she tried to ask him for help, when she tried to tell him something was wrong.

Swallowing around the lump in her throat, Darcy’s mind worked quickly to think of something she’d able to say without the stone twisting it. “Let’s leave.”

Steve’s eyebrows furrowed at her words, at the look of desperation on her face. “What?”

Darcy took a panicked step forward, hand reaching out for him. “Let’s leave. You, me, and Bucky. Let’s just leave. Right now. Right now!”

“Darcy -”

“Steve,” she said, frenzy in her voice, “listen to me, please! The three of us should leave and find someplace quieter. Leave all of this behind. It’ll be better for everyone. It’ll be safer for everyone.”

She’d pushed too far. Darcy felt the claws of the stone dig into her, wrenching control away again.
She fought against it but she was helpless, trapped in the darkness and once again watching everything through an impenetrable shield.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, watching as a bit of hardness returned to her gaze.

“Just leave,” Darcy answered, “leave everyone. Stop fighting. Stop dying. Stop being responsible to anyone but ourselves. We can have that life, Steve. We don’t have to tell anyone. We don’t owe them anything.”

Steve shook his head softly, not understanding the look on her face, feeling the twisting of uncertainty in his gut. “You know that’s not true.”

“Why? The world ends if we walk away? Why is that on us? Why do we have to fix it? Billions and billions of souls out there and it falls to us to protect them all? That’s bullshit. This place, this war… we can’t stop it. We’re going to lose. We’ve already lost. Barton was just the beginning.”

The resignation and derision in her voice dripped like acid and he felt it burn along his skin. “Maybe we lose, but we’d lose doing what we can to help those who can’t fight for themselves,” Steve said, recognizing Darcy’s voice but not the words that were falling from her lips.

I’m still here!

Darcy’s head shook from side to side, dark curls sliding over her shoulders, eyes beginning to glow a soft amber. “Oh. That’s right. I forgot who you are, Rogers. You’ve always been the big, proud man who stands up for the less fortunate, right? Pretty hypocritical of you, considering you want to give up the shield and leave your duties behind.” She watched surprise light into his eyes, head cocking to the side as she gave him a cold mocking salute. “Why are you fighting to stay when you’ve already talked to Wilson about giving it up?”

“Passing the shield to someone else is very different than just running away because I’m scared,” Steve said, watching her round the kitchen counter. She moved toward him, her gait stilted, feet falling heavily, so completely different than normal. Darcy stood in front of him, head tilted up so he could see her eyes, the swirl of amber covering the hazel he knew so well.

Looking into his eyes from this close allowed her to fight her way to the surface. Darcy knew she only had the strength for one more battle. She was so tired, and fighting the stone was draining her. She was beginning to fade completely, second by second. “We have to leave now,” she breathed, eyes widening, willing Steve to see the war inside. “Now, before something bad happens, before someone ends up dead.”

Steve focused on Darcy’s face, her expression one of pleading desperation. He could feel his heart beating heavily, unsure what to make of her words and the look in her eyes, a voice inside telling him this wasn’t the Darcy he knew. The Darcy he knew was stubborn, and caring, and would never suggest running away.

“I want to build a life with you and Bucky,” he said, reaching out to rest his hands on her shoulders, “but it can’t be like this. We can’t just abandon our team.”

The beseeching look in Darcy’s eyes was replaced by malevolence, as if a switch had been flipped. “Why not? People abandon people all the time. I was left behind. Over and over and over. And now you’re doing the exact same thing. I don’t know why I would have thought you’d be any different. You’re all the same. Every single one of you.”

Don’t do this, please.
“I’m not abandoning you,” Steve said, brows knitting together as he watched a different person than his and Bucky’s Darcy looking up at him.

“Well, if you’re not willing to leave with me, I’m not sure there’s anything left to talk about.”

Steve hands fell from her shoulders, lips parting as his breath passed them. “What are you saying?”

Darcy’s jaw tightened once before she shrugged her shoulders callously at him, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m saying I don’t think this little experiment is going to work out.”

No. No! Steve! Don’t listen to me. I’m not there. This isn’t me!

Taking a step backward, Steve’s arms fell to his sides. He could hear his heartbeat whooshing in his ears, the steady pumping of his disbelieving pulse, the worry in his chest crashing as he watched her face clear of any emotion. “You said you were ready.”

“I lied.”

She desperately wanted to take the words back the second they passed her lips, but she couldn’t. She could only watch the pain move across his face, the agony of her words hanging in the space between them. It was a bell that couldn’t be unrung, however badly she wanted it to, and Darcy felt her stomach flip with the stone’s barely contained satisfaction.

You just broke his heart. He’s never going to love you now. I’m going to take everyone away from you, until you can’t fight me anymore.

Steve took another step back, his shoulders nearly spanning the width of the door to their rooms. He looked at Darcy, the unfamiliar expression on her face, and felt the hairs on his arm raise. This wasn’t Darcy. This wasn’t his Darcy. Something was wrong.

The ghost of a memory passed through him, remembering what it’d looked like when he’d stared into Bucky’s eyes and but seen nothing of his friend and lover. This was eerily similar; he wasn’t looking at the Soldier, but it was strikingly clear that he wasn’t looking at Darcy, either.

Darcy’s jaw ticked as she ground her teeth, attempting to brush past Steve. “I’m leaving,” she growled.

When Darcy reached out toward the doorknob, Steve took a step to his left, blocking her way. “You’re not Darcy.” The way she looked up at him, eyes widening, was all the confirmation he needed.

I’m here! Steve! I’m still here!

The elation Darcy felt was short lived, her heart breaking all over again when her arm raised, her skin glowing from within. The threat of using her powers was there, wordless and clear. She could see it in the gorgeous cerulean of Steve’s eyes: he knew the person looking at him wasn’t Darcy, and he was willing to fight to get her back.

… but he would lose. Darcy could feel it like an approaching storm, the smell of pichor and the sharp taste of copper on the air. He knew what her powers were capable of, yet still he stood to face her. She didn’t want to hurt him, not knowing what she could do if he stayed in her way, and she felt the helplessness twist in her heart.

Darcy gathered everything she had inside, every single ounce of strength. She left nothing behind, keeping none for later, siphoning everything she had into this one, final wrestle. She felt the tiniest
hint of control, a desperate breath passing her lips as her eyes cleared of the amber, the hazel breaking through for the moment. “Please don’t make me do this,” she gasped, watching as recognition filled his eyes.

“Darcy?”

She was pulled violently, the control wrenched away with force. Darcy watched in horror as her arm drew back then slammed forward in Steve’s direction. He flew back against the door, the wood and metal holding for a glorious second before it splintered and broke apart. Steve continued moving until he crashed across the hallway, leaving a large dent in the drywall before falling limply to the ground, crumpled on his side, eyes closed.

No! No! Steve! Get up! Steve! Oh god!

Darcy looked down at him for another moment, the stone filling her with satisfaction when he didn’t move. She turned on her heel and started down the hallway, whistling softly.

PageBreak

“What happened?”

Wanda looked up as Bucky, Tony, and Peter ran toward them, their faces each carrying a similar level of worry. “We found the missing Wakandans,” she explained, helping push a gurney which carried a severely injured man who was in the midst of a seizure. A group of doctors and nurses elbowed through the crowd, taking control of the gurney and running with it down the hall. Wanda pushed the hair back from her forehead, hazel-grey eyes filled with emotion.

“Are they all in this bad of shape?” Tony asked, eyes widening as the seizing man was wheeled past.

“He’s the worst. The other four are better, but not by much.” Sam answered, coming to stand next to the small group, his face pulled into serious lines as he reached for Wanda’s hand and threaded their fingers together.

“There were only five?” Peter asked, seeing Sam pause before nodding his head. “But weren’t there over fifty missing?”

“There were,” Wanda said, her eyes darkening with haunted thoughts. “The others were already dead when we got there.”

The reality of the death toll hit all of them, and the group went silent, gravity pressing on their shoulders. “What happened to them?” Peter asked, his voice soft.

“They were experimented on,” Bucky said as he watched a doctor help one of the injured walk inside, an arm around the woman’s emaciated waist. The expression on her face was familiar, the way she held herself like the ghost of a memory at the back of his mind. She looked broken, and lost, and whatever personality had once lit her eyes was gone, replaced by nothing. Vacant. What’d made her her had been ripped away, and Bucky felt the wave of understanding threaten to drown him.

He’d knew how she felt. After he’d fished Steve out of the water outside the Triskelion, he’d had months of looking at his own reflection and not knowing who was staring back at him. It’d come back in snippets and waves, barely more than sand through his fingers. If any of them had experienced the same, there was no telling the horrors they’d seen.
“Oh god,” Peter gasped, sympathy and disbelief filling his brown eyes, tears pooling as he watched a child being carried in the arms of a nurse, the little boy’s face blank, dirt and blood speckling his tiny body.

“How did you find them?” Bucky asked, turning his attention to Wanda and Sam, needing the mission to take his focus, pushing at the remembered pain.

“We found one of Thanos’ people hiding in the jungle outside the barrier,” Sam said, frowning as he remembered what had lead to their discovery. “Wanda dug into him, tried to get as much information as she could.”

“He didn’t know a lot, but I looked until I found out how he was communicating. Viz traced the line back to a remote base in Siberia. Somewhere already outfitted for what they needed.”

Bucky’s breathing stopped at her words, his body going still. Siberia. Memories assaulted his mind, the training facility that the Winter Soldier Program had been run out of something he only thought about in his worst dreams. There were only five people who knew where that base could be found. As one of them was sitting in jail, only four remained. When his eyes flicked up at Tony, the two men locked gazes.

“No one knows about that place but us, Rogers, and T’Challa,” Tony said with a shake of his head, seeing where Bucky’s mind had gone.

“Does it really matter where they were so much as what they were doing there?”

Peter’s question seemed to shake both Bucky and Tony from their inner thoughts, both of them turning to look at him with equal expressions of dread. Tony looked back up at Sam. “Were you able to find out anything from the injured?”

“No, we just knew we had to get them to safety, and this is the safest place on the whole planet.”

Sam’s words made Bucky frown, looking over at the other man, remembering that Darcy had said something very similar just a few hours ago. A ball of dread was forming in his gut and he couldn’t shake the feeling like something bad was happening beyond what they knew.

“We should question them, find out what they can tell us.”

“They’re too weak,” Wanda said, glaring at Tony, “trying to do anything more might hurt them.”

“I’m not saying we give them the third degree, I’m just saying they have information that might help us figure out why Thanos’ goons wanted them in the first place. We need to know everything before we can make a plan of attack.”

“I think we need to be more worried about healing them,” Sam said, frowning at Tony, “and less worried about re-injuring them by pushing too hard.”

“Tony’s right,” Peter said, both Sam and Wanda’s glares pointing in his direction. “We’re losing time arguing like this. They took those specific Wakandans. Why? What was so special about them?”

Peter’s questions seemed to make everyone pause, a hush falling over the hallway until it was broken by Wanda. “We can ask the ones that are not hurt as badly, but I do not know how much we will be able to uncover.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Peter said with a shrug of his shoulders. When Sam and Wanda started down the hallway, Peter trailed after them, leaving Tony and Bucky alone in the hallway.
Tony frowned when Bucky didn’t start moving but continued to glare at the ground, grey eyes flicking with his thoughts. “What?” he asked, voice making it clear that he knew something about what had just happened wasn’t sitting right with the soldier. “You got a problem with the plan?”

“There weren’t only five people that knew about the HYDRA base in Siberia,” Bucky said, glancing up at Tony, his eyes full.

Frowning, Tony lifted his hands and counted off names with his fingers. “You. Me. Rogers. T’Challa. Zemo. That’s five.” When Bucky continued to look at him, Tony’s face took on an expression of confusion. When it hit him, he let out a noise of disbelief, his head shaking heavily from side to side. “No. No! There’s no way. It’s not possible.”

“She knows everything I know,” Bucky said, his voice low, like gravel under boots. “She’d know how to get in, what supplies were already there, how to get it powered back up…”

“How? How would she have been in contact with any of them? She’s spent the last month fusing with the couch, barely even leaving your guys’ room. If she’d been in contact with an alien horde bent on the destruction of the planet, I think we’d know.”

“They had creatures that could tear into a mind. Use their memories. One of them got into your head.” At Tony’s trumpet of denial, Bucky took a step closer to the engineer. “If they got into Darcy’s head and saw what she knew…”

The hallway fell silent as the two men struggled with what it would mean if someone had been able to read Darcy’s memories and now knew everything she did. It would be catastrophic. The quiet second seemed to pass before both Tony and Bucky began moving. Tony did his best to keep up with Bucky as the soldier tore down the hallway.

“Friday, I need you to change the passwords on all S.H.I.E.L.D. servers, code level alpha.” When Tony heard nothing in his ear, he slowed to a stop, watching Bucky disappear around the corner. He tapped on his ear piece again. “Friday?”

Growling when he still didn’t get a response, worry pooling in his stomach, Tony turned down a different hallway and began running as fast as he could.

Bucky pushed his way into the med ward, skidding to a stop as he counted only four people in the sterile white beds. They were all in varying states of injury, doctors and nurses huddled around the three adults, their faces blank. “Where’s the fifth?”

“He’s in surgery,” Wanda explained, reaching out to grip the hand of the woman Bucky had seen before. “They had to release the pressure on his brain. They’re not sure of his outcome.”

Letting out a sigh, Bucky glanced over his shoulder, brows knitting in confusion when he didn’t see Tony right behind him. His grey eyes flicked up at the sounds of laughter, watching as Peter knelt next to a bed where the child was huddled under a pile of blankets. He, Sam, and Wanda watched as the younger man was able to coax another smile and laugh from the little boy, his voice quiet as he spoke softly.

“They hurt us.” Bucky turned at the gravel-sounding voice, watching as the woman beside Wanda seemed to take in a deep breath then let it out slowly. “They were looking for something inside of
Wanda squeezed the woman’s hand gently, tears springing to her eyes as she saw the Wakandan struggle past the rattle in her chest. She nodded at Sam, who poured a small glass of water and held it out. “What do you remember?”

The woman took the glass, moving slowly, like she ached everywhere. She coughed at the first sip before drinking it greedily. Wanda took the empty cup and handed it back to Sam. “There were tests. So many tests. Painful. No anesthetic. They took our kimoyo beads. Analyzed the data. Made us explain our family history. The rooms were small. They took us in waves. The screams of the others from inside…” The woman’s body shuddered at the memory.

Bucky’s jaw clenched, teeth grinding together, forcing himself to keep his eyes open and focused on her. Her story was immeasurably horrible and brought so many of his own nightmares to the surface, but if she had the strength to tell it, then he would find the strength to listen.

“When they could not find what they sought, we were useless to them. They would come back and take more. Sometimes the testing took weeks. Sometimes less. We were barely fed. Just enough to stay alive, not enough that we could fight back.”

“Guys,” Peter gasped as he rushed over, alarm on his face, tension in his shoulders, “the kid said his family was taken. All of them. If they were just looking for people to experiment on, why take a whole family?”

“They were looking for something that could be passed down,” Sam said, arms uncrossing and falling heavily to his sides. “Something in their genes.”

“Not their genes,” Peter said with a shake of his head, “something in their DNA.”

Realization blazed over Bucky’s face, turning toward Sam with wide eyes. “We thought they went after access to the mines when they broke into Wakanda’s satellites -”

“- but they were pulling up their medical records. The attacks were just a diversion for the kidnappings.”

“But what -”

Peter’s question was cut off when Wanda began to scream, falling to her knees next to the bed, hands clutching at her head. Sam dropped to his knees next to her, worry thick as he tried to ask her what was wrong. Bucky looked around the room, unsurprised that everyone had turned to look in their direction. What was surprising was how the four Wakandans had no expressions on their faces as they watched Wanda cry out in pain.

Wanda gripped at Sam’s arms, face screwed into a grimace as wave after wave of agony vibrated through her body. Skin feeling like it was on fire, she clawed at her throat, at the tube that had been stuck down it. But there wasn’t a tube down her throat, and she wasn’t in the surgical room across the compound.

“The other survivor,” Wanda breathed, still trying to breathe past the feeling that there was something in her airway, “the one in surgery. It’s… he’s…” She shook her head heavily, trying to think past the barrage of memories and emotions assaulting her mind. “He was there. The white alien, the one who could whisper nightmares.”

“The one Steve killed at the Sanctum?”
Wanda nodded, looking up at Bucky with sweat beading her brow. “Ebony Maw. He needed to find some that matched. Someone who could absorb the soul stone.”

“Like Darcy,” Peter said, face draining of color. “They want to take the stone away from Darcy. But why? Why do they care who has the stone? Thor said the stone could see souls, steal them, control them…”

“And trap them,” Bucky breathed, lips parting as he remembered the first day he’d ever seen Darcy, horrified in that bed and having a panic attack about the rock she’d grabbed, terrified of the power the infinity gem had gifted her.

Sam watched Wanda breathe through the pain, dark eyes flicking up to Bucky. “What happens to the souls that have been trapped inside if the stone is taken from Darcy?”

“They’ve got to be set free, right?” Peter cast his worried gaze around the room. “Why else would they want to transfer the stone from one person to another?”

Wanda rose slowly, her eyes impossibly wide. She pulled backed from Sam, taking steps away from everyone, hands shaking. When Sam tried to follow her, Wanda shook her head, stopping his forward motion and getting enough room that she could think clearly. “My vision... when I looked in Darcy’s head... It wasn’t her I was seeing. It was who was trapped in the stone.”

“Who would she have…?” When Wanda pointed her gaze in his direction, Sam’s mouth fell open, eyes widening to match hers. “Son of a bitch.”

“Thanos,” Bucky whispered, the reality of what Wanda was suggesting constricting tightly around his heart. The darkness that had been growing in Darcy since that day at the sanctum, the differences in her personality... It hadn’t been her. It’d been the madman she’d destroyed. Except he’d never truly been destroyed. He’d been tucked away inside the stone, allowing him to poison her.

Puzzle pieces began to connect in Bucky’s head, memories of the day he and Darcy had been bonded together. She’d saved his soul by giving him part of hers, and he’d known, with every fiber of his being, that if he hadn’t given her a part of his, something else would have taken up residence in her soul. Their outcome had been the best case scenario.

… but she’d saved Steve. That day, in the sanctum, Darcy had found Steve’s soul and pulled it back from the brink. She’s forced it back inside, saving his life, but there’s been no connection, no bond, no transference of memories. She’d saved his soul but, in return, had given up part of hers, allowing the darkness to seep in, inky blackness from the soul she had trapped inside.

No.

“It’s Thanos. It has to be. Darcy didn’t know how to use the stone, she just knew she wanted Thanos to go away. He’s been trapped in the stone the whole time.” Wanda reached out for Sam, a look of horror on her face. “If they get the stone away from Darcy, then Thanos will be freed. We can’t let them get to her. We’ve got to -”

Wanda screamed when she was pulled backward, her grip on Sam failing as she was dragged across the floor. Her eyes widened, fear turning them a beautiful shade of crimson.

“I always knew you’d be the one to figure it out, little fish.”

The voice behind Wanda was filled with a kind of begrudging affection, which was in stark contrast to the sound of bones snapping. The fingers that had been wrapped around the back of Wanda’s neck released and her body fell limply to the ground, eyes open and unseeing.
Darcy’s smile was sharp as she took in the group left standing.

Oh-god
Chapter Summary

Taken over, Darcy watches as her world grows dimmer minute by minute. Bucky and Steve adjust to this new pain.

Chapter Notes

I wish I could tell you that things are looking up. There's enough horribleness out there in the world, right on our doorsteps, that this feels like just one more slap of sadness. But, if any of you out there are like me, I use stories and movies/music/TV as a means of escape. Even if what you're consuming makes you sad, it's less sharp than the hurt waiting on the other side of the door. Not all pain lasts forever. The ache will fade. The storm will pass. Use my words as a reason to ignore, just for a little while, what's still waiting. <3

PageBreak

So full of emptiness.
No room.
Empty.
Nothing inside those walls.
Taken.
Empty.

PageBreak

Tony rounded the corner at a clip, sneakers squeaking on the floor as he skidded to a halt. The secured door to the compound’s server room was open, the sound of heat alarms blaring from inside. He ran, already thinking about triage, working through the problem he was about to faced with; the engineer knew what it meant if the equipment inside was destroyed, and how vulnerable it made them.

“Son of a bitch.”

His brain tried to make sense of what he was seeing; bits of metal littered the floor, the plastic innards
of machines were strewn about the room in happy chaos, wires torn from ports were sparking as they hung limply, large puddles of water from the liquid-coolers covered the ground.

There were only three people who had access to this room. It had been just him and Steve for the longest time, the most sensitive details of the compound being hidden for good reason. After everything that had gone down while they were in Wakanda, Tony had given Darcy access to Friday and the mainframe that powered her. He thought it’d been a smart move, giving up a little of his control to someone he trusted.

The negative voice in the back of his head repeated the mantra that this is what happened when he allowed his tech to be in anyone else’s hands, but the more rational part of Tony knew this wasn’t it. Something was wrong with Darcy, and the footage he’d analyzed in the lab said as much. The last thing Friday had confirmed was that Darcy was in their rooms. It was a long shot, considering what he was currently looking at, but he ran from the room toward hers.

Tony slowed as he neared the door leading to the living wing that housed Darcy, Steve, and Bucky’s rooms. He took a deep breath in then let it out slowly before peeking around the corner, hoping that he wouldn’t see an amber-colored Darcy floating in the air and coming toward him like some kind of horrible horror movie.

Finding Steve on the ground, drywall and dust surrounding him, was definitely not what he’d expected. “Rogers?” Tony rushed forward, sliding to his knees as he neared, hands brushing over the other man’s chest and shoulders, trying to find any wounds. “Cap? Hey! Rogers, buddy, you’ve got to wake up. Steve!”

Consciousness folded over Steve slowly, his name pulling him from the blackness. His body ached, his back one large knot of pain, and it took him a few tries to remember where he was and what had happened. He’d been coming home when Natasha reported Sam and Wanda had returned with the missing Wakandans. He hadn’t gone straight to them, though, because Bucky had needed him -

“Darcy,” Steve groaned, rolling onto his stomach, blue eyes blinking open. He pressed his fist to the ground, feeling sharp pieces of plaster beneath his knuckles as he tried to stand. “It’s not Darcy.”

“Hate to burst your bubble, Cap, but this most definitely was Darcy.” Tony helped Steve climb to his feet, the soldier wincing as he straightened his back. Tony kept a hand on the blond’s arm to steady him, watching as clarity slowly returned to Steve’s eyes, a look of worry coloring the cobalt.

“No. It’s not Darcy. It’s the stone. She tried to tell me, to get her out of here, but it took over when I realized it wasn’t her.”

Tony rose an eyebrow. As far as he knew, Darcy hadn’t heard the stone’s voice in months, so he wasn’t exactly sure where Steve was getting his data, but he wasn’t going to argue semantics. “Yeah, and after laying you out, she Waco’d Friday and the rest of the security. We’re working blind at the moment. Which way did she go?”

“I… I don’t know,” Steve said, glancing to the right and the left with a frown turning his lips. He shook his head, still trying to erase the hurt of Darcy’s eyes, callous and cruel and so utterly unlike hers. The words she’d said, the pain she’d caused… it was all an act. A ploy. Said for maximum suffering, intent on tearing him apart.

Instead, it’d made his realize something more than just grief was twisting her heart. Darcy was warm, and kind, and there was no way she’d have said those hurtful things. It wasn’t her. It wasn’t her. Did Bucky know? Had he figured it out?
“Where’s Bucky?”

Tony caught Steve when the soldier’s ankle turned, keeping him upright with an arm around his waist. “He went with Maximoff, Wilson, and Peter with the Wakandans. Med Wing.”

Steve got his footing and rolled his shoulders back, the quiet white noise of the mission filling his ears. “We’ve got to warn them before they hurt her.”

Tony wrapped his fingers around Steve’s arm, stopping his movement. “Okay, I get that, I do,” Tony said, his voice showing hesitation, “but we’ve got more problems than just Darcy. The Wakandans were being held in Siberia. In the old Winter Soldier’s home sweet home. The one where we almost killed each other. I assume you remember that bit of history?”

Steve looked over at Tony, frown deepening. “How did they -” Realization widened his eyes, his lips parting in shock. “Oh god.”

“We’re not sure why yet, but if they knew about that from Darcy, and she just took down Friday and the security -”

“Then the whole army could be on their way here right now,” Steve said, the gravity of the situation falling heavily on his shoulders. He swallowed heavily, chest aching with pain different than the ache in his muscles. He had no idea how they were going to fight this, not when the thing in Darcy’s body had access to her powers. There were only so many things they could do to take her out of the fight without hurting her, and knowing that she was still in there - that she’d been able to wrestle control back, however momentarily - meant that there was hope.

Tony watched the weight of the situation tense Steve’s shoulders, his eyes losing a bit of their light. Reaching out, the engineer clapped Steve on the shoulder. “Good news is that even though she took out Friday and the backup servers, we’ve still got the regular security in effect. If someone crossed the barrier of the compound, we’d know it.”

The second those words passed Tony’s lips, a shrieking, shrill alarm began to blare throughout the hallway, safety lighting flashing between strobes of bright white and dark, crimson red. Tony sighed, looking down at his feet as he shook his head, an expression of guilt turning his lips. “I shouldn’t have said anything. That was my fault. Shoulda known better.”

“We’ve got to find her,” Steve said, starting down the hall, not checking to see if Tony was keeping up.

“And how do we do that?”

Steve’s jaw ticked once as his face took on a mask of intensity. “Follow the screams.”

Valentine’s Day

“I was never a big fan of Valentine’s day,” Darcy said, her fingers trailing a path down Steve’s back, just over the skin of his spine. “The day after? When all the candy went on sale? That bit I overwhelmingly enjoyed, but the rest?” She gave a shrug, a small smile on her lips as she watched his skin raise with goosebumps.
Bunching the pillow beneath his head, Steve pressed his cheek to the cotton, grinning at Darcy. Her skin was still flushed pink from what they’d just done to each other’s bodies, her full lower lip even plumper, his teeth always aching to bite softly so they’d swell, so he’d be able to see his effect on her even after the fact. "We never got much candy," Steve shared, knowing that she was well aware of the financial struggles he’d faced growing up but mentioning it anyway.

"There was that one time," Bucky said when he returned from the bathroom, flopping onto the bed on the other side of Steve, utterly comfortable with his lack of clothes. "You won that taffy, remember?"

"That's right!" Darcy said, her eyes lighting up as she remembered the sketch Steve had drawn of his mother, winning the second place prize. "You shoulda gotten first. Craig Davies wasn't half the artist you were."

Steve flipped on the bed, tugging the sheet so he was still covered, cheeks heating when his movements caused the fabric to dip on Darcy's chest, revealing more of her porcelain skin for his eyes to rove. He settled back against the pillow, shoving both hands behind his head. "Davies was alright." The echoing sound of Darcy and Bucky's incredulous snorts from each side only widened his smile, his cheeks beginning to hurt from the expression. It was a singular problem that he’d found having both Bucky and Darcy at his sides; he was laughing more, smiling more, feeling more solid than ever before, and it was all because of them.

"Well, you were more than just alright, punk," Bucky said, knowing the look in Darcy's eyes was matched in his, "and you should have won the whole thing. You coulda bought a ton of taffy with those two dollars."

"Or a new dress for Ma," Darcy added, knowing it’d been one of Steve's biggest wishes as a kid. He’d adored his mother, with her kind eyes and unwavering support, becoming a nurse so she could learn how to care for him better, so he could get the help he needed. "She was always so pretty in blue."

Steve let his eyes fall closed, the warmth of his lovers more than staving off the snow and ice that had canceled their Valentine's date plans. None of them seemed to mind the way they’d salvaged the evening, attempting to make dinner before getting distracted by other hungers. He couldn't bring himself to feel guilty, not when Darcy had worn that dress with those heels, the hazel in her eyes appearing to be lit from within, the crimson stain on her lips demanding to be tasted. And Bucky? In that gray slacks and vest combination, the sleeves of his button-up rolled back to his elbows? He’d been a goner from the start.

"I wonder if they still make that taffy," Bucky said, head dipping to press his lips to Steve's shoulder, biting softly into the flesh, satisfied when a shiver seemed to travel down the other man's spine.

"We could have a field trip, head into the city," Darcy offered, sharing a look over Steve’s head, a similar smirk on both their faces. "I know a lot of the places, but I've never been there, you know?" She shifted closer to Steve, reaching out to turn his chin in her direction, Bucky's dark head of hair peppering kisses along Steve's skin and moving south. Darcy smiled at the blond when he opened his eyes and blinked at her, happiness in the depths of his cobalt gaze, enough that her stomach flipped in satisfaction and affection. "Would you take me there?"

"I'd take you anywhere, sweetheart," Steve answered without hesitation, his words ringing with honesty, answering her question and leaving the door open for everything else he meant but didn't voice.

"Even to Funky Town?" When Steve cocked his head to the side in confusion and Bucky lifted his
head from where he'd been sucking a purple circle in the skin at Steve's hip, Darcy's hand gestured in the air. "Whenever Jane would talk about Thor, and you know, the heavy Asgardian banging they'd gotten up to, she always used the euphemism of 'Funky Town'. The woman is a world-renowned astrophysicist and she still blushes when I ask about how good he is at using his 'hammer'."

"I'm not sure I want to know," Steve said, eyebrows raising toward his hairline when Bucky and Darcy shared a heavy look. "Do I want to know?"

"It might be better if you didn't."

"She's right. Somethings are better left as mysteries."

Sitting up on his elbows, Steve looked back and forth between them, an amused but demanding glint in his eyes. "Tell me."

"I don't know... You might look at him differently."

"Okay," Steve said in resignation, falling back against the pillow. A second later, he popped back up to his elbows, determination coloring his features. "No. Tell me."

Darcy laughed, clapping a hand over her mouth. She shouted when Steve's fingers dug into her ribs, throwing her head back, the cackle that broke free from her throat filling the room with the happy sound. "Steve! Stop!"

Bucky's voice was full of mirth as he watched Steve attack Darcy. "Let's just say his powers aren't his only godly attributes." His laugh joined Darcy's when Steve turned his attention, throwing himself at Bucky and pinning the other man to the bed.

Steve slipped his thigh between Bucky's, the sheet falling away from his body completely, holding Bucky's wrists above his head, stretching the long line of the other man's body. He was breathing quickly with exertion, his eyes bright, and he was still laughing when he dipped his head and captured Bucky's lips with his own. The laughter faded as the kiss morphed into something more, something deeper. A growl rumbled through Steve's chest when Bucky ground himself against his thigh, grip tight and seeking that friction.

Shifting positions, Darcy rose to her knees, scooting so she could press her teeth into the flesh of Steve's ass, hearing the moan that issued from his mouth and passed into Bucky's. She skimmed her hand up Steve's back as she moved closer to the pair, until she could tangle her fingers in the honey-stands on his hair, tugging with enough force that his lips were separated from Bucky's, stealing them for her own.

Looking up at the gorgeous scene above him, Bucky's left hand reached up to palm Darcy's breast while his right slid between his body and Steve's, wrapping around Steve's warm length and squeezing softly, watching the blond swallow harshly at the attention he was being shown. The levity and lightness of a few minutes ago had evaporated, something darker and perfect taking its place.

Gasping when Bucky's fingers rolled one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, Darcy pulled back, hazel eyes looking back and forth between the men. "Best. Valentines. Day. Ever."
Darcy’s dark-tinted grin slid from her face as she lifted her hands toward the group left in the med ward, cutting off their shouts as she slammed them backward against the wall. Bucky, Peter, and Sam fell to their knees, howls of pain filling the air as she did it again, then again. The Wakandans on the beds looked at her with blank, shell-shocked expressions, used to this level of violence after that they’d seen. They would not be a problem, so they were not important.

**What did you do to them?**

*I found a way to take you out of the equation, girl. If you won’t do what I want, then you just get taken off the board.*

**Don’t hurt them! You’ve already got what you wanted!**

*They’ll never stop fighting. Not for you.*

Darcy’s fingers formed a fist in the air, her arm rising, the three men’s limp bodies doing to the same.

**No! Stop!**

Her arm trembled, a look of angry frustration crossing her face. “How are you stopping me?” she roared, the sound foreign as it passed her lips. Darcy glanced up when a loud, piercing alarm split the air, the lights flipping to emergency strobes. Her gaze flicked back to the men on the ground, unconcerned with them for the moment. “It won’t matter. My army is going to tear this place apart and slaughter everyone they cross.”

*Then I guess you better find what you need*

Growling, Darcy turned on her heel, letting the men fall to the ground as she disappeared into the darkened hallway.

*~*~*~*

It took several tries before Bucky groaned, using a nearby cot to climb painfully to his feet. “Wilson. Parker. Report.”

“That wasn’t Darcy,” Peter insisted, face pale and eyes wide as he too climbed to his feet. His brown gaze stared at the door Darcy had just left from before moving toward the body that was draped across the threshold, dark, auburn hair covering her face. “She… is she…”

Sam crawled across the floor, pulling Wanda’s body into his lap, brushing the hair from her face to reveal eyes open and pointed toward the ceiling. He knew he would feel nothing, but still Sam pressed his fingers to her neck, feeling no pulse or beat of her heart. He tucked a wayward wisp of hair behind her ear then looked up at Peter with an expression of anguish. “We have to stop this before more people die.”

“How do we… stop him? How do we stop Thanos?”

“We know what he wants,” Bucky growled, voice like gravel, jaw clenching as he breathed heavily from his nose, staring at Wanda’s slack face. “He left the other Wakandans here. He wants the injured man, the one in surgery. He must be the only one that’ll work.”

“But what do we do when we get there? How do we…” When Bucky glanced up at him, a hardness in his eyes, Peter shook his head and took a step backward, denial in his face. “No! We can’t, I mean, we can’t just *kill* him!”
“Yes you can.”

All three men turned to look at the Wakandan still sitting in her bed, her dark eyes filled with ghosts. “We were held for months by these monsters. Death would be preferable to whatever they would use him for. He would rather die.” She looked up, locking eyes with Bucky. “Death would be merciful.”

Bucky held her gaze, a lifetime of understanding passing between them. He knew what she said was true. When Zola had begun his experimentations, Bucky’d wished for death countless times, screaming it until his voice was gone, until he could only whimper as they continued tearing him apart then putting him back together. He would have welcomed death like a friend, like a loved one, like a balm.

Peter could see the resolution on Bucky and Sam’s faces, shaking his head softly at the fact that they were discussing killing a man who’d done nothing wrong. “And then what? We fight off Thanos’ army? What about Darcy? How do we save her? The stone is part of her!”

“I don’t know, Peter.”

“But what -”

“Parker!” Bucky’s shout was loud in the room, quietness following the outburst as the people in the med ward went silent. He held up a hand in Peter’s direction, his face softening slightly. “Thanos’ kill squad is coming. They’re going after the man in surgery so Thanos can be freed. Right now, that’s the mission. That’s the only mission. We stop them from getting him. Everything else is secondary.”

“But Darcy -”

“Darcy would want us to stop Thanos,” Bucky said, certainty in his voice.

“And if it comes down to stopping Thanos or saving her? What would she want then?”

Bucky turned at Sam’s question, eyes flicking from the soldier’s look of expectation down toward the body in his arms. Wanda was dead, and it wouldn’t matter that it was Thanos’ fault, Darcy would still blame herself. He knew exactly what she would want, because she’d made them promise that they’d stop her before she hurt anyone.

Bucky had already failed her once. He wasn’t going to do it again.

“We’ve got to go. Now.”

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St Patrick’s Day

The powerpoint presentation in his meeting was very well done, but Steve was having a hard time following the speaker. It was on a topic he was interested in - Humane Treatment of Non-Terrestrials and Enhanced Persons in the New Sokovia Accords Era - and he wanted to pay attention, but his mind kept drifting. He sat back in his chair, straightening his spine, crossing arms over his chest as he attempted to re-engage in the discussion. It didn't take long before his eyes were fixed on a point behind the speaker's head, the gray of the wall a lighter shade that reminded him of Bucky.
Steve jumped when his phone vibrated in his pocket, thankful he’d remembered the put it on silent before the presentation began. He slipped it out, convincing himself that it was possibly a text from Maria Hill, something that needed his attention. He knew immediately that it wasn’t from Hill, but Steve didn’t do the right thing and put the phone away, instead he swiped his finger to the right, unlocking the phone and pulling up the message.

Bucky had sent him two photos.

The first was of him and Darcy, each of them wearing an obnoxiously-green t-shirt with white lettering. Darcy’s had the word "SHE" written across the front, while Bucky’s had the word "NANIGANS" and a horseshoe across his chest. The bright smile on Darcy's face was offset by the lack of one on Bucky's, a look of begrudging acceptance in his narrowed gaze, but the entire picture was enough to make Steve’s lips quirk upward.

The next photo was of Darcy, a middle finger held up to the camera as she took a large drink from a pint glass filled with green beer, a look of disgust on her face. The snort broke free before he could hold it in and Steve did his best to cover it with a cough, pressing his fist against his mouth. Everyone seemed to turn their attentions back to the screen except for Tony, who raised one eyebrow in his direction and shook his head accusingly. Rolling his eyes at the feigned look of disapproval in the engineer's brown gaze, Steve looked back down at his phone when it vibrated again.

This message was from Darcy.

Green beer is the worst thing on this planet. Can’t wait for you to meet us so we can shamROCK YOUR WORLD! Have fun in your meeting, Handsome! <3

Steve pushed his phone into his pocket, a smile on his lips as he glanced anxiously at the clock on the wall, willing time to move faster.

The blaring sirens sounded like background noise as they ran, the flashing lights heightening the alarm coursing through Steve’s veins. Dread had made a home in his gut, uncertain what they were heading toward. They had no way to communicate with the rest of the group, no way of knowing how many of Thanos’ men were attacking. If their goal had been to isolate and divide, they’d accomplished that with little to no effort.

As his legs pumped, the only thought in Steve’s head was trying to understand the look of panic in Darcy’s eyes. Please don’t make me do this. The memory of him saying that exact same thing to Bucky years ago had been what’d broken through his confusion, making him realize something bigger was going on, that the Darcy saying such hard and hurtful things wasn’t their Darcy.

She’d been fighting from inside, trying to make him understand, to finally see. The stone had used the grief of what happened to poison her, to turn her heart, to take over. She’d been drowning for so long. Shame burned in Steve’s throat. He should have realized there was something more wrong than what they’d thought. He should have known better.

As they neared the busy epicenter of the compound, the sounds of screaming and the bark of gunfire filled the air. They broke the barrier of the hallway, Steve’s eyes sweeping the room, taking stock of everything. The glass front doors of the Avengers base had been reduced to nothing but tiny shards
of glass that glinted and glittered in the strobing alarm lights. Several agents were engaged in heavy battle with creatures covered in armor and using otherworldly weapons. Bodies of the fallen, alien and human alike, were spread throughout the large room.

Steve ducked when a blast of blue energy flew over his head and hit the wall behind, a large chunk of metal falling to the floor. Reaching toward his feet, Steve grabbed the debris and threw it as hard as he could, the alien who’d shot at him yowling when it embedded in his chest and took him to the ground.

“Cap!”

Looking up, Steve caught a shield when it was thrown at him, looking over the brim at Maria Hill. She had blood above an eyebrow and a large gash at her jaw, but her eyes were clear and a gun was in her hand. He ran over, Tony on his heels and the three of them ducked behind a partially destroyed reception desk. “What do you know?” Steve asked.

“Advanced security went down. No access to cameras, communication, or defensive measures. Agents are reporting breaches in multiple locations. We can’t count on incoming support.”

“Wilson and Maximoff and the Wakandans?” Tony asked, tapping at a bump beneath his chest, watching as the light beneath the cotton of his shirt began to glow blue.

“Four in the med ward, one in surgery in the east wing.” Maria answered, motioning with her hands over Steve and Tony’s shoulders to a group of agents that had been headed their way. They stopped, reading her mimed instructions before darting down a side hallway to flank the aliens in the atrium.

“How many hostiles?”

Maria shook her head. “Too many to count. The armory’s blocked by debris. I’ve got men on it. They’re -”

Everyone in the atrium shielded their eyes when a cascade of bright lights stole their vision. As it faded, the whistle of spinning then crashing filled the air, grunts of pain following. When Steve squinted over the desk, a flood of relief crashed in his chest. He stood, seeing that all the creatures in the room were on the ground and unmoving. He could see several aliens had turned tail and were escaping down the endless hallways that ringed the atrium and led deeper into the compound.

“I fear we’ve arrived too late,” Thor lamented, Mjolnir returning to his hand as Steve, Tony, and Maria approached. His eyes surveyed the damage around them, a frown on his normally jovial lips.

“We are not too late, my King,” Heimdall said, nodding his head in greeting at the others. “There is still time.”

“I really love that hammer of yours right now,” Tony said, casting a glance over his shoulder, grimacing when more screaming and gunfire sounded from somewhere further in the compound.

“It is not the only weapon we have arrived with.” Everyone watched as Heimdall reached over his shoulder and pulled a long, black spear from a sheath on his back. He held it out to Tony, his amber eyes holding the engineer’s stare as the small man took the weapon and balanced it in his hands.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have?” Tony said, feeling the heft of the thing, fingertips running over the smooth dark material. When he realized what it was, he looked up at Heimdall with a surprised look. “Where did you get this?”

“This weapon was brought into being at the same time as the Infinity Stones. They are connected by
“History and power. It may be the only weapon we have that can stop the course of this war.”

“Pure vibranium,” Thor said, locking gazes with Steve when the soldier looked up at him.

“Her powers go wonky around vibranium,” Tony said, turning his gaze toward Steve, the first thread of hope sparking into his eyes. “If we can use this to disrupt…”

“Look, I really appreciate this meeting of the minds, but we’re in the middle of an attack here,” Maria said, lifting her gun and shooting over Thor’s shoulder at a creature who twitched on the floor, “and we still need an objective.”

“Ms. Maximoff has already been killed. If we do not act now, many more will follow.”

Steve’s blue eyes swung toward Heimdall at this words, his lips parting in shock. “What?”

Thor reached out, fingers gripping Steve’s shoulder, a look of empathy on his face. “I am sorry. She was a brave warrior.”

“But…”

“Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark!”

Everyone turned as Peter swung into the room, not bothering with his mask, his brown eyes wide as he arc’ed through the air toward them. “Pete?” Tony stopped the younger man’s forward momentum, fingers digging into Peter’s arms as he looked at the alarm on the scientist’s face. “What happened?”

“Wanda is dead. Darcy… it’s not her. It’s Thanos.”

“Thanos is dead.”

Peter shook his head at Maria then looked back at Tony, grasping at the engineer’s arms. “Darcy is Thanos! He’s been inside of her, inside of the stone, this whole time!”

Thor shook his head. “That battle, where we believed him killed, he was not destroyed. He was imprisoned in the soul realm.”

“What, like heaven?” Tony asked incredulously, a look of disbelief on his face.

“No, the stone -”

“Listen to me!” Peter’s shout of alarm paused everyone’s arguments, Tony’s gaze swinging back toward him. “The Wakandan in surgery, the one they found, he has the same mutation as Darcy. He can absorb the stone. If they get the stone out of her, if they transfer it…”

“Thanos will be freed,” Heimdall said, his voice deepening, his tone dripping with dread. “We cannot let that happen. The fate of the universe is at stake.”

“No pressure,” Tony said, gripping Peter’s shoulder, giving the younger man what he hoped was an encouraging bit of levity.

Steve stepped closer to Peter, the teenager’s widened brown eyes flicking toward him, real fear shining in them. As Steve approached, Peter seemed to gather himself, standing straighter, spine straightening. “Where is she? Where’s Bucky?”

“They chased after her,” Peter said, pointing down one of the hallways, “to the surgical wing.”
Nodding, Steve glanced over at Maria. “We need weapons. Stark, Parker, go with Hill. Get into the armory, then see what you can do about communications. Asgardians? We have an entire army of aliens attacking us. Level the playing field.”

“And you?” Tony watched Steve’s eyes swing toward him, holding the soldier’s gaze, unflinching. “What are you going to do?”

Steve stared at Tony, wave after wave of anguish crashing in his chest. He could feel the weight of the world on his shoulders, but that was nothing compared to the heaviness of shame when he remembered the promise he’d made to Darcy.

“I need to know you’ll do what you have to do. I’m asking you, please. Please tell me you won’t let me hurt or kill anyone. Buck. Steve. Stop me before I do something I can’t live with. Promise me.”

“I’ll do what I have to do,” Steve answered, a sort of acknowledgment lighting into Tony’s eyes at his words. He tore his gaze from Tony and looked around at everyone else, expression sharp and serious. “You’ve got your orders. Move out.”

The screams that echoed up and down the hallways brought a smile to Darcy’s lips as she stalked through the compound. Her memories provided plenty of knowledge, more than enough to make it to the surgical floor in the east wing. The sound of glass crunching underfoot as people ran was like poetry, the battlecries from creatures who didn’t belong on Earth like a sonnet. Everything was going according to plan.

Darcy’s feet stumbled, an arm reaching out to steady herself with the wall. She shook her head heavily from side to side, trying to clear the rising panic she could feel inside. “What are you doing?” she asked, her voice lower, her tone annoyed. “You’ve already lost.”

Fuck you .... you purple ..... fucking ... dick

Shaking her head one last time, Darcy straightened and began moving again. “You’re growing weak. I can feel it. Why do you hold on when the inevitable is on your doorstep?”

To ....... distract ....... you

The kick to the side of her knee sent Darcy to the ground, a growl rumbling through her chest as she was kicked again in the ribs. Amber-colored eyes turned to glare at the blonde in a black suit, an emotionless expression on the agent’s face. “You snuck up on me,” Darcy said with an impressed sneer quirking her lips.

Natasha tossed a small silver disk toward Darcy, averting her eyes when the flash filled the hallway with blinding light. Darcy’s scream of anger was cut short when Natasha’s foot connected with her jaw, sending her to the floor. Shards of glass bit into Darcy’s palms as she climbed to her feet, glaring at Natasha. “Why are you attacking me?” Darcy asked, her voice rising, laying the innocence on thick. “I didn’t do anything!”

“You’re not her,” Natasha said without hesitation, watching Darcy’s movement with carefully guarded eyes.

The look of impressed surprise on Darcy’s face tinted with condescension. “How did you figure it
Natasha’s face remained impassive at the use of Bucky’s nickname for her, her expression giving nothing away. “Your eyes,” she answered, green gaze steady. “They’re wrong.”

Darcy’s fingers stretched then formed fists at her side, the threat of physical pain clear in her warm-up. “And you always see everything so clearly?”

“I lost my eyes,” Natasha said, mirroring Darcy when she began circling, not giving the other woman her back, body tensing in preparation for the fight she could almost smell in the air. “I had to make up for it somehow.”

“I suppose I can respect that,” Darcy mused, giving Natasha a wide grin, “but it won’t matter in the end. Your kind may be more stubborn than most, but you will fall, just like world after world I’ve already liberated. One after another. You think your loss is special? You’re a speck of dust in the -”

Darcy shouted when Natasha darted forward with lightning-fast reflexes, landing a swift kick to Darcy’s ribs, effectively cutting off her wordy tirade. If Natasha had an reservations about hurting Darcy, she kept them hidden, attacking the other woman with everything she had. The fact that Clint had trained her meant Darcy was used to fighting someone larger and stronger than her. Natasha realized a little too late that it also meant her husband had given Darcy as many tools as he could, and she felt the weight of that training in the way Darcy blocked then pressed forward, each of them taking just as many hits as they were giving.

Hand wiping at a trickle of blood that had fallen from her scalp, a rather vicious headbutt splitting her skin, Darcy gave Natasha a dark smirk as they broke apart and reassessed their strategies. “He told her all your tricks and tips. I know what you’ll do -”

Giving no preamble, Natasha burst forward, placing a foot on Darcy’s knee then swinging around her head, legs locking around one of her arms before Natasha flung her weight backward, flipping Darcy to the ground with force, rolling out of the way so she couldn’t be grabbed. Natasha came back to her feet, glaring down at Darcy. “Stay down.”

Darcy growled, frustration and blood dripping from her lips. “Enough!”

She lifted her hand, fingers curling into a fist as she grabbed a hold of Natasha’s light. Darcy threw her hand to the right, intent on seeing Natasha fly through the air, but was disappointed when the agent simply scraped across the floor few inches. “What is this? You’re still fighting me?”

“You think I need the powers to kill her?” Darcy shouted, her voice booming in the hallway. “She won’t be the first I’ve killed with my bare hands!”

Darcy blocked Natasha’s cross with her forearm when the agent darted forward, reaching out to wrap her fingers into the blonde’s suit and toss her away. Natasha slid across the ground on her knees, eyes already up and planning her next move. She glanced around, realizing they’d passed through a set of double-doors, an empty cafeteria now functioning as their battleground.

Legs moving incredibly fast, Darcy closed the distance between them, her heel coming down fast and aimed at Natasha’s head. The agent rolled out of the way, avoiding the blow, but was unable to keep from being grabbed. She was thrown hard into a lunch table, the furniture scraping noisily across the tile, crashing into another and sending the chairs scattering.

The first chair Natasha threw at Darcy was easy to block, but the next one, only seconds behind, hit
Darcy hard in the chest, sending her back to the floor, sliding to a stop at the foot of a table stacked
with condiments. Darcy spat crimson on the ground, bloody spittle trailing down her chin as she
glared at Natasha. “You’re trying to distract me,” Darcy barked, climbing unsteadily to her feet. She
rolled her shoulders and straightened her spine as she stared at Natasha, a small smile curling her lips.
“Your attempt is commendable. Come at me. Allow me to send you to your husband’s side.”

Darcy closed the distance between them quickly, arms and legs striking out for anything they could,
an unstopping volley of kicks, jabs, and punches. Some of them landed, some were blocked, but as
they became more erratic, more powerful, Natasha struggled to keep her stance. When Darcy saw an
opening in the other woman’s defenses, she took it.

Her fist connected with the soft tissue of Natasha’s lower left stomach, right over the scar she carried
from the Winter Soldier’s gun. Grunting in pain, Natasha brought hands up to press at the flesh,
gritting her teeth as she looked up at Darcy with narrowed eyes. There was little she could do when
Darcy’s knee flashed out, catching her on the side of the face and sending her sprawling to the
ground.

“I’m going to kill her,” Darcy said, circling Natasha, trying to decide how she wanted to end this,
“and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

No! Leave her! Don’t you need to get to

The bellow of frustration rang through the open room, Darcy’s hands forming fists at her side as she
screamed at the voice inside her head, turning her back on Natasha. “I do not follow your orders,
girl! In a few short minutes your life will be forfeit! You have no more power here! I am through
with your ceaseless prattle!”

Fuck you

“No more distractions, no more words,” Darcy said, her tongue clicking as she turned, reaching
down to tangle her fingers in Natasha’s hair, pulling roughly, exposing the long line of her neck.
“She dies. Now.”

The first gunshot hit Darcy in her right shoulder. She stumbled backward, dropping her hold on
Natasha, blinking in confusion. When the second hit her sternum, the blast sent her cartwheeling
backward into a table. She pointed narrowed hazel eyes in the direction the bullets had come from.
The darkness in her eyes soon spread to her lips, the grin that blossomed there a thing of nightmares.
“You came for her. How sweet.”
Chapter Summary

Darcy fights for her soul. Steve and Bucky fight for their love.

Chapter Notes

You sweet, perfect, awesome readers. Thank you for your eyes on my words, and the kudos and comments. They make my day each and every time. It's something so little but it means so much.

This... has been a long time coming. I'm going to make an end note (because there are things that need to be said/clarified) but If I squint hard enough, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. It's still several chapters off (depends on the feels of the characters in my head and how they want to react to what happens within) but as soon as I know, I'll update the chapter total.

Deep breath in.
Let it out slowly.
Let's do this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PageBreak

If you're going to be the death of me, that's how I want to go.

PageBreak

The creature screamed as it crashed through a window, shards of glass flying and skittering across the ground. Steve threw his shield as hard as he could, the disc whistling through the air, hitting the alien in the head and sending it back to the floor before ricocheting back into Steve's hand. Somersaulting out of reach, another's claws centimeters away from finding purchase in his flesh, Steve popped up and moved in a flurry of punches and kicks, elbows and knees seeking soft bits, intending to inflict the most pain.

Steve ducked when a volley of gunfire sounded from behind him, glancing over his shoulder as several agents arrived, weapons drawn and focus on their faces. Satisfied that the room was taken care of, he kept his path toward the med ward, having to divert several times due to debris-covered hallways and walls that had collapsed. His path was jagged and a litany of curses sounded in his head when he had to double-back.
He fought out of instinct and muscle memory, his thoughts burdened, his chest tight with ache. Wanda was dead. Darcy had killed her. No, his mind screamed, not Darcy. Thanos. Thanos killed Wanda. What he’d assumed was the soul stone had in truth been Thanos, poisoning Darcy from the inside. Everything had been in check before the attack on the New York Sanctum. Something had happened that day and changed everything, and Steve knew exactly what it is.

It was me. This is all because of me.

The madman intent on the destruction of the entire planet had a hold of Darcy, and it because she'd given up something to save him. Steve had heard Bucky and Darcy speak several times of what happened when their souls were bound together: she'd saved part of Bucky's soul by giving up a piece of her own, and in turn, Bucky had done the same to save her. But there was no sharing when Steve had been brought back, no safety net, nothing that had protected Darcy’s soul from becoming vulnerable.

Did she know? Did she know if she saved me that she could lose this much?

He was able to answer his own question, knowing that Darcy would do the same thing he’d have. He'd made a habit of sacrificing his own safety for the benefit of others. He’d died that day in the Sanctum because he'd done just that, protecting Tony from the blast. He’d taken the damage gladly, happy as long as Tony was safe, as long as his teammate and friend was unhurt. He'd saved Tony at the cost of his own life, and though he'd had no way of knowing, he'd set all of this in motion.

This was his fault.

Steve's sprint was halted when a circle of glowing, orange embers manifested in front of him, blocking his path down a hallway. He caught glimpse of a rebuilt Sanctum behind the man who stepped through, then watched as the portal was released and disappeared from sight.

"Captain Rogers," Stephen Strange said in greeting, casting his eyes around the hallway, taking in the screams and the sounds of fighting emanating from all over the compound. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I was really hoping to not see you or yours for a while."

Steve's shoulders lifted and dropped with a small sigh of relief, reaching out to shake Strange's outstretched hand. "It's good to see you, doc. We could really use your help."

Strange nodded, his face falling into serious lines. "Wong and I felt a shift. It's Ms. Lewis, isn’t it?"

"No," Steve said, waving his hand through the air when he saw the look of confusion cross Strange's face, "'tis her, but it's not Darcy. It’s Thanos. Thanos has been trapped in the stone this entire time."

A look of shock lifted Strange's eyebrows toward his hairline, his eyes blinking quickly. "I... did not see that coming. Ironic, I know." Shaking his head at himself, wondering how he’d missed something this large, his gaze flicked back up to Steve. "So what's the plan?"

"One of the missing Wakandans is here and has the same mutation as Darcy. They want to take the stone from Darcy and transfer it to him, freeing Thanos in the process. We stop them before that happens."

Even as the words left Steve's mouth, he knew how impossible it sounded. It was all so unbelievable, so overwhelming and terrifying that it turned his stomach and threatened his nerve. He deadened the part of him that quaked with fear. Fear of Thanos. Fear of someone getting hurt. Fear of losing Darcy. He pushed all that fear to the side, jaw clenching as he steeled himself, knowing this wasn’t going to be easy and dreading the horrible ways the scenario could play out.
Strange glanced over his shoulder when an otherworldly roar sounded nearby. He turned back to Steve, an uncertain expression taking residence on his face. "And how do we stop it?"

Steve started walking, feeling Strange hurry to keep up with him. "We find Darcy, put her somewhere safe, and we figure the rest out later. We just need to keep them from getting that stone out of her."

"I hate being the bearer of bad news, but time is not on our side here, Captain."

"Yeah, well," Steve started, the hollow laugh that broke free from his chest heavy with sarcasm and thinly-veiled anger, "time owes me one."

Strange reached out and placed a hand on Steve's arm, halting the soldier's steps. "I know you love her, but this might not be a 'save the girl, save the world' type of scenario. People might not be walking away from this."

Taking a deep breath in, Steve shook his head, the weight of everything like a yoke around his neck. The grief of losing Wanda and the fear of losing Darcy was there on the edge of his thoughts but he knew he couldn't allow his pain to effect the mission. "I've faced bleaker times than this, doc. We need to find Darcy and stop this. Are you here to help or did you come to tell me the odds of failure?"

"I'm a doctor," Strange said, a hint of apology in his tone, "we deal in odds and percentages."

"Yeah? What's the percentage we don't all die?"

Strange hesitated, a self-indulgent but embarrassed smirk turning his lips. "... I'm not really a doctor anymore."

"Then don't be a doctor," Steve said reaching out to pat Strange's arm, "be a wizard."

"Actually It's sorcer -" Strange's words died on his lips when Steve sprinted down the hall toward the sounds of fighting. Sighing, Strange started after him.

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"Nat, you good?" Bucky kept his gun trained on Darcy, the dark smirk on her face making his stomach twist with worry and dread. Her eyes glowed with amber, her expression of cruelty so foreign that it made his mouth go dry. Is this what it'd been like for Steve, when he'd seen only the Soldier and no hint of the person he loved? It was horrible, heart-stopping, and the blood in Bucky's veins pumped with ice.

"I've been better," Natasha rasped, using one of the tables to stand, an arm wrapped around her stomach, shoulders hunched with the pain in her gut.

Darcy's softly glowing fingers poked at the holes in her t-shirt before grabbing the edges and pulling, ripping the fabric away, revealing the black suit with gold stitching beneath, undamaged by the bullets. Her lips quirked crooked, head cocking to the side as she looked up at Bucky. "Did you know she was wearing her suit, or did you just hope?"

"Oh god. Buck. Run. Run away! Take Nat and go!"
"Hands on your head." When Darcy made no movement, Bucky took a step closer, gun unwavering in his hands. "Now!" The laugh that bubbled from Darcy sent shivers down his spine, watching as she threaded her fingers together and raised them to rest at the back of her head.

Darcy lowered herself to her knees slowly, a grin on her lips as she stared at Bucky and the look of horrified attention on his face. "You really think you're going to be able to put me in a cage? That you'll be able to contain me? Your confidence would be commendable if it wasn't so pathetic. When my army -"

"He likes to talk," Natasha said, interrupting Darcy and turning toward Bucky. "We could put him in one of the containment rigs Stark built for Darcy in the beginning."

Bucky shook his head, eyes transfixed on Darcy, a frown tugging at his mouth. "It doesn't hold in her powers. She was in one when we were connected."

"He's not able to use her powers," Natasha said, glancing toward the set of double doors they'd come through, hearing fighting as it neared from other ends of the compound.

Bucky's eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Oh, you didn't know? She's still in here," Darcy said, a satisfied look on her face when Bucky's eyes widened. "She's a stubborn little thing, I'll give her that. Took me forever to get her where I wanted, and even then, I had to wait for one of you to die so she would be forced to sacrifice a bit of her soul. But it was only a matter of time. Your species is so fragile. Luckily, I was able to hide it all behind a mask of grief, though I suppose some of that credit belongs to Clint Barton. Losing him?"

She whistled long and low, shaking her head lightly from side to side, eyes holding mirth, enjoying the pain she could see in his eyes. "What a fortuitous bit of luck."

In his peripheral vision, Bucky saw Natasha flinch as she turned back to stare in Darcy's direction. Her spine straightened, her chin lifting defiantly, refusing to give into the bait. Her mask was familiar and he didn't need to see it on the outside to know Natasha was hurting on the inside. Compartmentalizing was one of her greatest assets.

"You're nothing without her powers," Bucky growled as he began to move slowly toward Darcy, desperate to see any hint of his lover behind those cruel amber eyes.

"I wouldn't say that," Darcy breathed, watching Bucky's approach with amusement. "This stone is a pesky little thing. None of you know it's true potential. Her body is much smaller than I'm used to, and though I don't have the same strength, I still have my skills."

Not giving them her back, Natasha edged toward the door, keeping an eye on their rear. The sounds of fighting came from everywhere and the last thing they needed was to be caught unaware. They might only get one chance to contain this before it got worse and she knew Thanos' army was attacking in order to split their forces, to wear them thin.

Bucky reached into a pocket on the back of his vest, pulling out a zip-tie handcuff as he neared. "Your plan's not going to work," he said, standing in front of Darcy, storm gray eyes heavy as he looked down at the face he loved, twisted with malevolence.

"And what do you know of my plans, boy?" When Bucky continued to glare down at her, Darcy's eyes widened slightly before a look of understanding crossed her features. "Ah. So Little Fish had a vision? Of course she did. So much raw potential. What a shame she had to die."

"Keep the gun on him, I'll get his hands," Natasha said as she came closer, grabbing the zip-tie out of
Bucky's hands then clicking her tongue at Darcy. Lifting an eyebrow at Natasha, Darcy raised her arms so the agent could begin to secure the ties around her wrists.

"The Wakandan isn't an option anymore," Bucky said, watching realization bloom into Darcy's eyes. The smile that grew on her face was unnerving, looking something like an animal who'd realized the door on its cage had just been slammed shut. It was a dangerous look, and she pointed it directly at Bucky.

"If that’s the case, then the only way this ends is if you kill her," Darcy said, voice holding the threat of mania, a barely constrained derangement tinting her amber gaze, "and I can already see doom in your eyes."

**Bucky! Run!**

As Natasha tightened the ties around her wrists, Darcy's head flashed forward, thumping heavily into the other woman's stomach, the same place she'd hurt minutes ago. When Natasha doubled over, the air forced out of her chest, Darcy's tied hands grabbed one of the knives in the holster around Natasha's thigh.

Swinging the gun around Natasha to get a better shot, Bucky shouted when Darcy knocked his arms toward the ceiling, several rounds discharging before she tackled him around the stomach and drove them both to the floor.

They slid across the tile, knocking into tables and chairs. Bucky's eyes widened when Darcy rolled on top of him, hands still in restraints as she bought her fists down on him over and over, a scream of rage tearing free from her throat. When he saw the glint of the blade, he dodged out of the way, narrowly avoiding the knife as it cracked the tile beneath where his head had been seconds ago. There was blood on Darcy's hands from the blade, though her face showed no hint of pain.

Darcy lifted her hands to her mouth, teeth biting down on the ends of the zipties, making them as tight as she could, the blood on her hands smearing across her cheeks and lips. She jerked her arms down, slamming her wrists against her hips several times before the ties snapped, freeing her.

She was thrown backward by a kick to her chest from Natasha, stumbling and crashing against one of the tables. Ducking under another kick that had been aimed at her head, Darcy threaded her fingers together and swung out with both fists like a baseball bat, hitting the side of Natasha's head and sending her to the ground. Flipping the knife still in her grip, Darcy threw it as hard as she could, watching it skitter across the tiles when Natasha rolled out of the way.

Bucky came at Darcy, feet and fists lashing out, wanting to take her out of the fight. Now that Thanos knew his planned method of escape was no longer available, he was pushing Darcy's body to its limit, using whatever he could to fight them. Thanos had mentioned still having his skills and it appeared he hadn't been lying, the ferocity and fury she moved with reminding Bucky of that final battle, before Darcy had grabbed the stone. It took both him and Natasha working together to beat Darcy back, blood and sweat covering them and much of the floor.

He knew it was necessary, but Bucky felt every cut and bruise he caused, watching the crimson flow freely from the woman he loved, stomach turning as he landed another punch, sending Darcy toppling over one of the folding cafeteria tables. When she didn't pop to her feet, Bucky jumped onto the table, gray eyes scanning the floor. He shouted when his ankle was grabbed and yanked, falling heavily to the table, the air in his lungs rushing out as he landed flat on his back. Darcy was on him in a second, one arm wrapping around his neck and squeezing, the other grabbing one of the guns from the holster on his hip.
Darcy lifted her arm and fired off several shots in Natasha's direction, the blond diving out of the way to avoid the bullets. She threw the gun away, shouting when Bucky attempted to throw her off. Darcy brought her elbow down on his throat as hard as she could, the sounds of him choking making her lips lift in a smirk. Darcy slid onto the table next to him, hands wrapping around the wrist of his prosthetic. A scream filled the air when she planted one of her boots against Bucky's head and the other against his ribs, face contorting as she pulled as hard as she could. The blast of purple as Darcy's suit discharged its stored energy was powerful enough that both she and Bucky were blown from the table in opposite directions, crashing to the ground as furniture was thrown across the room.

The pain that crashed through Bucky's mind was sharp, and cold, and utterly overwhelming. His panicked, horror-filled eyes looked to his left, seeing the jagged pieces of metal and spark of electrical wires where his prosthetic used to be. He felt all of it, *everything*, a testament to the skill of the scientists who had created the new arm, every nerve ending firing as it was meant to. Like a ghost at the back of his mind, Bucky remembered the first time he'd lost his arm, falling from that train, reliving that moment while in the midst of this new blush of agony.

Unsteadily, Darcy climbed to her feet as Bucky began to scream, huge, gulping howls of anguish filling the cafeteria. Glowing-amber eyes lowered, landing on the dark-metal of Bucky's arm, held limply in her hands. She dropped it like it'd burned her, her mouth falling open in shock. Feeling like she'd been doused in cold water, Darcy's eyes snapped closed, refusing to accept what she'd just done.

Oh god. Oh god! No! No! STOP!

Darcy ran away from the pain of what she'd done, coming to an ungraceful stop before she threw herself from a landing. She felt a wave of confusion turn her mind as she looked at the endless staircases that made up the room she’d found herself in. Arched openings appeared to dot the room, but it was the staircases themselves that dominated the space, and none of them made sense; some of them led nowhere while others appeared to be upside down. It was a mess, like a painting or an optical illusion, but something was familiar about it all.

"I know this place," Darcy whispered, taking a step back from the edge, head shaking as she realized where she was. "What is this?"

"This is your soul realm, and I despise it."

Darcy heard the voice from behind her, spinning to face her nightmare. The sheer terror that gripped her heart at the sight of him threatened to take over, but she pushed it back, forcing herself to stay standing. He was large, just as large as she remembered, and his skin seemed to glow with a purple light. She swallowed hard, taking a step away from him as her heart thundered in her chest.

"You're..."

"Thanos," he answered, voice gruff, "and I am your doom."

The reality of her situation, in all it’s horrific glory, was too much. Too real. The swirl of emotions in her chest made her heart ache, her pulse deafening in her ears, and for the briefest of moments, Darcy honestly wondered if she could have a heart attack while being inside a realm created by an infinity gem that she could absorb because she was a mutant.
The laugh that bubbled from Darcy's mouth was one of shock, as if everything compounded at once and needed an outlet of release. She giggled because it hurt too much, like laughing was the only thing that would make the pain stop, giving her enough time to gather her terrified thoughts.

"You dare laugh at me?"

Shaking her head, Darcy clapped a hand over her mouth, knowing she needed to focus, but so completely thrown by everything that had happened that she felt at risk of going crazy. "We're in the Labyrinth," she gasped, leaning to the side to look over the edge of the landing they stood on, "my soul is the fucking Labyrinth."

When Thanos took a thundering step toward her, Darcy stumbled backward, her face wiping off any amusement, her hands held out in a defensive gesture. "Hey! Back the fuck off!"

This time it was Thanos’ turn to laugh, and he did so, filling the open air with something like nails on a chalkboard, every inch of Darcy’s body breaking out in goosebumps, a cold sweat on her brow and the back of her neck. She watched the giant man laugh, unsure she’d ever felt this much intimidation before. Her stomach quaked with fear, the threat of desperation at the edge of her mind.

"It is amazing how someone with so much trauma has been able to hold me back for so long. It takes a lot to impress me, but you’ve done it. You’ve put up a commendable battle, little Darcy, but you’ve lost."

"No I haven’t," Darcy said, jumping when her back hit a stone column, watching him approach with a smirk turning his lips. "They’re not going to let you get what you want. They’re going to stop you."

"You mean they’re going to stop you? Have you ever actually been in a battle before, girl? I have the element of surprise, I’ve stripped them of their greatest weapon, and I’ve killed the only person who could have stopped me. As soon as I’m freed from this prison, they will all die."

Darcy shook her head. “That’s not going to happen. There’s no way this comes out with you on top. Ever. I’m not going to let that happen.”

“Oh? Like you let me kill the seer? Like you let me tear your man apart? I can’t even imagine the pain he’s going through right now.” As if on cue, the sounds of Bucky’s anguished screams bounced off the stone, as if his words alone had conjured the sound. Thanos laughed as he watch Darcy clamp hands over her ears as her eyes screwed shut. “Are you starting to understand now? I’ve already won.”

“No,” Darcy said, dropping to her knees, feeling each keening sob of Bucky’s agony like a knife in her heart, chest aching with pain at the sound. “No! No no no!”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? That much torment does one of two things to a creature. He’ll either go numb and pass out, which would be a mercy, or he’ll feel every little bit of that pain in excruciating detail. Considering that new arm of his, I’m almost positive it’s the second.”

“Stop. Stop it. Stop it!” Pushing against the wall, Darcy climbed to her feet, her knees threatening to give out, attempting to run away from the sound. She took the stairs two at a time, trying to escape, trying to get as far away from Thanos and the things he’d done with her hands. She cast hazel eyes around the room, watching as Thanos moved slowly down the stairs toward her.

Breaking into a run, Darcy had no plan in mind except to get away from the creature who’d turned his worst nightmares into horrible reality. Every stair she took seemed to do no good. She could feel
him as she ran, his breath hot on the back of her neck, pulse racing as she attempted to stay out of his reach.

“There’s nowhere you can run where I can’t find you,” his voice rang out, making her move quicker, breathing heavy as she glanced around in a panic. Across the open air, she could see him standing there, staring at her.

Darcy ran. She ran until her lungs burned, until she had to crawl up the steps on her hands and knees, hysteria speeding her pulse until she felt the blackness on the edges of her vision. What would happen if she passed out here? Was this the final thing she’d see before disappearing? She wanted to cry out to Steve, to Bucky, to anyone who would be able to help her, but she knew no one could save her here.

“That’s right,” Thanos boomed, “wear yourself out. When you’re nothing more than a shadow, there will be nothing in the way stopping me. Everything you’ve ever loved, everyone who cares about you will cease to exist. You won’t be able to save anyone this time, girl.”

Pulling her knees to her chest, Darcy wrapped her arms around herself, sobbing as she tried to drown out the sound of Bucky’s pain. What was she supposed to do? Thanos was right. She could feel herself beginning to fade away, as if there was an hourglass somewhere counting down every granule of sand until she was gone. And when she was gone, Thanos would be freed. If he was freed everyone she loved would die. Darcy would die, and they’d all be next. She couldn’t let that happen.

She couldn’t let them die because she’d made a mistake in thinking she’d killed Thanos when all she’d done was imprison him inside the stone. This was her fault. She hadn’t known what she’d been doing and this was the result. What was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to fix this?

Come on, Lewis, think! What can you do? What do you have that he doesn’t know?

The tinkering cadence of glass bouncing on stone lifted her head, Darcy’s eyes searching for the source of the sound. She saw it then, across the way from her, winking in the light. A brilliantly clear glass orb was leaping around the room, taking a path that she somehow understood. When it rolled across the floor toward her, she reached out a shaking hand and wrapped her fingers around it.

Darcy stared into the orb, seeing a hazy series of image come into focus.

Bucky laughing, throwing an arm around Steve’s shoulders. Tony throwing Peter a screwdriver as they both worked on a machine, brown eyes bright at their shared connection over engineering. Laura and Natasha chasing the kids around the field beside their home. Jane rubbing a hand over her stomach as Thor laid beside her on the bed, whispering something to the little spark of life that was growing inside.

“No,” Darcy breathed, looking up to find Thanos standing over her, victory on his face.

“No? Yet you fight? How exhausting.”

Darcy used the wall to climb to her feet, gripping the ball in her hand, pressing her shoulder against stone as she glared at Thanos. “You’re in me. You’re in my soul, douchebag. If the stone is destroyed, you’re destroyed with it.”

“And yourself,” Thanos growled, “you’ll die too.”

She shrugged, holding up the clear orb, watching him squint at it in confusion. “Technically I’ve
died several times now, so I guess you could say I’m unimpressed with death.” When she took a step toward him, the glass in her hand beginning to glow, he moved backward, uncertainty on his face. “Give me the stone.”

“You will lose everything you love.”

“No, I will save everything I love!” Her shout rang against the stone, echoing in the space. Darcy shook her head as she glared at Thanos defiantly. “That’s why people like you always lose. It’s why Voldemort lost in *Harry Potter*. It’s why Shredder always lost in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. And it’s why Jareth lost in *The Labyrinth*.”

“Because I don’t understand love? What a childish notion.”

“No!” Darcy screamed, taking another menacing step toward him, holding the ball so he could see it, watching his eyes widen. “You’ll lose because you don’t understand pop culture references, or sarcasm, or any one of a billion other things that I have that you will never get! And I’ll give it all in order to save the people I love! You know absolutely nothing of sacrifice, *you purple fuck*, and you never will!”

Darcy closed her eyes and brought the orb to her chest, letting the air out of her lungs slowly, hoping what she was about to do would work.

“*Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here, for my will is as strong as yours, and my kingdom is great.*” Her eyes snapped open, a small smirk on her lips as she swung the weight of her gaze toward him.

“You have no power over me.”

Darcy lifted the glass ball above her head then slammed it to the ground. It shattered in a crash of glitter and glass, sparks arcing through the air. Hair blown back from her face with the force of the wind, Darcy blinked several times before bending at the waist. She used her hands to brush away the debris, a look of satisfaction on her face as she uncovered and pulled out the shining amber stone.

She held the source of her powers in her palm, looking down at the gem as if she’d never truly seen it before. Darcy understood it now, the horror it held inside, and she wasn’t going to hesitate this time. She knew what she needed to do.

The scream of rage from Thanos’ mouth was swallowed by the sound of glass on stone. Darcy’s eyes looked up then widened when thousands of orbs appeared from nowhere, falling from every staircase, the deafening din crashing against Thanos and driving him over the edge. Flattening herself against the wall, letting the labyrinth exact its own punishment, she skirted away, knowing this would be the only chance she got.

A door glowed in the stone before her and she ran up the stairs as fast as she could. She grabbed the handle and yanked it open, gasping as the light consumed her.

Steve pushed through the double doors, skidding into what was left of the cafeteria. Smears of red colored the tile floor, chairs and table spread across the room in chaos, some reduced to nothing but splinters. His gaze landed on Natasha. She held Bucky’s head in her lap, his body incredibly still. Steve’s heart skipped a beat as he saw the bruises and cuts on his lover’s body, a crash of relief
flooding him when he saw the soft rise and fall of Bucky’s chest.

“Nat?” When her green eyes, wide and filled with worry, slid over toward him then darted away, Steve traced her line of sight, heart aching as his gaze landed on Darcy. “Oh god.”

Darcy hovered in the air, surrounded by a haze of amber-orange light, her hair streaming around her shoulders, face twisted in concentration. She looked no better than Bucky, covered in a tapestry of cuts and scrapes, blood drying on her skin as she floated. She was beautiful, and terrifying, and Steve felt the weight of worry as it stole the air from his lungs.

Steve heard the doors behind them open and spun toward the sound, lifting his shield and taking a step so he was between the newcomers and Darcy. Thor and Sam entered the room, eyes darting as they took everything in before they landed on Darcy’s form. Steve lowered his shield and took a step toward the Asgardian. “Thor, what do we do? How do we help her?”

Thor took a step farther into the room, Mjolnir hanging limply in his hand as he looked at Darcy, pain in his dark expression. “I am not certain there is anything that can be done.”

Strange had followed Steve into the cafeteria, though his attention had never wavered from Darcy once his eyes had landed on her. “What do you mean?” he asked, dread in his tone as he watched the girl hover

“I believe it may be out of our hands,” Thor answered, coming to stand next to Steve, his blue eyes filled with sadness.

The group flinched when the doors that led to the kitchen were pushed open, Tony and Heimdall making their way into the cafeteria. It took a second for them to realize what they’d walked into, confusion and alarm chasing across their faces, but both of them came to a stop when the weight of everyone’s gaze centered on them. Soon enough, their gazes swung to the woman still hovering in the air.

“Jesus,” Tony breathed, brown eyes filled with worry. He took a step toward Darcy on instinct, a hand reaching out, but stopped when Heimdall pulled him back. “What are you doing? We have to help her! If we stop them getting the stone, this all ends!”

Heimdall’s eyes flicked from Darcy, to Tony, to Steve, apology in their amber depths. “There is but one way we can help her now.”

Steve watched Heimdall’s gaze slide down to the dark black spear gripped in Tony’s gauntlet. Surprise forced the air from Steve’s lungs as he took a step toward them, shaking his head. “No, no, there’s got to be another way.” When Tony locked eyes with him, he could see a hesitance in the engineer’s face before his brown eyes looked back to Darcy. “Tony! No!”

His next step toward Tony was stopped by Thor’s hand on his arm. Steve brushed off Thor’s hand, then the next one, until he was fighting the Asgardian, surprised when Sam appeared on his left, attempting to help hold him back. “No! Let go!” When Thor and Sam said nothing, he turned to Tony and Heimdall. “Tony no! We can still save her! Don’t do this!” Desperate, Steve turned toward Natasha and Bucky, his voice growing louder. “Bucky! Bucky wake up!”

A flash of brilliant light filled the room, a wave of wind licking through the air, the slightest hint of an orange glow growing then fading away. The hands holding Steve back slackened as everyone squinted against the brightness, a negative image burned on their retinas as the light dimmed.

Gasping, Darcy fell the few inches to the floor, a brief second of motion sickness rolling through her
stomach. Realizing that she’d escaped the labyrinth, her eyes widened as a thrill of relief filled her chest. It didn’t take her long to realize that escaping didn’t mean freedom. Her skin felt like fire and ice, every hair on her body feeling like she’d touched an electric fence. Heart racing, she lifted her fist and slowly uncurled her fingers, the strobing, glowing amber light of the infinity gem winking and swirling in her palm.

“Darcy?”

Taking in a deep breath, awareness coming back to her in stages, Darcy’s gaze swung from face to face, each of the people in the cafeteria wearing varying expressions of confusion and alarm. She swallowed harshly when her eyes landed on Bucky, his head cradled in Natasha’s lap. His eyes were closed, his body limp, but she could see that he was breathing. Heart aching, she followed the line of his body to the jagged metal and wires where his prosthetic used to be.

I did that. I hurt him. Oh god. Oh god.

“Darcy!” When Darcy finally looked at him, hazel eyes hers and no one else’s, Steve’s heart leapt in his chest. It was her and not Thanos, he was sure of it, and for the first time since Tony had entered the room, he felt a surge of hope. The smile that blossomed on his face hung there for a few seconds before it faltered, watching as the first tear slid down her face. There was a brokenness in her expression, something like defeat. He followed her eyes, watching as her gaze slid back toward her hand. “How did you -”

“She didn’t,” Strange interrupted, taking several steps closer to Darcy. The air around his hands was filled with lines of orange light as he used his sling ring.

“What?” Steve asked, confusion in his tone. When he realized what Strange had meant, he tore his eyes from Darcy and back toward Tony, watching the engineer glance down at the spear in his hand. “What do you mean? She’s here. She’s standing right there!”

“I’m sorry,” Darcy gasped, gripping the stone in her fist, feeling her heart break as she looked at Steve, tears slowly slipping down her cheeks as her chin wavered. “I tried, Steve. I tried so hard, but I can’t. I have to stop this before anyone else gets hurt. I have to stop him. I have to stop me. There’s no other way.”

“What? No, Darcy, we’ll figure it out.” When Thor and Sam reached for him again, Steve yelled his frustration, fighting the hands that reached to pull him back, chucking Sam away with a shoulder, finding Thor harder to overpower. “No! Darcy, no!” When his arms were pinned to his sides by a glowing rope, Steve looked over at Strange with disbelief. When the ropes tightened and drove him to his knees, betrayal made his words sharp. “What are you doing?! We can help her!”

Strange’s gaze was apologetic, but there was resolve in his voice. “This is the only way. I wish it wasn’t, Steve, I really do.”

“No!” Even though he knew he couldn’t break free, Steve struggled against the mystical bonds, feeling Thor and Sam both place hands on his shoulders, squeezing with empathy and sadness. A fierce roar tore its way from his lungs, screaming past the swell of frantic sorrow that threatened his mind. “Bucky! Bucky wake up! Natasha! Nat! Please! Please don’t let them do this!”

Natasha’s mouth fell open and she looked back and forth between Steve and Darcy, but no words came out. She glanced down at Bucky, his brow beading with sweat and his breathing shallow, before her eyes flicked back up to Steve. “I’m -”

“This is my choice,” Darcy said, watching Steve’s beautiful blue eyes swing back to her, not
wanting him to blame anyone for something that was out of their control. He’d need all his friends after this, after what she did, and she needed to know they’d be there. “I have to do this. If I don’t, you all die. I can’t… Steve, I can’t let that happen. I won’t.”

“We’ll figure it out! Darcy, look at me! I promised you I’d help you figure this out,” Steve pleaded, remembering the first promise he’d ever made to her, “we will think of something else. Don’t do this!”

The look on his face was enough to shake her to the core, and Darcy felt the terror rise in her throat, the same terror that had filled her on the day she’d grabbed the stone in the first place. It wasn’t her own life she was terrified of giving up, it was their lives. Everyone who was looking at her, everyone she loved.

Once upon a time - what seemed like a lifetime ago now - she’d asked herself a question. If she’d known what would happen when she touched the stone, would she have still grabbed it? Her answer was exactly the same as it’d been back then:

*Maybe. Probably. Yes. Fuck, yes, I would.*

“I am stupid in love with you, Steve Rogers, you know that right?” She watched his face drain of color as she reached to the back of her suit, pressing the release and shrugging out of the top half. She let the vibranium suit hang around her waist, baring the tank top beneath. Taking one long, last look at Steve, she turned her body toward Tony and Heimdall, her cheeks hot with tears.

The air in Tony’s lungs huffed out as he read the words across the tank top Darcy wore beneath her suit. *World’s Okayest Intern* was scrolled across the fabric, and he looked up at her with agony in his eyes. “Darcy -”

“It’s the only way,” Darcy said, taking a step closer to him, face falling as she heard Steve begin to yell and fight against his restraints. “Heimdall, tell him he has to. It’s the only way! Tony!”

Steve’s screams filled the air. “No! No!”

“Tony,” Darcy said, her voice cracking as she began to beg. “You have to. Please. Please!” She could see when his eyes flicked over her shoulder, watching Steve struggle. “You promised me,” she breathed, Tony’s eyes swinging back toward her at her words.

“Tony no! Don’t do this!”

“It’s okay,” Darcy said, chin quivering, feeling the panic begin to set in. She was growing tired, weaker, and she knew it was inevitable. Their time was running out and it was possible they only had minutes, seconds, before it was too late. “It’s okay. I know, Tony, I do, but I asked you to, and you promised, and it’s the only way.”

“Darcy, we’ll find another way!”

“You promised me,” Darcy pleaded, watching the reality hit Tony, knowing what he’d promised but now, in the moment and facing the truth of what it meant, his hands shook. “You promised me!” Darcy’s sob was loud, desperation bleeding in as she felt her grip on control slip, taking a stumbling step backward. She shook her head, pushing back against the wave of black she could feel on the edge of her consciousness, falling hard to her knees. Thanos was fighting back, and they didn’t have time. She watched Tony take a step toward her, as if to help her up, but she held up the fist holding the stone that was glowing brighter by the minute. “Tony! Now!”
Strange took a step toward Darcy, shaking his head as he glared down at the floor, a ghost of a thought in his mind. Something wasn’t right, but he couldn’t figure out what. He held his hold on the ropes holding Steve back, but looked up with hesitance on his face. “There has to be -”

“No!” Darcy screamed, turning toward Strange with a hand held out, her eyes flashing amber in threat. Her skin was beginning to glow and they didn’t have time to spare. She watched the sorcerer take a step back, expression one of confusion, before turning back to Tony

Tony’s gaze flicked from Darcy to Steve, watching him struggle against the ropes, knocking into Thor and Sam, desperate to get free. The anguish on his face was clear when his whiskey-colored eyes found hers, the pain in them drowning. "Darcy, I -"

“I know,” she managed, giving him a weak smile, swallowing past the lump in her throat as she looked at the man she’d never expected to care about so much. Darcy knew what she was asking him to do was impossible, but he did the impossible every day. She needed him to be her hero. “I already know. You don’t have to say it, because I know. Please.”

Darcy watched his arm lift, the glint of the dark blade catching the light. Her mouth dried at the sight, terror flashing through her mind. The screams tearing their way from Steve’s mouth rang through her bones, heartbreaking, feeling the devastation of it all the way to her soul. Her soul, which would only be hers for a few more seconds.

"Tony." Darcy sobbed, letting her hands drop to her sides, fighting the rising urge inside to run. It was like Thanos and the stone knew what was going to happen and she felt their icy grip tighten around her throat. "Please."

She took in a breath and held it in her lungs, nodding at Tony, seeing the determination set in his face as he drew his arm back. Steve’s screams faded as she heard the beating of her heart in her ears, the whoosh whoosh whoosh taking over. She saw movement out of the corner of her eye, gaze sliding to see Bucky stir in Natasha’s arms, his gorgeous gray eyes blinking open to look at her.

Time slowed.

Darcy brought the fist holding the soul stone to her chest, right above her heart.

Darcy watched Bucky realize what was happening, shock rocketing into his eyes, his lips forming her name. She told herself that he knew, that Bucky knew how much she loved him, and even if she didn’t get to say the words one last time, he would know. He had to know.

She turned back to Tony, seeing a blast of blue light as his gauntlet propelled the blade forward, aimed for her heart, a look of despair and pain on his face even as he followed through on his promise.

She didn’t wonder if the blade would hurt as it tore through her skin. She wasn’t afraid of the pain. Darcy Lewis was only afraid of one thing.

Will this save them? Will they be okay? Please, please, let me fix this.

The stone in Darcy’s fist became blindingly bright and before she felt the first pierce of pain and her eyes fell closed, Darcy saw a flash of red, a flash of green, then black, then …

... Nothing.
Darcy Lewis grunted when the shock wave slammed into her body, driving her to her knees. She felt the bitter copper taste of blood in her mouth and squinted against the blast of air, glancing over at Jane, eyes widening in shock. “Jane!?”

"I know!” Jane screamed, brown hair streaming in the wind, reaching out to grab Darcy’s hand. “Just hold on!”

Gaze transfixed on Jane, Darcy could do little except stare at her best friend with giant, tear filled eyes. Her heart was beating fast enough that she could feel it in her throat, the first rise of panic rolling through her mind. "Jane..."

She pulled sharply on Jane’s arm, the other woman shouting in alarm when something flew by their heads and crashed into a building behind them. The heavy feeling of déjà vu tugged at Darcy’s thoughts and her breath fled her lungs when the puzzle pieces fell into place.

Oh god. Oh no. Fuckfuckfuck. Fuck! No!

How had this happened? Darcy’d gone back, back to the night everything had started. The final battle with Thanos. The fight that had changed her entire life. How? How? She didn’t understand, but even as her mind tried to make sense of it, Darcy knew she couldn’t. Time, as ironic as it sounded, was not on her side.

She knew what came next.

Jane called her name again, terror in the astrophysicist's voice, and Darcy looked a few yards ahead of them at the dirt and debris littered ground. She counted it down in her head, like some kind of horrible doomsday clock. She supposed that wasn’t a bad comparison, but she kept her eyes trained.

Waiting.

She didn't have to wait long before a softly glowing stone skidded across the rubble of the street, just like she knew it would. Just like it already had. She stared at the stone, her stomach clenching with fear and sadness. That stone, that fucking stone, sat there looking pretty, innocuous, amber with energy swirling within it, and just like before, her blood ran cold as she gazed at it.

"Darcy!?”

Her eyes flicked toward Jane, instinctively grabbing her best friend's hand when it was offered. She followed Jane's line of sight, eyes taking in the battle in front of them. Darcy heard a noise and glanced over her shoulder, at the van with the tacky painting on the side, and pulled on Jane's arm again, hitting the ground right before the energy blast would have knocked them off their feet and into the side of the vehicle.

Jane barely registered anything had happened, her brown eyes gazing into the carnage ahead of them, tears wet on her cheeks. She was looking for Thor in the roil of smoke and screaming, and whereas before Darcy barely recognized the people fighting, now she knew all of them.

The glint of crimson and gold. Tony. Her pseudo-boss, and by some twisted fate, someone she could count on. A man who had great taste in music and assistants, who was always ready to fight her with words and sarcasm, and who had the biggest heart buried beneath all his intelligence and thorny comments.
A blur of green and a mighty roar that made the hair on her arms stand at attention. 

**Bruce.** Quiet, earnest Bruce, who'd taught her about control, of being bigger than the monster you had hidden inside, who'd always had an ear when she needed to vent.

The *thwack* of an arrow hitting its target. **Clint. Clint!** Clint was in there, a father and husband and one of the kindest people she'd ever known. His kids hadn't lost him yet, Laura hadn't been made a widow, Natasha wasn't missing her partner. **Natasha.** She heard the buzzing of Natasha's stunners, knowing the super spy was in the middle, balancing the scales, never backing down despite being outmanned and outgunned.

Sam's wings. Wanda's crackle of red power. Vision’s yellow blasts. The countless other soldiers who'd followed orders and were doing everything they could to turn the tides.

And there in the middle of all of it, Darcy could make out two figures fighting back to back. She saw a flash of chrome, the brilliant pops of gunfire, and the glint of knives. She heard a whistling and could just make out a disc flying through the air, the colors streaming red, white, and blue.

**Bucky. Steve.**

They were in the melee, relentless in their determination, fighting tooth and nail against Thanos. He was there, too, in the darkness. Darcy could hear him. His laughter sent chills up her spine and she resisted the roil of her stomach at the sound. It'd been in her head, always there, waiting, looking for an opportunity to take over.

All she wanted to do was to make that impossible. She knew how the stone worked now, knew what she had to do...

... but she was frozen, stock still, her heart seizing in her chest. Tears were already cascading down her cheeks, knowing that she wouldn’t be leaving this battle alive. She would lose *everything.* In destroying the stone, she would destroy herself. There was no other way. Darcy knew she would die, but just like before, her reasons outweighed her fears. Before she’d just wanted to save Jane. Now, though, there were so many other lives she wanted to save.

She wanted Jane to live. She wanted her to be with Thor, for them to be happy, and have the fairy tale they deserved. Even if their children took a bit longer to arrive this time around, Darcy hoped they knew how much she loved them, even though she’d never get the chance to meet them.

She wanted Clint to go home to Laura. She wanted Cooper, Lila, and Nathaniel to have their father back, for them to never know the pain or loss of losing a parent. She wanted Natasha to feel complete, to have her partner back.

Darcy wished Bruce peace, and quiet, and to find someone that could convince him that he wasn't a monster, that he was strong, and perfect, and everything someone could ever want. Tony needed to marry Pepper, he deserved that happiness, and he needed to make sure Peter was safe, so he could grow into the amazing man Darcy knew he would be. She sent her desires into the universe, hoping someone or something was listening, desperate in her pleading. Through all of her prayers, the litany of hopes and dreams reciting through her mind, she kept her eyes on the two people in the middle of the fighting.

**Steve. Bucky.**

Darcy’s heart beat in her throat, mind protesting, her body threatening to shut down as she stared. She didn't want to leave them. They had so much still to do, to learn, to make. She’d had plans for the future, thoughts and dreams she'd been too afraid to speak aloud, worried that even putting them
in the air would steal them away. But they would be stolen away, stolen by Thanos, stolen when he'd hollow her out and take over.

It wasn't a possibility.

It was an inevitability.

Darcy couldn't. She couldn't waver, she couldn't worry, not about what might have been, or what could be, or what was. If she didn't destroy Thanos now, if she didn't destroy the stone, none of it would matter. It would all end, one way or another, and Darcy knew what she had to do.

Hazel eyes flicked up toward the fighting when she heard Thanos' laughter fill the air. His hand closed around Steve's throat, lifting her love off the ground, and Darcy knew he would kill Steve, knew that he would snuff out that brilliant gold, the cobalt, the gorgeous light that was Steve’s soul.

Darcy ran. She ran as fast as she could, sliding across the ground to dodge a blast of energy as it streaked over her head, until she could wrap her fingers around the stone. She climbed to her feet, glaring down at the stone in her hand. The gem was glowing, the swirling of amber in its depths, and couldn’t help but marvel at how easily such a gaudy little rock could destroy so many lives.

Jaw clenching, Darcy lifted the stone in the air, holding it above her head. "Hey, Thanos, you fucking asshole!"

She watched Thanos' attention turn toward her, watched his lips curl into a sneer. He tossed Steve aside and she stifled the sob that threatened to rip from her throat as he landed limply at Bucky's feet. Bucky rushed to kneel next to Steve in the dirt. They both looked up when another scream of rage tore from Thanos, grey and blue gazes peering at across the space, surprise and confusion in their faces when their eyes landed on her.

I love you, 'til the end of the line.

Darcy’s hand brought the stone to her chest, her eyes falling closed as a blast of orange energy erupted from her body. She heard the sounds of the fighting go quiet, a hush falling over the battlefield as everyone turned to look at her.

It wasn’t like it’d been the first time, when she’d felt an impossible energy and not known what it’d meant. She understood it now, the power that was held inside the stone, and she swallowed it all happily, somehow knowing what she needed to do. She blinked open her glowing eyes, hair blown back from her face by a wind the power had created and wrapped her in. Darcy lifted her arm, freezing Thanos in the air, letting him hang there with a look of fury on his face.

She didn’t move so much as glide toward him, toes scraping through the dirt, a look of careful focus on her face. She wasn’t going to allow Thanos to hurt anyone ever again. She lifted from the ground, until she could look in the dark depths of the mad titan’s eyes, until she could see the first hint of fear flash through them.

“You picked the wrong planet to fuck with,” she breathed, a small smile turning her lips, satisfaction burning in her chest when he finally realized what was about to happen.

“How?” Thanos growled, desperate surprise in his face.

“Because I’m the Babe with the Power,” Darcy answered, allowing him to suck in a deep breath before her hand reached out, fingers forming claws as she searched for the dim, barely there glow of his soul. When she found purchase, she jerked her hand backward, watching the light in his eyes fade until he crashed limply to the ground.
Darcy stumbled to the ground, almost falling before she caught her footing. She opened her fist one finger at a time, blinking down at the tiny, insignificant soul in her hand. The weight of what she was about to do pressed down on her shoulders, knowing there was no going back. Hazel eyes flicked up, needing to see them one more time before she did what she had to.

They were there, looking back at her, questions in their eyes, and seeing them whole and alive gave her the strength she’d needed. She closed her hands together, compressing the dirty shade of Thanos’ soul, a scream building in her chest and piercing the air before she tore her hands apart, shattering his soul and destroying it.

The blast of power forced Darcy to her knees, feeling the impossibility of what she’d just done like a knife in her chest. Just like the first test of her powers, the day she’d bonded herself to Bucky, she could feel the infinite threads of gold that connected her to all the souls in the universe. It was just as overwhelming, just as crushing and devastating, and before she could hold it in, her scream of anguish filled the air.

It was too much, even knowing what she was doing, and Darcy felt the first flutter of fear twist inside her stomach. She was too thin, too empty, and everything crashed into her at once, driving her to the ground. She didn’t hit it, instead lifting from the dirt as she writhed in agony. No one was meant to wield this power and her body felt like it was coming apart.

Before the blackness took her, as her heart stopped beating, she had just one thought.

I hope this was enough.

Chapter End Notes

So. SO. I have had the last two scenes (Darcy begging Tony to follow through on his promise, the travel back in time) outlined since OCTOBER of last year. IMAGINE MY SURPRISE when I'm sitting in the theater watching IW and Gamora starts yelling at Quill that he PROMISED. This was my face:

D: D: D: D:

Obviously it's not a totally original idea (I'm sure it's been done elsewhere before) so it's not like I came up with it, but hey! It means the Russo brothers like the "You promised me!" schtick as much as I do! *fist bumps the Russo's*

I hope you all enjoyed it! I'm going to down some wine and prepare myself for the next few chapters. The fallout is hype, y'all. *glug glug glug*
Echo Of You

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the final battle with Thanos, the Avengers deal with the fallout.

Chapter Notes

First, let me say a BIG HAPPY 100th BIRTHDAY to Steven Grant Rogers, a man who exemplifies everything good and righteous and perfect in this world. AND THAT BUTT, TOO, amirite?

Second, thank you to everyone who's been reading and commenting and leaving kudos. Some of you are binging this in a DAY and it's blowing my gotdamn mind. I hope I keep putting out quality stuff. *bites fingernails*

Thirdly, I'm dedicating this chapter to a friend of mine who passed this week. She was an amazing person, kind and generous, and she was taken far too soon. I hope one day to be half the amazing human being she was. Things can seem dark when you're in the middle of pain, but there's always a light at the end of the tunnel.

<3

PageBreak

Because the world seems darker.
Because the monsters in my head are drowning out your memory.
But I still find myself clutching an echo of you.

PageBreak

Bucky shook his head, the scowl on his face heavy. “Who was she? DoD? FBI?”

“No,” Bruce said, pulling his glasses from his face and wiping them with the tail of his button-down. His movements were small, exhaustion in his body as he glanced up at Bucky. “She was there with Jane Foster.”

“The astrophysicist?” Steve asked, his eyebrows knitting together. He knew that Thor’s girlfriend had been there, on the fringes of the fight, but the other woman? He’d never heard Darcy Lewis’ name prior to a few hours ago.

“What were they doing there at all?” Bucky asked, his tone sharp and accusatory. “I thought we’d
evacuated all the civilians.”

Steve’s eyes slid toward his lover, frowning softly at the look in Bucky’s storm gray gaze. They’d come straight to the compound after the barely won victory, making a half-hearted attempt at a debrief, but a battle that impossible was hard to put in perspective, especially as none of them had been able to explain the last second reprieve they’d been handed by a woman who shouldn’t have been there in the first place.

“I don’t know that Lewis technically counted as a civilian.”

Bucky shifted against the counter he leaned against, Bruce’s comment doing nothing to calm his anger of what had happened. “Why wouldn’t she?”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. has a file on her. She was there in New Mexico, when Thor first came to Earth,” Bruce explained with an almost painful shrug of his shoulder. “She was there in London, too.”

“With the…” Steve shook his head as he trailed off, something in him refusing to say the words dark elves, “the monolith and the reality gem?”

Bruce nodded, slipping his glasses back on and squinting softly at Steve. “Yeah. Seems like she had an affinity for, uh, being around infinity stones.”

“Did she have any training?”

Sighing, Steve couldn’t figure out why Bucky was having such a hard time accepting what had happened. Ever since they’d stepped foot on the quinjet home, his best friend had been surrounded by a cloud of dark, black anger. It was obvious something else was feeding his frustration, but Steve was at a loss as to the reason. “She had a right to be there, Buck, just as much as anyone else.”

“We lost enough people,” Bucky said, eyes flicking toward and holding Steve’s, grief in his expression, “we didn’t need to add anymore.”

The air in Steve’s chest huffed out, remembering how many agents had been killed in the battle, agents Bucky had been training for months. Bucky had made it his mission since being cleared to prepare his students for the battle they knew was on the horizon, and now he was looking at the cost of the fight. Steve’s hands itched to reach out and pull Bucky toward him, to take comfort from his best friend, but he held back, knowing Bucky wasn’t one for public displays, no matter how comfortable he was with Bruce.

“When is she going to wake up?”

Bucky’s question lifted Bruce’s shoulders in a shrug, the scientist taking a deep breath in then letting it out slowly. “I don’t know. There’s a lot we still don’t know, a lot of, uh, things I guess only she can answer.”

Consciousness seeped into Darcy like honey, sweet and oblivious, slow and in gradients. She was alive, she was alive, and that thought alone was enough to tug at her in the darkness she’d found herself in. She wrapped the black around her like a blanket, taking solace in the color, as if it was an old friend who’d come to visit.
There was something pulling at her mind, something important, but Darcy wasn’t ready to emerge from the cocoon of ink she’d become so buried in. It was familiar, and comfortable, and part of her knew there was nothing but pain on the other end of the line. She wasn’t sure she wanted to pick up, to announce herself just yet, not when she could feel the weight of hurt at the edges of her thoughts.

As soon as the knowledge that she was alive fully filtered through her brain, directly on its heels was the truth that she didn’t know how she’d survived. She’d been ready to die, happily sacrificing herself it meant the people she loved would live, but just as before, Darcy had found herself still clinging to life. Was it magic for someone to sacrifice themselves not once, not twice, but three times, and still be denied the quiet of death? When someone was so ready to die, but still’ life clung to them, like spiderwebs, was it a comment on their importance, or their unimportance?

Darcy pushed at those thoughts, wanting to snuggle deeper into the black, taking the rest she knew in her bones she deserved. So much pain had filled her for so long that being numb was a prize, her fingers digging into it like claws, unwilling to give it up just yet. She wanted the dark, the quiet, because what was waiting when she opened her eyes was bright, and loud, and she didn’t understand completely why, but she knew it was going to hurt.

The fan of warm air against her skin, skin she didn’t have there in the dark, meant she didn’t have long before it all crashed into her. She felt herself being pulled down the tunnel, and she fought it, uncertain what was waiting for her in the light. Whatever she’d sacrificed wouldn’t be atonement, and fear swelled as she was torn from the blackness she’d accepted.

Gasping, her senses roaring back with vengeance, Darcy sat straight up. Pain exploded when her forehead connected with something hard, and she heard a matching exclamation of surprise and injury from inches away. Fingers pressing against the lump she could already feel forming, Darcy squinted her eyes open, blinking heavily at the bright lights.

Vision clearing, the recognition that filled her mind replacing any pain she felt, Darcy’s eyes widened as shock rocked through her body. “Tony?” The engineer was hovering above her, brown gaze guarded and tinted with ache as he looked down at her with uncertain eyes. “Oh my fucking god!” She threw her arms around Tony’s neck, grip like a vice as her eyes screwed shut.

The happiness flooding her person was overwhelming, and the laughter that bubbled from her chest was light and breathy, gasping as she clutched at him. His body remained rigid and unrelenting in her grasp, but that didn’t deter her from pulling her head back and planting her lips against his cheek before squeezing him again. “I thought I’d never see you again,” she breathed against his neck, another laugh breaking free.

“Uh…” Tony’s half-hearted and awkward pat on her shoulder made her pull back, and Darcy blinked at the man who continued to look at her with confusion. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

“No more than you were going to kill me,” Darcy said with a smile, watching as his expression didn’t change. “What’s wrong?”

“Darcy, do you know where you are?”

While Tony carefully extracted himself from her arms, Darcy’s head swiveled to look at Thor, the Asgardian wearing concern in the blue of his eyes. “The compound,” she answered, swallowing past the dryness on her tongue, “or what wasn’t already destroyed.”

“Are you, uh, planning to destroy it?”
Darcy’s eyebrows knit together as she glanced toward Bruce, the frumpled scientist with dark bags under his eyes looking more tired than normal. She gave him a small, confused grin. “What?”

“I’m not going to die because you touched me, right Freaks and Geeks?”

Her gaze flicked back toward Tony, a thread of something making her smile falter. “Of course not. What is this? What’s going on?” Darcy looked back and forth between the three of them, feeling a heaviness in her chest the longer they stared at her with uncertainty. “What happened?”

“Best we can tell, you absorbed the soul stone,” Bruce answered her, hand gesturing softly as the weight of her gaze pinned him. “We’re not certain what to expect.”

The fog of misunderstanding that surrounded her was thick and it took Darcy several seconds before she shook her head. “I don’t… the stone is… I destroyed it.”

“Darcy, are you certain?”

Glancing up at Thor, her heart beginning to speed, Darcy blinked at him heavily before lifting her hands and turning her attention to them. She felt like she was on the precipice of a ravine, looking over the edge at the drop, and being asked to jump. Terror boiled just below her skin and she swallowed past the lump of fear in her throat. She’d looked at death, felt its icy hand tighten around her neck, and offered it the stone. If she still had the stone, did that mean she’d failed?

Taking a deep, shuddering breath inward, Darcy attempted to draw the power of the stone to the surface. She closed her eyes tight as a flash of bright, amber light blindingly burst from beneath her skin. She heard several chairs scrape along the floor as the occupants of the room scrambled backward, their gasps of surprise overshadowed by her own.

The power she could feel flowing through her body was overwhelming. It was like nothing she’d ever felt before. Heart racing, Darcy felt the light fill every pore of her being, the glow deep in her bones and licking like warm flames everywhere. The rush of everything made her feel dizzy, and she wasn’t sure what had changed. She felt in control, in full control of the stone’s abilities for the first time, and her laughter was loud in the small room.

“Mother fuck, this feels amazing,” she breathed, opening her eyes, a large grin on her face as she blinked at Thor. His aquamarine soul was just as bright as she remembered, calm and cool, and she watched it tint with relief as he directed that puppy-like smile of his in her direction. “I thought that was the only way, destroying it, but it… it didn’t…”

Darcy’s eyes jumped toward Bruce as her thoughts grew sharper, the exhilaration of everything beginning to throb with something else. Bruce’s soul was just like before, warm with just a hint of doubt. The look on his face was vague, like he was trying hard to figure out what she’d meant, but wasn’t sure. Her eyes felt heavy when they swung toward Tony.

The shining, glittering chrome of Tony’s soul was so familiar that the sight alone made her want to cry, the oil slick cover of purple and blue like the balm it’d always been, but something was wrong. Whatever familiarity she felt was not echoed in his face, and the look of open hesitance in his brown gaze made her stomach drop with dread. There was something, something she needed to remember, but her thoughts turned slowly, denial thick on her tongue.

“How did you know how to kill him?”

The air in Darcy’s lungs escaped as she closed her eyes, the voice to her left making her chest constrict in pain. Even though her eyes were closed, the stone’s powers meant there was no
blackness like she wanted, but the tapestry of colors hovering around her. It took nothing for her to
turn her head, the brilliant, beautiful gold of Steve’s soul close enough that she could reach out and
touch it.

She stared into that gold, the light as familiar as her own, and felt reality crash in. She hadn’t
destroyed the stone. Something had happened after Tony had thrown that spear, something she
didn’t understand, and then…

And then…

The pain erupted in her body, heart dropping when the memories began to play like some kind of
fucked up montage that she couldn’t stop. Wave after wave of realization slammed against her
protesting mind as she began shaking her head in disbelief. “No,” Darcy gasped, not knowing if it
was better to stay in the blackness and see his gold, or open her eyes and see his face. “No, nonono.”

“Darcy, are you -”

Ignoring Thor’s concern, she shifted on the bed, opening her eyes but looking anywhere but in
Steve’s direction. She still didn’t know how it’d happened, how she’d been taken back to the night
when she’d first attempted to kill Thanos, but she had, and though she’d been more than willing to
give her life to ensure he couldn’t hurt or kill anyone else, something had made her offered sacrifice
null. She’d been sent back over a year and no one knew it but her.

The agony tightened her chest, like the pain was going to stop her heart any second. The small keen
passing her lips filled the room as she struggled to keep a hold of her mind, and the ache continued to
grow until she could barely breathe past it, humming as her stomach flipped. “Ohgodohgodohgod…”

The door to the small room being pulled opened draw her gaze, and Darcy’s eyes swung to the new
person who’d entered. She watched Jane’s eyes widen in worry, her lips parting as she said Darcy’s
name. The flash of relief at seeing her best friend was all but erased when Darcy’s eyes slid down,
landing on the tanktop that stretched over Jane’s flat stomach.

Oh god. No. How? What did I do? Oh god, what did I do?

Everything hurt. She felt her grip on reality begin to slip, almost welcoming the release. This was
wrong, it was so wrong, and none of it made any sense. She struggled to take in air, feeling the first
wave of nausea as it made her mouth fill with saliva. When the pain became too much, when Darcy
was certain it was going to strangle her into unconsciousness, her sobbing scream was enough to
make the other people in the room freeze. “Get out!”

“Darcy -”

“No! Janey! No no no! I can’t, I’m not, I’m going to -”

Darcy could feel Jane take a step closer, but she threw up a hand, pushing against the soft purple of
Jane’s soul. The astrophysicist was pushed back toward the door, her brown eyes widening at the
brush of power.

Thor was suddenly at her side, and though she knew it was because he’d been afraid she was about
to hurt Jane, Darcy still gripped at his arm like it was the only thing keeping her alive. “Get them out,
Thor, oh god, please, please get them out!”

The Asgardian’s blue eyes took in the distraught woman clinging to him, the alarm he’d felt at her
use of power being replaced with uncertainty. “Jane will leave,” Thor said, glancing up at Jane and
seeing the pain in her eyes as she looked on helplessly.
Darcy shook her head. That wasn’t enough. She couldn’t bear the sight of that gold or that face any longer. “Steve,” Darcy sobbed, “I can’t...”

Her words seemed to lower a quiet over the room, and the confusion bit up and down Darcy’s arms like fire ants. She could feel them pressed around her on all sides, smothering, and she held her forehead against Thor’s arm as she shook her head and the tears fell down her face, unable to accept what was happening.

“You... know Steve Rogers?”

Thor’s question loosed another sob from her throat as a year’s worth of memories assaulted her, all of those happy moments edged with pain, cutting into her skin and leaving her in pieces on the ground. “Please,” she whispered, anguish in her voice, “please.”

Steve looked down at the woman who was still glowing softly, his name passing her lips as she cried against Thor. Almost all the eyes in the room had swung in his direction, and he was sure his face held the same bewilderment he could see on theirs. He glanced up at Thor, the Asgardian’s eyebrows knitting together as Steve shook his head in surprise. “I’m sorry... I’ve never met her before,” he said, gaze falling back toward Darcy as his words seemed to bring on another series of sobs.

“Please, please,” Darcy cried, “get them out.”

The bright flare of crimson as she held her eyes closed tight forced a gasp from her mouth, and she felt the color slam into her body like a wave of ice water. Her mind screamed at her not to, but her body didn’t listen, turning like a flower toward the sun. Darcy’s head swung toward the red like it was a magnet, completely out of her control.

Bucky stood there, his gaze guarded, his body alert, the tension lifting his shoulders and straightening his spine. Darcy stopped breathing, the grief of everything crystallizing as she looked into his slate gray eyes. There was no recognition in their depths, no knowledge as he stared. He had absolutely no idea who she was, and the torment of it was too much.

Clapping a hand to her chest, as if she’d be able to reach past her breastbone and clutch her bleeding heart to get it pumping again, Darcy took in a gasping lungful of air. Every nerve in her body was firing at once, trying to locate where she’d been wounded, desperate to stop the pain. She could feel darkness at the edges of her vision, ears sounding like they were full of cotton, and that’s when it hit her: it wasn’t just the memories she still carried of their time together, everything was still there.

She could feel Bucky’s anxiety growing in her stomach, pressing against her diaphragm and making it harder to breathe. There was still a piece of his soul in her body, a one-way connection, and the thought alone sped her pulse with agony. Darcy tried breathing, to pull air in her lungs, but her body had stop functioning, the wall of pain crushing until there was nothing left but a tunnel of blackness that pulled her deeper.

“I can’t,” heaving breath, “do this,” heaving breath, “I’m g-gonna...” The grip she had on Thor’s arm began to loosen, Darcy’s eyes rolling in her head, and the last thing she heard was Tony’s shout of alarm before the black took her.

Bucky took a step toward the hysterical woman when she began hyperventilating, recognizing what was about to happen, but Stark’s yell in his direction stopped him. He glowered at the engineer who’d stepped between him and the girl, unsure why there was an expression of anger on the other man’s face. Bucky’s grey eyes left Tony’s and watched as Thor lowered the unconscious woman to the bed.
“What happened?” Jane demanded, her voice a mix of worry and accusation as she stepped further into the room, her eyes flashing as they glared at Steve. “What did you do?”

When the weight of Jane’s gaze pinned him, Steve held up his hands in defense. “I didn’t do anything, I swear.”

“Well something happened. What did you say to her to upset her that much?”

“He didn’t say anything,” Bucky said, shifting his weight when the eyes in the room turned in his direction. “Steve asked a question and then she just started crying.”

When Bruce reached out to take Darcy’s pulse, Tony shook his head, lifting his hands in an effort to stop the scientist. “Wait!” When everyone turned to look at him, Tony let his arms fall to his sides, a sigh passing his lips. “We don’t know what happened to her, okay? Maybe we leave the physical contact to a minimum until we get some answers.”

Steve frowned, arms crossing over his chest as he looked at the dark-haired woman, the glow of her skin fading until it returned to the pink-tinted paleness that seemed to be normal for her. “What happened to her?”

“She had a panic attack,” Bucky answered, mirroring Steve’s stance, grey eyes cast at the woman in the bed.

“Pretty sure he was talking about what happened to her with the stone, genius,” Tony said with a roll of his eyes, ignoring the glare that Bucky threw him.

“It appears Darcy is experiencing effects of the soul stone.”

Steve frowned at Thor. “How is that possible? Thanos had to make a glove in order to wield those stones. How was she able to hold one herself?”

When everyone looked in Bruce’s direction, he lifted his arms and began pushing his wrinkled sleeves toward his elbows. “We’ll run tests. I’m not sure what we’re looking for so we’ll have to run them all.” His dark eyes flicked toward Tony, who was looking at Darcy with a frown on his face, rubbing at the bump growing on his forehead. “Good thing touching you didn’t do any harm.”

Brown eyes flicking from Darcy to Bruce, Tony seemed to shake off whatever thoughts had taken his focus. “Yeah, small miracles and all that. We should keep her here, just in case. Quarantine her for the time being.”

“Is she going to be okay?” Jane’s voice was small as she came to stand beside Thor, hand seeking his and gripping it tightly as she looked down at Darcy with tears in her eyes.

“Our friend is strong and stubborn, and while we may not know what has happened, I have faith she will handle whatever challenges she may face.” Knowing his words would do little to calm his love, Thor turned and placed both hands on Jane’s shoulders. “I am not certain why, but seeing you upset her.”

“I’m not going to leave her alone,” Jane argued, shaking her head and frowning up at him.

“She will not be alone when she wakes up, I swear to you. It appeared she could remain in Stark and I’s company without ill effects. Perhaps it would be better to maintain a smaller assembly until we know more.”

Jane allowed Thor to lead her from the room, casting one last look over her shoulder at Darcy before
they disappeared through the door. When Bruce followed them, it left just Tony, Steve, and Bucky in the room with the unconscious Darcy. They all seemed to look at her for a second longer before following Banner out of the room. The four men made their way into the observation room that connected to Darcy’s via a one-way window.

Bucky crossed toward the glass, arms crossed over his chest as he heard Bruce and Stark begin going over the battery of tests they’d be running on Darcy. Darcy. It was a name that was popular when he and Steve had been children, a nice Irish name that had been brought over with the mass of immigrants looking for a better life. He wasn’t sure why, but he kept repeating her name over and over in his head, like a mantra, as if the name alone would be able to answer his questions.

Steve watched Bucky distance himself, his attention on the window and the woman on the other side. Steve turned back toward Tony and Bruce, his eyes serious. “What do you think?”

Bruce removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I think that she’s lucky to be alive. If what Quill said is true, then she shouldn’t have been able to survive touching the stone. He watched one of those stones turn a person to ash when they touched it. The stone must have killed Thanos.”

“No,” Tony said with a shake of his head, reaching up to prod at the bump on his forehead, “the stone didn’t destroy Thanos. She did. He didn’t get a chance to touch the stone. She destroyed him.”

“But that opens the possibilities that she might be dangerous. Is it safe to keep her here?”

Sighing, Brce slipped his glasses back on, giving Steve an uncertain expression as he tried to come up with an answer to the soldier’s question. “Um, the short answer? I don’t know. The long answer? We’ll have to run the tests.”

“And if she is dangerous?”

Steve’s blue gaze slid to Bucky. There was something in the way Bucky had asked the question that made Steve pause. There’d been a hesitation in his lover’s voice, like he knew the answer already but needed to hear it said aloud. “Then we figure out a way to handle it.”

“Handle it? And what exactly would that entail?”

Sighing, Steve turned toward Tony as he answered the engineer’s question. “I don’t want to argue, Tony.”

“This isn’t arguing. This is a discussion. That girl in their saved our asses. You saw how close he was to taking everything. That you’re even walking right now it a fucking miracle. There will be no ‘handling’ here. There will be science, and science will be the one figuring this one out, not your weapon.”

Steve could feel Bucky bristle at Tony’s words, turning away from the window and glaring at the billionaire. There’d been a truce of sorts between Tony and his best friend: defeat Thanos, using everything and everyone they had. The Earth and everything on it had been at stake. He knew better than to hope that the line they’d been toeing would stay status quo

“I am not a weapon,” Bucky growled, grey eyes holding Tony’s, refusing to back down. Steve held his breath, not sure if he was going to have to step in.

Tony’s jaw ticked and Steve could almost hear him grinding his teeth as he weighed what he wanted to say. In the end he said nothing to Bucky, instead turning back to Steve. “She needs to stay in the med ward. The less people who know about her, the better. You should radio Barton, make sure that when they land in Wakanda they know to keep it hush.”
Steve nodded, stepping aside so Tony could leave the room. Bruce reached up and patted Steve’s shoulder as he passed, and Steve had to wonder if it was some kind of unofficial apology for Tony’s behavior. Steve understood but it did little to ease the situation. It was fraught, and messy, and some days were better than others.

Sighing, Steve turned toward the only other person in the room, holding his hand out toward Bucky. He watched those slate eyes he knew so well soften, no longer on edge or readying for battle. Bucky took his hand and Steve pulled the other man to his chest, taking solace as he wrapped his arms around him. “I didn’t think we’d be able to pull it off.”

“Almost didn’t,” Bucky mumbled against Steve’s neck. The took a deep breath - cedar and musk and Steve - and pulled back so he could press his lips to Steve’s, soft, softer than he did almost anything else. “Seeing that hand wrapped around your throat…”

Steve nodded, the memory of that moment washing over him again. He’d seen death over and over, but looking in Thanos’ eyes was like looking the reaper in the face. He’d begun to say his goodbyes in his head, and then there’d been a blast and he’d been tossed aside, like a rag doll, like he was inconsequential, like it was all just a game.

He supposed it was just a game to Thanos, just another game where he already knew the outcome and was just going through the motions. But he’d lost. By some miracle none of them seemed to understand yet, Thanos had lost and they’d won the day.

Steve’s eyes slid toward the window and the unconscious woman on the other side. He didn’t understand what had happened, how she’d been been able to do what she had, let alone why she’d had such an emotional reaction when she’d looked at him. He was certain he’d never met Darcy Lewis before that day, but the hurt in her eyes had been honest and real, and whether he knew why or not, seeing him caused her pain.

Tearing his eyes from the glass, Steve pulled Bucky toward him again, the press of his lips familiar and comforting, sighing against the other man’s mouth as he could feel the exhaustion of the battle and the lead-up begin to set in. “I might sleep for a week,” he whispered against Bucky’s lips, not ready to pull back just yet.

“Lair,” came the gravelly respond, and Steve smiled at the affection in Bucky’s tone.

“Gotta call Barton. Make sure they know that Darcy’s alive.”

Bucky nodded, Darcy’s name making his eyes swing back toward her. He’d recognized the ramp up to the panic attack, having dealt with his own since he was a boy, and he felt empathy toward the woman who seemed to have some kind of emotional break after what she’d experienced. He hoped she was able to move past the trauma, knowing how hard it could be to do so.

Steve took a moment to look at Bucky, just drinking him in, knowing that they’d survived. Against all odds, his goodbyes had faded into nothing, unsaid and unneeded. He was grateful, thankful, and his blue eyes flicked over Bucky’s shoulder toward the person who’d saved them. After a moment, he gripped Bucky’s shoulder then turned toward the door.

“What do we do if she is dangerous?”

Steve stopped and turned to look at Bucky. There was an uncertainty in Bucky’s tone that’d made him pause. “Yeah?”

“What do we do if she is dangerous?”
A long silence descended over them as both of their attentions turned toward the window at once, watching as Thor returned to the room and took up residence next to Darcy’s bed. The silence ended when Steve ran a hand over his face, his voice uncertain and tired. “I don’t know, Buck. I don’t know.”

“Ngggh,” Darcy mumbled, feeling like there was sand in her eyes, gritty and painful. Her body protested being awake, her cheek pressed hard against the pillow under her head. When she shifted, the bump on her forehead rang with new pain and she swallowed past the thickness of her tongue. “Ow.”

“Are you in pain?”

Thor’s voice next to her made Darcy blink her eyes open, gaze landing on the Asgardian. Slowly, fragments of what had happened the first time she’d woke returned, and Darcy’s chin wobbled as her eyes filled with tears. What did I do?

“Please don’t cry, Darcy. May I?”

When Thor opened his arms to her, Darcy went willingly, his strength comforting as she cried against his neck. When the biggest sobs had subsided, she shook her head, sniffling. “I did something. Something really big and I don’t know how.”

“I know,” Thor said, patting her shoulder, “you killed Thanos. You did something mighty this day and saved many lives, my own included.”

“No,” Darcy said, pulling back so she could swipe at her eyes and run her sleeve under her nose, “not that. I mean, yeah, that, but I didn’t kill him. I destroyed him.” She could see that Thor didn’t understand the difference, even though she felt the truth of her statement in her bones.

It wasn’t like it’d been the first time. She knew, somehow, that Thanos was gone. He was well and truly gone. No hiding, no shifting into the soul realm. Darcy had taken his soul and blotted out the tiny bit of light that’d remained. Even as she knew it’d been a necessity, that it’d been the only way to ensure he never hurt anyone else again, she could feel the weight of that action on her shoulders. It wasn’t right that anyone could do what she’d done.

“That’s not… I did something else, something big, and now it just hurts,” Darcy said, biting her lower lip to keep in the sobs that threatened to reappear.

“I have known you for many years now, Lady Darcy. You are my heart’s best friend and one of the strongest women I have ever met. Whatever you did, however big, I’m certain you did what you had to.” When his words didn’t seem to slow her tears, Thor reached out and patted her knee. “My father once told me that pain is choices made physical. It hurts because you made a choice, and whether good or bad, you are changed. Pain is how we grow.”

Darcy nodded, tongue darting out to wet her lips, his words heavy on her heart. When he sat there quietly, willing to just be there for her, the ache in her chest only increased. The memory of worry in Jane’s eyes was overshadowed by the knowledge that she’d erased the life that she and Thor had created.

“I am sorry to see you hurt like this. Is there anything that I can do?”
The way he was looking at her, so earnest and honest, made Darcy’s chest constrict tenfold. “Oh, Big Guy,” she gasped, fingers tightening around his, leaning so she could wipe her eyes on her upper arm before looking back at him. Even though they’d spent less time together lately, the friendship they’d built over the years was strong, and Darcy drew on that connection to calm her aching thoughts.

When so many things had changed, it was nice to have a little bit normalcy in the hurricane of loss.

She sniffled, jaw jutting out as she tried to make the words she was about to say make sense. “If I took something away from you, and telling you what I took would cause you pain, would you still want to know?”

Thor’s blue eyes turned thoughtful as he looked at her. She’d forgotten that behind those cheekbones and that jovial smile, the Asgardian had a mind that could spark with brilliance. It was one of the reasons he and Jane worked so well together. After a moment of quiet, he dipped his chin in her direction. “Will this thing leave me in more danger for not having it?”

“No,” she answered with a slight shake of her head.

He nodded, another silence falling for a second as he considered his next question. “Did your choice to take it help someone?”

“Yes,” she said with a hollow laugh, “possibly on a planetary level.”

“Is it something I will never have or see again?”

“No,” Darcy said, certainty in her voice, “I refuse to believe you’ll never have something like it again. You will. I promise.”

The bright smile that blossomed on Thor’s face seemed to momentarily push the darkness back, all on its own. “Then I would trust you made the right decision,” he said, squeezing her hand. He leaned closer, her voice lowering and filled with warmth. “And if you realize later that you made the wrong choice, I will be there to listen and understand, because I know you, Darcy Lewis.” Thor pressed his finger against her chest, watching as her eyes flicked up to hold his. “I know your heart and you have never given me reason to doubt you.” Thor’s expression slipped when Darcy burst into a new set of tears, guilt turning his grin into a frown. “I’m sorry if I -”

Darcy threw her arms around his neck, eyes screwing closed as she squeezed him with every bit of strength she had left. “You really are a golden retriever,” she cried, even as her shoulders began shaking with laughter. When Thor hugged her back, for the briefest of seconds, Darcy felt like the weight of what had happened lessened, her lungs expanding fully for the first time since she’d realized what she’d lost.

It was there, though, on the edges of her thoughts, and it wasn’t long before the laughter faded and was replaced by true cries of anguish and grief. Yes, it was true that what she’d stolen from Jane and Thor could be restored, but everything else… “I don’t know what to do,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “I don’t think I can fix this. I broke my own heart.”

“Nothing is broken forever, Darcy,” Thor said against her hair, reaching up to smooth it with his hand, “and nothing is truly gone.”

Pretty words from a pretty man, Darcy thought as her chest ached, such pretty, untrue words.
“Wake up, Buttercup.”

Darcy’s breath huffed out through her nose as her eyes opened, staring at the wall her cot was pressed against. She hadn’t been asleep for hours, idly watching the colors move around the compound, letting the swirl of hues distract her from the permanent apathy that had filled her for the past three days.

She’d gone along with every test Tony and Bruce had wanted to run, wanting to tell them it wasn’t necessary, but knowing her words would do little to make them feel better. They needed data, and since that data required pints of her blood and other body fluids, she’d given them what they wanted. What they’d needed.

The memories of the jokes and sarcasm she’d had the first go-round made everything hurt, unable to dig out the happy, carefree girl she’d been before. Darcy knew that if she wanted, those friendships could be reforged, their easy camaraderie just below the surface of their interactions, but she didn’t know how to balance everything anymore. She knew things about these people, about who they were, and using that knowledge to make them like her seemed wrong somehow. It’d been true and honest the first time, but now… now everything felt like a plan, like a scheme to get back what she’d stolen from herself.

Not what she’d stolen, but what she’d sacrificed. It’d taken a lot of soul searching, pun intended, to realize that sacrificing something was easier when you didn’t have to witness the rebuilding phase. That she’d survived seemed like a slap in the face. But that’s why sacrificing something was hard, she supposed. It wouldn’t have been a sacrifice if it was easy.

None of this was easy.

When she didn’t move quickly enough for him, Darcy felt Tony’s kick on the cot leg, looking over her shoulder and glaring at him. “I’m not really hungry,” she said, eyes glancing down at the peanut butter and peach preserves sandwich, remembering how it’s tasted before.

“It’s doctors orders,” Tony said, setting the tray on the end of her cot, grabbing a stool and pulling it over so he could sit beside her.

“Just because you’ve got four doctorates doesn’t make you a real doctor,” Darcy said with a sigh, pulling herself into a seated position.

“Actually, that’s exactly what having a doctorate means. Didn’t you work with an astrophysicist? Thought you lot were smart.”

“I majored in political science.”

“My opinion of you just dropped three points.”

“I’m wounded,” Darcy deadpanned, lifting her knees so she could wrap her arms around them, “truly.”

Tony looked at her for a long moment with a frown on his face. “You’re not eating.”

“I’m fine.”
“You’ve lost eight pounds, seven ounces since you first got here.” At her raised eyebrow, he shrugged a shoulder. “We’ve been testing you for the last three days and that includes your weight.”

“You’re not supposed to ask a girl her weight.”

“I didn’t ask you, I literally told you what it was, so it doesn’t count.”

Darcy’s eyes closed as she took in a deep breath then let it out slowly. “Is there something I can help you with, Stark?”

“What’s going on with you?”

When Darcy opened her eyes, Tony was leaning back on the stool, arms crossed over his chest. It was his analytical expression, the look he got when he was trying to figure out a problem, or troubleshooting an error in his code. The fact that it was pointed at her made her skin heat. “What do you mean?”

“You’re taking this all pretty well, or as well as anyone who absorbed one of the most powerful things in the galaxy can take something. What’s your deal?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Bullshit.” When Darcy’s eyes rolled up to look at him with annoyance, he leaned forward. “Most people would be happy to have some of the premiere scientific minds looking into what had happened to them.”

“Premiere scientific minds? Really?”

“But here you sit, like you already know what we’re going to find out. Do you? You already know what happened to you, don’t you?” Pressing her chin to her knees, Darcy blinked at him, seeing his soul light green with vindication when she said nothing. He leaned back again, brown eyes narrowing slightly. “What, did it show you when you touched it? Is that how you knew what to do to kill him?”

“Something like that,” Darcy murmured, seeing the thoughts turn behind his gaze.

“I know someone else who’s been in contact with a stone,” Tony said with a shrug of his shoulders, “and she sees things in people. Visions. Possible futures. It was a different stone, but the properties might be the same. You feel like you know things? Know what you can do?”

It was an easy enough excuse to go with, Darcy thought. It would explain why she knew the extent of her powers, and even if it wasn’t the whole truth, it was the only one that would convince them that she wasn’t a danger to anyone. “I know what powers the stone has given me, yeah.”

“You could have just told us,” Tony said after a moment, eyes sharp behind the glasses he wore.

“Really? Like you said, I just absorbed one of the most powerful things in the galaxy. You’d have been fine with me saying ‘oh, no, guys, it’s totally fine, I know exactly what happened and you totes have nothing to worry about’? I kinda doubt that.”

“Not in those words, no, but we’ve dealt with some pretty strange stuff before, we’d have figured it out eventually.”

“There’s nothing to figure out,” Darcy said, uncurling herself as he continued to pin her with his stare. “I know what abilities the stone has given me, and I know why I’m able to do the things I do.
It’s not a line, or an excuse, it’s the truth. And unless you confirmed it with your tests first, you wouldn’t have believed me.”

“So you went along with it just to make us feel better?” At the soft shrug of her shoulders and the avoidance of her gaze, Tony crossed his arms over his chest. When she continued to avoid looking at him, he pushed back on the stool, wheeling toward where he’d left the glass of milk he’d brought. He made his way back to Darcy, holding the cup out toward her. When she just looked at him, his eyes narrowed. “Take the milk, Lewis.”

Hesitating, Darcy waited until he thrust it out at her again before she grabbed it. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“This isn’t me being nice.”

“Yes it is,” she said, watching as he seemed to consider her answer.

“I’ve talked to Thor about you. Since me and him are the only ones who’ve been in physical contact with you,” Tony ignored the grimace that flowed over her face, “we wanted to compare notes. He says you’re a good person. I know he’s not the best judge of character, considering the shitshow that is his brother, but I want to believe him when he says it about you. The fact that you’re willing to along with all of this just to make us feel comfortable? Well, that doesn’t take a genius to appreciate.”

“And seeing how you are a genius,” Darcy said, rolling her eyes when his shoulder lifted and dropped in faux ambivalence.

“I’m just saying I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. I don’t do that very often.”

I know. Darcy thought sadly, giving him the first smile she’d had in days. “So I guess saving the universe has its perks.”

“I wasn’t worried about the universe.” At her scoff of disbelief, Tony’s hand gestured through the air, “sure, yeah, tangentially I was worried about the rest of the universe, but I was more worried about things close to home, things I care about. And you saved those things, so I’m inclined to give you a little wiggle room when it comes to keeping your secrets. But if this is going to work, if we’re going to trust you not to use your newfangled infinity-stone-powered abilities to destroy the next person who cuts you off in traffic, we need to be honest with each other.”

“I can peer into someone’s soul and see if they’re telling the truth. There are no secrets with me.”

Tony blinked at her, like he was trying to tell if she was telling the truth or not. When she didn’t flinch, he let out the breath he’d been holding. “... maybe not that honest.”

The laugh that fell from her lips was light, and though she knew that everything outside this room was horrible, being with Tony and realizing that he hadn’t changed, even if she had, made her feel incrementally better. “I think I can do semi-honesty.”

Tony shook her head, amazed when her stomach growled for the first time in days, Darcy reached for the PB&J and took a bite, raising her eyebrows toward him, looking for his nod of approval.

“Good, then let’s finish these useless tests so we can have a pow-wow about your newly minted phenomenal cosmic powers and see what comes next.”
Looking into Tony’s familiar brown eyes, Darcy held onto the small nugget of hope that maybe not *everything* was lost.
Chapter Summary

Darcy's test results come in and she shows the group what she can do, then makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

Before we get into this nonsense, let me tell you this: You are amazing. Whatever challenges you're facing, whatever struggles you might be going through right now, if there's something weighing on your heart or mind, I believe in you. You're a beautiful, awesome you, and by definition, there's only one of you, and that one is phenomenal.

I keep saying that I can see the end in sight on this thing, and I think I have it pretty much outlined out. We're looking at less than a month for this to all be posted. I am... sorta wigging out about it, but trying to hold it together. Voices in my head willing, I'll be able to update the total chapter count.

Thank you so much for all the comments/kudos/reblogs. To the OGs that have been here from the beginning? You fucking rock my face off. And the new readers? WELCOME TO THUNDERDOME!

<3<3<3

Standing in the wake of devastation,
Waiting on the edge of the unknown,
With the cataclysm raining down,
Insides crying save me now,
You were there,
Impossibly alone.

PageBreak

Darcy was studiously looking down at her feet as her legs swung over the edge of the cot. She could hear the murmurs of whispered conversations going on between the people who’d gathered in the room to hear the test results Bruce and Tony had received. After her conversation with Tony a few days prior, things had gone much faster than they had before; it’d taken almost two weeks for the scientists to come to some kind of understanding the first time around, but now that she was giving
them the information that she could remember (they’d run so many tests before that it was hard to remember all of them), things had escalated much quicker.

*Just another fun trick of time travel*, Darcy thought humorlessly, shaking her head to clear it of the darker thoughts that seemed to always hover on the edges of her mind. Even with her heart broken, things had felt like they were getting better. Despite refusing to use her memories to reforge the friendships she’d lost with Tony and Bruce, the two men had treated her the exact same way: caring and empathy from Bruce, sarcasm and honesty from Tony. Though she felt like horrible company, her moods vacillating wildly as she came to terms with what had happened and what she’d lost, they’d gone out of their way to make her feel comfortable.

Having Thor at her side had been incredible, and she couldn’t help the small turn of her lips when her hazel eyes flicked up to look at the blond Asgardian who was seated next to her. Just being in the same room with him quieted the part of Darcy that wanted to hide away in the darkness, the part that whispered that she’d never feel happy ever again. It was hard to hold onto such grim and bleak thoughts when that bright smile of his was pointed in her direction, but she knew, sooner or later, the dark would take over and she’d be back where she’d started.

Focusing past Thor meant her eyes landed on the brunette on his other side, who’d been looking at her with concern since the second she’d entered the room. After her initial breakdown upon waking, Darcy’d had limited contact with anyone outside Thor, Tony, and Bruce. Avoiding Jane all together had been made impossible, and though it’d hurt, she’d met with her best friend twice. The first time had been nothing more than Darcy clutching at her best friend and crying hysterically, knowing there was nothing she could say or do to make Jane understand why she was shattered. The second time had been with less tears, but the guilt still clutched at Darcy’s heart when she looked into Jane’s eyes and saw concern she didn’t think she deserved.

Wanting to look anywhere but at Jane, Darcy let her eyes rove the rest of the room. When the door opened, her hazel turned toward the newcomers, taking in a sharp breath when Steve and Bucky stepped through. She caught their gazes as they landed on her, her body going still as their expressions shifted to something closer to uncertainty. Darcy tore her eyes away from them, returning to her hard stare at her feet, fingers gripping the edge of the cot as she breathed through her feelings. *Breathe. Just breathe.* The last thing she wanted was to have another panic attack, and she closed her eyes as she tried to reign in the wave of emotion that had swelled at just the sight of them.

When Thor reached out to squeeze her knee, Darcy’s eyes opened and her gaze flicked up to him, taking in the warmth and comfort he offered, feeling eternally grateful that he was willing to put up with her unexplainable emotional shifting. "Remind me to get your an edible arrangement," she breathed, watching a look of confusion cross his face before Tony cleared his throat and everyone turned to look at him, and Bruce, and the monitors they had queued up behind them.

“Okay, now that everyone’s here,” Bruce started, pushing his glasses further up his nose only for them to fall right back down again. “With Darcy’s help, we’ve run the tests necessary to figure out why she was, uh, able to control one of the infinity stones when no should have been able to.”

“She’s healthy. Blood pressure’s normal, no abnormal body fluctuations, just a relatively normal girl, right?” Tony didn’t wait for anyone to respond before he gestured at one of the screens behind him. “Normal except for this. We’ve done an experimental gene map and -”

Jane leaned forward, eyes widening. “You have access to a program that can map the human genome in three days?”

“It’s experimental,” Bruce reiterated.
“But yes,” Tony said, a satisfied smile curling on his face before continuing, “and that little bit? Right there? That bit shouldn’t be there.”

Darcy watched Jane as she rose from her seat, moving closer to the screen and the science. Lips quirking upward, feeling déjà vu as the conversation went much the way it had the first time, she turned back to her feet. Anything to avoid looking in Steve or Bucky’s direction.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said from his spot near the back of the room, having put as much space between himself and Darcy as possible. The woman seemed to have a hard time being in the same room as him without bursting into tears, and he didn’t want to make her any more uncomfortable than she already seemed to be “Maybe I’m misunderstanding, but are you saying her DNA is different than ours?”

“There is a marked difference between our genes and Ms. Lewis’ genes, yes.”

“I’m a mutant,” Darcy said, feeling everyone’s eyes slide toward her. She took in a deep breath before looking up, a shrug lifting and dropping her shoulders as she sighed. “I didn’t know my mom, but she gifted me with a gene that made it possible for me to hold an infinity stone. To absorb it and use its powers.”

The tone in Darcy’s voice made Steve frown. “Did you know this before you grabbed the stone?”

The words ‘This time?’ had almost fallen from her lips before she stopped them. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, Darcy nodded before her eyes rose toward his. “I wasn’t sure what would happen when I grabbed it. I didn’t know if I’d survive.”

Bucky looked up at her, seeing the ghost of something pass behind her eyes. It was almost like he could hear the words that she hadn’t said, like they floated around her head as nothing more than a thought. I wasn’t supposed to. When her eyes slid from Steve’s to his, Bucky looked down at the ground, arms tightening over his chest where they were crossed.

“What kind of powers are we talking about?” Jane asked, turning from the screens and back toward Darcy.

Shaking her head, not sure she’d be able to explain it all without falling apart, Darcy nodded in Thor’s direction. “Feel free to take that one, Big Guy.”

Thor’s shoulders straightened when everyone looked his way, more than happy to answer if it made things easier for Darcy. “The Soul gem is arguably the most powerful for the infinity stones. It grants the wielder the ability to see souls, to steal them, to trap them.” Darcy couldn’t help the small grin that turned her lips when she felt everyone else in the room bristle at Thor’s description. “To have or possess the soul stone is to control souls or, depending upon the wielder, destroy them.”

“Oh my god,” Jane said, taking a step toward Darcy, her hand raising like she was going to pull her friend into a hug.

“‘There’s more than just that,” Tony said, making Jane pause in the middle of the room, “isn’t there, peanut?”

Tony’s easy use of nicknames for her made her chest ache, and Darcy looked up at him with carefully guarded eyes. She took in another deep breath, nodding as she attempted to draw courage around her like a blanket. “I can see people’s souls like a kaleidoscope. Kind of like an Instagram filter.”

“Like a what?”
A soft snort at Bucky’s question rumbled from Darcy’s chest. She shook her head like the sound had hurt, a self-deprecating smirk on her face. “I see the colors of someone's soul, and if I focus, I can use that to find them.”

“Find them how?” Steve asked, watching as she avoided looking up at him.

“I can find someone’s soul, wherever it is.” Darcy’s tongue darted out to wet her lips before she looked up at the various expressions being sent her way. “Everyone’s is different enough, like a fingerprint, that if I wanted to find someone in particular, I’d just have to focus.”

“Tell them how far,” Tony said, giving Darcy a challenging eyebrow raise when she threw him a glare.

Almost thankful that Tony Stark was Tony Stark, regardless of doing the time warp, Darcy climbed to her feet, needing to be mobile as she explained everything. “I’ve tried not to push it too hard, but far. A lot far. Far enough that I’m not sure anyone can hide from me without going to some pretty extreme extremes.”

Steve watched as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, uncomfortable as she explained what her new abilities could do. “Is that it?”

“No,” Darcy said with a hollow laugh, crossing her arms over her chest, “there’s a metric fuck-ton more I can do, and not all of it is good stuff. Some of it could be bad. Really bad. Like, unforgivably terrible. And even though I feel in control of it all now, it’s still there.” She could feel her body tighten, her shoulders hunch near her shoulders with tension as she couldn’t seem to stop the torrent of words that babbled forth. “I can tell when someone is lying, or sad, and I can look into them and see their worst nightmares and use it against them. Every twisted little secret is there, waiting for me to tug it into the light.”

“Darcy -”

Ignoring Jane’s concern, Darcy took a step closer to Steve as her eyes began to glow and her skin lit from within. “I can move souls, too. I can throw people across the room like a rag doll, like some kind of fucked up plaything. Not only that, but if I wanted to, I can snuff out their light, just like I did with that purple fuck,” she spat, the heat of truth burning in her veins as she purged all of the pain she’d been holding back, “and there’s not a damn thing anyone could do to stop me if I wanted someone gone.” Finishing, she took a deep, shuddering breath inward, chin wobbling as her eyes filled with tears.

As Darcy sat heavily back on the cot, her skin and eyes returning to normal, the rest of those in the room seemed to take a moment to digest what she’d just confessed. Tony was looking at her with barely contained fascination, and his chrome oil-slick gleamed in her peripheral vision. She pulled her lower lip between her teeth, worrying it as the silence seemed to stretched on.

“You won’t do that.”

Darcy’s wet hazel flicked up at Steve’s words, eyebrows coming together in pain at the look of certainty on his face. “And how would you know?” she asked, unable to keep the accusation out of her tone.

“Because if you were going to do that, you’d have done it already,” Bucky said, watching as her eyes slid from the man at his side, that hazel holding pain that he could recognize, “and it wouldn’t scare you as much as it does.”
Steve watched something like grief flow over Darcy’s face as the first tear slid down her cheek, eyes closing as she looked down at the floor. He looked to his right, watching Bucky stare at her with a calculated look in his grey eyes before his lover looked over, catching and holding his gaze. Bucky’s nod was small, but enough, and Steve turned his attention back to Bruce and Tony. “What happens now?”

“Ms. Lewis has agreed to show us a range of her powers,” Bruce answered, dark eyes watching as Darcy sat back against the wall and drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, “after which we’ll give a report to Director Hill.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked, turning toward Bruce with a frown.

“The new Accords are pretty clear when it comes to people with powers.” When angry pink filled Jane’s cheeks, Bruce cleared his throat softly. “Trust me, Ms. Foster, I know what you’re thinking, but it’ll be the best for everyone to get it all out now so there are no misunderstandings or confusion in the future.”

“What happens after she shows you? She won’t have to stay here, will she?” When Bruce didn’t answer her question, Jane spun toward Darcy, thrusting a hand out toward the other woman. “Get up. We’re leaving.”

Darcy’s eyes widened as she looked up at Jane. “W-what?”

“They can’t hold you here like some kind of criminal! You haven’t done anything wrong! They can’t treat you like this!”

“Jane -” Darcy’s heart sped up when Jane crossed to her, kneeling next to the cot and gripping her hands.

“So what if you’re a mutant? So what if you can hurt people? That’s not you! And if they don’t want you here on Earth, we’ll go someplace else. You’ve always wanted to go to Asgard. I’m sure they’d be more than willing to accept someone as brilliant as you! Right?” Jane turned toward Thor, her brown eyes shining.

If Jane’s question was sudden, Thor covered it with enthusiasm. “Without hesitation,” he said, sitting up a little straighter, nodding at Darcy. “Asgard would be happy to have such a fierce warrior amidst their halls.”

Darcy’s mouth hung open when Jane turned back to her, the astrophysicist’s eyes filled with such determination that it stole the air from Darcy’s lungs. The longer Jane looked at her, the more Darcy’s chest constricted with affection. When she couldn’t take the fury in her best friend’s expression any longer, Darcy leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Jane’s shoulders. “I love you so much, you doe-eyed goblin,” Darcy gasped against Jane’s neck, smiling through her tears when Jane laughed and hugged her back just as fiercely.

“I’m just saying you have options,” Jane said when she pulled back, reaching up to wipe at the tears on Darcy’s cheeks. “You don’t have to do what they want you to.”

“I know,” Darcy said with a watery smile, absolutely certain she didn’t deserve a friend like Jane Foster, but thanking Bowie that she had her anyway. “Janey, this is my choice.” When she saw Steve shift in her peripheral vision, Darcy closed her eyes, remembering the way he’d looked at her when she’d said that to him, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Shaking away the memory, she let out a sigh as she blinked at her best friend. “I just have to show them what I can do, show that I’m not a threat.”
“But you’re not a threat,” Jane insisted, squeezing Darcy’s shoulders, “you don’t owe them anything.”

Darcy’s tongue clicked in her mouth as her head tilted sadly, struggling with how to explain that she did owe them. Everything. She owed them everything. “I just have to do my little magic show, be a performing monkey for an hour or two, then everything’ll be fine.” She knew her words had come out exactly as confident as she’d felt, watching disbelief flash in Jane’s eyes. “Janey, I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“I do,” Jane said, hand smoothing over Darcy’s hair in a futile attempt to calm her wild curls, “I do trust you.” When Darcy gave her a small smile, Jane climbed to her feet, turning toward Tony and Bruce with arms crossed over her chest. “I want to be there when this happens.”

“Don’t you have a summit in Argen-”

“I am going to be there when this happens,” Jane interrupted Tony, eyebrow lifting when he raised his hands in mock surrender. “If I see anything I don’t approve of, it stops immediately. If S.H.I.E.L.D. expects to see my research ever again, they’re going to take her agreement to these tests as the gift it is and think long and hard before passing judgment on someone who just saved their entire asses.”

Darcy’s eyes flicked toward Thor, the expression on the Asgardian’s face nothing short of complete and total adoration as he gazed up at Jane. Feeling bolstered by her best friend’s speech, Darcy looked over at Tony, watching as one corner of his mouth tipped upward. Jane was tiny, but fiery, and it was clear she’d made quite the impression on the people in the room who didn’t know her well. When Tony caught her eye and raised an eyebrow, Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t look at me. I’m finally following my doctor’s orders.”

“I’m pretty sure your demands can be met, Doc,” Tony said, gesturing behind him at the screens, “I assume you’d like to look at the other tests we ran as well?”

“That would be nice,” Jane said, tone still holding a bit of the bite from before. When Tony’s arm swept invitingly toward the door, Jane nodded once before turning back to Darcy. “Are you going -”

“I’ll be fine,” Darcy assured her, smiling softly. Bruce followed Jane out of the room, and when Tony threw her a thumbs-up, Darcy gave him another appropriate one-fingered salute before he disappeared as well. The sigh that passed her lips was one of emotional exhaustion, and she reached up and ran a hand over her face.

“I’d like to be there during the tests as well, if that’s alright with you, Ms. Lewis.”

In all of Jane’s righteous fury, for a few blissful moments, Darcy had forgotten everything except the love she felt for her best friend. Steve’s words crashed reality around her shoulders once more, and the ache of it in her bones returned just as strong as before. “Why?”

The thread of hesitation in her voice wasn’t lost on him, and Steve gave her a small, apologetic smile. “As Chief Threat Assessment Officer, my report will go straight to Director Hill.”

Darcy’s eyebrow rose in Steve’s direction. "Doesn't that mean you'd be there with or without my approval?"

Steve stared at her, unflinching. "Yes."

"But you asked anyway," Darcy said, more to herself than him. Of course he’d ask her permission. Steve Rogers was one of the most polite people she’d ever met. His Ma had raised him to be a nice
Irish boy, and Sarah Rogers was a saint who deserved a federal holiday in her memory. Thinking of Sarah, and all of the other memories of Steve and Bucky's childhood, flashed through her mind, and Darcy let out a soft snort. "Why not? It'll be a party." When she saw the wounded look on his face, Darcy let out a sigh. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. I'm just... dealing with a lot of stuff.

Nodding at her apology, Steve tried to give her a comforting smile. "I think you're handling this all pretty well, considering."

"Yeah, well, you went from a nigh one-hundred pound anemic asthmatic to the beefcake you are now in a matter of seconds, so your view of sudden changes might be a little skewed."

Hearing Bucky's heartfelt snort at his side made Steve smile, and one of his eyebrows raised in agreement as he pointed that grin at Darcy. "Well, you've got me there."

When Darcy looked up at Steve, she couldn't help the sharp stab of sadness that punctured her chest, piercing what was left of her heart and throwing her over the edge of emotions once again. She watched Steve and Bucky head toward the door, biting her lips to keep from crying.

Steve stopped in the doorway, Bucky barely stopping himself before crashing into his back, and turned his blue gaze back to the woman on the bed. "Thank you for letting us sit in, Ms. Lewis."

She wanted to say something quippy, to make that smile of his return, but looking up at him was too hard, it hurt too much. Darcy nodded, averting her gaze until she watched both of their shoes pass her and leave the room. She took a large, gasping breath inward, the expansion of her lungs making her chest ache. She bent her head, hands coming up to cover her face as she began to cry.

"Darcy, please, don't cry," Thor said, reaching out to run a hand over her hair. When her shoulders continued to shake, he stood from the chair he'd been sitting in and moved toward the cot, sitting on it gingerly. When Darcy threw herself against his chest, Thor accepted her willingly, blue eyes turning with worry as they looked at the glass window that led to the observation room next door.

When she heard the whine of metal, Darcy's tear-stained face pulled back from the soft cotton of Thor's shirt, a look of confusion crossing her face. She only had the opportunity to make the noise "Whaaa -" before the cot beneath them creaked, their shared weight making the metal legs bend then give out, sending them both to the floor.

The giggle that broke free from her chest was loud, and as Thor began laughing, she couldn't help joining in. Everything had been so exhausting lately and the laughter seemed like an outlet for all the tension and useless pain she'd felt. She laughed until her cheeks hurt, until her sides burned from it, until the giggles turned to sighs, then transitioned back to tears. Thor followed her swing, pulling her against him again when her tears started anew. He rubbed circles on her back, telling her that she'd like Asgard, with its golden halls and beautiful buildings, and that, despite what the Warriors Three said, she should not drink anything they handed her.

As Thor attempted to take her mind off of everything, Darcy pressed her cheek to his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart, letting it soothe the storm in her head, if only for a little while.

Darcy shifted her weight from one leg to the other, chewing on her bottom lips as she stared at the camera that was pointing in her direction. It wasn’t really nerves per se, but a wave of apprehension that flipped her stomach. She knew the power she had over her abilities now, had felt that insane
rush the first time she’d used them after waking, but it was the control over her emotions that needed the help.

Ever since she’d woken to find that time had done a rewind, she’d felt the darkness pulling her down. It was a different darkness than before, one not tinted with the evilness of Thanos, but the realization that the life and love she’d had over the past year was gone. Erased. She was grieving something that had never happened, and she didn’t know how to explain it. She couldn’t explain it. It was like a ghost of a memory, the fading of light, but she felt the mourning deep in her bones. What was she supposed to do now? How was she supposed to keep going, knowing what she was missing?

She was pulled from her thoughts when movement drew her eyes toward the glass separating the testing chamber and the scientists on the other side. Jane and Bruce were pointing at a screen and seemed deep in conversation, and Darcy could only imagine the things those two giant-brained nerds were hypothesizing.

When Darcy’s eyes flicked to Tony, she sucked in a deep breath. She recognized the look on his face, the one that meant he was trying to figure out a puzzle. Only this time, she was the puzzle. She lifted her arm and swung it toward the camera. “Is there a reason why Dum-E is filming this?”

There was a crinkle of static before she heard his voice echo throughout the chamber. “How’d you know his name?”

Shit. Darcy waved her arm through the air in a dismissive gesture. “You mentioned it once.”

Tony didn’t look entirely convinced, but he moved past his suspicions. “Did I? Forget it, it gives him something to do, makes him feel special. Besides, the Powers That Be are going to want to see this footage.”

“Joy.” Darcy swallowed once, tearing her eyes away from Tony and that ‘too smart for his own good’ look in his eyes. Her gaze was drawn when the door to the chamber was pulled open, Thor stepping across the threshold before he pulled the door shut behind him. She felt the locks and air pressure fall into place, opening her jaw as her ears popped. She let out a sigh when Thor came to stand in front of her in his full Asgardian armor. “Was the outfit really necessary?”

“You are a warrior, Lady Darcy, and you deserve an appropriately adorned enemy,” Thor said, the grin on his face as bright as the blue in his eyes.

“You’re pretty much the farthest thing from an enemy I could get.”

“Then consider this a friendly bit of sparring. I have never been one to back down from a challenge.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget that I can literally tear your soul from your body?”

Thor looked at her for a long moment, his smile only faltering slightly. “I did not say it as without risk. In any case, you’ve bested me once before. I’d like a rematch.”

Darcy’s lips quirked up softly before they straightened into a line. The weight of what she was about to do was heavy on her shoulders and she could feel the importance of it, like the air was charged with electricity, the hairs on her arms and neck sticking straight up.

“You will not harm me, Darcy. I trust you.”

The intercom crackled. “How about you kids work on the BFF stuff later and we work on the stone stuff now.”
Darcy immediately lifted her middle finger toward the window and the asshole billionaire on the other side, feeling a jolt of surprise when she realized it wasn’t just Tony, Bruce, and Jane anymore. Some time during her conversation with Thor, Steve and Bucky had made their way to watch. She dropped her arm to her side, tearing her eyes away when they both looked at her.

She felt the ache begin in her chest anew, gaze cast down to her feet as she focused on taking in a breath then letting it out slowly, trying to control the speed of her pulse.

“Are you alright?”

Darcy looked up at the question, the look of concern on Thor’s face making her heart swell in affection for the Little G god. “I’m good. Just nervous,” she lied easily, watching as he took a step closer and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m ready, I promise. You should go to the other end of the room. Put some distance between us.”

When Thor nodded and followed her instructions, Darcy jumped up and down on the balls of her feet, shaking out her arms and legs, the habit of Clint’s still with her despite the fact that she’d never really seen him do it, except she had, but she hadn’t.

This is all so fucked.

“We need you to narrate what you’re doing, Darcy,” Bruce’s voice sounded from the speakers, “anything that we might not be able to figure out just by looking at you.”

Swinging her eyes back up to the window, locking gazes with Bruce and purposefully not looking at anyone else on the other side, Darcy nodded. “You want the play by play? I get it. But there’s some things I won’t be able to do today.”

Tony bent toward the microphone and pulled it in his direction. “Like?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed. “Like what I did to Ivan Ooze, for example.”

She watched Tony consider her answer before nodding. “... good call.”

Taking a deep breath inward, Darcy looked toward Dum-E and the camera he held between his pinchers. “Ok. Um… My name is Darcy Lewis. Height, five-three. Weight, none of your damn business. One class shy of a political science degree. Thirty years old.”

“ Aren’t you twenty-nine?”


“You okay, Darce?”

Looking at the worry in Jane’s face as she leaned toward the mic, Darcy focused on the whiskey-brown of her best friend’s eyes and used it to settle herself. “I’m good, Janey. Promise.” When the astrophysicist seemed mollified, Dacy turned back toward the camera. “Anyway, I’m gonna show everyone what wacky and zany abilities I received when I absorbed that glowing orange bitch of a soul stone.”

Eyes closing, Darcy dipped into the well of power she held inside. It felt like warmth, like a fist that’d been held so tightly and could finally began to relax and open. More and more the power just felt like flexing, like an exercise she’d done over and over. Familiar. Comfortable. So much different than it’d been the first time. She felt her feet leave the ground, seeing the golden-amber glow of her
skin even through her closed eyelids.

When she opened her eyes, she watched recognition flow across Thor’s face. She knew now that he’d seen eyes like this his whole life, in the face of his best friend, Heimdall. There was an expression of understanding in Thor’s gaze now, and she gave him a small smile. He nodded in her direction, returning the grin.

Turning back toward the camera, Darcy shrugged one of her shoulders. “I can see souls. Thor Odinson’s soul is like aquamarine, blue and warm and friendly. Now that I’ve seen it, now that I recognize it as his, I’d be able to search and find out where he is. The further away he is, the harder it is to find him, but I guess I’ve never tried to look for someone that’s really far away. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t matter, though. Another thing I can do is move souls. For example…”

Darcy lifted her hand, focusing on the brilliant blue of Thor’s soul and pushed it backward. The Asgardian was pushed back several feet, the movement smooth and calculated. She couldn’t help the small smile that curled her lips, remembering how it’d been the first time. Having this much control was comforting, and not being scared of the abilities made her feel more secure.

“I can lift him,” she continued, raising her arm and lifting Thor from the ground, “direct him, throw him into things. As long as I have a hold on him, I can move him.”

“What if he had a weapon?”

Darcy’s tongue darted out to lick her lips, not looking toward the window at Steve’s question. “He’d still be able to shoot me. It doesn’t stop anyone from moving their limbs or anything, just means I can stop them moving toward or away from me. I’ve found…”

She stopped herself mid sentence, realizing she was about to make it sound like she’d already used her powers in battle when they knew she hadn’t. “I’d assume throwing them against something hard a few times would make them drop their weapons, though,” she finished, glad when no one seemed to call her on her verbal backpedaling.

“What if he fought back against your hold?”

Steve’s voice again, echoing through the room. This time she looked over at him, the analytical expression on his face making her heart beat faster. “Uh, he can’t? I mean, he can, but it won’t really matter.”

“Can you explain?”

Heaving a large sigh, Darcy turned her attention to Thor. “Use myuh-myuh and come at me.” A look of disbelief shadowed his blue eyes, but she dropped the five inches to the ground, not needing the full power display for this little trick. “Seriously, Big Guy. Do it.”

Thor’s face still showed he didn’t believe her. “I do not wish to hurt you.”

The grin on Darcy’s face couldn’t be helped, and she lifted her hand and waved him forward. “Trust me, you wont.”

She watched him spin Mjolnir in his hand, shoulders hunching slightly as he coiled the muscles in his legs, gathering power. The hammer at his side began to spin so fast she couldn’t see it anymore, his face turning with focus before he swung his arm up and pointed it in Darcy’s direction. In the blink of an eye, he launched himself at her, and even quicker than that, Darcy lifted her arm. Thor froze in mid-air, blinking heavily when he realized he was within inches of her but could no longer move forward, despite how hard he tried.
“Like I said, it doesn’t matter if he fights against the hold.”

“But if he had a gun, he’d be able to shoot you.”

Darcy nodded before turning to look at Bruce. Jane was standing next to him, arms crossed over her chest, worry in her gaze. “Mmmhmmm. The stone doesn’t make me invincible.”

“Still pretty damn hard to hit you, though.”

The impressed tone in Bruce’s tone made Darcy’s lips curl into a small smile. “Yeah. That.”

“How did you master these abilities so quickly?”

The smile vanished from her face as she tried to figure out how to answer Bruce’s question. It wasn’t like she could say she’d had the powers for the past year, because they only thought she’d had them for a couple weeks. She remembered what Tony had assumed, that she’d had some sort of transfer of knowledge when she initially grabbed the stone, and decided that it was best just to go with that. “It came with the stone. When I touched it, when I… I just do. Just like I can look at someone and see something they’re trying to hide.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I look at someone, really look at them, I can see what’s buried in their color. I just have to, like, coax it out, make it come to the surface.”

“Can you give us an example?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, since the only time she’d ever done it had been on that French asshole assassin Batroc, and it’d been a pretty high-emotion day to begin with. Unbidden, her thoughts turned back to the vision of Steve in that hospital bed, bruised and bloody. She had to shake her head to rid it of the memories. Darcy looked up at Thor with a shrug. “You hiding anything, Big Guy?”

... there are things I have not shared with anyone else, if that is what you mean.”

“Do you care if I try to ferret it out?” When a look of uncertainty graced his face, Darcy shook her head. “Hey, no, it’s fine. We don’t have to.”

“No, Darcy. I agreed to help you. I trust you.”

She wasn’t sure if he kept repeating that he trusted her to make her feel better, or as a mantra to convince himself, but in either case, it made her heart thump at the honesty in his eyes. “Okay. This shouldn’t hurt at all. Just stay still, yeah?”

When Thor planted both his feet and straightened his back, Darcy took in a deep breath before peering into the beautiful light of his soul. The blue was just as pretty as she remembered, and the harder she looked, the more gorgeous it became. There were veins of gold crisscrossing it all, making it look like the prettiest marble she’d ever seen. Digging deeper, she pushed at the colors she knew, looking for what he’d kept hidden.

The room was a gleaming gold, the long hallway filled with columns. The ceiling was covered in depictions of battles and creatures that her brain told her couldn’t possibly be real, but in her heart she knew were. Her eyes fell on the giant throne at the end and the man with white hair and an eyepatch sat atop it. She could hear the murmuring of voices and walked closer, realizing for the first time that there was someone kneeling at the foot of the throne.
“My life is nothing without her by my side. I know it is unprecedented, but she is my heart, father. Mother knew of my feelings for her and she wished us nothing but happiness.”

Darcy watched Odin’s eye widen slightly at the mention of Frigga, but regained his composure seconds later. “If you are to marry this Midgardian, you would not be able to sit on this throne. Is your woman worth this?”

The certainty that filled Thor’s gaze made Darcy’s fill with tears. “I would rather never see the throne,” Thor said, voice unwavering, “than give up the woman I love.”

Both Thor and Darcy looked up at Odin, waiting for his answer. When he lifted and slammed his staff on the ground, Darcy felt the shockwave of it hit her body. “So be it,” Odin said, the air feeling like it exhaled.

Darcy stumbled backward when she returned to the present and the chamber at the Avengers compound. She brought a hand to her chest, breathing heavily. That was so much more than what had happened with Batroc, but she supposed the control she had over the powers now meant that everything was stronger. When her eyes flicked up and locked on Thor’s, a small sob ripped free from her throat seconds before she threw herself at the Asgardian.

Thor caught her easily, her arms tight around his neck. She pulled her face away from his neck to kiss his cheek before setting her lips near his ear, speaking to him in a whisper. “You are one of the best men I’ve ever met, Thor Odinson, and I know you don’t need it, but you have my entire fucking permission to marry Janey.” When Thor squeezed her back, Darcy let out a soft laugh, hearing his join her seconds later.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Darcy said when Thor lowered her to the floor, blinking her wet hazel eyes up at him.

“Darcy is truthful. She was able to determine what I held within.”

“Something you want to share with the class?”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed as she turned toward the glass and Tony. “You want me to try it on you, asshole?” She watched Bucky and Steve laugh, hiding it behind their fists when Tony spun in his chair to glare at them.

Looking chagrined, Tony rolled his eyes before turning back to Darcy. “So you can move souls, snuff them out, see someone’s deepest, darkest secrets. Anything else we should know about?”

Darcy’s arms went behind her back, shifting her weight. “I can trap people in a soul realm.”

“What’s now?”

“I can…” Darcy turned to look at Thor, unsurprised to find him nodding at her in acceptance. She lifted her hand, thinking about the night she’d accidentally banished Thanos inside the stone. She hadn’t destroyed him like she’d thought, she’d just made him go away. She focused on Thor’s soul, then thought about the stone, and when she finally made the connection in her mind, Thor was no longer standing in front of her. She watched the orange dust and fizzle of electricity hang in the air before that, too, faded.

She looked up toward the window and saw a flurry of activity on the other side. Jane was standing in open disbelief, her mouth hanging open. Tony and Bruce had turned their attention to a screen nearby, probably something measuring gamma rays or ultraviolet frequencies, or some other science-
y type thing. Steve and Bucky, though, were looking straight at her, their gazes focused.

Tony’s chair slid across the floor before he grabbed the mic. “And for your next trick, maybe you bring back the blond before all of Asgard marches on Earth because you just murdered one of their sovereign?”

“Hold onto your fucking knickers, I’m bringing him back.” With another wave of her hand, and the desire for Thor to return, a burst of energy filled the room before the Asgardian was back at her side like he’d never been gone. He turned toward her, his expression of surprise being replaced with relief. A horrible, evil thought occurred to her and Darcy reached out to grip his arm. “There wasn’t anyone else in there, right?”

“No, just me. It was… nice. Pleasant. How long was I gone?”

Darcy’s head cocked to the side. “Just a couple seconds.”

“Time must move differently there. It felt like much longer.”

“How much longer?”

Thor turned toward the window. “A day, perhaps. There was no light source on which to base my assumption.”

Her sudden disappearing act seemed to leave most of the people in the other room uneased and she saw their collective sigh as they took in everything she’d shown them. “I think that’s where we’ll end the day. You got anything else to tell us, Princess?”

Debating just how much to explain, in case they thought she was absolutely bonko cray-cray nuts, Darcy shrugged her shoulders. “When I first absorbed the stone, I could hear a voice.”

“...a voice?”

She turned toward Thor. “Yeah. A voice. Coming from the stone.”

“What did it sound like?”

Feeling completely hyperbolic, while intensely honest, Darcy gave him an almost apathetic shrug. “Doom.”

“That’s not an exactly comforting thought.”

“It is rumored that the soul gem, due to its very nature, had a sentience all its own,” Thor said, reaching out to clap his hand on Darcy’s shoulders. “The power it holds... it longs to be fed souls.”

Darcy sucked a breath inward. When she’d found out Thanos had been stuck in the soul realm, she’d assumed the voice she’d heard had always been his. Knowing that it wasn’t always him, but part of the stone itself, made her rethink a lot of things. “I haven’t heard it since I destroyed the purple scrotum-chinned fuck.”

“Perhaps you have mastered the stone so completely that it knows you will never satisfy its hunger,” Thor offered.

“Or giving it Thanos was a big enough meal that it's gone into hibernation.” When everyone, including Thor and Darcy, looked at Bruce with raised eyebrows, the perpetually frumpled scientist seemed to take it in stride. “What? I have a little experience dealing with a temperamental voice in
my head."

While everyone seemed to consider this new bit of information, Darcy felt her attention slipping. She blinked at Jane’s lilac colors, taking comfort in the softness of her best friend. It didn’t long until she sought out the colors she knew the best. Bucky and Steve’s souls pulsed with light, strong and powerful, and Darcy found herself drowning in the color, wrapping it around herself, warm and familiar.

On the heels of her comfort, though, she was hit with a stark reality. Inside the blood crimson and glittering gold was a steady thread of cobalt that tied the two men together. Before the time warp she’d unwittingly been caught in, she would’ve been able to follow that blue line from them to her. Darcy looked down, still able to see the crimson and gold stain of Bucky and Steve in her soul, as well as that thread of cobalt leading away from herself. She traced that line, watching it lead into the observation room and the two men inside. However, instead of tying to them, her cobalt line seemed to terminate before it connected.

The blue line stopped, and there was no emerald green in their souls, no proof that she’d ever been anything other than the weird girl they’d first met weeks ago. Darcy felt the air rush out of her lungs, the ache in her chest growing too large. She was suddenly exhausted, unable to push the dark thoughts away, and wanted to retreat to the quiet of Tony’s lab. He’d offered to get her a room in the domestic wing, but she’d refused, wanting to stay somewhere neutral. The couch in Tony’s lab was as close as she’d get, and the man had been rather sweet about it all, fluffy blankets and pillow appearing without a prompt.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Then I’m heading back to the lab,” she murmured, turning toward the door. She stopped when she felt a hand on her shoulder, looking back at Thor and the concern in his eyes. Darcy reached up and patted that impossibly large hand with her own. “I’m okay, Big Guy. Just zapped of energy. Need a recharge.”

When he said nothing, finally giving her a nod, Darcy made her way to the door, hearing the locks switch open, her ears popping with the new change of pressure. She struggled to pull the door open but finally got it, wondering why the stone couldn’t have given her super strength, or invisibility, or some other cool power that wouldn’t have fucked up her life so bad.

“Ms. Lewis?’

Darcy closed her eyes, steeling herself before she turned back toward Steve, watching him jog to catch up to her. “Yeah?’

Steve came to stop, giving her a small smile. “What you did back there… it’s impressive that you have such control in such a small amount of time.”

The snort that broke from her nose was heartfelt and Darcy shook her head. “Time is a finicky bitch.” When Steve looked at her with confusion, she gestured vaguely through the air with her hand. “I just mean that it feels like I’ve had them a lot longer.”

He looked at her, trying to decipher the look in her eyes, but ended up just as unsure as before. “I want you to know that my report to Director Hill will make it clear that I don’t believe you’re a threat. If anything, you’re an asset.”

Darcy couldn’t help the flinch when the word ‘asset’ fell from Steve’s lips. She nodded, hands snaking behind her back, fingers threading and gripping hard, using them as an anchor not to show
the reality of emotions crashing in her chest.

Not certain what he’d done to make her go quiet, or why there was a look of uncomfortability on her face, Steve pushed on. “You’re shown a lot of courage. There aren’t a lot of people who would have done what you did.”

Looking up, Darcy stared into the gorgeous cornflower blue of Steve’s eyes, heart seizing under the crush of pain. “You would have.”

Steve looked at her for a long time, judging whether there was any jest in her words. The longer he tried to look for an answer, the less he understood. When she continued to peer into his eyes, like she was seeing something deeper, he felt his cheeks heat at the attention, gaze flicking down to his feet. “You got me there.”

When he looked back up at her, he saw something like pain flash in her hazel eyes before she looked away. He didn’t understand the awkwardness that had descended over the hallway, but he pushed forward regardless. “I think what you can do is incredible. It might not feel like it right now, but it’s not the powers that are special, Ms. Lewis, it’s the person who has them and chooses how they’re used.”

Darcy’s lips curled upward at his words, looking up at him with thinly-veiled suspicion. “Sounds like you’re trying to enlist me.”

“I think you’ve got potential, and I’d be lying if I said that the thought of you at my side wasn’t comforting.” She focused on him again, with that stare like she could see all the way through him. “What I mean is that I think you’d be a good addition to the team.”

The open and honest look on Steve’s face was enough to break her resolve, and she avoided looking at him, just wanting the conversation to be over and the pain to not be so sharp. “Teams aren’t really my thing, Mr. America.”

He looked at her for another long second before nodding. “Well, if you change your mind, you know where we’ll be.” Steve watched her acknowledge his words before she turned and made her way down the hall and around the corner.

“If this was a cartoon, she’d have made a gunshot sound and disappeared from the frame,” Bucky said as he walked up beside Steve, looking at the ground for skid marks at how fast the girl had escaped. “What did you say to her?”

“I told her the truth,” Steve said with a frown, “that I think she’s not a threat, that the control she has over her abilities is impressive.”

“She didn’t exactly look relieved.”

Steve’s frown deepened. “I don’t think she likes me.”

“She doesn’t know you,” Bucky countered, watching as Steve shook his head softly. “Feels like she thinks she does.”

“Why do you care if she likes you or not?” The look Steve sent in his direction was enough to make Bucky nod, lips curling up into a smirk. “Oh. Right. I forgot you have that thing where you want everyone to like you.” When Steve continued to look concerned, Bucky draped his arm across Steve’s shoulders. “She’s gone through a lot in the last few weeks. Lewis has handled it better than a lot of people would’ve.”
“I just wish I knew what I did,” Steve said, his voice small as he looked down the hallway she’d disappeared down. Taking in a breath, Steve looked over at Bucky with a grin. “Most people want everyone to like them, jerk.”

“And you need to learn that not everyone will, punk,” Bucky said with a roll of his eyes. “How about you take your guy for some food? Then he can show you just how much he likes you.”

The sunlight streaming through the window was warm on her skin. The sheet had pooled around her waist, baring the skin of her back, and Darcy shoved her nose further into the pillow, taking in a deep lungful of the scent of her boys. She felt movement on her right, squinting open an eye in that direction. She saw Bucky laying on his back, left arm thrown over his eyes and the offensive sun, his new prosthetic draped across his stomach, his chest rising and falling with even breaths.

She began to turn onto her side to find Steve when she heard his voice from a few feet away.

“Don’t move,” he whispered, “I don’t want to wake Buck just yet.”

Laying back against the pillow, Darcy’s lips curled into a smile as she watched him work. This wasn’t the first time she’d woken up to find Steve sketching in the early morning light, and she knew it wouldn’t be the last. He used his art as therapy, something he’d always done since he was a child, and though he hadn’t had much time for art since becoming an Avenger, he took the little moments where he could.

“You should crawl back in bed,” she said, her voice low.

“I just want to finish this real quick. I’m almost done.”

“How long have you been up?”

“A few hours,” he answered distractedly, brushing his forefinger over the paper, smearing a bit of the graphite.

“It’s all a little fuzzy, but it involved me, and you, and our guy, and going dancing in one of those clubs in the city where it’s too dark to see anyone’s faces so you have to navigate by touch.” The small laugh and shake of his head made Darcy smile widen.

“I’m not sure being in a club where other people get to touch you would be the best idea.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?” Darcy knew exactly why, but she wanted him to play along, a flash of success making her stomach flip when he looked up at her with a wolfish grin.

“Buck and I have been known to be a bit jealous of other people touching our things.”

“Ah,” Darcy said, eyebrows raising toward her hairline. “Is that how it is? I’m one of your things?” When Steve looked up her, eyes widening when he realized how what he’d said could be taken, Darcy laughed into her pillow so it didn’t wake Bucky. She lifted her head and watched Steve
realize she’d been kidding before rolling his eyes at her antics. “I know what you meant. Maybe I like the thought of you being jealous. Not, like, stupid jealous, but you both tend to get a bit growly, and that’s pretty fucking hot.”

“We get growly?”

At Steve’s look of confusion, Darcy attempted to explain. “Maybe jealous isn’t the right word. It’s more like - are you finished?” At Steve’s nod, Darcy shifted to a sitting position, lifting the sheet and holding it up to her chest. “When I’m out with you two, you make me feel seen. There are a lot of people who don’t get that, you know?”

She watched as Steve set aside his drawing, laying his pencil careful on top before climbing to his feet. He crossed the room, the sleep pants he wore hanging low on his hips, and Darcy let her eyes rove all of that beautiful, ruddy skin. When he knelt beside the bed, she took in a deep breath, smelling the cedarwood of his and Bucky’s shampoo.

“You might be able to see souls, but I see you, Darcy,” Steve said, reaching out to hook a finger at the top of the sheet that hid her from view, “I’d see you even in a room filled with people.” Darcy’s tongue swept along her lips, her heart speeding at the look in Steve’s eyes. “There is nothing in this world would change that.”

Darcy woke with a gasp, sitting up, heart hammering in her chest and tears wet on her cheeks. She’d sobbed herself awake, and couldn’t seem to stop the shake of her shoulders and the gasping intakes of air. She jumped when a hand was pressed to her shoulder, raising her arms as if to thwart off an attack, her skin lighting instantly.

“Whoa! Hey! Darcy, it’s me, it’s Tony.” The engineer had taken his hand away and now held both of them in the air in a placating gesture.

Eyes widening as she looked at the concern in his face, Darcy tried to catch her breath, the glow of her skin fading when she realized she wasn’t in any danger. When the alarm faded away, she was once again drowning in the grief her dream had brought to the surface. She thought she’d been doing so good lately, trying to accept the impossible changes she’d been faced with, but all it’d taken was one memory to tear it all down.

Any time she spent time with either of them, all the hard-won steps forward melted away, replaced with the knowledge of what she’d lost. Just glimpsing them was enough to send her into a tailspin. What was she supposed to do? How was she supposed to move forward when they were right there? Bonding herself to either of them like before felt like a violation; the first time was because she hadn’t known what she was doing. But now that she knew what it would do, how it’d take away their consent? No. No.

She couldn’t. She couldn’t move forward while staying in the compound. Darcy gulped in air as her chest constricted, the truth harder to accept now. “I can’t... do this,” she cried, drowning hazel eyes looking over at Tony, “it’s too much.”

“You’re doing alright, all things considered,” Tony said, looking a little lost while trying to understand what she meant, “you’re made of strong stuff.”

“I’m not strong,” she said in between uncontrollable sniffles, “not enough to do this.”

“Not to do what?” Tony asked, hand patting her shoulder a bit awkwardly.

“I can’t stay here any longer,” Darcy said, reaching up to grip Tony’s hand with her own, clutching
at him like he was the only thing keeping her tethered to reality. “I have to leave.”

She felt the hesitance in the man at her side, knowing she was giving him nothing to go on, but he seemed to rally anyway, squeezing her arm and making her gaze swing toward him. “I know you didn’t ask for this. I know it’s been a lot in a short amount of time, and any normal person would have gone crazy already, but you’ve held on. This life… it isn’t for everyone. If you don’t want this, just say the word.”

Darcy looked at Tony for a long time, shuddering with sniffles as she tried to tear herself apart from the inside. He’d called her strong, but she was anything but that. Not here. Not now. Here and now she was a mess, every inch of this place reminding her of the life she thought she’d had, the friends she’d made, the men she’d seen a future with. That was all gone, and while she might have been able to re-establish those friendship, some things were well and truly lost, and there was not a damn thing she could do about it.

Except leave.

For the moment, Darcy forgot that she hadn’t spent the last year earning Tony’s trust and threw her arms around his shoulders, crying against his neck as she started to understand that if she was going to be able to move forward, she couldn’t do it at the compound. Maybe one day, when she’d healed a bit more, maybe then she’d be able to come back and not feel the ache, but not now. Not now. Not here.

“Thank you,” Darcy whispered, pulling back to swipe at her eyes with her sleeve, “I know how hard you’ve been working on everything, but I’m just… I’m not ready for all of this.”

“Hey, I get it. No one should be made a soldier against their will. I’ll talk with Rogers and Hill and see what we can figure out.”

Darcy nodded, biting on her lip to keep the cries back. “Thank you, Tony.”

“It’s, like, three in the morning. Why don’t you go back to sleep and we’ll talk more later.”

Darcy watched him climb to his feet, a small frown on her face. “Shouldn’t you be getting some sleep, too?”

“Had an idea. Had to work through it.”

Nodding, Darcy laid back down, curling onto her side so she could watch Tony work. “Mind walking me through your idea?” When he turned to look at her with a disbelieving expression, she sniffled then shrugged her shoulder. “Maybe it’ll help me fall asleep.”

Snorting softly, Tony turned back to the device he’d dropped on his worktable when Darcy had woken with a start. “I’ve been working on the tensile strength of this thing for a friend, and I had the brilliant idea to weave carbon into the liquid, forming a complex diamond-like helix that’ll make…”
Bruises

Chapter Summary

Darcy experiences some blasts from her past and is granted freedom.

Chapter Notes

I didn't realize this would be the penultimate chapter, knowing how the people in my head like to talk, but it is. This is the last chapter before the last chapter. Plus an epilogue, but I'll post that next week, too. What's that all mean? It means next week will the conclusion of this bit of wording.

I know there are a lot of unconnected dots, and stuff that hasn't been explained yet, but I hope these next "three" chapters wrap it all up.

Me? Emotional? Naaaaaaah. *sniffles*

Gird your hearts for the end, my lovelies and I'll be doing the same.

*grabs your hand and squeezes*

We got this!

<3

PageBreak

I've been told, I've been told to get you off my mind,
But I hope I never lose the bruises that you left behind.
Oh my lord, oh my lord, I need you by my side.
There must be something in the water,
'Cause everyday it's getting colder,
And if only I could hold you,
You'd keep my head from going under.
It's your love I'm lost in,
Your love I'm lost in.
And I'm tired of being so exhausted
It's your love I'm lost in,
Your love I'm lost in.
Even though I'm nothing to you now.
"They said I could have dropped dead any second!"

"That's awful," Darcy said into the phone, picking at a hole in her jeans, pulling on a thread as she tried her best to sound surprised.

"Darcy, I don't think you're hearing me correctly," Olivia stressed, her voice warm, "they said I could have just fell down. Dead. Game over. The blockage is almost one-hundred percent. What on Earth made you call me?"

Darcy smiled softly, her eyes filling with tears. "It was just a bad dream. I must have heard about it in some show or something. I just figured it'd be a good idea to call you and have you get it checked out."

"Well, you saved my life. They're going in later today to do their magic. Darcy girl, you saved me! When I told Lorenzo..."

Listening to Olivia as she recounted her day, Darcy did her best to follow her foster mother's words, but found her mind slipping. After she'd made the decision to leave, unable to continue staying at the compound without drowning in grief, she'd made a list of pros and cons for the bit of time traveling she'd done. The cons side was long, so fucking long, but there were some pros once she started digging.

Number one, obviously, was the fact that Clint was no longer deceased. The battle at the sanctum had never happened, would never happen, and that meant that the archer was home with his family.

When she started down that line of thinking, there were other people who were still alive that she could help. Olivia had been Darcy's next call, telling the only strong female role model she'd ever had growing up to go to the doctor for a check-up. It appeared the foster mother had been putting her physical aside for too long, and at Darcy's insistence, she'd finally gone through with it. And just like Darcy knew he would, Olivia's doctor had found the blockage and scheduled emergency surgery.

She'd saved Olivia's life. By losing the love and connection with Bucky and Steve, she'd saved Olivia's life.

That she'd helped Olivia - and the countless kids the foster mother would still be able to take care of in the coming years - should have made Darcy ecstatic, overflowing with happiness, but happiness was an emotion Darcy hadn't experienced in weeks. It was different, of course, than the darkness she'd felt crowding her mind when under Thanos and the stone's influence; now that she knew the difference, it was as clear as day. It'd been like poison, turning her thoughts to black, sucking her soul bit by bit. The anguish she felt now was still bitter, and hard, and overwhelming, but it was better.

It didn't stop Darcy, though, from asking the question: Was it better now? If she had to do it over, if she had to lose Bucky and Steve in order to save lives, was it still better?

Yes. Of course. Without question.

The world was better with Olivia Rodriguez in it. Same went for Clint Barton. They were here, whole and perfect and with their lights, and the amount of good they would do for the world was immeasurable. And if them being alive meant Darcy was the only one who knew what it had cost, she would pay that price. Even as it hurt, even as she felt like her heart had been ripped from her
chest by the icy hand of time, Darcy knew some kind of good had come from it all.

Darcy glanced up when she heard Tony's voice from the hallway. She swiped at her cheeks to rid them of the tears that'd slipped out, sniffing and sitting up a bit straighter before he appeared. She'd cried on his shoulder several nights ago and she wasn't exactly keen with having a repeat; the less weak she looked to everyone, the quicker they'd let her go.

"Ooop, looks like they're taking me back. Will you come visit me soon?"

"I will, Liv. Soon, I promise."

"Okay. Love you. Be safe."

Darcy nodded her head as if Olivia would be able to see it then rolled her eyes at herself. "Text me when you're out of surgery."

"I will. Bye!"

When the double doors were pushed open, Darcy's gaze flicked up, watching as Tony made his way into the space. When she saw a head of auburn hair follow him inside, she scrambled to her feet, eyes widening in shock. When the teenager looked over in her direction, a similarly surprised expression graced his face.

"And this," Tony said with a wave of his arm toward the assortment of machines in the lab, "is where you'll be stationed. We've got all the bells and whistles and if you think -" His words trailed off when his whiskey-brown gaze landed on Darcy and her widened eyes. "What's that? What's the face for?"

"I just... I wasn't expecting anyone other than you," she answered, taking a step closer before holding out her hand toward the newcomer. "I'm Darcy."

"Peter Parker," Peter answered, hitching his backpack higher on his shoulder and moving to take her hand. He stopped, wiping his palms on his jeans quickly before finally capturing her hand and giving it a firm shake.

"Pete here is a recent graduate of the illustrious Midtown School of Science and Technology. He's going to be working in my lab for genius minds," Tony said, rocking back on his heels as he watched the two of them separate. "If his aunt signs his release form."

"W-what? Of course she will. There's not an actual release she has to sign, is there?" At the roll of Tony's eyes, Peter turned toward Darcy with an explanation. "I'm eighteen. She doesn't, uh, need to sign anything. He's just... I mean, after everything, with the..." Peter went quiet for a second, casting an uncertain look at Tony.

"Oh, she's not a civilian," Tony said with a dismissive wave in Darcy's direction, "she knows how our operation here works. Cupcake, allow me to introduce you to our friendly, neighborhood Spiderman."

Darcy's eyebrows raised toward her hairline impressively, working hard to make it seem like she was surprised by the nugget of information. "Like the youtube videos?"

Peter blinked quickly, flipping his backpack from one shoulder to the other. "You've seen, the videos, uh, my videos?"

"Some guy puts on a red and blue suit and flies around Queens using spiderwebs? Yeah, those
videos popped up on my radar. Didn't realize you were so young, though. You must have started when you were, what? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

"About then, yeah," Peter said, his cheeks heating pink. "I've been working with Mr. Stark for a few years now. How do you, do you, um, work here?"

"Oh, no," Darcy said with a shake of her head, both arms going behind her back as she fidgeted. "I'm just here for a little while longer, hopefully. I'm not an Avenger. Not really. You, though," she said with a nod toward him, "stealing Cap's shield in Siberia? Not many people get to touch that shield and live to tell the story."

"Oh! Yeah. That was a great day."

"Though some people may question the judgment of bringing someone underage to a superpower firefight," Darcy said. She watched Peter's shoulder shrug softly before turning a raised, accusatory eyebrow in Tony's direction. The billionaire was giving her a considering expression, and Darcy felt the small smile slip from her lips the longer he looked at her.

"Are you an intern?"

"Am I a what?" Darcy said, attention swinging back toward Peter.

Brown eyes widening, Peter took a step closer to her, hands lifting as if he was surrendering. "Not that I don’t think you couldn't be something else, like a scientist, or an engineer, or, or, a -"

"You're fine, Pete," Darcy said, throwing Peter a metaphorical life preserver, satisfied when he looked up at her with an embarrassed grin, "really. I know how you science-y types can be. I'm not offended."

"She's just not a team player, isn't that right, sport?"

Darcy looked over at Tony, tongue darting out to lick her lips. *Something* she'd said had pulled the entirety of Tony's focus to her, and she could feel his beady, dark eyes boring a hole in her skin. "That's right," she said, tearing her eyes away from Tony and turning them back toward Peter. "Papa was a rolling stone. Or I assume so, since I never actually met him. Mama’s probably one, too."

“Thanks for the totally useful good first impression information, peaches, but not sure that’ll come up on his first-day pop quiz.”

“There’s a, really, there’s a quiz?” Peter looked back and forth between the two of them.

“You’ll be fine,” Darcy assured him, taking a step closer to him with a smile. She lowered her voice and leaned in so he could hear. “The answers are all C. He’ll do it just to mess with you. You’re going to do good work here, Peter.”

Peter took in a deep breath when she pulled back, nodding heavily. “That’s, thanks, I mean, thank you. I’m excited to start.”

“Of course you are, “Darcy said, grin brightening the longer she looked at him. She’d only known Peter Parker for a year, but in that year, she’d come to care deeply for the baby science nerdling, and seeing the ‘new car smell’ Parker made her heart ache in the best ways. He was going to do and learn *so much* that it was going to change who he was, allowing him to grow and gain confidence, and she knew it was going to be an amazing thing to see.

Except she wouldn’t get to this time.
Peter’s shy smile shifted toward one of confusion as he watched Darcy’s cheeks heat pink and her eyes grow glassy. “Are you, uh, you okay?”

“Huh?” Darcy blinked, feeling the first tear slip down her cheek. She reached up with embarrassment, angrily scrubbing the wetness from her skin. “Fuck, sorry, I’m having issues. Issue, I have an issue. Overactive tear ducts, it’s fine. You’re going to do great work here, Parker, I’m just… I’ve got to go.”

“Of course, yeah, do what you’ve got, what you gotta do,” Peter finished lamely as Darcy made a hasty retreat and disappeared through the double doors. As they flapped shut, he glanced over in Tony’s direction, watching an expression of analytical focus, tinted with suspicion, color the engineer’s face. “Is she normally like that?”

“So far,” Tony said, shaking his head and pushing his thoughts about Darcy Lewis aside. He clapped a hand on Peter’s shoulder, squeezing. “Let me show you where you can set up and we’ll go get you an ID and Stark security badge. The badge is incredibly important, if you don’t want to get accosted by Happy.”

When Darcy had woken between two bodies, her brain had fired off several messages before she’d pulled herself fully from sleep. Her heart had begun to pound excitedly, mind screaming that it’d all been a bad dream and that she was back where she belonged. She was back, pressed between her boys’ bodies, and she felt relief fill her.

The relief was nothing but a false, bittersweet poison, as it became clear she wasn’t between Steve and Bucky. The body to her left was much smaller than either of her men, and the sweet smell of Jane’s deodorant had Darcy figuring out pretty quickly where she really was. When Thor shifted on her right, Darcy’s face turned toward him in the darkness.

Darcy’s best friend and her best friend’s boyfriend, who was really a fifteen-hundred-year-old Norse god, were wrapped around her in bed, all in an effort to make her feel better. They didn’t know why Darcy was grieving, but they wanted to be there anyway. She felt an overwhelming wave of affection toward Jane and Thor, but the next wave to hit her wasn’t affection, but mourning.

She was never going to be able to wake up with Steve or Bucky wrapped around her. She wasn’t going to kiss them then complain that they need to brush their teeth on lazy Saturday mornings, or know what it was like to look at someone and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that they loved her just as much as she loved them. There was an entire lifetime of things she wouldn’t get to do, and suddenly being pressed between two people was too much. Darcy wiggled down the bed, their arms and legs threatening to hold her fast, but she managed to extract herself.

She blinked down at Jane and Thor, who moved in their sleep like magnets, until Thor spooned Jane against his chest, draping one of his insanely large arms over the astrophysicist’s waist and pulling her closer. The stab of jealousy hit her quick, and Darcy lifted a hand to her chest, as if she’d be able to pull out the blade and feel it cut into her palm. She could feel the bitterness coat her tongue and she knew she needed to get air before she began to feel the walls pressing in around her.

It probably wasn’t smart to be walking about the compound in the middle of the night with bare feet, but Darcy didn’t care. She wrapped the blanket tighter about her shoulders as she padded down hallways, taking the serpentine path toward the stairs. She took the long way, forgoing the elevator.
and taking the stairs all the way up. When she pushed onto the roof, she looked down at the gravel with a sigh. *Good going, Lewis,* she mentally groused.

The walk toward the electrical box wasn’t pleasant, but the rocks didn’t split her skin, they just left her wincing. She pulled herself onto the box then snuggled deeper into the blanket, laying back, blinking up at the incredibly dark sky above. She watched the stars wink their lights, tracing the path of a satellite as it crossed in its orbit.

Everything was quiet, barely even a wind brushing through the trees that surrounded the compound. What she’d considered her, Steve, and Bucky’s first date had been up on the roof. A picnic where Steve got to know her, where she was able to look at both of them for the first time without the guilt she’d felt at tying herself to Bucky and making Steve question his place.

That hadn’t been the only time they’d used the roof as an escape, though. They’d spent quite a few nights under the stars, dancing to songs she had on her ipod, laughing and loving and just *being* with each other.

Darcy wasn’t sure how long she’d been laying there, thoughts in a freefall, before she felt the tug at the corner of her consciousness. Rolling her head toward the door, Darcy sucked in a deep gasp of air when she spotted the pulsing mass of crimson on the other side. She wasn’t sure why Bucky had come to the roof in the middle of the night, but it was obvious he knew she was there. He stayed on the other side of the door, not moving for several seconds, before he pushed forward.

Bucky froze when he stepped onto the roof, Darcy’s eyes already pointed in his direction. There wasn’t much of an expression on her face, though he could swear that she didn’t appear shocked to see him. It was there in her hazel eyes, if you looked hard enough, and he held her gaze and didn’t look away. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were up here.”

It was a lie, and Darcy felt her lips quirk upward. “It’s okay. I knew you were standing there.”

“Because of your abilities?”

That’s wasn’t it at all, but Darcy nodded her head, “yeah.”

In truth, it was because she knew how Bucky gathered himself before he did anything. He’d grown up with a brash Steve Rogers, who was ready to throw down at any given second, whether he knew he’d win the fight or not. It’d fallen to Bucky to be the calm one, cool under pressure and thinking ten steps ahead. He took that extra time to make sure his thoughts were in order.

…but Darcy couldn’t tell him that, because she shouldn’t *know* it.

When she went quiet, Bucky struggled with what to do or say. She was looking at him intently, her eyes guarded, and he wondered if he’d made a mistake following her up to the roof. His insomnia had been particularly bad and he’d found walking the halls as something of a balm. He knew every corner, every office and chair, and that normalcy helped him push his anxiety aside.

Seeing Darcy Lewis’s shoulders hunched and under a blanket as she travelled barefoot down the halls had been slightly unnerving, and part of Bucky told himself he was following her because she was a new player in this game of superpowers and it was smart to be cautious. The other part of him, though, couldn’t help being drawn toward the dark haired woman.

There was something in her eyes, something he recognized in himself, and though he was *certain* he’d never met her before, she felt familiar. It wasn’t every day Bucky saw something of himself reflected in someone else, and he’d found himself curious. Following her to the roof was one thing,
but actually having a one-on-one conversation with her? It hadn’t been part of his plan, and he was left searching for the real reason he’d followed her. He was just about to turn and make his way out when her voice broke the night air.

“Under a bomber’s moon like this, you can almost forget that New York City is only an hour away,” Darcy said, turning her face up to the stars and sky. When she turned back to Bucky, he seemed to be unsure what to do. As much as it stung, being able to look at him was a gift, a gift she wouldn’t have for much longer, and some part of Darcy didn’t want to let him go. She felt the flutter in her stomach, just like she always did with him, and hung onto the vision of him with both hands. There was a look in the grey of his eyes, some kind of surprise, and she blinked at him. “What?”

“I just...” Bucky started, his voice like the gravel that covered the roof around them, “haven’t heard it called that in a while.”

“ Heard what called what?” Darcy asked, watching as he edged closer.

“The moon. Bomber’s moon. Not a lot of people know that phrase anymore.” She shook her head softly, eyelashes brushing against her cheeks as she grinned. Bucky watched her gaze out toward the treeline, almost like she was trying to figure out what to say. She was wrapped in a dichotomy, and he tried to puzzle it out. It was odd, this feeling of familiarity, and he wasn’t exactly sure how it worked.

Most people who met him held some kind of uncertainty, even outright fear, knowing who and what he was, and what his hands had done. Most people didn’t know how to act around him, but that wasn’t what Bucky was feeling with Darcy. It wasn’t fear or uncertainty that turned her eyes away from his if they’d looked too long, it was pain. Pain he wasn’t sure how he’d caused. “Figured it was out of style by now.”

The snort from Darcy was heartfelt. “Yeah. I’ve found I have an affection for vintage things,” she said, a smirk on her lips when she looked up at him. She watched his mouth curl up on one side and felt the attraction like electricity in her veins. As he looked at her, humor in his slate grey gaze, it was almost enough that she felt normal again. She knew this man, and what made him smile, and knowing his smile wasn’t hers anymore made the smirk slip from her face.

There’d been a minute, a few precious seconds, when the weight that lived behind her eyes had faded for a span of time. Bucky had watched the truthful smile climb onto her face and the light of her expression had been like a gust of fresh air. Watching it fall apart and wither reminded Bucky what the girl had been through in the past few weeks.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted, surprised when the words broke free before he’d put much thought into them. When she looked over at him with confusion, he took a step closer to the electric box she was sitting on. “I know what it’s like to wake up and find your entire world has tilted on its axis.”

I know you do, Darcy thought as he looked at her, a slight hunch in his shoulders because he normally wasn’t the one carrying a conversation. He was trying to make her feel better, doing what he could while having no clue what was wrong in the first place. He’d done it that day in the med ward, too, when the weight of all her new powers had become too much. She’d been drowning, and he’d been the one to walk her back from the edge.

She felt a firm hand press against her sternum. “I’m gonna pass out,” she’d groaned, head swaying as her stomach threatened to deposit its contents all over the floor.

His hand had pressed harder, drawing her amber eyes and holding them. “No, you’re having a panic attack.”
“’S a bad one,” she’d managed, words slurring as she stared into his grey eyes, using them as something to focus on.

“Breathe. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Do it. In through your nose.”

Darcy shook her head, swallowing around a tongue that had grown too thick. She could feel the black on the edges of her vision. “Can’t. Too much, ’s too much. I’m not~”

He’d pressed even harder, forcing her eyes to widen as his voice grew with the increased pressure. “Doesn’t matter what you are, matters what you do. And right now you need to take a breath in through your nose and push it out your mouth.”

She’d stared into his eyes, feeling her lungs complain. Darcy had drawn what strength she had left and followed his orders, sucking in a deep breath through her nose and letting it out through her mouth, lips shaking with the effort. He’d stayed there, staring at her as tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

Bucky’s voice had been calm, and certain, and as he’d brought her back from the precipice, something in Darcy had connected him with safety. She’d had plenty of time to think back about it now, and she wondered if that was why she’d found him the first time she really tested her powers. She’d plucked a golden thread and it’d led her straight to James Barnes, and everything had changed forever.

Even now, looking at him and the small uncertain smile on his face, Darcy felt the pull of him. That was the reason she needed to leave. She wasn’t going to be able to stay here and feel that pull every day. It’d drive her mad, being so close but never getting to be with him and Steve like before.

She just wasn’t strong enough to handle that amount of pain.

Looking at her eyes, gaze haunted and a million miles away, Bucky was hit again with a slap of familiarity. He already knew the answer to his question, but he was moved to ask it anyway, the curiosity winning out over caution. “Did we… I mean, have we…” When one of her eyebrows raised at him, Bucky nodded and took a step closer, until he was standing beside her. “Have we met before?”

I know you better than you know yourself, Buck. Every dimple. Every scar. Every story of yours is mine, too. I know your heart, the way you love, the weight of your hand in mine. I’m so lost without my place inside your heart. No one will ever be to me what you are. No one will be able to hurt me like this again. Not like this. Not like you. I’m sorry we weren’t able to do everything we planned.

“No,” Darcy said, looking down at the softness of her blanket. “No, we’re never met before. I just have one of those faces.”

“It’s nice.”

As Darcy’s chest constricted, she looked up at Bucky with confusion. “What?”

“Your face,” Bucky explained, wondering when exactly he’d turned into Steve and lost his ability to speak without stumbling over words. “It’s a nice face, I mean.”

“Ah,” Darcy said, watching his eyes close and his breath huff out in frustration.

Her first giggle shook her shoulders and Bucky looked up at her with a careful expression. When her laughter continued, none of it biting or seeking to make him feel more embarrassed, he found himself joining in. Laughing wasn’t something he did often, but it felt good when the sounds of their laughter
floated on the night air.

He crossed his arms of his chest, a smile remaining on Bucky’s face as he followed her line of sight and stared toward the dark treeline. He wasn’t sure why she was so easy to talk to, but pushed aside the desire for an explanation as she wasn’t going to be around much longer, anyway. “I heard you asked Stark to get clearance to leave.”

Darcy’s tongue darted out to lick her lips, trying to quell the storm raging inside her chest that his words stirred up. Trying to appear nonchalant, she threw him a forced smile. “Yeah. Who’d really want to mess with someone like me, right? I mean, it’s not like Tony or anyone else could do anything to make me stay, short of shooting me with enough drugs that I can’t even tell what day it is. Not sure how else they’d handle it.”

When he continued to look at her and the verbal sewage she’d just spewed out, she shrugged her shoulder. “They’re going to check up on me, kind of like what they do for Banner.”

Once again, Bucky felt certain that her jokes about needing to be stopped were just that: jokes. Darcy Lewis, for as much as he knew her, was not going to use her powers for evil. He’d been able to see it from across the room, the thread of fear that was coiled tightly inside when it came to her abilities. She was terrified of hurting someone, her hazel eyes too warm and worried to carry her over that line. He knew Steve felt the same way, and knew that his best friend would make it clear in his report.

“Where do you think you’ll go? Home?”

I thought I’d already found my home, here, with you and that stupid gorgeous blond downstairs. Taking a second, Darcy forced her voice to stay even, her face a mask of ambivalence. “I haven’t given it much thought. I don’t know yet. Maybe somewhere cooler. Maybe up north. I’ve heard good things about Waverly, Iowa.” If her plans sounded insane, Bucky kept those comments to himself, simply nodding at her words. The truth was that she hadn’t thought of where she was running to, just what she was running away from. “Just… someplace without so many -” memories “- eyes.”

Eyes that shone like slate, darkening to charcoal, filled with so much that it sucked the air right out of her lungs. Or stunning blue irises that could speed her heart like nothing else, the weight and focus she could feel in the marrow of her bones. Somewhere that wasn’t tainted by bittersweet moments that only she could remember.

It felt like she had faded off mid-sentence, a heft to the air as her eyes left his and turned back to the dark. Bucky watched her take a deep breath in then let it out slowly, reaching up to swipe at her cheek. For some reason, he wanted to make her feel better, to chase the ache from her eyes. He opened his mouth then stopped himself, unsure why he was still standing there in the first place. “You’ll find somewhere to land,” he finally murmured, “you seem pretty good at taking care of yourself.”

His words left like a knife and Darcy bit her lips as she nodded, managing to keep the sob from breaking free. She felt him shift in her peripheral vision, not sure what to make of the woman who was seconds away from falling apart. She was a hot mess and that was exactly why she needed to get away from this place and the constant reminders of what she’d lost.

Feeling useless, Bucky turned and started toward the door, gravel crunching under his boots. He’d wrapped his fingers around the doorknob when he heard her voice call his name. Turning, he found Darcy standing barefoot with the blanket wrapped around her shoulders, only a few feet away. There was something on her face, some expression of an internal struggle, and he watched her war with
herself behind those hazel eyes.

The desperation in her chest was going to strangle her. Bucky was standing there, right there, and she felt the urgency to confess everything, consequences be damned. Darcy wanted to tell him that she loved him, every single atom of her being was screaming at her to tell him what she felt inside, what they’d had, but the longer she looked at him the more she realized she couldn’t.

He was happy. Bucky was happy with Steve. It’d taken almost a lifetime, but they were together, and whole, and perfect, and she couldn’t shatter that. They deserved to be with each other. She hadn’t given him a choice the first time, and she refused to do the same thing again.

“... it was nice getting to meet you,” Darcy finally managed, feeling her cheeks heat with shame and regret.

Bucky nodded, watching as she drew her bottom lip between her teeth and worried at it. There was an anxiety in her body, like something was pulled tight and ready to snap, and it made him look at her a little longer before responding. “It was nice to meet you, too.”

Darcy didn’t feel the rocks biting into the feet, or the chill on the air as it blew across her skin. As she watched Bucky disappear through the door, she felt nothing but the sharp and sudden stab of knowing that she’d never get to see his face lit by the moon or starlight ever again. Pain crossed her face as she sunk to her knees, feeling like her heart was going to stop as the grief gripped it tight.

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Darcy’s chipped nail polish had been scraped off her fingers, anxiety keeping her hands moving, her skin itching. She felt like a constant rubber band now, taut and ready to pop. She kept her mind busy with useless apps and walking the halls, anything to distract her. Luckily, Jane had taken to texting her every hour, and Darcy frowned at her phone as her fingers moved over the screen..

Jane: My parents said you’d be more than welcome to use the beach house
Darcy: I don’t really feel like being by a beach
Jane: Well you’re going somewhere, and if I know where you are I’ll feel better
Darcy: You’ll be the first to know what I decide
Jane: Promise?
Darcy: Pinky swear.

She loved her best friend, more than she would have thought possible, but Jane was asking questions that even Darcy didn’t know the answers to. After her late night rooftop meeting with Bucky, it had become even more painfully clear that she needed to figure it out. She knew Tony was going to bat for her with Hill, and from what Steve had said he would be echoing Tony’s recommendation, but the longer she stayed at the compound, the more it hurt. The halls held too many ghosts, too many memories of times she wouldn’t get back. She saw them, everywhere she looked, like shadows on the edges of her vision.

This is where I first kissed Steve, in the cafeteria, in front of everyone..

Bucky and I ducked into this office, tearing at each other’s clothes like we’d get caught any second, laughing in between breathless kisses.

The black truck of Tony’s in the garage, the one they’d taken on their date to Anatoly’s, the first night
they'd actually gone out together.

It was too hard to walk the halls, remembering everything, and Darcy was almost desperate to run away. It was weakness, she knew, and maybe one day she'd be able to return, but all she wanted now was fresh air to breathe past the scent of the life she'd lost. When the phone in her hand vibrated, her hazel eyes glanced down, seeing the mass of text Jane had sent her, turning a corner without looking.

She let out a yelp when her body smacked into someone else's, arms cartwheeling in an effort to stay on her feet. Strong hands wrapped around her upper arms and held her steady, saving her from the inevitable sprawl she'd have made on the floor. When she looked up at her savior, her eyes widened further as she stared into Clint Barton's face, a quiet Natasha standing by his side.

"Slow down, turbo," he said, squeezing her arms until she was able to untangle her legs and stand on her own. Clint's eyes widened slightly in confusion when he saw color flush in Darcy's cheeks and her eyes begin to fill with tears. "Oh, hey. you're okay, no harm, no foul." When Darcy took a step back away from him, he cocked his head to the side. "Hey, I know you."

Darcy's heart froze in her chest as he continued looking at her with an expression of recollection. Oh god, fuck, he knows me. How does he know me?!

"You're the girl from New Mexico." Clint turned toward Natasha with a nod of his head. "She was there when Thor arrived," he explained. "Coulson stole her iPod."

"Oh. Right. Yeah. That… yep, that was me." It was an odd sensation, feeling complete relief and utter disappointment at the same time, and Darcy swallowed before she was able to look up at him again. I missed your eyes.

"Heard you saved the world, which is pretty cool." When Darcy's gaze swung toward him, a guarded look in her eyes, Clint gave her a friendly smile.

"Y-yeah," Darcy said with a quick lifting of her lips, "wasn't on my bucket list but crossed it off anyway." When both Clint and Natasha went quiet, Darcy struggled to come up with something to say. This was the first time she was meeting them, after all, and she didn't want to say anything wrong. Or confusing. Or more confusing than the situation already was. "How... how are you? I mean, alive, obviously, which is neat."

"It was touch and go there for a little bit, but we managed to pull it out, thanks to you. And you got some pretty sweet powers in the deal."

"Who told you they were sweet?" Darcy asked, eyebrows knitting together. The only people who knew about her powers had been in the room during her test, and while she didn't put it past Tony to keep Clint and Natasha up to date on the details, she had to wonder if it'd been Steve. Darcy knew he worked side by side with Natasha, and if he'd thought it was pertinent, he'd have shared it with her.

Clint reached up to scratch at the back of his neck, a small shrug lifting and dropping his shoulders. "No one really told me anything, but I've got pretty good hearing. I tend to pick up on things quickly."

It was such an utterly Clint Barton thing to say that the smile that grew on her face was organic. Darcy snorted and looked over at Natasha with an eyebrow raised. "Kudos on putting up with someone so tiring."
When Natasha just blinked at her, Darcy’s smile faltered. It'd been a rather forward comment, speaking toward a relationship they didn't have. It’d taken quite a bit of time for Natasha to finally trust her like she had, and it was abundantly clear that she shouldn’t have said anything. Darcy stumbled over her words, trying to cover the slip. "I mean, as a partner. I've heard you're... partners." At Clint's laugh, Darcy kept filling the hall with her words, despite her desperate desire to shut up. "But not partner partners. Not that that'd be a bad thing, but I wouldn't... you just look like you work well together."

When she finished, teeth clacking as she closed her mouth, Clint gave her a bright grin as Natasha stared, green eyes filled with a sharp interest. "So you're trying to get out here," Clint said, drawing Darcy's hazel eyes toward him. "Don't like the food? Not impressed with the turn down service?"

"What? No. The food's fine. I just... this isn't really my thing, you know?"

Clint nodded, crossing his arms over his chest as he levied the full weight of his attention on her. "Well, you were there in New Mexico. And London. And at that last battle. Kinda seems like it might be your thing after all. We could sure use someone with your kind of phenomenal cosmic power."

His words made it clear that Tony had been the one to inform Clint of her abilities, as the engineer had said almost the exact same thing just a few days prior. "It's all so new still. I need some time to adjust to it all."

"I get that," Clint said. "When you're thrust in the middle of something bigger than yourself, it can be hard to wrap your head around. If you'd told me or Nat that we'd be fighting side by side with a Norse god, I'd..." He trailed off, eyes unfocusing for a second before a surprised laugh rumbled from his chest. "Well, I'd have probably believed you, but that's just me."

"And you've seen your fair share of weird too, right, Паук?"

The second the nickname fell from her lips, Darcy felt the air freeze in her chest. Natasha's green eyes had become like a dagger, digging into Darcy's brain, her pupils dilating as she gave the woman in front of her a little more attention. It wasn't an altogether friendly expression, and Darcy tried to calm the hostility she could feel from the copper-haired spy. Why couldn’t she just shut up and say nothing!?

It was a one of her biggest flaws, rushing to fill silence with words, and she it was clear Natasha wasn’t having any of it. "I... heard one of the trainees use that name," Darcy lied, knowing there was no way the agent believed her.

Clint picked up on the tension immediately, taking a deep, dramatic breath in. "Well, it was nice to get to say hello before you make your escape."

"Yeah. It was nice to meet you, too," Darcy said, her lips turning up the longer she looked at him. After what had happened over the past two weeks, all the information she was still sorting through, this man standing in front of her was worth it alone. He was going to go home to Laura, and Cooper, and Lilah, and Nate. His family was whole and complete, and for the first time in weeks, Darcy felt a flare of happiness light in her chest. "I'm glad I was able to help."

When Clint took a step toward her and laid a hand on her arm, Darcy blinked at the uncharacteristically serious look on his face. "There are a few things in this world that mean everything to me,” he said, his voice low and sincere, “and you saved them. Thank you."

Feeling like she was about to cry, from both happiness and despair, Darcy took a step back and
waved her hand toward him, a nervous laugh breaking the air. "You don't have to thank me. I know you would have done the same."

"Yes," Natasha said, Darcy's gaze swinging back toward her, "and been turned into ash in the process. Neat trick that you happen to have that mutation."

There was a sharpness in Natasha's eyes, like she could see that Darcy was trying to hide something. Darcy had never been on this side of Natasha's glares, and *fuck* was it intimidating. Nodding, Darcy shrugged a shoulder. "I got lucky."

"Didn't seem like luck."

Not sure what else to say, realizing it was hard to hide *anything* from Natasha, let alone something as gigantic as a whole years worth of time being turned back, Darcy smiled at the two of them, her eyes lingering on Clint's jovial expression. She'd missed that smile so much. She was gutted by the loss she'd been dealt, but if it meant that Clint Barton got to go home to his family at the end of the day, Darcy couldn't regret what had happened. "Maybe I'll see you around," she managed, looking up at him one more time before she sidestepped them both and continued down the hallway.

When Darcy glanced over her shoulder, Natasha's keen green eyes watched her until she disappeared around the corner.

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Darcy looked up from the game of pool she was playing, glancing over at her opponent with knit eyebrows. "Did you hear that?"

"*Hear what?*" was the heavy Russian-accented response.

*Turning back toward the felt table, a large rip in the middle of the green fabric, Darcy lined up her shot. The last ball was a perfect sphere of black with a large, glowing gold star in the middle.*

When a voice sounded *right next* to her ear, Darcy shied away from the sound, turning her head to the pillow and burrowing further. "Noooo."

"Rise and shine, peaches."

Squinting an eye open, Darcy looked over her shoulder at Tony, blinking heavily, annoyance in her gaze. "What is it?"

Tony raised an eyebrow as he straightened in his chair, the wheels carrying him several feet backward, an expression of distaste crinkling his nose. "First? You need to go brush your damn teeth or I’ll be forced to call the CDC."

Glaring in his direction, Darcy peeled her blanket down, taking a deep breath in before climbing to her feet and grabbing the backpack of her things near the end of the sofa. As she brushed her teeth, toothpaste foaming at the corners of her lips, Darcy stared at herself in the mirror. She lost herself in the act, letting the repetitive movement lull her, quieting the noise of her thoughts. Even though Jane was at a conference in Oslo (after Darcy insisted that she’d be fine on her own and all but forced her best friend on the plane), she’d been sending texts throughout the day, checking in and making sure she was doing alright.
It was incredibly sweet and in any other circumstance, Darcy would have been ecstatic that the astrophysicist was thinking about her, but the texts had moved from sweet to monotonous, and though she knew it was unfair, Darcy couldn't help but feel trapped by every alert. She had nothing different to say, assuring Jane that she was not in any pain, and that everyone had been incredibly nice to her. There was no one that needed the fiery fury of the tiny brunette pointed in their direction, unless Jane could fight time, and though her best friend was wicked smart, time was not Jane’s area of expertise.

When she made her way back into the lab, Darcy watched Tony flick through his newsfeed before making it disappear with a wave of his hand. "Did you brush for the whole two minutes?" He smirked when Darcy threw him the middle finger, watching her collapse back onto the sofa, grabbing and wrapping her arms around a pillow before her gaze swung up toward him expectantly. Clearing his throat, Tony sat back on his stool. "I am here to express her sincere apologies that Director Hill was unable to meet with you personally during your stay, but she had some very important information come up that required her complete attention."

Darcy hadn’t really been expecting a visit from Hill in the first place, so this bit of news wasn't really a surprise. "That's fine. I'm sure your reports told her everything she needed to know."

"You're not wrong," Tony said, tossing a file folder toward her.

"What's this?" Darcy asked, flipping open the cover, frowning down at the neatly typed words. Her eyes moved quickly from left to right; most of it was nothing more than gobbledygook, science-speak that she was certain was above her pay grade, but it was the 'comments and recommendations' section that pulled her attention. The first block of text was at the end of Tony's data.

[Through conversations with Thor Odinson and my own personal experiences, it is clear that Darcy Lewis is able to juggle the absurdity that seems to surround the world of Avengerdom. She had proved, on several occasions, that she is willing to do what she can to save the planet. Under normal circumstances, that sentence may be nothing but hyperbole, but in Lewis' case, it is one-hundred perfectly accurate.

Though she has every reason to go insane at the unbelievable amount of power she holds inside, Lewis is reluctant to use her abilities, whether for good or evil. While the reality of what her powers can do border on astronomically un-understandable, she seems relatively at ease with her control.

It cannot be overstated how cooperative she has been, allowing any test myself or Dr. Banner wished to run, as well as allowing us to film her abilities for later use and study.

Lewis' abilities make her one of the most powerful beings on the planet, but she does not appear to let this affect her. She continues to go through her life like it is her own, and I believe there is no reason why she should be required to stay under S.H.I.E.L.D. surveillance. While I agree that she would make a wonderful addition to the Avengers active roster, the fact that she doesn't wish to be a part of our team should be respected. As the amended Sokovia Accords state, just because an enhanced person has powers that may assist S.H.I.E.L.D. in the line of duty, they cannot be expected to remain against their will.

Darcy Lewis' actions saved billions of people's lives. She should get to pick what she does with the rest of hers.]

When Darcy glanced up at Tony with tears in her eyes, the engineer was looking down at his hands, picking at a cuticle and specifically avoiding her gaze. Reaching up to swipe at her cheeks, she flipped the pages, the rest of her test results and data collated into a neat and tidy binder. The
comments from Bruce were along the same lines as Tony's, and reiterated that, like him, her assistance in S.H.I.E.L.D. activities should be on a volunteer basis and not required.

Toward the back of the packet was a single sheet of paper, Steve's delicate script signing his name across the bottom. Unbidden, Darcy's hand reached out and traced his signature. Taking a deep breath in, Darcy started from the top.

[As Chief Threat Assessment Officer, it is my duty to analyze any new threats that could put S.H.I.E.L.D., The Avengers, or the planet at large in harm’s way.

It is my recommendation that Darcy Lewis should be cleared of any reservations or restrictions.

Over the weeks that Ms. Lewis has been on base, she has allowed and followed through with every physical and mental test that has been asked of her. When questions arise, she gives as clear of an explanation as she can. She appears honest, and sincere, and well aware of the weight of the power she holds inside.

I know more than most what it's like to be gifted with powers you couldn’t dream of. A man I respected once told me that changes, like what Ms. Lewis has gone through, tend to amplify everything that's inside. It can make the good better and the bad even worse. If someone with a darkness inside had done what Ms. Lewis did, it is conceivable that the world would be a very different place than it is today.

How lucky we are, then, that a woman with a good heart like Ms. Lewis was there in our time of need.

Should Ms. Lewis decide at a later date that she wishes to return and gift S.H.I.E.L.D. and The Avengers with her strength, I will personally welcome her to the team. If, however, she decides that becoming an agent is not the path she is meant to walk, I see no reason why we should give Ms. Lewis anything than what she has requested.]

Darcy sniffled, letting the folder fall closed on her lap as she buried her face in her elbow to wipe it free of tears. When she looked up at Tony, the billionaire was looking at her with a neutral expression on his face. "What'd Hill have to say?"

"To be honest, I didn't care what she said."

"I'm shocked," Darcy said, rolling wet eyes at his incredibly true and unsurprising answer.

"Luckily, Hill agreed with me and Cap. As of today, you are no longer required to stay on base. In fact, if you wanted to get up and run from the room right now, there's not a damn thing any of us could do about it. Not that we could really do anything about it before, but whatever. It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're good to go."

Darcy blinked at him, her mind trying to turn over the fact that she was free. She didn't have to stay here anymore, haunted by the ghosts of a life she'd almost gotten to live. It'd been so bright, and shiny, and she should have known better than the expect it to last. Things that gleamed too much tended to tarnish when she touched them, and this was just the inevitable resolution. "That's... cool."

Tony's eyebrows lifted. "Cool? That's cool? Those are you words?"

"What did you expect me to say, dick?"

"A thank you so much, Tony, for giving me what I wanted' would have been nice." When she held his gaze, those words not leaving her mouth, Tony shrugged it off and grabbed an envelope he'd set
aside. He held it out toward her, shaking it when she regarded it with a suspicious expression. "I just
told you that you're free to go and you're gonna give me side eye?"

"I don't trust that magnanimous look in your eyes," she said, pulling the envelope from his hands,
slipping a finger under the seal and flipping it open. Darcy stared down at the check, and the amount
of zeros it had on it, not sure what she was really looking at. "What is this?" She looked up at Tony
with wide eyes. "Is this from you?"

"Does it say Stark Industries? No. This is from S.H.I.E.L.D. When Hill heard you'd be leaving and
that you didn't have a job, she decided you were due a little pocket change to see you on your way.
Consider it hazard pay."

Unsure what to say, Darcy sat back on the couch, feeling a crush of emotions inside. This was what
she'd wanted, what she'd been asking for, and now that it was here, she couldn't help but feel a bit
lost. It was fine to say she needed to be elsewhere when it was just a thought, but now it was a reality
and she had no idea what she was supposed to do. It was stupid that she hadn't thought farther
ahead, but it was the truth, and the uncertain uselessness felt heavy on her shoulders.

When a set of keys were thrown in her direction, Darcy let out a yelp and managed to catch them
before they smacked into her face. She glared hard at Tony before glancing down, confusion in her
hazel eyes. "S.H.I.E.L.D. bought me a car?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I got you a car." When she looked up at him sharply, he gestured vaguely in the
air with his hand. "I didn't buy you a car, I'm just letting you borrow one. I know you don't know
where you'll end up, but at least you'll have something that won't break down on you. And," he said,
crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back on the stool, "it means you'll have to return here
eventually."

Darcy looked down at the keys, tossing them up and down a few times before she glanced back up
at him. "So it's a form of blackmail."

"Come on. Blackmail is such a hard word. Think of it as... emotional extortion."

The laugh that broke free from her mouth was light, and Darcy shook her head as she tried to wrap
her mind around everything Tony had given her. "Thank you so much, Tony, for giving me what I
wanted."

When his words were parroted back to him, Tony's lips curled into a smirk. "One day, you're going
to wake up and miss seeing my face every day."

"Is that right?"

"I'm a genius and always right, try to keep up." Once again, Tony ignored the hand gesture she sent
his way. "On that day, which will happen, when you decide you want to come back, I'm sure I could
find a use for you around here."

She blinked at him. "Did you just offer me a job?"

"Not now, but eventually. You'll go do what it is that you think you need to do, sow your wild oats
or granola or whatever, then you'll be back. You'll bring back my car, and we'll figure it out from
there."

"And what if I can't come back here?"

Tony picked up on her emphasis, a flash of understanding coloring his whiskey-brown eyes before
he shrugged. "Telecommuting is a thing."

Brain swimming with everything, Darcy nodded, unsurprised when her shoulders lifted and her breath hitched on the way in. Once again, in just the few weeks he'd known her, Tony Stark had managed to tear her apart with his form of friendship. She thought the relationships she'd made before were gone, but it was painfully clear that what had been built between them seemed unchanged by the folding of time. "God, you're such an asshole," she gasped, glaring at him even as she smiled through her tears.

"Would you believe me if I said you're not the first person to call me that?" Her snort of laughter moved him to action, and Tony slipped from his stool and crossed so he could sit next to her on the sofa. Silence descended over the lab as they both breathed. It wasn’t often that Tony was pushed toward speechlessness, but this was one of those rare times.

“You’re a good man, Tony Stark.”

Tony glanced over at her with a frown. “Don’t ruin my street cred, Lewis.”

Darcy took in a large breath before she swung the weight of her gaze toward him. “I am going to miss you, Tony. I know you don’t know me that well, but I can see it. I get why you hide it, showing that vulnerability. I’ve got more than my own share of daddy issues. But you… when you commit to something, whether it’s a build, or a device, or taking a newly eighteen-year-old under your wing, you don’t half ass it.”

Giving her a long look, unsure how to respond to her words, Tony stretched his arm along the back of the couch, slouching his shoulders. “Never half-ass two things, whole ass one thing. Nietzsche said that.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Ron Swanson from Parks and Rec said that.”

“No, it was Nietzsche.”

“Really? This is the hill you’re going to die on?” When his eyes slid over to hers, Darcy could see the glint in all that chocolate brown, and she let out a groan before she sat back, feeling the warmth of his arm across her shoulders. “If I did work for you, I’d have to get good benefits.”

“Whatever you want, Princess.”

“And my own office.”

“You got it.”

“I’d want my birthday off every year.”

“We’ll make it a national holiday.”

Lips curling upward, Darcy looked over at Tony, seeing his face in profile as he smiled. She sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder. He didn’t flinch, or move away, so Darcy took the moment to soak in the man who’d become like an older brother, knowing she didn’t have much time left. She turned the keys over in her hand, grin growing larger. “Is it a cool car?”

“Take what you can get, peanut.”

“Okay, boss.”
Greatest Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Darcy leaves the Avenger's compound and starts the journey of moving past her loss.

Chapter Notes

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I used to think death was the greatest sacrifice,
But I realize now that death is kind.
The real test is in living with the glory,
And all of its consequences.
The real test is not the battle, but the aftermath.
I envy the ignorance of a young man's folly.
And if I told you how the story ends,
Would you change a step you take?
And if I could relive all of my days,
I'd live them all the same.
'Cause I'm scared of all that I don't know,
'Cause I want it all, but all of it ain't gold.

PageBreak

“Is that everything?”

Darcy lifted the garbage bag clutched in her hand and held it up for Tony’s inspection. She hadn’t really acquired much in the few weeks she’d been at the compound this time, and she’d never been the kind of person that put big emphasis on material objects. One of the many joys of growing up in the system. “I travel light.”

“I can’t decide if that’s genius or pathetic.”

“Little of column A, little of column B,” Darcy said, tossing her bag onto the passenger seat.

Tony ran a hand over the roof of the car, tapping it softly. “She’s all gassed up, tuned up, and you’ve got GPS and bluetooth tech. The tires can’t go flat and they’re filled with nitrogen.” At Darcy’s raised eyebrow, he shrugged a shoulder. “The insurance card and registration is in the glove box. If you run into -”
Darcy reached out and placed a hand on Tony’s arm, stopping his words, a sincere smile on her face. “Tony, I got it. Thank you. I promise I’ll take care of it.”

“Her.”

“What?”

Tony shrugged his shoulder and gestured through the air with his hand. “Nothing, don’t worry about it.” His brown eyes looked at the car then back at Darcy, seriousness bleeding into them. “Remember, this is a loaner. Don’t fuck it up. I fully expect you to bring her back in one piece.”

“I know.”

The silence that descended in the garage shifted toward awkward until Tony shoved both of his hands in the pockets of his slacks and rocked back on his heels. “Well, as soon as you figure out where you’re heading, shoot me a text. Or an email. But don’t call. No one uses the phone anymore. Just let me know where you end up.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, putting her hands on her hips as she pinned him with a look. “You say that like you aren’t going to know exactly where this car is the entire time I have it.”

“No, of course not,” Tony said with a sharp shake of his head, “that would be a blatant violation of your privacy.”

“Mmmhhmm,” Darcy hummed. She wouldn’t tell him, but knowing Tony would be able to follow her journey made her feel better. It was like a safety net she couldn’t see but knew was there. The nerves in her stomach flipped again and she shifted her weight, glancing down at the car before her gaze flicked back up to Tony. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Not a big deal. You’ll be fine.”

Darcy searched his brown eyes, seeing the brilliant brain behind the mask of indifference. *Fuck*, but she was going to miss this man. She took a step toward him, seeing the look of confusion cross his face. “Can I …?” When he didn’t make any movement, she took it upon herself and wrapped her arms around his chest.

Tony went still at first, and Darcy was almost certain he’d pull away, but then he lifted his arms and patted her lightly on the back. When she took a step backward, the engineer’s lips were curled upward. He made a fist and brought his knuckles to her jaw and pushed softly. The move was familiar, and Darcy felt a wave of affection that threatened to bring tears, and she didn’t want to cry anymore.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, Princess.”

“That leaves the door pretty wide open.”

“Means you’ll have to come back through it,” Tony said, watching the small grin grow on Darcy’s face. He turned on his heels, hands stuffed in his pockets. He glanced over his shoulders at her once, giving her a nod. When the door to the garage opened, Tony stepped to the side and gave Steve a nod as he passed by. “Cap.”

“Tony,” Steve greeted, his eyes following Tony’s exit before turning back toward his target.

Darcy’s hazel eyes had watched Tony as he walked away, widening when the blond she’d been hoping to avoid made his way into the garage. Worse yet, his gorgeous blue gaze looked up and
found her, starting in her direction, doing what she’d come to think of as his ‘mission strut’. It was
t entirely sexy and definitely not what she’d wanted to see before she left. A small, impossible voice in
her head told her to jump in the car and speed away, but she managed to not flee and stayed on her
feet.

She was absolutely certain that this conversation, whatever it’d be, was going to tear her apart.

Darcy took in a long, lingering look of Steve; if this was one of the last times she got to see him face
to face, she was going to look her fill. Her eyes traced across his jaw, his lips, up to his expressive
eyes that had always been able to undo her. If her staring made him uncomfortable, he didn’t say
anything, and when he neared, she let the air hiss out of her lungs before pasting a smile on her face.

There was a look in Darcy’s eyes that Steve didn’t understand and he felt another brush of
uncertainty, not sure why his presence seemed to push her toward sadness. He didn’t know her well
enough, but it the smile on her face didn’t appear genuine. Regardless, his lips lifted to match hers
and he stopped when he was a few feet away, hands on his hips as he glanced toward the car behind
her. “Tony’s letting you take the car?”

“It’s a loaner,” she explained, feeling his eyes like a laser when they swung back to her. “Pretty sure
he’ll be able to track me down if I go AWOL with his property.”

Steve nodded, looking down at his feet. When he looked back at her, he felt pinned beneath the
weight of her gaze. “Did Tony give you -”

“An incredibly generous hazard pay bonus to help me fund my country-wide farewell tour? Yeah.”

“Country-wide? You don’t know where you’re headed?” When she didn’t elaborate and he saw the
slight hesitation in her eyes, Steve’s hand gestured in the air. “That’s okay, you don’t have to tell me.
I just wanted to catch you before you left so I could say thank you.”

Darcy took a step backward, stopping when her ass hit the car, feeling her heart constrict in her
chest. “Steve, you don’t have to -”

“I don’t…” Glancing down, Steve tried to gather his thoughts. He didn’t want to upset her, but he
felt like he had to say something. What she’d done, what she’d stopped from happening, was
unbelievable. When his head lifted, he watched her stare, her lips parted and cheeks pink. “I know
this hasn’t been easy on you and... I really hope you find what it is you’re looking for.”

His words froze her breath, and the squeeze on her heart intensified, as if the organ would shatter
into a million pieces. This was what she’d been trying to avoid, just one more knife of sadness
finding her flesh, and as she stared at Steve, Darcy felt the slice of the blade as it cleaved her heart in
two. Her tongue darted out and licked dry lips, blinking past the pain. “I hope so, too.”

She had to take a steadying breath, weight shifting from one foot to the other. Darcy watched the
timid smile on his face grow, those blue eyes looking down at his feet. She couldn’t imagine what
was going through his head, wondering why this stranger acted like a crazy person every time he
was in the room with her. “It was…” His eyes swung back toward her and Darcy swore she’d never
seen something as beautiful or guttingly heart wrenching. “It was nice getting to see the real person
behind the shield.”

Steve held her eyes, seeing the sincerity behind her words. He took a step back as she reached down
to open the car door. She moved like she was going to climb in but paused, turning back toward him,
a look of pain crossing her face, as if she wasn’t sure she wanted to say what was on her mind. He
gave her room, trying to appear unassuming, not wanting her to feel pressured.
“You’re more than than, though, you know?” When Steve’s head tilted at her words, Darcy’s fingers gripped the top of the car door, using it as an anchor as she stared into his eyes, feeling the sharp, bittersweet taste of half-finished promises. “You’re more than just the shield. More than just Captain America. You deserve to be more. You’ve earned it.”

They were words she’s said to him, what felt like a lifetime ago, and Darcy had felt the crush inside, that she needed to say those words. A lifetime had passed since the night they’d shared together in the hotel, but the sentiment was just as true as it’d been then, and if the last thing she ever said to Steve Rogers was that he deserved more than just being Captain America, then at least she’d made her last words worth it.

There were so many unsaid things in her gaze that Steve could do nothing but nod at her, feeling an itch up the back of his neck as she looked at him for a beat longer before climbing into the car and shutting the door. He put his hands in his pockets, taking a step back when the car rumbled to life.

Darcy’s fingers wrapped around the steering wheel, gripping it tight, purposefully not looking in her side mirror and at the man she would be driving away from. She shifted into drive, the large door to the garage lifting and giving her an exit. She pulled away, seeing the bright green forest that surrounded the compound.

Though she knew it would be horrible and knew it would cause her nothing but anguish, Darcy’s hazel eyes flicked up to look in the rearview mirror anyway.

Steve stood there, hands in his pockets, watching her pull away. The fringe on his forehead was longer than he normally wore it, and even though she was far enough away that she shouldn’t have been able to see them, his blue eyes still held the power to break her apart.

The deep, gasping breaths started as the garage door stole him from sight, her vision blurring through tears. Darcy followed the road, winding away from the building until she couldn’t see the compound anymore, until there was nothing but lush, green vegetation on all sides. She pressed the brake, throwing the car into park before the sobs started.

Darcy pressed her forehead against the steering wheel, gasping her breath as her shoulders shook, feeling like she was going to burst into tiny shards of glass. She was leaving to get their tastes out of her mouth and off her tongue, hoping with space that she’d forget how soft their hands could be, and how even their breaths sounded when they slept beside her.

There were a million reasons why she was leaving, but every single one of them paled in comparison to one single truth: She would never love anyone like she loved James Barnes and Steven Rogers.

When she’d let the pain linger long enough that she’d begun to go numb, Darcy reached up to wipe her tears away. She sniffled, humming with sadness, reaching for her phone and swiping until she found the playlist she’d made for Jane after Thor had left in New Mexico. A ‘my boyfriend has left on a rainbow for Asgard and I don’t know when he’ll be back’ playlist full of upbeat, pop tunes that they could dance to and forget about the pain for a few minutes.

She hadn’t expected to need it for herself.

As the bumping bass flowed from the car’s speakers, Darcy pulled on the gearshift, wheels crunching over gravel before it shifted to pavement, leading her away from the people she’d thought were her home.
"You need a refill, hun?"

Darcy looked up at the waitress, giving her a small grin. "Yes please," she answered, sliding the mug across the chipped Formica table toward the woman who was wearing a one-hundred percent stereotypical light pink dress with a dirty white apron.

Turning her eyes back toward the window, Darcy watched sporadic headlights traverse the dark highway on the other side of the glass, her pen tapping out a random tune on the map she had spread across the table. When she'd crested a hill and seen the lights of the diner, she'd decided she needed a warm meal and a horrible cup of coffee. The quality of the coffee had been surprisingly good, and after she'd eaten, she'd pulled the map out of her bag, intent on planning the next leg of her journey.

Darcy'd spent a few days with Olivia, helping her foster mother get around after her surgery. Liv was doing great, healing quickly and feeling better than she had in years. Returning to the home she'd spent the better part of her teens in had been a stark reminder to Darcy of how far she'd come since that first night Olivia had taken her in. The woman had slept outside Darcy's bedroom door, making sure the angry, surly, jaded teen wasn't going to run away. Darcy had tried, of course, and it wasn't the only time Olivia had needed to keep Darcy from disappearing.

Fifteen year later, Darcy had returned the favor, sleeping upright in a chair beside Olivia's bed, watching over the older woman. The soft maroon of Olivia's soul had winked brightly at Darcy in the dark bedroom, strong and there, and the tears that'd slipped down Darcy's cheeks had been those of gratitude, immeasurably grateful that her death had been avoided.

When the anxiety began to pool in her stomach, legs jumping and hands fidgeting almost constantly, Darcy had taken it as a sign that it was time to move on. She'd hugged Olivia, telling her that she was sorry she'd gone out of touch for so long, only to have the foster mother tell her that she was happy Darcy seemed to have a healthy life of her own, and that it was the ultimate goal of any foster parent. Darcy didn't have the heart to correct her, to confess that she was currently wandering the world rudderless and lost. She tried to convince herself that she was just talking a small trip, like a semester abroad, but a voice in the back of Darcy's head reasoned that the last time she'd gone abroad had included an invasion bent on destroying the world, so maybe she'd be best to stay stateside.

She'd toyed briefly with returning to the New Mexico town where this had all begun for her, but Darcy didn't want to go back. She wanted to go forward, to someplace new, someplace without the ghosts of painful memories. The car Tony had loaned her had all the bells and whistles, and the stipend from S.H.I.E.L.D. meant she didn't have to worry about things like gas or lodging, but Darcy had never been particularly fancy. Motel 8 was more than acceptable, regardless of there being a continental breakfast offered, and roadside diners with tacky neon lights in the windows were perfect.

For being almost one in the morning, there were more people in the quiet diner than she thought there'd be, a mishmashed assortment of truck drivers and other road weary travelers. She could hear them talking about the weather, and the road work and other traffic snarls that would make driving a giant rig difficult. Darcy hadn't meant to drive so late, but she'd found comfort in the stillness of the dark highways. She'd found herself looking at the shining lights that dotted either side of the road, the souls of people who were asleep in the houses and farms that ran parallel to the highway, people who had no idea how close they'd all come to oblivion.

They say ignorance is bliss.
Bullshit.

Ignorance was only good for minimizing the damage, for shoving all that pain somewhere it couldn't be seen and hiding it away. For the longest time, Darcy'd wanted to know everything, but she understood the weight of things now. She understood that knowing things has a price; sometimes it's taken from your flesh, other times from your sanity, but however it happened, knowledge exacted its own cost.

Seeing Olivia had given Darcy a sense of clarity, some semblance of peace. Being at the compound had been too hard because she could do nothing but feel slapped in the face by things that she had lost. Leaving, putting space between herself and her heartache, had put things in perspective. Darcy would never regret grabbing that stone that first time, even with all the fear and uncertainty that came with it.

She'd lived an entire life with James Buchanan Barnes and Steven Grant Rogers, and even if it hadn't been meant to last, she felt luckier than almost anyone that she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was worthy of that kind of love. It still hurt, it still tore her apart inside, but Darcy was beginning to understand that just because it hurt now didn't mean it always would; one day, down the road, she'd be able to look back on that year with a smile and gratitude that she'd been gifted with it in the first place.

Tearing her eyes from the darkness outside, Darcy cast her hazel gaze back to the map on the table. She smoothed her hands over one of the creases, following the highway with her finger, circling the town of Riverside, Iowa. Future home of Captain James Tiberius Kirk. She'd go south from there, maybe to Texas. She'd never been to the west coast, and Seattle was home to grunge music and rain, so it couldn't be all that bad, right? She wanted to make the most of this mind-clearing journey, and stopping at all the kitschy roadside attractions seemed like a pretty good distraction.

Darcy had just grabbed her phone to estimate how long she'd have to drive when she heard a voice she recognized.

"Coffee, please, and if you could drop off some creamer, that'd be great. I'll be right over here."

Eyes narrowing, Darcy watched Stephen Strange slip into the booth across from her and spread his arm over the back of his seat. His face held the arrogance she'd come to realize was just his normal expression, his eyes steady on hers without a hint of explanation. "The coffee here is surprisingly good," she said in greeting, putting both of her elbows on the table and cradling her chin in her hands as she blinked at him.

"I've had better," Stephen said, smoothing his cloak across his seat and getting comfortable.

Darcy's gaze was pulled toward the fabric when it rippled around Strange's shoulders, crossing the table and waving softly at her. Lips quirking upward, she reached out and 'shook' the cloak's hand.

"It always liked you," Stephen murmured, the cloak returning to his side and going immobile when the waitress returned with a steaming mug of coffee and a dish of creamer. If she thought his collared cape looked out of place, the waitress kept the comments to herself, leaving the two of them after he'd assured her he wasn't needing anything from the kitchen.

"You know," Darcy said as she leaned back in her side booth, "I don't understand how that could be. I've only been around it once."

"Time travel can be... tricky." At Darcy's hollow sounding snort, Stephen sat forward. "I could explain it all to you if you wanted, but we'd be here all night."
It was clear that he didn't really expect her to take him up on the offer, but the sorcerer had caught her in a mood, and Darcy wanted to call his bluff. Besides, he'd come to her for some reason and she assumed he'd get to it sooner or later. "I've got no big plans. Let's do it."

Stephen looked at her for a long moment, trying to gauge how serious she was. Seemingly satisfied with her challenging raised eyebrow, he took in a deep breath. He'd always loved explaining things to people, after all. "There are, essentially, three theories of time travel. The first is the worst, known as a fixed timeline. Basically, it doesn't matter what you do, things are going to turn out a specific way despite your meddling."

"Hitler." When the man across from her gave her a confused look, Darcy waved her hand through the air. "You go back in time and kill Hitler, but instead of that Hitler becoming Hitler, someone else becomes Hitler. Nothing you can do. Shit's gonna be fucked no matter what."

It was pretty clear that hadn't been what he'd expected to hear from her, but Stephen shrugged his shoulder in concession. "That's as good an example as anything I could have given."

"I'm not just another pretty face," Darcy said with a small grin, watching his eyes flash with humor before he took a careful sip of his steaming coffee.

"The next type is dynamic," Stephen continued when he'd set his mug down. "If you go back and alter something that happened in the past, it would have a direct correlation to present day."

Darcy grabbed one of her half-eaten pieces of toast and took another bite. "Like Back to the Future. The disappearing photo he carried around. If he didn't get his parents back together, he'd cease to exist."

Stephen gave her another nod of his head. "You never know if what you changed could bring the entire universe down on its head."

"But no pressure or anything, right?" When his lips lifted in a grin, Darcy shoved the rest of the toast in her mouth and brushed her hands together then swept the crumbs off her map. "I've seen all those movies."

"Which ones?"

"Back to the Future. The Butterfly Effect. Looper. Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. I've seen them all."

"Then you know that it's not ideal." Stephen sat up a little straighter, a look of concentration on his face. "Let's stay with Hitler in this example, and he's your grandfather. You go back in time to kill him, but in doing so, you make it so you're not born. If you weren't born, you didn't go back in time to kill him, so Hitler is still alive, and therefore you are born. It's a paradox, an infinite loop."

"And ultimately useless, I get it. But how does that explain why your cape knows who I am?" Darcy watched the fabric wave at her, and she had the distinct impression that it wasn't exactly a kind gesture. "Sorry," she said, holding her hands up in surrender, "you're not a cape, you're a cloak. Got it."

Waiting for the cloak to settle back around him, Stephen relaxed back into the booth. "Now, the multiverse theory says there are alternate timelines out there. You go back in time and kill your grandpa Hitler. From that change on, an entirely new timeline emerges, one that no longer has a Hitler but still manages to have you alive. But, by creating a new timeline, there is no way for you to return to that original timeline. That timeline keeps going, and the last thing they knew is that you
went back in time never to emerge again. But you are left to deal with the new timeline you’ve created."

She let out a soft whistle and shook her head. "That's a fuckload of timelines."

"Yes, that's what infinite means."

Darcy rolled her eyes and sat back in the booth, crossing her arms over her chest. "So, did you come here to tell me something, or just wanted to leave me pondering about the troublesome physics and mental problems associated with time travel?"

"I'm answering your question," Stephen said, watching her face take on the same expression of a challenge she’d given him earlier. "My cloak knows you because there are multiple timelines that have seen you work together."

The look of disbelief on Darcy's face was thick. "I worked together with a cloak? Doesn't that mean that there are multiple cloaks out there, apparently living their best lives?"

"Myself and the cloak are able to see and traverse the multiverses."

"Well, aren't you special," Darcy said, the bitterness in her voice making her feel a small swell of guilt before she stamped that shit down. She had every reason to be bitter about time travel and the way it had fucked with her life. "Do you have any other nuggets of hurtful truth to lay down on me, or...?"

"Do you know why you were able to control the Soul Stone?"

"The first time or the second?" At his unappreciative glare, Darcy let out a sigh. "My mutation made it so I didn't crumble into dust."

"No, that's why you were able to grab the stone and absorb it. Do you know why you have control over its powers?" At the slight shake of her head, Strange continued. "In order for Thanos to control the stone, he was willing to sacrifice someone he loved. When you grabbed the stone, you were sacrificing yourself for someone you loved."

Darcy's eyes bore into his, the memory of that first battle floating to the surface. All she'd cared about was saving Jane, her best friend in the entire world, and she'd been willing to die to keep her safe. "Okay. Sure. I won control by gaming the system. Sounds about right. So why the hell did I travel back in time?"

"You can give the cloak some of that credit."

Like a scene straight out of a kids movie, Darcy's gaze swung toward the fabric at the same time that it lifted from Strange's body, shaking one corner at her in greeting. "What. The. Fuck?"

"That day in the cafeteria, you were going to destroy the soul stone and, most likely, yourself. You were sacrificing yourself again. Then things... got a little wonky."

The disbelieving laugh tore itself from her chest and Darcy saw several people look over in their direction when her voice rose. "Wonky?" She said accusingly, leaning heavily on the table. "You call that wonky!! I didn’t want to go through time! I didn’t ask for it, it never even crossed my mind! How -?"

“It wasn’t you,” Stephen said, leaning forward and lowering his voice. “You weren’t there, so you couldn’t have heard it, but I spoke with Rogers when I first arrived at the compound. I told him that
time wasn’t on our side. You know what he said? He said that time owed him one.”

“Time owes that man several,” Darcy said, her voice sharp and still dripping with scorn.

“I didn’t realize it, but I wasn’t the only one who heard his words. The stone heard it, too.”

“If I wasn’t there, how did the Soul Stone hear -”

“Not the Soul Stone. The Time Stone. I have a theory that -”

Darcy shook her head, lifting her hand and stopping the words that had been coming out of Strange’s mouth. She took a moment, her eyes falling closed, before they snapped open, the glare in them sharp enough to cut glass. “Hold on. Just… you mean to tell me that another one of the Infinity Stones fucked with me? Please, please, tell me you’re joking.”

“I’ve never been good with jokes. I’ve been told I have a dry humor.” The scowl Darcy leveled at him was heavy and he shifted slightly under the weight of it. “The Time Stone heard Rogers’ words. Then you were in the cafeteria and that blade was headed straight for your heart, and…”

Stephen’s hand gestured vaguely through the air, as if that was explanation enough. Darcy made it clear when she leaned forward that she was not amused with his method of storytelling. “Get to the fucking point, Gandalf!”

“The cloak took the Time Stone, wrapped you all together, and you... tripped the life fantastic.”

She was sure the expression on her face wasn’t pleasant, and if one of her powers had been the ability to melt someone with her glare, Strange and that fucking cloak would have been erased from existence. “But why did I go back that far? Why didn’t I just go back before the Sanctum battle, before I made the deal with the stone?”

“You didn’t choose where you went back. The stone did.”

“The Time Stone?”

“No. The Soul Stone.”

“But you just said -”

“The Time Stone facilitated, but the Soul Stone chose.”

There was nothing that Darcy would ever hear in her life that sounded as completely mental as ‘you went back in time because these two stones and a cloak decided to mess with the very fabric of the space time continuum’. “I don’t… What? Seriously, no, what the actual fuck? How? Why?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out, and I think I’ve got it.” When Stephen was certain Darcy wasn’t going to launch herself across the table at him, he continued. “The way that you gained control of the Soul Stone was by your self-sacrifice. It’s why you were able to harness its powers, even though you weren’t feeding it a steady diet of souls like Thanos would have. The stone knew you’d become its true master, so it went back to a time when you didn’t control it. I think it hoped you’d be killed first, or that you’d do something stupid like rush to Rogers or Barnes’ side.”

“It was hoping I wouldn’t absorb it like before,” Darcy said, watching Strange nod his head in her direction. “That’s a pretty small margin of error for the stone to bank on.”

“I suppose even the infinity stones can get desperate.”
Even if Darcy believed one-hundred percent of what he was saying, it was still hard to wrap her head around. “So the cloak and me are friends, the Time Stone felt guilty, and the Soul Stone wanted to evict me? That about the gist of it?”

“In words I wouldn’t have chosen, but yes. You have complete control over the Soul Stone now, and it’s because of what you were willing to give up.”

Darcy sat back in her seat, feeling the weight of her choices bear down on her shoulders. “I was going to give up everything,” she whispered, pulling her hands away from the table and hiding them beneath, fingernails digging into her palms as she tried to accept everything the sorcerer was telling her. “I... didn’t think I’d make it out. I didn’t plan on it.” Unsaid was the truth: I almost wish I hadn’t.

“That level of selflessness…” Stephen said, pulling his mug toward him and taking a sip. He set it back down, brushing at one of the crumbs she’d missed. “Very few people would have done what you did.”

Despite the ache in her chest, a small smile climbed onto Darcy’s lips. “Yeah, well, we know a few of those kind of people.”

Stephen nodded at her. “I suppose we do.”

So much had been shared with her that Darcy felt her head swimming, so many questions on her tongue, so many things that had to come together to make what he was saying happen happen.

It’d taken a Mad Titan, two stones of unbelievable power, a levitating cloak, two super soldiers out of time, and a twenty-nine-year old lab monkey who had a genetic mutation and a love of David Bowie that bordered on religion.

Try as she might, Darcy knew that she’d never be able to fully accept what had happened over the past year. Like so many things in her life, reason and logic had left the building long ago. Some things weren’t meant to make sense, some things happened even if you didn’t want them to, and some things would burn no matter how careful you were to stay out of the flame.

The man across from her had gone quiet, his explanation hanging in the air, and Darcy took in a deep breath then let it out in a sigh. “So what you’re saying is that I’m the best stones keeper out there,” she finally said, hazel eyes that shone with emotion flicking up to look at him.

The smirk on Stephen’s face grew crooked. “I won’t argue with you there, especially since I’ve spectacularly failed at protecting mine.”

Darcy frowned, cocking her head to the side as she looked at him with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t have the Time Stone any longer,” he said. When she raised an eyebrow, Strange gestured toward her.

Darcy’s eyes widened, eyebrows lifting toward her hairline. “I don’t fucking have it!”

“Actually…” When Stephen lifted his hand and leaned forward, he watched Darcy’s skin light with that amber glow, a warning of the power she held inside. When she seemed to calm, he reached across the table and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

From the corner of her eye, Darcy saw a flash of green light, then watched as he retreated, holding a glowing bit of green between his fingers. “Did you really just pull an infinity stone from behind my ear like some kind of fucked up magic trick?”
“I am a sorcerer,” Stephen said with a shrug.

His hands waved through the air, the heavy amulet that hung around his neck opening and revealing an inner chamber. Darcy watched the stone lift, the brilliant glowing gem of emerald moving from his fingers with practiced ease, returning itself to the necklace and seemed to settle into place with a release of air pressure. The amulet closed, hiding it from sight.

“That’s better,” Stephen said, patting it softly before sitting back in the booth, a large sigh passing his lips.

“Can I get you two anything else?”

Pulled from the mess of her thoughts, Darcy glanced up at the waitress. “Um, no, I think… I think we’re good. We’ll just take the check. Oh, and he’s paying.” Her raised eyebrow had the desired effect, and Strange reached into his pockets to pull out enough money to cover her food and their coffees.

When it seemed like Strange had said all he’d come to say, Darcy nodded, as if the last hour hadn’t been one of the weirdest of her life (and that was saying something). She folded her map and shoved it into her bag, gathering her things and slipping out of the booth. He followed her with his eyes but made no move to stand. “I’d say it’s been fun, but we both know I’d be lying out of my ass, so…”

Stephen blinked up at her, seriousness in his gaze. “I just wanted you to know. I know what you did to save us, Darcy, and what you were willing to do. I wish I could tell you it gets better, but it doesn’t. You get better.”

His words did little to ease the pain in her heart, but she nodded down at him, knocking her knuckles against the table before taking a step toward the door. She stopped, turning back to look at him. “Would you… look after them? I mean, I know you’ve got that whole ‘mystical protection of the planet’ thing going on, but just… keep an eye open, yeah? You’ve got all three of yours now, after all.”

Stephen laughed lightly at her words, reaching up to wrap his fist around the Eye of Agamotto and the infinity gem it held inside. “I can do my best.”

“Your best better be fucking good or I’ll come find you. Since the cloak and I are on such good terms, I’ll have him strangle you in your sleep.” Darcy couldn’t help but smile when the fabric rippled at her like it was more than happy to agree to her terms. Shaking her head, Darcy hitched her bag higher on her shoulder and made her way out the door.

Stephen’s eyes followed Darcy, watching as she climbed into a sleek black sportscar and pulled out of the diner’s parking lot. When the cloak around his shoulders fluttered, he turned his gaze toward it, frowning. “What?”

When a corner of the cloak pointed out the window, then swung back toward the Eye, Stephen let out a derisive snort. “No.” The fabric swished angrily. “It’s not possible. I mean, we’d need to…” Face taking on an expression of contemplation, Stephen looked back toward the window and the fading red tail lights.
hands lifting in the air at the man who stepped through. "Hey! Excuse me! We've got safety protocols in place for a reason and they still apply to you even if you're a wizard."

"I'm a Sorcerer," Stephen corrected with a sigh, the portal fizzling in the air until it disappeared completely.

"Same thing."

"Not really."

Tony reached out and grabbed a screwdriver from his work table, slapping it against his palm as he watched the sorcerer look around the room. He knew better than to assume there was a good reason for this unannounced visit. "Is there something I can help you with or did you just come to show me how you can make animal balloons?"

An expression of exasperation flowed over Stephen's face as he came to stand before Tony, crossing his arms over his chest. It was a little unsettling how alike Tony and Darcy were, as she'd said something along those same lines when he'd visited her. "Something's happened."

When Strange didn't continue, Tony raised an eyebrow. "Did you want to make that a bit more vague? You know, for a man who can control time, you sure do waste a bunch of it."

"Contrary to your belief, your time is not worth more than anyone else's," Stephen needled, blinking as a mask of arrogance made its home on Tony's face. "The control of time is difficult, even for those who've mastered it, and the stone only complicates things further."

"Yeah, I get it, you've got that big rock hanging around your neck and it makes you twitchy, that still doesn't answer my question."

Another sigh passed Stephen's lips, wondering if coming to Tony first had been a good idea after all. The billionaire had a strong bond with Lewis, however, and despite how exhausting Tony Stark could be, his mind was sharp and he saw consequences that others did not. It'd caused strife and infighting in the team before, but they'd managed to work it all out. As a person, Tony wasn't the easiest to get along with, but Stephen could see how much the other man cared for those he was close to. It was that loyalty that Stephen was seeking to test. "What would you do if I told you that Darcy Lewis is in pain?"

Tony's face wiped of arrogance or expectation, his dark eyes growing sharper as he took a step toward Strange. "Where is she? What happened?"

"She's fine," Stephen answered, "physically." When a flash of anger lit Tony's gaze and his mouth dropped open, a litany of curses locked and loaded on his tongue, Stephen held up a hand to stop them from falling. "Something happened during that final battle. Lewis made a choice, and making that choice cost her a lot."

"Hate to burst your bubble, but that's old news," Tony said, the screwdriver in his hand moving anxiously, swinging to point in the sorcerer’s direction.

Stephen’s eyes rolled heavily as he let out an exasperated sigh. "Are you this tiring all the time?"

"Hey, you're the one who dropped into my lab and have nothing but riddles. How about you spit out what you've got to say and we go from there?"

Stephen had only messed with time on a handful of occasions, knowing how easily it could be devastating when changes were made. If he thought there was a way to correct what had happened,
that'd be one thing, but to dabble in someone's heads and memories? He didn't make that decision lightly, and he struggled with what counted as consent.

To fix what had been broken and erased meant harnessing the time stone's powers and using them in a way that changed the fundamental truth of these people's lives. Wrestling with the implications, he'd come to Tony first, hoping the other man would help him gain clarity. "Through events outside of her control, Lewis was taken back in time."

"Now? She’s back in time right now?" Tony asked, head cocking to the side as he stared at Strange.

"No, she's here now, somewhere in Oklahoma, but she went back in time to the first final battle with Thanos."

His eyes blinking heavily, Tony gave Strange an uncertain glare. "When you say 'first final battle,' that kind of implies there was a second final battle."

"What you know as the final battle was really the second final battle."

Tony held up a hand, his eyes falling closed as he attempted to wrapped his head around what Strange was trying to explain. "Are you saying that we defeated Thanos once before, then something happened, and Darcy went back to that time?"

"Yes."

"What happened the first time?"

"That's the reason I'm here," Stephen said, leaning back against a work table, watching analytical fire flash behind Tony's eyes. "The only people who remember what happened before are Darcy and myself." When the cloak around his shoulders rippled, Stephen rolled his eyes. His visit was already confusing enough without trying to explain that the sentience in the cloak of levitation had an affection for the dark-haired woman.

Staring at Strange for a few more seconds, Tony tried to gather his thoughts. "How long?" When Strange looked up at him questioningly, Tony clarified. "So Darcy went back in time. How far back did she have to go to get to the second final battle?"

"Over a year."

Strange's answer made Tony's eyebrows lift, the engineer looking down at his hands and turning the screwdriver over and over. He thought of the way Darcy had hugged him that day, saying she thought she'd never see him again. He'd found it odd, but had chalked it up to the craziness of battle and what she'd done.

There'd been more than a few times where she'd mentioned something she shouldn't have known, things he wouldn't have told her. If what Strange was telling him was true, and he begrudgingly admitted he believed the man, than that meant that Darcy had gotten to know everyone for an entire year. He couldn't imagine what that'd been like. After several moments of silence, Tony's gaze flicked back up to the sorcerer. "Was it a bad year?"

"It had a few rough patches," Stephen said, careful not to say more.

Another few beats of quiet passed before Tony set the screwdriver back on the counter and turned to face Strange. "What happens now?"

Pushing off the table he was leaned against, Stephen gave Tony a considering look. "There are two
"Let’s start with number one."

"I was going to,” Stephen said, biting back the sharper retort that had climbed onto his tongue. The whole conversation was esoteric enough on its own that he was willing to give Tony a breadth of allowance. "Option number one is that we do nothing. The world continues on like nothing ever happened and -".

"The kid spends her entire life in pain?" Tony interrupted, shaking his head. "Option number two."

"Well, in option number two -".

"Nope,” Tony said with another sharp shake of his head, “that's not what I meant. I mean I choose option two."

"Tony -"

Tony held up a hand, stopping Strange’s argument. "Look, I get it. Time travel is a bitch, great cosmic ramifications, yadda yadda yadda, but can't you just use your mumbo jumbo mystic powers or whatever and pop the memories back into our heads?"

Dark eyes blinking, Stephen’s chin dipped toward his chest. "I could -"

"Then do it,” Tony demanded, “why are you pumping the brakes?"

Stephen sighed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose as he breathed through his exasperation. "It's a little more complicated than that."

"Fine. It's complicated. Great. I don’t care. Do it." When Strange continued to hesitate, Tony took a step toward him, hands dropping to his sides. "Whatever happened in that year happened, but it didn't. It's all a shell game. If we know what happened, if you give us those memories back, it doesn't change the past. It only changes the future."

"And you've always been a futurist, haven't you, Tony?" Stephen asked, holding the engineer’s gaze.

"I see where we need to go," Tony countered, chin jutting out defiantly as his eyes bore into Strange’s, "and what we need to do to get there. You're telling me that I lived an entire year that I don't remember? This is me telling you I want to remember. The good, the bad, the painful... What I do with that information is on me, it's not on you, and it sure as hell shouldn't be on her shoulders alone."

"Others might not feel the same way," Stephen cautioned.

"Then let them blame me."

The look in Tony's eyes was enough for Stephen to know the billionaire’s mind was already made up. Tony's reasoning wasn't exactly error-proof, but it wasn't completely without merit, either. If he was careful how he did it, Stephen could restore the memories without disrupting too much. It would be up to them to decide what they did with the new information, but that was something they'd deal with later.

"Darcy Lewis saved the whole goddamn universe," Tony said, watching Strange's gaze flick back up to him. "I think she deserves a little help carrying the load."
Stephen searched Tony’s eyes for any hint of doubt but saw none. He felt a shove in his back, glaring down at the cloak as he was pushed forward, until he found himself standing inches away from the other man. "This’ll change everything."

"Doc, I've been shot, kidnapped, tortured, poisoned, traveled to space carrying a nuclear weapon, died, and fought against an apocalypse of global proportions. This is just another Wednesday."

Hands moving in fluid motions, Stephen opened the Eye and revealed the green Time Gem inside. He let out a sigh and lifted his arm, pressing two fingers to the side of Tony’s temple. A glow of emerald light emanated from the stone, and Stephen watched Tony’s eyes flash green then light with gold. "Abracadabra."

*~*~*~*~*

Peter Parker looked up from his box of Chinese food, a gleam of gold coloring his eyes before he dropped his chopsticks.

May’s gaze swung from the old black-and-white movie they were watching, mouth turning down in a frown at the look on Peter's face. "Are you alright?"

"What?" Peter's wide eyes blinked as he sorted through the torrent of images that assaulted his mind. Memory after memory hit him, the knowledge of a year spinning in his head. "I'm, yeah, yes, I'm okay."

A look of uncertainty stayed on his aunt's face. "Are you sure?"

The grin grew slowly on Peter's face. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good."

*~*~*~*~*

Bruce took a step away from the microscope, reaching up to rub at his eyes. He pulled his glasses from his face, blinking heavily. His lips parted when he saw the flash of gold, taking a heavy seat on the stool behind him, hands in his lap. After several seconds, he climbed to his feet and reached for his glasses, slipping them back on, returning to his work, his lips quirking upward.

*~*~*~*~*

"But then, Ms. Mullins said that I shouldn’t have colored outside the lines, but I told her that if we were cutting it out anyway, it shouldn’t matter." Lilah stopped talking when a series of gasps filled the dining room, looking between her parents in confusion. "Mama?"

Natasha tore her gaze from Clint's, seeing the flash of gold fade from his eyes as she turned to see Laura with a hand pressed to her chest, a tear slipping down her cheek.

"Are you okay, mommy?"

Laura took in a deep breath and looked over at Lilah, blinking past the moisture that was pooling in her eyes. She reached out and squeezed her daughter's hand, gaze flicking up to see a look of open awe on Clint's face. "Yeah, baby," she breathed, her husband looking at their children in awe before his beautiful eyes found hers. "Yeah, baby, we're okay."

*~*~*~*~*

The papers in Jane’s hands fluttered to the ground when she stumbled on the stairs, reaching out to grip the railing, sucking in a large breath. Blinking away the golden warmth, her hand reached out
to smooth over her flat stomach, a small grin blooming on her face and growing brighter as she bent and began gathering her pages. She took the stairs two at a time, running to her office and her phone.

*~*~*~*~*

"And if we focus our attention -"

Heimdall looked up when Thor went quiet, his question dying on his tongue when he saw the glow of gold flash in the other man’s eyes. When Thor looked over at him in shock, Heimdall's lips curled into a knowing smile.

When a knock sounded at their door, Bucky looked up from his position on the floor, blades and guns spread around him on the floor, a rag with oil in his hand. Grey eyes slid toward Steve, seeing the confusion on his best friend’s face as he dropped his sketchpad and pencil on the bed and climbed to his feet.

Steve turned the knob, a look of concern in his eyes when they landed on the man waiting on the other side of the door, the red cloak fluttering around his shoulders. He’d never gotten a house call from Stephen Strange, but he nodded at him anyway. “Doctor.”

“Hi,” Stephen said, gaze flicking over Steve’s shoulder to see Bucky rise to his feet behind the blond. “Can I...?”

“Of course,” Steve said, opening the door wider and letting the cloaked man cross the threshold. He caught the look of uncertainty cross Bucky’s face and shrugged in response, no clue why the protector of the New York Sanctum would need to speak with them.

Stephen could see a reticent glint in Barnes’ eyes as he came closer, looking down at the weapons that fanned out on the floor. “I’m sorry if I’m interrupting,” he said, spinning so he could see both men, “but I’ve got a time sensitive issue that requires some attention.”

“Is something wrong?” Steve asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes and no,” Stephen answered, eyes flicking from Steve, to Bucky, then back to Steve. “An event has occurred where time was rewound in an effort to effect what happened during the battle with Thanos.”

Bucky went still, the memories of that last battle replaying in his mind. Unbidden, the image of seeing Thanos’ hand wrapped around Steve’s throat popped into his head, immediately putting him on edge. He glanced over at Steve, seeing the look on concentration flit across the other man’s face. “Who did it?”

“That is a good question. One I wish I could answer without it confusing the whole situation any more than it already is.”

“Why don’t you start from the beginning,” Steve offered, “then go from there?”

Stephen laughed, shaking his head. Tony was saying much the same thing in the lab on the other end of the Avenger’s compound. “I wish it were that easy.”
“Try us,” Bucky said, his tone biting. The only time he’d shared with the sorcerer had been when the world was at peril. If he was visiting them now, something serious was going on. It was only a month since they’d defeated Thanos, and the idea that more fighting was on the horizon only reinforced the idea that there really was so breathing room between traumas.

“An entire year was rewound due to the combined force of my cloak, the Time Stone, the Soul Stone, and you,” Stephen said, looking over at Steve.

Hands dropping to his sides, Steve’s eyes lit with skepticism. “What?”

“Like I said, confusing. What I can tell you is that I truly believe that the reasons behind the change were for the best, but due to the reset, someone lost something. Something... unfair.”

“Time isn’t fair.” When Strange’s eyes swung toward him, Bucky didn’t move, his grey eyes dark as he regarded the man in the cloak. After everything he and Steve had been through, he’d come to see time as a thing of terror.

“No, no it really isn’t,” Stephen said with an agreeing nod, “but I believe there’s a way that I can level the scales.”

“You’re suggesting you mess with time again? Isn’t that against the rules?”

Stephen’s eyebrows raised at Steve’s question. “You, of all people, should know that there really are no rules when it comes to time.” At the soldier’s silence and guarded expression, Stephen took a step closer. “I wouldn’t be going back or forward in time, I would simply be returning the memories of what happened in the year that wasn’t.”

“You’d interfere with people’s minds, with their memories.” At Strange’s nod, Bucky’s attention flicked toward Steve, his eyes filled with a crush of emotions. “Steve.”

“I know,” Steve said, looking over at Bucky with concern, seeing the careful thread of fear in his lover’s eyes. He turned back to Strange, a frown turning his lips. “You think this is necessary?”

“Necessary? No.”

“Then why consider it at all?”

Stephen looked down at the floor, his mind turning over with how to explain the pull he felt within him. “Somethings in this world can’t be corrected. People leave, people get hurt, people get killed. Even with the time stone, some things just can’t be fixed. But this?” He looked back up at Steve. “This is different. This... would make the world a little bit better.”

“Who did it steal from?”

Stephen turned at the question, eyes landing on Bucky. “What?”

“You said the rewind made someone lose something,” Bucky said. “Who lost it?”

He considered saying that’d be too much information, but Stephen thought better of it. They deserved to know what was involved before they made their decision. “Darcy Lewis.”

Bucky shifted at the dark-haired woman’s name, remembering the way she’d looked at him on the roof the last time he’d seen her. There’d been something there in her hazel eyes, something he hadn’t understood. “What’d she lose?”
Strange’s eyes stayed fixed on Bucky’s stare, unflinching and unblinking. “Her home.”

“What happened?”

“She saved the world,” Stephen said, gaze swinging toward Steve’s as he answered the blond’s question. “Again.”

When Steve’s blue eyes looked over at Bucky, he could see the hesitation in his best friend’s gaze. After everything that had been done to Bucky and his memories, it wasn’t hard to understand why he was skeptical of letting someone else mess around in his head. If he were in Bucky’s shoes, he’d say no as well.

...but his thoughts turned to Darcy Lewis and the pain her eyes. He’d known something more had happened with the woman, that she was hiding something inside, and Strange’s words just confirmed what he’d suspected. He didn’t know what had happened, but she’d sacrificed something to kill Thanos and save everyone. He’d seen the weight of it in her eyes, heard the sting of it in her voice, and Steve knew better than most how that heaviness could break a person.

Steve took in a deep breath, holding Bucky’s gaze for a second longer before turning to Strange. “I’ll do it.”

Bucky took a step closer to Steve, reaching out to lay a hand on the blond’s arm. “Steve…”

“I know, Buck,” Steve said, closing the distance between them. He pressed a hand to Bucky’s cheek, looking into the doubt that filled his lover’s grey gaze. “I know, but I think, somehow, I knew something had happened. The way she looked at me, the way she looked at you…” He trailed off, watching Bucky sort through the interactions they’d had with the woman who’d saved their lives. “Tell me you didn’t feel it too.”

Bucky stared into Steve’s eyes, unable to look away. He had felt something different with Darcy, some inexplicable force that drew him toward her. She’d been sarcastic, and troubled, and through all of it, Bucky had questioned why she’d been so easy to talk to, why seeing the pain her eyes moved him. Something about her was different, he just hadn’t known what. He could see that Steve had already made up his mind, and Bucky gave him a small nod, unable to push away the thread of fear and doubt that curled taut in his stomach.

At the look on Bucky’s face, Steve turned toward Strange. The sorcerer seemed to be waiting for some kind of approval, and when Steve nodded, Strange took a step toward him. When the sorcerer’s arm raised and he pressed two fingers against Steve’s temple, Steve’s blue eyes looked for any hint of deception in the other man’s eyes. “Will it be worth it?”

Stephen regarded the blond soldier for a long moment before answering. “Family is always worth it.”

Feeling like Strange was waiting for one more approval of what was about to happen, Steve gave him a firm nod, his eyes falling closed.

Bucky watched Strange’s every move, his body tensed and ready to attack if he saw anything he categorized as hostile. His gaze was pulled down toward the amulet hanging around the sorcerer’s neck when it opened, a soft emerald glow coming from inside. When Strange and Steve seemed to go still, Bucky took a step closer, looking back and forth between them, waiting.

Memory after memory flooded Steve’s mind, a torrential pouring of moments that slammed into his brain. Gasping, Steve took a stumbling step backward, his eyes snapping open, the brilliant azure blue of his eyes being replaced by gold. He shook his head, clearing the glint, looking around the
room like he was looking for something.


His gaze found Bucky’s, seeing the look of concern on his lover’s face, the hesitation that filled his best friend’s grey eyes. Steve reached out his hand, threading their fingers together. “Buck…” His brain felt overwhelmed as memory after memory crashed in his head, and Steve knew there was absolutely no way to explain what was causing his pulse to race.

Bucky’s tongue darted out to wet his lips, blinking nervously as he tried to decipher the look into Steve’s eyes. “What did you see?”

A billion things ran through Steve’s mind, wanting to say something to ease Bucky’s doubts, to assure him that the risk was worth it. He squeezed Bucky’s hand, a look of peace crossing his face. “Our future.”

The expression on Steve’s face and the emotion in those blue eyes had always been his undoing, and Bucky knew in that second that, by agreeing to this, everything was about to change. After all he’d been through, Bucky had stopped trying to understand the reason and rhyme to what happened in his and Steve’s lives. If Steve was ready to fall, he could do nothing but follow him down into the dark.

Bucky’s grey eyes flicked toward Strange, fingers squeezing Steve’s as he gave the sorcerer a nod. He clenched his teeth, jaw clicking with barely held anxiety, blinking quickly when two fingers were pressed to his temple. Strange’s eyes were clear, his face neutral, and Bucky watched what he could only assume was satisfaction cross the other man’s face. His eyes fluttered closed, his heart thundering in his chest.

When his eyes flew open, the slate charcoal grey was replaced by a brilliant, glowing gold. Bucky looked over at Steve, his chest heaving with gasping breaths as he felt the downpour, like he’d had amnesia and it’d all come roaring back. He felt tears pool in his eyes, a million little memories solidifying in his mind.

Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand, recognizing the exact moment his best friend remembered it all, and when the smirk lifted Bucky’s lips, a knowing smile grew on Steve’s face. “Buck?”

“Let’s go get our girl.”
Darcy groaned, shoving her face further into the pillow, her nose crinkling at the musty scent that seemed to stain the Motel 8 room. Absently, she wondered just how many heads had laid on the pillow before she had, deciding that one of her first stops of the day would be to buy her own pillow.

Laying back on the bed, Darcy blinked up at the ceiling, the last dredges of sleep slipping from her mind as she watched sunlight stream around the curtain that hid the world on the other side of the window. When she heard the sound of vibration she looked to her right, her phone plugged in and charging on the nightstand. She reached for it, squinting at it. There were a bunch of notifications on the screen but, without the glasses she’d left in the bathroom, they were nothing but blurry blobs of colors and letters.

She sighed and let the phone drop back to the nightstand, throwing the scratchy blankets from her body and padding barefoot across the small room. The harsh yellow light above the sink did nothing for her skin, and she frowned at herself in the mirror. After using the bathroom, she splashed water on her face and brushed her teeth, blinking past the blur of sleep. She ran the day’s worth of travel through her head.

When Darcy had arrived at the hotel at four a.m., the front desk attendant hadn’t looked surprised, repeating the motions of giving her a room like it was all mechanic, more than happy to return to the British procedural he’d been watching before she’d arrived. She’d only got a few hours of sleep and she felt the tiredness in her bones. She’d driven until she couldn’t anymore, until the white lines on the road had begun to run together and the other headlights on the road had gotten dimmer and dimmer.

Darcy scratched at her stomach, stretching her arms above her head and hearing several vertebrae pop along her spine. She was in the middle of yawning when a scream sounded from her throat and she clapped hands over her ears when the roar of a jet engine sounded overhead. She dropped to the ground in alarm, a string of expletives leaving her mouth, the stiff carpet rubbing against her bare legs.

She scrambled back to her feet, running toward the door and throwing it open. The sunlight blinded her for a few seconds, and as the glare cleared from her eyes, Darcy felt her heart sink in her chest. A quinjet had found an empty spot in the parking lot to land, the engines whirring as it powered down. Fear filled her, an unending list of horrible scenarios running through her mind. The only person who knew how to find her was Tony, and if he’d come to see her in a jet, something was definitely
Mouth going dry with the bleak possibilities, Darcy held a hand on her brow, squinting into the bright light as the bay doors lowered. She moved closer, feeling the breeze ruffle one of Thor’s t-shirts around her body, her feet protesting the bite of the parking lot against her skin. When she saw two people emerge from the dark interior of the plane, her hand dropped limply to her side, her body pinged with confusion, then disbelief, then fear.

She took a step toward Bucky and Steve, her heart pounding, her knees going weak at just the sight of them. “What is it? What happened? Is it Tony? Are you okay? What happened?” Belatedly, she realized neither of them were wearing their suits and the expressions on their faces weren’t alarmed or concerned, but that did little to calm the worry that was freezing her blood. “What happened?”

“You forgot something at the compound,” Bucky said when they came to stand before Darcy, watching as she shifted her weight from one leg to the other, confusion in the unceasingly beautiful hazel of her eyes.

“W-what’d I forget?”

Steve couldn’t help the smile on his face as he drunk in the sight of her, every memory they’d shared sparking through his mind. “Us.”

Darcy’s eyebrows raised, surprise dropping her jaw, her voice several octaves higher than normal. “What?”

When he couldn’t take it anymore, Bucky closed the distance between them, pulling Darcy into his arms, her body fitting perfectly against his, just like he remembered. The shock on her face was enough to stop his heart and make it hammer at the same time, and as she looked up at him, uncertainty on her face, he swore he’d never seen anything so beautiful.

He cradled her face in his hands, kissing her, stopping the flow of confusion she’d been about to babble forth. He kept the kiss brief, but soft, and when he pulled back, he pressed his forehead to hers, feeling her breath fan against his face. “There is not a single timeline that we want to be a part of it if means you’re not at our side.”

The timbre of Bucky’s voice made her legs feel like jelly, and Darcy knew that if he hadn’t been holding her up, she’d have collapsed to the ground, her body not sure how to process the crush of emotions she felt inside. “I don’t…. I don’t understand. How do you -”

One corner of Steve's mouth lifted when Bucky released Darcy. He reached for her without hesitation, pulling her sharply against his chest, peering into her eyes for several seconds before he captured her mouth, her body melting against his.

Darcy returned the kiss, heart racing, feeling lightheaded with the confusion that still roared through her body. When Steve pulled back, Darcy looked back and forth between the two of them, seeing the knowledge of her in their eyes. She brought a hand to her chest when she took a step back, shaking her head softly, bewilderment in her voice. "How?"

"Time owed us one," Steve said, reaching into his back pocket. As he pulled out the silver ring, both he and Bucky lowered themselves to a knee.

Eyes widening bigger than she thought possible, Darcy took a stumbling step toward them before her knees gave out. She didn't hit the concrete, Bucky's arms catching her and carefully bringing her to the ground, hands gripping hers as she stared at him in shock. "Doll, I can live with your mess, and
your stubbornness, and your grumpiness in the mornings when you haven't had your coffee yet. I can
live with your competitiveness and the way you can make an argument out of anything. I can
even live with your horrible taste in music."

When Darcy laughed, her eyes quickly filling with tears, the grin on Bucky's face brightened. When
she'd caught her breath, his eyes shifted toward seriousness, squeezing her hands tighter. "I can live
with all of that, but I refuse to live without you. Not for another second. I love you."

"Fuck, I love you, too," Darcy gasped, her lips curling into a smile when they pressed against
Bucky's, the truth of his words shining in his eyes.

When Bucky and Darcy separated, laughing with joy, tears streaming down Darcy's face as moisture
pooled in Bucky's, Steve held out the ring toward his best friend, who took it from his fingers. Steve
watched Darcy's focus turn toward him, and he reached out to grip her hands, his voice strong and
sure. "Getting Bucky back was a miracle. I didn't expect the universe to give me another, but then
there was you, with your eyes, and humor, and the way you make my world brighter just by being in
it. The best thing about my life is my love for you and Bucky, and I can't imagine spending the rest
of my life without either of you. I love you."

"I love you so much." Being able to press her lips against Steve's made her stomach flip, her heart
beating fast enough that she could feel her blood pumping through her veins as she kissed him, arms
wrapping around his shoulders.

"Do you mind? We're kind of in the middle of something here," Bucky whispered in Darcy's ear,
smirking when both Darcy and Steve laughed as they separated.

Taking a deep breath, his chest aching in the best way, Steve took the ring when Bucky offered it to
him. Steve's tongue swiped across his lips before he held it up for her to see, the early afternoon sun
making the stones gleam and catch the light. "We know you don't believe in happy endings, but we'd
really like to prove you wrong. Darcy Anne Lewis, will -"

"Fuck yes!" Darcy screamed, throwing herself into Steve's arms, squeezing him as tight as she could.
When he climbed to his feet, she stayed wrapped around him, laughing against his neck then pulling
back, peppering his face with kisses. When Steve lowered her to the ground, she held out her hand
and let him slide the ring down her finger, blinking at it in disbelief.

She squealed when Bucky swept her into his arms, twirling her through the air, a habit of his she'd
thought she'd never get to experience again. Already feeling dizzy with everything that had
happened since they'd landed, Darcy pressed her face into the crook of Bucky's neck, taking a deep
breath inward, drawing the scent of him as deep into her lungs as she could. She felt Steve mold
himself against her back, fitting perfectly, reaching up to sift fingers through the honey-strands of his
hair, sighing when his lips pressed against the side of her neck.

Bucky pressed his lips to Darcy's, then Steve's, the gray in his eyes having darkened to a storm of
charcoal. He looked back and forth between the two of them, uncertain his heart had ever felt so full.
Distantly, he heard the sounds of other's around them, people who'd come outside with all the
commotion. Since he and Steve's only mission had been to find their girl, they hadn't planned an exit
strategy. "We've got eyes," he mumbled against Steve's lips, seeing the awareness rocket into his best
friend's bright blue eyes.

"And I don't have any pants on," Darcy said, her voice lifting in a giggle when she saw a crowd of
people with their phones out, snapping pictures or taking video. She turned in the circle of Bucky
and Steve's arms, grinning up at the blond soldier.
"Let them stare," Steve grunted, hands traveling down Darcy's back before he lifted under her ass, a smirk on his lips when her legs wrapped around his waist and he started walking them toward her hotel room. Steve heard Bucky's dark chuckle behind him and Darcy's giggle in his ear when she reached for the other man over his shoulders, fingers waving through the air.

The sound of their laughter cut off when the hotel door swung closed, hiding the three from prying eyes and ears.

Later, as Darcy gathered her things to go home, she grinned over at her sex-rumpled boys, eyes lingering on their flushed skin and satisfied smiles. "Hey! Technically we know who's gonna win the world series this year."

"No one we know would use that knowledge to bet on the game," Steve said.

After a beat, all three of their eyes widened at the same time.

"Clint!"

I exist in two places. Here, and where you are.

Chapter End Notes

I've been sitting here, looking at this blinking cursor for a while now, trying to get my thoughts in order. My stomach is fluttering like crazy. Here and Where You Are has been a giant part of my life for the last year. It was my first bit of solo writing in forever, and I was nervous because I had the outlines of a story, the bare bones of the plot, but it was uncharted territory. As I wrote, things coalesced into this massive undertaking and as it grew, I realized just how much I needed writing in my life.

Since I began this special bit of wording, my mental health has improved dramatically. Part of that was because I was playing in a world (the MCU) that I adore. I've got Marvel tattoos, my entire kitchen is Marvel themed, and I feel the characters and emotions in a deeply personal way. I'm sure the actors who portray these roles have a large part to do with it, and I was nervous that I'd get someone's voice wrong. I was ecstatic to find out that this wasn't the case, that I was doing their portrayals justice.

Posting each new chapter was something I looked forward to every week, something to make my Wednesdays just a little bit brighter. Waking up to kudos and comments lifted
my spirit. I would let the comments sit there in my inbox, unread, waiting for a day where I needed a little pick me up due to real life struggles and falls. Seeing all of your kind words and knowing you were riding the roller coaster along with me was... amazing. You're amazing. I know people say that they don't write for the comments, and on some level that is 100% true for me (because I'd find myself going back and re-reading my own stuff because this is what I want to see in the MCU), but it's supremely satisfying to know my story was so well received.

I had no idea how big this would grow and how many people I would come to meet and talk to because of this story. So, from the bottom of my Marvel-loving heart, thank you. Thank you for reading, and leaving kudos or comments. For the shares on Tumblr and the private messages. All of it is overwhelming and means the world to me. Truly, you've made this last year one of the best of my life.

I am no where near done writing, either or in general or in this universe. Believe it or not, the true meat of the sequel hit me last night in a dream, and I woke up and frantically typed a note on my phone so it wouldn't fade away. I'm excited to come back with this new stuff and visit these characters and their world again. I have several other things in the works that I'll be shifting my focus to for the near future. The first one will be for the Captain America Big Bang, as both an artist and as a writer. That story's going to be Bucky/Darcy/Steve, and will be MUCH less angsty. Well, as far as I know. The people in my head might have other ideas...

I've created a music soundtrack that compiles all the songs that I listened to while writing. I'll be posting that here Right Here. If I get any snippets of scenes that didn't make it into the full story, I'll be throwing them in there too.

If you want to make sure you see everything new I post, I'd suggest subscribing so you don't miss anything.

Again, thank you so much for joining me on this ride and I hope you'll continue to enjoy what I'm putting out!

<3

V
"Think fast!"

Tony spun at the voice, quick reflexes barely catching the keys before they collided with his face. He let out a sigh, tossing them onto the nearest workstation. "Some of us think fast all the time, Princess, it's what makes us smart."

"Then you're the dumbest smart person I know," Darcy said, the double doors to the lab falling closed as she came closer. "The car is fine. Pulls a little to the left."

"Bullshit. That car was perfect. What did you do to it?"

Darcy came to stand before Tony, her arms crossed over her chest and an eyebrow raised. His dark eyes blinked at her, lips twitching as he tried to hold back his smile.

"If you wanted to get out of my wedding, there were easier routes," he mused.

"Getting to know you once was hard enough, I just didn't want to do it again. When I saw the out, I took it."

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. "We get it, you've got unimaginable powers. You don't have to rub it in our faces every second."

"God, you're such an asshole," Darcy growled, letting out a *meep!* when Tony closed the distance between them, his arms squeezing her tightly. She relaxed into the hug, circling his waist, leaning her cheek against his chest. "I missed you, too."

"Gross," Tony said, even as his hand came up to rest on her hair.

"Can I get in on this?"

Both Darcy and Tony glanced over to see Peter in the doorway, backpack on the ground near his
feet. They each made sounds of disgust.

"Ew. No."

"Public displays of affection are revolting."

Undeterred, Peter crossed the lab quickly and joined the hug, smiling when Tony and Darcy made matching groans of revulsion.

Darcy wasn't sure how long they stood there, enjoying each other's warmth and the emotions that went along with the reunion. When they heard the click of a camera shutter, the trio looked to the right. Dum-E's clamps were pointed in their direction, a video camera held tight, the robot giving a chirp of recognition. "Burn that footage."

"It'll be the first thing I do when we stop hugging," Tony said with a small shake of his head.

"When will that be?"

Tony turned back to Darcy, dark eyes shining. "Not sure yet. This whole 'liking people' thing is still new. I might not be doing it right."

Darcy's eyes widened and she turned her head toward Peter, faux shock on her face. "Tony Stark admitted to not knowing something!"

"Aaaaaaannd now we're done," Tony said with exasperation, extricating himself from the embrace. When Darcy's large smile beamed in his direction, he reached out and ruffled her hair, ignoring her shout of offense.

As the billionaire walked back to his work station, Darcy's gaze swung back toward Peter, who still had his arms around her. "You good, kid?"

"Don't call me kid," Peter mumbled against her hair, "and I need another minute."

Darcy sighed, though her heart constricted in the best ways. "I can't do my job with you being all weepy."

Tony voice rose loud enough for her to hear. "Who said you have a job here?"

"Ummmm, you did, old man. Are you going senile? Should I go back in time just a little further?"

"Could you? I mean, is that, you can do that now?" Peter watched the grin grow on Darcy's face, his grip on her going slack as she rolled her eyes softly. "What? I'm serious. Can you do that?"

"I thought he was supposed to be a genius," Darcy mused, crossing toward Dum-E with a smile, running a hand down the bot's frame.

"He has his moments."

"Hey!"
Can one of you grab the door?” The telltale sign of her kids screaming when something crashed made Laura wince. Drying her hands on the towel she’d swung over her shoulder, she made her way to the front door and pulled it open.

Darcy, who’d been on the porch for several minutes gathering her courage, gave the frazzled mother of three an embarrassed smile and a little wave. “Hi.”

The sigh that fell from Laura’s mouth lifted and dropped her shoulders with its size. “We’ve been waiting for you,” she said with a hand on her hip, regarding Darcy with a stern expression.

“I know, I’m sorry, I came as soon -“

“YOU!”

Darcy’s eyes widened when Clint yelled from the top of the stairs. Using some kind of flip that she was certain he’d learned at the circus, the archer was on the first floor and had his arms around her middle before she could even make a noise. She screamed when he spun them, the warm interior of the farmhouse streaming by in colors. “I’m gonna barf!”

When Clint set Darcy down, the look on his face sent shivers up her spine. He tried to play off the theatrics, nodding his chin in her direction. “Hey, kid. How ya been?”

“Oh, you know,” Darcy said with a small shrug, "killed an alien. Traveled through time. Just another normal Wednesday.”

“Mmmhhmmm,” Laura hummed, physically pushing Clint out of the way so she could pull Darcy to her. She squeezed hard, grunting with the effort. “I didn’t know I needed to miss you.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Darcy said with a laugh, grinning when Laura pulled back with shining brown eyes. Seeing the emotion in Laura pulled her own to the surface and Darcy swallowed around the lump in her throat. “Stop that right now, you hear me? You’ll tarnish my street
cred."

The snort from Natasha as she walked into the hallway with Nate balanced on her hip was heartfelt, and the look in her green eyes was sharp as she peered at Darcy. “You can travel through time but you’re still late.”

“Couldn’t really control the time travel bits,” Darcy said, grinning at the copper-haired assassin.

“Next time maybe warn us, искра,” Natasha rasped, one side of her mouth lifting in a smirk.

"Искра? I know a fair amount of Russian, mostly curses, but I don’t know what that means," Clint said with a frown

"Spark," Darcy answered, grinning when Natasha nodded at her.

Clint let out a loud gasp and leaned into Darcy’s space. “She gave you a nickname. Guess we’re keeping you after all.” When Darcy laughed, Clint shot her a bright smile.

“Okay, I’m glad that part’s settled. Now, let’s see it.”

Darcy blinked at Laura. “See what?”

“Playing dumb doesn’t look good on you, honey. You know what.” When Darcy continued to look at her in confusion, Laura wiggled the fingers on her left hand.

“Oh!” Darcy extended her hand toward Laura, laughing when the nurse wrenched her arm so she could take a better look.

Natasha peered over Laura’s shoulder at the glinting ring, an impressed expression flowing over her features as she looked up toward Darcy. “Give the boys my approval.”

“Give it to them yourself. They’re checking your home defenses and alarms out back.”

“Son of a bitch!” Clint started toward the back door before skidding to a halt and flying back toward Darcy. He crashed against her, arms like vices around her shoulders. He held on, tight, burying his face in her hair. “You saved my life.”

“You saved mine first, so I guess we’re even,” Darcy whispered, the tears she’d been holding back slipping down her cheeks. When he pulled back, Darcy smiled then laughed when he darted forward and pressed his lips to her cheek, grimacing at the wetness before running as fast as he could toward the back of the house.

“Mommy, Daddy yelled a bad word...” the little girl’s voice faded as she came in sight of the group of women in the foyer. She took a step forward and peered up at Darcy. “Are those sad tears?”

Darcy shook her head as she knelt, grinning at the blond girl with eyes so like Clint’s that it clenched her heart. “No, they’re happy tears. Very happy tears.”

“I guess that’s okay, then,” Lilah said before putting a thumb toward the doorway over her shoulder. “Did you want to come play Pretty Pretty Princess with me?”

Her nod was heartfelt and immediate, the affection she held for Clint’s little girl swelling in her chest. “Sure,” Darcy said with a smile, “I’d love to play with you.”

When the little girl started back toward the living room, Laura called out. “Lilah, aren’t you going to introduce yourself?”
Lilah spun on her heel, giving Laura the confused look that only a child could pull off. “Why, Mommy? It’s just Darcy!”

As Lilah ran out of sight, the three adults went still. Darcy looked over at Laura with wide eyes, seeing the expression mirrored on the mother’s face.

“Yeah, mommy,” Natasha parroted, raising an eyebrow at Darcy and Laura as she followed after the blond girl, “it’s just Darcy.”

Darcy’s heart jumped in her chest before she looked back at Laura in shock.

“Ohhhhh balls.”
Hello all you lovely, lovely people!

Thought I'd let you know that my new story *Blood Stained* posted its first chapter tonight!

You can read it [Right Here](#)!

End Notes

You can find me on [The Tumbles](#) and [The Tweets](#)

Works inspired by this one: [Blood and Water](#) by [Molly Jae](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!