Darcy Lewis: Archaeologist (one must howl with the wolves one is among)
by aphroditecythera

Summary

AU in which Darcy Lewis does NOT study political science... but instead studies archaeology, is pretty freakin' good at it, meets a few Norse gods, makes some friends, finishes her thesis... and finds out her biological father is a superhero who wants to pay off all her student loans.

Also, who would have thought the Winter Soldier would enjoy excavating ancient ruins?

Notes

Hi, all!

This story has been in my head for a looooong time. I love reading all of the beautiful stories in the "Darcy Lewis is Tony Stark's daughter" tag and have brainstorming this for a few months. I was just endlessly amused by the idea of a badass Darcy Lewis who travels the world excavating ancient sites and still somehow gets dragged into superhero nonsense.
I also love the idea of Tony Stark finding out his daughter is a liberal arts major and subsequently chasing her around the world and keeping her out of trouble.

Also, I am a huge Wintershock fan... so expect some good romance. Eventually.
About five minutes after realizing she is pregnant — soft pink test with two straight lines still gripped between white knuckles — Kara Lewis already has a plan outlined for the next ten years.

First: Move away from California. Far, far away. As far as one can possibly be from Stark Industries. (East coast, perhaps?)

Second: Locate best K-12 school systems in area and buy a house within district parameters. Give kid everything possible to be successful and, more importantly, happy.

Third, raise this kid to be nothing like their father.

Planning was always Kara’s specialty.

It’s how she got herself through undergrad and graduate degrees from Colombia, in spite of her deadbeat father, and wound up working for one of the top marketing companies in the United States by twenty-six.

It’s how she steadily climbed her way up to a ritzy life that is utterly at odds with how she grew up — trading a ramshackle house in Michigan for a studio apartment in Malibu and an abusive asshole father for weekly appointments with a trained therapist and the occasional glass (bottle) of pinot noir.

Unfortunately, for once in Kara’s life, she failed to anticipate a massive wrench in her shiny California plans: Tony Stark.

When Kara was hand-picked by her company to work one-on-one with Stark Industries and their re-branding team, she never dreamed that she would want to fuck Tony Stark.

Helping a weapons company look more wholesome in the eyes of the American public made her feel somewhat sleazy already. But mostly, it was because he represented everything she hated: born into money, born into an unattainable legacy, arrogant to the max, and somehow still managed to be a fucking genius.

It irked her, his casual intelligence that seemed to give him a pass to flounce around wasting everyone’s time. The first few meetings she had with his team were not nearly as productive as they should have been... because Tony Stark didn’t even bother to show up.

His advisers didn’t seem surprised at all, smoothly apologizing for his absence with a stale excuse: “Mr. Stark is struck with ideas at sometimes inopportune times. He is in his lab, testing out a new design.”

Like hell he was.

Their third meeting adjourned nearly as soon as it began, as both Kara and Stark’s team were unable to make anything resembling progress until Stark gave them something, anything, even just
a fucking memo sent down with what he wanted. She was seething as she made her way to the lobby, heels clacking as she stomped on Tony Stark’s expensive marble floors (imagining his face being impaled by her stilettos).

And then his face actually appeared. In person. Attached to the man waltzing through the front glass doors with a blonde on each arm and dropping Ferrari keys into the hands of a terrified valet.

“So, ladies, like I said, lunch with a side of hanky panky can happen any weekday, weekends unavailable due to a prior booking with the Russian aerobatic team. Just give my office line a call. I’ll book us a private room, some champagne, maybe a few poles—”

Kara wasn’t sure what came over her. Rage climbed up her throat at the sight of this playboy, barely pushing twenty-five, who was not in his lab creating genius works. No, he was getting his rocks off with Britney Spears’ clones.

She had Tony Stark by the collar before he could think to yell for security.

The blondes scampered back, eyes staring wide at the furious business woman who had one of the richest men in the nation by the shirt. Tony’s dark gaze was almost comically surprised, yet still assessing, and he made no move to push her off.

Kara saw two beefy security men approaching out of the corner of her eye, but Tony waved them off as his gaze shifted into a leer. “Honey, if you wanted in on the action all you had to do was ask.”

“I don’t want in on your action, Stark,” Kara hissed, yanking his collar tighter. “I want you to show up for your fucking meetings instead of wasting everyone’s time! I don’t care if you’re the wealthiest man on the northern seaboard—"

“On all seaboards, actually.”

“—you are an arrogant, insolent child who needs to put away his dick and realize that self-obsession went out of style when democracy came into fashion!”

“Excuse me, what?”

The expensive silk of his shirt crumpled under her fingers. “I’ve been here nearly four times for meetings that are utterly wasted because you are a spoiled little man, too busy fucking washed up MTV models to attend!”

Tony opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again, but Kara was thrumming with adrenaline and took the opportunity to capitalize on his (rare, she was sure) speechlessness. “Oh, and if you didn’t already guess, take this as my resignation from your project. Good luck getting the public to look nicely on your arms dealing, asshole!”

She released his collar, deeply pleased when Tony stumbled backward to regain his footing. With one last ‘I-could-murder-you-in-your-sleep’ look, Kara turned and walked out of Stark Industries. She vaguely heard a bit of distant clapping, but her hands were shaking and brain was screeching enough to make her think it was a figment of her hopeful imagination. She didn’t look back to check.

If Kara had, she might have seen Tony Stark grinning and asking the front desk for her private number.
Kara waited by the phone all night. She was dreading the call from her firm, the firing she would no doubt receive once they heard what she said to one of their largest clients.

Part of her wondered why it was taking so long. No doubt one of Mr. Stark’s many officials had called to tattle on her and terminate their contract, or maybe Stark himself had called to demand her head on a pike.

Either way, she mused, her career was down the toilet.

The phone finally rang around dinner time, shredding the remainder of Kara’s nerves and making her want to vomit up the bit of soup she had managed to choke down.

In the space of three rings Kara was hit by a sense of loss. She had moved to LA for this job, a city she despised! She had worked her ass off for five years post-university, not allowing herself time for a social life, or friends, or anything more than random hookups to get where she was!

Now all of that would be wasted, just because she couldn’t control her temper.

She took a deep breath and grabbed the phone. At least it was almost over.

But it wasn’t the voice of her boss on the line.

“Hey there, remember me?”

Kara knew immediately who had called her, she just couldn’t believe it. “What the fuck?”

Tony Stark laughed down the line, warm and deep. “I get that a lot. This is Kara, right? Kara Lewis from Advantage Marketing Co? Of course it is. I knew as soon as you dropped the F-bomb. You’ve got a mouth like a sailor, ya know that?”

Kara couldn’t think of a single thing to say. So, naturally, her brain-to-mouth filter disappeared again. “I’m from the Northeast, Stark. We tend to swear more.”

“You had me at maple syrup. Versatile. Sticky. Lots of things we can do with it.”

Kara let out a huff of indignation, the first emotion she managed besides shock. “Wait a second, Stark—”

But he barreled on. “Let’s get down to business, Kara. Can I call you Kara? Miss Lewis? Woman of my dreams, particularly the lewd ones?”

“The whole reason I was upset with you is because you weren’t getting down to business, Stark. AND that is insulting!”

“Is it? Most people find it flattering. You know, billionaire genius playboy who is turned on and intrigued by previous fisticuffs and wants to treat the lovely lady to dinner? Pretty flattering to me. You like oysters?”

Stark’s rapid-fire speech finally began making sense to Kara. She wasn’t being fired. She was being propositioned.

No. Fucking. Way.
Every bit of righteous anger from that afternoon suddenly flooded back into her voice. “Stark, I am not doing this with you. I am not eating fucking oysters with you.”

Stark huffed down the line. “Fine. No oysters, got it, not everyone is a seafood fanatic—”

In a rush of adrenaline, Kara hung up on Tony Stark.

~*~

He called her again that night.

She answered, realized who it was (“Hey there crazy lady, remember me? Billionaire you manhandled effortlessly today? I think I found a solution to our oyster problem — you know what everybody likes? Wine. How’s about dinner at my own private vineyard tonight — custom wines, silky napkins, my own personal good looks— “), and promptly smashed her landline back into the receiver.

He called again. And again. And again.

And at some point, Kara stopped scowling at his ridiculous messages and started laughing. The whole situation was completely off the charts crazy. She wasn’t going to be fired for her behavior; instead, Tony Stark found her attractive enough to spend a whole evening calling.

Her career had always been her main priority and the compass that guided her decisions. She hadn’t become the top marketing consultant at her firm by insulting rich men, but rather by outsmarting them and proving herself invaluable. Somehow, that day she managed to prove herself to Stark in a strange, borderline unhealthy way. It would be completely idiotic of her not to capitalize on that.

She finally answered after a few more hours of debating with herself. Honestly, she was impressed he’d kept calling that long. Her phone only seemed to pause for minutes between rings.

“Finally falling for my smooth messages?” Tony Stark says by way of answering. Kara hides a laugh.

“Your messages consist of you listing all the thing you’re capable of buying me if I have dinner with you. Not very impressive, in all honesty.”

“What?” He demands in mock outrage. “I offered you a pony! And when you didn’t bite, I offered an entire stable!”

“I’m allergic to horses, Mr. Stark.”

“I’ll breed some hypo-allergenic ones.” He pauses, an amused lilt to his voice. “Developing technology as we speak.” Kara hears the clacking of a keyboard in the background before he continues. “So, I’m Mister Stark now and not ‘pretentious asshole’?”

“Depends. I’m not interested in being your flavor of the week. Or day, I suppose. Hour is more likely, I would think?”

“I do move fast. And so did you, when I watched those beautiful legs march out of my lobby this
morning.”

“Thank my Pilates instructor.” She deadpans.

“I would love to show her just how grateful I was to be on the receiving end of that Pilates super-strength this morning. Do you realize that you nearly lifted me off the ground? Very impressive biceps. And taller than I imagined you.”

“The heels helped my height situation.” Kara admits, before finally working up the courage to lay down her ground rules for the plan she has outlined in her head. “Alright, Stark, I’ve listened to your messages have decided that we are agreed: no ‘hanky-panky’ for me, stud—”

“Agreed? When did we agree on that?”

“--But I am interested in starting and finishing what you hired me for. What you need me for—if you start attending meetings and stop fucking off while I’m on the clock.”

“… is that a no to dinner?”

“That is a no.” She confirms, happily imaging what face he must be wearing to match that sulking tone. “But, it is the beginning of a possibly volatile but doubtlessly interesting work relationship, Mr. Stark.”

Stark signs, resignation lining his tone, but he relents. “You had me at volatile. Be back at SI by 12:15 tomorrow, let’s see if you’ve got bite to back up your bark.”

Kara is not ashamed to admit that she is grinning when she hangs up the phone.

~~~*~~~

Tony keeps his word.

He appears-- only seconds from being late nearly every time and usually a strange mix between scowling and smirking-- to every meeting throughout the next three months.

The other members of the Stark Media team look flabbergasted, not only at Mr. Stark’s appearance but at the fact that Kara is still on the team and not unemployed on the streets.

She smirks back at them all.

~~~*~~~

As the weeks pass, Kara begins to see the genius that is layered behind the famous playboy and almost, almost, appreciates it.

Tony Stark is a funny man, she realizes. Saturated in sarcasm and unable to regulate his own need for vices in bulk—beautiful women, alcohol, shiny and expensive things. He’s childlike both in his earnestness and his excess, it is all a game of more, more, more to him.
Kara wonders what he is trying to make up for.

Two months of frequent meetings and putting up with Stark’s variously creative ways of flirting with her (she ends up being the first person to pet a hypo-allergenic horse, which was very sweet, but Tony didn’t seem to understand that normal people don’t have stables attached to their homes) when he finally relaxes into something regarding friendship.

They talk over coffee. Over whiskey on ice. Over lunch and sometimes dinner. Nothing happens to make Kara feel pursued, or wanted only for her body, and it relaxes her.

She begins to realize how starved Tony is for actual companionship, for someone to lay a friendly hand on his shoulder without trying to take something from him. It makes sense that a man famous for his sexual exploits desires a deeper form of intimacy. Simple as a smile that takes nothing, a friend who stands at his side with no desire to utilize his genius or wealth or connections.

And despite the fact that Kara is working for him, she tries to give him as much of her friendship as she can. She tries to take as little as possible, to bring lunch for them both on long days and never let him reach for the black Amex in his slacks. She tries to show him that he owes her nothing for her friendship.

~~~*~~~

Obadiah Stane is a snake.

Kara can see it immediately. He reminds her of her father, charming smiles and pressed suits hiding oily motives and a heart of darkness. He works Tony over like a con artist, sneaking designs from his labs while plying him with women and booze.

The first time Kara watches it happen, she is stuck still with horror.

Obadiah swaggers into the lab, laying two heavy hands on Tony's shoulders and cajoling a new prototype from him with practiced ease.

"War in Iran is about to climax, Tony, we need to capitalize. Weapons of mass destruction are the new currency, remember?"

Tony smiles and agrees, pushing through papers to hand Obadiah a stack of new designs. They look like old friends, comfortable with each other, almost like a son leaning into his fathers touch and attempting to earn his praise with new work. Except this is not a son showing his father a new coloring page, it's love-starved Tony Stark handing over weapons designs to a man with greedy eyes.

A man that Kara already despises.

"Here, a new missile prototype--"

The papers are in Obadiah's greedy hands before he finishes speaking.

"Tony, these are fantastic. Inspired. I'm so proud of you." Obadiah lays another heavy pat between Tony's shoulder blades, pulling a grin from Tony. "How about you celebrate tonight? I have a few ladies who have been dying to meet you, a Spanish Flamenco team--"
Finally Obadiah seems to realize that someone else is in the lab. His gaze flicks to Kara, up and down, assessing why she would be leaning against Tony Stark's lab table with a half-eaten tuna sandwich in her hands.

"Unless, you already have company tonight!" Obadiah chortles, slapping Tony on the back. "What a looker! Is this the lovely lady who threw a fit in the lobby a few weeks ago?"

Tony's smile slips, just a fraction. "Yeah, this is Kara Lewis."

Realizing her cue, Kara reaches a hand out to Obadiah, trying to will the redness in her cheeks to subside. She's been underestimated by men before, she can manage this. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Stane."

He takes her hand with a bemused smile, as if she was a child trying to dress up as business woman. "Tony always has loved a spitfire. You letting them down in your labs now, Tony?"

Kara bristles. "And what do you mean by that? Absolutely inappropria--"

Obadiah waves an imperious hand. "Oops, made the little spitfire angry. I'll give you two space. Remember what I said, Tony, Spanish ladies tonight if you can finish that missile."

And then he is gone. Waltzing out with a wink for Tony and a leer for Kara.

Kara is still furious. "He thinks I'm just your little toy? That was horrifically unprofessional! And why is he promising you women?"

"Kara," Tony warns, a tone flat and emotionless. "Drop it."

"Drop it?" She parrots. "Obadiah Stane is an absolute snake! Plying you with dancers for designs-"

"No he isn't!" Tony barks. He takes a deep breath, turning away to run a hand through his hair. "He's all I have, Kara. A bit rough around the edges, but a good man. Been here since my father died. He steers me in the right direction."

Kara stares at Tony, reading the heavy lines of his face, and bites her tongue. Is the right direction towards alcoholism and a sex addiction? But then she remembers the way Tony had lit up at Obadiah's praise, relaxed at his casual touch. She thinks of Tony's own bitter jokes about his father, the late and great Howard Stark.

Obadiah fills that hole, he has Tony manipulated and wrapped so tightly around his finger that there is nothing Kara can do about it. Not that it is her job, she reminds herself. I'm here to work. Not to fix him.

"I'm sorry," She says finally. "He means a lot to you. I'm sure that was just his humor."

When Tony smiles at her again, the lie almost feels worth it.

~~~*~~~

They finish their work. Kara has nothing more to give Stark Industries, no more advice on how to win over the American public than to make bigger guns and appeal to the sector of those who seem to love the second amendment more than the ones that guarantee democracy and the right to
happiness.

Tony Stark shakes her hand as they sign the papers, celebrating a 39% increase in SI interest after her work. His palms are warm and his smile is true, which only depresses Kara when she realizes that she’s learned to tell the difference.

The numbers are truly phenomenal. It is a record in Kara’s work, a record in California, and now Kara is free to leave Malibu behind and enjoy the fruits of her labor—there is a rumor that she will be offered partner in her company before the year is out.

But all she can think about is how she may actually miss Tony Stark’s presence in her life.

Tony throws a party to celebrate—because, of fucking course he does—and Kara is expected to attend as the guest of honor.

Whatever that means.

She spends far too long picking a dress. She spends even longer sitting on the bathroom floor of her studio apartment, heart racing and eyes wet, because she feels as if she is on the brink of something huge, bigger than money and romance and Stark Industries…

…and all her intuition tells her is that Tony Stark is the key to it all.

~~~*~~~

She fucks him on his desk.

The party has been reduced to embers, only a few drugged out and wasted stragglers lingering downstairs, blinking blearily in the flashing lights. It had been overwhelming. Kara is not used to huge crowds, especially not huge crowds that want to congratulate her and kiss her ass, and had begun drinking heavily early in the night to seem friendly and open to all the people who wanted to shake her hand.

Tony had been in the crowd, everywhere and nowhere at once. Flashing like a golden fish in a pond of silver, small glimpses that tugged on the gravitational pull of everyone in the room. Everyone wants to be him—be with him—be in him—be on him—

Including, Kara realizes dizzily as she downs her fourth glass of champagne, her.

The room is hot, smothering, too close. Kara pushes past the crowd, pushes past the faces of people who are just as fickle as the wind, who only want a piece of her because they believe she has a piece of Tony and they are wrong, as much as she wants to—

She finds his lab. Downstairs, glass walls locked by a pass code that Tony mentioned to her in passing once, not believing she would ever remember.

But she remembers.

Her fingers skip across the touch screen, hopping against the numbers with confidence. The glass unlocks with a hiss. Kara lets herself into the steel room, eyes roving across the cars and robots and screens that make up Tony Stark’s head—
She stops. Presses her head against cold glass. Takes a deep breath, trying not to think of how Tony’s hands look when stained with grease, knuckles dark but face bright with genius. An alien tenderness wells up in her for this sad man-child, this young man who designs weapons that murder thousands and plugs his leaking holes with women.

Suddenly, he is there. With her. Leaning against the glass with the same whisky-bright eyes, hazel and dark all at once, kind and cocky and full of fire.

Kara kisses him without hesitation.

"You didn’t get me a goodbye gift," she whispers, "this is what I want. Just once."

His eyes darken, whiskey turning to a deep dark chestnut, and he nods with his lips still on her skin, on her neck, on her breasts— Tony Stark takes his time.

He peels off her dress with steady hands and swollen lips, worshiping her in a way that Kara would never have expected from a trust fund baby, taking his time and spreading her and pulling her apart…

When he is finally inside her, Kara cries. She feels a dam break inside her, intuition and sadness and longing all fused into one solid mass of feeling.

"I don’t love you, but doesn’t this feel like it means something?"

He stops moving for a moment, those whiskey eyes focused on hers, allowing only honesty.

"Yes," he rasps. "I don’t love you, but this feels like something important."

Kara moans, loud and long, as he takes her, turns her inside out with longing and fulfillment and fire.

She falls apart in his hands again and again and again and knows that it is fate, fate and fire and iron falling down around them. Something bigger than us both.

She leaves Malibu the next day, hungover and sore and stalwart in believing that Stark Industries holds nothing more for her.

Nothing.

Especially while Obadiah pulls the strings behind the throne.

~~~*~~~

Now, as Kara stares down the pregnancy test in her hands, she understands her part in this story, understands why she felt the earth spin on its axis under Tony’s touch...

A child.

Fear trails up her spine, freezing her mind. Not fear for herself or even her hard-won career, but for this little spark of life in her body. For the child that would be half of herself and half of Tony Stark.
She closes her eyes and leans against the cool porcelain of the sink, dizzy from the direction of her thoughts.

She thinks of Tony, so alone in the world, shackled as heir to the Stark fortune with no other true options.

He is a complicated man, but Kara has the deep feeling that he would be a good father. Given time and practice. He would love the kid. He would be scared shitless, probably fight against the lifestyle change being a father entails, but Tony always loves the things that are his. Kara knows this.

But what would become of his child? A daughter to take over as heiress, forced into a leadership role and given the wonderful choice of businesswoman, engineer, socialite or scientist? A son to follow in his father’s footsteps, drowning his responsibility in women and booze? A child destined to have hands steeped in the blood of all those killed by Stark weaponry?

Any child of Tony Stark’s would carry a heavy burden. Genius or no.

And any child of Tony Stark’s would be sure to draw the mentorship and attention of Obadiah Stane.

The thought nearly makes Kara dry heave. No. A sudden rush of firm intent courses through her—never, no, never. Obadiah can never know that Tony Stark has a child, can never know that there is another Stark out there for him to warp and control, to twist and tangle to his own ends.

A bone deep sadness overcomes Kara as she holds the test in her hands, staring blankly at the future that must come to pass to keep this little spark of life safe. If Obadiah can’t know… … Tony Stark can never know either.

Kara moves.

She leaves Malibu and all its dirty splendor behind with no real regret, desiring only to put as many miles between herself and Obadiah as possible.

Naturally, she winds up on the East Coast. Her savings go far enough to purchase a small colonial home in Connecticut, the kind of home that Kara had always secretly dreamed of having—two stories with three modest bedrooms, a sunny kitchen, and a wraparound porch surrounded by tall hedges.

It is the kind of place that Kara wishes she had been raised in.

Her days turn slow.

There is enough money for her to stay out of work for a few years, courtesy of Tony Stark’s extravagant paychecks, and Kara takes advantage of this newfound freedom. She explores the small town, makes friends with a local dance teacher and the man who runs a local coffee shop. Attends a handful of yoga classes, finds a nearby doctor, invites her new friends over for dinner.
She settles into the idea of motherhood with more grace than expected. Kara has never been the type to have many friends, and making them now among her kind neighbors makes her realize how much she needed companionship. Startlingly, Kara starts to realize that she needed Tony just as much as Tony needed her. She hurts all over again, roasting in the guilt of not saying goodbye, of not telling him about this precious thing they made together.

She picks a room upstairs that overlooks the front yard, one with a tall oak tree casting green shadows through the window. Hours are spent painting the room a soft lavender, the perfect color for a nursery.

~~~*~~~

Darcy Evelyn Maria Lewis is born on October thirteenth, only minutes shy of midnight.

Evelyn, for Kara's mother. Maria for Tony's. The smallest gesture she can make towards Darcy's father, towards the man that Kara knows she is cheating out of this brilliant happiness.

All the fear and anger and confusion regarding the idea of being a mother fled Kara as soon as she investigated Darcy’s clear eyes and held her tiny, puckered body.

The universe around her seems to have righted itself, whirring and focusing in on the bundle in her arms.

Already, she has a head of dark hair that rivals Tony’s, but Kara’s own sharp grey eyes.

It is cliché, but Kara is already willing to die for her daughter. Ready to hide her little girl away from all things to do with Stark Industries and Obadiah Stane’s grand plans.

To raise her as a Lewis, never a Stark.
Against Which She Will Judge All Men

Chapter Summary

Hi!

Here is chapter two, which is set about nineteen years later, after the events of the first Iron Man movie. I'm not going to pretend to be great at keeping the timeline of MCU accurate, as I may have to bend parts for my own purpose...

It takes Tony a long time to work up the emotional courage to clear out Obadiah’s office.

Pepper had already tried to have someone else take care of it, someone who would discreetly comb through his nefarious files and flag anything important, but Tony had waved the suggestion away. He may not be a poster child for facing his problems with a healthy attitude, but even he understands that this is his job. Leaving Obi’s plans and loose ends in the hands of someone else is just asking for the entire debacle of betrayal to repeat itself.

It takes him a month and some gentle badgering from Pepper (she’s still worried about him, a mixture of concern and affection that both warms Tony to his toes and simultaneously makes him want to bolt) before he finally faces Obi’s old space.

The arc reactor buried in his chest aches as Tony makes his way into the office, taking note of the fact that everything seems to be in the same place Obi left it. As if he just left for a round of golf, or to visit Tony’s lab and praise the genius that kept Stark Industries on the cutting edge of the weapons market. God, he was so blind. So fucking blind to not realize what a snake Stane was, and it doesn’t even stop the little pinpricks of grief Tony feels for the man who honed him into a successful man and then tried to kill him. Multiple times.

Sighing, Tony sinks into Obi’s plush desk chair and unlocks his system with ease, pushing past the firewalls and going straight for his private files—the good stuff.

Although Pepper already downloaded and showed him the worst of it all, Tony is certain. Tony can’t really see how it can be worse than finding files plotting his own abduction and death.

And so far, it isn’t. Mostly plans for how to phase Obadiah in after Tony’s death as the face and brain of Stark Industries. New logos, new approach to the public. Obi had enough of Tony’s designs saved to keep SI on the cutting edge of the weapon’s market for years, even though the brain behind it all would be rotting away in the sands of the Afghan desert.

God, what a depressing thought.

He wipes the computer, slightly disgusted and more than ready to be done digging into Obadiah’s mad plans, when he notices another file. Deceptively small. The simple title of: DEML Phase 3.

This grabs Tony’s attention. Phase One would have been his own death at the hands of terrorists, Phase Two was Obadiah inserting himself as reigning monarch of Stark Industries, which mean Phase Three should not even be a thing. Obadiah’s main goal would be achieved and more in Phase Two.
The file yields results that have Tony stiffening in confusion.

Pictures, hundreds of them, of a little girl flood the screen.

A baby with a shock of black-brown hair, sleeping in a hospital cradle. A chubby toddler with bouncy dark waves at the end of a sidewalk, smiling through a gate at the picture taker.

A kid? What the hell did Stane want with a little kid?

The pictures increase in number as the little girl grows older. They are covert paparazzi style shots, capturing the ten-year-old girl from a distance as she rides a purple bike down a suburban road, dark hair blown back in the wind and a goofy half smile on her face.

The same little girl now clearly in high school, stepping into a car while dressed in a bright pink strapless gown, a prom corsage tied around her wrist and dark hair tied up in a fancy bun.

Tony feels sick with confusion as he clicks through the pictures, an urgent need to understand bursting through his mind. Why her? Who is this little girl? Why is she Phase Three?

The pictures transition from creepy shots of a teenage girl going to prom to creepy shots of a teenage girl outside of a supermarket, sporting a letter jacket that proclaims her last name as LEWIS.

Lewis. Tony knows that name. A faint, fuzzy memory that naggles in the back of his mind.

Report cards, twelve of them, take up the screen. Darcy Evelyn Maria Lewis, Grade 12, Willa Cather High School.

Tony flicks through the forms, still stuck on why the name Lewis seems familiar. There are discrepancies in the girls grades—high As in Advanced Placement English and History, high grades in her elective classes, but a C in physics and calculus. There is a trend through the years of grades, barely scraping by in mathematics yet excelling in her language and history courses.

After the report cards come the doctor’s office forms. The girl—Darcy—is mostly healthy. Anemic, and diagnosed in late high school with an anxiety disorder, linked to her high IQ. Tony blinks. Her IQ is off the charts, so why she is scoring so low in the classes that matter?

The girl grows older again. This time the pictures show her on the green grass quad of Culver University, clearly moving into her freshman dormitories as she stands typing on her phone, surrounded by moving boxes. This time she is dressed like a normal eighteen-year-old college freshman, leggings and a grey hoodie, long dark hair spilling down her back and glowing a bit red in the sunlight.

The next picture shows a woman joining her, her mother if Tony is willing to start assuming. The older woman’s back is turned to the camera as she reaches for a box, the girl grinning down at her as she balances her own pile of luggage on her hip.

Tony’s breath catches.

The last creeper picture of the file is both women coming down the stairs, free of boxes and wearing matching grins. Well, Darcy is grinning, the mother is smiling with barely concealed sadness in her eyes. Tony doesn’t remember Howard or Maria sending him off to school with any sort of parental sadness. Maybe Maria had been a little bit upset, but Howard had just seemed happy to be rid of him for the semester, off to blow things up in a different lab than his.
Clearly this woman feels differently about her… daughter? Niece? Ward of the state? The resemblance seems to beg familial genetic relations.

A shock flows through Tony as his eyes return to the mother’s face, jolting through him like electricity.

He knows this woman. Lewis. KARA Lewis. Brown hair, now longer than ever, pale skin worn with new lines but the same sharp grey eyes. The stunningly attractive marketing spitfire who gave him hell in his lobby almost twenty years ago. The only reason he even remembers her so clearly is because of how much it took to win her, how long he tried to pull out all the stops, and how she became something akin to a friend by the end of it all.

Well, a friend that finally fucked him in his office during the celebration party and then moved away to her next job without so much as a later, Stark!

It had hurt him, badly, somewhere deep. Not that he had been in love with the woman, or even heading in that direction at all, but she had earned a friendship with him when he was even more of a mess than he is now.

That meant something. An inbred sense of loyalty that Tony can never seem to shake. He hadn't thought one night of ill-advised (but awesome) sex would scare her off and destroy their friendship.

And now here she is, twenty years later. On Obadiah Stane’s computer. Dropping off a girl that looks suspiciously like her daughter at university.

Tony freezes as he puts the pieces together.

1992… 2010… nineteen years ago he and Kara Lewis had…

…and now…

… a daughter.
Cathedral - Jade Bird

"I woke all in white
Right in the middle of the knife
I hoped that you knew that I had left you with no reason why
And I know I wasn't kind..."
“Because I found something much, much worse.” Tony’s flat tone gives her pause. She stares at him, unsure of what to ask, when Tony gestures at his screen and pushes the whole thing towards her. “Have a gander, Pep.”

The image of a little girl takes up the entire screen. She cannot be more than four or five-years-old, caught giggling madly as she dangles her feet from her perch on a swing set. Pepper leans closer, eyes tracing her thick dark-brown hair and wide toothy grin, finding something familiar in the lines of her little face.

“She’s adorable.” She says slowly and cautiously, trying not to think about the implications of child pictures on a man’s private system. “But… why is she on Obadiah’s computer? Who is she?”

Tony’s hands return to the keyboard, flicking to a new picture. The derision in his tone surprises Pepper, alerts her to the fact that something deeper is at play here. “Well, that’s the golden question isn’t it? Good thing I have an answer.”

The picture changes. The little girl is in elementary school, a picture taken from nearby woods as she sits reading under a tree; she’s in high school, curves beginning to show and the same flashing grin present as she hands out water bottles during what looks like a car wash fundraiser.

Pictures fly across the screen. Always the same girl, the same pale skin and deep brown hair, crinkled eyes and grinning face. She looks so much like…

Tony summons a file to the screen.

**PATERNITY REPORT:**

**LAB TESTING CONFIRMS ANTHONY E. STARK IS FATHER OF DARCY E. M. LEWIS**

**AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTION FROM STANE**

**AGENTS ON STANDBY**

Pepper reads the words, then reads them again, and again, until they finally start to make sense.

She tries not to think about what the agents on standby are for.

“They tested my hair,” Tony explains quietly, gaze fixed on the screen. “Somehow got a lock of her’s, too.”

Pressing a hand against the desk for support, Pepper tries to calm her racing heart. Of all the emotional revelations she expected Tony to make in Obadiah’s space, nothing could have prepared her for this.

“Tony…” She begins. “The report is dated 1994. Her birth date is listed as 1992, which means…”

“It means that Obadiah has been aware of another Stark heir for almost twenty years. He’s had eyes on her for twenty years and I haven’t even known she exists—”

Tony’s voice cracks before lapsing into silence, eyes still fixed on the report.

"Obadiah was going to use her?"

Tony's shoulders fall. "Once I was dead, it wouldn't have been the worst thing to have another
Stark heir in his pocket. He was holding onto her for a rainy day. Unimpressed with her science and math scores, thankfully."

A small blessing, that this little girl did not inherit the Stark inclination to weaponry.

“Tony,” Pepper begins, watching as he skips through the pictures of Darcy once again. “She’s beautiful, and she looks happy.”

Tony smiles, a tiny quirk of the lips that Pepper has trained herself to see. “She's at Culver. Studying anthropology."

A long pause falls between them.

"Bachelor of Arts or Science?"

Tony smirks, a slight tilt of his lips that tells Pepper he finds it funny too. "Arts."

Pepper can’t stop her snort. The irony is not lost on either of them. A child of Tony Stark, in the humanities.

“I need to call her mother,” Tony announces after a beat, serious again. “I need to figure out why she didn’t tell me. Why she hasn’t even asked for anything, no child support, no college money…”

Pepper tries to clear her throat, eyes stuck on the image of a smiling Darcy on the Culver campus. “You remember her mother?”

Tony nods, fingers flying across the keys, pulling up a picture of a brown-haired woman along with every single bit of information about her. “I remember. She did marketing for SI when I was twenty-five, we became friends—which you know is something nearly impossible for me.”

Pepper hides a tiny smile, still staring at Kara K. Lewis’ picture. Very much impossible.

“Got drunk at her goodbye party and had a bit of a wild night. I woke up the next morning worried that it would destroy our friendship, and then I realized Kara had packed up and left Malibu before I was even awake.”

Pepper’s brow furrows. “She can’t have known she was pregnant right away.”

“No,” Tony agrees, suddenly full of bitterness. “But she did hate Obadiah. Only took me twenty years to realize that what she was saying was true, he was a snake in the grass.”

Silence falls.

A phone number lights up on the screen, crossing over Kara’s picture.

“Time for some answers.”

Pepper pauses for a moment, weighing her advice against Tony's emotional state. She decides to go for it.

“Maybe you should sober up, before you call the mother of your nineteen-year-old child?”

"...good idea, Pep."
She Fears I'll Be A Servant To My History

Chapter Summary

Bees - The Ballroom Thieves

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"She fears I'll be a servant to my history
Or worse a slave to someone else's misplaced doubts
So I try too hard to kill what's out to kill me..."

Darcy has the Stark genius.

Kara knows this nearly from the beginning.

As a toddler, she’s curious. Always opening drawers and digging up worms in the dirt, always asking why, why, why.

Kara knows that this is regular toddler behavior. Trying to figure out the world, taste things, smell things, ask the mother how and why and who.

But Darcy’s gift for people and culture comes young.

She loves new faces. Loves watching emotions play across them and watches transfixed when Kara laughs at her jerky, baby movements, repeating it again and again to earn her mother’s delight.

When Darcy is four years old, she and Kara are awoken in the middle of the night by Carol and her loud sobs outside their front door. Carol is one of Kara’s closest friends, having bonded during her pregnancy with Darcy and attended every milestone of Darcy’s life since then.

Kara silently lets her distraught friend in, already aware of the misfortune that has fallen her.

“He finally left,” Carol cries, running a hand through her short copper bob. “I told him I knew about her, and he said that he was glad to not have to tell me, a-and that he’s been wanting to leave for years—”

She falls off into deep, body wracking sobs. Kara lifts a hand to her friend’s shoulder, full of sorrow but having no idea of how to help, she’s never been a natural at body language and comfort, even with her own daughter.

But Darcy has no such qualms. The four-year-old climbs into Carol’s lap without hesitation, dark pigtails bobbing and eyes filled with a childlike seriousness as she puts her tiny hands on either side of Carol’s tear-stained face.
“Don’t cry for a mean man.”

Darcy’s child voice rings clear and true, which only seems to make Carol cry harder. But she pulls the little girl to her chest, rocking her slowly and burying her face in her dark curls.

“I know, Darce. I know I shouldn’t.”

“If you know,” Darcy asks, little brows raised in confusion as she pats Carol’s face. “Why are you still sad?”

Carol gives a melancholy smile.

“Sometimes knowing doesn’t make it easier. Sometimes you need to be sad for a little bit to feel better.”

Darcy soaks in her words, nodding. Her big grey eyes are solemn, but Kara can see her little girl’s pain at Mommy’s friend being so upset. “Then I think you should keep crying. Mommy has lots of adult drinks you can have, she says they make things better.”

Carol actually laughs, pulling Darcy in closer for a snuggle, which in turn causes Kara to blush and blunder for a moment.

She finally sighs. “Darcy’s right. Would you like some wine? We can all have a sleepover downstairs, if you don’t want to be alone.”

Carol smiles over Darcy’s head. “Thank you. I’d love some. You’ve got a smart little girl here, Kara.”

Kara smiles. “I know.”

Carol eventually splits from her husband, moving into a house only a few blocks from theirs. She adores Darcy and volunteers herself as a babysitter while Kara interviews at a few marketing jobs outside of town, letting the little girl order whatever she wants from the local pizzeria and marathoning classic Disney movies. Kara often comes home to find them both in a food coma, curled up and fast asleep on her ruby couch.

At seven years old, Darcy is a voracious reader. She devours books meant for high school students and carries around her favorite—a well-worn biography of Cleopatra VII—nearly everywhere.

When Darcy is thirteen, Kara splurges on a vacation, planning an expensive trip to Puerto Adventuras, Mexico. She books an all-inclusive resort that boasts a coral reef, free entertainment, beach access, and day trip to nearby attractions.

Darcy packs a suitcase full of books and reads the entire trip. Books on Ancient Rome, Greece, Istanbul, the Mayans and Aztecs. Kara tries her best not to pull her hair out, trying to convince her daughter to bring bathing suits and sunscreen instead of Encyclopedias of the Ancient World.

Because Kara booked the flight so late, she and Darcy end up having to sit almost ten rows apart on the plane ride to Mexico. Near the last hour of the journey, a flight attendant pulls Kara aside to congratulate her on having such a smart and polite little girl. She finds out later that Darcy had kept her entire row of fellow passengers enraptured by describing the Mayan and Aztec culture for nearly three hours, answering the questions of curious adults about Aztec ball games and Mayan sacrifices with an easy accuracy.

(One man on the flight is so impressed with Darcy that he gives her his card, one that declares him
a nautical archaeologist who once had a show about shipwrecks on the History Channel. He chats with Darcy about archaeology for the final two hours of the flight. It’s all Darcy can talk about the rest of the trip.)

The ritzy perks of an all-inclusive resort are lost on Kara’s daughter. She sits on the beach and reads, eats at fancy island restaurants and reads, drinks a virgin pina colada and reads. The only time Kara can get her to look up from her books is when she takes them to Tulum, knowing that the ancient ruins will make her daughter’s day.

(They do. Darcy makes them stay all day in the heat, walking through the stone ruins again and again, pointing out the different layers of soil that have been excavated and the marks of ancient stone masons. Kara finds herself enchanted with the picture her daughter paints of the Mayans—the bright colors, the feathered headdresses and priests. The ruins seem to teem with forgotten life as her daughter speaks, yanking up a dead civilization before Kara’s eyes from a dark abyss like magic.)

They come home after a bright two weeks, and Darcy starts high school. Her thin body begins to sport dramatic curves, and Kara winces in sympathy when Darcy’s breasts finally come in. Kara herself had a breast reduction in college, tired of the back pain and leering looks, but Darcy never complains.

(Kara does, however, once get called to the school to pick her daughter up for starting a fight. A slimy little boy fried to cop a feel, which caused Darcy to pop him in the nose. The little bastard wailed at the sight of his own blood and Darcy was sent to the office. Kara buys her an ice cream afterwards.)

For the first two years of high school, all Darcy can talk about is Ancient Egypt. Then Ancient Rome. Then Greece, then Neolithic China, then various Canadian aboriginal cultures.

Darcy excels in her humanities classes. She’s the darling of every English and History teacher in the school, but her daughter nearly fails chemistry, and then nearly fails physics, and then nearly fails algebra and geometry and calculus. It takes an expensive tutor and sheer force of will to get Darcy through these classes.

(Kara thinks of Tony and lets herself laugh. When Darcy had started school, Kara waited for her to excel in math and science. She was certain that this aspect of Tony would be passed to her daughter, that Darcy would have a future as an engineer or scientist.) (What would Tony think if he knew about his liberal arts minded daughter who once broke out in hives when learning a new equation in physics?)

Kara encourages her to start thinking about college, to ponder about what she might want to do, even though Kara knows that Darcy has wanted to be one thing since she talked with that man on the airplane to Mexico.

Darcy wants to be an archaeologist.

She must hand it to her daughter, she is determined. There are other fields she has investigated—museum studies, English literature, classical studies—but Darcy always comes back to the same thing.

“Mom, I can’t explain it!” Darcy says one day, grey eyes wide and dark hair hanging down her back. She’s sixteen years old, eyes ringed in purple eyeliner. Her black converse are scuffed, tucked into black skinny jeans. A brown t-shirt hangs off her daughter’s body, proudly declaring her a part of the *LOCH NESS MONSTER ADVENTURE CLUB: FINDING ANSWERS,*
I just know that it’s what I was meant to do. I want to put my hands in the dirt and pull out history, I want to be the one who helps the world figure out where we came from.”

Kara smiles at her daughter. “I know, Darce.”

Darcy lights up. “Good! Because there’s this archaeology undergraduate program at Culver that I think I can get into, even with my math scores…”

And she does get in. Suddenly Darcy is eighteen, all curves and red lips and deep laughter.

Kara looks at her daughter and sees parts of herself—they share the same full lips and grey eyes, the same pale skin that bronzes nicely in the sun, the same braying laugher.

But she sees Tony as well. Darcy’s brown hair is the same shade and smooth texture as his—so dark it nearly seems black in low-lighting. Their brows are similar, Darcy’s have a feminine arch that she keeps neatly plucked, but when she furrows her brow at Kara, the resemblance is startling. For a moment, it’s Tony glowering at her behind a half-finished robot.

(What was the robot’s name? Wall-E? Stupid-E? Kara feels these details slipping away from her, bit by bit.)

Kara firmly changes her stance on nature vs nurture as Darcy grows. There is so much Tony in her mannerisms. Her snark. Her cutting intelligence. Darcy can adopt the same protective arrogance that Tony used to sport in the face of gross teenage boys and the occasional cat caller.

It makes Kara’s heart ache, to know that Darcy exists—beautiful, bright, vivacious Darcy—and Tony doesn’t even know.
lack of caffeine.

He loves Darcy. Absolutely adores her. Always has, from the moment that Kara returned from the local hospital, exhausted and in love with the bundle in her arms, to find Dan and Carol in her kitchen surrounded by new baby supplies.

(Kara had broken down into tears, still unused to the kindness of friends and the idea that she was worthy of such gifts. Dan grinned at her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and peering to the bundle of blankets in her arms, declaring that this baby was much less ugly than all the others in town.)

He’s been the one who check up on Darcy while Kara is at work, who found out about Darcy’s first broken heart when a boy from a nearby town stood her up for homecoming. He was also the one who hunted the boy down and put the fear of god into him.

(Kara once wondered what it would be like to love Dan. To open that part of herself up. But she can’t banish the guilt for what she did to Tony, she can’t figure out how forgive herself for this deception that she has built their lives upon.)

When Darcy does realize what she is lacking, she is nearly eight years old. She wanders into the kitchen, only a glimmer in her eyes betraying her thoughts.

“Is my dad dead?”

Kara dropped the pot she was cleaning straight into the sink, swearing as the hot water splashed onto her blouse. Darcy was many things, but not subtle. Or… good at working up to things.

“What?” Kara squeaked, eloquently.

“My dad,” Darcy restated, sitting calmly at the breakfast bar with a smores pop tart. “Did he die?”

Kara presses her body against the counter for a moment, trying to recall all years of preparation she has done for this conversation.

“No…” She finally speaks. “He’s alive.”

Darcy hums, chewing thoughtfully on her snack. The sweet smell fills the kitchen, making Kara feel sick to the stomach.

“Does he not want to live with us?” She finally asked, grey eyes focused on her mother. “I’ve read a lot about Roman emperors who didn’t want their kids to live with them. Especially if they had them with a mistress. The Egyptians had a whole palace of the Pharaoh’s kids though, which is pretty cool.”

Kara flinched at the word mistress. Internally, she realizes just how much Darcy has thought about this. She should have talked with Darcy sooner, explained it in full, instead of letting her draw her own conclusions.

“No, Darcy…” Kara finally moved, gently pulling Darcy and her pop tart to the living room. They fall onto the couch, side by side. “He doesn’t know about you, baby.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. “He doesn’t know about me? At all?”

“I—I didn’t tell him that I was pregnant with you. I worked for his business, and then there was a mean man who I thought would hurt you if he knew about you, so I didn’t tell your dad. I wanted
to make sure you were safe.”

“Why would he have hurt me? Couldn’t dad have stopped him?”

Kara sighs, rubbing at her head while keeping one arm around Darcy’s thin shoulders. “I don’t know. I wasn’t wanting to risk it. This man was really awful, and he was trying to manipulate your dad.”

“Why?”

“Darce, your dad… he’s a great man. Very smart. Almost as smart as you.”

Darcy makes a show of rolling her eyes, but Kara sees the smile.

“And he is very important. A lot of people look up to him, and he has a lot of things to do. He’s so busy that I used to sometimes only see him once a month. He had a lot of people who wanted to take his money and hurt him, and I knew if these bad people knew about you, they would try to do something bad.”

Darcy’s eyes are wide, fear creeping in. “Are they going to come for us?”

“No!” Kara jerks, pulling Darcy into her lap. She has never wanted Darcy to carry this fear, to hold it in her heart. “We live very far away now. And I’ve made sure that nobody knows who your father is. Someday, if it all goes away, I hope you can meet him.”

“Can I know his name?” She asked, hope in every line of her tiny face.

“Darce… not yet. It isn’t safe. But I promise I will tell you someday.” She gathers her daughters hands, keeping eye contact and hoping Darcy understands how important what she is about to say is. "You can't tell anyone what I've told you, Darce. Not even Carol or Dan. Its our secret."

"Okay." Darcy sniffs, the only sign that her daughter is upset by this information, and then composes herself. “I want to tell him about the Egyptians and Mayans. Sometimes royal children didn’t meet their daddies until they were grown up.”

Kara breathe a sigh of relief, blinking back her own tears. “See? Maybe you’ll meet him when you’re a grown up, too.”

Darcy is accepted into the archaeology program at Culver University. She’s over the moon for a month, already planning the classes she will take: Egyptian Architecture and Classical Archaeology and Literature of Pompeii.

Kara moves Darcy into her dorm on a Sunday, choking back her tears as her grown up daughter hops around with boxes and greets her new roommate with a hug. She’s so happy, so excited, so full of nervous energy as she puts up her art posters and writes her schedule down on a whiteboard gifted from Carol.

Kara and Darcy can barely let go of each other when it is time for her to leave. Dan stands back by the truck, now empty of all Darcy’s belongings, and watches with sad eyes as Kara fights back her
tears.

Culver is less than an hour away from their home, but it is farther than Kara has every let her
daughter roam. Distantly, Kara feels the old fear of Obadiah and Stark Industries finding out about
her brilliant, larger than life daughter. But she smothers the fear, telling herself that nothing has
happened for twenty years, that last she checked Tony was still enjoying the womanizing limelight.

She smiles through her tears as they drive away from Darcy’s dorm, imagining the look on Tony’s
face if he ever found out his child was a liberal arts prodigy.

~~~*~~~

Darcy comes home for Christmas break, full of stories and bright eyed with love for her major.

Kara hosts a Christmas party, half for the holiday and half to celebrate Darcy’s first 4.0 semester.
Carol shows up with a cake decorated to look like an Egyptian tomb (Darcy cries, taking picture
after picture of the beautiful creation and kissing Carols cheeks repeatedly) while Dan brings over
a shovel and trowel that he ordered with Darcy’s initials (she cries over this too, so touched that
Dan’s flannel runs black with her mascara).

Darcy returns to school in January, coming home one weekend with the exciting news that she is
the youngest student in Culver’s archaeology department to be asked to attend a professional dig in
Costa Rica.

(Kara doesn’t have the heart to say no, despite the fear creeping into her heart that tells her Darcy
should not travel alone, not when Tony Stark just returned from the depths of the Afghan desert.)

Darcy returns to school, brimming with excitement for the upcoming dig, unaware of Kara’s fears.
Dan refuses to leave Kara alone, sensing that there is something bigger than she is letting on that
may explode in her and Darcy’s face. Kara's silences have grown longer without Darcy, she hides
away from her friends when she can, caught in memory.

Dan doesn't let her hide for long.

Finally, over a bottle of merlot and a home-cooked meal crafted by Dan in her kitchen, Kara spills
the entire messy story of Darcy’s creation. Tony Stark. Obadiah Stane. Her work for SI and her
exodus to Connecticut.

Dan holds her for a long time afterwards, face drawn and silent. He refuses to judge, only asks how
he can help keep Kara and Darcy safe if Obadiah ever came looking.

Kara doesn’t know what to say. So she kisses him.

The next morning, as Kara rolls away from Dan’s warm arms to check her phone for texts from
Darcy, she sees the news.

CNN REPORTS: OBADIAH STANE, SECOND-IN-COMMAND OF STARK
INDUSTRIES, HAS DIED IN A SMALL PLANE CRASH WHILE ON VACATION IN
PERU

A second, flashing banner follows, declaring breaking news.
TONY STARK, BILLIONAIRE CEO OF STARK INDUSTRIES, CONFESSES THAT HE IS VIGILANTE 'IRON MAN'

Dan wakes up to Kara's hysterical laughter.

Of course. Of course nothing is simple with Tony.

Obi is dead. She wants to feel light, to feel relieved. After twenty years, she can tell Tony about Darcy, she can finally rid herself of the secrets and guilt she carries. She can tell Darcy who her father is.

But now Tony Stark is a fucking superhero.

A controversial superhero with a dozen targets on his back already.

It's almost a relief when, months later, Tony calls her.

Chapter End Notes

This work is unbeta'd, so apologies for errors.
The Words She Aches to Hear Pour Through My Canyons

Chapter Summary

In which Tony and Kara catch up.

Tony drinks a gallon of water, sends Pepper away by promising on the Iron Man suit that he’s not about to spiral into an emotional tailspin, and then gets JARVIS to dial Kara’s number.

It rings for a long time. Long enough for Tony to realize that it probably isn’t very polite to call at ten p.m. But… it also isn’t polite to keep someone’s illegitimate daughter a secret for twenty years, so suck it and answer the goddamn phone, Lewis.

“Hello?”

The voice on the line is annoyed and low in pitch, as if trying to speak quietly. Suddenly, Tony is reminded of when he called Kara twenty years ago, for a much different reason. He is also reminded of drunken day in his lab involving hypo-allergenic horses, for some reason he cannot place.

“Hi, Kara.”

He hears her gasp, then hears the phone drop. There’s static on the line, and the sounds of someone desperately trying to scoop a cellphone off tile flooring.

“TONY?”

“The one and only.”

“W-what? How—how did you get this number?”

Tony snorts, remembering that Kara was hopeless with technology even twenty years ago.

“I have a lot of connections. And you listed it in the local phone book.”

“Dammit, seriously? I thought I filled out a form requesting that our numbers not be listed in public forum! I spent three fucking hours at the courthouse!”

“Not the point, Lewis.”

“…Right.” Kara breathes. Her voice sounds vaguely hopeful. “Calling to catch up on old times? Nothing new here, just, you know, life, I moved east—”

“I know about Darcy.”

Silence falls. Tony can hear Kara’s labored breathing, suddenly harsh even through the distance. Her voice is sharp. Cold. A knife that cuts deeply into Tony's resolve.

“How?”
Tony leans back in Obi’s chair, rubbing at his face. How the hell is he supposed to explain this.

“Well, have you been looking at the news lately?”

“I have.” Kara says slowly. “I know that Obadiah died. I’m sorry for your loss.”

There’s a beat of silence in which Tony tries to figure out what to say. Thank you? Don’t apologize, he was stalking our daughter? Also, I’m the one who killed him? Kara beats him to it.

“I also heard that you made a tin man suit and like to fly around in it.”

“This is true. Iron Man. I’m a superhero, Lewis. Cool, right?”

Kara sighs, a strained sound that makes her sound like a true mother. “Very cool, Tony. But you still haven’t told me how you found out ab—about Darcy.”

Tony clenches his hands in his lap, deciding just to come out with it. He’s never been know for tact, anyways. “Obadiah didn’t die in a plane crash. He tried to kill me and stole a prototype for the suit. I killed him.”

Another long silence falls. Kara’s breathing evens out again. “Tony. I’m so sorry. I know what he meant to you—”

Tony waves his arms around, despite the fact that Kara can’t see him, because he's not able to exactly articulate that yes, yes his second father figure ended up being a manipulative prick. There’s a trend. At least Howard never attempted to actively murder him.

“I’m fine, Kara.” He takes another breath, touched slightly that she remembers and still seems to care. “I’ve been looking at Obadiah’s files today, trying to clear everything out and be done with it. He… he had a file. For Darcy.”

“What?”

Tony continues, hoping in vain that if he says it quickly it will somehow be easier to deal with. He closes his eyes and spew the truth. “I don’t know how he found out about her, but it’s pictures. Of Darcy. From far away. The first pictures are her as a baby, the latest are the both of you on the Culver campus.”

Kara’s breathing is quick and harsh, Tony can feel her panic through the phone line, tendrils of it sinking into his own heart.

“Culver,” She whispers. “That wasn’t even eight months ago. He was following her? Us?”

“He… he had agents. I don’t know specifics yet. Looks like he hired them from a mercenary group. Unarmed, at least.”

“Agents?!” Kara stutters. “Armed?”

“Not anymore,” Tony says quickly, doing a quick trace of Obadiah’s files to confirm they were called off after his death. “When Obadiah died, they didn’t get their paychecks and it all ended. She’s safe, Kara.”

“Holy shit. Tony. Holy fucking shit. This was never supposed to happen, they were never supposed to know about her!”

Tony can’t keep the bitterness from his tone. “Is that why you never told me about her? Ran away
“*YES!*” Kara yells, nearly bursting Tony’s eardrums. “You loved Obi, and I understand why-- I’m not blaming you-- but I saw what he did to you! I saw the manipulations, I saw what the world asked of you and how little you got in return! I didn’t want that for Darcy. Weapons and kidnappings and tabloids. I wanted her to be able to choose.”

“Choose what, Kara?” Tony barks. He’s staring at Darcy’s picture, of her crossing the quad on campus, and imaging what he could have been. What he should have been. “If I had known about her, I would have helped. Sent money, had her intern at SI in the summers, had her shadow Pepper or fucking something!”

“Exactly.” Kara sighs, all the anger drained from her tone. “I didn’t want her to spend her summers at SI. I wanted her to do what she wanted to do. Can you honestly tell me that you would have kept her a secret from Obi? That you wouldn’t have trusted him with her existence?”

Tony’s silence is his damning answer. Kara hears it and continues,

“I thought she was safer this way, Tony. I am so, so sorry for keeping it from you, but I would do it all again. For my daughter, I would do anything.”

Tony soaks in Kara’s words, letting the silence stretch on as he thinks. She’s right that he would have trust Obi, he would have even let him mentor her, teach her the ropes of SI. Not that he even knows this kid.

"I just, how did they know about her? For twenty years?” Tony can hear the disgust in Kara's tone. The blame she is turning in on herself. "They've known about us all along? Why wait?"

Tony clears his throat. "The plan was to kill me, let Obadiah take over the company, and then if his power was contested by the board... I think he would have brought in Darcy. Claimed her as a Stark. Puppet stuff."

"That's sick. Fucking twisted. If he wasn't already dead I would kill him myself."

"Vicious."

"Says the man who actually killed him!"

"Yes, yes, you're right. What matters now is that he's dead, and I can keep these threats away from Darcy. I can be the buffer."

Kara is silent. For long enough that Tony wonders if she's hung up on him. He might not blame her.

"Thank you," She says finally, calmer. "That means a lot."

“What...” He takes another breath, trying to calm his roiling stomach. “What is she like?”

He can hear the smile in Kara’s voice, suddenly gentle, adoring. “She’s brilliant, Tony. She has so much of you in her. Your hair, your smile. Her IQ is off the charts, but not in the way you would expect. Science and math have never come easily. It took years off my life just to convince her to try and pass them.”

Tony fights a smile. “Not what I would have expected from a Stark spawn.”
“Ew,” Kara laughs. “But I agree. I spent most of her elementary years waiting for her to build a robot or take apart the TV. Never happened.”

“What’s the kid good at, then?” He swallows, suddenly tongue-tied. The report cards flash in his mind, the enrollment papers for anthropology. “Strengths?”

“She’s training to be an archaeologist. Only a freshman, but her professors keep throwing around the word prodigy. She’s the only undergraduate student to be invited on a graduate dig, she’s actually excavating in Costa Rica right now. Keeps sending me pictures of toucans and skeletons. Excavating pre-Colombian sites with a forensic team.”

“Costa Rica?” Tony chokes a bit on his watered-down scotch. Faintly, he also hears the word skeleton and forensics. “Is that safe?”

“Wow, I see the latent paternal instincts are springing to life.” Kara deadpans. “She’s safe, Tony. Staying in a nice hotel near the beach, even.”

Tony sighs, making a mental note to track some credit cards and figure out exactly where she’s staying. “Good, that’s… that’s good.”

“Tony,” Kara begins, carefully. “We should talk about this. I kept her a secret because of Obadiah, but I’ve never not wanted you in her life. Do you want a relationship with Darcy?”

The breath freezes in Tony’s throat. “Well, that’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?”

Kara ignores his attempt at humor. “I’ve never told her who you are. It would have been too dangerous for her, especially as a kid.”

“I understand.”

“She guesses a lot. A few years ago she asked if you were the Prince of Genovia. Broke her heart when I said no.”

Tony fiddles with the keyboard, searching quickly for what the ever-loving fuck Genovia is. A picture of Anne Hathaway comes up, which tells him all he needs to know. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“I hardly think Iron Man will disappoint.”

“Will?” Tony questions. “So, you’re planning on telling her?”

“That’s what I’m trying to get at. It’s entirely up to you how involved you want to be. She’s mostly grown up, but I think that she would love you.”

His arc reactor aches for a moment, yanking the muscles near his heart together. “I… I’m still dangerous, Kara. Obadiah’s gone, but the world knows Iron Man now.”

“I know.” She murmurs. “But I’m done trying to hide the truth from Darcy. I’ve always wanted her to know you. I won’t say anything if you don’t want me to, but I know she’s going to dig up the truth soon, Tony. That girl has an archaeologist’s heart. No stone stays unturned for long.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Tony mumbles, eyes focused on the picture of his daughter still illuminated on the screen. “Maybe when things die down, I can meet her. Tell her.”

“I understand, Tony.” Kara comforts. “It’s a process. You only found out about her this morning.”

“Will… Can you tell me about her, until then? Keep me updated on school?” He jolts,
remembering exactly what absentee fathers are responsible for. “Shit, Kara, I owe you a check. How much? Couple million?”

“NO! Tony, no. No money.”

“This is the only way I know how to express affection.”

“You know a few ways, if I remember.”

“Minx!”

Kara laughs, a deep sound that reminds Tony of why he liked her so much twenty years ago. “Seriously, though, no money. I have it handled. Get her twenty birthday presents when you break the news or something.”

“You still have an awful sense of humor, Lewis.”

“That I do,” Kara laughs again. “Want to hear a few stories before we hang up? I’ve got twenty years to catch you up on.”

Tony pauses for a moment. Realizing that this question is asking for more than listening to a few stories. Does he want to know about his girl?

He can stop this and walk away. Pretend he never found out about Darcy Lewis. End it now with the knowledge that Obadiah is gone and Kara has things under control.

Or he can know. He can listen to the stories of a girl who digs in the dirt for a living and shares half his DNA. Who has his eyebrows.

“Please.”
Look at the Fleeting Stars with Fleeting Eyes

Chapter Summary

Trigger warning: slight talk about sexual assault. It's actually a pretty big problem on excavations, a lot of female archaeologists feel unsafe with men in their fields. Darcy knows this.

Beginning quote from Joseph Fink - Welcome to Night Vale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So look at the fleeting stars with fleeting eyes, and feel how the earth beneath you gives. It is all a temporary manifestation of particles, and it is all unraveling back to particulate silence. The bustle of the human day will come and go. And then there will be night.

Be proud of your place in the cosmos. It is small, and yet it is. How unlikely! How fantastic! And stupid. And excellent."

By twenty-two, Darcy is the darling of the Culver archaeology program.

She’s gone on more digs than most of the graduate students—Costa Rica, Florence, Xian, Chile, Nunavut and Alaska. She comes home with pockets full of dirt and a mouth full of stories, which freshman fell into the trash midden, which professor drank too much moonshine and fell asleep in an excavation trench.

But she’s still six hours of science credit shy of graduation.

So she bites the bullet and signs up to intern for an astrophysicist in New Mexico, praying desperately that this lady doesn’t actually require an intern with basic knowledge of chemistry and physics. Darcy has neither.

She’s pleasantly surprised when she meets Dr. Jane Foster, a tiny elfin woman who picks her up from the Las Cruces airport in a giant, beat up van.

“So, you have no science experience?”

Darcy shakes her head with a grin, fiddling with her seat belt as they drive the hour towards Puente Antiguo. The sun is setting outside the window, turning the desert a brilliant red. Darcy is hooked on the clear desert skies already.

“Sorry, Boss Lady. I have an okay grasp of dendochronology and radiocarbon dating, but not much physics. I realize I was the only applicant, I just really need those six science credits.”

Jane’s face falls, and suddenly Darcy feels awful for being the only one who wanted to study the stars with her.
“I’m a quick learner! If you can show me, I can pick it up. I promise. Kinda. Maybe. Will it involve math?”

Jane actually cracks a smile, throwing a sideways gaze at the mess of a girl in her passenger seat. “You won’t have to worry about math. Your duties will mostly be recording information and helping out in the lab. Book-keeping, tidying up, just general intern things.”

“Sweet,” Darcy relaxes, feeling a bit less over her head. “I can be a lab monkey, totally doable. Are we camping?”

“Camping?” Jane’s brows shoot up. “No, we’ve got a trailer. You and I will share, Selvig has his own space. Are you the camping type?”

“Sort of,” Darcy admits. “I spend most of my summers and breaks on digs. A lot of times we excavate pretty far from human settlements, so we set up a town of tents. It’s pretty fun. The lack of running water sucks though.”

“Ah, I forgot. You had some great letters of recommendation from the Dean of Anthropology.”

“Yep.” Darcy grins. “He and I are buds. I found out that New Mexico has a ton of awesome heritage sites, Navajo ruins in the canyons and stuff. If we ever get a day break I might try to see some.”

Jane looks impressed at her fervor. “I might have to come with you, sounds fascinating.”

“You would love it! The Navajo people have beautiful stories about the constellations. There’s this one about the Coyote Star, I would love to hear about it from one of the heritage sites…”

~~~*~~~

Darcy and Selvig get along wonderfully.

He and Jane both seem bemused by their new intern, enjoying having the excuse to teach a new soul the laws of the universe. Surprisingly, Darcy picks it up pretty quickly. She can fuck with the big bang. Hot and dense universe, slowly getting larger and colder. Easy.

The one time that Selvig tries to explain the Boltzman Equation, Darcy actually breaks out in hives. Jane and Selvig didn’t believe her stories of getting splotchy in math class until they see the evidence with their own eyes. Giant welts of red start climbing up Darcy's arms, snaking around her wrists.

"I told you." She says solemnly, trying not to itch. "I'm hardwired to hate math."

"I think you're just being dramatic, Darcy." Jane says, eyeing the splotches with a science! gleam in her eyes. "You're working yourself up."

"No way! I'm calm, I just get itchy when people start trying to throw numbers at me. And why have they added so many letters to math? Doesn't that defeat the purpose? Aren't the math people cursed to hate the alphabet people for all eternity?"

"Ah," Erik intones wisely. "It's the expectation. We'll keep it theoretical, Darce."
"Bless you, Norse Man."

Later, Erik buys her a cupcake and a tube of cortisone creme in apology. Jane takes her out into the desert to look at stars and share a bottle of tequila. They learn a lot about each other, trading stories about crazy ex-boyfriends, and come back to the lab in the morning with their arms slung around the other, hungover and happy.

Erik mutters something about too much estrogen in the labs.

It’s strange for Darcy, this sense of community between the three of them. They learn from each other, Darcy picking apart Erik’s childhood stories of Norse mythology while Jane chimes in about ancient star placements and how they’ve changed.

Even on digs, Darcy usually keeps her distance from her fellow students. She’s been to a handful of sexual harassment seminars the department offers, usually focusing on the plethora of sexual assault that can happen on digs in the middle of nowhere. Misbehaved boys start to get Indiana Jones complexes, wanting to pull up gold from the ground and kiss pretty girls. It's easy to be followed on your way to the bathroom after dinner or in the night. After the first time Darcy had to knee an overeager senior in the balls, she invested in a taser and started to take it everywhere.

It's a hard world for women archaeologists.

But she doesn’t have to worry with Jane and Erik. They all share an easy orbit, working around each other in the labs, Jane charting her sky maps while Erik adjusts the equations and Darcy faithfully types it all into the computers. Evenings are spent outside in the cool desert air, wrapped up in blankets as they stare at the sky. Erik usually pulls out a bottle of sweet mead, enjoying the fact that Darcy has learn how to say ‘cheers’ in Norwegian. He and Jane will lapse into deep conversations about the theories of the universe while Darcy counts shooting stars.

It’s an easy rhythm, until Jane hits Thor with her car.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you guys for the comments! You are all so sweet.

There's been a lot of focus on Tony and Kara because I felt like it was important to explain where Darcy comes from. And to establish that Kara doesn't hate Tony or judge him for his actions, she was a genuine friend to him and appreciates the parts of him she sees in Darcy.

That being said #tony&pepper4ever
Shit goes down in Puente Antiguo.

Darcy thought she was lucky to have a somewhat interesting hobby that took her to exotic locations. Darcy thought that the most excitement she was going to encounter would be stumbling across ancient bones. Darcy did not think her internship with two star-scientists would be action-packed in the slightest.

Darcy was really fucking wrong.

Despite hitting him with their car, Thor ends up being a cool dude. Aside from the whole 'I-am-the-God-of-Thunder!' bit he has going on, which makes Darcy snort up her coffee (even though she likes the guy, he made her bacon) because there’s plenty of online forums in which people roleplay as ancient gods (and furrys?), and this guy does not belong on it.

She likes Thor well enough. He promises to get her iPod back from the SHIELD assholes (and Jane’s research, less importantly); bonds with Selvig over Norse stories; and lets Darcy post a selfie of the two of them to Facebook (she just wants to rub something in all of her classmates faces: “HOPE U GUYS R HAVING FUN EXCAVATING IN TUSCANY, BUT LOOK I JUST FOUND A HOT GUY WITH A HEAD PROBLEM WHO CLAIMS TO BE THOR GOD OF THUNDER —WHO IS REALLY THE WINNER???? U TELL ME”. It gets one-hundred-and-twenty-one likes. Darcy’s mother calls, concerned about the giant blonde man, but Thor takes the phone and promises on his honor that he will let no harm come to Darcy. Or her beautiful friend. Or her grandfather. It was sweet in a medieval kind of way.)

(SHIELD eventually makes her take the post down. She will hold this grudge until death.)

Darcy starts maybe believing Thor right around when the Warriors Three come to the lab. She’s taken a few classes on leather-pleating in the pre-Christian world, enough to know that the badass armor skirt Sif wears is the real deal. Not a Renaissance Festival or Party City copy, but an actual functional set of armor.

(Sif fucking rocks it. Darcy falls in love with her a little bit. Sif is teaching her a few moves with her incredibly heavy sword until a fire-breathing robot starts exploding things.)

Turns out that Thor has a brother. Loki. God of Mischief.

Darcy hates to admit this, but Loki is totally someone she would make out with. If he wasn’t trying to kill her. She’s a sucker for long dark hair and sad eyes, it makes her want to jump in his lap and show him all her favorite indie bands.

Not that he stays long. Drops off the Destroyer, has a little evil monologue, and then leaves. Rude.

Darcy has her taser clutched between shaking hands as they dodge fiery explosions of death. The Warriors Three all march right towards the danger, which Darcy appreciates as very badass, but she and Jane and Selvig are not alien warriors of old. They run like hell in the opposite direction.

“MOTHER FUCKER!” Darcy screeches as a nearby car explodes in a hailstorm of fire and death.
“Keep moving!” Selvig instructs.

“But, Thor!”

Selvig and Darcy pull at Jane, ignoring her boner-crush worries about Thor, while trying to book it to safety. But this giant robot isn’t allowing that, because it keeps shooting death-rays at the empty buildings Darcy wants to hide in.

(When Darcy sees the pet shop full of terrified animals pushing against their cages, she doesn’t even stop to think. Selvig’s focus is on keeping Jane from running into the fray, he doesn’t expect Darcy to be the one to break away. He assumes that she has better survival instincts than love-struck Jane.)

Darcy clutches her taser, sprinting across the street while the robot is distracted by Sif’s thighs. She can hear the metallic screech of the robot gearing up for another shot, but Darcy refuses to let herself think about that shot being aimed at her as she bursts into the pet shop, opening cages and grabbing puppies and kittens by the armful.

Thankfully there are no fish for her to rescue. Carrying tanks would be an actual nightmare.

She’s herding the animals towards freedom when Selvig and Jane find her, livid at her stupidity but helping to scoop up the animals that Darcy can’t.

It happens quickly after that.

They push the animals to safety, rounding back to find Thor… reasoning with the robot? Cool. Darcy is all for pacifism.

But Thor gets backhanded by the huge metal man with a crunch that tells Darcy his skull should be putty.

Jane runs towards him (they have a romantic moment in the middle of battle, which Darcy is pretty sure is only supposed to happen in movies, and like, when Thor is conscious), Thor doesn’t stir, and suddenly Darcy remembers a Norse curse that Selvig taught her and screams it at the top of her lungs (‘Gamla vis Hrüga uskít’r, motherfucker!’) when the robot actually turns to her, eyes filling up with orange, letting Darcy know that her curse may have been too effective.

She stares at the fiery eyes, unable to move. Darcy realizes this is how she was meant to go. Screaming Norse curses about shit at a sentient alien robot.

(Not the worst way, at least. Maybe Sif will go back to Asgard and sing songs about her brave little human friend.)

And then suddenly Myeh-Myeh the magic hammer is flying through the air to save the day.

The robot moves its scary eyes from Darcy to track the hammer, shooting rays that the hammer weaves and dodges with flair.

Darcy loves Myeh-Myeh. She is so full of gratitude that she internally promises to knit the hammer a little handle warmer with Viking designs. Maybe some hot-rod flames.

Thor plucks Myeh-Myeh from the air and lightning erupts. All they can do is watch in awe as Thor summons a wicked set of armor (with a cape!), sends a sexy smirk back to Jane (who nearly fucking swoons, Darcy has to hold her up) and proceeds to wreck the robot.
Darcy finally realizes that Thor is exactly what he was claiming to be. God of Thunder. The fucking God of Thunder made her bacon and let her post him to her Facebook page.

*Holy shit.*

Darcy stares at the funnel of black storm clouds encasing Thor, shuddering with lightning and filling the air with the sharp tang of ozone. For a moment, Darcy is forced to question nearly everything she knows. The Norse gods are real. The Vikings worshiped super-powered aliens. Are the Egyptian gods real? Do they have a planet? A realm? What about the Greek gods? Should she be worried about being struck down by Zeus because of that time she called him a ‘cock-swallowing bloody-asshole rapist’ during a Socratic seminar in high school? Will Thor be able to protect her?

And then suddenly… Jane and Darcy and Selvig are alone.

The storm clears. The robot lies in pieces on the hot road, and all that’s left is a stamp of interwoven Celtic knots.

SHIELD pulls up within seconds.

Chapter End Notes

gamla vis Hruga uskit'r - you're less than a heap of shit!

**used what resources I have for the translation, do not yell if you are a scholar please, just drop me a polite comment with what help you can offer.**
A Victory Celebrated

Chapter Summary

Nobody can convince me that Clint and Darcy do not become BFFs after surviving all this Thor nonsense. Snarkfest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy likes Agent Barton.

SHIELD drives them back to the lab, asking question after question about what happened, who the hell is Thor, who the hell is Loki, please stop talking about how awesome Sif’s thighs looked when she stuck a sword through the Destroyers head (that last question is directed at Darcy. She’s a nervous rambler).

But once they get back to the labs, Phil Coulson surprises her by giving back all of their ramshackle equipment and offering Jane a job. Well, more like telling Jane, because there’s no way they’ll let her publish her findings about the Bifrost bridge and ancient aliens. Something about national secrets. AREA 51. Aliens in pods.

Jane is about to pull the biggest of all bitch fits in Phil Coulson’s face when Agent Barton shows up, squished face full of band-aids and a wicked looking bow slung over his shoulder. He directs his gaze to Darcy and Selvig with a grin.

“Wanna come grab a drink and let these two work out the finer details of employment?”

“God, yes.” Darcy breathes, yanking Selvig forward. “We need safe passage to nearby booze.”

Normally Darcy would stay to assist Jane in her battle against the jack-booted thugs, but surviving annihilation by explosion and finding out that the gods in her history books are real have left Darcy in desperate need of a drink.

Jane can handle this one.

Turns out SHIELD won’t let Darcy and Selvig leave the premises until Jane and Coulson work everything out, but Agent Barton pulls a handle of tequila from his backpack and leads Selvig and Darcy outside to a deck of lawn chairs.

“Is this an interrogation tactic?” Darcy asks, accepting the shot of tequila from Barton’s scarred hands. “Ply us with alcohol and then ask us questions about our Thor-centric wet dreams?”

Selvig chokes on his shot. Barton just raises a brow. “You have wet dreams about Thor?”

“No, me,” Darcy admits. “But I’ve been sleeping next to Jane for almost six weeks. I, the lowly intern, know things.”

“Darce,” Selvig protests, wiping his spilled shot from his lapel. “You’re not an intern anymore. Surviving death makes us colleagues, and I’ve already promised to help you with your thesis.”
The mention of her upcoming thesis makes Darcy shudder. Once she returns to Culver for graduation, the real world of masters programs and having to choose an area of expertise will set in. Darcy has incredible scores and has been told by her department head that any graduate program would be lucky to have her, but that she needs to choose an area of focus. Egyptology? Classical archaeology? Near Middle Eastern studies?

She's been supposed to be using this time in New Mexico to think it all over and make a decision. But the whole Norse god thing has been a little distracting.

Barton raises another brow at Darcy. “I didn’t realize you were also astrophysicist.”

Darcy throws back her head to laugh at that. “You’re a secret agent, aren’t you supposed to know everything about me already? Fear, hopes, dreams? How many times I wet the bed as a child?”

Barton shrugs, digging into his pocket for something. “No, but I know you have the strangest taste in music I’ve even seen. Who the hell has an entire playlist for different versions of ‘Cotton Eye Joe’?”

Darcy gasps, lurching forward to rip her beloved iPod from Barton’s grip. He holds it over her head, laughter making his face seem much less intimidating than usual. Also maybe the fact that he isn’t holding a loaded bow.

“And a whole playlist dedicated to ‘sad times in the bathtub’? And then ‘sad times in the shower’? ‘Sad times on an airplane’?”

“Sadness depends heavily on location, asshat!” Darcy fights the blush rising in her cheeks, infuriated by Barton’s hysterical laughter. “Give it back, you wretch! Hon madr roman therva Kuaran!”

Barton blinks, laughter fading as he drops the iPod in her hands in his confusion. She cheers.

“What the hell language was that?”

Darcy grins, cradling her prized possession to her chest. “Ancient Norse. Selvig’s been teaching me.”

“It’s true,” Selvig lifts his drink. “She just insulted your mother’s choice in footwear. Traditionally, a duel would be the only way to settle this.”

“Whaddy say, Barton, wanna duel?” Darcy wags her eyebrows before eyeing the bow he has stashed at his feet. “Wait, never mind. You would just shoot me from afar, the way of the coward.”

Barton actually jerks forward, brows drawn. “Shooting arrows is not cowardly!”

“Face me in real battle then, with a sword and the promise of honor!”

“Wait, back on track for a minute.” Barton pauses for a moment, fighting a smile at Darcy’s tirade. “So that story about you cursing at the Destroyer in ancient Norse is actually true?”

Selvig answers for her. “Completely true. If the Destroyer hadn’t been about to kill her, I would have. Of all the asinine things to do...” The rest of his sentence is lost in his shot glass.

Barton’s gaze darts from Erik to Darcy, suddenly assessing. Darcy can see the secret agent persona take over the cool dude one. He lets out a low whistle. “That took balls, kid. You might want to cultivate a fighting skill and look into SHIELD careers.”
“I am trained in the ancient arts of tasering.”

“Doesn’t count. But I heard you downed Thor, so, kudos.”

“Eh, it was nothing.”

“False modesty doesn't look good on you, kiddo. But think about SHIELD, okay?”

Darcy opens her mouth to finally explain that, no, she won’t be looking into SHIELD jobs because she’s just sent out her first round of applications to graduate schools for archaeology, and she will never ever give up on her dream career dammit, but she never gets the chance.

Because a sleek black helicopter emblazoned with **STARK INDUSTRIES** lands less than a hundred feet away.

And Tony fucking Stark steps out onto the desert sands.

Chapter End Notes

Hon madr roman therva Kuaran actually means: your mother wears Roman soldier shoes!
Which is pretty cool. Not a Viking-era curse, but from one of the Germanic tribes that hated Romans (if my research is correct). My bad if it isn’t translated correctly, relying on internet sources and a friendly professor. Remember to be kind to your fanfic authors, please~

BUT YAY, TONY'S HERE!
Darcy can’t stop staring at Tony Stark’s goatee.

She’s seen it a thousand times on TV, on the news and documentaries about the Starks, but it’s different in person. Meticulously groomed. Humbling to gaze on with mortal eyes. He must shave twice a day to keep it so sharp.

It takes a minute for Darcy to realize that the man himself is talking to her.

“…have you been injured? I can’t fucking believe that SHIELD let a civilian get involved with this mess. Fucking robots and Viking aliens-- I’ve heard of pornos with better plotlines. Have you signed any NDAs yet? If not, don’t. I have a team of lawyers on standby ready to make it look like you were never here.”

Tony Stark is still talking, looking at her very intently with his honey-brown eyes. Darcy Lewis is standing close enough to Tony Stark that she can tell his eye color.

What the fuck is her life.

From the corner of her eye, Darcy watches Selvig slip away to instruct a passing lacky on where to move the equipment. Lucky bastard.

“Uh, Mr. Stark, with all due respect…” Barton says slowly, gaze jumping between Tony Stark and Darcy like he’s trying to figure out how they know each other. Darcy is too. “Why are you here? Natasha said you aren’t being considered for the…” His eyes slide to Darcy. "...top secret thing I can’t say in front of civilians.”

“Is it a superhero team?” Darcy questions, annoyed at being called a civilian yet again. It sounds suspiciously like an insult. “Please tell me it’s a super awesome team of superheroes including Iron Man.”

Barton goes red. “What the hell, how do you know this stuff?”

Darcy shrugs. “Context clues. Top secret thing involving Tony Stark is either weapons or his suit.
Hence, superheroes.”

“I really don’t see the correlation.”

Tony Stark gives Darcy an impressed look (is that… pride? From a billionaire superhero?) before turning to Barton with huff, yanking his fancy sunglasses off with so much style Darcy nearly applauds. “None of your business why I’m here, Hawkass.”

Darcy snorts. Not even a cute snort, the kind of inelegant and dirty snorts that nobody should make in front of a billionaire. Both men stare at her.

“Excuse me, Iron Stark, fuck—” Darcy stops, blushing brilliantly and perilously attempting to collect her confidence. “Er, Mr. Tony Man, fuck—”

“Don’t hurt yourself, Darcy.” Barton deadpans.

“Mr. Stark.” Darcy finally grinds out, trying desperately to work up the courage to look him in the eyes and prove she isn’t an idiot. “Do I know you? I mean, it’s nice of you to offer lawyers and everything, but, why are you offering?”


“Touché.”

“Still doesn’t answer her question.” Barton chimes.

“Shut up, Barton.” Darcy and Tony say at the exact same time. They exchange a surprised glance.

“That’s fucking weird.” Barton’s head swivels between the two of them. “Are you related or something?”

Tony goes an interesting shade of purple, but Darcy can’t hold back her laughter. “Me? Related to Iron Man? You’re on shrooms, Agent Hawkass. If I was, I would totally be flying around in my own suit of armor right now, not burdened by a shittin of student loans. By the way, have you ever seen that Lonely Island video? ‘I’m on SHOOOOOMS!’”

Barton ignores her. Tony goes white.

“Student loans?” He questions, harsh enough that Darcy jerks to meet his eyes. “You have student loans?”

“Yeah,” She answers, trying not to roll her eyes at the mega-rich playboy. “Like most of my generation, I have a sizable amount of loans. Not unmanageable though.”

“Doesn’t your mother have money?”

“Woah, kind of personal, dude.”

“But doesn’t she?”

Darcy throws her hands up, exasperated. “She’s comfortably middle class, but that doesn’t mean she has a pile of money lying around for a daughter who travels every summer and is looking into very expensive programs!”

Tony takes a deep breath, pressing his fingers into the bridge of his nose like this conversation is horrifically taxing. Darcy almost wants to take back the nice things she thought about his goatee.
“Stark,” Barton finally interrupts, something unreadable in his eyes. “Shouldn’t you go talk to Coulson? He can fill you in on what’s happened.”

“You know what, I think I’ll do just that. Have a quick word with him about involving civilians in highly dangerous war zones.”

“Stop calling me a civilian!” Darcy finally yells, at her maximum capacity of conversations about her that don’t include her. “I’m capable! One time I tasered a horse thief in the Andes! I even got a medal from the Peruvian cattle guard. Very shiny under the cow shit.”

Tony and Barton both freeze at her words, eyes bugged out.

“I don’t want to know.” Barton finally says. “You should go, Tony.”

Tony shakes his head and stalks away, still muttering about SHIELD and civilians something that sounds suspiciously like fucking horse thieves, but turns back to point an imperious finger at Barton. “Hawkass, look after her! No more liberating pet shops under enemy fire! No tasers!”

They both watch in silence as Tony disappears into the labs.

“What the hell was that.”

Barton shakes his head, hiding a smile. “I have a theory, but I’m not sharing it.”

Darcy grimaces. “Is the theory that he hates me for being incapable?”

“No,” Barton says slowly. “No, it’s not.”

~~~*~~~

Phil Coulson is not expecting Tony Stark to come bounding into the labs.

Mostly because Tony never bounds, he swaggers.

But there is no practiced arrogance or superiority when he points at Coulson, only constrained rage.

“We need to talk.”

Coulson sighs. His luck really has been awful, lately. He follows Tony Stark into a nearby storage room, empty and free of surveillance. It’s been functioning as Coulson’s office for the past few days as they wade through the wreckage Thor and his friends left behind.

“Mr. Stark, if this is about the Avengers Initiative, I really must insist we talk about this another time. My hands are full right now with cleaning up Puente Antiguo and containing fallout—”

“This isn’t about the Avenger’s Initiative.” Stark growls. “You really think I’m dying to join your little SHIELD circle jerk? No. This is about SHIELD involvement of civilians in the latest disaster.”

Coulson’s face furrows with confusion. “Civilians? I can assure you, Mr. Stark, that SHIELD has been taking care of the people of Puente Antiguo. We’ve taken down statements and are providing
reimbursement for the destroyed homes and businesses. They even get to stay in a nice hotel in Albuquerque. There’s a pool and everything.”

“No, not the locals. Darcy Lewis.”

Coulson stops shuffling his papers, looking back up to Stark. “Lewis? What about her?”

“Why the hell was she involved in all this?” Stark demands, cheeks glowing red. “SHIELD should have gotten her and Foster and Selvig all out of here before Thor even touched down.”

“SHIELD attempted to intervene very early on, Stark. As soon as it was apparent that Foster’s team was involved with the alien presence, her data and laboratory were seized. We had no idea that they would find Thor and continue to work with him.”

“You should have been on the Destroyer scene earlier, Coulson. I saw the surveillance videos. I saw Darcy and Foster and Selvig dodging fireballs and rescuing puppies. Where was SHIELD when this was happening?”

“We reached the scene as soon as possible. Thor had already fled.” Coulson stops, rubbing a hand across his tired face. “Is there a reason you’re so concerned about Ms. Lewis? She proved herself very capable during the battle. Barton has already recommended that she be offered training through the SHIELD career center.”

“No.” Tony jerks, his next words come slowly and carefully. “No. Darcy Lewis will be recruited to SHIELD over my dead body.”

The warning bells in Phil’s head are chiming, alerting him to the fact that something deeper is at play here. Something that doesn't match up. “Is there a relationship between you and Ms. Lewis that I need to be aware of?”

“God, no!” Tony turns green. “Not like that. She’s just—she doesn’t know me. But I know her. I’m responsible for her, alright? She’s determined to be an archaeologist. No way in hell will she give that up for SHIELD.”

Coulson frowns. “I’m afraid I can’t refuse to offer Lewis training just because you’ve decided to be concerned for her. SHIELD would be a great option for her future, we’ve already looked into her IQ scores and medical records, she’s a strong option for an agent. And it’s the only way to keep her from being buried in NDAs.”

Tony goes very still, his face contorting with so many different emotions that Coulson worries for a moment the man is having a heart attack. An arc reactor attack? Maybe the new element Stark discovered to save his own life isn’t working as well as Fury had reported? He’s half a second from calling for medical when Tony finally speaks.

“She’s my daughter, Phil.”

Coulson has never been overly fond of cursing, but the only words he can find to describe this situation spring to the front of his mind.

Holy fuck.
Two days later, Phil and Clint pack up the last of SHIELD’s equipment into the vans. Phil gives an awkward wave goodbye to Dr. Foster (who glares, still upset about her forced employment), Dr. Selvig (who looks confused, like he can’t remember if he should hate Phil or if they teemed up in the end), and Darcy Lewis, who grins back at him with a cheery ‘bye, Son of Coul!’ (Phil has trouble looking too closely at Darcy Lewis. He remembers the desperation in Tony Stark’s eyes when Phil spoke of recruiting her, how raw and human it was for the billionaire CEO.)

(Phil is not looking forward to explaining to the board why a civilian was allowed to walk away from SHIELD under the protection of Stark Industries. Not that Darcy knows the bullet she has avoided).

Clint’s goodbye is a little more cordial. Dr. Foster shares a tight smile, Dr. Selvig shakes his hand, and Darcy gives him a tackle hug.

Phil should have seen that friendship coming from a mile away.

Once they’re in the van, Clint driving while Phil shuffles through statements, Clint finally speaks.

“So, Darcy Stark, huh?”

Phil spills his coffee over the top paper. Swearing, he reaches for a napkin to sop it all up. “Do I want to know how you know?”

Clint shrugs, shit-eating grin directed to the desert horizon. “Easy to tell. Stark was acting out of character. Either he was in love with her or having a paternal panic attack.”

“Thank god it is the second.”

Clint spear Phil with a sideways glance. “You going to put it in her SHIELD file?”

“I have to.” Phil admits. “Fury already knows. I had to report why Tony Stark flew his helicopter into our site. He’ll kill me if I keep it off the books.”

“Well,” Clint frowns. “I guess we just have to hope the files never leak.”

Phil summons a grin. “Please, Agent Barton. SHIELD files never leak.”
Darcy doesn't want to make a big deal out of her graduation.

After all, she’s looking down the barrel of another 6+ years of schooling if she plays her cards right. She’s already accepted her admissions to the University of Edinburgh for her graduate studies.

(Jane and Selvig both had a laugh when Darcy admitted she was going to focus her thesis on Viking and Celtic studies. Apparently, the whole Thor thing did help her make a decision about her future thesis. In a roundabout way.)

But now she stands in a crowded arena in an uncomfortable pair of heels (deep purple with five-inch heels. Kara picked them out, she has a massive collection from her badass-marketing-lady phase before Darcy was born), a fancy plum dress (off the shoulder, clinched in the waist, another one of Kara’s) and her long hair curled down her back (Kara’s work).

Darcy sighs, falling into her plastic seat gracelessly as they wait for the mysterious keynote speaker to come up to the podium and start the whole spectacle. The university had booked a sorta well-known author to speak at the Liberal Arts graduation, but something had happened (he probably realized how lame their graduation would be), and the dude pulled out last minute. Maybe they won’t get a keynote speaker at all this year. Knowing Culver, the University has probably already blown its budget in securing a former president to speak to the engineers.

(Darcy isn’t bitter. Really.)

The speaking begins to die down as the Dean of Liberal Arts takes the podium. Darcy shifts in her seat, turning to get a quick glance of Kara and Dan in the front row on her left. Kara is already wearing one of her proud smiles (saved for special occasions like graduations and that one-time Darcy punched a boy in the nose for groping her budding breasts) and Dan is grinning, a giant poster board sign leaning against his knee (“I DIG YOU, DARCY!” with a cute little trowel and skull at the bottom).

Kara’s new diamond ring catches the auditorium lights for a moment and Darcy smiles. The best part of surviving the giant killer robot in New Mexico was coming home to find Dan with a ring in his pocket and a plan to involve Darcy in the proposal.

(The only time Darcy has ever seen her mother cry is when she walks into her new, fancy marketing office—decorated all sleek pastel colors by Darcy and paid for by Dan—to find Darcy holding a Saint Bernard puppy and Dan on one knee.)

(While Kara and Dan kissed, Darcy took the liberty of naming the puppy Heimdall, after the dude that Thor kept yelling at to open the bridge. She hopes that somewhere, out in the universe, he approves.)

But the part that threatens to make Darcy truly emotional are the two new faces that appear in the crowd, pushing through the stands to the empty seats next to Kara. Kara stands to hug the woman while Dan shakes the man’s hand, smiles and introductions presumably being shared.

Jane and Selvig.
Last Darcy checked, Jane was zipping between Culver and New Mexico to solidify some data before she begins to run more concrete tests. And Selvig is supposed to be working on something super-secret with SHIELD that Darcy and Jane aren’t supposed to ask questions about.

(They do anyways. Selvig has this awful habit of answering questions without thinking when distracted with equations. Darcy doesn’t know what a tesseract is, but it sounds like a French dish.)

The point is, neither Jane nor Selvig are supposed to even be in Virginia, let alone taking time out of their busy scientist schedules to watch her walk across a stage.

(Darcy is not crying. She’s just allergic to all the goddamn dust in this ancient auditorium. Stupid fucking engineers and their stadium graduations.)

“Welcome, graduates!”

A cheer goes up from the green-clad students. Finally.

“First of all, congratulations on your achievements. Graduating from Culver University is an honor you will hold dear for the rest of your lives. You are about to face the future and take your place in a network of Culver alumni that is respected throughout the world.”

Another cheer. Darcy rolls her eyes, she’ll be bragging about her new fancy place at University of Edinburgh before she ever mentions Culver again.

“We are making history with this graduation ceremony.” The Dean intones, suddenly exchanging his professional seriousness for excitement. “Our keynote speaker is a man who holds multiple PhDs in physics, mechanical and electrical engineering, and serves as CEO of his own, well-known company. After our last keynote speaker fell through, he took the initiative to contact Culver and volunteer his time and energy.”

Darcy’s jaw drops. Those bastards. She doesn’t even try to contain the outraged noise that rises from her throat. Culver hates the liberal arts and Darcy finally has proof. Or else they would not be bringing in an fucking engineer to speak to a bunch of English, Anthropology, Gender Studies, Theatre and History majors.

But the Dean (who Darcy knows was a fucking economics major during his undergrad, the phony) is still grinning like this is the best thing Culver’s ever done.

“Please join me in welcoming… Tony Stark!”

No fucking way.

There’s a beat of dazed silence as the auditorium collectively takes a stunned breath.

And then suddenly Darcy’s fellow classmates are screaming, jumping, chanting ‘IRON MAN!’ like buffoons as Tony Stark takes the stage.

His goatee looks as good as ever. He’s added another little spike at the bottom. For a strange, fleeting moment, Darcy wonders if she could ever rock a goatee.

Stark soaks up the applause, the attention, lifting his hands in a classic ’I-can't-hear-you!' movement. The crowd screams, suddenly less stuffy-graduation and more rock-concert.

Then he begins speaking. “Hey, Culver Liberal Arts. Wondering why I’m here?”
Yes, Darcy thinks desperately. Secretly she’s beginning to dread the moment he confesses that his assistant misbooked him, that he’s supposed to be at the super ritzy Science & Engineering ceremony.

“I heard your last speaker dropped out. Sad. But are you really sad? Now that you have me?”

“No!”

“I LOVE YOU TONY STARK!”

“Goddammit,” Darcy mutters under her breath. Her classmates are idiots. And as much as she would like to be pumped about Iron Man attending her graduation, she keeps thinking about how angry Tony Stark was in New Mexico. How upset he was that she, a simple civilian, could partake in anything cool and otherworldly. The asshat.

“I love you, too,” Tony says seriously, tone laced with good humor. He finally whips off his sunglasses (Darcy must resist the urge to cheer again. So much flair! Ugh! Unfair!) and tucks them in his sleek suit. His gaze turns serious. “As you all know, I’m an engineer. I do numbers. I build things. I’m a genius, but my genius is best expressed through works of mechanical and electrical creation.” He pauses. “I’m also devastatingly handsome.”

Another cheer rises from the graduates.

“Yes you are!”

“I’LL HAVE YOUR BABIES!”

Laughter breaks out. Darcy cringes. Tony waves the comments away.

“Putting aside these well-known facts, I am attending your graduation ceremony because I want to talk about different pathways of genius. Genius in engineering doesn’t look like genius in literature, or archaeology, does it?”

Darcy jerks in her seat. Did he just say archaeology? Nobody ever mentions archaeology. Ever.

“I have attended countless MIT, Harvard, Cornell and other various graduations and seminars as a keynote speaker for the sciences and for engineering. This is my first time speaking to the humanities, and I am very sad to admit that.” Silence falls over the auditorium as Tony's tone turns serious. “I am sad to admit this because of how long it took me to see the deep value in the arts. In those who study literature, history, culture and human nature. I have always brushed these topics off as abstraction, as less important than the subjects in which my own strengths lie.

“I’ve realized, in my later-but-no-less-dashing years, that the arts are the backbone of our world, of our society. How can we understand the future if we do not learn from the past? How can we understand our world if we do not explore the bones buried underneath us?”

Tony steps closer to the edge of the stage, gaze skipping across the graduates. Darcy freezes when it meets hers, grey against liquid brown, speaking all the words that Darcy has told herself every time her studies have been difficult, when the world has felt like it stands against her. That her work is important. That she is digging up the foundations of humanity and strengthening them.

Tony Stark doesn’t look away.

“All of you have spent at least the past four years dedicating your lives to understanding, and I have to say that I am impressed. So impressed, that I asked your Dean about how many of you are
pursuing more education.”

Another silence, laced with tension. Baited breaths.

“For those of you who are heading straight into a master’s or PhD program,” He pauses, smiling right at Darcy. “The only reward I can give you for your diligence is to tell you that your tuition, fees, and housing will now be covered by Stark Industries.”

A roar raises up in the crowd as graduates and parents alike jump to their feet, unbelieving of Tony Stark’s generosity and their own good luck. Darcy stands with her classmates, clapping and swaying on her feet as the reality of his statement sinks in. Her fees to University of Edinburgh, the tiny flat she has been dreading having to find, all taken care of.

Darcy turns see Kara’s face, frozen and disbelieving and stiff with tears.

The sight makes her hate Tony Stark a lot less.

“Talk to the Dean of your local college for details, I promise that Stark Industries doesn’t skimp.” Tony announces over the din, raising his hands in a farewell salute. “Dig up the world, graduates.”

The rest of the ceremony passes in an excited haze, her classmates nearly sprinting across the stage in their excitement to shake Tony Stark’s hand. Darcy is locked so deeply in her own disbelief and confusion over Tony fucking Stark that she almost forgets it’s her turn to cross the stage.

(Does he remember her from New Mexico? Does he know she goes here? That she’s graduating at this ceremony? Is he going to revoke her right to SI funds when he realizes the dumb civilian is shaking his hand?)

“Darcy Evelyn Maria Lewis,” The Dean announces. “Summa Cum Laude in Anthropology and Archaeology.”

Darcy makes her way across the hardwood planks, praying she can keep her balance in these shoes as she shakes hands with the Dean of Anthropology, the entirety of the Board of Liberal Arts, and the Dean of Liberal Arts before walking towards Tony Stark himself. He has her rolled up diploma in his hands and is grinning like a madman.

She is so nervous that she wobbles dangerously in her heels as she approaches.

Mr. Stark whips out a steadying hand, grasping Darcy’s shoulder with a surprising amount of care. “You alright there, kid?”

“Fine,” Darcy croaks, rushing into her question before she can lose her nerve. “Do you actually remember me?”

A flash of feeling crosses Tony Stark’s face, but before Darcy can name it his cocksure grin is back in place. “How could I forget. Darcy Lewis. Survivor of aliens, liberator of puppies, lady with a taser.”

Darcy snorts. She’s distantly aware that she’s holding up the line, so she reaches forward and plucks her diploma out of his hands. “Well then. Thanks for the grant, Mr. Stark. It means a lot.”

“Woah, tiger, you really want this degree,” He says mockingly, relinquishing the diploma with a bemused smile and reaching out a hand. Darcy shakes it with a smile. “You deserve it, kid. Discover something groundbreaking.”
Darcy gives him her fullest grin, instantly forgiving every mean thought she has had about Tony Stark and his involvement the New Mexico stuff.

“I will, Mr. Stark.”

She turns away from Tony Stark to see Kara and Dan on their feet, cheering and waving his sign (which also has twinkle lights, booyah) while Jane jumps up and down in excitement. Selvig seems to have snuck in a flask and is lifting it in a cheer.

Darcy feels like maybe Kara was right, this graduation stuff is worth celebrating.

~~~*~~~

Tony steps off the stage, followed through the bowels of backstage by every ass-kissing academic within a mile radius.

The Dean is saying something, thanking him and wondering aloud if Tony would be interested in speaking again with the economics department next. There’s a vibration in his pocket. Tony waves the Dean away, promising to send his assistant to figure the details out (yeah, right. Pepper has already seen the footage of Tony’s speech and dubbed it ‘very sweet and well-done, but MIT is already complaining that you refused to speak with their graduating class this year…’), before pulling out his Stark phone.

A text.

KARA LEWIS: Well done, Tony. Very smooth. She’s crazy excited to use your grant to avoid living with roommates.

Tony grins at his phone like a fool, typing back a quick reply. True Stark behavior. I would expect nothing else.

He pockets the phone, waltzing out to an awaiting car.

He has no regrets about spending a cool twenty million just to pay for some of his daughter's education.

Chapter End Notes

C'mon. As if Tony would miss Darcy's graduation. He’s a huge softie.

Up next... Darcy & Jane & Ian & Selvig & Thor verses the Dark Elves.
They Lie Between the Wish and the Well

Chapter Summary

This section was actually a bit difficult. I want to chronicle Darcy's education and descent into Indiana Jones badassery, but I also don't want to completely ignore her continuing canon adventures with Jane & Selvig. Compromise! Next we get to see some Darcy growth.

Scotland treats Darcy well.

Dr. Mark, the program director for Viking & Celtic studies, takes Darcy aside after her first semester and changes her life.

He's a handsome man who has aged phenomenally well, dark skin smooth and a salt and pepper beard that matches his short hair, still dark but shot through with silver.

“Have you ever looked into nautical archaeology?” He asks, leaning back in his plush desk chair and cradling a thimble of scotch. “You’ve got a spectacular CV for land excavations, but if you’re looking to push yourself in this program…”

Darcy sips her own drink. Distantly she remembers being on an airplane, sitting next to a man who gave her the words to describe her own passions. A world preserved, a world submerged. “I should go underwater?”

“You should look into scuba lessons,” Dr. Mark corrects. “There have been groundbreaking discoveries in our field recently, yielded from the waters. Hogeborn and various other specialists have found Viking aged wrecks in the Baltic, and the Black Sea alone is a veritable paradise of preservation conditions and full of wrecks.”

“I’ve taken classes on Ancient Seafaring,” Darcy remarks, the idea blooming in her mind. “If I can get scuba certified, is there a wreck excavation I can apply for?”

Dr. Mark smiles, swirling the amber liquid in his glass like the fancy man he is. “I have already taken the liberty of adding you to the Jarkson excavation. How do you feel about Sweden?”

~~~*~~~

Darcy loves Sweden.

She blows through scuba certification, loving her open water and confined water dives and enchanted by the idea of a world submerged. It isn’t long before she joins the Jarkson excavation, assigned the job of diving in thirty feet of water to clear silt and sediment off iron ingots.

The ship in question is the submerged wreck of a Viking long ship that had gone down in nasty weather around 824, preserved by the frigid temperatures of the Baltic. The hull had split against
hidden rocks, depositing ancient trade goods of iron and bronze across the seafloor. Darcy spends long hours underwater, clearing off ingots and pulling history from the sand with her hands.

She’s hooked.

After the Jarkson dive, Darcy volunteers her time over Christmas break to join a secondary excavation of the Uluburun shipwreck off the coast of Turkey, a trade ship full of glass, more ingots, and Mycenaean pottery.

(This time, Darcy gets the job of diving for pottery pieces, recording their provenience to the wreck, and reconstructing them on dry land in a nearby lab.)

After that, she returns to classes and spends her weekends taking the train to northern England, helping excavate a Viking era boat burial nicknamed ‘The King’s Grave’. A farmer had stumbled upon the hoard in the corner of his family fields, knowing enough to call for professionals to preserve what history was left.

She finally puts her hard-won knowledge of biological anthropology and radiocarbon dating and Bayesian chronological analysis to use.

(Who said she can't split atoms and do statistics? Painful, but if it helps her date artifacts, she excels.)

A year passes in a blink.

~~~*~~~

Jane comes to Europe, chasing star patterns and following tips from SHIELD on possible data surges.

Darcy is curled up in her tiny flat (free of roommates, thank you Tony Stark) painting her toenails purple and looking over her field notes from the weekend.

Slowly but surely, Darcy is starting to earn credit on her digs. Her professors have stopped assigning her the grunt work of moving and cataloging, and now she finally has moved up the ranks enough to be named assistant to the site director of the boat burial site. She’s celebrating with a bottle of cheap merlot and some good ole ‘merican reality TV when Jane calls, hysterical.

“It’s the project Erik was involved in, he's not answering. Turn on your TV!”

New York is under attack.

~~~*~~~

Within six hours, Darcy is in Tromsø.

She and Jane watch the end of the battle, huddled together on the couch of Jane’s fancy science! suite.
It’s unspeakably harrowing, Darcy realizes, to watch your home country under attack.

The battle is contained to New York, Kara and Dan and Jane's family are safe, but it still shakes both women to the core. Especially when the camera shows Thor, bashing in Chitauri skulls with Myeh-Myeh. Jane yelps beside her, a sound so full of hurt and fear and anger that Darcy immediately understands her feelings. He’s on Earth! And hasn’t called! But he’s also battling for his life!

Hard to be angry at a dude when he’s currently saving your planet.

And apparently (to the surprise of no one) Loki is responsible for the attacking aliens. Darcy catches a glimpse of him in the footage, zooming towards Stark Tower on a weird, flying razor scooter thing, black hair all greasy and slicked back.

(Darcy can't believe she wanted to make out with him in New Mexico. What a prick.)

The camera view changes rapidly. Captain America is bashing aliens with his shield (Darcy takes a moment to appreciate his firm star-spangled ass) while the Hulk crushes the massive warships (Darcy once heard a rumor that the Hulk is actually some Culver alum, one Bruce Banner. She refuses to believe it). Black Widow is taking down aliens left and right (Darcy cheers every time she strangles one with her thighs or electrocutes them with a cool little ninja star thing) and even freaking Hawkass (dude she drank tequila with in Puente Antiguo is a fuckin’ Avenger?) is blowing shit up with his arrows.

She doesn’t see Iron Man.

Not until he’s flying into a wormhole with a nuke on his back.

Darcy’s heart is in her throat as she watches the man who shook her hand at graduation, single handily making her dreams attainable, disappear into an alien army infested space hole.

Jane clutches her hand so hard that Darcy’s fingers grind together, the other over her mouth. Darcy thinks she might throw up. *She just watched Iron Man die on TV.*

But suddenly he isn’t dead. He’s falling backwards into our world, chased by fire and death and ruin, seconds away from becoming an Iron Man shaped pancake…

…until he’s caught and cradled by the Hulk.

Darcy and Jane both fall back into the couch in relief. Darcy’s cheeks are wet and Jane is shaking. Iron Man is safe, but not everyone is accounted for.

Deep down, they both know Selvig was somewhere in that mess.

~~~*~~~

It takes Darcy almost four months to track him down.

Jane moves to London, even going as far to buy a flat, and Darcy commutes between her place and Jane’s by train. By some miracle, Darcy manages to balance her weekend duties at the Manchester boat burial (train ride is about three hours, she wakes up at 4am to make it to the site by 7am) with
her classes while still spending a large chunk of her two weekdays off of classes (Thursday and Friday) working on research and tracking down Selvig at Jane’s place (four hour train ride, Darcy can catch up on homework if she stays awake).

(Darcy finally ends up cracking and hiring an intern to help Jane with her data inputs. Ian is sweet, picked up from the physics department at Manchester Uni, and eager to please. Darcy is so ready to exploit this.)

(He's also cute, in a tall and skinny and British kind-of way.)

Christmas break rolls around again by the time they find him.

Darcy has never experienced full fledged rage until she realized that SHIELD let Erik Selvig, the man who nearly gave his life helping with the tesseract and who endured Loki’s brain washing, get dropped off by British police at a mental institution in southwest London.

(Darcy is going to kill Nick Fury. With a rusty, ancient Viking sword. Up the rectum.)

But she doesn’t get a chance to enact her revenge plans, because shit goes down yet again.

~~~*~~~

JARVIS alerts Tony of the situation in Greenwich about ten minutes after the action finishes.

“Thor’s on planet again?” Tony questions, leaning back against Pepper as they recline on his couch. New York is lit up outside his penthouse windows, finally thriving again after Loki’s massive temper tantrum. “I'm sure he's got whatever it is in hand. And you’re interrupting my lovely, romantic night with my lady love why, JARVIS?”

“…because Darcy Lewis has been involved in the combat, sir.”

Tony is up in a second, pulling the footage as Pepper yanks her StarkPad out from the cushion.

“When did this happen?” Pepper questions. Her fingertips dance across the screen, yanking up the most recent edited files on Darcy Lewis. She and Tony keep a pile of daily updated information on her, enough to confirm her safety in moments like this.

Her schedule flies up in the air, light particles spinning into an image. Classes Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday from 8am-5pm, habitually spends Thursday and Friday with Dr. Jane Foster in London, Saturday and Sundays spent in Manchester on excavations. Orders a flat white at Starbucks every morning at 7:32 without fail.

“Surveillance was down at the site of the attack for an hour. I have only established connection within the last two minutes through streetlight cameras. I can place the time of the battle between 3:56pm and 4:32pm, GMT.”

Tony and Pepper both still as the footage begins to play, illuminating the penthouse with the grey skies of England. Thor is facing off against what looks like an orc. Elf-orc. A ship lands behind in front of them, pouring out elf-orcs by the hundred.

The cameras switch. Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig are operating a handheld device, speaking lowly and
urgently into a cellphone.

And then there’s Darcy. Tony’s heart drops when she comes into view, hiding behind a pillar with a gangly looking man that Tony is certain he could snap in half. (With his suit.)

A flash of blue, and Darcy is gone. Gone gone. Thankfully reappearing in a nearby parking lot and breaking nearly all the laws of physics on her way.

God, can’t his kid ever sit a life-threatening situation out?

There’s a lot of zapping and teleportation and heart attacks (on Tony and Pepper’s end), but Darcy emerges from the chaos unscathed. Kissing the awkward, gangly boy, but unscathed.

“JARVIS, prepare the suit.”

He’s halfway out the penthouse when Pepper pulls him back with surprising strength (Tony is pretty certain that Pepper does Pilates on early weekday mornings, he obviously has a thing for women that can manhandle him).

“What are you doing?” She demands. “Darcy is safe. You’ve seen that with your own eyes, but you’re still going to fly across the Atlantic?”

“Yes! To—”

“To what, Tony?”

“To tell her to stop being an idiot!”

Pepper throws up her hands, a rare show of inelegance. “And how is she going to take that, Tony? Iron Man swooping in yet again after it’s all said and done to have a fatherly chat? Call her a civilian again?”

Tony flinches. Pepper presses on.

“I understand why you went to New Mexico—I was worried for her too, and we had no information—and I even understand why you wanted to speak at her graduation, but she’s going to figure this out Tony. At some point she is going to put the pieces together and you’ll be forced to explain why you never told her.” Pepper takes a deep breath, spearing Tony with her gaze. “If you fly across the Atlantic just to tell her off, you better tell her why you’re so concerned. If you go, you tell her the truth.”

For a horrible moment, Tony considers it. He’s already so overwhelmed with the images of Darcy, dodging knife-wielding aliens and hiding behind cars, caught in the shadow of a massive alien ship. Why shouldn’t he tell her? Convince her to come live in the Tower where he and Cap and Hawkass and Nat can keep an eye on her?

But the moment ends. Tony remembers Obadiah and his pictures, the game he played for years with Darcy in mind as the ending goal. He remembers Ivan Vanko and the killer grudge he held for years, waiting and waiting and waiting to strike. He remembers Pepper, caught in the sliced up car and moments away from death because of him.

“I can’t,” Tony croaks. “Being a Stark is too dangerous. She already has a plan, she doesn't need the weight of a legacy on top of it all. And being related to Iron Man would put a big, fat target on her back.”
“Tony,” Pepper sighs, doing a shit-poor job of hiding the pity in her eyes. “It looks like Darcy has been doing a pretty good job of finding danger herself. Thor loves her, Clint loves her. You may hate it, but Darcy Lewis has already wriggled her way into this life. If you aren’t going to be honest with her, then you have no right to stop her.”

Tony doesn’t bother with words for a long moment, staring out at the New York skyline. He thinks of all the ways he is able to check in on Darcy—the street cameras outside her apartment, tracking transactions on the train and at various supermarkets, peeking at her through paperwork and notes from her master’s program. Is it going to be enough for him forever? To stay away and yet know so much?

“You’re right, Pep.” He says finally, the sudden certainty shaking his bones. “You’re right.”

~~~*~~~

“Hey, Thor?”

Thor emerges from Jane’s mouth long enough to give Darcy a warm smile, full of that brotherly appreciation she’s learned to expect and appreciate. They still stand in the courtyard of the Old Naval College, surrounded by wreckage and dead Dark Elves. Selvig is catching his breath (and pulling uncomfortably at his pants), Ian is hovering around Darcy (God, she’s going to have to deal with this soon), and Jane and Thor are… wrapped up in each other.

Darcy’s not exactly sure why it took near-death by Dark Elves to figure out what she should do for her thesis, but she’ll take it.

“You’re going to be here for a while, right?” Darcy questions, making a concentrated effort to not lean into Ian’s side. She’s tired and exhausted but doesn’t need to add more fuel to this accidental flame. “Like, here on Earth. With Jane. Not disappearing for two years. Again.”

Thor has the grace to look sheepish. “I must return to Asgard to tell my father by plans to forfeit the throne, but yes. I shall return. There is still the matter of Loki’s staff, and I would not abandon you, my friends, again.”

“Great!” Darcy grins, the plan already forming. “If you’re trying to make up for past abandonment, how do you feel about being a primary source on Vikings for my research?”
I Know There's Beauty Buried Beneath

Chapter Summary

As Darcy would say... shit is getting real.

Quick note of the facts of this chapter: obviously trade routes between all of these different cultures (in a few cases) have not actually been discovered (although there is evidence of some contact with the Middle East, there's been some cool findings of Arabic rings found in boat burials) and I am twisting a lot of MCU/historical stuff to meet my own ends, plotwise. So I apologize to anyone who is very well versed in Norse/Celtic archaeology, as I am trying to keep things as close to historically accurate as possible... but I'm also totally making up Asgard's influence on ancient cultures. More will come, don't worry!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy learns how to shoot a gun.

She refuses to admit it to Jane or Selvig (who have both decided to stay in London for the time being, much to Darcy’s happiness. It’s nice having friends again), but Darcy realizes that being in (another) hostile situation with nothing but a taser is beginning to mess with her head.

Darcy is done with needing to be saved by the big dude in a cape. She would like to have a few different ways of defending herself next time the aliens come, maybe one involving swords.

She had been meaning to learn how to competently shoot a gun and brush up on some self-defense for a while. After all, this is the time to do it. Her spring semester is light—she’s teaching one section of a freshman undergraduate ‘Intro to Archaeology’ course twice a week, attending her own classes on theory and applications, and cataloging some of the artifacts found in the boat burial from last semester.

And now that she’s no longer spending all her extra cash on train fees, she has the funds to pay for self-defense courses and time at a gun range.

Her site director, Dr. Juniper, a badass lady who has a gift for experimental archaeology, hears about Darcy's plan and offers to take her to a range and train her in handguns and rifles.

(Dr. J is famous at Edinburgh for building a small merchant boat using only tools that were available in AD 1000. She’s also missing the tip of a finger because she hacked it off while creating obsidian arrowheads by flint knapping. There's a rumor that Dr. J once ate human flesh in the Amazon while staying with a reclusive tribe of cannibals.)

(Darcy loves her and desperately wants to be her someday.)

“You’re not a bad shot,” She compliments, twisting her long white hair into a high bun before taking the ginormous gun from Darcy. She has a body like a ballerina, lithe and unbreakable. “Keep this up.”
Darcy relinquishes the gun with a sigh, yanking her headphones off. “Thanks, Dr. J. But don’t you think the rifle is a little much? Not like I’ll be able to carry one of those in my purse.”

Dr. J hums, flicking the safety on and hitting the assemble. “You never know. Most site directors will keep a rifle or shotgun on the excavation, just in case. It’s good for you to know how to use one. Not safe for women out in the wilderness sometimes, not with all those men and their complexes.”

Darcy shudders. She’s been lucky enough to avoid any incidents involving creepy professors or classmates, but she knows it happens. She knows how many universities cover up instances of sexual assault when the students are on faraway digs. If it doesn’t happen on campus, they don’t want to know.

It’s disgusting.

But Dr. J is right. On top of worrying about what Thor will bring to them next (Darcy and Selvig have a betting pool that the next alien to attack will be a battalion of talking trees, don’t ask why), Darcy also needs to be able to defend herself in the field. Especially since she’s planning on branching out.

“I heard your thesis is already causing a lot of stir,” Dr. J says, blessing Darcy with a rare smile. “The Dean nearly shit his pants when he saw that video of Thor. Brilliant move, using him as a primary source. You’re the only one that even has access. Gonna drive those stinky old men crazy.”

Darcy grins, basking in the rare praise. “He owed me for the Greenwich situation. I had to talk to police and SHIELD agents for, like, days.”

“Manipulation of guilt,” Dr. J says proudly, flicking her headphones back on and flicking off the safety. She aims at the 100-meter target, hitting a bull’s eye. “I approve.”

~~~*~~~

Ian won’t stop texting.

And calling.

And sending grossly romantic letters.

Darcy gets they bonded over near death and adrenaline rushes, but c’mon dude it was one kiss.

She tries to call him and explain herself-- I’m not really looking for a relationship right now, I’m married to my thesis!-- but Ian seems to sense when she’s on the verge of telling him and makes excuses to get off the phone.

She finally manages to convince him to meet her for coffee halfway between Edinburgh and Manchester. Darcy tries to make the break up (can she even call it this?) painless, but Ian reacts badly anyways. He storms out and leaves her to pay for his coffee.

Well, get thee gone, asshat!
Darcy’s master thesis is presented to a panel of judges for defense, and as much as she hates to brag (she doesn’t), she *rocks* it.

The room falls into silence as she announces her topic, armed with a slides presentation, a fuckton of research, and a killer professional outfit that Darcy picked up at a fancy outlet store for the occasion (she gave up drinking anything but Folgers coffee for a month to save, it was awful but worth it, because she’s really channeling this hot young professor thing).

*From Mythos to Reality: Asgard’s Influence on Viking and Celtic Cultures in Europe,*

*by Darcy Lewis*

*Supervised by Dr. Eleanor Juniper and Dr. Joseph Mark*

They look suitably impressed as Darcy takes them through the ages, emphasizing how the entire field of Viking and Celtic studies should be turned on its head and reexamined with the discovery that these gods—Thor, Loki, Odin, Frigga—are *motherfreaking* real. But it’s the video interview with Thor (and the documents Darcy spent months on, taking his claims and ensuring that they are rooted in tangible evidence) that brings the panel to their feet.

(Jane and Selvig sit in the back, cheering silently as Darcy ruthlessly defends her work. They buy her drinks afterwards, pausing the usual stream of astrophysical conversation to ask Darcy if it really is true that the Vikings had a possible trade route to the Middle East, influenced by Asgard?)

(She’s not sure. But she’s going to get a PhD and find out.)

It turns out that the world wants to know more about Asgard and the ancients.

Darcy fields offers from schools left and right, offers of funding that make the idea of moving a little less stressful.

(The Stark grant had been great during her masters, but Darcy really feels like it would be pushing her luck to call Stark Industries and ask if they’ll pay for her doctorate degree, too.)

She decides to stay with Edinburgh. The stuffy old dudes who judged her thesis are eager to see where her research goes (and impressed that she has one of the Viking gods as a shield-bro) and make a generous offer: full funding for travel and research, as well as autonomy in her decisions in the field. Darcy is finally going to oversee her own digs.

She’s the site director now, motherfuckers.
Dr. J recommends that Darcy should make the most of the beginning of her research.

“Don’t get bogged down here,” She advises at their weekly meeting at the shooting range. Darcy’s finally getting the hang of it. “Investigate the edges of your work, first. You think the Asgardians may have influences trade routes with other cultures? Egyptians? The Middle East?”

“Yup.” Darcy nods. “There are a few hot spots in Cairo, Istanbul and Alexandria that are promising. Now I just have to prove it.”

“Then go. What are you waiting for? You’ve got the funding. You’ve got the map. You can organize your own digs when you're back in the UK, so take this goddamn lucky time to get your experiences. Fucking go, girl.”

Darcy takes her words to heart and packs up her gun quickly, already wracking her brain for what needs to be stuffed in her backpack. On the tube back to her flat, Dr. J sends a text.

There’s a series of digs in Cairo beginning in three days and another in Alexandria in about a month. I’ve pulled some strings and got you on as a researcher for all of them. Don’t forget your gun.

Darcy is on a plane to Cairo the next morning.

~~~*~~~

“Darcy,” Jane’s voice is a strange mixture of worried and amused. “What do you mean you’re going to be gone for six months? I just saw you last weekend. And we have plans for this weekend. Margaritas and tapas, Darce!”

“Sorry Boss Lady,” Darcy frowns, capturing her cellphone between her shoulder and ear as she inspects the map in her hands. “Archaeology stuff happened. I’m in Egypt for the next three months. Then some time in Turkey and Greece.”

“What?”

“Remember that time you moved to New Mexico for half a year to research stars?” Jane is silent. “This is me, doing that. You can come visit! Be my intern! Hold my shovels!”

“Very funny,” Jane deadpans. “I can’t believe you just left. I saw you three days ago! Are you really in Egypt? Are you safe? Starting any fights?”

“Janie, you know I only end them.”

“Ha-ha.”

Darcy folds the map up, finding a quieter corner of the bustling airport to finish her conversation. “Tell Selvig I’m sorry, too. It all happened quickly, and I had to jump. This research could change my career.”

“I understand,” Jane says, with genuine affection. “Stay in contact. If I don’t hear from you at least
once every three days, I'll get Thor to find you. You know I'll do it.”

“Erg,” Darcy shudders, imagining the damage Thor could do if he came barreling into a fragile excavation site. Dude is always creating holes in the ground. “I will. Promise.”

“You’ve told your mother that you’ll be gone, right?”

“Fuck,” Darcy hisses, slapping the folded map to her head. “I knew I was forgetting something.”

“You called me before you called your own mother? I don’t know if I should be touched or worried for how your brain operates.”

“She’s been busy!” Darcy defends. “She’s gone back into big corporate work. And I can totally tell that she’s been keeping something from me lately. Every time I come home to visit she has this look on her face, like she’s about to tell me something horrible. And she corners me in the kitchen or living room when Dan is gone like she’s going to tell me, but last minute she always stops and asks if I want more banana bread!”

She can hear Jane’s frown across the line. “Could she be sick?”

“Nah, I looked at her medical stuff. Healthy as a horse. Nothing can take down Kara Lewis.”

“Could she be pregnant?”

“That’s what I thought! But this has been going on since I moved, which would mean she has the gestation period of an elephant.”

“How long is that?”

“95 weeks.” Darcy laughs, leaning her head back against the cool tile airport wall and waving away a man who keeps trying to sell her sunglasses. “I figure she’ll tell me eventually. I should probably call her now and tell her that I’ve left Scotland.”

“Alright,” Jane says. “You’re such a odd duck, Darcy. Be safe. Stay in contact, I mean it!”

“Yes, Janie. Love ya.”

“Love you too, Darcy.”

~*~

The next six months are incredible.

Egypt is everything she had dreamed about as a child. Magic and sand and mystery, the pyramids glowing in the Cairo skyline.

The locals are fantastic, friendly and willing to help when Darcy gets lost on the maze of streets. She picks up the bare bones of Arabic, blushing brilliantly every time she blunders through ‘hello, ‘goodbye’, and ‘how much for a drink’ but loving it anyways.

Darcy jumps between sites, explaining her thesis and theories to the starry-eyed site directors. Most bend over backwards to help her, women and men alike pointing out links that Darcy hadn’t even
thought to look for. Others look her over, eyes always lingering on her chest, and wonder aloud about *what a pretty little thing like you is doing alone here in the desert?*

Darcy makes sure these men catch a glimpse of the handgun and ammo in her backpack, silver and glinting in the sunlight.

(One particularly idiotic Indiana Jones complexer follows her to the bathroom one night, trusting the cover of darkness and distance from the tents to cover his tracks. Darcy tases him in the balls when he tries to grab her and reports him to local authorities before he can even stand again.)

She spends some nights in cheap hotels in Cairo and others in tents on the sand with her fellow archaeologists, listening to their stories of scorpions and snakes in bedrolls, amazing discoveries of tombs under the sand and small but groundbreaking uncoverings of tiny statuettes that change entire timelines.

It is magical, and Darcy never wants to leave.

When she finally is forced to move on, carting her thick files of research and excitement over new connections, Darcy feels different. She’s stronger, lean from carting piles of rocks and sand in the heat, and bronzed/burnt from the harsh sun. The time she’s spent in Egypt feels like it has stretched for years, soaking up the tombs and monuments, learning as much as she can, making leaps and bounds in her own research…

…and occasionally tasering pervy American dudes in the balls.

(While spending a day off in a local bazaar trying to find gifts for Jane and Selvig, Darcy felt someone rip her purse off her shoulder. She’s aware that she looks like easy prey, but after chasing down the pickpocket for thirteen blocks with her taser out and crackling, screaming insults, she’s surprised to receive a personal apology from the pickpocket and an invitation to dinner at his house.)

(His name ends up being Mido. He has the best smile and admits that he figured she was a rich tourist. Darcy forgives him quickly, especially since his mother, Aya, boxes his ears and makes Darcy the most delicious tea. They visit a few times afterwards, and Darcy promises to send postcards from Turkey.)

But when she catches a glimpse of herself in the tiny airplane bathroom (on route to Istanbul), she jerks back in surprise. Her profile is different. Dark hair that now reaches the small of her back, grey eyes striking and wide in a red cheeked face.

She looks… capable. A bit wild. Rough. Like an archaeologist emerging from the desert sands.

That’s what she gets for spending three months camping, she supposes.

~~~*~~~

Another two months pass, one spent on the outskirts of Istanbul and the other in Crete, and Darcy begins to see the fruits of her labor.

She has evidence of trade routes that should be impossible. Trade routes that would have only been possible if the Celtic and Nordic societies trading had some sort of technology beyond the time,
something that was helping and influencing their ideas. Something like visiting Asgardians.

Darcy is wrapping up her time on Crete when it happens. Crete has been great—she’s participated in land excavations as well as been able to use her scuba skills and hop in on a few ship wreck strips. It’s through these activities that she makes friends with a local group of archaeologists who live on the island seasonally, monitoring and excavating new sites while regulating tourist levels in the more famous digs. They meet at a local café for dinner to celebrate her last night, to drink and relax and soak in the sunset dancing across the water.

Darcy is more relaxed than usual already, ready to have a few drinks, say goodbye to the gorgeous Greek coast, and then hop on a plane back to London in the morning. The next phase of her research will stay solely in Europe, which is both a blessing and a curse… because Darcy realizes how much she has enjoyed living out of a backpack.

The diner is small and mostly empty. The owner smiles at Darcy as she orders her drink,motioning to the table in the corner where her friends sit.

“Have you been watching the news, Darcy?” Jacob asks, eyeing her over his glass of fruit juice and vodka. He’s a classical archaeologist with a huge boner for anything mythological who took Darcy under his wing at the Knossos site. “Shit has been on fire in the States.”

“Huh?” Darcy’s head shoots up, her whiskey and ice momentarily forgotten. “What happened?”

“Washington D.C. happened,” Karina, a classical linguist who also works at Knossos, answers. She tosses her black hair over one shoulder, dark eyes sparkling with gossip. “Captain America was suddenly declared a fugitive, three giant helicopter carrier things fell from the sky, and then it was revealed BY Captain America that SHIELD—you know them? That shady secret government branch?”

Darcy chokes on her whiskey. “I-I know them. Yeah.”

“So turns out that SHIELD was actually taken over by some weird Russian or German terrorists group? TENTACLES, maybe? Something about an octopus?”

“It was called HYDRA, you idiot!” Jacob laughs, unconcerned with Darcy’s green expression. “Stealing Greek mythos for their own ends. Horrifying. Then, get this, Black motherfucking Widow releases all of SHIELDS top secret documents to the public. Including the ones about herself! She was a freaking Russian assassin!”

“Seriously?” Darcy questions, mind racing. "This is insane."

“Yeah, I know! She did some intense shit, like burning down—”

“No, I don’t care about that.” Darcy waves him off. “Her business is her business. I mean the SHIELD files being public. Everything? On all the Thor stuff and aliens and defrosting Captain NiceAss?”

“Yup.” Karina answers. “You know Thor, right? I don’t think there was much on him. Just some information about when he landed. Personally, I haven’t read anything. Don’t have the time or the Wi-Fi.”

Darcy nods in agreement. She’s dying to check and see if SHIELD had mentioned her anywhere in correlation to the New Mexico alien attack, but she’ll have to wait until she can access airport Wi-Fi.
On one hand, it’s cool that she can tell people about the Destroyer thing now, probably. On the other, it would be a bit disconcerting to see one’s own name on a bunch of official leaked documents.

They end the night not soon after, exchanging hugs and promises to return to the island for visits and digs. Darcy is sad to say goodbye, but strangely relieved to be home in her tiny apartment with tea and access to unlimited showers. Jane had texted and confirmed that she is fine, Selvig too, but Darcy wants to see it with her own eyes.

SHIELD falling is too big of an event to be away for.

Darcy is so deeply entrenched in her own thoughts as she walks to her hotel—SHIELD and Puente Antiguo and Dark Elves—that she barely feels it when a man in the shadows reaches forward and cracks her skull against a nearby brick wall.

Chapter End Notes

>:(
Pepper is trying to cajole Tony into signing something—the forms allowing Pepper to have complete control over the Stark Industries art collection, actually—when Thor Odinson bursts down the door.

“Manners?” Tony demands as the dust clears, wrapping a protective hand on Pepper’s wrist and hovering over the button that summons his suit. “Do they teach them in Asgard?”

Thor halts mid-step and looks back to the crumpled glass door. Guilt bleeds into his expression before his glower returns.

“I apologize, friends. Lady Pepper.” He inclines his head to Pepper before turning to address Tony. “I need your help, Man of Iron.”

“Is that why you kicked down my door instead of using the perfectly good doorknob? I swear, it was inlaid with gold and everything—”

“My shield-sister has been kidnapped, Tony.” Thor growls, cutting off Tony’s tirade. “I am requesting your aid. If you are not willing to give it, I will ask elsewhere.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Tony rises, hands out in a surrender. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help. Who’s the lovely lady? Asgardian?”

Thor’s expression darkens. “No, she is Midgardian. She is intelligent, but possesses no combat skills beyond quick thinking. She was meant to arrive at home from Greece two days ago, but the air craft came home without her. We must liberate her from those who hold her.”

“Liberate who?” Clint enters, bow already slung over one shoulder, with Natasha, Bruce and Steve on his heels. Natasha looking impassive, Bruce looking tired, and Steve looking… very normal and healthy for a man who had been shot in the stomach four days ago.

Steve catches Pepper’s disbelieving glance and shrugs. “It’s the serum. Two days in the hospital and I was good as new.”

“Comrades!” Thor’s booming voice cracks through Pepper’s thoughts. “I request aid. My shield-sister has been taken hostage. Heimdall has lent me his eyes and shown me that she is being held in a cavernous room in Izmir, Turkey.”

Clint’s gaze narrows. “Shield-sister?”

“We fought many battles together.”

Bruce cocks his head. “A Midgardian? Battles? You sure you’re not thinking of Nat?”

Tony hushes them with a wave, crossing back into his work space to pull up a glowing map of light. “Gotta concentrate. Can you give me a direct location?”

“No,” Thor moves to the map. “With Heimdall’s sight I could only see the building and a map indoors, placing the operation in Izmir. I need you to help me find where.”

“Alright,” Tony cracks his knuckles, dark eyes darting between his screens as he moves pinpricks of light. “The rest of you should suit up. We can rescue a damsel and be back before midnight if we
take the qunjet. Except you, Bruce. Hostage situations are delicate, not exactly the Hulk’s style.”

Bruce gives a rueful smile. “It isn’t. Let me know if I can help from here.”

Tony motions with his free hand to Thor. “Anything that can help me narrow the search, Pointbreak? Descriptors, name, height?”

Thor nods. “Darcy is small in height but mighty in—”

“Darcy?”

A sickening silence falls over the room. Pepper doesn’t realize she’s swaying on her feet until Steve moves to steady her.

“Yes,” Thor says slowly. “Darcy Lewis. My shield-sister, she once felled me with lightning.”

“Oh,” Steve realizes. “The girl who tasered you? Dr. Foster’s intern? I only know of her from your stories.”

“Fuck,” Clint mutters. “I should have fucking said something—”

“Said something about what, Clint?” Pepper spins on her heel, feeling a strange mix of fear and guilt. Crippling fear for Darcy, for the girl in the pictures who smiles so brightly, and guilt for Pepper's own actions. She was the one who gave Tony the ultimatum—tell her the truth or stop monitoring her every move. If she hadn’t come up with the idea, they would already know where Darcy is.

They may have even prevented the whole thing.

“About the SHIELD leak,” Natasha says calmly, gaze flicking lazily between Pepper and Tony. Tony, who is sickly pale and frozen in front of his screens. “Clint and I assumed you knew what was leaked.”

“Well we didn’t,” Pepper snaps. “What was it?”

“The files on New Mexico,” Natasha states. “From Thor’s landing. Coulson had file on each of the main players: Jane Foster, Erik Selvig, and Darcy Lewis.”

“So what,” Steve interrupts. “They kidnapped this woman because she was involved in Thor’s landing? Could it have been to leverage Dr. Foster’s research?”

“No,” Clint says slowly, spearing Tony with his eyes. “They kidnapped Darcy Lewis because her SHIELD file listed Tony Stark as her father. Not that she knows that.”

Silence.

And then—

“You’re her father?” Thor demands. “And she is not aware—”

“Tony,” Steve looks horrified. “You have a daughter? And never told her that she’s yours?”

Tony doesn’t blink. His fingers are flying across the keyboards, eye fixed on something only he can see. Clint takes this as his cue to jump in.

“Tony didn’t know it was on her SHIELD file, Coulson tried to keep it off record, but once Fury
got wind of Tony Stark personally visiting Puente Antiguo…”

“He had to put it in.” Pepper finishes, horror dawning. “But who has her?”

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupts. “An unnamed organization has sent a video containing a hostage. I believe you need to watch it immediately--"

“Play it. Now.”

The room illuminates as Tony enlarges the screen. The feed flickers to life—a blond man, hulking and muscular, stares down the camera with an AK-47 cradled in his arms.

“Tony Stark,” He greets with a twisted, scarred grin. “Obadiah never got around to paying us for the years of surveillance we did. The debt has been passed to you.”

The man moves aside, revealing Darcy Lewis strapped to a chair, bleeding from the forehead and unconscious.

Clint flinches. Thor’s hands are dancing with lightning and sparks. Steve makes an outraged noise in the back of his throat. Natasha's fingers twitch to the knives on her belt.

Tony is silent.

“A hundred million dollars by morning,” The man says slowly, stroking the trigger of his assault rifle. “Or Darcy Stark dies by a bullet in the brain.” His smile grows. “Maybe one in the leg to wake her up, first.”

The feed stops.

There is no emotion in Tony’s face as he yanks up the file he and Pepper kept for Darcy, quickly synthesizing the information about her movements. The algorithm put in place to track her still works, even though neither he nor Pepper had been checking, both thinking it was privacy she deserved. Pepper watches locations fly across the air—Cairo, Alexandria, El-Amarna, Istanbul, Mykonos and Crete. Excavations and museums scattered across Europe and Africa and the Middle East.

They hadn’t even known she had left the UK.

Now she’s in the hands of the same people who followed her from childhood. Mercenaries hired by Stane who never got their dues.

God, how could they have not thought about SHIELD files?

“I have her location,” Tony says motionlessly. Pepper flinches, knowing Tony is tearing himself apart with blame internally, and nothing Thor or Captain can say will make him hate himself more than he already does.

Tony looks up to Pepper, pain bleeding into his eyes, but a summoning a small smile. "I'll get her back, Pep."

He turns to the team.

“We’re leaving. Now.”
I Know That I Have Gone Astray

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh *hell* no. Darcy did *not* watch Angelina Jolie as Laura Croft: Tomb Raider eighteen times in high school to be stuck in this situation.

She woke up in a cell. A tiny room with a metal cot, a curtain around a sink and toilet, and a full set of bars facing an empty hallway. (Not so bad as far as prisons go, she could have nothing but a hole in the ground to pee in. The curtain is a nice touch.)

As soon as Darcy peeled her eyes open, neck resting painfully against the cool bar of her cot, she stumbled to the sink to throw up. Her head was pounding, aching so acutely that Darcy wondered if her skull was caving in.

There’s no mirror, but Darcy runs her fingers across her face and notes the places that are bloody. Forehead, neck, and what feels like a small gash across her right cheek. Rope burns on her wrists tell her that she's been tied up a few times before waking.

She’s wearing a familiar outfit, the last she can remember putting on: tight khaki pants (now ripped and scuffed), sturdy and lightweight brown boots, a black tank top (which has always done great things for the girls) and a light olive-toned jacket. Perfect for digging in the field and meeting friends for drinks. Hopefully perfect for getting out of whatever situation she's in now.

She remembers… Crete. Drinks. Jacob and Katria saying something about SHIELD files leaking to the public. Walking home… and then pain. A man, maybe?

Outside the bars sits her brown backpack, untouched and lying just out of reach. Just inches from the furthest point she can stretch her arms through the bars.

*God*. She needs to be calm, she needs keep her mind steady and reliable. No panic. No imagining why she’s here, if this is a sex-ring thing or just plain old fashioned murder-for-fun, no.

She’s going to find a way out. She’s Darcy *motherfucking* Lewis. Smart. Capable. Hardy from sleeping outside for the past month. Hell, this metal cot and indoor plumbing is a *luxury*! She’s *happy* to be here!

Darcy jumps as footsteps echo down the hallway, flinching back from the sudden onslaught of light and sound.

“Hi there, little girl. Finally awake?”

Two men come towards the bars. The first is blonde and golden, arms crossed against his chest showing some impressive GI Joe arms. His hair is buzzed, drawing attention to the horrific scars slashed across his features. The second looks kinder. Jet black hair combed back from his face, olive skinned and leaner than the other. His expression is faintly pained as he surveys her bloody face.

“I gotta tell you, I am not impressed. No coffee? No linens?” Darcy shakes her head, full of false bravado and trying her best not to wince at the pain. “I am *shitting* on this place on Yelp.”

The blonde man doesn’t blink. “You know, watching someone from afar for two decades
“somehow doesn’t warn you how mouthy they can get.”

“Watching someone?” Darcy asks. “Two decades? Are you talking about me, Joe?”

This time he blinks. Score one for Darcy. “Don’t call me Joe.”

“Then tell me your name.” A beat. Best to start out polite. “I’m Darcy.”

“I know your name.” Okay, asshole. “You better pray someone comes through for you, Darcy Lewis.”

Darcy cocks her head, trying her very goddamn best to look like a vapid college student. “What, do I have to post bail or something to get out of here? Are you guys police officers in disguise? Is this PUNKED?”

The blond man moves so quickly that Darcy relies utterly on her instincts to scramble backwards, pressing against the cinderblock wall as he shakes the bars and bares his teeth. “Stop fuckin’ playing around, bitch.” Spittle flies from his lips, pale eyes bloodshot. “You better pray that your daddy thinks you’re worth the cash, or you’re getting a bullet in the head by 6am.”

“My dad?” God, Darcy wants to cry at how weak her voice sounds. She’s trying her best to channel out the fear, to focus not on the part about bullets and more the part about how to get out of here. Keep him talking. Get as much as you can. Fake the confidence. “I don’t even know who my dad is. He doesn’t know who I am, either. My mom ran before he could know.”

“You’re wrong, sweetheart. He knows you. Showed up to your goddamn graduation and everything.”

Darcy shudders, trying to push past her splitting headache and regain her higher thinking skills. “God, my graduation? From Culver? That was almost 4 years ago, jackass. I can’t remember every middle-aged man in the crowd. You’re going to have to give me a clue.”

GI Joe bares his teeth again, like he’s a fucking feral cat. “Here’s a clue: he’s filthy fucking rich. And if he doesn’t pay for you, I’m going to enjoy ending you myself.”

He finally pulls away from the bars, muttering under his breath and pacing the hallway like a trapped animal.

“Fucking Stane had to get himself killed, leaving us with twenty fucking years of work and nothing to show about it. He promised us hundreds of millions, but all we ended up with was jackshit.”

“C’mon, man. She doesn’t even know—”

GI Joe has the dark-haired man by the throat in seconds.

“Doesn’t fucking matter if she knows shit! He has six hours to deliver. If not, I’m taking out twenty years of fuckin’ frustration on the source. Her.”

He drops him. “I’m havin’ a smoke. Watch her.”

The footsteps recede, leaving Darcy and the dark-haired man in a loaded silence. She watches him warily, keeping her back against the wall and the most space possible between them. She is grateful for the bars dividing them, even though he doubtlessly has a key.

“What did he mean,” Darcy finally rasps, summoning up her courage. “When he said you have
been watching for twenty years?"

The man shoots her a warning look, turning back down to stare at his boots.

“What, god forbid you talk to the girl you’re going to be executing dramatically at sunrise anyways?”

He flinches. “Don’t say that. I believe your father will give us the money.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe you and GI Joe will let me walk away scot-free?”

He stays silent, eyes darting back to the floor.

Time for Plan B, then.

Darcy starts to hyperventilate. The panic of the entire situation finally sets in, freezing the air in her lungs and pushing painfully against her heart.

“Oh—Oh God. I really. I really am going to die. H-Holy motherf-ffing shit. You assholes really are g-gonna shoot me. I-In the head. Me.”

A few more labored breaths has Mr. Nice Guy shooting up from his chair, eyes wide. “Kid, you gotta breathe.”

“I can’t fucking breathe!” Darcy wheezes, heaving for breath. “I-I’m a fucking severe asthmatic, y-you asshole! And you-you’re fucking talking about mur-murdering me! You kidnap me but you can’t read my g-godamn medical files?”

Mr. Nice Guy’s hands fly to his hair, yanking nervously. “We tried, but after you began college, they were protected by a firewall. We couldn’t access them. Nothing before your seventeenth birthday mentioned asthma!”

“T-that’s fucking creepy, dude!” Darcy stops speaking for a moment, struggling desperately for air. “I was diagnosed in c-college. There-There’s a rescue inhaler.” She sucks in air. “In my backpack.”

He doesn’t move, looking between her and the bag with agonized eyes.

“Do you want me to fucking die before you get your money?”

He scrambles up, yanking the zippers open and pouring the contents of her backpack across the floor. Papers, pens (her favorites, the black super-inky kind), and books spill across the floor, but no inhaler.

“T-try the side pocket.” Darcy gasps. “Oh my god, please.”

The man continues digging, ripping open the side pocket to find only her cellphone. Darcy nearly gags, clawing at her throat, sucking in as much air as she possibly can before her airways completely close.

“GOD, please! Just fucki-fucking give it to me!”

She must sound half dead, because Mr. Nice-Guy pauses to think for only a moment, looking at the destroyed and empty state of her backpack as well as her contorted body, before lunging to unlock the bars and shove her backpack into her arms.
He steps back, as if afraid that asthma is contagious.

Darcy pants, fighting the pain and weightlessness of her head as she pulls the backpack into her lap. She sticks her hand in, wheezing, and feels for the hidden latch Dr. J had insisted on installing.

(“It won’t work with metal detectors, so remember to declare your firearm at the gate, but it might trick a man who wants to take away your means of defending yourself. Don’t roll your eyes at me, Lewis! I’ve been in the field! I know that something like this can save your ungrateful ass!”)

God. Darcy is so, so grateful to Dr. J and her badassery as she finally touches the cool metal of her Luger. She pulls the safety back, praying desperately for steady hands.

Mr. Nice Guy blinks in confusion as Darcy’s heaving finally stops. “Did you—”

Darcy doesn’t think. She just shoots.

He collapses, screaming and clawing at his right thigh as Darcy scoops up the remains of her backpack (she’s got an extra round of ammo and two extra charges for her taser) and sprints out of her cage.

God, Mr. Nice Guy is screaming at decibel levels that Darcy thought only dogs were capable of. She tries to run past him, but he catches at her legs, yelling such ugly things that she only feels marginally bad for shooting him again, this time in the arm.

5 bullets left.

She has to make them count.

The hallway leads to a set of stairs with no end that Darcy can see. She doesn't want to think about what could be at the top. Even though this guy was unarmed, Darcy is willing to bet that GI Joe has some heavy-duty weapons he can use against her. Her little pistol won’t be anything against a machine gun.

She runs up the stairs as lightly as possible, trying desperately not to think about the fact that she just shot an actual human being and the other fact that she’s probably going to die anyways.

But at least she’ll die on her feet, fighting, instead of waiting on a man who probably doesn’t give two shits to pay for her life.

The stairs finally end, a metal door shining at the top. Darcy hesitates, unsure if opening the door means freedom or a headshot from GI Joe. Either way, it’s her only option.

“Don’t pee your fucking pants, Lewis.” Darcy coaches, allowing herself one quick minute of pause. “You’re Laura Croft. You’re Evie Carnahan. You’re Indiana Jones without the rapey vibes.”

(She’s not thinking about how much it will destroy Kara to identify her body. She’s not thinking about how Jane and Selvig will blame themselves for letting her run off alone. She’s not thinking about the fact that she’s never gotten to even meet her dad.)

She just opens the door and keeps moving forward.

Her heart drops when cool night air hits her skin. It’s a roof. No where to run.

“Came out to play, little girl?”

GI Joe is leaning against the cement railing, speaking as casually as if they were just two smokers
having a chat in the night air.

Except instead of a cigarette, he has an assault rifle dangling from his fingertips.

Shit.

“I really don’t want to kill you ahead of schedule,” GI Joe sighs, rubbing a hand across the scruff of his jaw. “But I figure your daddy won’t be able to tell if you die now or later.”

Darcy is running so heavily on adrenaline and fear that she doesn’t even have to summon her pretend arrogance. The snark is one-hundred-percent organic.

“You dickhead, you really were going to kill me either way!”

GI Joe shrugs, but Darcy doesn’t miss the way he fingers the trigger of his AR-47. “It’s the only way to get even. I get rich, your daddy gets to find you with a bullet in your brain. Fair ‘n square.”

“How, exactly, is that fair?”

“I spent twenty years takin’ pictures of you shitting your diaper, riding a bike, goin’ to fuckin’ dances, all because Obadiah promises that it’ll get me rich, promises that I’ll get to sit on the right side of his throne at the end of it all.” GI Joe spits on the concrete. “He pays us pennies for years, promising the riches will be worth it in the end. Millions. And then he dies.”

“How is that my fault?” Darcy demands, clutching her gun and taser as tightly as her sweaty hands allow. Don’t think, don’t think, don’t think. “Is this Obadiah guy my father?”

GI Joe throws back his hand and laughs, a full-on cackle. He’s so amused at Darcy’s guess that he doesn’t notice her aim and pull the trigger.

Blood blooms across his white t-shirt. It’s a sloppy shot—missing his heart and instead hitting the soft part of his upper pectoral, but he roars like a bull and stumbles back.

But he doesn’t go down. Damn this tiny handgun.

“You BITCH!” He screams, ignoring the steady flow of blood from his chest and pulling the AR-47 into his arms. “Run, girl. Make it fun.”

Darcy runs.

The only cover she can see on the roof is the tiny building that housed the stairs she came up. She dives for cover, thanking Odin and Frigga both for the stamina she’s build up for the past six months, just as GI Joe starts unloading his chamber.

Darcy knows the odds. He’s going to smoke her out, not risking another shot from her if he can keep shooting and shooting and shooting until one of his stray bullets hits home.

It’s only a matter of time.

She should have tased him.

The spray doesn’t stop, sharp tinny noises of bullets chipping away at brick. Darcy presses her back to the wall, trying fiercely to meet her end with some kind of dignity. She could try and get another shot out by taking advantage of her cover, but with the way he’s unloading she would be hit just as easily as him. If she aimed for the head... at least they would both die.
Him, quickly. Her, probably slowly bleeding to death alone on this rooftop.

Well, decision made.

Darcy edges towards the edge of her cover, attempting to see past the double vision her head injury is causing and wiping the blood from a reopened wound that keeps dripping into her eyes. She can do this. Five more steps, and it’s over. There will be rest. Somewhere. Fields of green, or something.

A metallic roaring seems to fill up the sky, distracting both Darcy and GI Joe. A shooting star is making it’s way across the sky, heading straight for them.

“You have got to be fuckin’ with me,” GI Joe gasps.

Darcy doesn’t give herself time to chicken out. She takes the moment of distraction, pops out from her cover, and shoots.

Unfortunately, he does too.

GI Joe falls backwards, screaming, as Darcy’s second shot takes him in the chest. He’s not dead, she can hear his screams turn to gurgling, but he’s finally down.

Her arm is on fire. Dropping both gun and taser, Darcy finally falls on her ass. Bullets litter the roof, covering the floor, and one stays embedded in the fleshy part of her left bicep.

It’s over. It’s over. And her wound isn’t even that bad—once she catches her breath and her head stops spinning, she can get out of here.

God. Getting shot hurts really fucking bad. Darcy almost feels bad for Mr. Nice Guy down in the cell.

The sound of metal colliding with concrete rips Darcy from her hazy thoughts. She looks up to see a humanoid of gold and red, all shiny in florescent lights.

Iron Man.

“Darcy,” He’s falling to his knees beside her, faceplate retracting so she can see Tony Stark’s actual face for the third time in her lucky life. Goatee on point, as always. “Are you hurt? Were you shot?”

“My arm,” Darcy manages to say. Her tongue feels huge, too big for her mouth. She keeps stumbling over it. “Not badly, I think.”

“Not b—not badly.” Tony Stark breathes, looking as if his world is coming apart at the seams. “I can’t even—”

Lightning arcs across the sky, imprinting itself against her eyelids. Thor is here. Thor came for her, and he's brought the team with him. A reckoning. An avenging.

“Tony,” a new voice calls. “Is she alright?”

Somehow, in the midst of her pain, Darcy didn’t hear the fancy looking air-ship touch down.

Captain fucking America comes jogging up in all his American-goodness, handsome brow drawn in concern. Black Widow is behind him, peering curiously at the body of GI Joe and then back to Darcy, and…
“Hey, Hawkass!” Darcy chirps dizzily, sinking back onto the concrete. “I didn’t think I would be important enough for an Avengers Assemble, am I missing something?”

“Hey, Darce.” Barton gives a half grin, eyes tight. “You’re not missing anything. Did you leave us anyone to fight?”

“There’s a dude down the stairs, I think he’s still alive.”

“Jesus, Darcy. When did you learn to shoot?”

Darcy waves the question away, suddenly unable to form words. Her mouth tastes like blood.

“Can you carry her, Cap?” Tony questions, not taking his eyes from Darcy’s face. “I don’t think the suit would be comfortable. She’s wounded.”

Darcy doesn’t have the energy to protest before Captain America is pulling her up, gently, to fit bridal style in his arms.

“Wait!” Darcy motions, wincing as pain shoots up her arm. Her adrenaline high is fading and everything is starting to fucking hurt. “Mr. Stark Man!”

Captain turns to face him, polite enough to lift Darcy to his face level.

Later, Darcy will blame this sentimental question on the immense pain and shock of the day. Barton and Black Widow have disappeared into the building, presumably to see if any other bad guys are involved and clean up Mr. Nice Guy, so Darcy feels a little less pathetic showing her insecurity.

“Did my dad send you?” She asks, trying hard not to slur the words together. “Was he going to save me?”

For a moment, Tony looks so unbelievably sad that Darcy wonders if she’s said something very wrong.

“Yeah, kid.” He says finally. “Your dad sent us.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh god. What a monster of a chapter. So fun to write-- but I look like a serial killer with the amount of gun stuff I've been googling.

Kudos & comments appreciated! Next chapter comes within a day! :)}
Our Hearts Know Deeper Seasons Than Our Memories

Chapter Summary

Short and full of angst.

Tony’s kid is in surgery to remove the bullet from her arm.

God, Steve thinks. Just when I think I can’t be surprised anymore.

He’s changed out of his uniform (dark with the stains of Howard’s grandchild’s blood) and back into civilian clothes. Soft sweatpants and a t-shirt. Clean.

He pads back into the medical bay around three AM, looking for Tony. Pepper had pulled him and Thor aside when Darcy was wheeled into surgery, explaining none-too-gently exactly why Tony had hidden his existence from Darcy. To prevent something like this from ever happening. To keep her safe in obscurity.

He hadn’t known about the SHIELD files.

Well it happened anyways, Steve thinks for a moment before realizing he can’t keep being ugly about this. Tony is his friend and, last he checked, a complete wreck because of his wounded daughter. The ride back from Turkey had been tense, Tony’s flinty gaze never leaving the bundle of girl in Steve’s arms.

He cares. He loves his kid. He’s doing the best he can.

Steve can’t judge him.

The scene sticks with Steve, somehow more brutal than the hostage situations he has managed before. The sight of Darcy Lewis, dark haired and defiant and bleeding, surrounded by bullets and bodies on that rooftop... it was haunting. Harrowing. One scrappy little girl somehow holding out against two men with murder on their mind.

(It almost reminds him of how Bucky had looked after being liberated from Zola, back when Steve thought they had an honest chance of surviving the war unscathed. Fragile and defiant and horrified all at once.)

God, she really is Tony’s kid for that fact alone. It’s just the kind of impossible odds that Tony himself always seems to defeat.

Steve finds Tony outside the operating room, watching blearily through the glass as the doctors finally pull the bullet from Darcy’s bicep, smoothly repairing as much damage as they can and adding a neat row of stitches.

“Are you alright?”

Tony doesn’t react. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”
“Well, my daughter was just shot.” Tony deadpans, watching as the doctors begin clearing their tools and bandaging her arm. “And I didn’t get there in time to stop it.” He swallows, jaw working angrily. "She was forced to take two lives on her own conscience because I wasn’t there.”

“Tony—”

“Don’t you dare tell me this wasn’t my fault, Cap. We both know I should have been watching.”

Steve sighs, aware of just how hard it’s going to be to talk Tony out of his self-imposed guilt. Part of this is Steve’s fault. He had been so ready to blame Tony, to damn him for being a selfish bastard who leaves a kid to fend off the world alone.

Pepper showed him the files, the careful attention and agony Tony has spent in the past seven years to smooth his daughter's way and keep her within view. Safe. Steve has always been too quick to judge. He knows this.

“Pepper told us why you were distancing yourself. You wanted her to be able to live her own life. I understand now. I know that we make these sacrifices so civilians don’t have to. You were trying to spare her.”

“But she isn’t a civilian,” Tony spits, turning on his heel to face Steve. His eyes are red-rimmed and burning, undone in a way that Steve has never seen. “I keep trying to give her normalcy, trying to keep all my shit and SHIELD’s shit and alien shit out of her world—but it finds her anyways. She’s a magnet. She’s a genius. She’s apparently spent the last six months gallivanting across Africa and the Middle East for Christ’s sake—sleeping in tents and carrying guns in her backpack to scare off men. Does that scream civilian to you?”

Steve thinks honestly for a moment, trying to connect what Tony has said to the scared and bleeding girl he plucked off the roof only hours ago. There was a reason she was able to take those shots. “No, it doesn’t.”

“She’s special,” Tony says, self-loathing sinking into every tired line of his face. It is so rare for Steve to see Tony like this—stripped bare of all the arrogance and pomp, raw and hurting and full human fragility. “It took me seven years to say it, but I want a relationship. I want her to know who I am. More than anything. But when I tell her the truth... she’s going to hate me. And I deserve it.”

He is certain. Tony Stark is so certain that his daughter is going to hate him, to send him away from her side, that for a moment Steve realizes that exactly how deeply the cracks Howard instilled in Tony go. How deeply those wounds run.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Steve says quietly, staring at the shock of dark hair spilling over the sterile blankets. The doctors are packing up, wheeling Darcy out of the OR. Both men’s eyes follow her bed. “If she’s as special as you say, I think she’ll understand.”

~~~*~~~

Everyone has flaws.

Tony knows this. He’s more than aware of the plethora of baggage and snark and general awfulness his own brain and personality contain.
But everyone has something. Natasha has worn so many faces that she can try on strengths and weaknesses like hats. Barton kills people for a living and hogs the remote and wears too much purple. Bruce turns into a giant rage monster on a semi-regular basis. Thor is clueless 24/7. Hell, even Cap has a stubborn streak a mile wide that includes stupid self-sacrificing shit like trying to rescue an assassin best friend from himself and also volunteering to wash all dishes left in the sink at once, even the gross ones that aren't his.

But Tony has no idea what his daughter’s flaws are. No idea.

Everything he has read about her has been professional—fantastic scores in her classes (is being abysmal at math a flaw? For a Stark, he supposes), fantastic reviews from professors detailing her work ethic and creativity and ingenuity in the field, and even a handful of accounts from past landlords gushing about her status as a kind and efficient tenant.

Nothing about her shortcomings. Her failures.

What if her flaw is rage? A refusal to listen or forgive? What if she shuts him down before he can even plead his case?

Tony is a shitty parent who has learned from his own shitty parent.

Maybe this is what he deserves.

He tries to push the thought from his mind. Kara has alluded a few times that a pitfall of Darcy's is her pride. Tell her she can’t do it? She does it. Tell her a goal is unachievable? She achieves it. Try to keep her grounded? Watch her attach jetpacks to her feet.

The whole complex screams Stark. The drive to prove, to invent and remake and discover. Tony wonders how much this pride they share will factor into the conversation that needs to happen.

Pepper gets an unconscious Darcy set up in one of their nicest suites (that can still function as a hospital room) and hovers protectively as the nurses wheel her in. The doctors had cut off her tank top and khakis before surgery, replacing them with a sterile gown. Pepper brings her own lavender cashmere sweater and a pair of soft flannel pants for the nurses to change her into, letting a gentle hand linger on Darcy's brow. Caring for the girl she has only seen in pictures.

(For a moment, Tony realizes that he has never loved her more.)

She brushes Tony's cheek in the hallway, mentioning softly that she needs to arrange a driver to pick Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig up from the airport. Once Thor had seen Darcy alive and breathing in Cap's arms, he had rushed to London to assure his hysterical lady love of Darcy's safety.

Well, now there's one more fact Tony now knows about his daughter. She sure does inspire loyalty.

Tony enters the room just as the medical staff begins to clear out. He takes a seat at her bedside, trying to even out his breaths, to calm his racing heart.

She looks tiny in the plush bed—just a flash of rosy cheeks and black hair against lavender and white. His eyes track her face, noticing the differences that time has wrought. At her graduation, she had looked young and untouched. Face plump and full of color, eyes bright, grin unabashed. Charming and sarcastic and full of life.

The girl in the bed is older. Darker and leaner, signs of rough living evident in the sunburn stretching across her nose and cheeks, the nicks and scars on her fingers, the new strength in her
shoulders and lean frame of her body. Who is this Darcy? Who is this girl who lives in the shadows of ancients, who spends her days digging in the soil and yanking history out with her own hands?

She isn't the girl in Obadiah's pictures. Not the grinning maniac who convinced Kara to let her move to Scotland. Not the inexperienced millennial who challenged Barton to a duel over a glass of tequila.

She's grown up. Twenty-five and traveling the world with a plan.

Tony's eyes slide to her bandages, ticking off the injuries in his head. Gunshot wound. Severe concussion. Severe dehydration. Multiple mild lacerations.

He knows one thing for certain. Whether she hates him or not, his daughter isn’t leaving the Tower anytime soon.

He barely gets another moment to think before an army of footsteps approach, entering the suite. Steve appears in the doorway, followed by Natasha, Clint, Thor and Bruce. A full assemble.

“We aren’t going to leave you alone to brood,” Natasha announces, taking a graceful seat on the far chaise lounge with a sigh. “And I want to greet Darcy when she wakes up. A woman who can take down mercenaries is a someone worth a handshake.”

“What she means,” Cap says with a sharp look at the redhead. “Is you shouldn’t be alone right now. It’s been an emotional night. We want to be here for you.”

“Gee. Thanks,” Tony is helpless to his own snark. He knows that it’s ungrateful and petty, but he’s exhausted and emotionally stripped and can’t control his own need to lash out. “Did you bring me a Carebear? Better yet, some Xanax and whiskey?”

“No,” Bruce says gently, depositing a warm mug in Tony’s empty hands. His gaze is sorrowful as he scans Darcy, probably remembering that she is a Culver graduate like him. “But I hope tea will do.”

God. He knows that the world is twisted on it’s head when Bruce makes him calming tea.

“Crush a Xanax in it and we’ll call it even.”

Bruce gives his trademark half-smile, retreating to glance over the charts at the edge of her bed. Cap leans against the far wall, glancing over Darcy with eyes that seem a million miles away. Clint nabs the seat next to Tony.

“Tony,” Thor announces, crossing the carpet to lay a heavy hand on his shoulder. As if Tony needs more weight on those. “The Lady Pepper has spoken to me and assured me of my own folly. While I do believe it is a grievous offence to hide a parent from a child, I understand why you did it. Darcy’s safety has always been first in your heart. I thank you for that.”

Tony has no idea what to say. Why do people keep trying to forgive him for this? As if it's their place? As if it's anyone’s burden but Darcy’s?

He tries to be appreciative. “No harm done, Pointbreak. The blame is all mine.”

“She will awake,” Thor intones seriously. “Jane often speaks to me of Darcy’s adventures. She is daring and fearless, injury to the head is nothing. She once spoke of a time when the two of them managed to make it home after a night of--”
Thor stops, eyes focusing on Darcy as she stirs under the blankets. Moving. Waking up.

She shifts, raising a pink hand to pat at the gauze on her face with a huff. Fingers probing the IV stuck to her forearm.

The room goes still, all eyes on Darcy Lewis as she regains consciousness.

It only takes a few seconds.

Her eyes blink open—grey and assessing and full of unnameable emotion.

Another moment passes. No one moves. Tony can't breathe.

“Alright,” She rasps, gaze jumping between Tony, Clint, Bruce and Steve. “Which one of you ejaculated in my mother?”
First off, I love you all so much. So, so much. I had an awful day and seeing your comments made it so much better!
I've put a lot of emphasis on Darcy being very skilled in the humanities and not very skilled at maths and sciences. Archaeology obviously marries both the humanities and the sciences (one of my professors once explained it as "the study of culture using concrete scientific methods, ultimately at the interpretation of the archaeologist themselves"), and my intention was to create a contrast between Darcy and Tony as well as show that Darcy isn't really interested in subjects outside her comfort zone. She aces classes like bioarchaeology & osteology and has a great handle on the chemistry needed for dating and soil testing- but Kara has to PUSH her to WANT to pass certain math and science classes in high school because she doesn't care for what doesn't come easily.

I love archaeology (and have studied it!) and want to do it justice- but I am also blending things for the sake of the story/plotline. I love all of your comments so much and want you guys to enjoy this, but ultimately it is a passion project I have already mostly written out, and because I am not perfect, will have occasional flaws.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“M-Ma’am, I only came outta of the ice a few years ago…”

“Hah! As if!”

“Nope. Not going to be a part of this conversation.”

The room clears quickly.

(Captain America is so red that Darcy wonders if he has ever heard the word 'ejaculate' before. Clint barely contains his laughter as he hightails it out of the room. Bruce looks tiredly between Darcy and Tony, muttering something about there being two of them now.)


Holy shit, her brain is screaming. There is a very real chance that Tony Stark is my dad.

Go Kara, honestly.

Darcy stares at the man in the floral chair, only a few feet away from her comfy bed. Tony Stark looks exhausted—red eyed with deep purple bags beneath them, and in stained clothing he must have worn under the suit.

For once, his goatee is a bit scruffy. Needs to be touched up.

His hands are red with dried blood.
When her mother had explained about her father and his dangerous but rich life, Darcy had first imagined a prince. Then a secret agent. In her adult years, Darcy had tried hard not to think about the missing piece in her life that was labeled ‘FATHER’, but she had concluded that he must be a rich oligarch or oil baron. Something that hit ticked both boxes of wealth and danger. Someone a bit slimy, who may not have cared about his daughter even if he knew.

She hadn’t expected a hero.

She had never, ever expected Iron Man.

Darcy pulls her gaze away from Tony Stark, choosing to instead inspect herself. Her previous outfit is gone, replaced with soft pajama pants and an expensive feeling jumper. Under the sleeve, Darcy can feel the pressure of bandages against her left bicep along with the faint memory of pain.

Oh, right. She got shot.

“Docs took you into surgery to get the bullet out,” Tony explains, watching her warily. “You were right that it wasn’t bad, as far as gunshot wounds go. Didn’t hit bone or any major blood vessels.”

“That’s a relief,” Darcy sighs, poking at the bandage. “You see people getting shot in movies and shaking it off like no big deal, nobody tells you how much it really fucking hurts.”

Eyes widening, Darcy slaps her good hand over her mouth. “Dammit, I’m sorry—my mom always says I swear too much. And I’m too crass. Which, I guess you already know, because I asked if you…”

“…ejaculated into your mother?”

“Yeah,” Darcy says lamely. “In my defense, I didn't really think it was Captain America. My mom says I rely too heavily on shock value for my jokes.”

She pauses, trying to find a delicate way to ask this.

“So… did you?”

Tony nods. “Almost twenty-six years ago.”

Darcy crinkles her nose, trying desperately to appear calm and unaffected until she can process this information. “Ew.”

“You asked.” Tony chuckles dryly, before the smirk slips from his face. “But, yeah. I’m your father, kid. Sorry.”

The words don’t change anything like Darcy had expected. No alarms going off in her brain, no angels playing trumpets in the sky, no earth-shaking understanding that suddenly passes over her.

Just the words. I’m your father, sorry. Ringing in the air.

Sorry?

Darcy turns to look at Tony Stark, glancing over the olive-toned planes of his face, dark eyes, dark hair. He looks like death.
“I always imagined this moment would be me telling you, trying to convince you or something.” She presses a palm to her forehead, trying to stave off the incoming headache. “I didn’t think you knew about me. Mom said she kept it a secret.”

“She did,” He says, scrubbing a hand across his jaw. “There was a… plot. An enemy of mine, who hired those mercenaries last night, had pictures of you in a file and I found them. Along with a positive paternity test.”

So it was an accident. He found out accidentally. Kara really had kept it from him, like she said.

“Your enemy,” Darcy asks. “Was it Obadiah?”

Tony gives her a sharp look. “How do you know about him?”

“Those two men talked about him last night. Said that he died before they could get paid, which is why it had to ‘come to this’ or something crazy.”

Silence falls. Darcy wants to tell him that she doesn’t blame him for last night, for this Obadiah biblical dude, but she can’t find the words. Not until she understands all this better.

“How old was I when you found the file?”

“Almost nineteen,” Tony says quietly. “I’ve… known for a few years.”

Darcy snorts in disbelief. “Six years. You’ve known six years?” She forces herself to stop, closing her eyes against the rush of exhausted anger that wants to rear its head. It isn’t fair to bitch him out until she has the full story. Until she’s certain that he can be blamed for not wanting her. “Why not say something?”

“How old was I when you found the file?”

“Almost nineteen,” Tony says quietly. “I’ve… known for a few years.”

Darcy snorts in disbelief. “Six years. You’ve known six years?” She forces herself to stop, closing her eyes against the rush of exhausted anger that wants to rear its head. It isn’t fair to bitch him out until she has the full story. Until she’s certain that he can be blamed for not wanting her. “Why not say something?”

“Have you already forgotten about last night?” Tony demands, suddenly animated. “The whole scenario in which you were kidnapped just for being related to me?”

“I had it in hand!” Darcy spits, matching him. “If you’ve known about me for six years, you should know that I’m capable! Not a wilting flower that needs other people to protect her from the truth!”

“Kid,” Tony says seriously, eyes boring into hers. “You were bleeding out on a rooftop in Turkey when we found you. Good job taking down the two henchmen, don’t get me wrong, I’m not trying to deny that you’re capable, but there was no possible good ending to last night.” His voice lowers, full of loathing. "You were forced to take two lives because I couldn't get there in time.”

Two lives. Four bullets she shot. Darcy feels herself shrink back into the covers, mind whirring with memories. “They both died? Even the one… downstairs?”

Tony's eyes soften, words a little calmer than before. “Bullet nicked an artery in his thigh.”

“God,” Darcy breathes, hands fistng in the expensive sheets across her stomach. “I wasn’t aiming to kill, I promise. I just wanted to keep him down, stop him from keeping me in the cage, not to murder him—”
“Hey, hey, kid.” Tony reaches out to clasp her hands on the blankets. “Breathe. It wasn’t murder, it was self-defense. He was going to kill you.”

“And that makes it okay?” She demands.

“Yes.” He says simply. “It makes it okay.”

There’s something in the way he says it. Confident. Soothing. Fatherly.

“Okay,” Darcy says, pulling in a shuddering breath. She wants to believe him. “Okay.”

They fall into silence for a few minutes, both struggling to comprehend how close the previous night had come, trying to comprehend how to move forward, how to deal with the elephant in the room that is being directly related.

“Six years,” Darcy finally says, looking up at Tony. “That means… New Mexico? You weren’t actually upset that I was a civilian involved in cool alien things?”

Tony gives her a tired smile. “I was upset that, somehow, my daughter had nearly gotten blown up by an Asgardian robot. And then, later, dark elves.”

“And my graduation? Did you mean what you said about liberal arts?” Her brow furrows. “Were the grants just a way to help pay for my schooling?”

“First off, yes. I meant what I said about different kinds of genius.” He holds up his hands in a typical surrender gesture. “And of course. I got to pay for your schooling and look like a very generous man with a bit of pocket change. How could I pass that up?”

Darcy shakes her head, thumbing nervously at the sheets as she thinks her way through this craziness. “Why have you stayed away, then? I mean, Kara must have known you knew, since you were ballsy enough to show up at my graduation.”

“She knew,” Tony confirms slowly, the weariness returning to his face. “Once Obadiah died and I found out about you, I called her to confirm. She told me that she hated keep it a secret and that we needed to tell you, but… I asked her not to.”

“What?” Darcy jerks, staring at Tony with accusing eyes. “Why would you do that? Did you, do you not want a…”

“Relationship?” Tony offers. “A father/daughter montage of crying and other disgusting emotions?”

“Well,” Darcy sputters. “Yeah!”

“I never thought having a kid was in the cards,” He says honestly, palms splayed out against the empty air. “There was something comforting about the Stark legacy ending with me, it all being over once I kick it.” He closes his eyes, head falling backwards. “I didn’t want anyone else to be burdened with it. Your mother understood that. She left that decision to me, and I chose what I thought was a good trade-off.”

“What the fuck?” Tony isn’t prepared for Darcy to lurch forward out of bed, grasping the collar of his shirt and shaking him angrily.
This girl clearly inherited a good portion of her mother’s anger management.

“Why would you make that choice for me?” She demands, shaking him again. “That’s not fair! That’s dumb! I thought you were a fucking genius, Tony Stark!”

“Stop manhandling me! You have a bullet wound!”

“Then stop making dumbass decisions for other people!”

“Get back into bed!”

“No! You aren't in charge of me!”

"I'm your father!"

"And you kept it a fucking secret!"

“Your concussion is talking!”

“I don’t care!”

“Darcy,” Tony grabs at her hands, pulling them from his collar gently and speaking plaintively. No distance or arrogance or practiced disinterest. Just Tony Stark. Begging her to believe him. “I didn’t keep this from you because I didn’t want you.” His hands are tight around hers, beseeching.

“God, kid, I’ve wanted to meet you since the moment I found out you existed, but protecting you was always more important. It will always be more important.”

“It isn’t to me!” The words are finally tumbling out, and Darcy is helpless stop them. “All my life I thought you would be some oil baron or a hotel tycoon or a mobster or something, do you understand how much better this is? How happy I am that you’re you?”

Tony Stark drops her hands and lets his head fall into his palms, clearly pulling away to deal with ugly feelings, but Darcy doesn’t relent. She’s been waiting twenty-five years to talk to this dude, and she’ll do what it takes to knock some sense into him.

“Tony, I don’t blame you. For any of this.” He doesn't move. "Okay, yeah, the bitter, teenage part of me wants to be melodramatic and slam my bedroom door in your face and maybe blare some screamo, but that’s stupid. I mean, this shit isn’t easy, and I hate that I’ve been left out of the loop for six years, but the point is that I’ve wanted to know you since I was a child. I understand why you kept it from me. The reasoning is stupid and self-sacrificing but understandable. I forgive you, and I’ll take whatever I can get now, if it's still up for grabs.”

Darcy stops, waiting to see if Tony will give any indication that he’s even listening to her speech. For a moment, Darcy is struck with the cold fear that maybe he really will tell her to take a hike, that he only came to her rescue out of a sense of misguided guilt, that he doesn't want to be a player in her life.

She really doesn't want to find out she has a kickass (although annoyingly overprotective, she's already guessing) superhero father just to lose him.

When he finally raises his head from his hands, his cheeks are wet.

“Kid,” He says, hoarsely. “I’m starting to think we aren’t related. No Stark is this well-adjusted.”

Darcy stares at him for a moment, unblinking. Then she falls back onto the bed with a laugh,
blinking away the wetness from her own eyes.

“I thought Starks didn’t do emotions.”

“We don’t,” Tony responds with an exhausted grin. “This is all thanks to heinous allergies. If you tell anyone differently, I’ll disown you.”

Darcy smothers a hopeful smile. "Does that mean you're formally admitting to siring me?"

"If you're forgiving me for everything else."

"I'd call us squared up."

~~~*~~~

Pepper puts her ear to the suite door, heart pounding. Bruce had warned her that Darcy was awake and demanding answers (he muttered something about ejaculation, Pepper hadn't asked for elaboration), having put enough pieces together to realize that her father must be an Avenger.

And now she's alone in the suite with Tony. Still demanding answers.

_I thought we would have more time to plan this out, Pepper thinks. Break it to her gently, show her what a good man Tony is before dropping the paternal bomb._

Apparently not.

Taking a fortifying breath, Pepper pushes open the door, ready to come to Tony's aide, expecting to find Darcy in tears and/or screaming and Tony (probably) setting things on fire with his emotional incompetency.

She doesn't expect to find them both relaxed- Darcy leaning back against the pillows (a thick bandage across her forehead, comically askew already) and Tony with his chair pulled all the way up to her bed, leaning his elbows on the blankets as Darcy speaks animatedly, Tony hanging onto her every word.

"So then I grab my shovel and start waving it around, thinking I'll scare it off, right?"

"Right..."

"--but no! It just stands there, blinking at me! A freakin' moose! Do you know how many people die from moose attacks? More than you think!"

Tony laughs, sounding so light that Pepper wants to cry. "What'd you do, kid? Bash it in the head? Ride it off into the sunset?"

Darcy shakes her head. "Nah, we left it alone. Turns out one of the lab techs had been leaving lettuce out for it every night. Became a sort of horrifying mascot for the entire dig."

"We're going to have to talk about safety in the field, Darcy..."

Pepper steps back into the hallway, shutting the door silently.
Steve had been right. This girl had something the Stark family usually lacked—perspective, maturity, and the ability to forgive.

Darcy Lewis really was something special.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed!

This took me a loooong time to get this right. I just couldn't see Darcy exploding or dragging out the pain of finding out about Tony. Yes, she's hurt and frustrated, but Tony's reasoning is so based in concern for her that I couldn't see her hating him or pushing him away. It isn't her style—she accepts things, makes the best of them, and moves on.

Kara talks about (I think in chapter four) how Darcy has such a talent for people, for understanding and empathizing and supporting, and I wanted us to see that now. It's not hard for her to see why Tony did what he did. That being said, there is still PLENTY of angst between our father/daughter duo to come, but this isn't the hill Darcy wants to die on.

ALSO! We are finally getting into the thick of things! Thank you guys for sticking around while I have been world building. Darcy and Tony are cool with being related, but she's going to have to learn to deal with some major lifestyle changes that come from having an over-protective superhero dad.

(FYI I usually write a few chapters ahead, and I finally got to the first Bucky POV. Get PUMPED!)

Thank you guys. You are all the best and I'll keep this going for you. Expect some updates very soon. :)
Hi! You guys are the best! The reaction to the last chapter honestly made me so strangely emotional. I love you all, and I will be responding to comments soon!

Slightly sad news: my break is over... which means I must return to my undisclosed university (yay, driving across Canada!) and face school and the ever-present threat of my graduate school stuff beginning. This means that I won't be able to update twice a day like I've been trying to. My updates will probably come every 1-3 days, depending on how heavy my workload is during the week. Also, I literally almost died today because the temperature up here in the Great North hit 30 degrees Celsius. Can you believe?

The Black Widow is standing at the foot of her bed, staring.

Darcy stares back, but while making a real effort not to piss the nice fancy bed and nice fancy sheets.

She cocks her head, red curls bouncing slowly against her cheek. “Where did you learn to shoot?”

“My professor,” Darcy says, trying to maintain eye contact and speak lowly, like you’re supposed to do with a bear. “She wanted to make sure I knew how to fend someone off. I’m in a male dominated profession, staying in tents in the middle of nowhere. It can be dangerous. Especially when you’re five foot two and cursed with my knockers.”

The Black Widow says nothing for a long moment, gaze assessing on the other woman’s face—flicking from her eyes to her breasts to her bandages.


“Would you like to learn how to never miss?”

“I knew your grandfather.”

Darcy blinks, dropping the files she had been rifling through (Barton had gathered up the spilled contents of her backpack from that cell), to find Captain America standing in her doorway.

“Ca-Captain,” Darcy stutters, sending off a messy salute. Which she immediately regrets. What the hell is wrong with her?
Darcy knows exactly what’s wrong with her. Normally, she doesn’t go for blondes, but Captain America is… Captain America. And she totally remembers falling asleep in his lap during the ride home from Turkey.

Rock hard thighs, that’s all she can say.

Captain America only laughs, baby blues crinkling good-naturedly as he steps into the room.

“May I sit?”

“By all means, please.” It comes out a little more fervent than Darcy means. “I mean, yeah, company is appreciated. Tony won’t let me leave this bed until the doctors say, or something. I mean—I finally got a shower, which let me tell you, was great because I still had sand in places—”

Darcy stops as red begins to creep up Captain America’s face.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” She moans, slapping a hand on her forehead. “I don’t know what cocktail of drugs I’m on, but I swear it’s making me even more crass than usual. I’m sorry, Captain America.”

Steve grins, waving her apology away. “No need, ma’am. I survived the trench talk of WWII, just different hearing it come from a lady.” He pauses, slumping carefully onto the armchair Tony had dragged in after complaining about Pepper’s ‘uncomfortable floral disaster chairs’. “Would you mind calling me Steve? Captain’s a bit cumbersome for normal conversations.”

“Sure,” Darcy agrees, feeling like her like has already fallen down the rabbit hole enough, she may as well add being on first name basis with Captain America. She rolls the name around in her mouth. “Steeeeve. Steve. Okay, got it. You’ll forever be Steve in my mind from now on.”

The man in question chuckles, eyeing her with a mixture of confusion and amusement. “If you say so.”

“So, you know my grandfather?” Darcy questions, setting aside her pack of crinkled papers. “I’m assuming you don’t mean my Grandad Lewis, who I never met but apparently was an a-class asshole.”

“Ah, no. I’m talking about Howard Stark. Tony’s father, now your grandfather.” Steve pauses, brow crinkling in concern. “This must be strange for you. Waking up in the Avenger Tower, finding out about your father…”

“Getting a bullet to the arm.” Darcy adds, grinning. At Steve’s confused glance, she elaborates. “I’m going to milk this for all it’s worth. Not to you guys, obviously, since being shot is like a usual thing, but to everyone back at Edinburgh… I’m going to be put in the badass hall of fame.”

“Archaeologists don’t get shot often in the line of duty?” Steve smiles, clearly teasing. “From what Tony’s been saying about your work, sounds like guerrilla warfare.”

“Nah,” Darcy shrugs. “He’s embellishing, it’s tame. I’m just not very good at staying out of trouble. Most of my classmates live very safe lives. I mean, on nautical digs there’s always the added risk of diving deep and your scuba equipment malfunctioning and being stuck knowing you’re going to drown slowly, or catching the bends and being paralyzed before your friends can get you to a decompression chamber…”

Steve looks horrified.

“But that’s not why you’re here!” Darcy says quickly, brushing away her words. “First you tell me
about my long-lost family and then I’ll convince you how fun archaeology is. Howard Stark? New family I had no idea about? Subject change, pretty please?"

Steve gives her a look (so much like’s Tony’s that she actually has to blink for a moment, surmising that being 97 years old must make him feel rather paternal towards babies like her) that says clearly ‘I’m-telling-Tony-about-this-later’.

She’ll deal with that when she has to. Darcy isn’t worried, Tony and the Avengers can be as horrified as they want by her field experience, she’s twenty-five and nobody can stop her from being who she is.

“You look like Howard,” Steve says suddenly, yanking Darcy from her thoughts. “I thought that when we found you on the roof. He was more olive-toned than you, tanned I guess, but you have his brows. Same dark, dark hair.”

The words feel painful, falling from Steve’s mouth with a sudden slowness. He ducks his eyes, focusing on his interlaced hands.

“He was… a good man. He and Tony had a lot of problems, so I figured that Tony might not give you the best look at him, but I knew Howard. He was flawed, of course, but one of the best people I’ve known. Brilliant. Funny. Loyal.”

All at once, Darcy remembers that Steve Rogers was pulled from the ice only a year or two prior to this, yanked into a new century like a fish on a line. The forties were only yesterday to him, so close it would feel touchable and yet so far that everyone he knows is dead or pretty damn close.

If Darcy understands one thing, it is the past. Displacement of it, the way it flows into the present if you know how to look, how it changes and twists the farther back you follow the path. Maybe she can help him.

“That means a lot to me, knowing that I have one grandfather who wasn’t an utter asshat.” Darcy says, rewarded with Steve raising his head and bewilderingly processing her creative swearing.

“That means a lot to me, knowing that I have one grandfather who wasn’t an utter asshat.” Darcy says, rewarded with Steve raising his head and bewilderingly processing her creative swearing.

“Can you tell me more about him? I want to know about the Starks, and I also have a friend at Edinburgh who specializes in 20th century archaeology. He’s a big fan of the 30s and 40s, and would shit himself if he knew I was talking to a primary source. Anything you can tell me, stories or facts or experiences, would make his day.”

Steve is quiet for a moment, glancing between his hands and Darcy’s wide eyes.

He smiles, a quick quirk of the lips. “Is this some roundabout way of calling me a fossil? Primary source sounds a lot like an insult.”

Darcy presses a hand to her heart. “Insult Captain America? Treasonous. I would never. How could I ever face a bald eagle again without shame.”

“God,” Steve sighs, burying his head in his hands to smother his laughter. “You’re just like Tony. I don’t know if I can survive another Stark.”

“Call me Lewis, Steve.” Darcy commands. “My mum would kill me if I changed my last name, even for marriage. She believes in matrilineal lines of power.”

That’s when it hits her. Kara. She hasn’t told her mother about any of this—getting kidnapped in Greece, surviving, getting picked up by Tony Stark—her fucking father. Although, what is she supposed to say—hey mom! I’m at the Avenger’s Tower! Found out about Tony, but it’s okay you
lied to me forever, because I actually like him a lot!


“Uh, nothing.” Darcy says quickly. There’s no way Kara knows yet, Darcy hadn’t even told her a return date because she didn’t want to be held to a hard and fast deadline. For all Kara knows, Darcy is still hanging in Greece…

…not answering any calls or texts, because her phone is somewhere in Mediterranean, dumped by kidnappers.

Yeah, she and Tony are going to have to deal with this. Soon.

But not until Darcy can cheer up until the very sad looking national figure beside her bed.

“Whaddya say, Steve? Up for telling me some stories? Once I get my cell phone back, we have to call Jeff—that archaeologist—he’s not going to believe that you’re really here…”

~~~*~~~

Steve stays for hours, telling her stories about Peggy Carter and the battlefields of Germany and France and about his childhood with Bucky Barnes. Darcy is entranced by the picture he paints of 1930/40s Brooklyn and World War II, humbled by the sorrow that leaks into his voice when he speaks about his lost best friend, who she is shocked to learn is still alive and used as a Hydra assassin.

“That is so fucked up,” Darcy breathes.

“I know.” Steve echoes.

A nurse come in with an injection in hand, reaching for Darcy’s IV to give her the next round of good drugs. Steve takes this as his cue to leave, looking lighter than he had hours ago and apologizing profusely for taking up her time.

Darcy waves tiredly. “As if I had anything better to do than hear war stories straight from the mouth of Captain America. Made my day, dude.”

She’s asleep within moments of his leaving, dreaming of swing dancing and trenches and a charming man with brown hair and a crooked smirk.

~~~*~~~

She wakes up to screaming.

~~~*~~~
“WHAT THE HELL, DARCY LEWIS?”

Tony jerks from his nap, blinking in confusion as Dr. Jane Foster bursts into the suite with Dr. Erik Selvig and Thor hot on her heels.

_Ah, he realizes. The reckoning is upon us._

Darcy’s suite had been a hot spot for the past day, as members of the team drift in and out curiously, scenting out the newest Stark. Every time Tony leaves her bedside, usually to sniff out some grub or deal with something dire in the labs, he comes back to someone else in his spot. Steve, rattling off war stories; Clint, showing off his new arrows (boomerang, really?); Bruce, chatting quietly about their days at Culver; and even the terrifying Natasha, leaned back with her feet up on Darcy’s bed as the two girls trade stories of ruining men’s lives, or something.

It’s nice, don’t get him wrong, but Tony is a bit annoyed at this breech of time. He wants to get to know his own kid before anyone else gets a piece of her.

Looks like that isn’t in the cards.

Darcy’s eyes shoot open, slack jaw shutting as she wakes up and glances wildly around the room before realizing who it is.

“Janie!” She stumbles up from the bed, pushing off Tony’s attempts to keep her sedentary, and wheels her IV to the new comers. She stumbles into Dr. Foster, wrapping her arms sleepily around her friend. “You’re here! And Selvig! Thor said you got a flight—”

“No,” Dr. Foster raises an imperious hand, pointing it accusingly at Darcy (who drops her arms from Foster’s waist in confusion). “I am angry at you, Darcy Lewis.”

Darcy glances at Dr. Selvig, who gives her an apologetic shrug. “I’m just happy you’re alive, but Jane’s been stewing the entire flight.”

“She has not been stewing!” Foster shrieks. “I have been rightly upset that my former intern and closest friend has been, _once again_, putting herself in danger without so much as a backwards glance!”

The astrophysicist’s loud anger has drawn a crowd of superheroes. Tony tries his best to keep a straight face as Barton and Steve pop in, ready for a fight, with Natasha and Bruce trailing behind.

_Well. Witnesses are fine, Tony supposes._

“Doctor Foster,” Tony starts, figuring now is as good a time as ever to be fatherly and protective and stuff. “If you’re talking about the situations in New Mexico and Greenwich, I believe you are the one who put Darcy in danger…”

He trails off as Foster’s blazing eyes turn to him. Fuck if he isn’t a little terrified of the tiny, Nobel-Peace prize winning woman.

“You,” She says slowly, every word dripping in disdain. “You don’t get to hop in and play father, suddenly. You haven’t been around during the insane traveling she did during her master’s degree. I am not talking about New Mexico or Greenwich, I’m talking about how Darcy has a horrible habit of disappearing for months at a time and reappearing with stalkers and injuries!”
All heads in the room swivel to Darcy in disbelief. Darcy, who sways on her feet before sitting back down on the bed, looking like she wants to sink into the sheets and disappear. “That… that isn’t totally true…”

“What?” Tony demands, this time at Darcy. “What is Dr. Foster talking about?”

Darcy doesn’t answer, so Foster jumps in.

“This isn’t the first time all of this has happened,” Foster explains gruffly, shooting daggers at the girl in question. “I mean, she’s never been kidnapped and shot before, last time she fell of the map for two months in Northern Arctic Canada and came home with a stalker who sent letters for months, trying to convince her to come back and marry him, to bear his children and work in his museum or something.”

“What?” Steve and Barton say in unison.

"I hope you stabbed him," Natasha adds.

“Tased him in your hallway and left him there all day!” Jane counters. "That is not handling it! Didn’t even call the police, just stepped over him and went to her classes!”

“It was fine, Jane!”

But Jane continues, ignoring Darcy’s protests. “He was eating her leftovers when she got back. She let him stay and marathoned freaking House of Cards with him before buying him a flight back with her own cash! She’s absolutely insane!”

“Ouch,” Darcy mutters, ignoring the disbelieving looks on nearly every face in the room (Barton is trying not to laugh, as usual, and Natasha doesn’t have an expression, as usual). “Not insane. He was a nice guy once I got it across I didn’t want to marry him. We’re penpals now.”

“Penpals?” Tony echoes, feeling both like he wants to laugh and like he wants to grab Darcy by the shoulders and never let her leave the Tower.

“And then she disappears to Romania for a month, comes back with a face full of bruises and three broken ribs—”

“I fell into an excavation trench!” Darcy interjects hotly. “It was ten feet deep, of course I had bruises! That was an accident!”

“—and then she’s off to Colombia for three weeks, promising that it’s just a research dig for credit, but I find out later that she was off with her crazy mentor holding negotiations with a gang that pandered black market antiquities or something!”

“Hey!” Darcy frowns, looking like a petulant child. “Dr. J isn’t crazy. And they were nice people, just trying to feed their families. We set them up with jobs at a local conservation clinic and we got those artifacts given back to a local museum! Nice people once they realized we weren’t trying to steal their history and stick it in a fancy American or British museum like the Elgin Marbles.”

“Not the point!” Jane says, stabbing a finger at Darcy and ignoring Thor’s delicate attempts at pulling her back. “I am sick of having heart attacks every time you miss checking in, do you know how sick I was when your plane landed and the attendants told us you never got on? When your friends in Greece admitted that, last they saw, you were walking home alone in the dark?”
Silence. Darcy shifts on the bed, reaching out to Jane. “Janie, I’m sorry, but you don’t know what happened…”

“I was a wreck! Thor had to contact Heimdall, and then I hear that you’re strapped to a chair and bleeding in a warehouse.” Jane stutters to a stop, blinking hard. “Do you even care about the people you leave behind, Darcy? Have you even called your mother, yet?”

Tony goes cold in his seat, realizing suddenly just how enormously he has fucked up at this fatherhood thing already. He’s had Darcy safe for almost forty-eight hours and hasn’t called Kara. Fuck.

“I… My phone got dumped by the kidnappers,” Darcy says lamely. “And of course I care! That’s not fair, Jane, I didn't go ballistic on you for being taken to Asgard and leaving us on Earth when you've got weird aether stuff in your body!” She stops, gathering a breath. "Honestly, I would rather not tell Mom about all of this. It's done, all that would happen is she would be worried and blame herself for missing it all. I’ll call her tomorrow and tell her that I lost my phone, that I’m safe on the way back to school…”

“Nope.” Jane says viciously, swiping at her eyes. “I already called her. She and Dan were wrecks, Darcy, they were calling all your advisers and the dig coordinators and nobody knew where you were. She was booking a flight to Crete when I called.”

“Jane, you didn’t…”

A smooth robotic voice breaks through the silence. “Sir? There is a situation in the lobby. Security has detained one Kara Lewis, who is demanding entry to the high-security Avenger levels.”

Tony and Darcy exchange glances, wearing matching green expressions of horror.

“Let her up, JARVIS.” He says finally, rubbing the bridge of his nose, turning to the eavesdropping superheroes. “And all of you—out. This is a family matter.”

“Jane stays,” Darcy says suddenly, sad gaze fixed on her best friend. “She knows my mother. They both need to hear the full story, Selvig too.”

“Fine,” Tony relents. “The interlopers stay. Any chance your mother is going to be very calm and forgiving about this?”

“No,” Darcy says in a small voice. “I hope you’re happy with having me as a kid, because our balls are about to be busted so hard that you’ll never be surprised with offspring again.”

God. Tony really hopes she’s being melodramatic.

Chapter End Notes

ALSO anyone starting to realize Darcy's fatal flaw of running into danger and not looking back??? Jane knows! Darcy is awesome and deserves love but also is HUMAN AND FLAWED!
“Nope,” Selvig says suddenly, standing up to follow Steve and Bruce out. “No offense, Darcy, but there is no way in hell that I’m staying for this conversation. I’m going to go chat with Dr. Banner about simple, non-convoluted things like gamma radiation. I’m not recovered from the last time you and your mother fought.” He shudders. "There are still ketchup stains on my favorite blazer."

Tony shoots a half terrified, half amused look to Darcy, who shrugs.

“We argued about my moving to Scotland. It degraded into a food fight,” She explains. “Kara has an arm like you wouldn’t believe.”

Oddly enough, this does not make Tony feel better about the furious woman currently riding his elevator.

~~~*~~~

Kara Lewis has not seen her daughter in seven months.

She’s almost used to it. Ever since that first dig in Costa Rica (the same week that Tony had found out about her existence) Darcy has run off to the corners of the globe at the drop of a hat.

Kara is proud of her. She really, really is. Every time Darcy is listed in a new publication, her name in thick blocky letters at the bottom of a report on new artifacts found in some pit somewhere, Kara cuts it out and frames it, covering her entryway walls with Darcy’s triumphs.

But it doesn’t lessen the sting of missing her. When she had been at Culver, she would come home on the weekends, spending her time lying around the house and reading just like she had in high school. Easy, close.

Then she went to Edinburgh, delighting in the strength of their program and the caliber of professors and the connections she could make. How could Kara say no? Even if it meant giving her only daughter up to the world, having her back only for a week at Christmas and two in the summer.

Her entire master’s program had been spent jetting between South America and Europe, Africa and home. Kara had almost gotten used to Darcy’s static filled calls, declaring that she was currently in Greenland because an opportunity came up that she just couldn’t say no to…

When Darcy had called from an airport in Cairo, sounding so excited and happy and delighted in her luck, Kara had felt the cold hand of fear down her spine. Every other time Darcy had jetted off to a dig, it had been at most a month or two and she had traveled with a mentor. This time she was going to be gone for half a year, alone, following her own research.

But Kara let her go. Because being a parent means knowing that you have to let go, that you have to let those wings spread and watch your child soar away, chasing horizons. She told herself that it
wasn’t right to hold Darcy back, that she can’t be the one to clip her daughter’s wings, that Darcy needed to go where life was leading her, that her phone calls once a week would be enough to know she was safe…

…and then Jane had called, hysterical, saying that Darcy had never gotten on her flight home, and that Thor (her apparent superhero boyfriend, which should have been Kara’s first clue that Darcy was mixed up in the Avengers) had confirmation that Darcy had been kidnapped and held in Turkey, but was now safe in the Avengers Tower in Manhattan.

And *fucking* Tony Stark hadn’t even *fucking* called her.

~~~*~~~

When Kara first sees Darcy, she almost forgets to be angry.

Her daughter is braced on the edge of a huge bed, looking small and sunburnt and scraped-up against the bright white sheets.

“Hey, mom.”

Kara is crying before she can make the decision to start, crossing the room to pull her daughter into her arms, every instinct in her screaming to *protect, protect, protect.*

“I’m okay,” Darcy murmurs in her ear, rubbing a hand across her back. “I’m *okay*, mom.”

“What happened?” Kara demands. “Jane called, said something about a kidnapping? Who? Was it a sex-trade thing?”

“Obadiah’s old henchmen used the recent SHIELD leak to sniff her out,” A new voice drawls, setting Kara’s already fried nerves on fire. Tony Stark has the audacity to smirk at her. “Hiya, Kara. Remember me? Been a while.”

“Yes, I do.”

Kara Lewis slaps Tony Stark across the face.

“Woah,” Darcy breathes. “Not something I ever thought I would see.”

“How could you?” Kara demands, rocking forward on her feet as Tony scrambles back “How could you not call me right away? My daughter is safe and you couldn’t think to tell me?”

“Things have been a bit touch and go,” Tony defends, rubbing at a red cheek with a bemused expression. “She was in surgery, and then we had to have a long talk about the fact that we are related, you know, that small fact that we both were not aware of for a sizable amount of time.”

“Surgery?” Kara demands. “For what? And don’t you *dare* put this on me, Tony Stark.”

“I’m not, I’m just saying… if I knew about Darcy in the first place this would have been a lot less painful—”

“You’ve know about me for six years,” Darcy interjects. Both Kara and Tony shoot her identical exasperated looks. She raises her hands in surrender. “Fine, I’ll shut up, carry on having a
conversation about me and in front of me but without me.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass, Darcy.”

“I got shot in the arm, I can be whatever I want to be—”

“What?”

“…Did I not mention that? I guess I was so busy, taking care of our spawn and her bullet wound, that I must have, understandably, forgotten to update you…”

“You are insufferable, Tony Stark.” Kara throws her hands in the air, throwing Tony and Darcy a look so steeped in hurt that Darcy’s heart twists. “I guess you both are getting along fine without me. Understood. I’ll head back and tell Dan that my daughter is just fine.”

“Mom,” Darcy lurches forward, catching her hands. “I’m sorry. I forget how much you worry about me when I’m away, but you have to believe me that I never thought this would happen.”

Kara blinks, gaze softening as she stares at her daughter, lingering on the bandages riddling her face and arms.

“Can someone please tell me what happened?” She says finally. “I’m happy, so happy, that you both know each other. I promise. But I can’t stop looking at my daughter and imagining the worst, so please, please tell me what happened.”

And they do. It takes the better part of an hour, Tony beginning with the motives of Obadiah’s henchmen, Darcy taking over to recount the cell and her escape and the shots—pausing to fall into Kara’s open arms, two lives she took—and ending with Tony’s own account of Darcy’s wounds. Jane jumps in to explain how she and Selvig and Thor were able to track Darcy down and alert the Avengers, which honestly makes Darcy want to weep more, knowing exactly how panicked so many people were on her behalf.

For a sick moment, looking at all the hurt Darcy seems to have caused with her disappearance, she wonders: is she even worth it?

The conversations drifts afterwards, Tony sprawled in his chair, eyeing Kara and Darcy like two explosive units in his lab, Kara still wiping at her eyes and glowering at Tony, Jane (having finally decided she had suffered enough) taking a seat on either side of Darcy’s bedside. And Darcy, staring at the four people in her room and trying to figure out just when her life decided to explode.

“Kara, we don’t have to worry about this again.” Tony is explaining tiredly. “Pepper has already set Darcy up with an apartment in the tower, right beside Cap. There’s an opening at the Met Museum for a curator of the Greek and Roman exhibits, and JARVIS has sent Darcy’s latest resume—”

“Excuse me, what?”

“You heard me,” Tony says, glancing backwards at Darcy. “A curating job at the Met is a dream come true, isn’t it?”

“No!” Darcy gasps. “I have a fellowship at Edinburgh, I have to go back!”

“Darcy,” Tony sighs, sounding more paternal than ever. “There are plenty of universities in New York you can finish at. NYU, Colombia, St. John’s, Fordham…”
“No! No way in hell! My mentors are at Edinburgh, my funding, my fucking autonomy! You don’t get to jump in a play ‘dad’, I’ve only known you for two days!”

“You’ve been shot,” He counters. “There is no way in hell you’re heading back to Europe after that. Especially after Jane has very kindly listed all of dangerous situations you walk into.”

“I didn’t tell you that so you could rip away her PhD,” Jane interjects with an apologetic glance at her friend. “I was just trying to get Darcy to understand that the choices she makes in her field are dangerous and affect the people she loves.”

“Exactly!” Tony waves vaguely at Jane, as she is the icing on top of his point. “Which is why she should stay in the US!”

Kara is impassive, gaze fixed on her daughter’s horrified expression.

“You aren’t serious,” Darcy starts, feeling nausea crawl up her throat at the fact that her biological father, who seems awesome, is already trying to take away her choices, to box her in. “Look, I meant what I said about wanting a relationship with you and being pumped about the whole ‘cool-you’re-my-dad’ thing, but this is bullshit. You don’t get to jump in and call the shots after forty-eight hours,” Darcy continues, fire building in her voice. “This is my life. This is all I have ever wanted to do with it, and I am a twenty-five year old with a PhD fellowship and the chance to prove something! Nobody is going to take that decision away from me, not even you.”

Tony stares at his daughter for a moment, both locked in a stalemate of wills.

“It’s about safety,” He maintains. “You were kidnapped and almost killed, Darcy—”

“Those men are gone! You said it yourself!”

“Have you not realized that I am Iron Man?” Tony demands. “Those men are gone, but more will come. I have a list of enemies a mile long who would love a chance at my kid, you really think I’m going to let you waltz out into a world like that?”

“It’s not your choice,” Darcy says simply. “Pepper told me that SI had my SHIELD file pulled as soon as you realized what it said. Nobody else needs to know about our relation. I can come back and visit you and mom on holidays and in the summer, I’ll stay in contact and promise to be safer—”

“Not good enough!” Tony hisses, clenching his fists against the chair arms. He glares at Kara, gesturing wildly. “You’re her mother, you tell her how absurd and stupid this argument is.”

“I think she should go back to Edinburgh,” Kara says calmly.

“What?”

“Tony, you can’t keep her locked up in your tower.” Kara sighs, rubbing at her red-rimmed eyes. “Maybe before she was eighteen, you could have tried, but she’s an adult. A daft, occasionally very irresponsible adult, but an adult nonetheless.”

Both Tony and Darcy blink at Kara, wearing matching expressions of confusion.

Darcy cocks her head, unsure if she should be offended or pleased. “Did you just call me daft? What is this—1950s England?”

“Kara,” Tony sputters. “Are you saying you want to let Darcy run back to Europe? You haven’t
heard everything Jane said—about her falling into trenches and letting stalkers sleep on her couch—"

"Of course I don’t want to, Tony!" Kara finally yells, glaring. Tony and Darcy both shrink back into their seats. "But I know my daughter. These incidents would not stop just because you tried to lock her away. Darcy would find a way to let another stalker into the tower, or hop on a plane to the Arctic, or rescue a homeless man with a murder streak, or something equally ridiculous—because that’s who she is!"

There’s a heavy pause.

"I don’t think that makes me feel better," Tony mutters.

"It shouldn’t, Tony! Welcome to being a parent!"

"I’m just going to jump in here and interject that, as far as surprise kids go, I think I’m pretty cool… and smart… and generally entertaining—"

"Shut up, Darcy." Kara and Tony say at the same time, not even bothering to glance at their daughter, locked in a battle of wills and meaningful eye contact.

Darcy crosses her arms, leaning back against Jane. "Tough crowd."

"I can’t just let her go," Tony finally says, shoulders slumping under Kara’s unrelenting gaze of disapproval. "It was my fault that she was shot and kidnapped, now you’re telling me to forget about it and let her keep running around the globe?"

"I’m telling you that you have to make the same sacrifice that all parents make, you need to let your daughter have her career and follow her heart."

Tony snorts. "And just wait by the phone, hoping she remembers to call from the ass-end of nowhere?"

Kara shrugs, hiding a rueful smirk. "It’s what I’ve done since she was eighteen. Welcome to the fucking club, Tony."

Tony groans, letting his head fall into his hands in defeat. His next words are muffled through his fingers, a gesture of surrender. "Fine. But we are all in agreement that she gets her dirty mouth from you, right Kara?"

"True," Jane confirms, resting her cheek against Darcy’s shoulder. "They both swear like sailors. Didn’t believe it until I saw the two of them together."

"Wait," Darcy sits up, swinging her head from Kara to Tony. "Does this mean I can go back to Edinburgh? I mean, not that you guys could have stopped me, I’m financially independent and twenty-five and have a freaking fellowship and funded dig waiting on me—but it will be so much easier to not have to sneak away in the middle of the night with all my belongings strapped to my back in a beat up canvas bag."

Tony raises a brow. "You would have done that?"

"She has an overactive imagination, nearly threw her into childhood counseling for it." Kara mutters. "She doesn’t have a canvas bag, but she would sneak out."

"Oh, great, the canvas bag was completely what I was hung up on." Tony turns to Darcy, waving
an imperious finger. “You can go back,” he raises a hand at her smile, “with conditions. Those being that I pay for a better apartment, I get to install a Stark-approved security system, I get daily updates on your whereabouts, and you deal with a bodyguard of my choosing.”

Darcy pauses, grin freezing on her face as his words sink in. “No, no fucking way.”

“These are my conditions!”

“I’m not having a bodyguard follow me around! And I’m not moving!”

“Tony,” Kara interjects tiredly. “You can’t make her move.”

“Yeah, you can’t!” Darcy chimes.

“But you can install a security system. I have no qualms about that.”

“Hah!” Tony cheers, wagging his brows at Darcy’s sulking expression. “And a bodyguard. And updates from said bodyguard if you try to leave the country.”

Darcy is about to open her mouth to tell her newly-discovered father to eat her ass when, thankfully, Kara intercedes as the voice of reason.

“I’m going to introduce a new concept that neither of you have ever heard of,” She says, spearing them both with her gaze. “Compromise. It’s magical. Darcy stays in the Tower until the doctors say she is free to go, which I have already discussed with Dr. Cho and found out that she will be cleared within four days. Tony, Darcy will agree to give you updates on her comings and goings from the UK. Darcy, Tony will not be an overprotective asshole and assign you a bodyguard, which would only call more attention to you than anything.”

“What—”

“No, but—”

“AH!” Kara tuts, stopping both Stark’s complaints. “These are the terms. Agree to them and end this or be prepared for chaos. I know you both enough to know that whatever you two would do would only escalate—sneaking out, flying the suit to stop her airplane, changing identity to better blend with the Scots…”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tony objects. “I would never change my identity. Or stop an airplane in the suit, that would be disobeying at least a dozen air safety laws.”

“Ha-ha,” Darcy deadpans with a glare at her father. “You’re so funny, Tony Stark. I am so lucky to be the scion of such a hilarious man.”

“Don’t be mean to your dear old dad—”

“God,” Kara breathes, dropping her head into her hands. “I can’t do this. You two are so alike I want to die.” She raises her head, making one last ditch effort to fix the situation. “Do you or do you not agree to the terms? Because, if the answer is no, I’m going to possibly kill you both.”

Darcy and Tony both look like they want to make a joke about double homicides, but Kara’s frigid expression stops the coming snark in it’s tracks.

“Fine,” Darcy yields, suddenly exhausted and wishing one of those nice nurses with the good drugs would come knock her out. “I’ll be better at updating you guys. And I’ll let Tony install his
stupid robot security shit in my flat.”

Tony fixes her with a dry smile. “Wow, I really feel the love.”

“Tony?” Kara prompts.

“I promise to not send her to Scotland with a bodyguard. Okay?”

“Okay,” Kara echoes. “Now, can we use the back pay of child support you owe me to order something to eat? I’m starving and emotionally drained from hearing about my daughter’s almost murder.”

“Sure. JARVIS, send up some enchiladas.” Tony stops, glancing at his daughter who is currently drifting off on Jane Foster's shoulder. "And more morphine, Darcy looks like she’s about to keel over.”

Chapter End Notes

Posted this quickly, so forgive any errors. I'll read it over again when I get home and fix grammar stuff.
Tony keeps her at the Tower for a week.

Honestly, Darcy can’t say that he’s keeping her, per say, it’s just that they both have so much to catch up on that the days stretch on. It takes more than a week to know your father, but Tony seems determined to give it a good shot.

They spend a lot of time in the labs, Tony showing off his robots and suits, Darcy ignoring him to chat amicably with Bruce about the fact that the Culver cafeteria hasn’t been updated since the late seventies. Tony pouts.

Steve pulls her aside to hang out a few times, seeming to genuinely enjoy the conversation and company of someone who isn’t a spy or alien or somehow super. He tells her about the Brooklyn he remembers, and she tells him about her adventures in Egypt and Europe, leaving out some of the trickier details that could possible trigger an over-protective Tony if they ever filtered down the grapevine.

On one very memorable occasion, Darcy teaches Steve the ins and outs of Skype. With his permission, she video called her classmate Jeff and cackled with glee when the 6-foot 4 burly archaeologist started weeping at the sight of Steven Grant Rogers, ready and willing to answer his questions about 1930s New York and WWII.

(They become fast friends and stay on the line for hours, so long that Darcy actually falls asleep in her desk chair as they chat about the invention of color television and atom bombs.)

Kara leaves and returns with Dan, who sheds a few tears and scoops Darcy into a bear hug and gives a very valiant effort of not staring too intensely at Tony. Tony, on his side, does also try to cut down his snark for the reunion.

Kara and Pepper get along so well that it seems to terrify Tony. Darcy laughs so hard she almost pees the first time she and Tony wander in to find Kara and Pepper, curled up elegantly on a chaise lounge in Pepper’s private rooms with a bottle of fancy Merlot between them. Of course the two women would love each other, they both share a perchance for power suits, crushing men’s dreams, and have survived Tony Stark.

They want to start a long-distance book club with Natasha, apparently. This fact makes Tony look so nervous, Darcy points him in the direction of a nearby trashcan ‘in case you need to hurl’.

He doesn’t. But he almost does later when he watches the footage of Natasha training Darcy in the gym.

Natasha made good on her promise to train Darcy in firearms. And also, self-defense. And throwing knives. Within a week, Darcy can sort-of escape Steve’s creeper hold (the nickname Darcy gives the hold that Natasha commands her to break, using Steve as a substitute for an actual creeper), has regained some confidence with handguns (she tries her best not to think about Mr. Nice-Guy and GI Joe, their lives on her hands), and earns rare praise from the Russian assassin on her knife throwing.

“Impressive,” Natasha remarks. “For an amateur. Your chances of survival are increasing.”
Darcy grins. “That’s all you can really hope for in life, isn’t it?”

Natasha actually laughs, throwing back her head as Darcy and Steve look on in amazement.

“I like you, Lewis.” Natasha smirks at Darcy’s reddening cheeks. “You’ll be back semi-regularly?”

“Uh, yeah,” Darcy stutters. The Black Widow likes her. *Holy shit.* “I promised Tony I would give this father/daughter relationship thing a shot. I’ll be back a few times between digs.”

“Good. We’ll train every day that you’re here.”

~~~*~~~

A few days after her stitches come out and her painkillers are weened down, Darcy starts looking into flights back to Scotland.

“No, no,” Tony objects, walking in on her bent over Barton’s laptop. “You don’t need to be looking into flights.”

Darcy bristles, ready for a fight. She and Tony had been along well, really well, but Darcy is ready to drop him and his fancy Tower like a sack of bricks if he tries to stand between her and her PhD.

“Take one of my private planes,” Tony says, small smirk emerging that tells Darcy he was aware of her thoughts. “Flying commercial is one of the lowest layers of hell. Be a Stark for a day and indulge.”

Darcy doesn’t need to be told twice.

~~~*~~~

The fancy private plane is awesome, stocked with free champagne and movies that haven’t even hit theaters yet and an actual bed (which made the seven-hour flight so much better).

For a fleeting period consisting of lounging in the sky, Darcy starts to think that this whole ‘being a Stark’ thing may not be so bad.

Until she trudges up to her much missed flat (it’s been nearly seven months since she had a night alone with Netflix and shitty Chinese food and, oh god, *wine*) to find a man in a navy jumpsuit at her door.

“Ms. Lewis?” The man asks, righting himself from the giant box he had been leaning on.

Darcy hesitates. “That’s… me.”

“Here to show ya how the security system works,” The man steps back to reveal a panel now embedded in the wall next to her front door. “We’ll program your retinal and conscious face prints as a key, install a series of safe words that should trigger police and ambulance services if you say them loudly enough in your apartment…”
She nearly stops the whole deal then and there. But then Darcy remembers that this is her tradeoff for no bodyguard and no Stark meddling in her travels, which all-in-all is worth it, so she plays along and lets the technician program her face into the blue board and tries not to giggle when he asks if she has any pre-existing safe words to use.

(She does. Her romantic life may be non-existent, but her sex life occasionally flourishes in the field.)

Her routine falls back into place. Turns out that Dr. Mark and Dr. J had both been updated about Darcy’s locations, tracking her from dig to dig, and had called the authorities themselves when she had failed to return from Crete.

Darcy is surprised to learn that Tony had actually called on her behalf, somewhere between her surgery and Kara’s arrival, to explain to them both the kidnapping attempt and Darcy’s injury.

“Your father wasn’t too happy about the program allowing you to travel so much,” Dr. Mark remarks, pulling Darcy in for an awkward hug almost as soon as she steps into his office. “I tried to explain that the nature of archaeological research means we must go to the sites and excavate with our own knowledge or it means nothing.”

Darcy sighs. “I’m so sorry, Dr. Mark. He’s a great guy, just upset with me for not wanting to stay safe at a desk job in Manhattan.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Dr. Mark say suddenly, a smile growing on his wrinkled face. “He called again yesterday, and we had a nice chat about keeping your identity under wraps.” Darcy flinches, but he continues. “And then this morning, Stark Industries made a private donation to the Edinburgh Archaeological Society for ten million dollars.”

Silence buzzes in her ears. It takes Darcy a moment to process her mentor’s words, but when it finally makes sense, Darcy claps a hand over her mouth and blinks away tears.

“Ten…million?”

Dr. Mark grins, a white smile that breaks through his salt-and-pepper beard, turning his face into a beam of light. “Very generous. But more generous of Mr. Stark was that he helped you, one of our best minds, to come back. I would trade that for the donation any day.”

Darcy is saved from her own embarrassingly emotional response (she does hug Dr. Mark again, this time very tightly) by Dr. J’s entrance to the office.

“Heard you got a few good shots in,” Dr. J says in way of hello, hazel eyes twinkling as she surveys her pupil. Her white hair is loose down her back, navy blouse tucked fashionably into her khaki pants. “Your dad said that you were in surgery. Did you get hit?”

Darcy ignores the dig at her somewhat famous father and instead yanks her olive jacket and bandage aside to show off the neat little hole in her bicep.

Dr. Mark’s brows shoot to his hairline, sputtering disbelief, while Dr. J gives her a high-five. “I hope you killed the bastard that did that,” she whispers into Darcy’s hair. “Lessons continue next week, no excuses.”

Darcy ignores the dig at her somewhat famous father and instead yanks her olive jacket and bandage aside to show off the neat little hole in her bicep.

“Your father said injury, not gunshot wound!” Dr. Mark continues to gape.

“You’re not a real archaeologist until you’ve been held at gunpoint,” Dr. J crows, proudly patting Darcy’s head. “Kidnappers count for half, since they wanted you and not your research. But we’ll
get there, don’t worry.”

“Dr. Juniper!” Dr. Mark admonishes.

“What, Joseph? Don’t play the angel. You had us looking down the barrel of assault rifles in the Amazon twenty years ago.”

“Accident! We needed access to that site!”

“And we were willing to die to get it.” Dr. J says simply. “Do you see my point? Darcy will get back on the horse and be better prepared for when this happens again.”

“I will.” Darcy promises, infusing as much meaning as she can in the two words. She knows that the kidnapping is already trying to haunt her, lingering longer than her bruises and wounds, but she doesn’t want to let it. She had fallen asleep the night before, tortured by the memory of GI Joe and Nice-Guy bleeding, but she’s ready to beat those memories back. Now her focus needs to be on her work.

Yanking out her laptop and stack of files, Darcy leads her mentors to the desk and spreads her research against the polished wood. “I’m ready to narrow down my focus. You won’t believe this, but I don’t think my research should be focused on Asgardian influenced trade routes anymore.”

“What?” Dr. Mark demands, lifting a stack of papers to inspect them. “I thought that you found fantastic information in the field. The work you sent back from Alexandria and Istanbul was beautiful.”

Darcy grins. “Thanks, Doc. I found plenty of evidence of Asgardian travel and influence on Abbasid period Egypt and Greece in the 700-800s, but I also think I’m onto something bigger.”

Dr. J leans closer, white hair sweeping the table as she bends to scrutinize Darcy’s charts and field drawings.

“I kept finding this ridiculous evidence of alien influences,” Darcy continues. “And the research is fantastic, I could build my PhD on it and be fine, but I can’t get this question out of my head. Where do the old roads lead?”

“To Rome?” Dr. Mark guesses with a joking laugh.

But Dr. J only raises a white brow. “Your research seems to hypothesize that these are rare trading routes between major cities.”

“They are, I think.” Shuffling through the files, Darcy reemerges triumphantlly with a crudely drawn map she had sketched out in Mykonos and a larger copy of a map of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. “Look, yes some of these routes echo major routes of Rome to Istanbul, Alexandria to Mauretania, that isn’t new. But look at these smaller branches.”

“Dead ends?” Dr. J guesses, using a tanned finger (the one not missing the tip) to trace the red line. “Or…”

“Or!” Darcy confirms, nearly buzzing with excitement to be finally speaking about the theories she spent six months without a shower for. “Why would the Asgardians create these routes on Midgard to uninhabited places? Look here, there’s a possible trail starting in Cairo and leading to Amarna.”

“Pharaoh Akhenaten’s doomed city,” Dr. Mark says, removing his glasses to get a closer look at the map. “You think it was influenced by Asgardian aliens? This predates your specialization by a
good thousand years—"

“I know,” Darcy nods. “This goes beyond just Norse and Celtic studies. I think that Amarna is
direct an example of this trend. What are the odds this city follows a direct Asgardian trace? There
have been carved horns from animals not known to Earth, buried in the sands! Knotwork that Thor
himself identified as popular in Asgard thousands of years ago carved into destroyed sandstone.
And these trails are all over Europe!”

There is a long pause as all three archaeologists pour over the research before them, marveling at
the red lines snaking across Turkey, Egypt, Italy, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Niger, the
United Kingdom.

“This is…” Dr. Mark breathes.

“You need to be in the field.” Dr. J starts. “Now. This is groundbreaking and the longer you wait,
the more likely someone else will catch on.”

“Where should I start?” Darcy asks, suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. “Amarna
was my prime example that ancient people followed these paths, but I’m not even sure if the
Asgardians were leading them or if the Egyptians were just dropping gifts—”

“Start here.” Dr. J commands. “In our backyard. You have at least three possible lines from
London to the Isle of Skye, Aberdeen to the Shetland Islands.”

A sparkle returns to her eye as she turns on her heel to face Darcy.

“I hope you don’t mind camping on an uninhabited island.”

~~~*~~~

Darcy doesn’t.

She takes a month to organize the entire dig, reveling in her power (freaking site director YES!) and
yet moaning at the amount of work it takes to create a team. Jeff, the American era archaeologist
who totally owes for her setting him up with the time capsule that is Cap, signs on as her site
supervisor and resident geologist. A few graduate students jump in, excited to work with Darcy and
her reputation for bringing adventure to digs, and even a few members of the Edinburgh staff offer
their services as lab technicians or researchers.

It costs a pretty penny, but thanks to the SI donation the Edinburgh Archaeological Program can
buy a new Ground Penetrating Radar system.

First use? Darcy’s dig.

The Scottish government, finally and after heaps of paperwork, allows the University of Edinburgh
to use and excavate the land, provided that the findings are published in public record.

“Duh,” Darcy laughs when she read it, signing her name on the forms. “Publish or perish, my
dudes.”

“Publish or we are no better than treasure hunters,” Dr. Mark corrects. “The recording and
distribution of knowledge is what separates us from the apes who dig up gold and sell it to the highest bidder.”

Darcy frowns. “Assholes.”

Darcy has a week and a few days before her excavation is set to begin. Remembering her promises to Kara and Tony, she books a commercial flight and texts Pepper to ask if it’s alright to pop in (because… she can’t remember if Tony has a cellphone for the life of her. His suit and JARVIS just seem to pick up calls).

The call goes to Pepper’s personal assistant, who apologizes for the fact that Pepper is in a CEO meeting but promises to tell her everything when she’s back. It’s only minutes later when her phone rings again.

To her surprise, it’s Tony.

“Heya, kid. Coming back to visit already? Miss your dear old dad?”

“Hah. Hilarious.” Darcy fights her own smile. “I’m making good on my promises, you know, pretty sure I can develop a strong enough portable dish to get you guys some contact…”

“Tony, no. I’ll be fine.”

He ignores her. “I’ll look at a prototype. When should I send the jet?”

“The jet?” Darcy hesitates for a moment, remembering the cloud bed and free drinks and gourmet food and fancy entertainment. “I’m literally a few seconds away from booking a flight through United. Don’t waste the fuel.”

“You’re so full of it.” Tony says directly. “Don’t be a martyr. I’m sending the jet now, can you be ready in eight hours? Bring Foster. Thor is missing his lady love.”

Who is Darcy to argue?

The week goes quickly.

She and Jane enjoy the jet and free champagne a little too much, arriving on the launch pad of Avenger’s Tower both happy tipsy and swaying on their feet, much to Tony’s amusement. Thor carries Jane away to his chambers, which, ew, and leaves poor drunk Darcy to try her best to sober up before Tony starts to offer her hangover advice or something equally mortifying.
“C’mon, kid.” He contains his laughter, swinging an arm around her shoulders to lead her into the tower. “I won’t tell your mom. Come meet Rhody.”

Meeting James Rhodes drunk is not something Darcy was planning on doing. He seems like a nice enough guy, ignoring the scent of champagne that follows her around and shaking her hand with genuine interest. Tony is listing off all these awesome facts about her and her accomplishments, calling her a ‘genius’ and a ‘prodigy of the arts’ and bringing up her IQ score (which, would possibly bring sober Darcy to emotional-happy tears), while Darcy begins to blink heavily, having passed from happy fun intoxication (dance party in the sky with Jane to One Direction hell yes!) to sleepy and hungry intoxication.

“…Tony, is she drunk?”

“Uh, did I not mention that? Had a bit of fun on the jet. Chip off the old block.”

Darcy blinks back into the awake world to see James Rhodes, U.S. military officer and Tony Stark’s voice of reason, laughing so hard that tears are running down his face.

Tony had, apparently, been filling him on Darcy’s adventures.

“Karma does exist! Oh, Tony, I am so glad you have a daughter. Now you can understand what Pepper and I have gone through for years, trying to keep your genius ass alive.” He claps Tony on the back with a scary-huge smile. “She sounds just as bad. Good luck, buddy.”

Darcy falls asleep on Tony’s couch, comforted by the low tones of him and Rhody and Pepper laughing. Tony brings her water at some point in the evening. Somehow, this is more touching than the ten million dollars donated on her behalf.

~~~*~~~

Natasha has her in the gym the next morning, listening closely to the details of Darcy’s upcoming dig and coaching her in defensive and evasive moves in return.

If Darcy didn’t know better, she would say the assassin is a little concerned for her.

“You know, you’re not as scary as I thought you’d be. Wanna make pasta and marathon some Will & Grace later—ooph.”

Natasha has her pinned against the wall, muscular forearm pressed against her windpipe and red brows drawn down.

“I am scary.” Natasha releases her, ignoring Darcy’s gasping breaths. “Remember that having your back close to a wall means you’ve lost.” She tilts her head, considering. "Unless you'll let me teach you parkour."

She reaches down, helping the archaeologist up. “I like tortellini. With pesto. And episodes that are Karen heavy.”

“Sounds good.” Darcy wheezes, throwing the terrifying assassin a thumbs up.

Of fucking course Natasha Romanoff is a Karen Walker fan.
Darcy loves Sam Wilson.

Steve introduces them, tactfully avoiding the whole ‘Stark’s-long-lost-daughter’ thing and instead calling her a friend. Sam probably already knows, but Darcy appreciates the lack of a label.

“He’s helping me look for Bucky,” Steve explains, a glimmer of pain apparent in his blue eyes. “Latest signs are pointing to Eastern Europe, but he’s been staying under the radar so it’s hard to be sure.”

“Yikes, poor dude.” Darcy responds. “I’ll shout if I see him around in Scotland.”

Steve smothers a smile. “Thanks, Darce.”

“Is it true you got bit by a barracuda?” Sam asks directly, eyeing her up and down like he can’t connect the stories with the little girl in front of him. “Steve said you excavate underwater sometimes. You look like you have all ten fingers and toes.”

“I do,” Darcy wiggles her fingers, spreading her right hand in front of Sam’s face and pointing to the jagged scar on her pinky and ring finger. “It was a small barracuda, to be honest. I was reaching to pull up a piece of pottery from the sand and didn’t see him lurking. Just a nip, I didn’t even need stitches, and it was entirely my fault because barracuda honestly don’t attack unless you get in their space. I should have checked my site a bit more.”

Sam raises his brows in disbelief, looking at Darcy like she’s spewing nonsense.

“Funny thing is,” Darcy continues, locked in the memory of her young and dumb undergrad days. “We were diving at about thirty feet, and the first color you lose is red, so I kept seeing green coming from my fingers. Thought I must be losing it from lack of oxygen, but then my dive coordinator started making all these gestures at me, pointing to the barracuda and my finger. It was pretty funny.”

“Funny,” Sam echoes, turning his wide gaze to Steve. “You weren’t lying about her. She’s insane.”

“Entertaining,” Darcy corrects, with a glare at Steve. “I’m entertaining. A hoot to have around, I’ve been told. Also, this is rich coming from a grown man with wings.”

“You’re someone I’d like to get drunk with,” Sam amends. “Steve can’t get drunk, but he can DD for us. You down?”

Darcy grins. “Hell yes I am.”

In the end, Darcy is sad to say goodbye to the Avengers when the week is over.

She had enjoyed passing the time with Steve and Sam, reminiscing on the New Mexico desert with
Barton, and sampling Bruce’s teas. She drove down to Connecticut for a day to have dinner with Kara and Dan and had even gone shopping with Pepper (who Darcy is in love with, even if she kept trying to steer the girl away from greens and khakis).

(Darcy is fashionable. In an absent minded, Tomb-Raider kind of way.)

She had even worked in time to pop down to the Metropolitan Museum, peeking into the Viking Art exhibits and storage rooms to glance at the art styles. Asgardian influences in the works, but nothing that seemed to be directly from Asgard.

Tony is attentive but busy, helping Steve and Thor to narrow down Hydra bases in the mad search for Loki’s special staff or something.

When she returns to Edinburgh (once again on the Stark Jet, which she’s worried has ruined her for all other kinds of air travel) the work truly begins.

~~~*~~~

The dig lasts three months.

Three months of Darcy and eighteen other people living with minimal electricity, two hand held showers, and very little connection to the outside world. The island itself it beautiful, Foula is the most remote inhabited island of the Shetland islands, with a whopping population of thirty-three people.

(It almost makes sense that an ancient Asgardian treasure map would lead to what feels like the edge of the world.)

The addition of eighteen archaeologists and their things is a big deal to the locals, who are warm and polite once they realize Darcy and her crew are only here temporarily.

There’s no pub or shop on the island, only a decrepit old post office, but one family opens the doors to their cottage and invites the entire team and island to bring whiskey and beer for a party.

(Darcy ends up knocking back shots with the son of the old Laird, whose family owns the entire island, and then relaxes with a beer in hand as one of the shepherds of the island explains how to properly shear wool. It's awesome.)

They set up the site on the highest point of the island. The sight is beautiful—cliffs over deep blue waters, storming and crashing against the stone—but the gale winds are hard to get used to, blowing equipment and (on bad days) team members around.

But the findings are fantastic. They trace the road up to the highest point of the island—the Sneug, it’s named—and are happy to discover the lower layers riddled with Asgardian artifacts, metals and weapons and armor not of this world.

(Darcy risks a static-filled call to Jane, who connects her to Thor, who tells her that he has no knowledge of Asgardians living permanently on Earth.)

(“Such things would be before even my time, Shield Sister.”)
The strangest thing that they find, dug up by Darcy herself at the exact spot the road ends—on the high point of the island overlooking the stormy, freezing seas—is a golden bracelet.

She uses the term ‘gold’ loosely, as it is definitely an Asgardian brand of precious metal but studded with (interestingly enough) Midgardian jewels of amethyst, emerald, and one huge hunk of diamond.

They name it the Foula Bracelet, after the island they discovered in on.

It’s a find that should be immediately presented to a museum, or donated to a Royal family or something, but all Darcy cares about is keeping it safe and studying it until she can pass it off to a local museum for safekeeping.

(Darcy is a firm believer that artifacts should be housed and displayed in their countries of origin. Stealing heritage is no joke, and colonialism rears its ugly head much more than one thinks even in modern times.)

(Sadly, there is no museum or building with enough security on Foula to display the bracelet after testing, although Greg from the post office offers to buy a plastic safe from the mainland dollar store. Darcy is sad to have to say no.)

After testing in their ramshackle laboratory (which reveals that the bracelet is not made of gold, but a metal currently unknown to Earth), the bracelet sent back to Edinburgh (with maximum security possible, thanks Tony) and prepped to be displayed in the National Museum of Scotland.

At the end of the third month, they pack up the supplies, leaving a little outpost and a few graduate students to keep excavating a few midden pits while watching over the site, and take their findings home. There’s another trail a few islands over. Darcy is already planning to follow it.

Home is like a warm hug. Her apartment is as she left it-- blue and lavender walls full of art prints, cozy blankets tucked over her purple couch, bedroom full of twinkle lights and kitchen clean but a bit dusty.

Until she emerges from her shower, fresh-faced and free of the permanent layer of dirt that had encrusted her skin the past three months and turns on her TV to see footage of Sokovia being replayed on CNN, over and over.

No wonder Tony had been so gung-ho about her being out of contact.

She’s late to the party, the Ultron incident had ended last week, but now the Avengers are left in the rubble, fending off world governments asking questions that cannot truly be answered. The footage is terrifying.

She’s only known about her connection to Tony for four months, but the videos of him with Sokovia on his back, trying desperately to keep the city and its civilians safe at his own risk, nearly undoes her.

She did not find her father just to lose him.

Darcy doesn’t hesitate. She pauses only to throw a few extra shirts into her duffel bag before she books her ticket (commercial, Tony doesn’t need to know she’s coming) and hails a taxi to the airport.
All the flights are overbooked. Seems like everyone, suddenly, is trying to get to New York at all costs.

Probably because when things like Sokovia happen, people feel the need to go home, to be with their families, to wonder if this could happen in the good old U S of A. Darcy’s stuck. She calls Pepper from the airport, voicemail twice before she answers the third time.

“Darcy?” Pepper’s voice is strained, thin. “Are you alright? You’re supposed to be in the Shetland Islands for another week.”

“I’m fine,” Darcy promises quickly. “I just got back from Foula, weather was good, so they let us jet out, and saw the news—”

“It’s okay,” Pepper says immediately. “Tony’s fine. It was a win, Ultron was destroyed. I promise, Darcy, you don’t need to be worried.”

“I know, I just…”

Darcy is horrified to feel her throat growing tight, tears welling up in her eyes in the middle of the chaotic airport. She’s not a crier. At least, not a person who comfortably cried in public places. “I just want to make sure. I saw him t-trying to hold up all of freaking Sokovia, and I just—I dunno Pepper, I’m freaking out—”

“Darcy, Darcy,” Pepper soothes, dropping her business woman persona and sliding into her strangely maternal side. “Tony is fine. Everyone is fine. Bruce is the only one we lost, and he’s still alive, just decided to take the Qunjet into space. We can’t track him, but Fury has an idea on how to find him. It’s all okay. Everyone is alright. The best thing you can do right now is stay in Scotland.”

Oh god. Bruce. The gentle presence in Tony’s lab, a voice of reason among the chaos.

Her words are a balm, but Darcy can’t stop her little hiccups of tears as she begs into the phone. “Pepper, did you see the footage of him? He had the whole damn city on his back, he was going to die before he let them die, we would have lost him!”

“I know,” Pepper’s voice is thick, wet. “I know, Darcy.”

They stay on the line for another few minutes, both sniffling and cursing Tony’s name, before Pepper finally promises to get Tony to call soon. “He’s out with Cap, discussing what to do next. It’s a media firestorm but we have control for now. As soon as he’s back, I’ll have him on the phone with you.”

“Thanks,” Darcy sniffs. “Thank you so much, Pepper. I love you more than him right now.”

Pepper laughs, a loud noise that betrays her ‘cool-smooth-lady’ exterior.

“Get rest, Darcy. Glad you’re out of the wilderness.”

She hangs up, leaving Darcy wrung out on an airport bench, tired enough to pay tourist fee for cab fare back to her flat.
Darcy jumps out of bed around 5:30 in the morning, awoken by the shrill ringing of her cellphone.

*Tony.*

She stumbles through the darkness, reaching for her phone, fighting tears as she remembers the footage of Tony and Steve and Nat and Barton and Bruce all ready to die…

“Darcy.” It isn’t Tony. Her heart sinks as Dr. J’s intense, strained voice fills her ears. “Darcy, you need to come to my office. Now.”

Darcy falls backwards into bed, the phone held loosely to her ear. “Dr. J, I only got back last night, I told you that I would need a few days to recover from exile—”

“Darcy,” Dr. J repeats, tone laced with urgency in a way that Darcy has never heard before. “I’m not fucking around. There’s been an incident. We need you in the labs. It has to do with your research.”

Darcy swallows. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

She shows up to Dr. J’s office in mismatched shoes, one purple sneaker and one black, under ratty tights and an oversized Iron Man t-shirt.

(A gift from Tony. She secretly loves it.)

Dr. J is seated in her armchair, back ramrod straight as she focuses intensely on her computer screens.

“Dr. J?” Darcy knocks, stepping in. “What’s wrong?”

Dr. J’s steely gaze flicks to Darcy and then to the door. “Close it.”

Darcy obeys, shutting the door and turning to her mentor.

“I…” Dr. J opens her mouth, shutting it again with a snap before gathering her thoughts. “There is no easy way to ease into this. The Foula Bracelet has been stolen from the National Museum of Scotland.”

“WHAT?”

“Shh!” Dr. J huffs. “This is not common knowledge. There are other factors at play. The authorities are not able to intervene—”

“DR. J! That’s my *life’s* work!”
“You’re being dramatic, Darcy.”

“An alien bracelet made of unnamable elements found in a layer dating to 900 BCE? That would make any archaeologist’s academic career, including mine!”

Dr. J lowers her head, pressing a hand against the bridge of her nose as if Darcy and the universe are conspiring to test her patience.

“Dr. J—”

“I know who took it.”

Darcy freezes, staring intently at her mentor. “Who?”

“I...” Dr. J stops, swallowing. “Surveillance identified one person. Luca Grigore. Romanian mobster. Black market antiquities dealer, only comes out for big deals.”

“The bracelet has a diamond the size of an egg, I would assume that’s a huge deal. How the fuck do you know him, Dr. J?”

“He shot me once, when I was twenty.” Dr. J’s words freeze Darcy, the older woman’s hazel eyes far away. “My first major dig. Teotihuacan. Stole my first find, a statuette made entirely of gold. I tracked him down, chased him and his friends across the world, stole it back, and then lost it.”

“How did you lose it?” Darcy questions, raw with the hurt of already losing her best find. “Did he follow you back to the UK?”

Dr. J laughs, a quick bitter thing with no humor. “I lost it because I was too busy fucking him in his warehouse to notice that he had taken the damn thing back.”

Darcy feels her eyes widen. “…what the fuck.”

Dr. J shrugs. “We can’t choose who we lust for. My flaw was that I was charmed by him, drawn in before I even knew his part in the story. He’s built up an empire since then, henchmen who can break into museums like Scotland’s and succeed. You can’t afford to underestimate them like I did.”

Darcy starts, confused. Is Dr. J trying to say that she should...?

“What are you implying?”

“You’re going to get it back, aren’t you?”

“What, like illegally?”

Dr. J rolls her eyes, abandoning her previous vulnerability. “No, within the legal confines of government. What do you think, Lewis? You think that the British police are going to help you track this guys down? That they care about thing they don’t understand?”

Dr. J stops, stooping to bring her face level with Darcy’s. Her eyes are clear, pools of deep brown light. “You are onto something, Darcy Lewis. Something bigger than all of us, something that could rock the foundations of our world. Are you going to let your first major find slip into the hands of the enemy?”

Her words hit home. Darcy is exhausted, emotionally wrecked by Tony and her fucked up family and the strength it took to survive three months in the wild, and it all seems black and white. Why
should she let these assholes steal her work? What she bore from the Earth with her own hands? Why should she wait for Tony, who doesn’t even care enough to call her back for a three-minute phone call?

No. This is her life. Darcy Lewis has her own path, and she is damn well going to follow it, no matter how much others try to police her.

“Where do I find them?” Darcy says finally, so pumped full of righteous anger that she pins Dr. J with her gaze. "How do we get the bracelet back?"

“First of all, I’m coming with you.” Dr. J says, lip quirking as she appraises Darcy’s nerve. “This is my fight as much as it is yours. I should have done away with these conmen when I was your age. Calling themselves the fucking ‘Black Snakes’. Worst name ever. What is this, a comic book?” She gives a feral grin, showing off canines. "Second, we get it back with our strengths. Feminine wiles and firepower."

“Agreed,” Darcy says. “But where do we go, Dr. J? Where are the Black Snakes?”

“They have a base of operations we can infiltrate. If the bracelet hasn’t been sold yet, it’s there.” The gaze in her mentor’s eyes is faraway, glinting with old emotion as she speaks.

"Bucharest."

Chapter End Notes

Foula is real!

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foula

Seriously, I had so much fun reading about the island. There are so many actual cool archaeological excavations that have happened on the island (standing stones!).

(Also... do I have any Will & Grace fans? I was dying laughing over the idea of Natasha meeting Karen.)

AGAIN, the history of Asgard and stuff Darcy is discovering is all of my own imagination. But I have a plan and that plan involves a lot of badassary.

Also... who is in Bucharest? ;)


Abraham's Daughter Raised Her Voice

Chapter Summary

We get some major Indiana Jones vibes in this, so get excited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All in all, Darcy is aware that she’s being stupidly impulsive.

But, in her own defense, she has never been good at sitting on the sidelines. The idea of someone else rushing in to rescue her artifact? Eh. The idea that nobody at all is going to give a shit that an elite team of Romanian smugglers has stolen her groundbreaking discovery from under her nose? Not. Cool.

They don’t have the luxury of time. Darcy’s only chance at securing future digs on the trade routes is hidden somewhere in Bucharest, a warehouse, from what Dr. J can glean from encrypted files.

Yup. Darcy is really starting to wonder if her mentor was a super spy before her archaeology days.

She mentions this to the woman, who is bent over a computer with a frown line between her brows.

“Not a secret agent, no.” She flashes a toothy grin. “I was just like you, actually. Loved the field with my whole heart and had a knack for getting into bad trouble. Makes you learn fast and pick up strange skills, huh?”

It’s true. The six months she spent hopping between Africa and the Middle East, the kidnapping and her escape, the training sessions with Natasha and the three months of backbreaking work in Foula… it has changed Darcy. Not for the worst. She’s strengthened under pressure, lean muscle and work-hardened hands as evidence of her battles.

(She still totally has tummy rolls though. Darcy calls bullshit on anyone who thinks that you can have an hourglass figure and no extra bits of fat and skin. It’s NATURAL, assholes!)

It has prepared her. She can do this. She can get the ancient alien bracelet back. It was her find, her research, and now it’s all pointless without that bracelet to prove that these routes will yield results.

“You are both absolutely insane,” Dr. Mark finally says, leaning back in his chair tiredly to glare at Darcy and Dr. J. They had included him in their plans, trusting that he could advise them on how best to infiltrate an artifact cartel. “I cannot even find the words to warn you away from this—“

“Oh, stuff it.” Dr. J rolls her eyes, propping an elbow up on his desk. “This cushy mentoring job has spoiled you, Joseph, spending more time cleaning your glasses and breathing in the nice conditioned air than out in the field with the dirt and danger.”

“Eleanor, you’re being completely—”

“I seem to remember you, in your more handsome days, bursting into a Ukrainian safe house of angry Communists just to demand your papers back—”
“Look,” Darcy interrupts, waving her arms around in an attempt to draw back their attention. “I totally ship you guys and love the banter, but there are bigger things to talk about. Namely, stealing back my artifact.”

“Ship?” Dr. Mark questions, wiping his classes on his blazer. “Are you alluding to the boat burial excavation Eleanor and I worked on in the eighties?”

“Don’t ask.” Dr. J grumbles. “She’s using millenial jargon.” The older woman inclines her head to Darcy, pointing her out to Dr. Mark, silver hair spilling down her back and tanned skin golden even in the fluorescents. “This research is utterly game-changing. Lewis could be the youngest archaeologist to make such a fantastic breakthrough, she could change the field, Joseph! Are we supposed to just sit by and let her work disappear into the dark trades?”

“I’m not saying that. I just—are we sure that the authorities won’t help?” Dr. Mark asks hopefully, scrubbing a hand across his grey beard. “You’ve spoken with museum security and the police?”

“There’s apparently nothing they can do,” Darcy sighs, remembering the six hours she spent early this morning talking to nearly every police official in Edinburgh, each giving her the same answer. “They have confirmation that the artifact is probably already over the border. Now that it’s an international incident, I must go through different channels, which will take an approximate month for the paperwork alone.”

“Which is a month too long,” Dr. J says, gaze hooded. “I can guarantee that it will be sold with no hope of tracking within forty-eight hours. It’s a missing persons case, hope declines with every minute that passes.”

Darcy nods, her heart sinking. She knows just as well as Dr. J the dangers of losing something to the black market, watching priceless cultural treasures disappear into the private collections of rich barons and oligarchs. No time to waste.

Her fingers fly across her laptop, pulling up flights and selecting the quickest flight from the list and booking two tickets.

“We’re on the next flight.” Flashing a distracted look at Dr. J, who nods. “Two hours from now, with a five and half hour flight, means we can be on the ground on Bucharest by six this evening, our time, which is… eight in Romania.”

“Good.” Dr. J stands up fluidly, crossing to Dr. Mark’s bookshelves to select a handful of books on Eastern Europe. “Darkness will be good. There’s no chance of calling in your familial connections?”

Darcy snorts, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone. “What, Tony Stark? I can’t even get him to call me back. And if he knew that we were planning on going to Romania, I would be moments away from being forcibly flown over the Atlantic and locked in his tower. Like Rapunzel, but with worse hair.”

“That’s a violation of human rights,” Dr. J mutters darkly. “The other Avengers?”

“Captain America would be disapproving, so no.” Darcy ticks the list off her fingers. “Natasha and Barton might want to help, but last I heard she was dealing with the Sokovia fallout personally. I mean, I think they all are, so…”

“Just you and I then.”
Darcy grins in confirmation, feeling something like excitement curling in the pit of her stomach. Maybe she really is an adrenaline junkie.

Dr. Mark stands suddenly, jaw set. “I can’t let you do this.”

But Dr. J only raises a single brow in his direction, radiating ‘stop-me-and-die’ energy in a way that makes Darcy insanely jealous.

(Between Dr. J and Natasha, Darcy just wants them to rub their femme fatale cooties on her and pass on their terrifying hot woman vibes.)

“And just how do you think you could stop me, Joseph?”

“At least,” Dr. Mark continues, ignoring Dr. J’s jibe. “Not alone. Perhaps you’re right, Eleanor, I should jump back into the thick of things.”

Holy shit. Both of Darcy’s mentors are going to travel to Romania with her to kick ass.

Dr. J looks delighted, clapping her hands with a loud snort. "Oh, this will be just like the old days-

“What exactly are we going to do?” Darcy interrupts. “Rush in, guns blazing, and demand that the very experienced group of criminals return the priceless jewelry?”

“No.” Dr. J stands, pulling herself up to her full height, regal and imposing and totally making Darcy wish she was tall enough to do that. “We use the next two hours to pull every bit of information on the Black Snakes in existence, and then we use the plane ride to research.” Dr. J states, pinning her gaze on Dr. Mark before smiling at Darcy. “We do this like archaeologists, we dig.”

Darcy calls Jane on the way to the airport.

“Darcy?” Jane’s voice is hurried, but she is obviously concerned. “Are you alright? We talked yesterday, I'm so happy you're back from Foula but I can't do drinks, you know that I'm at a convention right now—”

“I’m fine!” Darcy confirms, accepting a mint from Dr. Mark as Dr. J stuffs another set of books in her backpack. The taxi driver had been very kind in taking ‘the pretty young lassie and her grannie and grandad to the airport for a local fee’. Darcy thought that Dr. J was going to put her boot through his face. “Not calling for drinks. Just need a favor. A huge favor, actually.”

Jane hesitates. “I’m at a convention, I can’t really…”

“No, you don’t have to do anything! I mean, you might, but it’s little. Just some words. All I’m asking is that, if Tony or Pepper or anyone in spandex calls you, you tell them that I’m in Bath with you. At the convention. Supporting you or enjoying the spas or something. If they ask to talk to me, tell them I'm in an all day mud bath to soak away the stress of watching my bio-dad almost die on TV.”

“But… you aren’t here.” Jane finally catches on with a gasp. “You want me to lie! Why? What the
hell are you doing? Where are you?”

Darcy sighs, trying to figure out just how much to tell her best friend. “I’m on my way to the airport. A really important dig just came up in Romania, and I need to go, but Tony’s probably going to stop me because of what happened in Sokovia. He hasn’t returned my calls, so it’s not like I have a way to tell him anyways.”

There’s mutter on the line, someone trying to pull Jane’s attention. “One sec, I’m on the phone.” Her voice gets closer. “Will it be safe, Darcy? I think it’s insane that Tony keeps trying to say where you can and can’t go, but Romania is close to where everything happened.”

“I’m going to be fine,” Darcy promises, trying her best not to think about the fact that she and her two kooky mentors have no real plan. “I won’t even be gone two days. In and out. Besides, you owe me, Janie. Tony wouldn’t be so bent on boxing me in if you hadn’t given the laundry list of my worst and most entertaining moments.”

“Fine,” Jane relents. “But you can officially not use that against me again. My debt is paid.”

“Paid in full. Thanks babe! Love you!”

Darcy hangs up before Jane can demand that she call and check in every two minutes.

~~~*~~~

They spend the first two hours of the plane ride arguing.

Darcy is stuck in the middle seat between Dr. Mark and Dr. J, trying her very best to not tear her hair out. Dr. Mark wants to gather evidence and intel for at least a day before making a move. Dr. J wants to swing in and use the element of surprise to shoot every mobster involved in the heist in the knee.

Darcy just wants to get the bracelet back, stay alive, and punch maybe one person in the face to express her anger and displeasure.

But nobody is asking her.

So she decides to say it anyways.

“Look,” Darcy nearly screams, banging a fist on her tray table for good measure (the flight attendant glares). “For two of the most brilliant minds in Scotland and people who brag often about their exploits, you guys are really not helping right now.”

Dr. J raises a silver brow. “Idea, Lewis? This is your show, after all.”

Darcy knows the look on Dr. J’s face. It’s her ‘take-the-reins-and-impress-me’ look. Darcy usually only saw it in her days of supervised digs, when Dr. J would watch her from across the site, silently demanding the student to prove her skillset.

Darcy has done some dumb things to impress her mentor, but this does take the cake.

(Which is saying something, because once Darcy had pulled a Bella Swan and cliff dived off a very high precipice in the Pacific Northwest after Dr. J had remarked that the indigenous locals
would often do it to prove worthiness, and who are we to deal with their history and culture if we
don’t pay respect to their traditions?)

(Darcy had screamed the whole way down. The water was icy, and no hot werewolf boy came to
drag her out, she had to pathetically doggy paddle to shore on her own.)

Dr. Mark looks baffled when Darcy rips the blueprints from his hands (she doesn’t want to know
how Dr. J got all this information, she had only cryptically admitted that she ‘called in some
favors’) and spreads it across her own tray table.

The mobsters have set up in an abandoned building deep in the heart of downtown Bucharest.
Three story building with fire escapes on the East and West sides, two doors in and out, and a room
that Dr. J identified as the main office in which the bracelet would probably be kept.

“That’s the room that Luca and I—"

Dr. Mark raises a hand, looking green. “Going to stop you there, Eleanor. Didn’t want to hear
about it forty years ago, don’t want to hear it now.”

“Joseph, sex is natural. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a good—”

“Eleanor! Darcy is present!”

Darcy shoots them both a look of pure annoyance. “First off, I’m twenty-five. I’ve had sex.” Not in
a while, though. “Second, can we focus? I have an idea.”

Darcy takes advantage of the rare shocked silence to detail the half-formed thoughts in her head,
pointing to the entrance points on the map and highlighting the stairwells.

“…so, Dr. Mark drives the getaway car, Dr. J, you’ll be the outside distraction, and I’ll break in.
We can grab supplies on the way into the city.”

There’s a long pause in which Dr. Mark gapes and Dr. J beams.

“The risk…” Dr. Mark begins, worry clouding his dark eyes. “

Will only be to me.” Darcy interjects. “Worst comes to worst, I’ll use the feminine wiles to distract
the boys and make my escape.”

“I doubt it will be that easy,” Dr. Mark mutters, before spearing Darcy with an expression that
takes no prisoners. “We will not be leaving you, Darcy. Should the worst happen, I will be on the
phone with every authority and Avenger I can reach.”

Darcy swallows, exchanging a knowing glance with Dr. J as she imagines how Tony and Steve
would react to this clusterfuck of a situation.

“It won’t come to that.” Darcy promises.

~~~*~~~

Bucharest is beautiful.
Tall, slanted buildings of smooth stone reach into the sky, blotting out the sunset. Darcy had read about Bucharest before and is delighted to push her face up against the taxi window, marveling at the patchwork styles of architecture littered throughout the city sectors. Most buildings seem to lean into Art Nouveau—gothic windows with swirling designs of stained glass, black wrought iron accents of balconies and street lamps—while other buildings lean more towards their Ottoman history, with Byzantine designs of gold and bright colors (mostly churches) depicting saints and angels wreathed in halos.

It’s one of the most interesting cities Darcy has ever seen, an eclectic mix of colors and stone that displays its history through beautiful works of art and domed buildings as much as the graffiti and Communist era grey complexes.

For a moment, Darcy wishes that she and her mentors were here for a museum opening or even a dig, something that would allow her the freedom and time to sample the city.

But then she remembers the bracelet. She remembers what she stands to lose.

~~~*~~~

They rent a van, pile in their stuff, go over the newly-improved plan a few more times, and then begin the stakeout.

Luca Grigore’s building is in a bad part of town, full of abandoned buildings that had once been bursting industrial centers. The closest populated center is a nearby market, about half a mile away. This works well for their plan.

Dr. Mark and Dr. J spread out the supplies in the back. Three laptops are up and running, displaying PDF versions of the building blueprints and all the information Dr. J had been able to pull up on Luca Grigore—police records, a few bank statements, and testimonials from a trial against him in the eighties.

(The charges? Murder and theft. Makes Darcy realize that this evening might be just as dangerous as her kidnapping.)

(Shes stops herself from yelling “YOLO!” as they park in a nearby lot.)

As Dr. J and Dr. Mark identify safe stations in the city in the case of fleeing, Darcy takes the chance at privacy to get herself ready. She changes in the back, trading her comfy pajama plane clothes for an outfit like what she wears in the field, one that she can move in.

The exterior of the building is all faded stone, bleached tan in the darkness. This is a small blessing, Darcy realizes, as she shrugs into her tight khakis (she really loves the jegging feel, okay?) and buckles a thin, weathered leather work belt at her hips. The air outside is warm enough that she realizes a jacket really isn’t needed (and it would honestly be in her way more than it would help) so Darcy leaves her tight black shirt alone and tucked into her khakis. Usually, Darcy would be glad to hide behind baggy layers (having huge boobs means avoiding tight clothing, unless you want to be pouring drinks over men’s heads all night) but she knows that the amount of movement and stealth that will be demanded of her requires figure-hugging materials.

She stuffs her socked feet into her favorite boots—deep chestnut and broken in perfectly. No baggy ends to trip over or catch on anything, no loose layers than can be grabbed, just streamlined
She gathers her hair in a pony tail, cursing at the broken ends. Even with the damage (from sunlight and not washing and long months in the field… and the fact that she hasn’t been bothered enough to cut it since before Egypt and Greece and the kidnapping) it reaches the small of her back, deep chestnut in the cabin lights.

Dr. J snorts when Darcy hops out of the back, handgun and taser tucked carefully into her belt. Dr. Mark chokes on his vitamin water.

“Well,” Dr. J drawls. “Using your feminine wiles shouldn’t be an issue. Haven’t seen breasts like that since the Laura Croft video game came out.”

Dr. Mark’s face is horrified. “Eleanor!”

But Darcy just grins. “You actually played that?”

“Of course I played it.” Dr. J gives a cheeky grin, before the serious light returns to her eyes. “Do you have your weapons? Taser, gun, recharges?”

Darcy pats her belt—the same she hangs her trowel and tools off in the field—displaying the shiny metal of her luger on one hip and her black taser on the other.

“Upgraded from my last taser,” Darcy doesn’t need to say after the kidnapping, Dr. J knows what it means when fear drives you to be better prepared. “This one can discharge three times before I need to change the cartridge.” She reaches down, patting a bulge in her khaki pocket. “If I need it, I have another pack of three stuns.”

“Not going to rely on the pistol?” Dr. J questions.

Darcy shakes her head. “Not if I can help it. I don’t want to hurt anyone unless I absolutely have to.”

Dr. Mark barks a laugh. “And stunning them with 2,000 bolts isn’t hurting them?”

“It isn’t killing or maiming,” Darcy answers, thinking of the man she tricked and left to bleed to death in that cell. “They’ll go down, but it won’t wreck their lives.”

“These men aren’t going to have the same courtesy to you,” Dr. J warns. “I fucked their leader and escaped with a shot to the shoulder. This time, they’ll shoot to kill.”

Darcy swallows her fear, forcing up a trademark Stark cocksure grin. “Then I’ll just have to make sure they don’t see me.”

This is a fucking awful idea.

The thought finally crosses Darcy’s mind as she dangles, three stories in the air, on a rickety fire escape. The ground is far below, peeking up from the gaps of the thin grate she crouches on, dizzying her senses. She realizes now, too late, how much she hates heights.
On the plus side, she has a great view through this thinly-glassed window of the seven men inside the warehouse, all crowded around one thing.

The bracelet.

Even from a distance, she knows the exact specifications of the pieces. Beaten Asgardian gold, half an inch thick and three inches wide, almost more of a wrist brace than a bracelet. The edges are lined with amethyst, with seven chunks of emerald forming a circle around a hunk of diamond.

Priceless, in monetary value as well as knowledge.

From her perch, she can make out the details. Six of the men are dressed in faded black fatigues, dark jeans over boots and tight black t-shirts showing off biceps that could rival Barton’s. One man in particular stands aside, dressed in black but standing ahead of the others, power written in the slanted leaning of his stance. The leader of the henchmen, then. Luca Grigore?

She won’t know for sure until she sees his face.

The seventh man stands apart in nearly every way. He’s dressed nicely, a grey suit obviously tailored to his exact measurements, with blonde hair combed back and tucked behind his ears. A fancy watch glints on his wrist as he gestures to the men, stance laid back and relaxed, as if he is not speaking to a group of notorious mobsters.

The client, Darcy guesses. The man who wants to buy her bracelet. Which can’t be going for less than 50 million. Rich man with too much time on his hands.

A deal seems to be going down between the well-dressed asshole and Luca. They both take a seat, the five henchmen hovering around Luca’s chair protectively, on opposite sides of the table with the bracelet in the middle.

Darcy crouches, ducking her head back from the glass as she waits for the next sign.

Dr. Mark and Dr. J should be…

A deafening popping noise begins to fill her ears, the hot smell of gunpower and fire igniting in the air. Darcy grins as the men in the warehouse jump, grabbing their weapons and heading towards the front of the building, where Dr. J has fashioned a sparkler bomb out of 1000 sparklers and a roll of tape, purchased from a Romanian firework stand on the way into the city.

(Apparently this isn’t the first time Dr. J has used a makeshift bomb as a distraction. She insisted that the bomb, made of the same type of fucking sparklers Darcy used to run around with on the fourth of July, can provide a shockwave that will set car alarms off for one hundred feet.)

As promised, Darcy hears the distant echoes of car alarms. Her cue.

Ducking down, Darcy shimmies down the fire escape to a first story window, keeping her back flush against the wall as she nudges open a weak widow with her boot. It groans and pops open, leaving Darcy to marvel at the fact that Dr. J has a memory like a steel trap (the same janked window she had escaped from forty years ago, holy shit) before pressing her body through and into the building.

It’s empty. A huge warehouse of steel and concrete bare walls and shelves of covered packages (more artifacts?) and safes that break up the space. Darcy weaves through the shelves, grateful for the hours they had spent pouring over blueprints.
The space is free, deserted, but once the mob boys find the remnants of the sparkler bomb and realize the distraction… She has only seconds.

The table comes into view, steel-plated and bolted to the floor, with her life’s work sitting pretty on the surface. Darcy sprints to it, not even pausing to consider how stupid it is of them to leave a priceless piece of jewelry alone and untended.

She skids on her heels across the concrete floor, reaching forward and scooping up the thick golden band with a sigh of relief when…

The click of gun being cocked.

Fuck.

“Little girl, what are you doing?”

Darcy turns slowly, the bracelet grasped tightly in her left hand, leaving her right free to reach for her taser. She’s greeted with the sight of a gun in her face, held by a very handsome man with tanned skin and grey hair, staring solemnly at her like he doesn’t actually want to shoot.

“Put the bracelet down.”

Darcy jerks, keeping the bracelet firmly in her hands before giving in to her mouthy-in-the-face-of-death tendencies.

“You’re Luca,” Darcy states, proud that there is no trembling in her voice. “You had sex with my mentor. And then shot her. Not exactly a good bedside manner, buddy.”

Luca twitches an eyebrow, keep his gun steady at her face. “Eleanor Juniper is your mentor? I can see the resemblance. She was very… beguiling. Bewitching. I should not have let her leave alive.”

He raises his gun higher, aiming for the space between her eyes. “I won’t make the same mistake again.”

Darcy is saved from answering (or wetting her pants, more likely) by the detonation of second explosion that knocks both Luca and Darcy off their feet. She hits the ground painfully, twisting her body as to not damage the bracelet against the concrete, and hears the blessed sound of Luca’s gun skidding across the concrete.

They scramble for it at the same time. Darcy presses her knees against the ground, propelling herself forward, outstretched fingers brushing the metal just as Luca pulls himself to his feet, abandoning the gun to aim a vicious kick at Darcy’s ribs.

She screams, collapsing in on herself with the gun only a foot away. His boots must be lined with metal, because she swears she felt a rib or two give way under the blow.

“Bitch!” He snarls, reaching forward to wind a greasy hand through her hair, breaking the elastic holding her ponytail up and yanking her to her feet. The pain is shooting as hair rips from her scalp.

“You think you can come in here and play hero?” He demands, hot breath against her cheek. “You think I’ll be distracted by a bomb and a nice pair of tits?”

Darcy jerks, falling backwards as he drops her to the ground.

“I like to think my tits are a bit better than nice,” She snarks from her sprawl on the dirty floor,
fighting against the pain in her head and ribs. “Exceptional, I’ve been told. Unprecedented, even. Best rack of the 2010s, voted by local populace.”

Luca cocks his head, regarding her curiously. “You should learn when to stop talking.”

Darcy eyes the gun, only a few feet away from her prone form, a perfect median between them. Luca watches her, smiling the type of smile that Darcy knows means bad things.

“I may keep you,” He quirks his lips, showing off a dimple in his cheek that screams innocence. Too bad Darcy knows exactly how many people he has killed in his black-market antiquity runs. “So much heart. Nerve. You would look good with a collar around that pretty neck, chaining you to reality. A mascot, perhaps. Defiance incarnate brought to her knees.”

Darcy’s heart is hammering against her damaged ribs, sickened by his words. What the hell did Dr. J ever see in this guy?

“No thanks,” Darcy says as politely as she can. “Consent is important, dickwad. And I’ve never been into the whole BDSM thing anyways.”

Luca’s face twitches in confusion, obviously annoyed by a reference he cannot understand, when Darcy makes her move and uses one hand to reach for the dropped gun, the other still clinging to the bracelet and flying to the taser on her belt.

A shot fires, inches from her outstretched hand.

“You think I keep only one firearm on me at a time?” Luca has a glint in his eyes, bright, as if this whole thing is fun to him. Sure enough, he has drawn a handgun from a holster on his back. “You think that keeping that gun away from me will change your fate?”

Another shot rings out. Darcy yelps, jerking back from the hole between her outstretched legs.

“The next will be in your stomach, girl.”

Darcy stares at Luca, reading the absolute promise in his gaze. Her fingers are inches from her taser, but if she so much as twitches them—he will shoot.

“Luca,” A new voice announces, causing hope to bloom in Darcy’s heart. “You’re still into the rough stuff, I see.”

Luca turns quickly, kicking the gun out of Darcy’s reach and turning to face Dr. J.

“Eleanor.”

Dr. J smiles, teeth flashing white and dangerous in the dim, broken lighting. She stands with her feet apart, shooter stance perfect as her gun stands out in her lifted hands. “Hi, honey. Miss me?”

Luca’s expression doesn’t change. His eyes flick between Darcy and Dr. J and the door behind them.

“My men will be back in seconds,” Luca says slowly. “You cannot hope to win against another six.”

“You remember what a good shot I was,” Dr. J’s tone is husky, low. The kind of gentle talk one uses in bed, almost a lover’s croon. “I can show your men a fight they haven’t seen since the seventies. And this girl here? Trained her myself. We can decimate you.”
Darcy can hear the distant footfalls of the mobsters, rounding back into the warehouse. They only have moments, and as much as Darcy wants to believe Dr. J could kick all these asses herself, she needs to act fast.

Luca has turned his back to Darcy, focus entirely on Dr. J. He must think that she is defenseless now, with the gun under his foot and another in his hand…

… but he hadn’t seen Darcy’s belt.

Dr. J winks just as Darcy yanks out her taser, gripping it in shaking hands and aiming it at Luca’s back.

"I never got to tell you what an awful lay you were," Dr. J mocks, hazel eyes flashing. "Worst I ever had."

“You—”

He falls heavily against the concrete as the prongs connect to his lower back, crackling with more electricity than totally legal.

(Tony souped it up a bit in his lab, delighted by the idea of his little girl electrocuting horny men in the field.)

(If only he knew.)

Darcy pulls herself up to her feet, taser still held in her hands, as Dr. J rushes to her side, speaking rapidly.

“Get out as soon as you can. If you can take down two on your way out, I’ll get the other three, and then you run. Joseph is waiting with the car at the city block we chose, just at the end of the night market. I’ll meet you both at the second mark—”

“You can’t hold off three on your own!” Darcy protests. But Dr. J gives her a dry look.

“Watch me, kiddo.”

The mobsters finally round the corner, taking only a moment to glance at the two armed women and their fallen boss before raising their guns. Dr. J pushes Darcy behind a row of storage units roughly. “Aim through the shelves!”

So she does. Her pistol is still safely in her belt, untouched. She’s got two charges on her taser that she wants to use before she thinks of taking another life.

Shots fire, bursting in the echoing chambers of the building. The men are yelling in Romanian and Dr. J is yelling back, firing shots that land themselves in the thighs and shins of two men who fall, screaming, to their knees.

“Still dangerous!” Dr. J says raggedly, ducking behind the unit with Darcy to catch her breath. “Legs hurt, but they can still shoot.”

“Noted.”

A firestorm of shots ricochet off the metallic shelves that Darcy and Dr. J hide behind, thankfully missing the slots of open air. Darcy positions her taser between the packages, carefully eyeing a large man that is making a move towards their hiding spot—
The prongs fire. The bulky man goes down without a murmur, convulsing like his boss.

Thank God for Tony Stark and his crazy gift with weapons.

“Good!” Dr. J praises. “Make a run for it when you can, I’ll cover you to the door—”

Another hail of shots presses against their metallic covering.

One more charge. Darcy can get one more man down before she’s going to have to actually hurt someone.

She peeks through the opening just as Dr. J comes around the corner, aiming at a thug and taking him down with a pop to the chest. The sight of blood blooming like a rose over his heart, the disbelieving darting of his eyes between Dr. J’s gun and his own chest, almost makes Darcy puke on her own boots.

But Dr. J’s own scream stops her theatrics.

A shot takes her mentor in the shoulder, opposite from the bullet she had taken forty years ago. Dr. J sways for a moment, staying on her feet and pressing a hand to the wound before raising her gun again and firing a flurry of bullets at the man who dared to wound her.

Darcy uses the last charge of her taser on a man who comes up behind Dr. J, gun inches from her head. He falls.

There are still two men, one limping with a bullet in the shin and the other whole and furious with their gazes locked on Darcy’s mentor. Dr. J jerks in pain, her free hand pressed so tightly to her bleeding shoulder that Darcy can see the tendons under her skin.

Her mentor is not going to last against these two thugs, not while wounded and probably in the beginnings of shock…

Both men raise their guns, Dr. J standing between them and Darcy’s cover, proud as a Valkyrie and unflinching in the face of death.

Enough hiding, she decides. I don’t let other people die for me.

Die. They could die. It finally hits her. Over her artifact.

Darcy can’t let it come to that.

The taser is out of charges. Darcy pulls her pistol into her hand but realizes that the remaining mobsters are smart and have moved out of range from her tiny openings. She’s going to have to give up the cover, but a gun against two guns will just amount to…

She turns to the left and sees it. Hanging from a hook on the far wall, hidden safely by the corner of shelves, is a bullwhip. The type that someone like Luca probably used on traitors, long and curled in circles of braided dark leather.

Darcy doesn’t even take a moment to laugh at the stereotype she’s embodying before she’s on her feet, tucking the bracelet around her own wrist for safekeeping and plucking the whip off the wall, steadying her pistol in the other hand.

“Hey assholes!” Darcy steps out of the darkness, pistol trained on the man who has a gun to Dr. J’s head. “Fuck you!”
The thug on the left smiles, raising his rifle to level with Darcy once more, but Darcy relies utterly on her instincts to duck and flick her whip out towards his ankles. The thug howls in pain as her whip digs into his legs, the pant legs saving him from true sting.

Darcy tugs with her entire weight, toppling the man by tearing his legs out from under him.

Maybe Harrison Ford was onto something. She could get used to this new toy.

“Bitch!” The man snarls, clambering to his feet before raising his gun again and firing. Darcy ducks just in time to see a bullet embed itself in the wall behind her head. “Scum!”

Another shot, this time closer to her head.

“Run!” Dr. J commands, having used Darcy’s distraction to bring her own assailant down with two quick shots to the leg and shoulder. “Get to the doors! I have this one! Get to Joseph!”

Darcy hesitates, looking between Dr. J and the last henchman, locked in a stalemate with guns trained on the other. If she can just give Dr. J an edge...

She cracks the whip again, the sharp sound causing the man to jerk back. Unfortunately, Darcy is untrained at bullwhips and feels a sharp stinging pain on her own face, splitting her chin.

The whip had ricochet back onto her own face.

It really fucking hurts.

“Hah!” The man laughs, turning to her. “Stupid cunt, you think you can—”

A shot. The man gasps, gaze falling to the tiny hole in his stomach.

“Monologues are always the death of stupid men,” Dr. J says sagely. She raises a blood splattered face to Darcy. “Run, girl. I’ll tie up the survivors and call the police. Nobody will die if we can have them here soon, but we need to be gone.”

“You’ve been shot—”

“I’m fine.” Dr J raises her hand, showing Darcy the neat hole trickling red in her blouse shoulder. “It’s clean. I can run and meet you guys at the second mark just fine. Missed the bundle of nerves that would make this messier. Stitches and some whiskey and I’ll be fine.”

God. Her mentor really is a crazy woman.

“Won’t Luca give up your name?” Darcy questions, gripping the bracelet between shaking hands. “They’ll know it was us—”

“He won’t say a word. Mobsters don’t talk, not even in prison. It’s a code of honor, the spoils of us winning this war. We get out soon, we’re safe from them and the police.” Dr. J pauses, just as the sound of men comes around the corner. “Four more, and I need to track down the man who was going to make the buy. Run, Darcy! You have the cargo! I’m not going to tell you again!”

This time Darcy listens. Whip trailing behind her, bracelet on her arm, torso screaming in agony and pistol gripped tightly—Darcy runs.
She follows the trail they had agreed on, a quarter of a mile down the North side of the street, turning at a green faded factory, then continuing for half a mile until she sees the water of Morii Lake, then—

Pounding footsteps.

Darcy is almost to a populated area when she realizes that at least three men are on her tail.

Fuck.

PE had always been Darcy’s least favorite elective. Climbing robes and playing dodgeball is an utter waste of time. Running in circles on a track is the epitome of boring.

Now she’s wishing she had been more of a track star.

Thank god for the stamina that hard living has given her. All those days working in the sun, strengthening her calves and thighs by climbing uphill and downhill with heavy loads… she can run. She can keep running. Despite the burning agony of her ribs and the pain in her face, she can run.

But not forever.

Darcy sprints, legs and ribs burning and her whip trailing behind her as she pushes her body to go faster, to outrun the footsteps. She has the bracelet, Dr. Mark is waiting, Dr. J will be at the second checkpoint, all she has to do is be faster than these assholes—

Lights. The market place they had driven through earlier is still awake, even in the evening darkness there are the lights of vendors and entertainment, the smell of roasting meat and food and laughter. A perfect place to lose her stalkers.

Darcy changes direction suddenly, boots skidding across gravel as she makes a sharp turn to the market. She can see colorful tent coverings, the blurry view of people haggling for goods and sharing food with friends.

Scrambling to unbuckle the pocket of her pants, Darcy yanks out her extra charges, ejecting the old cartridge and pushing the new in as she runs. Three more shots. One for each man.

The mobsters are still on her trail, but now further back. The burst of speed and change of direction gives Darcy an edge as she sprints into a crowd of people, ducking and twisting as she tried to make herself as small as possible. The crowd hides her. Some of the locals give her curious looks, the obviously American girl pushing and running through the hordes of people, while other’s look shocked to see her bloody and bruised face. Mostly they ignore her, as if used to strange things like tourists on the run.

Darcy runs a hand over her chin, wincing as she probes the deep cup. Her own damn fault. It’s leaking blood down her neck, not clotting or stopping.

The three men aren’t hard to spot. Tall and dressed in all black, glaring at the crowds as they try to track her movements. Darcy is crouching, moving as quickly as she can without drawing attention.

The tallest thug points, finally spotting her in the crowd. He moves towards her, drawing his gun, sick smile promising that Darcy is going to feel a good amount of pain for the trouble she’s caused.
She has one last chance. Not to survive, but to limit the damage. If she runs fast enough, maybe she can clear the crowd of civilians and make sure that nobody else is caught in the crossfire before they gun her down.

Better than letting someone innocent die with her.

Drawing a deep breath in her aching lungs, Darcy sprints for open air, a nearby alley way where she can die without bringing anyone else into it—

-and bumps into the chest of the most handsome man she has ever seen.

Chapter End Notes

YOU GUYS KNOW WHO IT IT.

Also-- DARCY HAS A WHIP. I love the idea of her being aware of how stereotypical it is but still loving it. And the part when Darcy cracks the whip and hits her own face? Totally the same thing young Indiana Jones does to himself in The Last Crusade.

This work is not beta'd, just as a reminder. I fix typos as I see them!
The Dice Was Loaded From The Start

Chapter Summary

Got home from class, edited with a glass of wine, and am hoping you guys will enjoy this new point-of-view.

I have a plan. I promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Bucky Barnes meets Darcy Lewis, she’s sprinting through an outdoor market in a not-so-nice neighborhood of downtown Bucharest with a bloody face and three men hot on her heels.

The sight jars Bucky, pulling him away from his meager grocery shopping (he has enough money for meat and a bit of produce if he haggles) towards the action just as the girl in question takes a sharp turn into the market. Most civilians haven’t noticed the chase, and if they have, they’ve chalked it up to some sort of domestic dispute. Bucky can see it in their gazes: girl running away from home, from protective brothers, maybe.

But this girl has true terror on her face and a handgun strapped to her waist.

Three hulking men chasing a tiny dame? Bucky may be majorly fucked in the head at the moment, but even he knows that those odds aren’t right.

He watches for a moment, stepping behind a tent flap as he gives his trained eyes time to track the two parties. The girl is small but quick, using the cover of the crowd to duck and hide as she heads for safety. The three men, who Bucky immediately identifies as part of the Black Snake organization, a rare item and drug trafficking group that operates nearby, lose her for a moment but sense her darting through the sea of people, a golden fish in a pond of silver.

Bucky hesitates as he watches. This is exactly what he has been trying to stay away from. Mobs and assassins and cartels in the darkness, murdering and pillaging and taking what they want.

But what could they possibly want with this girl?

It’s his Brooklyn chivalry that finally convinces him to act, the mere resurfacing of those instincts to protect a dame from the world that shocks him into action. The Soldier cared nothing for protecting women, but maybe Bucky Barnes cared a lot.

He wants to be Bucky Barnes again.

The girl zigzags through the crowd, clutching her arm. It becomes clear quickly that she realizes her own chances of escape as she veers for a nearby alleyway.

It’s a punch in the gut when Bucky realizes that she’s trying to save the civilians, to bring the fight somewhere where it’s only her that will be hurt.
Just like that, his decision is made.

Bucky darts forward, intercepting the girl’s path and placing himself in the alley she’s heading for in a matter of seconds. The men chasing her are far enough away that he should have a moment to declare himself friend instead of foe.

She careens into him, so focused on the assailants behind her that she doesn’t see him.

“Fuck!” She curses, tiny hands reaching out to grasp his jacket before she falls backward. Bucky has enough sense to steady her, fingers shaking with what feels like the first voluntary touch he has given since he rescued Captain America from the water.

(Steve, something in him whispers. Steve, your best friend, the scrappy little boy you promised to look after—)

“Who the fuck are you?” The girl demands, stepping back. “Are you—”

“Here to help,” Bucky rasps, his English heavy with disuse. “You’re being followed.”

“I fucking know that, dumbass!” The girl spits, fiery gaze jumping from his face to the dead end they are standing in. “How can you even help me?”

Bucky doesn’t answer, instead he braces his metal arm in front of her face as the mobsters round the corner. The first shot glances off his metal hand, hidden by layers of glove and jacket.


Bucky doesn't smile. "Something like that."

"Still cool."

And then she explodes into action. Shots ring out, chipping at the brick behind of the alley as the men unload their guns with little precision. Part of Bucky wants to scoff at their sloppiness, the other part of him feels sick at the sound of bullets against stone.

Survive. The mantra that has run through his head returns in full force, pulsing like a heartbeat. Survive. And a new addition: get her out of this.

He disarms the closest man in three smooth moves, crushing the barrel of his rifle in his cybernetic hand and then closing his fist around the man’s throat.

“Don’t kill!” The girl commands from behind him, making a curious sharp noise with something in her hand. “Maim if you have to, but try not to kill, pretty please!”

The command shocks Bucky, shaking something deep seated inside him.

How long has it been since he has been told not to kill? Before HYDRA? Before the war, when the US government pushed a rifle in his hands? Back when he was a kid in Brooklyn who didn’t know what killing truly was, running around with a tiny blonde boy?

He drops the henchman, leaving the villain gasping and clawing at his throat in the muck of the alley. When he turns, he gets his first good look at the girl.

She isn’t a girl, Bucky realizes. She’s a woman.

Memory flashes inside his eyelids. When Bucky was seven years old, he had gotten all spiffed up
with his sisters and mother and headed down the nearest cathedral for his first communion. His mother (warm, brown haired, smile like molasses) had pressed a pendant into his hand, a treasure made of silver and passed down from his father (dead, an infection of the lungs, only memory a press of a warm hand against the crown of his head, in praise, in love).

The pendant was made to be worn around the neck on a chain, a scene depicting the Archangel Michael descending from the heavens with his sword held high, face alight with fire and righteousness, ready to strike the blow against Satan, the snake, the slithering mass of tentacles, HYDRA—

Bucky blinks.

He had loved that pendant. Worn it around his neck until the war, when he had carefully kept it in his bags during boot camp, then returned it to his rightful place around his neck and between his dog tags before the 107th had been captured. He’d lost it when Zola had started the experimentations. Someone had ripped it from his neck along with his tags, stripping his identity away bit by fucking bit—

And yet, here it is again. The scene. This girl. Her back is inches from the alleyway wall, with two men ignoring Bucky to corner her in, but there’s no fear in her face. Just rage and certainty. Bucky can read the emotion, her full lips pulled back in a snarl and eyes bright, just try and take me alive, fuckers—

Her face is bloody and bruised, a black eye already forming and thick river of blood flowing from a cut on her chin down her neck and into the neckline of her shirt. The skin of her bare shoulders and cheeks is sunburnt and wind kissed, the mark of someone often working in the elements, and Bucky can see the faint line of scars on her fingers. Brown boots hug her calves and are laced up to her knees, tan pants gripping the lines of her tights before disappears underneath a thick belt, all curves.

What’s a girl shaped like a pin-up model doing in the middle of a cartel dispute?

She’s grinning as she faces the two men, expression beautiful and terrifying, so full of defiance that Bucky wants to take a letter from her book, to take this scene into his heart—a girl against the world, a woman backed up against the wall with blood in her teeth and wild dark hair framing her face.

He finally realizes that she’s armed. She’s got a bullwhip in one hand, held aloft like a sword, a taser in the other that is crackling electricity, and a handgun holstered to her waist.

Bucky swallows.

For a scary moment, there is only one coherent thought in his mind: fuck.

She’s Michael. She’s an avenging angel, straight from his dreams. Face contorted in righteous fury as she brings down the whip, cutting a long weeping gash in the face of the man on her right.

She’s Steve, standing up against bullies in alleyways with nothing but his tiny fists and a trash can lid and his own unshakable belief.

The thug howls, clapping a hand to his scarred face, and the woman looks up, raising her taser with furious eyes to Bucky and discharging it—

“Duck!” She yells, and Bucky does, just to see the prongs bury themselves in the man behind him. Bucky had been so distracted by the sight in front of him that he had missed the mobster climbing
back up to his feet, gun raised at Bucky’s head while he was stuck in the flow of new memories.

She had saved him.

“Get your head in the game, dude!” The girl commands, smirk taking the sting from her words. She raises the whip, lashing back one of the thugs and dodging his next shot. Bucky doesn’t need to be told twice. He reaches for the one shooting at the girl, ripping his gun from his hands and bending the barrel backwards. Then reaching out to throw him—

Another electrical current. Prongs hit the man’s neck and he falls, convulsing to the stones.

God. This girl is scrappy, uncontrollable, and holding her own much better than Bucky had expected.

“Sorry!” The girl chirps. “Thought you might need help, handsome.”

“Help?” Bucky growls, something alien and familiar all at once rising in him. “You’re kidding me, sweetheart.”

“Ooo, I’m sweetheart?” She raises a dark brow at him, smirk so deep that Bucky finds himself staring at her lips. Plump. Revealing pearly teeth. “Are you flirting with me? During a brawl?”

“I might be, doll.” Bucky swings at the coming back, knocking him back. Child’s play. "Ain’t the first brawl I’ve been in. First with such a pretty partner.”

Bucky can barely tell where his words are coming from. It feels so natural, speaking to this knockout woman with lips red with blood and a smile that could burn down the world. He thinks of Brooklyn, of dates and women with thin stockings, of kisses stolen under lampposts and—

Distraction comes in the form of violence. The last man seems to be the toughest. Huge and bulky, but no match for the Soldier. He aims a swing at the girl, who ducks.

“I’m Darcy, by the way!” She says, stepping out from the henchman’s arm span. “You gonna give me your name?”

Bucky darts forward, locking his arms around the man and knocking the gun from his grasp before landing a punch to the gut. He grunts but doesn’t fall, built like a linebacker meant to take hit after hit after hit. He keeps Darcy’s command in his head. Don’t kill.

“It’s James, doll.” Bucky huffs, tossing the man’s gun aside. “You can call me James.”

Safe. James is somewhere between Bucky and the Soldier, neutral territory.

“James.” She purrs. “Anyone ever tell you that you have gorgeous eyes?”

Bucky huffs a laugh. “Anyone ever tell you that you have gorgeous everything?”

“Smooth.” Darcy winks, finally raising her taser at the man. In a last-ditch effort to bring her down, the linebacker rocks forward on his feet, wrapping one meaty hand around Darcy’s throat and squeezing, she tries to dodge and misses, gasping as his grip hits home, clawing at the hands—

Bucky barely registers that he’s moved before his hands are ripping the man away, tossing him against the wall so hard that he can hear bone crunch.

“Unnecessary,” Darcy rasps, rubbing at her red neck firing her taser one last time as the man attempts to stand. He twitches on the ground, finally going still as the electricity pushes him into
unconsciousness. “I had him under control. But thanks.”

Bucky snorts. “Yeah, sure looked under control when I saw you running for your life.”

She turns her glare to him, and for the first time, Bucky realizes how small she is. A full foot shorter than him at least, tiny and defiant and terrifying.

“What’s an American like you doing in Romania?” She questions, gaze dragging up and down his body in a way that makes him feel warm. “Research? Drugs? Vacationing?”

“None of those.” Bucky answers automatically. “Taking a break.”

“Hmm.” Darcy hums, eyes flashing. “How’d you learn to fight so well?”

“I—I’m a veteran.” Bucky fights the urge to duck his head, hide his lying mouth. “Comes with the territory.”

Darcy’s gaze softens, understanding as she draws the lines between why a veteran might need to flee the US for a break. There’s no pity, just a vulnerable sort of empathy. “Well, thanks for your help.” She says finally. “You know how to get out of here? I don’t think we left fingerprints on them, so hopefully the police will just chock this up to gang violence when they arrest these fuckers—”

“You’re going to call the police?” Bucky asks, baffled.

The girl peers at him as she bends over, popping out a blackened cartridge from her taser. Bucky tries valiantly to not let his eyes follow the lines of her curves, but that tank top doesn’t leave anything to the imagination. “Well, yeah. They need medical attention, I don’t want them to die.”

Bucky freezes, caught between the desire to laugh and the desire to shake some sense into her. Ridiculous, the Soldier thinks, to leave your enemies alive. Merciful, Bucky thinks, to not want to take a life.

Then a more pressing question comes to mind. “Doll, why were they after you?”

The girl’s hands fly protectively to her wrist, gold blinking between her spread fingers.

“They stole my research,” She says slowly, gaze fixed suddenly on the unconscious men surrounding them. “I came to get it back.”

“Must be some important research.”

“It is. My entire career.”

He takes a second to mull that over. A career on the line, what is she? Scientist? Operative?

“You’re bleeding,” Bucky says finally, not wanting to leave her in this darkness. “Deep cut. Should get it looked at.”

Darcy gives an embarrassed smile, wincing as Bucky brings his flesh hand up to probe the cut. “Gave it to myself, actually. Never used a whip before—”

A blaring honk cuts through the scene. Bucky stiffens, pushing the girl behind him as he turns from the brick walls, facing a white van that is skidding up to the alley.

“That’s my ride!” The girl brightens, smiling like she hasn’t just defeated a handful of mobsters
with nothing but a whip and taser (and former brainwashed assassin, Bucky adds scornfully).

Bucky scowls at the headlights, unsure of exactly why he is so hesitant to let this girl go. She reminds him of angels, of the Steve he had known as a kid, of the Bucky Barnes he had been before his memory turned to absolute shit.

God, he can't even meet the eyes of locals for the fear that they could be HYDRA. How is he so trusting of this little girl? So sure that she isn't a prop being used to drag him back to the murdering and chair and stripping of identity.

Small fingers tug at the collar of his jacket. Bucky blinks, looking down to find the girl—Darcy—with her hands at his neck.

His first instinct it to rip her hands away and break them, yank back the tendons and bones until they snap, too damaged to reach him, but this is overrode by the look in her grey eyes, by the memory of what Bucky Barnes did when a lady looked at him with warm, liquid eyes.

“Thanks for the help,” Darcy whispers, the air between them filling up with warmth. “Feel free to stop me, but I’m high on adrenaline from almost dying like four times and maybe a bit in shock from the gun fight and also you’re, like, the hottest guy I’ve ever met, and I probably won’t see you again, so—”

Bucky cuts her off with a cocky grin that feels wrong on his face. Not wrong, he corrects, alien. Almost forgotten. Smirking at a beautiful dame isn't something that’s happened in the past seventy years. "What are you tryin' to say, doll?"

“I’m going to pull an Indiana Jones and plant one on you,” Darcy explains seriously, eyes wide with certainty. “But with your consent, of course.”

Bucky’s brain is suddenly on fire. “I-Indiana Jones?”

*Plant one on me?*

Darcy’s pretty mouth gapes in disbelief. “You’ve never heard of Indiana Jones? How can you even call yourself American?” She lifts a thick bracelet off her arm, Bucky noticing it as the golden flashes he had seen during the fight, and waves it around in the air. “’It belongs in a museum!’”

She peers at him expectantly, batting those flashing eyes. "Nothing? Really? Not ringing any bells?"

“ Been gone a while.” Bucky manages.

“Not THAT long, surely!”

“ You wouldn’t know.”

Darcy shrugs, replacing the bracelet back on her right wrist. Bucky doesn't miss the forming bruises, telltale signs of rough handling. “Well, I’m what he was. An archaeologist. And you just saved my ass, so…”

She moves quickly, stepping up on the tips of her feet and tangling a hand in Bucky’s hair, yanking him gently down to meet her mouth.

(He could have stopped her a million ways before she even had her hands in his hair. He doesn't.)
It’s his first kiss since the forties.

She smells like cinnamon and nutmeg and sweat and smoke. Heady. Coying. Filling up his senses until he feels drunk for the first time since the war.

The first touch of her lips is soft, then suddenly deepening as he responds instinctually, tasting the metallic hint of her own blood in his mouth and the distant taste of vanilla. As his lips move against hers, his hands fall to her waist, remembering what it meant to hold a dame right, how to grip at the dip of her hips pull her into his space, not leaving an inch between them.

Her lips are gentle, taking but not demanding, as if she knows somehow that he cannot take commands anymore, that he needs to be able to choose.

She shifts, pressing against him and winding her fingers deeper into his hair, tugging, while her other hand drops the taser and tangles itself into his shirt. He groans at the contact, pulling her closer and opening his mouth, her unfolding like a flower under him—

The van honks again, insistent.

She pulls back, nipping at his mouth one last time. He tries not to chase her lips as they pull away.

“I gotta go. Time to flee the country,” She whispers, breath fanning against his face, her eyes wide and clear in the head lights. “Stay safe?”

His voice is hoarse. “I will. You, too.”

Darcy steps away, dropping his hands and reaching for her abandoned taser. Bucky tries not to flinch at the lack of her, the lack of the first warm touch he can clearly remember.

“There’s a doctor,” Bucky begins, eyes falling from her swollen lips to the bloody mess of her chin and the careful way she is holding her right side (Bucky knows broken ribs when he sees them). “He lives in Otopeni, about twenty minutes if you drive fast. Gabriel Dalca. He can fix you up and won’t ask questions.”

Darcy’s face splits into a grin. “Does he treat gunshot wounds?”

Bucky jolts, looking her up and down. “Are you—”

“Not me. My friend.”

Slowly, Bucky uncurls, releasing the tension in his shoulders. “Yeah, he does gunshot wounds. Just make sure to pay him nice.”

Darcy smiles, a slow unfurling thing that pulls her lips up like a reward. "Thanks for the tip. You're a great kisser."

Bucky doesn't have words. He can actually feel something like a blush working up in his cheeks, like a fucking schoolboy.

Darcy doesn't seem to notice. She waves her hand in a cocky salute, tossing her dark hair over a shoulder looking back at him as she crosses to the car door.

“My name’s Darcy Lewis. If you’re ever in Edinburgh or Manhattan, look me up. We can watch the Indiana Jones movies, and I'll treat you to dinner.”

And then, in a flash of long hair and tanned arms and another damned wink, she’s gone. The van
pulls away in a flash, speeding towards freedom, leaving Bucky in the dark.

_Darcy Lewis._

Her name. The feel of her in his hands, the warmth in her eyes, the blaze of fire in her face as she faced down the henchmen of Bucharest’s worst criminal with nothing but enthusiasm. A spitfire, roaring and crackling and twisting with a smile.

The gentle way she held him, as if she could sense the decades of abuse and pain thrumming through his blood.

His pendant, come to life.

Bucky holds onto her name and the memory of her face—defiant, laughing and flirting through the fight, full of light and animation, a beacon of hope-- through the shitshow his life continues to become.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this was everything you dreamed! Or at least close!

ALSO-- some of you brilliant people have noticed that a good chunk of my chapter titles are songs. Would any of you want me to post the playlist I use for this story? It’s a lot of songs that make me think of how badass Darcy is and the romance that is going to happen between Bucky & Darcy.

I wish I was blessed with art skills because I SO want to draw Darcy as Bucky sees her-- badass and beautiful with her whip and taser!
As she ducks into the van, trying her best not to run back and continue to kiss the sexy James-alley-hero-man senseless, Darcy is surprised to find Dr. J in the passenger’s seat, hand pressed to the wound in her shoulder and a bright, shit-eating grin on her face.

“Thought I would pick her up first.” Dr. Mark explains, glancing tightly at Darcy's bloody face. “I know the plan was to grab you first, but I realized that there was rarely a time in the past that Eleanor emerged from the madness unwounded. I was right that she would be the one who needed the pickup.” He pauses, shooting a worried and long-suffering look at his colleague. “She was on top of the buyer, punching him in the face despite the fact that a bullet went through her shoulder.”

“Hate private collectors,” Dr. J mutters. “He deserved a broken nose. Also,” She offers a hand to Darcy, uncurling her fingers to reveal a pin. "Ripped this from his lapel. Weird, huh?"

Darcy takes the tiny metal pin from her, peering at the design. A skull with six tentacles unfurling underneath.

Freaky.

“Well, good thinking grabbing her first,” Darcy hops into the back, lips burning and tucking the scary pin into her bag. They can inspect it again later, although it's probably just a memento of the buyer's strange tastes. “I got the name of a doctor nearby, I’ll google his clinic--”

“Who’s the stud?” Dr. J interrupts, peering through the windshield to the dark alley. James still stands where she left him, shaggy dark hair framing his face under his cap and those blue eyes (glacial, the first thing Darcy had noticed about him, other than his huge shoulders) reflecting in the headlights as he glowers.

Fuck. Sexy glowering is Darcy’s kryptonite.

“Drive!” Darcy demands, trying desperately to fight the urge to pull James into the van and take him home with her. “Dr. J got shot. Less chatting and more driving to this nice doctor I just found out about. Gabriel Dalca.”

Dr. Mark obeys, skidding the van tires as he pulls out from the alley and follows the directions Darcy pulls up on the laptop map.

(Thank GOD for portable WiFi hotspots, that’s all she can say.)

James disappears in the rearview. Darcy tries her best not to look back.

“How the hell did you manage to have time for kissing in the middle of a fight?” Dr. Mark
demands, looking for all purposes like he is finally done with Darcy and Dr. J’s shit. “I pick up Eleanor, who tells me that three of Luca’s men were running after you and that we needed to get to you as soon as possible so you weren’t murdered, only to find you surrounded by bodies and kissing a local?”

“He’s American!” Darcy defends. Her brain is spinning, the pain of her injuries returning in full force as the shock finally wears off. Her cheeks are prickling from rubbing it against James’ scruff, and her chin aches even more from the kissing (TOTALLY WORTH IT, WOULD DO AGAIN). “He saw me running and stopped to help, I guess.”

“Certainly a looker,” Dr. J sighs. “To be young and impulsive.”

“You’re still horrifically impulsive, Eleanor.”

“Shut it, Joseph.” Dr. J turns in her seat gingerly, grinning at Darcy over the headrest like she’s not nursing a gunshot wound. “Did you get his name? An ass like that should not be left in Bucharest, it should be brought home.”

“Eleanor!” Dr. Mark sputters. “You can’t say that—”

“Let her answer the question!”

“James. I don’t know his last name,” Darcy answers automatically, bracing herself in the back as they take wild turn. “I told him my name, but there wasn’t really time to invite him back for a fucking nightcap. I did tell him to look me up if he ever finds himself in Edinburgh, although the odds of that ever happening are slim to none.” Darcy rubs at her sore eye, trying not to groan at the pain and the searing memory of how good his hands had felt at her hips. “God, I feel drunk. I don’t know what came over me, I don’t even know who he is! Just showed up, deflecting bullets and saving my ass, and flirting—oh my god, so much flirting. He did this sexy thing where he would punch one of the guys and then smirk at me...”

“Is that why we got the entire view of your tongue down his throat?”

“Please, Dr. J.” Darcy rolls her eyes. “As if you wouldn’t have done the same thing.”

“I would have gotten more action than that. Did you even get to grab his ass?”

“Dr. J!”

Her mentor only shrugs, turning ahead as they finally reach Otopeni. “He looked like he would have enjoyed it.”

~~~*~~~

James had been right.

Gabriel Dalca opens the door of his clinic, despite the semi-late hour, and takes only a moment to survey the bleeding, rag-tag group before ushering them inside.

The clinic is sparse but clean, a couch and a few chairs and a singular examination table. It smells like antiseptic, and Darcy spots a door at the back that seems to lead to his living quarters.
Gabriel Dalca himself is a kind-looking man. Short and thin, a shock of grey hair that is carefully combed behind his ears, and a face full of smile lines. He zeroes in on Dr. J first, sharp eyes catching the scarlet mess of her shoulder and immediately pushing her onto the bench, gesturing for her to move aside her blouse and probing the small hole.

“Clean,” Dr. J murmurs, the only indication of her pain being the strain of her voice. “Went all the way through. Didn’t hit anything important, I can still move everything. Just fuckin’ hurts.”

“She may be underplaying it,” Dr. Mark offers, eyes hooded and tight as he takes in Dr. J. “She has a history of hiding wounds. Took an arrow to the knee back in ’78 and didn’t say a word for the whole day, pulled it out herself. Insane.”

Dr. Dalca nods, continuing to inspect and not seeming to find the story odd. James must be right, the doc must see enough weird shit to be unfazed. “You need blood and fluids. Very lucky you have not lost more. I will stitch it up.”

Dr. J nods, leaning back against the reclining seat. “I’m A positive.”

Darcy isn’t sure if it’s the adrenaline fading or the fact that she’s just exhausted from the day, but everything seems to happen quickly. Dr. Dalca treats Dr. J’s wound, hooks her up to an IV, and pulls a handful of red baggies from his fridge. Within moments, Dr. J is dozing in her chair while being pumped full of new blood.

Weird.

When Dr. Dalca seems satisfied with his first patient’s condition, he turns to Darcy. His fingers are gentle as he turns her head, tutting his tongue as he touches her bruised eye and uses a clean cloth to wipe away the blood on her chin. He thankfully does not comment on the beard-burn on her cheeks.

“It was a whip,” Darcy offers. She left the offending weapon in the van, thankfully. “Hit myself. Never used one before.”

Dr. Dalca shakes his head, surely thinking something along the lines of kids these days.

“You need stitches. More will make sure there is less of a scar. Bruised eye will heal on it’s own.”

Darcy waves his words away. “Just do what you have to do, I’m not worried about scarring. Kinda badass, right?”

Dr. J barks a laugh from her chair. Dr. Mark drops his head in his hands.

“She’s you,” Dr. Mark mutters between his fingers, turning accusingly to Dr. J. “You’ve turned Darcy into a mini version of yourself.”

This just makes Dr. J cackle more, so much so that she shakes her IV and fancy blood bags. Dr. Dalca steadies them with a sharp look.

He stitches up Darcy’s chin (she nearly shed a tear when he put a numbing needle in her fucking face, and then ten freaking stitches, while Dr. Mark made a comment about her being able to face down cartel lords but not tiny needles), and then seems to notice that Darcy is having difficulty breathing deeply.

“Got kicked in the ribs,” She explains, untucking her shirt. “Probably just bruising, but you can look.”
Darcy raises her shirt and is surprised to find the left side of her torso a mess of red skin, tender to the touch. The beginning of what looks to be some pretty intense bruising.

Dr. Dalca runs his hands over her skin, noticing the yelp that Darcy can’t contain when he presses gently.

“Broken,” He confirms. “I need to listen to your lungs.”

A few minutes later, he has declared that most likely no splinters have punctured her lungs. Darcy hadn’t been worried, she wouldn’t have been able to run so much if that had been the case.

“I do not have an x-ray machine,” He says sadly. “But I am certain at least two are broken. I can give you painkillers and wrap them. Will heal on own within six weeks if you are careful.”

“Sweet,” Darcy tries to muster a smile, accepting the nice little pills the doc offers. “Thanks a ton.”

“Two more hours for her blood transfusion,” Dr. Dalca explains. He gestures to a sofa in the corner, next to Dr. J’s recliner. “Sleep if you like. I have blankets. Pay later.”

Which is exactly what happens. Dr. J dozes in the reclining lab chair, Darcy sprawls carefully on the felt couch, and Dr. Mark keeps vigil in a fold out chair between the two of them.

Dr. Mark is also the one who, three hours later after Dr. J is unhooked from the machines, pays Dr. Dalca a thousand bucks in cash.

(“I withdrew funds before we left Scotland,” Dr. Mark says proudly. “I knew that there were at least five possible endings to tonight that involved bribing someone to keep quiet or stitch us back up.”)

Dr. Dalca tries to deny the money, muttering about it being too much for stitches and a transfusion (it totally isn’t, this would cost an arm and a leg in the US) but Dr. Mark stands firm.

“We would have had to go to an ER,” He insists, pushing the wad of cash into the doctor’s hands. “And you’ve given us medicine for the trip home. Thank you.”

Dr. Dalca finally accepts, offering advice to make up for the larger fee.

“The airport is close,” He says as they file out the door, Darcy limping and Dr. J leaning into Dr. Mark. “Your injuries should not prevent you from flying. But no drinking, painkillers will react badly with alcohol.”

“Damn,” Dr. J mutters.

With a final soft smile, Dr. Dalca shuts his clinic door with a wave.

“Well,” Darcy says, watching the sun begin to crest over the Bucharest skyline. She wonders, briefly, where James is right now. “Time to head back to reality.”

~~~*~~~

They make it back to Edinburgh, utterly exhausted.
It's a relief to pile into a taxi, although both Dr. Mark and Dr. J get off at Dr. J’s very classy
townhouse. Dr. Mark says something about making sure that Dr. J doesn’t do anything stupid
while recovering from a gunshot wound (sure, Darcy thinks, sure), leaving Darcy alone for the ten
minutes it takes to get to her flat.

She’s bone-tired and sore, face aching and ribs feeling like a someone hit them with a
sledgehammer (or an iron lined boot).

While Dr. J’s wound was well hidden under a cardigan they bought at the Bucharest airport,
Darcy’s black eye was beginning to show through her hastily applied concealer and there was no
hope of covering her weeping stitches. The cabbie keeps looking at her in the rear-view, obviously
concerned about the beat up girl in his backseat.

But Darcy can't muster the energy to care. The entire past twenty four hours feels like an insane
dream—the guns, the mobsters, the fight, the hot man in an alley that swooped in like a ninja and
saved her life and also was a fucking fantastic kisser. It’s a testament to Darcy’s oddness that her
brain lingers more on James, the dark haired and smoldering hero, than the fact that she’s almost
died another four times in one day. What a kiss.

They finally arrive to her building, the cabbie offering to help carry her stuff up, but Darcy declines
and shoulders her duffel bag. The Foula bracelet is wrapped up in deep layers of clothing within her
bag, and she’s not about to let it leave her sight again.

(Darcy realizes that she's going to have to come up with a story on how the bracelet is suddenly
back in her care, but that can be done later. Right now, all she wants is her bed.)

She’s halfway up the winding staircase (not for the first time, Darcy laments living on the seventh
floor in a building with no elevator) when her phone rings.

PEPPER POTTS.

Darcy breathes a sigh of relief that Pepper is calling now and not hours earlier when Darcy had
been in another warehouse fighting for her life. At least now she can muster up an energetic voice
and pretend everything is A-OKAY.

“Pepper!” Darcy greets, huffing as she crests the fourth floor of stairs. “What’s up? Is Tony okay?
He never called me, but—”

“Darcy.”

Oh fuck. Speak of the devil.

“Heeeeeeey, Tony…”

Her bio-dad’s voice is smooth, not giving any indication of anything being wrong. Maybe he really
is just finally calling to check in.

“What are you up to, kid?”

“Oh, you know,” Darcy presses her free hand against her wrapped ribs, trying her damnedest to
keep her voice light and not short of breath. “Just climbing the stairs to my place. Went to see Jane
in Bath for the weekend.”

“Oh, really?” Tony’s voice doesn’t change, still moderate. “That's funny, because I got a
notification earlier that says you discharged your taser in Bucharest, Romania.”
Darcy's heart is hammering against her ribs. “Y-You! You put a fucking tracker in my taser?!?”

“Yes,” Tony says, as if this a normal thing for people to do. “It’s a safety feature. I wanted to be aware of where you are when you have to use it.”

Darcy jerks to a stop before the door to her floor, spitting angrily. “That’s- That's a fucking breach of privacy!”

“Eh, debatable. Stark technology, Stark rules.”

“God, well see if I ever let you touch my stuff again! Asshole move, Tony!”

Tony hums, his steady tone really starting to freak Darcy out. She expects him to scream back or argue or accuse her of something, but he’s just… speaking.

“Wanna tell me what you were doing in Romania and why you made Foster lie for you?”

Darcy bites back a groan. “So you did call Jane.”

“I did. Well, Pepper did, at my behest. Then I realized your taser was saying differently.”

Darcy sighs, already forming a story in her head. “Look, there was a dig I was invited to peek in on, just for the weekend. Since you haven’t called me back since I got back from Foula and was forced to be surprised by footage of you almost dying—thanks for that, by the way— I figured I didn’t have to tell you my arrangements. Jane was just a contingency plan to keep you from turning into an over-protective monster.”

“Over-protective monster,” Tony repeats dryly. “Alright, I’ll buy it. Why the hell did you fire your taser, then?”

“I was showing it off to some undergrad students,” Darcy lies easily. She relaxes, feeling like she might get away with this, and finally gets to the door of her flat. “They loved it, by the way, you should really market it as a cool self-defense weapon—”

“You demonstrated it six times?”

Darcy scans her face in her fancy security panel, trying to smother her annoyance at Stark technology. “We did target practice. Made me look very cool. Which is also why I am glad you didn’t impulsively come flying in your suit to Romania or something, because that would have been very awkward—”

She pushes open the door to her apartment and chokes off her words.

Tony Stark is sitting at her tiny dinner table, cradling a cup of coffee (in her favorite mug, the fucker!) with his Iron Man suit assembled behind him and sleek phone tucked to his ear.

“Yeah,” He says darkly, snapping his phone shut. “Would have been awkward, huh?”
Darcy's in for it.
Poor girl just wants to sleep.

**PLAYLIST (so far, will be updated)**
1. Abraham's Daughter - Arcade Fire
2. Rhiannon - Fleetwood Mac
3. Romeo and Juliet - Dire Straits (or The Killers, great cover)
4. Bees - The Ballroom Thieves
5. Shame - Ciaran Lavery
7. We Don't Eat - James Vincent McMorrow
8. Come Away to the Water - Maroon 5
9. Please Don't Tell Her - Jason Mraz
10. Lament of Eustace Scrubb - The Oh Hellos
11. Blood - City and Color
12. Shine - Anna Nalick
13. East - Sleeping at Last
14. Work Song - Hozier
15. Sing Me To Sleep - The Smiths
16. Indiana Jones Theme Song ;)
17. Wicked Game - cover by James Vincent McMorrow
18. Thunder - Imagine Dragons
19. Song for Zula - Phosphorescent
20. If We Were Vampires - Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit
21. It Will Come Back - Hozier
22. Cathedrals - Jump Little Children
23. O Children - Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
24. From Eden - Hozier
25. Gun Song - The Lumineers
26. One More Cup of Coffee - cover by Grouplove
27. Broken Horse - Freelance Whales
For a good thirty seconds, Darcy wonders if her almost forty-eight hours of no sleep and the drugs Dr. Dalca had given her are combining and causing her to hallucinate.

Because there is no way that Tony Stark is that good at the ‘disappointed-dad’ face.

“I…” Darcy trails off, trying her damnedest not to favor her left side and give away the whole broken ribs thing. “This is all explainable. And I will explain.” Tony says nothing, just stares, so Darcy continues. “See, it could have happened to anybody, I tripped—while I was showing off the taser—while I was showing off the taser—and—”

While Darcy is stuttering and attempting to come up with a coherent story not involving Romanian mobsters and her own questionable decisions, Tony is utterly still. His eyes are wide, tracking her black, swollen eye and then down to the neat row of ten stitches holding the angry line down her chin together, then scanning over her ripped tank top and filthy khaki pants, and finally to the careful way Darcy can’t help but hold her side.

Yeah. She’s fucked.

Tony’s face doesn’t change. Still expressionless. But Darcy can totally see this weird burning anger thing going on in his eyes.


“I told you,” Darcy can’t keep the quaver from her words, exhausted from the lack of sleep and stress of the day and the fact that the last time she saw Tony he was trying to hold up a small city. “I tripped—”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not, well—OK—I’m only sort of lying.”

Another long pause. Darcy sags a bit against her entryway wall, trying not to squirm under the infamous Stark gaze. It's a little harder to lie when the recipient of said lies is staring her down, mercilessly.

“Alright, here’s what’s going to happen.” Tony’s voice is tight, he stands stiffly, yanking out his cellphone to type in some sort of command. “The jet will be here in twenty minutes. You and I are going to go to the airport and fly back to Manhattan, during the flight time you’re going to tell me the truth and nothing but the truth about whatever the hell happened in Romania, once we land you’re going to get checked out by the Avengers medical team. And then we are going to have another long talk about body guards and checking in, since you have already broken the previous compromise.”

“Tony—”

“No, no ‘Tony’ing me. This is not a suggestion game. Get packed.”

His words hit Darcy in a tender place. Darcy has never been good about reacting maturely when
people give her commands. “No!” She jerks back, waving a finger in his face. “You do not get to just come in here and order me around! I’ve already seen a doctor—”

“What, in Romania?” Tony demands, gaze flinty. “Some crackpot shaman gave you stitches in the back of a truck?”

“That is rude!”

“It’s true though, isn’t it?” Tony crosses her tiny living room, cradling his left wrist. He takes her silence as an answer. “Goddammit, Darcy! Do you have any sense? Any modicum of oh hey, maybe I should not run off around the world, come back bleeding and injured, and give everyone who cares about me a heart attack?”

His words hurt. Darcy scrambles for a moment, finally hooking onto the truth. “I wasn’t trying to—look, my artifact was stolen. I had to get it back.”

“What?” Tony blinks. “Stolen by who?”

“Uh… black market traders? They called themselves something really dumb, Black Snakes, or something.” She pauses for dramatic effect. “But I handled it.”

Darcy’s deflection fails. Tony’s face goes dangerously still, causing Darcy to scramble for an explanation to diffuse this whole conversation.

“Black Snakes.” He says flatly. “The infamous Romanian smuggling mob. Headed by Luca Grigore, who has murdered and maimed his way through Eastern Europe many, many times.”

“…I did not expect you to know the name, honestly.”

“Of course I know the name. Black Snakes. Ten Rings. AIM.” Tony ticks them off his fingers, jaw working angrily. “All groups that would love to target Stark Industries and, by extension if this was common knowledge, you.”

Darcy snorts. “Believe it or not, this wasn’t about YOU, Tony. They stole something from me and I retrieved it. The word STARK never even came up.”

“And how long do you think it will be that way?” Tony questions harshly. “Pepper and I are both aware that it’s only a matter of time before you’re pictured going in and out of Avenger’s Tower, or before someone reveals that they saved the PDF of your files—which link you to ME as family, I’ll remind you—and sells it to the media. How are we supposed to trust you to keep yourself safe when you run and get involved with mobsters as soon as I turn my back?”

“I was safe!” She protests. “My mentors came to Romania with me. Dr. J had dealt with the group a decade or two back, so we had all the information we needed before—”

“Darcy.” Tony’s tone is clipped, dangerous. “I better not be hearing what I think I am hearing. Because what I think I am hearing is that you, along with your kooky New-Age mentor, traveled to Romania and faced off with a gang of Romanian crooks?”

“…I plead the fifth.”

“Not allowed. Did you or did you not go to Romania to fight gangsters over a hunk of pottery.”
Darcy bristles. “It wasn’t a hunk of pottery, Tony, it is quite possibly my life’s work, not that you care.” She hisses. “And does it even matter? I’m back now. I’m safe. I got the artifact back and turned some bad antiquities dealers over to the Romanian police, okay? Luca Grigore is being incarcerated with taser marks on his back at this very moment somewhere in Bucharest. Shouldn’t you be proud of my daring and nerve?”

“No!” Tony finally erupts, his dangerous calm giving way to emotion. “You’ve been lying through your teeth and then revealing your stupid, impulsive actions all while looking like you’ve gone a round with the Hulk! Why would I be proud of this?”

“That is overstating things a bit,” Darcy objects, rubbing at her eye. It feels hot and tight, beginning to swell again. “OK, I whipped myself in the face. My fault. I deserve the stitches, sure, and ribs aren’t even a bad thing to break, I did a lot of WebMD reading on the plane and I am assured a fast recovery—”

“Ribs? You have broken ribs?” Tony demands. “God—Do, do you even hear yourself right now? This is insane. An ‘adult’ of your age should not be so reckless with her life, so disrespectful to the people that care about you—”

The anger seems to hit Darcy all at once. Tony’s words are targeting her soft spots. And the fact that he has busted into her apartment and is now demanding actions from her, making assumptions, is what finally pushes her over the edge. She’s done.

The dam of emotion breaks, and everything—her fear for her own life, for Dr. J’s, the bits of her that knows Tony is right, her pain and exhaustion and fear that she’s doing everything wrong—flows out.

And it isn’t pretty.

(Darcy knows and actively fights her own capacity for cruelty. The Stark snark and intelligence that she has inherited—it is in her to know where best to hit and how hard, the cheap shots that can break someone apart.)

(Tony isn’t pulling any punches. Why should she?)

“You’re one to talk.” Darcy says softly, voice straining with repressed anger. “When’s the last time I saw you, huh, dad? Oh, on the news. Holding up a fucking country. Literally about to die.”

Tony flinches at her word choice and falls silent, the rage slowly draining from his face, replaced with something like shame. “Kid…”

“I called Pepper six times!” Darcy detonates, her words coming faster and sharper, distantly acknowledging that her face is suddenly wet. “I waited hours at the airport, hoping a flight would open up so I could see you! And you couldn’t even find the time to call me back!”

Tony collapses back in her dining chair, scrubbing a tired hand across his face. “There… there were loose ends to tie up. I had to deal with it all first. Darcy, Ultron was on me.”

“How the hell was Ultron on you? I heard on the news it was created from Loki’s alien staff.”

“It was,” Tony admits. “But I was the one who was experimenting with it. Tried to power up JARVIS with the stone. Hence the shitstorm that created Ultron.”
Darcy quirks her head, pondering. “Still not your fault. How were you supposed to know that it would make a weird, sentient internet robot thing?”

“That’s not all.” Tony’s words come heavily, yanking something warped from him. “By extension, because I was responsible for Ultron, Sokovia and every civilian who died on it is because of me.”

The statement hangs in the air, clouding the space between them.

“That’s not true.” Darcy doesn’t have to fake her own certainty. “This is literally a guessing game. I mean, I’m sure Bruce was helping you in the labs. His fault too, then? And if we look at the big picture— isn’t it really Loki’s fault for leaving his alien death stick at the hands of those science Nazis? Tentacles or whatever?”

Tony raises a brow. “HYDRA?”

“Yeah, them. It’s their fault, hundred percent.”

“I appreciate you trying to absolve me, kid, but it’s too late for that.” Tony sighs, drawing Darcy’s attention to the haggard lines of his face. Dude looks like he hasn’t gotten a good night of sleep in a while.

That makes two of them.

“Secretary Ross has announced that the Avengers can no longer be allowed to act privately. We now have to sign the Sokovia Accords, which deems that our actions will be controlled by an international panel.” Tony takes a heavy breath, eyes faraway. “Cap is saying he won’t sign. Trouble’s on the horizon.”

Darcy struggles to understand the implications of his words. The Avengers had previously operated under SHIELD, but now that SHIELD has fallen…

“I don’t really blame him,” Darcy reasons. “Government agencies are prone to corruption, SHIELD’s demise proved that. I doubt that a panel of countries will be different, and it would probably take ages for them to agree on anything, rendering the Avenger’s team useless without the ability to take fast action.”

“God, kid,” Tony groans suddenly. “You sound just like Cap. It’s making me sick.”

“What?” Darcy raises her brows, spearing Tony with a bewildered look. “You don’t agree with me? Are you actually going to sign?”

Tony shifts. “I did sign.” He admits. ”If the government wants to take the reins on the whole constantly-saving-the-world thing, I’ll let them. My focus can be on keeping the people I love safe. You, Pepper, the team.”

Part of Darcy is screaming at the fact that Tony just admitted he loves her, which is huge, considering they’ve only really had a handful of awkward hugs that left them both uncomfortable and he still seems unsure how to speak to her sometimes.

He loves her. He cares about her.

Darcy barely registers how much she needed to know that.

(It’s been in the back of her mind, the idea that she is a burden— a surprise child, only earning Tony’s attention because he has a hero-complex and feels indebted because of Obadiah’s planning.)
But another part of Darcy is realizing that this isn’t Tony Stark. Not the Tony Stark she knows, who regularly flips off government officials and once hijacked a congressional committee meeting just to tell Senator Stern to fuck himself.

He wouldn’t sign this. Not unless he was out of his mind.

“But you’re still going to be a superhero?” Darcy asks finally, angling. “You’re still going to risk your life on a semi-regular basis?”

“Only when asked.” Tony snarks. “Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing, drawing the heat away from the fact that we still need to have a very long conversation about getting you a bodyguard and a better tracker, since you have proved that your word is moot.”

But Darcy just shakes her head in disgust, slipping back into her vexation like a worn glove. There is no Kara here to mediate between them, nothing to dilute the Stark fighting style of mudslinging and cheap shots.

“No, Tony.” She’s revolted by this change of topic, her anger resurfacing. “You have no right to come into my home and be upset with me for being in danger, not when you’ve been doing the exact same thing. I was impulsive and defended something I care about. So did you, literally last week.”

“Darcy, not sure if you missed this, but I am Iron Man. I have a responsibility to the world. I’m trying to separate myself, but this comes with the territory—”

“—and I am an archaeologist! I have a responsibility to my work—to my colleagues and all the undergraduates and grad students I bring on these digs to protect our results!” The words pour out of Darcy, tinged with hurt and desperation. “I would never ask you to stop being Iron Man. I realize that it is a part of you. How can you ask me to stop being who I am?”

“Darcy, I’m not—”

“But you are!” She interrupts, blazing. Her words are knives, and it’s all she can do to keep throwing them, to keep up the momentum. “You want to change me, to make me less like you! Well, sorry, too fucking late!”

To Tony’s credit, the flinch is less noticeable this time. “You know that Kara would feel the same way. That if you came waltzing into her house, looking like this, she wouldn’t be having the exact same conversation.”

“First of all, mom respects the lines. She has always given me the space to live and be who I am. I choose not to tell her certain things right away, because what’s the point? I’m not going to change, Tony.”

“That’s—that’s not fair.” He says finally. The fight seems to leak out of him, falling forward to cradle his head in his hands. “I can’t let you keep doing this. I can’t keep hearing that you’ve been putting yourself in dangerous situations and not do something to protect you or shake sense into you.”

“You aren’t getting it, Tony.” Darcy sighs, pulling out the chair next to him and gingerly lowering herself into it. Damn ribs. Her stiff movements do not go unnoticed by Tony. “You can’t stop being Iron Man even though it would make everyone who loves you breathe easier. You ask Pepper and Rhodey and Happy to watch you run into danger because it is who you are, and it’s for something you believe in. Can’t you see that it’s the same for me?”
“I save the world, kid.” Tony shakes his head, stubbornly pushing away her logic. “If I didn’t do this, nobody would. Ultron would have won. Obadiah would be overseeing SI. You would be a puppet.”

Darcy recoils, not able to keep the hurt from flashing across her face.

“And my work isn’t worthy of the same respect?” She asks desperately, beseeching him not to say what she thinks he will. “I know I’m not saving the world or negotiating accords, but what I do is important. You said that yourself at my graduation.”

There’s a beat between them. Darcy is suddenly aware that Tony’s answer could change everything between them, could decimate this fragile relationship they’ve built.

“Your work isn’t worth your safety,” Tony finally says. “I am not saying it isn’t important. I mean, look, I donated a cool ten million to your program. I want to support you—but not at the risk of your life. It is not important enough to die for.”

Darcy’s heart sinks. Her chest starts to ache as she pauses, closing her eyes and slowly replaying his words.

*It is not important enough to die for.*

He has no idea how much those words have wrecked her.

Because she would. God, Darcy would die for her work, no regrets.

“I disagree,” Darcy says, slowly and softly. She feels lightheaded, exhausted and diminished and heartbroken, part of her screaming that this must be a dream. “If it wasn’t, I wouldn’t be risking my life for it. But it is.”

She can’t hold the next words in. She knows, deep down, that they are driven by exhaustion and anger and fear and her own shame at the truth of his argument and the hurt she is holding in her heart that he keeps trying to call all the shots in their relationship, that he belittles her passions—

-but she cannot hold it in.

“You can have your opinions about my life, Tony. But it doesn’t change anything.” She throws up her hands, voice cracking with emotion. “I haven’t even known you for six months, I’m not about to drop my passions and my career and what I believe in just because some man marches in and decides to play father-figure when it suits him.”

Tony jerks back, wincing and searching her face with wide eyes. “Darcy—”

“I think you should leave.” She says, staring at the chipped wood of her kitchen table. This is going too far, too fucking far, but she’s powerless to stop it. The shame and anger is twisting in her gut, making her want to run far and fast. “I’m twenty-five years old. You cannot legally make me do anything. Please leave my apartment and keep your opinions about my work to yourself.”

God. Tony’s face shatters, contorting into an expression so full of self-loathing and sadness that Darcy immediately wants to take it all back, to tell him that of course she wants a relationship, that she desperately wants him to be proud of her and her work, more than anything, and that watching him almost die on TV hurt her so much worse than she had thought it would, shook something deep inside her—

“I see.” Tony says, adopting a carefully distant mask. “I don’t think we have anything more to say
to each other.”

With a last measured look and the soft click of her front door, Tony is gone.

Chapter End Notes

...please don't kill me.

Tony and Darcy are both coming off AWFUL weeks and are emotional people. There was no good way for this conversation to happen. Usually, Darcy would be a bit more together/empathetic (like how well she took the news that Tony was her dad), but after everything in Romania and Tony's misunderstanding of what archaeology means to her... yeah, not a good combo.
All Of My Dreams They Fall and Form a Bridge

Chapter Summary

ALSO, remember that this is an AU! I am trying to tie in a lot of canon stuff, but I am totally twisting a good amount of it to fit the story I want to tell. I have pushed together Age of Ultron and Civil War because it made sense for Darcy & Tony's headspaces, and I'll be continuing to change things as I see fit.

ALSO IDK WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN IN INFINITY WAR so from here on out, it will be my creative way of fixing the shitstorm that was Civil War (loved the movie tho)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy lets herself cry for an hour after Tony leaves, pathetic body-wracking sobs at her dining room table that made her wish that she had a pet to cuddle for comfort. Or some tequila.

Then she mechanically takes a shower (replaying the conversation, again and again, I don’t think we have anything more to say to each other), wraps herself up in a giant VISIT ATHENS t-shirt, and sleeps for fourteen hours.

She doesn’t dream.

(A small mercy.)

When she finally does awake, it’s to bright light shining into her bedroom windows (rare for Edinburgh) and burning pain in her torso.

Oh. Right. Broken ribs.

She shuffles into her tiny bathroom, bracing herself to inspect the damage. A quick lift of her shirt shows that her torso color is beginning to deepen into deep purples and blue, which is expected according to WebMD.

Her face is another story.

Her left eye looks awful. The swelling is at its peak, nearly keeping her eyelids stuck together and making it hard for Darcy to even see from that side, and the bruising has turned a deep, unattractive purple. At least the line of her stitches is neat, but still gruesome looking. The whip lash left a deeper gouge than Darcy had expected—about two inches long, beginning a little underneath the right side of her mouth and trailing down to her jaw.

Definitely going to leave a scar.

A badass scar. A badass scar that will be super fun to brag about to all the starry eyed undergraduates.

All in all, Darcy thinks, not too shabby.
She moves slowly into her kitchen, trying not to look at the chair Tony had been sitting in which is still ajar, and brews a pot of coffee. As the water begins to drip through the grounds and into the pot, Darcy finally lets the events of the last night filter back into her mind.

*It is not important enough to risk your life for.*

*I am Iron Man, I have a responsibility—*

“I have a responsibility too, asshole.” Darcy mutters, yanking her second favorite mug (one that says: “ARCHAEOLOGIST: because badass isn’t an official job title”) and slugging it full of the good stuff. “A responsibility to kick you in the teeth.”

(She has already tossed the mug Tony used in the sink. It has a similar slogan, proudly sporting “Archaeology is like sex… when it’s good, it’s really good, when it’s bad, it’s still pretty good”.)

(Jeff sends her these mugs at least once a year for Christmas. She loves them.)

Despite her bravado, the guilt starts trickling in before she even has her cereal and milk out. Yes, she’s still furious that Tony would disrespect her work like that, that he would belittle the sacrifices she is willing to make for the things she cares about. But she also recognizes that the fight was born of exhaustion and their combined emotional incompetence.

Tony had looked so tired and worn. Darcy can see more clearly, now that he’s gone, the state he had been in. Bruised and battered and drained. A man standing against the world.

Yet why is he bowing now? Darcy isn’t going to pretend to understand what Secretary Ross is trying to get the Avengers to do—she can debate for days about the intricacies of Athenian democracy and Egyptian god-rule, but she’s always had very little patience or interest in modern politics. But if this is big enough to pull Tony into the government’s side and push Steve out into dissent…

God. This stuff is not her speed and not her problem. Tony’s made it very clear that ordinary civilians such as her have no place anywhere in the middle of the fun stuff.

~~~*~~~

Darcy tries to show up at the university, ready to channel her frustration into work and figure out the bracelet.

But Dr. Mark physically locks her out.

“You need rest!” He yells through the plexiglass doors, the frosted golden words of EDINBURGH ARCHAELOGY DEPARTMENT pressing against his forehead. “I am not allowing you or Dr. J into the labs for at least five days, I do not care what threats you throw at me, you both are injured and require time to recover!”

“I can recover while I test things,” Darcy whines, trying not to bang her fist against Dr. Mark’s shadow. “Please, let me in. This is all I haaaaaave.”

“No,” Dr. Mark frowns, although the force of his disapproving face is lessened by the imprint of his nose against the glass. “Stop being dramatic. Go home. Watch ridiculous American television.
Do some planning if you have to, but for God’s sake rest.”

Dr. Mark peels his face from the glass, ignoring Darcy’s pleading look. “You and Eleanor will be the death of me, I swear. An early grave is destined for the men who try to keep you from trouble.”

She walks away, huffing and resisting the urge to shock his polite UK demeanor by flipping him the bird.

“And don’t forget to take your antibiotics!” He calls after her. “You don’t want the stitches to get infected!”

~~~*~~~

Darcy really tries to relax.

But Tony’s face keeps popping up in her mind, twisting her gut with the memory of his broken expression. Yes, he said some things that hurt her… but should she have hit him so hard back? Should she apologize? Or at least, call Pepper and make sure he got back to Manhattan safe?

No. Darcy shakes the thought from her head. No, she’s not going to immediately call back and fall into Tony’s orbit again. He hurt her. She hurt him. Everybody lost and it’s going to stay that way until they both have time to untangle their views. She’s still emotionally exhausted. She needs time to digest and form a plan that goes beyond apologizing and hoping he still cares.

From three months on Foula to watching Ultron coverage to immediately dealing with the bracelet and leaving for Romania… Dr. Mark is right. she needs a break. She needs to think before she rushes into action, for once.

She puts the self care routine from her undergrad days to use — Chinese food, wine, and season four of Jersey Shore, all indulged in while clothed in her comfiest sweatpants and a nest of blankets.

(Darcy has a strange soft spot for Snooki and Vinny. Jersey Shore is the reigning queen of trash TV and Darcy is not ashamed of her love for it. Also, season four is the best because it includes Snooki asking if a random church in Florence is the Vatican. This ignorance of culture is hilarious to Darcy and cracks her up every time.)

(It gives her brain a break. Also, these Jersey girls are intense and Darcy secretly wants to be them.)

The third episode is playing and Darcy is digging her way through some lo mein when Jane calls, utterly hysterical.

“Can I come to Edinburgh?” She asks through her sobs. “Thor left to go hunt down Infinity Stones, and I have no idea how long he’ll be gone, but I’m exhausted and sick of my labs and I miss him already, and I just want to curl up—”

“Yes,” Darcy says immediately, scrambling to look up the train timetables. “Come now. I have wine, Chinese food, and warm arms.”
Jane arrives four and a half hours later, red-eyed and wrung out.

Darcy meets her at the station, waving gleefully over the crowds of people before running to meet her friend.

“Darcy!” Jane grabs her by the shoulders, horrified stare zeroing in on her injuries. “What happened to your face?”

“Oh this?” Darcy shrugs, swallowing a grin. “Just the trials of the field, Boss Lady. Archaeology is hands on work. Sometimes face on.”

“You—” Jane sputters, gaze still stuck on her black eye and swollen chin. “Do you not noticed how much you’re being stared at? You look like you’ve been abused.”

Darcy had noticed. Lots of people on the way to the station and inside it have caught sight of her face and paused, giving her wide eyed looks and concerned glances. One bro-man had even offered to beat up whoever had done it to her. He had looked wary and left her alone after she told him that it was the work of a group of Romanian drug-lords.

It was funny. Darcy did not feel bad for laughing like a crazy person as he made his excuses and scrambled away.

“I realize, Janie.” Darcy says simply, reaching forward to relieve her friend of her heavy bags. “I just don’t care. I think I look both rugged and adventurous.”

Jane mutters something under her breath that sounds suspiciously like you look like a basketcase. Darcy grins and lets it slide.

They wind up curled up on Darcy’s velvet couch, another round of Chinese food ordered (Jane loves her mooshoo pork) and three bottles of red wine snagged from a nearby convenience store. Jane is convinced that Snooki is meant to be with Jionni, Darcy disagrees. Loudly. Many times.

“How long has it been since we’ve done this?” Jane asks, stealing a forkful of Darcy’s noodles. “Feels like ages.”

“Since before I found out Tony Stark was my father,” Darcy nods, speaking around her mouthful and reaching for her wine. “Which is a bit fucked, honestly. Sorry about that. Kinda ran into the field and away from the drama.”

“I expected it. How has that been?” Jane turns, giving Darcy her full ‘worried-about-you’ expression. “I’ve been going on and on about missing Thor and his jetting off into space—”

“—hey,” Darcy interjects, waving her fork like a spear. “That’s valid. Your boyfriend slash love-of-life keeps running off to space and not telling you when he’ll be home. That shit isn’t cool. You know I love Thor, but he needs to learn to stay.”

“He’s an alien Prince,” Jane says miserably. “I can’t ask him to stop defending the universe, you know? I can’t ask him to stop being who he is.”

Jane’s words hit Darcy in a soft spot. A mirror of what she had tried to explain to Tony the night before.
“No,” She says softly. Darcy lets her head fall back against the couch, bracing herself against another rush of emotional wreckage. “That’s exactly it, we can’t ask the people we love to change themselves.”

Jane raises a brow, using that genius intellect to zero in on the matter in seconds. “You and Tony finally had a chat, didn’t you. I knew Pepper didn't believe the Bath excuse.”

Darcy sighs. “Yeah, they didn't buy it. He put a tracker in my taser, so when I shot it off in Romania…”

“He knew.” Jane’s elfin face has a strange mix of fury and understanding. “I get why he worries. I worry about you when you run off. But a tracker is a bit... much.”

"It is!” Darcy agrees with fervor. “But that wasn’t even the meat of the whole thing. I get home from Romania and he’s sitting in my apartment. Waiting. All fatherly and shit.”

“Yikes.”

“And then proceeds to demand I come back to Manhattan with him, to have a talk about my lifestyle and my immaturity and the assignment of body guards.”

Jane’s brows go even higher. “Yikes.”

“God, and you know the worst part?” Darcy sinks deeper into the couch, clinging to her fuzzy purple pillow for comfort. “I could have forgiven all of that. I get it. Over-protective new father, I came in looking pretty beat up, he reacted. That’s fine. It was when he talked about my career and my work as if it is some out-of-control hobby, like I’m a little kid and he’s finally going to pull me out of swimteam or something.”

“He threatened to make you stop your work?” True fury begins to bleed into Jane’s voice, a thundercloud that rivals Thor. “That’s wrong. Not that he could do it.”

“I know, he has no leverage over me other than the fact that we both want to get along and have a relationship.” Darcy sucks in another deep breath. “And I know he couldn’t stop me. It’s the fact that now I know that he thinks my work isn’t important. I’m just a kid with a shovel to him.”

“Darcy…”

“It’s true! You and Selvig and Kara know that what I do is important. Even Thor respects it! And even if you guys don’t always understand, you still respect that it is to me what studying the stars is to you. A gate to something bigger.” Darcy presses her face into the pillow, muffling her own words. “I love Tony. More than I thought I would in six months. But how can he be in my life if he only wants to control it?”

Jane shifts closer, gently disentangling Darcy from the pillow. “Sounds like he’s trying to make up for a lot of missed fathering.”

“Still makes him an ass.”

“Well, yeah.” Jane fights a sneaky smile, turning up the corners of her mouth. “He’s Tony Stark, of course he’s an ass. Surprised I didn’t see the familial resemblance sooner.”

Darcy chucks a second nearby throw pillow at Jane, who shrieks and topples off the couch. They laugh so hard that, for a few minutes, Darcy feels light again.
“You’re going to have to talk to him,” Jane says breathlessly, lifting herself back onto the couch after the laughter fades. “You both seem so alike. He might be depending on you to say something first.”

Darcy swallows. “I know.”

Jane jerks up, looking surprised. “That easy? I don’t have to convince you to take the healthy, adult road?”

“I’ll take it eventually,” Darcy admits. “Just not yet. I need some time to think, Janie. My life keeps getting turned upside down, and if I talk to him now then it will just turn into a hurricane of feels again.”

“What are you going to do until then?”

Jane already knows the answer to this question, it’s only a matter of location.

“Well, last I checked,” Darcy gives a coy grin. “Greenland is gorgeous this time of year.”

~~~*~~~

The dig is planned in record time.

Mostly because Darcy does it all herself. She only needs a small team, specialized and comprised of people she trusts and knows will give it their all. Dr. Mark protests her leaving, once again citing her injuries and need for rest. Darcy waves it off, promising to take it easy on her ribs and stay out of trouble.

“No gun fights,” Darcy promises, laying the thick files containing her research and plans for the next trade route. “Just me, my team, and the dirt. Solemn oath.”

Her mentor sighs heavily, gently removing his glasses to rub tiredly at his eyes. “I respect your promise, but I am beginning to worry that I cannot keep the trouble from you.”

“Joseph,” Dr. J appears in the doorway, long white hair brushing her waist and clad in the usual gripping cargo pants and grey blouse, looking not like a woman who had been shot a week earlier. “She needs to be allowed to continue with her research.”

“I am not contesting that,” Dr. Mark defends. “The Foula bracelet is game-changing in its own right, the successful excavation of a second Asgardian trade route would be more than enough for Darcy to finish her PhD. I am simply worried about sending her out alone.”

“Not alone!” Darcy protests. “Jeff is coming again to act as my geologist and site supervisor. I’ve got a handful of masters students that I trust and adore, and if Dr. J wasn’t recovering from a gunshot wound I would totally be begging her to come.”

Dr. J adopts an offended expression, sniffing the air disdainfully. “As if a gun shot wound would stop me from coming! I am fully recovered.”

Darcy grins. “Wanna come?”

“No!” Dr. Mark stands, abandoning his never-ending battle to rub his glasses clean to glare at them
both. “Eleanor, you are not recovered. You were shot. Do I need to remind you what the doctor said? No heavy lifting for six weeks, no stress on your shoulder for another month to avoid nerve damage…”

Dr. J turns her enraged gaze to her colleague. “If I wanted a man to boss me around, I would have gotten married!”

“Eleanor—”

“Joseph—”

“You’re being dramatic, I am only looking out for you—”

“Look out for this, you cow-humping, twat-licking ridiculous sack of shit—”

Darcy intercepts Dr. J just as she reaches for the fancy geode paperweight (with her bad shoulder, no less) and begins to wind up, ready to launch it at Dr. Mark’s head.

God. And everyone seems to think Darcy is the strange one.

“Stop,” She commands, yanking the fancy geode from Dr. J’s hands and stepping between her mentors. “Can we focus again? Mentors advising their PhD candidate on her latest dig?”

Said mentors continue to glare at each other (but Dr. Mark’s deep brown eyes are tinged with relief that the paperweight is now in Darcy’s hands, who will only throw it at him if he denies her research proposal) until Dr. J, surprisingly, breaks the silence.

“I may fly to meet you on the island,” She says, gaze still cold where it rests on Dr. Mark. “How long are you planning to be gone?”

“Four months this time.” Darcy answers. “We start next week, finish in mid November. From what I have seen, Narsarsuaq is a pretty popular tourist destination so WiFi and calls should work, but chunks of the excavation sites will lead out of range for a few weeks at a time.”

Dr. Mark takes the stalemate time to shuffle through her files, eyes lighting up as he scans the hypothesis Darcy has made on what this route could lead to.

“This research is impeccable,” He compliments. “If you could find something like the Foula bracelet, we would have something to compare it with. Two finds make a line, a trend.”

“Exactly!” Darcy beams. “This could prove that Asgardians had influences all over, that my work is essentially a treasure map!”

“Where is the Foula bracelet?” Dr. J asks, eyes narrowing.

Darcy pats her bag, slung carefully and closely to her torso. “Took your advice. I carry it everywhere. I can take it to Greenland, but soon we need to figure out how to safely keep it out of mobster hands.”

“Good, I don’t trust the Museum. The whole thing reeked of an inside job.”

“What are you saying, Eleanor?” Dr. Mark perks up, horrified. “You think someone in the museum allowed those criminals to take the bracelet?”

“Of course I do.” She says sharply. “I’m surprised you don’t. The work that Lewis is doing will gain attention sooner or later. It is time that we close the ranks, make sure that only people she
trusts are working on the digs.” She turns back to Darcy. “What did you call it, a treasure map?”

Darcy nods, beginning to connect her argument.

“The problem with treasure maps,” Dr. J’s voice turns low, a warning. “Is that there are always others who will follow them.”

~~~*~~~

Narsarsuaq feels like a different world.

Darcy and her team touch down in Greenland on a mild day, dressed in light jackets and long layers against the fifty degree median temperature. The settlement itself is tiny, a collection of houses and municipal buildings nestled in the Tunulliarvik Fjord, stone and green hills rearing up on either side and a tangled harbor of icy blue. Snow dots the tops of the nearby hills and mountains, contrasting against the deep grey skies.

And there are actual icebergs floating in the sky blue water, steaming and popping in the waves.

(Jeff swears that he can see narwhals in the water, but Darcy is eighty percent certain he's full of shit.)

While the population of the settlement is only comprised of one hundred and sixty permanent residents, the locals are very used to tourists and glad to have new faces around town—especially when they realize that Darcy and her team are here to investigate the famous Brattahlid (Erik the Red’s ancient settlement) and establish new connections to possible sites. The people of Narsarsuaq are proud protectors of the Norse ruins nearby, and are estatic to hear that Darcy thinks there could be more.

They make good on their promises to help out Darcy and her team. After dropping their stuff off at a local hotel (Darcy transfers the Foula bracelet from the hidden clasp in the bottom of her backpack to her own wrist—she can’t explain why, but she feels much more relaxed to have it near and not in the hands of any more mobsters), a group of locals invites them to a nearby pub for dinner and drinks.

(Darcy eats her weight in slow-cooked salmon and whiskey, but Jeff eats an actual reindeer steak and loves it. Darcy feels a little bit traumatized when he announces that ‘Rudolf was great!’)

The locals are fantastic. They hook Darcy and Jeff up with a few other researchers that spend six months of the year in Greenland, trekking between the Eastern Nord settlements and the Western settlements, trying to unlock the mystery of why the civilization disappeared. Hours of listening to local theories and jokes only makes Darcy even more determined to help them figure it out.

Darcy’s team ends up numbering eleven people—Darcy as the mastermind, Jeff as her site supervisor and manager, five masters students that are each specialize in something different and needed (a guy well versed in osteology because gravesites are a possibility, two guys with different focus on periods of Norse archaeology, one girl who is a BAMF when it comes to organic residue analysis, and another girl who has worked with Darcy before and is a boss at setting up laboratories to process artifacts even in very strange conditions) and four wide-eyed undergrad students majoring in archaeology.
After a week of living in the hotel, hanging out with the locals, and taking long day treks to survey the well-known ruins. They identify the markers of an Asgardian trade route quickly—soil (under the permafrost) tinged with remnants of an element not usually known to Earth that leads from the Brattahlid site west down the coast and towards an area believed to have been hunting grounds for the ancient Nords. The same substance that was found in the soil surrounding the Foula bracelet in the Shetland Islands.

Jeff and Darcy share matching grins at the news. They’ve found another route.

~~~*~~~

Darcy spends the next month and a half off the grid, sharing a tent with Jeff (who is happily married to a very nice schoolteacher in Edinburgh that Darcy adores and often gets margaritas with) and spending every daylight hour in the dirt. The situation is similar to her dig on Foula—except everything is fucking cold. Always.

At night the temperature drops so suddenly and harshly that Mohammad, the grad student well versed in osteology, requisitions heat lamps and a shitton of thermal blankets for the tents. They have enough for each person to share with another, but Darcy knows that a few of the undergrad girls have sleepovers and share body heat.

Darcy loves this part of the job. Her team forms a sort of community, living in a circle of six tents surrounding an above ground fire pit (for cooking, Darcy is a champion of making sloppy joes with minimal ingredients) with nearby handheld shower pumps that take two people to operate (one to pump the water from a nearby travel case, the other to try not to scream while naked in the icy air).

After deliberating on what is best to do with the priceless, ancient bracelet that Darcy has been carrying around, she finally decides to strap the beaten gold to her own wrist. It feels wrong and unsafe to leave it unattended in her tent, and her shirtsleeves and thick jackets are long enough to cover the gold and diamond.

(Darcy realizes in her first week wearing it that the gold stays warm, no matter how far the temperature drops, and that the Asgardian gold seems to mold to her perfect size.)

(She feels weird about wearing something worthy hundreds of millions of dollars on her wrist while she digs in the mud, but tries not to think too hard about it.)

The days are spent excavating the route, stripping and recording layer after layer, sending off findings of pottery shards with Asgardian designs and flecks of unidentifiable metals to Jaycee in the labs. The evenings are spent huddled in thermal blankets and lawn chairs around the fire pit, Jeff and Darcy sharing their more daring stories to their devoted helpers.

(The grad students are already aware of Darcy’s budding reputation for adventure. They request that she tell the story about being bitten by a barracuda.)

(One of the more daring undergrads, a girl named Scout who hero worships Darcy, demands to know how Darcy got the jagged scar on her chin.)

(The entire campfire, including Jeff, is shocked silent as she tells them about the Romanian gangsters—leaving out the exact artifact stolen—and applauds when Darcy gets to the part about tasering Luca in the back.)
Of course Scout zeroes in on the part about the ‘romantic kissing of the hot rugged dude’. Darcy laughs it off and tries not to think too much about how kissing James was totally the best kiss of her entire life.

The stars are out in the millions on these nights—lighting up the sky with such detail that Darcy wishes Jane and Selvig were with her, just for the beauty of space that her friends taught her to appreciate.

Before she knows it, it is the beginning of October and they have most of the route excavated. Two months of no phone calls, no contact with media or internet. Just the cold soil and open skies of Greenland.

It’s what she needed.

Darcy is ecstatic. The digging and recording is methodical and time consuming, because they need to be sure that every bit is registered and photographed.

“Archaeology is inherently destruction,” Jeff intones to the undergrads (and Darcy) as they carry wheelbarrows of earth to the shifting station. “Which is why, if we do not publish, we archaeologists are no better than…”

“TREASURE HUNTERS!” The four students (and Darcy) chime, not bothering to hide their own annoyed laughter.

“Just making sure you remember!” Jeff teases. “Back to work, slaves!”

Their pace continues, long days of excavation and cold nights of laughter. Darcy loves the bond that comes between she and Jeff and their team—the shared jokes and relationships formed by surviving in uninhabited areas.

The real world feels far, far away. In the evenings she can, Darcy will sneak away from the site and sit near the edge of the cliff overlooking the fjord—far enough from the site that she is visible to her teammates but out of vocal range. Privacy in the wilderness.

Darcy finds herself here again, surveying the icy waters below under a cold full moon. October brought inches of snow that made excavation slow down abundantly—and she and Jeff are beginning to realize that they may need to retreat and return to finish the digging when it heats up again. It disappoints Darcy that they won’t be able to finish the dig all at once, but she understands. This happens often in the field, sometimes excavations take years of on and off seasons.

It’s the idea of returning to reality that makes her shudder.

The distance has taken off the edge of Darcy’s anger, turning her rage into a small bundle of hurt she can hold in both hands. She understands it now, why her father’s words uncurled her heartstrings, why the pain was so acute.

Tony was hurting. Darcy was hurting. There was no possible outcome of that night that was positive, that involved them listening to each other the way they should have.

I’ll go see him after this dig, Darcy promises the icy air. We can talk. I’ll show him my findings, prove that what I am doing is important.

With that oath floating from her chapped lips down to the waters below, Darcy contentedly treks back to the site to share heated cider with Jeff and her underlings. She feels true peace for the first time since the world exploded around her—under the stars, with dirty hands and a good team and
laughing floating in the frigid air.

~~~*~~~

Darcy turns twenty-six in the wilderness.

They begin the lengthy process of packing up the site, knowing that the coming snow drifts will cover their excavation tracks from any curious people wandering the fjords.

October thirteenth comes as an afterthought, their last day in the field before being picked up by helicopter in the coming morning. Darcy doesn’t realize the date until her team begins serenading her over a vat of her favorite stew boiling on the fire (chicken broth with cumin and garlic and corn and actual hunks of chicken, although Darcy is a bit afraid to ask how they got the ingredients while in the middle of nowhere) and an offkey rendition of happy birthday.

“You weren’t going to say anything!” Jeff accuses, raising a pale brow and running a giant hand through his light brown locks. “Just going to let us all go on with our day, as if it wasn’t your birthday. Shameful.”

“I forgot!” Darcy defends, speaking through a delicious mouthful of hot soup. “I haven’t looked at a calendar since September, days get messed up dude. Need to invest in something nicer than a sundial.”

Scout tosses her red hair over a shoulder, sitting tucked under a thermal blanket like sardines with the other undergrads. She’s cozied up with Mohammad, a romance born in the field. “I thought you were older than twenty-seven, Dr. Lewis. You look older, I can’t explain it.”

“I’m not Dr. Lewis yet,” Darcy warns. “Gotta finish tearing up this site first. Then I get the fancy title.”

Scout opens her mouth to retort, but the sudden grating noise of helicopter blades fills the air, jerking everyone from their hot meals. Darcy and Jeff shoot up from their seats (Darcy has a hand on her taser, tucked into her belt at all times, of course) just in time to see a sleek black helicopter coming over the fjord.

“Uh, Darce?” Jeff questions, eyes focused on the chopper. “Did you accidentally mix up our extraction date?”

“Nope.” Darcy breathes. “They radioed it in this morning. No pick up until noon tomorrow.”

Silence falls as the chopper circles over head, dipping lower and lower until it lands on the snowy grass.

Darcy nearly throws up when Pepper Potts, wrapped in a very fashionable parka and matching snow shoes, steps out.

Her blue eyes are wide as she takes in the scene—Darcy, unshowered and very scruffy looking, surrounded by a team of people who have been living the rough life for nearly three months and a half packed up site.

She speaks the two words that have Darcy on red alert.
“It’s Tony.”

Chapter End Notes

Jersey Shore is totally Darcy’s secret indulgence.
Darcy’s hands shake through the entire helicopter ride.

“He’s okay,” Pepper promises through the headset, although her own haggard face and pale skin tells a different story. “Beaten up, but okay. The fight with Cap was…” She trails off weakly. “He needs us. He needs family. He needs to feel like someone is on his side.”

_Last time I saw him, I told him to leave. How has that factored in with the rest of this? How alone has he been? How much of this is my fault?_ 

They land in Narsarsuaq and immediately board the Stark jet—sleek and shiny and as overabundant as Darcy remembers, but this time it makes her feel sick.

“Only a four hour flight,” Pepper comforts, perched elegantly in her seat as Darcy sprawls on the opposite side. “Have you been eating enough? You look very pale. The flight attendants can prepare something, or set up a shower—”

“I’m alright.” Darcy promises. “Can you fill me in on what happened? I don’t understand why he and Steve are fighting. Why?”

“It’s…” Pepper grimaces. “Complicated.”

She launches into an explanation that takes the better chunk of the flight. Details about the Sokovia Accords and the UN bombing and a dude named Zemo who played the fuck out of the Avengers and an airport fight (goddammit, superheroes are so fucking dramatic) between Team Steve and Team Tony.

(Pepper also mentions, with a long suffering sigh, that Tony actually recruited a fifteen-year-old superhero who wears a suit with spiders on it. Darcy stares blankly back at Pepper, because she desperately wants to laugh and also wants to scream WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK at everything.)

The worst comes when Pepper, with a shaking voice, explains what caused the entire situation to go bottoms up. Zemo’s master plan. Forcing Tony to watch a video of his parents assassination at the hands of brainwashed Bucky Barnes, counting on Tony’s fucked up emotional response to cement the divide between him and Steve.

It worked.

God. Pepper’s words begin to fade into the background as Darcy realizes just how much she has contributed to this. She sent Tony away, kicked him out of her apartment and then ran off to
Greenland just when he needed her. Just when she could have proved to him how much she cares.

Yes, she’s still angry about what Tony said. But it makes so much more sense now that she understands his mindset—the guilt over Ultron, the immediate pressure from Secretary Ross, his tension with Steve.

Not an excuse to insult her career, but still a little easier for her to understand.

How could this whole situation escalate and grow and explode to the point that Rhodey is paralyzed? That they fought to wound so badly?

“Darcy?”

Darcy blinks, yanking herself from her thoughts to see Pepper’s concerned face.

“Darcy,” Pepper begins softly, reaching forward to lay a thin hand on hers. “I know that expression. Tony wears it too.”

“I—” Darcy blinks in surprise, always caught off guard by comparisons between herself and Tony. Evidence that they are made of the same stuff. “I just feel bad. He must have told you about… about what happened the last time I saw him.”

Pepper nods, gentle smile fading. “Yes. And I want to apologize for Tony.”

“Apologize?” Darcy echoes. “I should apologize! I kicked him out of my place just before all of this happened, if I had just been a bit more understanding and stuck around, I could have helped—”

“No, Darcy.” Pepper’s hands wrap around hers, holding firmly. “This is not your fault. You know how much I love Tony, and it’s because I love Tony that I can tell you this.” She pauses, blue eyes sharp and serious in what Darcy knows is her CEO gaze. “You had to draw the line. Tony forgets how consuming his life is, and he isn’t used to loving someone who isn’t utterly consumed in it with him. I admit that most of us are. I act as CEO of Stark Industries, the Avengers are constantly running out to save the world with him, he employs Happy, and even Rhodey is his liaison for the US military. We all exist in his orbit.

“But Darcy,” Pepper’s grip tightens on her hands. “You don’t depend on him, and for someone like Tony, that’s terrifying. You have this whole life that is utterly your own and he doesn’t know how to make himself important within it. He is so used to already being the center, the focal point, that he has no earthly idea how to deal with a grown up daughter just as stubborn and brilliant and independent as him.”

Darcy laughs, a watery sound that distantly alerts her to the fact that dreaded emotion is finally catching up to her. “I don’t think I deserve you being so nice to me, Pepper.”

“Why not?” The CEO demands, arching a brow. “I was the first person Tony told after he found you. I am not trying to say that I am any sort of mother figure, as you already have a very lovely mom with fantastic taste in books, but I’ve been with Tony on every step of this journey to you. I know him deeply and I’ve seen just how much he loves you, but even all of that doesn’t excuse the way he spoke to you.”

“He told you what he said?” Darcy asks, head popping up. “About archaeology?”

Pepper nods. “He came back to the Tower disgusted with himself. Hurt, yes, and still very angry, but he knew what he did. It takes Tony a lot of time to admit his own errors, but he knew. If the Sokovia Accords and things with Cap hadn’t been so demanding, I have no doubt he would have
been back at your door.”

Pausing, Darcy takes a moment to digest this, to let it soak in. Pepper knows Tony better than anyone, if she says that Tony regrets it…

Darcy still needs to hear it from his mouth. But first, she needs to help make sure that he is okay.

“Oh!” Pepper jerks, moving fluidly to reach beneath her seat. “I almost forgot. I have something for you.”

Darcy watches warily as Pepper pulls out a small, beautifully wrapped box. Barely the size of her palm and covered in a layer of thick silver wrapping paper, with a soft lavender bow on top.

“Happy birthday,” Pepper smiles, the first true happiness that Darcy has seen on her face since she touched down at Darcy’s site. “Twenty-six years old, and such an impressive young woman.”

At Darcy’s utterly dumbfound expression, Pepper lets out a peal of laughter.

“You didn’t think Tony and I forgot, did you?” She asks, eyes twinkling. “Here, take it. Open it.”

Darcy obeys, trying to ignore the shaking in her hands. Why is she so undone at the idea of a birthday gift from Tony and Pepper? Birthdays have never been very special to her, she and Kara had a habit of ordering takeout and marathoning Darcy’s favorite movies when she’s stateside for the event, but…

Tony. Remembering that today, twenty-six years ago, she was born from him and Kara. Marking the occasion as special to his heart.

The silver paper rips under Darcy’s careful grip, revealing a tiny box of polished dark wood.

At Pepper’s encouraging smile, Darcy lifts the top of the box open, revealing…

“Oh!” She jerks, staring at the treasure. “Pepper, I…”

“Tony picked it out,” Pepper interrupts, softening under Darcy’s wet gaze. “He spent time wanting you to have something special. I convinced him to use amber and garnet for the stones, he was pushing for diamond, but this keeps the piece historically accurate…”

Pepper trails off as Darcy stares, finally reaching out to pull the gift from the velvet lining of the box.

A necklace of sterling silver, the medium chain is a thick length of interlocking Celtic knots, shining in the cabin lights. At the end of the beautiful swirls hangs a teardrop pendant of glowing silver, the edges stamped with the same intricate knotwork, embedded in the center with a circular chunk of garnet and flowing designs of amber spreading out to the edges.

It’s beautiful. Precious. Darcy has never seen anything like it, except…

“This is a Norse design,” She breathes. “Different, but even the gems…”

“Unique,” Pepper offers. “The designs are Asgardian, Thor helped with it before he left. He said the knotwork spells out an old blessing for warriors, runes meant to protect. And as for the gems- we were going for unique, just like you.”

~~~*~~~
The Tower is just the same as she remembered from nearly eight months prior, except that it is empty.

Steve and Nat and Bucky fucking Barnes (who, distantly, Darcy wants to meet… despite the fact that he assassinated her grandparents) are on the run, Clint and Wanda (who Darcy has yet to meet, but sounds super badass) and Ant-Man (wtf kind of name??) and Sam are currently stuck in a high security prison in the middle of the Atlantic (Darcy is going to have WORDS with Tony about that) and the only souls in the Tower are Darcy, Tony and Pepper.

It’s strange.

Pepper fastened the beautiful necklace around Darcy’s neck on the plane, understanding without words that wearing it will show Tony that she comes in peace, that she understands, that she misses him.

That she wants to fix things.

Pepper gently nudges her towards the second to last floor, underneath the penthouse she and Tony share. His labs, the place Darcy often would sit with him and Bruce—

(Bruce, one of Tony’s closest friends on the team, who is now floating somewhere in space, possibly dead.)

(Another blow to her father, another wound beneath his armor.)

She’s not prepared for what she finds.

~~~*~~~

The labs are dark. So dark that Darcy nearly walks away, heading back to tell Pepper that Tony isn’t where she had said—

Until she spots the dim light at the far end of the long room, a desk shielded by filing cabinets and debris.

Tony.

Darcy approaches slowly, keeping her steps soft and measured, despite the fact that she knows Tony will be able to hear her coming. He may be human without the suit, but his senses are more honed that anyone gives him credit for.

Carefully, Darcy edges around the cabinets, looking for her father.

She finds him.

Tony is still, his head of dark hair all she can see as he stares at something held in his lap, cradled between careful hands.

“Tony…”
He jerks, pushing back in his chair and turning wide liquid eyes to Darcy. The sight of his face pushes away any reservations or secret anger in Darcy’s heart—he looks so tired, so worn down and weary. His face is pale, more shrunken than Darcy has ever seen, as if he is not eating or sleeping at all. There are more lines in his skin than ever, bags beneath his eyes and lines deepened by frowning. But what surpasses all of these details are the livid purple bruises down his face, eclipsing his left eye and making a painful mess of his cheekbones. His lip is split, bandaged neatly but still leaking dried blood.

(For a horrible moment, Darcy understands exactly how he must have felt when he saw her after Romania—a deep fear for her loved one, a desire to tear whoever hurt him limb from limb, to make it so he was never hurt again.)

The past months seem to have worn him to the bone.

His gaze is fractured, lips gaping as he stares at his daughter in disbelief.

Maybe he hadn’t heard her footsteps after all.

“Darcy,” He breaths, gaze locked on her face for a long moment before falling to the necklace she wears. “Kid, what are you doing here? Kara told me you were in Greenland, somewhere out of reception—”

“I was.” Darcy answers evenly, trying not to linger on the way her heart is breaking for her tired father. “But I heard, too late, what happened. I know we fought—I owe you an apology, for kicking you out—and I want to be here for you.”

“You owe me an apology?” Tony demands, gaze seeming to deepen from disbelief to awe. “Kid, I’ve spent the past three months thinking I ruined us beyond repair. It didn’t take me long to realize what I had done. I asked you to leave behind what you love. How can you be apologizing to me? How can you forgive me?”

Darcy shrugs. “I don’t hold grudges against people I love. We were both upset. I went behind your back and you went behind mine, we both said things we didn’t mean. I think that’s what fathers and daughters are supposed to do, anyways.”

Tony’s lip twitches up, a small victory. “Are you implying that this was a normal fight between a parent and his kid?”

Darcy grins. “As normal as it can be, given that you’re a billionaire superhero and I’m a budding archaeologist with a penchant for trouble.”

Tony raises a brow. “Seeking out trouble is not a penchant.”

“Tomato, tomato.”

“Not the saying.”

"Did you mean it?" Darcy asks, breaking the moment of levity between them. Tony's smile fades, sinking deeper into his chair with a tired swallow. "About my career, about archaeology not being worth it? I just can't-- it hurt so much to think that you thought little of my life, that you didn't think I was--"  

"Darcy, no." He reaches his hands forward for a moment, beseeching, before moving them at the last minute to his desk. "I don't- I'm not good at this. I never thought I would be a father, let alone watch my kid walk into danger all on her own. It wasn't about archaeology, it was about how afraid
I was for you. Afraid that you would be hurt and that there would be nothing I could do. Do you understand how hard that it?"

Darcy snorts, fighting back her tears. Why the hell is she crying so much lately? "Yeah, I know how hard it is. I've seen you on the news a few times."

"Shit. I walked into that one."

"Anyways," Darcy steps forward, yanking up a nearby metal chair to sit on the other side of Tony’s messy desk. Four mugs of half-drunk coffee litter the surface, stained files and bits of greasy machinery surround his set of monitors. “I accept your apology. I hope you accept mine. And I heard some fucked up shit happened. Wanna talk about it?"

Tony flinches, covering the movement by reaching for one of the half-drained cups. He sniffs it and shudders. “No.”

Silence falls between them. Darcy stares at her father, reading the pained lines of his face. Tony’s eyes are far away, their usual spark and sharpness dulled by whatever memory he has been forced to relive.

“"I never liked my father,” He says finally, setting the cup aside. He doesn’t look at Darcy. “Our relationship was bad. I hated him for not acknowledging me beyond reprimands, he disliked my acting out… a cycle of shittiness. But I loved him, Darce. I didn’t like him, but I loved him.”

Deep down, Darcy understands this. How can you hate the person who raised you? Even if they were flawed. Darcy could never hate Kara, never, although their relationship was clearly leagues better than Tony and Howard’s.

Darcy remembers, suddenly, the stories that Steve had told her of her grandfather. His brilliance, his charm, his own moments of emotional stunted Stark-ness and periods of not being able to look past his latest project.

Not exactly sterling father material, though Darcy does not doubt that Howard was a good man. The fondness and pain in Steve’s voice proved that a thousand times over.

“My mother, your grandmother, she was one of the best women to walk this earth. Kind. Spine of steel. Corralled Dad with a wave of her hand, he never looked at another woman. She always tried to smooth the space between us, to pull him out of his projects and me out of my teenage indifference…”

Tony’s voice fades, lapsing into memory. Darcy remembers the pictures of Maria Stark she has seen, ironically long before she knew of their relation. In her Honors history course in highschool, a black and white picture of her dark hair and soft smirk, tag lined with the charitable donations and foundations set up in her name.

Her grandmother.

Darcy blinks hard, Pepper’s words coming back with more force than ever.

*He saw them die, he watched the entire goddamn video…*

“Tony,” She reaches, ignoring his small start of surprise and wrapping her hand around his shoulder, bracing. “I know what you saw. Nobody, nobody, should ever have to see that. Never. Zemo should burn for—”
“It wasn’t Zemo,” Tony says firmly, his voice hoarse. “Zemo orchestrated all of this because his wife and kid were killed in Sokovia. I almost don’t blame him.” Tony takes a shuddering breath. “It was James Buchanan Barnes. He bludgeoned my father to death and strangled my mother. He did that, Darcy.”

Darcy shuts her eyes for a moment, struck by the horror of what Tony is describing. Steve’s voice is echoing through her head, superimposed over her imagination’s retelling of the murders.

My best friend, Steve had said that day at her bedside. Bucky was the best man I know. I wish he had died on that train, Darcy, anything but the brainwash and torture and forgetting, turned into an unthinking weapon...

“That wasn’t James Barnes,” Darcy says, opening her eyes and gripping Tony tighter. The certainty in her voice causes him to look up, searching. “He was brainwashed, Tony. I heard it from Steve, from Pepper, from the news. He was a prisoner of war manipulated and used by Hydra —”

“He killed my mother!” Tony jerks back from her touch, suddenly livid. “Do you hear what you’re saying? Dammit, Darcy, I know you didn’t know them but—”

“But what?” Darcy demands, pulling herself to her feet. “I can’t feel the lack of them? I can’t understand that they were robbed from us?”

Silence. Darcy softens, hating the desperation and deep hurt on Tony’s face. “I hate this too, Tony. I’m sick about it. If someone killed Kara and showed me the video, I would hunt them down to the ends of the Earth.”

Tony’s grip tightens on the edge of the desk, knuckles white. “Then why are you telling me not to?”

“You should.” Darcy says. “I’ll help! Lets wipe HYDRA from the map, decimate them, salt and burn their fields and pillage their villages—”

Tony groans. “Ha-ha.”

“—but leave James Barnes out of it. Listen to Steve on this, he’s been an ass about the Accords but he knows his best friend. You said it yourself, HYDRA has ways of turning people into mindless tools! Imagine if it was me that was brainwashed, forced to kill—”

“Don’t joke about that.” Tony snarks, furious eyes lifting to meet hers. “Don’t ever joke about that. I would never let that happen.”

“I know,” Darcy soothes, immediately realizing the line she crossed. “I know you wouldn’t. I’m just saying, imagine. Would you blame me? For being a weapon in their hands? For enduring a few months or a year of brainwashing?”

Tony sighs. “Of course not. You’re my kid. It would be fucked up, but—”

Darcy doesn’t let him continue, pouncing on his admittance. “How is it any different for James Barnes? Seventy years of brainwashing, Tony. Seventy years. You said that Steve’s taken him to Wakanda for treatment? I’m honestly surprised that he has any brain left to save.”

Tony goes still, her words processing in his mind. Darcy can see the moment it clicks for him, the moment he realizes that his argument has been used effectively against him. He slumps into the chair once more, a hand tangling in his dark hair.
“I messed up,” He says quietly, so softly Darcy steps forward to catch his words. “Not just about Bucky, but with the others. I saw them in prison, Clint and Scott and Sam, Wanda had a shock collar—”

He chokes, cutting himself off.

“Pepper told me,” Darcy says softly. “She told me that she already has a legal team working on unraveling the Accords, finding a weakness in the paperwork. It was thrown together, there is going to be a weak point, and we can use it to fix this mess. Get Steve and Nat back. Free the others.”

Tony’s hands go back to his lap, gaze falling. “You think it’s that easy? You didn’t watch us fight, Darce. Cap and I nearly killed each other. I tore off his best friend’s arm. I took his shield.”

Darcy flinches at his words, hating the image of Steve and her father, locked in fatal combat.

But nobody died. Even if Tony fucked up James Barnes a bit, it is fixable.

(She can’t really blame him. Darcy totally believes in James Barnes’ innocence and place as a victim, rather than a villain, but if someone showed her a video of Kara being murdered and then confronted her with the man whose hands did the deed—she would tear the arm off the dude who did it too, regardless of guilt.)

“I do think it is this easy,” Darcy says finally. “It’s Steve. He understands. The team was manipulated and worked over—he is not going to blame you for lashing out after what you saw. Not if you apologize.”

Tony jerks, gaze burning with horror. “You want me to apologize to the man who killed my parents?”

“Maybe not apologize,” Darcy amends, recognizing that this is a hurt that will take a long, long time to heal. “But understand. See that the true murderer was HYDRA, not a geriatric POW who probably believes birth control is a sin.”

At Tony’s confused look, Darcy elaborates. “Wasn’t James Barnes Catholic? I feel like I remember learning in the eight grade that he was catholic. I dunno, I sucked ass at the American history unit.”

“He was Catholic,” Tony relents. “No idea what he is now.”

“So…” Darcy prompts, pulling her seat closer to her father, who is once again staring at some mysterious object in his lap. “Am I swaying you at all? Reconnect with Cap, rescue the team, fight the asshole Secretary Ross and his bullshit Accords?”

Tony gives her a dry smile. “The Accords were ratified by 117 countries. Hardly bullshit.”

Darcy shrugs, flippantly waving a hand through the air. “Pepper said she has a plan. I dunno about you, but I’m pretty sure she can take on all 117 countries singlehandedly.”

Tony barks a laugh, turning the object over in his hands.

“I think you’re right,” He finally says. “I don’t think I’ll be pals with Barnes anytime soon, but I’m not leaving the team in prison any longer.”

He finally lifts the object, silver glinting between his bruised hands.
A burner phone.

~~~*~~~

“Before we do this,” Tony says, eyeing Darcy up and down. “You need a shower. You look filthy, kid. And you smell like…”

“Probably reindeer. And sweat.”

Tony hums in agreement. “Woodland-y. The scent of someone who chops wood and never showers.”

“Digs in the dirt and never showers, actually.” Darcy corrects, not bothering to hide her grin. “Insulting me on my birthday?”

"Happy birthday, kid. Now go take a shower." He mutters, betrayed by the humor in his tone as he slowly reaches forward to engulf Darcy in a tentative hug. Tony hugs with all the awkward earnestness of a man who has never been a hugger. “I’m serious about the shower, Darce. Go douse yourself in Pepper's soaps. You stink.”

~~~*~~~

Steve answers on the second ring.

Darcy listens, newly clean (and smelling of expensive sandalwood) and stiff and nervous in her seat, as Tony paces and speaks into the phone— voice moving from a rough dark to a lighter form of friendly snark, finally to what Darcy recognizes as Tony’s serious tone.

It takes two hours on the phone, but Steve and Tony agree on a plan.

Pepper jumps into action, targeting the weak points in the Accords with the best legal team money can buy. Clearing Steve’s name as a fugitive, fighting for the release of their team from the Raft, pushing for recognition that the UN bomber was Zemo impersonating James Barnes.

The entire thing is a mess. But if anyone can untangle it, it is Pepper.

“The Avengers can only stay a private organization if we have a government agency at the helm,” Pepper explains, notes spread across her glass desk. “When SHIELD fell we lost that protection, and the decisions that were made gave the UN reason to sanction us.”

Darcy cringes, remembering the footage she saw of the Hulk smashing through Johannesburg, of the twelve Wakandans killed by an accidental denotation from the Scarlet Witch’s fingers.

The Avengers do need guidance, she knows this. But not totally decimation. Not to be cataloged and locked up for being heroes, at the mercy of someone like Secretary Ross, not allowed to fulfill their purposes.

Darcy stays for the next two months, moving into an apartment in the Tower that Tony had saved for her and spending her days assisting Pepper in her legal battle with Secretary Ross (filing papers) and Tony’s plan to save the teammates locked in the Raft (making him coffee and supervising his phone calls with Cap).

They have Clint, Scott, Wanda and Sam released within a week.

Their homecoming to the Tower is frosty, full of resentment towards Tony despite his work to have them freed. It takes soothing words from Pepper to rub the scowls from Sam and Clint’s faces, although Scott just seems happy to be out.

(Darcy likes Scott, despite her initial derision of his superhero name. He’s a nice guy, more normal than any of the others—even Sam—and talks Darcy’s ear off about his daughter. It is refreshing in the midst of all the Accords drama.)

Wanda is a different story. Darcy watches carefully as the willowy girl walks slowly into the Tower, Vision hovering protectively at her side. Her face is blank, cheeks hollow, but her eyes are sharp.

They rest on Darcy.

Time seems to freeze for a moment, the air between the two girls coming alive with energy. Darcy’s skin prickles and she feels herself caught, pulled into Wanda’s bottomless blue eyes—leagues and leagues and leagues of ocean water—

The moment breaks into pieces, Darcy slumping as Wanda finally blinks, the tall woman’s face breaking out into a wide smile.

She crosses the space between them, coming to Darcy.

“I am sorry,” She says carefully, accent pulling her words up in the end. “I do not usually use my powers without permission, but it has been a trying time. I acted without thinking, to ensure you were not an enemy.”

Darcy blinks, staring up at the beautiful woman. She remembers Tony’s bitter words detailing the straitjacket and shock collar they had used on Wanda, keeping her from moving or speaking.

Darcy does not blame her for being defensive.

She tries for a bright smile. “Uh, totally cool. Unfamiliar face and all. Did you, like, look inside my head?”

Wanda nods, looking a bit sheepish. “I did. Only deep enough to know your motives.”

“Cool,” Darcy breathes, grinning. “What’d you see? Do you know everything about me now? Like that time I wet my pants in the school play in elementary school? Shit, that was embarrassing—”

A choking laugh resounds behind her. Sam and Clint are totally listening in.
In fact, Darcy is suddenly aware that everyone in the foyer is listening in, testing the air for tension. Tony is on the alert, looking like he’s ready to stop Wanda from enacting her vengeance on Darcy, while Sam and Clint both scan the body language of the girls with experienced eyes.

“I did not see that,” Wanda explains, a small smile curving her full lips up. “It is more of a… a flavor, perhaps? A glimpse of your heart.”

Darcy blinks again. “So, no peeing myself?”

“No,” Wanda finally laughs, the tension in the air subsiding. “I saw tombs under the sand, ships preserved in murky depths, upturned Earth with gold glinting from the piles. Bloody knuckles against carved stone. The feel of standing in the middle of a storm, strong winds and a deep grey sky against green, rolling hills.” She pauses, stopping the litany of words in their tracks, as if it surprises even her. “I have not seen a mind like yours before. I do not understand what it means exactly. Do you travel much?”

Silence falls. Darcy aches with the familiarity of her words, as Wanda is describing a secret scene of her heart.

Darcy hears another bark of laughter from behind her, this time from Tony.

“You could say that. I’m an archaeologist, actually. Nailed it.”

“A glimpse into your soul,” Wanda says softly. “I did not sense fear. Are you not afraid of me and my ability?”

Darcy measures the girl with her gaze, allowing the vestiges of kindness to fall away and truly assess the Scarlet Witch. “Maybe I’m a bit fucked in the head from hanging out with the Avengers, but I trust you. I understand why you looked in my head, but I hope that you will grow to trust me enough to stay out of my thoughts. Besides, what you saw was very… intimate, but cool. I’m not upset you know how much I love digging for artifacts.”

Wanda smiles as Darcy speaks, a true show of humor, showing of a set of pearly teeth. “An ancient heart, rooted in the past as much as the present. You long for distant shores and time with those who came before, and I sensed no malicious intent.”

“Moments that are me,” Darcy breathes, not bothering to disguise the wonder in her tone. “That’s amazing. You make me sound poetic. And not a bad guy.”

“You are not.”

“Does this mean we are friends now?”

“It means I trust you,” Wanda corrects, looking over to fix her gaze on Tony. The crestfallen look on Darcy’s face softens her sudden anger. “Friendship may come later.”

Darcy is just starting to appreciate the fancy apartment she lives in (it has a Jacuzzi bathtub! And a fully stocked fridge! Luxuries!) when Tony announces that they are moving.
“I had plans to move us out of the Tower anyways,” Tony says, flicking through holographic files midair. His bruises have faded and the color has returned to his face, as if the planning has given him back his life-force. “A compound upstate makes more sense. Easier to defend, more space, more options. Less eyes.”

Pepper’s legal battle is going well, victories for Stark Industries and the Avengers are pouring in as people remember why they originally loved the superhero team—for saving New York from the people who wanted to bomb everyone on the island in order to ‘contain the problem’.

Namely, Secretary Ross. Asshole.

The only downside of all the positive press and interest over the Accords fight is that the paparazzi are merciless.

They camp outside the tower, swarming the doors every time someone of interest goes in and out. The poor Tower employees have begun taking back alley routes to their cars, just to avoid being propositioned for inside clues by the screaming voices.

Darcy gets her first taste of fame in a very stupid way. She convinces Sam one night, who is obviously missing Steve and Natasha, to run out with her for a pack of beer and pizza. Never mind that they could totally get FRIDAY to order it for them—the whole point is to get out, to taste the smoggy air of NYC.

She doesn’t account for the paparazzi.

They manage to get in and out of the building okay, Sam is a gentleman who gently (or not so gently) pushes the cameras out of her face and clears a small path, arm protectively pulling her through the crowds. The whole thing probably looks very sweet—superhero taking care of his lady friend—but the true reason Sam has such a tight grip on Darcy is because she was spitting curses and threatening to pull out her whip.

“You can’t taze civilians,” Sam hisses in her ear, although she can totally hear an undercurrent of humor in his tone.

“Watch me!”

The whole scenario is somewhat hilarious, but Darcy really doesn’t think anything of it afterwards. She and Sam have their pizza and beer, pigging out on a couch in the common area and benevolently allowing Scott to have a slice.

(Clint steals an entire box from his place in an air vent above the counter. Darcy actually threatens him with her whip.)

The next morning, however, Darcy chokes on her cereal when Tony drops a magazine on the table with a picture of her face plastered across it.

“Slow news day,” He remarks, pulling up a chair and doing the most Tony Stark thing by lounging in it, yanking up his glasses (still so smooth! Darcy is not ashamed to admit she has practiced the same move in the mirror, hoping the cool is embedded somewhere in her genes). “ Didn’t know you had a thing for the bird-man.”

Darcy gapes, pulling the magazine forward to see the headline. A picture of her—long brown hair pulled into a ponytail, eyes blazing as she glares at the camera, with Sam Wilson holding her hand and pulling her forward…
“No way,” Darcy stutters, unable to look away from her blown up, glossy face. At least she had worn foundation that day. “They think… me and Wilson…”

Tony reaches forward, plucking an apple from the table basket. “Yup.”

“I’m on a magazine,” Darcy tries to remember how to breathe. “All of my friends are going to see this. The world thinks I am a cape-chaser.”

“Well,” Tony tilts his head. “Only the friends you have that read In Touch and Star. And cape-chaser? Really?”

Darcy’s head shoots up. “Wait, I’m on two covers?”

“Headlining two, small spreads in about seven. They’re trying to guess your identity. Pepper has it covered.”

“Pepper has everything covered,” Darcy grumbles. “We can’t keep pushing all our problems onto her. The legal battle—”

“Is going well,” Tony interrupts. “Very well. It’s a great sign that the press is moving away from ‘kill the Avengers’ to ‘Falcon’s latest leading lady: who is she?’”

Darcy rolls her eyes, trying to squash the little rise of panic in her chest because of how ridiculous her life is. “Glad to be of service, I suppose.”

“Kid, don’t stress about this.” Tony leans forward, wearing his ‘more-sincere-than-snarky’ face. “We have it covered. I won’t let the press into your life, I promise.”

But Darcy waves his promise away. “Don’t waste too much time on it. I really don’t care, either way. I spend half my time in uninhabited places, what does it matter if magazines are wondering about me?”

“Well, safety.” Tony points out, taking another bite from his apple. “We’ve been trying to keep you my dirty little secret for a long time. Your face being associated with the Avengers means that people will want to figure you out, use you as bait.”

Darcy bristles at the insinuation. “Do I look like bait material?”

“To HYDRA?” Tony says flatly. “Yes, actually.”

“…I’m not accepting another tracker ridden taser.”

Tony grins at her rage. “You don’t have to. Your necklace has a panic button in the back.”

“WHAT?!” She sputters. “Tony, I can’t believe you! You said that—”

“No, kid, no. I can only track you if you press it. Plenty of autonomy. Calm down.”

Darcy stills, weighing his words. “Only if I press it? No way to track me if I don’t?”

“No way possible. I will only be able to find you if you want to be found,” Tony promises. “It’s only a way for you to ask for help if you need it.”
“Hmm,” Darcy hums, trying not to smile. Something like this would have stopped her kidnapping in its tracks, saved her from having to kill. “I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Tony gapes. “Ungrateful spawn.”

~~~*~~~

“Hey,” Darcy says, sliding in between Sam and Clint on the couch. She turns to Sam. “Sooo, don’t know if you’ve heard, but we’re dating now. Madly in love. Possibly with a love-child on the way.”

Sam raises a brow, glancing away from his Dog Cop’s episode to stare at Darcy’s somewhat-flat stomach. “Reading the gossip blogs?”

“Yup.” Darcy steals a chip from the bowl on Clint’s lap. She loves Doritos. “I’m actually here to confront you about my lack of a ring. I don’t want to pop out Falcon Jr. as an unwed mother. What will the ladies at church think?”

“You go to church?” Clint asks, smirking.

“Nah,” Darcy admits. “But the tabloid-version of me does. I have her all planned out. She’s a gentle southern woman who has been pulled into a superhero sex ring of sin and debauchery.”

Sam chokes on a chip. Darcy cackles.

“You’re enjoying this too much,” Clint remarks. “Most people are upset by being slandered in the papers.”

Darcy shrugs. “It’s funny, I’m good about seeing the humor in situations. And it’s not like they actually know my name.”

“They might soon,” Clint warns, a rare shadow of worry passing over his face. “You should be careful, Darce. Keep your weapons on you outside the Tower.”

“I always do,” Darcy pats the taser hanging from her hip, and thinks of the whip stashed in her room. “Don’t worry, Hawkass. There are bigger problems. Like, should Sam and I choose a spring wedding, or a fall? I’ve been told that lavender really showcases my skin tone…”

Both men groan.

"Fall," Sam finally agrees. "I want to get married by one of those geysers in Yellowstone. You know-- the ones that can vaporize you? Wicked cool. And I can throw myself in it before Tony tries to kill me at the altar."

"We are going to be so happy together."

~~~*~~~
Pepper isn’t able to destroy the Sokovia Accords, but she is able to change them.

“Remember when I told you that, without SHIELD, becoming a puppet to Secretary Ross was inevitable?”


“We can reestablish SHIELD,” Pepper says excitedly. Her long pale hands are moving quickly, moving files from one side of her desk to the other. “Build up the organization under Coulson, vet the agents for loyalty, win back public opinion—”

“Wait,” Darcy waves her hand in the air, trying to pull Pepper’s attention. “But wasn’t the whole problem that SHIELD was actually HYDRA? Six letters of cool secret heroes to five letters of doom? How do we know the whole awful affair won’t happen again?”

Pepper doesn’t say anything. She only reaches forward, yanking a file of paper from her desk with the air of having a secret.


The CEO hides a grin. “I already have someone who has agreed to rebuild the agency, to lead SHIELD back into the world’s good graces and work on equal footing with Director Coulson.” Pepper pauses. “We need a system of checks and balances, and someone who would die before letting HYDRA back in. Who can judge character and win back the public.”

“Who?”

Pepper smiles. “Steve Rogers.”

Steve and Tony have, apparently, buried the hatchet.

There have been a handful of tense phone calls between the two (in which Pepper and Darcy are usually hovering in the next room, waiting to see how far it escalates before they can jump in) and it is clear that Tony is still hurt by Steve’s decision to not tell him about Maria and Howard’s deaths. It’s clear that Tony is still haunted by what he saw, by watching the footage of the murder of his parents, but he’s trying to understand, to push past and open up a dialogue with Steve.

Darcy isn’t exactly sure how it happens, but Tony finally seems to relax after the six or seventh call.

“Cap is moving back in once we get to the Compound,” He announces lazily one morning, watching with fond eyes as Pepper shows Darcy how to order pant suits from a Nordstrom’s catalog. Pepper and Darcy are curled up on the chaise lounge of the penthouse suite, sharing a bowl of fruit as breakfast and surrounding themselves with magazines. "Barnes is finishing up treatment in Wakanda, getting the murderous assassin part of him rooted out, and it's looking good."

Darcy sits up, abandoning her banana. “Wait, really? Just like that?”
“It wasn’t exactly easy,” Tony corrects. “I still think Cap is an idiot eighty-two percent of the time. And a virgin. And in the wrong.”

“Tony,” Pepper warns.

"He totally is not!" Darcy objects, cackling. "He did travel with all those USO girls, and Peggy Carter was an A class babe..."

“But!” Tony waves away his daughter's words. “Not going to talk about that. We can work together again. He approves of our fight against the Accords and the establishment of SHIELD 2.0.”

Darcy and Pepper exchange a glance, thinking of the same thing.

“What about Barnes?” Darcy asks, gauging her father’s expression. “Steve didn’t sound like he wanted to be parted from his long lost BFF.”

Tony’s expression shifts for a moment before he schools it back into place. “I extended an invitation to one James Buchanan Barnes,” He admits. “You were right, kid. It was HYDRA, not him. I’m going to try and see that.”

~~~*~~~

The move is quick and efficient, thanks to Tony’s army of employees and Happy’s strong organizational skills.

Darcy watches in awe as the Tower is packed up, only a few mountains of things left behind for Happy to deal with transporting, and she boards a quick flight to the brand new Compound.

It’s strange, she realizes, to be so included in Tony’s life. A year ago she thought that week long visits were enough, that staying in the Tower for a few days was more than enough to establish a relationship. And it was.

This is the longest Darcy has been in Tony’s presence... the longest she has ever stayed at the Tower and in his orbit. Two months. Two months of packing and listening and bonding with the Tower inhabitants.

It’s nice.

(Sam and Darcy start a game of ‘tease the paparazzi’. They both know that press not about Ultron and Sokovia and airport fights is good press, even if it’s dumb speculation on whether or not Darcy and Sam are a thing.)

(They aren’t. Sam feels more brotherly than romantic, a fact that Darcy tells him over beers one night and tries not to be upset at the relief on his face.)

(No magazine is able to, yet, correctly guess Darcy’s name. Tony keeps trying to talk to her about being responsible with her safety in the eyes of the world, but as soon as Darcy prints out a picture of him drunk in Vegas with a fedora on, he shuts up.)

(Darcy emails to magazine covers to her mother. Kara calls to congratulate her on bagging the ‘hot
Avenger’. They laugh for a good hour as Darcy describes the sour look on Tony’s face.)

It’s strange to experience the lengths to which Tony goes in order to make her feel a part of things. The first thing he had told her about the Compound? That she had a suite of rooms, between Natasha and Wanda’s. With an upgraded Jacuzzi tub and display cases for the objects she carries.

(Tony has noticed the Foula bracelet, faithfully wrapped around her wrist and usually covered by long sleeves. Darcy can’t bear to leave it unattended while Happy takes the Tower apart, shipping items upstate. Too easy for it to get picked up and taken accidentally.)

Tony is aware she cannot stay forever. Darcy is so close to finishing her PhD, to having full autonomy over the trade routes and her research, to earning the right to excavate wherever in the world she pleases.

She has to go back at some point.

It is December now, Darcy can stay for another month or two before she needs to go back to Scotland, to plan her next foray into the wild.

Jeff had been a great help of packing up the site in Darcy’s absence and getting the team home, but Darcy still needs at least a month or two in Edinburgh to go over the findings and catalog the artifacts before the snow melts in Greenland and they can excavate again.

*There is time,* Darcy reminds herself. *Make sure Tony is alright, stay until Steve and James are here and everything is well.*

She isn’t going to leave Tony again. Not when he still needs her.

Not when he has to, once again, face the man that murdered his parents.

~~~*~~~

Darcy meets Peter Parker right before the press conference that is supposed to declare him an Avenger.

He is absolutely adorable, and all Darcy wants to do is wrap him up in blankets and protect him from the world.

"Hi!" He stumbles, walking away from Tony (who looks very bemused and confused) to greet Darcy. "I hope you don't mind, but Mr. Stark told me about you. I had no idea he had a daughter! You look like him, actually--"

"It's a secret," Darcy reminds him, gently. "Promise you won't tell?"

"Of course not!" He squeaks. "I saw you on the cover of a magazine, are you really dating Falcon?"

The amount of hero worship in his eyes makes Darcy almost sad to crush his dreams. "No, not at all. Just buds."

"Aww." He frowns, before popping back up with another excited grin. "Anyways, I gotta go! Happy is waiting for me outside. Maybe I'll see you around sometime?"
"Wait, aren't you-" But Peter is bounding away, backpack slung over his shoulder and waving at her and Tony.

She is going to protect this precious little boy at all costs.

Tony reads the determination in her face and smirks. "Same."

~~~*~~~

Darcy nearly dies laughing when, after announcing that SHIELD is being reestablished under the guidance of Steve Rogers and Phil Coulson and will be taking control of the Avenger's Initiative (much to the delight and surprise of the reporters), Tony pulls a ring from his pocket in the press conference.

Pepper does not look surprised, but she does look happy.

Maybe things really are starting to look up.

Chapter End Notes

CANON STUFF IS NOW OVER.
The second time Bucky Barnes meets Darcy Lewis, she’s standing in the Compound kitchen, wielding a ladle like a weapon and screaming at Tony Stark.

For a long moment, Bucky is certain that the Wakandan doctors have somehow managed to scramble his brain worse than before. Because there is no way that the girl he’s fought with in Romania—the girl that Sam and Steve and Natasha have been teasing him about, because he made the mistake of confiding in them that yes, he has been around dames since the forties—is standing before him.

It’s almost embarrassing how much Bucky has thought about Darcy. It is embarrassing. Embarrassing that her face has become a kind of symbol to him, a replacement for the pendant lost seventy years ago in Zola’s laboratory, a symbol of fire in the darkness and laughter in the face of fear.

Something to clutch onto when the long nights creep in.

(He is reminded of the knockout dames that pilots would paint on the nose and sides of their planes, ladies with curves for days and smiles to ward off the ravages of war, protection against the violence.)

Bucky had held the memory of her blazing eyes and bright grin in his mind as the suffocating cold of Wakanda’s cryo chamber froze him. His last fleeting, unbidden thoughts dedicated to remembering her long dark hair, the slash of her whip, the low timber of her voice as she teased him between assailants. The soft press of her lips and how she had felt in his hands.

He isn’t sure exactly why this girl has become such a symbol to him, but he is powerless to fight it.

Grab your talismans wherever you can, Dum-Dum had said once in a rare moment of woe, sharing a flask of strong gin outside Azzano the night before their capture. Hold on damned tight to whatever gets you through the violence.

After escaping Tony after that god-awful fight, Bucky had told Steve about her in broken sentences. Explained the whole crazy situation—a girl cornered in an alley in Bucharest, blazing and unafraid, the first to treat him like a human in almost seventy years. Confessed that he is half-gone on a damn he spent about fifteen minutes with and is too afraid to look up again.

Steve had laughed with delight, taking the situation as a sign of the old Bucky resurfacing, chasing ladies and breaking hearts.

“You sure your girl wasn’t an angel?” Steve had teased, leaning against the vibranium wall of T’Challa’s laboratory. “I remember that necklace of yours. Never took it off.”
“Never,” Bucky agrees. “Not until—until they took it. I’m tellin’ ya Steve, she was something to see.”

The turn of Steve’s lips is fond and wistful all at once, aware that Bucky will never be the lady chasing lighthearted man of the 40’s again, but not stopping himself from trying to jog it. “Must be, to turn your head.”

(Even now, after Shuri has fixed his brain and restored a good chunk of his memory, Bucky knows he cannot be that simple again. Never simple again, but maybe something close. He is beginning to hope that he can be something worthy again, something better.)

But Steve, for all his happiness, understood Bucky’s reluctance to look her up— the life they lead is no place for a civilian, even one that somehow wound up in a cartel dispute. Steve has his own dame that he worries over, another Carter in his heart.

Bucky couldn’t drag someone innocent into his mess. At least not until he has figured himself out again, tested the limits of his mind and fragile attempts at control. Has Shuri really fixed everything in his mind? How can he be sure? How can he trust his own hands after so much senseless killing?

And yet, here she is. Here he is.

“Tony’s promised we’ll have the same amenities as in the Tower,” Steve had been saying, leading Bucky through the maze of hallways and conference rooms with Sam trailing behind. “You’ll have your own apartment, right next to me, near the back of the residential area for privacy. There’s a gun range, a handful of gyms, an archery range…”

Steve’s cheerful litany of reasons why Bucky should enjoy living in Tony Stark’s Compound is cut off by a furious female voice.

“I can’t believe you!” The voice screams, full of the promise of retribution. Bucky’s hand flies to the knife strapped to his thigh, immediately tensed for danger. The fight seems to be happening around the corner, where Steve had promised a fully stocked kitchen exists.

“This is ridiculous! I am not getting a bodyguard, not in a million years! I thought we had this talk two months ago—compromise, remember? I have the panic button—”

To Bucky’s surprise, Steve starts grinning, utterly relaxed. “Looks like Tony’s kid is back.”

“Surprised it took her this long to crack,” Sam agrees. “You’ve missed it. Tony’s been relying on her pretty heavily lately. They’ve been getting along, but, you know Tony…”

Bucky looks between Sam and Steve, utterly shocked with this new information. How could they keep such a big chunk of the story from him?

“Tony’s kid? Tony Stark has a child?”

“A daughter,” Steve explains quickly, a flash of guilt flitting across his face. “I’ve told you a bit about her. Tony had only found out about her when she was eighteen, tried to stay out of her life for the sake of her protection, but…”

The gears click in Bucky’s brain, remembering Steve’s stories.

“The girl you rescued in Turkey,” Bucky finishes, remembering Steve’s wild tale of a little spitfire who took down two mercenaries and nearly bled out afterwards on a rooftop. Bucky had enjoyed
the story, scoffing at the idea of a civilian able to think so quickly on her feet. “You didn’t tell me that was a rescue mission for Tony’s daughter.”

Steve shrugs, sheepish. They both know why Steve had left that detail out—to save Bucky from guilting over not only taking the lives of Tony’s parents, but some poor kid’s grandparents.

“You’ll like her,” Steve promises, lips twisting up into a smile full of irony. “She’s… interesting. Sam calls her kooky. Her work takes her all over the world, and she’s constantly coming home banged up from falling in trenches and off horses. Drives Tony insane.”

Howard Stark’s grandchild. His face flashes through Bucky’s thoughts- olive toned and dark haired, a permanent smirk pulling the edges of his mouth up, glittering dark eyes. His face again, flashing, but older- white haired and bleeding beneath Bucky’s cybernetic fist, choking on his own blood and broken teeth...

Fuck.

“She is kooky,” Sam interjects, a fond smile belittling his words. “But she’s fun. Closest thing to normal in this Tower, which is sad because she comes back with split lips and barracuda bites and stories that cannot possibly be true.”

“You know her work, Sam.” Steve defends, chivalry personified. “It’s off the beaten track and not something I really understand, but sounds important.”

Sam mock whispers to Bucky, conspiratorially, unaware of the bile crawling up Bucky’s throat. “Steve loves her. Little sister he never had, or something. And what’s even scarier? Clint and Nat love her almost as much as Cap does.”

“Hey, I’m not the one apparently fathering a love child with her.”

“Cap!” Sam barks. “Not fair. I didn’t think you read tabloids.”

Steve shrugs. “Only when I’m in line for groceries.”

Bucky’s lip twists in something resembling a smile, trying to squash the closeness of his memories. He tries to hide the bitter self-loathing from his tone at the new knowledge that he has another Stark to indebt himself to, to apologize to for the murder of her grandparents, another Stark to bay for his blood as retribution. “Starks are never simple, huh?”

“Never,” Steve agrees. The voice of Tony’s daughter rises again, cutting through their conversation, yelling something about overbearing fathers. “But she’s soft. Softer than Tony and easier to talk to. We spend time together when she’s in Manhattan, she hooked me up with a friend who studies the 30s and 40s. Helped me a lot to talk to someone who knew the facts.” Steve stops, eyes soft. “I consider her a good friend.”

Ah. She must be made of the right stuff, Bucky realizes, to have won Steve over to her side.

If Steve isn’t worried about her hating his friend, maybe Bucky should relax. Trust that any dame Steve holds so highly must be tough enough to feign politeness to the brainwashed ninety-year old who murdered her grandparents.

“But not a good enough friend to call in on your team?” Bucky questions, immediately wondering where Tony Stark’s daughter falls in the latest fight. The way Steve speaks about her tells Bucky that they truly must be friends—something Steve has always been in desperate need of—but her loyalty towards Tony could complicate things.
Where did she stand when Tony was trying to kill he and Steve?

Steve barks a laugh, running a hand through his long blond hair. Punk seems to keep forgetting where the fuck his razor is. “You know, maybe I should have recruited her. She’d have won the whole thing for us.”

Sam nods. “And brought a six-pack to the fight.”

Bucky frowns. “Stevie, she’s a civilian, what help would she have been other than as leverage—”

“I love you, Tony, but you’re an asshat!”

“Darcy—”

Bucky freezes in his tracks.

That name. Darcy—

It can’t be. It must be a coincidence.

Steve, mistaking Bucky’s sudden fear for anxiety over seeing Tony again, presses a warm hand against his back, his words coming in a fast rush.

“Everything with Tony will be fine, Buck. He doesn’t blame you. Darcy talked sense into him, pretty sure she’s your biggest fan, least you can do is meet her. Not a typical civilian, I’ll tell you that.”

Steve gently pushes Bucky forward, rounding the corner to find…

Darcy.

She’s standing with her back to him, a long tumble of brown-black hair falling to the small of her back. Small, dwarfed in height even by Tony, with her hip cocked to the side and one scarred had resting in the dip of it. Haloed in the natural light of the shining kitchen, alive and vibrant against the sleek marbles and steel counter tops.

Bucky barely notices Tony. His gaze is glued to Darcy, breath coming in deep swallows.

The girl from Romania.

His pendant, come to life.

Tony, dressed in a pair of grease-stained jeans and a white t-shirt, spots Steve approaching. He looks up with wide, amused eyes, apparently unaffected by his daughter’s strong words. “Cap! Save me!”

“Save you?” Darcy sputters, thrusting the metal ladle in the air like a sword. “No, no, no. You are not walking away from this discussion until you get this fact through your thick skull: I AM NOT GETTING A BODYGUARD. End of story. No saving necessary.”

“Darce,” Tony turns back to her, leveling a stare. “You’ve been pictured with Clint and Sam and Wanda in the papers lately, it’s a target on your back.”

“My name is never mentioned!” Darcy protests, still refusing to turn from her father. “And I’m heading to Scotland, far away from American tabloids, and then to uninhabited Greenland! I am going to be fine.”
She turns on her heel, ignoring Tony’s words and waving a middle finger in her father’s face with a half-grin. The smile turns real, red lips parting in happiness, as she catches sight of Steve. “Heya, Steve! Soooo glad you’re back—”

She stops.

Her gaze travels, pupils blown out as she turns her focus to Bucky.

Bucky makes a small, longing noise in the back of his throat as their eyes lock. Hers are huge and grey and full of surprise.

He can’t stop from staring at her, cataloging her face and comparing it to how she had looked that night in the alley—half hidden in shadow but blazing, a whirlwind.

She’s cleaner this time. Glowing in a white blouse, gaping at her throat in a way that flashes the flushed skin of her chest, and tight brown khakis that make Bucky very glad that women of the 21st century have decided pants are causal wear.

Her skin has lost the tan it had in Bucharest, fading to a tone paler than he had expected, but her cheeks still show signs of windburn and there is a half-healed thin red line of scarring slashed down her chin—the wound Bucky had seen five months ago.

The years of observation he had honed as the Winter Soldier catalog these minor details, expanding them to fit her possible lifestyle. White and pink lines of scar tissue and callouses on her fingers speak of a profession that requires rough use of her hands; the exposure of her skin to the elements means she often works outside; the easy grace of her stance speaks of someone who trusts and uses her body against physical obstacles.

The curves of her breasts and waist, the flare of her hips and glint of a cheeky grin, tells Bucky that she is the girl he remembers, the girl he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about, who haunts his dreams with her fire.

“James?”

Bucky’s brain shuts down at the sound of her voice, ringing through his ears like the first clear call since he woke up, triggerless, in Wakanda.

“Darcy,” he breathes. His hands twitch with the memory of holding her, he stops himself from reaching out, aware that everyone in the kitchen is frozen with surprise and horror but unable to care. “Darcy—”

For a moment, Bucky is sure that Darcy is about to reach out to him, hands leaping forward—

“What. The. Fuck?” Tony is suddenly crowding Bucky’s vision, leaping in the space between Bucky and Darcy, pushing up his sleeve to reveal a bracelet that weaponizes his hand, a better version of the weapon he had used to fight Bucky in Berlin.

“How do you know her name?” He presses Darcy behind him, a protective gesture that speaks volumes, keeping his glare fastened on Bucky while demanding the same of his daughter. Darcy squeaks in outrage at the gesture. “How do you know his name?”

Darcy doesn’t answer, keeping her gaze burning on Bucky’s as she attempts to sidestep Tony’s protective arm. Beside him, Steve wears an expression so dumbfounded that it would usually make Bucky laugh, if it wasn’t for the fact that Bucky is shocked still with this new onslaught of information. Steve at least seems to notice that Tony has pulled out a weapon, his own hand going
Bucky doesn't care about a fight. He can't stop staring at his girl.

Darcy. The girl in the alley. His pendant. Tony Stark’s daughter. Steve’s friend.

All the pieces seem to suddenly click into place, the stories from Steve and Sam, the bits he has heard while traveling with his lost friend. Dame with a knack for dangerous work. Center of the stories. Little girl on a rooftop who took down two mercenaries and a shot to the arm.

Howard Stark's grandchild.

The girl currently pushing Tony out of the way, peering at Bucky with curious eyes.

“Wait,” Sam steps forward, raising his palms in a gesture of surrender to Tony and taking advantage of Steve’s shocked silence to speak. “You two know each other?”

This snaps Steve back into reality. He turns to his friend, questioning bewilderingly. “Bucky, is this…”

“The same question has literally been asked three times,” Darcy interjects with her clear voice, seeming mostly at ease in the sea of superheroes. She turns her gaze to him, searching, as she slowly pushes her father's metal hand back to his side, effectively insisting on a ceasefire. “James here saved my life in Bucharest.”

“Wait, what?”

Three identical faces of sheer surprise stare at Darcy and Bucky.

“This—Darcy is the dame you met in Romania?” Steve asks suddenly, comprehension dawning. “The girl who kissed you in the alley?”

“Kissed?” Tony demands, the metal casing of his hand retreating back to the watch, allowing Tony to rest both hands on his daughter's shoulders, pulling her back. A red flush has worked its way up to his face, fury barely contained. He stares down at his daughter in horror. “You kissed the Winter Soldier?”

Darcy shrugs, apparently nonchalant, the only indicator of her surprise being the daring movement of her eyes between the Bucky and Tony and a sudden flare of color in her cheeks. “I guess so.” A slow smile blooms across her face. "Bucky Barnes, the Howling Commando? No way. This is awesome."

“Darcy is the girl you were googling in the getaway car!” Sam crows happily, ignoring Tony’s demands and grinning at the flush that spreads to Bucky’s cheeks. “God, I am blessed to witness this. She, Darcy Lewis, is the one you were talking about! Asking about Edinburgh and Manhattan and how to find someone on Facebook, what Facebook is—”

“That’s enough,” Bucky growls, more than ready to bash Sam’s grinning face against the nearest hard surface (the counter, his brain suggests, marble is good at withstanding such force).

Darcy seems to ignore Sam, the only indication of hearing his mortification recited aloud is the slight tug of her lips upward. She takes a step forward, squaring her shoulders while ignoring Tony’s identical step forward behind her and his steel grip on her shoulders, to peer at his new vibranium arm.
“Oh,” She says cheerily. “That’s how you deflected the bullets.”

“Bullets?” Tony echoes, his expression a mask of horror. “You never said anything about being shot at in Bucharest, or meeting a famed assassin of old—”

“You didn’t ask!” Darcy finally snaps back. “We weren’t going to talk about Bucharest, remember? That whole time where we had a massive fight and didn’t talk for three months—”

“You still should have told me you’d been shot at!”

“Well, I wasn’t shot, thanks to this guy, so… no harm no foul, right?”

“No!” Tony sputters, face turning an even deeper shade of crimson. “Yes harm! Yes foul! You kissed a soviet assassin, dodged bullets, took a whip to the face and a nasty kick to the ribs—”

“Healed,” Darcy protests, glaring. “No longer an issue. We’ve been over this. Old news.”

“It still happened,” Tony asserts, turning his furious gaze to Bucky. Those Stark eyes are dark and full of paternal malice. “And you were part of it.”

“I—” Bucky jerks, looking to Steve for back up. Is he supposed to talk? Stark already has a lot of reasons to hate him. This is a curveball he did not anticipate. He clears his throat, trying to ignore the sudden dryness of his mouth. “I was there, yes.”

“He saved my life!” Darcy pushes Tony back, raising the volume of her voice to carry through the kitchen. A declaration for everyone to hear. “ Seriously, dudes. I was running from at least two of Grigore’s goons—”

“Three,” Bucky corrects automatically, his mind already conjuring the details of that night with an intensity and accuracy from his HYDRA training. He earns a glare from Darcy, but soldiers on. “Three on her tail. Big guns. Angry lookin’.”

“Three goons,” Darcy admits. “And for a good minute I was pretty certain I was going to die. They would have shot me in the crowd of people I had run into, but I spotted an alley that would at least limit the damage to my stupid ass—”

“You mean,” Tony interrupts furiously, practically vibrating with anger. “You ran into an alley to make sure nobody else died? Limiting your own chances of survival?”

Darcy huffs, guilt leaking into her grey eyes as she looks at her father. “I did. It was the only option of the moment. Can’t you just be proud that I was somewhat selfless?”

“Not as selfless as carrying a nuke on your back into a rip in space,” Steve mutters, glancing carefully at Tony. “Seems to run in the family.”

“Thank you for that fantastic point, Steve!” Darcy turns her megawatt smile to Steve, unaware of how it makes Bucky’s stomach twist. “You are so right.”

“Not the same thing,” Tony growls. “I was saving New York!”

“Anyways,” Darcy pulls the conversation back into her orbit. She is gesturing wildly with the ladle, using it to poke the air decisively as she makes her points. “I honestly thought I was going to die. And then James comes out of nowhere, yanking me behind him and deflecting close-range shots off his hand and saving me from a bullet to the brain.”
Silence falls.

“Wait,” Steve looks between Darcy and Bucky, eyes narrowing. “What were you even doing in Bucharest, Darcy? There’s no way Tony would have let you go into Eastern Europe right after Sokovia.”

“Good thing he isn’t my keeper,” Darcy corrects, a warning glance that tells Steve that the good influence he earned by calling out Tony is about to be lost. “The artifact I recovered in the Shetland Islands was stolen by a group of Romanian black-market traffickers. I went to get it back. Because I am a **capable and awesome modern woman**, assholes.”

“Woah,” Clint peers around the corner, one hand adjusting his hearing aid and the other stuffed deep into the pocket of his jeans. “Who dares to use such foul language? Oh, Darcy. Should have known.”

For a moment, nobody seems to know how to involve Clint in this conversation. Sam takes the reins.

“Were you aware that James Buchanan Barnes and Darcy Lewis have met before?” Sam asks conversationally, ignoring the screaming tension of the room. “Because they have. In Bucharest. Where he saved her life. Without knowing who the other was.”

Clint pauses, his usual jovial nature falling away into assassin stillness, sharp gaze jumping between Bucky’s guilty expression, Steve’s shock, Darcy’s flushed cheeks and Tony’s barely contained fury.

“Fuck,” Clint curses, jaw unhinged. “You’ve been hanging out with another assassin? Nat is going to have a cow. Your training schedule is about to get a lot worse, Darce.”

“Noooo,” Darcy’s expression falls. “I just convinced her to stop making me run every morning.”

“Alright,” Tony finally interrupts, tone clipped and brutal. “Time for Capsicle and his buddies to leave. Go look at your new rooms that I have so graciously granted you and stay out of my hair. And away from my daughter. I need to have a very serious talk with said daughter about stranger danger, as it seems like the topic has been previously neglected.”

Steve sighs, a sound so full of familiar exhaustion. “Tony, she’s twenty-six. Hardly a child.”

“Yeah! I am!” Darcy spins, pressing a pointer finger into Tony’s sternum. “I know that this situation is shitty in more ways than one, but Bucky Barnes saved my life. He saved me from winding up dead in the muck with a bullet through my forehead. He saved me from being shot, probably execution style, by a bunch of hopped up Men in Black—”

“I get it,” Tony interjects, suddenly pale. “Please, no need to go on.”

“There is a need,” Darcy insists, eyes blazing, gesturing to the place where Bucky stands, ramrod straight by the back wall with Steve hovering protectively. “I know that you’re inclined to hate James because of what you saw—”

Bucky flinches.

“But he saved me, Tony! I would not be here, standing before you in all my adorable charm, if he hadn’t noticed I was being chased and jumped in to help me, no questions asked.” Darcy stops her tirade, sucking in a deep breath. “I’m grateful to him, Tony. *So grateful.* Are you?”
A beat falls. Bucky’s chest is aching, his gaze unable to move from the woman currently defending his honor with all the blazing intensity and commitment she had used while taking down mobsters.

It’s been a long, long time since anyone other than Steve went to bat for him.

Bucky is certain he doesn’t deserve this.

Very certain.

But he can’t deny that watching Darcy Lewis blazing with fury on his behalf melts the last bit of ice in his bones.

“Kid…” Tony sighs, suddenly looking ten years older. “I understand. Really, I do. And am I grateful that you aren’t dead in an alley thanks to the Manchurian Candidate over here? Yes. Of course. A thousand times, yes.” He waves in Bucky’s direction, as if unable to look at him. “I just—I can’t wrap my head around this right now. He killed my parents. He was brainwashed. He saved my daughter, not brainwashed. He kissed my daughter, still not brainwashed!”

“Actually,” For the first time in the entire conversation, Darcy shows something close to embarrassment. “You can’t blame James for that part. I kissed him.”

“Not surprised,” Clint and Sam remark in unison, cut short from their laughter by Tony’s stricken expression.

“Why would you do that?” Tony demands, sputtering. “A-are you, are you not aware that kissing strangers is something that often gets you killed or sold to sex-slave traders? I mean—”

“Nobody should be judging me!” Cutting him off, Darcy waves a hand in Bucky's direction. “Have you seen him? Bucky Barnes is a total panty dropper! He was smirking and punching goons and flirting, how could I not beg off a kiss? I mean, I got his consent and everything, I wasn't that adrenaline drunk-”

Steve makes a strangled noise, something between a laugh and a gasp. Sam and Clint are openly cackling, Clint draping himself over the counter in an attempt to catch his breath.

“Panty-dropper?” Tony echoes, slapping a hand across his eyes. “Darcy.”

She grins, diffusing the tension with a failed attempt to look apologetic. “Okay, wrong choice of words to explain this.” She turns to Bucky, true hesitance splaying across her face. “Sorry for kissing you. Thanks for saving my life. I am also sorry about this awful 'welcome to your new home!' party.”

“Ain’t nothin’ to be sorry for, doll.” Bucky says, hating that she feels she needs to apologize and ignoring Sam’s shaking swallowed laughter. “I enjoyed it. The kissin'.”

Tony makes a strangled noise, turning away to place his head in his hands.

Her frown is gone, replaced by a blazing grin. “Enjoyed it enough to have that date I offered? Dinner and Indiana Jones?”

Bucky starts, utterly surprised at the offer. “I—what?”

“Indiana Jones?” Darcy prompts. “You didn’t watch it without me, didya?”
Bucky shakes his head. He had gotten as far as looking it up on Sam’s computer-phone and realize it was a movie but had no time or inclination to watch it without her. “You still want to do that? With me?”

“Well, yeah.” Darcy tilts her head, brows drawn in confusion. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Bucky can’t stop himself from barking a harsh laugh, full of bitterness. “Because I—”

God. He can’t even make himself say it. The shame is clawing up his throat, closing it.

*I killed your grandparents.*

“Hey,” Darcy is suddenly in front of him, gentle and soft. “It’s no biggie. We can find a time. I’ll be around for another week.”

“A week?” Bucky and Tony ask at the same time.

“I thought you would be here at least another month,” Tony protests with a hint of desperation, something so vulnerable in his face that Bucky looks away. “We still need to iron out an approach to the media, figure out how to keep you out of their eyes.”

Bucky finally understands that Tony, despite his annoying habits and flaring temper, is just a father trying to keep his daughter close and safe.

A daughter that, according to Bucky’s own memories of her and Steve’s stories, does not enjoy being held or tamed.

“I know a way,” She counters. “By heading back to Edinburgh, constructing my final defense of my research, putting a fancy Dr. in front of my name, and then heading back to Greenland once the snow melts a bit more.”

Tony is silent for a moment, before a grin spreads across his face. “PhD? It’s been scheduled then?”

Darcy grins back. “A week from Wednesday I’ll present my stuff. It’s been a quick process, but the research speaks for itself. Dr. J called me this morning. I’m ready.”

Tony looks torn between happiness and reserve. “Congratulations, kid. We should celebrate. And if you’re going to Scotland and Greenland and Neverland, pick out a bodyguard until we figure out the press.”

“Fine,” Darcy surprises them all by relenting, blinking calmly at Tony. “I agree. But only if I get to choose the person.”

Tony visible sags with relief, although his eyes are sharp as he susses out his daughter’s honesty. “Fine? Fine. Yes. I can have at least ten candidates up here within half an hour, you can interview and choose—”

“No need,” Darcy chimes pleasantly, turning her sinful red lips and cutting eyes at Bucky and Steve. “I would rather it be someone I’ve worked with before.”

She smiles, winking at Bucky like they share some joke.

“I choose him.”
To nobody’s surprise, Tony does not allow Bucky Barnes to be Darcy’s bodyguard.

Darcy does not care about this declaration.

“Bucky Barnes or no bodyguard at all.” Darcy announced to the shocked kitchen, skewering Tony with her pointer finger. “Granted that he consents, of course. Autonomy is important and stuff.”

She feels a deep sense of hurt for the dark haired assassin in front of her for a long moment, suddenly remembering all the tidbits Steve had shared of Bucky’s captivity. Denied of an identity, of choice, of any sort of hand in his own life.

And here she is, demanding him.

Damage control time.

“And because Bucky has better things to do, because he is allowed to do whatever he wants of his own volition and freedom, this whole bodyguard thing ends here. I’m sure he has better things to do than hangout in my apartment in Scotland and watch me write proposals.” Darcy says, trying not to wince at the way her voice echoes in the marble kitchen while also doing her best not to look Bucky in the eyes in order to not die from embarrassment. “In which case—I now declare this entire argument void and my final ruling to be that I do not need a bodyguard, as previously stated. I will involve Pepper Potts in this if I need to, and we both know which side she will take.”

“I—” Tony sputters, wild gaze darting between her and the tall, dark, and handsome assassin that also wears an expression of utter bafflement. “Why are the women in my life so ruthless? Fine! You win, spawn. No bodyguard. God. But I’m putting a tracker in everything you own—”

“Try if you dare, Tony. Try if you dare.”

And then she marches out of the kitchen with both middle fingers held high (blowing a kiss to Bucky for good measure, because Darcy has NO impulse control whatsoever) and barricades herself in her room (suite) to try and digest what the everloving fuck just happened.

Fuck.

James. The man who saved her life in Romania, who she kissed and has been thinking about for months, is actually Bucky Barnes. War hero. Hottest Howling Commando from her US history textbooks. The Winter Soldier. The dude who fought her father and Helen of Troy’d Steve away from the Avengers.

His lips were so soft.

Darcy decides to initiate her DEFCON FOUR think-time.

Thirty minutes later Darcy is lounging in her jacuzzi bath (with lavender bath salts, thank you Pepper!) while her “Shocking Discoveries” playlist blares through the speakers of her suite (a playlist she had made as a joke after finding out the identity of her father, which has a large amount of her old Emo faves) and a mug of mead held carefully over the bubbles.
It’s the same thing she does in her apartment in Edinburgh when times get tough. Warm bath, strong drink, good music. Although the fancy Compound apartment (which she cannot bring herself to decorate yet, not when she has to go home soon) does make the whole process a lot fancier (the expensive bath salts and fantastic stereo system are not things she has in Edinburgh), the result is the same. She has time and space away from the craziness to think clearly again.

Holy shit. She kissed Bucky Barnes.

And then demanded him as a bodyguard.

Demanded. To a man who has spent seventy years as a puppet for Science!Nazis.

Shame crawls up her throat. She has some apologies to make, that’s for sure.

Darcy is pulled out of thoughts by a sudden banging at her door. Relentless. She sinks deeper into the sweet-smelling bubbles, trying to focus on the angry croon of Gerard Way instead of the person breaking down her door, but the knocking is too instant to ignored.

Probably fucking Tony, here to assign a buff, stone-faced man to follow her around.

“Coming!” She yells angrily, yanking herself out of the warm water and reaching for a plush purple towel. “You better be ready to see me in a towel, whoever you are. This tower is full of people who do not understand the meaning of the word PRIVACY!”

Water drips down her legs (newly shaven, such a luxury after spending weeks looking like Bigfoot during digs) and pools on the sleek wood floors as Darcy pads to her door, scowl already in place.

“What is so important, Tony—”

It isn’t Tony.

It’s Natasha Romanoff, Black Widow and Darcy’s closest female friend in the entire fucking Tower, a woman who can kill with the smallest movement of her fingers.

And she does not look happy.

Red hair curling perfectly to her strong jaw, green eyes hard and blazing, and her perfect pouty lips (Darcy is so jealous, she has no shame admitting it) are taunt with disapproval.

Shit.

“You went to Bucharest without telling me.”

It is a statement. Not a question. Darcy has no way to deny it.

“I—” She takes a deep breath, trying to remember the lessons Nat and Clint have given her on withstanding torture, on keeping secrets to the death. “I was in Bucharest, yes.”

So much for that.

Nat raises a single red brow, disapproval in every smooth plane of her face. “You did not tell me. You went, knowing that you would be forced to confront a famous cartel lord.” Her gaze narrows again, unreadable. “Why?”

Darcy leans against her door frame, keeping her hands firmly on the towel that keeps her girls from spilling out. “I had a plan. I thought about contacting you, but I was afraid that Tony would find
out. And you were busy at the UN.”

“Busy,” Natasha says slowly, focused entirely on Darcy. “You believe I was too busy to help you? Someone I consider a close, trusted friend? That I would not come to your aid?” She shakes her head. "That is insulting."

“I—” Darcy raises her hands in exasperation, trusting that her towel will stay were it is supposed to. “You were dealing with the fucking United Nations! Explosions in Lagos! Important things! Why would you drop that all to help me get my research back?” She gulps a breath, surprised at her own honesty. “I would never ask that of you Nat. You’re one of my best friends, but I wouldn’t ask you to give up saving the world for me.”

Natasha doesn’t move a muscle. She is still, staring at Darcy with unreadable eyes, voice devoid of any emotion that would give away her true thoughts.

Finally, she speaks.

“Tell me everything that happened in Bucharest. How you met James. What you did to take down Grigore.”

Darcy nods, hiding a smile. The crisis is somewhat evaded, Darcy is forgiven for her secrets, and they can talk this out. “Come in, then? I have good Merlot. We can girl chat.”

Natasha, sweeping into Darcy’s bare quarters and gracefully plucking a crystal goblet from her dishes, settling easily on the couch.

“Talk. Now.”

Topping off her own mug (classy lady, as usual), Darcy gives Nat the entire story, full gory details, admitting her own certainty of death in that alley before Bucky had saved her and laughing with triumph as she relived taking down Grigore and speeding away into the night.

Natasha had smiled through the story, although her eyes stayed tight, pained. After Darcy finally finished, she swirled the red liquid in her glass and speared Darcy with her eyes.

“This is not the existence I wanted for you,” Natasha admits, sipping at her wine. “Civilian life is a blessing. Do you think I chose to be molded into what I am? That I do not know what I am missing?”

The words are so honest, falling from the mouth of a woman who has been trained in espionage and seeped in lies since childhood. Darcy’s heart aches for her, immediately drawing the parallels between beautiful Nat and broken Bucky. Two people, stripped of their choices and trying to use their bloody skills for the good, to be better than they were.

But, empathy aside, Darcy cannot deny her truth.

“I am who I am, Nat.” She says finally, trying her best not to quaver under the Black Widow’s iron stare. “This research is my life. My work is my life. It is my choice to die for it, to risk everything for what I believe. You understand that, don’t you?”

Silence. Natasha stares at Darcy, and Darcy stares right back.

Stalemate.

“We are going to step up your training, starting tomorrow morning.” Nat announces finally. “Six
am. No more running. I am going to teach you evasive hand-to-hand techniques and knife-work, skills that can keep you alive in a fight.”

Darcy blinks. “Six am? That’s so early—”

The iron in Natasha’s face stop her sentence in her tracks.


Natasha’s lips curl upward, the ghost of a smile. “Bring that whip of yours. I’ll teach you how to truly use it.”

---

Nat is a brutal taskmaster, more so than usual.

Darcy wakes every morning at the brink of dawn, knowing that if she ignores the shrill tone of her alarm, she will be woken by a Nerf arrow to the face or a widow bite on the ticklish part of her foot.

Not fun.

The only pro of the arrangement is that Natasha, of course, knows exactly how to use a bullwhip as a weapon and makes it her newest duty to train Darcy in whip work and knife-fighting.

Which, all in all, getting combat lessons from the Black Widow is pretty goddamn cool.

(Darcy only stabs herself once, and not even bad enough to admit to Tony.)

(Clint gifts her a purple band aid with Hawkeye designs.)

(If Nat didn’t have a poker face of steel that makes Darcy unsure of everything, Darcy would think that the assassin has a soft spot for her.)

---

Steve and Bucky lay low for the following days.

Darcy tries not to feel like its her fault.

After the morning training sessions with Nat (in which Darcy has her ass handed to her in a thousand different ways, but at least is somewhat competent in whip and knife fighting), Darcy hangs out with Tony in his labs, Pepper in her offices, and works on her own paperwork for the upcoming doctorate panel in her rooms.

Bucky does not seek her out.
Darcy does not seek him out.

Logically, she begins to realize that the kiss they had shared—frenzied, full of heat, wandering hands and open mouths—was the result of their circumstance. Two strangers, no chance of meeting again, running on adrenaline and fear, had connected.

What would Darcy Lewis and Bucky Barnes have in common in real life, anyways?

Nothing, she decides. He must be focused on resetting his life, finding his place in the 21st century and spending his time with the best friend he had thought lost.

Which is fine. Utterly understandable. Darcy has shit to focus on, too.

She spends hours pouring over the findings from Greenland, locked in her suite with music playing and pasta boiling, noting the abundance of Asgardian relics pulled from the permafrost. Items made of the same strange gold as the Foula bracelet, still wrapped warm around her wrist (despite the bulletproof cases Tony has gifted her, taking off just doesn’t feel right to Darcy), that were littered across the two mile radius of the site.

Darcy is onto something. She can feel it.

Whatever this is, it is bigger than just alien trade routes. Bigger than the transfer of precious metals. Bigger than lines in the dirt.

Why would ancient Asgardians frequent Midgard so heavily? Even Thor had admitted that most Asgardians of his age had regarded Earth with poorly concealed pity and disdain, hardly even worthy of a vacation spot.

There has to be a reason they established these snaking pathways, far-flung and remote and connected to some of the Earth’s richest cultures. Something they have hidden beneath the dirt and sand and waves.

Darcy needs Thor to get back to Earth, pronto. A primary source is one of the few ways she can connect these points, find the ties between Asgardian jewelry and the manipulation of the fabric of history.

Dr. J’s voice rings through Darcy’s thoughts, heavy with wisdom.

*This is how you change history*, she whispers. *One fact, one document, one artifact… it changes the world as we know it. Rewrites the past. Grants us the truth. How can we not seek such magic?*

~~~*~~~

Darcy is pretty sure that Tony is running intense interference (and that he’s won FRIDAY to his side) because Darcy does not see a hint of Steve Rogers or Bucky Barnes in the coming days.

She sees plenty of Tony. He invites himself into her rooms with Dum-E (newly mobile with a set of sick wheels) and camps out, ordering caviar and champagne and generally making a nuisance of himself. He insists that she take her piles of paperwork and proposals to his labs, where she can ‘work without distraction and keep your old man company’, which is sweet and all, yes, but Tony
spends the entire time glaring at the doors and asking FRIDAY for updates on ‘everyone’s’ positions in the Tower.

Darcy understands his overprotective urges to keep her in sight, but she does not appreciate the mother-henning.

Her days begin to wind down, a strange routine of waking up early to train with Natasha, grabbing breakfast with Sam, catching a few morning episodes of Dog Cops with Clint and Scott Lang, and then dragging her heavy files to Tony’s lab to work. Neither Sam nor Clint nor Natasha will breath a word to Darcy about Bucky, no matter how much she charms or cajoles or begs.

She spends these days constantly looking over her shoulder, hoping to find Steve and ply him for information on Bucky and why the hell he is avoiding her.

Three days until she leaves for Scotland. Maybe she needs to stop looking back, even at such handsome Soviet assassins.

The past is behind her.
The world is ahead.

~~~*~~~

Bucky lays low for the next few days, trying to wrap his head around the latest series of events.

The apartment that Stark has given him is nicer than any place he has stayed before—all sleek surfaces, a plush bed (too soft, Bucky camps out on the floor), and technology that Bucky has yet to understand how to use.

He stays in his strange new rooms for five days, allowing Steve to hover around him and unsuccessfully try to cajole him out into the rest of the Compound.

“The gyms are great,” Steve says conversationally one night, peering over his plate of microwave pasta. “Don’t you miss working out?”

Bucky grunts.

“And the kitchens will have more variety than granola bars and protein shakes.”

Bucky says nothing.

“We could go for a jog, get some fresh air…”

“Steve,” Bucky says finally, standing to toss his own plate away. “Just tell me you’re worried. ’M not made of glass.”

Steve signs, tension draining from his face. “I just don’t want you to feel like you need to hide. Darcy’s a great gal, she’s not going to bother you if you don’t want her to.”

“It’s not…” Bucky trails off, unable to figure out how to articulate his thoughts. Decades and decades of silence and obedience seem to press down on him, choking his thoughts before he can organize them into words.
Steve waits, patient and aware of the small things that still do not come easily for his friend.

“I don’t want her to stay away.” Bucky says finally, unable to look Steve in the eyes. “I want to talk to her.”

Steve’s face brightens. “You should. She would love to talk to you, I’m sure—”

“I killed her grandparents, Steve.” Bucky interrupts, deadpanned with the certainty of his damning words. “I almost killed her dad. And—how can I know that my brain really is fixed? What happens if I snap and she’s beside me?”

“Buck, you won’t. She made it clear that you hold no blame for what HYDRA made you do. I trust the Wakandan doctors, Shuri alone is the smartest person in the world, she works miracles—and you need to trust yourself too.”

Bucky swallows, staying silent. He does trust Shuri and her work, but he can’t help but worry about the possibility of a tiny slip up, of somehow losing control like he did in Berlin.

Those words. That red book.

Hard to believe that he really is free of it, hard to trust.

Steve barrels on. “Darcy is the last person you should be avoiding, I know exactly how gone on her you are—”

“Steve,” Bucky growls. “I don’t wanna chat about it. Or her.”

Steve raises his hands in surrender, a small smile tugging up the side of his mouth at his friend’s reaction. “Alright, alright. Just promise me you’ll get outta the apartment with me tomorrow. Just for a work out.”

Bucky sucks in a breath, trying not to show his anxiety at the idea of leaving his safe space. “Fine. Early. Five am.”

Too early to run into her, if Clint’s stories of her lazy mornings are true.

“Alright. I’ll come by to grab you.”

~~~*~~~

Bucky should have known that luck would never be on his side.

True to his word, Steve had knocked on his door at five am sharp, dressed in one of his ridiculously tight shirts and a pair of running shorts, looking bright and excited to get Bucky out of his funk.

Bucky had finally perused his new closest, finding a sea of clothing that seemed to fit him perfectly—tuxedos, suits, tactical gear, and casuals. Obviously someone had gone shopping for him. He tries not to bristle at the idea of a mystery person knowing his exact measurements and sizes, picking items out for him.

Not HYDRA. Not a handler, choosing everything for him. Just help. Things they thought he might
He yanks a pair of joggers and a black tank top from his drawer, feeling somewhat soothed by the routine of wearing dark clothing.

They walk lazily to the gym, Steve leading him through a maze of hallways that are empty of people, the scent of coffee in the air and the haze of sunrise beginning to light up the dark sky beyond the glass walls.

“Nat told me that this gym is the best for sparring in the Compound,” Steve says cheerfully, reaching for the steel doors ahead. “Mats, gear options, a wall for knife-throwing—”

The doors open easily, allowing Steve and Bucky to step inside.

It isn’t empty.

They both halt in their tracks.

Because Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow, ex-KGB agent and deadliest woman alive, is facing off in the practice ring with Darcy Lewis.

Bucky stares ahead in shocked horror.

The two women are on the mats, Natasha in her simple black training gear, Darcy in a pair of tight black pants and an over-sized crimson shirt with Iron Man’s helmet on it, the same gold bracelet he remembers from the alley glinting on her right wrist.

The same wrist that is lazily flicking a bullwhip—the braided dark leather she had used against the mobsters.

“You need to view it as an extension of your arm,” Natasha is saying, flicking her gaze to Bucky and Steve before focusing back on her pupil. “The tip is lighter than the handle, which is a handy distribution of weight. If you ever use another whip, you’ll need to practice and get a feel for the same distribution, as it likely will be different. Slashing is effective in pushing enemies out of range, but you need to learn how to flick your wrist to best have it coil around an enemy’s hand or legs.”

“I did it to one of Luca’s dudes,” Darcy says happily, flicking the whip against the mat in an attempt to recreate the motion. “It was badass, but not sure I remember exactly how I managed it.”

“Which is why you need to practice,” Natasha affirms, playful glint in her eyes that can only spell danger. “I’m going to attack you, just like when we practice hand-to-hand. Use the whip to stop me.”

“What?!” Darcy squeaks, eyes wide and grip slackening on the whip. “Nat, this thing can split someone in half—”

The assassin’s mouth twitches. “I’ll be fine. Hit me.”

Darcy shakes her head wildly, side to side. “No, Nat, I can’t—”

Natasha doesn’t give her a chance to protest. The Black Widow is a red blur, striking out at Darcy’s abdomen with the heel of her left palm, sweeping the girl’s feet out from under her in a vicious movement.
Darcy hits the mat on her back, head thumping with enough force that Steve winces.

She didn’t even try raising the whip.

(Laughter echoes faintly from the ceiling. Steve had warned Bucky that Clint enjoys crawling around the air vents, popping out usually in an attempt to scare Darcy or Nat.)

(Darcy screams nearly every time he does it, usually dropping whatever is in her hands and cursing up a storm. Nat never even blinks.)

Bucky is moving before he even realizes it, propelling himself forward to where his girl lies.

Natasha gives him a knowing, guarded look as he presses through the ropes, hovering over Darcy and falling down on his knees at her side as she catches her breath.

“You okay, doll?”

To his surprise, Darcy begins cackling, blinking her big eyes at Bucky and not even bothering to pull herself up.

“That was so fun,” She gasps, a shit-eating grin lighting up her face. “I mean, it hurt like a bitch, but you literally had me flying through the air. Again?”

Natasha suppresses a smile. “The point of this training is not to enjoy being taken down.”

“Sure, sure.” Darcy finally pulls herself up into a seated position, turning her jovial face to Bucky. “Long time no see, James. Missed your face. Do you only show up when I’m about to get my ass handed to me?”

Bucky can’t stop his huff of laughter, unable to wrap his head around the fact that this insane girl is laughing after an attack from the Black Widow.

"Call me Bucky," He insists, trying not to be surprised at his own comfort, as if talking to Darcy is like slipping back into well-worn shoes. “What kind of bodyguard would I be if I didn’t jump in to help?”

His words freeze Darcy, regret pooling in her eyes and the smile slipping from her face.

“Yeah, about that.” She sucks in a deep breath. “I am so sorry that I literally demanded you, like without asking you and stuff. I promise I wasn’t trying to actually force you to come to Europe and follow me around—that would be ridiculous, I barely know you, despite the fact that I kissed your face off and told my undergrad workers about your godly face, which I should not have just said. Uh. Fuck. Anyways, I wouldn’t ever honestly try to uproot you from your life and Steve and getting used to the Compound, I was just trying to make a point to Tony and get him off my back—and it worked! So like, thank you. And I’m sorry. Super sorry. Yeah. Sorry.”

Bucky blinks, unprepared for the onslaught of information. She is apologizing? For using him to get Tony off her back?

She thinks his face is godly?

“Nothin’ to apologize for.” He says eventually, not even bothering to hide his own pleasure at her words. “I’d be your bodyguard any day, doll.”

“Oooo, so charming—"
Natasha clears her throat, staring down at Bucky and Darcy with a single raised brow. “Flirt later. Right now it is time for Darcy to learn how to use that whip.”

Darcy grins up at her friend. “Gotcha, boss.” She accepts Bucky’s offered hand and pulls herself back up to her feet. “I’m heading back to Scotland in three days for at least a month. Now or never, Barnes: are you willing to watch Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark with me tonight?” She pauses, reading his face. “We can even make a night of it. Everybody’s invited.”

Bucky hesitates for only a moment, his anxiety flaring at the idea of spending time with Darcy. What if he relapses? If something triggers him into a panic attack? He and Steve haven’t had enough time to test his health, to make sure that Shuri’s work truly has fixed him—

(The nightmares haven’t stopped.)

Steve steps forward, reading the twitch of Bucky’s face and his hesitation, and claps him on the back.

“We’ll be there, Darce.” Steve promises. “Seven work? I’ll bring Sam.”

“Sweet!” Darcy cheers, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I’ll order snacks and, oomph—”

Darcy goes down again, falling face forward into the practice mats. Natasha stands calmly over her, the small of her foot pressed into Darcy’s spine.

“Remember,” She smirks. “Always be aware of who you turn your back on. Order some pork pirozhki, will you?”

Darcy gives a groan and thumbs up from the ground.

~~~*~~~

Most of team shows up to the spacious living room that evening.

Clint has to stifle his laughter at Bucky’s crestfallen face as Sam and Steve and Nat march in, followed by a suspicious looking Tony and softly smiling Pepper.

Not exactly the date the poor dude had been hoping for.

(Wanda had declined her invitation, as she already had planned on teaching Vision how to cook traditional Sokovian dishes.)

“Where’s Darcy?” Tony demands, glaring distrustfully at Barnes, who is perched carefully on far end of the couch, Steve sitting nearby on a nearby armchair. “She said—”

“Right here!” The new voice chirps.

Darcy rounds the corner, balancing three bowls of popcorn, chips, and what Clint identifies at Nat’s favorite Russian pastries. Bucky stands immediately, rushing over to take two of the giant bowls from her grip.

“Thanks dude,” She smiles up at him, unaware of the flustered dark blotches that spread across Barnes’ cheeks. “Much appreciated. We ready to cue up the movie? Escape into a world of bad,
bad archaeology and Nazi-punching?"

“Nazi-punching?” Steve and Barnes echo, exchanging confused glances.

Darcy gives a wicked grin. “You shall see.”

The team begins to settle into their places, Darcy plopping down in the space beside Barnes, ignoring the strangled noise that escapes Tony’s mouth.

(Tony jerks up, planning on pulling Darcy towards his side of the room or going as far as to sit between them, but Pepper’s iron grasp yanks him back down to her side.)

(Clint doesn’t bother to stifle his laughter.)

Nat takes the space on Darcy’s other side, motioning for Clint to sit beside her. He knows, from years and years of practice when it comes to reading her facial expressions, that Nat has a soft spot for Tony’s daughter. Affection from the Black Widow is rare, but even the lengths to which Nat trains Darcy speaks of her worry and desire to give the girl the best chance at survival in her crazy life.

Nat and Barnes exchange a level glance, sizing the other up. The Winter Soldier once shot through the Black Widow to kill his target. They go back far enough that Clint can’t seem to tell if Nat trusts or hates Barnes.

One thing’s for sure, no matter what Nat’s personal feelings about Barnes end up being, she will gut him without hesitation if he oversteps when it comes to Darcy.

What a fucking (hilarious!) mess.

The movie begins playing. Darcy hums along happily to the opening credits music, utterly unaware that everyone in the room is focused on her and Barnes instead of Harrison Ford’s dramatic escape from a crumbling temple.

("Horrible archaeology!" Darcy announces, glaring at the TV. "Losing an entire temple for an idol? Ugh! And, god, imagine the carvings and paintings that were on those walls...")

Barnes is watching her from the corner of his eye, the sides of his usual frown pulling up in fondness. Darcy is utterly lost into the room, soaking up the movie and chattering her commentary with a single-mindedness that surprises Clint.

The atmosphere finally begins to relax as Indy signs on to help the US government keep the Ark of the Covenant from the Nazis.

“I like Marion,” Nat announces, watching with amusement as she takes down a goon with a frying pan. “She chooses her weapons wisely.”

Darcy nudges Nat lightly. “How many ways could you kill a man with a frying pan? Be honest.”

“At least thirty-four,” Nat says without pause. “Forty-two, if I am given time.”


“Hundreds of ways to maim badly,” Barnes says suddenly, a rare teasing light in his eyes as he glances over at Darcy and Nat. “Blunt force trauma is a great way to break knees.”

“I could drop it on a Nazi’s head from the sky,” Sam offers. “That would wreck ‘em.”
“Throw it like a frisbee,” Clint offers. “Aim for the soft joints.”

“God, all of you assassins and heroes.” Darcy shakes her head, peering at Steve. “What would you do? Use it as a shield?”

Barnes snickers at that, smothering his laughter behind his metal hand.


Tony jumps in, eyes narrowing at the camaraderie that is surrounding his daughter. “What is it made of, cast iron? That sucker could deflect bullets. I’d attach a laser to it, cut through the sea of enemies.”

“Unfair,” Darcy crows. “You can’t add things to the frying pan! That defeats the ironic simplicity of using a frying pan to kick ass.” She takes a thoughtful pause, watching as Marion takes down another man. “I would use Marion’s approach. Clock people over the head until they stop shooting at me.”

Clint snorts. “Isn’t that what you do anyways?”

“Debatable. I have a whip now, and the skills to use it.”

“That is why you will never be an assassin,” Natasha says with a smirk. “Your combat style is very blunt. More suited for brawls and bar-fights than espionage.”

“But it is effective!” Darcy crows, triumphantly. “Ask Bucky. He saw me, kicking ass and taking names—”

“You whipped yourself in the face.” Barnes points out, deadpanned and fighting a smirk. "Split your own chin open."

Darcy gasps, facing him with horror. “You Judas! I seem to remember saving your ass and tasing a dude who was about to go for a cheap shot—”

Barnes raises his hands in surrender, blue eyes bright and fixed on her face. “Sorry, doll. You’re right. You, what was it? Kicked ass and took names.”

“Thank you,” Darcy says primly, settling back down against the couch. “I would like that statement in writing, if you please. Notarized as well.”

“I can get my lawyers here in minutes, kiddo.” Tony says helpfully, seeming to finally have relaxed, one arm thrown around Pepper. “Just say the word.”

“I think—”

Darcy is interrupted by the ring of a cellphone, vibrating against the soft suede of the couch. She shifts, fishing out a silver iPhone from her pocket.

“Wait,” Tony eyes are wide on the object in his daughter’s hand. “Is that an apple product? Is my daughter betraying her family company by using an object made by Steve Jobs?”

Darcy has the grace to look sheepish. “StarkPhones are expensive! I got this on a free upgrade—”

“You have a trust fund of millions!” Tony exclaims. “Not to mention I have a thousand StarkPhones lying around, all for free!”
“With trackers?” Darcy jabs cheekily, before looking back down at her caller ID. “Oh shit, it’s Dr. J. I gotta take this.”

She stands, flicking the screen and pressing the phone to her ear before disappearing into the hallway.

Tony is still distraught, turning to Pepper with true hurt. “Did you see that, Pep? The blood of my blood, my spawn, using an iPhone?”

Pepper smiles. “I saw, Tony. I’ll get her the newest upgrade StarkPhone in the morning.”

“We should tweak it a bit, add a few features—”

Pepper’s voice is suddenly steel. “No trackers.”

“But—”

“No.”

Tony huffs. “Fine. Not sure I trust her to activate the panic button when she should, though.”

Barnes looks up, interested. “She’s got a panic button?”

Tony’s jaw works for a moment. “Yes, Scowly, she does.”

Barnes nods, unaffected by Tony’s jab. “That’s good. Could get her out of a corner.”

“I don’t particularly care what you think, but this once I’ll agree with you, Scowly—”

Tony is cut off by Darcy’s entrance to the room. She is pale, expression tight.

Something’s wrong.

“Kid?” Tony stands immediately, stepping forward. “You okay?”

Barnes and Nat and Steve all shift from relaxed to alert, reading Darcy’s distress. Clint’s hand itches, wishing for his bow despite the lack of an evident danger.

“It’s fine!” She says quickly. “I’m fine. No threat. I just- Tony, is there anyway I could borrow the jet tonight? I gotta get back to Edinburgh ASAP.”

“What?” Barnes stands, suddenly despondent. “I thought you had another few days here.”

“I thought so too,” Darcy admits. “But my mentor just called. The PhD panel is a bit upset with me for disappearing from the university for so long, between the dig in Greenland and my three months here.”

“So what?” Clint chimes in, rolling his eyes at the idea of stuffy academics trying to pretend they have power. “Tell them you’ll be back soon. What are they going to do, throw some papers at you? Write a strongly worded paper about it?”

“Not exactly,” Darcy says grimly. “They’ve been wanting updates on my research for a while now, but after Bucharest I’ve been… trying to be more careful with who I trust.”

Sam’s brows raise. “You’ve been hiding your research from your own PhD panel?”
“Not hiding, exactly! Just biding my time. I’ve been synthesizing my research while I’ve been at the Tower, trying to see the connections between these sites and get my head together.” She pauses, lifting her right arm and pulling back her sleeve to reveal a bracelet of gold. "This is the artifact that was stolen from the museum. I haven't really trusted anyone but myself to take care of it, and I wanted more time to study it."


"Yup," Darcy confirms. "It's priceless. Now I have to own up to it's discovery, which hopefully won't lead to more people trying to steal it."

“Wait,” Steve interjects. “I still don’t understand why you have to leave now. What are they holding over you?”

Darcy’s smile slips. “The Dean of Anthropology has moved my final defense and *viva voce* to tomorrow evening, Scottish time. I have to present my research and convince them to give me doctorate degree in sixteen hours."

She raises her gaze to Tony, desperation leaking into her voice. “So, can I borrow the jet? Like now?"

Chapter End Notes

HI SORRY... so Bucky isn't going to be traveling with Darcy just yet. They don't know each other well enough, and also Darcy is aware that she can't just DEMAND that an ex-brainwashed assassin follow her around the world on a whim.
Darcy uses all seven hours of the flight to pull a presentation together.

She is prepared, she knows her research, she knows what has been proven by her own hands—but if the PhD panel can nail her on anything, it will be the fact that she’s presenting her life’s work on no sleep and two red bulls after hopping across time zones.

Those fuckers.

It helps that Tony loans her a plane with an office, fast Wi-Fi, and a set of Stark brand computers to work on.

Once Darcy had been able to communicate how urgently she needed to be in Scotland, the team had jumped to help her. Tony had immediately called for the jet, Steve and Nat had assisted her in rapidly packing up all of her belongings (just a suitcase full of clothing and two boxes of paperwork and research), and Pepper had pulled together an outfit worthy of defending one’s dissertation that was (somehow) already perfectly tailored to Darcy.

Bucky had been at her side the entire time, watching anxiously as she muttered to herself about Asgardian artifacts and alien routes, helping her carry armfuls of paper from her room to the jet.

“You’ll be back, right?” He asked, gently taking the thick stack of files from her arms and balancing it (along with the giant box of her books) in his huge arms.

Darcy gives him a distracted smile, trying not to let her eyes linger on the bulge of his biceps or the adorable way his hair keeps falling into those sharp blue eyes (focus, Darcy, focus! You have a PhD to win! Metaphorical villages to raze!).

“I’ll be back within a month or two, should all go well. My dig in Greenland is scheduled to begin again in about three months, early April, and I’ll for sure be back here to see everyone before then.”

Bucky’s face falls. “Thats a while to be away, doll. You sure you don’t want me to come along and watch your back?”

“Watch me stuff my face with frozen dinners and work through piles of paperwork?” Darcy laughs, feeling a deep tingle in her stomach at the idea of holy shit does he like me and actually want to come? “You would be so bored. And I can’t ask you to leave Steve, not when you’ve barely been in the Compound for a week. I heard they already want to phase you into missions.”

“They do,” Bucky mumbles, staring down at her with so much purpose in his eyes that her stomach flips. “But I’d drop missions for you. When you get back, you and me should have a chat.”

Darcy blinks. “A chat, or a date?”

Bucky finally grins, a flash of white teeth against tanned skin and stubble. “Both, hopefully.”

“Deal.” She sticks out a hand. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Barnes.”
“Are you seriously treating this like a business meeting?”

Darcy slowly retracts her hand, cursing her mind-to-mouth filter. “I have been told that I am somewhat awkward in matters of possible romance, yes.”

Bucky smirks, eyes crinkling with amusement. “You weren’t awkward when you were kissin’ me in that alleyway.”

“I’m a creature of impulse, alright?” Darcy explains, reaching for another box of files. “If I don’t have time to think about it, I can do anything. It’s the messy, emotional, let’s sit and chat and reflect on our actions stuff that trips me up. Kissing hot hero-man after he saves my life? Hell yes! Trying to hold a conversation with said hot hero-man and not come off as a headcase? A little harder.”

“You aren’t a headcase, doll.”

Darcy spears him with a knowing look.

“Alright,” Bucky relents, grinning. “Sam says you are. But I think you’re unique. Interesting.”

“Hold onto those good traits of mine while I’m gone,” Darcy commands, trying her damnedest not to show him how flustered his words have made her. “Don’t let Sam convince you of how much I suck.”

“I’ll try, doll. I’ll try.”

And then suddenly everything had been packed onto the jet, and Darcy had nothing left to but wave sadly at the group of superheroes sending her off on the roof.

“Next time I see you,” Tony crows, standing beside Darcy as the stairs to the plane are lowered. “You’ll be Dr. Lewis.”

Darcy sucks in a nervous breath. “That’s if I can pull this whole thing off. Not sure anybody has ever synthesized two years of doctorate research in fifteen hours.”

“You can,” Tony says with so much certainty it makes her feel strangely weepy. “You will. You’re a Stark. You got this in the bag, kid.”

Warmth fills Darcy's chest. She leans her head against his shoulder. “Thanks, Tony.”

The stairs finally hit the ground. As Darcy steps up, feeling a pang as she turns back to see Bucky, watching her with a gaze so intense it feels like a brand against her skin.

A promise.

She swallows, trying to suppress the regret rising up at the sight of him. So much for getting to bond with him and/or address their weird pseudo-romance thing.

Next time.

Right now, she has a PhD to win.
Dr. J picks her up from the airport, the familiar sight of her white hair, tanned face and sleek pantsuit peeking through the sea of passengers and sending a pang of happiness through Darcy.

“You ready for this, Lewis?”

Darcy nods, leaning into her mentor’s side as they wait for a cab. “I’m ready. I have my PowerPoint, my research all organized, evidence arranged, and I even caught two hours of sleep on the way. Golden.”

Dr. J nods, face tightening. “Good. Because I have some info you’re going to want to know.”

“Well, shit. That sounds bad.”

“It is. I’ll explain in my office. Less ears.”

Darcy prays that she is not going to have to pull off a repeat performance of Romania.

Dr. J looks over her stuff in the cab, eyes glinting with approval as she glances at the files and files of research, statistics, and evidence Darcy has prepared.

Once they finally make their way into Dr. J’s familiar office, the smile on her mentor’s face slips off.

“The panel moved your defense up for a reason,” She says finally, leaning back against the edge of her desk. “They did not think you would be able to make it back here in time, or prepared as you are.”

Darcy’s jaw falls. “They were seriously counting on me not making it? I thought they were just angry that I took two months of personal time—”

“I’m sure some of the panel believes that,” Dr. J admits. “But I did some digging, and the results aren't pretty. Dr. White is the mastermind behind it. He does not want you to continue with this research, especially not with the autonomy that the department has previously granted you.”

“What?” Darcy sputters, blindsided. “Why? What have I ever done to him?”

Dr. White was the Dean of the entire Anthropology department, a rugged man in his sixties who boasted a history of major digs around the globe, a small (but notorious) celebrity in the world of archaeology.

The problem? He is also a huge, misogynistic asshole with a history of assigning female archaeologists to kitchen work on the digs he runs. There has been a plethora of complaints and requests to have him removed from his place as Dean, but somehow he manages to wiggle out of the blame every time.

Female students who take him as a mentor often find themselves not graduating from the program.

Darcy had been lucky enough to avoid him almost completely during her time at Edinburgh. A handful of PhD students had told her horror story after horror story about his methods (not only is he sexist, he apparently has been under fire once or twice for ‘accidentally’ taking cultural artifacts away from their countries of origin, something he has never been charged for) and warned her to stay as far away from Dr. White as possible.
Which was perfect, because it meant she had found Dr. J and Dr. Mark as mentors instead. Dr. White had never even blinked in her direction, unaware of Darcy’s existence beyond that of a PhD candidate outside of his control.

So why is he interested in her now?

"Your research," Dr. J answers with a scowl. "That scumbag started asking questions about your digs last year. Joseph and I tried to lead him away, but he has, apparently, been doing some research of his own. On you."

"On me?" Darcy demands. "Why would he care? The only item of material worth I’ve found is the Foula bracelet," She raises her wrist, waving the cuff in the light. "And nobody knows that I got it back except you, me, and Dr. Mark!"

Dr. J shakes her head, white hair spilling down her shoulders. "Not true. After Dr. White convinced the panel to move your defense up, citing that the past two months of leave from the program are examples of your immaturity and lack of dedication—"

Darcy squawks in outrage, anger crawling up her throat and causing her hands to shake. "How dare he! He doesn’t even know me!"

"—I did some digging of my own," Dr. J continues, flashing her hazel gaze at Darcy in warning. "There are ulterior motives at play. Big ones."

Darcy swallows, bracing herself. "Such as?"

"Such as the fact that I have evidence that Dr. White was in contact with Luca Grigore before the Foula bracelet was stolen," She states flatly. "And that the buyer we met in Romania was one of his men, purchasing on his behalf."

No words come for a long moment. Darcy’s brain is working in overtime, sluggish with exhaustion and shock (and the energy drink she had downed in the cab), trying to process everything Dr. J has said.

"How do we know this?" Darcy finally asks. "Do we have evidence...?"

Dr. J nods, crossing to her filing safe to unlock it and pull out a handful of papers. "I've been looking into this extensively. White was never charged for any of the crimes attributed to him, but there is ample evidence that Grigore has assisted him in the past. I also found a record of communication between White and Grigore, the night before the Foula bracelet was stolen."

Darcy looks on the papers in disbelief. "How did you get this?"

"I may have broken into his office."

"Dr. J!"

"It was the only way to be sure!" Her mentor argues. "I would say that we should go to the authorities immediately, but White has a history of buying off local authorities and fellow colleagues. It is too much of a risk to come out with this... yet."

"So we can't even use this," Darcy waves the stolen papers at Dr. J. "To expose him?"

"Not yet. Lewis, all you need to do is focus on your research and stay aware of White’s motives. I'm working on getting enough evidence to truly fuck him over, I promise."
Darcy looks up at her mentor with both fondness and horror.

“The head of my PhD panel,” She says slowly, trying to come to terms with this insanity. “The man that I have to go before with all of my research and evidence in ONE HOUR… is the man who tried to steal my artifact, has been attempting to derail my career, and is the reason we all almost died in Bucharest?”

Another beat. Dr. J’s gaze is flinty, filled with hate. “Yes.”

“What the hell am I going to do?” Panic is coursing through Darcy’s veins, her heart hammering against her ribcage. “I can’t let him see my presentation! Not my future dig sites, or the fact that I have the bracelet—”

“He knows you have it,” Dr. J interrupts. “I’ve spent the past twenty-four hours pulling everything I have on this man. Like I said, Lewis, he was close with Luca Grigore, he had worked with him before, so it is safe to assume that White is already aware that the bracelet is back in your possession.”

“Then why hasn’t he come after me?” Darcy demands shrilly, her control beginning to snap. “Walked up and ripped it off my arm?”

“You’ve been living in the Avenger’s compound for the past two months,” Dr. J points out. “He may not know of your relation to Tony Stark or his team, but you’ve been somewhat untouchable. Protected. Manipulating the PhD panel was his only shot at getting you back to Scotland and within range.”

Sucking down a deep breath, Darcy attempts to pull herself together, smoothing her damp hands down Pepper’s beautiful pantsuit. “Alright, okay. I can deal with this. I can— God, what am I supposed to do?”

Dr. J stands, spine straight and gaze unflinching. She wraps her scarred hands around Darcy’s shoulders, pulling her up to eye level.

“You are going to go in there and earn your doctorate degree,” She states with vehemence. “We can deal with White later. Now what matters is that your research is impeccable, well-evidenced, and utterly groundbreaking. They would be fools not to award you your degree and additional funding to keep the research associated with this university.”

Darcy jerks back. “But, Dr. White—”

“Already knows almost everything,” Dr. J says, regret flashing in her eyes. “He’s been somehow kept abreast of your digs and check-ins for months. Dr. Mark and I should have been aware of this from the start, but we were foolish and did not think him the same monster he was in his youth. We will help you stay a step ahead of him. If you can get your doctorate and accept funding from the university, White will have a much harder time in stealing your work. He will be bound by his position to at least appear like a supporter and protector of your, his new colleague, research. We can use that to our advantage.”

Darcy soaks in her words, yanking another rattling breath into her lungs. “God, I just—this is a lot to take in. I need a minute.”

With help from Dr. J (who can be surprisingly gentle in emotional moments) Darcy falls back onto the leather armchair and tries to regulate her breathing.

“It’s going to be fine,” Dr. J promises. “Dr. White is absolute scum, but easily outsmarted if we
stay careful. Dr. Mark and I will protect you and your work with our lives,” She smirks. “As I believe we have already proven.”

Darcy nods. “You’re right. And of course I trust you, you took a fucking bullet for my artifact.”

“And I would do it again.” Dr. J says solemnly, a vow backed by the certainty in her voice. “Now, you have thirty minutes before the panel expects you. Time to go over some war tactics.”

~~~

Dr. Maximus White is not the type of man one mistakes for a fool.

American born and bred-- with the stance of a linebacker leftover from his college football days--he cuts an impressive shape even in his sixties. White-blond hair that falls to his jaw like a mane, piercing grey eyes, and a charming smile that has wooed a good number of undergraduate students and border officials.

But past the charm, it isn’t hard to figure out that he has a sense of self-preservation and cunning that could rival Grima Wormtongue. Sly, slick, and greasy.

(Darcy is a huge *Lord of the Rings* fan. She can do almost perfect impression of Gollum arguing with himself. It freaks Clint and Steve out.)

She walks into the conference room with her head held high and a confident smile plastered on her face, hands steady as she hooks her presentation up to the computer system and projector.

The panel watches her silently, a long row of seven men and women Darcy recognizes as professors and academics within her department, with Dr. White in the dead center. Dr. Mark and Dr. J have accompanied her in, taking their seats behind the panel to watch their protégée.

Dr. Mark flashes Darcy a smile so encouraging and kind that Darcy feels her anxiety fade just a bit. Dr. J bares her teeth in a feral grin that reminds Darcy of the words her Amazonian warrior mentor had uttered only minutes before.

*Don’t you dare let them see you sweat. You are the most brilliant student I have had the pleasure of knowing in all of my career. Maximus White is a bug beneath your heel. Crush him.*

Time to blow some fucking minds.

“Ms. Lewis,” Dr. White speaks finally, leaning back in his fancy chair, looking at her with so much lazy arrogance that Darcy is reminded of an aging lion. “We were afraid you might not make it.”

Darcy forces herself to smile, as if she has been utterly unaffected by the way the panel tried to fuck her over. “Of course not. I’ve been preparing for this moment for years. Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

Dr. White’s grey brows shoot up. “Oh really? You’ve been on personal leave for some time. More than the university usually allows.”

“Ah,” Darcy fights to keep her voice light. “My father was in a bad accident. I was called back to
the States to help him recover. If you had looked at the paperwork I submitted to my mentors on his health, you would have seen that my two-month leave was perfectly legal within the program’s absence policy regarding the critical condition of a direct family member.”

Dr. White’s gaze narrows with suspicion, obviously not happy with the fact that Darcy just called out his asshole move of illegally moving her panel to a sooner date. A couple of the panel professors shift uncomfortably in their seats, expressions shifting from stone-faced to hints of guilt and pity.

Yeah, fuckers. Darcy totally had to see her father post-beat up by Captain America and the Winter Soldier. She deserved that time off.

Not that they can know that part.

But whatever. She totally did fill out the paperwork on Pepper’s jet, back when she had feared the worst about Tony’s condition.

The flash drive finally boots up, filling the projector with color. Pressing the slide clicker against her palm, Darcy takes her place at the front of the room with steady hands and a slow-burning confidence in her gut that says, I have this. I have this. I am going to make Dr. White eat his own khakis.

“We are all very eager to hear about your work, Ms. Lewis.” Dr. White says, a knife’s edge of tension running through his words. “You have been very busy in the field, from what we have heard.”

“I have,” Darcy confirms, meeting Dr. White’s gaze a flash of steel, refusing to be cowed. “I have been very, very busy.”

With one last deep breath, Darcy launches into the work she has dedicated her life to.

~~~*~~~

Afterwards, Dr. J drags Darcy and Dr. Mark to a nearby, very crowded pub to talk strategy.

“Dr. Lewis!” Dr. Mark cheers happily, saluting Darcy with his pint of Guinness. “It sounds so natural, as if it has been your title all along. Congratulations, dear.”

Darcy grins over her own cup of mead, hands still shaking even an two hours after the long, long, long defense had finally ended. Dr. White had been merciless in his attacks against her research, jabbing at perceived weak points and attempting to intimidate her into hesitation.

But she had stayed strong, matching each of his (increasingly ridiculous) questions with cold, hard fact.

And now? Her grey pantsuit is wrinkled, and her hair is escaping the careful bun Dr. J had pinned it into, but she feels free. Triumphant.

Dr. Darcy Lewis.

The new title is sweet, but it is the memory of Dr. White’s pained smile at the end of her defense,
when the rest of the professors had burst into a standing ovation and awarded her a fancy new degree, that will keep her warm and happy for months.

“You proved yourself a formidable enemy,” Dr. J says with a small smile, eyes tight as she sips her own mug of beer. “He will not underestimate you again.”

Darcy nods. “No, you’re right. He won’t.”

“Which is why we need to have a plan on how to keep his greasy hands off your dig sites,” Dr. J announces, slamming her pint down. “Dr. Mark and I can handle him here on campus, but you need to be prepared for him to send his people to your sites, trying to steal information and artifacts. He knows how priceless the Foula bracelet is, and if you’re likely going to find other artifacts of Asgardian gold and gems…”

Darcy nods, resisting the urge to touch the warm gold wrapped around her wrist. She had shown pictures of the Foula bracelet in her presentation, allowing the panel to believe that it was still lost after being stolen from the National Museum of Scotland.

She isn’t a fan of omitting such information, especially when it involves something as precious as an artifact, but there was no way that she was going to yank the bracelet out in front of Dr. White, even if he is aware that she had stolen it back from Grigore.

Not worth the risk, not yet.

Someday she will return it to a museum. As soon as it is safe to.

(Darcy can’t deny that she has grown fond of having the bracelet around her wrist. There has been something very comforting about the weight and warmth of the gold against her skin, molding perfectly to her skin. In moments of anxiety, Darcy has a habit of stroking the gold, pressing gentle fingers against the cuff.)

“We need to stay a step ahead,” Dr. Mark agrees. “Once we can gather enough evidence to have him stripped of his position, we can relax. But until then…”

“Until then, you have just earned your place as his newest target,” Dr. J continues with a strange thread of pride in her voice, saluting Darcy with her pint. “Dr. Lewis.”

Darcy stumbles home from the pub around midnight, finally feeling the full effects of her lack of sleep and jet lag. It has been a day and a half since she left the Compound and about twelve hours since she found out that she had earned the title of Doctor.

She and Dr. Mark and Dr. J had spent a few hours at the pub, sipping their drinks and allowing the noise of the crowd to keep their words secret, planning exactly how to gather evidence against Dr. White and keep his greedy hands out of Darcy’s work.

The plan seems to revolve around Darcy keeping her research as quiet as possible, Dr. J gathering intel, and Dr. Mark keeping Dr. White out of their hair by making sure he never has the clearance to enter Darcy’s new lab or office.
All in all, it isn’t the worst plan. But there is one thing that keeps nagging at Darcy. What the hell are his motives? Why would he help Grigore steal the bracelet from a museum, only to try and buy it from him in Romania?

Darcy would say that Dr. White must be wanting to turn the bracelet and make a profit, seeing as the hunk of diamond is worth at least 30 million on its own.

(Darcy doesn't even want to know what Asgardian gold must be worth here on Earth.)

But then why involve Grigore?

Her brain is way too tired to dwell heavily on the new messy situation she is in. She needs sleep. She needs rest. She needs to stop thinking about Bucky Barnes’ blue eyes.

She had texted Tony after the panel (“I’m a doctor!!!!!!!!!!”) and called Kara on the way to the pub, happily chatting with her mother and promising to visit before she heads to Greenland. Tony had taken up so much of her time post Sokovia Accords that Darcy had only made the trip down to Virginia to see Kara and Dan a handful of times.

(Next time she really needs to spend more time with her mother.)

Pushing all thoughts of the future aside, Darcy pads up the stairs of her building, fumbling for her keys. It’s been nearly four months since she’s been in her apartment, before Greenland and her time at the Compound. The idea of being alone-- after months of sharing breakfast with Tony and Pepper, watching movies and grabbing dinner with Sam and Clint-- is lonelier than she expected.

Pushing open her door, Darcy nearly falls face first over a huge package that has been carefully placed inside her door, tall enough to bruise her hip as she runs into it.

What the fuck?

Darcy pauses, staring at the canvas box, marked red with the words IMMEDIATE DELIVERY, ROYAL EXPRESS POST, PRIORITY!!!

The word priority is underlined three times.

Huh.

Darcy slowly reaches forward, poking at the box experimentally. Who sent it? Kara? Is it a bomb sent by Dr. White to take her out? A literal box full of cats?

Only one way to find out.

Grabbing a knife from the kitchen, Darcy slits open the top of the canvas and uses the flashlight on her phone to peer inside.

Half a dozen small boxes are inside, with a thick manila envelope at the top.

She opens the envelope first.

One line of beautiful writing that she immediately recognizes as Pepper’s graceful hand.

*Congratulations, Dr. Lewis. We are so proud.*

Darcy swallows a sob as she stares at the letter, suddenly and utterly wrecked with emotion. Below Pepper’s beautiful words, nearly each Avenger had signed—Tony, spiky and bold with a little
blurb about her getting the genius from him; Steve, with a little smiley face; Scott Lang, with three exclamation marks after his name; the letter ‘N’ in beautiful calligraphy (so Nat’s style); Clint had signed just by drawing a tiny doodle of a cartoon bird with a bow and arrow; Wanda with her name and a tiny heart; and Sam, in surprisingly nice cursive.

No Bucky. Darcy tries not to feel disappointed at that.

She digs back into the box, yanking out a handful of individually wrapped boxes. One ends up being a brand new StarkPhone with all of her favorite music and contacts already updated (along with a promise from Tony that there is no tracker) and a new taser with six charges and two packs of replacements (also tracker-less). The next is an absolutely gorgeous pencil sketch of Darcy climbing a pyramid, with the caption ‘Dr. Lewis sets her sights on high’, clearly in Steve’s style (she squeals a bit at how beautifully he has captured her face and decked her out in the same outfit Marion Ravenwood had been wearing in the bar scene of Indiana Jones). Then a six pack of her favorite beer from Sam, a note that says ‘IOU one night of drunken karaoke’ from Clint, a silver ring made to look like a whip from Wanda, and finally a beautiful knife (with what looks like a carved bone hilt) from Nat.

Darcy is so overwhelmed by all of these gifts, she almost misses the last two items at the very bottom of the canvas carrier.

One ends up being from Tony, a tiny velvet box that opens to reveal a sleek black credit card with Darcy’s name on it.

_Your inheritance, Tony had written, don’t spend it all in one place._

Scoffing, Darcy tucks the box in her backpack, vowing to never use it unless it is an emergency. She has her own funds. Not a lot (Darcy knows what it is like to live on ramen noodles) but enough to survive happily.

One last letter sits at the bottom, on top of a bulky mass of wrapped silver paper, the same paper that Pepper had wrapped her necklace in months earlier. Darcy reaches it for, sliding the flap open carefully, trying not to hope that it is…

The handwriting is unfamiliar, whoever had written it seemed to have been painstakingly careful with each letter.

_Congrats, Doll._

_Guess I gotta call you Doc, now. Pepper said you like really big shirts and sweaters, so I hope this isn’t too presumptuous, but I sent you one of mine. Steve said you complain that Scotland is too cold. Hope it helps._

_See you soon. Stay safe, please._

_B_

After reading his words at least three times with her brain short circuiting (_holysitholysitholysithit_), Darcy screams, thankful for her solitude, and clutches the letter to her face.

He wrote to her! He called her doll! He sent her his hoodie!

She scrambles for his present, ripping open the paper to find the same soft grey sweatshirt he had worn to the movie night only two days ago. Whipping off her jacket, Darcy pulls the material over
her head and inhales, dizzy with happiness and the faint scent of spices and Bucky. It’s huge on her, falling down to the middle of her thigh and nearly drowning her arms in fabric.

But for the first time since she found out the Dean of Anthropology wants to steal her research and ruin her career, Darcy feels safe.

(Does he know that, in 21st century terms, this is totally something a boyfriend would do? Or, at least, something a guy does for a girl he wants to romance?)

(Darcy isn’t sure what they did in the forties. Wore his dog tags? His letter jacket? Wait, that might be the sixties…)

She falls asleep on the couch, surrounded by presents from the people she loves, still wrapped in Bucky’s hoodie.

~~~*~~~

Darcy spends the next few days reveling in her new title, staring happily at her doctorate degree and trying her best to avoid Dr. White. She had accepted the continued research funding from the University of Edinburgh (as well as a position as the newest associate professor), but her happiness is tempered by the new knowledge that she has to work in the same department as the man who helped steal her artifact and buy it off the black market.

She spends most of her time in Dr. J’s office, as the department is clearing out an old office nearby for Darcy that will not be ready for another week, and dives headfirst into paperwork and plans to return to her site in Greenland.

As part of her understanding with the university, Darcy now has a salary and research stipend. She will have to lead a few classes sometime in the next year, but the university has promised her plenty of time for travel and digs.

She won’t be stuck behind a desk just yet.

Which is good, because she needs to finish up her current dig in Greenland. And after that… she has a list of routes that will need to be excavated. Amarna, Estonia, southern Alaska, and New Zealand to name the bare minimum.

The snow and ice in Greenland should be melted enough for dig work by the end of the month, giving Darcy a month to get it all in order.

The next three weeks pass quickly.

She has almost everything set up for the Greenland excavation by the second week, the paperwork submitted and neatly stacked, her team gathered and vetted by Dr. J on their loyalty towards her work (the six undergrad students had nearly pissed themselves when Dr. J had asked them if they understood the academic policy towards stealing research and artifacts from a site—immediate expulsion) and her new office finally clean and proudly proclaiming DR. D LEWIS on the door in bronze.

She’s surveying her office proudly, despite its small size, when Jane calls.
“I have some news,” Her best friend says, a rare nervous edge to her voice. “And I’m not sure how you are going to feel about it.”

Darcy swallows a groan. How much bad news can one girl take?

“Hit me,” She commands. “Are you knocked up with Thor’s heir to the throne? Because that would only be good news. You know how much I love babies.”

“Darcy! No!” Jane sucks a breath in, grating against the receiver. “I… I accepted a job. In the States.”

Darcy freezes, hating herself for the immediate selfish moment of sadness that rises up. Jane not being in Britain will mean that they don’t get to have weekends together, camped out in the other’s flat with Chinese food and wine, or jetting to Norway for a stolen few days with Selvig.

But if Jane has accepted a new job, it must be great. Darcy needs to be happy for her.

“Jane, that’s fantastic.” Darcy says honestly. “I mean, I’m going to miss you so, so much. But if it helps with your research…”

“It does. It is one of the best opportunities I’ve ever been given, but the kicker is…” Jane hesitates. “It was offered by Tony Stark.”

“WHAT?”

“I know!” Jane is speaking rapidly, a sign Darcy knows means she is nervous. "He had expressed an interest in my work and the Einstein-Rosen bridge before I even knew you, and they have rooms for me in the Compound, a state-of-the-art lab, access to a non-light polluted area…”

“Holy shit,” Darcy breathes. “Woah. I mean- I’m not angry! All in all, this is a lot better than you moving somewhere where I can only visit every once in a while. The Compound! I sometimes live at the Compound! And you can be near Thor again!”

Jane laughs, a sound so full of relief it makes Darcy feel ashamed that Jane would even think she would be upset by this information. “Yes, exactly. I’m not moving for Thor, but it is a nice perk. And speaking of, he’s due to arrive back on Earth next week at the Compound. I’ll be traveling back to see him in a few days, if you want to come.”

Darcy smiles, looking over at the finished work on the corner of her desk. Technically she has two weeks of freedom to do what she wishes before she needs to be in Greenland…

And Dr. J had told her to find a way to stay out of Dr. White’s line of sight.

“I’m in,” Darcy agrees. “I’ll get Tony to loan us the jet again. Will you be ready to leave by Wednesday night? I have a lot to tell you on the way.”

~~~*~~~

Darcy is packing up her papers and locking them in the new safe that Dr. J had gotten her (“Unpickable,” She promised. “It will hold your research safely while you’re gone.”) when Dr. White appears in her office, thick shoulders filling up her doorway.
Shit. She has been lucky in avoiding him since her panel, but it makes sense that he would catch her literally before she flees the country with Jane.

“Dr. Lewis,” He greets, a soft smile that has probably fooled thousands of undergrads into trusting him. “I never got a chance to congratulate you. Your defense was riveting. Game-changing.”

His gaze flicked from her face, to her breasts in her sweater (which, EW), to the open safe behind her.

Absolute scumbag.

Darcy puts on her best smile, the one that says _oh, little ole me?_

“Thank you so much, Dr. White. I’ve spent a lot of time with my artifacts, just like my mentors encouraged.”

His gaze narrows. Darcy knows that he is thinking of the bracelet.

She is ridiculously thankful that her tan sweater has such long sleeves, hiding the gold around her wrist.

“Yes, it is clear you know your research.” He steps into the office, casting an appraising eye over her desk (a framed picture of her and Kara on vacation, another of Darcy with Jane and Selvig in New Mexico) and the books on her shelves. He finally sighs, weaving a vain hand through his grey-gold mane. “I came to ask a favor, Dr. Lewis.”

“Oh?” Darcy prompts, trying her very best not to scoff.

“I have two graduate students under my mentorship who are very interested in your area of expertise.” He begins, reaching out to run a finger down the cherry-stained wood of her newly framed doctorate degree.

Darcy can’t hide her surprise. “They are interested in Asgardian alien influence on cultural history? I wasn’t aware anyone other than myself was interested in it.”

Dr. White doesn’t flinch. “Word of your digs travels. You are quite a favorite among the students, Dr. Lewis.”

“I’m flattered.” She says flatly. Darcy's popularity in the department has come from the two facts that she encourages camaraderie on her digs and treats her undergrad and grad students like human beings, not slaves.

“My question is if you would be willing to take them along on your excavation in Greenland,” He continues, turning to stare down at Darcy. Internally, she is cackling. She hangs out with superheroes, which means that one man a bit over six feet tall is hardly intimidating. “They would be most appreciative of the experience, as would I.”

Darcy pretends to ponder it for a moment. “That is very kind of you, but I’m afraid my team has already been put together and is at capacity. We have limited supplies, and extra hands just get in the way.”

Dr. White frowns, a hard glint flashing in his grey eyes. “Are you sure? Not even for two anthropology students? They come with my highest recommendations.”

“I’m sorry,” Darcy repeats. “It just isn’t possible; my team is full. I am sure there are other
excavations that would be interesting for them, in fact, I believe Jeremy Garcia is leading a dig in Puerto Rico that sounds fantastic.”

(Garcia specializes in trash middens of the prehistoric world. His dig is literally the equivalent of ancient dumpster diving. Darcy loved it as a grad student.)

White is clearly is not a man used to being denied. A muscle in his jaw works, and for a moment, Darcy realizes that she’s pinned in her office with a very large man who is definitely angry with her for multiple different reasons.

Good thing she has a pistol stashed in her desk and a taser in her backpack. She’s certain that she could reach the gun in a matter of seconds, surely before he could make a successful grab for her.

(Wouldn’t that be a fun note on her professional record: killed the Dean of Anthropology her second week as a professor.)

Thankfully, the tension in the room dips as Dr. White seems to reign himself in, the charming aura once again returning to his space.

“Well, then I will recommend them to your next dig,” He nods towards the map behind her desk, riddled with pins and possible dig sites. “It looks as if you plan on spending the foreseeable future in the field, even beyond Greenland.”

Darcy refuses to answer, staring the Dean down. He can try and peddle her for information all he wants, but she will not budge.

“Remember to stay safe,” He says finally, moving toward the door. His last words to Darcy are tossed carelessly over his shoulder, as if in jest. “The field can be quite a dangerous place for little ladies like yourself.”

Darcy fights against the shaking of her hands as she watches him disappear down the hallway, steps light and unaffected.

It was a clear threat. But she will never let a man like Maximus White unnerve her.

He thinks that she can’t survive hardship? That an asshole man with a complex is the worst she has ever dealt with?

Darcy will show him just how much backbone she truly has.

~~~*~~~

Jane had taken the train to Edinburgh and is fresh-faced and glowing when she meets Darcy in the lobby of EDI’s Terminal A.

“Dr. Darcy Lewis!” She cheers, rushing forward to wrap her thin (but surprisingly strong) arms around Darcy’s shoulders. “Look at you! With a doctorate degree! I am so proud.”

“Awww, Janie.” Darcy lets herself melt into her best friend’s arms, thankful for the kind touch. “I’ve missed you so much, you have no idea.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed you. Selvig says hello and congratulations,” Jane says. “He came to
help with some of my studies for a few days, but now he’s gone back to his family home in Oslo. I think what happened with Loki and the Dark Elves really convinced him to slow down.”

It makes sense. Eric had been twitchy (and pantless) during the Dark Elves invasion and had only seemed to relax while conducting his own quiet research back in Norway. Darcy does not begrudge him the break.

They walk through the airport arm-in-arm, bypassing security with their fancy ‘private plane’ papers (thank you Tony!) before finally being allowed to board and settle in on the Stark jet.

“I don’t think I can ever go back to being stuffed in coach again,” Jane says, reclining in her armchair and glancing over a dinner menu (Tony apparently prefers to eat caviar and squid while flying, but Darcy convinces one of the flight attendants to whip her up some chicken tenders and fries). “Your father really knows how to make travel fun.”

“Tell me about it!” Darcy hums, curling up on the nearby sofa. “It makes flying commercial so much worse, knowing that a plane as glorious as this exists.”

The first few hours in the air are spent catching up. Jane is doe-eyed with happiness at the idea of seeing Thor, for the first time in months, and is riding a high mood because of it. But she is able to summon a good dose of righteous anger when Darcy finally explains the whole ‘the-Dean-of-my-department-threatened-me-and-is-trying-to-steal-my-artifacts’ thing.

“That’s—that is—” Jane sputters. “Completely unlawful! What is it about strong, academic women that makes men want to tear us down?”

“Probably jealously,” Darcy says as wisely as she can for someone who is wearing fuzzy ‘sky-socks’ and in her not-boyfriend’s hoodie. “Capable women are the worst fear of small-minded men.”

“Cheers to that,” Jane raises her mug of tea. “Smash the Patriarchy!”

“Smash the Patriarchy!” Darcy echoes.

Both girls are able to catch a few hours of sleep, but only after Jane had forced Darcy to explain why she is wearing an XL men’s hoodie.

Jane absolutely dies laughing when Darcy admits that she has a weird possible thing with Bucky Barnes, the Winter Solider and war hero.

“This is so perfect,” Jane giggles, wiping at her teary eyes. “I couldn’t imagine someone better for you.”

“What?” Darcy demands, utterly confused. “I mean, I’m glad, but I was expecting you to be… I dunno, upset with me? Worried? Maybe a bit of yelling about my dangerous choices, as per the usual?”

Jane just shakes her head, smirking. “No, I don’t believe any friend of Steve Rogers is capable of not being a good guy. And if his head really is fixed, you have my blessing.”

“Well…thanks. But why are you so happy about this?”

“Darcy,” Jane says seriously, turning those big brown eyes at her. No wonder she has an Asgardian prince wrapped around her finger. “You always chase away guys. Not because you aren’t appealing and delightful and hot, but because nobody has ever been able to keep up with you.
Running across the world, starting fights... But I think that if anyone has a fighting chance at keeping up, it must be the Winter Soldier.”

Darcy digests her best friend’s words. It’s true that Darcy has never really dated. There have been a handful of small relationships that sprouted at certain times in her life, meaningless romances on digs with a fellow grad student or field hand, but nothing that had ever made Darcy want to slow her roll or lose her focus.

Bucky Barnes definitely makes her lose her focus.

The jet lands at Newark airport in the early afternoon, rousing both Jane and Darcy from their cuddle pile in the plane’s king bed.

(Due to construction at the Compound, the landing plane isn’t ready to receive aircrafts this weekend. It speaks to how spoiled Darcy has become is that the idea of a four hour drive upstate in one of Tony’s limos sounds taxing.)

She and Jane wave goodbye to the flight attendants and pilots, shouldering their bags and making their way to the pick-up area at the front of the airport. The crowd is thick with people waiting for taxis and drivers or in line at the rent-a-car stations.

An idea forms in Darcy’s head.

“Hey,” She nudges Jane, staring at the car station. “What if we ditch the driver and take ourselves? Rent a fancy car and put the top down, like we used to?”

When Jane and Darcy had first become close, stuck together in the deserts of New Mexico, they had combated the long days cooped up in Jane’s lab by taking Selvig’s car (which had a ceiling that could fold back) and tearing through the desert roads, watching the sunset and the stars wheel wildly overhead while jamming to all the trashy boyband pop they wanted.

It had been healing for them both, and Darcy still treasures the memory of Jane—wild and laughing with her hair all blown around her face, the scent of sand and sunshine in the air.

Before Thor, before Tony, before life became very complex for them both.

Jane perks up, pulling up similar memories and immediately agreeing. “Yes, yes, yes. Just like the old days. You drive, I’ll DJ?”

“As long as you promise not to grab the wheel this time,” Darcy grins. “Deal.”

An hour later, Darcy has explained to Tony’s driver that they will not need his services (poor dude seemed pretty excited to have the day off) and she and Jane now have the keys to a very pretty purple convertible mustang.

(It was the cheapest top-down car that she and Jane could afford to rent. They promised to have one of Tony’s employees drive it back within a week.)

Since Darcy has barely figured out how to work her new StarkPhone, Jane and her beat-up iPhone
five act as both GPS and music-maker, filling the car with their favorite British pop as Darcy smoothly pulls the car out of the parking garage and manages through Jersey traffic.

“Three hours and forty-five minutes,” Jane announces, waving the map at Darcy. “It’ll go quicker once we get out of this area.”

Jane was right, once they had survived the first hour of city traffic, the roads turned into quiet two-lane streets through beautiful New York woods. Darcy relaxes as at the lack of traffic and vibrant green trees that surround them, dancing along to the music with Jane and inhaling the clean, upstate air.

“So crazy how we go from NYC, the concrete jungle, to this!” Jane shouts over the air and music, motioning to the gorgeous sight of hills and hills and more hills ahead, full of trees blooming with springtime flowers, interrupted occasionally by sprawling, manicured mansions.

“There’s, like, nobody even out driving today!” Darcy cheers. “All the rich people must be in their LA homes!”

They continue onward, Darcy enjoying the freedom of finally being able to drive again (Edinburgh is not a city to have a car in, at least not for her needs) and soaking up the sunlight against her skin.

The clock on Jane’s GPS steadily ticks down. They have only an hour and a half of driving ahead when Darcy finally spots a fellow car appearing in her rearview.

“Oh,” Darcy hums. “Finally! Evidence that we aren’t driving though a crazy time-loop. Other people on the road.”

Jane turns, peering at the dark hummer that is rapidly coming up behind them. “I guess this really is low season for tourists. They sure are driving fast.”

Nodding, Darcy steps up her own speed to eighty. “I’m already breaking the speed limit. Should I let them pass us—”

The hummer roars up, gaining speed as it tears over the hill behind them. Darcy has just enough time to see a gloved hand emerge from a tinted window, holding a silver handgun and aiming—

A shot rings out.

Jane screams. Darcy grabs at the wheel uselessly as the right front tire blows, punctured by a bullet and sending the mustang spinning into the tree line, tossing Jane and Darcy around in their seat belts like dolls—

The rolling turns into a shuddering. For one horrible moment, Darcy and Jane hang sideways off the side of the teetering car, unsure if they will be crushed by another flip or…

The car finally halts.

The world is spinning, Darcy has windshield glass in her hair (and probably a few bad bruises, but all in all feels okay for such a dangerous crash), and Jane is gasping with fear.

Darcy untangles herself from the seat belt, wincing as she falls from her seat onto the glass ridden pavement. Her backpack. If she can get to her backpack she can get her gun, her taser, her whip, and Nat’s knife to cut Jane’s seat belt.

Jane is a step ahead, thankfully, scrambling to unlock her own seat belt and falling next to Darcy.
There is a nasty cut across her best friend’s forehead, but thankfully she looks mostly alright.

What the fuck just happened?

“Get the doctor alive,” A harsh female voice announces from the other side of the flipped car. Shrill. American accented. “We need her research.”

Darcy freezes, locking horrified eyes with Jane.

They want Jane. They want her research, the Einstein-Rosen bridge, the key to other dimensions.

_Of-fucking-course_ they do.

(Jane is totally the one who needs a bodyguard, not Darcy.)

Yanking herself up, Darcy fumbles for her backpack, hanging by a strap from her seat. Her fingers pull the hidden clasp at the bottom, taser and pistol and whip falling out onto the pavement.

Darcy is not about to let them take her best friend, not without a fight.

And, like, over her cold, dead body.

The woman’s voice rings out again, along with the metallic _clink_ of a gun cocking.

“The other one is expendable.”

Chapter End Notes

:0
I'm Calling for My Mother As I Pull the Pillars Down

Chapter Notes

We are about to enter a place where I am going to bending some light Norse mythology to my whims. Marvel does not say anything about a few major gods/goddesses, and I am going to play around with some stuff.

So please do not be upset with me for accidentally getting a detail wrong or not being totally accurate with the normal mythos-- I am pulling a Marvel and playing around with Asgardians within the universe. You have been warned that this is all a product of my imagination and should NOT be treated as fact!

TW: lots of description of violence!

Happy reading :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy is really fucking tired of being called expendable.

Although, this isn't really the time to be butthurt over it.

The noise of another gun being cocked finally pulls Darcy from her state of panic.

*Combat clarity*, Nat had said in one of her training sessions. *Calm down as quickly as possible. Center yourself. Take stock of your surroundings, of the danger, and what you have to protect yourself.*

She does, cataloging her weapons, spilled across the pavement. The car lying fully on its side, pouring out the girl’s luggage (which kinda sucks) and providing good cover from whoever the hell is trying to kidnap and kill them. Jane is huddled with her back pressed against the hood of the car, defenseless.

Darcy snatches up her weapons, tucking Nat’s knife into her belt (thank god she had changed into clean clothing on the jet—her usual khaki pants, brown belt, and a billowy white button down that she thankfully had kept tucked in), wrapping the whip around her arm and grasping the pistol.

“Here,” Darcy hisses urgently, pressing her taser into Jane’s shaking hands. “It has six discharges. Hit anyone who comes around the car.”

Jane gapes, clearly out of her element without fancy technology to teleport her enemies away. “I’ve never used one of these before, how am I supposed to—”

“You’re a genius, figure it out!” Darcy whispers back, checking the chamber of her pistol. Full round. “Aim and shoot!”

They both freeze as footsteps crunch on the other side of the car, the rustle of boots against crushed glass.

“Shit,” Darcy breathes, trying to suck down deep breathes and keep her combat clarity firmly in
“Alright, remember what I said Jane? Hit any fucker that gets close. I’m going to try and push them back.”

“Are you insane—” Jane scrambles up on her knees, pulling at Darcy’s arm. “Darce, you can’t just run out there—”

“They want you, Janie, I need to try—”

“Wait!” Jane pulls her back down, speaking rapidly. “Didn’t you say that Tony had taken the tracker out of your taser?”

“Yeah… which, in hindsight, would have helped us a lot right now.”

“But he gave you a panic button— I remember because you called me just to complain about it!” Jane hisses urgently. “Press it, you idiot!”

Cursing, Darcy drops her pistol in her lap, scrambling to pull the silver chain out from under her shirt. How the hell could she have forgotten about her panic button? The teardrop pendant falls into the curve of her palm, garnets winking happily as Darcy desperately feels for a control.

Her thumb slides against a tiny clasp on the back, flipping it open to find a red button the size of a penny. Darcy presses down just as a hail of gunfire shatters against the other side of the mustang.

Jane yelps, clutching at the taser. The car takes the brunt of the attack, but hot bullets begin rolling by their feet, filling the air with the scent of gunpowder and fire.

Their cover won’t last for long, especially if they decide spray it with ammo again.

Darcy presses herself back up into a crouch, taking up her pistol in one hand and unfurling the whip in her other. How long would it take Tony to respond to her alarm? She has no doubt that he will drop everything to get here, but even flying in the suit… ten minutes? Fifteen?

This fight isn’t about winning, Darcy realizes. It’s about keeping the thugs distracted until Tony can come save Jane. Giving her best friend every possible chance to get out of this.

Even if it means Darcy doesn’t.

“Come out, ladies!” The female voice sings. “This can be done easily and painlessly, I promise.”

“Eat shit!” Darcy calls back. Play for time, she chants internally. Play for time, play for time.

“How crass—”

The mystery lady never finishes her sentence, because Darcy uses the opportunity to pop up over the top of the car and fire a shot into her shoulder.

The woman, blonde and dressed in all black tac-gear, begins screaming. Darcy counts at least four brawny men with guns before she is forced to dive back behind the car, flinching as they unleash another round of ammo.

“Stop!” The woman shrieks. “We need the doctor alive!”

“Boss—”

“Get behind the car, you cowards!” She commands. “Drag them out!”
Ah, this is Darcy’s cue.

A small group of men appear on each side of the car, the two on the right reaching for Darcy while the two on the left nearly trip over Jane. Darcy’s two thugs are brandishing guns, but the man after Jane is armed only with a knife.

The crackle of electricity and garbled screams tell her that Jane has just taken him down. And stolen his knife.

Darcy grins. That’s her girl.

A silver handgun is suddenly level between Darcy’s eyebrows, the bearer of the weapon smirking in a manner that screams *you’re-cornered-you-stupid-woman*.

Good thing he doesn’t expect to get a faceful of leather whip.

The man screams as Darcy’s whip splits his cheek open, dropping the gun in agony. The thug behind him rushes forward, aiming for Darcy’s head and shooting—

She ducks, the shot missing her only by an inch.

Too close.

Darcy pulls her whip back, slashing at the man on the ground mercilessly (Darcy isn’t a fan of killing, but these fuckers are trying to take her best friend, so she feels a little less awful about taking lives if she has to) and raising her gun at the man who had just shot at her.

“Bitch,” He snarls, nervous eyes darting to her bloody whip. “Drop it.”

Darcy pretends to consider it. “No.”

He shoots at the same moment she raises her whip. His fear of the whip works in her favor, causing him to jerk back, sending the bullet flying upwards instead of into Darcy’s face.

The taser fires from behind Darcy, knocking the man back.

“Thanks, Janie!”

Jane doesn’t smile. “There are more!”

“Of course there are,” Darcy mutters, kicking the gun away from the bleeding thug. “Hummers are fucking clown cars, always pouring out bad guys.”

Now it’s time to lead them as far away from Jane as possible.

“Tase anyone who gets near you,” Darcy reminds, trying to catch her breath. “Don’t leave the cover, no matter what you hear.”

Jane’s face falls, agony and fear flashing in her eyes. “Darcy, no—”

But Darcy doesn’t look back.

She launches herself into the open space, whip aloft and pistol steady, just as another four men spill from the hummer, armed to the nines.

*Please let Natasha have prepared me for this*, Darcy prays, eyes locked on the blonde woman who
is glaring murderously at her, arm pressed to the bloody mess of her left shoulder. *Trust in what I know, trust in my instincts, trust that Tony is booking his red-and-gold metal ass to our location right now...*

Darcy doesn’t have time to shoot before one of the men lurches forward, socking her across the face.

The blow takes her across the cheekbone and clips her mouth. The pain seems to wake Darcy up in a strange way, focusing her, as she slashes out with her whip (trying not to feel too satisfied at the asshole’s cry of pain) and spits blood out onto the dirt.

Three guns are pulled on Darcy. Her pistol is held steadily in front of the blond woman’s chest—the clear leader of the gang.

A stalemate. The focus is all on her, which means Jane is safe.

Now she just has to keep it that way.

“Who do you work for?” Darcy demands, ignoring the sting of her split lip as she speaks.

The woman bares her teeth, white and sharp. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Uh, yeah,” Darcy snarks. “That’s why I asked?”

The woman only laughs, reaching a bloody hand down to her waist. Darcy watches with detached horror as she pulls a wicked, serrated knife that is at least as long as Darcy’s forearm from her belt.

“You know,” Darcy stares at the knife. “I’m still the one with the gun.”

The woman smirks. “And too stupid to properly use it.”

A thug from behind sweeps Darcy’s feet from under her, sending her pistol flying towards the wrecked car.

She should have seen that coming.

Darcy scrambles up, flicking her whip at the legs of the man who handled her. He steps backwards, avoiding it neatly, before casually backhanding Darcy hard across the same bruised cheek.

She swallows a groan (and a mouthful of blood) before pulling herself back up, rearing back to slash the grinning evil woman with as much force she can manage—

The whip whistles through the air, slashing through the air towards her face—

The Amazon woman catches it, uncaring that it rips open her left palm, and pulls it taut in the space between them, yanking Darcy forward.

With one flash of her silver knife, Darcy’s whip goes limp in two halves, one blunt end dangling uselessly from her hand.

That bitch just cut her whip in half.

Well, fuck.

“Go get the other woman,” The blonde commands, flexing her bloody palm. “I’ll take care of this
one.”

Darcy barely has time to yank Nat’s knife from her belt (oh god, the last weapon between her and utter vulnerability) before the blonde is upon her, slashing and jabbing with trained precision as Darcy scrambles back and does her best to dodge the attack.

(For a woman who has a bullet wound in her shoulder and a gushing hand, this lady fights like nothing is deterring her.)

She falls back, trying to remain one step ahead of each slash and stab. But this woman, unhindered by her black fatigues, has obviously been trained for a long time by whatever bad-guy agency she works for.

Well, Darcy has been trained (a handful of times) by the Black motherfucking Widow, so she’s hoping it evens out.

Nat’s lessons finally kick in, although Darcy is very aware that she is barely managing to fend off the woman’s attacks. Part of her brain is screaming about the fact that the three thugs are rounding the car, scuffling with Jane from the sounds of it (Darcy only hears male screams and the buzzing of a taser, so it seems like the little astrophysicist is holding her own quite well) while the other (larger) part of her brain is focused on the fact that the evil woman has just narrowly missed slitting Darcy’s throat.

Darcy huddles behind her knife, trying to make herself as small a target as possible, holding it aloft and close while parrying a vicious blow from the woman. Nat had drilled her in using a blade to protect the vitals—face, throat, and chest.

Knife fighting is vicious, Nat’s calm voice flashes through Darcy’s mind. It only takes one move for an enemy to disembowel you. Keep your distance, move in, jab, move out of range.

Darcy does just that, reaching in to slash at the woman’s legs before jumping back. They circle each other, dancing on the balls of their feet. Darcy tries her best to remember Nat’s teachings, staying on the far side of the woman’s striking arm and controlling the space between them. The woman strikes for her face and Darcy moves with her, stepping back and crouching to slash at her thigh.

She misses, only able to deal a shallow blow that barely breaks her thick black pants and pays for it when it puts Darcy directly in killing range.

The woman’s knife is a flashing arc of deadly silver as she brings it down towards Darcy’s midsection, a blow that will surely spill her guts out across the grass.

She turns at the last moment—knowing that she cannot avoid the attack, but she can at least try to take it somewhere less… lethal.

It still fucking hurts.

Darcy screams as the knife scores across her right hip, ripping through her pants and gouging deep enough that she drops her own blade in a burst of agony.

The woman darts forward, kicking Darcy’s fallen blade away before rearing back. She smirks as Darcy sways on her feet, pink lips widening into a grin as she looks over Darcy’s shoulder.

“Look who we found,” A male voice crows. “Not so fierce without the taser.”
Darcy opens her eyes to see Jane, fighting and screaming and being pulled out from behind the car by her hair. A broken taser is still in her grip, and she seems to be bashing it against the hands yanking her out.

No. No, no, no, no. This is not supposed to be happening.

Where the hell is Tony?

Darcy’s vision is blurring, the image of one of the tall dark thugs forcing Jane to her knees in front of her, strong hands holding her best friend face to the sky.

“No,” Darcy begs. Her hand comes away bloody from her hip, gaze swimming. The wound must be deeper than she thought. “Please, let Jane go. Please.”

“No until we know that you two will cooperate,” The woman says. “I had thought to only take one, but some leverage might make this whole process easier. Hm?”

The blood loss is making Darcy lightheaded, making it hard for her to process exactly how bad this situation is.

Now the evil dudes want them both. Jane and her. Darcy, apparently, as leverage to keep Jane obedient.

Darcy falls to a knee just as the blonde woman accepts a gun from one of the thugs, pointing the sleek black weapon at Jane’s head.

“Will you cooperate, Dr. Lewis?”

The world freezes. Darcy struggles to make sense of her words, utterly confused at what they are asking of her. Cooperation? In being a hostage? In convincing Jane to give up her research more easily?

Her gaze narrows. Everything is hurting—the pain in her face at least dulled by the burning agony of her hip—and all Darcy can see is the sight directly before her. Jane, her best friend, with a gun pressed to her head and terror in her eyes.

“I don’t want to have to do this,” The woman says, although her smirk tells a different story. “But I will.”

The gun cocks.

Jane sobs.

Darcy realizes with true horror that she is not going to be able to get them out of this situation.

She has no other tricks. No options.

“You’ll have to kill me before you hurt Jane,” Darcy manages to spit, staggering up to her feet. “Let her go. Now.”

By some miracle of strength, Darcy is able to stumble forward, pushing herself in front of Jane and staring down the gun. She presses Jane behind her, trying to act as a human shield between her best friend and the gun, to at least give the bullet something to go through before it hits her friend, slow it down, make Jane’s chances of survival as large as possible.

The woman blinks, holding the weapon steadily. “You’re hardly in a place to be making demands.”
She motions at one of the men to the side of Darcy and Jane. He raises a hand, the lines of his fingers encased in some sort of metal (*brass knuckles, her jumbled brain supplies helpfully, *this is going to hurt*), winding up to slash her across the face—

Pain. Splitting, agonizing, world-ending pain rockets through Darcy, ripping through her veins like fire and causing her to fall forward.

The thug’s swing halts as Darcy screams. The burning pain isn’t coming from her face.

It’s coming from her wrist.

Pushing Jane out of the line of fire, Darcy rips up her sleeve in terror. She swallows a scream as she stares at what used to be the Foula bracelet.

Her arm looks like it has been dipped, from wrist to elbow, in molten gold.

Very hot, very painful, very *burning* molten gold.

What. The. Fuck.

“Darcy!” Jane howls, reaching forward but stopped by one of the thugs, who tugs her back into a vise grip. “Darcy—"

The gold is moving, burning up Darcy’s arm, molding into some sort of shape…

“What…” The blonde woman stares at Darcy’s arm, eyes wide. “Is that—”

Utter agony bursts through Darcy, ripping at her insides, spreading from her right arm. It feels like she is on fire, encased in a red-hot supernova and slowly being reduced to a pile of ashes. Darcy crumbles on the pavement, writhing, as her assailants look on in fear.

“Boss,” The thug holding Jane says. “What the hell is wrong with her?”

The blonde doesn’t move. She stands over Darcy, gun still pointed at Jane’s head, and smiles.

“The bracelet,” She breathes, a strange light in her eyes. “Something is happening to the bracelet. Activation—"

The agony crescendos, yanking the fiery pain up into a climax, *burning, burning, burning*, Darcy is screaming and Jane is screaming and the world feels as if it is coming apart at the seams, stars are wheeling wildly overhead, spinning against the sun, light and dark—

“Worthy,” A soft female voice explodes against Darcy’s ears like water, soothing the fire, invoking the images of dancing bonfires and home. “*She is worthy of wielding a weapon of Freyja.*”

The pain abates in a flash, sudden burning turning into a blissful cold solid against her arm.

A bracer. The Foula bracelet is gone—replaced—*changed* into a bracer of the same Asgardian gold, dotted with tiny emeralds and diamonds, protecting her right arm in a smooth, thick band from wrist to elbow.

Darcy turns her arm over, gasping as the gold shifts slightly, a sudden weight sliding smoothly from the bracer into her outstretched palm.

A golden whip, extending from her bracer on a thin chain and fitting perfectly in her palm.
The Foula diamond winks at her, embedded in the hilt of the whip.

“Holy shit,” Darcy breathes. Is she hallucinating? Did her artifact truly just transform before her eyes? What the actual fuck is going on?

(This is worse than that one time Darcy, as stupid undergrad, tried peyote.)

“Get that off of her!” The blond shrieks, wondering evaporating. “I want that weapon!”

Darcy acts without thinking. The whip is perfectly balanced in her hand, truly acting as an extension of her arm, flicking up as Darcy scrambles to her knees—

The body of the whip wraps around the blonde’s gun arm, smooth bands of interlocking Asgardian gold biting into her skin—

Darcy yanks, trying to pull the gun from her hand, but the metal is sharper than any whip should be, suddenly sheering through skin and bone in one smooth movement as the woman wails—

Her hand falls to the pavement, neatly severed. The gun tumbles from the limp grip, landing next to the gruesome appendage.

Holy fuck.

She just cut off a woman's hand.

Darcy dry heaves for a long moment, gaze fixed on the severed hand only a foot from her place. The woman is still wailing, clutching desperately at the stump of her arm—while the sleek metal of Darcy’s whip is drenched in blood, scarlet and gold, pulling her focus—

Jane’s screams rouse Darcy from her panic. She pulls herself up, hip screaming in protest and trying her best to avoid stepping on the pale hand bleeding black clots of blood against the asphalt, to see three guns leveled at her face.

The remaining thugs look terrified, eyeing her whip and bracer with a comic hesitation. Darcy is sure she looks pretty scary at the moment, bruised and bleeding and now with some sort of magical weapon of doom.

A shot rings out, aimed for Darcy’s dominant arm, but deflects off of her bracer, burying itself back into the assailant’s knee.

Darcy jerks, raising surprised eyes to the thugs. “That was easy.”

Her words break the stalemate. The man holding Jane tosses her to the side, aiming at Darcy with his rifle, while the second man throws aside his gun in favor of a strange sort of baton, crackling with electricity.

Not something Darcy wants to get hit with.

The adrenaline dulls the pain in her face and hip, sharpens her gaze and speeds up her brain functioning. Distantly, she is aware that she is still losing a worrying amount of blood, but it doesn't matter in this moment. She dodges the first man’s swing, slashing out with the whip and nearly cheering when it opens a deep line across his abdomen, cutting through his skin and thick clothing like butter—

But it doesn’t take him down. He roars, raises his baton again, buzzing with white-blue sparks,
aiming to sweep her legs out from under her, just as the second man pulls the trigger—

Darcy dances out of range from the baton, lashing out with the whip to push both men back. The shot fires, and Darcy does her very best to twist out of the way while holding baton-dude back—

A sharp, burning sensation cuts across her left bicep. *A graze,* Darcy realizes, panting. *Better than getting fully shot.*

Turning against the man that just fucking shot her, Darcy feels a deep sense of rage. Jane is crumpled against the pavement, Darcy has been stabbed and shot and beaten and forced to watch her friend be hurt…

She raises the whip, suddenly completely unafraid. If she’s going to die here, she’s taking both of these fuckers with her.

The dance begins in earnest. Darcy relishes in the brutal sharp bite of her whip, jutting forward to slash cruelly at the two men. Ducking and twirling, channeling moves that she had only used successfully a handful of times in training with Nat. Darcy evades the baton and bullets, wanting to laugh at the frustrated and pained expressions of the two hulking goons—

She slashes viciously, knocking the gun from the man’s hand, blood blooming through the split skin of his fingers—

The air is suddenly screaming and alive, the roar of repulsor engines and quiet hum of the Avenger’s quinjet hovering above.

“You just *had* to ditch the driver, huh, kid?”

Iron Man lands beside Darcy, robot glare firmly in place and palm repulsors alive and pointed at the two thugs (Darcy is proud to see that they both look pretty beat up for guys that thought taking out a girl would be easy). Darcy keeps her own glare fastened on the men, whip coated in blood and taut in her hand, as her father prepares to blast them into another world.

“Wait!” Darcy throws out a bloody arm in front of his repulsors. “Don’t kill them! We need to figure out who they work for. They wanted to kidnap Jane.”

Iron Man is silent. The circle-gun-things remain bright.

His voice is desperate when he finally speaks. "How badly are you hurt?"

Darcy grins through a mouthful of blood. "I still have all my teeth."

"Jesus, Darcy-"

Lightning cracks through the sky as Thor touches down, barely bothering to land fully before he sprints for Jane, gathering her up in his arms and speaking softly to her. The thump of metal on the road tells Darcy that the quinjet has landed, spilling out what looks like the entire Avengers team and then some.

A full assemble. *That’s* why they took so long.

“Darcy,” Jane cries, fighting against Thor’s grip. Darcy nearly sags with relief at her best friend's voice, grateful that she is no longer unconscious. “Is Darcy okay?”

Darcy pulls herself up, scrambling to her best friend’s side. Jane’s hands are searching, grasping
against Darcy’s bloody palms with relieved eyes.

“Darce,” She breathes. “I thought you were going to die, all the guns, and your screams…”

“I did too,” Darcy admits. “Not sure what happened,” She flexes the gold encasing her arm, making a mental note to ask Thor about magical Norse weapons as soon as he is done holding Jane, and once Darcy isn’t so lightheaded. “I just wanted to keep you safe. I promise I would never let them take you, Janie. I’m so sorry I almost did—”

“Darcy!”

Natasha and Bucky are both racing across the pavement to her, spilling from the quinjet fully armed and suited up. Steve and Clint and Sam seem to be surveying the scene, taking note of the unconscious men that had fallen to Jane’s taser and the passed-out (and now one-handed) woman on the street.

(Darcy tries her very best not to look at the pool of blood surrounding the woman’s arm, almost a mockery of a halo.)

A rogue thug makes a move for Bucky, darting from the treeline to swipe at Bucky’s back with a baton. Darcy doesn’t have time to scream before Bucky has turned, smoothly lifted a knife from his belt, slit the man’s throat, and tossed him away.

Killing should not be as hot as Bucky makes it. Streamlined outfit of all black, vibranium arm glinting in the sunlight, eyes fastened on Darcy like she’s the only thing that matters.

The shock must be truly beginning to set in, because her vision goes spotty for a moment. Darcy almost doesn’t feel the grip of strong, weathered hands shaking her shoulders.

“Darcy? Darcy!”

Her knees give out, head swimming. Darcy had almost forgotten about the slash on her hip. She feels drunk, light.

She whimpers as the hands press against her bullet graze.

“Kid? Darcy? *Fuck,* that’s a lot of blood—”

In a sheer act of will, Darcy fights off unconsciousness. She doesn’t want to be like the blonde woman in the street, bleeding and asleep and vulnerable. Her body has not caught up with her brain, has not realized that the fight is over.

The golden bracer is warm against her skin, whip still firmly in her grasp.

“I got stabbed,” Darcy manages. “And grazed by a bullet, I think. Can I have some stitches?”

Bucky’s face swims above her, pale and tight. “Yeah, doll. We’ll take care of you. I’m going to take you into the jet, alright?”

“No,” Darcy jerks up, body protesting. “Not without Jane. And Thor. And Nat. And Tony.”

“I’m here, kid.” Tony has retracted his armor, hovering above her in a grease stained wife-beater. “You blacked out for a minute. I’m coming into the quinjet with you. Thor is bringing Jane.”

“Where’s Nat?” Darcy asks, trying to pull herself into a seated position. Strong hands push her gently back down.
“I’m here,” Natasha’s smooth voice promises. “I’m right here, Darcy.”

The world is swimming again. Darcy blinks, trying to clear the squiggles. “Thanks for teaching me knife-fighting. I think it saved my life.”

Her pale skin and red hair comes into focus for a moment, wearing an expression of both pain and pride. More human than usual. “You did good.”

“Barely left anyone for us to fight, Darce.” Clint’s voice rings through the air, followed by a long pause. “Holy shit. You took down almost ten guys.”

“Jane helped,” Darcy slurs. “She tased them. I just whipped people.”

Jane breaks through the ring of heroes, followed by Thor. “We need to get her to a doctor. I saw her fighting with that woman, she slashed Darcy—lift her shirt—”

Light hands probe at her hip, lifting the bloody once-white material stuck to her skin, making Darcy wince.

“Oh, shit.”

Bucky’s voice is desperate, raw. “Get her on the jet, now!”

Strong hands are lifting Darcy up, up, up. The scent of spices. Blue eyes peering down at her in worry.

“Stay awake, doll. *Stay awake.*”

The jostling sends hot strings of pain through her, although much duller than before. Her hip is a bloody mess, the bullet graze on her arm is stinging, her face feels hot and tight, her brain feels like it’s been put through a blender.

Suddenly Darcy is in the jet, balanced carefully in Bucky Barnes’ lap. Someone is gently prying at her arms, prodding at her wounds, but Darcy barely feels it. Bucky is muttering nonsense in her ears, low enough that she only catches bits and pieces. *Stupidly brave- taking on ten HYDRA assassins on your own- you’re unbelievable, you know that? -Jesus, Darcy, I’ve never been so scared for someone-*

Darcy jerks in surprise, allowing Bucky’s hands to pull her in closer. *HYDRA?*

And then he stops, Darcy fights against the silence. She can hear that Jane is now speaking, voice raw and rough, recounting the story for the heroes. Darcy fades in and out, catching snippets of her words.

“Darcy was trying to die for me,” Jane sobs. “She kept putting herself between me and the guns, running out from the cover to try and pull them away from me, all because they wanted the Einstein-Rosen Bridge—”

Darcy wants to lean over and pat Jane on the head, tell her that she’s worth it, but Bucky’s strong hands keep her in his lap.

“That Foula bracelet, it was burning her, moving up her arm—and then a woman’s voice rang out, speaking what sounds like Ancient Norse, how you speak on Asgard in formal events, Thor—”

Murmurs. Darcy wants to protest. *Ancient Norse? The voice spoke in English.*
“—and then it was a whip.”

Thor’s booming response is lost to Darcy for a long moment.

More voices. Darcy can make out Tony, right next to her ear, clipped and thick and furious.

“—Steve and Sam have the woman, they’re flying her back for medical treatment and questioning —”

Nat interrupts. “This doesn’t add up. The attack, the bracelet, how roughly they handled Jane. Jane has been living in London, utterly unprotected, for weeks. Why make a grab for her now?”

“We need to find out.” Bucky’s voice grumbles, vibrations rocketing through Darcy. She is pressed up against his chest, tucked under his chin.

Darcy pulls herself from the fog, swatting Bucky’s hands away as she tries to sit up.

The world is spinning, but Darcy manages to meet Thor’s wide eyes with a surprising amount of dignity.

“Worthy,” She croaks, blinking heavily. She lifts her arm, showing him the bracer of gold and trailing, bloody whip. “The voice said I was worthy.”

Silence falls. Thor stands, gently disengaging from Jane’s side, to cross over to Darcy.

“I know, Shield-Sister.” Thor leans down, brushing a gentle kiss across Darcy’s bloody brow. “Valkyrie.”

And then darkness claims her.

Chapter End Notes

Delilah by Florence + The Machine is Darcy’s fighting anthem. Listen to it, please. I was so struck with the image of Darcy fighting against impossible odds, pulling down the pillars around her.
Scream Up to My God, Say "I Do What I Can"

Chapter Summary

AGAIN, I have to warn you guys that I am bending Norse mythology/Marvel canon to my whims. Please do not try to crucify me for not remaining utterly true to historical/mythological beliefs. The comments are always so kind, but I do reserve the right to remove comments that are mean/blaming/rude. I have not encountered many comments that have made me want to quit writing, but it is only fair to explain to you all my expectations when it comes to interacting with me in the comments.

This is a work of passion and fiction that I dedicate my free time to (and love/enjoy!), I do not want it to ever become a source of negativity. Be kind to your fanfic authors! :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Darcy dreams.

She dreams of deep, open water - so vast that she cannot see the bottom, cannot tell up from down - and she is suspended within it, surrounded by endless, endless blue.

Her eyes flutter against the cool waves, fighting to see through the murky depths. Images flash:

A metal whip, coiled like a snake in the palm of her hand, hissing and spitting fiery sparks that burn against her flesh—

A city of silver, sleeping under the sands of Egypt — Mesopotamia — the jungles of Asia — rural Europe — untouched, uncovered, still alive and thrumming with energy—

Stone walls rising from the dirt, rebuilding themselves brick by brick under invisible hands—

New York City skyscrapers collapsing and toppling to the ground, Avenger’s tower falling beneath a cloud of grey, melting into the asphalt and concrete—

Heroes, falling like angels from the sky, falling stars arcing across the horizon—

She gasps and tears her eyes back open to find that she is no long swimming in the deeps, to find—

A woman, standing amidst the rubble that was New York, bare feet bloody against the asphalt.

She stares at Darcy. Her face is so lovely that it should only exist in marble, in paint, idealized by ancients. Her hair is a waterfall of beaten gold falling to her feet, shining against the wreckage of Darcy's world. Her eyes are the same shade of gold, two solid yellow orbs without pupils.

Otherworldly. Not human.

But what draws Darcy’s attention are the lines of molten gold pouring from her eyes, streaking down her pale cheeks.
Tears.

Made of the same precious material as the Foula bracelet.

Asgardian gold.

Darcy reaches out to the woman, stretching one scarred hand towards her figure—

The woman mirrors her, reaching forward with a lovely pale hand held delicately aloft—

The space between them closes and Darcy’s rough palm slides across the woman's soft fingers, she marvels at the dull glow of the woman’s skin, the faint scent of amber permeating the air.

The woman smiles, but her tears do not stop, dripping from the edge of her face to splatter across the bloody wreck of her feet.

She opens her lovely mouth, pink and soft, to speak with the same voice that had proclaimed Darcy worthy, now a cool water against Darcy’s raw wounds.

“I have walked a long ways to find you, dóttir.”

Their fingers intertwine, both gripping tightly. Darcy opens her mouth to speak, to question—

But the woman blows away in a shower of red-gold sparks.

~*~

Darcy wakes up alone in a Compound medical room.

She must not have been out for long, because while she had been redressed in an (ugly) medical gown, the remains of her previous outfit hang off of a nearby chair. Darcy reaches out to gently brush the scarlet stained sleeve of her blouse, still wet with blood.

And she’s totally hooked up to an IV.

Definitely on the good medication, she notes distantly. Her pain is a dull thrum in the back of her mind, twinging only as she shifts and sits up in her hospital bed.

It takes a moment to shake away the fog of her strange dream - Darcy realizes that such a vivid blip of her imagination must be the work of the painkillers, but something about it sticks deeply inside her: the woman, her golden tears and bloody feet, “Dóttir” reverberating in her mind - but Darcy manages to root herself back in reality.

The fight. The Foula bracelet turning into a motherfucking whip. The Avengers crashing the scene just as Darcy was beginning to fall to her wounds.

Speaking of wounds...

Lifting her shirt and carefully avoiding the tubes connected to her arm (other things besides the IV have obviously been poked into her, but she remembers losing a lot of blood), Darcy tries not to gasp at the mess of black sutures across her side. The knife had carved a jagged slash from her hip up to her ribs, thankfully shallow enough that someone was able to stitch it back together. Twenty-
five neat stitches poke up around a thick bandage.

(She’s grateful to have been out for that process.)

The bullet graze on her arm has also been taken care of, three more stitches pulling her skin together under another mass of bandages and astringent smelling lotion.

A quick check of her right wrist reveals that the Foula bracelet is back to its original state—a golden cuff with a huge-ass diamond — leaving Darcy to wonder if she somehow dreamed the entire whip-and-bracer thing.

The pain in her face tells her no.

Darcy suddenly realizes she has never needed to pee as badly as this moment. She pushes herself up, yanks the IV from her arm (ouch, but she can’t stay connected to bed forever), and walks on shaky legs to the bathroom. The wound on her hip flares with pain, but it’s dulled by all the nice painkillers she had been given through the IV she just yanked out.

Business taken care of, Darcy crosses to the sink and peers at herself in the mirror. The woman before her has definitely seen combat. A black bruise rings Darcy’s left eye (call her Spot!), a mottled purple shadow covers her left cheekbone, and the right side of her mouth is sporting a very impressive split lip.

Dark hair loose around her face, bruised features, and bloody lips… Darcy looks like a wild stranger, even to herself.

(When did this become her life? Waking up, beaten and bruised, in various medical facilities?)

Each wound is a reminder of the hand that dealt it. Now that she is feeling a little more clear-headed, Darcy remembers more details of what happened. The thugs. The blonde woman. The Avengers team swooping into save her and Jane, mentioning HYDRA and…

She needs to speak to everyone, get the story together.

Someone (probably Pepper) had left a change of clothing by the shower. Darcy strips off her thin hospital gown (wincing at the patches of material stuck to her skin by dried blood) and runs a warm washcloth over some of her sticky patches, watching the rust-colored water flow down the sink. It is clear that someone had tried to clean her up earlier (please let it have been a doctor), but Darcy feels better for attempting to do it herself.

After she feels relatively clean, she tugs on the soft grey sweatpants (perfect for not rubbing against her hip bandages) and brown STARK INDUSTRIES long sleeve, wrestling with the best way to twist her bandaged arm into the sleeve without twisting the bullet wound.

Now to go find everybody else.

Logically, Darcy knows there must be a good reason that Jane and Tony aren’t waiting faithfully by her bedside. Jane must have been treated for her own wounds (Darcy remembers a nasty cut on her friend’s forehead), but surely Tony wouldn’t have left her alone…

Darcy pads barefoot through the medical bay. She’s starving, her last meal being the chicken tenders she poked at on the jet.

A few white-coated doctors walk by, heading for her room, but Darcy ducks down to avoid being seen.
The last thing she wants right now is to be herded back into her hospital bed and reattached to the IV. She wants food and her people.

But first, food. Good food. Cereal sounds great.

…and she knows exactly where Clint hides his Captain Crunch stash.

~~~*~~~

Bucky had not wanted to leave Darcy’s bedside, despite the fact that he was already on Stark’s shit list for ‘coping a feel’ by carrying his unconscious daughter from the battlefield to the Compound, but Nat insisted.

“Won’t take more than fifteen minutes,” the assassin promised, eyes tight as they looked down at Darcy’s pale form atop the blinding white sheets. Bucky wanted to tuck her in and pull the blankets up around her, but the doctors had stopped him, needing access to her wounds.

(The wound on her side was shallower than originally thought, which was lucky. If it had been even a centimeter deeper Darcy would have needed intense physical therapy to rebuild her muscles, instead of just twenty-five stitches and bed rest.)

“I need to debrief everyone on what I’ve found. Clint pulled up footage,” Nat continued, eyeing the astrophysicist in a nearby chair. “You too, Jane. We need to you to confirm some of the choppier moments.”

Jane looked at her, eyes red. “Haven’t I already?”

Nat shook her head, as apologetic as she had ever been. “Not with the footage. New information has come to light that we need to consider.”

“Who is going to stay with Darcy?” The tiny woman demanded.

Nat frowned, obviously caught between her affection for Darcy and her desire to get to the bottom of the situation. “The doctors will be here. They promised to call as soon as it seems like she might wake up.”

Tony finally spoke up from his perch on the far side of his daughter’s bed. He had seemed to age years in the past few hours, his skin pale, features haggard and heavy. Bucky remembered the look on his face only two hours ago, when he had looked up from his place snarling at Steve to hear the chirping alarm of Darcy’s panic button.

For once, Bucky and Tony had thought the exact same thing: Darcy had run off to Bucharest to participate in a firefight without thinking she would need backup. What the hell horrific thing had happened that actually made her press the panic button?

They hadn’t waited to find out, yet they had still missed almost the entire fight.

Bucky wasn’t sure he would ever get the image of Darcy — indestructible, vivacious Darcy — falling to her knees with a mouthful of blood out of his head.

It would haunt his dreams, he knew.
“Bring the meeting here,” Tony said flatly, eyes not leaving his daughter’s prone form. “We can run the technology from this room.”

“Tony,” Nat countered. “This is not something Darcy should hear as she wakes up.”

~~~*~~~

Clint had pulled video from a nearby traffic camera. The footage of the fight was grainy, but enough to make Bucky wish he had killed more than just one of the assassins.

The entire team was silent as they watched the purple convertible zoom into the frame, spinning and then flipping after a shot to the front wheel. HYDRA operatives streamed out of the hummer.

The fight only lasted about ten minutes, seven minutes from the point after Darcy pressed the panic button and then flew out from their cover to pull focus away from Jane. It was short and brutal. Darcy was a force of nature, even as untrained and sloppy as her moves were (Nat was right, her style truly is more bar-fight than deadly-dance, punching and slashing with abandon), and she kept up valiantly with the trained operatives. Another surprise was Jane, who tased at least five men and — when the charge finally ran out — bashed another over the head with the clunky machine and stole his knife.

(Thor looks a bit cheered by his beloved's ingenuity.)

Their wins didn’t last. Jane was finally subdued, pulled out from her cover by her hair. Darcy’s whip was split into halves, leaving her with only a beautiful bone-hilt combat knife for defense.

Thor’s hands danced with sparks as he watched. Jane, at his side, refused to look away from the suspended screen.

Bucky could have lived his entire life without knowing what it looks like to watch Darcy being stabbed, the vicious slashing movement of her enemy’s knife producing the jagged wound he had seen stitched up only a few hours earlier. He could have lived happily without ever seeing the force one of the operatives used to backhand her once, and then again—

Tony was silent, his knuckles white against the steel tabletop. Natasha was absolutely still. They watched as the bracelet shimmered, even in black and white, and elongated into a sleeve of metal. A whip slithered from the gold, dropping into Darcy’s hand.

The rest of the fight was brutal, but Bucky couldn’t help but be proud of the viciousness his girl summoned against the thugs.

(His girl, when did he begin thinking of her as his—)

“So,” Clint broke the tense silence, as he stopped the footage. “Magic bracelet?”

“Asgardian,” Thor corrected, still glowering. “It is of Asgardian origin.”

“Is that why you pulled me from my kid’s side?” Tony demanded. “To talk about the magic Asgardian bracelet? Because I’m fairly certain that could have been dealt with later—”

“No,” Natasha said firmly, her gaze shadowy. “I called you here because I interrogated the blonde
woman. Janessa Hurlington, thirty-four, American…”

Steve spoke up, brows furrowed. “Who does she work for?”

“She used to work for SHIELD,” Clint interjected. “Before SHIELD fell.”

Silence.

Bucky’s ears were buzzing.

“HYDRA,” Natasha confirmed. “Or what’s left of it, anyways.”

“I thought you took care of that, Cap!” Tony whirled in his seat. “Last I was briefed, HYDRA was cowering in the shadows. That was your mission.”

Steve was silent, staring at the stilled footage with burning eyes.

“Cut off one head,” He quoted, face twisting with hate. “‘And two more shall take its place.’ We pushed a terror organization back into the shadows, yeah, but where do they work the best?”

“Away from prying eyes,” Thor confirmed. “Festering in hidden places.”

Clint leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed and gaze distant. “The new incarnation of SHIELD has been hunting down the loose ends, but clearly the threat is bigger than expected. Organized.”

Natasha nodded. “After interrogation, I can confirm that HYDRA has at least two bases in the New England area, fully operational.”

“Oh, HYDRA’s rebuilding. We can deal with that.” Tony waved away the arguments around him, his fury bleeding into impatience. “But why attack Dr. Foster? The Einstein-Rosen Bridge is great, but they’ve never expressed an interest in it before—”

“They were not trying to kidnap Dr. Foster,” Natasha said tightly. “They were under orders to kidnap Dr. Darcy Lewis for her research on Asgardian relics of importance.”

Silence fell again.

Bucky’s vibranium hand dented the steel tabletop. Nobody but Steve noticed.

“Well, shit.” Clint sunk back into his seat, baffled. "Of course. Can we even be surprised at this point?"

“Darcy?” Sam demanded incredulously. “Our Darcy? The girl that regularly eats her own weight in pizza and beer and passes out on various couches in the Compound?”

“Yup.”

Tony went deathly pale, all the color bled out of his olive complexion. Steve’s jaw hung open; Thor looked murderous…

“If they think I will care less because they target my shield-sister instead of my beloved—” He started furiously, reaching for the hammer at his side. “They are wrong.”

Bucky was nauseous, hot and cold all at once, his metal fist suddenly crushing the table’s edge. The idea of HYDRA still in the shadows, targeting Darcy for being close to him, to superheroes, to Asgardians…
“I pulled this off our friend Janessa,” Natasha reached into the pocket of her skin-tight suit and withdrew a tiny piece of metal. “A blacklist with Dr. Darcy Lewis’ name on it. It details—”

“Excuse me, Sir.” FRIDAY’s voice broke through Nat’s explanation, lilting and pleasant. “I must inform you that Ms. Lewis is no longer in her hospital room.”

Tony and Bucky were up in a heartbeat, followed by the rest of the team, all heading for the door.

“Where is she, FRIDAY?” Tony demanded. “The doctors were supposed to alert us if she woke up —”

“It appears that Ms. Lewis avoided detection by the medical team,” FRIDAY answered. “She is currently in the second-floor kitchen, dining on Captain Crunch. Shall I alert her to your coming?”

“…are you kidding me?”

~~~*~~~

Darcy is trying to figure out how wide she can open her mouth to insert cereal without resplitting her lip when the Avengers (and Jane!) bursts into the kitchen.

“You guys!” She cheers around a mouthful of Captain Crunch. “I was wondering where you had all gone. Fun stuff happening without me?”

“Awwww, Darcy, no.” Clint steps forward, looking mournfully between the cereal box and her full bowl. “You promised you wouldn’t touch my stash.”

“Yeah, well. I’m injured and stuff, so I get special treatment—”

“Yes. You’re injured,” Tony pushes through the crowd of superheroes to give Darcy what she suspects is his best parental glower. “Which means you should be in BED.”

Darcy waves him off. “I don’t feel like being in bed. I feel like hearing what you guys have dug up on the bad dudes.”

Tony covers his flinch with a scowl. “I don’t care what you feel like—”

“Darcy,” says Jane, moving to her side. “Did you rip your IV out of your arm?”

Darcy, who had last seen her best friend with a gun pointed at her face, is momentarily distracted from a proper reunion hug as she glimpses down to see a long line of scarlet dripping down her arm.

“Ahh, fuck.” Darcy curses, turning back to the kitchen bar for a roll of paper towels. “I was a bit out of it when I woke up, had to pee really bad and the IV was stopping me from moving—”

She stops abruptly as Bucky steps in front of her with a first aid kit, pinning her with an intense stare that somehow manages to express relief, frustration, and ‘why the hell are you like this?’ all at once.

(Oh God, she just talked about peeing in front of Bucky Barnes.)
Darcy watches, wide-eyed and speechless, as the Winter Soldier gently takes her arm, wipes away the blood, and applies anti-bacterial gel and a Black Widow band-aid to her tiny puncture wound. His flesh hand is warm on her arm while his vibranium hand peels open the band aid, and smooths it gently across her skin with a swipe of his thumb.

He is totally smirking at the blood that rushes up into her cheeks. Darcy isn't sure if she wants to hit him for that or kiss him.

(When the hell did this become her life?).

Darcy vaguely registers Tony spluttering in the background, and if she keeps looking at Bucky she is going to combust with lust and longing and a desire to kiss him senseless (same as lust, she wonders?), so she quickly turns back to Jane.

“Janie!” Darcy cheers, eyeing the comically large bandage taped to Jane’s forehead. She peers at the smaller woman, noting a few purple bruises on her thin arms (rough handling from the assholes, she assumes), but doesn’t find anything to worry over.

“You’re okay! I was so scared that—”

“I’m fine,” Jane smiles, stepping into Darcy’s embrace. She leans her head against Darcy’s shoulder. “You’re the one who took the hits.”

Darcy shrugs, happy to have her best friend in her arms, alive and well. “Worth it. By the way, do you realize you took down like, five guys? That was so badass, Jane! I didn’t know you had it in you!”

“Well—”

Natasha interrupts, eyes trained on Darcy. “We have information on the incident.”

"The incident?" She repeats. "You mean the fuckers that tried to kidnap us? I have a theory—"

"The operatives that attacked you were HYDRA."

Darcy blinks. “Wait, really? Not my theory. I thought that HYDRA was, like, wiped off the map —”

“Not quite,” Steve corrects. “We dealt them a devastating blow, but terrorist groups are very hard to completely obliterate. They regrouped much more quickly than expected, although our intelligence tells us that they are still small.”

His words soak in. Jane disentangles herself from Darcy’s side, frowning in a way that tells Darcy something is definitely up, and exchanges a meaningful glance with Thor.

Something else is happening, Darcy realizes. She finally takes a second to put the pieces of the past twenty-four hours together: HYDRA, demanding ‘the doctor,’ research...

God, she is such an idiot.

Darcy is suddenly grateful Bucky hasn’t moved, leaning into him to take strength in his solid warmth. His hands twitch, sliding down her side.

“HYDRA did not want Jane Foster,” Natasha finally says. “HYDRA wanted you, Darcy, and whatever it is you’ve been researching for the last four years.”
Darcy stares blankly at Natasha for a long moment, her grey eyes full of an emotion that Bucky cannot discern.

“Kid,” Tony is suddenly at Darcy’s other side, his gaze wild. “I promise, I am going to take care of this—”

But she is suddenly hunched over, gasping for air between deep peals of laughter.

Of all the ways Bucky had thought Darcy may react to this information, he had not predicted this.

(He had expected tears, honestly, and had a very private fantasy of comforting her through them, slinging an arm around her waist and letting her rest her head on his shoulder…

Of course, he hadn’t expected to find Darcy - the girl whom they had pulled from a battle scene with a bullet wound and lacerated hip only six hours ago - calmly eating cereal in the kitchen either.)

“Ow,” She finally comes back up, caught between a grin and a grimace. “I think I re-split my lip.”

It was true. The crazy dame had laughed so hard that the healing scab on her mouth had pulled apart again, blood now staining her teeth. Bucky tries not to flinch, remembering the blood that had wet her lips as she lay in his arms, muttering about Valkyries and Jane and cities under the sand. Dame just can’t keep herself together.

Bucky reaches for a set of wipes in the first-aid kit. She snags them from his hand before he can give into his mother-hen instincts (honed from keeping Steve alive before the serum) and cleans her mouth up herself.

The rest of the team is baffled by her reaction. Tony is gaping. Clint is dangerously close to laughing himself.

“Darcy,” Steve says in his Captain voice, all authority and just a hint of warning. “Why are you laughing about this?”

Darcy dabs at her lip with a grin. “Because, god, it’s so ironic. Tell me you see the irony?”

Natasha raises a brow. “Go ahead and fill us in.”

“Look,” Darcy waves the bloody napkin in the air. “Can anyone here name what I’ve been studying for the past, what, four years?”

Sam raises his hand hesitantly. “…Archaeology?”

Darcy rolls her eyes. “Well, yeah. Try to be a bit more specific.”

“Norse stuff,” Tony offers. “Something about Asgardians.”

“Warmer.”

Jane opens her mouth to offer—
“Not you, Janie!” Darcy commands. “I know you know. Because you’re awesome and my best friend and you listen when I talk.”

Tony looks offended. “I listen when you talk—”

“Yes,” Darcy sighs. “But you don’t listen to the details. And I don’t blame you guys! It’s easy to think of me as kooky and my career as some weird mixing of the humanities and sciences; easy to write me off as just a flighty liberal arts child who zips across the globe and gets herself in trouble.”

Bucky watches as Clint and Sam shift uncomfortably. Tony looks absolutely gutted.

Steve, at least, had always treated Darcy’s work with respect. Even if he didn’t understand it.

“You know I don’t think that about you, kid,” Tony says, pained. “I just worry for you.”

“I know,” Darcy reaches forward to lay a hand over his, suddenly gentle. “You care. I’m not trying to say that you don’t. I just—

“Of all the people to have research that HYDRA wants, who would think of me? Jane is the ‘real’ scientist, with the Einstein-Rosen bridge and teleporting joysticks and particle accelerators. I’m just the sidekick. Hell, it’s hard for me to think of myself differently...”

Bucky feels sick as Darcy’s words trail off.

He stares at the girl in front of him, bruised and bloody and somehow still laughing. How could anyone look at her and not see a hero?

In the month that she had spent back in Scotland, Bucky had done his research on her. He had tried to be subtle, asking FRIDAY for information on Tony Stark’s kid and poking around the places in the Compound she had frequented, but Steve had caught on to him. After the third time Steve found Bucky interrogating the AI about her, he had taken the liberty and used his clearance to open her file to Bucky. The two super soldiers had spent the day on the couch, drinking watery beer and watching videos of a younger Darcy running through the streets of Puente Antiguo with Dr. Foster and an armful of puppies in tow, then later through London with a skinny boy who had barely managed to protect her from teleporting aliens. Not that she seemed to need the kid’s protection. Bucky had smiled as he watched her nail one of the aliens over the head with a nearby crowbar, cheering in victory when the skinny boy pulled her away from the violence.

“Crazy dame,” Steve had commented, eyeing Bucky over his beer. “Just your type.”

Bucky had not seen a sidekick in any of those videos.

“My point,” Darcy continues, interrupting his thoughts, “Is that it’s ironic that HYDRA was after me and not Jane, because it breaks the usual mold. They want the kooky archaeologist and not the brilliant, Nobel-prize winning astrophysicist who can open portals to other worlds? Insanity!”

Silence.

“For the record,” Nat says finally. “I think you’re underselling yourself. What you’ve told me of your research is brilliant.”

“No way,” Darcy breathes. “You listen to my babble?”

Natasha gives her a sharp look. “Yes, I do. Don’t insult me.”
“Not insulting,” Darcy assures her. “Just… surprised. Half the things I say at sleep-o’clock in the morning are bullshit. I would ignore me.”

Sam, raising his brow at the hurt behind Natasha’s gaze, steps in. “You handle things in a very strange way, Darcy. Either you are — as I have said in the past — utterly insane, or stupidly brave.”

“Brave sounds more noble. Let’s go with that,” Darcy replies, grinning.

Natasha is not deterred so easily, though. “Their behavior does seem insane. Which is why you need to explain your research to us. If HYDRA is after you, we need to understand why.”

Darcy finally slumps, leaning her elbows on the counter with a frustrated frown. “Beyond the obvious? Luca Grigore stole the Foula bracelet because it is priceless. An artifact that could pay for his lavish lifestyle a thousand times over. Could HYDRA want it for the same thing?”

“No,” Bucky finds himself speaking, voice rough from disuse. “HYDRA doesn’t care about wealth beyond how it can fund their plans. They want whatever magic or power fuels that bracelet, to twist to their ends.”

(Like they twisted him, he doesn’t say.)

Darcy leans a little more heavily into his side at that.

He’s tempted to snake an arm around her waist — Stark be damned — and pull her in closer, but he is thwarted when she jolts out of his reach with a sound of surprise.

“Wait— Thor! You’re back!” she exclaims, belatedly.

Thor smiles, so full of warmth that even Bucky can feel his admiration and love for Darcy. Bucky does not miss the pained way Thor’s eyes track across her bruised face and bloody mouth, to the careful way she holds her stance to not aggravate her hip.

“I am, shield-sister. I must thank you for your bravery, for thinking to save Jane at all costs. You are truly a warrior.”

Darcy grins so widely, Bucky worries her lip will split again. “Aw, shucks. It was nothing, shield-bro. We both love our tiny astrophysicist.”

The giant Asgardian warrior-prince looks down at the dainty woman at his side, his gaze raw and intimate. “That we do.”

Bucky is intensely uncomfortable with the way Dr. Foster and Thor are suddenly inching closer and closer.

“ANYWAYS, not to break up the hot moment—” the couple finally jumps apart as Darcy waves her right arm wildly, inserting herself between the two with practiced ease. “You can tell me what-slash-why the hell this bracelet went all Witchblade on me!”

Thor’s golden brow furrows. “Witchblade?”

“Pop-culture, never mind.” She hops out of her seat (and Bucky’s orbit, making him miss her warmth instantly) and limps over to the Asgardian, shoving her wrist in his face. “I excavated this bracelet in the Shetland Islands while you were gone, on an island called Foula. It’s obviously Asgardian in origin, and I’ve based most of my research around it, but I hadn’t expected it to… turn
Thor smiles, gently taking Darcy’s right arm in his huge hands. He runs a finger down the knotwork stamped into the gold, which shines brightly even in the artificial light.

“There was a voice,” Darcy starts, her voice suddenly soft and gaze distant. “It said I was worthy to wield ‘Freyja’s’ weapon. And then on the jet you called me… a Valkyrie?”

Thor is silent for a long moment, staring at the bracelet as if it would give him answers.

“I…” He trails off, dropping Darcy’s arm. His voice turns low, serious, pulling the focus of the entire room. “I cannot pretend to know what objects of this power are doing on Midgard. We of Asgard pride ourselves on our weapons; we revere and respect the magic held within them, the sentience. Many weapons of immense power will not allow themselves to be wielded by a warrior who has not proved themselves in some shape or form.”

“Like Mjolnir,” Steve guesses. “It can only be used by you.”

“Yes,” Thor confirms. “Mjolnir has blessed me with certain powers. Although, as god of Thunder, these powers are now my own to wield even without my hammer. If someone else were to be worthy of lifting Mjolnir, they would presumably gain powers similar to mine - although this has never been tested.”

“But - this?” Darcy holds up her arm with the bracelet again. “I’m worthy of using it? Why did it turn into a whip? Do I have badass lightning powers now?”

“No, sister.” Thor shakes his head with an indulgent smile. “The powers that would come with your weapon would come immediately. Asgardian warriors train for hundreds of years to become worthy of our sentient weapons, in both mind and body. Many fail. I—”

He stops, wonder sparkling in his eyes. “There is no instance in all of history of a Midgardian gifted with the ability to use such a weapon.”

“Shit,” Darcy’s eyes are wide in her pale face, ringed with the dark purple of her bruised skin. “That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I called you a Valkyrie,” Thor continues. “Although that is not exactly true. The Valkyries, though long extinct, were once a group of elite female warriors who pledged their lives to Asgard’s throne. You are mortal and have made no such vows, but it was the only word I had to explain this phenomena. The Valkyries would train for millennia to wield such a weapon as you have. In truth, sister, I do not have a title for what you are.”


“Yes, human.” Thor reaches again for her bracelet. “You are mortal; you still bleed and fight of your own strength, the blessing has not changed that. Not quite a Valkyrie, not quite a normal Midgardian. Can you summon the weapon again?”

Darcy stills, her eyes falling to the golden bracelet around her wrist. Bucky sees a flash of trepidation — of fear — cross her pale face.

“It hurt,” She admits. “Like nothing I’ve ever felt. The gold burned.”

“Pain is its own blessing,” Thor intones, sounding more like a true god of old than his usual jovial self. “We are born through pain, from pain. The first use of your weapon must be born from you in
the same agony.”

“That’s shit,” Darcy states flatly.

"That is existence, sister."

“You don’t have to do this,” Tony says quickly, eyeing the bracelet with distrust. “Everybody saw the footage. Looked like it hurt.”

“There’s footage?” Darcy asks, before reigning herself back in. “No, I need to try. What do I do, Thor? Ask it nicely?”

“Channel your will into the bracelet,” Thor suggests. “It is now an extension of you, a manifestation of your will. Call your weapon back into the world.”

Nodding, Darcy steps away from the counter and into the empty space between Clint and Natasha. She slides her eyes shut, ignoring Bucky’s helpless step closer, and takes a slow breath.

Bucky watches carefully, caught between wanting to soothe her worries and wanting to tear the bracelet from her arm. How can an object like that do anything except bring her deeper into the world of violence and danger?

Tony seems to be thinking the same thing. He reaches forward-

Darcy yelps in surprise as the gold begins to bubble against her skin, slowly but surely spreading from her wrist up to her elbow and forming a bracer of gold and jewels. Bucky watches, utterly still, as a small section of the gold drips down into her hand, slithering with sudden weight into—

A whip. Thick golden bands of interlocking metal slide to the floor with a dull thud, pooling at her feet.

“That is one hell of a party trick,” Clint steps forward, prodding the tail of the whip with the toe of his boot. “Darcy the whip girl.”

“Ew,” The girl in question responds, wrinkling her nose. “Awful name.”

Nat turns back to Thor, eyes tightly focused on the flashing movement of Darcy’s bracer. “Why does it turn into a whip?”

“It became the weapon she was most comfortable and skilled with. I believe it will stay in this incarnation when she calls it.”

Darcy gently touches the thin golden chain that connects the whip handle to her bracer, folded softly in her palm.

“Sweet,” Darcy rolls the golden handle between her palms, testing its weight. “I’m a fan.”

“I have never seen anything like this,” Thor muses, reaching forward to let the golden chain slip through his fingers. “It is truly work of Vanaheim, not Asgard.”

“Vanaheim?” Darcy repeats, eyes alight. “As in, where the Vanir dwell?”

Thor smiles. “Yes. Most of the Vanir vanished long ago, Freyja among them. She was old when I was very young — only Odin truly knows their fate, if any being does.”

“Wait, what?” Darcy demands. “Freyja? The goddess of love? Lady who said I was worthy? I
wasn’t sure she was real."

“She had many domains,” Thor corrects. “Half of the weapon-dead from the fields of the slain would go to her hall, Folkvangr, while Odin collected the others.” His gaze is far away, deep in memories of another realm. “By all accounts she was a fearsome and honorable warrior in her own right, yet all we have left of her are tales.”

“If she’s dead, why is her bracelet finding me worthy?” Darcy demands.

“I did not say she is dead,” Thor frowns. “Death, for gods, is not like human death. In the few instances it has occurred, it is more of a… passing away. Energy and will redistributing in the universe. Echoes remain.”

“Echoes,” Darcy repeats. “Is that what happened to Freyja and the Vanir? Some of the Prose Edda by Sturluson describes a war between the Aesir and Vanir, which some scholars believe may have represented two human tribes, but…”

Thor nods. “It is true that such a war was fought, but long, long before my time, and it was not a battle of Earth. Asgard has a legacy of conquest through the nine realms, but Vanaheim stood strong against Odin’s attempts. Freyja was a fierce warrior of the Vanir, yet she also helped to smooth the path to peace between the two realms. She went to live in Asgard after the war ended, a good friend to Odin, and I remember her golden hair flashing through the gardens when I was a very small child—”

Thor clears his throat, shaking the memories from his eyes. “She loved Midgard. She argued with Odin often about you mortals, about the potential you contained despite your short lives. I wish I had been older and listened to her words, else I may have come to Midgard sooner, and under better circumstance.”

He grins at Darcy and Jane, a private smile among friends who have survived death together many times.

“I am glad you came when you did,” Jane beams up at him. “It was fate.”

“It was,” Thor agrees softly. After a prod from Darcy, he resumes his story.

“Freyja visited Midgard often, coming back to Asgard each time exhausted and older. She, Frigga, and Odin closed the hall doors and conversed away from Loki and me many times, as we were too young for such counsel.” His blue eyes grows heavy with memory. “One day she left to travel and did not return. Odin searched through the nine realms, but never found her. We all believed she had chosen to pass away, perhaps spending her last years among you humans she loved so well.”

“Believed?” Darcy questions, grey eyes alight. “As in, you no longer do?”

“Yes,” Thor looks up, jaw set. “If this bracelet truly is a weapon bearing her name, then some essence of Freyja must still remain on this planet; her consciousness still lives.”

He rests a heavy hand atop Darcy’s thick mane of dark hair, as if invoking a blessing.

“And she has chosen you, sister.”

~~~*~~~
Tony, to nobody’s surprise, does not take kindly to this statement.

“Tell her to choose someone else,” He demands, smacking away Thor’s hand and inserting himself between the god and his daughter, backing Darcy into the corner of the kitchen. “I’ve spent a good eight years trying — and failing — to keep my kid safe. First HYDRA, now some washed-up Asgardian goddess? No. Nope. Not happening. I’m exercising my parental rights, drawing a line in the sand.”

“Actually, she’s a citizen of both Vanheim and Asgard, I think—” Darcy attempts, cutting herself off when Tony turns his dark stare on her. “Besides, I’m 26 and you can’t stop me from doing anything. We’ve had this conversation, Tony.”

“Did you not hear anything that Natasha said?” Tony demands. “HYDRA is after you, Darcy. HYDRA. You are not safe out in the real world anymore. The only place that we can keep you from them is here, where you’re surrounded by Avengers at all times -- and even our security needs bulking up.”

“No!” Darcy, suddenly furious, spits angrily. “Tony, I am going back to Greenland. You are not locking me in this compound. If HYDRA wants my research, it means I’m onto something! Which means I need to keep digging! I can’t quit just because they tried to kill me—”

Bucky wonders, for a long moment, if he is destined to care about people who have zero self-preservation instincts.

“Yes, you can!” Tony’s gaze is sharp, bordering on manic - the sign of a man willing to do anything to stop the the situation he knows is coming. “Kid, please. Don’t make me watch you walk out into the world and not come back. This is a terrorist organization, not a group of mobsters. There are limits to even your luck, limits to how much someone without a super suit or powers can endure.”

“I—” Darcy freezes, taken aback by her father’s pleading. It is obvious that this is not how Darcy and Tony usually work, even Bucky can tell.

“I have to do something. I can’t cancel my dig, not when whatever is at the end of it is something HYDRA wants. What happens if something like the Foula bracelet falls into the wrong hands?”

Tony is silent, staring at his daughter as if he has already lost her.

“I’ll take a bodyguard,” Darcy reaches for him. “I won’t take unnecessary risks, I’ll keep the panic button on me at all times—”

“You were an hour away when you pressed the panic button,” Tony says, dangerously soft. “And we were almost too late. How can I trust you to use it correctly across the ocean? And even if it worked, you barely held out ten minutes against a fully trained team. We would be too late again.”

Darcy blinks, absorbing the insult with a swallow. “That’s what the bodyguard is for. To help me fight—”

“One hired bodyguard is not going to be enough against a team of HYDRA operatives,” Steve speaks up, his Cap voice strong but his expression deeply apologetic. “I’m sorry, Darcy, but Tony is right. This is a whole different ball game now.”

“Then send me with a team of bodyguards or mercenaries or something!” Darcy’s voice is
desperate, taking on an edge that twists in Bucky’s chest. “Please, God, please don’t take away my options. You know that I'm not going to let you all do this! I can’t give up my life just because a bunch of hopped up terrorists want me to.” Darcy pauses. "That means they win. I won’t give up because of them, I refuse!”

“It isn’t up for debate,” Tony says sharply.

“What if this is because they found out I’m your kid, or something?” Darcy asks quickly, hope flaring in her eyes. “What if this isn’t about my work, it’s all just an elaborate plan to get to you, barely anything to do with me at all—”

Natasha interrupts this time, her tone soft.

“They have no information on your father,” She says, something like pity in her eyes. “This isn’t about Tony Stark, Darcy - it’s about you. We played our hand in coming to rescue you, HYDRA will know that you have some sort of tie to the Avengers team now, but that is easy to write off for a scientist working for SI. They don't know who your father is.”

“Okay, well maybe HYDRA will stop coming after me now that they know you guys are protecting me!” Darcy looks beseechingly around the kitchen for a friendly face. “I can go back into the field and…”

She continues, desperate, when she finds none. "If HYDRA wants whatever Asgardian artifacts hidden at the end of the ancient trade routes, I need to get there first. This should only tell you all that my work is important and that I need to keep doing it, maybe with an endorsement from the Avengers!"

Nobody speaks. Natasha is blank (possibly weighing the options in her mind), Sam and Clint won’t meet her eyes, Steve’s mind is already made up. Tony is Tony, and even Thor wears an expression of deep concern.

Jane is glaring at Tony and Steve from his side, doubtlessly formulating her argument in Darcy's defense - although considering her silence so far, it seems that even she cannot find a way to justify risking Darcy's safety.

Bucky can’t make himself meet Darcy’s eyes as they fall upon him, keeping his chin down to his chest and his gaze fixed on the tile floor.

How can he help her? He knows HYDRA. They would take someone as vibrant and brilliant and full of life as Darcy and leave her gutted in the dirt.

Or worse, they would take her incredible brain and generous heart and mold her into a weapon — turn her inside out and spit her back out all wrong—

Bucky shuts his eyes for a moment, scrambling against the sudden pain in his head. Despite the lack of trigger words and programming in his brain, sometimes it was still hard to pull himself out of the deep gulf of trauma caused by HYDRA. The skull and tentacle brand is burned into his mind, a mark he will never completely be free of.

Now Darcy was facing the same fate. Robbed of her life and research and passion, all because HYDRA has a blacklist with her name on it.

He knows she isn't someone who can stay trapped in Tony's compound. She would find a way to go out on her own, with nobody at her side. She would take HYDRA on all on her own if it meant saving her work.
Bucky does not stop to weigh his options before he speaks. He can't explain why he is so fixated on Darcy Lewis. All he knows is that the memory of her smile was a light in the darkness for him, and that the longing to be near her has only intensified since their meeting in Bucharest.

Maybe this is all he can give the girl he is already half gone for.

“I’ll go with her.”

Chapter End Notes

ALLLRIIIIGHT. Here we go! Darcy x Bucky! DREAMTEAM!
(only took us thirty chapters to get here!)

So, Darcy is not a Valkyrie. Thor was using such a word because, as stated, it's the closest thing he can think to call Darcy after becoming 'worthy'. She has made no oaths to Asgard's throne and is still human! My fic is not a Darcy-gets-insane-powers fic because I have a deep, abiding love for human Darcy kicking ass in a world full of superheroes. Her heart and her nerve are her biggest weapons. But try to underestimate her and you get WHIPPED IN THE FACE BY HER FANCY ASGARDIAN WEAPON!
Jane Foster loves Darcy Lewis like a sister.

Friends had never been a thing that Jane expected in her life. Mentors? Yes. Romantic interests? Yes, although Jane’s dating history pre-Thor was full of pompous men who had always made her feel small: distant men with dreams that they assumed were bigger and better than hers, never caring that Jane had a brain twice as large as their own.

But it was okay. She was accustomed to the idea of being alone. Never fully understood or loved. Just Jane and the stars, a universe so expansive… how could she ever need anything or anybody else?

Jane told herself she was okay with this loneliness. She forced herself to be okay with this loneliness.

Selvig had entered her life as a mentor. They had an easy rhythm of science and work and the occasional drink in the evening, full of ease and light and bonded by their love for the sprawling stars, for equations scribbled over napkins and paper towels by firelight. It had been new to Jane, almost something she was suspicious of.

And then Darcy had burst in, the intern Jane hadn’t known she needed, hopeless with numbers but dedicated and relentless in her loyalty to Jane’s research. Red lips and a mane of dark hair, pale and scarred and full of life. She was such a strong personality and presence that Jane and Selvig found themselves bending towards her, like vines to the sun.

The three of them had formed a strong bond even before their lives had changed. Darcy as the glue that kept Jane and Selvig grounded, reminded of the perks of human life.

By the time Thor touched down and changed their lives, Jane already considered Darcy her first true friend. The word itself felt inadequate—friend… sister echoes deeply in her heart.

Darcy goes so fast. She’s the living embodiment of a flickering flame, jumping this way and that, imparting warmth and life and vitality—and she doesn’t even understand the effect she has. Every time someone unwraps themselves to bask in her fire, she summons an expression of such astonished delight that Jane knows it is not an act. Darcy truly does not seem to understand the effect she has on people, that there is a reason Natasha Romanoff, Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes and even Tony Stark (despite his title as her father, Jane knows that the bonds of family are not always indicative of love) are so dedicated to her safety and relish in her presence. There is a reason that Jane herself, the reclusive and misunderstood astrophysicist who has never made friends easily or for any substantial length of time, hates to be away from her best friend’s side.

(When Thor is gone it is always Darcy that pulls Jane back into the light, back into the orbit of loving and being loved, away from the dark cold places between stars, where aether flows, where Jane still feels the ache deep in her bones, the echo of something lost…)

It’s Darcy’s magic. Her pull. A blazing star that pulls in the orbit of other planets, unaware of their adoration.

Most of the time, Jane is content to laugh and bask in Darcy’s warmth, allowing her best friend’s comforting movements (always laughing, slinging an arm around Jane’s shoulders, pressing their heads together in solidarity, brushing Jane’s hair back from her head in a move so tender it feels
distinctly mothering, linking their hands in moments of terror).

But ever since Darcy’s plane had returned from Greece without her (thirty hours of terror, Jane begging Thor to use Heimdall’s knowledge, Selvig calling Darcy’s mentors while Jane stayed on the phone with Kara, swallowing her own bitter tears) Jane had been struck with the sudden sinking feeling that Darcy’s light cannot burn forever, not this brightly.

Is her best friend destined to be an Icarus, dipping too closely to the sun, flaring out in a spectacle of light and fire?

Jane watches her friend return from her kidnapping with a fire in her eyes and coals under her feet. Cannot stay still for a second, burning with some inner fuel. Was she running from Tony? Sprinting to her research? A combination of both?

Jane never figures it out. She watches Darcy jet off to Romania and come back with a face full of stitches and thick bandages around her ribs, grinning nonetheless. Tales tall and wild. Sated.

She watches Darcy, unafraid and full of determination, flinging herself from behind the car in a desperate bid to save Jane and her cosmic research— no hesitation, no reluctance, just devotion and blazing grey eyes, bloody hands pressing a taser into Jane's with unmatched ferocity.

Jane watches Darcy hold her own against HYDRA assassins bent on kidnapping them both, watches her lovable and huge dork of a best friend flick a golden whip and split the skin of their assailants with practiced ease, aiming and shooting her pistol with a preciseness that Jane finds bone-shaking. Never flinching at the clotted, black blood coating the road. Never flinching at the blows she takes, as long as Jane stays safe.

The world has demanded that Darcy roll with the hits: superhero for a father, ancient Norse god and Asgardian prince as a shield-brother, apparent chosen of a long forgotten goddess, a life of digging for bits and scraps of history as her calling... and it has molded her into such a bright, blazing thing.

She has survived it all up to now.

Jane looks upon her best friend, bandaged but glowing as she leans against the stainless steel of her father’s home, grinning at Bucky Barnes through a split lip and purple-ringed eyes, cocky and exhausted all at once, and has the sudden, crippling fear that she will be forced to watch Darcy perish, that her best friend’s life will be a short and powerful flare, shaking the centuries—

—but dying, flicking out and fading into embers and smoke, nonetheless.

(Jane has caught the same sad speculation in Thor’s eyes, the same realization for their shared sister. What comes of a mortal tempting fate as she does? Even Tony pays a price, again and again and again. What will Darcy be forced to pay? What blood will line her hands by the end of it all?)

(Shes feels it now, as she watches Darcy perched at the breakfast bar, face bloody and grinning with the Winter Soldier hovering at her side. The certainty that her best friend will burn through her own vitality in a desperate bid to make her mark, to save her work.)

If Darcy Lewis continues this way—dodging bullets and tempting fate— her flame will flare out, bright and sudden. Leaving only ash on the wind.

Ash in Jane’s hands, falling through her fingers, invisible even in the starlight.

But even with such a future looming, how Jane ever ask Darcy to give up what she loves? It would
be like Thor asking Jane to give up the stars. It would break her, saddle her with a life barely worth living, devoid of what makes her, her. That is what Tony does not understand.

Jane knows that she would die for the stars, die before she allowed herself to be locked away and her life’s work to be pried from her hands. Gladly.

Darcy would too.

The thought strikes Jane with the certain realization that she cannot stand by and continue to watch this happen to her best friend—watch as a handful of superheroes argue over Darcy’s fate like she isn’t even there. Watch as her choices and autonomy are ripped from her hands.

Winter Soldier as a bodyguard or no, Jane has a phone call to make.

Only one woman will know how to back Darcy up properly.

~~~*~~~

Dr. Eleanor Margaret Juniper is no stranger to answering calls in the middle of the night.

Although, a desperate call from an astrophysicist is new. Usually she gets messages from old spurned lovers, still waxing poetic on their lost love, or bitter enemies promising retribution. Same thing, really.

(Dr. J still receives two yearly calls from a Sultan in Perak, a man she had dalliance with in her youth who both hates her and still begs her to return to his land for marriage. She usually hangs up on him when the tears begin.)

Dr. Jane Foster fills her in quickly. After two shaking sentences from the woman, Dr. J is ready to act. A quick text confirms that her pilot friend is willing to fly them to New York despite the late hour, no questions asked.

The troops are gathered within thirty minutes.

~~~*~~~

Darcy is very certain that she is having a wacked-out hydrocodone fever-dream right now.

Because none of this should be happening. HYDRA wants her? Woah, a bit unbelievable. Tony is trying to keep her stuck in the compound? Okay, believable. But Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier, volunteering to become her personal anti-HYDRA body guard while she excavates trade routes? She must be dreaming.

Apparently not, because as Darcy stands frozen with her eyes locked on Bucky, the rest of the Avengers begin to make their opinions known.

(Distantly, Darcy notices Jane stalk from room with a telltale hard glint in her brown eyes—usually
a look that tells Darcy her friend is on the verge of either making a scientific breakthrough or physically expressing her anger… like that time she slapped Loki.)

(Darcy isn’t sure how she would feel if Jane bitchslapped Tony. Both proud and upset?)

Of course, Tony is dead against this.

“No,” He stands, cheeks red and brown eyes furious. “If you think I’m going to let the Winter Soldier follow my daughter around—”

“It’s not a bad plan,” Nat interrupts, fastening her cold glare on Tony. “Darcy is right. If HYDRA is interested finding possible Asgardian weapons we have a responsibility to find them first. We would be remiss not to use Darcy’s research and expertise. Coulson had recommended her as an agent after Puente Antiguo—”

“No way, seriously?” Darcy questions suddenly. “I could have been a SHIELD agent?”

“See,” Tony demands furiously. “Look what you’ve done! Now she’s going to get the idea in her head that she’s agent material!”

“I am agent material!” Darcy pipes up, unable to keep the smile from her face. “Coulson seriously recommended me? That’s flattering. I would have totally taken that into consideration.”

“Exactly,” Nat smirks. “She’ll do fine in the field. Instincts are already there.”

“But to put her in the line of fire?” Clint pipes up. “A civilian—”

“Bite me, asshat!”

“Darcy,” Tony sighs. “You are a civilian, you realize that, right?”

Darcy snorts, sharing a grim smile with Jane. “A civilian who, with the help of her badass astrophysicist best friend, took down ten HYDRA assassins. And a civilian with an advanced Asgardian weapon, who also calls most of the Avengers good friends.”

Thor nods. “The fact that the bracelet has chosen her marks Darcy as a warrior in Asgard’s eyes. She is worthy of combat.”

Darcy eyes the bracelet for a moment. “Thor, could somebody else wield this weapon? Or is it like Mjolnir, they would have to be worthy too?”

“I would guess that the weapon would have to judge another worthy,” He confirms. “Tony and the doctors attempted to remove the bracelet from your wrist while you were unconscious, to check the skin beneath for burns, but it would not move. For better or worse, it will remain on your arm unless you choose to remove it, or you fall in battle.”

“Sweet,” Darcy breathes. “See? I’ll be fine.”

“This could work,” Steve says, blue eyes moving between Darcy and Bucky. “Darcy is our best bet at finding these items before HYDRA does. If she has an escort who could defend her, I don’t see a reason we need to stop her.”

Darcy’s mouth twists up. “Like you could stop me.”

“Bucky needs to lay low,” Nat confirms. “I would offer to go with Darcy myself, but Steve and I are needed for talk over the Accords. Bucky knows how HYDRA operates and how to take them
“He’s the next best option for Darcy’s protection in the field.”

“In the field?” Tony demands. “We are not justifying this—we are not allowing her to go back out there. I am not.”

“I’m twenty-six years old,” Darcy retorts. “Technically you’re only listed as my legal father on a handful of redacted SHIELD files.” Her gaze travels to Bucky, vulnerable. “If Bucky is serious about helping me, I’m going. Sorry, Tony.”

“Course I’m serious,” Bucky’s face stays still, but Darcy can tell that the side of his mouth nearly twitches up. “Gets me outta Avenger’s hair, keeps Tony’s kid safe. Good deal.”

“Right,” Darcy sends him a smile, ignoring the butterflies in her own stomach. “Thanks, hunk, you’re hired.”

“Hunk?” Bucky’s blue eyes are alight, smirk in place. “What do ya mean by that, doll?”

“This is it,” Tony moans, dropping his head into his hands. “Someone just kill me now. I’m outnumbered, and my daughter is flirting with a trained Soviet assassin.” He directs his gaze to Darcy. “Is this revenge for me missing out on your teenage phase? You want to punish me by running away with a punk rocker?”

“Punk?” Bucky and Steve echo.

“No time to explain,” Darcy says automatically. “Just imagine black leather jackets and pants. Maybe some spikes.”

Bucky’s dark brows shoot up (interest?) while Steve’s cheeks go pink.

Darcy has a lot to teach them both.

~~~*~~~

Despite Tony’s anger, he still dotes on her with all the earnestness of a worried father.

Steve and Natasha are making plans for this new tactical change. Of course, nobody asks Darcy if she wants Bucky around (alright, she does, but she would still like someone to ask her permission for this change rather than continuing to decide for her… but it is a battle she plans on fighting another day, when less is at stake) and it seems everyone is content to talk around her.

It isn’t until she nearly nods off into her Captain Crunch (the exhaustion and painkillers hit hard and heavy and sudden) that the Avengers seems to remember she is with them.

Darcy allows Bucky and Tony to lead her back to the hospital room when her vision begins to get funny, leaning on Bucky as the pain returns to her hip with a vengeance.

Stab wounds, right?

She is asleep before her head even hits the pillow, her last memory being warm and rough hands lowering her into the pillows.

(Tony had said something earlier about the infamous Avengers painkiller mix—enough to relax
Captain America, which means it knocks Darcy on her ass.)

When she awakes, it is early morning and she is suddenly struck with the fact that Bucky Barnes is now supposed to be traveling with and protecting her.

Why did he do that? Why did he volunteer? Does he feel like he must, maybe because of the way she had jokingly demanded him a month earlier?

Darcy tries to fall back asleep, but her thoughts haunt her. The Foula bracelet is warm against her wrist, a comforting weight, but all she can imagine is that Bucky is regretting his words, that he feels trapped. Shackled to her.

Peeking up from her bed to peer down the empty hallway (FRIDAY informed her that Tony had stayed at her side for another hour after she had fallen asleep, apparently wracking his brain for ways to convince her to stay until Pepper had returned from her business trip and pulled him away for some rest), Darcy comes up with a plan.

She’s going to talk to Bucky herself.

~~~*~~~

In hindsight, it may have just been easier to pull out her IV again.

She almost feels like a new woman. The pain medication has taken the edge off her agony and a warm shower (keeping her stitches dry with a practiced ease that tells Darcy she gets hurt waaaaaaay too often) makes her feel human again, the memory of Tony’s desperate expression washed away with the dirty water. Darcy dozes lightly as the compound lights dim, waiting for the doctors to believe her sleep is true.

If HYDRA wants her work, Darcy needs to stop them.

But first she needs to talk to someone important.

Bucky Barnes.

The doctors are easy to dodge. It is nearly three in the morning by the time Darcy decides to act. She waits for their shifts to change, counting on the chaos of paperwork and overtired nurses to hide her steps, despite the fact that she pulls her new IV along for the ride.

(It’s a hilarious picture, she knows. A pajama clad, bruised woman trying to be stealthy while carting an IV at her side—but somehow it works.)

Darcy ducks as a group of white-clad doctors move from the compound break room to back to the labs, twisting the IV pole horizontal to keep it from sight. She breathes a sigh of relief as they pass her, unnoticed.

The hallways of the compound are winding, almost identical in the Stark décor of glass and steel, but Darcy remembers her way. The residential suites are nearby, but she needs to act quickly before FRIDAY alerts Tony to her wandering.

(She’s honestly surprised that FRIDAY hasn’t spoken to her or sold her out already. FRIDAY
doesn’t have the sense of humor or honesty that JARVIS seemed to have, making allowances for Darcy and Clint in their never-ending prank wars against Tony… before he became Vision.)

(God, what a headache.)

Darcy turns the corner, rehearsing quietly in her head what she is going to say to Bucky (do you seriously want to follow me around? Why the hell did you volunteer? Thank you, but also, we barely know each other? Did I drool on you when you helped me to my medical bed? Can we kiss more?) and trying to remember exactly which room Tasha had mentioned he had been assigned. On the right of Steve, back section…

She doesn’t get a chance to scan into the residential area, because thin but strong hands pull her to the side, down an adjacent hallway cloaked in shadow.

Well, shit.

“Lewis!” A warm voice hisses in her ear, yanking her upright. The IV jerks back, yanking itself out of Darcy’s arm with a sickening pop. She hisses in pain, fighting against the hands that hold her. Tony had said that the Compound security needed to be bolstered against HYDRA—

“Lewis!” The voice admonishes, causing Darcy’s eyes to pop open. “Open your goddamn eyes!”

Darcy obeys, opening her eyes to see the face of—

Dr. J.

Here. In the Avenger’s Compound.

(Why is she not as surprised as she should be?)

“Dr. J? What the fuck are you doing?”

Her mentor smiles, baring a mouth full of pearly teeth, familiar lines of tanned skin stretching in amusement. “Heard you need a jailbreak, Lewis.”

“What, from Tony?” Darcy snorts, extracting herself from the wall and trying to calm her racing heart. “I have him handled. Who called you? Are—shit, Dr. J, are you armed?”

“Foster,” Dr. J answers, unapologetically lifting her pistol to the side, defensive. “And of course, I am. You think I would break into a complex of superheroes without a gun?”

“I’m hoping you weren’t planning on shooting anyone—”

“Only if I had to.”


“I wouldn’t shoot to kill,” Dr. J smirks. She pauses, grey brow furrowing as she runs a critical eye over Darcy’s Stark Industries pajamas and injuries. “Shit, Lewis, you look like someone ran you through a blender. I hope you killed whoever wrecked your face like that.”

“I did. Ever heard of HYDRA?” Darcy questions, allowing Dr. J to prod at her cheeks. “Turns out Dr. White isn’t the only one who wants my research. Might even be working with this terrorist group. They tried to grab Jane and I. Which I guess you already know.”
Her mentor nods, gaze hard. “Jane filled me in on the attack. She was worried about you. Said Tony Stark was wanting to keep you from the field, locked up here like some princess.” Her tone darkens with disgust. “Figured some help getting you out would be needed.”

Darcy is overwhelmed for a moment, touched by the fact that her mentor has somehow infiltrated the Avenger’s Compound in order to free her. Dr. J is standing before her, smirking in a darkened version of her usual outfit—dark pants tucked into tall boots, grey blouse hanging off her tanned skin, white hair tied up in a careful tail. Her pistol is still held aloft, aimed lowly at the open hallway before them, ready to defend against assailants.

“I do need to get to Greenland,” Darcy admits. “But Tony cracked! Or— well, he’s about to crack. I agreed to take a bodyguard on the dig for protection, which is a whole other can of worms, but I was planning to talk to you about the team. If HYDRA is willing to kill to get my research, I can’t let innocent undergrad and grad students to get caught in the crossfire.”

Dr. J shifts uneasily, almost sheepish. “About the team—”

“Have you had contact with them?” Darcy asks, thinking of her beloved master students—Mohammad, Yael, Gregory, Charlotte—and her favorite and fearless undergrad, Scout. God, she truly does miss them.

“I’ve had contact with your master students,” Dr. J admits slowly, hazel eyes darting to the side. “And Scout, because she refused to be left out of the loop. In fact, they are—”

Dr. J is interrupted by the metallic click of a gun cocking. Darcy immediately moves, pressing herself in front of her mentor and reaching for a gun she doesn’t have—

The Foula bracelet grows hot against Darcy’s wrist, reacting to her sudden agitation by expanding into the bracer of gold, the weight of the whip falling into her hand.

Handy, that’s for sure.

"Holy fuck, Lewis!” Dr. J hisses, eyeing her golden weapon with appreciation. "That's some party trick."

Darcy ignores her attempts to push forward.

“Step away from her,” A melodic voice orders. “Now.”

The voice is familiar, but Darcy’s nerves are so fried from her run in with HYDRA only two days earlier that she doesn’t let that comfort her. The blonde woman is being held in the facility, if she escaped…

Her mentor has already been shot once in Darcy’s name, she’ll be damned if she lets it happen again.

Darcy turns on her heel to face their attacker, coiling the whip in her hand and making sure to keep Dr. J firmly behind her. She raises the tendril of metal to find—

Natasha, clad in soft tights and an exercise top, has a silver handgun trained on Dr. J. Her skin is smooth and pale in the soft light, red curls perfect despite the late hour, and her green gaze is unforgiving as it bores into Dr. J.

Behind her, palming a knife and wearing an expression that reminds Darcy of why he’s called the Winter Soldier, is Bucky, looking rugged in black sweatpants and a tight sleep shirt. His hair is
tangled, framing his sharp jaw...

Not the time, Darcy, not the time.

“This is explainable,” Darcy says immediately, dropping her whip and lifting her hands in surrender. “Let me introduce you to my trusted mentor, Dr. Eleanor Juniper, crazy woman who sometimes breaks into Avenger’s facilities.”

“Successfully,” Dr. J corrects, keeping her own pistol and steely gaze trained on Natasha. “Wasn’t nearly as hard as it should be. Redhead here should beef up security.”

Natasha’s gaze narrows. Darcy realizes that she probably shouldn’t have dropped her weapon—Dr. J’s mouthing off might just get her killed.

“Step away from Darcy,” Bucky repeats, drawl low and dangerous. He is absolutely still, but the blaze in his eyes promises danger. “Or I’ll be forced to remove you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Dr. J snarks, shifting her eyes to Bucky before grinning in realization. “Ah, I remember you, Broody. Saved Lewis back in Romania and gave her the best kiss of her life. Could never forget an ass like yours.”

Darcy jerks, turning to face her unapologetic mentor with horror. “Dr. J! You can’t say shit like that!”

Dr. J shrugs. “I don’t lie, Lewis. Too good a backside to forget.”

“God, I—” Darcy sighs, trying to take a breath and center herself. “Alright. Can we all put the guns and knives down? I know this woman, she’s an idiot, but I vouch for her. No threat.”

“She scrambled FRIDAY and infiltrated a high-security Avenger’s facility,” Natasha answers, gun never wavering from Dr. J’s face. “I would say she’s a pretty large threat.”

Darcy’s eyebrows shoot up, casting a bewildered look to her mentor. “Holy shit. You messed with FRIDAY? How the hell did you do that?”

Dr. J grins dangerously. “Had an affair with a Chinese government scientist back in ’95, during an excavation at Xian. She was a genius when it came to tech. Gave me one of these and promised it could knock out any wireless intelligence for a max of thirty minutes.”

The tall, older woman slowly opens her left hand—gun still trained on Nat, much to Darcy’s growing annoyance—to reveal a thick silver disk, glowing green and purple with LED lights.

Natasha’s head tilts, expression betraying nothing. “I’ve never seen a scrambler like that.”

“Of course you haven’t,” Dr. J shoots back. “It’s one of a kind. And your precious security system should be back online within thirteen minutes, which means we need to go, Lewis. Now.”

“You aren’t takin’ her anywhere,” Bucky growls, stepping forward. “Drop your weapon.”

Dr. J bristles, moving the barrel of her gun from Nat to Bucky. “I’m not the type who is easily manhandled into submission, son.”

Bucky smirks. "Willing to bet I'm older than you, lady."

“This is ridiculous!” Darcy darts forward, pushing herself against the firing end of Nat’s gun and bodily pushing Dr. J backwards. “Everyone drop the murder sticks. I’m serious.”
After leveling her best glare at Bucky, he slowly puts his knife back into the sheath at his side, glowering. Dr. J lowers her weapon as Nat does, tense and neither looking happy to be doing so.

Nat raises her free hand to her ear, revealing a tiny communicator. “Calm down, Tony. We have her.”

“Alright,” Darcy breathes, trying to smother her annoyance. “Good. Now we can talk without worrying about dying.”

“Jet is on the roof,” Dr. J says, ignoring the two assassins and turning to Darcy. “Your team is waiting for you, and if we want to stay off of Stark’s trackers we need to leave before his AI gets back online.”

“The team is here?” Darcy demands. “All of them?”

“Just your grad students,” Dr. J confirms. “And Scout. Even Joseph came along for the ride, once he heard you were being held here against your will.”

“All in the jet? Where did you get a jet, anyways?”

“Yes,” Dr. J says testily. “Which is why we need to bypass Thing One and Thing Two here and get the hell outta dodge. I got it from an old pilot friend.”

“God, Dr. J, how many ‘friends’ do you have?”

The woman smirks. “Enough to get out of a sticky place or two.”

“If you’re leaving, then I’m comin’ with.” Bucky steps forward, warm against Darcy’s side. “That was the deal.”

Dr. J raises a brow. “A deal, Lewis?”

Darcy shakes her head, trying to take in all this new information as gracefully as possible. “I’ll explain. Look, I can’t just leave Tony in the middle of the night with no information. Bring the team down off the roof and let’s all chat, some introductions need to be made.”

“You sure?” Dr. J fixes her unyielding gaze on the six-foot-tall super soldier at her side. “Ten minutes left on the clock. I bet we could fight our way out of here.”

Nat grins in challenge. “You really think so?”

“Stop!” Darcy interjects again, waving her arms wildly. “Yes, I’m sure. Radio them inside, I’m going to go find an empty conference room for us all to figure things out in.”

She turns to Nat. “Bring Tony and anybody else who will feel left out. My team needs to know what they’re getting into before we all end up too deep.”

~~~*~~~

Nat accompanies Dr. J to the roof, both women glaring distrustfully at each other, while Bucky helps Darcy find her broken IV and wheel it to the labs.
“Yanked it out again?” He asks, eyeing her bloody arm. “Thought you learned better than that last time.”

“I didn’t pull it out,” Darcy grumbles, allowing Bucky to pick up the metal rod of her IV and walk beside her. The bracelet had folded itself back into jewelry once the danger had passed. “It popped out when Dr. J grabbed me. Can’t say I’m looking forward to having to put it back in.”

Silence falls as they wrangle the IV, and Darcy uses the time to survey the man next to her. Bucky’s previous fury is seemingly diminished, but she can still see the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes track over her face as if looking for injury.

“That Dr. J…” Bucky trails off, brows drawn. “I don’t know if I trust her.”

“Well, duh, she just had a gun on you.”

"Could have disarmed her, was more worried about you." Bucky looks down at her, edges softening. “But you trust her?”

“With my life,” Darcy says simply. “I wouldn’t have survived Bucharest long enough to run into you if it wasn’t for her. The woman just orchestrated a break-in to a secure facility because she thought I was trapped. Once took a bullet to the shoulder for me. Loyal to the end, my mentor is.”

Bucky looks mollified by her logic (apparently taking a bullet for someone spells loyalty in assassin-speak) and gently reaches out to steady Darcy’s arm as they pad up the stairs.

“What were you doing out of bed, anyways?” He finally asks, those blue eyes roving over her, burning. “Chaos erupted pretty quick after FRIDAY broke down and the doctors sent a message saying you were gone.”

“Er, I was coming to see you, actually.” Darcy admits, trying not to feel guilty for waking everyone up. Stupid, overprotective Tony and his all-knowing robots.

Bucky looks stunned. “Me, doll?”

“Yes! I mean, I wanted to talk to you about the whole ‘HYDRA-almost-killed-you-and-now-I-feel-responsible-for-keeping-you-safe’ thing. It’s really kind of you to want to help me, especially since I’m pretty certain Tony was ready to chain me to my bed, but you don’t have to, I can manage—”

Bucky skids to a stop, dropping Darcy’s arm.

“What?” She turns, stopping short at Bucky’s dark glower.

“You think I’m going with you because I feel responsible?” He asks, pink lips pulled down in a frown. “Because I feel guilty?”

“Well, I mean—” Darcy stops. “Why else would you run around the world with a girl you barely know?”

Her words hit him like a blow. Apparently, judging by Bucky’s fallen expression, it was the wrong thing to say.

“Feel like I’ve been getting’ to know you pretty well,” He says slowly, true hurts flashing in the lines of his frown. “Wouldn’t have let you get close enough to kiss me if I didn’t trust you.”

Darcy blinks. “That means you decided to trust me in the first ten minutes of us meeting,” She
points out. “In the middle of a fight with mobsters. Before you even knew my name.”

Bucky shrugs, gaze raw. “I’d been away from society for a while. Didn’t have much faith in people after escaping.”

“Are you serious? You trusted me because I was the first decent person to stumble across you in your hermit days?”

Her disbelieving tone draws a dry smile from Bucky. “Hermit or not, I knew you were something special as soon I saw you in that alley, staring down those thugs like you were gonna chew on ’em and spit ’em back out again.”

Darcy wrinkles her nose at his imagery, fighting a grin. “Ew.”

“I thought it was inspiring.” His tone drops, blue eyes burning in a way that makes the air between them warm, electric. “You reminded me to fight fearlessly. I needed the sign.”

God, Darcy can’t stop herself from staring at his face—gaze tracking from his bright eyes to his lips, the line of his jaw under dark stubble, the soft tendrils escaping the bun he had gathered his hair into, framing pale cheekbones.

Bucky Barnes of the 40s was handsome in the history books, yes, with his boyish grin and carefully combed hair. But this Bucky? He was like kryptonite made especially for Darcy’s taste—long dark hair, sharp jaw, possessing a coiled energy in his stance and movements that give him a dangerous edge. Stalking like a predator, singularly focused on her...

Just slap a few tattoos and a pair of ripped jeans on him, and all of Darcy’s bad boy fantasies would be fulfilled.

“Excuse me, Dr. Lewis and Sergeant Barnes, but Sir and Miss Potts are requesting your presence in conference room 3A.”

The moment breaks with FRIDAY’s words. Darcy jumps back, tearing her hungry eyes from his face, while Bucky frowns up at the AI’s voice.

“We should—” Darcy stumbles, hip flaring with a dull pain. Bucky is suddenly beside her, his flesh arm darting out to wrap around her waist, balancing her.

“Ripping out that nice pain medication isn’t fun right about now, huh?” He smirks, humor dancing in his eyes. “I’ll request another IV once I’ve got you settled.”

Darcy glares up at Bucky, not needing to fake her look of betrayal. “You’re just as bad as Tony! Medication this, you shouldn’t be walking that—”

“You shouldn’t be walking,” Bucky confirms. “Nasty slash wound inflicted two days ago means bed rest and fluids for at least another day. In fact…”

Darcy yelps as Bucky sweeps her Gryffindor sock clad feet (yes, she does rep her Hogwarts house as much as possible) up from the tile and carefully balances her, bridal style, in his ridiculously strong arms.

(His forearm is warm under her knees, the vibranium arm wrapping under her and cradling the back of her elbow. Both feel better against her skin than they should.)

“Hey!” She squawks, resisting the urge to kick her feet like a toddler. “Put me down, visigoth! I
can walk!”

“You can walk,” Bucky nods, not bothering to hide his pleased smile as he carries her through the maze of hallways, back from the residential areas to the office units. “But you shouldn’t. I’m just doing what the doctors ordered.”

“I’m a doctor, too! And I say you should put me down, right fucking now!”

Bucky hums, pretending to consider her words. “How about this, doll? I’ll put you down as soon as you show me your doctorate of medicine.”

“Unfair,” Darcy protests weakly, beginning to realize that being cradled in Bucky’s arms is A) very warm and nice (he smells like smoke and cloves, probably from the expensive soap Pepper has no doubt loaded his bathroom with) and B) the careful way he holds her really does stop the jagged wound on her hip from aching.

Bucky seems to be suppressing his look of triumph as she settles. Once the hallway of glass conference rooms comes into view, he gently sets her down on her feet, offering his arm.

Darcy is grateful he has enough sense to not carry her in and invoke Tony’s wrath. She pushes open the steel-and-glass door with a strange sense of trepidation, suddenly aware that this colliding of her two worlds may change everything.

To her surprise, the long silver conference table is already lined with Avengers. Tony and Pepper at the head as they glance at a map of the Compound, floating midair and comprised of light particles. Clint is sprawled in a chair, dozing lightly, while Thor sits at his side, dressed in a fluffy robe. Jane rises as Darcy hobbles in, eyes wide and apologetic, but Darcy waves her off with a smile.

(Which is good, because Jane once confided in Darcy that Thor liked to sleep gloriously naked, which is fine, Darcy does that too on occasion, but after the second time Thor answered Jane’s door bare… they had to talk about the Midgardian concept of pajamas.)

“Heya spawn,” Tony greets, lifting his dark eyes to his daughter, subtly scanning her for injury. He’s in his usual night outfit of black sweatpants and a grey t-shirt, which Darcy is grateful for (she has no desire to ever know if Tony is the type to sleep in briefs, or worse… like Thor). “Your friends broke my AI and landed their ugly aircraft on my roof.”

“Our roof,” Pepper corrects, turning kind eyes to Darcy. “How are you feeling, Darcy?”

“Totally fine,” Darcy says, lifting her hand in a sort of awkward salute as she falls into the chair next to Steve. “Peachy, really. I think I heal really quick, because I feel like I could walk out of here tomorrow and be just fine—”

“Nice try,” Tony says, not looking away from his map of lights and air particles. “Two days isn’t long enough to recover from a stab wound. Docs say you need at least another day of fluids, since you keep escaping your room and ripping out your IV.”

“Need to get another one down here,” Bucky says, taking the chair on her other side. “Can you send one, FRIDAY?”

“Yes, Sergeant Barnes. It appears that it is time for Dr. Lewis’ dose of painkillers.”

“I don’t want to be high for this conversation,” Darcy protests, trying not to notice Steve’s disappointed face. “But, fine. And, uh, sorry about FRIDAY, Tony. Dr. J said the scrambling was
only supposed to last thirty minutes.”

“It did,” Pepper confirms, smoothing her silk robe (Darcy feels more guilt as she notices everyone in the room is dressed clothing meant for sleep, although Clint’s purple, fuzzy pajama pants are really adorable). “FRIDAY came back online after exactly thirty minutes, and we haven’t found any damage to her system. But it is worrying that technology exists that is…”

“Capable of knocking out MY technology, Stark technology, which shouldn’t be possible.” Tony looks more put out than Darcy is used to seeing—usually, when he is upset, it’s because she’s gotten her teeth knocked out in a fight or something. Although, this is still basically her fault. Scrambling his tech, trying to escape in the middle of the night...

Yeah. She owes Tony a pretty nice Father’s Day present when the holiday comes around.

“Dr. J said the device was specially made for her,” Darcy volunteers, trying not to sink down in her seat. “She, uh, had a lot of flings back in the day. It was made by a woman she was sleeping with, worked for the Chinese government or something.”

Tony looks intrigued by this (hopefully by the top-secret, advanced Chinese technology, not by Dr. J’s past love affairs) and flicks a bundle of lights off the map.

“Great tech,” He murmurs. “I’ll ask your mentor if I can get my hands on it next time she’s around, figure out how it was able to bypass my firewalls…”

“About that,” Darcy looks nervously between Bucky and Pepper. “I guess Nat didn’t tell you, but Dr. J brought my entire excavation team here. Jane called and said I needed back up, which is true, but they took that to mean I needed a jailbreak and…”

“I knew that,” Tony scoffs. “Foster explained it. Good friend for you, but uncool on the ‘inviting hostiles into our home’ part.”

Jane rolls her eyes. “They aren’t exactly hostile, Tony. And what did you expect me to do, watch while you strong-armed Darcy into giving up on her research?”

“For me for trying to keep my daughter away from the bloodthirsty terrorist organization with a vendetta against her—”

“Hardly a vendetta,” Darcy offers. “More of an intense interest, I would say.”

Clint snorts, covering his mouth with his hand as Bucky shoots Darcy a sharp look. “Not joke material, doll.”

“The moment I can’t make jokes about the situation I am in is the moment I know that life is not worth living,” Darcy says sagely. “I think it’s the one thing Tony and I have in common.”

“One thing?” Tony looks wounded. “I have it on good authority that you and I are very alike—”

“You are,” Pepper and Steve confirm at the same time.

“Anyways, my team is coming down from the roof to chat,” Darcy explains. “I figure I need to tell them the truth about HYDRA, the Foula Bracelet, and… me, I guess. It’s only fair that they know all the facts and decide if they still want to come along for the ride.”

Tony narrows his eyes, obviously wanting to dispute the idea of her going back into the field at all, but reels himself back in. “You’re going to tell them about me?”
“That you’re my father?” Darcy questions. “Yeah, I am. Doesn’t feel right to cook up a big lie about why I’m hanging out with the Avengers. Dr. J and Dr. Mark already know, obviously, but…”

“Think carefully about this,” Pepper warns gently. “I agree that the truth is needed, but every person you trust with the secret brings you one step closer to the press finding out. I’m not convinced that your SHIELD file wasn’t copied before we yanked it from public record, at some point we need to be prepared for the media to discover who you are.”

Darcy nods, trying not to dwell on the inevitability of her heritage coming to light. One disaster at a time. “All the more reason for me to disappear into the wilderness for a while, right?”

“Not exactly, kid.” Tony mutters. “I would say it’s even more reason for you to stay where it’s safe. But we’ve established that nobody listens to me.”

Darcy frowns. “I listen, most of the time—”

The door to the conference rooms swings open, revealing Nat and Dr. J, looking a lot happier to be in each other’s company than they had fifteen minutes ago.

“I could tell that you were a ballerina the minute I saw you,” Dr. J is saying. “You have the bearing.”

“I can say the same of you,” Nat responds with a pleased tilt of her lips. “It is apparent from the way you hold yourself. Ballet always leaves a mark.”

"Don’t I know," Dr. J grins. “Danced my way through the sixties. Helped pay the bills when digging didn’t.”


They stride in, followed closely by Dr. Mark (who steps warily in, blinking at the crowd of superheroes) and a hoard of students.

“Dr. Lewis!”

Darcy is suddenly surrounded by giddy graduate students, all rushing to reach out and hug her. She feels Bucky tense against the influx of movement and noise that is focused on Darcy.

Scout, as tiny and red-headed as Darcy remembers, nearly flings herself into Darcy’s arms. “What did I tell you about getting into the fun stuff without me?”

“Getting shot and stabbed by assassins is fun?” Darcy snorts, hugging the girl back. “Of course you would think so.”

Yael steps forward, black curls framing her olive face. “You aren’t supposed to almost die without us. We’re your team.”

“Aww, that’s sweet.” Darcy reaches out to squeeze her hand. “But you guys aren’t supposed to die for me, you’re supposed to get some field experience for your own research, not die for six hours of credit.”

“We are getting experience,” Mohammad pops up, dark eyes bright, flanked by Greg and Charlotte. “I would never have gotten into that forensic anthropology program if you hadn’t recommended me to the dean and shown him my excavation work.”
“Fuck, Darcy!” Jeff rounds the corner, zeroing in on his dig partner with frantic movements. “What the hell happened to you? Did you get in another bar fight? I told you in Mykonos—”

“Another?” Tony and Bucky both echo, turning hard eyes on Darcy.

She refuses to shrink. “Nothing, nothing. Let me get some introductions done. Team, these are the Avengers—Avengers, this is Yael and Charlotte, master students specializing in Norse archaeology; Gregory, studying geology under Jeff, my site supervisor; Mohammad, my resident osteology expert; and Scout, undergrad student who was just accepted into the Edinburgh archaeology master’s program.”

The team gapes as Steve Rogers and Thor wave at them, full of friendly smiles. Clint salutes with his bow.

Darcy clears her throat. “And my mentors: Dr. Joseph Mark and Dr. Eleanor—”

Before Darcy can finish, Tony butts in.

“Dr. Eleanor Juniper?” He questions, raising a dark brow and extending a hand. “Tony Stark, holder of seven PhDs and Darcy’s father. You broke into my facility and messed with my tech.”

“I am not apologizing. And I know of you,” She steps forward, poking a bony finger in Tony’s chest. “You’re the one who tried to keep this brilliant girl out of her work. Male superheroes and their god complexes. And I find that an abundance of degrees usually means you are compensating for something lacking in the downstairs area—”

“Eleanor!” Dr. Mark admonishes, chocolate brown eyes wide with horror. “We talked about this on the flight! Respect!”

The woman makes a haughty noise in the back of her throat. “Respect is earned, Joseph, not handed out like free condoms at a health office—”

The room erupts into chaos as the Avengers feel the full brunt of Darcy’s team. Natasha watches, amused, as Tony confronts Dr. J about her disarming device; Scout seems to realize that she is in the same room as Captain America and perches on the arm of his chair with her best smile, nearly falling into his lap (Steve goes pink at the attention); Charlotte and Yael both move with terrifying speed to interrogate Thor on his knowledge of Viking rituals; Gregory slides over to Clint and compliments his pajamas, revealing his own purple Hawkeye boxers; and Mohammad turns wide, worshiping eyes on Pepper Potts.

“Holy shit,” Jeff breathes, staring at the man to Darcy’s left. “You’re… you’re James Buchanan Barnes.”

Bucky squirms, unsure what to do with the sudden adoration of a tall, gangly blonde man. “Uh…”

“War hero, Captain America’s best friend, Howling Commando, longest living prisoner of war in the world—” Jeff lists off all of Bucky’s epithets, head swinging wildly from Steve’s grin to Bucky’s gaping jaw. “I think I’m going to cry.”

Steve laughs, reaching forward to clap Jeff on the shoulder. “Nice to finally meet you in person, Jeff. Buck, this is the man I was telling you about, expert on American history in the 1940 and 1950s. Helped me open up about the past.”

Jeff’s eyes are shining at Steve’s praise, beginning to ramble excitedly at the two super soldiers.
Darcy drops her head in her hands as chatter fills the air, unsure if she wants to laugh or scream. Her two worlds colliding…

“Wait,” Scout pokes Darcy in the shoulder, abandoning her perch on Steve’s chair (much to his obvious relief). “Did Tony Stark just introduce himself as your father?”

The room falls silent again as the excited students wait for her answer. Bucky slides closer to her side, his arm warm against hers.

“Er, yeah. He did. He is.” Darcy stares back at the baffled faces of her team. “My dad is Tony Stark, which has, you know, been a pretty big secret for… forever. But I wanted you guys to know, because there have been some, uh, developments…”

“That makes so much sense!” Jeff exclaims. “I knew that you didn’t just ‘meet Captain America in a supermarket’. Explains a lot, Darce.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She shrugs. “Look, can everyone sit down? We have a lot of stuff to talk about. Tony is only the tip of the iceberg.”

“Stuff more surprising than Tony Stark being your dad?”

“Yes,” Tony interjects, spearing the group of students with his best billionaire gaze. “And, now that you know, I’m going to have to insist that my lawyers bring in the NDA agreements—”


“But—”

Darcy waves Tony away (much to the shock of her team, still starstruck) and launches into her explanation—HYDRA, her research, the Foula bracelet, the Avengers…

“It’s a clusterfuck,” Darcy says in closing, surveying the shocked faces of her team. “And the stakes are high, but I can’t abandon my work. I’m going back to Greenland for excavation, hell or high water, but I can’t ask you all to do the same. HYDRA came for Jane and I with a team of mercenaries and an arsenal of guns,” She pauses, face aching with the memory of pain. She feels the burning gaze of everyone in the room looking upon her injuries, certainly marring whatever beauty she possesses. “They aren’t fucking around, and I don’t want you guys in the line of fire.”

Jeff speaks up first. “What are you saying, Darce?”

Darcy sighs. “I’m not trying to say anything, really, I just—this is my battle to fight, I don’t want to risk any of you.”

“As if we aren’t invested in your work?” Mohammad interjects, black brow furrowed. “Dr. Lewis, this research is groundbreaking. I think you should allow each of us the autonomy to decide for ourselves if the benefits outweigh the risks, and if we decide we still want to be a part of the team…”

“…you should respect it.” Jeff finishes. “I’m still in, terrorist group be damned.”

“I am also in,” Mohammad echoes, pushing back his short ponytail of dark hair. “HYDRA would win if we did not stand against them, if we gave up without a fight.”

“You’re a badass, Dr. Lewis, and I’d follow you into the fires of Mordor if you asked me to.” Greg says bluntly, earning a grin from Darcy as he works a hand through his sandy curls. “Also, we need
to pay those bastards back for attacking our favorite professor. I owe HYDRA one solid kick to the balls. I’m in.”


“We should get that on t-shirts,” Greg agrees. “’FUCK HYDRA: The Lewis Excavation’. ”

“As am I,” Yael grins, exchanging a high five with Scout. “I spent two years serving in the Israel Defense Forces. I am not afraid of combat, and know my way around a rifle.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to combat,” Darcy says quickly, ignoring Tony's eye roll and Bucky's warm look of surprise. “We get in, excavate, record our findings, and get out. If the trail leads to another location…”

“We follow it.” Jeff nods. “I’m not going to lie, the fact that Bucky Barnes is coming as security definitely makes me feel better about this.”

Bucky smiles at the blonde, having decided to try and relax in the presence of the people he will be traveling with. “I’ve got personal experience with HYDRA. If it gets too hairy, we come back here for protection. You all have guts, but HYDRA isn’t an organization to mess with needlessly.”

“And you’ll have the support of the Avengers,” Natasha continues. “We need to stay in the US as much as possible while the Accords are disassembled, but we will set up safeguards for your site.”

“You are all insane and I am not a fan of this,” Tony announces, eyeing his daughter. “But I’ve got some designs for safety in the field. Been working on them since I found out about Darcy, and all I ask is that you actually use them, kid.”

“Of course,” Darcy says, fighting guilt. “I know this isn’t what you want me to do, but you know that I need to do it, Tony. If HYDRA is following these routes, we have to get there first.”

Tony’s eyes are dark and weary, but he nods. “Last time I checked you weren’t the superhero, kid. This shouldn’t be your burden.”

“I don’t have to be,” Darcy retorts. “It’s my research. A burden I choose to carry.”

“Dr. Lewis?”

All heads turn to Charlotte, small and pale in her seat. The shyest of the team, her long brown hair braided tightly back from her face.

“I—” She stutters, turning red. “I don’t think I should go on the excavation. I appreciate all of the opportunities you have given me, but I’m not someone who does well with danger, and—”

“Charlotte,” Darcy soothes, reaching across the table to grab her cold hand. “It’s fine. I completely understand. I’ll recommend you for another excavation, no hard feelings.”

Charlotte nods. “I’m so sorry, Dr. Lewis.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Darcy repeats, glancing at Pepper. “We can arrange a flight back to Scotland for you.”

“On it,” Pepper confirms. “You still need a few days of rest, Darcy, but I’ll put the largest Stark jet we have on hold for the next few days. Nonstop to the Narsarsuaq airport?”

“It goes without saying that Dr. Mark and I support this excavation,” Dr. J speaks up. “If the seven
of you wish to fly to Greenland directly, Dr. Mark and I will head back to Scotland and organize what you will need. I will follow with supplies.”

Darcy fight a smile. “You’ll join the excavation?”

Dr. J snorts. “As if I would miss it. You’ll need the extra firepower at the very least.”

“Perfect,” Darcy grins at her mentor, feeling hope for the first time since HYDRA had barreled in and changed her course. “Nazi-punching, anyone?”
**My Heart is Gold and My Feet are Light**

Chapter Notes

I am jumping the gun on posting this, so ALL MISTAKES are mine. My lovely, talented beta Jess hasn't gotten to look over it yet because I already feel AWFUL about making you all wait so long.

Enjoy!

Darcy isn’t exactly sure how she ends up in a bar, but after being cleared for drinking by the fancy Avenger’s doctor (who takes away her pain medication after only three days, because thanks to Stark/Helen Cho technology her hip wound is now just pink scarring) she doesn’t question the stroke of good luck.

With such good news, naturally, her team wants to go out to the bars.

And who is she to stop them? Or dissuade them? In the four days they have had to wait for Darcy to heal, her ragtag group of grad students (and Scout, who will be starting her graduate studies in the fall, so Darcy may as well begin calling her one) have been absolute, heaven-sent delights.

Dr. J and Dr. Mark had hitched a ride back to Edinburgh a few days prior, returning to expedite Darcy's dig paperwork and make sure Dr. White isn't snooping around her labs.

Yael and Thor are on track to be best friends. The Israeli girl is immediately hailed by Thor to be a fellow warrior (hello, Darcy is not surprised because Yael is honestly the most badass woman in town, other than Nat and Dr. J, of course) and is rewarded for her loyalty to Darcy by immediate trust from the god of Thunder.

(With Jane’s help, Darcy hobbles down to the training rooms at least twice to see Yael and Thor discussing ancient and modern weaponry. Yael and Greg are able to use Tony's supplies to build a small scale trebuchet and launch flaming rocks… at Thor, who seems to be having the time of his life.)

Greg and Tony get along famously. Despite his proclivity to anthropology, Greg has always been the technology expert on their digs as well as the one who smuggles enough alcohol to have them tipsy every night. Both of these facts endear the frat boy to Tony, and Darcy watches happily as they lock themselves away in Tony’s labs, emerging hours later covered in motor oil and very drunk (Greg is shitfaced, but Tony has had so much practice holding his alcohol that Darcy can only tell how drunk he is when he collapses into Pepper’s lap and begs for a head rub).

Mohammad has taken to following Pepper around, practically drooling when she offers to show him her organizational methods for the company (there is a reason Darcy trusts Mohammad with all things budget and logic on their digs), while Scout pretends that this doesn’t bother her (did the two break up? Darcy makes a mental note to ask Dr. Mark, who totally has all the dirt on most of the grad students, despite the fact that he pretends to be above it all) and enacts her own revenge by following a very flustered Steve around.

It was Greg, of course, who has suggested that they have a night out in NYC before the exodus to Greenland.
Greg is a typical British ‘lad’, with his sandy cropped hair, big blue eyes, and habit of fist pumping when excited. Any night out with Greg is a night Darcy will always remember and yet wish she could forget.

(He refuses to speak about their time in Ireland, which involved Darcy matching shot-for-shot with Greg in a tiny pub, dancing on the bar, and waking up in the bathroom of a very nice, very clean Arnotts’ Department Store with Greg in the stall next to her.)

(He invited him to her excavation the next day over Hangover Bagels. His party spirit is only bolstered by his passion for archaeology and geology, of which Darcy heartily approves.)

Which is why Darcy is now sitting in the plush seat of a NYC pub, nursing a cocktail and watching as her grad students order a round of shots.

They need it! She needs it! Honestly, Darcy is pretty sure that a stiff drink and good music are the only cure for finding out a Nazi agency has targeted your research, or something.

But, of course, due to said terrorist Nazis, they can’t go without an escort. When Bucky had volunteered to accompany them, Darcy had nearly canceled the whole thing.

(She’s passed out on him, bled on him, kissed him, and demanded him as a bodyguard. There is no way she is adding ‘drunkenly-hit-on’ to that list.)

Natasha had sensed Darcy's panic and jumped in like a true champ. Declaring it a ‘girl’s night’ (plus Greg and Mohammad, and Thor for some reason), she brushed Bucky and Tony off with an icy ‘don’t-fuck-with-me’ glare. One hour and a short jet ride later, she’s crammed into a bustling booth between Nat and Jane, with Wanda, Thor, and her hoard of grad students claiming their own spots.

Darcy didn’t realize how much she needed to be out of the Compound (and away from Bucky and Tony’s protective eyes) until this moment.

“Shots, Dr. Lewis! Let’s toast to kicking Hydra’s ass! Greenland tomorrow, bitches!”

“Greg, pass me the Blowjob shot!”

Darcy laughs at the comical sight of Yael demonstrating how to take a blowjob shot to Thor, who seems endearingly enraptured by the mechanics of it. In fact, Thor seems starry eyed at the entire group of partying graduate students. Drinking is the quickest way to friendship with an Asgardian, something Darcy learned back in New Mexico (after teaching Sif how to take body shots).

“Wanda,” Greg is already slurring. “Have I told you that you’re my favorite Avenger? That red magic is the SHIT. Sparkle fingers of doom, hell yes.”

Wanda shifts, looking caught between laughter and embarrassment. “Thank you.”

“No offense, Black Widow!” Greg quickly realizes that Natasha Romanoff is staring him down. “I just feel like you could eat me alive, and if I was into ladies I would be so aroused by that, but…”

“None taken,” Natasha gives a terrifying grin. “I would eat you alive.”

Greg seems cheered by this information. “Wicked!”
“I forgot how excitable your group is,” Jane remarks a few minutes later, smirking over the rim of her beer at Thor and Yael. “Puppies, all of them.”

“Complete with cuddle piles and discipline problems,” Darcy agrees, accepting another fruity cocktail from Greg. It’s eighty percent alcohol and twenty percent mixer. “I’m going to have to herd them all onto the jet tomorrow, hungover. Thank God Jeff is busy with Steve and Bucky, he’s the sloppiest drunk of us all.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Very true.

“How are you feeling, Janie?” Darcy turns to run a concerned glance over her best friend. The ugly black bruise on her right eye has faded to a light purple, almost unnoticeable under her makeup. “Everyone keeps doting on me just because of a scratch, but you survived the same ordeal.”

“You threw yourself at a group of highly trained assassins and nearly bled out in the quinjet,” Jane reminds. “That merits concern.”

“Can you just answer my question?”

“I’m fine, Darce. Honestly. We’ve survived New Mexico, Aether and Dark Elves, and now Hydra assassins. My best friend is safe and kicking ass in her field, I’m living with the love of my life, I’m employed by a rich madman who supports my research. What could make it better?”

The atmosphere lifts, Jane’s eyes are sparkling in a way that tells Darcy exactly what her best friend is thinking.

"Seriously," Jane deadpans. "There is only one thing that can make tonight better."

Darcy pretends to ponder it for a moment. “Hm, maybe some SHOTS?”

Jane’s smile is slow and sure, sparking in the dim light. “You read my mind.”

~~~*~~~

Two hours later, Darcy’s head is in Natasha’s lap and Jane is sprawled across Wanda.

“We can’t do shots like we used to,” Jane is moaning, pressing her face against the cool column of Wanda’s throat as the woman runs a soothing hand down her back. “Why can’t I be twenty-two and invincible again?”

“Speak for yourself,” Darcy tries to sound assertive, but Natasha is wonderful at playing with her hair in the way she likes and Darcy is practically purring under her hands. “Ask Greg for another shot, Janie, power through it like the Viking Queen you’re destined to become!”

“You’re insane,” Jane responds. “I forgot how well you hold your liquor. It’s disconcerting.”

“We know why now,” Wanda murmurs, looking more relaxed than Darcy has every truly seen her. “She is truly Tony’s daughter, is she not?”

“Yes,” Jane agrees. “Knowing her for a few years before that truth bomb exploded explains a lot.
Her quirks make sense in hindsight.”

“Shhhhh,” Darcy hushes Jane, tired of talk about her famous father. “Natasha is putting me to sleep. Watch over the grad babies while I take a nap.”

“They’re currently going for another round,” Natasha comments, her voice highlighted by the sound of Yael and Greg clinking glasses. “I’m impressed by their fortitude. Greg seems to know exactly how to push everyone into drinking more. Fantastic interrogation tactic.”

“It’s his superpower,” Darcy confirms. “He takes care of everyone, too, unlike an interrogator. Good guy to have at your back.”

“Speaking of,” Jane sits up, shifting off of Wanda’s lap to reach for her champagne. At some point in the evening, she, Darcy and Wanda had graduated onto classier options. “Do you have to leave tomorrow? This has all happened so fast—the attack, your new Asgardian weapon, Sergeant James Barnes declaring his undying love for you…”

Darcy can’t swallow her snort. “I wish. I would climb him so fast—”

Natasha raises a brow. “I’m sure he would welcome the attack.”

“Nah,” Darcy waves a hand in the air, a slight slur betraying her own drunken state. “He’s got baggage. And religion, probably. And, not to play too deeply into stereotypes, I may be interesting and cool and flashy—”

“And humble,” Wanda interjects.

“—but dudes that look like him tend to go for, I don’t know, someone womanlier than me. You know? Like tall, willowy, evenly tanned, less proclivity towards disappearing into the wilds of the ancient world—”

“You’re speaking nonsense.”

“Thanks Nat.”

“Hot assassins aside, shouldn’t you take more time to plan?” Jane pulls them back in, true worry beginning to bleed into her tone. “HYDRA isn’t something you can defeat without a plan.”

Darcy’s slurried words become more pronounced. “I have a plan!”

“Alright, what is it?”

“To take it back from HYDRA!”

Jane exchanges a confused look with Wanda. “…take what back?”

Darcy’s hand shoots up, fist pumping into the air and narrowly missing Nat’s jaw.

“The glory!”

“Oh, god.” Jane’s forehead bangs against the sticky table, muffling her next words. “She’s hopeless.”
Darcy wakes up the next morning (tucked into her bed very tightly, probably by Nat, who seems to be the only one who would try to tie Darcy to the bed with her own blankets) hungover and staring into her father’s face.

She screams, because duh.

“You’re awake!” Tony doesn’t flinch, rocking back to take a seat by Darcy’s swaddled legs. “Heard you had a wild night. Aspirin?”

Sure enough, Tony has come armed into her bedroom with a tall glass of water, bottle of Gatorade, and two round pills.

“So,” Tony continues, watching with humor as Darcy fights to extract herself from the cocoon of blankets Nat had piled her in. “Our biggest quinjet will be ready to take you, your team, and the assassin boy wonder to Narsarsuaq by noon.”

Darcy doesn’t answer. Her head is achy and her throat burns, so she plucks the Gatorade and pills from Tony’s grasp and nods.

“The rest of your team is also down and out thanks to the devil’s drinks, but no worries because I did my duty as a concerned father to pack you up and pretend I’m sending you to a fun summer camp, not into the arms of HYDRA…”

Darcy scoffs through a mouth full of raspberry blue hydration.

“But, there was one thing I did want to talk to you about before you fled the country.”

“What is it?” Darcy finally speaks, flinching at her raspy voice. Memories of a karaoke duet with Wanda and then Greg begin filtering in, flashing lights and Taylor Swift songs. Yikes.

“Why have you been ignoring your mother?”

It takes a moment for Tony’s question to process in her hazy mind, causing Darcy to choke on her drink.

“Excuse me, what?”

“You heard me.” Tony’s jovial voice has an uncertain edge, as if he’s worried about how to approach the topic. “I’ve been in contact with Kara and she says you’ve been cutting her out. She knows nothing about the HYDRA attack, or your research, or your travel plans. Last she heard you had been awarded a PhD and didn’t invite her to the ceremony.”

Darcy throws her hands up. “I didn’t invite anyone!”

“Still, Kara’s hurt. And, honestly, she has a right to be. She says that you’ve changed in the past year, that you’ve stopped including her in your life since you’ve found me.”

His words hang in the air, heavy with implication. Darcy found Tony, found this world of superheroes and terrorists and magic… and never included her mother.

Deep down, Darcy knows exactly why. It is an ugly truth that she hides deep within the recesses of her own heart.

“It’s too dangerous for her,” Darcy lies, avoiding Tony’s sharp gaze. She counts the prongs in his
goatee, trying to keep her voice light. “How can I even begin to explain to her all of this? It’s bad enough that you have to worry over me, I would rather spare her the anxiety.”

Tony is silent, eyes never leaving her face. Darcy immediately knows that he sees through her bullshit, no matter how much truth it contains.

He finally sighs, standing. “Alright, I’ll let you get ready. Just remember that I do have some experience when it comes to resenting a parental figure for doing what they had thought was best. I’m all ears, Darce.”

It jolts her out of her thoughts. She forgets how perceptive Tony can be, despite his trademark blundering with human emotions.

Maybe his perception comes from their shared traits. They tend to make the same calls, the same mistakes: playing the hero, risking it all for the people they love, shutting out parents after a breach of trust…

Darcy would be a liar if she admitted that she hasn't resented her mother for keeping such a huge secret from her, despite how well she handled the unveiling of said secret. Her feelings regarding Kara are a tangled mess of hurt and love, trapped in her chest. No matter how much Darcy tries to let go of her hurt, nearly every time that she sees Kara there is a well of anger that threatens to spill over: how could you keep Tony from me? How could you almost cheat me out of having him as a father?

It isn't fair. Darcy knows why Kara did it, knows that it was only worry over Darcy's life that kept her silent.

She loves her mother, loves her more than anything, but as much as Darcy has tried to get rid of the unfurling resentment in her heart... it still stays.

Sitting up and reaching for the bottle of water, Darcy shakes the guilt and sadness from her mind. Later, she tells herself. I'll talk to Mom later, I'll fix it after I get back from Greenland, after some time in the field clears my head...

Bury the messy feelings in work.

Perhaps she truly is her father’s daughter.

~~~*~~~

In the end, Tony lets them go without much griping, but a truly odd amount of fanfare.

The entire team comes to the rooftop to say goodbye. Jane clings to Darcy and makes her promise to call for Heimdall for help if HYDRA attacks, or at least remember to hit her panic button. Tony echoes this point. Thor kisses her on the forehead and speaks a Asgardian blessing of luck over the Foula bracelet.

“You shall need to find a name for it,” Thor remarks, running a large finger down the alien gold. “A name worthy of its deeds.”

Darcy blanches. “What, like a pet name? Spot the magic bracelet?”
Thor chuckles, booming through his chest. “No, sister, you will know when it comes. A name that speaks from your soul.”

Scout pipes up from the catwalk. “Will it be a Norse name? Like Odin’s spear Gungnir and your Mjolnir?”

“No,” Thor remarks. “It will be whatever name speaks to Darcy. A bond between weapon and wielder.”

“Well, cool. I’ll think on Spot.”

Thor nods, a sunny smile breaking across his face. “Stay safe, shield sister. Jane and I will await your return and stand ready to come to your side if you need protection.”

“Thanks, big guy, but I think the Winter Soldier has my safety covered.”

Her gaze tracks across the helipad to where Bucky stands, Steve speaking lowly at his side. Both super soldiers are dressed casually, Steve in sweats and a too-tight tee, Bucky in dark jeans and a light navy jacket. A duffel bag of clothing (and probably lots and lots of guns) lies at his feet.

His seems to sense her gaze, turning his head to meet it.

Darcy turns back to Tony, trying desperately to shake off the rapid thumping of her heart.

Think about the field, think about the field, do NOT think about the super-hot assassin man who kisses VERY well and has pledged himself to your protection...

“Alright, do you have everything kid? I’ve loaded up all of the Stark tech and given Greg and Yael a rundown on how to use it, there’s a basket of upgraded tasers in there somewhere, so keep one on you at all times…”

Darcy grins at her father, fingers skipping over the Foula bracelet. “I have a built-in weapon, remember?”

“Still,” Tony’s tone turns dark. “Jane’s use of the taser saved your life in that last fight. Everyone on your team will have one. I’ve also given each member a panic button in some sort of wearable capacity. If even one person presses it, we assemble.”

“Yikes, but also… thank you.”

“Just,” Tony hesitates, glancing back at Pepper as if for strength. “Stay safe, alright? Don’t hesitate to ask for help. And if Sergeant Assassin gets handsy at all—”

“Alright,” Suddenly Pepper is there, steering Tony backwards. “The pilot is ready to go when we are.” She steps ahead of Tony, reaching for Darcy and pulling her into a warm hug. “Be safe, Darcy.”

“I will,” She squeezes Pepper back. “Dr. J will be following us in a few days, she could hold off an army on her own. Take care of Tony, please?”

Pepper’s smile is somehow both sarcastic and radiant. “Always.”

As goodbyes are being said (Jeff nearly clings to Steve, begging him to write with more historic facts), Darcy watches as her team begins to file up the catwalk to the shiny jet, packed full of Stark tech.
The beginning of an adventure.

Suddenly Bucky is at her side, warm and solid.

“Ready?” He asks, peering down at her. His eyes are glowing Mediterranean blue in the sunlight, the shadow of a smile on his face.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Despite her words, Darcy feels something like excitement curling in the bottom of her stomach. A taste of freedom, like she’s finally been given the wings to soar wherever she wishes—

And she has, truly. Thanks to Tony and Pepper, Bucky and Nat and Steve, Dr. J and Dr. Mark and her team… she is going back into the field.

Bucky follows as she climbs up the plane stairs, jerking to a stop as Darcy pauses before the cabin door, struck with a sudden bone deep realization.

One last thing she needs to say.

“Hey!”

Her voice carries, despite the wind. Tony looks up, anxious eyes fixed on her form as if he wishes he could pluck her from this path and put her on a safer one.

“I’ll be fine,” Darcy calls down to him. “Thanks for all of this, Dad.”

The last thing Darcy sees before the cabin door slides shut, blocking out the open air, is Tony Stark’s hanging jaw.
In his hazy memories, Bucky remembers women with curled hair framing their faces, thick lipstick that smelled like vanilla and stuck to his lips long after he made away with a kiss. He remembers smooth stockings under his fingertips, secret smiles in the falling dark, a promise that only lasts the night. Subdued touches, passionate in their own way—

Darcy is none of this.

Sitting in the seat across from him, knees knocking against his, is Darcy Lewis—scion to Tony Stark, the non-serumed, non-powered woman that has faced down HYDRA and mobsters alike and survived to brag about it, making sex jokes with the graduate students surrounding her.

Bucky is halfway to Greenland, sitting stiffly in Stark’s plushy jet seats with his one bag of clothing (and favorite guns) in his lap, listening to Darcy easily chat with her team— laughing and carrying on as if they have known each other for years.

Which, he realizes with sudden clarity, they have.

(It is an easiness that reminds him of the Howling Commandos, of the bond between brothers who risk life and limb for the same cause, united—)

“I’ve plotted out the remainder of the site on this software your father gave us,” Yael is saying, perched to the left of Darcy with a fancy StarkPad in her hands. Bucky notices how easily the black-haired woman halts the story of a man who had named an intimate piece of his anatomy after a US president, how she gently steers Darcy and Jeff and Greg back to the task at hand. “Who would have thought that Tony Stark would be capable of this? Or that he had access to so many satellites?”

Mohammad peers over her shoulder, balancing his bone China plate of fancy cheeses the flight attendant had offered. “Does he realize that technology like this can change the entire study of ancient excavations?”

Darcy shrugs, and Bucky’s eyes track the fluid line of her shoulders, dark hair spilling out from her ruby beanie, lingering on the fading green and purple of her facial bruises. “I’m sure he does. Pretty certain he’s not going to market this tech until after our excavations are finished— wouldn’t want to risk HYDRA using it.”

“HYDRA,” Greg drawls, splayed across his seat with a bright pink cocktail in his hand. “Still can’t believe that we get to kick Science Nazi ass. Or that your father is the actual Tony Stark.” He adds as an afterthought.

“I’ve known less than a year,” Darcy reminds. “And sometimes I can still barely believe it.”

“Well, you just called him dad. Which, if we hadn’t been let in on the big secret literally days ago,
I would have assumed was a kink thing.”

Greg falls back into his seat laughing as Darcy covers her face with her hands, howling into her palms. “Gross, gross, gross, you fucker!”

Bucky wracks his head for the meaning behind the word kink. The first thing that comes to mind is his mother, cursing quietly and attempting to unsnag a piece of gnarled thread from her knitting.

“I’m just saying! Out of context it’s all fuzzy! Can’t just run around calling blokes daddy! ‘Oh, daddy, I’ve been such a naughty giiiiirl...’”

Oh. Oh.

Bucky hates the sudden heat that creeps up his cheeks at the realization. The 21st century is a strange place, proven time and time again.

“It was the first time I’ve ever really called him that,” Darcy defends. “And he is my biological father. And now you’re making me want to vomit into your awful cocktail, Ott, so keep your sexy daydreams to yourself.”

“I totally see the resemblance,” Scout announces, waving her own drink flamboyantly enough for it to spill onto the sleeve of her shirt. “Between you and Tony, I mean. You both have dark hair, angry eyebrows, strange genius...”

“I do not have angry eyebrows!” Darcy’s hands fly up to the offending feature, scowling. “I’ve been told they are delicately arched.”

Greg snorts. “What do you use to cut those puppies down, a weed wacker?”

“You’re about to be fucking fired from the excavation, Ott.”

Greg laughs uproariously, reaching out to tap on Darcy’s nose. “Nope, I have a plan. I’m going to win Bucky Barnes’ allegiance, and then next time you try to kick me out, he’ll use his badass metal arm to defend my honor.”

Bucky glances up, surprised to find the humorous glances of five people (and Darcy) on him.

“Uh,” He says eloquently. “Doesn’t work like that, pal.”

Greg looks outraged. “What? Bucky Barnes, I thought we had something.”

“Known you two days, kid.”

“Kid?!” It’s Greg’s turn to sputter. “I’m twenty-four!”

Bucky shrugs. “I’m almost one hundred, I think.”

Silence falls over the group. Seven pairs of disbelieving eyes find him, and even Darcy’s delicately arched brows shoot up to her hairline in surprise.

“Well,” Greg breaks the silence, taking a deep drag of his fruity cocktail. “Somebody tell the pilot we need to make a quick stop. Barnes needs to stock up on his prune juice and adult diapers for the dig.” He turns to the assassin. “Do you ever have the urge to yell at us young folks and chase us off your metaphorical lawn?”

“Only pop culture reference I know about lawns has something to do with milkshakes, apparently.”
Bucky tries not to smile as the entire cabin bursts into laughter.

Narsarsuaq rises up beneath them, blankets of green and white and ice blue all gathered in the jagged rises and falls of the earth meeting sea.

Darcy can’t tear her eyes away from the plane window, not even for the handsome assassin who has quietly moved to her side, peering out over her shoulder.

“Wow,” He breathes, filling the space with the scent of spicy cologne. “That’s really something.”

Darcy nods, fighting a smile. “All grass and ice and sea. Wait until you see it from foot, it’s breathtaking.”

The plane begins its descent, shaking slightly with turbulence as they lower through the changing air currents and pockets of clouds. Despite her confidence in Stark Aviation, Darcy clutches at the arm of her seat and squeezes her eyes shut until the shaking stops—

Or until a warm hand covers hers, so gently.

She pries her eyes open to see Bucky, frowning down at her in concern, fingers weaving into hers.

“Not a fan of turbulence,” Darcy explains, embarrassed. Of all the things she should be a baby about, why has it always been shaking airplanes? “Not sure why, I think I just really dislike the idea of falling out the sky. I like boats better, because at least I can swim away.”

Bucky raises a brow. “You think you coulda swam away from the Titanic?”

“Armed with my sheer determination and fantastic doggy paddle, yes!”

“Doll.”

“Look, it’s not the weirdest thing to be afraid of! Who wants to freefall out of the sky while encased in a giant metal tube?”

Bucky ducks his head. For a moment, Darcy worries that she has said something that triggers him. Is he also afraid of taking off and landings? Is she projecting her fears to him?

But, only a moment later, she realizes he is hiding a full-on grin in the arm of his dark sweater.

“What!” Darcy yanks her hand away from under his, bringing her pointer finger to his face. “Are you laughing at me?”

“No,” Bucky says quickly, raising his hands in the universal sign of surrender, although he has yet to lose his smile. “Okay, yeah. A little bit.”

“Why, dammit!”

“Because, I dunno, I’m relieved.”

Darcy’s anger stops short. “Relieved?” She repeats.
“Yeah,” Bucky finally manages to shove the stupid grin off of his stupidly handsome face. “It’s just nice know that you’re human, that there’s something you’re afraid of.”

His words make Darcy blink, trying desperately to make sense of them.

“It’s just—” Bucky turns his gaze back to the window, to the beautiful landscape rising up around them. “I don’t actually know you that well, do I?”

“Not particularly,” Darcy says bluntly. “We’ve got great chemistry, but that date keeps falling through, huh?”

“Not for lack of trying on my part.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ve been dying a few times between now and then, takes up a bit of time—”

“That’s exactly it.” Bucky says softly, gaze fixed firmly out the window. “Every time I meet you, you’re doing something extraordinary. Fighting off Romanian gangsters with nothing but a whip and a taser, holding your own against a cell of HYDRA assassins, putting superheroes and aliens in their place…”

He leans forward, as if wanting a better view of the window, but all Darcy can comprehend is how close he is. How warm.

“And through all of that madness,” Bucky says slowly. “You do your best to avoid killing. It makes me wonder: how can you be real?”

Darcy swallows. “I am real.”

“And so human. No serum, no powers, no super suit.”

Darcy scoffs. “I don’t need powers or super soldier juice to be awesome. Regular human people are so much more capable than you hero folk give us credit for.”

“I know.” Bucky pulls back, breaking the odd spell. “I’ve seen acts of heroism and heart on the battlefields of Europe. But this feels different—you bounce back from each experience so quickly, you get back up every single time and brush off the ashes.”

Bucky trails off, gaze distant. It takes a few moments for him to find his words, to regain his meaning. “I guess it’s just nice to know you are scared of something, honestly. Even if it is flying.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Darcy is trying desperately not to let Bucky’s words touch her yet, to shove them down and make sense of them in private. Her heart is hammering, and her face is flushed and, honestly, she feels like she needs a cold shower.

“Nothin’, doll.” Bucky shakes the thoughts away with a wide smile that splits his face, gazing down at her with a laughing light in his eyes. “Just that it’s a silly fear for you to have.”

Darcy is about to tell him exactly why it’s isn’t a silly fear to have (seriously, has he never watched any of those documentaries on airplane crashes? The unsolved ones of planes that fall into the ocean and are never recovered? She needs to educate him, immediately!) when Bucky falls back into his seat, eyes unabashedly fixed on her face.

“Silly,” He explains, as if it is the simplest logic in the world. “Because I’d catch you if we fell.”
When they touch down, the true work begins.

The locals remember Darcy and her small team, welcoming them with a warm lunch and awkward hugs. The population is at its peak in the summertime, a full 130 residents working in the small town, bolstered occasionally by coming cruises.

Darcy shakes hands with the mayor, accepting his generous gift of a bottle of scotch (alcohol is very expensive in Greenland, so Darcy passes the valuable goods to Greg for safekeeping) and listens intently to his promises that the ground is currently the softest it will ever be for excavations.

Perfect.

The team had changed into their warmer clothing on the plane, which allows them to head immediately to a waiting helicopter (Darcy explains to the locals that they are on a very intense deadline, not daring to bring up HYDRA but instead hoping they think she is a harried, young PhD professor who needs results) and fly to a drop-off site.

(Darcy is able to distract herself during the rocky helicopter ride—thanks to the summer storm that kicks up—by playing rock paper scissors with Scout and thinking about how cute Bucky looks in the navy hoodie Steve had packed him.)

True to her word, the first thing Darcy sees as the helicopter lands a mile from the familiar trenches and posts they had left is a mountain of boxes sent by Dr. J, containing almost all of the supplies (and more) they could need.

“Holy shit, Dr. J sent us nice tents!”

“And good dry food!”

“First aid kits!”

“A CASE OF BEER!”

“…and three rifles?”

Darcy shakes her head at the guns Dr. J has sent ahead. She doesn’t want to think about a future in which they will need them.

“Give the guns to Bucky,” Darcy instructs. “Once we unload the chopper, I’ll pass out the tasers that Tony made everyone. Also, crack me a beer, pretty please. Make sure we keep the cans for recycling back in Scotland.”

“SICK!”

“Let’s set up camp!”

“Ready…. BREAK!”

Jeff plans the tents in a semicircle around the usual spot for a fire. This time, however, Tony Stark
has supplied them with a titanium cooking grate contraption that can be extended over a powerless heater.

Honestly, Darcy think that it is sweet how much technology Tony has gifted them, but she likes a good old-fashioned fire to cook dinner over. Her team agrees, keeping the fancy SI looking contraption in the supply tent for use when needed.

Creating camp is an easy routine that they fall back into. Tents go up, supplies are unpacked and organized, and as darkness falls—a fire is made from firesticks and dried logs, prepacked.

Bucky is an invaluable tool during all of this, as it turns out he can pitch a tent within ten minutes and is a pro at starting fires.

“How the hell does he know how to do all of this so well?” Greg asks, staring with naked appreciation at Bucky’s form as he bends to tend the growing fire. “Is he secretly one of those burly, mountain-survivor men, plucked from the wilds? Assassin boy scout?”

Darcy stifles a laugh. “Greg… he’s the Winter Soldier. A famous assassin from freaking Siberia or something. Of course he knows how to make a fire.”

“…touché.”

Bucky seems to realize that he is being talked about, because he straightens up (a shame, Darcy is a huge fan of how his ass looks in jeans, as is Greg apparently) and tosses a bemused look over his shoulder at them both.

“Super soldier hearing.” He calls, hiding his smirk by turning back to his growing fire. “I can pick up more than you think I can.”

Greg goes pale. “How many times have you heard me talk about your ass?”

Bucky raises a brow. “Today, or in all?”

“…today?”

“Almost every time I had to bend over to get a tent stake in the ground.”

Darcy can’t hold in her laughter, turning away from the sight of Greg gaping like a fish at the former Winter Soldier to hack into her coat sleeve.

“Well, you should be flattered.”

“I am, don’t worry.”

Greg seems to finally recover his confidence. “Are you going to be upset if I continue to admire one of America’s finest national treasures? A man needs to get warmth where he can out here in this lonely wilderness. I need something to hold in order to keep the madness of arctic isolation at bay. Namely, that ass.”

Bucky shrugs, sending a sly side glance to Darcy. “It’s a free country. Anyone can feel free to admire whoever they like.”

It’s a loaded statement. Greg nudges her, not so subtly, and Darcy takes the way the two men are grinning at her as a cue to move on and save her dignity for another day.

(Does everyone seem to know that she has a thing for Bucky?)
Her question is answered that night, when they have finally achieved a properly roaring fire, setting up a mix of lawn chairs and roughly hewn wooden benches around it. Darkness falls around ten-thirty and her team collapses into their spots after a full day of moving equipment and supplies across the hilly terrain.

Greg, of course, breaks open the super-sized case of beer and distributes the goods around the fire. Darcy declines, preferring to sip at a flask of the honeyed whiskey that the mayor had given them.

Bucky plops down next to her, grinning as he steals the flask from her hand and takes a long draw from it.

“Can you get drunk?” Darcy asks, genuinely curious. “I know that Steve can’t, with his metabolism and serum or something…”

Bucky shakes his head, brushing dark hair from his eyes with a gloved hand. “Nah, I can’t. Same deal.”

“Good thing I brought you a present, huh?”

Darcy reaches for the backpack at her feet, rummaging around through the mess of phone chargers and international wall sockets and journals until she fishes out a large bottle.

“You got me more booze, doll?” Bucky leans forward into Darcy’s space to peer at the nonlabelled bottle. “I hate to tell you this, but didn’t we just have a conversation about how I can’t get drunk?”

“Yes,” Darcy says, depositing the bottle in his lap. “But this is *Asgardian* mead, something that Thor brought to Earth and was more than happy to give to me. It’s capable of getting Steve drunk, so I figured I would pass along a bottle to you for completely non-nefarious reasons. Don’t drink it all at once, I think it can honestly put you on your ass with just a glass or two.”

Bucky raises a brow, staring at the bottle with renewed interest. “Do you know this from experience?”

Darcy nods. “Convinced Thor to let me have a shot of it once after the London alien attack. Woke up in Jane’s bed, ass naked and with someone’s phone number scrawled on my chest. I never asked for the details of that night, but Thor and Jane promised that they got me out off the bar once I started trying to strip.”

Bucky’s jaw falls open, looking for the first time Darcy has seen at a loss for words.

“Sorry,” She laughs. “Too shocking for your old man brain?”

“I—” Bucky sputters. “Someone wrote their telephone number on your chest?”

Darcy doesn’t miss the way his eyes flicker to the soft V-neck of her wool jumper, then back up to her face with an expression that speaks of utter mortification.

“Like I said, I didn’t ask for details. But Jane did tell me that I am a very friendly drunk.”

Bucky’s bafflement turns to a glower, pushing his face to the bottle and muttering something about how men in the 21st century are pigs. Darcy pats his back lightly with a hum, surveying the faces of her team around them.

Yael is wrapped up in blankets, huffing in the falling frigid chill. Her inky hair is tied up in a long
braid, olive skin glowing burnished gold in the firelight.

Next to her, Scout and Mohammad are deep in conversation with Greg, who appears to be attempting to convince them to take part in some sort of drinking game. Scout’s flaming hair is bright even in the darkness, leaning into Mohammad’s side, dwarfed by his height.

Jeff plops down on Darcy’s other side, running a hand through the swoop of his white-blonde hair.

“First night,” He says, fishing the whiskey from Darcy’s hand and taking a swig. “Weather is perfect, temperature is mild. An auspicious start, I think. Cheers to the next five weeks.”

“Cheers,” Darcy and Bucky echo, the ladder sipping from the Asgardian mead with a contented hum.

With the Milky Way glowing above and the chill air lifting Bucky Barnes’ hair from the nape of his neck, Darcy begins to think this dig may actually be a success—HYDRA be damned.

~~~*~~~

Bucky Barnes has never seen Darcy Lewis so relaxed.

She’s curled up on the bench beside him, a purple hoodie clinging to her curves and her chapped lips pressed in a content smile. The tension she has been carrying in her shoulders since the HYDRA attack seems to melt away, leaving a girl that smiles easier and laughs honestly. As if the chill night air and open sky have melted her into her truest self.

Bucky has to admit to himself that he, also, is breathing easier for the first time in… decades.

There is something soothing in the crackle of their bonfire and the wisps of sparks, dancing upward into the black sky. With the ring of tents surrounding the north side of the fire but a leaving a clear view of the horizon, Bucky can look to the south and see the sea, rearing up from the cliffs, and then look to the east to see the only land accessible pathway into the camp. Strategically speaking, if HYDRA tries to approach, Bucky will know.

As long as he stays vigilant.

The thought makes him put down the Asgardian mead, despite the pleasant warmth that has begun to leak into his chest. It’s been a damn long time since he’s been able to enjoy alcohol.

Another thing he has to thank the tiny girl at his side for.

“Hey,” Scout calls, tossing her short red hair over a shoulder. “Dr. Lewis, is it story time yet?”

Jeff snorts as Darcy slides down in her seat.

“Oh,” Darcy’s nervous gaze flickers to Bucky at her side. “No story time tonight. Let’s pull out Mohammad’s star chart and find constellations—”

Mohammad shakes his head, hiding a shit eating grin. “No, Dr. Lewis, I agree with Scout. Storytime is an honored tradition of our fireside time. One tale of Dr. Lewis’ crazy adventures a night. Can we request favorites, like last time?”
Bucky raises a brow in confusion, slowly looking between a reddening Darcy and her grinning team.

Jeff raises a hand. “If we’re taking requests, I want Darce to retell that story about the barracuda bite.”

“Ooo, good one!”

“No,” Scout pipes up again. “I want her to tell that story about cliff diving in Washington! I love when she describes the shirtless local boys…”

“Honestly, Scout.”

“Don’t judge me, Mohammad!”

“Wait, talk about that time you tasered that asshole guy in Egypt!”

Darcy moans, waving the comments away with a mortified expression. “Guys, not this time. Bucky doesn’t need to be subjected to—”

“To what, doll?” Bucky finds himself speaking, fighting a smirk. “I think I’d enjoy being subjected to stories about you.”

“Good!” Scout is practically bouncing in her chair. “Dr. Lewis has the craziest stories. We always make her tell us new ones during digs. One time, she and Dr. Juniper actually negotiated a stand-off with artifact dealers. You said their guns were huuuuuuge—”

Bucky freezes in his seat, turning a burning gaze on Darcy at his side. She refuses to look at him, but her cheeks are practically flaming now.

Of course his girl has tales of dangers that none of the Avengers are aware of.

Steve and Tony would have a cow.

“So,” Bucky drawls slowly, half anxious at Scout’s hints of Darcy’s dangerous lifestyle and half endeared by Darcy’s horrified reaction at it being aired out in front of him. “I’m assumin’ Stark doesn’t know about half these stories?”

Darcy’s reply is meek. “He knows about some of the big ones. Details about Bucharest, and of course the time I got kidnapped by Obadiah’s henchmen, and the latest stuff. But I’d appreciate if you’d keep whatever you hear between us.”

Bucky mimes zipping up his mouth. “Between us, sure.”

“Oh!” Scout interrupts, obviously eavesdropping. “Wait, Bucharest! Tell us that story again! It’s my favorite, I still can’t get over the hunky hero you kissed in that alley, the guy with the icy blue eyes and cute hobo hair and nice ass, and what did you say? Oh yeah: ‘Best kiss of my goddamn life’—”

Darcy goes utterly still, pressing her face into her hands and making a desperate keening noise that has half the group looking at her in concern.

Bucky, however, is rocketing between shock, elation, and the very masculine desire to preen.

It was the best kiss of his life, too.
His chest is warm and tight at the idea of Darcy having enjoyed it just as much as him. God, he really needs to be a gentleman and finally take her out for a night on the town.

“So,” He says loudly enough for everyone to hear. “You said I have a nice ass, doll?”

It takes a moment for his words to compute, but once they do… Gasps erupt from around the campfire, Scout’s eyes going wide as saucers.

“You—” She practically gasps. “Holy fuck. You’re the DUDE?”

“Hm,” Yael looks curiously at Bucky. “I would describe your eyes as icy, yes.”

“And the dark hair!” Greg crows. “Hobo chic! I’ve got some nice conditioner that will take care of those ends, Mr. Buchanan…”

“Guys,” Jeff warns, looking down at Darcy’s sprawled form with humor and concern. “Maybe we should let Darcy clear this up.”

The group quiets as all eyes fix on Darcy, crumpled in her seat and still covering her face with her hood. Bucky’s eyes linger on the soft waves of almost black hair, falling out from the hood and reaching almost to her lap. Soft pale hands, littered with scars and silver rings, clenching desperately to the fabric of her sweater.

“C’mom, Darcy.” Bucky finds himself cajoling, slipping into an ease that conjures half-forgotten memories of teasing firecracker dames from the 1940s. None that even held a candle to Darcy Lewis, though. “They deserve to hear about this handsome hero. I’ll help you tell it, huh?”

His teasing words pull Darcy from her fabric shield, revealing a beautifully flushed face full of anger. “Shut the fuck up, Barnes!”

“Aww, doll, is that anyway to talk to the man that gave you the best kiss of your life?”

“I will literally tase you. On your metal arm, you asshat.”

Laughter erupts from across the fire.

“C’mom, Dr. Lewis!” It’s Yael who is cheering this time, her usual façade of calm breaking in a way that speaks of how much she trusts Darcy, how relaxed she is in this company. “I want to hear the full story. We promise not to tease you, and Bucky can give his side of things.”

“A bullshit side,” Darcy muses, regaining her confidence slowly. “I did most of the work. The Winter Soldier was quite distracted, if the fact that I had to tase a guy off of him is any evidence.”

“Ooo, really?”

Bucky smiles, not at all bothered by the ribbing. “Yup. I was distracted by the tiny, furious girl who kept using herself as a human shield.”

The spots of color on Darcy’s cheekbones flare dark. “To save you!”

“Noble, but I think I repaid you with that kiss. Best kiss of your life, I heard somewhere.”

“I—” Darcy huffs, finally turning to face the group with flashing eyes. “Fine, I’ll retell the story. Yes, Bucky fucking Barnes was the guy in the alley. I did not know that at the time, but fate has decreed that his annoying ass is unavoidable.”
Bucky presses a hand to his heart. “You wound me, sweetheart.”

“—but, you all have to promise to believe my version of things. And never bring any of this up again.” She intensifies her glare. “Seriously, the teasing about kissing Bucky dies tonight.”

Jeff raises a solemn hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“Doesn’t mean much, have you met Scout?” Greg whispers conspiratorially.

“Fuck off,” Scout hisses back.

“Right,” Darcy says, reaching for the bottle of whiskey at her side and steadily refusing to meet Bucky’s eyes. “Well, remember how I told you all about the Foula bracelet we found in the Shetland Islands? So, now that you know Tony Stark is my father, I can give you the real truth of the entire clusterfuck. I get back from our dig to see footage of Tony nearly dying in Sokovia and news that the bracelet has been stolen, so of course Dr. J and I decide we have nothing to lose…”

“Meanwhile,” Bucky interrupts, enjoying the fixed gazes of his audience and Darcy’s huff. “I’m hiding out in Bucharest, because my brain is still a bit off and I really like Romanian food.”

"...that can't be true, can it?"

"Shh!"

“Are you going to interrupt through the whole story?” Darcy questions, ignoring the banter of her team to spear Bucky with her gaze.

“Just when I feel the story needs it. I was there for the action too, doll.”

Darcy sighs. “Fine. So, suddenly I’m on a plane to Bucharest, stuck between Dr. Mark and Dr. J, who still won’t admit that they are in love…”

~~~*~~~

Of course, Scout is the first to speak as the true story finally ends, having deviated from Bucharest and Bucky’s (not helpful) commentary about how Darcy had looked bleeding and fighting with her whip to a more complicated explanation of Darcy and her relationship with Tony.

“So,” She says finally, eyes swiveling between Bucky and Darcy. “You guys kissed in that alleyway.”

“Yup,” Bucky agrees.

“…now that you know who the other is, are you guys like, together?”

Darcy begins choking, nearly coughing up her whiskey as Jeff helpfully pats her on the back.

“No,” She sputters. “We really aren’t.”

Bucky nods. “She hasn’t taken me out and make an honest man out of me, despite my invitations. Yet.”
“WHAT?”

The group continues to stare at Bucky and Darcy like they are prime time entertainment.

“He asked you on a date?” Yael whispers. “And you haven’t said yes?”

“Yael,” Darcy says shortly. “I was a bit busy getting my ass handed to me by HYDRA. And do you really see any prime date spots in the area? You know, a nice sushi place in uninhabited Greenland?”

Jeff nods. “She has a point.”

Bucky shrugs, “We could make it work. Nice views, at least, very romantic. Whale watching.”

Darcy turns to him, the whiskey bright in her blue eyes. “You aren’t being serious.”

“I am.”

“But— you’re Bucky Barnes. I’m… Darcy Lewis.”

Bucky spears her with a look, not at all liking what she seems to be implying. “What’re you trying to say?”

“I mean—God, I don’t know. Can we save this conversation for when I’m not stress drinking and we don’t have an audience?”

Darcy’s words are humorous but her face crumples, eyes following the dancing sparks and smoke that twists into the night sky. Something about her expression makes Bucky want to use his fingers to smooth the lines of her frown, the worried wrinkle on her forehead, to embrace her and surround her as a shield.

(Although he’s not sure Darcy would appreciate the sentiment at all, the way she keeps running into gun fights with a whip.)

It’s a new feeling for him, utterly unlike anything he had felt in the memories of chasing dames across NYC. Not a conquest or a good time, but a desire to soothe, to comfort, to hold dearly.

Maybe he really is still fucked in the head, hoarding such strong feelings for a dame he has known for a handful of weeks.

But Bucky has been so many incarnations of himself—the Lothario; the draftee; the dutiful soldier; the sniper; the POW; the Howling Commando; the right hand of Captain America; the Winter Soldier; the reformed, charity-case assassin.

A man doesn’t live a hundred years and survive what Bucky has survived just to not stay true to his feelings, to his gut. Bucky Barnes is ready to be new, to enjoy the scraps and jumps of life he has left.

And no matter which way he turns it, Darcy feels like the center of it all.

He’s not afraid to admit that he has already fallen hard for her.

“Sure, doll. We’ve got time.”

The burningly curious gazes of Darcy’s team refuse to fade for the rest of the night, but as the stars wheel overhead and the quota of nightly beer finally runs out, Bucky realizes that Darcy has
shifted to lean gently against his side and counts the evening as a win.

The reality of fieldwork and HYDRA’s plan to take this fantastic girl from his side can wait until tomorrow to be dealt with.

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned :)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)

Stay tuned ;)
Brother Do You Believe in an Afterlife?

Chapter Summary

I'm BACK! And more importantly, Archaeologist Darcy is back!

Thanks to all of you who have faithfully waited. The story is not over, Darcy still has some adventures to come.

The excavation begins in earnest, as do the dreams.

A pattern is set. Darcy wakes each morning when the stars are still bright, stumbling out of her hard cot driven by desire to begin the day. No matter how early she awakes, Bucky is always there—seated beside the dead fire with his eyes on the horizon and two mugs of coffee in his hands.

One is his to sip on, black with just a hint of sugar. It becomes clear quickly that the second drink—sweetened within an inch of its life with vanilla creamer—is Darcy’s.

(She doesn’t bother to ask how he knows her preferences. Only chalks it up to Natasha’s snooping, and her proclivity to passing on information in subtle ways.)

It becomes a ritual for Darcy to sit beside him, accepting the coffee and lapsing into soothing silence before the rest of the team awakes.

Sometimes, Darcy thinks that her stolen, silent hour with Bucky is the best of her day.

When Scout is finally roused from her cranky, deep sleep with the promise of hot breakfast (and coffee laced with whiskey, double shots at the very least for the vivacious redhead), the day truly begins.

The team is a well-oiled machine, each member used to working together efficiently. Darcy leads the charge, pressing the excavations further and further, while her team fans out in her wake. They fall back into the site with a measured, pulsing energy—familiar routines of plotting and digging, of pulling up the earth layer by layer.

The only unknown variable is Bucky Barnes, the man charged with protection rather than excavation. Darcy isn’t sure what she expected from him. Standing around menacingly, dressed in assassin leathers, a gun on each hip?

She got the gun part right, at least. But everything else—utterly wrong.

While the rest of the team is bundled in layers, despite the milder summer temps, Bucky looks utterly relaxed in sinfully fit jeans and a tight t-shirt. The chill never seems to bother him as they work, although Darcy watches him often add a light jacket as night falls.

Turns out having a cybernetic arm that never tires and a man with impressive stamina is perfect for digging trenches quickly and relentlessly. And his assassin trained eye for detail helps with the screenings.

“He catches things that any one of us would have accidentally let slip,” Greg says to Darcy one
early morning, bright blue eyes fixed on Bucky as he diggs himself steadily deeper and deeper into his trench. Yael stands beside him, scanning the layer and gracefully guiding her pencil over a pad as she creates a sketchup of his work. The air is crisp, biting at Darcy’s exposed fingers as she cradles her mug of broth. “Yesterday he noticed soil seriation that would have taken Jeff two hours and a microscope to point out.”

“Did our resident Geologist feel upstaged?”


“This information is strange. Doesn’t match up,” Darcy murmurs more to herself than Greg. She turns, fixing her eyes on the makeshift table of papers and site maps she and Jeff have been using as their daily research base. “This site is not what I expected it to be.”

“Alright, Miss Grumpy. Can we focus on the important please? Namely Bucky Barnes and how his single-minded mission to discover the secrets of the Earth would translate in the bedroom? All of that focus, that attention to detail?”

“Greg, please.”

“HAVE YOU SEEN HIS ASS IN JEANS, DR. LEWIS? I KNOW YOU HAVE. I KNOW YOU HARBOUR THESE SAME THOUGHTS.”

Darcy doesn’t need to answer, the coy, half-secret smile she tosses to Greg is enough to have him grinning delightedly in return.

“Knew it.” He hisses with delight.

The days march onward, full of digging and cataloging, Darcy’s attention pulled a thousand different ways as she oversees each of her team members and mans her own trench. Half the excavation had been completed in the prior summer, but Darcy has the familiar prickling of intuition (combined with her years of research) that tells her this site is not what she had originally expected.

A road, yes, but leading to…

That’s the question they need to answer.

Darcy has her own hypothesis, one that she and Jeff share privately in the evening as Bucky corrals the graduate students back to camp for dinner.

“Look at this,” Darcy breathes, fingers hovering over the sketched map they have created. They stand in the largest tent of the camp, used as a makeshift operations room and lit with low burning lanterns, casting shadows over the maps. “Jeff, I don’t think this is just a road…”

“…it’s a grave.” Jeff finishes, awe in his eyes. “The slow roll of the soil upwards is almost directly copied from the Knock-e-Dooney site on the Isle of Man. I’m willing to bet my left nut that this is a boat burial.”

“Shit. You wouldn’t bet that lightly.”

“Especially not since Diana has decided she wants to try for kids.”

Darcy laughs, clapping Jeff on the back. “Only one thing left to do, then. Get out the radar. We got
some ground to penetrate. The sooner we dig this up, the sooner you can get home and do your
husbandly duty, producing children for the motherland.”

“Darce. Creepy.”

The first three weeks continue to fly in a blur. Once Jeff and Darcy realize the extent of the sight
the team seems to kick back into gear.

“Holy shit,” Scout breathes one afternoon, kneeling in her trench.

“Dr. Lewis!” She calls. “Dr. Lewis-- Darcy! YOU NEED TO SEE THIS!”

Darcy comes running, climbing out of her own six-foot trench with practiced ease and taking off
towards Scout in a run. They’ve been excavating for almost two weeks now, searching for
definitive evidence of what this site truly is.

“It’s…”

Darcy comes to a screeching halt at the edge of Scout’s trench, balancing precariously over before
the nine-foot drop. Before she can trip over her own two feet and into the depths, a silver arm
shoots out to grip her shoulder. She glances sideways as Bucky appears at her side, steadying her
with a dry look.

“Thanks,” She murmurs, trying to shake off the shivers that erupt from his gentle, metallic touch.
She is suddenly aware of how dirty she is—cracked fingernails filled with dirt, sweat from the
physical exertion still lining her brow despite the cool wind. Bucky nods, not seeming to notice
Darcy’s sudden worry over her body odor, his expression faintly curious as he peers over her
shoulder and into the pit.

Right. Possible amazing discovery to attend to. Head in the game, Lewis.

“Scout?” Darcy falls to her knees, bracing herself against the earth with both hands as she looks
down. Sure enough the redhead is grinning up, dirt streaking her cheeks and making her look a bit
like a wild woman. “What’d you find, lady?”

“Feast your eyes…” Scout moves to the side, revealing a deeper level of her work.

Jeff gasps, reaching to grasp at Darcy’s back with shaking hands. “Is that…”

Darcy nods, unable to contain her shocked laughter. Dirt been carefully moved, centimeter by
centimeter, to reveal the murky outlines of curved wood. To an untrained eye, it would just look
like a strange indentation of packed earth. But to an archaeologist, trained in maritime history…

“The beginnings of a hull.” She breathes.

“Well,” Jeff finally says, clapping Darcy on the back. “Our theory was correct. Looks like you’ve
found a boat burial, Dr. Lewis.”

Darcy doesn’t bother to hide her radiant smile, as dirty and sweaty as she is. “We’ve found a boat
burial.”

The discovery of the true nature of the site sends everyone into action. Yael and Scout spend their
days next to Bucky, knee deep and barefoot in the trenches as they teach him the arts of the trade
(shoes tend to disrupt the delicate chemical balance of the soil). Greg and Jeff spend hours with
their ground equipment, surveying the site again and again while speaking in a geological language
that Darcy is proud to somewhat understand (thank Freyja Dr. J had insisted Darcy take varying classes in her master’s work—she can hold her own in the sciences involving math and chemistry… finally).

Mohammad seems to stand alone. As the resident osteologist, he is overjoyed with the theory that they are now excavating a grave, but the news causes him to pour over his books and research. Darcy’s team has rarely ever dealt with burial excavations, only once finding a complete skeleton in a watery cave in Costa Rica during her graduate days, the dig in which she had met Mohammad for the first time—and that skeleton had been exposed to the humid, wet climate of the tropics for so long that the bones had been the consistency of wet paper once they had finally decided to raise them up.

It had been a sad time before they realized there were indeed still ways to preserve even watery bones. She remembers vividly when they had attempted to raise the skeleton, only to find it falling apart in their hands.

Mohammad had cried that day in the tropics, despite the fact that he had been the first to warn Darcy and the site director of the structural loss of tissue and marrow. His tears seemed to have stemmed not only from the loss of a valuable research opportunity, but also for the wound that had been visible to all on the ancient man’s soft cranium—a seven-inch gash that nearly cleaved his skull in two.

The poor man’s position in the cave and the array of gold and fine foods laid around him told Darcy that he had most likely been a ritual sacrifice, intended as a gift to honor the gods with, a messenger to die and plead the living’s case to deities in the afterlife. Mohammad had turned away from the sight, covering his dark eyes with a large hand and weeping openly into his palm. Darcy had stood next to him, feeling the same keen sting of what this ancient man’s last few hours must have felt like, decked out in gold and destined for death like cattle led to slaughter.

*Humanity*, Mohammad had cried softly into his hands. *Without it, we are only treasure hunters.*

Sitting silently at his side while he pulled himself back together, Darcy offered him a free-standing ticket to the digs she was planning.

Two years later, Mohammad still tells the same story around the fire once a dig. A tradition, of sorts.

“That is why we still call shipwrecks ‘tragedies’, Dr. Lewis!” Mohammad exclaims one night over dinner. His black eyes are wide and warm, brimming with empathy and feeling, and his large tan hands are gesturing wildly as Scout hides a smile at his side. Bucky looks up from his soup, brows raised at the sudden display of emotion on the usually calm man’s face.

“It was that word that put me on this path: TRAGEDY. Why I decided to become an archaeologist.” Mohammad blinks slowly, aware that his audience is captivated by the slow movement of his hands, the passion behind his quiet words. A born storyteller, conviction hot behind his words. For a moment, Darcy is reminded of Steve Rogers. “It is the study of humanity, the study of life. It affords a respect to the past that most modern humans neglect to understand. Do you know why I chose to follow this path?”

Darcy does know. She and Mohammad have had this conversation many times, but each time Darcy delights to hear his words again as she settles into her blanket-strewn lawn chair. She is nestled between Bucky and Yael, the sky full of stars and the fire blowing sweet smoke through the air.
“I signed up for a nautical archaeology course,” Mohammad begins, solemnly crossing his long fingers and fixing the fireside group with a long stare. “I was a biomedical science major. I liked the study of anatomy and physiology but disliked the idea of spending my life in a hospital or worse, a lab. I spend many hours praying for a path, a solution.”

Darcy nods, hiding a smile as Scout snuggles into Mohammad’s side. Her dark red hair is stark against his dark sweater, his hands protectively cradling her side. Darcy used to wonder if the two of them would be able to survive the other—dutiful Mohammad with his steady hands and kind eyes, fiery Scout with her quick mouth and blazing soul.

But they work, Darcy realizes. They balance each other, Mohammad’s hands steadying Scout’s edges, her words spurring him to action.

“And then I realized something,’ He continues, eyes fixed on the dancing flames. “We read a publication called In Mediterranean Depths which spoke of famous shipwrecks discovered by sponge divers in the 1900s. In each section, the archaeologists writing the publications referred to the shipwrecks as tragedies: an accident of fate that is still regretted, despite the thousands of years separating us from them. It was then I knew that this was a field worth pursuing, full of men and women who feel the loss of life as keenly through thousands of years as if it had happened simple moments ago. How could I turn my back on such humanity? How could I not dedicate my life to it?”

Under the slow-moving stars, Darcy closes her eyes in agreement.

The days spin by faster. It is not only Mohammad who is newly intrigued by the startling knowledge they have acquired. The entire team feels the weight of new responsibility, throwing themselves into their work with a newfound frenzy. Even Bucky, who had been more of a help than Darcy could ever have hoped, rises at dawn with her each morning—dark hair tied back in a scrunchie Scout had given him, scratching at his scruff with a black coffee in hand and handgun at his hip—heading for the trenches with the same determined set to his jaw Darcy had seen in that alley in Bucharest.

Those early mornings are the only time Darcy is able to speak with Bucky. Her day is taken up with a thousand errands and hours spend in the dirt, not exactly enough time to start up a romance.

Romance. The word sits strangely in her gut. Darcy is not a creature of subtlety or intrigue, rather a woman who possesses all the natural charm of a battering ram. She hates limbo—wants to know, wants to be in or out.

But something tells her that writing Bucky a note that says DO YOU LIKE ME, YES OR NO would be a bit pathetic.

Even with the distance of work and pressure, Darcy still feels the heat sparking between them. She looks up from her work sometimes to feel his eyes on her, smoldering heat pricking from across the site. She stretches out her back, aching from hours bent over a shard of pottery in the clay, and feels Bucky’s gaze tracking the movement of her neck, the tension and stretch of her chest and shoulders.

They often meet eyes in these moments, holding gazes long enough that Darcy has to catch her breath after Scout or Jeff or Greg or Yael ultimately interrupts with a question or concern. She knows that Bucky wants her to see him watching. If the Winter Soldier wanted to observe someone without their knowledge, she has no doubt she would live in blissful ignorance of his hot glances.

But she knows how much he watches her, how his gaze lingers and tracks, and she burns with it.
Each night when the team shares dinner and drinks around the fire, cooking and sharing stories and reliving the most exciting discoveries of the day, Bucky always ends up at her side. Darcy isn’t sure exactly how it happens. One moment she is ladling chili into her earthen bowl, chatting with Scout about their mutual love of Harry Styles, when suddenly Bucky Barnes is sitting calmly at her side, a bowl of his own cradled between flesh and cybernetic hands.

“How is Harry Styles?”

Darcy chokes on her chili. Scout claps her on the back with one hand, reaching for her phone with the other. Minutes later, Darcy is still red-faced as Scout sits between them, scrolling through her iPhone photo album of the glittery, Chelsea boots wearing rock star. Bucky listens intently, peering at the glowing pictures with thoughtful judgement.

“Wears a lotta rings.” He remarks as Scout pulls up another photo. “Not the best for fighting. But looks like long hair is back in, huh?”

He grins at Darcy teasingly, yanking at his own dark locks. Darcy’s eyes follow the smooth swoop of his hair as it kisses his jawline, dark against his olive skin.

She’s soooooo fucked.

“I guess so,” She finally says, pulling her gaze away from Bucky fucking Barnes and back to her chili. “I wouldn’t really know. Men’s hairstyles, so—uh—not my area of expertise.”

“Darcy, you love long hair!” Scout says in a sing song voice, finally clicking her phone back to off mode. “Didn’t you say last year that it was, like, the *most attractive thing a man can have*?”

Darcy nearly buries her face in her chili bowl. Scout’s words are a fresh wave of agony. She hopes that Bucky will connect the heat of the food to the flush of her face.

But of course he doesn’t.

“Good to know,” He says softly, his triumphant grin softened by the firelight. “So modern ladies like long hair, Scout?”

Scout nods sagely, her green eyes mischievous as they dart to Darcy. “That they do, Buck-o.”

Their shit eating grins cause Darcy to fall further into her chili bowl. Her nose grazes the food as she prays for some ancient god to smite her down.

Darcy excuses herself to bed early that night, glaring halfheartedly at Scout (who blows her a cheeky kiss) and clumsily brushing off Bucky’s attempts to walk her the twenty feet to her tent.

Honestly, a girl can only take so much sexual tension and will-they, won’t-they before wet dreams begin, and at this rate... Darcy is overdue for some gratification. Even the dream kind.

But the dreams that greet Darcy are not what she had hoped for.

~~~\*~~~

Darcy stands at a precipice, above a wide river that tumbles through a green landscape. All she can see is the flashing frothy currents of blue and green against grey, jagged rocks.
This is a dream, a voice reassures her. Fantasy and reality all mixed together...

Suddenly barefoot, clad only in her skin, Darcy steps through a sea of emerald grasses, grazing her naked hips. She shivers, drawing ever closer to the flashing waters. The river roars before her, and step by step she approaches...

She stops at the brink, balancing on the rocky edge as the water flows rapidly before her. It is the kind of current that Darcy connects with oceans rather than rivers, more powerful and raging that she had thought a winding river capable of.

The water flashes again. Darcy leans forward, uncaring of her nakedness and filled with curiosity. This is a dream. The knowledge calms her, distantly pushing her towards her natural instinct of discovery.

Below the rocky perch, fish of pure gold swim against the current. Darcy leans forward, peering at the flashing fish, as the water around them is a mixture of purple and turquoise and pink, hues moving around scales of gold. It is so odd to see such vivid colors in the water, she wants to reach forward and touch—

The balance shifts. The river roars as Darcy reaches too far, hand dipping into water that nearly freezes her fingers, so much colder than water should ever be—

The water grips back, as if sentient. Cold force wraps around her fingers, pulls her in, yanking forward without mercy—

Darcy has no balance. She falls forward, the beautiful, flashing water stealing the breath from her lungs, freezing her inside with a brutal pain that feels out of place in a dream. Darcy thrashes against the current, hands gripped around her ankles, her wrists. Fights with everything she has, reaching for some sort of grip on the rocks.

There is no grip.

Her vision begins to fade. The current is strong, the current is going to win...

You have a long way to walk, dóttir. A woman whispers softly, speaking with a voice made of firelight and the space between stars. I need you to be strong, my heart. The strongest you can be.

Just as the burning in her lungs becomes unbearable, Darcy shatters the dream, kicking through the freezing water with a last, desperate attempt. The river falls away, chill remaining.

She wakes in her own cot, panting and gasping in a haze of panic.

It was just a dream. A nightmare. A side effect from the stress of the dig, the overwhelming worry of HYDRA appearing and stealing their work, her friend’s lives.

Flicking on her lantern, Darcy throws her legs back to the soft floor, catching her breath shifting uncomfortably at a sensation she cannot quite name...

That same breath catches in her throat as she stares down at her threadbare pajamas. The faded purple striped pants are stuck to her skin, her top nearly molded to her chest.

The freezing, sentient water that had pulled her in maliciously now covers her.

She’s woken up in reality, soaked to the bone in water from her dreams.
Nothing Fucks With My Baby

Chapter Summary

For those of you who follow me on Tumblr, you may notice the beginning section as a character study written about young Dr. J. It connects!

Also: I HAVE FANART! The lovely stillgirlfrommars painted a FANTASTIC, BEAUTIFUL picture of Darcy while fighting in the alleyway in Bucharest (chapter 21)! I have to tell you all - I wept when I saw it. It is beautiful art like this and comments from you all that remind me of exactly why I began this story - to share an incarnation of Darcy as a woman who can burn the world down. You can view the art HERE. Check out Lisa's other pieces of art, she is SO TALENTED.

Eleanor Juniper is sixteen years old when her mother attempts to send her to finishing school, more than ready to polish off her daughter’s rough edges, to chase away her fantasies of adventure and action.

_There is no room for such nonsense in high society_, Margaret Juniper admonishes, hair and complexion the same shade of auburn and ivory as Eleanor’s, and yet somehow managing to look nothing like her. _We will have no hope of finding you a husband by twenty if you continue to behave like this, fool girl._

Eleanor is seventeen when she breaks out of finishing school, using a homemade smoke bomb for cover as she dives out the window of the Georgian style dining room.

(Shes bears scars from the jagged glass for the rest of her life, curving like wings down her shoulders, a reminder of what it costs to break out from a cage.)

Eleanor is nineteen and living in sin with a man she met at a bar in New York who has promised her safe passage to somewhere far, far away in return for her company. They board a ship together and spend days in a tiny, third-class room— making love and swapping stories, sharing a pack of sweet-smelling cigarettes and cold meat. Eleanor does not love him— she barely likes him, honestly— but performance is passable, and his stories make up for the slack. Anything for freedom, she believes fervently. There are other ways she could have escaped across the sea, but this man felt right, easily used. He is rugged around the edges, just like her, but he speaks of tombs beneath sands, excavations spread out on the coast of Greece, ancient palace complexes uncovered from the earth, bit by bit.

_Archaeology_, the man declares, running a calloused finger down Juniper’s naked spine. She shivers, not from his touch, but from the stirrings the word pulls from her, a promise, an invocation.

(Their destination ends up being London, a city of clouds and smoke and grey stone. They part ways at the dock, clasping hands as if old friends, bonded by a week of sex and travel. Juniper squares her shoulders and marches ahead before he even makes a move to leave her, unafraid of the alien landscape, and does not look back.)

Eleanor is twenty and dedicated to her research. London is a thriving city, full of promise and
autonomy and opportunity, so far from her mother’s tiny world of manners and luncheons and society. Eleanor pays for her first semester of schooling with her dance— ballet coming as naturally to her as ever, she is not famous by any means, but earns enough through a small company to live— and spends her evenings waving off admirers, turning down engagement offers from lonely men who flock to her performances.

Eleanor is twenty-two when she first meets Joseph Mark. She has been hired as an archive assistant in the British library to help pay for her university degree when the dancing proves too hard to keep up, spending the bulk of her days shelving books and working on her thesis (a study of boat burials in southern Norway, heavy on the experimental recreations of boat building). He is dark and sweet against the bright mosaic of stained glass behind him, smiling at Eleanor in a way that roots her to the floor and yet sends her instincts into a frenzy of run! run! run! This is a man who feels immediately different from the others— although she cannot figure out why. Dressed impeccably, smooth dark skin glowing against his tweed suit…

Would you happen to know where I can find Schliemann’s diaries? He asks, a smile so earnest that Eleanor blinks. He presses on, taking her surprise for confusion. The archaeologist who excavated Troy?

I have them checked out already, she responds harshly, hating his sudden look of shock— a woman in archaeology? A man dominated field? Oh, the horror! I have my own research to complete. You’ll have to wait until I’m finished, I’m afraid. Takes women a while to read and comprehend, I keep hearing.

She has seen it on the faces of nearly every man in her career, every male professor or site director who has attempted to bar her from her work, her research, her life.

To her surprise, Joseph only grins, running a nervous hand through his tight, dark curls with a look that borders respect. There is a gleam of realization in his dark eyes.

I’ve heard of you, he says finally. I had thought you looked rather familiar. Eleanor Juniper, the woman turning the archaeology department on its head. I hope you keep challenging the status quo.


Eleanor feels the edges of her mouth turn up, not bothering to hide the wicked glint of her canines as she shakes his hand (a move that makes most men squirm, but not him). Pleased to meet you, Joseph.

~~~*~~~

Dr. Eleanor Margaret Juniper does not have many regrets in life. A handful at maximum, mostly centered around her late start in the field, but not enough to ever truly wish to change any of the twisting paths her fate has turned. She is grateful for each triumph and failure that has come her way, each bend in the road that has led her to her truest self.

But when she steps out of the fancy Stark helicopter and onto the soft green grasses of Greenland, she feels an instant pang of jealousy that her previous travels had never brought her to this gorgeous, ancient land.
The excavation site is beautiful. Wide, shallow pits have reared back to reveal crumbling stone walls, standing proud and dark against a grey, stormy sky. In the northwest corner of the site Eleanor spots a section of digging that goes deeper than the rest, centered perfectly in the crumbling ruins her protégée has managed to discover...

“Eleanor,” Joseph calls, barely heard over the helicopter blades. “I see them!”

Sure enough, Dr. Darcy Lewis’ team begins to emerge, trekking over the rolling cliffside hills to meet them.

Eleanor swallows a smile of pride as they come into view. Ragged, unkempt, and matching the elements around them. The ragtag group of archaeologists and graduate students comes into view proudly, sporting threadbare outfits and wide grins.

“Dr. J!” A voice calls, and Eleanor can no longer hide her smile.

Dr. Darcy Lewis comes smashing into Eleanor’s arms with a rare, keening sort of desperation. Soft, strong arms wrap around Eleanor’s shoulders, flashes of thick black/brown hair suddenly obscuring her view. It is unlike Darcy to be so forward, so undone, but Eleanor allows the young woman to cling to her, even going as far to hug the little (but fierce) lady back.

(Dr. Eleanor Juniper has taken on many graduate students in this profession, coaching and growing them into archaeologists. So what if she loves this fire hearted student more than any of the others?)

Darcy steps back after a long moment, grinning with an earnest embarrassment. Eleanor tracks her trained eyes along the girl, noting the dark circles beneath her eyes, the tired sway of her body. Darcy has lost weight, which is normal for an archaeologist on a remote dig like this – as food is usually whatever you prepacked in freezer bags (or can hunt).

But this is not a weight loss that Eleanor is used to seeing in excavations. It is more of a sunkenness, a loss of some sharp edges and vitality that Darcy usually sports. Eleanor has always loved Darcy for her heart – for that inferno that burns in her eyes and words, the same blast of heat that Eleanor has stoked and controlled in her own being for her entire life. Despite the evident exhaustion in her protégée’s gaze, Darcy Lewis still stands proud and lean against the backdrop of her excavation site, cheeks rosy with windburn, hands balanced on the dip of her hips, the silver scar from Bucharest proudly glinting on her chin. Darcy has always been a girl forged in iron and fire, shaped and reshaped by life’s fuckery in a way that only makes her stronger – forges her backbone and wishbone into something unbreakable.

This Darcy is still unbreakable – nothing earthly could change that, in Eleanor’s opinion - but she looks tired, exhausted by something that must have to do with the site.

Or, Eleanor realizes, with the hunky piece of man-flesh currently hanging back at Darcy’s side with a worried expression.

“What the hell has happened to you, Lewis?” Eleanor demands, shooting her best glare at He-Man behind her. The brute from Bucharest is hovering, silent at Darcy’s side with a stone-faced look of distant concern. “You look like you’ve been dragged through the grave. Are you sleeping? Are you having so much sex that you’re neglecting your rest?”

A chorus of muffled laughter appears from the team behind her, but Darcy manages to spear Eleanor with a look of deep mortification. “Dr. J, please.”
“What?” Eleanor scoffs, pulling Joseph up to her side by the scruff of his stupidly expensive tweed jacket. “Look at her, Joseph. Really look-- doesn’t she seem ill?”

“Uh,” Joseph croaks, fighting vainly against Eleanor’s superior grip. “Now that she mentions it, you do look a bit peckish, Darcy.”

“She’s not sleeping,” He-Man finally volunteers, his voice rusty and low. Those icy blue eyes flash at Eleanor, testing, prodding. Eleanor stares back, refusing to blink. “Barely an hour a night.”

“How do you know that?” Darcy screeches. But Eleanor ignores the sudden dramatics, sizing up the hulking shadow at Darcy’s shoulder.

“Why?” Eleanor demands, raising a brow at Bucky Barnes. “Are you the one keeping her up?”

“No!”

“Well it can’t be Greg.”

"Why have you knocked me out of the running for Dr. Lewis' affections?" Greg complains, peeking out from behind Bucky. "Are you stereotyping me?"

"You haven't taken your eyes off of Barnes' ass since we landed," Dr. J says dryly. "And you came out to the entire faculty and staff almost three years ago."

"...true."

Darcy finally speaks up, red in the face and looking as if she has regretting inviting her mentors to a groundbreaking discovery. “It’s nothing. I’ve just been worried- you know? Worried about preserving the ship, worried about HYDRA and Dr. White and all the jackasses that want their hands on this–”

“Wait,” Joseph speaks up, stopping the torrent of words with a gesture. “A ship? Dr. Lewis… what have you found?”

The smile that Eleanor had been waiting for begins to spread across Darcy’s face. Coy, full of mystery and banishing all traces of shadow.

“Why don’t you come see?”

~~~*~~~

Dr. Mark is speechless at the sight of a massive, half submerged hull in the ground. Darcy laughs at his gaping mouth, while Dr. J hides her surprise behind a raised brow.

“This isn’t the township site we had anticipated,” Darcy admits. “It’s a boat burial. There must be remains under this hull, but I didn’t want to begin the process of pulling it up without the both of you. It’s going to be… delicate.”

That’s putting it lightly. Darcy had taken one look at the ancient, dirt-packed wood of the hull and realized that she needed someone versed in the preservation of ancient wood. Thank God Dr. Mark was an expert in the subject.
“Darcy,” Dr. Mark breathes, gaze glued to the landed boat before him. “I can’t do this alone. Wood exposed to air—we need a team, we need more specialists, lab time, access to preservation techniques that are, quite frankly, beyond our price range—”

"Good thing I happen to be an expert in boat burials," Dr. J interjects, spearing Dr. Mark with a dry look. "Or did you forget what I wrote my first thesis on, Joseph?"

“And good thing Tony Stark ended up being my father,” Darcy says with a smirk, stepping aside and motioning to a long, wooden tent nearby. “Good ole Dad heard my plea and sent up some tech that he had been planning on donating to the University of Edinburgh after our dig. I’ve been trying to keep the circle small, limit those who could be targeted by HYDRA – but if you need a team, by all means my fearless mentors, bring them.”

“Joseph,” Dr. J protests, swinging her thick white hair behind her with a newfound sense of urgency. “Dr. White cannot know about this. What he would do to get his hands on this discovery before Darcy… he would rush to publish, pretend it was his own. Your team has to consist only of people we trust, preservationists who have been vetted by ME—”

“Sounds like Natasha,” Bucky whispers conspiratorially, warm breath fanning Darcy’s ear.

“Yes,” Dr. Mark waves Dr. J off, dark eyes set with a determination Darcy has only seen when he is three glasses into a nice bottle of scotch. “You’re absolutely right, Eleanor. A team would be too risky. Mohammad and Jeffery are well versed in preservation, as well as Darcy. Between the four of us we can preserve this wood, we can make sure nothing is lost to the stealing grip of time.”

“Are you sure?” Greg asks skeptically, popping up from behind Dr. J with a furrowed brow. “This is going to be a job meant for a larger team than us. The preservation alone…”

“We can handle it,” Dr. Mark says surely, dark eyes fixed faithfully on the mound below. “Those under pressure shall rise to such an occasion. I am sure of it, Mr. Ott.”

Darcy smiles. At her side, Scout has begun to cheer, pushing Mohammad forward as if to force him to begin the work at this moment.

“Well?” Dr. Mark raises a black eyebrow, carefully setting his very nice luggage to the dirt and turning to Darcy’s team. “Every moment is a moment that this wood rots – why are you imbeciles standing around lollygagging? Have I taught you nothing?”

They don’t need to be told twice.

~~~*~~~

Two weeks later, Darcy is not regretting inviting her mentors into the excavation. They have broken ground that Darcy had only hoped to cover, pulling up the ancient boards of the hull in a way that preserves it entirely.

Beneath the hull…

That is where Darcy’s troubles begin.

The new movement pulls Darcy out of her worry over her strange dreams. After waking up that
night, soaked in water, she had been sure insanity was to blame. Darcy had never spoken a word to her team, unsure of how to even begin to articulate the situation – and after a week of fearing sleep, she had eventually begun to relax into the conclusion that she must have had a very vivid nightmare and perhaps not truly have been wet, or simply reacted to the damp air in her tent.

This makes it easier to focus on the task at hand: the boat burial that currently carries her name.

There are certain elements that are usual with a Norse boat burial, even with the scarce few found in the UK / Scandinavia area. Riches of some sort – jewelry, gold, remainders of food—and weaponry. The person buried was a person of importance – deserving of honors, of a smooth sail into the afterlife…

Usually, they are male.

Sure, there are a few remains whose gender are debated. The grave of a shield maiden? A queen with honors? A woman whose family laid to rest the best silver axes and swords with her?

Everyone is holding their breaths to see who this burial unearths.

Mohammad and Dr. Mark have worked for almost two weeks to test the stability of the hull and pull it up from the earth. Dr. J spends sixteen hours a day in the dirt, surveying the make and model of the ruined boat they have discovered, muttering calculations under her breath. Tony had communed with preservation experts at the Metropolitan Museum in order to send Darcy’s team the latest and greatest – a tent that had been shipped to the site within hours: waterproof, humidity controlled, and able to keep even the most persistent bacteria out.

Once this wood had been moved away, they had found stone.

Hundreds of stones. Not unlike the famous Sutton Hoo site – stones that had keep the boat upright, had covered the person and items beneath.

They days in which they finally decide to clear and catalog the stones… Darcy and Mohammad stand side by side, waiting with bated breath as Scout, Bucky, Greg and Yael slowly record each stone and pull it up.

Mohammad reached out to steady Darcy’s shoulder, his large hand wrapping around her small bones. They both have the same question on their tongues: what will this reveal? Are they worthy of being the ones to uncover it, to raise it from slumber?

Darcy isn’t sure if she is. But at least she and her team are better than HYDRA, who will only destroy, not worry about the finer, important details of preservation.

Anything, Darcy realizes, is better than HYDRA.

~~~*~~~

The night that Dr. J and Dr. Mark pull up the first section of the hull, Darcy dreams that she is walking through a field of thorns.

Black, twisting thorns as far as the eye can see. Growing so thickly under the smoky-red sky that Darcy cannot find the ground beneath it. The spikes are merciless – slicing through the pads of her
feet like butter, tearing her flesh open. The air is acrid, burning with remnants of something bitter-
each step is agony in her feet, agony in her lungs, agony tearing at the lines of her heart.

A woman is calling for her, pulling Darcy further.

*Come to me, dóttir... the path of my heroes is lined with pain... survive it, dóttir...*

She has never realized before how soft her feet are, what little resistance they have to this horrid
landscape – the soles of a woman who is privileged, the soles of a queen. They must be ruined,
Darcy knows, to walk the path she is meant to follow.

But no matter how much she begs herself, Darcy cannot stop walking, cannot stop putting one foot
in front of the other as she follows the haunting voice– *step, step, step.*

The pain finally becomes too much - breaking the confines of the red sky and field of thorns until...

Darcy opens her eyes.

She wakes in her bed, sobbing, twisting away from the dreamed terror. The bottoms of her feet are
aching, raw. For a long moment, Darcy gasps down air and waits for the phantom pain to end, to
cease existing, to vanish along with her horrible dreams.

But it never does.

Glancing down the length of her body. Darcy realizes the blankets tangled at the edge of her bed
are soaked in blood.

~~~*~~~

Darcy stays awake through the night.

She keeps herself together by raw strength of will – hobbling out of her tent as quietly as possible,
watched only by the bright slash of white, purple, blue stars in the sky above (she will never get
over what fantastic views of the Milky Way they have, so far from civilization) as she carefully
unearths a first aid kit from a box near the smoldering ruins of the previous dinner’s fire.

(Starting a completely new fire in the camp pit is a pain that the team has quickly learned to avoid
– letting each fire naturally wane and die until breakfast, rather than smothering it with water and blankets.)

Even the fairly thick texture of her EDINBURGH UNI sweatshirt and tartan pajama pants does
nothing to fend off the deep chill of the night, and the agony of her still bleeding feet is fresh.
Every step is an exercise in perseverance, fighting the spiking pain in order to get back into the
safe confines of her own space, a place where she can bind her wounds and think about what in the
actual fresh hell is happening to her.

*Please,* Darcy prays for a brief moment, shutting her eyes against the whirling stars overhead.

*Please don’t let me be going insane.*

When she summons the strength to open her eyes, she is not alone.

Bucky Barnes stands across the fire, still as a shadow. He is clad in soft sweatpants and a t-shirt,
the outline of a harness at his hip clearly visible, the bump of what could only be a gun.

There is tension in his silence that is practically physical – slamming into Darcy like a wave as she freezes, one arm cradling the first aid kit to her chest while the other grips the safe steady existence of a wooden bench. It is the same bench she sat on the evening before, sandwiched between Dr. J and Scout as they shared stories over dinner.

Now it is the only thing saving her from putting pressure onto the wrecked mess of her feet, sparing her from physically showing her pain to the handsome man staring her down.

Darcy sucks down a breath, scrambling for some sense of normality. “Fancy meeting you here—”

“Stop.”

The dark, flat warning of his tone shocks her. Sure, Darcy has always understood the reality behind James Barnes: a man who has killed, who has been used, who spent seventy years as a weapon, deemed by Tony as someone perhaps unstable—

But, to her at least, he has always been gentle. Kind. Steady.

Not this. Staring at her with something burning in those blue eyes, something sharp in his gaze.

“When are you finally gonna tell me what the hell is goin’ on?”

Darcy blinks, gripping the bench heavily. “I—”

“No,” Bucky steps forward, low and harsh. “I don’t want the bullshit excuses you gave to Dr. Juniper. No more ‘I’m worried about digging, HYDRA is keeping me up at night, what if we can’t preserve the boat’. I know you’re lying.”

“Those are honest concerns!” Darcy flares, forcing herself to stand up straight. “Don’t you dare talk down to me, Bucky. I’m allowed to be concerned about the lives of the people I have pulled into this rabbit hunt of a situation. I am allowed to spend my nights worrying that I have hand-painted a target on their backs.”

“You are,” Bucky concedes, frown deepening as he steps forward, clearing the ruins of the fire pit between them. “But none of what you’ve said explains why you can’t stand properly on your own two feet.”

Shifting, Darcy plants herself firmly behind the bench, counting on it obscuring his sight. “It’s just— I’m just exhausted. I got up for a drink, let me go back to bed and sleep.”

“Exhaustion doesn’t make you bleed, doll.”

He is suddenly before her, pressing her softly forward to sit on the abandoned bench before dropping to his knees in order to get a better look at what is obviously causing her pain. Darcy gasps as his hands go gently to her ankle, the cool kiss of cybernetic metal kissing the skin of her heel, lifting her baggy pajamas—

“Darcy.”

The dark light in his tone is gone, replaced with shock. She feels him recoil, although his hands stay steady and gentle as they inspect her right foot. In the starlight, Darcy knows she is only able to peer at a pale imitation to what Bucky’s serum-enhanced gaze sees. But even she is slightly sick as Bucky inspects pads of her feet, blinking back hysterical tears at the sight of thick red slashes
crisscrossing the soft white skin in such a chaotic parody of art – as if someone had decided to throw ribbons of red paint at a blank canvas.

He sets her right leg back down tenderly and immediately cradles her left, taking endless moments to gently probe the torn flesh. Darcy hisses when his touch drags slightly over a particularly deep gash, causing Bucky to pull away, his worried gaze darting to her face.

It relaxes when he spots the first aid kit still safely ensconced in her grip.

“Pass that here,” He demands, hardly waiting to Darcy to relinquish it before pulling it from her lap. She must look like an absolute mess, because his face softens with promise. “It’s alright, Darce. We can fix this.”

Those four words. We can fix this. We can fix this. They nearly break Darcy, shocking her by causing tears to prickle before her eyelashes. The exact words she has been craving to hear from someone she trusts, a promise that it will be okay, that her friends will not be hunted down and killed, that she has not finally proven Tony and Jane and Kara right – finally fallen so far into a world that is over her head, a world made for superheroes, that dreaming wounds and water into reality are something that can just, be fixed—

“But you have to tell me what’s goin’ on, doll. Are you going somewhere at night? Are you meeting someone? What the hell did you walk through to massacre your feet like this?”

Bucky Barnes is kneeling at her feet, peering up at her with those icy bedroom eyes and dark brows, his flesh hand still gripping her left ankle while his cybernetic hand balances a tube of triple antibiotic and a roll of gauze. All those practiced stories she had frantically been creating about tripping into the fire pit while getting some tea and whiskey have flown out of her head. How can she lie to him?

“Thorns.” Darcy chokes out, caught between tears and laughter. “A whole valley of thorns, far as the eye can see. I had to walk through them, I couldn't stop.”

Bucky does not pull away, he does not frown or even widen those calculating eyes at the impossible statement she had made. No implication that he has immediately realized she is fucking crazy. Although there are no thorns anywhere nearby on the entire island of Greenland, Bucky simply continues slathering the gauze in ointment and says, so very calmly: “What are you talking about?”

The story comes pouring out. With the stars as their only witness, Darcy stumbles and trips over the unbelievable story of her dreams – of reaching for golden fish in a roaring river and waking up soaking wet, of following the call of a woman across a field of razor-sharp thorns, unable to stop each step. She tells him about the dreams in between that have plagued her, although they have not followed her into reality: of a woman with truly golden hair that calls out to her in a language she somehow understands, crying tears of gold as she remains always just out of reach. A voice that pushes Darcy onward, calling to something deep within the confines of her heart.

He listens faithfully, his hands constantly busy with the work of bandaging her as Darcy hides her eyes. She ends the story with silent tears, unable to stop them from sliding down her cheeks as Bucky finishes binding up her feet.

Her blood stains his hands. These are not cuts that will heal quickly, and he says as much before straightening up, still balanced on his knees before her.

“Well,” He leans forward, setting the first aid kit next to Darcy on the bench, his crisp pine scent
filling her space. “I don’t know much about ancient curses, but maybe we’ve woke one up. Just like that man from the movie.”

“Which movie? The Mummy?”

“Yup, remember? The scruffy one you liked. Hardly blinked the entire time we watched, back at the compound. Enough to make a man jealous, that sort of rapture.”

“Rick O’Connell?” Darcy can hardly contain her mortification. “Bucky, that was fiction. This is—this shouldn’t be happening, it shouldn’t be real. Don’t you think I’m crazy? Don’t you want to send me packing back to Tony’s crew of psychologists and pill-pushers?”

Bucky spears her with a dry look. “I’ve met those psychologists a good number of times. I don’t think they specialize in dreaming things into reality.”

Knocked back, Darcy tastes shame, heavy and bitter in her mouth. Of course Bucky would understand the fear of being labeled crazy, insane, off your marbles. God, she wishes she thought before she spoke.

“I’m sorry.”

Bucky sits back on his heels, waving her off. “Don’t be. I just don’t think they’ll help you, is all. This is a little beyond their understanding, I think.”

“Wait—” Darcy stops, turning to Bucky with wide eyes. “Does this mean-- do you believe me?”

“Of course, I do.” Bucky says seriously, those blue eyes steady. “Did you think I would doubt you?”

There is something laced in his words, a heavy sort of promise, an implication that shakes Darcy to the bone. Goosebumps rise on the skin of her arms, staring down at a man who is, quite literally, on his knees before her. It feels like a pledge, straight from the old Arthurian tales of knight and lady, man and woman.

“But,” Bucky breaks the silence, slowly rising to his feet. With a quick, fluid movement, Darcy’s world is turned sideways as she is scooped up into James Buchanan Barnes’ arms, lifted off of her aching feet.

Held close to his chest, Bucky smiles down at her, the smile Darcy had seen in history books – one that historians claimed drew women into his bed, that devastated men and women alike with its sincerity and wicked intent.

“Besides, one thing we known for certain: consequences of your dreams carry over to the real world.”

“Yeah,” Darcy says eloquently, utterly distracted by the feel of his arms and chest, the tilt of his lips so close to her face. “Seems to be what’s happening.”

“Well then obviously,” Bucky pauses, fighting a rising smile. “For your own protection, you shouldn’t be sleeping alone.”

“What.”

“You heard me.”
“Wait, Bucky, no—”

“I told your father I would take care of you. I made a solemn oath. What if you dream something bad again? What if next time the wounds aren’t just your feet?”

“You have a point, but—Bucky, I snore! Badly! Scout used to hate having to share a tent with me!”

“I used to sleep in barracks with fifteen other men. You think I care?”

“It’s different, I’m a—”

“Darcy,” Bucky says firmly, that dark note returning to his voice. “I just woke up in the middle of the night to you limping out of your tent, balancing on feet that are so brutalized you probably shouldn’t walk for the next few days—” He stops, cutting off her protests before they begin. “I know you’re going to, I’m not even going to have that argument with you tonight. Come on, doll. I know we haven’t really spoken about what’s goin’ on between us but give me this. Seeing you bleed is—it’s the worst thing I can see, okay? I don’t want to worry every morning that something happened to you in the night. If you don’t want to sleep with me, that’s fine, but you can’t be alone. Scout, or Yael, or Dr. J even…”

“Dr. J kicks in the night.” Darcy grumbles, fighting off the sincerity behind his words. She's beginning to realize that he may have a point. “She’s the worst to share a bed with.”

“Well, up to you. I promise if you needed to be in my tent, I’ll be a perfect gentleman. Just please. Share with someone.”

There is a long pause as Darcy thinks over his words, mind swimming with possibilities. Between the dreams turning into reality and her feelings for Bucky and his proximity—

“Do you like lavender?”

Bucky blinks. “Lavender? The plant?”

“The scent,” Darcy explains. “I have a diffuser in my tent. Brought it from home—it makes everything smell like lavender. I could change it for eucalyptus if you wanted, but I usually prefer lavender.”

A long moment. Bucky smiles, cradling her closer to his chest. “I like lavender. Explains why you’ve smelled so nice in the field.”

“Good,” Darcy nods. She's desperately trying to be unaffected by the fact that she is STILL in his arms, inches from his face, utterly consumed by his nearness. Courage is thrumming in her veins, pushing her to jump in head first with this man. “May as well head to my tent then. Thank the gods Tony supplied me with a double cot, right?”

Her clumsy attempt at fighting her own awkwardness sucks, but Bucky only grips her tighter and turns his steps under the starry sky to her tent.

“Thank God indeed, doll.”
Chapter Summary

Song for this chapter is 'Close Your Eyes' by Jump, Little Children as quoted in the first lines. Very much for the Darcy/Bucky sleeping scenes. :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tell me you had bad dreams last night / cause you were rolling in your sleep...

Tell me the stars are made of tin / and that they're banging on your roof...

Darcy can’t fucking sleep.

There is a man in her bed.

Not even a normal man - but a hunky, stacked, World War II solider turned Russian assassin turned superhero with swoopy dark hair kissing his stupidly chiseled jaw.

The perfect storm, Darcy whispers to herself.

“What?” Bucky asks, pulling back the blanket to peer at her.

“Nothing,” Darcy says quickly. “Just, uh, saying my nightly prayers.”

“To who? Odin?”

“Ha-ha. Yup, you caught me. Now go the fuck to sleep, Barnes.”

Bucky huffs a laugh, turning slowly back on his side to give her privacy. He must feel how stressed Darcy is about this situation – surely he has seen himself in a mirror and realized that he is devastating to the population of humans attracted to men with dark good looks and firm asses. He must know that this is not easy for her.

(God, Darcy thinks. When Greg finds out he is going to shit himself out of jealousy.)

Pressing the sweet image of Greg's indignation aside, Darcy realizes just how deep she is in with this man. What the fuck was she thinking, inviting him into her bed? What the actual fuck?

(Admittedly, she was half insane from the pain of her sliced-up feet and crazy dreams, and Bucky had carried her all gentleman-like, with his warm hands, rough palms…)

But has she learned nothing about romances in the field? How they usually end with fire and brimstone and Darcy climbing out the window of a restaurant after a half-hearted attempt to see if the chemistry carries back over to the real world?

(It never does. She’s escaped exactly three dates with fellow archaeology students through stealth.)
Every attempt to build chemistry with a classmate or fellow crashes and burns in the real world, when the magic of ancient history and nights under the stars fades back into reality.)

How is Darcy supposed to survive this? She can feel Bucky’s indent in her padded cot, the dip of his body as he curls away from her. Between the ache in her feet and the steady vibrations of his breathing, Darcy is not going to be able to sleep a wink.

“Hey doll?”

Darcy’s breath catches. There is a careful distance between them, one that is slowly beginning to be destroyed as Bucky turns back to face her.

“What?”

“… I can hear you thinking.”

“What, are you telepathic now? Did Russia implant a mind-reading chip in your brain?”

Bucky snorts. “See, that’s what I like about you. You don’t pull any punches.”

“In hindsight I realize that my joke was a bit on the nose. Possibly offensive. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” Bucky says amicably. “It’s an expression. Means I know you’re worrin’ about something.”

“Me? Worrying? Hah.”

“That was a weak attempt at deflection.”

“We can’t all be trained super spies.”

“Seriously.” He shifts even more, propping himself up on his folded cybernetic arm. “Are you alright? If sleeping together is too much, I can lay my cot outside your door—”

“No!” Darcy objects, nearly shooting up. “That’s awful. No, you aren’t sleeping outside. I’m just – nervous. This is new.”

Bucky raises a dark brow. “What’s new, a handsome man in your bed? Can’t say I’m not pleased to hear that.”

“Excuse you, I’ve had plenty of men in my bed.”

Bucky’s cocky smile falls so quickly it is almost comical. “Plenty?”

“Well, like – god – two?” Darcy jerks up, yanking her plush purple pillow with her. “Why are we talking about this? This is not what I – my point is not about the men I have been with in the past. My point is that my feet hurt really fucking bad and I’m worried that it is going to impede my work in the field and, well, you’re in my cot looking so… so…”

“So?” Bucky prods, the glint of his white grin telling Darcy that he is very much enjoying her word vomit.

“Distracting.” Darcy decides on honesty. “I read about you in history books, you know? There were documentaries about you and Steve, your time growing up in Brooklyn, the 107th… they interviewed a lot of elderly folk who claimed to know you. Unearthed a lot of letters.”

“A bit,” Darcy admits. “You had the reputation of being a New York Casanova. All I can think about is how you’ve definitely slept next to beautiful women before, and I’m sure that in the 1940s they were real ladies, you know? With, like, perfectly curled hair and nice makeup and perfume and, I dunno, stockings. But here I am, smelling like sweat and am definitely unwashed and, God, Jane always tells me that I snore like a wombat— “

“A wombat?” Bucky blinks, as if summoning a mental picture of the animal. “What the hell noise do those things make?”

“No clue,” Darcy’s hands are tangled in the blankets, twisting nervously. “Thor spent a few months with Jane in an observatory in the Australian outback. He loved it apparently. Got along famously with all the wildlife that typically wants to kill you in true Thor fashion. He keeps trying to convince Tony to relocate the Avenger’s headquarters over there, something about how kangaroos are the most noble fighters and we can learn a lot from them. I stopped listening after a while, honestly, but I guess they heard some wombats snore and thought – ‘Wow, this small marsupial is just like our good friend Darcy!’”

Bucky squints adorably. “Aren’t they rodents?”

“Fuck off, Barnes.”

Bucky shakes off her bitter words with a yawn. “Fun story, but you’re deflectin’ again. Lewis, do you really think I care if you snore? I spent years living in a tent with a buncha dirty, unwashed army men. I promise you’re a sight far better than them.”

“Oh, thank you Bucky. At least I’m better than your old army pals. I feel so much better.”

“You don’t need to worry about any of that shit, Lewis.” Suddenly Bucky has lifted himself up, pressing his back against the tent frame in order to sit up next to her. “I don’t care about snorin’, or not wearing makeup. From what everyone else says about you, sounds like you’ve practically lived in the field. Why is that something that bothers you? Where is this coming from?”

Darcy is silent for a long moment, feeling Bucky’s eyes on her face, tracing her frown. She shifts, careful to keep a few inches between them, and fiddles with the tie keeping her hair up in its messy bun.

“I…” Darcy stops, weighing her dedication to explaining the truth. Maybe it is the fact that she is sitting near a man who feels like warmth and spice, the ease in which secrets are shared in utter darkness. “We established that I grew up watching a lot of documentaries. Stuff in American History class about you and Steve, like I said, and long exposes on the, ah, Stark dynasty.”

Bucky’s outline shifts, moving from tense stillness to lean back against the wall. The long, pale line of his throat is exposed as he tips his head back and swallows. “Ah.”

“Howard and Maria Stark were talked about like American royalty. The parties, the innovation, the excess. They had friends in every powerful position imaginable – the White House, the Senate, the military. I remember watching and thinking: God, what would it be like to live like that?” Darcy snorts, fistng her hands in the blankets. “Like waking up in The Great Gatsby or something.”

“And then you found out that you’re a Stark.” Bucky says slowly, with dawning understanding. “How does it feel?”
“Still unreal. Have yet to attend a Gatsby party.”

“That’s okay.” Bucky shifts closer, keeping his eyes fixed on the tent ceiling. “You never met Howard or Maria, nobody expects you to suddenly feel some connection to them.”

“Thanks,” Darcy smiles. “I think it’s just—the reality of it, you know? In all those documentaries and news clips, Tony was always portrayed as a boy king. The son poised to inherit it all, self-destructive and irresistible and brilliant. Now he’s Iron Man and his image has changed… but, what about me? I can’t stop thinking about what those documentaries would have to say about me. What have I inherited from that dynasty, and what I am destined to bring to it?”

Bucky is silent for a long moment, his head tilted back and lips parted as if he is tasting her words. Tense in stillness, contemplative.

“Why does it have to be about destiny?” He asks finally, words branded into the chilled air. “Fate, the universe, red strings – you modern folk are so preoccupied with the idea of being tied to some sort of plan. Shit happens, okay? We just keep movin’ on with our lives, making the best of what we can.”

There is a weight in his tone that has Darcy on edge. All too quickly she is reminded of his past, something she finds herself forgetting more and more. It is hard to reconcile this handsome, laughing man with the stories Steve has told about HYDRA, about the chaos in DC, of seventy years of bloodshed.

Those hands that are so close to her side were used to kill her paternal grandparents.

Not him, Darcy shakes the traitorous thought away with searing disgust. That was not him, that was HYDRA.

“You’re right,” She says quietly, knowing that Bucky can hear her clear as day. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t ever be sorry.” Bucky feels like a star, suddenly clear and bright even in the darkness. “You never have to apologize to me. You’re the first person in this century that treated me like a man, not a headcase.”

A wave of sleepiness hits Darcy slowly as she processes his words.

“You’re not a headcase, Bucky Barnes.” She falls back into her blankets, the sudden effects of the Ambien he had given her for pain making itself known. “You’re a man. A damned good man.”

Silence falls for so long that Darcy begins to drift, hearing Bucky’s next words as if from the bottom of a deep pool.

“Sleep, doll.” Bucky shifts, lying back with his arm tucked beneath his pillow. He moves closer, not touching her, but curling up inches away. His warmth soaks into her side. “I’ll help you fight off fate, I promise.”

~~~*~~~

When Darcy awakens, she immediately registers three things.
First, Bucky is no longer in her bed. The covers next to her are smooth, pillow fluffed as if he had never been there. Another dream.

Secondly, she did not dream! Peaceful darkness had been her reprieve from the dreams of thorns and golden tears, and for that she is beyond grateful.

And third: her feet hurt like motherfucking hell.

The minute Darcy shifts out of the blankets and tries her weight on the dirt floor, she drops to her knees and curses so loudly that somebody outside drops a pan and calls out to check on her.

“’M fine!” Darcy yells back, pulling herself up by the corner of her tall dresser in an attempt to spare her poor feet any weight. “Stubbed my toe!”

It takes almost twenty minutes for her to get dressed. Hobbling between the dresser and her washstand, Darcy manages to rinse herself down and pull on some khaki pants and a long-sleeved sweater, not daring to inspect the thick bandages Bucky had wound around her poor feet. She would need help for that.

“Lewis!”

Dr. J appears suddenly, pulling back the tent flap with a no-nonsense air. Her silky white hair is hanging, wound into a loose braid that touches the small of her back, olive faced pinched in a way that has Darcy immediately standing on red alert.

“You better see this,” Dr. J states firmly. “We’ve cleared the stones. The skeleton…”


Dr. J shakes her head with a smile. “You better come see for yourself. It’s your site, after all.”

~~~*~~~

It is a woman.


The woman is in her fifties. That they can be sure of, Mohammad promises. Her teeth show that she had eaten a hearty meal of grain and beef before her death. Seasoned with seeds.

Before she was killed by a nasty slice to the gut, a wound so deep that the bones of her spine show a deep gouge.

It would not have been a quick death.

The team assembles around her body, the skeleton spread out on a table in Tony Stark’s new preservation tent – complete with controlled temperatures, oxygen regulation, and technology that most archaeologists would weep with jealousy to see.

A week had passed in a blink of an eye since properly unearthing the remains. It had been a
lengthy process to lift the woman’s skeleton from the dirt and move her to the tent – paperwork being tilled each time a bone was unearthed and moved. Darcy’s right hand is utterly cramped from the amount of writing the past week has seen. Her team had been fantastic at the tedious work, cataloging and bagging the bones carefully as they filled out pro-forma burial sheets. Now the skeleton has been reassembled, washed and laid out carefully.

“She must have a woman of high-ranking status,” Dr. Mark explains. “This funeral bounty… it is truly groundbreaking. Not even Sutton Hoo can compare with this.”

“I agree that she was high ranking,” Yael interjects, using a burnished hand to trace a laceration on the woman’s shin bone. “But look at her wounds. This is a woman who was no stranger to combat, I can see no other explanation for how much bone has been hacked and chipped away. She was a warrior.”

"That fact alone makes this site unprecedented." Dr. J says firmly, turning to Darcy with a look of pride that makes her knees week (and not just from the constant ache of her feet). "Dr. Lewis, you are at the helm of another discovery that will rock the foundations of the archaeological world."

Bucky looks intrigued at the warrior comment. “Did she survive the hacking and chipping?”

Yael nods furiously. The woman had become more and more interested in osteology after discovering the woman's body. “Yes, she did. Look closely here – most of her wounds are most likely inflicted by some sort of metal weapon – an axe, sword, or dagger. This is the Late Dorset period here in Greenland, so any of those options could work. We also see stress fractures at the joining of her shoulders and neck, maybe some heavy armor. However, her hands…”

Yael raises one of the metacarpal bones of the warrior’s left hand to Bucky’s face. “Do you see these nicks?”

He nods. "She tried to defend herself. Push back an attacker, from the looks of it."

"Yes!" Yael is grinning, the rest of the team gaping at Bucky's apparent knowledge of combat. “The positioning tells us that these were most likely defense wounds, as well as the slashes on the ulna bone of her left arm. She fended someone off, most likely the individual that killed her.”

“Damn.” Bucky breathes, icy gaze glued to the bones. “That’s… wow. We can tell all that from her bones.”

“Yup,” Yael says proudly. “Our skeletons all have a story to tell. We can also discern that she probably had two or three children, was a fan of sweets, and died somewhere in her fifties. And that it was the nasty slash to her stomach, so deep we see the blade has damaged her lower spine.”

Darcy shudders. Gruesome.

“A warrior woman cut down in her prime,” Dr. J laments. “I can only salute her.”

Mohammad has not stopped kneeling beside the body, his tools set aside as he takes a moment to pray in Arabic over her remains.

Darcy takes her place next to Dr. J, looking over the bones still stained with dirt as they wait. Bucky comes to her other side, staring down at Mohammad and the skeleton with wide eyes.

“He’s really upset.”

“Of course he is,” Darcy softly. “Don’t you remember his story at the campfire? Of us all,
Mohammad has the most respect for the dead. He prays each time he deals with the remains. It is his way of respecting the fact that this is someone who lived a life we want to learn about.”

“I do, I just… this person has been dead for thousands of years.”

Darcy blinks, taking a moment to realize that Bucky is a man who has lived death and fire and brimstone for seventy years, not a man who has been given the opportunity to cry over the grave of someone lost.

“Humanity.” Darcy says in response as she watches Mohammad finish his prayer. “It truly is the most important thing in our line of work. How can you dissect the past if you do not care and respect for those who came before? If we found a fresh body, recently murdered, we would weep for the loss of life. We would be shocked, report it to the authorities. Looking at this woman, how can it be any different?”

A moment passes. Bucky opens his mouth to respond, stares down at the skeleton, and closes it. His eyes are far away, agonized with something that Darcy cannot name.

She realizes, suddenly, exactly what she has said.

“I’ll be back,” He promises lowly. “I just – I need a minute.”

Darcy reaches to grab his hand before he flees. She is completely aware that he allows her to touch him – he could be gone in seconds if he wanted to, twisting away from her before she could blink with that assassin stillness – but he stops, mindful of the cane Darcy has been using to help her hobble around.

(The team had bought Darcy’s story of accidentally walking into the smoldering fire pit while half asleep and looking for water with no questions asked, especially when Bucky stepped up and explained that he had seen the whole thing. A bit of teasing, some concern for Darcy’s bandages, and the gift from Dr. Mark of a whittled stick to use as a cane was all that had been given before the topic was dropped.)

“We’ll be in here for hours,” Darcy says quietly, despite the fact that her team’s attention is solely on the skeleton. “Take your time. Come back when you want to.”

Bucky nods, his face a careful, blank mask. Darcy lets go of him slowly, watching with concern as he disappears out the door without a backwards glance.

“Lewis!”

Darcy is yanked from her thoughts by Dr. J’s pale face, beckoning her over to the table with frantic hands.

“What’s the story?” Darcy asks as she hobbles forward, leaning on the cane. “This is already groundbreaking that we’ve confirmed the skeleton is female. I’ve been looking over the grave goods we’ve excavated so far with Greg and we both are thinking she was either a woman of very high status, like the wife of a King, or—”

“A warrior.” Dr. J finishes with a glint in her hazel eyes. “I’m inclined to believe this grave may change all we know about Norse boat burials.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Mohammad,” Dr. J ignores the question, urgently nudging the osteologist as Darcy takes her place.
at the skeleton’s side. “Tell Dr. Lewis what you just told me. And Darcy – hold out your wrist.”

Darcy raises a brow at her mentor and resident osteologist. “What’s happening?”

But Mohammad does not spill the metaphorical beans. “Your right wrist, if you please.”

Obeying, she lifts her right arm and presents it to Mohammad. He peels back the sleeve of her jacket and shirt with cool, gentle fingers, revealing the heavy, golden cuff of the Foula bracelet.

“Are you able to take it off?” Mohammad asks, dark gaze hooded as he prods the warm gold. “The bracelet?”

“I have before,” Darcy says. “Not in a while. Since—” She stops, not wanting to ruin the bright afternoon of amazing discoveries with mention of HYDRA. “Why, do you need it?”

“Try to take it off,” Dr. J commands quietly. “We have a theory.”

Looking between her two specialists, Darcy takes a moment to center her breathing and imagine the cuff slipping off of her wrist. Slowly, she grips the heavy gold (the weight practically unnoticeable to her now, she has worn it for so long) and slips it off of her wrist.

“Amazing,” Mohammad whispers. “It went from being molded to your skin, to expanding enough to pull off. Is this truly magic?”

“It can turn into a whip with only a passing thought from Darcy,” Dr. J says dryly. “I think that qualifies as magic, Dr. Siddiqi.”

“Perhaps you are right.”

Darcy watches curiously as Mohammad holds the cuff between his hands, carefully inspecting the inside of the bracelet. She doesn’t want to admit it but being without the bracelet for the first time since Bucharest is making her nervous, the uncomfortable feeling of being naked without the cuff kissing her skin. “Anyone want to share with me what the connection may be?”

“Ah! Yes, of course, Dr. Lewis.” Mohammad gestures for Darcy to step over to him, gaze directed to the warrior woman’s skeletal right wrist. “Do you see that indentation, here? On her ulna and radius?”

Darcy looks closely at the skeleton, tracing the carpal bones until she sees…

An indentation, just as Mohammad had said. A compression that seems to have shaved the wrist and arm bones down almost a full few centimeters.

“That’s odd.” Darcy can’t resist pressing her face up to the strange indent. “Normally we don’t see bone reshaping like this unless it’s cultural and purposeful, like artificial cranial deformation of infants.”

“Exactly.” Dr. J echoes. “And that is purposeful. This reshaping seems to show that this warrior woman wore something around her wrist for a long, long time. At least long enough to wear down her bone.”

The truth hits Darcy suddenly. Studying the shape of the indent, the depth and width…

“Holy shit.” She gapes. “This is the exact dimensions of the Foula bracelet. You think this woman wore my bracelet?”
“I think it is possible.” Mohammad nods. “I almost wouldn’t believe it, but I took the liberty of testing the hypothesis before I brought it forward…”

He steps back, pulling out a hanging tablet monitor (labeled with a proud STARK INDUSTRIES of course) full of numbers and pictures. Tapping quickly through the screens that even Darcy barely understands (she can keep up with formulas, but Mohammad is truly a protégée) he finally stops.

“Do you know what this is?”

“You know I’m shit at chemistry, but I know it’s a formula.” Darcy says slowly, leaning forward to glare at the mess of numbers and label beneath. “Aurum Asgardianus…. Asgardian gold?”

“Good!” Mohammad cheers. “Yes, this is the slightly incomplete formula for the substance you have been discovering here on Earth. The substance that the Foula bracelet is made of.”

“And the fact that you have the formula pulled up means…”

“It means that Mohammad has found traces of that same gold in the indentations of this woman’s carpal and ulna bones.” Dr. J reaches forward to pluck the Foula bracelet off of the table. “The same material, the same dimensions and measurements. It all adds up.”

“This woman wore the Foula bracelet.”

Darcy speaks the words with awe but barely manages to truly process them. She can’t stop staring at the bracelet shaped gouge in the woman’s wrist bone and said bracelet in Dr. J’s hands, the huge diamond arranged with sparks of amethyst and emerald, like stars spilling out around a galaxy.

“That’s not all,” Dr. J says grimly. “Due to the fact that tiny chips of Asgardian gold were found embedded in her dried bone…”

“We have reason to believe she died in the Foula bracelet, Dr. Lewis.” Mohammad finishes. “And was buried in it. It stayed on her wrist long enough in life to shape her bones, and long enough in death to seep into her cartilage.”

"... well fuck me."

~~~*~~~

The beer in Greg’s hand hits the table with a resounding clank. “So now the golden question is: how the hell did the Foula bracelet get off of a very dead woman’s wrist and into a completely different site WITHOUT disturbing this boat burial?”

Greg’s question is a very good one. Unfortunately, Darcy doesn’t have an answer.

“Uh… magic?” She says lamely, but with spirit fingers.

Greg shakes his head in mock-disgust. “Sometimes I wonder who in their right mind decided to give you a doctorate degree.”

~~~*~~~
It has become a constant routine for Bucky to sleep in Darcy’s tent. After realizing that Darcy’s dangerous dreams had ceased each night he spent with her, he made sure to never miss an evening. Usually he will slip in after the rest of the camp has gone to sleep and leave before they could awake, muttering cute 1940s era thoughts about protecting Darcy’s reputation.

(She laughs her ass off the first time Bucky explains his desire to make sure nobody thinks they are doing anything less savory than innocent sleepovers... but stops her laughter when she sees the absolute sincerity in his eyes. The chivalrous fucker truly doesn’t want anyone to think ill of Darcy, or God forbid, tarnish her reputation.)

(His sweet earnestness makes the fact that Bucky has made no move to touch her in all the long nights a bit more bearable.)

But as Darcy begins to get ready for bed, slipping on her softest sweat pants and shaking out her long, tangled hair, she realizes with sudden dread that she has not seen Bucky since they had all stood around the warrior woman’s body, mourning a lost life.

Well, shit.

Before Darcy can hop up on her still agonized feet and sound the missing persons alarm for their resident protective assassin and best trench digger, the man in question comes tripping into her tent.

And he reeks.... of sweet smelling booze.

“Holy fucknuts!” Darcy lurches forward, pulling him bodily forward into her living space. “You’re loaded!” She accuses.

Bucky sways, leaning heavily forward where Darcy has him by the shoulders. His brow furrows in confusion. “My guns are always loaded.”

“No, I’m not talking about the five guns you always have hidden somewhere on your body, I mean – you’re drunk!”

"And you're beautiful. Still need to take you out on that date, doll." Bucky is slurring, eyes bright. There is a heaviness to his vowels, his Brooklyn accent stronger with drink. "As soon as we hit civilization, promise."

Darcy’s cheeks immediately go red. She sputters, brain capacity suddenly so stunted she can only repeat herself. "Bucky, you're drunk!"

Taking a moment to think, Bucky nods solemnly. “I think I am.”

“You think?”

“Mmmmmhm. Been a while, but I feel drunk.”

“Did you dip into the Asgardian mead I gave you?”

He gives a slow, proud smile. “Yup.”

“How much did you drink?”

Bucky pauses, as if unsure of the answer. He moves quickly to the large belt at his waist, pulling
an empty flask from one of the pockets.

Darcy stares blankly at the drained container. “Well, that answers that question. You’re gonna need to sleep this off or sober up somehow, I don’t think even your super-soldier constitution can handle a whole flask of Thor’s drink.”

She moves to push him into her bed. He seems to find her attempts amusing, allowing himself to be pushed and prodded as he grins sloppily down at her.

“You’re strong, doll.”

“Shut up. You’re letting me do this and you know it.”

She sits him down on the edge of the bed, falling to her knees and reaching—

“Woah, Darcy! You can’t—”

Peering up in amusement, Darcy sees that Bucky’s cheeks are suddenly flaming with color, his blue eyes wide.

“What?” She asks innocently. “I can’t help a drunk man get his shoes off before bed? Last thing I want is grave dirt tracked into my cot.”

“…Oh.”

“Dirty mind.” She shakes her head, concealing laughter. ”Now sit still and let me get these boots off of you.” She gets to work on his laces, grateful for something to do with her hands. Her next question is serious. “Why did you start drinking, Barnes?”

He doesn’t answer. She looks up to see his head tilted back, those icy eyes intently studying the ceiling of the tent.

But Darcy has never been one to be easily dissuaded by silence. “Was it the skeleton?”

His first boot finally comes off. She sets it carefully in the corner of the tent, beginning to work on the second as Bucky formulates his answer.

“Nah,” He says finally. “I’ve seen plenty of skeletons before. It wasn’t that.”

“Then what was it?”

The laces of his left boot are somewhat tangled. Darcy works with her fingers to loosen them, squinting at the mess of leather string.

“It was the prayer.” Bucky’s head dips, elbows coming to rest on his knees. His sudden mood change causes Darcy to abandon her quest to free his feet immediately, giving him her full attention. “I just – I couldn’t -” His gaze turns dark, inward. ”Darcy, do you know how many people I’ve killed?”

His voice is raw, broken. It is an honest question.

“No,” Darcy says slowly. “I don’t know an exact number. But I’ve seen the Winter Soldier’s file. I saw what he was made to do.”

“What I did.”
“What a brainwashed, memory-wiped man was forced to do by a terrorist organization.”

“Stop defending me!” Bucky is suddenly up, his temper flaring as he jerks away from Darcy and paces to the far corner of her tent. Still in one boot.

"Bucky..."

“How can you say all of that shit about humanity and then look at me like I’m not a monster?” He demands, glaring down at Darcy in a way that reminds her of a cornered animal. He is not yelling, but there is so much anguish in his tone that Darcy feels it like a wound. “Today, in the lab, you went on about humanity and caring for those who die. How can you say that and then look at me and ignore the blood my hands have spilled?”

Darcy stays on her knees, glaring right back at Bucky Barnes. “Because that wasn’t you. I have never looked at you and seen a murderer, because you are not one. You were a tool in HYDRA’s hand! Would you blame a hammer for doing what it was meant to do, or blame the person wielding it?”

“I—You—” Bucky continues pacing, his hands coming up to tangle in the dark locks of hair kissing his jawline. “God, you’re the craziest dame I’ve ever met, you know that? I thought you were an angel when I first saw you fight in Bucharest, but now I think you must just be stupid—”

Darcy’s blood freezes in her veins, feeling the insult like a slap.

“That’s a cruel thing to say, Bucky Barnes.”

The hurt edge of her tone stops Bucky’s frantic pacing. He jerks forward, stopping himself from reaching for her at the last minute. “God, fuck - doll, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know exactly how you meant it.” Darcy says coolly. “You think that anybody who sees the good in you is stupid for hanging around. That we all are blind to what you think you still are. You still see yourself as a weapon, don’t you? Not a man.”

Her words cause the blood to drain from his face. He sways, rooted to the spot. The lost look in his face halts her anger, turning it back into compassion.

“Bucky,” Darcy says softly, rising up from her knees. With careful steps, like approaching a scared animal, Darcy inches towards him. “Bucky,” She murmurs. "You can’t hate yourself forever. Don’t you see how much we love you? You’ve saved my life twice now, you sleep next to me and save me from dreams I don’t even understand. And if you can’t figure out how to believe me, what about Steve? You’re still his best friend. He knows your heart.”

Taking a risk, Darcy reaches forward, giving Bucky plenty of time to move out of range. He widens his eyes as her hands reach up to his jaw, cradling his cheeks, but does not move back.

After a long moment, he leans into her touch.

With his face in her hands, warm and rough with stubble, Darcy continues. “You’re the man who half the graduate students on this dig are in love with and the man who makes us all feel safe to do our work. You’re the only person in this world who has made me truly feel safe, who makes me laugh when I feel utterly overwhelmed by the task ahead. Define yourself by all of that, the choices you make every day to be good and kind, not what you were forced to do.”

He crumples softly, quickly, barely in the space between breathes. One moment Darcy is staring into his eyes, willing him to see himself how she sees him, and the next his head is burrowed in the
crook of her neck, his arms winding tightly around her waist.

Darcy has no idea how long they stand like that, tangled together. She grips him as tightly as she can, fistng her hands in the back of his shirt and pulling him into her body. His tears trace their way down her neck, dipping into the fabric of her sleep shirt.

*God,* she thinks. *How long has it been since he cried?*

An eternity later, he finally loosens his grip as the tears dry out. His hands are warm as he pulls back, revealing red-rimmed, exhausted eyes.

“Come to bed,” Darcy says softly, stepping back and pulling him to the blanket-strewn cot. “You need rest. Come to bed with me.”

He doesn’t fight her. While Darcy moves to quickly tuck her dirty clothes into the makeshift hamper and shut off the lantern, Bucky climbs, pants and all, into bed.

She joins him, heart breaking for the frail way he moves, and tucks herself next to him. Instead of the usual careful distance that they always leave between their bodies, Darcy immediately curls up in his space, laying her head on his shoulder and gently tangling their legs. A type of bravery she seems to only summon when someone she loves is hurting.

Bucky stiffens at the contact, but Darcy takes the risk of knowing he will push her away if he truly does not want her near. He had clung to her so desperately when he cried that she is certain this is what he needs but will not ask for.

“Everyone needs to be held sometimes,” She whispers. “You protect my waking hours and my sleeping ones. Let me protect for you a little while.”

He releases a shuddering breath. The tension drains out of his muscles slowly as he drags her closer, turning his nose to breathe in the scent of her loose hair.

“Lavender,” He says quietly. “I love that you always smell like lavender.”

"And sweat."

"I like the sweat," He murmurs. "I like watching you work. You're so focused, totally blind to the rest of the world."

“Bucky,” She whispers back. “Are you still drunk?”

He grips her tighter, running a calloused hand down her back in a soothing circle. As if an apology. She shivers, despite the thick shirt between them. “No, I don't think so.”

“Good, I didn’t want to have to explain all of this to you again in the morning.”

He laughs, a dry sound that echoes his past tears. “Go to sleep, Darcy.”

“Sweet dreams, Bucky.”

Darcy is pretty sure neither of them sleep a wink, but she holds him all through the night and hopes that is enough.
“The excavation that yielded the Foula bracelet was dated to about 1100 CE. This site is roughly 720 CE… so the question still stands, how does an artifact move from one burial to another site without disturbing the remains?”

They hold a team meeting the next day around the firepit, Darcy at the helm. The summer months are waning, the ground soon to be covered with the usual layer of ice, which means that Darcy and her team need to solve this mystery quickly. Like, within the week.

(Most of the cataloged items have been recorded and shipped back to Stark laboratories for further analysis by the team. Darcy doesn't trust leaving them in Edinburgh without Dr. Mark or Dr. J to watch over them, and she plans on returning them to a museum here in Greenland as soon as possible.)

“Could the site have been somehow disturbed?” Yael volunteers without much conviction. “We know that mounds and graves are often looted. The Foula bracelet is a mighty treasure.”

Dr. J shakes her head. “No, we would have seen that. This site was completely undisturbed, preserved beyond the shadow of a doubt. The layers would have been mixed, the gold goods taken, not just the bracelet.”

“Are we sure that the skeleton was wearing the Foula bracelet? Like, really sure?” Greg’s blue eyes are hopeful. “Maybe it was a replica. Or a bracelet that just happened to be the exact size and shape.”

Mohammad speaks up this time. “I tested the Foula bracelet. The same bits of gold that became encrusted in the woman’s bones match up with the inside of the bracelet, like a puzzle. I am willing to bet the future of my career that this woman died and was buried for a long time in the same bracelet Darcy now wears.”

“Well damn,” Greg sits back. “I’m starting to think that this whole thing is venturing out of the realms of archaeology and into the realms of batshit magician tricks.”

“Maaaaagic,” Darcy says again, waving spirit fingers in Greg’s face. Bucky, behind her, stifles a laugh.

Dr. J throws her hands into the air. “The goddamn bracelet turns into a weapon, is it truly that hard to believe something larger is at play? Magic is just science we do not yet understand. There is still a logical reason for this, a path to follow.”

“But where does the path lead next?” Dr. Mark says, looking to Darcy. “You’ve been studying this for years now. Where does this site point us?”

Darcy opens her mouth to answer with an always eloquent I have no fucking clue when she is gratefully interrupted.

“Wait!” Scout comes running from the conservation tent, carrying what looks to be a hunk of stone. “Stop the meeting, I have something to show everyone!”

Greg rolls his eyes. “You’re always late to our important meetings.”

“Because I was SAVING THE DAY, you asshat!”

Darcy ignores the banter, looking over to the petite redhead. “Show us what you’ve got, Scout.”
The girl looks delighted to do so, her cheeks flushed and green eyes bright. “Dr. Lewis, do you remember when we found that stele? With the runic, swirly markings?”

“Yes,” Darcy says immediately. They had spent a whole week trying to decipher the meaning of the artistic circles, only to realize that they needed a true specialist in Norse proto-language to do so. “Why?”

“Because I cracked it! It’s not a language – it’s a map!”

Darcy is up on her feet before she takes her next breath, followed by the team.

“Look,” Scout lays out the flat, heavy stone on the nearest table, tracing the carved swirls with a light finger. “We thought the swirls were differentiated in color because the dye was fading in spots, but I think it’s a path. I knew the stone reminded me of something, and when I was finishing up cataloging, I realized what it was. This is a map of Europe! Squint and you’ll see it!”

Gasps of shock are passed around as they begin to look at the stele in a new light, like one of the perspective paintings that Darcy remembers from high school art classes, the ones designed to show two things at once. Darcy looks at the familiar stele and sees the same mess of faded red and purple swirls, then squints, tilts her head, and sees…

Europe. The land mass edged in faded red, with no country boundaries dividing the mass like modern maps. The entire continent is red, overlapping circles roughly stretching from what Darcy can only assume is the UK to the edge of the stone, eastern Europe…

“Quick,” She croaks, her throat thick with nerves. “Somebody get the world map from my tent. Rip it off the wall as quick as you can.”

Footsteps thud, and then Greg is unfurling the plastic map next to the stele. Dr. J appears at her side, pressing on the singular purple in what looks like southern Europe and moving her left hand to the modern map.

“We only have two locations marked in purple, the rest of the continent is red. I think we can believe that the purple location is what they are pointing us to. Somewhere south, somewhere north,” Dr. Mark mutters. “I will compare the two maps. Give me a moment.”

Dr. J nods, wheeling on Scout. “Where did we find this in the grave? What was the provenience?”

“I knew you would ask that.” Scout pulls a plastic bag of pictures out from under her arm, flipping through the developed shots of the site. “This is where it gets veeeeery interesting.”

She hands Darcy a singular photograph, dated a month prior. A photo that Darcy had personally taken to record the strange placement of the stone, tucked carefully underneath the warrior woman’s skeletal right wrist.

The wrist that had once worn the Foula bracelet.

Holy shit.

“The map must be connected to the Foula bracelet.” Dr. J says evenly, unaffected by Darcy's shocked sputtering. "This is no accident. They arranged the body in such a way that the bracelet would cover the map."

“The first location is in the Shetland Islands, I believe!” Dr. Mark announces behind them, bent nearly 90 degrees over the stone and map. “It looks like…”
Silence falls. Deep down, Darcy knows exactly where it points to.

“Foula,” She says. “The first location is Foula, isn’t it?”

“It is hard to be completely sure, but… yes. The first mark seems to be roughly Foula.”

“That’s where you found the bracelet?” Bucky asks, staring plainly at the golden bracer on her wrist.

“It is.” Darcy nods, heart in her throat. She feels suddenly overwhelmed, completely in over her head with the magnitude of this discovery. How can she even begin to connect these dots? How does a scientist chase down magic?

“I don’t think we can get a clearer clue than this,” Dr. J states plainly, only her bright gaze betraying the shock of such a find. “Whoever set up this grave knew that the Foula bracelet would move. It has marked Foula, where Dr. Lewis originally found the bracelet. Which means the second location needs to be our next step.”

Her announcement is met with stunned glances. But Dr. J just marches on, apparently untouched by the shock currently rooting the other team members in place. “Joseph, do you have a match?”

“Yes.” He says evenly, straightening. His eyes are bright, smile brighter. “The second location seems to be Rome, Italy.”

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun looking at pictures of wombats while writing this mega long chapter. Get excited - we are uncovering the mystery! And also major character growth ahead. Come say hi on tumblr if you feel the urge! reginapacisdux.tumblr.com
They have a location. But they still do not have a clear plan, or any true idea of what they are looking for.

The team pushes on anyways. When Greg and Scout begin protesting that jetting off to another city without an actual plan may not be the best course of action, Dr. J offers words of wisdom that shut everyone up: “A place on a map is better than nothing, you fair-weathered fools. What do you want, an ancestor to appear in the sky and tell you exactly what to do?”

It takes a week to pack up the site.

Jeff, sadly, announces that he has to go back to Scotland for a few weeks. His wife, Maria, is dealing with some sort of sudden medical issue that forced her into bed rest and he didn’t feel right leaving her alone.

“I’ll be back,” He promises Darcy as the helicopter lands, ready to take him away. “I’m so sorry to leave just when things are getting interesting.”

“It’s fine, you need to look after Diana. Give her a hug for me. I’ll keep you abreast of what happens.”

“Thanks,” He pulls Darcy in for a long hug, his skinny frame dwarfing her. “You’re a great leader, you know that? There is nobody else who could tackle this mystery like you.”

And then he is gone, and Darcy is left without her second-in-command and even more on her shoulders.

At least Darcy’s feet are finally well enough that the cane becomes unnecessary. She’s pretty sure that she will bear the gruesome pink/red slashes of scar tissue on her soles forever, but having ugly feet is something that falls very low on her ladder of worries at the moment.

More pressing is the upcoming trip. Darcy agrees with Dr. J that they need to move the team to Rome – but for what? The rough map offers no other information about why Rome is important, or what may be hidden in the Eternal City.

While the team works to ship out the artifacts (thanks to the cargo planes Tony sends) and pack up the priceless knowledge that had been found, Darcy joins her mentors in looking for a needle in a haystack.

“Where to start in Rome?” Dr. Mark murmurs, surveying the piles of books that Dr. J had unearthed from her personal travel collection. “The city is huge, thousands of excavation sites, museums, Vatican City…”

“My money is on another object of Asgardian gold,” Dr. J reaches for another book, thumbing through it. “Which means that – if it has already been discovered – it will not be in a museum. We would have heard.”

“True,” Dr. Mark confirms. “So, an undiscovered site, then? The entire city is built over layers and layers of possible discoveries. Every time they do roadwork something of historic importance is
discovered. And if this artifact is under a bank, or church, or any pre-existing building we will have great difficulty acquiring permission to dig.”

Days pass, and all Darcy has to show for her research is a hunch that, whatever it is they are looking for in Rome, it must be similar to the magical bracelet around her own wrist.

The thought is terrifying in itself.

“I’ve got it!” Dr. J announces early one morning, striding into the tent they have made into a makeshift library and startling Darcy out of her pensive ‘what-am-I-doing-with-my-life’ haze. “Joseph – get in here! We have a lead!”

A heavy book is slammed on the wooden table, nearly knocking over the coffee that Bucky had silently handed to Darcy only minutes before. Black with a bit of cream, blissfully warm.

“The precious goods!” Darcy cries, cradling the hot mug between her hands protectively. Glancing up, Darcy grimaces as she realizes that Dr. J is dressed for the day in khaki and linen while she has not even taken off her narwhal themed fleece pants.

(They keep her warm, OK? And Bucky said he liked them, so Darcy is never going to throw them out.)

“Eleanor,” Dr. Mark strides in, looking a bit ridiculous in his velvet lounge robe and his wire glasses askew. “What is the meaning of this? Six in the morning is hardly a godly hour to call a meeting. And what are you doing up, Darcy? I recall your strong words about rising at any hour before eight being a form of cruel and unusual torture.”

Darcy shrugs, gesturing to the laptop and maps crowding the table. “ Couldn’t sleep. Still trying to crack this – magic artifacts and nonsense.”

“Is anybody goddamn listening?” Dr. J holds up a hand, her hazel gaze sharp on the book beneath her. “I’ve done some digging and it has proved fruitful.”

“Care to share?”

But Dr. J doesn’t speak. She reaches over Darcy’s shoulder, flipping open the heavy tome with practiced hands.

(God, Darcy is aware of how much Dr. J enjoys her dramatic moments.)

“Look,” Darcy’s hands are suddenly very full of old book, smelling strongly of parchment and mothballs. Dr. J leans over her, directing her sight. “Right here, what is it mentioning?”

Darcy scans the page, nearly tripping over the tiny, archaic text. The words NORSE KNOTWORK, WEAPONRY TREASURE, and VENICE TO POPE stand out.

“What?” Darcy peers closer. “This is… insinuating that Norse artifacts were taken away from the UK and Scandinavia in... what, the early Dark Ages?”

“It fits our timeline,” Dr. J confirms. “Imperial Rome fell in 410 CE, but medieval Italy was dominated by powerful city-states from 1200 to 1400. This is a very rare book from my personal collection that details diplomatic relations between the city states: Naples, Sienna, Lucca, the Papal states, and all that. If the stele is pointing to Rome, it is most likely when the city was a power in its own right- the seat of Christianity.”
Dr. Mark sits up suddenly, his thin rimmed glasses comically askew. “During the proto-renaissance!”

“Yes- and right here,” Dr. J spears the text with a thin finger with a proud grin. “Details a shipment of riches and a large, bejeweled dagger of ‘Norse gold’- *Oro norvegese* - that had been taken from the barrows of what we call Scotland.”

“Dagger?” Dr. Mark asks.

Darcy blinks. “Norse gold?”

“Not regular gold, something different.” Dr. J flips her long, white braid over her shoulder. "Possibly what we call Asgardian gold today."

“This adds up. One of the major properties that Mohammad has theorized of Asgardian gold is that it seems to have a much higher melting point than earthly gold,” Dr. Mark confirms. “Gold has a melting point of 1,948 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Darcy raises a brow. “And Asgardian gold?”

“Mohammad was able to run a few tests on the flakes found on the bones…” Dr. Mark looks rueful. “We stopped just short of testing a laser on aluminum. Safe to say that I don’t think there is a source of heat on Earth capable of melting Asgardian gold down.”

“Wow."

“Which means,” Dr. J interrupts, all business. “That people of the 13th century would be able to see that an object of Asgardian gold was somehow different than our gold. Any attempts to melt it down would be unsuccessful. Hence the differentiation: Norse gold.”

“Holy shit,” Darcy breaths. “So Norse gold could be the ancient name for Asgardian gold. We have a lead: a dagger possibly made of the same material as the Foula bracelet. *We have a lead!*”

Dr. Mark raises a smooth palm, pensive. “We do – but many questions still remain. Where is this artifact, Eleanor? A museum, then?”

“Er… not exactly.”

“Elaborate.”

“The primary source that is being referenced is a list of valuable gifts being sent from the Doge of Venice to the pope as a show of good faith in 1250 CE. This is where things get a bit more complicated, timeline wise.”

“The stele from this site dates to 720 CE.” Darcy’s eyes go wide. “That’s more than five hundred years of blank space. Where did this dagger originate?”

Dr. J shakes her head. “We may be predating the Medici dynasty by a few hundred years, but you know powerful families have always desired exotic art to display. There are accounts of wealthy Venetian families importing valuables from what they deemed as ‘less developed’ places – and *this* particular hoard was looted from somewhere in Scotland around 900 CE and then kept in a Venetian family fortress for almost three hundred years before being gifted to the Pope Innocent IV.”

Baffled silence follows her words.
“So,” Darcy finally manages to say. “We have another possible item of Asgardian power, unknowingly given to Pope Innocent IV, and somehow people here in Greenland were able to foresee that this change of hands would happen. How the hell did they know the dagger would end up in Rome?”

“Don’t say magic,” Dr. Mark grumbles, falling into the chair on Darcy’s right. “The discovery of objects like the Foula bracelet that defy all matter and space is a difficult thing to rationalize. Forgive me for saying I am a bit sick of it.”

“But we must rationalize it.” Dr. J says firmly. “The field changes every day and it is our job as archaeologists to adapt. If our research is leading us to theorize that this dagger possibly has properties like that of the Foula bracelet, it isn’t a stretch to realize that this civilization of peoples had advanced technology that allowed them to realize the dagger would eventually change hands.”

But Dr. Mark does not look swayed. “I’m not ruling it out, I simply have a hard time reconciling my years of logic to the idea of ancient peoples with psychic foresight.”

“We live in a world of superheroes, Joseph. Strange shit happens every day, open your eyes!”

“These are questions we may never have answered,” Darcy cuts in, more than ready to move back to the main point. “But focusing back in on the possibly magic weapon that HYDRA also wants: where can we find the dagger? Do we have a trail after it was given to the Pope? Please tell me we don’t have to break into the Vatican.”

Dr. J hesitates. “Not the Vatican.”

“Oh, so we DO have to break in somewhere.”

“The dagger did change hands again,” Dr. J seems pleased to report. “Pope Innocent IV had no use for it and passed it along to one of his favored Cardinals: Stefanzo De Luca.”

“And what did Stefanzo De Luca do with it?”

“He passed it along to his son, and his son did the same to his son. The De Luca family has always been fabulously wealthy and powerful, known for hoarding objects of importance in the Castel Sant’Angelo before building a vault in their own family home. They pass down their valuables, keep them locked away.”

Darcy follows her meaning. “You’re speaking in present tense.”

“One member of the De Luca family still lives,” Dr. J announces solemnly, opening the nearby laptop and typing quickly. “Patrizio De Luca. He maintains the De Luca palazzo in the heart of Rome – richer than God, bosom buddies with most of the important people in the city, and known for keeping his private collection of artifacts under lock and key, despite warnings from historical societies to give them up to museums.”

The laptop is slid to Darcy, showing a google search that has yielded thousands of articles on Patrizio’s lavish lifestyle, his massive parties, his connections in the light and dark side of Roman law.

“So, what?” Darcy asks flatly. “Is this another Luca Grigore situation? Black market peddler we have to taze?”

“Nothing so uncouth as that,” There is a thick layer of sarcasm in Dr. J’s words. “A man like Patrizio would never dirty his hands with the messy business of excavations and stealing. My guess
is that he is a buyer, the type of rich man who would have spent a lot of money to own something like the Foula bracelet.”

Dr. Mark’s mouth twists into a disgusted frown. “Scum, putting a price on history.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Dr. J echoes. “Which is why we should feel very little guilt for taking it off of his hands.”

Darcy can’t help the shiver of anticipation that runs through her. “So our plan includes breaking and entering into his fancy house? Finding the vault, stealing the dagger and seeing if it truly is Asgardian gold?”

Dr. J’s smile is teasing. “No breaking and entering needed. I think we can walk through the front door this time.”

Dr. Mark and Darcy trade a confused look.

“De Luca is famous for his galas and balls, he hosts at least six a year.” Dr. J explains. “Luckily for us, he will be hosting his annual October gala one week from tomorrow in his family home.”

“You want us to infiltrate the party?”

Darcy shakes her head, struggling to understand the logic. “Dr. J, you said this guy rubs shoulders with the elite? We aren’t exactly on the guest list.”

“We aren’t,” Dr. J says mysteriously. “But a man like Patrizio isn’t hosting parties for fun, he’s doing it for influence. If Tony Stark and his entourage expressed an interest in attending, do you really think he would turn them down?”

~~~*~~~

“Heeeey, Tony!”

“Darcy? Do I dare believe my ears, is my spawn actually taking time out of her busy digging schedule to call her dear old dad? The man who sits by the phone all day, waiting to hear that his heir is alive?”

“Sarcasm noted and unappreciated. I text you, like, five times a day.”

“Long sentences of emojis describing your day hardly counts as conversation.”

“It’s like texting in hieroglyphics, what’s not to love? And I totally called last week to thank you for sending that preservation tent! You sent the call to your assistant.”

“I don’t do well with people expressing gratitude directly to me. How is it working? Any issues I need to fine tune?”

“It’s fantastic, Tony. The wood of the hull is perfectly preserved, all thanks to you.”

“Aw, shucks. Stop. So why are you really calling?”

“…My team and I need a favor.”
“Hit me.”

“Do you know a Patrizio De Luca, by chance?”

“De Luca? Powerful family. Dealt with Patrizio once for a business deal, expanding SI into the Italian market. He was a smarmy, ass-kissing fellow if I remember correctly, and I always do. Why are we talking about him?”

“He’s having a big gala in Rome in, like, four days. I think one of the artifacts he houses in his private collection is connected to my research, so I need to get into the party and see. But, you know, Darcy Lewis isn’t a name that fancy people put on the guest list to their fancy parties…”

“Well you’re in luck. Tony Stark is name many fancy people put on their invite lists.”

“Exactly. Think you could get the team and I in?”

“Sure, kid. No problem.”

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you – I’m serious, you are the best-”

“One condition.”

“…what?”

“I’m coming with you.”

~~~*~~~

The one good thing about Tony Stark crashing what Darcy has secretly dubbed The Great Artifact Hunt: Rome Edition is that he does it in style.

Pepper sends a private jet to pick the team up from Greenland within two days. While the team takes advantage of the plush seats and free drinks, the pilot politely pulls Darcy aside and explains that reservations have been made at the Hotel di Russo in Rome for them under the name Potts.

A quick google search (using the ridiculous high-speed plane Wi-Fi) confirms what Darcy suspected. The Hotel di Russo is listed as one of the most extravagant and expensive hotels in Rome, with a waitlist of a year for even a two-night stay.

(Darcy is fully aware that she may never grow used to Tony’s influence, to the wealth he wields.)

Dr. J appears at Darcy’s side, sliding into the empty seat next to her. Her mentor is straight-backed and clear eyed, looking utterly ready to crash a fancy party and steal a priceless artifact.

(Although honestly, she always looks ready.)

“Having a famous father has finally come in handy, eh?”

Darcy laughs. “It’s always been a handy, honestly, if you ignore the over-protective moments. I don’t think I’ll ever get use to this, though.”

Dr. J nods, looking around the luxurious aircraft, gaze lingering on cashmere pillows and fully
stocked bar that Greg has personally commandeered. “It’s a different world. Someday it could be yours.”

“I try not to think about that. If he does find a way to foist an inheritance onto me, I’ll donate it to charity. Maybe start a home for orphaned cats.”

“Hah,” Dr. J barks a laugh, before dropping her tone. “Lewis, I hardly need to tell you that we have to get together a plan for dealing with Patrizio. Have you been doing your research?”

“Of course,” Darcy reaches forward, turning her tablet to show Dr. J the news articles and exposés done on the De Luca family. “Patrizio is fifty-six, very healthy, vacations in Croatia and Ibiza every summer…”

“What about his dating history?”

Darcy raises a brow. “I’ve seen plenty of pictures of him with hot Italian ladies, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I think we can capitalize on that.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dr. J snorts. “Have you looked in a mirror, Lewis? With a bit of a polish, you aren’t half bad looking.”

“…thank you?”

“I’m serious.” Dr. J leans forward, plucking the tablet from Darcy’s hands and pulling up pictures of Patrizio, paparazzi shots of him hand in hand with a young actress, kissing another woman, playfully cuddling a third woman on what could only be an yacht. “He has a type. Average height, curvaceous build, pale skin and dark hair.”

“Where are you going with this.”

“With a bit of work, I think we could make you into his fantasy for the evening. A young, attractive, party girl who just wants, more than anything, to see his impressive private collection…”

“Dr. J! Gross! I am not a hot Italian woman!”

Her mentor raises her hands in surrender. “It’s an in, Lewis! A way to possibly gain access to the collection without drugging his guards!”

Darcy’s cheeks are burning now as she looks through the paparazzi shots of Patrizio and his ladies. Dr. J wasn’t lying, all the girls have a combination of curves, dark hair, and pale skin. But Darcy isn’t exactly supermodel material, especially not with the almost-permanent layer of dirt encrusted in her skin.

“We can dress you up, Lewis. Don’t worry about that.” Dr. J leans forward, leaning a weathered hand on Darcy’s shoulder in a rare display of affection. “I’m not saying you have to do this; flirt or any of that nonsense. I just wanted to point out that you have a natural advantage in dealing with him – and I figured you wouldn’t want me to mention it in front of Tall, Dark and Handsome over there. Seems the protective type.”

Darcy looks up to see Bucky, deep in conversation across the plane with Mohammad. The tall osteologist is talking with his hands, a sure sign that the topic is something he is passionate about,
and Bucky seems to be listening intently.

“I don’t know the first thing about flirting,” Darcy admits. “And I’m a shit liar.”

Dr. J looks put out. “Well don’t look at me. Subterfuge is only fun when it involves combat and sneaking around, I’m not the person to teach you the art of seduction.”

“Don’t call it that!”

“Call one of your super spy friends.” Dr. J. “A female one, preferably.”

~~~*~~~

The text from Natasha comes within seconds. I thought you’d never ask.

~~~*~~~

The Eternal City glows orange underneath a black sky.

It is close to midnight when Darcy and her team finally make it to the hotel. Darcy is so exhausted from the past days of round the clock research that she barely registers the beautiful city around her - which is a shame, because Rome is honestly her favorite city of them all.

(Hotel is not a particularly accurate word for the massive stone building they are dropped off at, nestled in the heart of Rome. Palace seems to fit it better.)

They carry their bags into the immaculate lobby – all gleaming marble floors, gilded arches and bleached statues. Chandeliers glint in the vaulted ceilings, while oil paintings of various Italian heroes line the walls in beautiful, gilded frames. The receptionist is a portly man who goes red at the sight of the rag-tag, unwashed group of archaeologists.

(In fairness, Darcy and her friends do look pretty bad. Scout had hogged the one shower on the jet, so most of them were still sporting dirt all over and smelly clothes. Greg’s hands are almost completely brown with dirt.)

“Ciao,” Dr. J steps forward, somehow the cleanest of them all. “We have rooms reserved.”

The receptionist looks livid. “Under what name?”

“Potts,” A new voice says, accompanied by the clack of very expensive heels against very expensive marble flooring. “Pepper Potts.”

Darcy drops her bags and squeals as Pepper comes into view. Despite the late hour, she is dressed in a spotless white pantsuit with her orange hair pulled back into a fashionable bun, new engagement ring sparkling on her hand. Tall and thin and endlessly elegant.

“Darcy!” Pepper responds gracefully to Darcy’s spontaneous hug, not looking upset at all to have an arm full of dirty 26-year-old. “I’m so glad you’re here safe. Tony and I have missed you so
much. He would have come down, but he got caught on the phone with one of the lawyers working on dismantling the accords.”

“As far as excuses go, that’s a good one.”

“And it is good to see the team again!” Pepper turns to the group with a gracious smile. “I hope you’ll all be happy with your accommodations. You each have a suite on the same floor, and don’t worry about room service. Everything is covered.”

The excited screams of Darcy’s very exhausted team are bellied only when Pepper turns, spearing the now sputtering receptionist with a cool look. “Giano, will you take their bags and escort Dr. Juniper, Dr. Mark, and the graduate students to their rooms?”

“O-of course, Ms. Potts.”

“Perfect,” Pepper smoothly guides Darcy away from the lobby, motioning for Bucky to follow. “Let me take you up to your suites. Tony and I have the penthouse, and Darcy you’re close by in the Raphael suite. James has the suite next to yours, the Picasso suite.”

“Holy shit, Pepper.” Darcy finally says as the elevator door slide shut. “This is – unbelievable. How much did you and Tony spend on us?”

“Musta been a pretty penny.” Bucky echoes, his gaze still glued on the opulence of his surroundings. He has hovered at Darcy’s side since they exited the plane, gaze flicking through the lobby as if preparing for HYDRA to pop out at any moment.

Pepper waves the question away with a flick of her wrist. “Here are your room keys. I know that you both need a hot shower and rest, but I’d love it if you would join Tony and I for breakfast in the rooftop garden tomorrow. I’ve also made reservations for Antonio Ricca to come tomorrow in preparation for the party.”

“Giano, will you take their bags and escort Dr. Juniper, Dr. Mark, and the graduate students to their rooms?”

“O-of course, Ms. Potts.”

“Perfect,” Pepper smoothly guides Darcy away from the lobby, motioning for Bucky to follow. “Let me take you up to your suites. Tony and I have the penthouse, and Darcy you’re close by in the Raphael suite. James has the suite next to yours, the Picasso suite.”

“Holy shit, Pepper.” Darcy finally says as the elevator door slide shut. “This is – unbelievable. How much did you and Tony spend on us?”

“Musta been a pretty penny.” Bucky echoes, his gaze still glued on the opulence of his surroundings. He has hovered at Darcy’s side since they exited the plane, gaze flicking through the lobby as if preparing for HYDRA to pop out at any moment.

Pepper waves the question away with a flick of her wrist. “Not as much as you think. Tony owns stock in the hotel, and of course they enjoy the publicity he brings.”

“Still, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t worry about it at all. Between you and I, Tony to loves to feel needed. And I am more than happy to have some vacation time, it’s been years since I was last in Rome.” Pepper pauses as the elevator stops, one floor beneath the penthouse, pressing two thin cards into Darcy’s hand. “Here are your room keys. I know that you both need a hot shower and rest, but I’d love it if you would join Tony and I for breakfast in the rooftop garden tomorrow. I’ve also made reservations for Antonio Ricca to come tomorrow in preparation for the party.”

“Antonio Ricca?”

“Very famous Italian stylist. The De Luca parties are well-known for their opulence, we all will need to look the part. Even you, Mr. Barnes.”

Bucky’s eyes widen in such a look of abrupt panic that Darcy can’t stop her laughter.

“Don’t worry,” Darcy says soothingly, patting his arm. “I won’t let them touch your hair.”

“I trust you to do your own hair,” Pepper says to Bucky. “But I have had a tux fitted to your size. It’s hanging in your closet.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says, although his face is still pinched. “Been a while since I dressed up.”

“It’s like riding a bike, I hear.”

The look he shoots Darcy is flat. “Har-har.”
“I’ll let you both rest,” Pepper interjects, apparently amused at the banter between her fiancé’s secret child and the ex-Russian assassin who may or may not have killed Kennedy. “Your rooms are connected by a balcony. Tony is not aware of that and I will not be telling him. Be discrete.”

Darcy and Bucky both share a look of utter shock as Pepper calmly steps back into the elevator, smirking.

“Holy shit,” Darcy breathes. “Did she just…”

“She did.” Bucky has recovered quicker than her. He reaches forward, cybernetic hand plucking the duffle bag from Darcy’s arm and shouldering it himself. “Let’s see our rooms, doll? Gotta sweep yours, make sure it’s safe.”

Darcy nods, following him down the hall. They arrive at a heavy oak door, emblazoned with the word RAPHAEL in gold gilt. The key slides in the lock smoothly, opening to reveal a suite twice the size of her apartment.

“Woah!” Darcy pushes in, marveling at the plush floors and antiquated furniture. The entryway opens into a small kitchenette, complete with what looks to be a fully stocked fridge and bowls of expensive fruit. Beyond that, Darcy makes out a huge bed on an ornate frame, four-postered and looking like it once belonged to royalty.

“Not so fast.” Bucky’s flesh arm shoots out, gently tugging Darcy back and behind him. “Let me check it out first.”

Darcy raises a brow but obeys. “You think HYDRA will be hiding in my super awesome, huge personal bathroom?”

“Maybe.”

“No way! Is that a jacuzzi?”

Once Bucky finishes with his sweep (checking every corner of the suite, pulling back curtains, upending vases in what Darcy assumes must be a search for evil technology) and declares it safe, Darcy races through her fancy new rooms, pointing out all of the modern luxuries she has missed.

“A toaster! I can toast my bread again, not over a fire!”

“A definite win. I should go check my side,” Bucky says somewhat awkwardly, glancing out at the balcony. “Make sure it’s all safe.”

“Right,” Darcy says, suddenly acutely aware of their predicament. It is one thing to share a shitty tent with someone on an excavation, but a hotel room? With a romantic, plush bed that looks out over one of the most beautiful cities in the world?

It feels different.

“Should I come back, after?” Bucky asks, something hidden swimming in his eyes. Darcy cannot read his expression or his tone. He’s packed all emotion behind the same distant mask she has seen on Natasha.

“I don’t want to make you feel like you have to keep staying with me through the night,” Darcy says slowly. “But I feel safe sleeping next to you. And you’re very warm, which is a plus.”

The mask breaks. Darcy nearly sighs with relief when Bucky smiles, crinkling those blue eyes.
down at her.

“I never feel forced, doll.”

“Good,” Darcy turns. “You go make sure there are no bad guys, I’m going to check out the pool that is my bathtub.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Darcy does not use the bath as planned. Once Bucky leaves to check his rooms and clean himself up, Darcy collapses into her plush bed fully clothed, wanting only to shut her eyes for a moment…

“Doll. Darcy.”

Her eyes fly open, heart pounding. “Ah! What? Is it HYDRA?”

Bucky stifles a laugh, suddenly swimming in her sleepy gaze, hovering above her. “Nah, you’re safe. I wasn’t gonna wake you, but you’re still in your boots…”

“Shit,” Darcy scrambles up, looking down to see she had fallen asleep atop the blankets and– yes, she is indeed still clothed in her dirty jeans and sweater, with her Lowa boots still very much tied tightly to her feet.

“Here,” Bucky is suddenly dropping down to the floor, hands reaching for the boot that Darcy is currently struggling with. She is still so tired, so hazy and exhausted that she allows him to take over the battle with her laces.

“You haven’t slept much in the past week.” Bucky says softly, yanking off her right boot and moving for the left. “You need the rest.”

“Mmmmm,” Darcy agrees, already leaning back into the heavenly, plush pillows. “This has a lotta thread counts, I think.”

The second boot comes free, and then Darcy is being lightly jostled, suddenly underneath the cool, crisp sheets.

“Night, Darcy.”

Darcy is almost too asleep to feel the weight of the bed shift as Bucky slips in. Almost, but not quite.

When Darcy awakes early the next morning, Bucky is gone. This is not surprising – Bucky always leaves at some ungodly hour to escape back to his own bed and spare her reputation or whatever—but what is surprising is that there is a different, ex-KGB assassin curled next to her.
“Nat?”

The Black Widow smiles, looking completely at ease in jeans and a nice suede jacket, reclining against a throne of pillows. “Hey, Darcy.”

“You know,” Darcy says, gracelessly pushing herself up from the blissful pile of blankets she had been swathed in. “When I asked for your help, I didn’t mean you had to show up in Rome. I thought we would, like, Skype or something.”

“Skype?” Natasha raises a perfectly sculpted, red brow. “You should know better than to trust any video-chatting application that has not been vetted by the Avengers.”

“Touché. So I would have StarkFaced you, or something. Also – ew that sounds awful. Fuck Tony for copying Apple.”

Natasha does not dignify Darcy’s ramblings with a response.

“But that aside… you’re here, in Rome.”

“I am.” Natasha confirms. “It’s a very quick ride in the quinjet, and I am always pleased to help you with espionage. Dr. Juniper filled me in on the situation after you reached out.”

“What!” Darcy squawks, kicking away the last of the blankets pinning her down. Bucky really doesn’t mess around with tucking in duties. “You guys are in contact?”

Natasha shrugs, a coy smile playing at her lips. “We text.”

“Without me?!?” Darcy slams her head down on the fluffy pillow in utter betrayal. “You know there is such a thing as group texting, right?”

“Some information is classified.”

“What could possibly be classified between you and my mentor?” Darcy stops, reevaluating her words. “Wait, you both love ruining evil men’s lives. I don’t even want to know the stories you share.”

“Our classified conversation was mostly focused on digging up information about Patrizio De Luca. Eleanor was right, he does have a long pattern of dating women much younger than him, all sharing distinct physical traits. He also has ties to the black-market antiquity trade a mile long – dealers in Yemen, Egypt, Britain.”

“Ohhhhh, so she’s Eleanor now?”

“Focus, Darcy. What does this information mean?”

Darcy blows out a breath. “It means he has a type. And that I want to punch him in the testicles.”

“Yes,” Natasha agrees. “And you fit that type. You want the dagger from him? It would be foolish not to capitalize on this strength.”

“You sound like Dr. J. Are you guys best friends now? Because I’m not sure I can handle that explosion of strong woman awesomeness.”

Natasha tilts her head, smirking. The arrow necklace around her throat gleams for a moment in the filtered light, reminding Darcy of the man who truly owns Nat’s heart. “We both want to see you succeed and keep you safe. A united cause bonds us, although I wouldn’t call it friendship.”
“Shame.”

“Get up and dressed,” Natasha commands, nudging Darcy out of the beautiful, awe-inspiring bed. “You missed breakfast with Tony, but I made excuses for you. He’s out with Dr. Mark and Barnes, hearing an incorrect version of the plan for tonight.”

“A incorrect version?” Darcy asks. “What are you talking about?”

Nat spears her with a cold look. “Do you really want your father and Barnes to know that the current plan of action involves you charming an older Italian gentleman into showing you his private collection?”

Darcy doesn’t even need to think about her answer. “Ew. No, no, no. Good. Continue with the lying. Fake versions of the plan are great – thank you.”

“They think that Eleanor will be disappearing into the bowels of the house as you cause a distraction. By the time you’ve managed to get De Luca’s attention, it will be too late for either of them to stop it without risking exposure.”

“That’s genius. Evil genius, but genius still.”

"Glad you approve," Natasha stands, staring down at Darcy with an air of expectation. “Eleanor is waiting for you in Pepper’s suite, we can start preparations together while Tony and Bucky are distracted.”

Darcy tumbles out of bed, peering up at the beautiful super spy. “Waiting for me, why?”

“Because Antonio Ricca is going to arrive within an hour, and if you want to seduce a very rich Italian man into giving up the goods, you need to look better than this.”

“Ouch, Nat. Ouch.”

~~~*~~~

True to her word, Natasha had lead Darcy up into the very fancy penthouse to greet Pepper and Dr. J, who are currently discussing options for the ball while drinking tea and surrounded by very nice evening gowns.

“Pepper?” Darcy asks, dumbfounded at the sight before her. “You’re involved in the seduction plan, too?”

“Involved is a heavy word,” The elegant CEO in question says, taking a delicate sip of out of a bone china teacup. “I am simply helping you to get ready for the gala tonight. If I am somewhat aware of why you need to look very gorgeous, I will not be sharing that information with Tony or Sergeant Barnes.”

“God Pepper, you’re the best!”

But before Darcy can tackle Pepper Potts in another Hug of Gratitude, Dr. J’s steel hands are suddenly clutching her shoulder and directing her towards a saloon chair and vanity set up next to a very attractive man.
“Sit your ass down, Lewis.” Dr. J commands. Darcy obeys. “This is Mr. Ricca, he’s here to make you into De Luca’s fantasy.”

Darcy shoots her a sharp look. “Should we be talking about this in front of, you know, someone not aware of the plan?”

Pepper shakes her head. “I’ve been using Antonio’s services for almost ten years. He’s reliable, and part of what we pay for is discretion. Right, Antonio?”

“Yes, of course, Signora Potts.” The man in question states, his shoulder length black hair gleaming in the morning light. He steps behind Darcy’s chair, dark gaze assessing every inch of her face and hair. “Now let us see what we have to work with.”

---

Antonio Ricca is not impressed with anything about Darcy Lewis.

“Your hair!” He wails, poking at a long strand, full of split ends. “What have you been doing, living outside with the bears and donkeys?!”

“…yes?”

“Darcy is an archaeologist,” Pepper interjects kindly. She is sitting at the dining table with Natasha and Dr. J, looking over photos of the women De Luca is usually seen with. “She’s been camping in Greenland for the past two months.”

But Antonio just takes this as reason to look at her hands. “Aeeei! Her nails!”

“I dig a lot,” Darcy offers meekly. “Hard to get the dirt out.”

After thirty more minutes of Antonio assessing and crying over most of her flaws, he finally admits that – underneath the dirt and split ends – she has potential.

“Very nice fair skin,” He says, slathering Darcy’s cheeks in sweet smelling balm. “Once we get rid of the dryness and windburn – you will glow.”

Darcy endures the prodding, tweezing, and waxing (fucking OW) without complaint. She still feels vaguely in shock over this entire situation: that she has woken up in Rome, facing three women she loves who have somehow bonded over Darcy’s shaky plan to seduce a high ranking official.

And she can’t even truly blame Antonio for his somewhat offensive reaction. Staring at herself in the vanity, Darcy has to admit that she looks rugged. Long, tangled hair and red cheeks, her face a bit gaunter than usual and full of scars. She remembers the first time she had seen herself after spending weeks off the grid in Egypt, how proud she had felt to see the changes in her body, how she had felt molded by the elements. This is different - Darcy looks at her reflection and only sees the marks of her own exhaustion.

“The hair is damaged but gorgeous,” Antonio announces. “The color is deep, perfect contrast against her skin – I see it in a cascade of curls, golden gems holding up glinting locks…”

Natasha and Pepper finally decide that Darcy should shave a few inches of length off her hair, for
health, and then leave it loose. Antonio spends an hour hacking at her ends, washing out the long strands while bemoaning her lack of conditioning, and then wrapping each strand up in a cushy roller and securing it with half a can of hairspray.

“Twill be back with the evening gown,” Antonio says as he pins the final curl up. “And then I will start on her feet. Do not touch your hair!”

As he leaves, Natasha yanks out an industrial style metallic bag full of makeup and gets to work on Darcy’s face, as Pepper and Dr. J look on.

“What do you think,” Nat asks, eyes glued to Darcy’s lips. “Her gown is purple. Light lips or dark lips?”

“Dark,” Pepper says automatically. “De Luca seems a fan of bold features. Darcy has great lips, lets highlight them.

“Lilac eye shadow?”

“Yes,” Dr. J reaches forward to yank out a think tube of liner. “And this for the eyes. Make her look a bit fearsome. Soft shadow, bold lines. She can’t just be generically beautiful - that beauty needs to do something. Inspire, invoke fear, make a man believe- with just a glance- that she can open up a world of possibilities for him.”

“Well said,” Pepper comments. "And very true."

"Possibilities," Natasha grins. “Got it.”

“The three of you are terrifying together,” Darcy says with sudden realization, keeping her eyes shut as Natasha carefully lines them with kohl. “I feel like, by combining your forces, you could take over the world.”

“We could.” Pepper confirms, leaning over Nat’s shoulder to get a closer look at whatever the spy is rubbing on her cheekbones. “Some highlighter would be good, don’t you think?”

“Yes, right in the bow of her lips.”

Antonio returns minutes later, squealing with joy to see that Darcy’s makeup is apparently finished.

“It matches the gown perfectly!” He cheers, hanging up a garment bag and beginning to unzip it. “You are a genius, Signora Potts.”

“Thank Natasha here,” Dr. J corrects. “Master with a brush.”

“It’s just another kind of armor,” Nat says with a pointed look at Darcy. “Remember that.”

The words are heavy, but they calm Darcy a little from the jangle of anxiety that has been buzzing through her as she is worked on. Back in university Darcy had loved getting dolled up for the night, going out to bars with Jane and various classmates while rocking a bold lip and big eyelashes, showing off her curves. It had been cathartic to spend hours on hair and make-up, to pull apart her wardrobe for a perfect outfit.

But this feels different. Those nights had been fun and anxiety free. This is another battle that Darcy has to face – one that makes her feel out of her depth. She would rather brawl with Patrizio de Luca than flirt with him, and the idea of attempting to charm a man she barely knows makes her skin crawl.
Nat seems to read Darcy’s sudden silence, letting her hand linger on the shoulder of Darcy’s robe for a moment. “Let’s get the dress on you, and then we will go over the details of the night. I’ve got you, Darcy.”

The dress is unveiled, and Antonio wastes no time in directing Pepper to help her into it while he unravels her hair. It takes a long ten minutes of stepping over fabric, moving certain ways, and a lot of neck strain – but then Antonio turns her to the mirror…

The woman looking back is not Darcy. Well, maybe she is, but she is a version of Darcy that has never spent weeks outside, rising her hair out in a stream and beating it with a rock to dry.

No, this is version of herself that grew up with her true birthright: heiress to the Stark fortune and legacy. Polished, manicured, and unreal.

The dress is a deep, imperial purple, clinching in at the waist with golden knotwork and then fanning out to her feet with a high slit, nearly hidden by the billowing fabric. Her shoulders are bare, the purple silk gripping the sides of her arms and then plunging to reveal the skin of her throat, her chest.

Antonio has taken her long, tangled hair and sculpted it – keeping the wild tone of her usual waves while somehow managing to make it sophisticated, a purposeful blend of chaos. Long, fat curls of almost-black fall down her back, glinting with tiny golden gems, flashing as she turns her head.

“Bellissima!” Antonio nearly screams, leaning forward to kiss Darcy on both cheeks as if he didn’t spend half the time disparaging her appearance. “Take care of your hair now. I will leave my bill with reception.”

He disappears through the door with a swagger, carting his tools. Darcy is completely aware that she will never be able to take care of her hair in a way that would make that beautiful man proud.

“I…” Darcy swallows, turning back to her reflection. “I look fancy.”

“You look like a goddess,” Dr. J says firmly. “But you need to pull down the dress and make the most of what God gave you – no Earthly man can resist those breasts.”

“Eleanor!” Pepper admonishes. “Don’t worry about that, Darcy. You look fine, you’ll be perfect.”

“Classy is a version of sexy,” Nat says wisely. “Let him imagine what is underneath. The neckline is good where it is.”

“But if he starts to look bored, just yank it down a bit and you’ll get his attention back.”

“Dr. J!”

“Shh. The gold accessories were a good touch,” Natasha tilts her head, scanning over Darcy with a practiced eye. “The Foula bracelet would clash with anything else, but the flakes of gold in her hair ties it in well.”

“Agreed. Well, I need to go get ready.” Pepper says with a sigh. “Tony can’t be trusted to wrangle himself into a suit without supervision. Dr. Juniper, I’ve had a dress sent down to your room as well.”

“Thanks, Pepper. I’ll head down and check it out.”

Natasha’s hand closes over Darcy’s wrist, gently tugging her to the door. “I’ll talk with Darcy and
show her the equipment set up in her rooms.”

“Equipment?” Darcy questions. “What equipment?”

“Someone has to make sure you don’t appear on any of his security cameras.”

Darcy’s suite is covered in screens.

Her beautiful, Italian suite is still beautiful and Italian, but now it also looks like the headquarters for SHIELD intelligence. If SHIELD was Italian.

“Tony was happy enough to loan me a set up for the occasion,” Nat explains, tapping quickly on a set of keys. “De Luca’s security was easy enough to infiltrate. Clint has sent over blueprints he snagged from an embassy somewhere in New York, and the cameras were child’s play.”

Darcy cannot pick up her jaw off the floor. She cannot believe she is friends with super spies who make hacking into expensive security systems easy.

“The trick is,” Natasha continues, brushing a piece of red hair from her eyes. “I can only shut down one camera at a time without triggering his system, and even then you will need to be prepared to run like hell if he contacts his security team. I’ll need to have some form of communication with you in order to tell your location and where you are moving next.”

“How are we going to manage that?”

“With this.”

Natasha flicks a tiny, flesh-colored button into Darcy’s hands. She gasps, unable to fight her sudden excitement. “A communicator? Nat, I’ve always wanted to use one of these!”

“Tuck it in your ear now. It’s tiny enough to not be seen, and I’ll be able to hear everything you say.”

“Will I be able to hear you?”

“Yes. I can warn you if security is tipped off by my meddling.”

A thought occurs, pulling Darcy out of her communicator-inspired excitement (she’s always wanted to look as cool as Nat does when she presses a hand to her ear and talks to unseen people).

“Do the blueprints include the vault?”

“No,” Natasha shakes her head, brow crinkling. “The vault is the wild card. Clint and I both theorize it is below the ballroom, but it could be anywhere in the estate. Getting him to trust you enough to take you down there is all on you.”

“Right,” Darcy sighs. “I forget this whole thing is based on my ability to flirt. Which is not my best skill, you know that... right?”

“Barnes is wrapped around your finger,” Natasha retorts. “I think that proves you have some skill.”
“I don’t flirt with him on purpose! I just hit things with my whip and make generally risky decisions and he seems to enjoy it!” Darcy sighs, thinking about the strange friendship and sharing of beds she has established with Captain America’s best friend. "And I think 'wrapped around my finger' is a little strong."

Natasha turns away. “Whatever you say.”

“Nat,” Darcy falls back onto the bed, no longer caring if her fancy dress is a bit crinkled. “I’m serious. I am so out of my element here, it’s insane. What happens when Tony realizes that I’m hanging off the arm of an old man? What happens when Bucky tries to follow us down to the vault, if I even get that far?"

“Let Pepper handle Tony and let Dr. J handle Barnes. We’ve talked through contingency plans should the worst occur. Relax.”

But Darcy can’t relax. Her hands are fisted in her fancy gown, silk crinkling between her fingers.

“Stop that.” Natasha swats her hands before abandoning the set-up of screens, reaching for her sleek, black purse. “I’ve never seen you this nervous. When we told you HYDRA had you on a hit list, you laughed.”

“I know, it’s just – it’s weird. I would rather this be a full-on fight, does that make sense? Punching is easier than lying.”

Natasha nods. “It does make sense. Espionage can be more taxing than combat, because the strain is mental. Keeping the secrets straight, your cover on. You do have the Foula bracelet should the worst occur and you need a weapon, but…”

Natasha’s pale hand disappears into her purse, reappearing with a black box. “I have something that may make you feel better.”

She tosses the box into Darcy’s lap. With a questioning glance at Natasha’s amused expression (the look on her face tells Darcy that she is not being gifted something nice, like chocolate, or Xanax), Darcy slowly opens it.

Lying nestled in swathes of red velvet, is two complicated-looking stretches of black material, connected to a tiny but wicked looking knife.

“No way,” Darcy breathes. “I get a communicator AND a sexy thigh holster all in one day? You know how to spoil a girl, Nat.”

“Glad you like it,” Natasha moves quickly, plucking the straps from Darcy’s hand and falling into a crouch. “One for each leg. Now look further in the box while I put this on you. Raise your leg.”

Darcy obeys, basking in the knowledge that she is one of the few people who has had the Black Widow call her a friend and kneel between her thighs.

“Ooo!” She yelps, looking down at the bemused assassin. “Cold hands!”

“There,” Natasha rises. “And have you seen the second gift?”

Darcy holds up a six-pronged hair comb, decorated with a tiny motif of angular hour glass symbols, Natasha’s personal design.

“This is gorgeous,” Darcy holds it up to the light. “Your symbol! Black Widow, yes! Are you, like,
claiming me? Because that’s sexy and I’m beginning to fall in love with you, I think.”

“Not claiming in the way you think,” Natasha says with a rare laugh. “Clint would not be pleased, but I appreciate the sentiment.” She reaches forward, running a finger along the golden design. “This is one of my knock-out clips. Press this latch,” Natasha gestures to the side, where a tiny jewel winks ruby red. “And it becomes weaponized – each prong is razor sharp and dipped in hangover poison. Lucky for us it also matches your outfit, purple and gold.”

“Holy shitballs,” Darcy nearly jumps back, holding the clip with the tips of her fingers. Badass and scary all at once. “What the hell is hangover poison?”

“Specially formulated by Bruce. It works so that, even with a tiny nick to the skin, the victim will fall unconscious for somewhere between two to four hours before waking up with memory-loss and symptoms of a hangover. It comes in handy when lacing a drink proves too difficult.”

Darcy blinks in surprise. “You want me to use this?”

Natasha nods, taking the clip and motioning for Darcy to turn around. Nimble fingers slide the clip into Darcy’s mess of hair, securing it. “This is your ticket back to the ballroom. You’ll have to knock De Luca out once you’re sure that you see the artifact you need. Then you secure the artifact and leave the hologram in its place. Should all go to plan, he will wake up sometime in the early morning thinking he drank too much and with no memory of you beyond another beautiful woman at his fancy party.”

“Right, let’s hope.” Darcy says, recalling the bits of the plan that Dr. J and Natasha had told her while she was being glammed up. “You have my clutch?”

“Yup.” Natasha points to a tiny purple purse, sitting on Darcy’s bedside table. “Inside you’ll find the hologram base, a Stark lockpick, and a few other bits and ends.”

“By bits and ends, you don’t mean a firearm, right?”

Natasha smiles. “No, Barnes will have enough of those strapped to his person. But I did include a mini-taser.”

“God, this is like Christmas morning. Have I told you I love you Nat? Because, even with all the cool gadgets aside, I love you. Thanks for coming to Rome to save my ass and teach me your secret spy ways.”

“I wouldn’t teach or loan you anything if you weren’t deserving.” Natasha says, looking at Darcy in a way that feels more approachable than usual. “You’re a good friend, Darcy. I don’t have many of those.”

Darcy shifts, taken aback by the sudden emotional display (if she can even truly call it that, because Nat’s expression is as level as ever, although there is a sort-of burning sincerity thing going on with her eyes). “Well, you know that if you ever needed help on a secret spy mission, I would be there in a heartbeat. Any time, any place.”

“I’ll remember that,” Nat doesn’t smile, but somehow that makes the whole moment more charged. “Now get your purse and head downstairs, the limo should be here.”

~~~*~~~
“Spawn!” Tony greets as Darcy steps out of the elevator, decked out in a well-fitted suit and shiny shoes. “You look great. Very grown up.” He stops, glancing at her dress with quickly narrowing eyes. “Too grown up.”

He looks over to Pepper. “Do you, uh, have one of those nice scarves? A pashmina, perhaps? Maybe a parka? I think Darcy would look even better with an extra, er, layer over her top.”

“Tony,” Pepper says, tone laced with warning. The CEO in question is draped in a light blue gown, tasteful and elegant. “Stop. She looks gorgeous.”

“She does!” Tony defends. “I just was making a suggestion that my daughter could use another layer.” He turns back to Darcy, a bit desperate. “Aren’t you cold? It’s cold in here, veeeeeery cold! Better layer up!”

“I’m fine,” Darcy brushes his well-meant concern off, reaching to link arms with him. “Long time, no see. How’s the compound?”

Tony sighs, aware of the battle he has lost. “It’s fine. Boring without you hanging out in the labs, and Steve is missing his super-soldier BFF.”

“I’m sure Bucky misses Steve, too.” Darcy responds, feeling a little prickle of guilt for breaking up the American dream team. “We’ll be back soon, I hope.”

“You think?” Tony questions, guiding his daughter through the lobby to her awaiting team. “Dr. Mark explained what’s going on. This could be a great lead.”

“It could be.” Darcy nods, throat suddenly dry and the gladiator heels already killing her feet.

(Wearing heels with barely healed foot lacerations? It sucks. Darcy knows she will be bleeding again by the end of the night.)

“Thanks for involving me in the heist this time, kid.” Tony says seriously as they step into the waiting area. “I’m glad I can be near, at least, to protect you.”

His sincere tone hits Darcy right in the heart. She looks up at her father: the always sculpted goatee, the deep dark eyes and stubborn mouth. For a long moment, Darcy reflects on how lucky she is to have found him, to be related to someone who has such a huge heart and goes to such lengths to pretend otherwise.

She pushes the thought away. There are other issues to be resolved tonight, then she can express to her father exactly how much he means to her.

“Don’t worry.” She grips his arm tighter. “Your job is to be the Tony Stark the world wants to see: enjoy the party, have a few drinks, talk about how great you are and pretend you don’t know me.”

“Ouch,” Tony’s knocks Darcy with his shoulder good-naturally. “Right, we all have a role to play. You have a whole secret identity, huh?”

“I’m the daughter of a Canadian oil baron from Yukon, but I know nothing about oil or business because I spend all my extra time partying in Toronto.” Darcy swallows a laugh as Tony rolls his eyes. “I landed an internship with Pepper Potts, so now I’m on the straight and narrow. But partying is just so much fun! I just had to bring my friends!”
Tony snorts. “Believable.” His smile falls, pulling Darcy aside as they come to the front doors of the hotel. “Remember – HYDRA is on the lookout for you. If you see one thing that is out of place, or anybody who seems off, you have to tell me right away. We can find another way to get the artifact without risking you.”

“It’ll be fine,” Darcy promises, the lie heavy on her lips. “No risk at all.”

~~~*~~~

The team is piled into the limo, separate from the one that Tony and Pepper are taking. Which is good, because Greg is already drunk and Mohammad is arguing with Yael on the best way to reenact the Egyptian mummification process, complete with hand motions to show exactly how to get the brain out through the nostrils.

At least they all look fantastic.

Pepper had delivered again, sending up a selection of dresses and tuxes to the graduate students to try on. Scout and Yael look gorgeous in green and pink gowns, hair pulled up into fancy updos, while Greg is rocking a leopard print cummerbund (which he has already spilled part of his cocktail on) and Mohammad looks lean and handsome in a traditional tuxedo.

“Dr. Lewis!” Scout squeals as Darcy steps into the car. “You look hot! Holy shit, I didn’t know you were capable of this level of hotness. You hide those under khaki?”

Darcy shoots her a dry look, beginning to be done with comments about her boobs. “Thanks, I think.”

“What she means is,” Greg reaches forward, offering Darcy a flute of champagne. “We only see you in field apparel of jeans and t-shirts, hence the shock. You clean up good, Dr. Lewis.”

“You guys clean up better.” Darcy takes a grateful swallow of the champagne. “Where are Dr. J and Dr. Mark?”

“Riding with Mr. Stark and Mrs. Potts,” Yael explains, her tight curls piled atop her head in an elegant updo. “Dr. J is getting along really well with Ms. Potts. Can you believe it?”

“I can,” Darcy says, thinking back to the afternoon. “I definitely can, but that makes it no less terrifying. Where’s Bucky?”

“Here, doll.”

Suddenly, Bucky is sliding into the limo. Darcy’s heart nearly stops as she gets a good look at him.

“Holy shit!” Scout is practically bouncing in her seat. “You got hotter too!”

“Just a tux,” Bucky mutters, clearly uncomfortable with the five people staring at him. "Greg and Mohammad got one on, too."

“Your hair,” Greg crows, nearly sloshing all of his drink out of the martini glass. “Did you use that fancy pomade I left outside your door? Jeff sent it for you. It’s the same ingredients they used in the 40s, or something.”
“I did,” Bucky’s flesh reaches up to touch his hair. “That was kind of you. Same one I used to use. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” Greg waves away the words. “It’s worth it to see you so… spiffy. Muscular. Dreamy.”

Darcy wholeheartedly agrees. She finally is able to string together words as Bucky turns to her, so close that she feels his heat bleeding into her side.

“You look fantastic.” She says honestly. Pepper is a champ who somehow managed to make sure Bucky’s tuxedo fits him in all the right ways, and his hair has tousled with gel just enough to show off his strong, newly shaven jaw. He hasn’t lost the wild, rugged look that Darcy loves, but has somehow managed to also look like a perfect gentleman.

And a quick look at his left arm shows that he has used one of Tony's hologram creations to make the skin of his wrist and hand look like flesh.

(He deeply, deeply hates that he has to disguise himself, to hide away a part of him, but she also understands that a man with a metal arm somewhat screams 'I WAS THE WINTER SOLDIER'. Which, apparently, is bad.)

(Not everyone has a fantasy of what that metal arm can do. Just Darcy, apparently.)

“Darcy.”

A hoarse voice shakes her from her illicit thoughts. Bucky's gaze is stuck on her body, wide and intense. He looks like a man who has been recently punched in the face, dazed and bit shocked. Darcy feels her face flush under his gaze, tracking from the make-up Natasha applied to the fancy dress and high heels.

“I know, right? I look different without the dirt and, uh, awful fashion sense. Took hours to make me respectable enough to crash a fancy party.”

“No-” Bucky swallows, eyes still wide. “You look great all the time. I just – the dress. It fits you, uh, really well. And your hair is nice.”

Darcy is unsure if his sudden inability to speak is due to shock at the fact that she’s not the grubby archaeologist she usually is, or if he is genuinely enjoying the effects of her dress.

It’s safer to believe the first option.

“Thanks,” She says softly, turning back to the audience that is very clearly attempting to listen to the entire exchange. “Alright, you all know what you have to do. Enjoy yourselves, have a drink, and make sure that other party-goers know you’re my entourage from Toronto. You’re all Canadian citizens for the night. Wield the honor well.”

“Eh!”

“Keep that up, Greg.”

The rest of the ride is spent in laughter as they share fake identities and backstories. Dr. J has assigned each graduate student a background, all connected to Darcy’s cover story (for example... Scout met Darcy at boarding school in the Alps), and Darcy is glad to see them excited and enjoying themselves. Her team would have no part in the danger of the evening, just the benefits.
And it needs to stay that way.

“We’re here,” Bucky announces quietly as the limo pulls to a stop. He opens the door and slides out, offering a hand to Darcy. “C’mon, doll.”

Darcy steps out, clinging to Bucky’s hand as she wobbles in her heels. Limos surround the manicured drive, with glamorous people spilling out in troves of suits and gowns. A purple carpet has been rolled out, leading up the grand set of stairs to the villa.

This is the last moment she can be her normal, awkward self. Now she needs to be someone better, someone new.

“Remember,” Nat’s clear voice says in her right ear. “Confidence. If you believe it, everyone else will too.”

She takes the words to heart, sucking in a breath and straightening her spine. Bucky’s hand is warm in hers, and she nearly swoons when he smiles and carefully tucks her arm in his.

It’s easy to forget that Bucky comes from a different time, one where- if Steve and Bucky are any indication- gentlemen were a bit more common.

“I got you,” He whispers, breath tickling her ear, her throat. She shivers, which only causes him to clutch her tighter. “Does this mean I’m your date for the night?”

That rocks Darcy’s newly acquired composure. She fights to keep her expression even, trying to slip into confidence like a well-worn pair of jeans. “I think it does. Can you handle it?”

“Not sure anyone can handle you, Lewis.” Bucky’s arm comes up around her waist, helping her to climb the entryway stairs. The gesture is gentlemanly and protective all at once, and Darcy can see him assessing the area for threats as he holds her. “But I’ll do my best to be worthy.”

“You’re already worthy,” Darcy says softly. The graduate students are climbing behind them, laughing and taking selfies. “You know that.”

But Bucky shakes his head. “Still wanna prove it. Keep you safe.”

“You already do,” Darcy protests, but Bucky shakes off her words with a secretive smile.

“Well, I also gotta question for you after the party, once all this dirty work is finished.”

Darcy glances up at him, stomach twisting. If he is trying to distract her from the hoards of famous Italians surrounding them and the anticipation of stealing from a man's own house, it is working. “A question? Can’t you just ask me now?”

But Bucky just grins, sly and totally hiding something, as he leads her into the party.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of build up. but up next: the party, the heist, and Bucky's question. ;}


You Know Better, Babe... You Know Better, Babe

Chapter Summary

Trigger warning: attempted sexual assault (not in excessive detail)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Patrizio De Luca does not take parties lightly.

Darcy is so stunned as she walks into the Roman estate that she nearly misses a step, causing Bucky to haul her forward as she stumbles. But who can blame her, really? The foyer of the estate is a paradise in of itself – marble flooring, fluted with gold and silver, flanked on all sides with huge Grecian pots filled with small forests of flowers. The ceiling is vaulted, reminding Darcy of a cathedral, and decorated with frescoes of angels and gods, towering above the mere mortals tracking into the ballroom.

It reminds Darcy of the grandeur of the Vatican. Beauty meant to inspire, to force viewers to their knees. Carvings and murals and gleaming statues. Heaps of greenery and suspended candlelight.

(Also she’s pretty fucking sure some of these murals are restored 15th century originals, which is…. Wow.)

Bucky’s grip is firm at the small of Darcy’s back, leading her through the crowds of gorgeous Italian men and women all decked out in their finery, but Darcy catches the awed glance he shoots nearby artwork as they descend the stairs to the ballroom.

It feels as if half of Rome has been invited. The very, very rich half. Darcy is hang-jawed at the sight of women decked out in expensive silks, draped with jewels, mingling with sharply dressed men sporting jeweled, golden rings on each finger.

“Did you see anything like this in Azzano?” Darcy whispers to Bucky, tightening her grip on his cool fingers as they weave to a nearby table.

Bucky huffs a laugh, gaze still focused ahead. “Nah, doll. Nothin’ like this. No parties, just Nazis.”

A woman at a nearby table, swathed in a golden dress that clings to each curve reaches forward, takes this moment to stab a suckled pig through the glassy eye with shouts of encouragement from the surrounding party goers. Cheers erupt as the pig is cut open, and Darcy – who loves bacon more than she should – knows she is hypocritical for the wave of nausea that comes over her.

She just feels way too much kinship with the dead pig.

“I think I would prefer Nazis over this.”

Bucky’s lips are a grim line. “I think I might, too.”

They sidestep a group of drinking men, red-cheeked and toasting happily in Italian with fluted goblets holding ruby red wine. Despite herself, Darcy thinks longingly of how nice it would be to
have a big glass of alcohol right then.

“Only thing we can really do is mingle until Dr. J sets off the mark,” Bucky says lowly, leaning into Darcy’s ear. “She said that you know the cue. I can’t say I’m not confused, what is the distraction going to--”

“Evelyn!”

Darcy yanks herself away from Bucky at the call. Dr. J is striding towards them, long grey hair loose to her waist and held back from her face with silver combs. Her thin, lithe body is half hidden and half revealed in a Grecian-inspired gown, non-nonsense white pleats falling to her exposed feet. Darcy actually stops in her tracks as she takes in her mentor, the woman who is on the run from at least three different terrorist organizations and bane of all terrified undergraduates, reborn as Athena.

“Evelyn MacDonald,” Dr. J says in a low, menacing voice that immediately has Darcy’s hairs standing on end, despite the ruse. A few of the well-dressed guests look over at the scene curiously. “What exactly are you doing? Are you aware you’ve left your mentor and boss, Ms. Potts, to watch over your ridiculous entourage?”

Darcy jerks, trying to will herself to play along smoothly. “Ah, yes, I- uh-“

“Come on,” Dr. J reaches for Darcy’s arm, yanking her out of Bucky’s grip none-too-lightly and dragging her sharply to the left. “I can’t believe that even an air-headed socialite like you would waste an internship opportunity with Pepper Potts like this. I know that you party all the time back in Toronto, but can’t you see the gift you’ve been given?”

Darcy doesn’t know if she is fighting a laugh or a full-faced blush. “Yes ma’am. I’ll do better, ma’am.”

“Then go on,” Dr. J plucks a flute of champagne from a nearby waiter, pressing it into Darcy’s palm. “Ms. Potts is at the VIP table with our host. She expects you to make a favorable impression for the company. Your father’s fancy name better be good for something.”

Under the guise of fixing Darcy’s mane of curls with the air of a frustrated PR director, Dr. J leans forward to breath soft words where no one else can hear. “Drink the champagne, Lewis. One glass will help those nerves but keep you shooting straight. Go meet your mark. This is just like Bucharest, the dealer is just prettier.”

Darcy nods gratefully, practically stumbling forward as Dr. J releases her. She is barely aware of Bucky moving to follow, stopped by Dr. J’s low words. Darcy just puts one foot in front of the other, gulping down nearly half the flute and moving forward until she finally spots what can only be the VIP table – if the intricate, yards long fountain set with food and spewing water from the mouths of tiny Cupids and satyrs is any indication.

This man is so rich he literally has a table-fountain. Made of gold.

(How is this even real?)

There is a protective glass barrier between the golden bone china plates and heaps of displayed food. Darcy stops to gather her breath, to remember what Natasha had said about confidence, before squaring her shoulders and making her way to where Tony is holding court.

It is odd, Darcy realizes, to see her father in truly in action. Darcy had not lied to Bucky when she had told him about the huge amount of Stark documentaries she had watched growing up – nearly
every history professor Darcy had ever had dedicated at least a day to lecture on the Stark family and their effect on the American legacy. Howard’s rise to fame, his relationship with the American government and role in WWII; Maria’s philanthropy and friendship with various first ladies; Tony’s… superhero-ness.

(Darcy is uncomfortably aware of Tony’s past relationship with the press: the drunkenness, the women, the ‘fuck-you-I’m-brilliant’ attitude.)

His image has changed in the media since the reveal of Iron Man. Now Tony Stark is more polished to the eyes of the public, commanding the attention of the millionaires and officials with little more than a half smile and raised, dark brow. With Pepper at his side, impeccable velvet over steel, Darcy is reminded of old court paintings of King and Queen, holding court.

She’s suddenly, chillingly aware that she is not sure where she belongs in this picture.

“Evelyn,” Pepper waves her over, a regal flip of the wrist that has half the nearby party-goers following the movement. “Come over and meet Rome’s minister of finance, Dr. Lucanzio, as well as our host, Mr. De Luca.”

“Please,” A voice at Darcy’s shoulder interjects, warm and fluid. “Call me Patrizio.”

Darcy turns just as De Luca gently snags her hand, planting a soft kiss on the back of her palm. It is strange to meet someone in the flesh after pouring over their paparazzi shots… she almost did not expect him to be fully real.

Patrizio’s hands are warm, cupping her in a gentle but firm way that must be practiced by those in power. Darcy glances up, calming her nerves by pulling similarities from his photos. Bronzed skin that is evenly and perfectly tanned and lightly marked with the first lines of age, white teeth that gleam against his full lips, dark hair that only beginning to grey in the most fashionable way…

But nothing prepares her for his eyes, gleaming with interest as he sizes her up just as intently. Deep, warm brown – flecked with gold and rimmed with good natured crow lines that crinkle at the corners as he smiles at her, flicking his lashes down with his gaze.

He makes no move to hide his interest in the way her gown clings to her curves.

“Charmed,” He breathes, lowering to kiss her hand once more. “You are the assistant Signora Potts speaks of? I had not expected such beauty.”

The line is cheesy. Ridiculously cheesy. Like rom-com level of cheese – but Darcy’s face begins to grow warm despite this knowledge. The accent! The smooth trill of his words! The fact that he won’t stop kissing her hands!

“Yes, I’m-” Darcy hesitates for a brief moment, coughing to cover up the beat and regain possession of her hand. “I’m Evelyn MacDonald, Ms. Potts’ new assistant. Well, intern, just temporary for the fall.”

“She’s been brought in from Toronto,” Pepper offers. “Her father is a business associate of ours, he owns a large portion of oils fields in the Yukon. When we heard she had a desire to put her PR degree to use…” Pepper delicately clears her throat. “An internship was the least we could do.”

There it is. The insinuation that Evelyn MacDonald is a Canadian heiress given a cushy opportunity to enjoy glittering parties thanks to her family name, forcing even Pepper Potts to hire her and keep the business flowing. De Luca makes the same realization, turning to Darcy with renewed interest flicking in his golden eyes.
It is with that renewed interest that he reaches to gather both of her hands in his own, bowing over them and gazing up at her through his lashes. “I should have known, MacDonald? You must have some Scottish blood in your background with that name and your dark hair. I love the Scottish – so passionate, so striking.”

“Alright,” Tony huffs, apparently done with the attractive Italian man flirting with his daughter. He strains against Pepper’s restraining grip. “Lay off the flattering, De Luca. She’s on the job.”

“Ah,” Patrizio straightens, although he does not let go of Darcy’s hands. “And what work is that? Perhaps I may assist.”

The red flush that begins crawling up Tony’s neck tells Darcy that his response is about to be appropriately fatherly and very bad for her cover, but Pepper smoothly intercepts to save the day.

“She is tasked with making connections for Stark Industries,” Pepper explains, weaving her arm through Tony’s and pulling him closer. “Mr. Stark and I decided that Evelyn’s… strengths lend her to forging social connections on behalf of the company. It is also a great way to teach her how to mingle with executives. I was planning on showing her around the party—”

“Say no more,” De Luca announces, releasing Darcy’s hands only to offer her his arm, clothed in an inky black suit. “I would be honored to introduce Signora MacDonald to my most esteemed guests. Is this acceptable to you, Signora Potts?”

Pepper barely hides her smirk. “As long as Evelyn accepts.”

Patrizio De Luca smirks at Darcy, gaze lingering on the dark waves of her long hair and the neckline of her dress. “Well, Signora MacDonald?”

Darcy only hesitates for a split second. She feels so incredibly out of her element, primped and polished and offered up to a rich man on a silver platter. Tony is visibly red at Pepper’s side, his mouth shut by some odd miracle, and out of the corner of her eye Darcy can see Bucky approaching.

“This is the chance we need,” Nat’s voice reminds, buzzing in Darcy’s left ear. “Take his arm, Darcy.”

“I would be honored.” Darcy finally manages, placing her hand over his arm. The material of his suit is silken under her fingers, endlessly expensive, and she is close enough to smell the coying scent of his cologne. “Thank you, Mr. De Luca.”

“Please,” De Luca is suddenly sweeping her away, spinning her from Pepper and Tony towards the opposite end of the ballroom. Darcy catches a glance of Bucky’s face- pale and murderous with Dr. J firmly gripping the back of his suit jacket, before De Luca steers them through a new crowd of richly dressed people. “My lady, call me Patrizio.”

Darcy does not have much experience with being arm candy. Her dating experience consists entirely of field romances, which are usually initiated by sharing some sort of strong alcoholic beverage by the fire a few nights in a row and then falling into the same tent. No strings, minimal awkwardness – just an appreciation for the other’s company and intelligence and sweat. The type
of sexual relationship where you have only really seen the other person in t-shirts and khakis, unshowered and caked with dirt in odd places.

This is different.

Patrizio De Luca has not let go of Darcy for even a moment. He had introduced her to the mayor of Rome with her arm tucked in his, his face glowing golden as he hungrily watched her blush and smile and look properly awed and impressed with his guests and his home. After the first few important introductions his arm had subtly shifted, now steering her firmly through the crowds with an arm crooked into the dip of her hip, spanning across her back.

It is a possessive gesture. The more people that he introduces her to—barons and lords and executives—the more familiar he seems to become with touching her. His arm never leaves her waist, flexing against the flare of her hips, pressing a new flute of champagne into her hands with a wicked smile.

(Darcy cannot return it, but he doesn’t seem to notice.)

Darcy sips carefully, trying to imbibe the least amount of alcohol possible. It is tempting to drink deeply and calm her nerves, but the silken material of her dress and the painful grip of her heeled sandals reminds her that there is too much at stake. So Darcy nods and smiles and makes small talk with the most powerful people in Italy while Patrizio De Luca hangs onto her like he owns her.

It is a miracle neither Bucky nor Tony has interrupted them yet.

“You’ve spoken to many people,” De Luca remarks after a long hour of trying to remember faces and names, turning them to a pair of ornate doors off of the ballroom. “You are beginning to look tired. I believe Signora Potts will be satisfied with your mingling. Shall we take a turn around the garden? I would love to hear more about you,” His gaze darts up to her lips, narrowing. “Less about all these others.”

Darcy nods her assent, trying her best to look starry-eyed and tongue-tied by his presence rather than full of dread. This is what she had been hoping for: time alone with De Luca in order to convince him to show her around his jewelry vault. But now that it’s here…

“Evelyn.”

Darcy stiffens at the new voice, a growl that is deep and accusatory. De Luca’s steps falter, turning them smoothly to face the interrupter.

“Where are you going?” Bucky demands, lean and tousled in his black suit. His voice is mild, but his eyes are icy blue – boring into Patrizio De Luca with enough murderous intent that a lesser man would run. “Ms. Potts has been looking for you.”

“There must be a mistake,” De Luca waves Bucky off, barely sparing him a glance. He doesn’t seem to realize he is dismissing an assassin hunted by most major governments of the world. “Signora Potts asked me to show lovely Evelyn around the party. It is my duty as host, after all.”

A muscle in Bucky’s jaw jumps. Those cold eyes flick down to the grip Patrizio has on her waist, big hands clenched in the material of her gown, and fix back on the Italian gentleman’s face with a lethal flare. “Looks like you’ve shown her around plenty. She should get back to her employers.”

“Not enough,” De Luca says mildly, although now he has turned to give Bucky his full attention. “May I inquire as to your identity? I do not recall inviting you.”
“Ms. Potts personal security,” Bucky says flatly. “I need to speak with-“

“You should return to guarding Signora Potts, if she is so worried about the security at my gala as to bring her own. I can assure you that I have the lady’s safety well in hand.”

Darcy flinches at the insinuation, hating the way her fake name seems to roll off of De Luca’s tongue with a chilling sort of intimacy.

“Now if you will excuse us,” De Luca’s voice is all cool politeness. “I will be taking Evelyn on a turn of the gardens—”

Bucky steps forward, about to intervene with that focused, chilling intent —

“You can tell Ms. Potts I will find her later,” Darcy addresses Bucky with a hot layer of authority, matching his icy gaze with her own. She is sick of this situation, realizing that this is a position only heroines of cheesy romance novels find themselves in. Darcy Lewis is NOT going to be stuck in a pissing contest between two dudes, especially not when her mission is to knock out one of said men and steal his priceless treasure. “I’m happy where I am.”

“Good girl,” Nat purrs. “Eyes on the prize. Eleanor is coming up on your left flank, she’ll wrangle Barnes.”

Eyes on the prize is right. Darcy forces her voice to turn high and sweet, naïve and excited, tightening her grip on De Luca’s arm. “And Patrizio is so kind, he’s introduced me to so many people Ms. Potts wanted to get to know, and now he’s willing to show me around the estate.”

“Patrizio?” Bucky echoes disbelievingly, staring at Darcy like he’s seeing her for the first time. “You lied—”

But De Luca wastes no more time on the over protective bodyguard. He sweeps Darcy out the side doors, into the most beautiful gardens she has ever seen. But even the sight of thousands of flowers cannot erase the guilt she feels for leaving Bucky behind, the pain of watching him begin to understand her subterfuge—that he was never let in on the true plan.

But it’s worth it, Darcy tells herself, thinking of the dagger. It has to be worth it.

~~~*~~~

The gardens are not as abandoned as De Luca seems to have hoped. As they walk, Darcy spots couples moving in the corners, disappearing into a well manicured hedge maze with linked hands and sly looks. In the brighter spots guests lounge together, raising flutes of champagne and red wine as they chat and laugh.

“I am unused to rivals,” De Luca says nonchalantly, guiding Darcy by the small of her back to a nearby fountain. The sound of water trickling is soothing, dripping from the open mouth of some sort of stone goddess, but Darcy tenses. “It is a new experience.”

“Rivals?” Darcy gasps. “Buck—that man was not a rival. Just one of Pepper’s security officers, they always keep track of our movements. He’s not not interested in me like that.”
But De Luca just chuckles, warm and easy. “He very much is, little empress. With a face like yours, Heavenly Mother knows I cannot blame him! I know that look in a man’s eyes. But do not worry, it is thrilling to have what another covets so intently.”

Darcy is momentarily struck dumb by his words. Which is good, because as soon as she processes the grossly possessive meaning behind his words, she is ready to punch him in his stupid handsome face.

“Save it,” Nat warns lowly. “You’ll get the last laugh. Just keep your emotions under control until then, or this bastard wins.”

“This garden was first established in 1560, there are still stone ruins beneath the flower beds. It is in the sunken style…” De Luca continues on, as if he has not just made a disgusting claim on a young woman he barely knows. “Each master of the De Luca estate has added his own flair to the grounds. As you can see, I have focused mainly on roses, creating new shades and breeds as I see fit.”

This is her opening. Pushing all feelings of disgust to the backburner, Darcy flutters her lashes and presses close to De Luca’s side. “Roses? Oh, I love roses! Can you show me?”

He is more than happy to oblige her. De Luca spends about twenty minutes chattering on about his flower experimentation, pointing out names and facts about the heavy, fat, vibrant roses that cling to the trellis surrounding his walls. Darcy doesn’t have to fake her appreciation for the beauty of his flowers.

“This is absolutely gorgeous.” She breathes, fingering a ruby red petal. “How long has this place been in your family?”

“Be mindful of the thorns,” De Luca breathes in warning, far too close to the naked skin of her neck for comfort. Thankfully he steps away to ponder her question, clasping his hands behind his back as he surveys the grounds and hardly hiding the boastful tilt of his lips. “Alfonzo De Luca established this estate in 1204, and his son took over the estate in 1240 after becoming a cardinal. He was the one who expanded our family’s power to rival the Medici—”

“What was his name?” Darcy interrupts quickly. De Luca stops, raising a brow at her eagerness. She quickly falls back into the façade of Evelyn MacDonald. “Ah, I love Classical history. I took a bit of Latin in uni—was absolutely awful at it, of course— but this is one of my interests, and I would be so pleased with any facts or stories you can share…”

“A love of the Classics?” De Luca smiles at Darcy like she is a small child, tone light and amused. “I have never been able to fully appreciate such a trait in a woman. You are full of surprises, sweet Evelyn.”

Darcy manages a coy flick of her lashes. Never mind the fact that he has just expressed his disbelief that women can have brains. “I aim to men on their toes, you know.”

“I can appreciate that,” One again, his eyes fall to her lips. Then lower, to the teasing neckline of her dress. He seems to reel himself in with great effort, leading Darcy further down a pathway into the low-lit maze. “Where were we?”

“Your family,” Darcy reminds. “The man who was a cardinal.”

“Yes,” De Luca remarks. “Stefanzo De Luca was the man responsible for turning my family into a true Roman power. We have roots in the old consuls and generals of the Imperial City, but like all
great families do, we changed with the times. Stefanzo secured favor with Pope Innocent IV, he curried power and traded with the other city states, acted as ambassador and spy on behalf of the Pope… but he was also a man of the arts.”

“The arts…” Darcy prods. “Like painting? Sculpture?”

“Both,” De Luca confirms. “And much more. He kept many artists and poets in these halls, patron of various Italian greats. But his true love lay in the past.”

“Stay on him.”


“Sometimes,” De Luca admits, his golden gaze faraway. “Stefanzo was a collector of many artifacts and oddities. Rome has always powerful, soaked in the ancient times, and it had families all over Europe. Stefanzo was sent to secure trade in the modern day UK and came back with an interest in their manners and ways, chests of golden coins and swords. His interests spread to collecting artifacts of all origins.”

“Wow,” Darcy breathes. “It sounds like he created a museum.”

“In a manner of speaking. He housed his artifacts here, created a series of chambers just for their protection.”

“Do you still have his collection?” The question almost sticks in Darcy’s throat. She is so close to what she needs, but every step feels like a minefield. “Or was it lost to the ages?”

De Luca hesitates. “I have most of his collection, yes. Some ancestors added to it, and even I have even acquired… a few pieces.”

“Can I see it?”

De Luca seems to sense the desperate edge in her words. He looks down at her, calculation glinting in the suddenly hard planes of his face.

Oh God.

“I-I just,” The stuttering does not help her image. “This garden is not as private as I had hoped, and perhaps these chambers of artifacts you speak of will be a better place to… talk?”

She can see De Luca warring with himself. He has enough instinct to find her sudden interest in his treasures unnerving, but a young woman asking for privacy and no extra eyes…

Darcy acts utterly on instinct. She is in danger of losing his interest, and with it all hopes of stealing the Asgardian dagger back.

“Oh!” Darcy stumbles in her heeled sandals, pretending to step oddly on a patch of stone, and roughly yanks the fabric of her dress down to expose a few more inches of her neckline. The purple gown gives, just as Dr. J had said it would.

Masking the movement, she falls against De Luca with as much grace as she can manage, clinging to the lapels of his suit and turning wide, darkly lashed eyes up at him in supplication.

(Thank GOD for Natasha’s fake eyelash kit.)

“I am so sorry!” Darcy breathes, pressing her body to his and only vaguely hating herself for the
action. Desperate times, desperate measures. “I am so clumsy! And forgive me for asking about your collection, I know it must be a private place just for family. You’ve just been so kind to me tonight and such an inspiration, I couldn’t help but hope for more time with you away from the party, and all the things you talk about sound like such a dream…”

De Luca looks stunned. His hands have automatically come up to cup her hips, his gaze wide and glued to the newly exposed curve of her cleavage.

Darcy take the moment to gently disentangle herself from De Luca, modestly yanking at the folds of her gown and stepping back to the doors. “I should go find Ms. Potts. Thank you again, Patrizio, for showing me such a gorgeous garden.”

It’s a gamble, but Darcy hasn’t even taken two steps to the doors before De Luca is at her back, pulling her back to his side and speaking lowly.

“Wait!” His hands curl back into her side, words spoken into the curve of her neck. “I should apologize. Of course I would be honored to show you the collection chambers.” He shakes his head ruefully, dipping to the flow of her dress against her curves. “How can I deny a goddess such a lowly request?”

“I’m impressed,” Nat compliments as De Luca leads her through a side door to a new wing of the estate. “Brutal, but effective. We will have to tell Eleanor that her method of seduction worked. She’ll be pleased.”

~~~*~~~

The rest of the estate is just as impressive as the foyer and ballroom.

De Luca leads Darcy by the hand through room after room of statues and marble, gilded walls and expensive furniture filling each space. Darcy does not have to fake her impressed expression, she truly is shocked by the wealth and history Patrizio De Luca commands in his Roman home.

“The map makes it look like he’s taking you right back to the party,” Nat mentions as they descend a narrow passage of stairs. “The vault is directly below the ballroom, like we expected.”

“These steps were once used by servants,” De Luca explains as he helps Darcy manage her dress. “When Stefanzo began his collection, he knew he needed a secure location to keep his riches. Clearing away the servant quarters and digging deeper, he found a way.”

Darcy is suddenly face to face with a stone wall, metal twisting to create a circular door with latches and flashing buttons. It is a stark difference from what Darcy has seen all night – a modern, state of the art security system in the midst of a 1200 era palace.

“I, of course, updated the system upon inheriting the estate.” De Luca adds, releasing Darcy to step forward and press a code into the keypad. The keypad glows green, prompting the man in question to step up and press his eye against a small camera.

“Rental scans,” Nat says with grudging respect. “Judging off of his shoddy cameras, I didn’t expect this level of protection. It’s not just golden daggers he has in here. Tread carefully, Lewis.”

“Granite walls,” De Luca motions to the stone surrounding them as the huge, steel door hisses
open, revealing a width of at least twenty-five inches. He catches her awed look. “I settled for no less than the best of what money could buy. The door weighs twenty tons and is blast proof – no bomb or drill can breech my treasures.”

The devotion and awe in his voice is enough to tell Darcy that she is dealing with a fanatic on the same level of Grigore. More polished, yes, and certainly richer… but a black market dealer with only selfish intentions nonetheless.

The thought steadies her. Just like Dr. J had said—at the heart of this situation, it is just like Bucharest. Get in, steal the artifact back and punch the dealer in the face, get out.

She took down Grigore, she can take down De Luca.

Darcy grips her clutch as she steps into the vault, De Luca hardly letting her move without some sort of bruising touch. His eyes are bright and fixed ahead, leading her eagerly through the massive door.

“This is the jewel of my family,” He says with devotion. “I show it to very few, so you must be honored.”

The light suddenly brightens, nearly blinding Darcy as she stumbles. De Luca remains tall and steady beside her, pulling her forward without much worry for her sudden blindness.

She realizes why as her eyes adjust.

The vault is huge. Darcy had expected a few display cases, maybe a handful of rooms and a few piles of gold…

This is Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark worthy. A massive steel bunker of towering crates, cases of glass that display full suits of armor, Grecian statues preserved with original paint and Etruscan death masks of gold lining the walls.

Darcy has never seen anything like this. It is a museum encased under ground, a hidden palace of historic treasures that are stolen away from the world above.

It makes Darcy nearly choke on sudden rage.

“Impressed?” De Luca inquires with a smug grin.

“That doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Darcy grinds out, caught between horrific anger and intense awe at the sights around her. “Holy shit, are those the missing crown jewels? The ones Bad King John of England lost in 1216?”

The offending crown glitters in a display case of honor, rubies and diamonds set in fur-lined gold. Darcy has only seen it in portraits, in rough pencil drawings and scanned illuminated pages.

Too late she realizes… she has played her hand.

De Luca stills, turning to look at the jewels before spearing Darcy with a gaze that is much more aggressive than she had expected.

“You know your history,” De Luca says stiffly, those golden eyes suddenly sharp. “Another thing you learned in your university classes?”

“Yes,” Darcy scrambles to cover, forcing a giggle. God, she hates that word. “In a medieval history
class. Elective, you know. Crazy professor was obsessed with the Magna Carta.”

The lie barely lands. De Luca is wary, suspicious even as he moves to run a lingering hand down the exposed flesh of her arm. "You studied the Magna Carta? In your... public relations degree?"

“Careful,” Nat warns in a whisper. “This just got dangerous.”

Darcy shrugs carelessly, heart pounding in her throat. "Like I said: elective credit. It was either early medieval history or engineering 101, and I'm awful at math. Always failed."

Her admission of failing at something seems to relax him, but not enough for Darcy to feel safe. Instead there is a new edge to this tension, an expectation that De Luca seems to be building around her.

“Shall we continue the tour?” He asks, reaching to guide Darcy with a firm hand down the aisle of cases and artifacts. “Perhaps you can surprise me with your knowledge yet again.”

“Probably not,” Darcy says quickly. “I'm afraid I've used up all my trivia.”

“We shall see.”

The tension is still apparent as they move, but De Luca falls back into his charming self as he points out various treasures that line the narrowing walkway.

“Shields used by Consuls of the ancient times, death mask of Greek kings, a diadem that Schliemann was happy to sell after excavating Troy…”

“Made of gold?”

“Of course, little goddess,” he says with a condescending smirk. “It is all made of gold.”

It feels like ages of bragging before Darcy is able to spot something of Norse design. De Luca seems to have loosely grouped his hoard by age and the country of origin it was stolen from. So far he has taken her through his Egyptian selections, Middle Eastern and Persian cases, and a surprising amount of Grecian statues.

“That looks vaguely…” Darcy pretends to search for the right word. “Viking?”

She motions to a silver pot stamped with intricate circles, almost Celtic in design. The pot itself is displayed above glass, gold and silver coins of clearly Norse origins spilling out, surrounded by arm bands dotted with semi-precious stone. Grave goods for someone of importance, robbed from their resting place and decorating a rich man's basement.

Using the naked eye, Darcy dates it to approximately 900, a small mass of Norse treasure that reminds her of the Vale of York Hoard discovered in Harrogate back in 2007.

“Yes,” De Luca crosses to the glittering pile, fingering a coin with a well manicured hand, gaze greedy. “An Irishman tried his hand at metal detecting a few years back. He got lucky and sold his findings to my… associates.”

Darcy swallows a disgusted snarl with great effort. Associates means middlemen like Grigore, seedy, black market dealers who exploit common folk to selling history like used clothing.

Unfortunately, De Luca chooses the moment in which Darcy is fighting the impulse to cut him down where he stands and find the damn dagger on her own to start touching her again.
“You outshine even this ancient gold,” he whispers, the strong grip of his arms circling her waist from behind. Darcy catches a flash of the silver and black of his hair as he presses his lips to the curve of her neck, brushing her mane of curls back for better access. Darcy tries her best to not squirm, fighting back the wave of nausea that is threatening to overcome her.

When his teeth scrape the sensitive skin of her shoulder, she cannot hide her trembling.

Luckily De Luca seems to take it as encouragement, his hands becoming more bold in their movements.

Darcy Lewis has stared down HYDRA agents with a straight face; she has laughed with the barrel of a gun pointed at her head and maintained her courage even in the face of impending death. She has always been able to face her fears with a unique brand of desperate spirit because—she knew what she was fighting for was worth the cost.

But this is a different kind of cost. As much as Darcy wants this dagger, wants this research... a man has his hands on her, and she does not want him to touch her.

It takes a long moment for her to swallow the ache, bitter and poisonous.

“You’re so sweet,” she hums, fighting to keep her voice light. Darcy’s skin is crawling, and for a long moment she battles the impulse to rip his hands off of her and slash him prematurely with the Black Widow comb she has hidden in the tangles of her hair.

This is not the move that would assure her access to the dagger. Gently disentangling herself by pretending to be endlessly interested in the display case before her, Darcy tries to seem unaffected and coy. “I can’t believe how gorgeous this is! I’ve been very into that new show on Netflix, Vikings. Do you have any other pretty things like this?”

De Luca takes her sudden movement in stride, following as if there is an invisible string linking them. His hands come to rest on her hips, and Darcy does not flinch.

(She wants to. God, she wants to.)

“This is the beginning of my Scandinavian displays,” he murmurs, breath hot against the back of her neck. “Stefanzo De Luca was enraptured with the culture of the Old Nords. If I show you my prized joys, will you focus only on me?”

A reciprocal agreement. She gets to look at his pretty objects, he gets to look at hers.

A deep, dark part of Darcy wants to hurt him beyond recognition for thinking she is his to take.

“Of course,” she laughs, forcing her hand to weave into his, yanking him along too forcefully to be playful. “I just love this collection! It’s a whole hidden world down here. So many jewels! I want to see more!”

Her host obliges. The walkway widens, turning into a room packed full of objects, a curator’s dream and nightmare all mixed together into something so bittersweet that Darcy nearly chokes. But this collection is not just ‘Viking’. It is a rich kaleidoscope of proto-Dane, Scandinavia, Celtic and Pict historical treasures. Darcy’s head is nearly spinning as she tries to take it all in: jewelry of gold and silver, carved standing stones reaching at least eleven feet tall, a nearly complete reconstructed boat with a curved dragon’s head prow…

“How?” She finally asks, eyes wide and tone laced with true hurt. “How have you collected all of this?”
“Friends and business associates,” De Luca waves a ringed hand, brushing off the question but barely allowing his eyes to leave the curve of her chest, reflected in the mirrored cases. “I make it my business to grow this collection. There are many ways to own the past, many men who are willing to sell their heritage.”

The words aches, but as Darcy turns to finally express some small burst of her rage—

She sees it.

Masked away from the rest in a small glass case, barely visible over the piles of priceless gems surrounding it, sits a small dagger of pure gold.

(An afterthought. Nobody would look at a knife when so much wealth circles it.)

“What is that?” Darcy nearly begs, every nerve in her body pointing her toward the unassuming object. “That—that knife?”

De Luca looks up, startled by her tone. “The dagger, there? It is nothing of consequence, a gift from Pope Innocent IV to Stefanzo. He knew of his love for the Nords and bestowed him a piece from his own collection, one of many gifts. I have had it tested, but it refuses to yield its date of creation… not even with carbon analysis. Strange, damned thing.”

Heat is crawling up Darcy’s throat, a deep-seated sense of this is it settling in the pit of her stomach. She’s not sure exactly how she knows, but she knows.

This is what they are looking for.

The dagger itself is modest, barely glinting with the same shade of dark yellow-gold as the Foula bracelet that sit on her wrist. One ruby glints cheekily from the hilt, winking and glowing even in the lowlight of this endless, endless vault.

“I do not know why such a small thing calls your gaze,” De Luca chuckles, but there is something dark lacing in his warm voice. “I have indulged all of your curiosities, but I have yet to see any pay in return.”

It takes all that Darcy has to not jerk out of his grasp, to keep the charade up for one, endlessly important second.

She plays dumb, slowly but surely putting as much space between them as possible.

“What do you mean, Patrizio?”

Darcy bats her lashes as she backs away, trying for innocent misunderstanding... but De Luca’s eyes are darkening, prowling forward with every step she manages to fall back. He invades her space with a violent intent, the same mild smile pulling his lips up as he surveys the empty room around them.

He doesn’t notice her reach for the clip.

“I am not used to being toyed with,” he mentions lightly. There is a sort of controlled tension in his body that Darcy is just noticing, like a wire pulled too tight. As he advances, the entire masque of honorable Italian gentleman falls away, revealing someone small and ugly and twisted that hides behind a nice suit and charming manner. “We are utterly alone. You have teased me, sweet Evelyn, and now you must pay the price.”
It all happens in a long, terrifying succession of seconds. De Luca’s hands are suddenly in her hair, ripping out bobby pins and destroying the careful curls that Antonio had worked so hard on. It hurts like a bitch, stings harshly as he rips strands of her hair out from the root in his attempt to bring her closer.

Darcy manages to turn her head just as De Luca’s lips descend, mashing up against the top of her cheekbone as she brings a knee up between his legs with vicious intensity. The blow lands and De Luca stumbles back, two bright spots of red suddenly vivid in his cheeks as he glares at Darcy through un concealed pain.

“You bitch!”

"Watch your left!"

Natasha’s warning give Darcy time to dive out of the wave, dislodging a pile of empty crates as she scrambles out of range.

De Luca obviously keeps up with his physique, because even a well-placed blow to the testicles barely keeps him down. He stumbles forward after Darcy dodges, leaning on a display case as he raises himself up slowly.

“That,” he pants, his combed back hair now falling into livid, golden eyes. The look on his face tells Darcy that he really, really wants to hurt her. “Was a very stupid mistake.”

Then he is lunging forward, reaching to press Darcy against the nearest wall or surface with ferocious anger. This is no longer a man who wants to wine and dine and seduce her, but a man whose pride calls for him to take want he wants. A man whose face is burning red with shame and anger, baying for her blood.

The sight is frightening. Even with much needed adrenaline pumping through her veins and the clarity of a fight, Darcy is afraid. More afraid than she was when facing HYDRA and various assassins, because she knows exactly what this man wants.

"The comb!"

Good thing Darcy has weapons blessed by the Black Widow herself.

All it takes is a quick flick to press the comb that has been hidden in her hand to attack mode, revealing sharp prongs coated in green. She unlocks the prongs just as De Luca manages to get a hand around her throat— strong hands closing off her access to air-- gripping so tightly that Darcy wonders if he truly means to crush her windpipe—to starve her of oxygen until she is unable to fight—

The panic forces her to action. She can’t breathe, she can barely think, but goddammit she can fight—

Her free hand has what she needs to live. To survive. It is with the anger that has been building with each unwanted touch of his fingers, the rage low and simmering with each artifact that he bragged about, that Darcy reveals the jagged comb blessed by Natasha Romanov and slashes him with the knife-like prongs, aiming for whatever skin she can reach, flailing her arm out in a last attempt to live.

The prongs cut through the fabric of his expensive suit like butter. He jerks in pain, and Darcy prays with her last gasp that it has hit skin, that it nicks his left side enough to save her.
De Luca goes limp with his palms still around her neck. Those angry, golden eyes slumping into unconsciousness quicker than Darcy would have even expected.

"Bruce will be pleased his formula is so effective."

But Darcy has no time to laugh. She can finally breathe, but her limp arms are suddenly full of person. De Luca's weight buckles, falling forward…

Unfortunately, that weight falls on top of Darcy.

Her beautiful, strappy heeled sandals are not meant to withstand an extra 200 pounds of passed out man. Darcy stumbles as De Luca’s body falls onto her, causing them both to collapse against the marble flooring.

“Darcy! Wake up, now!”

Nat’s voice calls Darcy back into reality. Her head is pounding, her throat so raw it feels like a strep infection. She is sprawled out on the cold marble floor, the body of the man who had just attempted to strangle her pressed against her midsection. The room comes into focus slowly, the combination of De Luca’s strangling and the sudden pressure of his body on hers must have knocked her into unconsciousness.

“Shit,” Darcy rasps, finally pulling herself out from under him. She sits up, shutting her eyes against the fuckery of her situation. “What the fuck just happened, Nat?”

“You’ve been down for almost twenty seconds,” Nat says in a controlled rush, and if Darcy didn’t know better she might think the woman had been worried. “Patrizio cut you off from oxygen long enough to knock you out. I’m glad I don’t have to call Barnes down here to get you, but I’m fairly certain you have a concussion of some degree from the floor. Are you okay to continue?”

“Of course,” Darcy murmurs, wincing as the words cut into the inside of her throat. Between the lecherous man, the hoard of artifacts, and the strangling… Darcy is ready to leave this awful place. “I’ve got the dagger in sight.”

“Good. Is there a lock on the case?”

It is expected that a man like De Luca would put as many locks on such precious material, but Darcy is beginning to know better. He has put so much effort into a break-in proof vault that he leaves his treasure lying around, pouring out in shelves and cases with abandon.

There is no lock on the case holding the dagger.


Darcy nods, even though Nat is just a disembodied voice in her ear and not a physical presence. She steps over De Luca’s drooling body while fishing a tiny disk out of her clutch. Carefully prying back the glass door and revealing the dagger, Darcy presses a small button on the top of the disk and watches as it flashes from red to green.

Once the light stops flashing, Darcy raises the disk directly level to the dagger. Light particles begin to spray from the tiny machine, mapping out the dagger quickly and effectively.

“Advanced holographic,” Darcy laughs, fighting this stubborn lightheaded feeling. The place where De Luca’s fingers had dug into her neck feel like brands. “Thank you Tony.”
“Upload complete. Switch them out.”

Natasha had the foresight to choose a clutch large enough to hold a multitude of things, including an ancient Norse dagger the length of half her forearm. For this, Darcy can only be grateful.

The gold seems to turn the air around it warm as Darcy carefully reaches to pluck the knife from the case. De Luca had not even propped the priceless artifact up, leaving it laying against the Plexiglas in a state of constant unrest. She slides the disk into the case, watching as a detailed hologram springs up and mimics the exact dimensions of the knife. Nobody would ever know it was just a ghost of air and light particles.

The hologram stays still, perfectly in place, which means that Darcy is ready to take the actual dagger and hide it away in her purse.

As soon as Darcy’s fingers brush the dagger, her world tilts.

It must be a reaction to De Luca’s attempt at strangling her, Darcy reasons even as she sways drunkenly, only supporting herself from slumping to the floor with the help of a nearby shelf. He’s hurt her worse than she had originally expected, that bastard.

But as the world turns hazy and strange, Darcy hears a voice that is as familiar to her as her dreams.

*You have chosen this path, despite all my warnings…* A woman speaks, somehow echoing both in the chambers of this vault and the corridors of Darcy’s innermost mind. Sorrow and fire and bittersweet vengeance. *I am so sorry, dóttir…*

It is *Her* voice. Darcy screws her eyes shut against a sudden, brutal flare of fiery pain, blooming in her head and the hand that clutches the damned dagger. She is not sure if she is screaming or sobbing as images of a yellow-haired woman flash against her eyelids—crying endless tears—crying blood—crying tears of molten gold—

One memory unlocks many: The Foula bracelet. The agony Darcy had felt as it transformed, crawling up her arm with world-shattering pain. The burning, the endless burning…

Freyja’s tears, carving rivers down an unearthly beautiful face.

*Forgive me, dóttir.*

The dagger in Darcy’s hand is made of the same star stuff as the Foula bracelet, as those torturous golden tears that take as much as they give. It explodes like a supernova as Darcy screams, a weapon meant for beings like Thor, gods and goddesses and giants, not little mortal girls...

But she cannot let go. She cannot drop the weapon— even as it rips open the skin of her palm—turning the exposed flesh black and crispy—

“DARCY!”

Even Nat’s begging cannot keep Darcy from the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I promise it will get happy again. I love you all! Thank you for such kind comments, I
refresh them daily! Have had an intense (but productive) few weeks at work and appreciate any good vibes/prayers/thoughts you don’t mind sparing on my behalf.
How Long, How Long, How Long?

Chapter Summary

Missed you all. The beginning quotation is from the song 'How Long' by the cast of Hadestown. I highly recommend listening while you read.

This chapter is dedicated to the wonderful, fantastic, beautiful Rosiedeplume for her birthday! Thank you for being such a great friend- wishing you the best day!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You and your pity don't fit in my bed,
You just burn like a fire in the pit of my bed,
And I turn like a bird on a spit in my bed,
How long, how long, how long?"

Darcy always imagined fainting to be a delicate, flowing action. The way movies always made it look: heroines swooning to the ground in a graceful heap, a slow release to the burden of gravity… usually with someone attractive nearby to catch them and spare any actual damage.

When she wakes up on the freezing tile of De Luca’s secret vault, she is ready to sue Disney for lying to her like this.

There was obviously no grace in her fall. Her face is mashed against the floor, a puddle of drool causing the skin of her cheek to stick to De Luca’s stupidly expensive marble flooring. There is a persistent buzzing in her left ear, and the side of her head that had been touching the floor is hot and throbbing.

(Yeah, she definitely did not swoon. She deadass almost broke the floor with her hard head.)

It takes a hazy, undefined amount of time for Darcy to pull herself up into a seated position. Her limbs do not want to obey her immediately, heavy and slow as she tries to command herself into motion.

What the hell happened?

The once-elegant folds of Darcy’s purple gown are crumpled and ripped as she stands, swaying only slightly while surveying the room. She remembers De Luca bragging about his artifacts, the rage she had felt while standing at his side and seeing treasures stolen from the cultures they belong to. She remembers De Luca’s sudden anger, his fingers tangling in her hair and forcing his lips to hers, the vicious blow she had struck between his legs, the hot, crushing press off his fingers against her windpipe...
A glance to the left tells Darcy that De Luca is still a heap of expensive clothing and lecherous limbs on the marble. She stares at him for a long moment, heart ramming in her throat as she realizes that she is in no position to fight him off again, but all that moves is the slow, deep heave of his chest.

He’s not dead, at least.

(If, deep down, she wants him dead... that is something Darcy is not ready to realize about herself.)

Her thoughts stop at a sudden, growing noise. The buzzing in Darcy’s head grows sharper, screeching intently. She raises a hand to her left ear, remembering vividly…

The com.

Natasha.

Darcy yanks out the tiny dot from the shell of her ear and struggles to her feet, sighing with relief as the shrill whine grows faint. Natasha’s voice is no longer with her, just a metallic screeching.

Her body aches, pain lacing through her fingertips as she drags herself up. What had happened? Somewhere between the showing of the vault and the fight with De Luca, Darcy had lost consciousness and her communications link with Nat.

Not even lost the connection, Darcy thinks as she sticks the still-buzzing com dot into her clutch, but absolutely shredded it.

Had he strangled her for that long? And if he did, why would the com connection die after he was already unconscious?

She’s missing something. There is an itch in the back of Darcy’s mind, accompanied by a growing headache from the unforgiving marble floor and a tingling energy in her hands. Darcy knows she has lost a moment, a piece of what occurred, but she cannot remember for the life of her what it is.

The answer burns suddenly and slips through her fingers, clattering to the marble floor with a ringing clarity that wakes Darcy back up. Pulls the spinning world around her back into focus.

The dagger.

She had not even realized she was still holding it, cradled gently in her right hand.

The offending item now lies between Darcy’s feet, glinting gold against the purple folds of her dress. It all comes rushing back to Darcy in an instant—a moment that feels both endless and barely a blink.

The dagger in her hands. The flaring pain. The voices—the crying—the image of a golden woman with golden tears…

Her right hand, peeling and burning black with power. Screaming as her flesh burned away from her bones.

The same hand that Darcy now inspects with her heart in her throat, shocked at the normal sight of her pale fingers, the same scars and short, ragged nails that not even Antonio could rescue.

No broken skin, no blackened burns, no peeling flesh. Almost completely the same, if not for the small golden brand that now rests in the dead center of her palm, ringed lightly with blood.
One thing that Darcy really prides herself on is the ability to keep a calm façade in the face of life’s fuckery. It is due to this skill that Darcy is able close her hand—pushing aside panic at the sight of her apparent new tattoo—scoop up the dagger with only minimal flinching (no pain this time!) and get the hell out of here.

De Luca is still drooling, so Darcy focuses on pressing the now harmless dagger into her purse and trying to remember the way out. She backtracks through rows of display cases, past the rebuilt Norse boat and a cache of sarcophagi before finally spotting the entrance.

(She allows herself one, vicious kick to De Luca’s slumped body before she goes.)

She leaves the vault open behind her, stepping over the threshold with no lack of relief. At some point in the near future this hidden city of stolen artifacts will need to be freed, but not today. Today there is another battle to fight. One that possibly involves her own sanity.

But she cannot focus directly on the idea that she may be insane. Darcy has a list of current, pressing, survival based concerns. First, secure the dagger. Second, figure out what the hell magic shit is happening. And lastly, somehow dodge both Bucky Barnes and Tony Stark and get to the hotel for a long, stress relieving and well-deserved bath. With bubbles.

Then she’ll expose De Luca. Maybe with some help from Dr. J.

The servant’s stairway finally widens, revealing the familiar winding hallways that Darcy knows lead back to the party. De Luca’s words about the layout of his estate are handy now as she slowly makes her way through his expensive home. Ducking into shadows and listening for nearby voices, it is only minutes before she is able to make it to the courtyard gardens.

Darcy knows that she no longer looks party presentable. She still feels the sticky remnants of drool on her left cheek and the taste of cotton and blood in her mouth. The hemline of her dress was ripped in her struggle with DeLuca, and she’s fairly certain that his attempted strangling has left her with a bruised neck.

All in all, she’s dealt with worse. She’s looked worse. But the intent of this particular attack has shaken Darcy in a way she is struggling to understand, as much as she tries to push it aside. It is one thing to want to fight someone, but another to include the trespass of one’s body in that violence.

The beautiful Italian garden rears up around her. Fat roses dripping with color hang from bushes, statues gleaming white under the moonlight watch as she silently steps through the grass. The temptation to hide in the maze is strong, and Darcy gives into the cover of darkness to catch her breath and regain control over her emotions.

*He didn’t get to touch me*, she reminds herself. *I am safe. I have the dagger. I am near my friends.*

Voices begin to spill into the night air. The party is still in full force, even without it’s host. Gorgeous men and women are illuminated at the far side of the garden, but Darcy’s feet are bolted to the soft grass. She stares ahead at salvation, the place where her graduate students are drinking and laughing, where Pepper is keeping Tony from offending diplomats and officials, where Dr. J and Dr. Mark are probably having a hell of a time keeping Bucky at a table.
I am safe. Darcy’s fingers clench shut, hiding the small bloody brand. I am safe.

She is almost believing her own words when strong hands pull her backwards.

Instinct takes over. Darcy’s shredded nerves react with violence, thrashing against the grip of someone who is obviously much stronger and much larger than her.

The hands are suddenly gone, but Darcy does not let the lack of physical assault stop her own attack. She lunges at the tall figure with her teeth barred, the Foula bracelet growing warm at her wrist as it transforms into a deadly whip.

She is about to strike when he speaks.

“What the hell, Darcy?!”

Oh.

Well, fuck.

~~~*~~~

Standing with a handsome man in the middle of a moonlight garden while wearing a gorgeous dress is supposed to be something every woman dreams of. A princess-like fairy tale. Romantic trysts and shit.

But concussed, scarred, and guilty Darcy is a far cry from a princess, and she would chew off her left foot if it meant she could get out of this situation.

(Luckily the magical whip she was going to use to attack him has turned back into a bracelet. She tries to discreetly wipe at the remaining drool on her cheek as she turns.)

Bucky Barnes stands at the entrance of De Luca’s maze. His dark suit blends into the shadows, but his gaze is intent. Piercing. Those blue eyes seem to glow in the darkness. In an alternate universe, he could totally pass as King of the Underworld or something equally panty-dropping.

But he does not look happy.

“You lied.”

The words are measured, smooth. It would take an ear expertly trained in the Bucky Barnes emotional spectrum to detect the anguish underneath them, the distrust.

Darcy can hear it.

“Bucky,” Her voice is a gasp. Everything aches—her raw throat, her burning hand, her heart and her dizzy head. “This really isn’t the time.”

The world is swirling in a way that feels dreamlike. Dark and lean Bucky Barnes with a hand in his pocket, gaze glued to her face with concern and anger and betrayal, framed by De Luca’s blood red roses. Dark hair, dark stubble, dark roses.

“Not the time?” Bucky repeats lowly. “You disappear on the arm of that man and—”
His voice comes to a jagged stop. A tense stillness fills the air between them. Darcy blinks for a moment, fighting off the pounding of her head, and opens them to find Bucky inches away from her face.

There is no romance in this proximity. He barely moves, breath stilling as those glowing eyes catch on Darcy’s neck, the rips in her dress, the tangled mess of her hair.

A moment passes. Darcy fights the urge to sway-

“Where is he.”

Suddenly it is not James Buchanan Barnes that stands before Darcy. It is not even Bucky.

The Winter Soldier is staring at Darcy, his words dark and smooth and dangerous. The promise of vengeance is apparent in every line of his body as he fixates on the trembling of her hands.

He advances.

“Where is he?”

Darcy takes a step back, keeping her eyes locked on Bucky’s. He has transformed from a handsome man with his hands in his pockets to a predator, hungry for violence.

“I took care of him,” Darcy is proud that her voice does not shake, unlike her hands. She speaks softly, calmly. “De Luca is down. And I have the dagger. We can get out of here.”

“I am not leaving until that man has been torn apart by my own hands.”

The promise in Bucky’s eyes turns Darcy’s blood cold. His voice is a deceptively low, soft and deadly. But Darcy knows this is a sign of true danger: the Winter Soldier does not need to scream and threaten, he invokes fear by doing exactly what he says he will.

His gaze finally moves from her face to the nearby door she had emerged out of, mentally mapping out the movements he must have seen her make. Darcy turns her head to follow his line of sight.

It with a precise, fluid movement that Bucky presses one light finger to Darcy’s cheek. She almost mistakes it for a gentle touch, a sign that Bucky is returning to his usual self, but as his gaze focuses in on her face all Darcy can see is frosty anger, so bottomless she does not know where it ends.

His touch results in a dull pain. His fingers press against a bruise left from the marble floor.

“He didn’t hit me,” Darcy says in realization, almost desperately. It doesn’t matter that De Luca tried to do a lot worse than hit her, all she wants it to keep Bucky from charging off and assassinating someone. “I fell down. The floor is responsible, not De Luca.”

Bucky does not answer. The mention of De Luca's name causes him to tense. He seems beyond words, chained by his own fury, but his gaze dips down to her ripped dress, then to the marks on her neck.

The sight of her neck seems to be the final nail in the coffin.

Suddenly Bucky is gone, pulling away and retracing the steps that Darcy has just walked. There is a tight promise in his strides, not even bothering to look back at her.

“You asshole!” Darcy yells after him, ignore the shredded quality of her voice. “Stop! You’re
She scrambles after him, determined to not let the whims of an angry man foil the entire victory she has just won. The purse with the dagger is tucked under her arm as she takes off after Bucky, catching up and reaching out to yank his arm back—

He turns viciously, nearly throwing Darcy off of his arm.

“Did you kill De Luca?” Bucky demands. “Did you kill him?”

Darcy stumbles, regaining her grip on his arm, fingers winding in the material of his suit jacket. “He’s—he’s unconscious.’

“Of course he is,” Bucky yanks his arm away, turning his face back to the servant’s door. “You can’t even kill a man who obviously wanted you dead. He needs to be dead.”

“He didn’t want me dead!” Darcy explodes. “I had the situation under control, it all happened like it was supposed to—”

Bucky stops in his tracks.

“If he didn’t want you dead,” He says slowly. “Then what did he want?”

Caught. Darcy does not know what to say, how to explain, how to weigh the terror of what he had tried to do to her with the terror of what Bucky will do if he knows…

Apparently her silence is answer enough for him.

“Get out of here,” Bucky commands in a voice she has never heard before, eyes distant and furious. She notices the shaking of his hands at his side before he balls them into fists. “You don’t need to witness this. I’ll see you back at the hotel.”

“What are you going to do?” Darcy snaps, latching onto the back of his suit with intent to be dragged along with him at the very worst. “Kill De Luca? You’re such a fucking idiot, Bucky Barnes! We can’t kill him, that ruins the entire plan!”

Bucky spins on his heel, turning all of his anger on the girl hanging off of him. “The plan? Maybe I would be a bit more understanding if I had been let in on the true plan in the first place.”

Ouch. He has a point, but Darcy is too upset to acknowledge it with words.

“Are you really butthurt because I kept a secret from you?” She shivers at his dark laugh. “You would have stopped me. You would have never let me try. I was the only person who could have gotten into the vault.”

“That’s a fuckin’ lie.”

“What?”

Bucky shakes his head, laughing darkly. “You think Dr. Juniper couldn’t have found a way into the vault? That Natasha would have failed? There are people far more capable and talented than you who could have been in and out, no injuries. No risk.” He turns his head, suddenly unable to look at her. “You overestimate what you can do, Darcy.”

It is a hot mix of shame and fury that boils in Darcy’s blood. Bucky has aimed this barb for the place that hurts her the most, the insecurity that Darcy tries so hard to hide.
She is the human tangled in a web of superheroes, chasing futilely after wisdom that forever floats out of her reach. She is the liability. The girl who thinks she can do so much, who truly can do nothing.

A girl in a world of superheroes.

Darcy recoils, pulling her outstretched hands back to her side. Bucky has turned away from her, shoulders heaving with forced breath.

“You dickhead,” Darcy hisses. She feels the weight of her bleeding heart in her scarred hands, red as the roses around them, bleeding like a pomegranate. “You absolute, raging asshole.”

Bucky does not flinch.

“You think I’m not capable? You think I’m just a little girl in over my head?”

He says nothing.

“Turn around and look at me, James Barnes. If you really believe that, you better say it to my face.”

There is no movement. Only Bucky with his back to her under a full moon, pulled so tight that he vibrates like the string of a violin, just before it snaps.

Let him snap, then.

Fury loosens the thoughts burning in her chest. Suddenly it does not matter that Darcy is standing in the ruins of her once beautiful dress, that her throat is bruised with fingerprints and her mouth tastes like blood. It does not matter that she has a possibly magical dagger in her purse and a troubling, bloody gold tattoo on her hand or voices in her head.

She is Dr. Darcy Evelyn Maria Lewis. She is a twenty-six year old woman who has clawed her way up the academic ladder, who has faced down danger and survived and survived and survived against all odds.

There is a choice before her. It is easy to buy into the idea that she would never have gotten to this point without Tony Stark, or Bucky Barnes, or the support of Earth’s mightiest heroes.

Or… to realize with exhilaration that the twisting path her fate has taken is based only on her own choices. Even without Tony she would have chosen archaeology over everything, she would have attended the University of Edinburgh and found Dr. J and Dr. Mark. She would have picked up the internship with Jane in New Mexico, hit Thor with a car and battled the Destroyer. She would have made the choice to stay loyal to Jane’s research and fight off Space Elves. She would have researched the connections between Asgard and the European archaeological record, pursued those clues relentlessly. She would have excavated Foula and found the magical bracelet, she would have torn after Grigore armed only with the taser she had from New Mexico.

There is a path that splits in two before her: believe in Bucky’s words, in the mocking voice that sings in the back of her head—or to believe in her own words, in the conviction and courage that burns in her heart and presses her onwards, onwards, always onwards.

Nobody has forced her feet to this path. It is not because of Tony or Jane or even Thor that she is following these clues.

It has always been her choice, her heart.
This is who she is. This is the only person she knows how to be. She understands that Bucky has hurt her because of his own fear, because maybe he feels something for her too.

But that is not enough. It does not excuse cruelty.

Darcy Lewis would never toss away her life’s purpose for the love of a man who will not even turn to face her.

(Love. God, why does that word surface now-)

It is with great exhaustion that she finally speaks.

“Do what you want, Bucky.”

This seems to shock him enough that his head jerks up, turning just enough to gaze at her over his shoulder. He must see the thread between them snap, the ending of something that barely began.

“I’m not going to change,” Darcy promises. “This is my purpose, my quest. It doesn’t matter who is beside me, I was meant to walk this path. And I don’t care who tries to stop me—De Luca, Grigore, Dr. White, Hydra… not even you. I’ll always find a way.”

There is no more need for words. No more need for speeches or begging or promises. The brand on Darcy’s palm burns as she runs her gaze over Bucky one more time—his sharp lean frame, the glossy swoop of his hair, the dark intensity of him—and turns away.

She makes it almost ten steps back to the party when Bucky’s voice pulls her back.

“Why did you have to go with him?”

The question lingers in the air, heavy and sharp.

“Why couldn’t you let me go with you?” Gone is the icy sharpness of the Winter Soldier. There is humanity in his voice again, pain. “I said I would protect you, but how am I supposed to protect you from yourself?”

Her spine stiffens. Her answer is low and simple, detached.

“Maybe you should have realized I didn’t need protection,” Darcy pauses, laying her cards all out on the table between them. “I needed a partner, not a bodyguard.”

"A partner implies that both parties know the situation," Bucky says quietly. "You're the one that didn't share the truth."

Darcy halts. He’s right, but so is she.

"Bucky, would you have honestly let me go through with it? If I told you I had to try and seduce De Luca, to be alone with him in a dangerous place that you couldn’t come?"

This time it is his silence that answers her.

"I thought so."

Darcy walks away from the man she is fairly certain she is a little in love with. She walks away with fingerprints bruised into her neck and a headache that threatens to crack her skull open, with love pouring out of her heart and loss already written in the lines of her palms.
But she walks tall.

She steps through the manicured grasses, leaving Bucky Barnes behind. The fallen roses beneath her sandals release perfumed clouds as they are crushed, scenting the air with coyng sweetness.

Sacrificing beauty for purpose.

The situation catches up to Darcy by the time she rounds the corner into the courtyard, skirting through shadows while nearby guests mingle.

“Lewis! Fucking hell!”

Darcy sways as Dr. J comes into view, clutching a nearby wall for support. She is so exhausted, so overwhelmed, so heartbroken.

Dr. J’s cool hands grip her arms, forcing her upright.

“Are you alright?” The older woman demands, hazel gaze flicking with concern. “I got a message from Natasha that she had lost communication with you, that you were screaming—”

Dr. J stops as she looks down at Darcy. She comes to the same dark conclusion Bucky had, but her reaction is to turn soft instead of hard.

“He didn’t hurt me much,” Darcy tries to explain. “He tried to, but I fought him off.”

The softness does not leave Dr. J’s face. She guides Darcy to a nearby stone bench, easing her down and fishing a napkin out of her dress pocket. Dr. J presses the napkin gently to Darcy’s right cheek, using her free hand to smooth down the mess of tangles Darcy once called hair. Her fingers skirt over the bruises on Darcy’s neck.

“Doesn’t matter that you fought him off,” Dr. J says slowly. “Still hurts. Every woman knows that terror.”

It is odd to see her mentor so gentle. Dr. J has always been the one to run headfirst into danger, to laugh at what would cause most people to run.

But she seems to have experience with this.

“Where is He-Man?” Dr. J questions with a sudden sharpness. “I had him cornered for most of the night, but he slipped away when Natasha rang.”

“Fuck,” Darcy hisses with sudden dread. “I ran into him in the garden. He was going to go after De Luca. We fought, but I ran off and I’m not sure if he’s still going to find De Luca…”

And beat him to a bloody pulp, she doesn’t say.

“I’m on it.” Dr. J presses a finger to her ear, speaking lowly. Darcy watches with surprise as Dr. J turns back to her with a bright grin. “Natasha was already on her way to the vault when your communication was cut. She’s got Barnes in hand.”
"You've been in contact with her?" Darcy realizes.

"Of course," Dr. J says unapologetically. "It was just a back-up com in cases you and her lost connection. I knew as soon as her voice appeared in my ear that something had happened. She was almost to the party by that time, though."

The news is good, but it is a punch in the gut to remember everything that has happened at this cursed party.

Darcy sucks in a shuddering breath. She’s thinking about Bucky, about the words she has just flung at him with brutal honesty. She’s thinking of De Luca’s hands around her throat and his knee between her legs, of the dagger burning her hand into shreds…


The entire story falls in hurried words from Darcy’s mouth. The dreams she was having on the dig, the decision Bucky had made to sleep next to her in case they occurred again, the woman’s voice… and how touching the dagger had brought that voice and pain she had only felt in dreams to the real world.

“I think I’m going insane,” Darcy chokes on the words, hating her belief that they may be true. She holds out her right palm, extending it face up to Dr. J. “God, between those dreams and that woman’s voice—I may commit myself. But I woke up after touching the dagger, and I had this…”

The brand glints in the lowlight of torches. Three circular spirals have been burned into the middle of Darcy’s palm, curling inward around a runic symbol that looks to Darcy like an ‘F’ with upward branching spikes.

The brand itself is lined with dried blood, but as Dr.J gently probes at the wound, the glint of gold within Darcy’s flesh is revealed.

“These spirals… it’s a triskelion.”

Darcy nods, realizing the same thing. “Old symbol, used in many cultures. Simple.”

“But this rune,” Dr. J hesitates. “Overtop of the spirals. It’s from the Elder Futhark. Fehu- the runic symbol for good fortune, wealth, beginnings.”

Darcy peers closer at her own palm, ignoring the prick of pain as Dr. J presses at the brand. “Well, that’s comforting at least. The magical symbol that has appeared on my skin at least has good omens. It could have meant ‘death’ or something.”

“Lewis,” Dr. J does not seem to pick up on the joke. “We’ve discussed how this research is beginning to transcend our human knowledge of the field: artifacts that move location without disturbing sites, treasure maps that are drawn long before the treasure itself is moved…”

“Where are you going with this?”

Dr. J’s gaze does not leave the brand. “I think it’s time we admit to ourselves that something supernatural is at play. You’ve got the runic symbol for the goddess Freya burned on your hand, and you’re having visions of a woman crying golden tears. For better or for worse, Lewis, you’ve managed to get the attention of a goddess.”

Darcy stills. “I don’t think my brain can handle this right now.”
“Suck it up,” Dr. J says, not without sympathy. “Vanir gods, Asgardian gods, something here is fishy. You’re the expert, Darcy. We know these creatures exist, these places... can your friend Thor give us any information?”

Darcy nods. “I can reach out. He’s spoken of Freya before, but I was a bit out of it at the time. He seemed sure that the Foula bracelet was one of her chosen weapons.”

It had been right after the Foula bracelet had activated for the first time. When Freya’s voice had apparently marked her as worthy.

“What draws my attention is the triskelion,” Dr. J peers once more at Darcy’s hand. “This symbol is one of the oldest in existence. The pre-Celtic triple spiral usually has longer spirals, thinner markings… this reminds me more knotwork from Mycenae.”

“Greece?” Darcy demands. “What the hell is a Norse rune doing stamped over a Grecian triskelion?”

Dr. J’s eyes widen, a familiar gleam that tells Darcy she has made a connection.

“The triple spiral is used in countless cultures, like you said. But the two most prominent are Northern Europe and Greece.”

Darcy blinks, struggling to follow Dr. J’s logic between the concussion and the exhaustion. “…right.”

“We’ve already excavated a few times in Northern Europe,” Dr. J says triumphantly. “I think your patron goddess has given us the next clue, Lewis. Burned it right into your flesh. We need to go to Greece.”

~~~*~~~

In Darcy’s humble opinion, the evening can’t get much shittier.

Dr. J gives the signal for her graduate students to wrap up their socializing, and within minutes Darcy finds herself being draped in an over sized fur coat to hide her ragged appearance and smuggled into the same limo they arrived in.

(But Dr. J had taken her on a path through the crowds that avoided Tony, which is a small mercy.)

The graduate students are tipsy and clearly enjoying themselves, but when they see Darcy the mirth turns to worry.

“Did it work?” Yael asks, resting a soft hand on Darcy’s shoulder as they pile into the backseat. “Did you get…”

Darcy nods. “I got it.”

“Sweet!” Greg cheers. There are multiple stains on his flashy suit—red wine, white wine, and even something a vibrant blue—but he seems to be clearheaded enough. “You did it, Dr. Lewis! Where’s Bucky?”

“With Natasha,” Dr. J answers, sliding into the backseat with not a hair out of place. “He’ll meet us
at the hotel. Tony and Pepper will stay at the party another hour or two to throw off suspicion and see how well the rumor that De Luca is passed out from drinking lands.”

“Did something happen?” Scout demands, flicking her gaze between Darcy and Dr. J. “We got the dagger, but you guys don’t look like this night was a success.”

“It was a success,” Dr. J shoots back. “But it was exhausting. Breaking into a state of the art vault, knocking out a black market smuggler, and stealing a priceless artifact is not as easy as Dr. Lewis makes it look.”

The graduate students fall into silence. Darcy hates to see their happiness turn to concern, hates the way their faces turn to her in worry.

“I’m fine,” Darcy promises, pulling the borrowed fur coat up around her neck to conceal her injuries. “It’s all good news. There are a few more things to wrap up here in Rome, but Dr. J and I are narrowing down the next dig location.”

Mohammad raises a brow. “Care to share?”

This time the smile that Darcy summons is genuine. “Mycenae, Greece.”

~~~*~~~

It is nearly midnight by the time Darcy stumbles into her suite. The room is dark, filled with computer screens and blueprints Nat had used to track Darcy’s movements in the estate. She had waved off the graduate students, claiming all she needed was sleep and some time alone.

Darcy pauses in the doorway, wondering how quickly Nat must have dropped everything to get to De Luca’s estate when the communication had been cut. By Dr. J’s account, Natasha had been quick enough to intercept Bucky in the garden after Darcy had stomped off. She had kept him from murdering De Luca, from ruining all of the careful deception that they had invested in for this night.

They must be together somewhere now, Darcy realizes. Cleaning up the mess Darcy had left in the vault, maybe, or waiting to escort Tony and Pepper home.

The silence is welcoming, at least. Darcy pries off her heels, cringing against the tender skin of her still-healing feet. She flings the fur coat onto a nearby armchair, reaching for the zipper at the back of her dress—

Her hand stills. Darcy is alone in a dark hotel room, feeling sorry for herself while the most beautiful city- the Eternal City- glows outside of her balcony window.

Before all of this security and Hydra hit list nonsense, Darcy had been spontaneous. She had been vivacious. As long as she had her taser at her side and a cellphone in her pocket, she had walked through streets of unfamiliar cities with very little fear.

She has grown guarded in the past months. Living in Greenland had been routine, before that she had been between staying with Tony and working with her PhD research… it has been almost two years since Darcy had explored a city on her own, since she has enjoyed an evening with her own company and no worries of kidnapping or murder or science Nazis.
Yanking down the zipper with a sudden finality, Darcy steps out of her dress. Her mind is made up. She dashes to the bathroom in her underwear, not even bothering to rub off the dramatic makeup Nat had applied, but instead reaching for a comfortable change of clothing.

She slips on a white blouse and dark jeans, stepping into a well-worn pair of heeled boots. It takes a painful few minutes to brush out her tangled hair and extract all the bobby pins, but the result is worth it.

Darcy looks into the mirror and does not see Evelyn MacDonald. She does not see bait for Patrizio De Luca, or Tony Stark’s heir, or Bucky Barnes’ maybe love interest.

She sees a pale woman with long dark hair, with wind burnt cheeks and cool grey eyes. With bruises on her neck but a smile on her face.

She sees herself, and loves it.

Grabbing a tan jacket and transferring the golden dagger into a worn satchel with all the basic necessities for avoiding overprotective friends, Darcy slips out of the hotel room without a backwards glance and makes her way to the always lit streets of Rome.

Chapter End Notes

Tell me what you think! Update soon ;)

Also I have been listening to Hadestown 24/7 lately, which may explain some of my Persephone/Hades imagery with our leading couple. I'm a sucker for dark, complicated, unconditional loooove.
I Will Not Cave Under You

Chapter Summary

In which Darcy finally gets some answers.

Lyrics at the beginning from "Red Dust" by James Vincent McMorrow

Poem by Robert Frost "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening"

and of course... Hozier's song "NFWMB"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

______________________________

I will not cave under you

For my heart is an unending tomb

I will not trouble your rest

For my heart is infinitely blessed

When Darcy had been an undergraduate at Culver University, she had taken an entry 200 level class detailing the basics of Classical Archaeology.

She remembers the course vividly. Her professor had been a chestnut haired man with an easy grin, tattoos poking out of his blazer sleeves. Rugged, bronzed, and with a lopsided smile that made students hang on his every word. Many of her classmates had been in love with the professor, charmed by his looks and his confidence, but Darcy had been drawn in by his words. He spoke of life on a dig, of sites overlooking the sea and discoveries made under a blazing sun.

It didn't matter what he looked like, his stories were what hooked her.

He had spoken of his years in Rome once during a lecture on Augustus' Mausoleum during their unit on the Battle of the Actium, a rare look of unadulterated peace spreading across his golden skin.

“A city of ruins, a city built on history—layer by fucking layer, all hidden under banks and corporations, cafes and boutiques. If we had permission to unearth the whole thing, to find everything that rests under Rome... it is an archaeologist’s deepest dream.”

He had been one of those professors who loved to capitalize on his young age, his obvious ability to charm and inspire. But what had truly made Darcy respect him was his obvious, deep love for the field. She had not cared about his glossy man-bun or his easy grins, only his words.

Darcy turns his old stories over in her head as she walks. Roma. The Eternal City. A rolling metropolis of history and life, golden light pouring onto orange stucco and ancient brick.
Darcy pulls her jacket closer around herself as she makes her way down the via dell’Orso. The beautiful hotel hosting her friends and family is a few miles behind, and Darcy finally feels peace in the sound of her heeled boots clacking against the cobblestone streets.

She is breathing easy for the first time in weeks.

The city continues on despite the late hour. Tourists and locals mingle in hoards at the edges of the streets, lining the sidewalks and filling the bright patio restaurants that spill onto the street. Wine is being poured, pasta and bruschetta shared, candles are burning.

Fellowship.

It’s been almost an hour since Darcy left the hotel behind. She has no destination in mind, no specific place she wants to go. Just one foot in front of the other, heeled boots tapping against the cobblestones, night air cool and crisp as Rome rises up around her.

Her steps slow as the tension begins to lift. Nobody seems to have come after her, demanding that she return to the safety of their grasp. Darcy feels a twinge of guilt at running out into the city without even leaving a note, but that guilty is quickly pushed aside at the relief of being on her own for the first time in weeks.

She wanders aimlessly for about an hour, turning over the past few hours in her head. Part of her is still furious with Bucky, still reeling after the conversation they had shared in De Luca’s garden. Another part of her is raw and aching, hating the memory of De Luca’s hands around her neck, his lips at her throat.

It is a relief to be alone, to not have to pretend to be strong for an audience of graduate students and superheroes, of people who depend on her to lead and others who worry she is not enough. With only the sweet air of Rome as her companion, Darcy pauses to lean on the balustrade of a stone bridge. The only witness to her tears is the ancient Tiber River, catching them gently as they fall down her face.

Darcy thinks of the devastation on Bucky’s face when she had left with De Luca, then the anger when he had confronted her in the garden. She thinks of Dr. J’s gentle words and Natasha’s concern, of Tony and Pepper arranging this trip and guiding her through their world of parties and wealth all because they knew how much an artifact meant to Darcy’s research.

The moon moves in the sky as Darcy cries. The first time in months she been alone... Darcy uses the time to lean against the railing of this ancient bridge and fall apart. She cries for Tony, for Bucky, for the graduate students who have no idea how much danger they are in. She cries over how much she misses Kara, how much she wishes home was just a step away, with no trouble to follow her steps.

By the time the crescent sliver of the moon is directly overhead, Darcy pulls herself back together. Wipes her tears and blows the snot out of her nose. She needed this, needed time to crumble without the gazes of her family and friends.

Darcy knows how lucky she is. She understands that this life she lives is fulfilling and charming and full of love. This is an adventure she has chosen, one she has decided... But there is an exhaustion that has sunk into her bones, a desire to collapse and catch her breath that she cannot give into.

The lines of her favorite Robert Frost poem come to mind:
"The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep... and miles to go before I sleep."

Miles to go, Darcy reminds herself, turning with squared shoulders back to the street. Miles to go before I get to sleep.

Getting these objects before HYDRA is worth any exhaustion, mental or physical.

She knows that she should return to the hotel soon. Surely Tony is arriving back soon, possibly with Natasha and Bucky in tow. They will tear apart the city to find her, and a dressing down from her father is the last thing that Darcy needs right now. No doubt Tony already has words prepared about the risk she took with De Luca, not to mention whatever ire Bucky has left to deliver.

But the evening is too sweet for her to turn away from just yet. Her steps slow, guiding her down a narrow alley of small restaurants, spilling tiny patio tables onto the cobblestones. Darcy is passing one of these lowly lit cafés, hands deep in the pockets of her tan jacket and gaze following the beautiful lines of Roman architecture... when she sees her.

Her.

A blonde woman, perched in a wrought-iron patio chair like it is a throne of jewels, lifting a crystalline glass of ruby red wine to her pink lips as she stares directly at Darcy. A table is set before her, one seat empty.

Darcy halts in her tracks, struck. There is something deeply familiar about this woman, the softly sculpted blonde curls that frame her pale face, the elegant, long tapered fingers that cling to the wine stem.

She quirks an eyebrow at Darcy, a welcoming smile brimming across her face, while Darcy finally realizes the connection.

Her eyes are golden.

No pupils. No iris. Just gold.

“Hello dóttir.”

Darcy freezes.

“Come sit with me,” The woman whispers, voice echoing in the alley. No other patron seems to notice the beautiful woman as she beckons to Darcy in a fluid motion, gesturing to the empty seat across from her. “Darcy.” She caresses the name with the plush cushion of her mouth. "I would love nothing more than to share a drink with you, my fair one. It has been such a long time.”

Darcy takes a step forward, heart hammering. She knows who this is.

“Freyja.”

The name falls out of Darcy’s still darkened lips like an accusation. Because after all—that voice, the chime and earthiness of it—the golden eyes that cannot belong to a human—

“Freyja,” Darcy croaks again. “You are Freyja.”

“Yes,” The goddess nodds, reaching forward to pour Darcy a generous glass of wine, waving her closer with a mysterious half-smile. “And you are Darcy, my Evening Star. My last, falling light.”
The goddess’ voice is even, steady. The sound is almost indescribable, flowing through Darcy’s ears like molten gold: low and warm and full of promise.

The strangeness of the moment finally hits, causing Darcy to collapse in the offered seat. This confusion is the opposite of the battle clarity that she had claimed with dealing with De Luca—now Darcy is so hopelessly shocked that she can barely string together coherent thoughts, let alone an explanation of why a Norse goddess sits across from her in a fancy Roman café.

“I—” Darcy accepts the glass Freyja offers disbelievingly, gaze glued to the glowing, pale light that comes from her skin. Her eyes track over the woman before her: tall and willowy, with a strong straight nose and high cheekbones. The goddess is dressed in a simple white dress, tied at the waist with a sash that highlights her athletic curves. Her hair is a burnished yellow, falling down around her shoulders in softly sculpted curls, more Old-Hollywood glam than Norse goddess of war and magic. “You don’t look like you do in my dreams.”

The goddess gives a low laugh, those inhuman eyes resting on Darcy with amusement. “I have to blend in, don’t I?”

“Are you—” Darcy stops, pausing to take a steadying sip of her drink while choosing her words and attempting to lower her racing heart. Pinot noir, she realizes, my favorite. “Are you really here?”

Freyja tilts her head, leaning back in her patio chair. “Define here.”

“As in here, at this café, casually drinking wine with me like you haven’t been haunting my dreams for almost a year.”

The words are sharper than Darcy should probably use with an ancient, very powerful being who may be able to smite her into a pile of dust. But disbelief mixed with panic mixed with all of the events of the past few hours has made Darcy’s tone the least of her worries, all she wants is answers.

And this Norse goddess can give them to her.

But Freyja does not seem upset by Darcy's rudeness. Instead she seems chastened, almost ashamed as she frowns down at her drink and sets the glass aside.

“I must apologize for your nightmares,” She says slowly, leaning forward to place one delicate elbow on the soft linen tablecloth. “I… I have not been powerful in a very long time. My magic is locked away, used against me to bind my consciousness to this world. Dreams were the only way I could establish contact with you, to warn you away from this path.”

“Warn me away?” Darcy demands, her brain skipping over the goddess’ words with a frantic anger. “You’ve been reaching out to me, telling me that you’ve been waiting for me, that you need me—”

“I do,” Freyja says softly. “You have no idea how much I need you.”

There is a rawness in the words that Darcy cannot figure out how to acknowledge.

“Then why warn me away?”

“Because you do not know what helping me will cost,” Freyja replies, the first bit of censure entering her tone. Every sound that falls from the goddess’ lovely mouth is like a stone thrown into water, heavy and final. “Every choice you have made so far has been based in free will, I have
made sure of that, but it has been made without understanding. It is true that I have been waiting
for someone of your spirit for thousands of years, but I would never ask that you to continue
without knowing my story.”

Silence falls between the two, one woman and one mythical goddess, staring at the other.

“So tell me,” Darcy finally states. “I’m sick and tired of feeling like I only have half the pieces to
this puzzle. I don’t understand what you want with me, or why I’m suddenly in a race with
HYDRA for artifacts that defy archaeological understanding.” Darcy takes a quick sip of her wine,
trying to disguise the shaking in her hands and voice before continuing. “I’ll suspend my disbelief
enough to admit that this feels real, that maybe I am sharing a bottle of fantastic wine with a
goddess—”

The goddess in question laughs, low and tinkling.

“Thor has named you his shield-sibling and adventured with you many times,” Freyja interrupts
with something like humor. “You have shared mead with an Asgardian god, reveling in shared
victories.” Her golden gaze is assessing. "You call the God of Thunder a kinsman… truly, this
should not be new for you.”

Darcy responds with a glare. “The old legends about you never mention this sass. And you know
about my friendship with Thor, how?”

“I watch over my chosen,” She says simply, setting her glass aside. “You have never been far from
my eyes or my heart, dóttir. Not since you put on that bracelet.”

The Foula bracelet winks gold and ruby on Darcy’s wrist, shining against the white tablecloth.
They both stare down at it, contemplating the cuff.

The path seems straightforward to Darcy. Only one way to proceed.

“Fine. You want to tell me your story? I’m listening.”

Freyja’s gaze flicks up, pride and sorrow seeming to mix together in her golden eyes. “Truly, you
wish to hear?”

“Of course,” Darcy says honestly, reaching her free hand to cup the warmth of the Foula bracelet.
“This cuff, bracer thing has saved my life and the lives of my friends many times. And as awful as
those dreams you apparently sent have been, I knew they meant that you needed me. Something
beyond my research has been set into play.”

Freyja’s eyes flutter shut, a pained look overcoming her delicate features. “Indeed it has.”

“So tell me your story,” Darcy says forcibly, splaying her hands on the table. “It’s time to put magic
and secrets aside. Talk to me, tell me why you call me dóttir.”

A long moment passes, with the goddess leaning back in her chair to check Darcy’s resolve for any
cracks.

There are none.

Freyja finally speaks, lush mouth opening like a petal. “I will share—”

The goddess flickers in the blink of an eye, one moment a woman of yellow and white-gold across
the table, the next empty air devoid of life.
She flicks back into existence as Darcy gasps, reaching forward to rest a soft hand on the table. Her skin has gone paler than before, the sickly white of a death mask.

“Freyja?” Darcy reaches forward without thinking, laying one hand across the goddess’. Her skin is as smooth as marble, hard and freezing. “Holy shit, what just happened to you?”

“My power is waning,” Freyja explains steadily, but Darcy can detect a breathlessness that had not been there before. “I have saved up my reserves for many months to meet you outside of dreams. I do not have enough. If we wish to continue this conversation, I must ask that we relocate.”

“Relocate?” Darcy echoes. “I mean, we can go somewhere else in the city—”

“Do you trust me?” Freyja asks suddenly, turning those golden orbs on Darcy with a cutting intensity. “Do you trust me enough to take us both somewhere safe?”

Darcy hesitates for a split second, her head suddenly full of voices that sound like Bucky, Tony and Natasha’s… telling her that the first rule of living a long life is to not accompany Norse strangers to random locations. Because of kidnapping and murder and nonsense. (But it turned out okay with Thor, right?)

“I trust you,” Darcy finally says, her voice sounding lower and older than usual, as if she is making a vow. “You can take us to another place, I trust you.”

Freyja smiles, this time a wide flash of white teeth that nearly blinds Darcy. The goddess reaches for Darcy’s scarred hand just as the air around them begins to shimmer, golden flashes erupting in the cool, Roman air…

Darcy’s last sight is Freyja’s inhuman eyes, crinkled in concentration.

Gentle darkness falls.

~~~*~~~

The apartment is soft, lowly-lit, and full of the scents of home.

Darcy is balancing her sharpest kitchen knife between carefully splayed fingers, concentrating on the act on mincing. She has lovingly peeled off layers of papery protection from the garlic, breaking away the skin of three cloves that leaves a slightly sticky residue between her hands. The soft skin of the garlic breaks apart as she begins to cut, first slicing the cloves into thin layers, then moving her knife to dice it into tiny cubes, the tiniest she can manage, inhaling the ripe scent of fresh garlic…

There is a glass of red wine at her side. Full and ruby and glinting in her favorite Earthen goblet, the one Darcy had picked up at a New York Renaissance Festival with Jane and Thor. Her kitchen is clean but cluttered—a cast iron pot of simmering tomato sauce boils lightly on the stove, while twigs of dried rosemary and thyme rest on the cutting block nearby, waiting to season the sauce. The smells mix in the air, roasting vegetables with the pungent scent of onions and the soft scent of olive oil, while Hozier’s soft voice croons from Darcy’s tiny stereo set up.

*Give your heart and soul to charity, because the best of you, the rest of you, babe it belongs to*
Darcy huffs happily as she finishes mincing, scooping up the garlic with a practiced hand and turning to dump it into the sauce. The chicken is marinating nearby in a vinaigrette of its own—a creation of balsamic vinegar, white wine, and soy—waiting to be cooked and combined into this delicious meal that she never gets tired of making. Kara had taught her this recipe before Darcy had left for Scotland, determined that her daughter would not rely on microwavable meals while abroad, a labor of love that Darcy had accepted with open hands.

(It is one of Darcy’s fondest memories. Kara commandeering the kitchen, firmly teaching Darcy just how combine spices into sauce, how to season cast iron pots and marinate meat in wine. Her mother had channeled all of her sorrow at Darcy’s impending move into these lessons, she had clung to her daughter’s hand under the guise of teaching her how to properly use the fancy kitchen knives Dan had purchased for her.)

(Kara had cried when the meal was finished, clinging to her daughter with fingers that Darcy had been surprised to see were beginning to wrinkle. The guilt Darcy had felt for moving across the sea was something that she had never admitted, even in the wake of HYDRA and Tony and craziness.)

The memory is bittersweet. Darcy makes the mental note to call her mother after dinner, to ask when Kara would be next able to take a trip to the UK for a girl’s week. Time with her mother is needed, achingly needed.

Salting the sauce and stirring in a handful of garden herbs, Darcy reaches absentmindedly for her wine glass. The taste of her favorite pinot noir is sharp against her tongue, deep and dark, and she savors it as she sways to the music.

*If I was born as a blackthorn tree, I’d want to be felled by you, held by you, fuel the pyre of your enemies...*

The oven beeps, and Darcy stretches between her tiny island and the appliance to set the chicken onto an awaiting pan. She straightens after pushing the pan back inside, catching a glance of the time displayed on her microwave in blocky numbers.

0:00 PM

She frowns at the sight. Is her clock broken? It must be sometime in the evening, she’s just come home from class and…

*Class?*

What class has she been at today? The lab? Her TA gig? Darcy reaches out to steady herself on the nearby island as she tries to remember—what was she doing today? Why is she cooking?

It must be a mistake. Maybe she had taken a rare nap today, those always tend to throw off her daily rhythm. Praying that this is true, Darcy reaches down to pull back the sleeve of her robe and glance at her watch.

The hands of her leather wristwatch are missing. The tiny golden spikes that have always faithfully told Darcy what time it is on digs all around the world are… absent, gone, somehow disappeared with no damage to the glass cover.

“You like to cook, I see.”

Darcy wheels around, heart beating wildly. She drops the knife, which is maybe not the best move
when confronted with someone unknown in your apartment, but whatever.

There is a woman sitting at her tiny island, perched carefully on one of her woobly bar stools. A woman with long blonde hair, too bright to be natural, and a face that is…

…so perfect. Unearthly perfect. High cheekbones under tanned skin, ripe pink lips pulled up in a half-smile, and eyes of... gold. Pure gold.

No pupils, no whites, just gold.

Human and inhuman all at once.

It all comes rushing back. The Foula bracelet, the golden dagger, Rome. This woman sitting calmly in a palazzo, smiling at Darcy like a long lost relative.

“You,” Darcy manages.

“Me.” The woman agrees lightly.

“I…” Darcy swallows, every hair on her body standing on edge. “Where am I?”

“You’re dreaming,” The woman supplies in a cheery tone, smooth and soothing. “You gave me permission to take us somewhere safe, and the only place that is possible is a dream.”

Darcy takes a moment to look around. The setting created is her Edinburgh apartment, the small space she has lived in for four-and-a-half years and created into a sanctuary of Darcy-ness. Colorful, cozy, soft. Full of jewel tones and mismatched furniture.

It has been almost six months since Darcy has stepped foot in this place, and longer since she has had the time to relax like this alone.

It’s not real. Just as Darcy confronts the fact that this is all the manipulation of her sleeping mind, the room around her begins to blur and shake.

“Careful,” The woman warns, glancing around curiously from her seat at the table. “Challenging created realities often does not go well, even those that are fashioned from dreams.”

“This is my apartment,” Darcy croaks, whipping her head around to stare at the familiar soft ruby walls, the afghan quilt and crooked picture frames. “You’ve conjured up my apartment.”

“Well,” The woman says with a tiny smile. “I am a goddess.”

The words have a teasing humor, but Darcy is too caught up in trying to get her bearings to acknowledge it.

“Besides,” Freyja interrupts, tossing her golden hair over a shoulder. “I did not conjure this. All I did was open the door to a safe location, you are the one who filled in the blanks. You took us both to where you feel safest.”

It feels true. Darcy cannot lie to herself that the sight of her Edinburgh apartment is soothing in a way she desperately has needed. Months in the field, weeks at the Compound, her life and research and safety up in the air... she feels a deep ache for the home around her, for the soft hands of her mother, helping her learn how to cook.

Peace. The thing Darcy had wished for at the bridge over the Tiber only minutes before, tears that have not yet dried on her face.
“The woods are lovely, dark and deep…but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep…”

Darcy makes the split-second executive decision to roll with this as much as possible, leaning against the familiar lacquered counter top and turning to the immortal Norse being sitting at her bar. “I think it’s your turn to talk.”

Freyja nods, casting her gaze around the apartment. “Indeed it is. I will tell you my story, dóttir, and hope that it answers some of your questions. All I ask is that you listen and remember that everything I ask of you is based on your free will.”

Darcy nods. “Thanks, I appreciate that.”

The goddess sinks into her seat, and with a voice that echoes with the weight of ages, she begins to speak.

“My story begins with an old war. When Midgard was still young, Asgard conquered the land of my people, Vanaheim. As the daughter of the King I was chosen to represent the Vanir and live among the Asgardians, to learn their ways and display our own.

“I was young then, hot-headed, curious, and full of ideas. I was lucky to find a friend in Frigga. Truly, she was the first to help me realize that those of Asgard and Vanaheim were not so different at all, and that though war had made us enemies… peace could make us friends.”

“Thor’s mother?” Darcy interrupts, unable to stop herself. “Jane met Frigga before she— before her death.”

“Yes,” Freyja’s smile dims. “I was sorrowful to feel her spirit depart our universe. Frigga was the kindest of us. She smoothed the way for a friendship between Odin and I, found me a place on his council of advisers, and trusted me with some of the secrets her magic blessed her with… a magic almost too terrible to know. But with this new friendship I was able to ask that the rules and restrictions put upon Vanaheim be recalled. And slowly, over many millennia, Odin grew to see my people as allies rather than conquests, allowing the governments of the past to stand on Vanaheim, though in name we still acted as a vassal state to Asgard.

“But I did not want to be a political adviser forever. Asgard is a kingdom built on war and valor, a culture of fighters, but to be Vanir was to know magic, to see the intricacies of the pattern the Norns weave in our lifeblood. I learned the skills of a warrior in the thousands of years I lived on Asgard, but I knew that my destiny was across the realms, somewhere out among the stars. I was not meant for Asgard or Vanaheim, I was made to love another realm.”

“Midgard,” Darcy breathes. “You found us.”

Freyja nods, flicking a strand of gold over her shoulder. “Yes. Thor was still but a child when Odin first showed me Midgard. He dismissed the realm, calling it a fool world of short lived children. A world of people who lived in the blink of an eye, who seemed to be born in the sunrise and dead by sunset.” Freyja smiles. “Asgard looked at Midgard with the condescending eye of pity and tolerance, but I was intrigued. In such short lives, you humans managed to do so much!”

The sentiment is something Darcy has heard Thor speak on, explaining the backwards weight of Odin's words to a furious Jane. “We aren’t to be underestimated, apparently.”

“You humans should never be underestimated.” Freyja agrees, tilting those golden eyes to the nearby photos of family Darcy keeps on her bookshelves. “You shamed me in the first moments of
meeting. How deeply you love, how deeply you care! What I saw of your race shocked me, and I began to journey to Midgard alone just to glimpse these lives. Heimdall and I were confidants, he often turned a blind eye to my wanderings. I walked the Earth and I saw your people build civilizations, I watched as they raised temples and pyramids and cities from the dust. I saw what one human could accomplish in such a short life… and then I looked to my own people, to Asgard and Vanaheim, and I felt ashamed of our immortality.”

“Ashamed?” Darcy can’t help but jerk herself up. “But—Jane has told me about Asgard! She even took some shitty quality photos on her cellphone while she was there once. Asgard is beautiful, insanely beautiful.”

“It is,” Freyja hums, golden eyes distant. “But Earth made me realize how slowly we moved. The cool halls of my father’s palaces in Vanaheim and the soft glow of Asgard felt like ice compared to your world, forged by fire and hope and nerve. It is common for the Vanir and Aesir to live slowly. Important matters could be turned over for hundreds of years, battles planned and waged carefully and deliberately over millennia.

“Odin allowed me the freedom to move through the realms, to travel and learn to my heart’s content… but it was Midgard that held me. I walked with your ancestors: with kings and queens of old, with warriors and farmers and merchants. I advised rulers and worked with healers, trained women and men alike to guard their families from wolves and bandits. Each trip I stayed in your world a little longer, helped midwives to birth children, held the hands of friends I had made as they died, old and withered and confined to bed.”

There is pain in the goddess’ voice. A pain that Darcy can barely understand, ancient and heaving.

“How long did you stay on Midgard?” Darcy asks, reeling. “I mean, you’re still here…”

“That is where my story twists,” Freyja confirms. “I was an immortal being living among mortals, and I grew attached to your people, but we were never truly the same. I never aged, never physically changed… and eventually I grew heartsick of watching the humans I loved die.”

“But death…” Darcy stops, realizing what Freyja is truly saying. “Even a long, human life is not enough to keep up with a goddess, is it?”

Freyja shakes her head ruefully. “I told myself that ten, twenty, fifty years with those humans I loved and called family was enough.” Her smile turns sad, strong profile turned away from Darcy to stare into the fireplace. “On Vanaheim and Asgard my title was Freyja, Goddess of Love and War. I was a leader among my people, such as Thor still is to Asgard. But on Midgard as the ages passed… I was truly worshiped. I called it friendship at first, cherished those who came to my side to learn the wisdom of the Vanir, but soon it became my doom.”

Darcy blinks, trying to follow her meaning. “I don’t understand. You’re a goddess, don’t you want to be worshiped?”

“Does Thor?” Freyja counters sharply. “Do you look to him as your god?”

This brings Darcy to a mental crash. She has a clear picture of Thor in full armor, wielding Mjölnir as unearthly lighting crackles around him, shaking the foundations of Puente Antiguo and Greenwich. God of Thunder, Prince of Asgard. That was a being who inspired awe, who gave Darcy goosebumps to witness in action.

But she also sees Thor, her friend and shield-brother who sneaks pop tarts from Darcy’s pantry in an pathetic attempt at stealth. She remembers him singing karaoke with Yael and Greg in a shitty
New York bar; pulling Jane in for a clumsy attempt at a slow dance during Tony’s winter party; reaching over to lay a comforting arm across Darcy’s shoulders as he regales the table of Avengers with the story of her mighty taser.

Thor, with his too wide smile and earnest affection. His protection, his desire to help and improve. Thor, who after helping Darcy drunkenly dance on a bar, once put Black Widow band-aids on her scraped knees because he felt guilty for not catching her when she tripped off.

“No,” Darcy says honestly. “He’s my friend, not my god.”

Freyja’s features shift, turning from sharp to soft, wistful. “And that is what I wished for. I came to Midgard to fight alongside humans who shaped the world, beings who were forged by courage and fire. But I stayed too long, and that worship changed me. It bound me to this world, turned me from a friend to a concept in the eyes of those I loved.”

Darcy blinks. “This is getting… metaphysical.” Understatement of the century. “What do you mean by bound?”

“The ancestors of those humans I first made contact with began to see me as a true goddess. They feared what would happen to their crops if I left, feared facing the harsh world without the magic and comfort I gave them. They devised a plan to keep me on Midgard, and I was too foolish to realize the betrayal.”

“Woah,” Darcy raises a hand to halt Freyja’s story. “Am I hearing this right? Humans found a way to trap you?”

“They used the objects I had once gifted to my friends,” Freyja explains, flexing her hands in her lap. “Those first humans I loved nearly broke my heart with their passing. So I created gifts to protect their fragile lives, objects of my magic that could only be wielded by those of true courage.”

Darcy’s breath catches at Freyja’s words.

“The dagger I took tonight—” She already knows the answer, but she still needs to ask. “The Foula bracelet. They were your gifts.”

Freyja honors her with a grin. “A few of the many, yes. They were gifts to my favored ones, to the women who took on the mantle of warrior, healer, mother or lover in my name. Women I loved and trusted. They were weapons I forged from Asgardian gold, blessed with magic of my own.”

“How did they use them against you?”

“Magic can be turned,” Freyja sighs. “But it always leaves a mark. My intent was powerful. I put part of my soul into each object I created, blessed those I loved with my own heart.”

“And you did this because…”

“Do we not give those we love the ability to destroy us, just by loving them?” Freyja asks gently, spearing Darcy with those inhuman eyes. “You act as if this is a mighty gesture to love another, but it is not. I gave pieces of myself away out of love for my friends, and hundreds of years later those who saw me as a goddess used these objects against me to bind me to this word, to force my magic back in on itself.”

The sentiment is dangerous. Darcy cannot imagine giving parts of her soul to Jane, to Selvig and Dr. J and Natasha and Bucky, only to be turned against her by their descendants. “The Foula
bracelet was used to bind you, and this dagger.”

Freyja dips her head, golden in the lowlight. “As were others.”

“You're saying that there are more objects of Asgardian gold,” Darcy states, reeling. “But why do I have these? Why does HYDRA want them so badly? Why did the bracelet respond to me?”

The questions come quickly, too fast for Freyja to truly answer. Darcy gathers her breath and leans forward, trying to pull hard answers from the goddess. “I know these items are significant, I know that the Foula bracelet is made from your magic— but why have they come to me?”

Freyja holds her gaze, hazel against gold. “Because you looked for them.”

Darcy snorts, falling back into seat. “I was hoping for a little more information than that.”

Freyja raises an eyebrow, as if it is the simplest truth. “Those ancient Nords were successful in binding me to the Earth. But with all my power gone, used against my being, I faded. It backfired against us all. The Nords realized their mistake: in forcing me to stay, they had lost me. The objects were passed down to their children and used in legend or buried in their graves, and we all lost.”

Freyja continues her story, deflating with each word. “I was powerless. I slumbered through the ages, unaware of the universe changing… until you woke me.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You found my bracelet in the earth and pulled it free with your own hands. You wore it on your travels, saved it from the hands of those who would use it for greed… and when you faced down enemies, when you stood between the sister of your heart and certain death… I heard you.”

“Jane,” Darcy realizes, disbelieving. “The fight with HYDRA, when I thought we would die. You were there.”

“In a way,” Freyja slips off of the bar stool, crossing the kitchen to stand in front of Darcy. She is a tall woman of gold and angles, motioning with a lofty hand to the gold hugging Darcy’s wrist. “May I?”

Darcy lifts her right arm, offering her wrist to the goddess. Freyja cups the bracelet gently, staring at the jewelry, and Darcy realizes that the Foula bracelet is the same gold as Freyja’s eyes. Otherworldly.

“Someday I may have time to tell you of the woman who first wore this bracelet,” Freyja finally whispers. “I hope so. But we are running out of time, and there is still much we must speak on.” Freyja grips the lines of Darcy’s jaw with fervent, gentle hands. "Know that you would not be able to wield the bracelet without purity of heart and spirit. You woke me when you wore my bracelet and stood up against great enemies. I looked into your heart that day, Darcy Lewis, and I saw the warrior I have waited for. I marked you as worthy, and in doing so I am afraid I have invited much evil into your life.”

Darcy cannot help but scoff, even in the face of a Norse goddess. “Evil? If you didn’t already notice, HYDRA targeted me before you even woke up.”

“Humans have searched for my power for ages,” Freyja seems calm with this new information. “Perhaps this HYDRA you speak of truly is a threat. Perhaps it is a front for the evil I have evaded for centuries. But you must realize that power is balanced by power, and in awakening me you
have also awakened those who would bind my might to their will.”

"This feels like The Mummy shit."

Freyja raises a curious brow.

“Nevermind,” Darcy mutters. “So, where do I factor into this?” Darcy finally asks. “HYDRA, which is this mega-evil group of humans who want to take over the world, already has me on hit lists for researching your artifacts. But if what you're saying is true, if you really woke up during the HYDRA attack… why do you need me, Freyja? Why have to done so much to contact me?”

For the first time in this strange dream state, Freyja looks uncomfortable. The golden-haired goddess shifts, longing written in the lines of her pale face as she reaches to press a pale hand to Darcy’s cheek.

Cold and smooth, hard as marble.

“You are my Evening Star,” Freyja says lowly, a promise, a vow. “You are my last, falling light. The final sun in my sky.”

Darcy stares at the goddess. She thinks of the thorns, the searing pain she had felt as they sliced into the soft pads of her feet, the inescapable knowledge that each step was fated. She thinks of balance: how it had felt to fall into rushing water, the icy touch of a current that Darcy could barely fight against.

Those dreams. Freyja had sent them to warn her, a dream for each time Darcy had unearthed something new, each time she had moved forward in her quest.

“You kept going,” Freyja says, reading the thoughts that flash across Darcy’s face. “You wore my bracelet, marked yourself as worthy, and despite all I could do to stop you, you pushed forward.”

“I kept my feet to this path.” Darcy whispers. “It was my choice.” She inhales. “It is my choice.”

“Yes,” Freyja breathes, so close to Darcy’s face that she feels the sweet exhale of the goddess’s breath—amber and rain. For a moment, Darcy feels her dark curls brush against Freyja’s blonde locks. “Your choice. It must always be your choice, my dóttir.” Freyja presses cool lips against her forehead, next words a prayer against Darcy's skin. “I have loved you from the moment you placed the bracelet upon your arm, from the moment your heart beat with mine, and what I must ask of you breaks my heart.”

“Ask me,” Darcy nearly begs. “I am so sick of riddles. Freyja, please. Just tell me what you need, tell me how I can help you. How do I break the curse?”

“You cannot save me,” Freyja says simply. “There is no curse. But you can help me.”

“What do you mean?”

Freyja pauses, turning to gaze over her shoulder for a long moment. She sighs. “We are nearly out of time. My power is weakening, and your friends have begun to look for you. We have only moments left.”

“Tell me!”

“Darcy,” Freyja says softly, with such a heartbreaking gentleness that Darcy wants to weep. “I don’t need you to save me. I need you to release me.”
“What do you mean?”

Freyja’s hands overlap with hers, cool fingers weaving tightly into Darcy’s. “Find the objects I left behind, after tonight there are two more for you to locate. Bring them to my temple in Hedeby, where they first learned how to bind me to Midgard.”


Freyja nods. “An old place. I was there when they first piled rock upon rock to build a home. Then they trapped me, bound my spirit to those same stones. It is the resting place of my spirit.”

“And then?” Darcy questions even as her head spins. "What will it take?"

"The cost of being my champion is high," Freyja whispers, cool and sweet against Darcy's cheek. "It will take all."

"What must I do?"

Freyja turns, a vision of gold hair and white skin, of raised scars and gentle hands. She speaks as the dreamed apartment around them begins to fade and spin in Darcy’s peripheral.

“*My dóttir,*” Her words are a kiss in the fading light. “I need you to unite the items, release their magic... *and destroy me.*”

*Destroy me.*

There is no time for a response. For the fourth time in less than twenty-four hours, Darcy’s world goes black.

Chapter End Notes

Love you all. Finally able to update regularly again! Just so you know: I am planning to end this by chapter 50. Ten more to go :)

Work is unbeta’d. Mistakes are mine, be kind!
Dr. Maximus White is a man who gives orders, not a man who waits for them.

Yet, here he is.

The glass between his weathered fingers is gripped tightly, whiskey over ice shaking as he marches to the open window. His office has never felt this constraining, never felt so much like a tomb. The city gleams outside, taunting his current predicament.

He needs to get out of Edinburgh.

And he would – if not for these damn orders. His contact has forced him to wait, to clean up the messes that Eleanor Juniper had done her goddamn best to for him in the anthropology department — his anthropology department. Now there are accusations from digs long past with enough merit to warrant fellow board members to look at him sideways. Juniper has managed to pull thorns out from his past, casting suspicion against his name, his character.

But Maximus cares very little for those petty concerns. The board can think what they want – he has the true leverage and power needed to keep them from ever acting against him.

No, he has a larger issue in mind, glory and freedom that he will chase to the very ends of the earth.

Gulping the whiskey left in his glass, he throws it aside. The night wind is the first touch of winter, crystalline particles of ice beginning to gust into his office. But Maximus does not care. A little chill has never bothered him.

What bothers him, the figure that keeps him up at night choking on his own anger, has a name.

One woman is the key to it all. She has twisted out of his grasp enough times to make the hunt all that more irresistible, cloying and sweet at the edge of his tongue.

His contact has told Maximus to wait, to not make his move until they sanction it. But a predator has instincts that cannot be ignored- and a predator waits for no orders. Maximus knows that he...
finally has what he needs to cripple his prey.
Darcy Lewis can’t stay invisible forever.
He will enjoy watching her bow at his feet.

~~~*~~~

Freyja’s voice is an echo, sound waves penetrating through deep water.

*Unite the four items... release the magic... and destroy me.*

It is all Darcy can hear as she sinks deeper and deep into the darkness.

~~~*~~~

Heavy blankets tucked around her and the scent of roasting coffee. That is what Darcy first registers as she comes back to the awakened world, utterly confused.

The fashionably pale walls of the Hotel di Russo come into focus, thin rays of sunlight pouring in through the half-open balcony doors. Darcy shakes her head and sits up, shocked to realize that she is in her hotel bed.

The room spins for a moment as Darcy sucks in a sharp breath, hating the helpless feeling that comes over her as she realizes she is waking up in an unexpected place for the umpteenth time.

She remembers… walking out into the city, anger brimming in her blood at Bucky, passing by the café and – Freyja.

“You awake, sleepyhead?”

The voice is light, friendly, but Darcy jerks backward so fast that her head bangs against the stupidly ornate headboard.

“Woah,” The voice sounders closer, concerned. “Kid, you ok?”

Darcy blinks, staring up. “Tony?”

Her father comes around the corner of the suite, already dressed in a crisp red and black suit, not at all looking like he spent last night wining and dining until the early morning hours with Rome’s elite.

(His goatee is spotless, ten out of ten.)

“You gave me the keycard,” He explains in greeting, passing her a mug of hot coffee. “Figured you would need some fuel after last night.”
Darcy stares at him in apprehension. Her heart is racing, trying to remember how she got from the café with Freyja to her bed. She looks down at herself, expecting to find her outfit of jeans and a blouse… but instead she feels the soft fabric of Hotel di Russo complementary pajamas.

“Holy shit,” She breathes. “I’m in pajamas.”

Tony’s head jerks up, regarding Darcy with thinly veiled amusement. “Don’t remember getting back?”

“I—I do—”

“Looks like you hit the free champagne a little too hard, kiddo.” Tony is smiling, no trace of shadows or suspicion in his gaze. “Don’t worry, it’s a rookie mistake. By your next gala you’ll be holding your expensive liquor like a champ.”

Darcy nods, his words distant. She’s frantically thinking backwards, jumping from panicked thoughts of last-I-remember-I-was-at-a-café-with-a-Norse-goddess and the realization that she is now here, in her hotel room, dressed up in nice pajamas.

“I wasn’t happy to have lost you at the party.” He frowns into his coffee at the memory, the first bit of censure entering his tone. “Pep said she stayed close enough to you and De Luca to make sure you were safe.” He peers into Darcy’s face, taking the confusion to mean something different. “He didn’t touch you, right?”

“De Luca?” Darcy hides her flinch by pressing the covers of her bed back. “Nah, he was fine.”

She must not be completely believable because Tony’s frown doesn’t disappear.

“You’re hovering,” Darcy says suddenly, trying to find a way to get her father out of her room so she can panic in private. “You only hover over me when you’re worried about something. What’s going on?”

“I’m not hovering,” Tony says automatically, still hovering. “Thought I would come and say goodbye before we all disperse. I’ve got a meeting in New York this afternoon over some Accords bullshit, and Dr. Juniper explained last night that you crazy kids would be rolling out within a few hours.” He pauses, raising a dark brow at Darcy as she struggles to digest the rush of information. “Greece, huh?”

“Yeah,” Darcy takes a steadying sip of her coffee. It doesn’t seem like Tony is aware of her late-night excursion into Rome, but her genius father may be lulling her into a false sense of security before he starts yelling about bodyguards again. “Mycenae. Some information last night made us think the next artifact may be there.”

Tony nods, looking contemplative. He takes a seat on the edge of her bed, chewing over some thought that Darcy can’t decipher from his face.

He finally speaks. “So, let’s confront the elephant in the room. What’s your endgame here?”

“Endgame?”

Tony spreads his hands. “You chase these seemingly endless artifacts down before HYDRA and then… what?”

The question is jarring. Darcy is barely holding onto this situation of artifacts and HYDRA and chaos by the skin of her fingertips, she has had no time to think about what comes after.
The real endgame was revealed to her last night – use the items to destroy the remains of a goddess.

But she can’t tell Tony that, not until she understands what the actual fuck Freyja was talking about.

So she plays at nonchalance and shrugs, like it’s obvious. “I use my contact at Stark Tech to get some major security measures that can protect the artifacts in research facilities, and eventually get them set up in museums.”

“You think relics of Asgardian influence will be safe in a museum?”

She hates that he’s so right. They won’t be, not with HYDRA on the offensive. “Okay, maybe they belong in an Asgardian museum! I don’t know!”

“Relax,” Tony raises his hands in surrender. “Not trying to stress you out. Just wanting to know what the plan is. I heard that Dr. Juniper was successful in getting the dagger last night. She reported that you kept De Luca busy with introductions and historical questions about the villa.”

Darcy stiffens at the lie. Of course Dr. J had found a way to cover for her absence. That woman could lie her way out of a prison cell.

“Mmmhm,” Darcy takes another sip of her coffee to cover her guilt. It’s boiling hot. “He was easy to distract.” The lie hurts. “Did you enjoy the mingling while I was gone?”

“I never do,” He says bluntly. “But I did come by your room last night to check on you. Dr. J stopped me at the door, said you were sleeping off the night.”

Bless Dr. J’s heart. Darcy is going to buy her all of the bullets and whiskey she could possibly want for this.

“Like you said,” Darcy confirms. “That champagne went right to my head. Lucky that Dr. J got me into pajamas and bed, right?”

Tony doesn’t bother answering. He’s looking at Darcy in that way she has learned to hate—calculating, testing her composure for the scent of a lie.

All at once she knows that he doesn’t buy her story.

But he says nothing, just stares down at her with that frown, waiting for her to crack. When he finally sighs, she knows he’s either not willing to push her or aware that her stubbornness is born of him.

“Right.” Tony stands up, placing his own untouched coffee on a nearby vanity set. “The jet is at your disposal. I expect an update as soon as you land in Greece—I’m talking a very detailed itinerary, minute-by-minute, of where and when you’ll be digging.”

Darcy sighs. “Any update on HYDRA movements?”

“None. But don’t let that make you feel better – this is a terrorist organization. They know how to wait. Your globetrotting is literally the least safe thing you could be doing right now.”

A long silence falls between them. Darcy is well aware that Tony would do anything to take her feet from this path, to convince her to let him keep her safe in the compound.
“You’ve fought HYDRA before,” Darcy reminds him, conviction settling deep in her bones. “It’s my turn.”

“That is quite literally the worst thing you could have said if you were trying to make me feel better.”

Darcy cracks a smile at Tony’s dark laugh. To be perfectly honest with herself, it’s a fucked-up moment to be sitting with her father she met only a year before, talking about the terrorist organization bent on finding her and the research she chases.

When Darcy imagined being an archaeologist as a teenager, she expected a reality of trench digging, cataloging, and endless paperwork. Honestly, the reality is true – it’s the danger and gun fights that are surprising.

But having Iron Man as a protective father figure is surprising too. At no point in her life did she factor in the idea of a superhero dad. At this point, Darcy is daring life to throw her another curveball.

(Is being a long-lost member of the British Royal family truly too much to ask? Darcy lowkey wants unfettered access to those crown jewels. She would look great in a tiara.)

“I need to go,” Tony announces, standing up abruptly. “If I stay any longer, I’m going to end up breaking my promise to Pepper and forcibly smuggling you on the jet back to NYC.”

Darcy grins up at her father. “You couldn’t if you tried, old man.”

“Old man!” Tony’s jaw drops as he takes the bait, humor sparkling in those brown eyes. “Careful with your words, daughter dear. I can still take you in a fight.”

Darcy contemplates this bold statement. “With or without the suit?”

“With or without the magic bracelet?” Tony counters.

It’s not a bad point. Darcy lifts her pinky finger solemnly. “Next time I’m in the compound, you and I can box. No suits or magic weapons. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun,” Tony echoes dubiously, raising his pinky nonetheless. “I’m not sure you know the meaning of the word, Ms. ‘I-like-sleeping-in-dirt’.”

Darcy shrugs off the jibe, aware that Tony will never understand her love for the field. “Clint and Natasha will enjoy watching. And I’m pretty sure Dr. J will be hedging bets.”

It lifts Darcy’s heart to see Tony’s real smile return, not the pained version he has used with her since this madness began. His pinky links with hers, a vow for a better day.

“When all this is over,” Tony promises. “You’ll come home.”

He isn’t talking about a friendly boxing match anymore. Darcy stares up at her father, this man who came into her life like a supernova. She traces the lines of his face carefully, noting the fire behind his chestnut eyes.

Darcy knows that she has inherited that fire.

“It’s going to be fine,” She promises. They’re both speaking to themselves as each other, but it doesn’t matter. Impossible odds are a Stark family tradition. “I’ll come home.”
Tony leaves minutes later, planting a rare kiss to Darcy’s forehead and shutting the door after insuring multiple promises to stay safe. After he is gone Darcy makes herself another cup of coffee, heavy on the cream, and takes a seat on her balcony. Beneath her Rome is aglow with morning sunlight, sparkling with tourists and pedestrians and locals and ghosts and goddesses.

Darcy wipes tears from her eyes as she watches the city unfurl beneath her. There is no doubt in her mind that the events of last night were real – De Luca showed her the vault, Darcy got the dagger, and Freyja appeared in a café. And somehow, with goddess-y magic, Freyja managed to get her from a street side stable to her own bed before her friends could find her.

Sipping at her coffee, Darcy knows that she is not sure what exactly she has gotten herself into, but Freyja’s words echo in her thoughts as she begins to put together a plan.

“Your world, forged by fire and hope and nerve… How deeply you humans love, how deeply you care…”

~~~*~~~

Dr. J shows up at Darcy’s door not long after Tony, already clad in tight khaki pants and a green button down that shows off her tanned skin, long grey hair tied up in a braid. She's tall and straight, impeccable posture and bright eyes.

“Hope you got what you needed last night,” Dr. J says in greeting, breezing past Darcy into the suite. “Because I covered the hell outta your ass last night.”

Darcy follows her into the rooms, tugging on the blouse she had halfway over her head. “Seriously, thank you so much. I just talked to Tony. He’s suspicious of last night and I’m fairly certain he knows I was more involved in the whole heist part than promised, but he didn’t say a word.” Darcy takes a breath. “Thank you for saying I was asleep.”

“Where did you go last night?” Dr. J asks, ignoring Darcy’s verbal vomit as she helps herself to a porcelain cup of coffee. “I saw you leave the hotel. You didn’t even check for tails like I taught you.”

Darcy grimaces. Dr. J had trained her to be aware a long time ago, given hell or high water. “I was… upset.”

“You had a right to be.” Dr. J takes a long gulp of her drink. Frowning at the taste, she fishes out a silver flask from her pocket and pours what looks like a large amount of whiskey into the teacup. “I hope you got some peace then, cleared your head.”

“Dr. J,” Darcy says flatly. “It’s eight in the morning.”

“I’m old enough to not give two shits about the time, Lewis.” She shoots back. “Now what the fuck was so important you had to run into Rome at 1 in the morning for?”

Darcy hesitates. She’s caught between wanting so desperately to talk to Dr. J about the whole crazy interaction with a Norse goddess and not wanting her mentor to believe that she must be crazy.

But this is Dr. J. One of the people that Darcy trusts most. This woman has seen the Foula bracelet,
has pushed Dr. Mark to accept the unacceptable. She has to understand.

Darcy claims the seat across from her mentor and spills the entire story: Freyja sitting in a café as if waiting for her, the point in which Freyja had pulled them into a dream landscape identical to Darcy’s apartment, and finally the task that the goddesses has set in her hands.

“Four objects,” Dr. J says after a long moment of digesting the information. “I’ve got no idea what this goddess means when she says ‘destroy me’—but the rest of the instructions seem clear. Four objects, you’ve got two: the dagger and bracelet, and gather them at Hedeby.”

“You believe me?”

“Of course I do, Lewis.” Dr. J takes a gulp of her whiskey with coffee. “This goddess claimed you the moment that thing turned into a whip and saved your life. It makes sense she has an agenda.” She raises light brown eyes to meet Darcy’s. “Nothing in life is free, apparently.”

Darcy doesn’t know what to say. The relief of being believed is staggering, but the task ahead seems monumental.

“You still think we should go Mycenae?” Darcy asks, sinking into her seat.

“Yup.” Dr. J eyes Darcy’s posture, fishing out the flask and tossing it over. Darcy accepts it and pours some in her coffee. Sometimes days just need booze. “That triskelion burned into your palm reminds me of what I saw in Mycenae. I’m willing to bet that the Mycenae Museum of Archaeology will have some answers for us- if not your third Asgardian object.”

The conviction in her tone inspires Darcy. “A hunch?”

Dr. J nods, the lines of her face relaxing. “Hunches haven’t lead me wrong in a long, long time.”

“I have a friend,” Darcy had emailed him last night on the way back from the party, a frantic email full of typos and begging. “He’s been working in Mycenae. We spent time together in Crete, he’s got a boat and might be willing to help us out.”

“Have you contacted him?”

“I got an email out just after Tony left,” Darcy admits. “He sent back a location for a boat pick-up and heart-eyes emoji.”

There’s no way that anything in Darcy’s tone gives it away, but Dr. J turns to her with a smirk bordering on smug. “An old flame, huh?”

Darcy gapes at her mentor. “How could you tell?”

“Girl like you has to have some men in her past,” Dr. J says matter of fact. “I’ve been waiting for He-Man to have some rivals. He needs to know that you’re a commodity.”

“It’s not like that!” Darcy hurries to try and squash Dr. J’s insinuation. Her heart aches at the mention of Bucky. “Yes, this guy and I slept together. But it was no-strings, purely friendly. You of all people should know how it can be.”


~~~*~~~
The goodbye to Rome is quick, hurried by a no-nonsense Dr. J who wants to waste no time that can be spent digging. Darcy calls up a handful of contacts in Greece, setting up private time at the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Mycenae as Dr. Mark fast tracks the paperwork for digging. They aren’t sure exactly where the team needs to excavate, but Darcy is fatally optimistic that the museum will help her find answers.

The team is packed and ready by eleven am. It’s a small miracle that Scout was able to pry Greg out of bed, but they make it to the tarmac. Darcy shoulders her own duffel bag and tries her best not to look in Bucky’s direction.

She fails, of course. Bucky is slouched beneath the Roman sun, a bag at his feet and a frown carved into his face. He’s clothed in a pair of sweats that cling sinfully to the curves of legs and the strong line of his arms. Natasha is at his side, speaking lowly and purposefully into his ear. Darcy desperately wants to know what she’s saying, but she’s also not ready to take any sort of step in Bucky’s direction.

And it seems like Bucky feels the same way. Natasha leaves with a quick word to Dr. J and a half-smile to Darcy as the team boards the jet lethargically, most of the graduate students falling into plush seats and promptly falling back into hangover induced sleep. Darcy perches near Dr. J and Dr. Mark, claiming the window seat of a middle aisle. She remembers too late that Bucky would usually claim the seat beside her, listening in on the conversations between her mentors or using his time to read whatever latest book Darcy had recommended.

But not this time. The plane is absolutely silent as Bucky walks past Darcy with a carefully blank expression, finally tossing his bag onto a seat at the back of the plane near Mohammad.

It is not a huge surprise. Bucky and Mohammad had become slow friends during their time in Greenland, sharing a surprisingly similar worldview and desire to discuss it. But the tension in this plane must be screaming, because Mohammad shoots a wide-eyed glance at Darcy that clearly asks what is going on with you two?

Darcy looks away.

The flight to Athens is two hours and five minutes. Darcy spends all two hours staring at the same sentence in her field notes, trying desperately not to turn around and throw the very heavy book at Bucky Barnes very infuriating head.

There are so many things she currently needs to be worrying about – funding from the university, HYDRA, what sites they will need access to in Mycenae… Bucky Barnes is not supposed to be on this list.

Her shoulders are heavy enough.

~~~

Squaring her shoulders, Darcy steps out into the hot afternoon sun. Athens is a boiling eighty-five degrees, which is the norm for a November day. They’ve taken a bus to the shipyard, ready to catch the boat that Darcy’s old colleague promised would be there.
“You sure he’ll show up?” Dr. J squints skeptically at the rocky coastline, looking cool and untroubled in the heat. “I’m trusting your judgment about this mystery man.”

“A classical archaeologist of his caliber would be helpful.” Dr. Mark admits, wiping sweat off of his brow with a crisp handkerchief. The mentor is adamant that first impressions are everything, which means he’s in his academic clothing when he should be dressed in light linen like Dr. J and Darcy.

“He’ll be here.” Darcy promises with a conviction she doesn’t exactly feel. “We’ve got a good friendship, he was able to get me access to the Knossos site two years ago. He’s working as a curator at the Mycenae museum now.”

The team is spread around on the busy dock, soaking up the Greek air and enjoying themselves. Darcy keeps her eye on the horizon, praying that her old friend really does show up to save their asses from having to take a ferry and manage access to the Mycenae museum. She knows that it’s her fault for harboring this doubt – the last time she saw these colleagues they were in a bar in Crete, and minutes after she said goodbye to them she had been taken by Obadiah’s old henchmen.

The year following that kidnapping had been full of Tony and adjusting to this new life, Darcy had not kept up with old friends like she should have. While Jake had responded to her cryptic, late night email with excitement... who knows if he will actually come.

“Is that him?”

Darcy is pulled from her thoughts by Scout’s gesture, pointing at a quickly approaching sailboat. The prow is white and gleaming, sails flapping in the breeze as a man hangs onto the ropes...

It’s only when she is able to make out the name painted proudly across the side in huge black letters that she knows it’s him. The SS Seaduction comes gliding into port, parting the crystal waters of the Mediterranean with easy grace. The chorus of Ariana Grande’s ‘Thank U Next’ comes roaring with it. Her grin is wide and relieved. “That’s him.”

“Great taste in music!” Greg perks up, leading the team back to Darcy’s side. “What style, what class, what an entrance!”

“He’s named his boat the Seaduction?” Yael questions, brow furrowed in distaste. “He must have confidence in his... abilities.”

Darcy keeps on grinning. “He’s an opportunist.”

Greg spins on Darcy, a dirty gleam in his grey eyes. “Hah! You know that from experience, don’t you Dr. Lewis?”

Darcy shrugs, but internally she’s screaming. Greg always seems able to sniff out romantic history, and how he does it is beyond Darcy’s knowledge. It’s like a six sense.

She pulls herself together. There’s no need to spread her romantic past with the team, especially when it only consisted of a few friendly bouts of tent sharing and no strings sex.

“That’s not a no!” Greg crows victoriously. “You’re a vixen, Dr. Lewis—”

She doesn’t miss the way that Bucky, who has been studiously ignoring her for the entire trip, snaps his head up and shuts Greg up with a dark look.

“What?” Greg questions, always cheeky in the literal face of danger. “Darcy’s allowed to have
dated before you. Respect her history, dude.”

“We’re not together.” Bucky says sharply, stalking back to the bus to grab his bag. It’s the first words that Bucky has uttered all day, and Darcy can’t help but feel like she’s been punched in the gut. Awkward silence follows in his wake.

“Well shit, Dr. Lewis.” Scout finally says, twisting a piece of fiery red hair around her finger. “You didn’t tell us that you and Bucky broke up.”

Darcy is about to open her mouth to explain that no—she and Bucky can’t have broken up because they never were together in the first freaking place when Dr. J interrupts.

“Stop pestering Dr. Lewis.” She orders, spearing the graduate students with a look that has brought gang members to their knees. “The bags are in the bus, make yourselves useful and go unload our equipment.”

Darcy is beyond grateful for Dr. J’s interference. That is until Dr. J turns on her with a wicked grin. “Don’t worry, Lewis, I’ve got your back.”

“Seriously, thank you so much. I’m not sure—”

“We’ve all faced spurned lovers in the past,” Dr. J continues, a wicked smile and faraway gleam in her eyes. “I’m sure this man will be useful out of gratitude for your past tumbles alone. Although reunions aren’t always happy - there’s a good reason I can’t travel to Albania or Croatia anymore.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “Too many old lovers.”

Darcy gapes at her mentor. “How many affairs did you have in Albania, Dr. J?!”

“Don’t ask.” Dr. Mark appears at their side, face set with exhaustion. “I’m completely serious, Darcy, for all of our sake: do not ask.”

The sudden interest in matters of love and sex only make Darcy all the more determined to run to the bus and kick Bucky where it hurts. It’s not that Darcy expected either of them to immediately confront the awful conversation they had in De Luca’s garden… but this awkward, angry silence between the two of them is beginning to eat at her resolve. She’s tempted to turn around and try to get a good hit in while Bucky is clearly distracted (is the Winter Soldier ever truly distracted?), but the long-awaited arrival ends that thought.

“Darcy Evelyn Maria Lewis!”

The team is able to bring most of the supplies to the dock just as the SS SEADUCTION pulls up, a flurry of sails and ropes and a cheery voice calling over the Ariana Grande soundtrack.

This time Darcy doesn’t have to fake a smile, she’s flooded with honest fondness for her old friend. “Jake Abernathy! You came!”

“AND ME!”

Darcy jumps at the new voice, tinkling through the air. As the boat comes to a gentle stop, she catches the shadow of a curvy woman through the sails…

“Karina?” She gasps. “Holy fuck, you came too?”

“You think I’d sit this out?” The woman in question appears, sleek black bob glinting in the sunlight. She is all lush curves and tanned skin, a teasing voice full of light. “Jake said you needed
“I had to get our gang back together,” Jake explains, hopping off of his perch in the sails and landing with a light thump. “Neither of us could pass up another chance to work with the unsinkable Darcy. And your email sounded pretty frantic.”

Darcy is suddenly wrapped up in a hug, Jake’s arms squeezing almost painfully and lifting her off of her feet. She laughs and hugs him back, pulling away only to get a good look at his face.

Jake looks almost exactly the same: medium height with strong arms from digging and manning his precious sailboat, his skin bronzed from the Greek sun. The only change she can see is the way his golden hair kisses his shoulders, longer and shaggier than she remembers. His face is just as cheerful though, always sporting that infectious grin that makes troves of undergraduates willing to follow him into the most-labor intensive sites.

The romance that Darcy had with Jake the last time she was in Greece was not truly a romance, but she’s not exactly sure how to tell Bucky that. She and Jake had shared a handful of nights together, enjoying the others company. No strings, no hurt feelings, just friendship with a physical side.

“You got shorter!” Jake cheers, leaving his hands on her shoulders as he gives her an up and down glance. “I didn’t think it was possible for you to shrink.”

“Ha-ha.” Darcy deadpans, although she can’t stop smiling. Karina wraps her up in a hug of her own, spelling of oranges and spice. “God, you both look the same.”

Karina steps back abruptly. Darcy looks up at her old friend, gasping when she raises her left hand, showing off a gold and diamond band that throws off ridiculous sparkles. “You missed my engagement!”

“No way,” Darcy breaths, reaching to clasp Karina’s hand between her own and get a better look at the ring. She remembers meeting Karina’s girlfriend in Crete, a tiny Greek woman with a tinkling laugh. “The same girl? Nadia?”

“Yup,” Jake answers for her. “Wedding is in January. They’re disgustingly in love, you’d have puked at the proposal. I have pictures somewhere on the ship.”

“Jake cried,” Karina laughs. “He just doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“AND NOW THEY ALL DO.”

The situation is so ridiculous that Darcy feels lightheaded with gratitude. Not only has Jake shown up to offer his expertise and sailing ability, he had brought the best classical linguist that Darcy had ever worked with along.

Karina seems to read her mind. “I’ve already looked over the files you sent Jake last night, this is potentially groundbreaking.”

“And we have a situation that you may be able to help with,” Jake continues, smile slipping. “But we can talk about that later. Perhaps privately.”

Darcy nods. She had almost forgotten about the audience watching their reunion with growing interest.

“I want you both to meet my team.” Stepping back, Darcy draws Jake and Karina’s attention to the crowd behind her. “Everyone, this is Jacob Abernathy and Karina Perez. Jacob is a classical
archaeologist that helped me with my PhD research in Crete, while Karina is a classical linguist who was instrumental in deciphering Linear B at the Knossos site.”

“Pleased to meet you all.” Karina smiles.

“Call me Jake,” He says easily, waving at the graduate students. “Excited to see you guys work.”

“And my mentors,” Darcy continues, ignoring the way that Greg and Scout are drooling over the newest male arrival. “Dr. Juniper and Dr. Mark.”

Jake reaches out to grip Dr. J’s hand, his face lighting up. “Dr. Eleanor Juniper? It’s an honor, ma’am. I’ve followed your maritime publications on experimental boat building for a long time. The fact that you built a Norse Knarr on your own… You’ve done so much for maritime archaeology.”

Dr. J’s eyes sparkle at the praise, sizing up Jake with appreciation. “You’re a filthy flatterer, Mr. Abernathy. I like it.”

Jake’s grin widens. “Glad to hear it.”

“And Dr. Joseph Mark,” Karina steps forward. “I have read nearly everything you’ve published about the Greek dark ages, it’s an honor to meet you.”

Dr. Mark looks absolutely charmed. “I’m always pleased to collude with fellow classical linguists.”

“Let’s move this to the ship,” Dr. J announces, eyeing the pile of equipment to be loaded. “I have a feeling that we need to fill Ms. Perez and Mr. Abernathy in on the shit they’re going to step in by helping us.”

~~~*~~~

“HYDRA.” Jake says blankly, staring at Darcy like she’s making a very bad joke. “You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.” Darcy confirms, running a nervous hand through her ponytail. “Look, this is not something I want to drag either of you into. All I need is a ride to Mycenae and access to the museum, and I understand if you don’t feel comfortable doing either of those things.”

“A bit late for that,” Karina says, gesturing pointedly at the captain’s cabin that they are using as a makeshift headquarters. “And you know we wouldn’t deny you this. Not after how you saved Jake’s ass in Crete last time.”

"Darcy was able to sweet talk some arms dealers for me," Jake admits to the cabin sheepishly. "And by sweet talk, I mean she tazered the leader and we ran like hell."

"I expected nothing less," Dr. Mark says tiredly, casting a pointed look to Dr. J. "That is all your influence, Eleanor."

But Darcy doesn't have time to reminisce.

“It’s dangerous,” Darcy insists as Dr. J makes a noise of annoyance in the back of her throat. “The Avengers have been running interference between us and HYDRA, trying to fend them off, but it’s
“They get it, Lewis.” Dr. J rolls her eyes. “You’ve gone over the risks about nine times already. Let the adults make their own choice.”

“Question,” Jake raises a lazy hand, sharp eyes zeroing in with disbelief on Darcy. “How the actual fuck did you get the Avengers as a protection detail? And, like I didn’t want to be rude and bring it up earlier if I was wrong, but does this mean that dark and scruffy over there is Bucky Barnes?”

From his place in the corner, Bucky gives a wary nod. He’s been glaring at Jake with barely concealed hatred from the moment they stepped on the ship, apparently unimpressed with what he had heard from the graduate students regarding Darcy’s past fling. The tidbit about the arms dealers did not lighten his expression, either.

Darcy had decided this meeting should take place while the graduate students secure equipment — needing the key players in this adventure to fill in Jake and Karina. This meant Darcy, Dr. J and Dr. Mark, and Bucky. She’s beginning to regret involving Bucky.

“Holy shiiiiiiit,” Jake breathes, something like hero worship passing over his features. “I’ve done so many school projects on you. I saw those SHIELD files, what HYDRA did to you is super fucked up, dude—”


“But it’s Bucky Barnes!”

“Look,” Darcy presses a hand to her aching head. “You’re both already doing so much by getting us to Mycenae. Are you willing to help me get in the museum?”

Karina taps a finger to her pouty lips. “Jake and I would both lose our jobs and possibly my fellowship if it came out that I used my employee status to get you in after hours…”

Darcy deflates. “I completely understand. I’ll figure something else out.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Karina cuts her off. “But I think we can help each other out. The museum currently has a pretty major issue that’s being kept hushed up, and if you’re as experienced with crazy shit as you say...”

“Explain.” Dr. J demands, on the scent.

“There was an attempted break in just a week ago,” Jake answers. “Super advanced technology was used- I’m talking insane stuff to get past the museum firewalls. They managed to knock out all of our cameras, deactivate the alarms, and nearly steal an artifact.”

“No,” Darcy breathes. “What artifact?”

“It was pretty common, the museum has a huge amount of Mycenaean gold that would be tempting for any thief, but this artifact was smaller. That’s why it’s surprising the object was even targeted. A golden cup that was part of a larger display, the smallest object there.”

“But the object is safe?” Darcy demands, heart racing at the mention of gold. It would make sense that some of the famous Mycenaean gold could be mistyped Asgardian. “What stopped the thief from getting it?”

“An old night guard,” Jake says lowly, grief lining his face. “Mr. Diakos. He was seventy years
old, had worked for the museum for decades. We’ve been transitioning to electrical surveillance, he kept his job more as a favor than anything.”

“Was?” Darcy swallows back the bile raising in her throat.

“He must have run into the thief.” Karina confirms. “He managed to pull a manual alarm and seal off all the glass cases, which saved the artifacts. Authorities came within three minutes and found him with a bullet in his throat. Choked on his own blood.”

Darcy slides back into her seat, struggling with what complete picture these pieces may show her.

“Mr. Diakos was a great man,” Karina says softly. “He has nine grandchildren. I’ve been to visit a few times.”

The reality is sobering. Darcy thinks of this old man who died at the hands of someone trying to get what she needs. If she had gotten to the museum sooner…

Bucky is suddenly at Darcy’s side, all sharp edges and shadows.

“It could be HYDRA,” Bucky says lowly. He’s leaning close to her side, so close that Darcy can feel his breath brush against her ear, cloves and spice. “It’s not their style to leave anyone alive. But it’s also not their style to be stopped before completing the mission.”

“We’ll need some sort of proof to confirm that it was HYDRA,” Dr. J points out. “Did they leave anything behind? No prints, no evidence?”

Karina shifts in her seat, suddenly nervous. “Well, no…”

“No?” Dr. J prompts with a edge to her tone. She’s caught the scent of a lie. “You don’t sound sure.”

“The lead curator managed to arrive right before the police did,” Jake elaborates carefully, glancing sideways at Karina. “Karina and I have both worked with the curator, Dr. Antolini, for a year now, and we’ve been trying to document some of the shit he’s pulled.”

“Such as?”

Karina begins ticking off the list on her fingers. “Stealing artifacts from the museum, sexual harassment in the workplace, bribery of government officials, and embezzlement of museum funds.”

Silence falls in the cabin, until Dr. J snorts. “Oh, is that all?”

“There is probably more that we haven’t caught,” Jake admits with a cheeky smile. “But this is all we have hard evidence on.”

“You must have turned him in already.” Darcy demands, full of indignation. She's survived enough assholes to wish her friends didn't have to deal with them. “If you have actual, tangible proof that he’s stealing from the museum…”

“We’ve tried,” Karina sighs. “But, Darce, this is why Jake called me when you emailed last night. Your story matches up with ours - there’s something wrong with the system here. I’ve submitted proof of Dr. Antolini’s crimes many times to various board members and even government officials, and they’ve ignored me.”
“Threatened Karina’s job last time,” Jake growls. “They actually told her to stop pointing fingers at her ‘betters’.”

“That’s not surprising,” Bucky’s flinty gaze is frozen on Jake, but he inclines his head to Karina. “This has HYDRA written all over it. They take over branches, infect and bribe and intimidate their way in.”

The fact that he knows from personal experience is left unsaid, but everyone in the tiny cabin knows the history of the Winter Soldier.

“So, let’s say that your curator is a HYDRA mole,” Darcy manages to sputter, trying desperately to remain logical. “Why would he not have gone for the artifact himself? Why make a thief do it?”

“We’ve asked ourselves the same thing,” Jake says quietly. “Dr. Antolini may be laying low after Karina’s inquiry of him, or he may have wanted to be able to blame an outside source if the attempted failed, like it did.”

“And what confirmed his guilt in our eyes,” Karina begins, heat entering her usually even tone. “Is it that it was announced the artifact would be moved to his private vault for safekeeping in case of another attempt.”

The hope Darcy had been fostering crashes in her chest. “He’s got it. The cup is gone.”

Karina shifts in her seat, studying Darcy and her mentors with suddenly wide eyes. “Not exactly.”

The edge of Jake’s lips turns up. “Show them, Rina. We can trust Darcy.”

“I know,” Karina sighs, suddenly seeming almost close to tears. “I just—you have to know, Darcy, that I never would have done this in a million years if not for that asshole. Honestly, I don’t know what came over me, I just saw it and—”

The entire cabin is focused on Karina. Her head is bowed, sleek black waves of hair framing a penitent face.

“…and what?” Darcy prompts, feeling desperate. “Karina?”

Karina does not answer. Instead she reaches to the satchel at her feet, setting it gingerly on the table between them. With slow movements she carefully reaches in, pulling out a small case.

Darcy’s breath catches. A silvery case, the type that preserves artifacts as they travel between museums and research facilities, lies in front of her.

Flicking the correct numbers into the combination lock, Karina opens the case…

The lid falls back, revealing a golden cup.

It’s small, only a little larger than Darcy’s hand. The indentations show that this metal had been beaten and flattened into the shape of a goblet, and immediately Darcy knows that this material is too bright to be earthly gold.

Just like the Foula bracelet. Just like the dagger that lies safe in the purse at Darcy’s side.

Darcy’s palm burns as she stares at the artifact. She doesn’t dare open her hand to show the branded symbol to her audience, but she knows from Dr. J’s sharp intake of breath that her mentor has noticed the same thing.
The exact spiral that Freyja’s dagger burned into the flesh of Darcy’s palm decorates every inch of this ancient cup. There is not an inch of gold has has not been stamped with an ancient triskelion.

“This is Asgardian gold,” Darcy says hoarsely. “Holy shit. This is the object we came for. Karina, I could kiss you.”

Karina’s head snaps up, staring at Darcy in confusion. Whatever response she had expected, clearly Darcy’s gratitude was not it.

“Please do,” Jake murmurs. “I would count myself lucky to witness that kiss.”

Bucky fixes Jake with a look that could make a HYDRA assassin weep. But Karina ignores them both.

“Asgardian gold?” She repeats. “Is this something about the research you were doing last time, for your PhD?”

Darcy nods, unwilling to tear her eyes from the cup before them. “I was researching ancient trade routes influenced by Asgard. But the discovery of this material has changed my path dramatically.”

Honesty is the best policy, she decides, pulling back the sleeve of her blouse to reveal the Foula bracelet. It is inhumanly bright even in the dark cabin. Jake and Karina both lean forward, gaping at the artifact molded to Darcy’s wrist.

“Asgardian gold,” Darcy explains. “It’s a compound not native to Earth, but Asgard. The entire reason my team has come to Greece is because we received a tip that an artifact of this material was in the Mycenae Archaeological Museum.”

“But…” Jake blinks at the gold. “How do you and HYDRA know about this? What the hell is going on, Darcy?”

Instead of answering, Darcy flexes her right arm, allowing the Foula bracelet to glow and expand into a bracer, the warm weight of the whip falling into her palm.

The reactions are expected.

“WHAT THE FUCK!”

Jake rubs at his eyes, his mouth falling open in shock while a spew of curse words fall from his lips. Karina screams and scrambles backwards, crossing herself.

“These objects are of Asgardian origin,” Darcy tries to soothe their fears with logic. “C’mon, you’ve heard about Thor’s hammer!”

“We’ve all seen Thor on TV.” Karina manages. "But seeing magic objects in person..."


“Close to the same thing,” Dr. J jumps in to explain, forcing both archaeologists to meet her flinty gaze. “These objects seem to have powers. That’s why HYDRA wants them so badly, and why you,” She points at a slightly terrified Karina. “Stealing this cup from your curator is the best thing you could have possibly done.”

“I…” Karina shakes her head. “I just—the cup has powers?!”

“We don’t know yet,” Darcy flexes her fingers, allowing the Foula bracelet to melt back into
bracelet form. “This is the only artifact that has displayed it so far.”

“How many do you have?” Jake questions.

“This will be the third,” Dr. Mark answers. “Dr. Lewis was able to recover another from a black-market dealer last night.”

Jake’s apprehension begins to melt into appreciation. “You move fast, Darce.”

“We do,” Dr. J confirms. “Which is why we need to figure out the next step now. We have the artifact, and after Mohammad runs some tests to confirm that it is Asgardian gold, we can begin researching the next site.”

“No breaking into the museum?” Bucky questions, glower firmly in place. “Even now that we know this Dr. Antolini chump is HYDRA?”

Dr. J spares Bucky a wolfish grin. “Don’t worry, Barnes. I’m keeping a list. Once we secure the artifacts, I’ll be paying Mr. De Luca and Dr. Antolini a little visit.”

“Agreed,” Dr. Mark lays a hand on Dr. J’s shoulder. “I’ll be going with her. But what’s important now is that we can move on—although I personally have no idea where to begin looking.”

Darcy exchanges a look with Dr. J. They both knows that this could be the third object—which means there’s only one more to hunt down. Then she needs to figure out what the fuck Freyja wants her to do in Hedeby.

“Wait,” Jake says suddenly. He sits up from his slouched position, excitement lighting his eyes. “I’ve seen gold like this before. The cup and your bracelet, Darce, they shine a little too bright.”

“They do,” Darcy is pleased he noticed. She and Mohammad have spent hours categorizing ways to identify Asgardian gold on sight. “That’s what most people notice about Asgardian gold.”

“Have you heard of Nestor’s Cup?”

The name pulls at Darcy’s memory, she thinks of…

“One of Heinrich Schliemann’s finds,” Dr. J’s voice is full of distaste. “The jackass who excavated Hissarlik with dynamite. Named all of his artifacts after heroes from the Iliad, trying to fetch a higher price and court fame.”

“He thought he had found Troy,” Karina confirms with a frown. She turns to Jake. “We have Nestor’s Cup at the Mycenae museum. What about it?”

“It’s not about that particular find, exactly.” Jake admits. “But when I was working on my PhD I did a lot of research on Schliemann, my advisor pushed me to read all of his journals and the notes he had taken at Hissarlik. He was an egomaniac, no doubt about that, but I remember a passage he wrote about an artifact that shone brighter than true gold.”

Darcy’s breath catches. “You think…”

Jake shrugs, but Darcy catches his excitement. Jake has always loved being in on an adventure, which is half the reason he and Darcy had gotten along so well in Crete. “I chalked it up to Schliemann convincing himself he had found something priceless. But much of the layer he is describing was lost after the whole ‘let’s-excavate-with-explosives’ thing.”
“Asgardian gold is bulletproof,” Dr. J realizes. “We learned that after Darcy deflected a bullet from her bracer. Explosives wouldn’t have been able to destroy whatever objects Schliemann had found, not if they were Asgardian.”

“Wait,” Dr. Mark raises a dark hand. “Let’s catch our breath for a moment, perhaps. Are we really going to rush to Turkey based on Jake’s memory of a small passage in a Heinrich Schliemann journal?” He looks to Darcy. “I mean no offense against Mr. Abernathy, but we all know that Schliemann was not a trustworthy fellow.”

“He was a gold digger,” Jake agrees. “But these were private journals of his that I studied. Why lie in something he wrote only for himself?”

“Jake has a point,” Dr. J admits. “This is the only lead we have, and if HYDRA somehow knew that the next object would be in Mycenae, this means they have access to the same information we do. We need to act fast.”

“The university will stand behind you,” Dr. Mark says to Darcy, warning in his eyes. “I can get us permission to the Hissarlik site within a day. But as soon as I submit the paperwork, every member of the anthropology board will know where we are. It will be like sending up a flare.”

Dr. Mark is choosing his words carefully, aware that Karina and Jake are new to the treasure hunt, but Darcy understands his meaning. Dr. White will know their next move.

God, Darcy needs a break. Her head is spinning with this new information, weighing the pros and cons of jumping to another country, grappling with the appearance of a third artifact, worrying about dragging Jake and Karina into a dangerous chase…

**Hissarlik.** Darcy tastes the name in her mind, shutting her eyes against the room of people. Deep down she can feel what her heart and mind seem to agree on. The answer is clear.

Like Dr. J had said, instinct hasn’t led her wrong yet.

“Jake, turn the boat around.” Darcy announces to the cabin. She opens her eyes, not caring that everyone is waiting on the edge of their seats for her instructions. “The Stark jet is still at the Athens’ airport. We can be in Alexandroupolis within an hour and a half.”

The room explodes into motion. Dr. Mark climbs out to share the new with the graduate students and begin the transfer of equipment. Dr. J whips out a sleek Starkphone, pontificating instructions to the standby pilot. Karina and Jake wait at her side, full of questions.

“Once you drop us off,” Darcy instructs, conviction bleeding into her words. She doesn't have time to explain it all. “Go back to Mycenae.”

“But—”

“Karina,” Darcy says softly. “If you abandon your job, Dr. Antolini will pin the missing artifact on you. You have to stay.” She turns her gaze to Jake. “Same for you, Abernathy.”

He isn’t happy with her decision. Jake’s usually sunny face is dark, eyes trained on her face. “I don’t feel right leaving you to the bastards who killed Mr. Diakos. You had my back in Crete, Darce, let me have yours now.”

The fact that he cares is touching, but Darcy is done dragging friends into this fight.

"Not your fight," Darcy says softly. "But I'll come back to see you."
She hugs Karina, then presses a kiss to Jake’s cheek. He clings to her for a moment, obviously fighting the desire to join her team.

“Be safe,” He breathes, pulling Darcy in closer. For a moment, all she can think about is the days they shared in Crete—the ease of passing a bottle of whiskey around a fire, the laughter, the touches that had pushed the boundaries of friendship but never broken them.

It was an easier time. Not the uncertainty and pain she has now.

“I will,” Darcy promises, although it tastes like sand in her mouth. She turns to Karina. “I’ll bring back the cup. It belongs in the Mycenae museum.”

“Just be safe,” Karina corrects. “I don’t care about the cup.”

“You don’t care about the artifact?”


Darcy grins, summoning as much confidence as possible. “Noted.”

Darcy watches as the Stark jet is loaded. Her team has been surprisingly accepting of the sudden change in plans, aware that time is of the essence. The flight to Alexandroupolis will be a little more than an hour, followed by a ferry to Eceabat, Turkey… and finally a drive to Hissarlik, the fabled ancient city of Troy.

The task ahead seems monumental. Not for the first time, Darcy finds herself shutting her eyes against the Greek sun and attempting to gather her thoughts.

She opens them to find Bucky before her. Only last night he was clean and bright in a tuxedo, hair slicked back and a smile ready. Now he stands in front of her with blazing eyes and a hint of shadow at his jaw, glossy waves of dark hair kissing his neck.

He’s not smiling.

(He’s so fucking angry at him—so hurt at his careless words—)

Bucky’s jaw is clenched as he stares down at her, barely allowing the next words to escape his lips.

“We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading - I’m updating again very soon :)

Come say hi! reginapacisdux.tumblr.com
Little Girl, Who Do You Think You Are?

Chapter Summary

Hi babes. Welcome back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We need to talk.

Darcy has heard those words before. Her ninth-grade boyfriend, Ivan Matherson, had come up to her during lunch with that exact phrase right before dumping her in front of the table of football boys. At twenty-two Darcy had heard those words again from a dig-mate on her third ever excavation in Tulum, a handsome blonde senior who had gently explained their relationship would die with the dig.

Neither of those experiences had wounded Darcy beyond repair, but they had stung. Every human being in the world knows what those words mean. Her life has always been hinged on the need to travel, to research on all corners of the globe... and that is not something that seems to encourage long lasting romances.

Hearing it coming out of Bucky’s mouth… hurts.

Darcy stares at Bucky for a long moment. She refuses to bow her head or look away, fixating on his icy gaze unflinchingly while straightening her spine. If he is going to break her heart, he better have the backbone to look her in the face while doing it.

“What do we need to talk about?”

The words are challenging, flinted with a cutting edge as they tumble from Darcy’s mouth. Like the obsidian arrowheads Dr. J shows in her classes, still deadly sharp after thousands of years in the earth. But instead of the heartache she had anticipated coming with the implications of this conversation, all Darcy feels is a cold, cool anger.

“You know exactly what we need to settle.”

Bucky matches her word for word, blazing with his own conviction. It is a sudden battle of ice and fire. He steps forward, close enough that their words are now private.

“You really trust that man?”

Darcy blinks caught off guard by the question. She had expected something about De Luca, or the fight they had had the night before, not…

“What, Jake?”

Bucky’s jaw works as he takes a moment to suck in a deep breath. His eyes track Darcy’s movements helplessly, as if he can’t stop himself. They rest for a long moment on the bruises still darkening at her throat, left over from De Luca the night before.
Something in his gaze seems to harden. As she watches him, Darcy feels an icy current travel up her spine. This is far from the Bucky that can laugh with the graduate students, blue eyes crinkled with good nature and posture open. Anger turns him sharp, as if he’s pulled into startling focus.

“Yeah,” He manages finally, fury barely contained. “Him. Has anyone run a background check on that punk? You think just because you loved him once he’s still a good man?”

There is a lot to unpack in that statement. Loved? Good man? Darcy huffs, staring up at Bucky with disbelief and anger.

“First of all, it’s not your right to question my history with Jake. It should be enough that I trust him. And secondly, you’re making a pretty big assumption with that love accusation, did you love every girl you spent the night with back in 1943? I’ve read the biographies on you—”

It’s impossible for Darcy to stop. She’s suddenly blazing with rage, full of the need to show Bucky exactly why it’s so pigheaded for him to act wounded and territorial just because another man has shown up to help.

Of course, this is when the universe decides to step in.

“Barnes! Lewis!”

Dr. J strides across the marina, her silver hair glinting coolly in the sunlight. Bucky and Darcy both stop to watch the older woman approach, something foreboding written in in the tight lines of her face.

Darcy can tell immediately that something has happened. Her mentor is straight backed and proud as always, crisp white shirt dancing in the breeze, but her tanned hand is protectively hovering around the pistol at her waist. The movement makes Bucky tense, reading the air for danger.

As she approaches, Dr. J takes a moment to soak in the tension of the moment, reading the obvious anger between her protegee and the assassin. Those sharp hazel eyes come up to spear both Bucky and Darcy in their merciless grasp.

(There is a reason Dr. J is one of the most feared professors among undergraduates. Legends have been passed down about her temper: that she once made a student eat the chalk that he had used to draw a penis on her board during a lecture break, and that she once had a nineteen year old anthropology student take her to the hospital with her severed finger in a baggie after a flint-knapping experiment gone wrong... and then berated her for puking on the way.)

(Darcy knows that the chalk thing is true. Dr. J refuses to comment on the finger story, but she does have enough finger scarring that Darcy believes it could be true.)

“Alright,” Her tone is icy, unrelenting. “I get that you two need to have your sexual showdown, but now’s not the time. Lewis, you need to go see Joseph. The department has made contact.”

“The department?” Darcy sputters confused by the resignation in her mentor’s voice. She’s still fighting the urge to take a swing at Bucky. “Why is that an issue? We’ve been waiting for them to approve the digging permit for Hissarlik.”

“It’s not about that.” Dr. J shakes her head, repeating her instructions. “Talk to Joseph.”

“But why?”

“Lewis.” Dr. J wheels on her, a frightening flash of silver and steely reserve. “This is not the
department calling in to say hi. Dr. White has sent over papers, and he’s left a message for you.”

Oh shit.

Thoroughly chastened, Darcy doesn’t wait to hear more. She’s turning on her heel, heart in her throat, trying desperately to think of what Dr. White, someone she deep down suspects may be working for HYDRA, has to say to her.

She’s so entirely caught up in her thoughts as she flees that she doesn’t see Dr. J lead Bucky to the side, the wrath of hell (usually reserved for undergraduates with phallic fixations) upon her face.

~~~*~~~

Bucky is no stranger to dressing downs. He had been a bit of a boot camp jokester during the war before the reality of combat hit, and because of that was often the focus of ire from his commanding officers in those beginning months. And HYDRA’s discipline hadn’t exactly been a walk in the park.

But the expression on Dr. Eleanor Juniper’s face has him remembering what it was like to be a new recruit in store for a lickin’ as he follows her to the far, shaded side of the plane.

She turns on him immediately. Unlike Darcy, Dr. Eleanor Juniper is a tall woman, thin and pointed like a notched arrow, full of vibrating tension. Still small compared to Bucky's bulk, but something in the lithe lines of her body reminds him of Natasha.

“Just what are you playing at, kid?”

Bucky stiffens. “Huh?”

If looks could kill, Bucky would be dead with a bullet between his eyes. “You heard me.”

Despite the foot height difference between them, Dr. J squares her shoulders and manages to make Bucky feel small. It’s an uncomfortable sensation he has not had in a long, long time. He shifts his weight, disguising his unease as he waits to hear exactly what he’s done to piss her off.

(Deep down, he knows.)

With narrowed, flinty eyes, Dr. J advances on the Winter Solider. “Have you taken a good, hard look at Lewis lately?”

The question is an easy one to answer. Yes. Bucky can’t seem to keep his eyes off Darcy Lewis, even when he knows that he has no business being so interested in her movements and reactions. He can’t help tracing the sharp line of her shoulders as she digs; the flash of humor in her eyes as she listens to the graduate students joke; the way the sunlight makes her dark hair glow red…

The darkening bruises left by De Luca’s hand around her throat.

That small thought brings back his fury. The anger that has been stagnating, swirling and fuming in his heart since he found Darcy in the garden last night—so beautiful, with her tangled dark hair and red lips… so terrified, with her wide grey eyes and hand clutched to bruises left by a man unworthy of even kissing her shoes. She had never looked so lost before, wide red eyes and trembling hands.
That girl in the garden was so different from the angel he encountered in an alley in Bucharest, flicking her whip and laughing as she brought down gang members. Different even from the woman who had collapsed into bloodstained grass outside of a flipped car, injured by a HYDRA assassin but still sharp, fierce...

De Luca had taken something different from her, crushed that light that Bucky was so used to seeing in her eyes. And all the Winter Soldier wanted to do was kill him for it.

Bucky should have saved her. He should have protected her, he should have turned that man into something that never would touch Darcy Lewis again.

But she hadn’t let him.

“Yes,” Bucky says roughly, crossing his arms to keep himself from reaching for a weapon. “I’ve seen her injuries.”

Dr. J stares at him for a moment, then barks a laugh. “What? The marks on her neck? This is a woman who cracked herself in the face with a bullwhip and still managed to play tongue twister with you—you think a couple of bruises matter to her?”

The insinuation is crude, but the mention of the kiss in Bucharest brings Bucky to a mental stop.

“I’ve known Lewis since she was twenty-one,” Dr. J continues, hands on her hips. “And you can trust me when I say that she’s strong enough to take on physical injury. I was hoping you had looked a little deeper than that.”

Bucky can’t avoid Dr. Juniper’s blazing gaze, stripping away his layers. Of course he’s looked deeper than that—he remembers the horror on Darcy’s face when she had woken up with lacerations on her feet, hysterical over a dream that had carried over to real life. The rare moment of fear and vulnerability that had echoed from her heart to his.

It was that moment under the Nordic stars that Bucky had truly decided to tie his fate to hers, to protect her from whatever forces - magical or not - that plagued her life.

It’s with that image of Darcy in mind- wide eyed and desperately trying to conceal her pain- that he replies.

“I know she’s dealing with more.”

“More what?”

“More than just physical injury.” Bucky runs a rough hand through his hair, hating that Dr. Juniper has managed to pin him in a conversation he knows isn’t going his way. He’s not sure she will believe the truth of Darcy’s night issues, and he is unsure if Darcy trusted anyone but him with the information that would make most think she is crazy. “I know that she’s dealing with some sort of Asgardian influence. The Foula bracelet, her dreams…”

To his surprise, Dr. J nods. “Darcy told me about the magic dreams a few nights ago. It has escalated from that, Barnes.”

This has his full attention. “What the hell do you mean?”

Bucky is suddenly desperate to know what he’s missing, absolutely desperate to have all the facts so he can make a plan to keep Darcy Lewis safe. He turns on Dr. J quickly, towering over her, but she just regards him with an unimpressed smile.
"You know that it was my idea for Darcy to act as bait for De Luca," She says nonchalantly, bringing up the elephant in the room with ease. "I was the one who pulled Natasha Romanov into the plan, and I was the one who kept you and Tony Stark out of it."

Bucky doesn’t blink. He had expected that Dr. Juniper and Natasha had a hand in that batshit plan, and it only made him angrier to think of how stupid they all were for pushing Darcy to the front lines without thinking of her safety.

"I figured." Bucky grits out. "Are you wanting in on my shit list? Coz I’m happy to tack your name to the front."

Dr. J throws her head back and laughs, a deep, full sound that fills the summer air.

"Oh, Barnes." She reaches forward to pat his bicep with a calloused hand. "You may be pretty skilled for a Soviet science experiment, but you’re full of shit if you think that I’ll be an easy target. You may have strength and speed, but trust me when I say that I am fairly masterful at not being found if I don't want to be."

Sputtering, Bucky stares down at the apparently suicidal archaeologist before him. Dr. Juniper holds his gaze, her face is a mask of teasing light… but there is pure steel underneath.

(He is baffled by the certainty in her tone. Bucky has worked hard to be as normal a member of the excavation as possible, to use his strength only when digging and working. He slouches around the site, making himself as minimally intimidating as possible to the graduate students.)

(Despite these attempts, Eleanor Juniper must know that she could not win a fight with the Winter Soldier. She would not last longer than a moment. Even she has no stomach for the cruelty he is capable of, the monster he fights within himself daily.)

(He wouldn't need a weapon to tear her apart.)

"You think you can hold your own against a killing machine?"

"No wonder you’re such an asshole," Dr. Juniper laughs in his face. "What kind of person refers to themselves as a killing machine?"

But her humor is lost on Bucky. For a moment all he can see is the red on his hands, the lives ended because of his strength. His hatred turns inward. "You don’t know what I’ve done."

"And you don’t know what I’ve done." She counters with a raised brow. "You’re not the only one who has ever killed, Barnes. I have, Darcy has… hell, even Joseph, who cries at fuckin’ Disney movies, has killed before. We had to."

It’s a kind sentiment, and Bucky is grateful for the attempt at making his sins seem human, but his actions aren’t excusable. He has known that for a long time. He’s the one who has to live with that. Darcy killed the mercenaries who held her hostage. The Winter Soldier killed innocents.

"Look, frankly I don’t have the patience or willpower to have a feel-good conversation about mortality with you right now." She advances, refusing to apologize for the space she takes up. "What I want to know is why you’re determined to be an absolute fuckhead to Lewis."

Bucky isn’t yet willing to admit just why he picked a fight with Darcy in De Luca’s garden, so he stares at Dr. Juniper and says nothing at all.

"I know you were born in the twenties and have a misguided sense of women’s empowerment,"
She continues mercilessly. “But if what I know is correct and Lewis really is funneling magical forces from Asgard, you have to put that shit away and be ready to help her.”

“Ready to help?” Bucky demands, suddenly indignant. “What else have I been doing, Dr. Juniper? Why the hell am I here right now?” He takes a step closer, fighting the fury building within. “I would do anything to keep Darcy safe, but you and her are the ones who have decided to cut me out of major decisions.”

“Last night was no place for jealousy.” Dr. J says sharply. “Natasha knew how you would react if we let you in on the plan. You would have hounded De Luca until he stayed away, or thundered into the delicate situation in the vault yourself because of the feelings you have for Lewis. Like it or not, Darcy was the only one capable of getting into De Luca’s vault without causing bloodshed.”

The words he had thrown at Darcy last night come back with startling clarity. You think Dr. Juniper couldn’t have found a way into the vault? That Natasha would have failed? There are people far more capable and talented than you who could have been in and out, no injuries. No risk.

He had known as soon as they had tumbled from his lips that it was untrue. Darcy Lewis is a force of nature, an angel from his dreams, and she’s capable of so much that it scares the hell out of him.

Those words were the only weapon Bucky had in the moment. It was his own bitterness that caused him to throw them at her, certain it would be the one thing to hurt.

“Fine, I shouldn’t have been so fuckin’ angry.” The admission comes like a hiss between his teeth, painful and bitter. “But I can’t do this. I can’t watch her walk into dangerous situation after dangerous situation and wonder if she’s lying to me.”

Dr. J is unimpressed at his heartfelt statement. “So?”

“So, what.”

“Give her a reason to be honest with you.”

“You think it’s that easy?”

“I think that you and your sullen mood are adding unnecessary weight to her shoulders right now,” Dr. Juniper says bluntly. “She’s leading an expedition and fighting off a terrorist organization all at once, and every extra issue we have just adds to that. Darcy is always going to absorb the causalities as much as she possibly can, she is always going to put her life on the line before she risks anyone else’s. You can’t change her, Barnes, so stop trying.”

Bucky knows this. He’s watched Darcy’s protective gaze over the graduate students, witnessed more than once her dedication to Jane’s life, to her colleagues. He’s seen her as a bloody mess on the ground, held up only by her father’s arms.

“What do you want me to do, then?” Bucky demands. “Sit down and let her run off to face HYDRA on her own?”

Dr. J turns clear hazel eyes on him, looking as if the answer is the simplest thing in the world.

“I know there are things that Lewis isn’t telling me right now. I’m trusting that she will come to me when she needs that help. In this moment, what I do know is that last night she walked out of De Luca’s vault with an Asgardian dagger and a bloody brand burned onto her right palm.”
Bucky startles at this information, turning to the archaeologist with wide eyes.

“I don’t know what the brand means,” She admits with a troubled shrug. “Trust me when I say that I’m researching as much as possible. But I do know that Darcy is in a lot deeper than any of us can really understand. Something has claimed her, Barnes. Written itself into her very flesh.”

Dr. Juniper turns on Bucky with a fresh wave of finality, acid punctuating each word she throws in his face. “So, get your sexy head out of your ass and realize that Lewis is a strong, independent, complicated woman that you’re lucky to have even the chance to be with. Both of you have fucked up – make amends and hear each other out. Because I have a feeling this fight is going to get a lot dirtier before it’s over, and if Darcy really is claimed by an ancient goddess… we have to be ready to pull her out of that fire before it destroys her.”

~~~*~~~

The flight to Alexandrouplis is only one hour, but it’s enough time for Darcy to feel like she’s drowning in anxiety.

The graduate students had boarded with excitement, seeming enchanted by the twists and turns of their adventure. From Greece to Turkey, the exciting life of an archaeologist…

Darcy can’t help but peer up when Bucky entered the plane, followed closely by Dr. J. He dips his head as he passes her, blue eyes darting to her face with—something soft? Apology? Worry?

She shakes off the moment as he claims a seat near Mohammad. He had been ready to scream at her before Dr. J had stopped them, and Darcy isn’t naïve enough to think that he’s had a sudden change of heart. Part of her was grateful for Dr. J’s interruption before she and Bucky could truly fight and say all of the hurtful words boiling up in them both. They need to talk, but not on the middle of a dusty, blazing tarmac.

Dr. Mark claimed her attention as soon as she had boarded the Stark Jet, pulling her down to read the latest missive from the anthropology department. The digging permit had been pushed through Turkish government, courtesy of the anthropology board, and accepted, signed with a flourish by none other than Dr. Maximus White.

At the bottom of the scanned file, in an unmistakable fluid cursive, was his personal message.

*Fortune favors the bold, Darcy Lewis. You and I are cut from the same cloth.*

The message brings an immediate chill to Darcy’s heart. To anyone else it may look like an encouraging farewell from a trusted mentor.

But Darcy knows it to be a warning.

“We’ve sent up the metaphorical flare,” Dr. Mark says lowly at her side, scanning the paperwork once more. “If Dr. White truly is involved with unsavory characters, they know where we are headed.”

“What else can we do?” Darcy questions, not bothering to hide her frustration. “This is the only lead we have, and there’s no way to hide at a site this popular.”
“All that we can do is be careful and alert.” Dr. Mark confirms. “Everyone must keep a weapon close, and Eleanor can establish shifts around our worksite.”

“And the note?”

Dr. Mark’s lips thin. “He’s trying to get under your skin. A man like Maximus White is ultimately a coward, he will do anything and everything to make you doubt yourself before he strikes.”

“So I should ignore it?”

“Ignore it.”

Darcy nods, pushing the papers with Dr. White’s writing away, but his writing still rolls around in her mind. “I’ve sent our digging coordinates to the Avengers and a message to Steve. He knows that this is our riskiest site yet.”

“Good.” Her mentor reaches under his seat, pulling out a weathered book. “Now, Dr. Lewis, I’ve realized something vital about our desire to dig at Troy…”

~~~*~~~

The sight of the sea has always calmed Darcy down.

The ferry ride is not long, a fifteen-minute path, but as soon as the boat takes off Darcy seizes the opportunity to sneak away from Dr. Mark and his research to climb the top deck. He has given her a lot to think about - a possible change of site, a glimpse into possible artifacts.

The graduate students are laughing on the deck below, watching as Dr. J and Dr. Mark bicker about the fine details maritime digs they attended long ago.

There is nobody on the top deck, just Darcy and the crisp sea air. Before her is a horizon full of glass blue waves, distant cities and villages glowing in the falling light.

Finally alone, she sucks in a shuddering breath. Responsibility is a weight that has etched itself into Darcy’s bones over the past year, strengthening her shoulders and keeping her steps steady. She has learned to stand tall despite the extra burden, the duty she now has to keep her friends safe.

But questions come from all sides, all day: Where should we set up camp? What should we do about dwindling supplies? Are you sure that HYDRA really wants the cup? Do you think we will be ready? What do we do, should the worst occur?

Darcy, Darcy, Darcy…

It’s her job to answer these questions. After all, it is her research at stake, her team that has bravely decided to stand at her side even in the face of HYDRA.

But Karina’s story is unsettling. A sixty-seven year old man, Mr. Diakos, has died and left behind a large family because someone—HYDRA? —wanted the Asgardian gold cup that Darcy now possesses.

A cup traded for an innocent man’s life.
Darcy did not pull the trigger on that innocent man. She knows that she would have done everything possible in that situation to secure Mr. Diakos’ life over the artifact, over even her own. But her hands still feel heavy with his blood, dark and sticky. How did HYDRA know that Darcy’s sights were set on Mycenae? Could it be that they have their own source of information, steps behind her own team?

They have three of the four objects. Asgardian gold beaten into a jeweled bracelet around Darcy’s wrist, molded into a dagger tucked into her hip, and now a goblet full of triskelions safely hidden in a silver case.

Her palm burns as her thoughts turn to Freyja, the triskelion burned into her palm aching slightly. Is this a coincidence, the symbol burned into her palm that matches the goblet perfectly? Who can she tell about a Norse goddess in need of help? Who does she confide in? Dr. J is the most likely to keep her secrets and help her work through this situation, but admitting the mystical meeting…

Too many questions, not enough answers.

“Darcy.”

His voice is steady, even in the wind. Low and rumbling and filling Darcy’s chest with butterflies, despite how complicated her anger towards him is.

She turns. Bucky stands alone on deck, dark hair brushing his chin while his eyes fix on her. All dark and shadow, black jeans and an inky long sleeve, bleeding black against the fading sunset. His hands are tucked into his pockets and there is something like shame on his face.

“Are you here to yell at me?” Darcy asks, unable to hide the raw ache in her heart. “If so, rain check. I’d rather us have this conversation at Hissarlik, once we’ve both gotten some sleep.”

“No, Darce, I—” Bucky makes a move towards her, stopping himself just before he begins to reach for her. “I know that I was an asshole.”

Shock courses through Darcy. An hour ago he wanted to fight, and now he’s staring at her with soft blue eyes?

An apology is long overdue. Darcy has to decide what she’s willing to accept.

“I was so fuckin’ scared, Darcy.” Bucky takes her silence as permission to continue, speaking lowly, his gaze never moving from hers. “The fact that you left me out of the planning, that I had no idea where you were going or why you were on De Luca's arm... I’ve got no explanation. All I could think about was a thousand ways he could hurt you, and how close he was holdin’ you.”

A shiver travels up her spine. The way Bucky is looking at her, as if with his heart in his hands, and the caress of his words seems to unravel her anger. How close he was holdin’ you.

“Why didn’t you trust that I had a plan?” Darcy counters, pushing away those feelings. “Do you really have such little faith in me?”

“Trust runs two ways, sweetheart.”

His tone is gentle, but the message is clear. They had both wronged the other.

“I should have told you about my plan for De Luca,” Darcy finally admits. “I’m not... used to sharing information outside of my mentors. Especially to you.”
He ponders this for a moment, face pale and still. “Why not me?”

“You’re…” Darcy searches for the words for a moment, trying to stack them together in her mind. How does she put her relationship with Bucky into words? “I knew you would want to protect me, and I knew that De Luca would have seen through both of us in a minute. I had to work alone to buy his trust.”

Bucky's frown doesn't abate. "I still could have helped."

"Yeah," Darcy admits. "You could have."

Bucky says nothing, so Darcy continues. A year of frustration spills out of her in a terrifying rush, as she is suddenly gripped with the desperate need for him to understand exactly why she operates like this.

“I try not to let other people worry about me. Avoiding lying is usually only possibly by keeping my mouth shut about the risks. My mother is safe in Connecticut and it has to stay that way.” Darcy feels the vow in her words, the aching desperation for one person in her life to be away from peril. “And Tony… he’s a superhero with his own danger. As much as I want to, I can’t fight his battles all for him, and he can’t fight mine.”

“Does he know that?” Bucky asks with a hint of snark. “Sure comes blazing in with demands for updates every few hours.”

Darcy shrugs, fondness etched in her smile despite the occasionally annoying reality. “He cares. More than I ever thought my missing dad would. We fought a lot when he first came into my life, and I don’t ever want to push him away like that again. If that means that he and I come up with a system of checks and security—so be it.”

It’s an understatement. Tony has his own ways of checking in with Darcy and Pepper after missions and emergencies, the same way Darcy updates them both after a week of digging, moving, or an attack.

Her panic button still hangs around her neck, glistening and ready.

“Steve said that Tony was a wreck when they pulled you off of that rooftop in Turkey.” Bucky says slowly, remembering the story Steve had told: Tony Stark in self-hating hysterics over a long lost daughter, shot by henchmen of an old enemy.

She nods. “I think he was. I mean – I was unconscious at the time, but Steve was great when I woke up. Helped me to see Tony’s perspective on things, honestly. Tony worried about me enough to try and keep me away from the danger in his life for a long time.” She smiles. “Of course, I can forgive him overprotective urges every once in a while.”

The ocean ahead of them begins to narrow, a tiny town of bright lights glowing in to the north. Çanakkale.

Bucky ducks his head for a moment, seeming to gather his thoughts. There is something slower about him, opposite of the quick anger he had been displaying since their words in the garden.

“What about me?” He asks haltingly, and Darcy is startled to hear a hint of desperation in his voice. “Can you forgive me for what I said?”

Yes. Darcy’s heart is honest, and she knows that Bucky flung such damning accusations at her because of his own hurt. But she can’t get his words out of her head, the assumptions he had flung
in her face. Forgiveness and memory are two very different things. One short, one long.

“You said that Dr. J and Natasha would have been more qualified to dealing with De Luca.”

The words hang in the air between them, and Darcy almost wants to cringe away from it. But she has to ask, she has to know.

Darcy will not entertain a man who thinks she is less than.

Forcing herself to turn to Bucky, she stares at his pale face, searching for answers.

He turns his gaze to the deck beneath them.

“I didn’t mean it.”

The boat rocks beneath their feet, swaying to the lull of the waves. Darcy keeps her footing with practiced ease, pushing forward until she tastes understanding. “Then why say it?”

A bitter laugh escapes his lips, thin and brittle. “One thing all those fancy psychologists can agree on is that I don’t handle anger well, even with my memory healed.”

“It’s not the anger I’m concerned about,” Though she remembers the pure rage that had filled him, his shaking hands and refusal to hear her. That night his fury had been a gulf between them that Darcy had no way to cross. “You still said it, those words still had truth.”

“Not truth the way you think,” Bucky is bluntly honest, hiding nothing as he speaks. “I don’t want it to be you who always jumps into danger. If it had been Natasha or Dr. Juniper breaking into the vault…”

“What?” Darcy’s mouth tastes bitter, her anger returning. She can feel every awful thing he could possibly say at the edge of her own tongue, a thousand ways to break her heart once again. “If it was them, you would have what?”

His full lips twist, grimacing as he admits. “I wouldn’t have worried.”

“Why?” She demands. “Because you think I’m less capable? Because I’m a little girl in a fight I don’t understand? Let me tell you, James Barnes—”

“Because I could stand to lose them.” Bucky’s hand is cool and firm against her wrist, keeping her close. She had not realize how close she was to walking away again, to leaving the situation that could cause her so much pain. He close her firmly while staring up at her, icy eyes boring into her with a finality that makes her feel like the world around them is frozen is suspense. “I could lose Natasha or Dr. J. But I couldn’t lose you. I can’t lose you, Darcy.”

Darcy freezes, anger fleeing from her chest so quickly she nearly stumbles. The expectation had been that Bucky would recite all of her worst qualities back to her face, all the deep dark things Darcy hates about herself.

She can’t think of how to respond to a declaration like this, no idea how to process this statement.

“You are the most capable person I have ever met.” Bucky is thrumming with conviction, refusing to look away as emotion bleeds into his words. "God, Darce, I’m so sorry for what I said. I know you can defend yourself, I know you can do what Natasha and Dr. Juniper do… I know that. But the idea of losing you…” He trails off, blinking as he gathers his thoughts. “I don’t have any other excuse than that I was scared outta my head after seeing you leave with De Luca. And in the nature
of full transparency: watching you at the party, I was so goddamn jealous that he got to touch you like that."

Darcy’s brain is slowly churning through Bucky’s words, analyzing each syllable for meaning. She freezes when it hits her, hot and cold all at once. He’s confessing that…

“I was an asshole.” Bucky repeats firmly, stepping forward to clear the space between them. “And you don’t have to forgive me. But I at least wanted to tell you that I’m sorry— for last night in the garden, and for today.”

Darcy can’t move. Her brain is flickering with thought, tracking this new chain of events. They are close enough that she can feel his breath stirring her hair, mint mixing with the sea salt-tinged breeze around them. He’s so much taller than her, leaning down in his earnestness. Deep down, she knows his words are genuine, his apology heartfelt…

“What about the state I left him in?”

Bucky blinks, not understanding. “Huh?”

“De Luca.” Darcy elaborates, focused on the confused wrinkle between his eyes. “You said you hated the state that he left me in. But did you see what he looked like when I was finished?”

Bucky’s gaze shifts to the side. “Natasha said…”

“I knocked him out.” Her voice is flat, unyielding. “I fought him off and managed to incapacitate him, steal the dagger, and get out of the vault without any triggering alarms.”

Silence hangs between them.

“I forgive you, Bucky.” It’s not a lie, so she repeats it with relish. "I forgive you – as long as you admit that I am not a damsel in distress.”

The is the hill Darcy is willing to die on.

He responds after a long moment, rubbing at his scruff. “I know you aren’t.”

“Then act like it.”

Bucky’s jaw works as he stares down at her. Darcy can see the emotions play across his face – worry, anger, relief, and a hint of pride.

“Here’s the agreement,” He says finally, sticking out a tanned hand. “You promise to include me on all your crazy, suicidal plans... and I’ll promise to guard your back and not act like a caveman.”

It is honestly more than she had ever expected him to offer. She had been burrowing down for a fight, not a truce. Darcy is almost weak kneed with relief that Bucky is standing before her with open hands and an apology, willing to hear what she needs from him.

But this isn't the end of it. Fighting a grin, Darcy contemplates his outstretched hand. Outwardly she is composed, brown hair whipping wildly around her placid face, olive green blouse billowing in the wind. Inwardly… she’s thinking of how Bucky’s lips fit against hers, how his arms held her up after HYDRA’s assassins nearly did her in.

“How do I know you’ll keep to your word?”

“Doll,” He smirks, suddenly all ‘40s charm and big blue eyes. “I grew up with Steve Rogers.
Suicidal plans are my specialty.”

She accepts his handshake, gripping the calloused ridges of his palm beneath hers.

“This isn’t a free pass,” She warns suddenly, twining her fingers with his and refusing to let go. He could break her hold (and her wrist) in a moment if he wanted to, but Bucky allows himself to be gripped. “We both are going to have to earn each other’s trust back, Barnes. At Hissarlik, either you show me that you know and respect that I am a grown woman with a PhD in my subject and pretty fantastic combat skills, or you walk the metaphorical plank.” She holds his gaze. “No do-overs.”

Bucky responds with a slow, devastating smile. The kind of white toothed, suave grin that had women trailing after him for decades.

”And you better show me that I can turn my back without worrying you’re going to jump off the plank without me.”

Their gazes lock.

“Alright. I’ll hold up my end, you hold up yours?”

Over his shoulder, Darcy sees the growing, glinting light of Çanakkale. Their last stop before Hissarlik, the place where her fortunes will either rise or fall, just like Dr. White had warned.

“Trust me,” He vows. "I won’t disappoint, doll.”

Chapter End Notes

Come say hello :) And please be kind to your fanfic authors! We are trying our best!
The ancient, famed city of Troy is little more than crumbling stone.

The team stands just before Hissarlik, the site that archaeologists and historical scholars have been puzzled over for centuries. A city that had once stood proud and mighty over the sea, a gateway to the city-states of Greece.

Scout is the first to speak.

“It looks…” Her blue eyes gaze out at the towering, half destroyed walls. She bites her bottom lip, hesitating. “Pretty excavated already.”

It’s true. The stone walls are exposed, layers shown off to mingling tourists through occasional protective planes of glass.

“It’s an active tourist site,” Darcy explains, gaze skipping over the lines of normal folk waiting to tour the ruins and enter the museum. “Excavations are still occasionally on-going, though. Usually small scale, looking over what other archaeologists could have missed. I really want us to walk through it, spend at least a few days learning about the site…” She holds her breath, hoping the decision she and Dr. Mark had made after realizing Dr. White’s threat would be received well by her team. “But we won’t be staying long.”

Silence falls for a long moment.

“Is this why you told us not to unpack the van?” Mohammad questions, dark eyes cutting as they flash between Darcy and Dr. J. “Are we moving elsewhere?”

Darcy tries not to squirm. “…we are.”

“What?” Scout squawks disbelievingly. “I thought our digging permit was for here!”

Dr. Mark shakes his head as the confused graduate students turn to him, a small smile on his lip. “An intentional lie, I am afraid. For safety reasons, Dr. Juniper and I decided it was best to submit a series of decoy permit to the anthropology department to give us the freedom to move, if needed. The University of Edinburgh needs to think we’ll be spending the next few weeks at a well-known site like this, looking through pre-sorted artifacts while surrounded by innocent tourists.”

Silence falls, and Darcy fights the urge to fidget. It had not been her idea to keep their true destination a secret… surprisingly, it had been Dr. Mark’s. Once Jake had brought up Hissarlik, Dr. Mark had immediately began looking to Schliemann’s lesser known sites – certain that an already well documented and excavated site could not be the location they sought. But she still feels guilty for the subterfuge.

“Wait,” Greg raises an imperious hand and squints at Darcy, reading her squirminess while waving at the flocking tourists. “I can’t say I’m not glad we’re skipping the crowds, but where the hell are
we going, Dr. Lewis?” He points to the leopard print duffel bag at his feet. “And just how far do I have to carry all my luggage now?”

“Not far,” Dr. J assures him, face turned to the horizon. “Not far at all.”

“Schliemann wrote about a temple near the coast,” Darcy explains, recalling what Dr. Mark had shown her on the plane. “The Temple of Athena at Assos. Jake had information on it that we reviewed together earlier, and it matched up with an area that it was a location of interest I had flagged in my original PhD work over Asgardian areas of influence. It lies right on a possible trade route to the Greek Isles.”

Her words shock the graduate students into silence. Yael seems to ponder the new information, while Scout is already bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement for a new location.

“Hissarlik is a cover,” The redhead nods furiously, putting the pieces together. “If Dr. White thinks that we’re excavating here, he won’t realize…”

“…That the real goal is a temple fifty-five miles south,” Bucky finishes. “That’s the plan.”

“You knew?” Mohammad questions, dark eyes pensive.

“I did.” Bucky nods at his friend. “It was a last-minute change, information that Dr. Lewis’ friend passed along.”

Darcy fights a smile, grateful that Bucky has a strong influence over the graduate students. They have always looked to him for support, relieved that a man like the Winter Soldier is fighting on their side.

Once she and the former Winter Soldier had descended from the top deck of the ferry, Dr. Mark had been insistent that Bucky know the true plan. Hissarlik is a site that had been turned over again and again, destroyed with dynamite by the world’s worst archaeologist. No, Darcy had known as soon as Jake had brought up Schliemann that their goal was not his much-loved site.

Bucky had taken the change of plans with grace, listening seriously as Dr. Mark pulled out his weathered map and marked the temple with an elegant swish. Darcy had hung back, still processing the chaos of Rome, her reunion with Jake and Karina, and her ultimatum to Barnes. The tension between them has faded in some ways and increased in others. The anger is gone – but something still ties them together, tight and sparking.

Not that she has time to ponder it now.

“I’m so sorry for the last-minute revelation,” Darcy says, swallowing her nerves and taking the time to meet the eyes of each of her students, the young men and women who have followed her into the depths of danger. Her heart is lodged in her throat. “It isn’t because of a lack of trust. Even with Jake and Karina, I was prepared to withhold as much information as needed to keep them out of this. I don’t want to bring any of you into more trouble than I’m worth.”

Silence falls again, and Darcy can barely stand to look at the brave young students before her. Is she finally asking too much? Follow me, even when I cannot tell you the truth? Even when I’m not entirely sure what I am doing?

Dr. J’s voice rings through the air, crisp and full. “As always, you are all more than welcome to turn back now,” She announces, hand cocked on her thin hip and gaze piercing. “Dr. Lewis isn’t going to pretend that this journey will get any easier. Every step you take with us leads to risk—and it’s your decision to follow or to return to the safety of a university lab and cushy research
stipend.”

A tense moment passes. Mohammad is the first to speak.

“I would follow you anywhere, Dr. Lewis.” He states formally, bowing his head in a way that reminds Darcy of court offal from long ago. “If the Temple of Assos is where we should be, let us go.”

His decision is echoed by each graduate student in turn, and Darcy cannot help but sag with relief as their affirmations overcome her. Scout and Greg come to her side, both speaking excitedly about the prospect of another site. Yael announces that she was never truly certain about Hissarlik, and is glad that the Drs had changed their minds.

In the sudden flurry of excitement, Darcy’s gaze is drawn to Bucky’s. He smiles, a half smirk that warms her to her bones.

They can manage this chaos. Between the two of them, the team will be safe.

~~~*~~~

Three items down, one to go.

If the voice of a semi-sentient ancient Norse goddess is anything to believe, they should be on the home stretch of this adventure. Darcy watches the horizon as she turns over the items in her mind, trying to decide what the connection could be. The Foula bracelet, a magical weapon of Asgardian gold; the dagger, an object that burned a triskelion into Darcy’s palm but has shown no other magical powers; and the cup, an object that Darcy still has not dared to touch with her bare hands. What could the fourth be?

Dr. J has downloaded thousands of texts pertaining to Freyja, Vanir goddess of love, death, sex, magic, and so many more domains that Darcy can barely remember them all. A beautiful woman with hair of golden, as seen in old myths and Darcy’s memory. While the team works, Darcy’s mentor is bent over a tablet, papers with notes on the goddess held down against the wind with rocks.

Darcy turns, surveying the site. As usual, the excavation team falls into a practiced routine of setting up camp: this time among the craggy rock of a cliffside site – the raked grass and sharp ground of their new home for the next six weeks.

The Temple of Athena at Assos is a study in solitude and decay, rising from the edge of a cliff: long Doric columns, fluted and elegant even as they tumble back into the earth after an eon of misuse. A thousand years ago, it had been an imposing place of worship with a marble façade and statues of gold, drawing thousands of pilgrims… but today it is a crumbling foundation of half collapsed columns, forgotten as it stands proudly over the Aegean Sea.

The landscape is wild, rock and grass colliding before tumbling into the sheer face of a dangerous precipice, a hundred-foot drop into the churning blue ocean.

It is this edge that Darcy finds herself drawn to on the first night of their dig, the fading sunlight catching her gaze over the ocean as she finishes pitching her tent.
The world falls away for a moment. It is only Darcy and the ocean that fills her sight, so impossibly massive. She steps to the edge, crossing the rocky outcropping to get a closer look at the drop beneath her, the sight of the ocean merging into the sky.

*Blue,* she thinks as the horizon stretches before her, kissing the setting sun. *All this endless, endless blue. Would it be like falling into the sky?*

A cold hand runs up her spine, making her shiver. A cold has seeped into her veins, despite the blazing sun overhead. This place feels strange, ancient and familiar all at once.

*Dottir... I am so sorry...*

The moment breaks as it crests, Freyja’s soft voice overcome by a more familiar one, calling out her name in fear.

“Dr. Lewis!” Scout’s voice rises over the wind, fluted and sharp. “What are you doing so close to the edge?”

Her words are smart, reflecting a true desire to keep away from heights and an undoubtedly perilous death. But Darcy can’t tear her gaze away from the frothing waves, far, far below.

The feeling returns, cold and sharp. What is up, what is down? Would it be falling, or jumping? Would it not be such a privilege to fall, to give into the heavy burden of gravity? It is so hard to fight all the time, to hold oneself up against the pull…

Falling, falling, falling…

Waves and currents, sharp rocks shaped by the sea.

*Dr. Lewis!*

Scout’s suddenly close voice yanks Darcy out of her thoughts. She blinks, feeling as a dream has been forgotten each time her eyelids shut.

“Are you okay?”

Scout is at her shoulder, green eyes wide and concerned. Her hands hover over Darcy’s arms, as if caught reaching for her to keep her from falling into that swirling sea.

“I’m fine,” Darcy promises, catching her breath. The ocean still reflects the last light of day before them, but suddenly Darcy feels as if the whole image is disjointed, alien. It must be exhaustion that had drawn her to the edge, to the precipice. She has always liked high places, contrast of earth and sky and sea.

Darcy turns from the sight, ignoring the concerned glance of her youngest team member. “I’m fine,” She repeats, as much to herself as Scout. “Let’s get the fire set up.”

~~~*~~~

On an archaeological dig with Dr. Eleanor Juniper, mornings begin with the sunrise. Darcy has long trained herself to wake with the first rays of sun, usually at a respectable six in the morning.
So when a figure appears at the end of her cot at fuck o’clock in the dark, something is wrong. Darcy rips herself out of the warm covers and has the Foula bracelet transformed within seconds.

She faces the intruder, fearless in her narwhal pajama bottoms and matching top, as the Foula bracelet casts a golden glow in the darkness.

“Woah, doll.”

Darcy sags with relief at the familiar voice, dropping her arm and falling back into the covers with a shaky curse. “Bucky?”

His face is unmistakable as her eyes adjust to the darkness. Lean and strong in the shadows, Bucky Barnes stands in her tent with an easy grace that reminds her that he’s been avoiding sleeping next to her for at least a week. Even after their conversation on the boat yesterday, he did not come to sleep next to her.

“What the hell are you waking me up for?” Darcy demands, sinking back into her covers resentfully. He may be hot as hell, but a girl needs sleep. “We made up, just come crawl in.”

“Not for that.” Bucky has a shit-eating grin that should tell Darcy his intentions are evil. “Remember how you said you’d listen to me about your safety?”

Oh no.

“What currently ringing a bell,” Darcy says lightly, burrowing back into her lovely pillow. “Remind me in a few hours.”

“Nope.”

Suddenly the blankets that had been caressing Darcy’s body like a heavenly cloud are gone, replaced with the frigid air of southern Turkey.

“BUCKY!”

He ignores the scream, regarding her with steady blue eyes under a swoop of dark hair. “You and I are going to train together. Every morning, four-fifteen at the very latest.”

“Four?”

Darcy is inconsolable. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to her. HYDRA is a walk in the park compared to waking up this early – at least they have the decency to attack her when she’s fully awake.

Morning time is sacred, morning time is for sleep. Dr. J has already pushed her to the limit with rising with the sun, and now—

The thought is overwhelming. She reaches for something to hurl at Bucky’s fat head, but he is gone within a blink—laughing blue eyes and smirk lingering with his words.

“Get dressed and meet me at the southern end of the temple within ten, or I’ll be back to pull you out of bed.”

The promise is much less sexy than it sounds. Knowing him, Bucky truly would come back just to yank her out of her warm cocoon by the ankle and drag her out into the frigid morning air. She is half-tempted to ignore his warning and burrow deeper, to fend him off with her Asgardian weapon
if needed… but that must be what he expects. Even Darcy Lewis, wielder of the might taser, knows that she is no match for the Winter Soldier.

When Darcy emerges from her tent, the stars are still out over the Temple of Assoss and she is ready to kill. She has cursed Bucky’s name to any ancient god and goddess she can think of, spitting curses between clenched teeth.

“Hey there, sunshine.” Bucky greets, grinning in a way that should be illegal at four forty-five in the morning. He is lean and coiled in his work out gear, hair still wet from his shower. For a long moment, Darcy has to remind herself why she is angry at such a smirky angel.

“See sweetheart? That wasn’t so hard.”

The anger returns, full force.

“Why exactly am I awake?”

Bucky’s grin widens. “Training time.”

Darcy blinks. “I’ve trained lots.”

“Consistency is key. That means working each day. I’m surprised Natasha and Dr. Juniper haven’t already told you that.”

“With all the assassin attacks and general tomfoolery, I consider myself pretty consistent.”

Bucky shakes his head. “Not enough. If you want to be able to earn my trust to go off on your own like you did in Rome, you need to train daily with someone who won’t go easy on you.”

Darcy raises a brow. “You?”

“Me.” A flash of white teeth, promising hell. “Trust me, not about to do you any favors.”

~~~*~~~

Facing off with the Winter Soldier in a misty field is not how Darcy thought she would be starting her day, but here she is.

The straggly grass growing between the rocky ground of the site is covered with a haze of fog. Bucky stands about six feet away, assessing Darcy with a glint in his eye that promises a complete assessment of her physical movements.

Great.

“Alright,” Bucky drawls, blue eyes bright even in the morning darkness. He stands loose, arms at his side, but Darcy can see the usual tense fluidity in the hard lines of his shoulders. “Use the bracelet. Attack me when you’re ready.”

“Attack?!” Darcy sputters, as soon as his words click together in her sleepy brain. Her free hand flies to the bracelet on her right wrist, cupping it protectively. “What, no tutorial first? Aren’t you supposed to train me before we get into sparring?”
“You said yourself that you’ve been trained before,” He reminds in a growing tone that does things to Darcy’s stomach for a moment. “Learn by doing. Besides, I can’t know how to teach you until I see you in action.”

“You’ve seen me in action before!”

Bucky shrugs. “Not in a while. Need a reminder, doll.”

“Barnes,” Darcy entreats, switching gears as Bucky begins to move in a slow circle around her. It’s like being sized up by a leopard- all sleek, smooth muscle and calculating eyes. She forgets how massive Bucky is - hulking muscle and a flashing silver arm. “This thing can shred through bone. Asgardian gold is the toughest metallic substance in the known universe, as far as Mohammad can tell. I don’t want to use it in a training simulation.”

The movement doesn’t stop. Bucky just smiles, coming a slow step closer.

“Worried about me, doll?”

“You’re fucking annoying,” Darcy manages, resisting the instinctual urge to step back as he moves forward. Prey instincts. “But I’d feel bad if I murdered you.”

There is a flash in the center of Darcy’s vision. One moment Bucky stands before her, dark and smirking, and the next he appears behind her – sweeping out her legs from underneath her in one smooth move.

With a very undignified yelp, Darcy crumples to her knees. The rock is unforgiving beneath her, digging into her shins as she scrambles back to even footing. The Winter Soldier has darted to her exposed side and is staring down at her.

“Your concern is adorable,” Bucky says lightly, as if he hasn’t just knocked her on her ass, but there is frustration in the lines of his face. “But completely unfounded. You can’t use a weapon as an advantage if you don’t practice with it. Get out the whip.”

The thread of command in his voice is new. The Bucky that Darcy is used to doesn’t sound like this – he is unassuming, gentle and soft-spoken, always working to make his movements as least threatening as possible.

This is a glimpse of his hard edges. He is no longer telegraphing his movements for normal people to follow, instead moving so quickly and surely that Darcy tenses as she takes in his stillness. In a predator, it is the promise of action, and action could mean death.

“I’ve used it!” Darcy protests, scrambling to her feet. The heart in her chest is thumping rapidly, despite her attempts to slow it. “You’ve seen me use it!”

Bucky snorts. “I have. And while you did manage to walk out alive, your technique was sloppy and desperate.”

“Maybe I like coming off sloppy and desperate. Maybe it lulls my enemies into a false sense of security.”

He cocks his head to the side, studying her. “You’re stalling. I know you, Darcy. Sarcasm is your last line of defense.”

“No – I’m refusing. Think you really know me? Well, watch me walk away—"
Spinning on her heel, Darcy does not even have the chance to take a step. Because suddenly Bucky is behind her, his cybernetic hand at her throat. In all of her bravado, Darcy truly thought he would let her leave. At De Luca’s, in the Compound… he had always let her walk away, allowed her control over the terms even in the midst of their verbal sparring.

The rules of their relationship have clearly changed.

Within a second, he has managed to cross the clearing and come up on her blind side. His fingers are cool against her skin, gentle, but one movement of his wrist and her neck would be broken.

She stiffens in his hold, the hard lines of his body pressing against her back. He has moved so quickly that Darcy can hardly believe it, a flash of dark clothing and air.

Assassin.

Bucky’s voice is a rumble against her back, his breath filling the air with the scent of spearmint. “Alright, first lesson. How would you break a hold like this?”

His fingers flex gently against her throat, illustrating just how trapped she is.

All of those lessons with Natasha are filed away in Darcy’s mind, flicking through her memories as she tries to figure out how to get Bucky’s arm off of her. His hold is ironclad, gentle enough that Darcy knows this is purely a training exercise, but firm enough that he won’t let her break it without effort.

Natasha’s advice come back to her. Don’t focus on the part of you that is held back, focus on what is free.

Her neck and shoulders are pinned by Bucky’s strength, no hope of movement. But her legs…

Relying on speed rather than strength, Darcy rams her boot up and backwards, connecting with Bucky’s inner thigh. Not exactly where she had aimed for, but the blow hits.

Unfortunately, Bucky doesn’t even flinch.

“Not bad,” He grunts, hold tightening almost casually. His fingers readjust, replaced by the crook of his arm. She is in a proper chokehold now, not able to move an inch without losing air.

“On a normal man, that might’ve broken it.” Bucky continues, still gentle despite their positioning. “But a HYDRA assassin would have tracked that as a possibility for your first move and braced themselves accordingly. Try again.”

Summoning her rage at being woken up at the asscrack of dawn, teased, and pinned against her will, Darcy doesn’t stop to think before she retaliates. She brings her foot down on Bucky’s instep with all possible force, simultaneously jamming her elbow back to connect with his stomach. He is a step ahead, pulling his foot back and using that movement to yank Darcy higher into his arms.

“Doll,” His chest heaves as he laughs against her hair. “You’ve got to have some better ideas than that.”

Oh, this is it. Darcy is pissed. She struggles against his arms, hating the fact that his superior strength truly does have her pinned. What move can she truly make?

Or…
With a simple thought of intent, the Foula bracelet activates on Darcy’s arm. The gold flashes, slithering into the whip that has saved her life time and time again. Bucky is distracted for a moment by the transformation, tracking the possible moves she could make with the weapon.

“Oh,” He says, teasingly. “So now you’re willing to use your weapon.”

“Yup, you convinced me.” Darcy grunts against his arm, sucking in air as she grips the whip. It is slack in her hand, unusable due to the force holding her forearms back. “There is nothing more that I want to do in this moment than strangle you with a substance stronger than diamonds.”

He chuckles at that, his laughing rumbling through his chest and filling the air again with his scent - she pushes the distraction away.

“Good to use a weapon if you can,” He says patiently, clearly enjoying himself. “But your arms are still pinned.”

But that was never her plan.

Before Bucky can truly finish his breath, Darcy has bitten viciously on the exposed skin of the arm still around her throat. He hisses, relaxing his hold for long enough that Darcy is able to repeat her previous actions – crushing her boot against his instep, elbow to the gut, swinging back her head to connect with his chin...

It’s still not enough. As soon as Bucky loosens his grip, Darcy’s attempt to yank herself out of range is thwarted by his quick reflexes. Strong hands clasp her arms to her side as she swings herself around, sealing off any means of escape. Her struggle is cut off by his sheer strength, almost lifting her into his arms.

They are face to face.

Icy blue against furious grey.

Bucky stills as he realizes how close they are. Darcy can see the realization dawn as his gaze darkens, his breath so close she can feel each exhale across her own lips. It tingles, earning a sharp inhale as Darcy shuts her eyes...

They are inches apart, held close by Bucky’s strength and Darcy’s inability to get herself out of this tight spot.

A moment passes, charged with electricity. She cannot stop herself from tracing the sharp line of his jaw with her eyes, the dark hair tucked behind his ears. The man before her is a study of contrasts – dark and light, right and wrong.

All she can think about, instantly, is that fated alley in Bucharest. The fight, the adrenaline, the trust she had placed in this dark stranger. From the very first moment that she met Bucky Barnes, she has trusted him with her life. Something deep in her heart recognized something in his, a sensation beyond words.

It fills her mind. The way his hands had spanned her waist as they kissed in that alley, pulling her closer as she tangled her fingers in his hair, tugging at the silky locks...

His lips had been chapped and soft, his breath like fire as it filled her mouth. She had dreamed about their lips touching for a month after.

They are so close. His grip on her shoulders tightens. His eyes are blown out, all pupil.
Just a second away from dredging that memory back into the present.

“Darcy…”

Bucky’s voice is husky, his eyes locked on her face. The way he is looking at her is a promise and a question all at once, another possible move in this dance that he will not make without her permission.

In this moment, they are poised at a crossroads. Darcy knows that her attraction to Bucky is bone deep, slow burning and molten… but can she take this plunge now? Is her head in the right spot? Is her heart?

The thought comes unbidden. You’ve always known that you wanted him.

Yes. She has always known, even as she has fought that knowledge and ran across the world. It is now a bone deep certainty. Darcy Lewis wants to kiss Bucky Barnes. Right now. Here. Preferably for a very, very long time.

Bucky is still staring down at her, unblinking, the question bared in his eyes. Darcy leans forward, ready to answer…

“Good morning, fearless leaders—OH. What are you two doing?”

“Oh god, we’ve interrupted something.”

“Are you about to murder Dr. Lewis, Bucky? Wait until she gives us our daily share of coffee, at least!”

The choice ends up out of her hands. The moment is broken as quickly as it came. Around them is the sudden ruckus of morning: the team cooking breakfast over the fire, voices rising over coffee, Dr. J directing the movement of tents.

Darcy is suddenly burning with embarrassment, even as the graduate students scatter to their duties. In their haze, neither had realized that the sun had begun to creep up on the horizon, bringing with it the actions of morning. Bucky lets go of her slowly. His hands uncurl from her arms, his expression now hooded. Is it disappointment flashing in his eyes? Relief?

Cold air brushes against Darcy’s skin as he steps away. She tells herself that is the reason for the goosebumps spreading up and down her arms.

“We’ll train every morning,” Bucky says lowly, a rumble that gives her shivers. She still cannot read his face, the phantom of his heat is a memory now. “Four forty-five am. Agreed?”

The routine of the day is already packed to the brim – digging, planning, research, paperwork, and not to mention the mundane running of the site that Darcy has to oversee. Waking up to spar with Bucky before dawn means that her already chaotic schedule will be even worse: possible nineteen-hour days of work, which leaves only four to five hours for rest.

Saying no would eliminate one of those stresses and give her more time to sleep…

… but Bucky is right. With three valuable items most likely wanted by HYDRA, they do not have the luxury to pretend that the future will be free of conflict. Darcy needs to be able to defend herself and her team, to have the skill to survive the next time a terrorist goon decides to attack.

She nods, raising her gaze to meet Bucky’s. “Agreed.”
And then he turns on his heel and heads for the trenches.

---

True to her word, Darcy wakes each morning while the stars are still bright in the Turkish sky to have her ass handed to her by Bucky. After that charged moment during their first session, he seems determined to keep their sparring and training as efficient as possible. He puts her through her paces – strength training, footwork, and endurance as warm-ups before the real action even begins.

Darcy curses at him more than she has ever cursed anyone before. She thought that Natasha was a brutal taskmaster in the handful of times they had trained, but now she sees that Nat’s instruction was gentle. Bucky seems determined to prepare her for every event possible – HYDRA assassins wielding knives, electric paddles, guns, baseball bats.

In their second training session, Bucky doesn’t push her to activate the Foula Bracelet. Instead he hands her a bullwhip that is strikingly similar to the one she had taken from Grigore’s warehouse in Bucharest – plain braided leather, sleek and well oiled.

"It will work for now," He promises. "But you will need to practice with your own whip soon."

They spar for at least an hour, stopping only when the graduate students (who come out earlier and earlier each morning to place bets on which way Darcy will fail) become too distracting to continue.

(Scout is champion of the betting pool so far – she has won a bottle of Crown whiskey off of Greg for guessing that Darcy would trip over her own whip while trying to fend off Bucky’s offensive, and a warm blanket off of Yael for her prediction that Bucky would consistently have Darcy in a corner before the minute-and-a-half mark of their first bout.)

It is a humbling experience to begin each day with at least three failed sparring matches. No matter how much Darcy grows, or how tactically she thinks, or how much strength she builds in her thighs and arms… Bucky can destroy her defensive maneuvers in seconds, before she can even begin to plan her next move.

He is the Winter Soldier. The most feared assassin in the world, a ghost-story that strikes fear even into the Black Widow. Of course Darcy knows that she isn’t going to win.

But some progress would be nice.

There is very little time for Darcy to sulk, however, as the puzzling nature of the site takes up all her extra time.

Excavations begin on the northwest side of the temple, furthest from the cliff. Trenches have been be dug at locations that Jake had marked – possible extensions of the main temple, where the priestesses of Athena would have lived and worked and hid the temple’s most valuable items.

Maybe even the one they are looking for.

Mohammad gives daily updates on his study of the chalice and dagger. Dr. J works beside him with steady hands, surrounded by her tomes on Norse and Asgardian mythology. They become
unlikely allies, working together through most of the day.

Darcy is knee deep in a trench with Scout when Dr. J summons her to Mohammad’s work tent.

“We need to test something,” Dr. J greets as Darcy steps inside. The tent is filled with precious equipment, most of which has been donated by Stark Industries. “Mohammad may have made a breakthrough.”

Excitement floods Darcy’s veins. It has been three long weeks of digging and the team has almost nothing to show for it. The site, despite being an obvious place of ancient power, seems almost wiped clean. Not even a midden, a trash heap, to dissect.

“All three items have been confirmed as Asgardian gold,” Mohammad stands, directing Darcy’s attention to a nearby monitor. Equations flash across the screen, followed by pictures of each object. “The Foula Bracelet, the dagger, and the chalice. They are pure Asgardian gold with gemstone designs on each. Diamond, emerald, and ruby on the bracelet; ruby in the hilt of the dagger; and emeralds dotting the base of the chalice.”

“Are gemstones like these even found in Asgard?” Darcy questions, trying to remember if Thor had ever mentioned or worn jewelry. “If their gold is a completely different property than ours…”

“We aren’t sure,” Dr. J states. “But it stands to mention that these objects could represent a fusion of cultures – Asgard and Earth.”

Freyja’s words flash in Darcy’s mind, a memory of the night they had spoken in Rome. They were gifts to my favored ones, to the women who took on the mantle of warrior, healer, mother or lover in my name. Women I loved and trusted. They were weapons I forged from Asgardian gold, blessed with magic of my own.

Pushing back the memory, Darcy centers herself by surveying Mohammad’s data. “That would make sense. But you said there was a breakthrough? I’m fairly certain it isn't about gemstones.”

A glance is exchanged between Mohammad and Dr. J. It causes a twinge of unease within Darcy, a secret confidence growing between her mentor and the graduate student in charge of their most powerful items.

“Dr. Lewis,” Mohammad begins slowly, unsurely. “I hope you do not find it an insult, but Dr. Juniper allowed me into her confidence on the subject of the dagger. She explained that you had a… reaction to the object when you first held it. That Natasha Romanov had thought you dead, for a moment.”

The moment comes rushing back to Darcy. The heat of the dagger in her grip, growing steadily. Burning and flowing, like molten gold. A supernatural fire that had peeled the flesh back from her bones, charred her skin into ashes—

“That is true,” Darcy manages, steadying herself on the artifact table. “There was pain. Horrific pain. Like fire crawling up my arm.”

“And you lost consciousness?” Mohammad presses.

“Yes.”

“Which arm did you use to grasp the dagger?”

“My right.”
Chancing a glance at Dr. J, she sees that her mentor’s features are hard, as if chiseled from stone. “The same arm as the bracelet.”

“Yes.”

“And the Foula Bracelet,” Mohammad continues, jotting down notes on the laptop in his lap. “Did you have a similar reaction when you first touched the bracelet?”

“No,” Darcy flounders for the memory. A dig in Scotland, her first as a leader. Before Tony had held Sokovia on his back. Before the endless complications of HYDRA and research and Freyja. “I excavated the bracelet myself, and it didn’t react to my touch.”

“When did it transform?”

“Mohammad,” Darcy’s patience snaps. The talk of the artifacts has her strangely on edge, tense. “You’ve heard the story a thousand time. Scout requests it at least once a dig.”

“I know, Dr Lewis.” His tone is filled with infinite patience. Dark eyes steady behind his glasses, long fingers balanced against the laptop keys. “I need to hear it one more time. Did you feel pain when the bracelet transformed?”

Darcy swallows. She glances again to Dr. J, who sits still in her own lab chair. “It did. The bracelet transformed into a bracer, you’ve seen it. It started to heat up against my skin and reform itself, molding to my arm.”

“And would you describe the pain as the similar to what you experienced with the dagger? Building heat?”

“I—” Darcy tries to remember exactly the shape and valleys of that pain, to track it in her mind’s eye. “Yes. It was almost exactly like what I felt when I touched the dagger. Like lava against my skin, in my bones.”

Silence falls in the laboratory.

“What does this have to do with the dig?”

“Dr. Lewis,” Mohammad comes carefully to her side, ignoring the question. “Dr. J and I have reason to believe that you have become intrinsically tied to the Asgardian artifacts. She mentioned that when you touched the dagger, you woke with a symbol on your palm.”

Mohammad’s cool hands cup Darcy’s right arm. Slowly, glancing to her for permission, he uncurls her fingers. In the center of her palm, stretching from the base to just below her fingers, lies a golden triskelion.

Dr. J hisses between her teeth, coming to view the brand over Darcy’s shoulder. Thick golden lines traverse Darcy’s skin, glittering even in the low light of the tent. It has never hurt, not since she had first grasped the dagger, but it is clear to the viewer that her flesh had been burned away to create the graceful, curling design.

“This is the same symbol that marks the chalice,” Mohammad says finally, gently curling Darcy’s fist closed again. “There is a connection between this all, I know it. The pain you felt with the dagger left a brand, while the Foula bracelet left no mark upon you.”

“She wears the Foula bracelet.” Dr. J objects. “Never takes it off. That could be why it did not mark her – it didn’t have to. The warrior woman we found in Greenland, her bones had been
Mohammad nods, his attention back to Darcy. “And you have not touched the chalice, have you? Not with your bare skin?”

“No,” Darcy shakes her head. Truthfully, she had avoided touching the newest artifact because of the very pain they spoke on. The idea of surviving the flesh boiling off of her bones again is not tempting. “When Karina gave it to me, it was packed into the artifact cooler. I've kept it in there, and I requested that no one touch it with their bare skin. The only person to touch it has been you, Mohammad.”

“And I always use gloves.”

He and Dr. J exchange another long look.

“What is going on?” Darcy finally demands, anxiety cresting. “Do you think that the chalice will react to my touch?”

“We do.” Dr. J answers this time, coming to Darcy’s side and laying a strong hand on her shoulder. “But there’s something else, Lewis. We need to test your skin and your blood.”

As courageous as Darcy is, she pales at this news. Memories of Kara holding her hand at doctor’s offices return, facing immunizations with utter fear. It has always been a secret unease of Darcy’s: needles and injections.

Her mother isn’t here to hold her hand now. “A shot?”

“A small one,” Mohammad explains gently. “Just a blood sample, and some scraping of your hand. I am trying to track how deeply you have been affected by the artifacts.”

“For your well being, as well as to understand the artifacts.” Dr. J rubs her hand down Darcy’s back, a rare sign of affection in response to Darcy’s clearly stressed state. “We need to know that your exposure to Asgardian artifacts isn’t harming you. I know that everyone else seems content to believe that magic is the reason behind every chance encounter on our digs, but I’m not leaving your health up to the same band-aid answer.”

Eleanor Juniper’s rare concern is touching. Darcy knows that her mentor is a loyal creature, but it is a loyalty that is hard-earned and once won, kept forever.


To his credit, Mohammad makes the entire process quick. He summons a medical kit, prepares the needle with a practiced ease from his medical school days. Within a minute, Darcy tenses as he slides the needle in the wrist of her right hand.

Scarlet blood fills the tube. They all watch as Mohammad extracts the needle, pressing gauze to her arm to stem the bleeding.

“I should be able to analyze this fairly quickly,’” Mohammad presses the tube into a machine, draining the blood into something unseen. “Your father's technology is truly better than anything I have worked with before. Give it a moment to process. While we wait, may I see your palm?”

Darcy offers the branded skin up. Carefully, Mohammad lightly scrapes at the golden lines crisscrossing her hand. She winces at a deeper tug of the scalpel, relaxing when he uses a cotton tipped instrument to pick up the fragments of skin.
“Done.”

They sit in tense silence for minutes as Mohammad deposits the samples into a machine, then moving half of her blood and skin to separate microscopes.

Mohammad tenses as he peers through the lenses. His hands move the dials back and forth.

He finally stands, pale. Without meeting Darcy’s eyes, he moves to the machine holding the other half of her samples.

“I want to be completely sure,” He explains, summoning the chemical components of her blood and skin to the monitor. “There is evidence in your tissues to my eyes, but the computer will verify.”

Darcy jerks forward, brow furrowing. “Verify what?”

But neither Mohammad or Dr. J answer her. They both move to the screen, freezing at the results displayed.

“Shit.”

Dr. J steps back, wiping a hand across her mouth. Her gaze is sharp, furious. At her side, Mohammad has not moved.

“Will you both please tell me what the fuck is going on?!!”

Darcy’s patience has come to it’s limit. She’s been poked, prodded, and is desperate to know about whatever calamity is hovering just beyond her view.

“Your blood and the tissue of your hand tell the same story,” Mohammad final speaks. His head is bowed, gaze still stuck to the screen. “The brand on your hand has high concentrations of Asgardian gold, which leads me to believe that the dagger injected the material into your skin.”

Darcy nods. This is not surprising. “The brand is golden.”

“But now your blood reveals that the problem is more than skin deep,” Dr. J’s tone is cutting, frustrated. “Your bloodwork yields high levels of *aurum asgardianus* as well. Blood is more telling than skin, as you can't shed the particles in your bloodstream. The artifacts are poisoning your body, Lewis.”

Darcy blinks.

“*Poisoning* is a strong word,” Mohammad interjects, wringing his hands and finally crossing to Darcy. “We don’t know yet how these particles of Asgardian gold will affect you. Nothing on Earth like this has ever been studied. My theory is that, through the magical trauma you endured while first touching the objects and your continued use of the bracelet, they are managing to bleed into your physical body. There is no way to tell right now if that is a good thing or a bad.”

“Good?!”

“It could be a mechanism from Asgard,” Dr. J explains. “Magic to change your chemical make-up, to make you more compatible with the artifacts. Or it could be the opposite – properties that are incompatible with human genetics. We know that it can hurt you eventually.”

“That’s—” Darcy stops herself, remembering Freyja’s story. Objects created to keep her favored
ones safe. “I don’t think that the objects would hurt me. I know that sounds crazy, but the Foula bracelet is designed to defend me. And how can you know that this substance can be harmful?”

“True,” Dr. J concedes. “I agree. But, from the preliminary research Mohammad and I have done in the past few weeks, your exposure to any more artifacts of Asgardian gold could begin a chemically invasive process within your body that elevates your body heat, throws you into a feverish state, and more unpleasant things we aren’t sure of yet.”

The words spoken are a haze in her mind, so important and earth-shattering that they seem almost insubstantial. Darcy reaches to support herself on the table once more, trying to get control of the situation, to understand.

“Dr. J.” She looks up into her mentor’s clear eyes, reading the hidden fear there. “What are you saying?”

A cool hand comes up to cup Darcy’s cheek. Dr. J’s stone façade falls away, revealing a deep etched sorrow.

“It means, Darcy, that if you continue interacting with any Asgardian artifact in addition to the Foula bracelet… the *aurum asgardianus* will increase in your bloodstream until you burn up from the inside out.”
Like the Salt and the Sea

"I'll let the darkness swallow me whole
I need to find you, need you to know

I'll be your friend in the daylight again
There we will be, like an old enemy
Like the salt and the sea."

This is what Darcy knows how to do. No hesitation, no questions, no magical expedition spirially wildly out of control.

Just her hands in the Earth: seeking and sure. Fingers splayed against clay-streaked dirt. Trowel working against spoil, back bent under a hot sun as the digging continues around from all sides.

What else can she do when faced with a thousand impossible decisions?

Dig, Darcy thinks to herself as she brushes back another layer of dirt. Dig until answers are found. Dig until all of this makes sense.

Unknown to her, somewhere in the camp Dr. J’s concerned eyes brush against her back. Somewhere, a clearly agitated Bucky is helping a tight-lipped Mohammad to station the next row of trenches.

They all know something is wrong.

Everyone has felt the tension pouring off Darcy since the moment she stepped out of the laboratory tent, freshly bandaged and wild-eyed, desiring only to work and dig until they made some scrap of headway in this site of rock and dead-ends.

But no one has said a word. No one has asked to know what distressing information was clearly shared in the laboratory tent. Bucky’s warning glance at the graduate students was enough to keep them valuing their tongues.

Darcy keeps her back to them all. She does not think about the voice in her head, or the apparent fire in her veins. The Foula bracelet is warm against her wrist as always, while the dagger and cup are locked tightly in the laboratory.

Dr. J’s words are an echo in the back of her mind, constantly jingling. If you are exposed to more than one of the objects at once, more than just the Foula bracelet, it could boil your blood where you stand. This is why we think you reacted so strongly to the dagger – you were incredibly lucky to survive holding it.

The memory of Freyja’s, possible imagined, voice follows quickly after. Unite the four items… and destroy me.

The trowel sinks into the dirt with a vicious thud. Darcy raises it again, forgetting to be gentle when working with unknown layers for the first time since she was a clumsy undergraduate.

There does not even seem to be a choice before her. Stubborn, that is what Tony and Kara both have said she is. Stubborn and resolute, stuck to the path of her choosing, unable to be coaxed or
pulled away. Unchangeable when her mind is set. Just like her parents.

And they are both right. Darcy chooses this, whatever it is. It doesn’t matter what threats hover at the edge of her vision: HYDRA, Dr. White, the very blood in her veins betraying her.

She will face them all if that is what this plan demands.

It has always been about the artifacts. Get to them before HYDRA, protect them from use by a group no better than the blackmarket gangs Darcy has dealt with for years. Whatever the pain, whatever the outcome. Her feet will not stray from the path, no matter the thorns.

Fire has always seemed more merciful than ice, anyways.

~~~*~~~

It is always dark when Darcy meets Bucky to spar in the early morning. They have a silent routine now, running through the familiar paces that Bucky sets to keep her instincts sharp and in shape. Drills for the first half hour, then a focus on movements and technique, and finally an back-breaking difficult spar against the Winter Soldier himself.

Each fight is harder than the last. Bucky seems to ramp up the difficulty every morning, thwarting Darcy’s attempts to gain even the slightest bit of ground against him. He is a machine of impossible precision – flashing blue eyes, narrowed and intent, fixated on her as she tries to think of a way to outmatch him. It never works. He is always three steps ahead, aware of her next move before she decides what it will be.

His hands touch her a thousand different ways before the sun rises. Pinning her arms above her head; yanking her ankles out from under her; pressing against her throat as she tries her best to wriggle out.

"Would this have saved your life?"

He always poses the question at the end of a match, watching impassively as Darcy pulls herself up from the dirt. She cannot hide what she is in these moments- human, fallible, streaked with sweat and failure, not at his level in the slightest.

The futility of their practice only adds to Darcy’s overall frustration. Here she is, leading a dig that has found absolutely nothing – keeping secrets from the people she loves the most out of fear of sounding batshit crazy – training for a fight to death when she may just die from exposure to Asgardian artifacts –

But then Bucky’s arms come around her body, caging and iron-tight. And even though she knows that it’s utterly fucked up to take comfort from physical touch when said person is trying to restrain you during a fight… it helps.

(She wishes Bucky would touch her again, somewhere outside of all this educational violence. That thought is fleeting and burning, immediately tucked into the back of Darcy’s mind as he manages to sweep her off her feet with a sharp jab to the sternum. The graduate students cheer from the sidelines.)

Their match ends with his victory as always, and after a moment of brushing off the dirt from her
knees and sore legs, Darcy turns to accept coffee from the tittering graduate students.

While sipping the bitter beverage, she watches as Bucky wordlessly retreats to his tent to shower and prepare for the day. They stopped sharing a tent after Darcy’s actions in Rome, and after their almost-kiss a week before, Bucky allows no familiarity in their training sessions. But she knows that he always waits for her to walk away from the fight first, to smile at Scout and accept breakfast, to turn away from him. And he still watches her from across the site, those eyes burning into her spine as she works, but he seems to be waiting for her to make some sort of move.

(At night, as the team sits around the fire to eat their rations of meat and rice, Bucky’s gaze burns even hotter. It traces the lines of her throat, her hands. Darcy wonders if it is her imagination, wishful thinking that someone like Bucky Barnes could still want to kiss her scarred mouth.)

Fear keeps her from reaching out. The memory of Freyja’s warning, of the reality they face each day when Dr. J scouts the sky for Dr. White’s drones.

Unite the four items… destroy me. It will take all.

There is a price that will be paid soon, Darcy knows this in her bones even without Freyja’s voice as a reminder. So she resists the urge to fall into his arms after each spar and instead walks alone in the dawn, shivering but steady. The people she loves move around the camp, chatting and busy, as Darcy slowly pulls away from them, inch by inch, locking them away in her heart. She feels as cold and remote as a distant star, preparing to be consumed by her own fire in the empty air.

Instinct has always served Darcy well. Research and preparation are major givens in her chosen profession - but Darcy has felt the shiver of dig here; act now; move to this site. This treasure hunt across the world has been driven by those hunches, by the scraps of information and luck she and her mentors have managed to piece together.

Now her instinct rises again, slow and sure. Something is coming. A hum on the horizon, the growing clamor of marching feet. Be it fire, HYDRA, Freyja herself. It is coming, not just for the artifacts, but for her.

The more people she can remove from the fallout, the better.

~~~*~~~

The discovery comes during a hot afternoon, the sun high and bright for a November day.

A bead of sweat trails down Darcy’s sweatshirt as she works beside Yael in trench 4a on layer S9, perched on the southern side of the site. Yael’s breathing is measured as she brushes past a delicate layer of dirt with a tiny brush, matching with Darcy’s in a soft rhythm that fills the breeze between them. They have always had a good partnership in the field, calm and meticulous as they work through the matrix of the trench layer by layer.

A scream shatters the air.

Darcy is moving before she even registers the action, honed by instinct. At her side, Yael is only a step behind – pulling herself out of the trench, brush now abandoned for a sharp trowel held aloft like a sword.
No words are spoken. A warning glance has Yael following on Darcy’s heels as they sprint across the camp as the screams continue, gaining volume as they clear the southside of the excavation. There are a thousand possibilities splitting Darcy’s thoughts. Has HYDRA finally come? Has someone fallen off of the rocky precipices Bucky had warned them to stay away from? Is Dr. J finally murdering one of the graduate students?

The reality is worse.

The smell of blood and burning flesh hits first. Darcy takes in the sight as she rushes forward, her tennis shoes sliding against loose stone. It is the northernmost trench, situated at the base of the crumbling temple - a low traffic area that has yielded almost nothing in the past two weeks of excavations. Mohammad had been the one stripping the dirt only days before, but she suddenly cannot remember who was assigned to this spot today.

Someone is propped up in Bucky’s strong arms, half splayed against the ground as they try to writhe out of Bucky’s iron grip. All she can see of the flailing victim is a flash of blonde hair clearly matted with sweat, wailing with such agony that Darcy feels sick. Across from the grisly sight, Scout has sunk to her knees in apparent terror.

The figure shifts as it screams, and Darcy nearly screams with him when she finally gets close enough to recognize the face.

Greg. It is Greg’s wails that pierce the air, arcs of agony cresting like waves that break across the horrified faces of the digging team. Sunny, smiling Gregory Ott, broken and bleeding in the dust.

An object is held inside his left hand, flashing gold in the light.

No.

Dr. J arrives at the scene before Darcy and Yael can clear the field between them. She jumps into action at Bucky’s side, reaching for Greg’s shaking limbs. The screams only intensify as Dr. J reaches out to unsuccessfully pin his arms back.

“What happened?” Yael demands, stopping only to turn to the kneeling Scout. “What is wrong with him?”

Scout is deathly pale in the sunlight, a hand clasped to her lips as her wide eyes track Greg’s thrashing. She is shaking, clearly in the grips of shock, her hair blood red against sickly pale skin.

“You were his digging partner today,” Yael takes Scout by the shoulders, yanking her to her feet. “What happened, Scout?!”

“He – we we’re digging,” Scout hiccups, clutching Yael’s hands. Greg’s screams rise in response to Dr. J’s ministrations. “– He found something, and I said to wait for Dr. Lewis, but he reached in —”

The rest is lost to her hiccuping sobs.

“Oh shit.” Darcy breathes. It couldn't have been...

She turns away from Scout, moving to crouch beside Greg’s thrashing body. Bucky is now on the ground with Greg’s torso braced in his arms, trying to hold him steady enough for Dr. J to find the injury. They are both moving with a frantic yet composed energy that she has only ever seen in those trained to deal with life-and-death situations.
Dr. J is trying desperately to stop Greg’s movements, but each time she manages to get close to his exposed skin, he howls like she has stuck a knife between his ribs.

“Get back, Lewis!”

But Darcy pays Dr. J’s words no heed. These sounds are familiar. This endless pain. Her heart knows this agony.

She knows the answer, but has to ask anyways. “What did he find, Scout?”

“I—” Scout has begun to sob. “I barely saw it clearly – it was golden, something on a chain –”

An object he still holds in his left hand.

“It’s burning him,” Darcy realizes. “Dr. J, it’s the fourth object. He touched it and now…”

Dr. J grits her teeth, pressing down on Greg’s legs in an attempt to hold him still. “I know, Lewis. It’s gotta be Asgardian gold. You need to step away. Bucky and I will-“

“Will what?” Darcy demands. “Touch the object and let the same thing happen to one of you?”

“You said that this happened to you with the bracelet and dagger,” Dr. J says. “It stopped for you -”

“That’s no guarantee it will stop for him! It shouldn’t even have started to hurt him!”

“I agree, we don’t know the rules to this magic. Which is why we need to get this out of him. It’s burned into his hand, Lewis.

“We have to separate it from his skin.” Bucky grunts as he pins Greg’s shoulders to the ground as gently as he can manage. He looks up, spearing Darcy with a determined look. “If it's adhering itself to his skin, pulling it off might not be an option. We don't want to rip his whole hand off with it.”

The idea is gruesome. Darcy stiffens, trying to think past the keening wails of her close friend.

“Then what can we do? We have to move fast, this is--”

Killing him, she wants to say. But the words catch in her throat.

Burning flesh. Darcy can smell it, now this close to Greg. Her heart is breaking in half, surrounded by the wails of a friend who trusted her to keep him safe.

This is my fault.

She remembers the pain that accompanied the first transformation of the Foula bracelet. She remembers touching the dagger in De Luca’s dungeon, how it had felt like touching a raw star – her skin crisping up and peeling back from white bone…

But she survived it. Miraculously. She had woken up with her skin back in place, unscarred both times. Protected by something: luck, fate, Freyja?

There is no guarantee that Greg will have any of those three on his side.

“LEWIS! You need to get back – you know what could happen if you interact with the metal!”

It doesn’t matter. The screams are getting worse, even as Greg’s vocal chords clearly begin to
shred under the pressure. Bucky is tight-lipped as he continues to keep Greg from clawing at his face, his arms, his hand.

This is something she can solve. Maybe.

Greg lets out a heartbreaking howl as Darcy reaches out to touch his skin. It burns under her fingertips, unnaturally hot. His entire body jolts backwards, curling away to protect whatever is clutched in his left hand. An animal caught in a trap, flailing wildly against it's fate.

Dr. J was right. The fourth artifact is burned into his flesh.

Darcy only has a moment to see the mess that used to be Greg’s hand. He turns from her touch to reveal a flash of red-gold, shimmering like lava against his palm. A split-second later, he pulled his arm away and clutched it to his chest.

“Greg,” Darcy presses her hands against his arms, trying to reach him over the noise of his pain. Bucky does not stop her movement, only holding him as still as possible while she encircles his injured wrist. “Greg! I need you to open your hand. I can make it stop hurting, you just have to listen.”

Her words don’t seem to reach him. The smell of charred flesh strikes Darcy’s nostrils on a fresh breeze.

“Greg,” Darcy begs. She can feel the anguished tears building in her eyes, but will not let them fall. Not now. “Just show me for a second, let me make it stop. I can fix it, Greg. I promise.”

Bucky’s surprised gaze flashes to Darcy as Greg stills in his arms for a moment, the screams dying down to jagged, hoarse whispers. Greg’s eyes blink open, bloodshot and leaking hysterical tears.

Slowly, shaking in a way that tells Darcy each move he makes is excruciating, Greg quiets and uncurls his left hand a fraction of an inch.

Behind them, Scout vomits into the dirt at the sight.

Greg’s hand is scarlet with blood and pus. At first glance, Darcy had thought that Greg was clutching the object to his hand – but now she can see it is the opposite. A thick chain of gold sticks to his skin, weavming between his fingers and charring the exposed skin it touches. The necklace shimmers in the light, alive and thrumming with some sort of energy. In the center of his palm, an amber the size of a small egg has been burned into his flesh. The edges of his flesh touching the gem are smoking, turning black.

There is no doubt in Darcy’s mind. This is Asgardian gold. It has eaten itself into Greg’s skin.

“Oh my God.” Dr. J’s voice is strangled with horror. “This poor boy.”

The strength Greg had managed to summon begins to break. His screams return in full force as the necklace seems to glow brighter, crackling against his skin. The smell of burning flesh intensifies, as if angered that the victim would calm even for a second.

“We need to get this off of him,” Bucky commands. He is the man who held Steve Roger's position in Nazi Europe, the cool and collected sharpshooter. “Dr. Juniper, if you can hold him down, I’ll get a knife—”

“No!”
Darcy stops Bucky’s plan with a cry. She knows the pain that Greg is battling, but this is wrong. It should stop. For her, it always stopped.

Maybe there is some sort of twisted truth in the magical fuckery of the past months. Maybe this is definitive proof of her connection with these Asgaridan objects – Greg now falls deeper and deeper into agony, while Darcy has always woken up from it.

The realization hits with the force of a thunderclap. She can touch it and live. Others cannot.

What had Freyja called her?

*My dottir, my chosen, my evening star…*

Daughter. Carrier of the legacy.

The one who can make this right.

Darcy can fix this. All it takes is a touch.

*“Lewis – don’t!”*

*“Doll—”*

It is an act of impulse, but in some crazy, instinctual way Darcy knows this is the only action that will save Greg. She slides to his side, blood now seeping into the rock beneath them. Dr. J and Bucky move to stop her, furious… but they are too late.

Darcy moves like a flash of light. She darts forward, pressing her palm against Greg’s ruined one. Her fingers lace with his, slick and bloody, while the amber gemstone of the necklace is cupped between their hands. The ridges of Greg’s torn, blistered skin press against Darcy’s scarred fingers.

It takes only a moment.

Greg’s wailing cuts off abruptly. Silence reigns for a long moment, as Dr. J turns to Darcy in absolute panic.

"Darcy...” Her mentor breathes. “What have you done?"

Her words are interrupted by Greg collapsing. The bloody grip against Darcy’s hand goes limp, something warm finally unattaching itself from his mangled flesh.

The necklace now rests in Darcy’s grip. Greg slumps back into Bucky’s arms, his ruined hand falling to his side.

For a moment, Darcy stares at the object she holds. It is a thick chain of interwoven Nordic knots, hammered with Asgardian runes and symbols with a massive pendant of glowing amber dangling from the chain. Heavy to hold, but shining with an inner light that captivates the eyes of all around them.

The image is deceptive. Even slick with Greg’s blood, the necklace looks too beautiful to have caused her friend so much pain.

That thought is shattered as the fire begins. This time, Darcy is braced for it. It is as she remembered - a supernova bursting against her flesh, an excruciating blaze spreading from her palm to her heart. An endless, endless crescendo.
Darcy’s screams replace Greg’s as her vision fails.

Bucky’s voice is what pulls Darcy back to consciousness, low and furious somewhere beside her.

“How could you not share this information, Dr. Juniper?”

The room seems still. Darcy tests her senses in small fragments - the smell of antiseptic; the cushion of a thin pillow beneath her head; and most surprisingly, a warm, calloused hand clasping hers.

She would know those rough palms anywhere.

Bucky Barnes is holding her hand. Livid, apparently. “I’ve been training her to the limit every morning for the past two weeks. If I had known she was a step away from dying, I wouldn’t have…”

He trails off, words lost suddenly.

“Wouldn’t have what?” Dr. J’s tone is harsh. “Wouldn’t have looked like you wanted to suck her face off every morning before you stormed off?” An annoyed huff. “Look, Barnes. It wasn’t our information to share. Mohammad and I ran the tests on her blood only days ago. Aren’t you familiar with doctor-patient confidentiality?”

Dr. Mark’s low baritone, warning. “Eleanor…”

But apparently the point for voices of reason has passed while Darcy slept. Bucky’s fury reignites. “Don’t preach at me. This isn’t exactly a normal situation, Juniper. You both know I’m the one who’s supposed to keep her safe, and the fact that she’s pushing herself to death for these goddamn artifacts is what I would label essential information.”

The anger sparking around Darcy is good enough reason for her to try to sit up and stop this conversation, but there is a weight pressing her eyes shut. She strains against her heavy eyelids, trying to lift her gaze even just a sliver open...

A new voice speaks from further away, soft but firm. Mohammad, mediating the growing tension. “Your training with Darcy had no effect on her current condition. Dr. Juniper and I warned her that it was exposure to the artifacts causing the spike of aurum asgardianus in her bloodstream. The effect of that spike being theorized as…”

“Something exactly like this.” Dr. J’s voice is sharp, but there is a thread of exhaustion in the lilt of her words. “Elevated body temperature, unconscious state, dangerously high heart rate.” A sigh. “We’re lucky she’s been stabilized before the cavalry arrives. I don’t fancy the idea of the full fury of Stark Industries coming down atop our heads.”

“No.”

The room explodes into movement as Darcy manages to speak. The word is a croak from her bone-dry throat, resulting in searing pain. After a moment of deep breathing, her eyes finally manage to slide open, vision still blurred as the world tilts into a range of hazy shapes. Around her is a riot of
color, figures moving vaguely into range above and round her.

Cool hands touch her cheek. Bucky’s furrowed brow sharpens in her field of vision as she blinks to gain clarity.

“Doll?”

All anger has been swept out of his tone. Only relief left in its place.

“Darce, can you hear me?”

Darcy tries to nod, taking strength from his fingers against her face, but it results in a dull pain rocking through her skull. Bucky’s lips purse in worry.

“Mohammad,” He barks, eyes never budging from her face. “What are you seeing on the monitors? Is she okay?”

“Her heart rate is back in normal range,” The scientist answers quickly, underscored by the click of his fingers flying across a keyboard. “Body temperature at 99.1 fahrenheit. Not ideal, but much better than her previous state.”

The room seems to relax. Darcy blinks, and when she pries her eyes back open it is Dr. J now at Bucky’s side, pressing a cool cup of water to her lips.

“Drink, Lewis.” She demands. “You’ve burned off a crazy amount of fluids. The IV is the only thing keeping you from drying up.”

The water tastes like heaven. Darcy gulps it down ravenously, managing in her desperation to pull herself up into a seated position with help from Bucky’s gentle hands. She barely cares that half of the water is flooding down her cheeks, only concerned about the bit that makes it into her mouth.

It feels like an eternity before Darcy is summon the strength to speak. The water soothed her throat, but the words are still stifled, clumsy and raw.

“What happened?” She manages, blinking at Bucky. The events of the day come rushing back, fear and guilt and agony all intertwined. “Oh God - the necklace, Greg-”

“Greg is doing better,” Bucky says quickly, grip tightening around hers. “The damage to his hand is... extensive, but Mohammad has treated the wound and sedated him.”

His hand, the artifact burning through skin and muscle. She remembers Greg’s screams, his bloody wound as the necklace burned right through his flesh.

He's alive, she breathes. Greg is alive.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Six hours.” Dr. J answers icily. She settles her sharp gaze on Darcy. Anger bleeds into her already sharp tone. “I warned you about interacting with any more of the Asgardian relics, Lewis! You’re lucky to be alive right now. For a good moment, Mohammad and I both thought that the fever was going to kill you. Do you know how high your temperature went?! Dr. J pauses. “105 degrees, Lewis. For a sustained six hours. Nothing we did could bring it down. Humans can’t battle fevers like that without brain damage, organ failure-”

“She gets it.” Bucky interjects harshly.
“Clearly she doesn’t, because if she did,” Dr. J jabs a finger in the direction of the IV in Darcy’s arm. “She would never have done something so idiotic!”

For once, Dr. J is wrong. Darcy would do it all over again.

“Dr. J...” Darcy protests weakly, wincing at the dry pull of her throat. “He was going to die. I had to try.”

“You could have died,” Dr. J counters. “You almost died. Came within inches. Lucky bastard, as usual.”

Mohammad shakes his head. “Luck runs out eventually, Dr. Lewis.”

A choked laugh escapes Dr. Mark. “There is some sort of irony in hearing you warn about the dangers of lucky saves, Eleanor.”

“Bite me, Joseph.”

The room threatens to descend into chaos, but Darcy clings to Bucky’s hand and forces herself to speak over the din of argument.

“I’m alive, aren’t I?”

She doesn’t mean to sound flippant in regards to her own safety, but judging from the expressions of those around her, she does.

Silence falls. Turning away from Dr. Mark, Dr. J rubs an exhausted hand down her face, and for the first time ever, Darcy notes how aged she looks. Stress has carved tired lines down her tanned face. Her long grey hair is loose around her shoulders, sharp grey eyes weary.

The sudden realization softens Darcy’s heart. The unstoppable, unflappable Dr. J had been worried for her. Truly worried. The only person who knows the entire truth about Freyja is Dr. J, who believed her in Rome with little more than a story of a woman crying tears of gold in a piazza patio.

“I’m alive,” She repeats, reaching out to intertwine the fingers of her free hand with Dr. J’s. Her mentor accepts the touch, stiffly. “And honestly, how? When the Foula bracelet activated, I didn’t pass out. When the dagger touched my skin Natasha said I was unconscious for only a minute. But this time...”

“Because with each ‘first touch’ of the Asgardian relics, you are increasing the *aurum asgardianus* levels in your bloodstream.” Mohammad answers honestly, coming around to attach a blood pressure cuff to Darcy’s left arm. “Each time you have interacted with an artifact, it has reacted back with you and fundamentally changed your chemical make-up. What we understand now, based on Greg’s reaction to the artifact versus yours, is that you have the capacity to survive exposure and life with this material, if just barely.”

Darcy blinks. “So, you’re theorizing that Greg wouldn’t have lived after touching the necklace?”

“Precisely,” Mohammad confirms, reaching to adjust the wire glasses on the bridge of his nose. “Greg was in agony for over five minutes, with the necklace adhering to his skin and burning through to his subcutaneous tissue. I am shocked he had lost consciousness due to the pain he experienced. However, once *you* interacted with the artifact the initial reaction was similar to Greg’s-”

“- screaming, burning flesh -” Dr. Mark supplies helpfully.
“- but within thirty seconds, you had collapsed and the necklace disengaged from your skin with far less damage. The wound was virtually non-existent by the time we carried you into the labs.”

“Virtually?” She questions. It is exactly what happened with the dagger in De Luca’s vault - her hand had been a mess of charred skin, peeling back to reveal bone… and when she had woken a minute later, all damage was gone.

There is a moment in which Dr. J exchanges an uneasy glance with Bucky.

“Take a look at your left hand,” Dr. J suggests grimly. “You’ve got a matching set now, Wonder Woman.”

Sure enough, when Darcy uncurls her left palm she is greeted by a familiar sight: a golden triskelion, burned into her skin with thick, curling lines.

She should be shocked. Instead Darcy pulls her right hand out of Bucky’s, silent as she takes in the sight of matching brands on each palm. A sense of calm falls over her.

The Foula bracelet chose her, marked her as worthy and made its home on her wrist. The dagger and bracelet… they branded their mark right into the hand she touched them with.

The chalice hasn’t gotten a chance to claim her yet.

“This exposure to aurum asgardianus,” Darcy finally manages to speak, unable to look away from her newest tattoo. “Is it going to kill me?”

The question on everyone’s mind. At her side, Bucky tenses.

“Not currently.” Dr. Mark says after a long moment of speculative silence. “You’ve managed to survive initial exposure, and as far as Mohammad can tell, once the compound stabilizes in your bloodstream your temperature and heart rate are able to recover. What worries us is that each new artifact has elongated that recovery time, with this instance taking you into dangerous territory.”

Darcy can see what Dr. Mark is implying. “Which means that interacting with the chalice, because it is confirmed Asgardian gold, would…”

“Result in an episode even worse than what you have just experienced with the necklace,” Mohammad finishes with a nod. “Which would, beyond a doubt, end in your death.”

Death.

How many times has she heard this, by now? Shouldn’t it get old at this point?

“Alright,” Darcy sucks in a deep breath, ignoring the concern and upset radiating from the three people around her bedside. There has to be a way to move past this, to keep going. “So I won’t touch the chalice. We’ll just keep it in the safe until we can transfer it back to the compound.”

It is the only scrap of a plan they have. Dr. J inclines her chin in assent, but Darcy can see in her face that there are reservations in her mind, contingencies to review.

“This is pushing the boundaries of science,” Mohammad says softly, breaking the silence with his telltale soft tone. “I know that your father has battled aliens from far-off universes, and that creatures like Thor speak to the truth of advanced, Asgardian culture. But what exactly are we dealing with here, Dr. Lewis? Why are these artifacts so intrinsically tied to you?” He shakes his head, dark curls brushing against his cheek. “I have gone over your blood samples time and time
again. I even managed to take a sample from Greg while I treated his hand. His blood had no traces of *aurum asgardianus*, while yours increases with each instance of exposure. What makes you so different from other humans?"

There is no answer that Darcy can give right away. She closes her eyes, exhausted, and thinks of all the impossible things that she has shoved to the back corners of her mind, unable to face: the dreams that left her bleeding, the brands burned into her skin, the melodious voice in her mind that speaks in strange moments…

... and a woman who claimed to be Freyja, crying tears of gold in a piazza in Rome.

She has spent too long trying to push these instances away. To ignore every bit of proof pressed before her eyes.

Darcy has *always* had an answer. She doesn’t want to run from this anymore, but she also doesn’t want to drag anyone else into this chaos.

It is Dr. J who meets Darcy’s gaze with understanding. Dr. J who listened to Darcy over whiskey-spiked coffee the morning after Darcy had woken up in her bed, a head full of dreams and instructions from a Norse goddess.

“It’s because I am Freyja’s chosen.” She looks up, clenching the thin blanket of her cot between branded hands. “There were four items that she asked me to find, and we’ve found them. The bracelet, the dagger, the cup, and the necklace. Whatever comes next, it’s me that has to pay the price.”

~~~*~~~

Greg is small and pale in his cot, surrounded by every piece of medical equipment Mohammad had the foresight to bring.

Bucky hovers at Darcy’s side, hovering but not touching as she stumbles forward. She doesn’t want to tell him to back off, not when his touch feels like the one stable thing in her world.

Darcy reaches forward to brush a matted lock of blonde hair back from Greg’s grey-tinged face. She had insisted on seeing him before leaving the tent, needing to see the extent of his injuries for herself. His left hand is encased in thick gauze, resting gently on his chest. Nearby, Mohammad fiddles with the beeping monitors.

“Internally, he is fine. Heart rate steady, blood pressure within normal range. None of the reaction you had with *aurum asgardianus* seem to have manifested in him.”

Darcy relaxes. “No traces of it in his blood?”

“So far, none.” Mohammad confirms. “His hand is my concern, however. Major nerve damage at the very least, which means it is kinder to keep him sedated for now. For pain management.”

Guilt is heavy in Darcy’s chest. She stares at Greg’s sleeping face, wondering: will he be able to forgive her for leading him on this quest? How much anger will he hold in his heart over the pain he endured because of her excavation plans?
She can’t even think of a way to begin apologizing.

“When will he wake up?”

“We’re going to keep him under until doctors arrive,” Mohammad answers gently. “They will be able to help him in ways I cannot. Skin grafts, perhaps. Surgery, certainly.”

Darcy tries to swallow, ignoring the burn of her still dry-throat. “Skin grafts? Mohammad, that’s advanced. Are they local doctors?”

The room goes still again. Mohammad drops her gaze, looking instead helplessly to Dr. J, who refuses to say a word.

“Not exactly,” Bucky finally answers. His grip on her shoulder tightens. “Greg is going to need intensive treatment to deal with the nerve damage in his hand. We had to call in Dr. Cho.”

The breath leaves Darcy in a startled gasp. “Oh no.”

“As you can imagine,” Dr. Mark grimaces. “Contacting Dr. Cho about a major injury at our site caused… agitation for your father. He was worried, and his humor did not improve when we updated him on your own condition.”

Dread uncurls in the pit of her stomach. “Tell me you didn’t…”

“Tony Stark will be here by morning,” Dr. J says bluntly. “Despite our messages that you are awake and fine, Pepper Potts last updated that they would be taking a jet to ‘check in’ on the site. Best be ready with a good explanation of your dumbass choices for your father, Lewis.”

Well shit.

~~~*~~~

When Mohammad finally finishes all of his testing and allows Darcy to leave the laboratory tent, it is the middle of the night.

The rest of the camp is asleep, shaken by Greg’s bloody injury and Darcy’s collapse. Dr. J and Dr. Mark had retired to research together, while Mohammad had enlisted Bucky’s help in beginning to clear up parts of the laboratory tent.

It is just her in the darkness.

She walks slowly through camp, stepping lightly in her boots. There is a finality that hangs in the air. If Freyja’s words are to be believed, four items of Asgardian influence existed for them to find. Four have been found by Darcy and her team.

Which leaves the question she and Dr. J have debated for the past two hours: what comes next?

They will mobilize first thing in the morning. Once Tony lands, priority will be to get the artifacts on his secure flight back to New York, leaving half the team behind to finish documenting the site. Darcy has not decided yet if she will stay or go.

She is tired of curveballs. She wants to do what she loves and she wants to protect who she loves.
Why does it now feel like a choice between the two?

One thing is certain, she will not let someone suffer in her place like Greg has again.

The night air is cool and crisp, stars glowing in the sky above like lanterns. This far from civilization the light of the moon and stars bleaches the stone and temple a bone white, rising eerily from the dark stone. The only noise comes from the distant crash of waves meeting rock, far below the cliff that the Temple of Assoss is perched on.

A prickling sensation between her shoulder blades tells Darcy that she is not alone. Turning on her heel, she lifts a hand to the Foula bracelet and stares into the darkness just beyond the dying fire-pit.

As her eyes adjust, Bucky comes into view. It is the bulk of his shoulders she notices first, then the glint of his icy eyes. Arms crossed, jaw set.

Darcy immediately drops her fingers from the bracelet. If this ends in a fight, it won’t be one weapons can win.

Bucky steps forward, illuminated only by moonlight. It occurs to her that he is a study of contrasts - cheekbones sharp in the light, the hollows of his cheeks cast into shadow. But his blue eyes burn, icy and bright as they scan her face. She imagines him sketched in charcoal, all shadow and shading, an artists’ rendition of a warrior in ink.

He speaks first.

“You scared me today.”

Darcy tenses. The idea of shouldering any more guilt today makes her want to fall to her knees, to surrender to exhaustion.

“I’m sorry.” She manages. “You know it wasn’t exactly - planned.”

“Not asking you to be sorry,” He shrugs, stepping further into the light. “Not this time.”

Surprise causes her to lift her head, to peer up at him in confusion. She had expected a conflict, another bursting crescendo, but Bucky seems… soft. Concerned. There is a look in his eyes she can’t read, a strange mix of conviction and vulnerability, as if he is the one with something to apologize for.

His voice is rough when he speaks. “Never met someone as strong as you, Darce.”

Darcy cannot move. She cannot figure out how to formulate words to best express her shock. All she can do is watch as Bucky stalks closer, fixated on her. “Everytime the world knocks you down, I watch you get back up. No matter how hard it hits.” He sucks in a breath. “I’ve made it clear that it scares the hell outta me.”

Darcy tries to relax. She’s had this conversation with him before. “I’m not fearless.”

But he keeps speaking, voice low and fervent. “Look, I’m not gonna fight you on this again. I’ve learned my lesson about telling you what to do.” An overdue concession. “I just- doll.” His tone is sinfully low, insistent in a way that has Darcy’s toes curling involuntarily. “You have to stop doing it alone.”

It takes every drop of self-control she has to stay still, to keep her emotions from bleeding into her
face. Bucky is now inches away from her, close enough that she can smell the cinnamon on his breath, the heat of his bare arms against the thin cotton of her sweatshirt.

“Let me help, Darce.”

The border of ‘friendship’ that Darcy has worked so hard to maintain between them breaks. Bucky’s hands raise, coming up to cup her cold cheeks. His thumb traces the line of her cheekbone, slow and sure.

She can’t help but lean into the touch. In this moment, framed by the night and a lonely moon, it does not feel like weakness.

(His touch is unspeakably warm against her frigid bones. Darcy has been cold since that first night under the stars, her feet sliced to ribbons, the weight of a secret held heavy in her chest.)

“I keep watchin’ you pull yourself away from everyone, and I’m not gonna pretend I understand much about these magic artifacts or the levels Mohammad talks about, but I can’t keep lettin’ you deal with it on your own.”

His words are a balm. They wash over Darcy, heavy with temptation and sincerity. She wants to sink into them, swallow their potential and rest in their security. But can she? Has Bucky really noticed the distance she has put between herself and the rest of the team, the solitude she has used as a protective shield as she comes to terms with what Freyja’s voice means?

The cool press of his forehead against hers almost makes her flinch, but Bucky does not let her pull away from his grip. The surety in his expression nearly brings her to her knees, icy eyes clear with the intention that he has enough confidence for both of them. One hand continues to cup her face, the other gathering her cold fingers against his warm ones.

This is the closest they have been since that alley in Bucharest, a thousand years ago.

The molten heat in his words is enough to melt her. Rasping, promising as those eyes burn into her.

“Please, lean on me. I’d walk into anything with you: HYDRA bases, hell, anything.” The rough, lilting tone of his voice is something she will never get used to, no matter how much she hears it. Rattling her to the bone, warm and frightening all at once. It is low, a plea and a vow all at once. “Let me do this with you. Whatever the hell it is you’re planning, at least let me help.”

And god - she wants to. Falling into Bucky Barnes is temptation personified - everything she has ever wanted to hear is tumbling from his lips, free for the taking. Since she first locked the idea of him deep into her heart after meeting him again in the Compound living room; these are the words she has dreamed of, crafted from fantasy.

(In her sleepless nights, Darcy's thoughts have always turned back to Bucky. A kiss in an alleyway, a thousand moments of flirtations... and then, what? Who is she to lay claim to a Brooklyn's Casanova? To the Winter Soldier? To the best man she has ever known?)

Darcy cannot look away from him, cannot turn away from the heat in his gaze, his finger, the skin that grips hers with fierce intent.

(“Devotion,” Kara had called it when Dan had taken her on that first date, after years of checking in and doting on them both. “It took me so long to see it.”)

All she can do is surrender.
“Alright.”

It happens in fragments. Bucky reaches a pale hand out, slowly brushing back a stray lock of hair from her forehead. His touch lingers, grip tightening as her affirmation processes, blue eyes dilating to a dark hue…

Darcy steps closer, clinging desperately to this affection, this burden shared from her shoulders to his - and suddenly -

Bucky dips his head as Darcy rises to meet him. It is an act of instinct and for a long moment, they are suspended together in time. Breath mingled, air thick with promise. An endless second before the blast - the bomb - the discovery -

She breathes him in. Cinnamon and flame, experience against passion. Before she can summon her own nerves to make the plunge, Bucky has closed the inches between them - sealing his lips against hers. Ever the pioneer, the ladies' man from history books.

He is kissing her.

It is rough and sweet all at once - so long overdue that Bucky seems like he doesn’t want to waste another second. All she knows is the rough slant of his mouth against hers, first hesitant - then full of fire - sure and firm - taking what has belonged to him all this time, since that damn alleyway in Bucharest when Darcy was so much younger than she is now and he was just a man who saved her life…

His grip tightens, arms cradling the small of her back and pulling her up. She kisses him with every damned word she has swallowed in the past months, tangling her free hand into his hair to pull him closer. It is a litany of lips, teeth, tongue. A prayer. A reckoning.

The moon watches as they finally manage to stumble into Darcy’s tent, unwilling to part for even a moment.

(Fate, Darcy thinks with his teeth at her throat, his weight hovering above hers. This has to be fate.)

(Fate, Freyja echoes, a soft underscore to Darcy's panting breaths. Of course this is fate, dóttir. How could it be anything else?)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!