File Fixation
by PumpkinDoodles

Summary

At SHIELD headquarters in DC, they have a game called "File Fixation." It's like "Hottie of the Month," only your voting choices are limited to people with SHIELD files. SHIELD R&D loves Dr. Jane Foster. Thor is popular on floors 1 through 41. An alarming percentage of SHIELD's female officers totally would with Loki (at least anonymously). One particular SHIELD employee always votes for Darcy Lewis.

This month's tally is interrupted by an emergency of Asgardian proportions: Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis are missing. Thor would really appreciate some assistance from SHIELD to get them back.

Notes

I own nothing!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

SHIELD headquarters,
Triskelion Building, DC

“Hey, Cap, what’s your pick for this month’s File Fixation?” Jack Rollins called across the desks on the 37th floor of SHIELD headquarters. Steve Rogers looked up from his report on the Lemurian Star mission and shook his head, a bit sadly.

“No, thank you, Agent Rollins,” Steve said politely.


“I’ve never played before,” Jack said to her, looking slightly confused. He was the newest member of STRIKE Alpha. Jack had just transferred in from Australian Special Forces. Fury had recruited him for, well, his usually unfathomable reasons. Nobody quite understood how Nick Fury and (the late, much lamented) Phil Coulson had determined hiring criteria for SHIELD. Ex-assassins rubbed shoulders with ex-soldiers, people occasionally spotted Thor having lunch in the cafeteria with Steve Rogers, and the most terrifying employee was probably Maria Hill, who had double degrees in engineering and communication, but could cut you dead with a look.

“Jasper always picks Pepper because he is a leg man and Steve refuses to play File Fixation because he lacks a sense of humor,” she explained. “Put down Bruce Banner for both of us, Jack.”


“Absolutely,” she said.

“All right,” Jack said, typing into the secret email roster that circulated every month. “Two for Banner, one for Potts as the hottest people in the SHIELD files for May.” Steve looked at Natasha dubiously.

“Really, Nat?” he said. “Bruce?”

“You can always supply your own answer, Steve,” she said. She smiled again. Steve looked curiously at her expression.

“It’s a demeaning game. We shouldn’t be trawling through the work files picking out a pinup gal for every month,” Steve said. “Or guy? Has a guy ever won File Fixation?”

“Stark has won several times, but I believe that to be more a function of SHIELD agent wish fulfillment than a reflection of his sexual desirability to the average SHIELD employee,” Nat said.

“I won’t tell him you said that,” Steve said.

“What kind of wish fulfillment?” Jack asked curiously.

“The last time he won, he’d just been on the homepage of TMZ attending the Superbowl with a roster of Victoria’s Secret models,” Nat said.
“He and Pepper are on a break!” Jasper Sitwell supplied.

“I hope you haven’t bugged Pepper Potts’ apartment,” Steve muttered quietly. “How does he even know that?” he asked Natasha.

“She could, in fact, kill you Jasper,” Nat said. “It was on the cover of last week’s People, Steve.”

“I thought you old folks loved to read things on paper still,” Sitwell said.

“Very funny,” Steve said, as Brock Rumlow entered the room. “Rumlow,” Steve said, nodding.

“Cap,” Rumlow said in turn. He went over to the coffee maker in the adjacent breakroom.

“What is that about?” Jack asked Nat in a whisper. “I’ve noticed tension.”

“Steve is not especially good with authority figures,” Nat said quietly, grinning. “They have chain-of-command issues.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “Ooooh. Two many chooks in the henhouse. I gotcha.”

“In my country, we would say too many wolves in the winter,” Nat said. “One wolf eventually has to back down or be killed.”

“Yeah, because that’s not a totally disturbing metaphor,” Steve muttered.

“You heard that?” Jack said incredulously.

“His hearing’s excellent,” Rumlow said, sitting down at his own desk with a coffee mug. “So’s mine, as a matter of fact.”

“Probably not quite as good as mine,” Steve said politely.

“Who knows?” Rumlow said. He was filling out electronic paperwork on his SHIELD laptop, but for some reason, he rolled a yellow no. 2 pencil between his teeth. Cleech-cleech-cleech.

“He knows this sound makes Steve crazy,” Nat said to Jack.

“Do you have a vote for File Fixation, Brock?” Jack asked, wanting to break the weird tension in the room. The odd sound paused.

“Taser Girl,” Rumlow said from behind the pencil and began rolling it again.

“Taser girl?” Jack said. When he said it, it sounded like ‘gel.’ He thought he might’ve misheard Rumlow.

“He means Darcy Lewis,” Nat explained to him. “She is the assistant to Dr. Jane Foster and once tased Thor. That is the origin of her nickname. There,” Natasha said, pointing to an entry on his electronic form. Next to the box for Darcy Lewis, it had ‘Taser Girl/Foster’s Assistant’ in parenthesis, just like Tony Stark was listed as ‘Tony Stark (Iron Man).’.

“He always picks Taser Girl,” Sitwell said. “He’s singlehandedly”--Sitwell snorted at his own dirty pun and Steve frowned at the implication--”responsible for keeping her on the list since Puente Antiguo. Even though he’s never met her.”

“Meeting her is beside the point, Sitwell. If I met her, that would ruin it,” Rumlow said. He’d taken the pencil out of his mouth and tucked it behind his ear. Steve had visibly cringed.
“Ruin what?” Steve said sharply.

“What do you think? The fantasy,” Rumlow said as if Steve was particularly slow.

“She’s a perfectly respectable young woman,” Steve said coldly. Natasha looked wickedly inspired.

“That’s right, you met her when you were in Norway with Thor and Jane, it was on Thor’s secret Instagram,” the Russian said. For a second, Rumlow had frozen, but he returned to typing. If anything, his typing might have grown more pointed. Natasha hit a few buttons on her own screen and brought up an image on the tactical screen on the nearest wall. It was an image of bundled up figures. Jack peered at it.

“We visited the Norwegian Resistance museum in Oslo,” Steve explained to a curious-looking Jack. “I knew a Norwegian Resistance guy during the war.” There were four figures in front of a brick and stone building with a large staircase. “That’s Thor, Thor’s girl Dr. Jane Foster, me, and Miss Lewis in the pink hat,” Steve said. “Miss Lewis studied political science, so she’s pretty interested in my wartime experiences.”

Jack Rollins hadn’t realized that Captain America could actually sound smug. But Steve was grinning slyly at Brock Rumlow’s back. The SHIELD Commander had turned fractionally to see the photo, then turned immediately back to his work. Jack looked at Natasha. She rolled her eyes and mouthed the word *children* at him.

There was a heavy series of footfalls in the hallway. “STRIKE,” Nick Fury said in the doorway, using the collective greeting for the group. “If we could put Rogers’ vacation snaps away, I have an upcoming project for you all. I assume the *Lemurian Star* reports are all filed.” Natasha and Jack nodded. Sitwell was typing furiously.

“I’m finished,” Steve said, then looked at Rumlow.

“Done,” the STRIKE Commander said, clicking a button.

“Well? Move your asses, please,” Fury said. Brock, Natasha, Jack and Steve stood as a unit and followed him. “Sitwell, get it done,” Fury said dryly. “Then go back to your actual office or I’ll be forced to tell Tony Stark that you keep a poster of his girlfriend and her legs from *Vogue* in your SHIELD locker.”

“Yes, Director Fury,” Sitwell said.

***

The group was in one of the weird SHIELD elevators traveling upwards. Rollins hated the exterior elevators; they gave him a slight case of vertigo and he hadn’t adjusted to them yet. It was worse on days like this. A sudden spring thunderstorm was brewing, he thought, looking at the darkening sky. There was a crack of lightning. Jack tried to focus on what Fury was saying about an upcoming project. *Boom.* This time, the sound of the lightning was so strong that even Captain America was distracted.
“Uh, Director? I believe we have an incoming visitor,” Steve said.

“Incoming visitor?” Rumlow said. “Care to explain?”

“Don’t worry,” Nat said to Jack. He was sweating. “It’s a friendly visitor.”

“That’s Thor’s lightning,” Steve said, as there was a sudden shuddering thud above their heads.

“Bloody hell,” Jack said. Rumlow had immediately reached for his weapon, but Romanoff shook her head. She swung her foot onto the elevator guardrail and popped away one of the elevator’s ceiling tiles. A hole appeared in the roof. In the hole, a blonde man’s head and upper torso emerged.


“Yeah,” Nick Fury said. “I kinda got that. What is going on, your royal highness?” The blonde man dropped to the floor of the elevator with a thump. The glass box shuddered slightly and Jack grabbed the railing. Rumlow arched an eyebrow at him as he holstered his gun, but Rollins missed it. He was too busy staring at the Asgardian’s hand.

“Is that Mjolnir? The actual Mjolnir?” Rollins asked.


“My Jane is missing,” Thor said in a fretful voice. “Heimdall cannot see her. This has not occurred since the matter of the Aether. I had hoped you could verify the location of Jane or my Lightning Sister with their SHIELD devices. Doubtless they will be together.”

“How long have they been missing?” Steve said, shifting into Captain America mode. He was even standing up straighter and involuntarily reaching for his shield.

“Heimdall lost sight of them only twenty minutes ago,” Thor said. “He cannot see them or hear their calls for distress, wherever they may be.” The elevator stopped.

“We can activate their signals in five minutes,” Fury said.

“Thank you, my friend,” Thor said solemnly.

“Open up situation room 2B,” Fury said into a speaker on the elevator.

“Yes, sir,” a voice replied. Thor tilted his head.

“Is there someone in there or is it another Midgardian marvel of communication?” Thor asked Rumlow, as the group stepped off the elevator. Fury had swept ahead of them.

“It’s wired to the mainframe downstairs,” Rumlow said, looking at him skeptically.

“On Asgard, we use ravens,” Thor explained.

“You need a phone,” Nat told him.

“I have difficulty with the buttons,” Thor said. “Loki is quite good at placing my calls for me with his own phone, owing to the relative slenderness of his fingers compared to mine and his adeptness with Midgardian devices, but he is currently detained and cannot assist me at present.”
“Jail again?” Steve said.

“Yes,” Thor said. “He was caught trying to parlay with my father’s long-estranged cousins.”

“Odin has cousins?” Natasha said.

“I did not realize any of them had survived my father’s ascension to the throne. It was, uh, quite bloody, so…” Thor said, hesitating.

“Your lunatic brother was cultivating alternative claims to the throne of Asgard?” Rumlow said, arching an eyebrow. They were turning into the situation room. Fury and Maria Hill were already at work. Someone must’ve sent her upstairs.

“He is adopted,” Thor said. Steve tried not to laugh.

***

“We’re gonna die in this tomb shaft,” Darcy said to Jane. “I did not want to die in anything called a shaft. Do you know the jokes that my brother will make at my funeral?”

“Shhh,” Jane said. She was waving a spectrometer or something around frantically. “They’ll hear you. I think if I can find a signal, we’ll know the weakest wall. I’m going to walk this way.”

“Do you know how much restraint it’s taking me not to make a joke in response to that? We’re in a freaking Egyptian pyramid!” Darcy said. “Hold on, tie this to your belt.” She’d brought climbing gear, including a rope that she now linked between herself and Jane. “No getting lost or separated,” she said.

“Yeah,” Jane said. She was glued to her doohickey. “I’ll be right back.”

“The floor slants down. Watch your step,” Darcy said.

“Sure,” Jane said diffidently.

“When have I heard that before?” Darcy said. She sighed. She’d hit her SHIELD tracker button about twenty minutes ago but didn’t know if it transmitted through walls this thick. Pure stone. “Heimdall, Heimdall, Heimdall,” Darcy muttered, twisting the gold Asgardian cuff bracelet on her left wrist. She didn’t yell; she was too afraid of drawing the attention of the tomb robbers they’d been running from when they fell in. Also, she was worried about echoes creating a collapse. Didn’t that happen in movies? Besides, an all-seeing Asgardian who watched over the worlds should be able to hear you at any volume, right?

Darcy watched as the rope attached to her waist unfurled. Jane was going farther and farther away. Bad idea, Darcy suspected, but you couldn’t talk sense into Jane where major Science! was at play. All of a sudden, Darcy thought she saw two tiny pinpricks of yellow light in the dark. Like eyes. Moving closer and closer, upwards and upwards. “Jane?” she said out loud. “Jane?” There was no response. Was it a rat? Or worse? “Oh God, oh God, don’t be a snake, don’t be a snake,” she chanted to herself. The walls on all sides were perfectly vertical. She barely knew how to scale the baby rock wall at the gym. Whatever this was, there was no escape from it.

“Darcy?” the yellow dots said, in a suddenly familiar voice.
“Oh thank the Realms! Loki, I thought you were a critter,” she said, slumping down against the wall in relief.

The yellow dots were actually a tiny set of phantom candles in his hand. He came closer. “What is a critter? Are you all right?” he asked.

“Uh, it’s uh, an animal of indeterminate origin?” Darcy said.

“You are injured,” Loki said crouching down to where she had sat when she realized he wasn’t a freaking cobra or an asp. She thought he looked weird, but there was barely any light. “You have a head injury. Tell me what transpired?” he said.

“Um, we were here in Egypt doing astro readings--the stars, not the tarot kind--and they led us to this pyramid. Jane wanted to go inside which I thought was a terrible idea because this is like a UNESCO World Heritage site, but she insisted even when I said I didn’t want to get arrested again- -” Darcy said.

“Because she is more bull-headed than Thor, which I did not think was possible in a mortal,” Loki said sharply. He sighed and peered up dubiously at the hole above Darcy’s head.

“True that. Anyway, we’d snuck in, I was feeling totally like Rachel Weisz in *The Mummy*, everything was cool, until these guys all in black with really, really large guns showed up and chased us,” Darcy said. “Arm muscles and AK-47s were both intimidating. There are at least a half-dozen of them, maybe more? I think they’re, like, serious trouble, not just poor Egyptians looking for relics for food money. Anyhow, we fell into this shaft and now Jane is wandering around with a thingamajig on the other end of this rope. Can you magic us out?”

“No,” he said. “I’m stuck in my father’s bloody gaol. My magic has limits. Can you tell me your exact location? I will try to get a message to Thor. I don’t know how long I can project myself. I only knew your were in distress because of your bracelet.” It was his protective magic metalwork. He’d given it to her as a gift after she’d snuck down to meet him in jail once. They were sort of prison pen pals now.

She repeated her exact coordinates to him and he nodded. “All right,” he said. “I will try to project myself to my brother and then return--Darcy!”

Darcy felt a sudden, violent yank on her rope and she was sliding away from Loki. He reached for her, but his shimmery hand went straight through her arm. She yelled in surprise, but a second later, she was falling and falling. Everything went black.

***

Thor was explaining to Nick Fury that Jane and Darcy had been in Egypt when Maria Hill interrupted him. “Sir, I’m running the tracker signals check, but we have a fuzzy signal messing with the monitor screen,” she said. They’d been pulling up satellite images of Jane and Darcy’s last known location. Only Thor wasn’t exactly sure where they were now.

“Get Cameron Klein up here,” Fury barked into his wrist receiver. He’d barely finished speaking when Loki’s face appeared on the screen.
“Where are you, you bloody great clod?” he snapped at Thor.

“I’m getting help for Jane, she is missing,” Thor said.

“Yes, I know that. I have just seen Darcy. She’s injured and they’re at the bottom a tomb shaft at Giza. There are armed bandits within the same complex. Possibly many of them. I am trapped in this ridiculous prison of father’s. Take Mjolnir to this location and get them out, you idiot,” Loki said, reeling off a set of coordinates. Natasha recorded them.

“Got it,” she told Loki. He nodded and huffed out a breath.

“Thank you,” he said to her.

“How can I trust you? What if this is a trick?” Thor said. “How did you even know where they were unless this is your mischief, Loki?”

“He gave Darcy a protective bracelet,” Natasha said. “They write letters to each other. She told me the last time she was here.”

“You are not meant to be using magic, brother,” Thor said.

“If I was not using magic, you’d have no clue where Jane was!” Loki said back. He looked at Thor with evident irritation. “She fell in front of me and I could not help her because I am trapped in this bloody cage.” There was a ding.

“His coordinates match ours,” Hill said emotionlessly.

“See?” Loki said peevishly.

“I apologize, brother, but--” Thor began.

“I do not think this conversation is a beneficial use of time,” Natasha said coolly. “Director?”

“Take STRIKE Alpha, Rogers, and Romanoff, and go get ‘em, your royal highness,” Nick Fury said.

“Let’s go,” Rumlow said calmly. Thor flipped Mjolnir and fell in behind him and Cap.

“Finally, reasonable people who are not idiots,” Loki muttered. The screen went dark. Rollins peered at it for a second, then followed Natasha out of the room.

“This is SHIELD relevant?” Hill said quietly, as the room emptied out.

“Dr. Foster has been looking for items of astrophysical and otherworldly significance for SHIELD for three months. I convinced her, after much effort, that we needed a specialist of her caliber after the business with Selvig and the Tesseract. I also insisted that she continue to employ Miss Lewis because Lewis is much more likely to actually call for help in an emergency, as a non-scientist,” he said. “Selvig and Foster would wander directly into traffic if they were distracted by a discovery,” Fury said.

“Maybe you should’ve given them a few agents,” Hill suggested, looking at the screen. With Loki gone, it was a pyramid again. It looked like the mine shafts were tens--if not hundreds--of feet long. Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis could be bleeding out at the bottom of one.
“That was a miscalculation,” Fury admitted. When Hill looked at him sharply, he chuckled. “I can admit a mistake, Agent Hill. I should have insisted, but Foster didn’t want them.”
“All right,” Rumlow said, reviewing the tactical plan on the quinjet when it was in the air. They’d brought the usual STRIKE Team. “Our satellite footage suggests that there are at least fifteen men. They’ve got guys stationed around the perimeter, here, here and here. More may be inside, but the thickness of the pyramid walls means we can’t get a visual. Cap?”

“Yeah?” Steve said.

“Do you want to go in ahead with Thor on the hammer?” Rumlow said. “He can carry one, correct?”

“That’s not protocol,” Steve said. “You’re suggesting we bend the rules on backup?”

“We’ve got two people potentially injured at the bottom of a tomb shaft. By the time the quinjet arrives, we could be too late,” Rumlow said in a low voice. He shifted his gaze. Thor was pacing at the back of the quinjet; they’d restrained him from going alone for the moment. Jack looked between his commanding officer, Steve, and Natasha. Steve looked thoughtful; it was impossible to know what either Romanoff or Rumlow was thinking. Jack was watching Cap for a verdict and didn’t notice when gold particles assembled themselves at his elbow.

“When shall you arrive?” Loki said. Jack jumped.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered.

“Our ETA is three to four hours from now, if we follow protocol,” Rumlow said grimly. Thor caught sight of Loki and stomped over.

“Brother, you should not be here. If father catches you--” he began.

“He will be disappointed as usual,” Loki said crisply. “I do not see the cause for alarm. I will see if I can find them to ascertain the extent of their injuries. It would be more useful if I had a healer to consult. Can you be useful and get a message to Sif? She will not listen to me, but it may be possible to bring someone with me by magic if I can get them to my cell.”

“I will try,” Thor said. “Be careful, brother. Father’s wrath--”

“Is exceedingly tiresome,” Loki said, dissolving. “I shall return.”
Darcy woke up on a stone floor. “Ughhhhhhhhh,” she moaned. “Jane?” she said.

“Darcy?” Jane’s voice said. There was the click of a flashlight.

“Hey, don’t shine it in my eyes,” Darcy said.

“Sorry,” Jane said, moving the light down Darcy’s body. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know,” Darcy said, “I’m sort of achy all over, but”—she felt her legs—”I can move my fingers and toes. Woo-hoo! You?”

“I’ve hurt my ankle,” Jane said grimly.

“Well, shit,” Darcy said, “I’m crawling over, don’t move.”

“Don’t worry,” Jane said. “This is intensely painful.” Darcy crawled over, took the flashlight from Jane, and peered at her right ankle. It was swollen and deeply bruised.

“Well, you aren’t bleeding and you got no bones poking out, that’s the good news,” Darcy said. She scanned Jane with the flashlight. She didn’t see blood or other injuries. “Move your arms for me?”

“Gee, thanks,” Jane said. She did jazz hands with as much sarcasm as she could manage at the bottom of an Egyptian pyramid.

“It’s not joke, remember that poor basketball player who broke his whole leg and they couldn’t even show it on tv? We’re lucky not to be bleeding to death. Here, I’m going to wrap your ankle with my scarf and elevate your leg with some of these rocks,” Darcy said, worrying her lip. She began to wrap Jane’s ankle tightly.

“Ow,” Jane winced. “Does it have to be so tight?”

“The point is compression, Janey,” Darcy said.

“Where’d you learn this again?” Jane asked.

“I twisted my ankle on an icy sidewalk and met that really nice Norwegian podiatrist, remember? Sven? He could really wrap an ankle,” Darcy said, holding the flashlight under her chin awkwardly, so she could have both hands free. “I need you, Sven,” she muttered.

“Darce,” Jane groaned. “No dirty jokes.”

“Oh, I was being serious, his compression wraps were really helpful. He, like, wove them, but they were still comfy. Rest, ice, compress, elevate. Well, two out of three,” she said, squeezing her scarf tightly against Jane’s tender skin. Jane hissed in pain. “Sorry,” Darcy said. “Needs must.”

“Did you have to pick up the most annoying Britishisms?” Jane said.

“Yep,” Darcy said, sliding over a rock and propping Jane’s foot on it. “You stay,” she said to Jane’s toes.

“I broke my equipment, too,” Jane said sadly. Darcy thought she saw tears.
“S’okay, Jane, SHIELD will buy you new doohickeys,” Darcy said comfortingly. She scanned the room with the flashlight. “Whoa, Jane, look.” All around them, the shaft was painted and decorated.

“It’s beautiful,” Jane said, stunned. She wiggled.

“No moving that leg, missy,” Darcy scolded.

“Fiiiiine,” Jane said. They looked all around the room, as Darcy shined the flashlight. Eventually, they ran out of interesting murals and talked about what they’d do when they got out. Jane wanted to note some discoveries. Darcy wanted pecan fudge. “How long have we been down here?” Jane asked finally.

“About two and a half hours since I wrapped your ankle,” Darcy said. “I’m trying very hard not to think of this weird movie I saw once.”


“It had the Will guy from The Good Wife and Craig Sheffer? He was a big deal in the eighties, like TigerBeat cover guy teen heartthrob. They play two sketchy guys who’ve escaped from prison to look for a hidden treasure that some rich guy had buried with him when he died. Eventually, Craig Sheffer finds it, but--irony!---he gets stuck down there alone, surrounded by all this wealth and probably dies. It’s called The Grave,” Darcy said. “He’s down in a crypt like this. Sorta. If I remember right.”

“Ugh, why did you tell me that?” Jane said.

“You wanted to know,” Darcy said.

“I swear, if we make it out of here, I’m taking your movies away,” Jane threatened.

“Janey!” Darcy said, shocked. Their argument was interrupted by a sparkle. As it grew, it evolved into a human-like form, then another. Loki appeared at Darcy’s side. With him was the semi-transparent shade of an Asgardian woman.

“I have brought Eir,” Loki said. “She is a healer. I will give you privacy whilst I do a count of the number of mercenaries within this place.” He shimmered away.

“Jane’s ankle is hurt,” Darcy supplied to the woman.

“I remember you both,” the woman said. Darcy thought her eyes slid curiously to the bracelet on Darcy’s left wrist. Darcy didn’t particularly enjoy the look on Eir’s face. Almost involuntarily, she moved her arm and tucked the bracelet under her sleeve.

“I remember you, too. From the Aether situation,” Jane said. “You’re the healer.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot bring my implements,” Eir said. “I can merely diagnose the extent of your injuries, not heal them.”

“So, you’re like an urgent care or a walk-in clinic? Cool,” Darcy said.

“Darcy,” Jane scolded.

“What? That’s better than nothing. I wrapped her ankle,” Darcy said, as Eir undid the scarf.

“You did neat work,” Eir said.
“See?” Darcy said. “I did neat work.” Eir looked up briefly, then returned to her examination. She peered down at both of them, insisting they lift their clothes. Darcy found it really uncomfortable to strip down to her undies in front of Eir. That woman saw too much. Lucky Jane didn’t have to stand up.

“You are both terrifically bruised, but you do not appear to have internal injuries. You were exceptionally lucky. Some would say unnaturally so for Midgard,” Eir said. Her eyes lingered on Darcy’s sleeved wrist. “I would stay roped to your friend, Dr. Foster,” she said. “She may be your charm of luck--how do you say it on Midgard?”

“I think you mean good luck charm?” Jane said.

“Yes,” Eir said.

“Oh,” Darcy said. It was the freaking bracelet. It had kept them from ending up in pieces because they were linked together.

“I am ready to leave,” Eir said aloud and Loki emerged in a shimmer. He magicked her away and looked at both of them.

“I am glad you are mostly uninjured,” he said solemnly. “I shall report to Thor and return. For now, wait quietly. I do not think the men above can locate you, given the depth of your fall. I will try to return, but--,” he said.

“Don’t worry about coming back if it will get you in trouble,” Darcy told him. “You’ve risked enough with Odin. Don’t exhaust yourself, either. We’ll be quiet.” Loki frowned.

“A SHIELD team with my brother and Captain Rogers shall arrive shortly. Thor will perhaps be able to come ahead on Mjolnir with Captain Rogers, now that we know the full extent of the situation,” he said. Jane and Darcy nodded. “Be safe,” he said. Then he vanished.

Darcy lay down on the floor next to Jane. She’d turned off the flashlight to conserve the battery and hide them better, so her eyes were slowly adjusting to the dark. Her mind wandered. “Did you know the expression ‘needs must’ is a shortening of the idiom ‘needs must when the devil drives’?” Darcy said.

“What the heck does that mean?” Jane said.

“Something, something, sometimes you gotta do bad shit when the devil is involved?” Darcy offered. A fragment of verse bubbled in her brain.

“That makes no sense,” Jane said. “Why would his driving impact your behavior?”

“Maybe he’s a bad driver?” Darcy said. “Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me;” she said. Darcy liked Emily Dickinson. The Belle of Amherst had a musical rhythm.

One of Darcy’s earliest professors had had them stomp on the floor to her “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” and it had cemented her love of Dickinson and poetry in general. Darcy had seriously contemplated majoring in literature that semester. She’d picked political science because it felt equally about people on some instinctive level. She was interested in people, really: why they did things, what motivated them, what they felt in response to the world. It was one of the reasons she’d bounced through majors from history to psychology, before finally settling on one. For some reason, other people thought political science sounded smarter than the older majors, like lit or art.
Which was actually dumb, but whatevs. Literature was much more challenging and complex than just ‘reading stuff’ when you really dug in—you had to understand the political and social context of Zionism in *Daniel Deronda* just as much as you did Zionism’s role in early Israeli history for Poli Sci 101. Maybe more, since George Eliot wasn’t Jewish, so her rendering of Zionism was skewed by her own point of view and potential prejudices as a British female author in the nineteenth-century. Nobody made art or wrote books in isolation from the world they lived in.

***

Loki appeared to Steve and Thor moments later. “They are mostly unhurt. Jane has injured her ankle, but it is nothing dire. They are trapped here,” he said, pointing a spectral finger at a section of pyramid on the quinjet screen. “The men inside are above. There are twenty searching inside and fifteen outside. They appear to be searching for an artifact. Doubtless it is the one that Fury sent Jane to look for,” Loki said.

“What?” Steve said, frowning. “Why are they looking for artifacts?”

“This is the work they do for SHIELD,” Loki said. “Were you unawares?”

“We didn’t even know they were SHIELD,” Rumlow said quietly.

“Nick of the Furies keeps his secrets, for reasons I do not know,” Thor said.

“Not good ones,” Loki said archly. “I return to Asgard,” he told Thor abruptly. “Sif has warned me that Odin approaches. My illusions will not hold much longer in the cell. Do not fail, brother.”

“Aye,” Thor said. “Be cautious. I will defend what you have done today to father,” the blonde man said, as Loki faded into sparks of gold. There was a barking laugh in response.

“Naif!” Loki’s voice said in the empty air.

“I shall go now by Mjolnir,” Thor said. “Unless the Captain objects?”

“If they are truly unhurt--” Steve began doubtfully.

“Loki’s not lying,” Natasha said. “He has tells, just like anyone else.”

“Then I think we should wait,” Steve said. “Go in with the whole team as normal. We don’t want them to fall back and take Jane and Darcy as hostages because there are only two of us. We need to have the numbers to overwhelm them. How long will it be?” He looked at Rumlow.

“Twenty-two minutes,” the dark-haired man said.

“I defer to you on Midgard,” Thor said, sighing. He paced the quinjet with thudding feet for the rest of the trip.

***

“What are you thinking about?” Jane asked.
“George Eliot and Emily Dickinson,” Darcy said. She quoted another Dickinson poem out loud to Jane: “The Devil, had he fidelity, would be the finest friend--because he has ability. But Devils cannot mend.”

“Oh, Darce,” Jane said.

“What? Emily Dickinson is amazeballs. You’re entirely too negative about the humanities. You and Tony have complexes about it,” Darcy said. “What is that about? No one in any English department in America talks shit about science the way scientists trash-talk the arts and humanities.”

“You’re not thinking about that poem right now because of your love of the arts, okay? That is one of your Loki poems,” Jane said.

“Phhffft,” Darcy replied. Intelligently.

“Don’t try to pretend there isn’t something between you and Loki. Just date already!” Jane said. “I’m so weirded out by the whole thing. You send him poetry and books from our world and he sends you jewelry he magically forges himself, you’re practically together already. He writes to you more than Thor talks to me.” She sounded put out.

“We’ve totes discussed this. Haven’t you ever watched 20/20 or Dateline? The whole reason women marry guys in prison is that they’re attentive, but only because they can’t do anything else. The minute Loki gets out of jail--or rafts it out like those mysterious Alcatraz dudes--he’ll forget all about me and go back to his old ways. He’d probably be Silvertongue-deep in at least one Starbucks barista within the hour,” Darcy said.

“Eww, that is a totally disturbing image,” Jane said.

“Never get Fandral drunk and ask him for all the good gossip on people’s sexual habits on Asgard, okay?” Darcy said. “I still think Errol Flynn might have based his whole public persona on Fandral, by the way.” Darcy had come up with this theory one weekend when they half-watched The Adventures of Robin Hood with Flynn and Olivia de Havilland (aka Melanie from Gone With the Wind) on TCM.

“Did they ever meet?” Jane asked.

“Fandral isn’t sure,” Darcy said. “He was drunk a lot in our 1930s, too. They did pop down to Midgard some. It’s possible. Isn’t it funny to think Olivia de Havilland is still alive and has lived such an interesting life that she met Steve at a USO thing during the war and last year when he had coffee with her in Paris? In addition to co-starring with Vivien Leigh, doing The Heiress, and the whole feud with her sister?”

“She has a sister?” Jane asked.

“I thought I told you? Joan Fontaine was her sister. They had a big ol’ feud. Olivia was their mother’s favorite, but Joan won the Oscar first. Ben Mankiewicz talked all about it when he introduced Rebecca on TCM the other night,” Darcy said. “Steve said Olivia was so ladylike, even at 102.” Darcy sighed wistfully.

“What?” Jane said.

“No one will ever say that about me, Jane,” Darcy said.

“Being ladylike is stupid and antiquated,” Jane said.
“You just say that because no one would ever call you ladylike, either,” Darcy said.

“I’m a scientist, not a lady,” Jane said firmly.

“Peggy Carter was a superspy and a lady,” Darcy pointed out.

“We’re just not made like those 1930s women, Darce,” Jane said. “Let it go. We don’t have whatever it is.”

“Crisp blouses and victory rolls,” Darcy whispered.


Above them, there was a sudden, deep boom that seemed to rattle the pyramid itself.


“And they’re going to be in trouble,” Jane said grimly, flexing her foot and wincing.

At the sound of a second thud, Darcy grinned. “I think that might be the sound of America the Beautiful landing his shield on somebody.”

“You know Steve hates when you call him that,” Jane said, grinning.

“He refuses to ask me out, I have to get my fun somewhere,” Darcy said.

“I don’t know why he doesn’t, you should be his type,” Jane said. “You and Peggy Carter even look a little alike.”

“It’s my total lack of lady manners,” Darcy said, sighing. “I burped in front of him the first time we met. I’d had two Diet Dr. Peppers. He’s never looked at me the same.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

1930s Arab cinema for nerds.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There’s a second route to that part of the pyramid on this side,” Rumlow said to Rollins as the quinjet landed in the sand. It was dark. Cairo glittered in the far distance. “Cap, Thor, and Romanoff are going to draw them away from where we’re going and we’ll rappel down, retrieve both of them, and lead them back out. If we’re lucky, we won’t be intercepted. Our SHIELD sights aren’t designed for walls of that thickness, so we’ll be working blind.” The three special SHIELD agents had already lept from the quinjet when it was in mid-air and made their way into the pyramid.

Rumlow paused. There was a beep on his comms device. “Call from Alexander Pierce,” the voice from headquarters said.

“Transfer call to me,” Rumlow said flatly. “Yes, sir?” He was silent for a moment. “Understood.” He ended the call.

“Anything important?” Rollins asked.

“Not about this mission,” Rumlow said. “Regular business in DC. Ready?” He looked at his team. They nodded. “Let’s move,” he said.

Trailed by several other STRIKE team members, the two men entered the pyramid, armed with SHIELD-issued weapons and night vision goggles. They swept the tunnels silently, heading for the spot on the map where Jane and Darcy waited.

***

The sounds of battle above them grew louder. “This is a UNESCO World Heritage Site,” Darcy said sadly. She knew Mew Mew was probably going through the millennia-old walls above them.

“So? I don’t want to die down here,” Jane said.

“Jane, this is some archaeologist’s version of heaven, their life’s work, their Convergence project, yadda yadda,” Darcy said. “Thousands of years and these ancient murals up in smoke because some assholes want a Chitauri artifact for its extra special battery juice, probably to blow more stuff up.”
“Don’t tell me that,” Jane said, groaning. “I’ll feel guilty.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “I’m going to sneak over and see if I can see anything farther up. My eyes have adjusted a little.”

“Please be careful,” Jane said.

“I will,” Darcy said. “I won’t go far. We’re still roped together.” She stepped quietly towards the end of the room with the hole in the ceiling. The first tomb shaft apparently sloped down gradually into a hole that fed into this room. Jane had probably been walking along, Darcy realized, glued to her screen, when she dropped like a rock, dragging Darcy down with her from the ramped platform above. Jane had either bounced or rolled farther into the room where they now were. The shaft must zig-zag or something? She wondered if that was for stability or something. Had she seen something on *National Geographic* once with diagrams of tomb shafts? Darcy peered up into the ceiling. She was too cautious to shine her flashlight. The battle noises above sounded farther away. She sighed and returned to Jane.

“Nothing?” Jane asked quietly. She’d sat up.

“Nothing?” Darcy said. “I guess Thor could come busting through like the Kool-Aid Man, though. I’m gonna drag you towards the middle of the room, Janey. I feel like that’s safest.” With a grunt, she put her arms under Jane’s armpits and tugged her.

“Ow!” Jane hissed.

“Sorry,” Darcy said.

“S’okay,” Jane said, gritting her teeth. Darcy breathed heavily.

“I need to actually start working out, if we’re really doing this job,” she said, feeling a little giggle of hysteria leave her chest. It was nerves. This was tense. She’d thought Thor or Steve would be here by now. There was a bang above them.

“Yup, no more going to the gym just to flirt with Gianni the trainer,” Jane told her.

“I miss Gianni,” Darcy said. “He was the best part of London after fish and chips and museums and the Harrod’s makeup counter.” She looked nervously at the ceiling. What if it caved in on them? That would be ironically horrible, she thought. “I’m going to peek again,” Darcy said, creeping back to the hole in the ceiling.

Nothing. She sighed and turned back to go to Jane. There was a whoosh of air and small, odd whirring sound behind her. Before she could move, Darcy was seized. She yelled. A hand clamped over her mouth.

“Darcy!” Jane screamed.

“Be quiet,” a male voice said calmly in her ear. This wasn’t Steve or Thor. She didn’t recognize that voice. Darcy bit the hand he was holding over her mouth and elbowed him in the ribs simultaneously. Hard. “Fuck, don’t bite me, I’m here to rescue you, Taser Girl,” he said. “We’re SHIELD. Wasn’t expecting to practically land on you,” he said. He removed his hand from her face and shook it. Darcy thought she heard a chuckle in the dark.

“You’re SHIELD?” she asked quietly.
“STRIKE Alpha,” the shadow near her said. “Thor, Romanoff, and Cap are drawing them away from you. C’mon, I need to hook you into this harness,” he said. That was the whirring sound, Darcy realized. Climbing ropes working as he descended. She knew that Natasha and Steve worked with STRIKE Alpha.

“Okay. Take Jane out first, she’s hurt,” Darcy said. “Jane, they’re SHIELD,” she called.

“Oh thank God,” Jane said in the dark.

“Fine,” he said, sounding slightly dubious. When Darcy took a step, he tugged her to the left by her shirt. “Rock there, don’t fall. I’ve got goggles, I can see Foster. Stay here.” The shadow moved around her silently, like a ghost. A few moments later, she realized Jane was inches from her face. He’d moved her quickly.

“Hold onto me,” Darcy said, letting Jane rest her weight on Darcy’s arm as the SHIELD agent buckled Jane into the harness. “We’re linked together,” Darcy told the SHIELD guy.

“I cut her rope already,” he said. It sounded odd to Darcy. “Moving Foster up to you, Jack,” he said. “She can’t weight bear, so she’ll need support.”

“Gotcha,” an accented voice said from above. Darcy waited, tense, while Jane was lifted away.

“Don’t fall, don’t fall,” Darcy whispered to herself in a mantra.

“She’ll be fine,” the stranger next to her said. In the dark, he was very near. In a few moments, he was bucking her into a second harness with surprisingly nimble fingers and she was being pulled through the hole in the ceiling.

“Gotcha, darl,” that other voice said, seizing her arm. It was the one who’d helped Jane. Jack. His name was Jack. “Take this,” he said, handing her a pair of goggles.

“Thanks,” she said. Darcy put them on. She could see him for the first time. A pair of high cheekbones in an oddly handsome, angular face, half-masked with military goggles. Astoundingly tall, too.

“Move forward, love,” he said. “Wait at the end.”

“Okay,” she said.

“You’re up, Brock,” he said into the room below. Darcy turned and headed back to the spot where she’d first fallen. She met two other agents, gingerly moving Jane up. She winced when Jane almost brushed against the wall as she was lifted.

“She’s all right,” a voice said in her ear. She jumped. It was the first SHIELD guy. He could move like a freaking cat. Darcy turned to look at him. He wasn’t as tall as the other guy and his features were harder to distinguish under the goggles. She could see stubble and a defined jaw, and what looked like short, dark hair. Between those two sets of features, the night vision goggles reflected emptily back at her. It was uncomfortable to look into them. She looked away. Once Jane had disappeared above her, he clipped Darcy’s harness into the lowered rope and she was lifted again.

It seemed like a terribly long time for your feet to dangle in the air, but eventually, mercifully, she was deposited onto solid stone again. Darcy stumbled a little as her ropes were unhooked and one of the half-dozen SHIELD guys waiting--a few were already leading Jane away--caught her.

“You all right, honey?” he said in a thick southern accent, sounding amused. “Don’t want you to
get hurt now. Boss man wouldn’t be happy.” Through the goggles, she saw a flash of teeth. The men around her were all grinning?

“I didn’t even know Fury liked me that much,” Darcy said. A few of them started to actually laugh. What was so funny?

“Be quiet,” a voice said behind her.

“Yes, Commander Rumlow,” one of the guys said seriously. They all suddenly looked nervous.

“Go,” he said. The group started moving forward. Weird first guy--Darcy had started thinking of him as Cat Guy or Not-the-Aussie already--must be the ranking jack-booted thug. He moved in front of her, so that she was sandwiched between him and several other agents. What was his first name again? Breck? Or was it Rick? She had to have misheard the Aussie guy, Jack. It must be Rick. Nobody was named Breck.

***

Darcy exhaled in relief when they exited the pyramid without getting shot. Ahead of her Jane was already being half-carried to the quinjet. “Don’t slow down,” Commander Whatshisname said to her shortly. “They can still shoot you, Taser Girl.” He yanked her up by the arm so that her feet barely touched the ground and dragged her onto the quinjet.

“Ow,” Darcy said, rubbing her elbow when she was unceremoniously dumped on a quinjet bay jumpseat next to Jane. He ignored her. She pried off her night vision goggles. She didn’t know how to turn them off. She looked at Jane. “You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jane said. She looked exhausted and pale; the pain must be bad, Darcy thought.

“Get us in the air,” Commander Weirdo was barking at the pilot. He’d already pushed his goggles onto his head. The other SHIELD guys were sitting between them and the bay ramp-slash-door thingy, looking relieved.

“You can’t just leave Steve and Nat down there, they don’t have Mew Mew,” Darcy said, alarmed, as the quinjet began to rise. Commander Whatshisname turned to look at her.

“Excuse me?” he said. He was older than she’d expected him to be. Dark eyes, dark hair, tan. Maybe Greek or Italian-American. Dramatic, masculine features.

“You’re just going to leave them?” she asked, incredulous. “You can’t! They’ll be trapped in the desert!”

“They’ll be fine,” he said dismissively. “I’m moving you and your BFF out of shooting range for the moment.” He moved farther away from them and closer to the pilots, looking pissed. They were having some sort of intense convo about Jane’s ankle.

“Asshole,” Darcy said out loud. His eyes flicked back towards her, then returned to the pilots. The SHIELD guys sitting near her the ramp bay started to laugh in earnest, trying to hide it from him by looking down and covering their faces. Apparently, everyone hated Commander Rick. Or Commander Breck. Whatever, she thought. What else would explain the laughter?

“Can I get you anything?” Jack the Aussie said a few minutes later. “Water?”

“You have anything I can give Jane? I’ll take extra strength Tylenol for her, anything you got?”
Darcy said. He went to a cabinet to get some.

“No drugs, Darce,” Jane said weakly, opening her eyes. Jane had a weird thing about medicine.

“Jane, you will not get addicted to Tylenol. Unless you wash it down with vodka and tank your liver, you are perfectly fine to take some,” Darcy said, sighing. “Be practical, okay?” she pleaded. This was an old argument.

“Both of you take the goddamn Tylenol,” Commander Rick said, walking past them. “You fell forty feet altogether.” He sat across the quinjet bay from Darcy, several seats down. He was already drinking a bottled water. She stared at him. What a rude fucker, she thought. He had to be a Fury hire, he had The Glare. She didn’t know what Fury would say about those tattoos on the backs of his arms, though. Darcy had assumed that buttoned down generic guy with zero tattoos was regulation.

“Here you go, love,” a voice said, pulling Darcy’s attention. It was Jack with the water and Tylenol.

“Thanks,” she said. He’d brought them back some kind of military wafer, too, so Darcy badgered Jane into a few bites, a sip of water, and Tylenol. “Now rest,” she said to Jane, biting into her own wafer. They tasted like cardboard, but crispy. Like thin, stale, flavorless graham crackers.

“My mass spectrometer,” Jane said.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” Darcy said, popping a Tylenol. She ate the stupid wafer to protect her stomach and wished for some lemon curd or something to put on it. Or Nutella. She could kill a jar of Nutella right now.

“I made it,” Jane said sadly. “With parts from RadioShack.”

“Alas, poor Janerick, they are no more,” Darcy said quietly. She leaned her head back against the quinjet wall. She was half-closing her eyes when she caught Commander Whatshisface watching her as he fiddled with his water bottle cap. His gaze moved away as soon as he sensed she’d noticed. He looked confused, she thought. That macho asshole probably thought Hamlet was a butcher’s shop.

She was half-asleep when Jane spoke again. “I’m sorry about your lecture, Darce,” she said.

“It’s okay, I’ll catch up with Dr. Sharif eventually,” Darcy said. She had been planning to attend a lecture that night in Cairo, before Jane’s “errand” for SHIELD went haywire. One of her former professors was a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo. As if on cue, her phone rang. “It didn’t break!” Darcy said to Jane joyfully, digging around in her messenger bag. She’d honestly forgotten it.

“Don’t answer that--” Commander Rick began, but Darcy ignored him.

“Dr. Sharif! I’m so sorry we missed you tonight. We ran into a snafu with Jane’s work and couldn’t get away. Oh, no, it feels disrespectful to call you Asma,” Darcy said into the phone. “Yes, I know I call Dr. Selvig by his first name, but Erik also works without pants. Uh-huh, yes. No, I’d love that. Are you really? Oh my God, that’s fantastic. I mean, not that they’re in Egypt instead of al-Qurayya, obviously, but that you get to talk to them. I hope we get to see each other soon, too. Inshallah,” Darcy repeated back politely, before hanging up the phone. She sighed. God wasn’t willing to let her have a cool evening in Cairo, for whatever reason.
“Why can’t you call Asma by her first name?” Jane said sleepily. “You call me by my first name, too.”

“It feels disrespectful with Dr. Sharif,” Darcy said, shrugging. “I haven’t force-fed her Pop Tarts or seen her get drunk with Thor. She’s...elegant. A real lady, Jane. Do you know what she’s doing?” Darcy said, unable to tamp down her excitement.

“What?” Jane said. “Something that will elude me, I’m sure.”

“Serves you right for gloating over Science! Terms at me for years. She’s going to interview members of the al-Atrash family who’ve fled al-Qurayya--that’s the family’s traditional seat in the mountains of Syria--because of the civil war. It’s background research for her Asmahan novel,” Darcy said, sighing wistfully. “Where did I go wrong in my life that I’m not her assistant?”

“I understood about every third word,” Jane said.

“What’s that, love?” Jack asked her. He was nice, despite his terrifying resting bitch face.

“One of my ex-professors is writing a novel that’s loosely based on a real-life Arab actress and singer named Asmahan from the 1930s?” Darcy said. “She was a member of a very prominent Syrian family. Anyway, some of Asmahan’s relatives have fled Syria for Egypt, so Dr. Sharif is interviewing them. It’s incredible.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jack said politely.

“Yes,” Darcy said. “The al-Atrash clan is a huge deal, politically. Or they were, until fairly recently in Syrian history. One of them led a successful revolt against the French in the 1920s and was a Syrian national hero. The Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. Asmahan and her brother, Farid, were from a slightly different branch of the family. Farid ended up becoming one of the most famous oud players and singers in Arab cinema. He played a lot of singers in musicals, sort of like an Arab Frank Sinatra? But Asmahan died in a car crash under mysterious circumstances during WWII. She was only, like, 30, so her movie career was cut short. People say she might have been murdered because she was a spy.”

“For who?” Commander Rick said suddenly.

“What?” Darcy said, startled. She hadn’t realized he was paying attention.

“A spy for who?” he repeated.

“That’s the question,” Darcy said. “Was she spying for the Allies or the Gestapo?” She looked at him. He looked away. He was so weird, Darcy thought. She missed Agent iPod Thief, in retrospect. She needed to chew Loki out about that again when she saw him next.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen an Arab musical,” Jack said.

“C’mere,” Darcy said, patting the seat next to her. “I’ll show you my favorite clip of Asmahan and Farid.”

“Oh God,” Jane said grumpily. “Use your earbuds. It’s terrible.”

“Shut up, Jane,” Darcy said. Jack sat next to her and she played him a clip on her phone--with her earbuds, so as not to bother anyone else--of some of her favorite scenes. “They’re a lot like old MGM musicals,” she explained. “This one, this duet,” she told Jack, “is my favorite. I love the way they spotlight Farid. It’s so dramatic. I mean, your eyes are on Asmahan singing and you don’t...
even realize he’s there until, boom, they throw that spotlight and there he is. They were both so glamorous and magnetic, you don’t even need to understand the words to swoon over it.”

“How’d you learn about them?” Jack asked. “Is your family Egyptian or something?”

“No, I was a political science major with a Mideast Studies minor,” Darcy explained. “I never did science science.”

“Why aren’t you working on something like this, then?” Jack asked curiously. “Since you’re so interested?”

“Well,” Darcy said, “the semester before I was supposed to start Arabic and take the GRE exam for grad school, I needed six science credits because I’d switched majors a lot? So, I got this internship in New Mexico….”

“I basically ruined her life,” Jane muttered.

“You did not!” Darcy insisted.

“Yes, I did,” Jane said. “She’s been my assistant ever since. She’s totally overqualified and should have a doctorate in political science or Middle Eastern studies by now and be doing, like, archival research on Arab nationalism or whatever bizarre historical thing she’s obsessed with this week.”

“Pffft,” Darcy said, sticking out her tongue. Her moment of childishness was interrupted by a thud above them.

“Thor,” Jane said happily. He’d landed on the quinjet.

“Lower the ramp,” Commander Rick said. They lowered it and a moment later, Steve and his shield were slung bodily into the cargo bay by Thor. He’d been carrying Steve in one hand, Mjolnir in the other, and had Natasha clinging around his shoulders.


“Steve’s lucky that I’m much lighter than he is,” she said, “or Thor couldn’t have got us onboard.”

“Lucky, huh?” Steve picked himself up--he’d been slung rather roughly--and shook his head.

“You two are a sight for sore eyes,” he said to Darcy and Jane. He was covered in pyramid dust. Darcy hugged him anyway. She seldom got the opportunity.

Thor wanted to sit next to Jane on the ride home--he needed two seats--so they shuffled and Darcy ended up sitting next to Steve. She did not mind this one bit, even if Steve was his usual quiet, slightly reserved self. Darcy tried not to bug him. It was easier because he was handsome enough that she found it difficult to talk his ear off, like she would have done with anyone else. He was just so pretty. Whenever he smiled at her, she lost her train of thought. Eventually, she fell asleep listening to Asmahan croon and Farid al-Atrash play the oud in her earbuds.

***

When Darcy half woke up, she was being carried easily against a very warm, very muscular chest. Steve, she thought dreamily. She wasn’t going to open her eyes fully or say anything. He might put
her down if he knew she was awake. He carried her down several hallways. Darcy heard the
telltale squeak-squeak of shoe treads on waxed linoleum. She leaned her face into his shoulder.
Steve smelled amazing. Like sandalwood and pepper and honey. Darcy kept her eyes closed, but
breathed deeply. It was a very relaxing sort of smell, whatever that cologne was. They should
pump it into yoga studios or Buddhist meditation centers or something. She would be a totally
different person if she woke up feeling this unstressed on the daily.

Finally, he eased her gently down onto a soft surface. Darcy waited a beat or two, then opened her
eyes so it would seem natural. She was on a hospital bed in a SHIELD med center. “You smell
great,” she said softly, yawning. “Like, really great. Stupid great.”

“Thank you,” someone who was definitely not Steve said. Darcy turned her head sharply, but the
man had already disappeared through the door to her right. Through the glass in the room’s
windows, she could see the back of Commander Rick Whatshisface’s head as he walked away. She
recognized his tattoos.

Chapter End Notes

The stuff about Asmahan and Farid al-Atrash is factual, or at least as factual as I can
make it and still have dialogue sound like real people talking? Farid al-Atrash is
sometimes called one of the "Big 5" of Arab music and his sister Asmahan did die in a
mysterious car crash and was rumored to have been a spy during WWII. Various other
members of the al-Atrash family are major figures in Syrian and Druze (a religious
minority group) political history.

When Darcy shows Jack her favorite scene of Farid and Asmahan as costars, she's
talking about this one. Asmahan's striking eyes were supposedly green or green-blue,
according to people who met her: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3FnGHeqwSs
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The Sultan of Verai is totally fictional.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos! Y’all are great.

With Jane injured, Nick Fury insisted she stay put in DC. The SHIELD doctors had suggested that she take three to four months of desk-duty type work before returning to potentially hazardous conditions. There was some sort of weird combo of acute sprain and chronic tendonitis happening in her ankle, mostly because she’d sprained it in Puente Antiguo and then never properly taken care of it? When Darcy woke up in the med center, Fury had already given Jane a lab space and rented them apartments on the same floor of a complex largely populated by SHIELD agents, over Jane’s protests. Jane tried to counter that she’d be fine in a few days, but the sight of the glossy new lab won her over. Darcy grinned as she hobbled in on crutches and got a look her face like a kid in a toy store.

“Everything’s new,” Jane said breathlessly.

“We have some new tech on loan from Stark that should arrive next week,” Fury told her.

“If this is part of an evil plan to keep her here forever, this is totally gonna work,” Darcy told Fury in a whisper. He and Thor had escorted them here. “High five my dude!” she said to the director, offering her palm. He looked down at her with his one good eye.

“I’m not doing that,” he said, sweeping out of the room dramatically. He was so into dramatic exits and entrances.

“Awww, you left me hanging, Nicky! You can’t just do that to a girl!” Darcy called down the hallway. Several passing SHIELD employees stared at her.

“Get to work!” he called over his shoulder.

“High five?” Thor said, clapping her palm gently.

“Thank you. That was excellent!” Darcy said.

“I have mastered it?” Thor asked, beaming. Darcy had given him lessons so his high five didn’t give people accidental concussions.

“You did!” she said. “Jane, Fury says our clothes and stuff should arrive from New York tomorrow.” They had storage spaces that Tony had loaned them at one of his old upstate buildings and had stashed their things there while they traveled for SHIELD.
Darcy secretly thought Tony Stark was an excellent dude. Exceptionally generous and caring, underneath the truly tragic goatee. He’d given them their own access to his movie streaming service when he found out Darcy spent hours in the lab babysitting Jane. So what if Starkflix was really heavy on 1980s action movies? Darcy had discovered a secret subsection that Tony must have curated with really sweet romcoms: *Moonstruck, A Walk in the Clouds, An Affair to Remember*, even one where David Duchovny and Minnie Driver fell in love after she received his late wife’s heart in a heart transplant. Tony Stark--Iron Man, professional snarker, lover of *White Snake*—was a closet romantic.

“Yeah,” Jane said, not registering anything Darcy was saying about unpacking. Darcy could see her brain virtually looping *new equipment new equipment new equipment.*

“You are content staying here while Jane recovers?” Thor asked her curiously.

“Heck, yeah,” Darcy said. “I’m excited not to live out of a suitcase and have an American shower again. Fresh coffee and good water pressure, babe, that’s all I need,” she said, grinning. Which was true: European showers tended to be small or they had these weird half glass doors that swung constantly, so you got water all over everything but you. Or worse. She’d made the mistake of letting Jane book their hotel once--Jane was too much of a workaholic to need creatures comforts--and had discovered it was possible for the shower to be a showerhead and a drain. In the middle of the bathroom. Just sitting there. No tub, no shower surround. Just a freaking grate in the floor. With cobwebs in the corners. Shudders.

But Darcy had another reason to feel giddy: if they were going to be in DC for awhile, she’d decided she was going to actually start talking to *Captain America*. In a flirtatious fashion and whatnot. It was too good an opportunity to give up without trying, considering they’d be working in the same building (at least when he was here and not on missions). She might actually ask him out, once she’d established that she wasn’t just Jane’s slightly rude, dorky assistant. All she had to do, Darcy thought, was get him to see her in a new light. Not that hard, right?

She had a tentative tactical plan to beguile him, now that she had both a SHIELD salary and a semi-permanent closet to hang clothes in:

1. Buy a few pretty, yet professional work outfits with a retro vibe, so he’d see her looking nice sometimes, instead of covered in tomb dirt, bruises, or blood (or bundled up in a huge, shapeless coat with a red, runny nose from the Norwegian cold?).
2. Learn how to do pincurls. She’d already ordered a book.
3. Invite Steve to dinner sometime. He’d probably say yes if it was dinner with Thor and Jane, too. Less pressure. Wear something that would have knocked his wool socks off in 1943. She was thinking red or polka dots. Or red polka dots. Could she find a replica of that dress Rita Hayworth wore in the first scene of *The Lady from Shanghai*? That was a good dress. White with red polka dots.
4. Red lipstick everyday (she liked that anyway, she just never seemed to be wearing it when Steve and Thor had to fetch them from tombs, mercenaries, etc.)
5. Figure out what an enchanting lady circa 1945 would have smelled like, because olfactory memories were powerful stuff. She’d read an article once.
6. Learn how to do that gliding, elegant walk women in old movies seemed to do effortlessly. This was going to be the hardest one. She tended to stomp.

Jane refused to leave the shiny new lab even though it was Friday night, so Darcy brought her and
Thor both dinner before she left work. “For you, my lady Jane, a healthy Thai platter with protein and vegetables. You will heal better if you actually eat it,” she said, setting down a small bag.

“Sure,” Jane said, waving her hand from behind a doohickey.

“Make sure she eats,” Darcy told Thor. He was reading a book on military strategy that Steve had loaned him; apparently that was one of their shared hobbies, along with eating in quantity. “These are for you,” she said, setting down a bag with four takeout platters inside.

“Excellent,” he said, beaming.

“I’m off!” Darcy said. “That’s all folks, I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow. Jane, you have an apartment, please don’t sleep here on a table.” Jane usually worked Saturdays and Darcy popped by to bring her food and verify that she bathed and stuff.

“Of course,” Jane said absently.

“You are going?” Thor said, looking a little sad.

“Yup, I’m going shopping, big bro. By the by, if you get the injured scientist home at a reasonable hour by kidnapping or persuasion--I’m not particular--I heard a rumor in the breakroom that Fury made sure Jane’s bed was a king-size. Make of that what you will,” she said, winking. He grinned.

SHIELD headquarters was near the DC metro line, so she caught one of the evening trains to hit up one of the bigger department stores. Darcy was looking for crisply draping blouses with squared shoulders, high waisted pants, and modest skirts. She didn’t want to look too costumey, but she’d spent the afternoon researching at old Vogue patterns and articles about 1940s daywear on her phone. Hats or seamed stockings would be totally obvious in week one (SHIELD was a hotbed of Steve-related gossip; one of the techs had actually shown up in a WAC-era uniform and proceeded to wander past Steve’s desk several times). But she could work a few pieces into her regular wardrobe without it looking like Halloween. She was thumbing through the racks when she found the world’s most perfect Steve date dress: cream with bold red flowers, cinched waist, shoulder pads, and a perfect row of tiny, cloth-covered buttons down the center. She sighed. Even if Steven Grant Rogers didn’t give her the time of day, Darcy wanted to be the kind of person who wore this dress. She put it in her cart, along with several blouses and some pairs of flowy slacks. She’d decided on pants for the first week. Luckily, it was May and palazzo pants were back in a big way; she thought she’d seen photos of Garbo in wide-legged pants like that once. They were nicer in DC humidity, too.

This was a discreet op, she wasn’t going to fly a “Hey, I’m Here To Seduce Steve” mission banner over her head. Maybe over her bed, though. On her way to check out, she stopped at the makeup and perfume counter. “Would you like some help?” the woman in the white coat asked her.

“I need a good red lip and a recommendation for perfumes my grandmother might have worn?” Darcy said. “I’m trying to impress this guy who is really into WWII history? He swing dances, has the fancy uniform, everything, so I think he’d love it if I showed up looking glamorous.”

“I think we can do that,” the woman said. They tried orange-based reds, vetoed them as too garish, then shifted to blue-based ones. “You’re stunning, you really shouldn’t have any trouble catching a history nerd,” the woman told Darcy, handing her a tissue between lipstick swatches. Her name
was Deborah.

“Stop flattering me, Debbie, this guy is hot, like young Paul Newman hot,” Darcy said. She sighed. “I think I made a bad impression on him at first and I’m trying to reset the situation, seem a little more desirable.”

“Then this is the one,” Debbie said, holding up a mirror. Darcy peered at herself in the glass. She looked great. Or the lipstick did? Somehow, this color was perfect. It didn’t even make her coffee-drenched teeth look more yellow.

“Oh, wow,” she said.

“It’s long wear. You can wear it matte or--after you let it dry a minute--put the gloss end over the color,” Debbie said. She was holding a double-ended tube of lip stuff.

“So, it’s like paint? It dries?” Darcy said.

“Exactly. No smudging,” Debbie told her. “Paula kiss tested it when we first got it in. Apparently, she made out with Jimmy from menswear in the breakroom and it didn’t even budge. With tongue.”

“Go Paula!” Darcy said. “I’ll take that and that really good mascara you showed me.”

“Now, I’m going to call Marie in fragrances to help you with perfumes. She’s older,” Debbie said in a whisper, “so, I feel like she might know more than me. I just wear whatever they send us in the samples, so I can upsell it.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Darcy said.

“Right?” Debbie said. “I got a bonus at Christmas.”

Marie was excellent. She steered Darcy towards a few choices: Chanel no. 5, Guerlain’s Shalimar or Vol de Nuit, even a brand Darcy had never heard of called Caron. The issue with older perfumes was that they weren’t exactly approachable at first sniff, Darcy realized. They were tough broads. You had to chase them. “Maybe I’m not sophisticated enough for these, personality wise?” she asked, snifffing a paper strip of Estee Lauder’s Youth Dew tentatively. It was strong. Wear it with your giant mink strong, really. In the heat, she’d be knocking people unconscious. “Whoa, that’s a lot, Marie,” she said. When they got to one called Fracas, Darcy smiled. “This, I would love, only at about half the strength. HR would murder me if I wore this into a cubicle farm. But it’s beautiful. I wish there was a diet version,” Darcy told her. “What is this?”

“Tropical white flowers--tuberose mostly,” Marie said. “That gives me an idea. This isn’t old, but it’s similar in feeling. It’s called Beyond Paradise,” she said, spritzing Darcy’s arm. Darcy sniffed. “I like that,” she said. “It reminds me of the smell of a florist shop--those tropical flowers, but kept cool? Like you’ve opened up one of those flower fridge cases. Nothing sugary or too much like candy.” Most newer perfumes seemed tooth-achingly sweet compared to the vintage ones Darcy had just smelled. She wondered if modern perfumes ever made Steve feel queasy, like he’d eaten too much fudge? Did the serum make his nose strong, too? His hearing and vision were both extraordinary.

“It’s very sad. Estée Lauder just put it in one of their generic square bottles, so I can’t move it like I could when it was in the old bottle,” Marie said, shaking her head. “That was so much prettier.”
Darcy bought a bottle anyway.

An older woman on the Metro told her that she smelled nice and cool when she walked by. “Thank you!” Darcy said, smiling. That was exactly what she wanted Steve to think. That she was cool and graceful and desirable, like Grace Kelly or something.

***

Darcy was practicing her pincurls—they were challenging, ughhhhh—and adding to her list at her new apartment that night when Loki shimmered into being on her couch.

“What are you doing?” he asked dryly. He gazed at her head in astonishment.

“Old-fashioned hairdressing, it’s all part of the Steve Seduction plan,” she told him. He knew about her crush on Steve. What Jane didn’t know was that Darcy and Loki kept each other’s secrets: she had a tiny, tiny thing for Steve and he was nursing a centuries-long unrequited thing for Sif, the gorgeous but terrifically scornful lady-warrior. Loki didn’t want anyone to know, because Thor or his father might meddle and try to encourage Sif. He wanted Sif to like him genuinely, he’d told Darcy. It was strangely touching, she thought, that he loved her enough that he wanted her to be guided by her own mind, not Asgardian court politics. Also, Sif was a total badass.

“I simply do not understand what you see in Captain Rogers. He’s dull. Witless. Can he even read?” Loki asked wryly.

“How do you feel about the Fitzgerald?” she asked, ignoring one of his regular jabs at Steve. They had a little book club going. Since his mom died, he had no one to share books with, so Darcy had made the extra effort to get Loki interesting Midgardian things while he was in jail. They’d read Moira Egan poems, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, a history of kitchen tools by Bee Wilson called Consider the Fork, and several memoirs. Loki had magicked up a spell so they could share marginalia across their book of the month; his golden, ornate scrawled appeared in the edges of her copy and her much less elegant handwriting appeared in his. This month, they were reading The Great Gatsby.

“The prose is lovely,” he said. When she opened her mouth again, he gestured furiously. “I’m not finished yet, don’t spoil the ending!” he said.

“Okay, don’t get your panties in a bunch,” she said.

“You told me the ending of that last Agatha Christie,” he grumbled.

“Accidentally! It’s not my fault that a short story and a novel by the same person have similarities. I just think the way she uses the love triangle as a motif is very interesting, I totes forgot that “Triangle at Rhodes” and Evil Under the Sun are reworkings of the same themes,” Darcy said.

“Very well,” he said. He looked more solid than normal.

“You know,” Darcy said, looking at him closely, “if you had blonde hair, you’d look a lot like F. Scott Fitzgerald. You could play him in a movie.”

“Blonde men are terribly boring, in my experience,” he said. “I would never choose to be one.”
“You look very corporeal at the mo,” she told him slangily.

“Mo’ is not an acceptable shorting of moment in any recognized dialect, Darcy Elizabeth Lewis,” he said haughtily.

“Pfft,” Darcy said, sticking out her tongue.

“As it happens, Thor’s raven was apparently persuasive? My father has loosened my bonds so that I may appear to Thor, you, or Jane in a sturdier, more useful form in case of emergency. I am, however, supposed to tell you not to let me near any knives, guns, or military-grade weaponry,” he said.

“Booooo,” Darcy said. “How you ‘posed to have any fun?” He laughed and she poked at him. He winced and looked affronted. “Oooh, solid. You want some popcorn and M&Ms? I was just about to start a movie,” she asked. He brightened.

“That sounds acceptable,” he said. “What’s this?” he asked, looking at her television, after she’d pressed play.

“It’s How To Marry a Millionaire. I’m treating it as a primary source on ladylike mannerisms,” she told him. She explained that she wanted to study Lauren Bacall’s movements. Steve seemed like a Bacall guy, not a Marilyn Monroe guy. She’d tried walking around with a book on her head, but it kept falling off. “The main love story is ridiculous, though.”

“Oh?” Loki said.

“The Bacall character likes the angry gas pump jockey when William Powell is right there. I mean, that guy is all right, but he’s not William Powell,” Darcy said, “watch.” They ate popcorn and studied the screen together.

“It was considered inappropriate not to wear a tie in that period of Midgardian history?” Loki asked, when Lauren Bacall scolded the guy who was pursuing her.

“Yup, you wore hats and ties if you were a man, hats and gloves if you were a lady,” Darcy said. “People were much more formally dressed back then, even though it’s like five minutes your time.”

“You are correct, the older mortal who courts Lauren Bacall is much more elegant and intelligent,” Loki said eventually. “His speech about not wanting to her to be burdened by him as he ages is surprisingly touching for a Midgardian comedy of manners that hinges on that blonde woman being nearsighted.”

“It’s sweet, right? I mean, the No-Tie guy is handsome--he sort of looks like Asshole Commander Rick--but he even smokes angry, you know? You can’t tell me they don’t end up divorced in five years after she’s had two or three kids. Blam, she’s a single mom with a difficult ex-husband and really has no money. Lauren Bacall should totally pick William Powell, he actually cares about her well-being more than No-Tie guy,” Darcy said.

“Who is Asshole Commander Rick?” Loki asked, raising an eyebrow.

“One of the SHIELD guys who was super rude the other night. I bet he loves cheap diner food, too,” Darcy said, watching Lauren Bacall eat hamburgers on one of her ‘poor boyfriend’ dates.

“Why are we supposed to think this is more enjoyable than steak with William Powell?”

“Perhaps the screenwriter was not a millionaire?” Loki offered.
“Oh my God, you’re right! This is poor schlub wish fulfillment, isn’t it?” Darcy said, shocked. “It’s so obvious now that you say it.”

“I think you should seriously consider whether or not Steve Rogers is, as you say, ‘a cheap diner food’ sort of Midgardian?” Loki suggested with a sly expression.

“No, no, Steve’s different,” Darcy insisted. “He likes hot dogs because he’s unpretentious and down-to-Earth, not because he thinks being rude makes him a better person or somehow more honest than people who wear ties to weddings. That’s the difference between Steve and your average No-Tie guy. Guys like that, they’re actually proud of being rude because they think that makes them distinctive. They confuse being a jerk with having a personality.”

“Uh-huh,” Loki said.

“Steve’s just so great,” she said sighing. “Warm and caring and so earnest. The last thing he’d ever want to do is call attention to himself at somebody else’s wedding, much less sulk in the middle of it, like No-Tie Guy does at Lauren Bacall’s before she calls it off. Steve is sincere.” Loki made retching noises and rolled his eyes.

“Earnest? Sincere? These are qualities you desire in a lover?” he said skeptically.

“Yes! I sincerely want Steve Rogers to earnestly want to get into my pants, okay? I just wish he’d actually see me,” Darcy said, sighing. “I mean, he’s always polite, but so reserved.”

“How terribly pedestrian,” Loki said, rolling his eyes. “You could do better. How about a nice prince? Perhaps I could arrange a meeting with the Sultan of Verai?”

“The Sultan of Verai? He’s seventy! Doesn’t he have, like, four wives and a zillion mistresses?” Darcy said, befuddled. “How do you even know about him?”

“He owns many, many interesting things of great value,” Loki said casually. “Including a very impressive Midgardian emerald.”

“Oh, no. No stealing any Sultan’s emeralds!” Darcy ordered. Loki loved emeralds.

“But think of how little work any one wife has to do when she is one of many wives and mistresses?” Loki suggested, almost innocently.

“You are terrible and I adore you,” Darcy said. He perked up. “Besides, if I was going to marry an older, more distinguished prince, why not your father? Imagine what a lovely stepmother I would make to you and Thor? You could call me Mama Darcy,” she said.

“That is not at all funny,” Loki said huffily.

***

The next day--Saturday--Darcy stopped for donuts on the way into the lab. Jane liked raspberry-filled and Darcy had been on a sour cream donut kick. It was ridiculously humid in DC. She didn’t dress up, there was no reason to. Steve took long motorcycle rides on weekends, he’d told her once. It was on her bucket list to join him one day, even if it was just to ride around the block. Instead, she threw on a swishy sundress she’d had for years. But she did spray some of her new perfume and wear her red lipstick. She needed the practice to get the hang of it. It dried super quickly, so you couldn’t make mistakes.
Triskelion was pretty dead. She’d gotten into the elevator alone and was cheerfully humming along to Kay Starr’s “It’s A Good Day” on her earbuds when the doors opened and a herd of be-suited guys got on. She almost didn’t recognize Jack in a suit. “Hey, Jack,” she said, carefully balancing her coffee tray on the donut box. He and the other STRIKE guys had probably just come from outside; they all looked overheated and miserable to be working on a hundred-degree weekend.

“G’day, Darce,” Jack said, turning all the way around and chatting with her about their new digs for a moment. She was thrilled when he complimented her. "You look cool in this heat, too," he said. Darcy grinned.

"Aww, thanks," she said. It was the perfume, she thought, projecting cool flowers in the heat of the glass elevator. Next to him, Commander Rick half-turned his head.

“IT’s Saturday,” he said.

“The tenth of May,” Darcy supplied, in case he was confused about the date.

“What are you doing here?” Commander Rick said.

“Jane works on Saturdays,” Darcy said, nonplussed. “So, I’m here to make sure she eats and bathes and whatnot.”

“How nice for you,” he said sarcastically. Even though she could only see half his face, she could tell he had an attitude. He turned back to face the elevator doors.

“Yeah, I get free donuts,” Darcy said cheerfully. “It's great.” She rolled her eyes at Jack. He grinned back at her.

When the door opened to her floor, Darcy belted out some loud excuse mes and squeezed past the SHIELD guys in their suits. To her surprise, Commander Rick ordered them to move.

“Don’t bump her coffee,” he scolded one of the STRIKE Alpha guys. “What, were you raised by wolves?”

“I thought that was a prerequisite for STRIKE teams,” Darcy joked, stepping off the elevator. “Ah-wooo, you all turn into werewolves when the moon is right?” Some of the STRIKE guys chuckled. She looked back at Commander Rick. He was glowering again. Darcy waited a beat. No laughter, not even half a smile. “Okay, thanks, bye! See you, Jack!” she called.

Once the doors shut, she burst into laughter. Commander Rick had been the only guy in the elevator not wearing a tie with his suit. He was a No-Tie Guy. Literally.

“What’s funny?” Jane asked, when she came into the lab. Darcy was still giggling.

“I had a movie moment,” Darcy said.

“Which movie?” Jane asked absently, as Darcy brought her a donut. She was knee-deep in Science! and it was only eleven.

“How To Marry A Millionaire ,” Darcy said.

“Yeah?” Jane said.
“Uh-huh, they opened the doors at Bergdorf’s and I fell in,” Darcy said. “I’m covered in minks and diamonds right now.”

“That’s nice,” Jane said, making a note.

“I’m going to marry William Powell in your living room and move to Texas, you’ll have to find a new assistant,” Darcy said idly, sipping her coffee. “We’re going to fix that movie so it ends right and she never picks the No-Tie guy who sulks.”

“Great,” Jane said.

“It’s really too bad Phil died. He was the most William Powell-ish guy I’ve ever known. I could have married him,” Darcy said. “He would have totally treated me like Schatze Page, taken me far, far away from this life of drudgery and suffering.”

“Of course,” Jane said distantly.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“'I had that familiar conviction that life was beginning over again with the summer.'”
— F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy loved playing dress up with her new blouses and pants. It turned out that wide leg pants were just as comfortable as leggings, only they made you feel like Miss Phryne Fisher herself. It was freaking awesome. “I wear the pants around here, Inspector Jack Robinson,” she told her reflection in her apartment mirror before she departed for work in the morning. Between her swishy pants, her cap-sleeved blouse, and her red lipstick, she looked a little retro, but also just cool. And it was surprisingly easy to wear in the heat. Darcy had decided not to fight the DC humidity and just let her hair go curly, bobby pinning some of it away from her face in a way she hoped looked like Rita Hayworth in Gilda. She felt oddly polished and together.

On the way up to Triskelion, she was on the up escalator at the Metro station when she saw Jack and some of the other SHIELD guys headed out. “Hey, mate!” she called.

“G’day, Darce,” he called back. Several commuters looked at him nervously. Jack was an intimidating-looking dude. “You look bonzer, love!”

“Thank you, honey!” Darcy said, blowing him kisses playfully, in the exaggerated manner of a breathy-voiced Hollywood starlet. Some of the STRIKE guys laughed.

“Who’s gonna tell Rumlow she blew kisses at Rollins?” Darcy overheard one of them say, laughing. Who was Rumlow, Darcy wondered? The name sounded vaguely familiar, but she’d met dozens of people at SHIELD this week and was having trouble keeping all the names straight. There was her Aussie pal Jack Rollins, an analyst named Mike Rowley, and even a female Mel Ramsey. Mel ran the gun range.

Sometime around ten am, Darcy decided she was having a really, really great day. The best freaking day. She’d run into Steve multiple times and he’d actually told her that she smelled “just swell, doll.” Unprompted! She was practically walking on air when he stopped her on her way into the one of the SHIELD break rooms for a coffee break.

“Are you ready for dinner, doll?” Steve asked.

“Dinner?” Darcy asked, trying not to grin like an idiot. It was really hard.
“We’re supposed to have dinner at Thor and Jane’s on Thursday. Did Jane not tell you?” he asked, smiling.

“Nope!” Darcy said, beaming. “But that’s great.”

“Yeah,” he said. “They don’t let me out much.”

“I’ll make sure you get plenty of food,” Darcy promised. Her heart was thudding like a drum. It was happening, it was happening, she thought, with a kind of desperate giddiness. She was actually going to spend time with Steve. She could wear her new dress.

“I’ve seen how well you feed Thor, Darce,” he said, chuckling. “I’d trust you with dinner any day.”

“I hope I can, uh, live up to your expectations,” she babbled. “You don’t have allergies, do you?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “Whatever chow you fix me or bring me, I’ll eat. I’m not a picky guy.”

“Oh, Steve,” Darcy said, “you’re so down to earth, it’s really refreshing.” Another SHIELD employee walking by rolled his eyes. Darcy realized she was probably gushing, but she just couldn’t not. Those blue eyes were fixed on her and she was gone.

After he walked away, she had to go into the break room and breathe deeply to calm down for a little bit. Her chest was all flushed, which probably meant her face was, too. Steve had probably heard her heart racing. Whoops.

***

She was finally making coffee and humming along to Ella Fitzgerald’s “Let’s Do It” on her phone’s earbuds when Loki shimmered into being behind her. “Ahhh!” she yelped in surprise, her giddiness momentarily forgotten. “What are you doing here? These SHIELD people are scared of you!”

“I’m wrecked,” Loki said. “Just gutted.” He even looked paler than normal. Darcy hadn’t known he could.

“What happened?” Darcy said.

“He died!” Loki said in despair.

“Who?” Darcy said.

“Gatsby. He died and she just left,” Loki said. “Daisy didn’t care about him at all. He would have done anything for her, everything, just so she would notice him.” He slumped down at the break room table. “Everything was for her and to her it meant nothing. He just wanted to be noticed and loved.”

“Oh, little bug,” Darcy said sorrowfully, “it was the green light, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t say green light,” he said, sounding very near tears. “I really thought Gatsby’s plan would work. She’d run away with him and they’d be happy. Since when do Midgardian books have such tragic endings? I thought you mortals liked a cheerful ending?”

“Oh, after World War I, sweetie. It was a whole Lost Generation thing. Would you like some of my summer blend coffee?” Darcy offered. “It’s vanilla creme brulee flavor?”
“I can’t,” he said mournfully. “I’m too upset to eat. You don’t think he’s pathetic, do you? Gatsby? My introd--my introduction implies that some critics think he’s delusional?” Loki said, stuttering a little in his distress. “That he-he doesn’t really love her at all?”

“Oh, darling, of course he’s not pathetic,” Darcy said, knowing that he was having a case of hard relate to a fictional character and needed reassurance. “He’s just trying to reinvent himself.”

“Th--they never tell you just how impossibly difficult it is to actually reinvent yourself,” Loki said, with a kind of fierce, childlike desperation. He burst into tears. They were a little icy-looking. Darcy stroked his head tenderly and rubbed his shoulders.

“Oh, honey, it’s okay, it’s okay. Thor’s in the lab. Would you like to magic there and get a hug?” Darcy asked him.

“I can’t,” Loki said, sniffling. “I used the last of my magical resolve to get here. I can’t magic well when I’m upset.”

“Well, we’ll walk then,” Darcy said, “c’mon, let’s go, sweetie.” Darcy abandoned her coffee--he needed help walking, as he’d started to sob in earnest--so she put one arm around him and used the other to pat his belly. “I’m going to pick something upbeat for the next book, I swear,” she told him as they entered a hallway.

“No, no, I’m glad I read it,” he wailed. “It is great Midgardian art,” he sobbed. “Francis Scott Fitzgerald is a genius.”

His wails attracted attention on the floor. Suddenly, there were a lot of panicked-looking SHIELD agents pulling out guns. “Hostage situation!” Jasper Sitwell yelled. Darcy saw Steve jerk up in alarm and automatically reach for his shield from where he was talking to some of the STRIKE Alpha guys ten feet away.

“No!” Darcy yelled, waving her arm. “Calm down! Holster your weapons! He’s here to see Thor. We’re fine, we’re fine,” she said reassuringly.

“Everything’s okay, everyone go back to work,” Steve said calmly.

“Captain’s orders!” one of the analysts said.

“Thank you,” Darcy told Steve quietly as she and Loki stopped in front of the elevator and Darcy hit the button.

“You’re welcome,” he said. He moved in front of them a little. “I’ll give you a little privacy,” he said, standing so his shield blocked Loki from prying eyes.

“Thank you, Captain,” Loki said sniffing. They got on the elevator alone.

“You need an escort on the lab floor?” Steve asked suddenly.

“Probably,” Darcy said. Loki was wiping at his face, exactly like an overtired child after an emotional outburst. Darcy felt all kinds of maternal pangs. He needed someone to take care of him, really. He needed sturdy and understanding mothering. Some nice lady should marry Odin.

“I’ll get somebody,” Steve said, reaching for his comms.
“Thank you,” she said. As the elevator doors closed, Darcy looked up. Steve was watching her with a quiet, half-secret sort of smile. She smiled back at him. Oh God, she thought, I’m half in love with him already.

As soon as the doors fully closed, Loki started to cry harder again. “It’s okay, sweetie,” Darcy said.

“That last paragraph. Boats against the current….I feel like that has been my life for centuries,” he said, sobbing. “I’m so tired,” he said. “So tired.”

“You just need to rest. Thor’ll give you a big hug, okay? He gives really good hugs,” Darcy said, rubbing his belly.

“Yes,” Loki said. The elevator ascended to the lab floor.

“We’re almost there,” Darcy told Loki. “Sweetie, we all love you.” Somehow, that only made him cry more.

The doors opened and Commander Rick Whatshisname was standing there, looking tense. His hand was on his gun. He stared at them. “He needs his brother,” Darcy said quietly.

“Uh-huh,” Commander Rick said, stepping back so they could get off the elevator. He walked with them to the lab. As soon as Loki saw Thor, he started to shake with sobs. Thor looked at Darcy. Jane looked up from her readouts.

“He needs a hug,” she supplied. She let Loki go and he staggered into Thor’s arms. Darcy could hear Loki saying something about how Jay Gatsby needed a brother and various things about the past and currents and green lights. *Who is Gatsby?* Thor mouthed over Loki’s shoulder.

“Book club,” Darcy said. Thor nodded in understanding and Jane shook her head a little and went back to work. They’d done this once already when Loki had sworn he was ready for *The Bluest Eye* after a crying jag during *Beloved* (he totally wasn’t ready). Darcy reached over and touched the Rick guy’s tattooed, muscular arm. “Let’s give them a minute,” she said, leading him out of the lab.

“What the hell was that?” he said, once they were in the hallway. “Book club?”

“He has a lot of deeply repressed feelings, you know?” Darcy said.

“Deeply repressed feelings?” he said, incredulous.

“Asgardians can live for thousands of years. He has centuries of things that he hasn’t dealt with at all,” she said. “They pretend to be Viking gods, but they’re emotionally just like the British in the pre-Freud era. It’s all stiff upper lips and invading other places to burn off all that restlessness. So, sometimes, he’ll go all in with a book because he can connect to it.”

“A book?” he said.

“Especially marginalized or liminal characters,” Darcy said.

“Liminal?” he asked.

“It’s, uh, an anthropology term for the disorientation people experience on, like, the threshold
between two identities. You know he’s adopted, right?” she asked. “He has a lot of disorientation and confusion, emotionally-speaking.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He was looking at her intently. He had interesting eyes, Darcy realized. Darcy loved eyes. It was weird to say--people thought you wanted to collect them, like a serial killer?--but eye colors were fascinating. Every person’s was slightly different. Jane’s eyes were a dark chocolate brown, like a tray of yummy truffles. Thor had baby blues the color of a southern sky on a clear day. Commander Rick’s eyes were even more unusual: warm coffee brown with flecks of green in the centers of the irises. Like a forest floor or something?

“You okay?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Darcy said. “Eyes,” she said, gesturing to indicate her train of thought floating away. “I got distracted.”

“Distracted?” he said, as if she was particularly dim.

“You have an unusual eye color,” she told him.

“Are you serious?” he asked. “You got distracted by my eye color?” He grinned at her.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “It’s one of my interests. Look at Nat’s eyes sometime, they’re amazing. She has the coolest eye color of all the Avengers. People think it’s all Steve, but hers are, like, a grey green?”

“Do you, uh, want some coffee?” he said suddenly.

“Oh em gee!” Darcy said. “The coffee! I left mine in the breakroom. It’s my vanilla blend. I forgot! Thanks, uh, um, sir?” She dashed for the elevator. She didn’t want to call him by the wrong name since he’d been so good with Loki. Maybe he wasn’t a total asshole after all. She was freaking lucky that Jasper Sitwell hadn’t shot them both, Darcy thought. She leaned out of the elevator. He was still standing there, looking faintly stunned. “I appreciate your help, sir!” she said, waving. She ducked back in before the doors closed.

He’d left by the time she got back with her coffee. Maybe she should send him a little thank you gift, like a $5 gift card or something? The only problem was, she wasn’t sure of his last name. Because of the whole super secret agency bit, there was no employee directory with photos. Darcy sighed. Then an idea occurred to her: the email system. Everyone’s emails were by last name and initials. Jane was “fosterja@shield.gov,” while Darcy was “lewisde@shield.gov.” When you typed part of a name it, the internal email system recognized it. Darcy plugged in every variation on Rick she could imagine, then wrote down the handful of email names that popped up. When she cross-referenced with the division directory, she found Ricks or Richards in various departments, but none on the STRIKE floors. Maybe his name was Breck? But there was no Breck in the email system. Ugh, Darcy thought, he probably used a nickname. Lots of the southern guys she’d known at Culver had, she remembered, because they had formal-sounding family names. She’d known a Roosevelt Alexander Moore III who went by Ram, of all things. Commander Rick or Breck or whatever definitely wasn’t from the south, but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t using a nickname. She could ask Jack the next time she saw him without Commander Whatsits. It was a damn shame she didn’t have a list with all the people who’d reached that rank at SHIELD.
She still hadn’t figured it out by Wednesday. Her double dinner date with Steve was Thursday. She and Jane had discussed whether or not they’d cook or order in. Darcy wanted to cook--she was a pretty decent one, having learned that a good meal sometimes made Jane less grouchy in the frozen hinterlands of Norway--but Jane demurred. “Let’s just order Chinese, Darce,” she said. “It’ll be less stressful for everyone.”

“But will Steve be impressed by Chinese?” Darcy said fretfully.

“You just show up looking pretty,” Jane told her. “He’ll be impressed enough.”

“Are you suuuuuuure?” Darcy said. She really wanted this to go well. Darcy changed clothes twice before work everyday now. She’d yakked Loki’s ear off about it so much on Monday night that he’d actually shimmered away in irritation and refused to talk to her again until she switched topics. They’d finally picked out a light book for their next read: Chandler Burr’s *The Perfect Scent: A Year Inside the Perfume Industry in Paris and New York*. She’d read it before, which was good, because Darcy was almost incoherent with excitement and anticipation the whole afternoon. People kept replying to her half-written emails in befuddlement until she finally turned off her email notifications. She couldn’t focus to read. She couldn’t think about anything else: Steve’s smile, Steve’s laugh, Steve’s *muscles*. She wandered around Triskelion, clutching her book, feeling as dazzled as a person could get.

“How are you, Darcy?” Natasha asked, as she rode the elevator with her little equipment cart. Jane had sent her down to pick up some large mail items, including the new Stark doohickeys.

“Enthralled,” Darcy answered honestly. They were alone in the elevator. “Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered,” she said. She sighed dreamily. Natasha laughed.

“Has he asked you to dinner yet?” Natasha said.

“It’s tomorrow,” Darcy said. “I’m very excited. I have a great dress.”

“Yes, I am aware of your delight,” the Russian said. “I heard you received a bouquet today.”

“I did?” Darcy said, confused. “A bouquet?”

“That’s what someone told me. They saw a courier with an arrangement of very striking flowers coming upstairs,” Natasha said.

“Ahhhhh,” Darcy said. “I haven’t seen them yet!” She put her book on the cart and bounced on her toes. “He sent me flowers! Me!”

“Why should someone not send you flowers, milaya?” Natasha asked, using the Russian word for darling. She looked amused.

“I’m going to die of happiness,” Darcy said.

“I would not go that far,” Natasha said. “Calm yourself. It is necessary that men not know you are so flattered by their little attentions. Do not give your power and femininity away so easily.”

“You are so Russian and I love you and you’re probably right,” Darcy said breathlessly. “But this is the happiest week of my life. I don’t care if he knows how happy I am. Everyone tell him. You
hear that, camera guy?” she said, beaming and waving at the security monitor lens in the corner of
the elevator. She hugged Natasha, who laughed at her. When the elevator doors opened, she pushed
her little cart to the lab like it was in a game show race and practically mowed down two passing
agents.

Sitting on her desk was the most extraordinary set of flowers Darcy had ever seen. Inside a cube-
shaped container there was a cluster of exotic-looking blooms of various heights: tall orange and
blue spikey flowers on long green tropical stems, a spray of magenta orchids, some glossy green
leaves, and at the base, a cluster of brightly-hued Asiatic lilies. “Wow,” Darcy said. The whole
arrangement was almost two feet tall and looked more like an art sculpture than any flowers she’d
ever seen.

“They got here ten minutes ago. It’s been killing me not to look at the card,” Jane told her. “I can’t
believe Steve has such sophisticated taste in flowers. I would have thought he’d send red roses or
carnations or something?”

Darcy looked at the card and sagged with disappointment. “These aren’t from Steve. Do we know
a Barack Romolou?” she asked Jane.

“Nooo,” Jane said slowly. “Who is that?”

“I have no idea,” Darcy said. Written on the card was a strange, perplexing message:

\[
\text{Darcy,} \\
\text{I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’d like to make it up to you.} \\
\text{Barack Romolou}
\]

“Is it a scientist?” Darcy asked Jane. “Someone we met at a conference?”

“We haven’t been to a conference in months,” Jane said. “It sounds like the fake name of one of
those email scammers.”

“I will transfer twenty million dollars from the estate of my late, beloved wife into your account, if
you simply pay the required fees of five thousand US dollars,” Darcy singsonged. “Sincerely, your
cherished friend, Barack Romolou.”

“They’re gorgeous flowers, though,” Jane said.

“Do fake email scammers send beautiful flowers? These look expensive,” Darcy said, studying the
card and then the flowers as if they’d spill the secret. “Maybe they have the wrong Darcy?”

“How many Darcys could there be at SHIELD?” Jane pointed out.

“More Darcys than Baracks,” Darcy said. “Oooh, I know! I’ll check the email server in case it’s
someone I accidentally spilled coffee on or something at SHIELD.” She typed furiously. “Ughhh,
no Barack, either,” she told Jane sadly. She’d picked up a gift card for Commander Rick--it was
one of the things her Steve-dazed brain could still do--on her morning coffee rounds, she just
hadn’t run into him yet.

“You’ll figure it out,” Jane said, going back to her Science! bender.

Darcy sniffed the spiky, exotic blooms and read the care side of the card out loud. “The Bird of Paradise is a tropical plant whose blooms resemble the bird of the same name….Aw, boo. It’s toxic to dogs and cats,” she told Jane.

“Oh-huh,” Jane said.

“You better not eat it,” Darcy warned.

“I will, I promise,” Jane said distractedly. Darcy giggled. When Thor came back, she asked him if he’d met anyone called Barack Romolou.

“I’m afraid not, my Lightning Sister,” he said. “I was with the warriors of STRIKE. They invited me to spar with them in the gymnasium. I am afraid I may have broken Agent O’Neil’s nose.”

“Whoops,” Darcy said. Thor grinned and shrugged. The bro-iest dudes were always trying to spar with him and then getting their noses broken. “Is that where they are? The gym?” Darcy asked.

“Aye, on on the twelfth floor. I just left them. Those blooms are quite striking. Is Barack a common Midgardian name? It is the name of your former president as well?” Thor asked curiously.

“No, it’s really uncommon. Hey, have I shown you my favorite Barack Obama SNL skit?” Darcy asked him. “It’s like a fake 1990s music video.” She pulled it up on her laptop.

Thor was delighted by Saturday Night Live’s “Come Back Barack” and was still humming it when she went downstairs to find Commander Rick in the gym. She could at least give him the gift card, if her Steve-preoccupied brain wasn’t good for anything else. Darcy was really bummed the flowers weren’t from Steve. She’d have been happy with some dyed carnations that had been dropped on the ground and stepped on, if only the card had been signed with one particular name.

***

The twelfth floor gym was super sketchy. It was definitely a guy space. For one, it stank like old socks and sweat. Darcy was seriously tempted to hold her nose. For two, all the big muscley guys walking around stared at her, like she was from another planet. Did SHIELD not have a coed gym? Actually, Darcy had visited a Baptist college in Virginia once--no coed gym, separate sex dorms, no overnight guests--and been stared at less than she was on twelfth floor. Neanderthals, she thought. She was headed down the main hallway, past the weight rooms full of sweaty, grunting dudes when a guy on a bench caught sight of her expression and said, “if you’re looking for the treadmills and the ellipticals, they’re one floor up.”

“Oh, no, actually, I’m looking for a person,” Darcy began, wondering how you asked for somebody if you didn’t know their actual name? Mercifully, she was interrupted.

“Hey, honey,” a vaguely familiar voice said. “You looking for the Boss?” It was the southern guy who’d pulled her out of the tomb shaft in Egypt. The smiley one. “Commander Rumlow’s in there,” he said, gesturing with his thumb towards the adjoining room. Darcy could hear the sounds
of people beating each other up. She winced slightly.

“Um, actually, I hate to interrupt y’all’s important, uh, work,” she said, falling back on one of her Culver southernisms. Jane made fun of her for saying y’all, but it was freaking useful sometimes. “Can you give him this for me, please?” she said, handing him the gift card. He looked at it dubiously.

“You don’t wanna give it to him yourself?” the southern guy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” Darcy said. She’d written “thanks for the help with my Asgardian friend!” and signed her name to the cardboard backing that held the plastic card. “He just helped out when my buddy from Asgard popped by this week. I’m lucky Sitwell didn’t shoot both of us,” Darcy said.

“Yeah, I heard about that,” southern guy said. “Was Loki really crying?”

“Yeah, he gets very into our books sometimes,” Darcy said. She was still carrying her copy of *The Perfect Scent*. “I picked a less sad one this time, so no cause for alarm,” she said, gesturing with the book.

“Really?” the guy from the bench said, looking skeptical. He glanced at the book. “Your bookmark’s kind of glowing?” he said. She had an Asgardian magical bookmark that flitted to Loki’s latest notes. It had--of course--a tiny notification emerald at the top (Darcy preferred to dogear her pages to mark her own reading place, a practice Loki referred to as “uncouth and ill-mannered.” He’d tried to give her fancy Asgardian bookmarks to use, but she kept leaving them at home. Once, she’d tried marking her page with a spare bobby pin, but it had fallen out of the book).

“Oh, he’s left me some notes, he’s already reading it,” Darcy said. At the men’s confused expressions, she said, “he has a lot of free time in his jail cell on Asgard.” She flipped the page open and scanned it. “Ugh, what is he talking about, an ‘absurd capitalist Midgardian hellscape’? Where’s my pen?” she muttered. She pulled a pen out and scrawled a frowny face back. “He’s so not getting the point of that section on marketing,” she told the men staring at her. “Sometimes, I think he says things just to troll me.”

“Yeah,” the first guy said, looking more confused.

“I appreciate your help,” Darcy told them.

“I’ll give this to the Commander,” southern guy said.

“Thank you!” she said.

She hightailed it out of dude-land. That place was creepy. It was only when she was back on the elevator that she realized southern guy had called Commander Rick (Breck?) Whatsits by his last name. *He* was Rumlow. That made sense. That was who the guy on the escalator had been talking about the other day, then. Rumlow probably didn’t appreciate her and Rollins goofing around in public because he wanted STRIKE Alpha to seem serious and professional. Well, at least she had half a name now. She could just call him Rumlow when necessary and not worry about whether or not it was Rick or Breck. Or Brick? It had to be Rick. Only Tennessee Williams characters were called Brick. Steve did look like Paul Newman, though, Darcy thought, sighing dreamily. What was it Liz Taylor had said to Newman’s Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?

“I can’t see any man but you,” she said out loud to the empty elevator. The doors opened and
Jasper Sitwell and another agent got on.

“You okay, Lewis?” Sitwell asked her. Had he overheard her talking to herself?

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, grinning. She had a hot date with a national icon. And Jane and Thor. But that was just a technicality, right?

Chapter End Notes


Chandler Burr's The Perfect Scent is a real book and great.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“We grew up founding our dreams on the infinite promise of American advertising. I still believe that one can learn to play the piano by mail and that mud will give you a perfect complexion.”
— Zelda Fitzgerald

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments & kudos! Y'all are great!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night of the Steve dinner, Darcy felt like she couldn’t breathe. She had put on her new lipstick and her new dress and was trying to process oxygen like a normal person when Loki shimmered into her apartment. “I cannot believe you are so unmoored by that lump of a man,” he said. “You cannot even perform the basic functions necessary to sustain your fragile mortal existence.”

“Shut up,” Darcy muttered. “Sif probably thinks iambic pentameter is a knife-sharpening tool or something.”

“Such a thing is possible,” Loki admitted. “But her eyes!” He sighed.

“You like ‘em cause they’re green,” Darcy said, trying to make her lungs work properly. She had back sweat. She could feel it sliding down her spine and into her drawers, for goodness sake. She’d put on pretty underwear for luck.

“I like green because of the color of Sif’s eyes,” he said quietly.

“Awww,” Darcy said, feeling emotional. Tears actually welled up in her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” Loki said, sounding astonished.

“That’s just--it’s just so touching and real and lovely,” she said, waving her hands. “I think I’m gonna wreck my mascara. I’m verklempt!”

“What is verklempt?” he asked.

“Old SNL skit. I need to introduce you to Linda Richman, so we can say ‘talk amongst yourselves’ at important moments,” Darcy said, dabbing her eyes with a bit of tissue from the end table. “Verklempt means overwhelmed or touched or something. I think it’s Yiddish?”

“I think I liked you better when you were bitter and cynical and with that pitiful Midgardian in London,” Loki said. “The Ian one. He did not inspire such nauseating sentimentality.”

“Phfft, you try to pretend to be above it all,” Darcy said, checking her reflection in the bathroom
mirror, “but now I know your secret, mister.”

“Hah,” he scoffed. “I continue on the with perfume book,” he said, shimmering away. Darcy could have sworn that his smile faded last. Who—in the name of all that was holy—had told Loki Odinson about the Cheshire Cat? That was a terrible idea.

***

“You look beautiful,” Jane told Darcy when she arrived. “I love that dress.”

“You, too. Is he here yet?” Darcy said. She wanted to clutch at Jane’s hands. She was practically hyperventilating.

“Not yet,” Jane said. “Breathe. This is worse than when you saw the makeup floor at Harrod’s in London for the first time and shook like a kid at Christmas.”

“In my defense, we’d been in one-stoplight Puente Antiguo forever and they had all kinds of British makeup I’d never tried before,” Darcy said. “That Harrod’s was my mecca. Give me something to do, I’m too nervous to start drinking, I’ll be wasted by the time he gets here.”

“Come with me and help carry Thor’s plates, then?” Jane suggested. Thor ate off serving platters, not human-sized plates. It took two people to carry a fully-loaded Thor plate. Jane and Darcy decided to bring the takeout boxes and the plates to the tables separately. They were in the kitchen when the doorbell rang.

“I shall answer!” Thor called. Darcy looked at Jane. Jane looked at Darcy. He was here.

Suddenly, Darcy realized she could hear Thor, Steve, and a third voice. It was a woman’s voice.

“It is an honor to meet you, my lady! The good captain has brought a date, my Jane!” Thor boomed. He was using a louder-than-normal register, trying to warn them. It was at moments like this that Darcy loved Thor’s big, generous heart. He didn’t want her to walk into that unprepared. Even then, Darcy’s heart did a sudden sink of disappointment and landed somewhere in the vicinity of her ankles. She felt just sick—literally heartsick. Had she been able to eat earlier in the day, she probably would have retched. For a moment, they both just stood there.

“How’s my face?” she asked Jane in a brittle voice. She tried to make something like a natural smile.

“Fine,” Jane lied.

“Liar,” Darcy said. It was hard to keep a happy face on when you wanted to cry. Like a lightbulb that kept going out, her smile was all flickery.

“What should we do?” Jane said.

“I’m calling in assistance,” Darcy said, tapping a spot on her Loki bracelet. She hoped Loki could show. He would help alleviate her third-wheel-ness, she knew. “Let’s go,” she told Jane.

“You sure?” Jane whispered.
“Gotta rip off the Band-Aid,” Darcy said with a clenched jaw. “If I stay in this kitchen, I’ll cry.”

“I’ve been waiting to introduce her to everybody,” Steve was saying, when Darcy came around the corner in Jane’s galaxy-print apron and her perfect date dress. Next to him was a smiling, albeit slightly overwhelmed-looking blonde woman. “Jane! Darcy!” Steve said joyfully. “Come meet Kate,” he said. “She’s my neighbor. My girl, too.”

“Hi,” Jane and Darcy said in unison.

“Hi,” Kate said politely. “It’s nice to meet you. That’s a lovely dress.”

“Thanks,” Darcy said, realizing it was possible for a compliment to feel like a kick in the teeth. She talked to cover her awkwardness. She was the most fancily dressed person there. It was obvious she’d worn it for Steve, but she tried to lie anyway. “We’ve been living in cold climates, so I’m using DC’s heat as an excuse to buy pretty clothes for a change,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” Steve said, laughing. “You shoulda seen ‘em when I visited in Norway. There’s poor little Darce, all bundled up like a walking thermal blanket. She looked three times her size. All you could see was her little red nose peeking out!” He laughed.

“I don’t miss that weather,” Darcy said to Kate, trying for breezy. “But I did keep all my fingers and toes, so it was a win.” Mercifully, the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Darcy said. She bolted for the door. When she opened it, Loki was there.

“What’s wrong?” he said. She shook her head and then pulled him inside. Steve would hear if she said anything out loud. She mouthed the words “He brought a date,” until Loki’s eyes went wide and his eyebrows shot up. He gestured towards the door with his thumb and made to pull her towards it like they could leave, but she shook her head. He gave her a sad look. She nodded. He snapped his fingers and a gift appeared in his hands. “Brother,” Loki called out, “I brought wine!”

“Don’t forget the table,” Darcy whispered. That was his cue to add a plate to the table, as if he’d planned his attendance all along. He nodded smoothly.

Darcy decided she really should have made Loki a platonic dinner instead of thinking about Steve like a hopeless little fool. He chatted and told funny stories about Thor and his childhood and was just generally sociable in a way Darcy couldn’t quite be, as they doled out the Chinese. She tried to seem normal and cheerful and bubbly, but it was exhausting. She just wanted to go home and weep. Failing that, go into the bathroom and weep. But Steve would hear and know. Somehow, that made it all worse. She just couldn’t touch her food. They talked about work things--Jane reeled off a bunch of twelve-syllable Science! Words and everyone pretended to understand--before Steve mentioned that Kate was a nurse.

“Oh?” Darcy said. “What floor do you work on?” Darcy’s mother and aunt were nurses.

“What floor? The fifth,” Kate said, looking confused.

“No, I mean, what division of the hospital?” Darcy said. How odd, she thought. She’d grown up around nurses. Everyone talked about working “the oncology floor” or the “maternity floor.” It was just how nurses talked.

“Umm, I move around,” Kate said. “I just did an infectious disease rotation?” she offered.
“So, PRN pool type stuff?” Darcy said.

“Pool?” the blonde said. Kate looked at her blankly.

“My aunt’s a nurse,” Darcy explained. “She always said the nephrology floor was the hardest work. Brain trauma is no joke,” Darcy said carefully.

“Yeah,” Kate said, “I agree.” She smiled at a gently beaming Steve. Kate, Darcy knew suddenly, wasn’t a freaking nurse. Nephrology was your kidneys, neurology was your brain. If she wasn’t a nurse, what was she? A Russian spy? She looked like a spy, Darcy thought. No one was naturally that sweet. Her real name was probably Katya and she’d end up murdering Steve with her thighs or something. Darcy was fretting about Steve’s date when Captain America asked her a question.


“You don’t know who it is?” Kate asked, before she shut her mouth with an audible click. Weird, Darcy thought.

“No,” Steve said. “You know, I don’t pay attention to workplace gossip. Tough to do. I had to take these meditation classes that Fury recommended, just to learn to tune out chatter, or I’d go nuts. Who is it?”

“Fury recommended meditation classes?” Darcy said. She tried to imagine it. No, she thought, not possible.

“Yeah,” Steve said, shrugging. “So who’s your guy? One of the STRIKE guys?”

“We don’t know!” Jane said.

“Nope, not a STRIKE guy. The card is this weird name that doesn’t match up with anybody at work—or anybody in the world,” Darcy explained. “He—or she—is a total mystery.”

“Huh,” Steve said. He looked wry.


“You should,” Darcy said softly into his ear. “She might appreciate them.”

“Barack Romolou?” Kate said, looking startled. “Oh that’s actually….unfortunate. The name, I mean. Maybe there was an accident or a mistake.” There was a moment of awkwardness around the table, as Kate realized it sounded like she’d meant they weren’t for Darcy.

“I don’t think she got these accidentally,” Jane said defensively, “they were expensive.”

“Oh, no, I meant the name. The name could be an accident or not a real name,” she said, looking nervous.

“Like an alias?” Darcy suggested. She had a sudden moment of realization: expensive flowers from a funny name? That had to be Tony Stark’s idea of a joke. He would totally travel under the alias ‘Barack Romolou,’ just for fun. Heck, he’d probably known a Barack Romolou and just borrowed their name to check into the Plaza. She’d call Tony tomorrow. Darcy had tuned Kate out, but she looked up to see Kate looking at her expectantly. “I’m sorry,” Darcy said, “I was just wondering if
“It’s our friend Tony’s idea of a joke?”

“Oh,” Kate said, almost squirming in her seat. “I was just mentioning that I had an aunt with an unusual name and this happened to her all the time. People used to garble it constantly. You wouldn’t believe what she got on her Starbucks orders. If I were you, I’d look for someone with those initials, just in case that’s what happened.” She gave Darcy an oddly significant look.

“Sure,” Darcy said, more out of politeness than anything else.

“Well, that does sound like Tony, if it’s not someone at work. I sorta thought one of the STRIKE guys liked you,” Steve said.

“Not that I know of,” Darcy said. “Not at all.”

“You sure?” Steve said, winking.

“Pretty sure, Steve,” Darcy said.

This was probably Tony. It all made sense. “Hey, wait, how’d you see the flowers?” Darcy asked Loki suddenly. “I put them in my bedroom!”

“I dropped by earlier,” he said innocently.

“Why?” Darcy said.

“Just to see if you were home?” he offered.

“When I find out….” Darcy began.

“I am wholly innocent,” Loki said, holding his hands up in surrender mode.

“Loki Odinson,” she said firmly. “You stay out of my dresser.”

Darcy dreaded imagining what he’d done--or borrowed. The real danger was Loki borrowing something and then pranking someone else. Last time, he’d borrowed her underwear and then hung them from the trees in the front yard of Jane’s loathed supervisor at their last observatory. The supervisor had been refusing to give Jane adequate instrument time. It hadn’t been the prank, so much as the fact that he’d ‘borrowed’ Darcy’s oldest and rattiest undies. The ones she wore during her period. A few pairs had never been located. Someone had told her that a passing dog walker had been spotted trying to pry one of the cotton granny panties out of her labrador’s mouth. She decided the best thing to do was toss them all and buy new underwear. Jane had suggested--based on her observation of the number of holes-to-total number of panties ratio--that it was probably time anyway.

Somewhere between the fortune cookies and Darcy thinking about her underwear flying in the breezes of Norway, the dinner conversation ground to an awkward halt. Darcy felt utterly miserable and letdown. She was desperately trying to think of what to do to bail out of there--pretend illness? Break her shoe?--when Loki asked if he could look at Thor and Jane’s little balcony.

“Come along, darling,” he said to Darcy.

“Yes,” she said. She followed him out and they stood there for a minute. Steve had that great
hearing, so Darcy couldn’t even have a decent breakdown while he was still in the apartment with Katya the Russian spy-slash-nurse. She looked at Loki’s profile. He looked sad and somehow, mournful? “At small parties, there isn’t any privacy,” Loki muttered. Darcy looked at him in astonishment.

“Holy freaking crap,” she whispered back, “that is so true. Fitzgerald was a genius.”

“What should we do?” he said softly.

“Let’s get drunk and jump in a fountain like Scott and Zelda?” she said. “Will you take me away?”

“Gladly,” Loki said. He snapped his fingers and they vanished.

***

“Where did they go?” Steve asked, looking up when movement caught his eye.

“It is impossible to say,” Thor said. “But I have fears.”

“He means somewhere they’ll get in trouble,” Jane explained to Kate.

“I imagine Barack Romolou would not be happy to see that,” Kate said, as if he was a real person she actually knew.

“Uh-huh,” Steve agreed, chuckling. “He has rotten luck.”

“Steve,” Jane said, “you know who it is! Who is it?”

“Commander Brock Rumlow,” Steve said.

“Oh, no,” Jane said.

“Why?” Kate asked.

“She hates him. She called him an asshole on the plane back from Egypt,” Jane said. “She says he has no sense of humor and is a ‘character from characterville’?” Steve threw back his head and laughed.

“A what?” Kate said.

“It’s from an old movie with Lauren Bacall where the guy is pushy, arrogant, and doesn’t wear a tie to weddings,” Jane explained.

“Two out of three,” Steve said, chuckling.

“Huh?” Kate said.

“He’s arrogant and he didn’t wear a tie to Agent Jones’s wedding,” Steve explained. ”I don’t think he owns one.”

“You aren’t going to tell her?” Kate asked Steve.

“Why? Watching him stew is hilarious. Besides, he said some smart aleck thing about how
meeting her would ‘ruin the fantasy’ for him?” Steve said, doing air quotes. “And he’s the biggest womanizer in all the STRIKE teams. She deserves somebody decent. I’m sure his intentions are no good. Heck, I think Loki probably treats her better. No offense, Thor.”

“None taken,” the Asgardian said. “My brother is exceedingly fond of my Lightning Sister.”

“Ruin the fantasy?” Jane said sharply. “What does that mean?”

“Oh yeah, he’s been voting for her in that terrible contest they have every month for years,” Steve told Jane.

“Which means everybody at work knows about it and is snickering behind her back?” Jane asked, suddenly intent. The whole idea of File Fixation pissed her off and she hadn’t even known Darcy could be in there. She’d figured people mostly voted for Thor and Steve, the semi-public celebrities, not the regular people who’d been sucked into SHIELD’s net of jack-booted thugs. Suddenly, Darcy seemed vulnerable to Jane, just going about her regular life, singing along to her music, oblivious to the leering of faceless SHIELD agents with guns and combat training. It seemed terribly unfair to be objectified by strangers for years when you’d had the misfortune of aliens landing on you. Darcy would laugh it off, but Jane was upset. Her friend was not some pinup to be ogled. Darcy hadn’t agreed to that; worse, did that kind of interest put Darcy in danger from stalkers and crazies, Jane wondered? Darcy was always the one who ran errands alone or picked up things from that creepy loading dock near the mailroom.

“Well,” Steve said, “I think they’re mostly snickering at him, really.”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said. She might be distracted when she was at Science!, but Jane Foster was familiar enough with the experience of being the new girl in an environment where established, older men developed pervy fixations and ran amok. She’d had to switch committee members on her master’s thesis after one famous astrophysicist tried to put his hand on her thigh during office hours. It had been one of the most upsetting moments of Jane’s life--she’d worried that complaining would jeopardize her whole career. Some people--sexist, cynical jerks--always thought the younger woman had sought out the attention or was using sex to get things: lab privileges, funding, etc.. As if she had wanted a sixty-two year old man with visible nose hairs and bad breath to feel her up! “Does anybody else vote for her like that?” Jane said. She and Thor could make a list of potential creeps and pay them a visit, if necessary.

“Not that I know of,” Steve said. “It’s sort of his thing.”

“If he’s that kind of guy,” Jane said, “I’m not telling her, either. And he’s too old and humorless for her anyway.” She crossed her arms. “You’re not telling her, are you?” she said to Thor.

“If you wish me not to, I will not,” Thor said gently, seeing the flash of fire in Jane’s eyes. Thor was not a stupid man, even if Loki made jokes about dumb blondes.

“He’ll give up when she doesn’t just fall into his arms,” Steve said confidently. “I’m pretty sure that’s what he expects his women to do. She’s better off if she doesn’t even know it’s him.”

Thor and Kate looked at their respective partners with something like fond exasperation. They were both so stubborn when they thought they were doing the right thing.
There were a surprising number of Scott and Zelda-era bars still surviving in New York City, Darcy realized, once Loki had whisked her to one. She looked around at the luxurious bar and grinned. “This is very snazzy,” she said. “You look handsome too.” He’d somehow changed his clothes. He was wearing a dark pinstriped suit, a matching waistcoat, and an emerald green patterned tie. Even his white shirt looked somehow more beautiful. She thought she’d seen Johnny Depp wear a suit like that, in that movie where he played John Dillinger.

“Thank you,” he said. “May I change your outfit as well?”

“Sure,” Darcy said. “Have fun.”

“Delightful,” he said. He magicked her into a modernized flapper dress with a deep v neckline and a sequined pattern. It was sleeveless. She really never wanted to see her other dress again, so she was fine with this new outfit. Plus, she really liked the swishy details at the hem and the long necklace of pearls he’d helpfully provided. They both moved when she walked.

“I love it!” she said.

“How about this? Too much?” he said, turning her head towards the mirror behind the bar. He magicked her up one of those flapper sparkly jeweled headbands.

“I look like Marie-Jose of Italy,” Darcy said, shocked by how beautiful it was. “That’s all magic?”

“It is bad?” he asked.

“No, no, Marie-Jose had the best style of any princess ever. She wore Egyptian-inspired flapper dresses. She was cool,” Darcy explained. “She wore her fancy-schmancy tiaras as headbands a lot.”

“Drink?” Loki offered. When she agreed, he leaned forward. “What if we really have fun tonight? Really put on a show? I have an idea.”

“Oookay,” Darcy said, sipping the retro cocktail he’d magicked up. “What is this? It tastes like flowers.”

“That, my darling, is something you Midgardians call the bees’ knees? I find the term befuddling myself,” Loki said.

“The bees knees!” Darcy said. “I’ve read about this. Bathtub gin and honey. You know, people didn’t like things so sweet then? Even the perfumes are less sweet.”

“Really?” he said. “I am enjoying that book, by the way. Though it is ridiculous that they come up with a perfume name before they decide what it should smell like.”

“Oh, that’s all about copyrighting the name first,” Darcy said, airily waving away his criticism, “but I went to the department store and smelled a bunch of older things from Scott and Zelda’s day. Well, except for Youth Dew. It’s from the 1940s. Not at all youthful or dewy, really. It smells like a fur coat feels.”

“A fur coat?” he said. “You do not wear fur coats. You think animals are for petting,” he said.

“My grandma had one. Silvery-white. I think it was rabbit? It was awful, but I tried it on once,” Darcy said. “So heavy. Gross. Anyway, that’s not what I was thinking. It was thinking about liking
things sweet versus not sweet. None of the 1920s ones were sweet at all—Shalimar is probably the sweetest and it still has this powderiness and smokiness? It reminds me of, like, the idea of bare skin sprinkled with talcum powder on a hot afternoon before air-conditioning? The bare skin is a little sweaty and the powder smells like flowers and citrus and vanilla beans, but it’s not sugary.”

“Evocative image,” he said wryly, “Did you want another drink?”

“Yes,” Darcy said. These glasses were small, right? There couldn’t be that much alcohol?

“Go on with the perfume idea,” he said. “I’m interested.”

“It’s just that there are so many ways of being not-sweet,” she said thoughtfully, “a drink or a perfume can be smoky or herbal or soapy or spicy. Chanel no. 5 is just a really beautiful clean, soapy smell. Mitsouko is peach and spices, but very dry. Jicky is lemon-herbal and dry, too. The Guerlain guys were very into that. The drinks are the same. Like whatever this is?” She gestured to her new drink. He’d filled it with something different.

“Gin fizz,” he supplied.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “In the 1920s, people didn’t crave sweetness the way we do or something? They didn’t mind things that were harder to like, a little more challenging? I feel like there’s a metaphor there.”

“I think we need to try more cocktails to verify your theory,” he said. “How about a French 75? It has champagne?” There were a shocking number of other twenties-era drinks to try: martinis, sidecars, gimlets, and oceans upon oceans of champagne. Darcy decided she liked the Mary Pickford best. It had pineapple juice, rum, and grenadine. She could admit to herself that she did prefer things on the sweeter side. But maybe she needed to develop a taste for angular, more difficult things?

“What else can I try?” she asked Loki.

“How about an Aviation?” he offered.

Thoroughly sloshed, Darcy attempted to climb into the Pulitzer fountain after their fourth bar, but it was too slippery. “I want to bob my hair and do this every day!” she said.

“Your fragile Midgardian liver would not survive,” Loki told her, grinning.

“I want to love first and live incidentally!” Darcy said, quoting Zelda Fitzgerald.

“Get down, silly thing!” he called.

“No!” Darcy said, before practically landing on him. Loki had to catch her, laughing.

“Let me teach you to dance,” he said.

“That,” she told him, “will be a terrible mistake. But okay.”

She turned out to be a semi-okay tango dancer. Loki, of course, was perfect at it. The slower dancing was easier. “Thank you for getting me out of there,” she told him, as they swayed to a smoldering live cover of Lady Gaga’s “A Million Reasons” at this little club. She rested her head against his neck. He smelled like 4711. Darcy’s grandparents had kept a splash bottle of that in
their bathroom in the summers. It was an old-fashioned cologne. How’d he magic that up, she wondered? He absorbed things like a sponge, just like a kid always caught the cuss word they weren’t supposed to hear. He probably knew everything already, he just pretended not to know human things because it amused him. “I’m having a lovely time,” she said softly.

“That’s the idea,” he whispered. She missed his sneaky grin.

Afterwards, he snuck her into a nice restaurant. It was empty and dark. “What are we doing? Is this breaking an entering?” she asked.

“Only a smidge,” he said. “Sit down,” he said. When they heard someone walking in, Darcy froze. But Loki merely exchanged words with the man and he waved at her pleasantly.

“You know him?” she said.

“I eat on Midgard on occasion,” he said. “Wait here.” First he brought her bread, then massive plates of a simple pasta.

“Who made this?” she said, befuddled. They were sitting alone in the half-dark.

“I did,” he said. “Naturally.”

“Without magic?” she said, stunned.

He shrugged. “I prefer to let my knives dice the tomatoes themselves, but I do monitor the boiling water. Speaking of--”

“Where are you going?” she said.

“To make sure I don’t burn the place down,” he said. He came back to the table with more champagne. Then he took her to another club for more dancing.

***

They wound down their adventures back at Darcy’s apartment in DC, just as the sun was pinkening the sky. She called in sick to work, just to get away from SHIELD for a day. Darcy was fairly sure her blood was 100-proof at the mo. She left a voicemail; Jane wouldn’t mind. “What shall we do now?” Loki asked her. He was lying on his back on the floor next to the couch. He’d lost one of his shoes at the last club.

“Continue your Midgardian education in pop culture, of course, by watching dumb movies and hold each other’s hair while we puke,” Darcy said, rolling over onto her belly to peer at him from the sofa. Her headband-slash-tiara thingy was crooked and her hair was all askew.

“I do not puke,” he said.

“Well, then, I’m your Huckleberry,” she said. She was definitely gonna sooner or later.

“Nope,” he said, magicking her up a tonic. “Drink this, tiny mortal,” he said.

“Sure, sure,” Darcy said, reaching down to grasp it, then swallowing the whole thing. “What’ll it do?”
“No idea,” he said.

“Where did your tie go? It was pretty,” Darcy asked, grinning at his pretend indifference.

“I gave it to that pleasant barman,” Loki said. “At the fifth bar.”

“Barman,” Darcy said, giggling, “barman!”

“You are perhaps still drunk,” he said.

“Tonight at Jane and Thor’s was miserable,” Darcy said. “I really thought…..”

“What?” he said.

“That Steve would see me, you know? I mean, I’ve had all these things happen to me and I just roll with it, do the whole non-attachment thing. No expectations. It makes life easier, when you just let things sweep you along.” She waved her hand tipsily. “But I wanted this. I wanted to make it happen. I thought maybe, maybe, just this once, I could make something happen, instead of just like, responding to a crisis from the sidelines. I wanted to be the lead girl in my own movie. I thought if I just got the right dress or made the right meal, something would be different. But I’m just me,” she said.

“You are fine. He is a dullard,” Loki said, with admirable loyalty. “You can make things happen, just not with him. Which is as it should be.”

“Do you know who Barack Romolou is?” she asked him. “Can you tell by magic?”

“Unfortunately, no. When I touched the card today, all I got was a very confused florist who couldn’t understand the man’s name for the sound of gunshots over the telephone. But it is a he and he is undoubtedly SHIELD, unless you have found your own bootlegger?” he said.

“Huh. Nope, no bootleggers. God, wouldn’t that be exciting?” Darcy said. “Racing away from the cops with a trunk full of rattling booze? A winding road somewhere in the dark?” She sighed.

“You see? Someone who imagines that as an adventure should not be with a Captain Rogers,” Loki said.

“Phhft,” Darcy said, still thinking of the sound of rolling booze bottles in the trunk of an old car and shotgun blasts. “Steve has a motorcycle and jumps out of planes. I didn’t say I wanted to do it, anyway. I just maybe want someone like that to chase me for a change. You know what’s really sad about Scott and Zelda?” Darcy said to Loki. When she was drunk she rambled more than when she was sober. It was considerable.

“What?” he said.

“He took her stuff. Her diaries, her lines, her anecdotes, and used them in his books and when she tried to write one--one!--book, he freaked out, basically. She made some joke about ‘plagiarism begins at home,’ but you know that hurt badly. She wanted to be somebody herself, not just his somebody,” Darcy said, with three-martini conviction. “But she stayed stuck on the sidelines, too.”

“I thought she was just unwell,” Loki said.

“What do you think makes people unwell?” Darcy said, standing up wobbly. “I’ll be back.”

“Be careful,” Loki said, as she stumbled into her bedroom. She grabbed a book, shook her head at
the exotic floral arrangement from Mr. Nobody-Knows-Who, and staggered back to the living room. “This is it! This is the book. Her book. I’m gonna read you some stuff.”

“Oh, jolly,” Loki said dryly.

“Shhh, she’s good. You’re gonna eat your raven,” Darcy said.

“Eat my raven?” he said.

“Like eat crow--nevermind. Listen,” she said, self-seriously:

Being in love, she concluded, is simply a presentation of our pasts to another individual, mostly packages so unwieldy that we can no longer manage the loosened strings alone. Looking for love is like asking for a new point of departure, she thought, another chance in life.

“Unwieldy,” Loki said from the floor, sighing and nodding in recognition. “I, myself, am very unwieldy.”

“Oh-huh,” Darcy said, nodding. “Me, too.”

“No like me,” he said.

“Tell that to allllll the men,” Darcy said. “Besides, women love you. They want to mama you, take care of you. I’ve seen the blogs. If you actually dated, people would go crazy.”

“You really think so?” he asked, a glint in his eye. “What is a blog?” he said.

“We decided not tell you. Thor was afraid you’d start an all-girl army. Whoops,” Darcy said.

“I’ll forget,” he said, waving a hand. “I’m quite drunk as well.”

“Pffhttt,” Darcy said. “Lie. You’ll google as soon as I pass out.”

“Of course. Did she actually love Fitzgerald, do you think?” he said. “Zelda?”

“She loved him,” Darcy said firmly. She read him the line where the fictionalized Zelda described falling in love as feeling yourself be pulled and remade like blown glass. They sat for few minutes in silence. The words swam on Darcy’s page. She tossed the book at Loki when he gestured for it.

“Do you think that was intentional?” she asked, a thought occurring to her from behind her closed eyelids. “That something hot and dangerous and forged in a furnace turns into something that you can shatter with a touch? Like a metaphor for their whole deal? The marriage?”

“Possibly,” he said. He reached for the nearest champagne bottle. “Empty,” he sighed.

“Welcome to my life,” she said.

“You are turning maudlin,” he said. “You have reached the maudlin stage of drunkenness.”

“Stupid Steve,” Darcy said sadly. “Why does he have to be so good? I could hate him if he weren’t so good.”
Loki scoffed. “Good! That is the saddest compliment in all of Midgard,” he said. “We shall suss out the identity of this man Romolou and see if he is more worthwhile. I rather imagine he is. His taste in flowers suggests a flair. And if he is not suitable, we will find someone who is better.”

“Steve is good! Even if he doesn’t have a-a-flair or whatever,” Darcy said, feeling a little wave of sadness. She hiccupped. “He’s solid. Solid people don’t need flair. Steve’s like--”

“A rock?” Loki offered.

“The rock of Gibraltar,” Darcy said sadly. “The best rock of all the rocks...”

“Still a rock,” Loki said.

“Do you think she’s really a nurse?” Darcy asked. She’d confided her fears about Kate.

“I sense deception, you are correct,” he said.

“What does she have that I don’t have?” Darcy asked. “Is she prettier?”

“No,” he scoffed. “She is also just a rock person. Clunk clunk,” he mimicked.

“I wish I was a rock,” Darcy said, with maudlin wistfulness. “I talk too much, it’s a man repeller.”

“Please do not be verklempt,” Loki said sympathetically.

“Verklempt, I forgot,” she muttered, “to show you a clip.”

“No, you showed me at the third bar,” he said, yawning. “You were very excitable.”

“Oh, yeah,” Darcy said. “Did I really ask you to marry me if we were both single when I’m 40?”

“Indeed,” he said, closing his eyes. “I accepted, contingent on our plans failing. It arrives tomorrow,” he mumbled.

“What does?” she said.

“Phase one of our plan,” he said. Darcy had no idea what he was talking about, but she hoped it included a donut truck to assist in hangover recovery.

Chapter End Notes

Marie-Jose (Princess of Belgium, briefly Queen of Italy) was the flapper princess, basically. Here she is wearing part of a famed tiara as a headband: https://pin.it/ffhpd5ncdgp5m

Marie-Jose also went to formal events in an ancient-Egypt inspired flapper dress: https://pin.it/q6jwnugx2ldro

Darcy's modern take on a flapper dress (it's a recent Ralph Lauren): https://pin.it/fdzv7n66tfptw

(ETA: Kate/Katya the Russian spy is, of course, Sharon Carter. Who has asked Steve not to mention her at work because “uh, reasons?” and is sort of breaking the rules by
dating him. Sharon knows who Barack Romolou is and would tell Darcy, but that would blow her cover as a SHIELD agent embedded in Steve's apt. building.)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Paying for it now, like wooooooooooooooo.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thank you for all the comments & kudos! Y’all are awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Darcy woke up, she was half-dead of a hangover. Or 35%. It was difficult to verify without a breathalyzer. “Ooooh, oooh,” she moaned. She checked the floor for a prone Loki before she stumbled to the bathroom, but he was gone. A long shower did nothing to alleviate her piteous condition. She wanted to make tiny kitten noises at someone until they brought her food and a new-functioning--brain. How had the Fitzgeralds done all that drinking? No wonder Zelda had described their fictional counterparts as waking up looking like “uncombed terriers” or something once.

A makeupless, damp-haired, and totally ineffectual Darcy got on the Metro for work. It was Saturday, but she’d check in with Jane and then lie on a lab table for a few hours to make up for skipping all of Friday. She was clutching a travel mug of coffee and murmuring a mantra to herself. “One step, kiddo, one step, kiddo,” she whispered, whenever something seemed especially daunting. Like figuring out her stop. Or getting on the escalator without landing on her face. She was walking into the empty-seeming Triskelion when several of the STRIKE Alpha guys came out of one of the building’s doors. At the sight of her, they actually stopped and whistled like cartoon wolves. Only Jack refrained; he stopped to hold the door open for her.

“What’s going on?” Darcy said. He was grinning. Like a damn possum, she thought. Did they have those in Australia?

“It looked like you had a great time in the city, Darce,” he said. “He’s lucky.”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I’m paying for it now, like woooooooooo.” She shook her head.

“Have a bonzer day, love,” he told her, with a wink.

“You, too, Jack,” she said.

She’d gotten ten feet into the nearly-deserted building lobby when it hit her. “Looked like?” she said out loud. “What?”

As she got further into the building, it became horrifyingly clear. All the TV screens were normally
turned to cable news and a few of them had been left on over the weekend. And every cable news channel was doing a story on Thor’s brother, the spare to the heir of Asgard, and his mysterious new girlfriend. Her. Darcy was graced with multiple paparazzi images of herself bar hopping with Loki, wandering around New York arm in arm, even him catching her and laughing at the Pulitzer fountain, and having what CNN called “an intimate, romantic meal at a private restaurant,” as he led her inside by the hand. They were speculating on whether or not he’d been “redeemed by love” and trying to ID her. A bunch of people thought she might be someone important. It was the fanciness of Thursday-into-Friday’s dress and jewelry.

But by far, the worst images--worst was relative to embarrassment level here--were the grainy shots and video clips of them dancing. They were sexy. Like, ridiculously so. He was a great dancer. Also, he put his hands all over her in a way that implied they knew each other very well. More terrifyingly, Darcy realized, when she’d frozen in front of a TV, he seemed to have taught her to be a sexy dancer, too. The news kept replaying a particular angle of him holding her from behind as she looked over her shoulder at him and wiggled suggestively. Was her lipstick that red? Were her boobs that Jessica Rabbit-esque? Or had he done something with magic to make her look like that? Darcy gaped at the screen. She didn't recognize herself.

“Miss Lewis,” a voice said sharply from the end of the hall, “I trust you’re feeling better?” It was Nick Fury.

“Yes, sir,” Darcy said, scrunching her face in embarrassment. She was going to be SHIELD famous as the weirdo intern who’d been banging Loki, the guy that eighty percent of the organization loathed. The only people who didn’t hate Loki were the ones who also wanted to bang him. Everybody was gonna hate her. Oh shit.

***

Darcy stopped in the breakroom to refill her coffee before she went upstairs. Steve was standing in there. Oh, she thought, I’m so not ready. “Hey, Darce,” he said cheerfully. “You have fun?”

“Oh, the best kind,” Darcy said, not feeling fun at all. She made the coffee as quickly as possible.

“Darce, is something wrong?” Steve said, in a kind voice.

“Um, it’s just being hungover. You’re lucky, you don’t get those,” Darcy said. When she looked up at him, the soft expression on his face almost made her heart skip a beat. God, Steve was dreamy. All of a sudden, the words were just spilling out of her. “Steve, I’m worried about you--about your safety. It’s Kate. I don’t think she’s an actual nurse. But if she’s not a nurse, what is she?” Darcy said.
“Darce, honey, I’ve seen her in scrubs, she’s a nurse,” Steve said.

“Anyone can buy scrubs. They don’t ask for your hospital ID when you buy them or anything,” Darcy told him. “I’ve been to those uniform places with my mom. They are expensive, but anyone can buy them. And she doesn’t talk right for a nurse, Steve, I swear. She didn’t make one joke about anything that would made a normal person want to puke all during dinner. You cannot eat with an actual nurse without getting one story about gangrene or bed sores or vomit, I swear to Frigga. My mama’s a nurse, I know.”

“Sweetheart,” Steve said gently, “are you sure this isn’t your imagination running away with you? You and Loki, you’re clever people. You read all those books and you’re, well, real creative minded?”

“No, Steve, I promise. She thought nephrology was the brain trauma floor. It’s kidneys, Steve. Every nurse I’ve ever met says working dialysis stuff is, like, super stressful. They have to filter all your blood with a machine and, supposedly, they start chopping your toes off if you’re non-compliant, so it’s a big mess.” Darcy heard a chuckle behind her. Some of the STRIKE guys had come in and were getting coffee, too. “And Steve,” she said in a quieter voice, “she didn’t recognize the term PRN pool. Everybody knows that.”

“So, because she didn’t tell any gross stories and she didn’t recognize one, uh, pool term, you think she’s not a nurse?” Steve said, smiling gently. “C’mon now, doll.”

“She’s right,” a voice said behind Darcy. She jumped. It was Rumlow. “My sister’s a nurse. Teri worked PRN for a couple of years—and bitched like hell about the dialysis floor being understaffed,” he said seriously.

“See? See?” Darcy said. “He knows floor, too. All nurses say floor, Steve.” She looked at Rumlow. “But when I asked her what floor she worked on, his girlfriend actually said ‘fifth’?!”

“I’d look into that if I was you,” Rumlow said to Steve. Then he turned on his heel and left the room abruptly. Weird, Darcy thought. Still, he’d backed her up.

“Steve, please look into it, okay?” Darcy said. “Just check. What if she’s a Russian spy?”

“A Russian spy?” he said. He gave her one of those heart-racing smiles again.

“Or worse, a tabloid reporter! Steve, you’re a celebrity now. People might target you for all kinds of reasons,” Darcy told him. “Women are always chasing Thor with itty-bitty hidden cameras, trying to lure him into cheating on Jane to sell it to the National Enquirer or something.”

“Sure, Darce,” Steve said with obvious affection.

“You promise?” she said.

“I’ll check,” he said tenderly. Ugh, Darcy thought, he was just so perfect. The man’s smile was gonna cause her a cardiac event one day and his fake nurse girlfriend would be no help whatsoever. She’d be dead and then Steve would believe her.

***

Darcy had just stepped on the elevator and was watching the doors close when someone called for her to hold the doors. She hit the button and leaned back against the glass wall. If she shut her eyes,
the pounding in her head felt slightly less. “35th?” the man who’d joined her said. Darcy opened her eyes. It was the Rumlow guy. He had his back to her and was doing the half head-turn thing he did when he talked to people in elevators. Darcy wondered why he didn’t just turn around; it wasn’t like the elevator was crowded. That head turn looked like it would make your neck sore. Why not just make eye contact? He had left the breakroom abruptly, hadn’t he?

“Yup,” she said. “35.” That was she and Jane’s floor.

“Yeah,” he said flatly. Oh God, Darcy thought, he probably lost friends in New York and thinks I’m a total schmuck. In fact, he looked a little tense. She could see it in his neck and his solid shoulders. He was wearing a t-shirt and his tactical gear, so she could study his tattoos, too. One of them--right above his elbow joint on the back of his arm--looked like a Santa Muerte and the same spot on the other arm had, maybe, like a rosary thing going on? Oddly religious, but like, ‘I’ve-seen-some-shit’ religious? He probably really did think she’d befriended Satan. He’d walked past the same TVs she had to get here.

“You hate me,” she said. “What did Loki do? Was it a friend? Did you lose somebody?”

“Excuse me?” he said, doing the half head turn again. His eyes were focused on the wall to her left. He looked tired, she thought. Almost as tired as she felt. Poor guy. They must hate working Saturdays in this heat. Did Fury actually make them come in and do drills in a heatwave or were they headed off to, like, catch terrorists somewhere?

“Look,” Darcy said, “I get it. You think I’m, like, dancing with the devil in the pale moonlight or whatever? Lots of people lost friends in New York. Loki is a problematic friend. So, now all of SHIELD hates my guts, probably. I’m sorry if my friendships are, like, triggering for you? Honestly. I’m not saying that to be a smartass. Loki really is my problematic friend.”

“A problematic friend?” he said, frowning slightly on the half of his face she could see.

“Problematic is maybe not a big enough word,” Darcy said. “Especially when, you know, I’m technically working for SHIELD and he unleashed aliens on you and your friends.”

“Look, it’s a free country,” he said. “You can date whoever you want. I get the message.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s more like my difficult brother?” Darcy said. “Do you have that relative?”

“Well, I guess he’ll really be my brother-in-law one day, when Thor and Jane get married? But we have our own sibling relationship, sorta. For me, he’s that family member you have who does insanely stupid, dangerous things, but you look at him and all you see is that little crooked smile he used to do when he was five and you were his favorite babysitter, you know? And sometimes, you see that kid again and it’s like whoosh, he’s still in there and you’re just hoping against hope that you can throw in a line and tow that kid out again. He’s trying to turn it around, only sometimes he goes overboard. I’m pretty sure I’m all over the news because he’s trying to suss out my secret admirer or make this girl on Asgard jealous? But you can’t not forgive him. I mean, you’ve got a rosary on the back of your arm, so I’m gonna hazard a guess that you believe in forgiveness?”

“My tattoo?” he said, sounding incredulous. He’d half-rotated his whole body now. Encouraged, Darcy kept talking. The residual booze in her system was still making her ramble, probably. Also,
it was weirdly warm in this elevator. She’d started to sweat a little.

“Yeah, I mean, those are cool. Very nifty. I’ve always been too chicken to get one. I thought everybody at SHIELD was all buttoned down and very, like square, but obviously not,” she said. “You don’t look like a door-to-door Mormon missionary at all.”

“What?” he said.

“You have a whole unfathomable vibe?” she suggested. “It’s intimidating, which is probably useful at work.”

The Rumlow guy leaned forward and hit the stop button on the elevator. It shuddered to a stop. Her stomach lurched as the elevator halted. “Wait, are you saying you aren’t wit—hey, you okay?” he said, catching her as she swayed a little. He’d put his hands under her elbows gently.

“Ooohh,” she moaned. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’m just stupidly hungover, even with Asgardian hangover tonic. Never, ever drink with anyone from Asgard, even if they have good intentions.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“They always do. Asgardians will drink with you, whatever you’re feeling. Sadness, celebration, whatever. Thor will say the mead is mild alcohol, but I lost a whole week,” she said, “and I still have no idea how we crashed that flying boat.” He was still holding her up. He actually smiled. It was a good smile, Darcy realized, momentarily distracted. “Um, yeah, so Loki was trying to be a good bro and took me out the other night and I’ll be paying for it for at least a week.”

“What were you celebrating together?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, we weren’t. I was sad about my pathetic love life and he helped me drink to forget my sorrows,” Darcy said. The Rumlow guy had gone a little tense again.

“You’re sorrows?” he said in a perplexed voice.

“Yeah, I, uh, showed up for what I thought was a date, only my date brought a date, so I was a little on the spot, you know?” Her voice broke a tiny bit. “All in my fancy dress, feeling like a total fool, the ultimate third wheel. Loki gets it, because he’s been in love with this woman in Asgard who won’t give him the time of day for--literally--centuries now. Anyhow, Loki helped me escape the not-date, took me drinking, and is going to help me find my Keyser Soze, my Rolo Tomassi, the mysterious Barack Romolou? Oh em gee, I just realized that Kevin Spacey is in Usual Suspects and LA Confidential. I really hope Barack Romolou is not Kevin Spacey. That would be hella awkward, I do not want Kevin Spacey to be him,” Darcy said. “You don’t know Barack Romolou, do you?” she asked.

“Barack Romolou?” he said, looking lost. “Who the fuck is that?”

“Nobody can tell me,” Darcy said sadly. “He sent me flowers and nobody knows who he is.”

“He sent you flowers?” Rumlow said slowly.

“Beautiful flowers,” Darcy said mournfully. “Les oiseaux du paradis? Birds of paradise,” she said, sighing. “I put them in my bedroom. They’re toxic to pets, so it’s not safe to leave them in the lab with Jane, she gets easily distracted. I wish I could find this guy and talk to him,” Darcy said. “I don’t even know why he likes me? Much less why he thinks we got off on the wrong foot? How can you be on the wrong foot with somebody you’ve never seen?”
“Barack Romolou sent you flowers,” he said again, in that same slow way.

“Yes,” she said. “If you run into him, please tell him I’m looking for him? I can’t even find him to thank him.”

The Rumlow guy looked like he wanted to say something, but then his comms device crackled and Darcy heard the southern STRIKE guy. “Boss, what’s your ETA? We need you on the helipad!”

He took a step towards her, but his comms device crackled again. “Boss?” the voice said again.


“I gotta go,” Rumlow said, sighing. “But I’ll find you again soon, okay? We’ll figure this out. Always the worst possible fucking moment,” Rumlow said, shaking his head.

“Okay?” Darcy said politely, confused by his intensity. She watched in surprise as he hit the door open button. They were between floors, but he hopped up onto the floor effortlessly. Rumlow was agile.

“Just hit the button after the doors close,” he told her. “We’ll talk soon.”

As they slid shut, she called out, “you and Jack be safe!”

Brock Rumlow jogged towards the helipad stairwell, shaking his head. “Barack Romolow?” he said out loud. Had there just been a name fuckup somewhere? He would call the goddamn florist, see if they had a record of what was on that card.

In the elevator, Darcy was fretting. What could he want to talk about? What if Rick Rumlow was sincerely religious? She hoped he wasn’t going to corner her and talk about his personal relationship with Jesus or something, the next time they saw each other. He would probably want her to bring Loki to some sort of worship service? Or one of those Panera Bread men’s Bible study groups? Loki would hate that. You couldn’t even take Loki to $5 yoga at the Unitarian church without him getting all eye-roll-y and the Unitarians were so nice.

***

She found Jane working in the lab. “Heyyyyyy, Janey,” she said quietly.

“Did you have fun with Loki? It looks like fun,” Jane said.

“Oh, yeah, we had a great time and now I’m paying for it. Also, I think someone from the elevator is going to try to talk to me about finding God soon?” Darcy said.

“You babbled, didn’t you?” Jane said, smiling.

“There was a rosary tattoo, it wasn’t my fault,” Darcy said.

“How hungover are you?” Jane teased.

“On a scale of 1 to 10, I’m at fifteen and a half and that’s with Loki’s magic hangover tonic,”
Darcy said, “Which lab table is the most comfortable?”

“That one,” Jane said, pointing. “If you get a blanket, it feels just like my favorite lab table in Norway.”

“You hid blankets from me again?” Darcy asked. She’d tried to remove all of them in an effort to get Jane to go home and sleep. Jane shrugged guiltily.

“They’re under that cabinet, behind the scientific journals,” she admitted.

“Jane, you wicked, wicked woman, you picked the one thing you knew I’d never read! That’s genius,” Darcy said.

“I got very nervous when you started reading The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, I was afraid it would get you into science journals,” Jane said.

“No, I cried too much,” Darcy said, fishing out Jane’s secret pillow and blanket. “What Henrietta went through was just--ugh, heartbreak.” She crawled up on the lab table with the battered pillow and blankets and turned on Chris Isaak’s Forever Blue album on her earbuds. Darcy sang along with him at her favorite parts. One bit made her think of Steve. It was super fun to sing along with when she was being silly and self-pitying over Katya the Russian spy snagging her perfect guy. He had no clue how she felt. None. Would he ever see it? Loki thought she should give up, but he didn’t get Steve.

“No singing,” Jane said.

“Phffft,” Darcy said.

When she woke up, she’d drooled on the table a little and someone was knocking on the glass door. She’d been asleep for four hours. Jane was crashed on her notes, so Darcy got up to answer. It was some guy from SHIELD’s cafe with a green drink. “I, uh, didn’t order this?” Darcy said.

“Someone sent it to you. Cures any hangover,” the guy said. “Commander Rumlow’s personal smoothie recipe.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” the guy said, looking at her like she had two heads. “He paid for it.”

“Oh, okay,” Darcy said. “Is Rick always this nice?”

“Rick?” the guy said, looking even more baffled.

“Rumlow?” Darcy said tentatively. Maybe it was Breck after all?

“His first name is Brock. Brock Rumlow,” the delivery guy said slowly.

“Brock Rumlow?” Darcy repeated. When you said it slowly, it almost sounded like something else... The delivery guy paused for a minute and Darcy absently got him a tip, her mind a million miles away.

“$5?” he said, “I just carried it upstairs.” She didn’t answer, so he left.
Darcy looked at Jane’s whiteboards. She grabbed a dry erase marker.

_Brock Rumlow_

_Barak Romolou_

Could it be possible? Why hadn’t he said anything? Darcy shook Jane awake. “Jane, Jane,” she said frantically. “What if Barack Romolow is Commander Rumlow? His first name is _Brock_, not Rick!”

“I know,” Jane said sleepily. “Rumlow sent you the flowers.”

“He did? You _knew_? Why didn’t you tell me?” Darcy said.

“I just found out on Thursday from Steve,” Jane said.

“Steve knows?” Darcy said, shocked.

“Everyone knows,” Jane said, rubbing her bleary eyes. “Rumlow has been voting you his hottie of the month for _years_. He told Steve he didn’t want to meet you because meeting you would ‘ruin his fantasy.’ He’s a creeper. I’m sorry, Darce. I didn’t know how to tell you,” Jane said. She closed her eyes again.

“But he sent me a hangover cure?” Darcy said, utterly baffled. Jane started to snore.

Chapter End Notes

The Chris Isaak song is, of course, "Somebody's Crying;" especially the chorus of "if you don't love meeeeee like I love you." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex55OsvPxDU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex55OsvPxDU)
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The paintings of pinups on WWII-era planes are called "nose art" because of their positions near the nose of the plane.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos! Y’all are great.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While Jane was passed out, Darcy paced. One of the SHIELD employees who worked on the same floor passed by and Darcy waved at her. Linda. Her name was Linda. “I’m just checking our fridges in this heat,” Linda said. “We had one fail last weekend because the A/Cs are overworked in this weather. Everything spoiled. Such a drag,” she said.

“It wasn’t like gooey, scaly Chitauri tissue samples, was it?” Darcy joked.

“Haha, no, I wish, it was the employee fridge. Some asshole left their lunch in there and it practically baked. So disgusting. Those R&D guys never clean anything,” she said.

“Ewwww,” Darcy said.

“Uh-huh,” Linda said.

“Hey, can I ask you a weird question?” Darcy asked. Linda nodded. “What do you know about Brock Rumlow?”

“Oh, honey, did he finally make a move? We’ve all been wondering, ever since we heard y’all were moving in,” Linda said.

“He sent flowers,” Darcy said. “Fancy flowers.”

“Well, then,” Linda said. “Follow me, I’ll fill you in.” As they walked around checking all the refrigeration, Linda told her all the gossip about Brock. There was a lot of it. Talking to Linda opened up the SHIELD text and email floodgates: as soon as people found out she was asking about Brock, she started getting messages through the SHIELD private messaging system. As Jane napped on her desk, Darcy’s phone pinged constantly.

She took a selection and forwarded them to a sleeping Jane, scrawling commentary with her stylus.

Agent Miranda Lee: Giiiiirll, he is obsessed with 3 things: STRIKE, maintaining his crazy
Agent Greg Fields: He is a total workaholic. People think he wants to run SHIELD, but I think he’ll die doing fieldwork. No outside interests or meaningful personal life that I know of, but going to the gym and trying weird kinds of booze. Has over two months of unused vacation time. Fury would make him use it, but STRIKE Alpha is too damn useful and Fury’s a realist. Rumlow is more of a professional implement than a full-fledged person, if you ask me. Nobody else his age still doing this; other people burn out way fast because of the pressures. He doesn’t know how to do anything else. [A few of these, too, Jane--D]

Agent Jennifer Randolph: I always see him picking up women at this bar…. [On the plus side, I have a lot of bar recommendations now. There’s a tiki bar I want to try called Archipelago on U St. They supposedly have those little umbrellas & a shrine to Tom Selleck! You know how I feel about Magnum, PI and men who don’t wax their chests--swooooom, baby. Also, I found Thor a beer garden, too.---D]

***

“So, he’s Barack Romolow,” Darcy told Loki that night at her apartment. “Asshole Commander Rick. He walked us to the lab. The one who doesn’t wear ties and left your brother in the desert!” They were having their usual movie night. Darcy had decided to show him Public Enemies -- Johnny Depp’s John Dillinger movie--just for the fashion alone. If he magicked her up a dress again, she wanted him to have seen this movie, so she could request that ruby pink one Marion Cotillard wore. She didn’t mind if someone thought she was a floozy.

“Technically, he left Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff in the desert. My brother had Mjolnir,” Loki said. He was looking for the green peanut M&Ms. He swore they tasted better.

“But what do I dooooooooooooooooo?” Darcy said.

“You are not contemplating bobbing your hair again?” Loki asked, looking at Marion Cotillard onscreen. “You always say you want to, but you never do. Her hair is quite attractive, however. It would suit you.”

“No, no about Rumlow,” Darcy said. “Jane thinks he’s a creeper because I’ve been his pick for SHIELD’s version of Hottie of the Month for years? What do you think?”

“How many years?” Loki asked.

“Two or three?” she said, shrugging. She wasn’t technically sure. Loki scoffed.

“That is barely a moment,” he said.

“You are probably not the person to ask about this,” Darcy said. “Given your alternative time lifestyle.” He snorted. “But what about the ‘ruin the fantasy’ thing? Does that make him creepy?” she asked Loki. “Oooh, wait, table that question. This is my favorite part,” Darcy said, “Dillinger’s ‘What Else Do You Need To Know?’ speech. It’s the best part of the whole movie.” They were both silent as Johnny Depp waltzed off with Marion Cotillard’s coat-check girl.

“You like that speech?” Loki said, arching an eyebrow.

“What?” Darcy said. “It’s romantic.”
“Is it?” he asked.

“He robs banks, of course, he’s gonna tell her likes her in a weird way,” Darcy said. “Did you know the real Dillinger liked Myrna Loy movies?”

“Remind me again what Asshole Commander Rick looks like?” Loki said, curiously.

“Brock. His name is Brock,” she said. “I can’t believe I had it wrong this whole time.”

“How unfortunate,” Loki said dryly.

“Me not knowing or the name itself?” Darcy asked, confused.

“Take your pick. But what does the man look like?” he said. “Who is he? What does he like?”

“He’s ridiculously attractive. Dark hair, greenish-brown eyes—you’d like them, they’re remarkable-average height, interesting tattoos. He’s forty-two, from the Bronx, Italian-American, was a Navy SEAL, then got recruited into SHIELD by Alexander Pierce. He transferred to DC from the New York City office. I asked Linda from our floor while Jane was passed out. Primary interests are work, then drinking and womanizing, in that order,” Darcy said. She picked up her phone. “I had to silence the notifications, they were going so crazy with stories about how he’s a bonkers workaholic who goes through women like a hot knife through butter.”

“What a colorful turn of phrase,” Loki said. “I quite like it.” He gestured to her and she handed him her phone. He seemed to be reading the SHIELD messages.

“You’re going to heat up your knives the next time you stab somebody, aren’t you?” Darcy said.

“What an amusing idea. Where do you come up with these things?” he asked. “What time does this tiki bar close? And who is Tom Selleck?”

“Oooh, we have to go!” Darcy said. “You’ve probably never been to a tiki bar!”

“When does the Rumlow man return?” Loki asked her, once they’d gotten to the bar and he’d ordered a mai tai and some sort of wonton things. Darcy was drinking a virgin Cuba Libre as a ‘I’m still hungover’ joke—basically a Coke with a garnish and a fancy umbrella. The bartender found it funny when she explained that her ‘friend’ had a super-powered liver and she had a puny human one. He really thought she was kidding.

“No idea,” she said. “Whenever STRIKE gets back from wherever they are, I guess?” she said. “Is your drink good? I swear my umbrella makes this Coke taste better.”

“This is excellent,” he said. Darcy nodded happily; she loved mai tais. Even more, she loved the look on Loki’s face when he saw tiki glasses, paper umbrellas, and the palm tree murals. “Do you like it here?” she asked him.

“This place is astounding,” he said.

“Tiki was a midcentury trend on Midgard. I love that whole aesthetic, you know? I need to get you my copy of As Seen on TV, it’s all about fifties material culture: paint by numbers, pink cars, Elvis, this.”

“Ooooh,” Loki said. “Can it be the next book?”
“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, beaming. “We’ll put it on the list. Oh em gee, we should go to Graceland sometime. Or Hawaii.”

“I would like that,” Loki said. He sighed.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I am bored when I am on Asgard,” he said. “It is dreary.”

“So come stay with me,” she said. “Would Odin stop you? We can be roommates!”

“My father cares not, as long as I keep myself out of major trouble. However, I would prefer not to sleep on your divan. It is far too confining for someone of my height,” Loki said.

“We can magic you up a suite. I’ve got that spare closet that’s supposed to be for linens and I just put snacks in there. I’ll move my Cheetos to the kitchen,” she offered. “Can’t you, like, make a space?”

“You are a clever woman, Darcy Lewis,” he said, a gleam in his eye. “This is why we are friends.”

“I thought it was shared love of little umbrellas and movies?” Darcy said, grinning.

“What about the Rumlow man?” Loki said. “Suppose he wants to go through you like a hot knife through butter?”

“Pffht,” Darcy said. “I’m not feeling particularly butyraseous at the mo. Now that I know he’s Mr. Obsessed, my expectations are pretty high. He’s going to have to work to get his knife in my butter dish, sugar.” Loki grinned.

“I have a feeling this will be very diverting,” he said. “I would not like to miss it. Very well. I shall become your roommate. Do you want anything particular in the apartment? Perhaps a sauna? A library? A movie theater?”

“Hmm,” Darcy said. “Lemme think.” A movie theater would be nice. Would the neighbors complain if she asked for Dolby surround? Was magical Dolby as noisy as the real thing?

“What is a creeper?” Loki asked suddenly.

“You know, I’m not sure I really know,” Darcy said. “I feel like people say it, but I don’t have a real definition? What is a creeper anyway?” she said. A woman at another table looked at Darcy and laughed.

“It’s like obscenity, you know it when you see it,” she said, waving her drink.

“What on Midgard is that beverage?” Loki asked her.

“A banana daiquiri!” the woman said cheerfully.

“Let’s get some of those,” Loki said.

“Make mine without rum, please?” Darcy said. It occurred to her that banana daiquiri might actually count as a health food if you took the rum out. Wouldn’t it?

“I am paying,” Loki said, after they’d had daiquiris, putting an Avengers trading card on the table. She’d had him watch the underrated *Bewitched* remake and he’d borrowed Nicole Kidman’s preferred method for magicking up credit cards.

“Who knows?” he said.

“Just don’t, like, ruin Thor’s credit, in case he proposes to Jane. She’ll want to be able to qualify for a mortgage one day, I think,” Darcy said. He snorted.

“Why should she want a home? She sleeps on tables like a cat,” Loki said. “She is catwoman.”

Even entirely sober, that made Darcy giggle.

“Catwoman!” she said. “Catwoman.”

“Why is that humorous?” he asked.

“Because I just had a mental image of Jane running a science conference in a catsuit with a whip?” Darcy said, laughing. Then she had to explain Catwoman to Loki.

“Can we watch that movie?” he asked.

***

Darcy decided that a permanent resident Loki was oddly delightful. He kept magically redecorating everything in silly ways to make her laugh and then going around scrutinizing her books for their next pick.

“What kind of book do you want to read next?” he asked.

“I want something that fits with where we are now,” Darcy said, looking up from a YouTube tutorial on pin curls. She was still going to master them, whether Steve had a girlfriend or not. She wanted to learn that stuff anyway. It was one of the reasons she thought she and Steve might work as a couple. Shared interests in the events of 1932.

“I am in your apartment, where are you?” Loki asked.

“Our apartment,” she said, smiling. She wanted him to feel welcome. “No, I mean I want a book that captures the idea of summer as a child, you know? Running through the sprinklers and the ice cream truck, and reading in the heat. Something with a slow pace. That hazy, slow feeling?” she explained. “I feel like I’ll know it when it dawns on me.”

“What is an ice cream truck?” he asked.

“Oh, your poor thing,” she said. “I’ll show you soon.” They had made a to-read list that included As Seen on TV, Beryl Markham’s aviation memoir West With The Night, and Rebecca. Darcy was contemplating Frances Mayes or another travel writer.

“Why can we not read this?” he said. “She is enchanting.” Loki was looking curiously at her copy of Dita von Teese’s beauty book.

“If you just want to look at her, I think she has, uh, more, shall we say, intimate photography books,” Darcy said. “Or you could just watch the clips of her dancing in the champagne glass?” she offered. “She’s a burlesque dancer.”

“I cannot believe this woman exists and I did not know,” he said dreamily.
“She’s pretty amazing, style-wise,” Darcy said. “Dresses like that all the time, does the whole 1940s shebang. The funny thing is, in interviews she seems pretty shy. You might have a chance, her last husband was Marilyn Manson, the rock musician.”

“Really?” he said, looking both rapt and thoughtful in a way that made Darcy wonder if Dita von Teese was going to receive like a million roses and a big emerald at breakfast. She kinda hoped he did. The two of them together would be stunning, Darcy thought. Such a cute couple. She left him to his thoughts of la belle Dita and went to bed.

What a strange day she’d had, Darcy thought, curled under her blankets. Still, she was really fond of her new roomie. Even if his cavernous suite in the snacks closet was decorated in barkcloth and hula girl lamps. It looked a little like the Jungle Room at Graceland at the moment. She probably shouldn’t have taken him to the tiki bar on the same day he decided how to decorate his rooms. She should ask him if he could magic her up an all white bedroom like Jean Harlow, though. Maybe one of those fabulous headboards? She fell asleep imagining mirrored vanities and long floaty white curtains. They’d have to do something fun on Sunday, she thought.

***

He woke her up with news. “I have three items of import,” he announced, as Darcy shuffled sleepily to the coffeepot.

“Yeah?” she said through a yawn, hastily covering her mouth.

“If you are done catching flies,” he said archly.

“Phhhfft,” she said, pouring water into the reservoir. The humming sound of a heating coffee pot was a thing of joy. “I love that noise.”

“Your coffee maker?” he asked.

“Yup. The sound of the coffeemaker is great. So is the whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of a dishwasher in mid-cycle,” she told him.

“If you say so,” he said. “I doubt Captain Rogers has ever contemplated the whirr of a coffee maker.”

“You don’t think so?” Darcy said, grinning. She had ideas about what sounds would be meaningful to Steve.

“I doubt he contemplates sounds at all,” Loki said.

“Any sounds?” Darcy asked.

“Yes,” Loki said.

“I bet you’re wrong. I’m going to ask him about some sounds he might like,” she said.

“The national anthem should not count,” Loki replied with asperity.

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about that,” Darcy said, winking. “But we’re agreed on the bet?”
“What shall I owe you?”

“Perfume,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “Bottle to be determined at a later date. What’s your news?”

“One, I have obtained VIP tickets to the next appearance of Miss von Teese in our vicinity. We shall attend with Jane and my brother. He has confirmed his own interest and Jane does not object, either. Which perhaps means that wonders never cease,” he said dryly.

“I’m pretty surprised about that one, too,” Darcy said. She’d have guessed Jane might consider burlesque objectifying. Then again, Dita von Teese ran her own career. Jane was very into women who blazed their own paths in life.

“Two, I have found someone locally with access to lotus root. Combs your hair, once you have finished that Midgardian beverage that is so essential to your daily functioning, so that we may apprehend some,” he said.

“Cool,” Darcy said, “I’m excited.” They were trying to buy things mentioned in their perfume book as having interesting scents to sample as they read. Loki had wanted to put a perfume-making lab in his snack-closet rooms, but Darcy had wondered if an enfleurage room would be overwhelming? How much did pans of flowers soaking in oils smell, anyway? Would the neighbors complain if he put ten pounds of jasmine in a vat in one place?

“Three, my brother has heard chatter that STRIKE returns as soon as Tuesday or Wednesday. We must do something with your hair,” he said.

“Why?” Darcy said, looking at her shoulders in confusion.

“Miss von Teese has given me ideas. You should be more alluring, you have great potential. You hide behind your bulky sweaters and those hats when you could be more glamorous,” he said.

“Duh, why do you think I bought those Steve outfits?” she said.

“Hah,” he said. “I am not speaking of Captain Rogers. I mean the Rumlow man. He has expressed an interest, now you have some influence over him that you should use to your advantage, if you mean to take him seriously,” Loki said.

“You sound like Natasha,” Darcy said. “She thinks it’s wrong to show a man you appreciate his gestures too much.”

“She is an astute woman,” he said. “We shall bring her into consult when she returns. Finish your nectar of roasted shrub beans.” He vanished.

“Whaa-?” Darcy said, before she realized he meant the coffee.

***

When she got ready to leave for work the next Monday, Loki was making banana smoothies. “I have made breakfast,” he said. “Out of these delightful bananas and pineapple juice.” The daiquiris from the other evening must’ve have left him on a banana kick. He’d magicked up banana splits on Sunday, too. They had those phases of focused interest--Jane called it monomania, like she had room to to talk!--in common. Darcy had once spent an entire summer reading only Agatha Christies when she was thirteen and last year had gone on a baking kick after watching too much Great British Bake Off. Her pineapple upside down cake was stellar, though.
“Oh, cool, thanks. We should ask Steve about bananas,” Darcy said.

“Why?” Loki said, idly poking at a chunk of ice in his smoothie with a straw. He’d put little umbrellas in both glasses. How adorable, Darcy thought.

“Back in his day, the most popular banana was a different variety, but it got hit by, like, a global blight? Just like the Irish Potato Famine, only for bananas? People say the old banana was much better than ours,” Darcy said. “Sweeter or creamier or something. He’s old enough to remember. I mean, people say it was a huge difference and that, by comparison, our bananas are awful.”

“That is interesting,” Loki said, sipping, “because I quite like these bananas.” Darcy looked at the little cup where she’d put their tiki umbrellas from the night before. They looked so bright and cheerful against her SHIELD-issue beige laminate countertops. It gave her ideas.

“Have you ever seen mid-century laminates?” she told him. “They were much more awesome than this faux-granite stuff.” She pulled out her phone and plugged in the address for a website about preserving vintage homes.

“Yes?” he said curiously.

“I think it’s so much cooler to have a laminate that is unapologetically patterned than trying to fake boring stone,” Darcy told him. “I don’t care if this guy I met at Culver called me a hipster because I thought they were neat.”

“Midgardian kitchens used to look like this?” he asked her.

“Uh-huh, you gotta see the boomerang laminates,” Darcy told him, swiping at her phone over his arm.

She was almost late for work they had so much fun, but she had tropical green Nassau-print laminate countertops and banana yellow metal cabinets now. You couldn’t even get that anymore, for love or money. She needed to give Loki a “World’s Best Roommate” mug.

***

“Darce, are you really going to date him?” Jane asked, when she got to the lab.

“Who?” Darcy said.

“Rumlow!” Jane said, as if it should be obvious.

“I dunno,” Darcy said, shrugging, “he hasn’t even asked me yet.” STRIKE, Steve, and Nat were still overseas someplace.

“Everybody’s talking about it,” Jane said. “That you asked about him. He’s going to take that as a sign you’re interested. Are you interested?”

“I don’t actually know him,” Darcy said.

“What if he’s crazy? I mean, everyone’s telling me he’s been obsessed with you for years…” Jane fretted.
“Don’t worry,” Darcy said, yawning slightly. “I have my taser.”

“I really want you to talk to Steve before you go out with him, okay?” Jane said.

“Sure,” Darcy said. Darcy’s mind turned back to Steve. The thing that was so wonderful about Steve was his utter conviction and steadfastness. They sounded like silly qualities when you said them out loud, but they were the bedrock of who Steve was. His essence. It was what made Captain America so symbolically powerful. Whatever Steve did, he did with the fullness of his heart and mind. People were drawn to it. That was why SHIELD wanted him as their representative. It was--secretly, in her heart of hearts--why Darcy was infatuated with Steve. She knew that if he loved her, he’d do it wholeheartedly. No evasions. No cynicism. No criticism veiled as jokes. He’d be there. Even she realized that it was deeply, deeply ironic that she, the freaking queen of sarcasm and jokes, wanted that sincerity. She wanted to be chosen by someone who’d really choose her and make no bones about it. And Brock Rumlow? Darcy was pretty sure he wasn’t an axe murderer. But her suspicion, based on all the little texts, notes, and emails sent her way over the last twenty-four hours, was that she was a convenient sort of crush for an ultra-driven workaholic.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Darcy told Jane.

“Really?” Jane said, frowning.

“I have this feeling I’m just his lucky symbol or something?” she suggested. “Like those guys in WWII used to paint girls on their airplanes and hang posters of pinups,” she said. Some combination of Rumlow’s tattoos and the tiki bar had made her think about it as a possibility when she was half-asleep on Sunday. He might be superstitious enough to think of her as his own personal hula girl. “I don’t think he wants to put my eyes in a jar, Janey. He probably doesn’t even really want me as me, but more as an object, you know? Nobody actually falls for somebody from grainy photos in SHIELD files, seriously. It’s super unlikely.”

“Okay, Darce,” Jane said. “That doesn’t sound very comforting.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” she told Jane. Then she re-sent all the emails she’d garbled during her Steve brain haze, filed Jane’s paperwork, and straightened up things while she listened to her favorite podcast, Stuff You Missed in History Class. They had a new episode on Victorian-era orchid mania.

She went out to get lunch--Jane had actually spent all of Sunday with Thor like a normal person and deserved a reward--and then carried her bag of sandwiches back to the office. When she got back to Triskelion, there was an unusual smell in the elevator. It was rich and lemony and sweet. “What is that?” Darcy said, sniffing the air. It reminded her of something oddly familiar--she and Loki had been on a hunt to smell things mentioned in their perfume book and had wandered around florists the day before.

“I have no idea,” Linda from the labs said. “But it’s nice. I thought it was your perfume.”

“Jane, I got you that chicken panini you like,” Darcy announced when she walked in. “What’s going on?” Jane was standing in the middle of the lab, frowning.

“Rumlow sent you those, I’m guessing,” Jane said. “They brought them a few minutes ago.” There was a glass container of creamy beige flowers on her desk. Dark glossy leaves contrasted with a few wide blooms. She recognized those big, showy blooms from trees when they’d done a road trip to Charleston from Culver. Darcy leaned forward and smelled them. Lemony-sweet. Southern magnolias.
She read the card.

*Let's try this again. I'd like to have dinner with you?*

*Brock Rumlow*

“Oh God,” Darcy said aloud.

“What?” Jane said.

“Loki’s right. I probably need to have my hair done,” Darcy said. "How does Brock Rumlow know about good flowers?"

Chapter End Notes

Archipelago is a real DC restaurant: [http://archipelagobardc.com/drinks-and-food/](http://archipelagobardc.com/drinks-and-food/)

The "What Else Do You Need To Know?" speech from Public Enemies is, like, Johnny Depp's last shining moment of total hotness for me: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAvccNVx9tE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAvccNVx9tE)


Stuff You Missed In History Class: [https://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/victorian-orchidelirium.htm](https://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/victorian-orchidelirium.htm)
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

This Woman and This Man

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki talked her into going to a vintage-focused hair and nail salon after work that night. “I think she should look like this,” he said, magicking up a portfolio of images. Darcy spotted a glimpse of Veronica Lake and Lana del Rey in that Burning Desire video before he turned his back. “No peeking,” he said. “This is a surprise.”

“You know, you have the makings of a decent Svengali. This feels very Sunset Boulevard or something,” Darcy said. “Do I get a new coat like William Holden? It’s too warm for a new coat, isn’t it?”

“Thank you,” Loki said, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Yes, it’s too warm for a coat. You shall have some new clothes, however.”

“I still wish you were seeing Steve,” Jane said.

“I knoooooow,” Darcy said. “Me, too.” Jane had come along, although she was much more dubious on the whole subject of Brock Rumlow.

“Booooring,” Loki singsonged.

“You know, you would totally rock being a male Norma Desmond,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “I can see you in that old car with, like, a pet leopard and a really snazzy vintage suit?”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said. Loki preened.

“Could I have a pet leopard in the apartment?” he asked.

“No!” Jane and Darcy said in unison.

“No leopards and no reptiles,” Darcy said, shivering.

As they put a gloss on Darcy’s hair---she had no idea why, but Loki had decided it was important---and someone did her nails into one of those 1940s half-moon manicures, she and Jane talked. “Have you said yes to the dinner thing yet?” Jane asked.
“No,” Darcy said. “Loki thinks I shouldn’t be too eager.”

“She needs practice in being more alluring. Eagerness isn’t alluring,” Loki said, from where he was having his own nails buffed and coated in a green metallic shade. “It’ll be more fun if he chases her. He needs to think she is unattainable.” Darcy snorted.

“I’m the least unattainable person the planet. He probably just thinks I dropped my phone in the toilet. Loki has this crazy idea that he can turn me into a retro babe. So, I haven’t replied to the flowers at all,” Darcy said. Jane nodded.

“Why should you not be? You are talented enough to remake yourself into the woman you’d like to be,” he said. “It only requires a little effort.”

“It feels rude not to reply to his note somehow,” Darcy said.

“Does he expect a reply so soon? He’ll be back tomorrow or the next day,” Loki said. “The crucial thing is that you look cool and unflappable when he arrives. And perhaps his interest will provoke others,” he said.

“Others?” Darcy said in perplexity.

“He and Captain Rogers have a rivalry, do they not?” Loki said.

“Ahhhh,” Darcy squealed in delight.

“Ooh, that is sneaky,” Jane said.

“Thank you,” Loki said, preening again.

“Sit still,” the woman doing his manicure said sternly, waving a nail file at him.

Darcy laughed. The whole situation felt supremely silly when her objective wasn’t Steve.

She had to admit, though, that her gloss-treated hair looked pretty. It looked shinier, even wet. They’d decided it should be trimmed into a long, Veronica Lake-style middy. “You will have that characteristic u-shape in the back,” Loki said, gesturing. He explained to Jane that the middy was designed to be shorter in the front and longer in the back, so that it could be curled. He’d obviously been reading his Dita von Teese.

“Huh,” Jane said. “Show me the portfolio?”

He obliged.

“Hey, why does she get to see it?” Darcy asked. “I want to see it!”

“No,” Loki said. “As soon as your haircut is done, we must shop. You can see the clothes.”

“Fine,” Darcy grumbled.

***

After a shopping marathon worthy of a romcom, Darcy dropped into bed, exhausted. It was just
before midnight. Her phone pinged again. She had three new messages about Rumlow and an older one from the man himself. He’d sent it a few hours before, probably when she was in a dressing room and the phone was in her pants on the floor. His text was just two words.

**STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow:** So, dinner?

She thought about it for a long minute. She could be aloof and not reply? Loki would say that she should be. But aloofness wasn’t part of her DNA. Also, she didn’t even know if she liked this guy. She’d called him an asshole, he’d refused to laugh at her werewolf joke, the whole evening would probably be weird and stilted, right? Her gut told her to say no politely. On the other hand, if there was any chance--like a nano-flicker of a chance somewhere out in deep space, only seen by telescope--that a bit of jealousy might make Steve see her as desirable, she wanted to do it. But was that evil? Unethical? If Brock Rumlow was some sort of tender-hearted, shy guy, she would have said it was 100% wrong and let him down as gently as possible, rather than ever have dinner with him and potentially get his hopes up. But this was SHIELD’s Hottest Hounddog of the Year for, like, five years running. He probably had three women on boil at all times. One dinner with a woman who wasn’t that into him wouldn’t break his heart, right?

There was a little green light next to his name. His phone was active. She tried to channel Loki when she answered his text. Cool, vaguely indifferent.

**Lab #221B Manager Darcy Lewis:** Sure.

**STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow:** Great. Friday at 7?

**Lab #221B Manager Darcy Lewis:** Works. Where should I meet you?

Her phone rang. It was his number. “Hello?” Darcy said.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said, sounding gravelly. Darcy almost laughed. Did he actually just call her sweetheart like *that*? Oh em geeee. She didn’t mind endearments--one of her favorite things was when older people called her “hon” or “darlin’”--but he sounded so weird. There was none of that coy humor that she got from diner waitresses or grandpas shooting the breeze or when Steve called her “doll” in a tongue-in-cheek way. Brock Rumlow was calling her sweetheart in the most self-serious way possible.

“Hullo, sugar,” she said back, channeling *Some Like It Hot* and hoping he would laugh. She got a tiny, fractional chuckle. If she hadn’t been paying attention, she would have missed it.

“I’ll pick you up on Friday,” he said.

“You’ll pick me up?” Darcy said, confused. He thought he should pick her up? Oh man. That was an old dude move. She kept forgetting that was what guys did in his day. What if he brought, like, a corsage? Her mom had dated guys who did that a few times back in the Reagan years.
“They’ve got you and Foster at those Imperial apartments, right?” he said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “But I can just meet you at the place? You don’t need to pick me up. I’m very good at the Metro now.” She thought she heard him sigh.

“I don’t have to, but I’d like to,” he said quietly. She thought he’d continue, but he didn’t say anything else. The silence was hella awkward. Darcy hated awkward silences. They made her itch. But if she caved, he might think she was a pushover. “Okay. I’ll meet you there,” he said finally. “It’s Le Bon Voisin,” he said, giving her an address. She wrote it down on the notepad she kept on her nightstand for random fun ideas (current list: get ice cream truck ice cream for Loki, surprise Jane with galaxy frosting birthday cake, measure Thor’s guns so he could tell people the exact circumference of Thunder and Lightning).

“Okay, cool,” Darcy said. There was another weird pause. Should she say something? “I’m sure you’re tired…” she began.

“No, no,” he said, not taking her out like any well-socialized person would. What was up with this dude? “Tell me about your day?” he asked. She paused. She’d had a pretty standard lab day, then had her hair done and gone date clothes shopping. That was boring. Loki would tell her to flirt a little, be coy.

“Oh, I’m sure your day was more exciting than mine, Commander,” Darcy said, trying to put an edge of flirtatiousness in her voice.

“Yeah?” he said softly. “I don’t think so, sweetheart.”

“Is that your way of telling me that your activities are classified, Brock?” she said, biting her lip a little. Could he hear that playful note over the phone?

“No, they’re just boring,” he said flatly. Whoops, guess not, she thought. She knew how to flirt with people who were receptive or someone she had an established teasing relationship with (she’d teased Phil Coulson about her iPod a lot by email, until he finally broke and sent it back to her. RIP, sweet, wonderful Phil) but not someone she didn’t know at all and who wasn’t giving her much to work with, especially over the phone.

“Okaaay,” she said.

“Tell me about your day,” he said. In a softer voice, he added a final word. “Please?” he asked. Did he just say please? Darcy’s brain had short-circuited for a second. Brock Rumlow was asking her to describe her day and saying please? This was so freaking weird. Freakily weird and weirdly freaky. She’d assumed he’d be Mr. Smooth. She’d been promised a ladykiller. She’d been conned! No ladykilling was happening. She was resolutely alive. Un-killed. Where was the guy she’d heard described in the SHIELD messages, the one who supposedly could charm your pants off--and then somehow convince you to beg for more? According to Linda, he had women so desperate to crawl into bed with him again that they sent nudes unbidden? She’d been hoping for at least one risqué joke from him.

“Phhft,” Darcy said, accidentally vocalizing her sense of letdown.

“What, baby?” he said. Ooops, she thought.

“Well,” she said, going for radical honesty leavened with humor, “I usually have to be restrained from murdering someone--anyone who crosses my path, really--before my first cup of coffee in the morning. So the first half hour or so is just me getting that sweet, sweet java hit and letting it make
me safe to people again? Then I make an executive call about whether it’s a million degrees out or two million in DC and dress accordingly. Sometimes, I get Jane breakfast. I might run into Jack and blow him some kisses, say hi to Lauren in the lobby, snag more coffee in the breakroom, try to convince Steve his girlfriend is a Russian spy, yadda yadda,” she said. “The bulk of my day is just trying to keep Jane functioning and alive. She thinks her body is just a Tupperware container for her genius brain and forgets to eat, sleep, and bathe sometimes. I have to remind her that she is, in fact, biodegradable?” Darcy said tentatively.

“Yeah,” he said. That moment of silence stretched out again. Darcy just could not handle it.

“Well, i’m really, really tired, so I need to go, okay?” Darcy said.

“Of course,” he said, sounding more alert. “I’ll see you when we get back. Should be very soon, okay? Tomorrow,” he said. “Probably.”

“Okay. ‘Bye!” Darcy chirped.

“Bye, baby,” he said.

She hung up the phone. “Well, shit,” she said out loud. There was a tap on her door. It was Loki.

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Come in.” He stepped into her room.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I just had the most awkward call with Brock Rumlow. We’re set for Friday, but he was just....zero flirtation?” Darcy said. “I am all astonishment.”

“Yes, Miss Lizzy,” he said. They’d read *Pride & Prejudice* and watched the TV series together. Loki, to her delight, insisted on watching several other Austen adaptations. He loved Austen’s sly, wicked humor. They would have been 1800s BFFs, Darcy thought. “Perhaps if he felt less, he could talk more?” Loki offered.

“That is *Emma* and also, no way, dude,” she said. “He is not my Mr. Knightley. Steve is my Knightley. Brock Rumlow is supposed to be Frank Churchill, maybe.”

“I do not think he is,” Loki said.

“Really?” she said.

“No,” Loki said mysteriously.

“What does that mean?” Darcy asked.

“It would not behoove me to say,” he said, shimmering away with another Cheshire cat smile. Darcy groaned and threw a pillow at it.

***

The next afternoon, Loki surprised her at work. “We are having lunch,” he said. “Follow me.”
“Cool,” Darcy said, when she realized he’d changed her outfit into a floaty cotton dress that reminded her of celebrities on the French Riviera. “Do I get a hat?”

“Voila,” he said, handing her a dramatically brimmed one, plus a scarf.

“Yay!” she clapped. “I feel like Coco Chanel, only without the Nazis.”

Lunch ended up being a picnic on a strip of grass outside Triskelion. They could see the Potomac, but Darcy suspected he had other motives. Still, it felt very retro. He magicked her a parasol and music from an unusual record player as they ate cold chicken drumsticks, salad, and cucumber sandwiches. Darcy had found a market place that sold Egyptian varieties of mangos, too, so he’d brought them. As Loki sliced them with one of his terrifying knives, she read him the section of The Perfect Scent where Burr described the aroma of green mangoes still on their stem in an Egyptian garden near the Nile.

“This feels very between the wars,” she told him. “Picnicking on the grass. Oh, we should add The Long Weekend to our to-read list. I’ve heard good things.”

“Oh, yes?” he asked.

“Interwar leisure culture in the British upper classes,” she supplied. “There’s also this reprint of a period activities book called The Week-End Book, so it’s all about card games, long walks, and cocktails,” she said.

“Excellent,” he said. Darcy sighed.

“What is wrong?” he asked.

“I have all this nervous energy,” she said.

“We’ll go do something interesting tonight,” he said. They discussed potential plans. Then he waved a hand. “Ah, here is our moment,” he said.

“Moment?” Darcy asked. Then she realized there was a quinjet getting ready to land on the roof of the Triskelion. It would fly directly over them, fifty odd stories above. “Is that Steve?” she said, looking up. There was a brief glint of red and blue as someone leaned slightly over the ramp’s edge.

“I believe so,” Loki said casually. Darcy waved with the scarf he’d helpfully provided. She thought she saw Steve’s hand wave back from over the edge of the quinjet.

“Did you set this up so I’d be looking all pretty as Steve and STRIKE Alpha flew over?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” he said as Pink Martini’s “Quizas, Quizas, Quizas” played. It was one of Darcy’s favorite songs.

“What do I do now?” Darcy said. After that awkward phone call with Rumlow, Darcy wasn’t sure where they stood.

“You can go flirt with Rumlow?” Loki suggested.

“Ughhh, I tried that on the phone, it sucked,” she said. At his raised eyebrow, she rolled her eyes. “Not in any way a man would like, trust me.” She sighed. “I’m so anxious!”
“What?” he said.

“I dread this date on Friday,” Darcy told him.

“Just think of it as charm practice for the next man you really care about,” Loki advised.

“You are weirdly wise, for a God of Mischief,” she told him.

“I know,” he said. “I have no idea why my plans always go so sideways,” he mused. “They seem so reasonable when I think them up?”

Darcy decided to let that one go without comment. “Go upstairs with me?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. With an airy gesture, he packed up their picnic goods.

“I’m stealing this,” Darcy said, swiping the parasol. It reminded her of Phryne Fisher.

***

On their way up, they met Steve and Brock in a hallway near Jane’s lab. “Darce,” Steve said cheerfully, “I couldn’t believe it when I looked down and there you were with your pretty skirt blowing in the wind, doll.”

“We had a picnic lunch,” Darcy told him. She didn’t know who to look at. What was the etiquette when you were smitten with Captain America, but had agreed to dinner with his colleague and virtual right hand man? She let her eyes skate over to Brock. He was doing this whole inscrutable, I’m looking-at-you-but-middle-distance thing, where it looked like he was a million miles away.

“I think I shall consult my brother about the matter we discussed?” Loki said casually, carrying the picnic basket on his elbow.

“Yes,” Darcy said. They’d decided to go to country western place with Thor and Jane, if they wanted to go tonight. Darcy was fretful with nervous energy. Loki thought they could burn some off and he was curious about line dancing. “But no servals!” she called after him. He was still on the exotic pets topic.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned old movie stars having leopards,” Darcy said to Steve with a sigh, once Loki had shimmered away.

“I don’t know how you tolerate it, Darce,” Steve said. “His pranks must be something else.”

“Oh, he never does anything mean, ever. He’s wonderful,” Darcy said loyally. “He fixed up my kitchen, hold on, lemme show you,” she said, pulling out her phone. “I have 1954 laminate now, Steve! Just looking at it makes me so happy.” She showed him the screen.

“That’s real cheerful,” Steve said. “Makes the whole room look sunny.”

“I know! Can you believe they stopped making that?” she said. “I swear, I’m going to get Tony to make them again and see if they take off. Maybe call ‘em Darcy Lewis Laminates by Tony Stark?” Steve threw back his head and laughed.

“I wanna to see that, doll,” he said. “You and Tony’s happy countertops division.”

“You laugh,” Darcy told him, “but Tony wants to make the world a better place and I could do it
with happy kitchens and my pineapple upside down cake.” She looked at Brock again. He was smiling wryly. “What?” she said. “You have doubts, Commander?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Not at all.” Above their heads, someone paged Steve.

“I gotta get that,” he said. “I’ll see you, Darce.”

“Oh, see you, Steve,” she said and then turned back to Brock with a flash of a grin. She had a suspicion that someone was messing with the PA system. There’d been a tiny giggle at the end of the page of Steve’s name.

“See ya, Cap,” Brock said to Steve’s back and the wave of acknowledgement that followed.

“So, Friday,” Darcy said quietly. Was he going to, like, actually flirt with her now? She hoped so. She’d dread the date less if he lightened up a little.

“I wish you’d let me pick you up,” he said seriously. Well, Darcy thought, that’s certainly not smooth.


“Because nobody wants to send their date home on the DC Metro,” he said sharply.

“You don’t think it’s safe?” she asked. “What, I’m such a delicate little flower? I do like your taste in flowers, by the way.”

“Good,” he said. “It’s just not, uh,--” he paused and seemed to be working out how to say something right.

“Not what?” she asked, biting her lip to hide a wicked grin. She’d caught him being a male chauvinist, she thought. So busted.

“Not how I’d like the date to end, sweethe--” he began, before a voice behind them spoke.

“Rumlow? Darcy?” Clint Barton said from the end of the hallway. He was standing there with another SHIELD agent that he’d worked with in Puente Antiguo named Jimmy. Jimmy wore cowboy hats and was from Oklahoma.

“Clint! Tulsa SHIELD!” Darcy said, running over and hugging them both.

“Barton, Jones,” Rumlow said. The four of them had a brief conversation before Rumlow excused himself to go file a report. Darcy led Clint and Tulsa up to Jane’s lab so they could see her, Thor, and Loki. Clint had forgiven Loki, thank goodness.

“Agent Barton!” Loki said. “Would you and your colleague like to join us for line dancing?”

“Seriously?” Tulsa SHIELD said, looking happy. Darcy had always harbored a little crush on Tulsa. He had good hair and looked like he could be in a Stetson ad (the man filled out Levis, she noted).

“Of course, I am learning Midgardian customs. Darcy has taken me many interesting places,” he said.

“Well, I love line dancin,” Tulsa said. Darcy grinned.
Somehow, this evolved into him demonstrating moves with Darcy for the rest of the group. Only Clint had been line dancing before. Darcy borrowed Tulsa’s cowboy hat and was (poorly) mimicking his foot footwork to the tune of Shania Twain’s “Any Man of Mine” to Clint’s immense enjoyment. He was practically rolling on the floor. When the song on her phone speakers switched to Billy Ray Cyrus’s “Achy Breaky Heart,” she dragged Thor and Loki into the line. Loki magicked up cowboy hats for them both.

“I had no idea that “Achy Breaky Heart” was so maudlin!” Loki said.

“Shh, brother,” Thor said. He was taking his footwork seriously. Darcy was worried his stomps might be impacting the lower floors of the Triskelion. Whoops.

Darcy was doing a close two-step with Tulsa to “Whose Bed Have Your Boots Been Under?” when there was a rap on the glass.

“That doesn’t look like SHIELD science!” Nick Fury said. He was being trailed by all of STRIKE Alpha.

“Nick!” Darcy said. “Come line dance practice with us!”

“I am not doing that, Lewis,” he said. “Get back to work.”

“Yes, sir,” Tulsa said politely. Darcy popped his hat back on his head gently, playfully tipping the brim down.

“Thanks for letting me borrow your hat, Tulsa,” she said.

“I’ll let you store your boots under my bed, too, honey,” he said. “Anytime.” Clint whistled.

“That’s the one time that line actually works, Jimmy,” Clint said. “He says that to women all the time, Darce. Don’t believe him.” Tulsa winked at her.

“Oh, I won’t,” Darcy said. “He’s all hat, no cattle.” She tried to catch Brock’s eye to communicate with him, but he was laser-focused on the back of Fury’s head. Ughhhhh, she thought. Fury and STRIKE Alpha went down the hallway without Brock making eye contact. Where the hell was Mr. Smooth, anyway?

She let Tulsa teach Thor so she could grab Brock when he came back by. “Commander Rumlow, a word?” she said politely. He nodded, but didn’t smile. The two of them went into a small conference room. Darcy was getting ready to tell him that, yes, she’d let him pick her up for their date when he spoke abruptly.

“I think we should keep things professional at work,” he said.

“Professional?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Have you met me?” she said. Professional was not a word anyone would ever use to describe her. “Do you expect me to behave differently?” Darcy asked.

“No.” He tilted his head at her. He was just staring now.
“You still want to pick me up on Friday?” she asked, perplexed by his silence. Maybe this whole thing was just a terrible, terrible idea?

“Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

“I’m in 312 at the Imperial,” she said, giving him her apartment number. He gave her a slow smile and Darcy felt suddenly self-conscious. She couldn’t read him at all.

“Seven on Friday,” he said. “I’ll be on time, sweetheart.” He turned on his heel and left.

“What the heck is happening with him?” Darcy wondered out loud, once he’d gone.

***

Line dancing was stupidly fun. Clint had mad skills and Loki seemed to have caught the eye of a female line dancing instructor there with a group. Darcy danced with Tulsa until she needed a break and they went over and grabbed a beer. “So,” she said, “why aren’t you in DC?” He looked too young to semi-retire like Clint. He couldn’t be much more than thirty-five. He grinned at her and his blue eyes flashed.

“Well, honey, there was a girl,” he said. “She didn’t want to leave Enid, Oklahoma, so I left headquarters for the Oklahoma field office.”

“I hope you’re happy,” Darcy said sincerely. Tulsa was a good dude. He’d been a great agent, according to Clint, even though Phil Coulson had hated his cowboy hats.

“Oh, the happiest day of my life was the day we got married,” he said. His grinned turned wicked. “Second happiest day was the day we got divorced,” he said.

“Oh shit, sorry,” Darcy said, doing a mock innocent-whistle. He laughed.

“It ain’t no big thing, honey. Sometimes you love somebody, but you can’t live with ‘em,” he said. “Or their crazy sister.”

“I sense a story,” Darcy said. She was practically rolling on the floor after he explained that his sister-in-law had stolen his favorite belt buckle and pawned it to give the money to her no-good boyfriend.

“Hey, now, don’t laugh! It was solid silver,” he scolded her with a smile. “I loved that belt buckle.” Darcy was watching Thor apologize profusely for almost mowing somebody down--accidentally, he couldn’t see them for them brim of his cowboy hat--when the Judds’ “Why Not Me” started playing.

“I love this song!” Darcy told Tulsa.

“You really like country music?” he said.

“I haven’t listened to the new stuff, but I love 90s country music. I was very into it in elementary school. I blame my school--they had us do a school show to all this country, like Alan Jackson and Randy Travis and stuff? A bunch of second graders performing “Grandpa Tell Me ‘Bout The Good Old Days,” is a trip, though. It was years before I realized that song was about divorce and men abandoning their families?”
Tulsa laughed. “I wonder whose idea that was?” he said.

“No idea, but I got very into Faith Hill and Martina McBride and Ty Herndon when I was, like eight,” she said.

“Really?” he said.

“I wonder whatever happened to Aaron Tippin?” Darcy mused out loud.

“I’m gonna see if they’ll play any more of the older stuff,” he told her.

Darcy was two-stepping to Diamond Rio’s “Meet In The Middle” with Tulsa when the crowd near the bar moved and she realized Steve was standing there, talking to Clint. He saw her and waved. Damn, she thought, I wish Steve Rogers was picking me up on Friday night. “What’s wrong, honey?” Tulsa said.

“Who sang that “Shake the Sugar Tree” song?” she yelled over the music. She wasn’t gonna tell Tulsa how sadsack she was over Steve if they’d be working together.

“Pam Tillis,” he said, laughing.

“Hey, do you remember Clay Walker?” she asked. He shook his head.

“No, but I got a guitar I can bring into work, if I can crash y’all’s picnics?” he said. “I’ll play and sing for food,” he said. She and Loki were going to make lunch picnics a regular thing. Darcy was trying to get Thor to drag Jane down, too. She could use the vitamin D.

“Deal,” Darcy said. “Shake on it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

Tulsa was as good as his word. He didn’t start at SHIELD for a week, but he and Clint crashed their picnic lunch the next day. They had a small crowd--once people realized Loki could magic up free food, they just started showing up--when Tulsa sang a few songs for her. He’d been googling Clay Walker, so she got surprisingly good covers of “This Woman and This Man” and “What’s It To You.”

“Dude,” Darcy said, “you can sing! Like, really, sing. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Thanks, honey,” he said.


“Is it murals of Iowa wheat fields or something?” Darcy asked.

“He don’t got a dinner table, he has a pool table,” Tulsa said.

“Oh, that’s awesome,” Darcy said. “High five, Clint! I’d rent your place.”

Chapter End Notes
This whole chapter has just been the most fun because I spent the writing time listening to old 90s country music from my childhood. I really did do an elementary school show to the The Judds' "Grandpa Tell Me Bout The Good Ol' Days" and other country, weirdly, and I still have no idea why somebody thought we should be singing "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" and Alan Jackson's "Chattahoochee"?

If you don't remember Clay Walker, here's "This Woman and This Man":
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEJxECENSAk

In my headcanon, Jimmy Jones, aka Tulsa SHIELD, would ideally be played by the actor and singer Christian Kane (from Angel, Leverage, The Librarians, etc.) and would get his own buddy comedy MCU spin-off involving an Iowa road trip with Clint Barton. There would be a lot of bickering. Tulsa would lose his favorite hat. Eventually, they'd make it to Clint and Laura's.
“Oh em gee, that’s a terrifying idea,” Darcy said, when Tulsa asked her if she’d like to go horseback riding with him this weekend. Tulsa’d already gotten a yes from Thor and Jane. “I’m scared of riding tall things!” she said.

“Oh-huh,” Tulsa said flirtatiously. “Well, I ain’t exactly tall, honey, but…”

“Shut up,” Darcy said, playfully. She did not mind this harmless little flirtation at all. Even if he’d told her--unprompted--that he wasn’t looking for anything serious at line dancing.

“I’ll teach you to ride,” he said with a grin. “You free on Saturday?”

“You should know I’ve got a date with Commander Rumlow on Friday night,” Darcy said.

“Really?” Tulsa said. “I mean, I knew you were his File Fixation--”

“Everyone knows,” Darcy said, groaning.

“Yeah, honey. Sorry. Anyway, I figured you’d already shot him down when he didn’t even say hey to you when he was here,” Tulsa told her.

“He was here?” Darcy said. She hadn’t seen him at all.

“He grabbed some chicken and left with Smith,” Tulsa said. Smith was the southern STRIKE Alpha guy. The smirking one.

“Pfft,” Darcy said. “I have no idea what’s on his mind,” she said.

“That so?” he said. “So, it ain’t no big thing?”

“Yes, sir,” Darcy said. “Not for me.”

“So, come have fun with me this weekend after your date’s a bust?” Tulsa said, grinning.


“I want a hat like your hat,” she said.
“Oh, I think I can find one for you,” he said, putting his hat on her head. “See? Real easy.” He grinned. “You keep that, honey,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. “It doesn’t bug you that I call you Tulsa, does it?”

“Heck no, I’m thinking of switching to that for work,” he said, grinning.

“Really?” Darcy said.

“Who the hell wants to be Jim Jones, honey? That’s why I go by Jimmy. But Tulsa’s better than Jimmy. I like it,” he said, winking. “Agent Tulsa Jones has a nice ring.”

***

With fifteen minutes left on her lunch—Jane gave her more time because she worked weekends, nights, days, and general Science! benders—Darcy headed back to work in Tulsa’s cowboy hat. On the elevator Darcy and Loki ran into Steve. “Hey, Steve?” Darcy said.

“Yeah, doll?” he said politely, smiling that amazing smile. Her heart skipped a beat, but she had a bet to win.

“Can you tell what your shield’s doing based on the sounds it makes?” she asked curiously.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Nothing in the world like that thunk-thunk when you hit your target,” he said, beaming. “One of my favorite sounds. That and the sound of my motorcycle starting up,” he said.

“The sound of freedom, huh?” Darcy said, cutting her eyes at Loki. He rolled his eyes.

“Exactly, Darce,” Steve said. “There are some sounds that just make you happy. You know what I’m talking about?”

“I sure do,” she said, smiling.

“Hey, you want to go for a ride sometime?” Steve asked her.

“Yes,” Darcy said. “I’d love that. Riding on a motorcycle is on my bucket list.”

“You got a minute now?” he asked.

“I have about fifteen right now,” she said.

“Let’s go then,” he said. “You should, if it’s on your bucket list.”

“Take my hat,” she told Loki, grinning happily. She mouthed, “I won!” and saw him repress a snicker.

A helmeted Darcy found herself clinging to Steve’s warm back as they threaded through city traffic. “You hold on tight now, doll,” he told her. So she wrapped her arms around his impressively firm abs and pressed her head against his shoulder. The man had a crazy shoulder-to-waist ratio, like a 1950s cartoon bodybuilder. She was stupidly happy. This was maybe the most fun she’d ever had being terrified she’d fall off a vehicle.
It was all over too soon. Steve dropped her off and headed back out again on an errand for Kate and Darcy repressed a sigh of envy; Kate was so lucky. When she got back from the motorcycle ride with Steve, Loki was waiting in the garage elevator alone. “What do I owe you?” he said, sounding bored.

“A bottle of Jovan Island Gardenia,” she told him. “From the drugstore.”

“From the drugstore?” he said.

“Yup. It’s eleven dollars, I think?” Darcy said.

“You won the bet and you are asking for an inexpensive item?” he said, sounding baffled.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s the principle of the thing. You’re wrong about Steve. He does have an imagination. He’s an artist. Also, Island Gardenia is incredible.”

“He’s an artist?” Loki said.

“He went to art school, pre-serum,” Darcy told him. “Back when he was a skinny kid with a bunch of illnesses.”

“Ah, I see,” Loki said.

“See what?” Darcy said.

“This is what fascinates you so. He is a you kind of person,” Loki said. “Underneath all of the muscles and the righteousness.”

“A me kind of person?” Darcy said.

“You are an oddity collector,” Loki said. “First, Jane and Erik, then my brother, me, Tony Stark, etc.” He waved airily. “All of us ill-fitting Asgardians or humans in some aspect or another. If you did not mind people, you would be one of those individuals who minds a colony of three-legged cats or somesuch.”

“Are you suggesting that you’re my rescue cat?” Darcy said.

“Perhaps,” he said. “You disagree?”

“No, I totally see it,” Darcy said.

“Captain Rogers is, obviously, the reclusive feral cat whose attention you are constantly trying to obtain,” he said.

“Shut upppp,” Darcy said, smiling happily. Steve--Steve!--had taken her on a motorcycle ride. It was all she could do not to float up to the labs.

***

“You’re ridiculously eligible lately,” Jane said teasingly, once they were alone in the lab that afternoon and she’d filled her in on events. “You’ve officially been linked in the media to a Prince of Asgard, you’ve got a date with the hottest STRIKE Commander in SHIELD, and now the Marlboro Man is in love with you.”

“Shut up, I hear you teasing me. But Tulsa’s much cuter than the Marlboro Man,” Darcy said.
Then she sighed.

“What?” Jane said.

“None of them are who I’d really like to go line dancing with,” Darcy said.

“I know,” Jane said sympathetically. “But you can’t moon over Steve forever, even if he did take your for a bike ride.”

“Can’t I? Watch me,” Darcy joked. “I’m going to be the Miss Havisham of SHIELD, that’s my eventual lifestyle plan. Wander around the office looking all sad and mopey over someone who doesn’t love me. Wear tatty lace.”

“Darce,” Jane said, “that is a very unhealthy sort of coping mechanism.”


Jane snorted. “Okay,” she admitted, “that’s actually true. But it doesn’t mean you should pass up someone as fun as Tulsa. I can’t believe Loki isn’t bothered by all these men.”

“Jane,” Darcy said. “I tell you and tell you, we’re just friends. I’m pretty sure he’s in love with Dita von Teese now, though.”

Jane went back to her readings. A few minutes later, Darcy spoke. “Jane?” she said, worried.

“Yeah?” Jane said absently.

“You don’t think Loki could have sprinkled me with some sort of horny man dust, do you? Like pheromones?” Darcy asked tentatively. “Could he do that?”

“I think that would be Thor’s department. He’s the fertility one. It’s why I have to be so careful with my birth control,” Jane said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “Thor wouldn’t, like, help Loki with that, would he?”

Jane looked up and frowned. “I should probably ask. But I’m sure he would have said something if he was going to make you all Love Potion no.9’d, really,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. She sniffed the inside of her arm. She smelled normal. Her skin looked normal. There were no obvious signs of Asgardian woo-woo. Hmmm.

***

Loki insisted on picking out her date dress on Friday and fussing over her makeup. “Have you been watching Dita’s Youtube videos?” Darcy asked, when he flawlessly executed a 1960s-style cat’s eye.

“For research purposes,” he said.

“Are you going to try to meet her at the show? I think you should,” Darcy said. He paused.
“Really?” he said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “You’re a prince of Asgard, that’s very retro and glamorous. Plus, your father would have a cow if you came home smitten with a Midgardian girl, too.” Loki grinned slyly.

“What a delightfully wicked mind you have sometimes,” Loki said, brushing her eyelashes with mascara. “I am proud to influence you so.”

“Pffhht. I was like this before I met you. Which outfit am I wearing?” Darcy said. She’d ceded control of her look to Loki for the night, just to see what he’d do.

“What do you think of this?” he asked, magicking her into one of the dresses they’d picked out. It was a Pucci-style print in shades of black and purple with a v-neckline and a slit in the skirt. It felt very light and summery, more like a beach coverup than a formal dress.

“It looks like the dress Lana del Rey wears in the “White Mustang” video,” Darcy said. “I love it.”

“I anticipated that you would. I would have prefered the bandage dress in red for a date of consequence, but if you’d like to give the impression that you both are alluring and not overly impressed with your date, this is the perfect level of casual,” he said.

“Ooooh, you’re so good at this,” Darcy said, turning in front of the mirror. “You really should be a stylist.”

“I owe my knowledge to Miss von Teese,” he said formally.

“Can we get me a glossy nude lipstick and some hoop earrings, too? Maybe a little wave in my hair?” Darcy asked. “Can you give me those turned under ends like Dita has?”

They went to work and a few minutes later, her reflection was doe-eyed, with swingy earrings, and a s-curve in her hair that made her look very retro and Veronica Lake-esque.

“You need heels,” he said suddenly.

“No,” she said. She hated heels. They bickered, before Darcy finally compromised on a pair of strappy low sandals. “These are barely even shoes,” she complained.

“I have been informed by the Google that your usual footwear is far too clunky to be considered alluring,” he sniffed. “It would clash with the dress.”

“Yeah, it’s also why I can still walk after twelve hour days. I wear comfortable shoes,” she said, shaking her head.

“Stand up, I will mist you with the Island Gardenia. You were correct, it is quite fetching,” he said.

“There’s nothing...funny in that, is there?” Darcy said.

“No, why would there be?” Loki asked.

“Umm, I wondered if you’d put novocaine in my lipstick?” she said tentatively, jokingly paraphrasing Jane Russell in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. “There are all these men around?”

“No,” he said. Then he looked thoughtful. “It is an idea, however….”
His train of thought was interrupted by her doorbell. “I shall make myself scarce at Thor and Jane’s,” Loki said, shimmering away.

As he left, her stereo started playing Howlin’ Wolf. Darcy loved the Wolf but she wondered if Brock Rumlow was a fan? It was a funny choice, but Loki had a weird sixth sense sometimes. Maybe Brock Rumlow was a low-key enthusiast of blues & soul music? Darcy walked to the door and peered through the peephole. It was Rumlow. He was leaning casually against the doorframe. She swung the door open.

“Oh,” Darcy said nervously. He looked at her for a long moment.

“You look wonderful,” he said. Did his eyes linger for a second on the slit her dress and her bared leg? She thought he might have.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” she said. He had on a dark suit and a pale blue shirt open at the collar. No tie. It was sexy, she realized, when she got a glimpse of his tanned, defined neck and sternum. She’d totally missed that in the elevator the other day, unless he’d unbuttoned more buttons tonight. Was he really flashing her the male equivalent of décolletage?

“I try,” he said. “This is for you.” He was holding a clear box with a single rose inside. For a scary moment, Darcy thought he’d actually bought her a hot pink corsage. “It’s a preserved rose,” he said. “Supposed to last an entire year and you don’t even water it?” His voice sounded skeptical.

“A whole year?” Darcy said.

“I’m going to suggest that you not touch it too much,” he said, “in case they’ve pumped it full of dangerous things.” He finally cracked a smile. Darcy laughed.

“Did you bring me a danger rose?” she said teasingly.

“Possibly,” he said.

“Well, it looks beautiful, not deadly at all,” she said. “Did you want to come in and not put this in water with me? Maybe have a drink?”

“Your roommate’s gone, isn’t he?” Brock asked, frowning.

“Yeah, he’s at his brother’s,” she said, confused. “Why?” He sighed.

“I’ll wait,” he said, not stepping over her threshold. In the background, Howlin’ Wolf, well, howled a little.

Okay,” Darcy said, surprised. This was so weird. Who brought you year-long roses, but didn’t want to come into your house? She set the perfect hot pink rose on her tropical green retro countertop, grabbed her purse, and left, locking the door behind her. When the lock clicked, the music stopped. Loki must be back, she thought.

The second surprise of the night was Brock Rumlow’s choice of vehicle. She’d expected either conspicuous flash or conspicuous masculinity, but he drove a low-key black sedan. A freaking Honda Civic. She’d been assuming she’d have to climb out of something truly stupid, like a Hummer, when she’d argued with Loki about wearing heels. Seeing her look of surprise as he
“I didn’t expect you to drive something so...subtle?” Darcy said, as she sat down in the car. “Even Natasha drives that flashy Corvette. I thought it was SHIELD regulation for all the professional badasses.”

“A car is an ego trip,” he said, sliding into the driver’s seat. “There’s no reason to spend money on anything other than an entry-level car that will carry the number of people you usually carry. Absolutely stupid thing to spend money on, but people do it for their ego.”

“Hmm,” Darcy said noncommittally. He kept his car neat, she noticed. It smelled like his good cologne. Or he did. She wasn’t sure.

“You don’t think I’m right, do you?” he said.

“No, I do,” she said and laughed. “I’m thinking about my ego. My last real car was a yellow VW Bug. I loved that car. Really loved it. But she was seven years old and started to go on me right before we left for New Mexico. A problem with the starter? Or maybe it was the alternator? I forget which. It’s supposedly a common thing. Every mechanic I met said it was the beginning of the end for Ethel. You could have three of them go in the space of a year, if you were unlucky. German parts are twice as expensive and I had no money for multiple replacements. No money, really. So, I fixed it once, sold her before something else broke, and used the money to live on during the internship. Jane and I didn’t need a second car. But it broke my heart. If I’d had any money at all, I would have kept her--and probably be broken down somewhere right now. If I had Tony Stark money, I’d have kept her ’til I was dead and just replaced everything as it went.”

“You would have kept a ten year old, failing VW Bug?” he said. “That needed expensive German parts?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “I was attached. We’d had good times. I bought candy cane ornaments for her little flower vase and I got nowhere to put them now. And the newer Beetles are all masculine and have those terrible low roofs. I can’t really replace her with something new.” She sighed. She really missed Ethel. It had been like riding around in a happy glass bubble or a greenhouse. The tall roof made it feel roomy and open and sunny.

“Ego trip,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re attached to the idea of being the kind of fun girl who drives one of those.”

“I am?” Darcy said. For him, this counted as a speech.

“You are,” he said, going silent again. She watched him tap the steering wheel. He had surprisingly attractive hands for someone who worked with them a lot. Good palms and elegant-looking fingers. Clean, short nails. She’d noticed that he talked with his hands. When he actually talked. He stayed just under the speed limit as they cruised through DC traffic. She could tell because his non-ego trip Civic had a digital speedometer that she could read from the passenger seat.

The third surprise happened when they stopped. “This is a house,” Darcy said. It was a tall, brick mansion, really. There were lights on the porch and cars around the block.

“The restaurant is in the house or so they tell me,” he said. She spotted the painted sign for *Le Bon Voisin* as he came around to open her door. When they went in, Darcy felt like the music had
suddenly stopped: it was an extremely fancy restaurant, filled with what looked like antique furniture and formal place settings. There were silk freaking Scarlett O’Hara curtains around the windows. Also, people were staring at them. Darcy wasn’t sure if it was her outfit (too sexy and too casual) or his (no tie) or that they were the only people there under seventy. Most of the tables were occupied by very formal-looking Washington types. As they were seated, Darcy thought the elderly man who eyed her lasciviously might actually be a current cabinet secretary. Was that Thaddeus Ross in the other room? Her suspicions were confirmed when she saw the menu. It was one of those six-course fixed menu places with prices in the three-digits. If he expected her to split the check, she’d be on the hook for $200 and she wouldn’t even get to choose what she wanted, not really. She didn’t consider a choice between force-fed ducks or snails to be a true choice.

She was horrified. If Darcy would have spent lots of money to keep Ethel the Bug alive, she certainly would never eat at a place like this. She looked up at him. He was totally unreadable.

“Something wrong?” he said.

“Um, I think a cabinet secretary just leered at me and uh, I feel a little underdressed for this place?” she said tentatively.

“You want to go?” he said quietly. “You want to go.”

“Yes,” Darcy said, relieved. “Before they charge us for anything.”

They left quickly. Darcy could literally feel the tension leaving her body as she slid into the Civic. It was replaced by a kind of giddy elation, like she’d just robbed a bank or gotten away with something. They’d escaped! She didn’t have to eat escargot or veal! She buckled her seatbelt and turned to smile at Brock.

“I’m sorry,” he said flatly.

“Oh, no, it’s okay,” she said happily.

“I’ll take you home,” he said quietly.

“What?” Darcy said, shocked.

“It’s fine,” he said quietly.

“Really?” Darcy said. She’d assumed they’d go to a normal restaurant. Pizza. Mexican. Asian fusion. Whatever.

“I pissed you off with the car thing, I know,” he said, as they drove.

“Ummm, not really? You’re not totally wrong about the car thing. I just thought that restaurant was pricey and stuffy,” she told him. “I was just hoping to talk you into, like, pizza?”

“Pizza?” he said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. She wanted to burst into laughter. “Do you eat that?” He was very fit. What if he only liked weird health foods? “Pizza or lo mein or something that doesn’t require a stock portfolio and a senate chairmanship to afford,” she said. He looked at her with an expression of incredulity.

“You’re not upset?” he said.
“No!” Darcy said, finally giving into the giggles. They stopped at a light. “It was Senator Karpel and his pruney, grabby-looking hands, really,” Darcy said. “I couldn’t eat and guard my leg from attack when the tables were that close. He could have probably had me arrested if I stabbed him with that little fork, too. What was the little fork for?”

“I have no idea,” he said. “Shit,” he muttered under his breath, shaking his head. Darcy wondered what would have possessed him to pick that restaurant anyway. A guy who thought a fancy car was an ego trip shouldn’t like a place like that, right?

They ended up at a pizza place. She relaxed as soon as they walked in. It was all younger patrons and parents of small children. People her age in jeans and stuff. There were twinkle lights and beer. Darcy had to resist the urge to fist pump when she ordered a potato and ranch-topped pizza with onions and cheese. She grinned at Brock. He looked befuddled. “Are you okay?” she asked him. Really, the man had no game whatsoever in her presence. It was weird.

“I’m fine,” he said quietly. Darcy decided to order a beer. She needed to relax and he was driving, so why not? “You’re okay with a chain restaurant?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Darcy said. “I’m not anti-chain restaurant. That’s totally politics of privilege, right there. You have to live somewhere with actual options to be anti-chain. When you’ve lived in a one stoplight, three-restaurant town in New Mexico and then in Norway for awhile, you really miss, like, there being twelve Starbucks within a mile of anywhere or being able to get Pei Wei at the spur of the moment? It’s kind of weird how comforting chain food can be sometimes. In Puente Antiguo, we had the diner and a Mexican place and one restaurant in an old gas station. We were so happy when they put a Domino’s next to the grocery store. And in Norway, we were way out in this isolated observatory, so there weren’t any restaurants, really. Just a bar and a cafe in the nearest small town. It was more like a village. I didn’t know Loki well yet, so I couldn’t ask him to get me things, either. People did try to teach us to make all this, uh, Scandinavian food?” Darcy made a frowny face.

“Scandinavian food?” he said. “I’ve never really heard people talk about it.”

“Well, lutefisk is like, a Christmas thing along the Norwegian coast. One of the people at the observatory invited us to have some at their home, right after we got there. Big family dinner. I speak, like, 10 words of Norwegian at the time. Jane and I are trying to be cool, right? We’ve just met all these people,” Darcy said. “We’re excited to be fitting in and making friends and all that.”

“Yeah?” he said, watching her closely.

“I’m imagining that lutefisk will be like a fancy smoked salmon or something, since this is Christmas food? Nuh-uh. It’s cod soaked in actual lye. Fermented! The fermentation dissolves the bones. You eat the whole thing. It’s like weird gooey textured fish? Gelatinous, like Jell-O,” Darcy said, shuddering. “And I was in someone’s home! I couldn’t even spit it out, it would have been so rude. So, there I am,” she said, laughing, “trying to chew this first bite I’ve taken and it’s like the lutefisk is growing in my mouth and I’m trying not gag. It was horrible. I was elbowing Jane and going, stick to the potatoes, in the quietest voice I could. Thank Frigga, they served it with bacon
and mashed potatoes.” Darcy laughed.

She expected him to laugh, too, but he didn’t. He merely gave her another of those slow, ambiguous smiles. Was he not going to laugh at any of her jokes, she thought? Everyone laughed at her Norway culture shock stories. This was like talking to a wall. Maybe she could get him to talk about himself? “So, what about you? Have you eaten any strange things out in the field?” she asked. Fit people loved to talk about their diets, didn’t they?

“No, not really,” he said. “We live on MREs and protein bars, mostly. I eat a lot of protein. Have for years.” He shrugged and threaded his hands together.

“Oh,” Darcy said. “They don’t let you out to have any fun when the missions are over?”

“Sometimes,” he said obliquely. He rubbed the underside of his forearm. He hadn’t even taken off his coat. Was he just so handsome that he could be boring, Darcy thought? People at SHIELD had told her all these crazy STRIKE stories about him. Once, he’d supposedly been shot in the field, closed his shoulder wound with, like, duct tape, and gone right back to rescuing hostages. Successfully. He’d refused treatment until the mission was complete. Before they’d found Steve, he had the most mission successes in modern SHIELD history. She’d been told he was sarcastic and funny as hell and had no fear of death or injury whatsoever. “What book are you and Loki reading now?” he asked suddenly.

“Um,” she said, surprised, “it’s called The Perfect Scent by Chandler Burr? His specialty is science writing, but he wrote about the science of smell--it’s interesting, we don’t really know how the nose recognizes smells, exactly--and that got him into perfume journalism. So, in this book, he follows the creative process for a celebrity perfume and one for Hermès, from the first meetings to the finished product,” she said. “Burr does these perfume-inspired food events, too. Where you eat foods that are supposed to jive with the things he brings for you to smell, I guess? He could bring things that contrast, too. I’ve always wanted to go to one, I just haven’t had the money or the opportunity yet.”

“Interesting,” he said flatly.

“How did you get into flowers?” she asked, thinking it made a nice transition. “Do you have a secret love of ikebana?”

“No,” he said, smiling wryly. “That’s simple. My mother works as a manager for an old Manhattan florist on West 28th St. I grew up in the Bronx. It was a little rougher then, so she worried I’d get in trouble out on the streets. She used to drag me to work with her on the train and I would do my homework in the backroom. When I got old enough, I helped out and did deliveries.” He shrugged. “You pick up a lot. Those preserved roses are the next big thing, Ma says. They don’t do them, though. Her boss is a purist, says it’s unnatural. He’ll probably give in eventually, although it’s not going to help.”

“Not going to help?” Darcy said.

“Florists can’t keep up with rents in Manhattan now,” he said. “Everybody’s going to end up pushed out of the city into Queens or closed. All the money’s in weddings and big parties, nobody sends flowers anymore.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “That’s sad.”

“Yeah,” he said.
“But flowers kept you out of trouble?” Darcy said, smiling. There was something delightful about the idea of a young Brock Rumlow surrounded by roses and lilies.

“No,” he said. “I still got in plenty of trouble.” He gave her a real grin then.

Chapter End Notes

Preserved roses are a real thing! I imagine Darcy's looks something like the single rose in an acrylic box (Le Clair Un Clair) from Venus & Fleur in hot pink: https://www.venusetfleur.com/collections/le-clair-arrangements

Dita von Teese, talking about her hair & style: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKOYXyZY2zA.

Howlin' Wolf, if you've never heard him, singing Smokestack Lightning: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ri7TcukAJ8
& Back Door Man: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVIA1n5ng4Y
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

“I suppose I do have one embarrassing passion- I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately.”
— Susan Orlean, The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nick Fury was meeting with Clint Barton and Tulsa Jones in an undisclosed location. “You think there are Nazis inside SHIELD?” Clint said.

“HYDRA is back,” Fury told him. “There was a mistake before my time. SHIELD hired Armin Zola and he started a shadow org within SHIELD.”

“We hired Zola?” Clint said, horrified.

“US government hired a lot of Nazi scientists after the war. Keep up,” Tulsa told him. “It ain’t unheard of.”

“Shit,” Clint muttered. “Shit.”

“How many of them are there?” Tulsa asked.

“Less than they’d like me to believe,” Fury said. “My first intel suggested they controlled all the STRIKE teams and 45% of the tactical units, but I think that’s psych ops. They want to catch us by surprise, make us think every third agent is theirs, so we’ll panic and run around like chickens with our heads cut off. Bullshit. STRIKE Delta is still all us and so is STRIKE Bravo and STRIKE Echo. I have people on the other teams, too. The people they’ve got are zealots, but not especially stable. It turns out that you can’t exactly lure that many troubled teenagers to your side by asking them to shoot their dog.”

“Motherfuckers,” Clint said. He loved dogs.

“The Nazi thing also limits their recruitment pool somewhat,” Fury said wryly.

“I’m gonna guess 1940s racial superiority ain’t exactly popular in Harlem or Little Havana,” Tulsa said. “So, look for agents who are white males?”

“Primarily,” Fury said. “There may be a handful of women or non-white agents, but my suspicion is that their primary emphasis has been on that demographic.”

“We bringing in Cap?” Clint asked. “He knows HYDRA.”
“Not this HYDRA,” Fury said. “My primary goal is to root out HYDRA quietly and save SHIELD. If it goes public, it will harm the organization, discredit all the work we’ve done. The last thing we need is public Senate hearings and a bunch of bastards chipping away at our funding in the middle of a crisis. I think we can do it ourselves. We’ll bring in Cap if we need him, but only after we’ve tried to solve our infestation problem in house first. Start with STRIKE Charlie.”

***

“You think Fury’s right, that there are less of them than they’d like us to think?” Clint asked Tulsa as they left the building together.

“I was looking at a book about al-Qaeda and Muslim terrorists the other day,” Tulsa said. “University professor talks about how Bin Laden and all them complained about the failure of Muslims to join up in big numbers. Turns out they estimate it’s only thousands of people who’ve been recruited on the whole damn planet, out of a billion Muslims, plus anybody non-Muslim they could convert to radicalism. Most people aren’t psychopaths, so they got no interest in killing themselves to remake the world. They end up with a bunch of mouth-breathers and dumbass kids with crazy eyes making bombs in mama's basement.”

“Huh,” Clint said. “Since when do you read?”

“I read,” Tulsa said. “And how much real leeway you think somebody could make with ex-soldiers and people who’ve been through SHIELD recruitment? We’re looking for the dregs here. I’m more interested in why Fury thinks Cap’s his outside man and not his inside man. You got any ideas about that?”

“I dunno,” Clint said. “They don’t let him do the messy missions, just the tidy ones. Tasha goes everywhere and anywhere, but not Steve. There were rumors they were having him watched, for his own safety. I tried to figure out who it was to warn him, but I couldn’t verify it was legit and didn’t want to make Steve paranoid. He’s got enough on his plate. But you don’t watch somebody if you think he’s a real agent.”

“So, Cap’s their mushroom. Keep him in the dark and feed him bullshit,” Tulsa said, shaking his head. “He’s good enough for their PR, though, ain’t he?”

“That’s where they’d like to keep him,” Clint said. “SHIELD’s squeaky clean PR face, on all the school videos.”

“Squeaky clean,” Tulsa said wryly. “I have a feeling things are going to get real messy for you and me before this is over.”

***

Darcy asked him to tell her what kind of trouble, but he merely shook his head. “Just dumb kid stuff,” Brock said. He seemed to relax somewhat as they ate. At the least, he took his coat off. Some of the tension ebbed out of his shoulders and he actually consumed a beer (just one, before switching to water) and a single slice of pizza (meat, no cheese). He was a health nut, she realized. Probably a really rigorous one, if he could resist the combined smell of melted mozzarella, pizza dough and the appeal of cold beer. How tightly wound was he? He must have willpower like steel.
She had no such restraints.

Darcy was happily working on a second slice of pizza and a second Blue Moon when she caught him looking at her. “What?” she said, once she’d finished chewing.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” he said.

“You know, you could have another slice of pizza?” she said. “I promise not to tell the food police.” He smiled.

“No, I’m okay,” he said, rubbing his jaw. It was totally strange to be watched while you ate, Darcy thought.

“Well, if you’re not going to eat, at least talk. You’re making me feel like a bug under glass. I can’t chew under these conditions, Commander. Tell me some of your crazy STRIKE stories,” Darcy said.

“My crazy STRIKE stories?” he said.

“I have been told you can shoot someone from a descending parachute while in mid-air and personally saved a dozen SHIELD employees being held in wooden freaking cages by militants in the jungles in the Philippines?” Darcy said.

He shrugged. “I had a whole team with me for that Philippines situation. It was only a half-dozen hostages. The captors were almost as pitiful as the hostages, anyway,” he said. “We’re well-trained and well-equipped teams going up against scrawny kids who’ve been brainwashed. It’s not Guadalcanal, baby. It’s just practice and timing.”

“But you have to be ready and lucky every time you’re in the field,” Darcy pointed out. “The militants only have be lucky once.”

“Says who?” he said.

“Johnny Depp in a movie where he played a bank robber?” Darcy said. “I mean, I’m paraphrasing. He said he could rob one bank, anytime, and the law had to be in every bank, all the time, to stop him. You’re the law in this movie metaphor.”

“I’m the law, huh?” he said. He seemed to find that especially amusing.

“You have to get it right every single time and, according to people at work, you’re the most successful STRIKE leader in SHIELD’s history,” she said.

“Minus Cap,” he corrected, frowning.

“I’m not sure Steve counts,” Darcy said, “since he’s what Jane would call a statistical anomaly that skews the whole data set.”

“It’s sweet of you to say that, baby,” he said wryly. She could almost see a hint of a personality emerging, she thought, when his voice changed.

She saw flickers of it for the rest of their meal. He did tell her a little bit about flowers and the flower industry. That seemed to relax him more, so she asked about that. She ate and he talked. “It teaches you about people, working somewhere like that. You got guys crawling in, all sad sack,
trying to figure out how to find flowers to say I’m sorry I’m such a fuck up,” he said, laughing. “And then you get the guys right at the beginning of the romance, when it’s all shiny and new and she’s just the best thing that’s ever happened to me. People who are in a panic because they forgot a birthday or an anniversary. And then there’s weddings.”

“Are they crazy?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” he said. “I was about twelve when this woman and her future mother-in-law got into a big screaming match over centerpieces. I still remember the woman screaming about carnations being cheap. I think she threatened to skip her own son’s wedding.”

“But carnations are pretty,” Darcy said. “I like how fluffy they are and how they smell.”

“You’re too easy to please,” he told her. What did that mean, she thought? “You like orchids?” he asked suddenly.

“I’ve always wanted one, but I’ve never had one,” Darcy confessed. “One summer, I went on a whole Nero Wolfe reading kick, so they have that glamour for me.”

“Nero Wolfe?” he asked.

“It’s a 1930s mystery series. Wolfe is a brilliant detective who hates women, loves food, never leaves the house, and collects orchids,” Darcy said.

“That’s the hero?” he said skeptically.

“Well, for me the hero is Archie Goodwin, the detective’s charming assistant. Who definitely leaves the house and really likes women,” she said. “But tell me about orchids. Please?” She decided to use his own trick against him.

“Well,” he said, “your books ever mention maxillaria tenuifolia?”


“No reason,” he said. He kept looking at her out of the corner of his eye and smiling slowly. That smile did strange things to her stomach.

“You can’t just do that!” she insisted. “What is maxillaria tenuifolia -whatever?” He literally refused to answer. It was the craziest thing. “I can just Google,” she threatened. “My Google kung fu is unprecedented.”

“Don’t Google and maybe I’ll tell you,” he said flatly.

“When?” she said. But no amount of flirting or asking about work or being silly seemed to shake his veneer of distance. What was that about, she wondered? Maybe the whole ‘ruins the fantasy’ thing was real and he secretly found her a disappointment? Was that why he’d called her ‘too easy to please,’ too?

“I’d like to do this again,” he said, as they left the restaurant. “Soon.”

“Sure,” Darcy said, surprised. “You know where to find me, right?” Was he serious? He couldn’t be.

“I think so,” he said wryly. “You busy on Sunday?”
“Um, I don’t have any plans,” she said. “This Sunday?” She couldn’t believe she’d heard him right.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll pick you up at 5, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. Wow, she thought. Not even waiting a day to make a second date?

But he didn’t kiss her goodnight at all. Not when they walked out to the car and were alone in the parking lot and not when he walked her to her door. So weird. If he was that into her, shouldn’t he want to kiss her?

***

Jane and Loki were waiting when she got back to her apartment. “Where’s Thor?” Darcy asked.

“Sparring with the STRIKE Alpha guys,” Jane said. “I can’t watch.”

“Too much blood,” Darcy said, shivering.

“How did the date transpire?” Loki asked.

“Wellll, at first I thought it was going to be bad, like ‘still telling the story years from now’ bad? We went to this ridiculous French place with at least five senators and Thaddeus Ross,” Darcy said.

“Ewww,” Jane said.

“Major eww,” Darcy said, nodding. “There were little forks! But we, uh, fled that place and the night ended on a slightly better note and he wants to see me on Sunday. Also, the rose in the kitchen is supposed to last for a whole year?”

“A year?” Jane said.

“It is quite beautiful,” Loki said, magicking it into his hands.

“You don’t even have to water it.”

“Wow,” Jane said.

“So, I was correct about him all along?” Loki said and preened.

“Maybe,” Darcy said. “He’s much more reserved than I expected, though.”

“What were you expecting?” Jane asked.

“Well, like, naughtiness, Janey. Dirty jokes and flirtation and teasing,” Darcy said. “He’s supposed to be a big womanizer, but I got nada, zilch, nothing. He was still pretty serious.”

“I think this calls for a drink and a close scrutiny,” Jane said. “Red or white wine?”

“Oh, white,” Darcy said. “That pinot grigio I got from Trader Joe’s is a bubbly one.” They analyzed her date, talked about the lab, and their plans to go horseback riding.
“Hey, is it slutty to make out with someone in the parking lot of a Mellow Mushroom? On a scale of 1-10, is that like a 5? I didn’t, I just wondered,” Darcy asked, as she sorted through a pile of books Loki had set out while she was gone.

Loki looked at her curiously. “You wanted to kiss that Rumlow man in the parking lot, did you not?” he asked.

“I thought he would kiss me, but he didn’t,” Darcy said.

“Not at all?” Jane said. “That is so frustrating.” She’d been through it with Thor. Almost kisses. Interrupted kisses. Darcy nodded.

“Sorry I totes killed your romantic moments with Thor sometimes,” Darcy said.

Jane waved it away. “I’ve kissed him plenty now,” she said.


“I think The Orchid Thief should totally be our next book,” she told Loki.

“Very well,” he said, smiling slyly.

“He said I was ‘too easy to please,’ too?” Darcy said. “Is that just a fancy way of saying I’m easy?”

“But he didn’t make a move?” Jane said, shocked.

“Zero moves,” Darcy said.

“ Weird,” Jane muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Tulsa is reading Charles Kurzman's book, "The Missing Martyrs."

Carnations smell like powdery cloves and vanilla.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"When I do vanilla I get crème anglaise, when Guerlain does it he gets Shalimar!"--Ernest Beaux, the perfumer who created Chanel no.5

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for your comments and kudos! Y’all are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think we should warn Darcy,” Clint said to Tulsa. They’d been the first to arrive at the barn on Saturday. “What if Rumlow is one of them?”

“I’m not doing that,” Tulsa said. “You ain’t, either.”

“You don’t think she ought to know?” Clint said.

“If she knows, she’s gotta act like she doesn’t and that puts a burden on her. What if she slips? If he’s not one of ‘em, she’s fine. And even if he is,” Tulsa said, “well…”

“Well, what?” Clint said.

“It’s to our advantage if he’s distracted. The man don’t do nothing but work. She might be the one thing capable of throwing him off his game,” Tulsa said. “He’s been into her for years, right?”

“I don’t like it,” Clint said stubbornly.

“You’re all heart and no brain. It’s why I love you, brother,” Tulsa said. “There they are.” He waved at Thor, Jane, and Darcy.

***

“Oh my God!” Darcy shrieked, as Tulsa encouraged the horse to go faster. She’d insisted on the slowest horse, but this did not feel slow. She had Tulsa in a death grip.

“Shhh,” he said, “you’ll spook poor Belle. She’s old. This is a snail’s pace.”

“Are you doing this so I’ll hang onto you tighter?” Darcy asked him, slightly terrified. Okay, really terrified. The horse was very far from the ground and she did not feel stable. Tulsa had been telling her that riders had to develop strong leg muscles to balance. She thought he might be fishing for compliments on his thighs. They weren’t bad, though.

“Well, they do say you should take a girl to see a scary movie if you want to fool around afterwards,” he said. “You feel like fooling around, honey?”
“I feel like murdering you right now,” Darcy said. “Or tasering you repeatedly until your hair is ruined.”

“That’s just mean,” he said. “It’s my best feature.”

When Thor mentioned that Rumlow wanted to see Darcy again as they were stabling the horses, Tulsa cut his eyes significantly at Clint. Clint shook his head. He didn’t like it.

***

“Dress casually,” Loki advised her on Sunday afternoon.

“You aren’t helping?” Darcy said.

“No, I am venturing out to the beer gardens with Thor,” he said. “You will be fine. You are perfectly capable of dressing yourself. I would choose slacks of some description for this evening.”

“Slacks?” Darcy said. “Why slacks?” He shrugged elegantly and shimmered away. “Come back here!” Darcy called. She thought she heard a fleeting bark of laughter. “That is extremely rude,” she said. “I never should have let you see Uncle Arthur on *Bewitched*!” Still, she took his advice and wore her leggings and t-shirt. Just to be cute, she threw on one of her favorite scarves. Loki had called it “juvenile,” but she liked the print of little cartoon pugs doing yoga.

Brock knocked on her door quietly. “Hey,” he said, when she opened the door. He was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. How had Loki known, Darcy wondered? He had something tucked in the crook of his elbow. More flowers, this time in a little pot.

“Hi,” Darcy said. “What are those?” They were burgundy and yellow-splotched ruffled blooms.

*Maxillaria tenuifolia* ,” he said. “Your first orchids. Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” she said. She let him in and tried not to be distracted by how good he looked in fitted tees and distressed denim. She’d noticed he did this thing where he hung his sunglasses from his shirt collar, like he knew he had a good neck or something. For sure he knew, didn’t he? How sneaky.

He brought the orchids into the kitchen and gestured for her to come closer. “Come here,” he said, stepping back so she could stand in front of them.

“What?” she said. He pulled her gently between him and the counter.

“Here,” he said, taking her scarf from around her neck, “you’ll like this, I promise. Pugs?” He chuckled, as he tied it over her eyes.

“You’re blindfolding me?” Darcy said. “I’m pretty sure this is how women end up dead in the movies. I can’t see anything. Also, don’t insult pugs. My friend had a pug mix and she was awesome. I loved all her little snorts and sniffles. She was like an adorable old lady with a head
cold who wanted to eat your popcorn.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “This is the idea, it’ll make it easier for you to smell the plant if you can’t see. I won’t let you fall,” he said, holding onto her elbows. She had to repress a little shiver of sensation when he touched her bare skin with his fingers. “Lean forward and smell that,” he said. She leaned towards the plant. “There,” he said. “You’re good.”

She inhaled. A rich, sweet scent flooded her nose. “It smells like something I recognize, like really familiar. Is that … coconuts?” she said. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Maxillaria tenuifolia is the coconut orchid. Smells exactly like roasted coconut. I knew if I told you the name, it would ruin the surprise.”

“Wow,” Darcy said. “I thought orchids didn’t have strong scents?” She took the scarf from around her eyes and leaned in to smell it again. “That is so cool.”

“Some of them smell good, some of them smell gross,” he said. “It depends on the pollinator. Vanilla’s an orchid, too.”

“So, wait, can you sell vanilla flowers? Why don’t they?” she asked. Wouldn’t vanilla flowers seem romantic, even if they didn’t smell like vanilla beans?

“I dunno,” he said. “I’ll ask around, find out.” She looked up at him.

“This is really nice,” she said. “You have such cool taste in flowers.”

“Thanks,” he said. There was a weird moment of silence. She couldn’t read him at all. God, it was so confusing.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He took her to freaking mini golf in the suburbs. She was half-delighted, half-frustrated. On one hand, mini golf was awesomesauce. On the other hand, it was totally a friend activity, too. “I have to take Thor here, just for the photos,” she told him. “Can you imagine?”

“Yeah,” he said. He was wearing his sunglasses, which made him even more difficult to read. Also, he was so much better at this than she was.

“Ughhh,” she groaned when he made another shot perfectly. “Why do you have to be the Tiger Woods of mini golf?”

“I played professionally for awhile,” he said flatly, “until I got too big for the tiny jerseys and the mini shoes that came with my endorsements.” She burst into laughter.

“A joke! I didn’t know you did those,” she said. At least, not in her presence. Other people said he was funny.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, sweetheart,” he said. He tilted his club over his shoulder and just...walked away.

“What the hell?” she muttered to herself. She was so thrown by the sense that he was constantly watching her behind those sunglasses that she kept missing shots, too. At mini golf. Mini golf!

“You eat Chinese?” he asked eventually, once she’d sworn loudly enough at her ball getting caught
in a wooden cutout of George Washington chopping a cherry tree that people started to stare.

“I do,” she said.

***

She caught him looking at her again as they ate. She grinned at him and he smiled briefly back, then looked serious. “Sweetheart, I need to tell you something before somebody else does and you get the wrong idea about me,” he said.

“Okay?” Darcy said. Did he have, like, a secret family? She’d heard that there was at least one SHIELD employee other than Clint with a family stashed away.

“There’s a game that we play at work, it’s stupid, but, uh, everybody votes for the person they think is the most attractive in the SHIELD fil--” he said.

“Oh. Oh, you think I don’t know about File Fixation?” Darcy said. “I know. Steve told Jane that you’ve been voting for me. Is it really two years?”

“Shit. I’m sorry,” he said. Darcy shrugged.

“I would probably play, too,” she admitted. “It freaks out Jane and Steve, but it sounds kinda fun to me?”

“I don’t want you to think I was watching you in your sleep or some shit,” he said. “Or that I memorized your file. I played the game because it’s one of those things people do at SHIELD. Sometimes you do stuff just to add to team cohesion.”

“So, it was a more casual stalking scenario?” Darcy said, hoping for a chuckle. He blinked instead. “There’s one thing that surprises me,” Darcy said curiously. “You never wanted to vote for somebody else? Not Hope Van Dyne or Pepper Potts or somebody like that? Just for a little variety?”

“No,” he said flatly.

“Why not?” she said.

“You tased Thor, that took some balls. And you kept surviving things, like that London deal that we cleaned up. You had no training, but there you were, popping up wherever crazy shit happened and making it out alive. I thought you might be lucky,” he said.

“Ah ha! So, I’m right. I have this theory that I was like a lucky charm or a pinup on a old-timey plane,” Darcy said. “You don’t actually have me painted on a quinjet or anything, do you?”

“No,” he said. “That footage of you holding up a sign that said ‘Phil Coulson/SHIELD, where the fuck are you?’ in front of a closed circuit TV camera in London was pretty funny. People replayed that for weeks.”

“That impressed you?” she said, surprised. “I was trying to contact SHIELD and couldn’t get anybody,” she explained. “Jane was MIA and I didn’t know Phil had died. I saw it on an episode of Elementary and thought it might work,” she said. He nodded.

“It wasn’t a bad idea,” he said. “We did see it.”

“I don’t get it,” she said. “You don’t laugh at my jokes!”
“I’m laughing on the inside,” he said dryly.

She reached for another eggroll, then paused. “This isn’t one of the things that ruins the fantasy for you, is it?” she said playfully. He jerked visibly.

“What?” he said. “What did you say?”

“Me eating all this food? Is that one of the fantasy ruiners that made you not want to meet me in person?” Darcy asked. “Steve told Jane, Jane told me,” she explained.

“Sweetheart, that is not what I meant,” he said. “Not at all.”

“Really? I assumed---” she said

“No,” he said crisply. “Just forget it. Rogers told people that?”

“Yeah, but--” Darcy said.

“What else did they tell you about me?” he asked carefully. Whoops, Darcy thought. Was he upset?

“You want me to answer that honestly?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Go, I’m ready,” he said. Almost grimly.

Darcy inhaled, looked at the far side of the room, and then started talking. “Well, you’re the most successful guy in STRIKE’s history, you’re in incredibly good shape, and you’re a workaholic. Your big social event is having one drink with your STRIKE guys on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Literally, one drink. I don’t know how you do it. You have a thing for old-fashioneds and, according to your HR file, your preferred birthday cake for those terrible office parties is actually chocolate sheet cake from a bakery in Georgetown with no frosting, which I do not understand at all. People say you have no furniture because you’re never home. You pick up a lot of women, but it’s never the same one twice. That confused me, because where are you having sex with them if you have no furniture? Do they leave because of the lack of furniture? Are there, like, carpet burns involved?” Darcy said out loud, grinning. “Also, did you really duct tape up a bullet wound and keep working? These are stories I want to hear.” She looked at him when she heard a sound. He was actually laughing.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, shaking his head. “The gossip mill at that place,” he muttered. “I’ll have you know that the chocolate sheet cake has a glaze, okay? It’s a coconut chocolate cake.”

“Like German chocolate cake?” she said.

“Sort of,” he said. “It’s not as thick as the icing on a German chocolate cake. Can’t have pecans in a work cake, either. Could kill somebody with allergies.”

“My grandma made that a lot when I was little, German Chocolate Cake,” she said. “I’ve never tried it, though.”

“She made cake and wouldn’t let you have any?” he said, looking alarmed.

“No, I always refused to try it because I thought the coconut-pecan frosting looked like vomit,” she said. “She made it for church.”

“It was cake,” he said. “What kid says no to cake?”
“I was very stubborn,” she told him. “I refused to try anything coconut. I had an aversion to the texture of dyed coconut from those cheap sheet cakes parents brought to kids’ birthday parties at school back then?”

“And I bought you a coconut orchid?” he said, shaking his head.

“No, I’ve always really loved the smell of coconut, it was just that Easter-grass-dyed texture that bugged me. I’m totally over it now. Preacher cake’s my favorite.” At his blank look, she continued. “It’s amazing. Coconut, pecans, and crushed pineapple with cream cheese frosting,” she said. “Oooh, hold on,” she said. “I gotta add that American Cake book to my to-read list for Loki. I listened to a podcast about that book.”

He looked at her for a minute. “How did we get here?” he said.

“Um, SHIELD gossip, then cake, then my grandma, then cake again,” she said. “Is that your favorite orchid, the coconut one?”

“No,” he said. He refused to tell her what orchid was his favorite, even when she mock-pouted. He was so weirdly secretive. She didn’t get it at all.

“I have furniture,” he said suddenly as they left the restaurant. “Actual furniture. And it wasn’t that many women. I mean, maybe, like twenty? Twenty-five?”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, as they reached the car. “This month?”

“No, in the years since I took the STRIKE job, for fuck’s sake, I’m not a bartender or an NBA player,” Brock said, following her to the passenger side of the car.

“Sure,” Darcy said teasingly. “And you have furniture.”

“Do you want to see my furniture?” Brock asked. He put his arm up on the side of the Civic, so he could step closer. “I could show you my furniture, sweetheart.” There was a hint of a smile.

“Oh, here he is,” she said, grinning.

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“I’ve been waiting for noted lady-killer Brock Rumlow to make an appearance. I feel like someone should be playing that music they used to play when Elvis came out on stage,” she said. “That science fiction theme?”

“You’re just making fun of me now,” he said.

“Ruined the fantasy for you yet?” she teased.

“Nuh-huh,” he said. He locked eyes with her and leaned closer.

“Not even a little bit?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said. There was slight movement in his arm. She heard a beep. He’d unlocked her car door with his remote. “I should take you home,” he said. “I’ve got something I need to do tomorrow morning. Very early. You doing anything on Tuesday night?” he asked, opening the car door.
“Just work and then we have plans in the evening,” Darcy said, sliding into the seat. Thor wanted to go to another bar she’d heard about.

“Did you want to keep those plans?” he said, leaning against the car door. His expression was unreadable.

***

Steve was filing reports when Brock Rumlow walked into the room on the 37th floor. “Cap, a minute?” he said crisply. He sat down at his desk. It was slightly off-set from the group, so he could do performance reviews for the other members of the team more quietly.

“Yeah?” Steve said, turning around. They were the only two people in the room that early in the morning.

“Come have a seat,” Rumlow said casually. He nudged out the chair on the other side of his desk with the toe of his boot. Steve came and sat down in the chair.

“Is there a problem with the reports?” Steve asked. “You know I lost Romanoff for several minutes on the Lemurian, so we have a time discrepancy….”

“I’m not worried about your time discrepancy. The mission was a success. Whatever Romanoff needs to do is what she needs to do,” he said coolly. “She’s indicated to me that she had special instructions. Not my problem. My problem is trust, Cap.”

“Trust?” Steve said.

“I’ve given you a lot of leeway over the past two years, Rogers. Deferred to your specialized skills, supported your arrival on the team. We had to go to bat for you with HR, get them to make an exception for you and circumvent all the tech bullshit, so you wouldn’t get bogged down in their demands that you follow standard-issue SHIELD rules about email responses and electronic reports in our system. You’re good at what you do. It’s impressive, it really is. You’ve earned my trust in the field. But you have two years of SHIELD experience, which makes you essentially a junior agent in certain ways. Now, I’ve seen this with junior agents before, so I recognize it. You’re a little bit dissatisfied with how things are run at the organization, now that all those shiny new feelings of excitement have worn off. You know enough to be unhappy, but you don’t know everything. A good agent--somebody who wants to stay here--keeps going, gets on with the work, and comes out the other side eventually. They become whole-picture people and those negative feelings go away. A bad agent starts bitching to anyone who will listen that SHIELD is flawed or their commander is an asshole, whatever, and gets bogged down in the details. Eventually, they burnout, leave us, because they’re a source of negativity,” Brock said. “You understand?”

“I don’t think I follow you,” Steve said, shifting in his seat.

“When I hear you making a fuss about Romanoff or that you’ve been gossiping and complaining about me to people within the organization, Cap, I start to wonder if you’re turning into one of our three year agents?” Rumlow said casually. “Darcy Lewis happened to mention that you’ve been talking to people about my personal life, too. I have to say, that surprised me. I expected you, of all people, to be opposed to gossip. I thought people in your generation appreciated how bad it is for morale for team members to snipe at each other. Was I wrong?”

“No,” Steve said quietly. He had been been complaining about the Lemurian Star mission, too.
“No?” Rumlow said. “So, you don’t want to leave us? Because I’d hate to lose you, Cap. I think you could have a long career at SHIELD. Fury’d like you to stay with us, I’d like you to stay with us. But I don’t want you to start down a path that will put us at odds in the future. SHIELD is Peggy Carter’s legacy, after all. The organization is important to a lot of people, a lot of lives.”

“Of course,” Steve said.

“I’m glad we had this talk. I want you to know this isn’t personal,” Rumlow told him. “I just want us to be on the same side here, Cap. Good talk.”

He got up and left the room while Steve was sitting in the chair on the other side of his desk. A few minutes later, Natasha Romanoff stuck her head into the room. “Steve?” she said. “Something wrong?”

“Has Rumlow ever said anything to you about three year agents?” Steve said.

“Oooh, you got the speech,” Nat said. “I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never witnessed it. What was it like?”

“Difficult to say,” Steve said. He was still processing.

“Supposedly, other division heads have asked Rumlow to give it to their failing team members. After Mark Anderson got it, he actually started going to the gym and finally passed the fitness clearance. He told me he never wanted to be called a ‘funnel for negativity’ in that tone of disappointment again,” Nat said.

***

Darcy had been wondering what a third date with Rumlow would be like, but Monday afternoon she received a simple text: Team called out on mission. Have to cancel Tuesday’s plans.

There wasn’t even any indication that he would call when he got back, either. She showed it to Jane in the lab. “Is this a weird text?” she said.

“Maybe?” Jane said. “But Thor says he’s very calm, always. He never loses his temper during sparring matches or anything like that. I asked.”

“What else did Thor say?” Darcy said.

“He has a very dry sense of humor, too,” Jane said. “Slightly sarcastic, but very low-key.”

“Hmm,” Darcy said, going back to her laptop.

“He always asks about you, though. How you are, if you’re having a good day,” Jane said.

“Way to bury the lede, Janey!” Darcy said. “Start with that next time!”

Monday evening, Darcy and Loki went to the drugstore. Her Island Gardenia had made him want to smell drugstore perfumes for some reason. “You should see if they have White Diamonds or any of the other Elizabeth Taylor ones,” she told him.
“What on earth is this?” he said, holding up an Exclamation bottle. “It is made to look like punctuation?”

“Oh, guess what? Sophia Grojsman did that one, too,” Darcy told him, looking up from her phone. They’d discovered that the perfumers—called ‘noses’—who formulated the actual perfumes often worked for one of five or six big corporations, except for a handful who had prestigious jobs as in-house noses for a few luxury brands. That meant that most perfumers could make a high-end perfume one week and a drugstore one the next. From Gucci to Celine Dion, they did it all, working from initial briefs—reports that described the hoped-for image of the perfume, budget, demo, etc—from the brands. “She was the nose for that and Lancome’s Trésor and Yves Saint Laurent’s Paris,” Darcy said. Grojsman was most famous for her use of big, feminine roses and powdery notes. Darcy had realized that she’d been adventently a fan of the nose Maurice Roucel (Frederic Malle’s Musc Ravageur, Guerlain’s Insolence, Lolita Lempicka’s L, and Hermés 24 Faubourg—all allegedly Princess Diana’s favorite) without realizing he’d built them all. She’d googled him; he was a big bear of a Frenchman with a cheery-looking face. Now she imagined him like a ghost maestro in her favorite things and looked for his work. More sadly, Darcy had fallen for a sample someone on one of the perfume fandom boards had sent her and Loki—a discontinued Guerlain called Attrape Coeur (Heart Catcher)—only to discover that the perfumer, Mathilde Laurent, just did bespoke fragrances for Cartier’s ultra-wealthy clients now. Heart caught, indeed.

“What are you thinking about?” Loki asked.

“Whether or not Tony Stark could fly Maurice Roucel in from France for my birthday,” Darcy said. “I think he might find it funny to watch us fangirl over a French guy in a lab coat? Also, I feel like Roucel would have all kinds of interesting opinions, you know? Every French person I’ve ever met is opinionated, it’s kind of awesome.”

“It is because they do not spend so much time watching television,” Loki said.

“Phhft,” Darcy said, snagging an older mini bottle of Shalimar from under the drugstore counter. She was developing a whole Shalimar thing. It grew on you. Marie from the department store had been right. “Hey, have you ever heard that Nat King Cole song, “Nature Boy”?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

“It’s so you, come here,” she told Loki, sticking an earbud in his ear.

“Ow, that is exceptionally rude,” he said.

“You’ll live,” she told him. “I’m going to go pay for this Shalimar.”

“Your Shalimar collection is going to outlive you,” he said.

“This is the eau de toilette, it’s slightly different from the eau de parfum I bought the other day,” she told him. “It’s cheap here. Besides, I can leave it to you in my will or something, like people leave their orchids to another owner. You want my Shalimar and my coconut orchids? If it’s spoiled by then, throw it out, but wear it if it’s still okay. I think you could pull it off.”

“This is an entirely depressing conversation,” he said, sighing. “I do like this song, however.”

Back at the apartment, they sprayed her different bottles of Shalimar on each arm and sniffled. “You’re right, it is different,” Loki said. “Not entirely different, just different enough to be interesting.”
“Like a piece of music played on different instruments,” Darcy said. “The eau de parfum is so more much vanilla pudding-like, compared to the eau de toilette. Plus, I don’t know how long that EDT bottle was at the drugstore, that’s the older bottle style.” Every so often, new regulations on materials meant that perfumes had to be overhauled to comply with the law on allergens or endangered forests, while still smelling similar enough not to lose regular customers. “I wish I’d been alive in the 1960s to smell the old nitro musks in Chanel no. 5,” she said. They’d been banned for environmental reasons, but people old enough to remember them waxed poetic about nitro musks.

“I would magic some up for you,” Loki said, sniffling his arm. “But I cannot recreate something I’ve never experienced that no longer exists. Besides, aren’t they explosive?”

“Phhfft,” Darcy said.

“So, you have not heard from Rumlow?” he asked curiously.

“Not a syllable,” Darcy said. “I assume he’s either shooting at terrorists or disinterested.”

“Shooting at terrorists,” Loki said sanguinely.

Chapter End Notes

Maxillaria tenuifolia: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhVZwa_y9x0


An interview with Maurice Roucel, about his work for Frederic Malle. His "Musc Ravageur" is incredible--FM will send you samples--but alas, very expensive: https://vimeo.com/67792896

I had such fun writing Steve & Brock's convo--at first, it was going to be much more aggressive in tone--but then it occurred to me that someone with Rumlow's background would probably use his one psychological advantage with Steve: his greater comfort/savvy with institutional politics and structures at SHIELD and Steve's sense of feeling slightly out of place. Yeah, Steve is technically the person in the lead in their missions, but I'm guessing Steve also had to ask people for help with the office coffee maker and stuff at first. So, Steve occupies this weird liminal place between "the guy in-charge" and "the new guy who doesn't understand SHIELD's difficult-to-navigate government computer network at all."
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

A bagel with everything?

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos! Y’all are just super-duper, jinkies!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The week passed fairly quietly. They--Darcy, Loki, Jane, and Thor--tried that beer garden together. Darcy liked the twinkle lights they’d strung overhead. Clint and Tulsa both left town; Clint was going back to Iowa and Tulsa was doing some off-site training seminar that he grumbled about to Darcy in the lab on Clint’s and his last day in DC together. “I’ll just be sitting on my ass looking at Powerpoints, honey,” he told her. “But you gotta follow the rules sometime.” He winked.

“Pffhtt, I’m sorry,” Darcy said. Seminars were so boring. He grinned at her and then he and Clint departed for what they were calling “The Last Supper.” Darcy suspected that the it would involve more beer than actual food. “Bye, y’all!” she said, waving goodbye.

“Take care of my hat! It’s a Resistol,” Tulsa said.

“Take care of yourself, Darce,” Clint said, more seriously.

***

There was no word from Rumlow. Darcy spent her free time reading with Loki. He wanted to add a balcony to the apartment, but she thought that might draw too much attention. Instead, they went up to the roof at night and listened to old music and talked. Sometimes, they went to the tiki bar and had mai tais. Darcy was learning to pace herself and Loki was busy looking for the perfect banana perfume. Darcy thought they should try Comptoir Sud Pacifique’s Vanilla Banane, if they could find a bottle. Loki was all sad because she’d dug up a sample vial of Monyette Paris’s Coquette Tropique--to her, it smelled like bubblegum, gardenias, banana, and incense--and he loved it. But she thought it had been discontinued. “Nothing lasts on Midgard!” he pouted. “You have a dizzying array of options, but you don’t keep any of them.”

“We could always check ebay?” she told him. “Hold on, I just found a website that has it for eighteen bucks.”

“Don’t tease me,” he said.

“I’m serious,” she said. “Look!”
“How many of them do they have?” he asked.

“No idea,” Darcy said.

“Order as many as you can on this card,” he said, handing her a plastic square.

“What’s Thor going to say when he finds out that a credit card with his name paid for, like, a dozen tiny bottles of a tropical perfume that smells like the kind of trashy fun that Cyndi Lauper would appreciate?” she asked, adding to the online shopping cart.

“I will tell him that he did it while drunk,” Loki said slyly. “And that he thought Jane would like them, but she did not.”

“You are terrible. I love you,” Darcy said. “But we have to stop bleeding money. We’re spending like birdbrained spendthrifts and you pay for all these things, too.”

“No, I will continue to pay. Life is entirely too short on Midgard to economize, anyway. What a dreadful notion,” he said.

“You are such an F. Scott Fitzgerald,” she told him. “He ended up broke, you know.”

“Perhaps I should write my memoirs?” he said.

“Marry Miss von Teese first, the two of you together would make for an interesting story, like Richard Burton and Liz Taylor,” Darcy advised.

“She is quite shy,” he said. “You are correct. I have noted it in the interviews. I will perhaps have to think of how to approach her, if we ever do meet,” he said. “A delicate personality.”

“That is, like, stupidly adorable. It just warms my bitter heart,” she said, grinning.

“You are not bitter,” he said, smiling gently.

“How are you liking *The Orchid Thief*?” she asked. They just started it. She had very carefully omitted any mention of Susan Orlean’s other non-fiction, for fear that Loki would see that one essay about the real woman in New Jersey who’d kept twenty-odd tigers on her property. Nobody had been sure of the exact number initially; Tiger Lady herself had lost count at some point, before a tiger (maybe?) escaped and was wandering around town.

“I do not understand all her references to Florida? What is it about Florida?” he said. “Is it unique on Midgard?”

“Oh, Florida. Yes, unique is the right word. It’s sort of a mishmash of wealthy and non-wealthy, elderly retirees, and people who grew up in the not-fancy parts. So, the craziest news stories come out of Florida. There’s this one documentary about a town where multiple residents maimed themselves for insurance money called *Vernon, Florida*. They made sure not to injure a certain foot and hand combo so they could still drive stick in their fancy cars, it’s really fascinating. Where do you keep your crazy people on Asgard?” she asked.

“I think I’m the crazy person on Asgard,” Loki said slowly.

“Not Florida crazy, sweetie. They’d probably like your helmet down there, though. I feel like it would be popular on spring break, but people could get injured,” she mused out loud. “It’s too fearsome a helmet for drunk undergrads.”
“Quite,” he said. He was rather proud of his armor, she’d noticed. She had the impression that Asgardians in general thought Loki’s armor didn’t quite fit in, but Darcy thought it was cool. She’d often wondered if he was just a smidge too creative for his own home, like Picasso had had to get out of Spain. Or Andy Warhol had had to get out of Pittsburgh. Gender-fluid, that was the word that made the most sense to her. Asgard was probably bass-ackwards about gender politics, based on the stories she’d caught about Sif being the only female warrior and Odin ordering Figga out of the room when they’d brought Loki back after New York. That was some patronizing shit for your husband to pull when your child was in trouble, Darcy thought. Telling Frigga to go like she was an employee, not a full partner. Maybe Loki should just stay here forever. She wasn’t going to tell him that, though. It might upset him to bring up his mama.

“Hey,” she said to Loki, “you should listen to Nico and Velvet Underground sometime. And Nouvelle Vague! You’d love them.” To demonstrate, she played Nouvelle Vague’s cover of “I Melt With You” and grabbed his hand. “C’mon, bro, let’s shake it on this roof like we’re stoned people in a Quentin Tarantino movie,” she said.

“What are you doing?” he said, looking at her with an expression of utter bafflement.

“It’s the chicken dance, only in slow motion,” Darcy said. “Flap your arms, real slow.”

“This is absurd,” Loki said.

“No way, you’ll look totally cool,” she said. “Trust me.”

“Very well,” he said, sighing. But eventually, she made him laugh. Plus, he was terribly excited when she told him what day all the little pink vials of Coquette Tropique would ship.

***

When Darcy arrived at the lab the next morning, there was a bouquet of big, fluffy flowers waiting on her desk. They were a deep raspberry color. “Flowers?” she said.

“Uh-huh, the flower fairy is visiting you again. Those are beautiful. What are they?” Jane asked, when Darcy opened the envelope.

“Carnations,” Darcy said. “They’re carnations.”

“I didn’t know carnations came in that color,” Jane said. “They’re really gorgeous.”

“According to this info card, that color is called Deep Velvet,” Darcy said. Her mouth twitched as she held in a giggle. Jane burst into laughter.

“Do you think he realizes he sent you flowers that sound like a sexual innuendo?” Jane said. “I mean, that sounds like a really trashy romance novel. Or maybe 1970s porn.” Darcy opened the note inside. There was just one line: I debated whether or not to bother signing this. -BR

“I do not get this man at all,” Darcy said. She read Jane the card. There was nothing about missing her or about seeing her again.

“Maybe this is his sense of humor?” Jane offered. “But it is weird. I can’t believe he hasn’t tried to get in your pants yet. Everybody tries to get in your pants! Remember that time we went into that...
lesbian bar in Norway and you got, like, twenty numbers in fifteen minutes once people realized we weren’t a couple?”

“He’s totally immune to my charms, unlike Norwegian lesbians. The closest we’ve gotten is Very Close Talking, Jane,” Darcy said, deploying her favorite *Psych* not-quite-a-kiss reference. She sighed. “I don’t know how to interpret his behavior at all. Are these sarcastic flowers? Sincere flowers?”

“Do you ever wonder if he wants my bagels or something?” Jane said quietly. “Like, for SHIELD?” Jane had a stash of research that she’d done solo, before signing on with Fury. It was in a safe, Tony Stark-tech protected secret location. They called it “bagels” as a joke. She didn’t want SHIELD to compel her to bury it for their own reasons. Jane’s joining SHIELD had been more of a compromise, after they offered her a sizeable budget, a great benefits package, and the freedom to travel. She had not anticipated being stuck in the Triskelion with a tender ankle. Darcy knew she worried she was being spied on.

“I hadn’t thought about it, but now that you say that,” Darcy said, frowning. “It is possible, isn’t it? Ughhhhhhhhh, he’s a raisin cookie.” She had always loved her “Raisin Cookies Gave Me Trust Issues” coffee mug.

“So, don’t see him again?” Jane offered.

“But he’s such a hot raisin cookie, Jane. I totes wanted a bite of that sometime,” Darcy admitted. “I thought the raisin cookie would taste like a chocolate chip cookie.”

“You could always have one raisin cookie and then return the rest of the box,” Jane said.

“So reasonable,” Darcy said. “How can I work myself into a full funk when you give such good advice? Besides, I’m not even sure he’s doling out any free samples.”

“He totally looks like a guy who’d give out free samples,” Jane said. “It’s so weird. Weird!”

“You,” Darcy said, looking at the carnations. They were so beautiful. What did it mean?

Her focus on Rumlow’s weirdness abated suddenly that afternoon, when they heard the news being whispered through the SHIELD offices. The quinjet carrying all of STRIKE Charlie had crashed in the Adriatic sea. They’d just finished a mission in Libya. The word was that the whole team had been killed instantly. “The entire team?” Darcy said in horror. Her mind went immediately to STRIKE Alpha. She couldn’t imagine Steve, Natasha, Brock, Jack, and the rest of the guys just being here one day and gone the next. It was awful to contemplate.

“Yeah,” Jane said. “It’s horrible. I shouldn’t have said that about Rumlow being interested in you for my bagels, Darce. I feel shitty now.”

“No, it’s okay,” Darcy said, “you’re not wrong to ask. He lives for this job. He’d do anything for SHIELD, I think. Even go out for bagels.”

***

“C’mon now,” Tulsa said to the bruised man tied in the chair. “I can wait all day. We done took your little cyanide capsule, so you gotta talk to us eventually.”
“Hail HYDRA,” Bobby from STRIKE Charlie said firmly. He’d survived the firefight that broke out after Tulsa and Clint had intercepted STRIKE Charlie with their own team. Clint had managed to get sedation arrows into a few of them, including Bobby.

“Now, eventually, I’m gonna need to go and leave you with these nice Libyans. You wouldn’t believe it, but you know, they remember the first HYDRA? Yeah, your people got some bad press ’round these parts for burning a village while Cap was chasing ‘em during the war, Bobby,” Tulsa said. “The first HYDRA thought North Africans were a lesser race. So, if I have to leave you behind, they’ll do things to you that you won’t like much. Now, if you cooperate with me, we can put you in a nice SuperMax where you get hot meals and reasonably clean sheets. But if you don’t, well, man, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Bobby said.

“It’s your funeral, son,” Tulsa said. “You sit with that, think on it.” He left the room. In the adjoining room, Clint Barton was watching through a double mirror.

“You think he’ll talk?” Clint asked. “Without enhancement?”

“I dunno,” Tulsa said. “You still got them enhanced arrows?”

“All truth serum ones,” Tulsa said.

“They ain’t foolproof,” Clint said. “It’s a delicate science.”

“Sure, sure, brother. But beating somebody ‘til they talk ain’t foolproof, either,” Tulsa said. “And I don’t much enjoy the sound ribs make when they break. I’m not an animal.”

“Yeah,” Clint said.

***

“Can you take something to Thor for me?” Jane asked on Saturday. “He’s downstairs in the gym, sparring with some of the guys. He forgot his snacks.”

“Ugh, you’re making me go to the creeper gym? I hate the creeper gym,” Darcy muttered.

“Pwease?” Jane said pathetically. She pointed to her still-sad ankle. Why did people think carnations were awful, anyway? They were so nice. Even if the newer, longer-lasting variations sold by florists didn’t have the intense clove smell of the ones that her grandmother had grown.

Darcy took the elevator down to the twelfth floor carrying Thor’s giant paper snack bag. It was dimly-lit on the weekends; someone had only turned on half the lights. She repressed a shiver of unease. This floor was so horror movie. The stank smell was still at full power, though. She just about jumped out of her skin when she met someone around a corner by surprise. “Darce!” Steve said cheerfully. “I’m sorry, did I scare you, doll?”

“Yeah,” she said, laughing. “Steve! I almost peed myself, you scared me so bad. Oh em geeeee.”
He laughed. It made Darcy smile. Maybe he wasn’t as repelled by her unladylike behavior as she thought.

“I’m real sorry,” he said. “I was just headed back upstairs. What you doing down here?”

“Bringing Thor his snacks. I hate this place. So creepy,” she said.

“I’ll take ‘em for you,” he offered gallantly.

“Thanks! I didn’t know you were even back?” she said. He’d gone on the STRIKE Alpha mission. Had they gotten back this morning?

“Yeah, we got back yesterday afternoon,” Steve said. Rumlow hadn’t even called her, Darcy realized. Even with this depressing news about STRIKE Charlie. She’d been mopey and sad last night at home, fretting about the whole team, and he was home at the time! If Rumlow cared, wouldn’t he call? Text? Send a damn raven?

“Grrrr,” she accidentally vocalized.


“I think this floor is making me feral, Steve,” she joked. “It’s all the sweaty man smells.” He laughed again. He was smiling at her a lot, she thought. He must be having a good Saturday. He was all lit up and twinkly, like a Christmas tree.

“Well, I’ll take this to Thor, so you can get out of here before you go wild and stuff,” Steve said. He smiled again. “Hey, I heard y’all know a good tiki place?” Darcy gave him the address, told him to try the banana daiquiris, and watched him carry Thor’s big ol’ snack bag away and turn left into the sparring room.

She was so eager to leave that Darcy got lost in the warren of half-darkened twelfth floor corridors and somehow ended up farther into the floor, instead of near the elevator. When she heard the sounds of sparring, Darcy realized she’d just wandered to the hallway parallel to the one where she’d met Steve. She was on the right side of the sparring room. This hallway was even darker and creepier. She was tempted to actually jog away, but then she heard Rumlow’s voice.

“Smith, yield!” he called. She crept to the edge of the darkened doorway and peered in.

The whole STRIKE Alpha team was watching Thor spar with a bloodied and battered Smith in a ring some forty feet away from her. Steve was nowhere to be seen; he must have left already. She could see Thor’s snack bag on a bench near the far wall. Brock climbed into the ring and looked at Smith, shaking his head. Thor had his back to Darcy, but looked relaxed and uninjured. “You’re wearing yourself out, Smitty,” Brock said. “And look at Thor. Not a scratch on him. Did you not pay attention to anything Romanoff said in that seminar on weakness assessment?” Brock asked the other man.

“He was paying attention to her ass!” one of the other Alpha guys called. There was laughter.

“That is going to get you killed one day,” Brock said, shaking his head. “You gotta focus, okay? Look at Thor. Really look at him. What you see, Smitty?”

“A big Asgardian motherfucker,” Smith said, spitting out a little blood on mat. Thor chuckled; a deep rumbling bass.
“Yeah?” Brock asked. “What else?”

“I dunno. I dunno, Boss. What you want me to see? I keep going up against him and it’s like fighting a damn wall. What do you expect me to do?” Smith said.

“Use your head,” Brock said. With a move that startled Darcy for its quickness, he’d yanked Thor off his feet and had planted his foot in Thor’s back, pulling a gun out. He leveled it at Thor’s head and the smile on Thor’s face turned into a oh shit expression. “A man who keeps his hammer in his right hand is gonna favor that side of his body. It’s where his strength is. Strength on one side means relative weakness on the other. It’s your job to learn to notice these things, so you can turn them to your advantage. Why do you think the Widow is virtually unbeatable at half your weight? She fights with her mind and her body, Smitty.” He holstered his weapon, moved his foot, and extended an arm to Thor to get him up. “You, pal,” Brock said to the Asgardian, “should consider some cross-training to improve that left shoulder. You’ve got a little stiffness in addition to the weakness.”

“Old injury from a battle on Vanaheim,” Thor admitted.

“Talk to Cap,” Brock said. “He’s got a parkour guy or some shit, his body balance is perfect. That guy can get you a PT plan.” Brock turned to Smith. “It’s important that you pay attention to Romanoff,” he said seriously. “She’s a good teacher. You could learn a lot from her. Get out of that old macho Army headspace that tells you that a woman can’t teach you, all right? Not many people have the opportunity that we have here, to train with somebody who learned under the old Soviet system. There’s a handful of people in the world, maybe, who know what she knows.” He helped Smith up. “I swear it’s not just because I’m Navy, either,” Brock said. “Romanoff’s taught me a lot.” Brock’s voice was easy-going and non-judgmental; Smith chuckled.

“Yes, sir,” Smith said. Darcy was even more surprised that Smith didn’t sound resentful at all.

“What do we say?” Brock called to the watching group.

“Use your head!” they chorused back.

“Then what?” he asked.

“Shoot ‘em in the head!” one guy said.

“Hey, it works, right?” Brock said to Smith, clapping an arm around the other man’s shoulder. No one noticed Darcy. She crept away quietly, thinking. Brock Rumlow didn’t use his steady, patient teaching voice with her. He didn’t smile that much when she was around or seem that relaxed, either.

Chapter End Notes

Deep Velvet Carnations are *stunning.* Hellllllooooo, someone send me these, please: https://www.fiftyflowers.com/product/deep-velvet-carnation-flowers.htm

Coquette Tropique is real and really fun (and I think sadly discontinued?) and actually on clearance for $18 at Luckyscent. It's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" a bottle for me. I
think it smells like flowers and bubblegum? But very polarizing:

If you don't know Nouvelle Vague yet, OMG, they're awesome!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeX8Ah1eSt8&index=5&list=RDKitcvxK9bzU

Susan Orlean’s "The Lady and the Tigers:"
http://www.susanorlean.com/articles/lady_and_tigers.php
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Stress Baking for One?

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for everyone's awesome comments and feedback!

PS: Your author is in the Carolinas and they are telling us we could lose power for days or (ughhhhh) weeks with ol' Hurricane Flo. So, updates could cease for a bit, but I'll be back! Wish me luck if my power goes out & I'm trying to make coffee with a French press & an electric kettle, like, plugged into a car, LOL. This update = my pre-Hurricane Writing Party!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Darcy was truly sad or depressed, she baked. There was something about assembling flour and sugar and eggs into cake or cookies or something that made her feel comforted and like she had a real life skill. You started with butter, you ended with cream cheese brownies. Good trade, right? She’d baked so much during the winter in Norway (sads from the weather) that Jane had gained ten pounds despite walking everywhere in the snow. When she left the Triskelion on Saturday, she decided it was a baking night. Cookies, she would make cookies. When she got back to the apartment, she’d brought home bags of serious baking supplies: her favorite butter, a florally Tahitian vanilla, bags of the good Trader Joe’s coconut, and chocolate chips, too. She had a few battered cookbooks, including a Martha Stewart one that was all about cookies.

“What are you doing?” Loki asked, picking up a yellow bag. “Chocolate chips?”

“I’m a-bakin,’ my friend,” Darcy told him. “Baking up a storm.”

“What are we making?” he asked.

“Did you want to help?” she said.

“Of course,” Loki said. “I have never done such manual labor. In Asgard, such things were done by kitchen workers.”

“One day, we really need to have a chat about Asgardian labor practices and how your economy works,” Darcy said.

“That sounds terribly boring,” Loki said.

“Tell that to the kitchen workers, my prince,” Darcy teased. “Okay, we’re doing my favorite chocolate chip oatmeal cookies with added pecans and coconut. That’s what the dark chocolate chips are for. Then we’re doing a new recipe I’ve never tried before that I found online, which is...
Fruity Pebbles cookies with marshmallows. Fruity Pebbles is a kid’s cereal.”

“You don’t say,” Loki remarked dryly, looking at the cereal box on the counter.

But he was a very good baking assistant. In no time flat, they had cookies in the oven. And he seemed to have done some sort of magic that meant she never ran out of ingredients, so they were lots of cookies. “What are you doing?” Darcy asked him.

“Thor will like these Fruity Pebbles,” he said. “It is necessary to make them in quantity.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Darcy said. It was really nice to have help and company, too. She laughed at all the faces he made---he really had never actually baked before!--and the way he tentatively poked a chocolate chip oatmeal cookie with his finger when they got the first cookie sheets out of the oven.

“Ow,” he said.

“Don’t try to eat one, you’ll burn your mouth,” she told him. “You’re too cute, by the way.”

“I feel as though you are patronizing me,” he said. “I am not five.”

“But you’re so cute!” she said. “I feel like you’re my adorable extra-tall child and we’re baking together.” He glared.

“I am a prince of Asgard,” he said, a little haughtily.

“Phhft,” she said.

Loki delivered the cookies to Thor. Trays and trays of cookies, by the time they were done. He’d had to magic up a a hotel style food cart to push them to Jane’s apartment.

***

When Steve dropped by the sparring gym on Sunday, he found the STRIKE Alpha guys eating cookies. “What are those?” Steve asked. They were all brightly colored.

“They are a Midgardian delight known as cookies of the Fruity Pebbles!” Thor boomed. “They are made with the cereal of the children! I find them excellent. You should try one, my good captain.”

“Not bad,” Steve admitted. The Fruity Pebbles were almost lemony-sweet and the marshmallows were quite nice. “Where’d you get them from?” he asked. There was a giant pile of cookies on the table.

“My Lightning Sister has been baking! My brother has assisted her as well. It is good to see him taking an interest in such harmless events,” Thor said proudly. “It does my heart good.”

“Loki helped with these?” one of the STRIKE Alpha guys said, scrutinizing a cookie as if it might be poisonous or turn into a snake.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Steve said. Loki would never poison anything Darcy made. Well, not for a
not good reason, Steve thought. He might magic some cookies into something lethal if a firefight broke out or to poison someone who meant her harm.

“They’re bonzer,” Jack Rollins said, having another cookie. “I didn’t know she could bake.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “She’s a good baker. Real talented that way.” He frowned.

“Ah, yes, once she made a magnificent cake flavored with plum wine!” Thor said. “I dream of that cake. It was a cake of almost Asgardian proportions.”

“It was a five-tier cake,” Steve said, still frowning.

“Five tiers, huh?” one of the guys asked.

“With frosting of the buttercream most delicious. Tony of the Starks became afraid that the Lady Pepper had ordered cakes for a ceremony of marriage when he saw it,” Thor said, laughing. “He went quite pale.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve said. “It had a crushed pineapple filling.” He looked over at Rumlow. He was observing two of the Alpha guys running drills in the other part of the room.

“Something wrong, Cap?” Rollins said.

“I dunno,” Steve said. “Any of you talk to Darcy lately?” He knew that Darcy and Rollins got on well.

“Not since we got back, why?” Rumlow said.

“She bakes like this when she’s down,” Steve said.

“Yes,” Thor said, suddenly looking grave. “I had forgotten. Upon the end of her relationship with our friend Ian, she made twelve different kinds of brownies and my Jane was quite vexed at gaining three pounds. I thought they were fetching, however,” he said to Jack, then looked at Steve. “Perhaps my brother’s assistance means that she is not truly upset, despite baking in such generous quantities?”

“Hope so,” Steve said quietly.

Darcy was having a cookie when her doorbell rang on Sunday night. Loki looked up from his armchair. He was reading The Orchid Thief. “Are you expecting someone?” he asked.

“Nope,” she said. When she answered the door, Steve was leaning against the doorframe, looking grave.

“You okay? What’d he do, Darce?” he asked.

“Steve! Whatcha doing here?” she asked. “He who?”

“I saw all them cookies you made for Thor and was worried. Did Rumlow do something to hurt your feelings, honey?” he said.

“Ooooooh,” Darcy said, realization dawning. “It’s more what he hasn’t done,” she said, letting Steve in. “You want a chocolate chip cookie?”
“We saved many of them for ourselves,” Loki said casually, turning a page. “My brother would devour them within the hour.”

“Hey, Loki,” Steve said.

“Good evening,” he said. Darcy pulled out a chair for Steve at the kitchen pass-thru. She had a little bar that barely fit one, but it gave her the opportunity to let Loki read in peace. Plus, Steve looked adorably large and masculine on the little bar stool with his arms resting on her cheery Nassau laminate.

“Coffee?” she said.

“I’d love some,” he said, smiling. “I don’t mean to bust in on you like this, but I wanted to check on you, doll. You’re right, this kitchen’s real nice. You did a good job,” he said to Loki, looking over his shoulder at Loki across the room.

“Thank you,” Loki said. “I hope to master glitter laminates for the bathrooms as soon as we can locate a sample. I cannot get the colors pleasing enough with only online images, they are quite subtle.”

“We’re debating between retro glitter and 1960s mod daisy, actually,” Darcy said. She passed Steve a cup of coffee. He like black coffee. “This is vanilla flavored, though.”

“It’s good,” Steve said. He ate a bite of his cookie. “So…” he said, sighing.

“You’re really worried, aren’t you?” Darcy said. It was sweet. He must have headed over when he saw the cookies; Thor had mentioned taking them to the gym on Sunday.

“Yeah,” he said, almost bashfully.

“He hasn’t done anything, Steve, not really. I’m actually not sure if he’s all that interested? He didn’t call when they got back Friday. We’ve been out a few times and, uh…” Darcy began. Steve sat up a little straighter.

“He hasn’t led you on, has he?” Steve said, looking offended.

“Steve, he hasn’t even kissed me yet!” Darcy said, laughing. She realized that Steve thought Rumlow had pulled a wham, bam, thank you, ma’am on her and disappeared.

“Oh,” Steve said, looking relieved. “Wait, he hasn’t even kissed you yet? You?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Steve?” Darcy said, laughing. He blushed.

“Well, uh, I, uh, just assumed that he would, since you’re so, uh, pretty and so much younger than him,” Steve said, blushing.

“Good save, Steve,” Darcy said, laughing.

“Very artfully done,” Loki commented, not looking up from his book.

“But he hasn’t even kissed you?” Steve said, looking a little stunned. “Him?”

“I know, right? It’s very confusing. He’s sent me flowers a few times, though. He bought me that orchid,” she said, “it smells like coconuts.” Steve leaned through the pass-thru and smelled the orchid on the kitchen counter.
“It really does,” he said. “Huh. That’s a real unique-looking flower.”

“Our first date was really awkward,” Darcy explained. “He took me to this French place called Le Bon Voisin?” Steve whistled.

“I know that place, Darce. A couple of politicians took me there with Fury and Alexander Pierce right after I joined SHIELD. Awful joint. Snails,” he said, shaking his head. “I’d never seen prices like that before. I’d rather grab a hamburger someplace.” Darcy nodded.

“I made him go to a pizza place before they charged us for anything,” she said. Steve laughed. “And he took me to mini golf for our second date,” Darcy said. “I don’t know how he knew I’d like that.”

“Huh. I can’t see him at that French place, but he doesn’t seem like a mini golf person, either?” Steve said, chuckling. There was movement in Darcy’s peripheral vision. Loki had shifted with his book.

“Loki! You sneak! Did you tell him I liked Putt-Putt as a child?” Darcy yelled. “I had a birthday party there once,” she told Steve.

“I may have mentioned it in passing. We happened to be on the same elevator,” Loki admitted.

“You sneaky little bug,” Darcy said, grinning. Steve looked between the both of them, smiling.

“Well, ain’t that something,” Steve said.

“What?” Darcy said.

“Doll, I think Brock Rumlow really likes you,” he said, shaking his head in surprise. “He’s acting like a guy woulda done in my day. Sending nice flowers and not moving things too quick? Overshooting the first date with a place that’s too fancy? Trying to figure out where you’d like to go?”

“You really think so?” Darcy asked.

“Ain’t it something?” Steve said. “He’s the wolfiest wolf of that whole bunch and you’ve got him on tenterhooks.”

“I dunno, Steve,” Darcy said doubtfully. Steve hadn’t seen the ambiguous cards or his diffident behavior on dates.

“This has been my position as well,” Loki dryly. “The captain and I are in perfect agreement.”

“Pffht,” Darcy said. “If he likes me so much, why doesn’t the man call?” She still wondered if he was in it for the bagels.

“I dunno, Darce,” Steve said, grinning, “maybe you got him rattled hanging out with Tulsa and living with Loki and all that?”

“I am a rather dashing figure, I am not?” Loki said. “Perhaps he feels he cannot compete? What a pleasing notion. Thank you, Captain Rogers.”

“You guys are ridiculous. There’s no way he feels like that!” Darcy said. Still, it gave her a tiny flicker of hope.
“What do you think?” she said, as she brought Jane coffee on Monday. She’d laid out all the Rumlow theories and told Jane about how different he seemed with his team than with her.

“I think it’s sweet of Steve to think you’ve got him all dazzled,” Jane said. “And to rush over to check on you.”

“Jane, focus. Steve has Kate,” Darcy told her. “We’re tabling Steve.”

“But Steve may not be with Kate forever?” Jane said hopefully.

“Don’t torture me like that,” Darcy complained. “It’s not fair. I can’t even get the sluttiest manslut in SHIELD to kiss me. What if it’s me, Jane? What if I peaked and nobody told me? Maybe that bar in Norway was my last hurrah of hotness?”

“Not possible,” Jane said. “You’re looking extra cute now that Loki threw out all your ratty t-shirts and made you get that good haircut.”

Darcy had been momentarily buoyed by Steve’s suggestion about Rumlow, but she didn’t hear from him at work on Monday, either. So much for having tamed the wolfiest wolf, she thought, as she left Jane with Thor that evening. They were meeting Steve and Kate at the beer garden. Darcy had begged off, claiming tiredness from her baking binge. At the nearest Metro stop, her train was slightly delayed from departing on time. She offered her seat to an elderly woman and was standing at one of the train windows when an arriving train pulled in across the station. Several of the STRIKE Alpha guys got off, led by Jack, who spotted her and waved. She waved back. Rumlow was the last one off. When he realized it was her, he froze for a second. She gave him a tiny wave as her train pulled away. The last thing she saw was him standing in the station, frowning. Why didn’t he text her or something?

Whatever, she thought. She wasn’t going to chase him and end up as one of those ‘desperate Rumlow girls’ in the SHIELD gossip mill. Nuh-uh. No way, baby.

“What are you doing now?” Loki said to her.

“I’m stress-crafting, sweetie,” she told him. She’d been so bugged by seeing Rumlow giving her frowny face that she’d checked her phone a few times on the train ride home, then stopped at a craft store. Of course, he hadn’t texted her. Why didn’t he text? “I checked with Thor and he still has cookies, so I’m making Jane a present. Oh, ow, shit,” she said.”And I’ve just burned my hand with hot glue,” she muttered.

“I will get ice,” Loki said smoothly. When he returned, she thanked him, took the towel-wrapped ice cubes, and shook her head at her glue gun. “What are you making?” he asked.
“Illusion necklaces,” she said, holding up the monofilament roll. “They were a big trend when I was like, twelve or thirteen? Jane and I were talking about it at work the other day. The idea is that the pendant looks like it’s floating. There were really nice designer ones with real diamonds that I wanted so badly when I was young, but I could only afford one from Claire’s, the girl’s store. And mine eventually broke,” Darcy explained, laughing. “It was such a fad that I don’t think the fancy designer is still in business. Like our generation’s macrame or lava lamps. But I still like it. There was one particular style I wanted. It was like a tiny diamond x or a mini flower, I’m not sure. But I can recreate the plainer ones, sorta.”

“It hangs on this?” Loki asked, holding the roll of thin, clear plastic.

“Yup, it’s basically like an ultra-fine fishing line,” she said. “I decided to make my own, so if it breaks, I will have spent $5, maybe, on supplies and I can make more. Help me decide on one for Jane? I bought some Swarovski crystal pendants, some seed beads, and some fake pearls. Which ones do you think she’d like better?”

“The pearls, perhaps?” he said. He proceeded to study every option. “Ooh, wait, these are sparkly.”

“This is surprisingly difficult,” Loki said, once they were working on securing the clasps for two fine, delicate necklaces. Darcy had decided on a single CZ stone for herself and a triple strand of single pearls for Jane. Loki was getting a single big green pearl, at her insistence. At first, he’d said that he didn’t need one, but she argued with him. He would be included, even if it sat in his drawer unworn later.

“Hot glue is of the devil,” Darcy said, with the confident air of someone who’d survived many hot glue burns. “But there’s no better way to get that clasp closure to secure to the plastic filament.”

“I keep melting my filament,” Loki said, sighing.

“Your glue is set is too high,” she told him. “It just needs to be on the lowest setting, so it’ll be warm enough to be soft. I’ll get you super glue if that doesn’t work.”

“I preferred the cookies, this is frustrating,” he complained, gritting his teeth as his filament knot came loose.

“It sounded really easy online. I watched a Youtube. Did you want to watch the Youtube?” she asked. He shook his head and then promptly scalded his finger.

“For all the Realms!” he yelled. “I loathe this glue gun. Darcy, why do you not call the man yourself before you cause yourself dire injury in an attempt to cope with uncertainty?”

“Maybe this is the wrong craft for us?” Darcy suggested gently. “We could try painting? Or maybe recreating those Starbucks holiday treats you like so much?”

“Yes,” he said. “I do like pumpkin cream cheese muffins. But I think you should call Rumlow. Or go and see him?” Darcy sighed.

“He’s never even mentioned where he lives. He knows all this stuff about me and I know next to nothing about him,” she said.

“That is vexing,” Loki said.
“Hold on, I have an inside man–er, woman,” Darcy said. “I’m texting Jessa in HR.”

“Isn’t that against the rules?” Loki asked, glaring lethally at his hot glue gun.

“Yes,” Darcy said. “High five?” she offered. Loki gave her a gentle high five, then frowned.

“Ow,” he muttered.

“Use your non-burned hand,” Darcy said. “If I crash Rumlow’s house, do I bring booze or food?”

“Food,” Loki averred.

“Why?” Darcy said curiously.

“Can you not tell? The man is constantly a little bit hungry. Always,” he told her. “That is how he stays in such optimal Midgardian condition.”


“For you, yes, I imagine it would be. I think perhaps it is part of his mental framework now,” Loki said. “What will you make him?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Brownies with a pecan-coconut frosting,” she said. “Like German Chocolate topping. I finally get to try the vomit stuff. Do you want to be my taste tester?”

“Pardon me?” he said. “Vomit stuff?”

“It’ll be okay, I promise,” she said. “Voila! Do you think Jane will like her triple necklace?” She held the necklace up. The pearls bounced daintily on their little plastic strands.

“Yes, you have mastered that infernal glue,” he said.

Darcy got to work looking for a brownie recipe that night. She found the perfect one. The next day, Jessa—a gleeful rule breaker like herself, very surprisingly for an HR person—dropped by the lab and handed her a piece of paper. “I wasn’t here,” she said, winking. It had an address on it.

“Thank you, invisible lady,” Darcy said.

“Are you really going to surprise him at home?” Jane said.

“I mean, unless I run into him today?” Darcy said.

“Nope, Thor told me that they’re doing an all-day shooting exercise at the big SHIELD terrain range in the suburbs. He wanted to go along, but Fury said it would just be a waste of ammunition,” Jane said.

“Booo, Nick,” Darcy said. “No funsies. Was Thor sad?”

“Totally. Thank God he had your cookies. I love my necklace, by the way,” Jane said. She’d been wearing it all day.

“Well, like, tell me if it breaks, okay? I worry it might, but I think I could fix it. I am a novice fishing line wrangler. Those things are surprisingly tricky!” Darcy complained. “I have to get Loki some polysporin on the way home.”
“Does that work on Frost Giants?” Jane said quizzically.

“I thought it worked on everybody?” Darcy said.

***

Despite his hot glue injuries, Loki helped her bake that evening. He liked that. They did several pans of brownies (some were surprises for Thor) and a big batch of German chocolate topping stuff. “I was a totally stupid child,” Darcy said, when she’d tried it. “I never tried my Grandma’s coconut cake, either. And now she’s gone and I never will.”

“I am sorry,” Loki said, sounding like he was thinking of Frigga.

“S’okay,” Darcy said. “My grandma was kinda mean, remember?”

“Oh, yes, she elbowed you when you fell asleep during your Midgardian religious services?” he said casually. “And never gave you toys for your Yuletide holiday.”

“And they were three hour Baptist church services. Three hours! Once she pinched my brother so hard, he woke up and yelled, “why are you pinching me?!” and everybody heard him,” Darcy said, snorting. “She refused to buy us anything fun, insisted we get savings bonds. I’m still mad about those. I found out after she died that she’d cashed mine in because she never charged my mom for babysitting. I was going to pay down some of my student loans with that money. My cousins all got theirs, I got zippo,” Darcy said. “I need a mug that says ‘Grandma Gave Me Trust Issues,’ too, but I bet they don’t make those?”

“Here you are,” Loki said, magicking up a tie-dye patterned mug with the phrase in big yellow letters.

“Excellent,” Darcy said. “Ugh, I hope these turn out okay,” she said, studying the cracked-tops of the cooling brownies.

“He will like them,” Loki said.

“Do you know that via Asgardian woo-woo or are you just guessing?” she said.

“It is an educated guess,” Loki said.

“Okey-dokey,” Darcy said.

She took the Metro to Rumlow’s address. He lived in an apartment tower very near the office, actually. That had surprised her. A lot of the longtime SHIELD people lived in houses in the suburbs and commuted. But, she guessed, a STRIKE guy would want to be able to get into work quickly on a frequent basis. She slid in with a woman and a baby in a stroller and took the elevator.

“Those smell great,” the mom said, as they ascended.

“Thanks,” Darcy said. “Wish me luck, I’m surprising a dude, I don’t know if he’ll like them.”

“If he doesn’t want them, we do!” the woman joked, getting off a floor below Rumlow’s floor. Darcy waved goodbye to the baby and took a deep breath. When the elevator dinged and the doors
opened, she stepped out. In her head, she repeated her personal mantra: "You tased Thor, this is no biggie, you tased Thor, this is no biggie."

When she got to the correct door, she knocked. Rap-Rap. No scaredy cat knocks, she thought. Act like you belong here and this is totes fun and okay. At first, she thought he might not be home—-that would really suck--but then she heard the unmistakable sound of voices behind the door. Darcy might listen to Prince and Madonna all day, but her hearing was still solid. Also she was nosy as heck. She recognized his voice—and a woman’s voice. She was trying very hard to keep her face calm when the door opened. “Sweetheart,” he said, “this is a surprise.”

“Good surprise or bad surprise?” Darcy said coolly.

“The best kind of surprise,” he said, but she noticed he didn’t open the door all the way. He was almost blocking her view of the apartment.

“I brought you German Chocolate brownies,” she told him, gesturing with the square foil pan. She’d picked out a cute one with red hearts on the sides. “Does that mean I get to come in?” she asked.

“Oh, wow, baby,” he said. “Those look good. You caught me on my way out, actually. I have an important thing with the team to go to.”

“At eight at night?” Darcy said, not controlling her brain to mouth filter.

“Yeah,” he said. “We’re organizing a fundraiser for the STRIKE Charlie families,” he said. “Hold on.” Then he actually took the brownies and shut the door in her face. Well, Darcy thought, message fucking received. He came back out a few seconds later, jacket in hand. “I’ll walk you out,” he said smoothly. He was too smooth. She knew without a doubt that there was another woman in that apartment.

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” she said coolly. “I can manage the elevator all by my lonesome. I hope you can raise a lot of money. Let me know when I can contribute?”

“Of course,” he said. He looked at her intently. “I wish I wasn’t in the middle of something, sweetheart. I really do.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Darcy said. He was totally screwing someone in there. “You have a productive evening,” she said, with as much slyness as one person could learn from having Loki Odinson as a roommate. It was a lot of subtext. She turned to walk away and took a few steps.

“Darcy, wait a sec,” he called and she almost jumped out of her skin when his arms went around her waist from behind. He pulled her in close and whispered in her ear. “When can I see you? Any other time, I’d be so fucking happy to have you show up, I swear to God. With brownies. Jesus,” he said. She couldn’t see his full expression, but he sounded oddly...delighted? Why was he happy? She swallowed.

“Yeah?” she said archly. “Because this kinda feels like the brush off?”

“No, no, no,” he said, squeezing her a little tighter. He was really strong. She was utterly stunned when he kissed the side of her face softly and practically lifted her off her feet, smooshing her up against him like a doll.

“Are you, like, laughing?” she said. She could feel the chuckles rising in his chest against her back.
“You tracked me down and baked for me,” he said, sounding joyous, as he set her back down.

“I have an inside man at SHIELD who gave me your address,” she told him. They were standing in a hallway and he was, like, still hug-squeezing her from behind? He kissed the side of her face again, this time more enthusiastically. It was strangely playful.

“Don’t go yet,” he said. “Give me a minute,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “You smell nice, baby.”

“Um, it’s Beyond Paradise?” she said.

“Mmm,” he said.

The elevator door open and an older man stepped out. “Hey, Mr. Hoffman,” he said cheerfully.

“Mr. Rumlow,” he said, looking at her as if it was totally bizarre. Which it totally was, let’s be fair, Darcy thought.

“This is Darcy,” he said to the older man.,

“Um, hi,” Darcy said, giving the neighbor a wave. Brock’s arms were around her torso, but she could half-wave her arms. The poor confused guy walked away, eyeing them weirdly. Was Brock making little snuffing noises in her hair now? “Are you like Pugging out in my hair? Because you sound like a Pug, actually,” she said. “Have you been drinking?”

“No, baby,” he said, turning her around. “Totally sober,” he said, putting his hands on her face. “When are you free?”

Once she’d given him a time for a third date, he kissed her in the elevator. With enthusiasm. Lots of it. So much that she found it startling and fun. “The doors are closing,” she said to him, feeling a little dizzy.

“Ughhh,” he groaned, pulling away. He hit the door open button on the panel. “We’re going to revisit this topic on our next date, okay?” he said, grinning. He kissed her one last time and disappeared.

“Who are you?” Darcy said out loud, when the doors had shut and she was alone in the elevator. As she was getting ready to leave the elevator, a pizza guy got on. He had an address written down on top of his pizza box envelope. Brock’s address, she realized. She turned around abruptly and announced, “oh, man! I left my Starbucks cup at my friend’s house! Reusable, you know? So pricey.”

She chatted with the pizza guy on the way up, then got off the elevator first, walked past Rumlow’s apartment and turned down the next hallway. Then she stopped and peered around the corner. Pizza guy was totes stopping at his door. A second later, the door opened and she heard Brock’s voice clearly, calling to someone in the apartment. “Do you have $5 for a tip? This is your pizza. You better not be eating my brownies, Sharon,” he said. “Step away from the brownies!”

Darcy went down a floor via the stairwell after the pizza guy left, then got on the elevator and tried not to cry. She kept trying not to cry all the way home on the train.
Fruity Pebbles cookies are a thing! I have yet to try them, but I want to: http://traceysculinaryadventures.com/2013/09/brown-butter-fruity-pebble-crunch-marshmallow-cookies.html#.UjNfsWTF3nI

Are you old enough to remember the whole illusion necklace trend (like circa 1999? 2000?). It was such a big thing that I got one as a birthday present ’cause my mom thought they were really cool (and people actually asked if I'd pierced my neck somehow, lol). Now I think the guy who made the first trendy/fancy ones, Jeffrey Robert, is no more, but people still make inexpensive versions with CZ/Swarovski and glass pearls on Etsy. You, too, may have nostalgia whenever you look at them.

Darcy's DIY necklace looks like this: https://www.etsy.com/listing/484972998/single-cz-crystal-on-invisible-illusion?ref=related-8

The fancier flower/cross one Darcy wanted in grade or jr. high school: https://poshmark.com/listing/Jeffery-Robert-MicroCord-necklace-5744bcb95c12f8c671003857
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Loki likes Chanel no. 19 and Fu-Ki plum wine.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all y'all's comments and feedback! I've still got power, so updates will hopefully continue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I really, really hate him,” Darcy said. “Damn him and his good mouth.” She was crashed on her couch. Loki was sitting on the floor in front of her, his head leaning back against the side of the couch.

“I do not understand,” Loki said. “Not your hatred, just the general course of events. I thought he was utterly smitten with you. He gives every sign of it. What are we supposed to do now?”

“What do you mean, every sign?” Darcy said.

“You are blind to it, of course. You should rate your own charms more highly, but you do not, for reasons that have always eluded me,” he said. “You are not a secret Jotun. Why should you assume that people don’t want you? Many an uglier person believes themselves to be irresistible to the opposite sex. Fandral, for example. Yet, you are quite attractive for a Midgardian and you have not seriously dated anyone since Ian. Jane and I have often thought you are missing all the male attention directed your way because you are always listening to music…”

“Yeah, yeah, so all men want me, where are they? You’re as bad as Jane. I know who I’m really popular with and it’s a Norwegian lady named Ingrid. I should probably move back to Norway and start dating Ingrids, I might be less confused about their intentions. Ingrid wouldn’t be so damn mysterious. What makes you think Rumlow even cared anyway?”

“He was behaving exactly like a normally indifferent, albeit charming man would behave if he ran into a problem that he could not solve,” Loki said.

“I’m a problem?” Darcy said.

“No, the getting you to like him, that was his problem. I believed I recognized it, because it had something of my feelings for Sif. The inability to access normal methods of charm and discourse, the outright fear that you would rather be anywhere else leading to an emotional and often physical paralysis…”

“What?” Darcy said. “Where are you getting this?”

“Hello, my darling girl, have you overlooked that evening at Le Bon Voisin? When you objected
to the restaurant, his assumption was that you wanted to go home. That it was him that you didn’t want, not the foie gras. He was perhaps befuddled and hurt when you presented him with a coffee gift card without acknowledging his flowers?” Loki said. “He has lingered at the periphery of your life, peering in, and holds himself at a remove, so as not to become too vulnerable. Yet, you tell me he seemed positively buoyant when you showed up to surprise him?”

“Yeah, okay, sure, he seemed happy. But he had Sharon waiting. Whoever that is,” Darcy said.

“A truly unfortunate name, Sharon,” Loki commented. “But how do you think I would feel if I had made tentative overtures to Sif and then she appeared at my chambers by surprise with the Asgardian cake that is my favorite?”

“Giddy with happiness,” Darcy said. “But I assume you would not have Sigga Hulldottir waiting in your rooms?” Sigga Hulldottir had a thing for Loki.

“Perhaps I would have,” he said, shrugging. “Not realizing that Sif really cared.”

“Are you suggesting that I just forget he lied about his supposed whereabouts and I heard him getting pizza for someone else?” Darcy said.

“For you, that is a grievous crime, indeed,” Loki said.

“Shut up,” Darcy said. “What’s your favorite Asgardian cake?”

“Perhaps Sharon is merely a friend? An aunt? Something of that nature?” he offered. “You ought to at least ask?”

“Phhfft,” Darcy said. “Why not introduce me, if she was?”

“I do not know,” he said, sighing. “But it is curious, is it not, that whoever she is, he did not want her stealing your gift of food? According to you, he scolded her like I would scold Thor if he attempted to oafishly eat cake given to me by Sif. Perhaps she is his sister and he finds her an embarrassment?”


“It is not so much Thor that is an embarrassment as it is how people respond to Thor with such appalling glee. Do you know how old he was before he could read?” Loki said. Darcy giggled. They sat in silence for a minute.

“My favorite cake is the plum wine one that you made for Thor,” Loki said suddenly. “He smuggled me in a piece in my cell, in his attempts to persuade me to become your correspondent.”

“Awww,” Darcy said, throwing her arms around his shoulders and sticking her face into his hair. “I love you so much, Loki!”

“How terrifically nauseating and sentimental,” Loki said, patting her arm gently.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, smelling the faint traces of his hair tonic. He’d been magicking, she could tell. His hair smelled like a sample of Chanel no. 19 they’d gotten in the mail: green stems and iris. It was bitterly leafy and sharp at first sniff, but oddly appealing and soft as it developed. How perfect for him, she thought.
When a confused and sad Darcy shuffled into work the next morning, Jane looked up. “Darce,” she said, seeing her expression, “what’s wrong?”

She was explaining it all to Jane in a jumble—the odd joyfulness of his manner when he’d kissed her, her suspicions about someone in the apartment, Mr. Hoffman, Sharon, Loki’s thoughts—when someone knocked on the glass lab door. The delivery guy on the other side of the glass door was holding a bouquet of flowers. Or it wasn’t so much of a bouquet as it was a spray of pink and purple blooms in an interesting little bag. The corner even had a filmy organza bow. “Oh,” Jane said. “I’ll get it.”

“That’s me,” Darcy said nervously. She took them. The bag was its own little handle for all the flowers.

“Darcy Lewis?” the guy said.

“What are they?” Jane asked.

“Roses and orchids and daisies, mostly,” the delivery guy said. There was a note from Rumlow: Looking forward to Friday, sweetheart.

“Ugh, I forgot I still have a date with him, Jane,” Darcy said, once the delivery guy left. “What should I do?”

“Cancel,” Jane said simply. “Or you could go and see if he wants our bagels?” she said, more cannily.

“Do you want me to?” Darcy asked.

“Not if it will upset you,” Jane said.

“I dunno,” Darcy said, sighing. She set the little bag on her desk and crossed her arms, thinking. Half of her wanted to confront him about mystery pizza women, the other half wished they’d never met or something.

“It’s really a shame he’s a creep. Those flowers are beautiful,” Jane said.

“He has great taste in flowers, the asshole,” Darcy said. “Let’s get back to work. I’ve got days to decide, anyway.” Jane went back to her readouts of astrophysical disturbances—she was looking for tell-tale signs of unusual artifacts on Earth using SHIELD’s global monitoring systems, sort of like hella advanced Ghostbusters, Darcy thought—and Darcy got coffee and Pop Tarts for them both.

“Huh,” she heard Jane say later, as she was midway through a blueberry Pop-Tart.

“What?” Darcy asked.

“I’m getting weird atmospheric disturbances in Sokovia?” Jane said. “What could be in Sokovia, I wonder? What even is Sokovia?”

“It’s one of those much-contested ex-Iron Curtain states, Jane,” Darcy explained. “Like the Czech
Republic or Ukraine. Lots of armies in and out over the decades. It’s possible that there’s weird military equipment you’re picking up? I’ll pull up everything in the SHIELD databases about Sokovia for the last six months and then the summary sheets.” There were analysts at SHIELD who created reports to summarize outstanding geopolitical issues for individual countries.

On their own, Darcy and Jane had figured out that experimental military equipment was often buried when armies fell back, because there was no time to move it safely. Decaying weapons and bombs put out energy readings that were superficially similar to the ones Jane got for Chitauri weaponry and other alien tech. In Egypt, Darcy had assumed that their weird initial readings might just be buried WWII-era stuff from battles in North Africa, actually. The alternative theory was the Egyptians had been visited by aliens, which was hilarious. It gave her flashbacks to this show Leonard Nimoy had done for the History Channel about Nostradamus and Bigfoot.

“And people don’t understand why you’re the world’s best assistant,” Jane said, shaking her head. “Idiots.” Jane’s grasp of geopolitics was really shaky--she’d slept through Western Civ as an undergrad because she stayed up all night making homemade astro equipment in her dorm as a nineteen year old--so she depended on Darcy for important historical and political context during their artifact hunt. It meant Darcy had been the one trawling through old microfiche machines or online databases looking for information about Norse mythology that could have actually been Thor et al., or weird stories about lost caches of Cold War-era weapons that could be throwing off their primary source of readings, SHIELD’s massive global satellite system. They’d been speculating about the strange places where they were picking up signals.

Before their return to DC, they’d been getting a lot of energy spikes in eastern Europe. And these were new energy spikes. Still, Darcy thought it was unlikely that Chitauri stuff could be moving through Hungary, of all places; in all likelihood, new construction and development was just unearthing old stuff that was whacking out the satellites. She’d put it in her last report for Fury and requested that SHIELD’s Eastern European field office look into it, though.

“I could go down and talk to David in the archives, too?” Darcy said. SHIELD had their own in-house academic floor of researchers and a full archive staffed by badass librarians, just like the State Department. Also, it would take her mind off Rumlow.

***

Darcy messaged David through the internal message system and he let her know she could show up anytime; they were having a slow week in information science with a lot of the agents off doing training exercises for recertification. Darcy thought it was particularly cruel that this stuff seemed to be scheduled for May or June and November or December, like the object was for the agents to either freeze or sweat to death while they shot at cardboard targets or whatever. She refilled Jane’s coffee and bopped down to Archives to ask him about Sokovia.

David was a glasses and bow-tie guy, which Darcy found sweet; he wasn’t a pretentious one (that was Tucker Carlson), just old-fashioned and a little bit quirky. He was about Darcy’s age, but was a baby genius, like Jane. He’d earned multiple degrees at an absurdly young age and subsequently been recruited into SHIELD’s research and archives division. Darcy had been told by other people that Fury and Coulson wanted him to be the public face of SHIELD’s team of support brainiacs, but he suffered from deep anxiety about public speaking and was happier alone in the archival library.
Which was slightly ironic: he was a rangy six-foot-four and really intimidating-looking. On a scale from herself (0, not intimidating at all) to Jack (10 and scary as hell, when you didn’t know him), David was about a 7. Darcy thought his face was particularly fascinating, however; when he was nervous, he looked mournful and long-faced like a hound, but when he was relaxed, he had the mysterious beauty of a young man in one of those gold-toned Rembrandt portraits. It was a neat trick. Most people never saw it, though. Darcy had met him during their first week in DC giving an in-house talk about archival assets and determined to befriend him. It had taken a few visits to the Archives with coffee before he stopped regarding her with something like woeful alarm.

“Hey, David!” she trilled cheerfully, when she walked into Archives. “Does anyone ever say that to you like Katharine Hepburn in Bringing Up Baby?” she asked. “That stress on the first syllable? I always want to.”

“Darcy,” he said, looking up from his desk in the little office off to the side and smiling slightly. “I can’t say that they do. It’s good to see you. I’ve found some interesting things about Sokovia in the files.”

“Cool,” she said. The Archives still had stacks of physical files and books, in addition to their digital file database. They were progressively digitizing everything, but David knew the files better than anyone. He had one of those eidetic memories.

“Come and look at this,” he said, taking her over to a table where he’d lain out multiple files and some books. “There were reports after WWII that HYDRA might have been using radium experiments in Sokovia to create, uh, a new--” he paused awkwardly.

“More Steves?” Darcy supplied.

“Yes,” he said, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “They were never verified, however. There was a lot of doubt in-house about these reports because the source was supposedly a turncoat HYDRA person and those were unheard of.” Scrawled in the corner of the file was an elegant note in faded red pen. Complete poppycock? I have my doubts this man is actually HYDRA --PC

“Because of the suicide aspect,” she said. HYDRA people were supposed to kill themselves, rather than blab. It was all very mystifying to Darcy that HYDRA had ever been able to recruit a single person. “But who would use radium?” Darcy speculated out loud.

“Hmm? It’s radioactive, isn’t it? I’m not very familiar with that chemical,” David queried, putting his hands behind his back. He had a way of leaning with his height that reminded Darcy a bit of a crane.

“Yes,” she explained, “which they would have known in the 1930s because of the Radium Girls. They used radium in a lot of applications at the turn-of-the-century: decorative things, glow-in-the-dark watch faces, even glowing sodas. But if you absorbed any of it--the female factory workers did--it literally decays your bones from the inside, Dave. There was huge media attention given to these girls who sued because they were told to dampen their brushes with their mouths as they painted watch faces. Some of them sued after they got sick. There’s no cure, even now. You die slowly and painfully. Why would HYDRA even attempt to juice up super soldiers with something that might kill anyone who succeeded? Their super soldiers would start falling apart immediately..”

“It’s possible they thought it was an acceptable loss,” he said. “It was HYDRA?”
“Yeah,” Darcy said. “But if this is the stuff that is triggering our readings flares, we need to get a team on it. You can’t just leave it there, lying around for kids to stumble on. It would be an actual facts horror show.” She shivered; she’d listened to podcasts on the poor Radium Girls.

“If it exists,” David cautioned. He was very cautious where Darcy would jump in. “As it happens, I’m supposed to introduce the head analyst for East European Affairs at a talk this afternoon. He’s talking about SHIELD’s delicate role in countries like Sokovia anyway and it might be of interest to you more generally. Perhaps we could talk to him afterwards?”

“Oh, yeah,” Darcy said. “I would go to that regardless.” She tried to stay on top of whatever was going on in various regions when she and Jane traveled, so she’d know if it was a good thing or a bad thing to flash their SHIELD IDs if they got arrested.


“I so hate doing introductions,” he said mournfully.

“Just look at me,” Darcy said. “Pretend we’re talking. What time is it?”

“Three-thirty,” he said sadly.

“I’ll bring you a cinnamon chai latte,” she told him. “Can I take these?”

“Yes, I’ve already checked them out for your lab,” David said.

“David,” Darcy said, doing her best Kate Hepburn, “you are a magnificent individual and a credit to library science.” He blushed.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

***

Darcy took all her stuff back upstairs and bounced into the lab. Jane was in full Science! Mode. “Janey!” Darcy called, “it might be radium. Freaking radium blooming on our satellite images. Do you remember that podcast I had nightmares about? The ones where my teeth fell out?”

“That’s nice,” Jane said distractedly. Darcy shook her head and giggled. She plopped all the files on her desk and started reading the one about the supposed ex-HYDRA source. When she looked at the marginalia in the file, it suddenly occurred to her that she might be missing a crucial source. Poppycock, she thought. She picked her phone and dialed a desk extension.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve’s voice said, when he picked up on the second ring.

“Stevie! Steverini, this is Darcy. Can you come upstairs and see me now? I’ve got an old file with notes that I think might be Peggy’s and I wondered if you’d recognize her handwriting?” she asked.

“That’s nice,” Jane said distractedly. Darcy shook her head and giggled. She plopped all the files on her desk and started reading the one about the supposed ex-HYDRA source. When she looked at the marginalia in the file, it suddenly occurred to her that she might be missing a crucial source. Poppycock, she thought. She picked her phone and dialed a desk extension.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve’s voice said, when he picked up on the second ring.

“Stevie! Steverini, this is Darcy. Can you come upstairs and see me now? I’ve got an old file with notes that I think might be Peggy’s and I wondered if you’d recognize her handwriting?” she asked.

“Peggy’s?” he said, sounding delighted. She knew he loved finding anything that was Peggy-related; he still visited her in her assisted living facility, even though she was suffering from dementia and sometimes didn’t recognize him. Other times, she was totally lucid and present. Darcy thought that must be really difficult. She imagined that he used SHIELD’s history as a way of filling in the blanks he couldn’t learn from Peggy herself now. It was pretty damn tragic, she
thought. They’d loved each other so much.

“Even if there was another British PC at SHIELD in the 1950s, this is HYDRA-related, so I could use your input anyway,” she told him.

“I’ll be right up,” Steve said.

“It is Peggy’s,” Steve said, when he looked at the file.

“You’re sure?” Darcy said.

“Yes,” he told her. “But she had doubts about this story?” He read the notes and then Darcy told him about Jane’s readings and the talk she was attending. He decided he wanted to go, too. “If there’s even a slight possibility of remnants of HYDRA experiments putting people in danger, we’ve got to fix it,” he said firmly. He looked especially handsome and heroic, she thought.

***

When she and Steve headed down for the East European Affairs talk--Steve politely carried the coffee for her and David, even though he declined any himself--Darcy’s mind was running a mile a minute. What if there was radium in Sokovia? Would Fury send her and Jane? How quickly could they get a team in? Was it more of a UN issue? She entered the briefing room, followed by Steve. When the East European Affairs guy saw Steve with her, he made a beeline over and started chatting energetically. Steve smiled back. Darcy thought they appeared to be having a long talk about something that happened with Natasha in Budapest, so she took David his chai latte. Standing near the lectern at the front, he looked fretful. “You’ll be fine,” Darcy said. “You’re great at this, really.” He was too hard on himself.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling shyly and holding the cup. There was a slight tremor in his hand, she noticed, so she reminded him.

“Just look at me,” she said. “I’ll smile and nod at appropriate intervals.” She did that for Jane, too, whenever she had a big conference paper to give.

“I really appreciate that,” he said, swallowing. His adam’s apple bobbed nervously.

Darcy took a seat near the front. The room started to fill in with various SHIELD staff--she recognized the field agents assigned to Eastern Europe, a few division heads, and many of the technical analysts--while Steve sat to her right and talked to the guy giving the lecture. Steve brought up her and Jane’s work and introduced Darcy as Jane’s partner. “Miss Lewis provides the contextual analysis and research support for Dr. Foster, who does the astrophysics work, when they’re looking for important items for SHIELD,” Steve said. Good ol’ Steve, Darcy thought, making sure to talk her up front of a potentially dismissive new person. It warmed her heart a little bit. Okay, a lot.

“Radium’s a pretty serious concern, if it’s true,” he told her.
“Obviously, we don’t know for sure yet,” Darcy admitted. “It could be some other kind of decaying military equipment or something else putting off energy, but we’ve been noticing an increase in readings in the region, so it’s worth investigating.”

“Yeah,” the East European Affairs guy said, “I was copied on your report from last week, too. It’s not the norm.”

“I hope it’s not something that could cause a public health threat,” Darcy said.

“You and me both,” Steve said.

Darcy felt slightly relieved. East European Affairs guy seemed to be taking this seriously. That was good. Her relief was interrupted when the members of STRIKE Alpha suddenly appeared in the doorway. Brock was leading the group. The tech analysts looked slightly intimidated and a few of them even leaned away a fraction. STRIKE moved towards the part of the room where Darcy was sitting as a unit. What were they doing here? They fanned out and sat in a row behind her and Steve, with Brock going for the seat directly behind Darcy. She felt him gently brush the bottom edge of her hair with one hand as he moved down the row of chairs silently. It was so subtle that nobody else would have noticed. The chair squeaked behind her as he sat down without saying anything. She wasn’t going to look back. Darcy kept her eyes focused on David up front. The poor man’s hands were shaking. She could see his notes fluttering.

Chapter End Notes

If I'm fan casting this story, David would totally be played by Adam Driver in his glasses and suit from Midnight Special: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLuOhjkmUXw

Darcy's flowers from Rumlow are one of these incredible "totes" from Bloom de Fleur. This place makes stunning arrangements. I want them ALLLLLLLL: https://www.bloomdf.com/collections/totes/products/tote-de-rachel?variant=5443954769953

Ooo, ooh, I forgot to include this Missed In History podcast about the Radium Girls. Horrible, but fascinating: https://www.missedinhistory.com/podcasts/the-radium-girls-2.htm
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Pepper Potts could totally pull strings to get you a Vogue spread...

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos!

PS: my power went out at 5am last night, so this will be the last update for a bit, probably (I had this chapter saved already). Currently on my cellphone in a dark house with no A/C, but only minor damage from Flo. Wish me luck that nothing changes & power is restored ASAP!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy kept her eyes glued on a nervous David all through his introduction. Poor David sagged with relief when everyone applauded politely at the end. Darcy made sure her applause sounded enthusiastic. Then she took notes as East European Affairs guy described SHIELD’s geopolitical situation in the region. She most definitely did not think about Brock Rumlow’s mouth or Brock Rumlow’s hands or the fact that he was a few inches from her, probably watching the back of her head. She had not anticipated seeing him today. She’d thought there would be a good twelve to twenty-four hour breather before she’d have to decide whether or not she’d even go on that date on Friday. She inhaled, thinking some sort of yogic breathing would help her chill, only to smell the man’s damn cologne. Arrrrrgh, she thought. Also, what did the back of her head even look like? Was her hair messy? She also pretended not to notice when Steve passed a note to Brock. “Yeah,” she heard him say quietly to Steve, leaning in so that his shoulder brushed hers. She kept her eyes on her notes.

After the talk ended, people got up and exited slowly, some stopping to speak to East European Affairs guy. Steve gestured to Darcy to follow him and carried her coffee up to the front of the room. She got up and went without looking back. “He wants you to show him what he’s looking for, Darce,” Steve explained. “Can you pull up Jane’s readings from here?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “We’ve got them in the SHIELD database. She’s working on them upstairs and I’ll be able to show him exactly what we’re seeing as of a few minutes ago. There’s about a two minute lag time between initial readings and their uploading.”

“Good,” Steve said, nodding. “How’d you get it down to two minutes?” He sounded curious.

“Um, that’s classified,” Darcy said, winking. “We might have installed a backdoor after Jane had a meltdown over SHIELDNotes.” SHIELDNotes was the in-house report filing system; it was notoriously clunky and slow-running and sometimes crashed during peak hours. Jane had no patience for it, especially as they’d bounced around Europe and Asia and she’d had to use it with
Darcy had run straight to Tony for advice on a work-around. Darcy was sure that Fury knew, but was turning a blind eye--pun!--to their shenanigans. Jane had called him, screaming, from an internet cafe in Cambodia and Darcy imagined it had been a memorable conversation. Darcy vividly remembered the tiny scientist screeching, “Listen to me, you motherfucker, I cannot take one more day of this fucking system…” into her cellphone at the time.

“How did you do that?” David asked, looking impressed.

“By methods far, far too unethical for someone of your exemplary character, David,” Darcy said, grinning. David couldn’t lie. The tips of his ears blushed when he tried. It was cute. “Hey,” she asked the archivist, “can you stay and help me summarize the files? I’ve got them half-tagged with notes, but I haven’t finished reading yet.” His memory would be useful.

“Of course, yeah,” David said. He relaxed a little as the room got quieter and quieter. She’d stood so that her back was to STRIKE Alpha. She expected them to mill out with the rest, but they didn’t. Then the door opened and Natasha stepped in, walking gracefully over to her and Steve.

“Rumlow texted me,” she said to Steve and Darcy, then sat down. Steve followed her.

“Are you ready?” East European Affairs guy said to Darcy and David.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “None of you saw this, okay?” There were murmurs of assent from STRIKE Alpha. In her peripheral vision, Darcy saw Jack lean forward curiously.

She went over to the laptop attached to the digital projector at the front of the room and started typing in an URL. When she was done plugging in the encrypted information that activated her Tony-created work around, an image of the Stark Industries Tower and a few bars of specially-chosen music blasted from the speakers in the room. That was Tony’s preferred form of greeting for his favorite people; he changed the song whenever he felt like it, but it was usually a song she liked. He’d data-scraped her iPod when they first met. Today it was Hole’s “Happy Ending Story,” one of Darcy’s angsty teen favorites.

“What is that?” Steve said, baffled at the sound of Courtney Love singing.

“Music,” David said in his low, deep voice. “My sister saw her at Lilith Fair in ‘99.”

“Dave, way to make me die of envy,” Darcy said, grinning at him and giving him a fist bump.

“Okay,” Steve said doubtfully. Darcy heard Nat snicker, but was so not looking at her in the midst of STRIKE Alpha.

“Welcome to the Tony Stark Alternatively Awesome Network,” a smooth British-accented voice said. “Because Your Government Network is an Abomination.”

“Sup, J-man. Tell Tony I said thanks,” she said aloud. JARVIS was activated whenever she ran the work-around; it had been one of Tony’s requests. Darcy half-believed he did want to check in on her and Jane more than he wanted to spy on SHIELD.

“You’re welcome, Miss Lewis,” the AI said. “Is there an emergency of any sort? Sir can be in DC in approximately ten and half minutes to render aid?”

“Nope,” Darcy said. “Everything’s cool. Say hi to Pepper for me.”

“Miss Potts sends her warmest wishes to you, Dr. Foster, HRH Prince Thor, and HRH Prince Loki.
Let me know if you need assistance?” the AI said.

“Will do,” Darcy said politely. She tried not to grin at the last one; Pepper must have talked Tony into adding Loki onto the list of people she could tell JARVIS to greet now. Tony had blacklisted Loki for a bit, but finally come around. JARVIS signed off and there was another bar of “Happy Ending Story.”

“All right,” Darcy said, when the screen resolved itself into Jane’s latest Sokovian readings. It was a map image with an overlay of blue spots. Darcy knew that Jane was okay with her sharing this info; Jane had had a tersely worded email convo with Fury over his refusal to share it with the State Department when they realized they were picking up shit with major diplomatic implications. Jane wanted to share it with the UN, State, and ethical NGOs to do clean-up, but Fury had refused.

“Here are the readings we’re getting. See the blue flares? I know it looks like a weather channel map, but it’s crazy advanced stuff. Jane and Erik Selvig created a program to triangulate SHIELD’s satellites to pick up the same kinds of astrophysical disturbances we found in space when Thor arrived, only smaller. They’re organically generated by alien tech. Essentially, we’re looking for Chitauri artifacts and other, similar items. We’ve found some Asgardian stuff, too. Over the last three months, we’ve noticed a big increase in the number of flares occurring in Sokovia,” Darcy explained.

“So, you think Sokovia could be a site for smuggled Chitauri goods?” Nat asked.

“It’s possible,” Darcy said, “but here is our complication: the program also picks up organic energy from decaying human weapons, like bombs, landmines, biological agents, and secret caches, especially when there are a lot of them. Jane and Erik worked out the technology and my job has been to prescreen sites to eliminate ones that are actually human weapons, not anything SHIELD is interested in.”

“How can you tell the difference?” East European Affairs guy said.

“It’s mostly geopolitical knowledge and process of elimination. I consult with SHIELD’s archives and a source Fury set us up with at Langley, too. Look at this,” Darcy said, zooming out her map and clicking on a particular location in Syria. “That’s probably not Chitauri stuff. It’s a Syrian military base loyal to the Assad government. Odds are, it’s a weapons storage facility of some type. We get the strongest flares from really big bombs and biological agents.”

“Crikey,” Jack Rollins said. “There are a dozen blue flares on that map.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “In all likelihood, that’s where Assad is storing the stuff he’s gotten from the Russians. Before that bombing incident a few months ago, we saw blue flares moving from this area to the impacted rebel villages.” This was why Jane had argued for greater transparency and wanted to give her tech to the UN, but Fury had insisted that as an emerging tech, it stay with SHIELD. He didn’t want their own weapons storage places to be readily known by others, they guessed. It was one of the reasons that Darcy didn’t mind circumventing SHIELD’s network, either; it wasn’t like SHIELD was made up of saints and angels. “We’ve also picked up some increases in weapons storage linked to tensions between North and South Korea,” Darcy said, pausing to scroll her global map.

“Linked to?” Rumlow’s voice said quietly. How was he so legible even when he talked softly, Darcy wondered. Were her ears just attuned to his voice now? She felt hyper-conscious of him.
“Yeah, everybody’s stockpiling and moving stuff towards that area. The North Koreans started massing weapons along the DMZ, then the South Koreans responded, and the Chinese did, too,” Darcy said. “The Japanese have no flares because they’re the only ones prohibited from doing so, basically. Everyone else in the region is stockpiling.”

“Why are the North Koreans flares slightly different-looking from the others?” Smith from Alpha asked.

“Um, that’s difficult to say with absolute certainty, but I would guess that they’ve hidden stuff underground? When we pick up flares from deeper within the ground or in pyramids or caves, they tend to have that thinner shape because the signal is weaker,” Darcy told him. “But the newest stuff I wanted to bring to everybody’s attention today is about what David found in the SHIELD archives relative to HYDRA activities in Sokovia, in case what we’re seeing is old HYDRA materials from WWII being unearthed. We’ll see that on the maps sometimes—equipment that might be dangerous gets revealed by new construction and development. David, can you speak to that?” Darcy said, moving the map back to Sokovia.

“Yeah, of course,” David said, stepping up with his notes. He was more confident with a smaller group, Darcy guessed, but she stayed next to him, anyway. “In 1952, SHIELD got a report from a source in West Berlin who claimed to be an ex-HYDRA operative. The source claimed that HYDRA had secret bases in Sokovia where they were trying to create their own super-soldier serum”—here, he looked at Steve and cringed a little in embarrassment, but Steve was looking at the map—“with radium treatments. The report wasn’t believed to be credible at the time, however, it is significant that the bases he named in 1952 match the locations of Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis’s latest readings.” He continued on, pointing out places and reeling off an entire file’s worth of highly-detailed information. It was super-impressive, Darcy thought. Finally, he looked at her, a slightly panicked look in his eyes now that he was out of memorized stuff. Darcy jumped in.

“Since radium is such a dangerous chemical to be exposed to, it has potential to used as a biochemical weapon as well,” Darcy pointed out. She, Jane, and Steve had discussed how best to ‘sell’ radium clean up to SHIELD as a beneficial activity. That seemed like a motive that would appeal to all the realists within the agency.

East European Affairs guy and Natasha and the STRIKE team asked a few more questions before they wrapped up. At the end, Rumlow came over to Darcy and David. “Is there a way you can give Alpha access to that map on missions?” he said politely. As if she was just another coworker.

“You’d have to ask Tony for permission credentials,” Darcy said. “Or get Steve to do it. Steve?”

“I dunno Darce,” Steve said, “you know how I am with technology. I’d rather have Rumlow run point on that.”

“Okay,” Darcy said. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, Miss Lewis?” the AI said.

“Can you get Tony for me on a non-emergency question?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, miss,” the AI said.

She looked at Rumlow. “He’ll ask you for something, but we’ve checked and there’s no way you’re legally obligated to name your first child Tony. Just agree to it and move on,” she said.

“Excuse me?” Rumlow said.
“Is your first child going to be called Tony?” David asked.

“Possibly,” Darcy admitted. Tony had gotten her some really good concert tickets over the years, so she figured she did owe him. And Tony Lewis wasn’t a terrible name for a baby, either (Darcy had initially imagined little Tony as the accidental offspring of a grappa-fueled fling with a Norwegian ski instructor whose last name she wasn’t certain of).

A second later, Tony Stark’s face appeared on the projector. “Itty Bitty! Capiscle!” he said. “Commie Natasha! My favorite people and some jack-booted SHIELD thugs. Oooh, did you get a cute new intern?”

“Hi, Tony,” Darcy said. “No, that is David. He runs SHIELD’s Archives. How’s your day going?”

“My life is fantastic, as always. Hey, I got us on-set passes to the filming of the Miss Fisher movie. You me, Pep, Jane, Point Break, and Point Break’s greasy-haired brother. You two finally shacked up, huh?” Tony loved Miss Fisher’s Murder Mysteries; he considered Jack and Phryne to be a gender-swapped 1920s version of himself and Pepper. He was the sassy heiress and Pepper was the stern and smoldering cop-type.

“Tony, we’re not shacked up, we’re just roommates,” Darcy said, laughing.

“Sure, sure,” he said. “But you have that thing with princes, Itty Bitty. They love you.”

“A thing with princes?” Jack said from his chair.

“Oh, yeah, she’s like catnip to minor royalty. She had Prince Jean-David of Gottsburg carrying her around like they were on the cover of a romance novel at my Christmas party,” Tony said.

“I tripped and he helped me up,” Darcy said. “It really wasn’t a thing.” Tony scoffed audibly.

“It was the featured image on People.com’s Royals section for a week. Someone made a whole Lifetime movie about it. If you don’t want to go to the Miss Fisher set with Point Break’s brother or Jean-David, you could always go with Prince Christian of San Lorenzo? I saw him in Monaco during the Grand Prix and he asked about you, too. Very interested,” Tony said.

“Who?” Darcy said. “I don’t even remember meeting a Prince Christian.”

“Oh, yeah. You were super drunk. Jarvis, cue up that footage of Itty Bitty and the casino prince at my South of France party,” he said. A grainy image of Darcy sway dancing with a dark-haired guy in a tuxedo laden with medals appeared onscreen.

“Tony, he was like twenty,” Darcy scolded. “I could be his babysitter or something!”

“So? Get your title before he catches too many STIs on the party circuit. It’s a good plan. You could always divorce him later? I’ll get you good enough lawyers to keep a title, a Paris apartment, and some very nice jewelry. You know San Lorenzo royal family owns that casino and the bank on the island, just like the royal family in Monaco owns theirs, right? That’s why Princess Charlene of Monaco gets all the best jewels. It’s Albert’s private money, so he can spend whatever he wants on her, no public outcry. You could have that, plus live on an island, if you married Christian. Pepper is very pro this plan, she thinks she could call in favors and get you a Vogue feature story as soon as the engagement was announced,” Tony said.

“Have you and Pepper seriously discussed this?” Darcy said, surprised that Pepper would even
participate in that.

“Yeah. What?” Tony said. “You’re the only one who doesn’t see it. Ask Jane.”

“Okay, we’re tabling this talk for later, I need you to give this SHIELD commander some credentials so they can use Jane’s map, okay?” Darcy said. “This is Brock Rumlow, he works with Steve.”

“Brock Rumlow?” Tony said. “Are you an actual person or someone Fury had made in the lab?” he said sarcastically. “Knock-off Rock Hudson-slash-Rambo?”

“No, my parents hated me,” Brock said dryly.

“Oooh, he made a joke. I’m impressed. I didn’t think they let agents do that. All right, I’ll clear you for the network, just for that,” Tony said. They exchanged information. Before he signed off, Tony looked back at Darcy. “You’re coming for the holidays, right? Do you want me to invite Prince Christian? Pep sees him sometimes at Cartier.”

“Nooooooo,” Darcy said. “But I’ll definitely be there for the holidays. Will you invite someone called Maurice Roucel to your holiday party for me?”

“Who’s that? Is he somebody with a title?” Tony asked. “A Bourbon or something?”

“No, but Loki and I want to meet him,” Darcy said.

“Why?” Tony said.

“He makes perfume. I’ll explain later. Love you, Tony!” Darcy said. “Oh, wait, invite Dita von Teese, too?”

“Perfume? Okay,” Tony said skeptically. But he brightened at her mention of Dita. “Does Point Break’s brother have a crush?” he asked, eyes gleaming.

“I think they’d make a cute couple,” Darcy said.

“Okay, gotcha. I’ll put JARVIS on it,” Tony said, before saying goodbye and signing off. It was the end of a very weird, very awkward meeting Darcy thought.

“Bye, Darce,” Jack called, as STRIKE Alpha departed. She waved back. Rumlow looked at her, nodded emotionlessly as if they didn’t know each other well, then followed Jack out with the rest of the team.

“Asshat,” Darcy said to herself, once she was alone in lab with Jane again. Her gorgeous flowers seemed especially mocking in their little tote.

“Oh of course, I’d love coffee,” Jane said distractedly.

***
“I would, perhaps, remove the Cheetos dust from your face,” Loki said, strolling into the living room that night. “We shall have company. Or you shall.”

“What?” Darcy said. She was watching an Audrey Hepburn movie and vegging out. It was one of her coping strategies. She’d spent some time reading the archival files, until her brain had started to swim with HYDRA horror stories and she needed Audrey and Fred Astaire to stop feeling nightmarish.

“Someone shall be visiting you shortly. I will be drinking with Thor and the gentlemen of STRIKE Alpha,” Loki said.

“Really?” Darcy said. “Jane is coming?” Jane usually skipped the all-boys nights.

“Yes, they have found a most delightful-sounding theme bar. A whiskey-themed speakeasy hidden behind a restaurant. I must investigate,” he said. “I will surveil it and report back to you.”

“Oh, of course,” Darcy said, grinning. “Surveil away. But why should Jane mind if I have Cheetos on my face?” she asked, as he started to shimmer off. All she got in response was a cryptic laugh. “Phhft,” Darcy said aloud. But she went to the bathroom and got the orange off her chin anyway. She was going back to the couch when the doorbell rang. She walked over and opened the door, expecting to see Jane.

Brock Rumlow was leaning against her door frame. “Hi, sweetheart,” he said. He was holding grocery bags. “I’m here to cook for you. Would you like some Italian tonight?”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Ending Story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXYcXeg1yI

All Princes herein are fictional, but Princess Charlene *does* have the best jewelry because the Grimaldis in Monaco own the casino and receive no taxpayer funding (so she can spend much more $$$ than a comparable British princess). She is more free to have new pieces made specifically for her. I especially love her Ocean-themed tiara that can be worn as a necklace. It’s made of ombre diamonds and sapphires to mimic the colors of waves: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwwFt8PdpSw

A few more examples of her jewelry (just mute the musak), including her stunning Cartier yellow diamond necklace and Graff earrings: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yO_b6TeN0k
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Third dates and other natural disasters

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for your support!

Author's note! I'm not back at full function yet--the hurricane appears to have screwed up/fried the Bluetooth on my computer and I can't fix it--too early to know if it's even fixable, really--but I do have data on my phone, so apologies for any errors in formatting/weirdness. This and subsequent chapters may or may not end up being inspired by me going through multiple days of no power with a leak in the roof and only being able to listen to the fuzzy radio station on a battery-powered alarm clock and writing offline on a tablet with a charge that I hoarded like a troll under a bridge.

We are still under a flood warning and the roads are a total mess, so it's possible my power could go out again. They're telling everyone to stay home and most everywhere is still closed in this part of NC--you've probably seen southeastern NC on the news if you're in the US.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What are you doing here?" Darcy said, shocked.

"World peace?" Brock said dryly. "I'm cooking, baby." He moved casually through the door and carried his bags into her kitchen. "Huh," he said. "This is your magic countertop?" He tapped it curiously. She watched him from the edge of the kitchen as he unpacked. The nerve of the man.

"Yeah. I thought we weren't seeing each other until Friday?" Darcy asked. Her tote of flowers was sitting on the dining table. She'd received several compliments on the Metro ride home.

"Uh-huh," he said. "So, have you had risotto alla Milanese before? I had it once on a job in Rome and modified a recipe for this. It's saffron and onions. I think red onions are better than yellow for flavor." He got one of her pans and turned on the stove.

"You ate this?" Darcy said. He was melting butter to sauté the red onions. He'd set out a hunk of Parmesan on her counter along with the butter. It didn't look like health food. She watched the muscles in his arms move while he swirled the lump of butter. He was wearing short sleeves so she could see his tattoos. The Santa Muerte was above the elbow on his right arm, while the rosary design was above the elbow on the other arm. Why the backs of his arms, she wondered, instead of the sides or something? Wasn't that more typical? She was a little pissed that he was so sexy. She could totally give him the brush off if he was just meh or average or whatever. But no, he had to send pretty flowers and have good arms and that face. Unfair!
“I was undercover as the type of guy who'd eat carbs,” he said dryly. “Sometimes, I make behavioral exceptions for work. You have a corkscrew?”

“Drawer by the stove,” she said. She watched as he uncorked a Sauvignon Blanc and poured two glasses. He must've bought an already chilled bottle; it was dewy with condensation. The color was almost a peridot green.

“Jack recommended this. Tell me what you think,” he said, sliding the glass to her. The wine was really good, Darcy thought. Fruity and crisp. There were notes of peaches.

“Very good,” Darcy said. “Really.”

“I usually drink red, but you mentioned white the other night,” he said casually. She had? Darcy racked her brain. Oh yeah, she'd mentioned it when they had Chinese. Made a joke about being a girly stereotype and liking rose and Australian white wines. He hadn't laughed then, either. “You like your flowers?” he asked, interrupting her train of thought.

“They're beautiful. Even Jane was impressed and she doesn't notice stuff like that so much,” Darcy said. “The tote thing is cute, too.” He nodded. They were both silent for a minute.

“Coconut orchid giving you any trouble?” he asked. The red onions sizzled in the pan.

“Nope,” she said.

“I've got you some orchid food in the bag,” he said quietly.

“Oh, thanks,” Darcy said awkwardly. It was shaping up to be one of their stilted conversation evenings. Again. Darcy was baffled. The weirdly affectionate, happy guy from brownies night was gone and he was back to his previous setting: zero banter guy. She'd never met a man--much less a good-looking, hardcore STRIKE Commander--who didn't want to talk about himself or his interests before. Most guys in his place would have a huge ego and the ability to monologue at other people for hours. They both got quiet. Behind them, TCM was introducing a movie.

“Why are you here?” Darcy said finally, sipping her wine.

“I thought I ought to surprise you. You surprised me,” he said without emotion.

“Yeah,” Darcy said unhappily. That wasn't the answer she really wanted to hear. Damn pretty flowers, she thought, looking at them over her shoulder. They were on her dining table. She watched him stir the rice and the broth and then put in the saffron. It tinted everything soft gold, except for the darkest parts of the purplish onions. “Interesting colors,” she said. Gold risotto flecked with bits of deep purple.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “What's bothering you?”

She looked at him. “Was there a woman in your apartment the other night?” she asked.

He frowned. “There's nobody else I want to date, okay?” He stopped stirring and set his spoon down. He came around to the other side of the kitchen bar where she was and rubbed her shoulders. “Sweetheart,” he said, “talk to me?” That was rich, she thought. He didn't tell her anything. He was lying now. She was staring at his clavicle when he startled her by leaning down and kissing her mouth. She wasn't expecting it and froze slightly. He stopped.

“You okay?” he asked, frowning more deeply.

“Yeah,” she said. “I'm fine.”
“What would make you better than fine?” he asked. He leaned in, kissing her again. He deepened this one, threading his fingers through her hair and half-pulled her off the barstool into his arms.

“The food is going to burn,” she said, trying to make space between them.

“Fuck it,” he muttered. Despite her irritation, she let him keep kissing her for a minute. He was good at it. Then she pulled back a little.

“Do you know that evolutionary theorists think kissing mimics parent-child mouth to mouth feeding?” she said. It was literally the most disturbing kissing factoid she knew and she wanted it to bug him. Just always be there in his psyche when he thought about kissing (Jane had accused her of having an especially devious revenge streak after she'd seen Darcy casually give people “Mambo no. 5” ear worms when they were mean to Jane, usually about Thor).

“Really?” he said, failing to freak out as expected. He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip and gave her a long, inscrutable look. She couldn't maintain eye contact with him without blushing, so she looked down. “I guess I should feed you then,” he said. He went back to the kitchen. Darcy was completely lost. Should she admit to knowing about Sharon? And hold on, was he making a joke about being her Daddy or some shit?

“Is that some sort of dirty joke?” Darcy asked, not engaging her brain to mouth filter.

He chuckled. “No,” he said, but didn't elaborate. “Hey,” he said. “You feel like playing some music? Pick something, sweetheart.”

“Anything?” Darcy said.

“Yeah,” he said, still stirring. Risotto took a lot of stirring, she was realizing. Why didn’t he want to talk? So weird. She played She & Him. “That’s nice,” he said, as “Stars Fell on Alabama” played.

“You think so?” Darcy asked him. “Steve really likes that song. That’s how we met, actually. I have about five different covers and I was playing one of them when he wandered by. We were crashing with Thor at Tony’s. We had a long talk about the merits of Ella Fitzgerald versus Billie Holiday. He was so nice that I didn’t realize he was Captain America until later.” Darcy couldn’t keep a wistful note out of her voice. She’d been dazzled by Steve: the warmth of his smile, his enthusiasm for Ella Fitzgerald, and his easygoing manner, even then. Without knowing he was a national icon, she’d realized he was special.

“Everybody likes Cap,” he said with an odd note in his voice. Was it envy? Or was that just a joke? Eventually, she switched to something else. Melody Gardot singing about being a fool for trusting someone. Subtle it wasn’t, but she didn’t care. “Who’s that?” Brock asked.

“Melody Gardot,” she said.

“Nice,” he said without emotion.

“Mm-hmm,” she said. It was going to be a long evening, she thought. Of course, it occurred her that she didn’t have to try. She could just be as silent and cryptic as he was. So, she didn’t talk. She just played Melody Gardot singing “La Vie en Rose” and watched him work.

The risotto was really good, however. Good enough to make her break her mini-vow of silence as they sat at her dinner table. “You’re a very good cook for someone who says they live on MREs or protein bars,” she told him. It was the first time she’d really spoken in fifteen minutes or so. She’d pretended to be alternately be absorbed in her music choices or his stirring and they’d said a few things back and forth, but nothing significant..
“I know a few things,” he said. They lapsed into one of those weird silences again. This time it lasted for a whole song. She had a lot of silence to think about the particular flavor of saffron. Mentally, she wondered if Loki had ever had it. She could probably thrill him by making saffron rice with some green vegetable. Broccoli? Zucchini? Zucchini would probably be better. It was milder. She plotted out a menu that involved a particular combination of flavors: zucchini to start, saffron risotto, some sort of honey-laced cake? She’d had a honey cake at a Lebanese restaurant once and adored it. What had that been called? Semolina! It had been a semolina cake. She wondered if it was possible to lace everything with saffron? A saffron and honey cake? Saffron and panko breadcrumbs on the zucchini maybe? Over her shoulder, Melody Gardot was singing “Love Me Like A River Does” from her phone speaker. “It’s a nice song,” he said suddenly. “She sings well.”

“Very professionally,” Darcy said, trying not to crack up. This was absurd. He flicked his eyes at her. What was his endgame, she wondered? Did he just want to get her into his bed? If so, he was doing a terrible job. Just awful.

“What do you think about Sokovia?” Darcy asked finally, desperate for any topic that might go somewhere. He frowned.

“I had a discussion with Fury about next steps,” he said coolly. “He knows what I think should happen.”

“What?” she asked. She registered tension in his shoulders.

“I want the STRIKE teams assigned to artifact retrieval. Alpha can handle Sokovia. I don't know what Fury was thinking, sending you and Jane out alone to collect dangerous objects, or potentially be exposed to land mines or experimental weaponry. It's insane. SHIELD has multiple tactical teams better suited to retrieval work,” he said. For him, that was a lot. His tone was so openly scornful that Darcy was thrown.

“Oh, so you don't think the little girls can deal with the very bad stuff?” she said sharply. He sat down his fork roughly.

“No, that's not what I mean at all. You and Jane are too valuable to risk on that side of the equation. He should have had you working on the technical side somewhere safe from the beginning, supported by a full-team and actual fucking security,” he said. “I can't believe he risked you both like that. If you weren't exceptionally lucky in Asgardian friends, I might still be looking for your body in Egypt,” he said, sounding angry.

“You're mad?” Darcy said. It was like opening a floodgate: he gave her an intense look and the words poured out.

“Listen,” he said, “I've got five guys who could replace me in a minute, just as talented as I was when I took over Alpha. Every time we have an opening on my team, I get fifty good applicants--twenty who are exemplary--for one slot. The STRIKE teams are elite, but completely replaceable. We train people for those jobs every year. But they only people on the damn planet who understand and can maintain the technology you're using are you and Jane. You're both too valuable for what he asked you to do and he won't even fucking explain the rationale to me. If it were up to me, I'd be moving you to a secure location now.”

“Why?” she said, puzzled. He was clearly upset with Fury.

“As soon as people find out what you've got, they'll want it,” he said flatly. “So I expect you and
Jane to start getting mysterious job offers or worse soon. Kidnapping is a possibility. Fury has made it clear that he won’t even distribute the tech to other departments, just to lessen the risk to you.”

“You asked him to do that?” she said.

“I asked him to put someone with you during the workday and in the lab and he refused,” Brock said bitterly. “Won’t even tell me why. Jane at least has Thor, but who do you have when you run errands during the day? I’ve got trained agents doing their dumbass yearly seminar while you wander around with a target on your back? Of course I did.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “You think I’m that valuable?”

“You see anybody else doing what you were doing at that presentation? You’re intelligent and talented and exceptionally good at people. Could Jane function with anyone else? Can anyone else keep her alive and support and expand on her work as well as you do?” Brock asked. His tone was pointed. “Anybody else you know capable of getting Loki Odinson—who is not known for his concern for humanity—to make them protective bracelets and somehow being lucky enough to survive a forty-foot drop inside an Egyptian pyramid?,” he said bluntly, “Or getting support from people as disparate as Tony Stark and Phil Coulson? Could Jane do that without you?”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “No, I guess not.” Jane had been pretty anti-Tony at first and only Darcy’s cajoling had coaxed her into building a relationship. But Tony had given them no-strings-attached help with research and travel, just to irritate SHIELD and gradually become a good friend.

“Thanks?” She said. He nodded. He picked up his fork again and went back to eating. A few minutes later he looked up at her.

“You always assume I’m a raging misogynist, you ever notice that?” he asked. “You think I’m a caveman who wants to treat you like the little woman?”

“No, I don’t!” Darcy said defensively, but she felt a pang. Was she being unfair to him? He was a surprisingly un-Neanderthalish STRIKE Alpha leader. She remembered how he’d encouraged Smith to take Natasha seriously as an instructor. “I don’t think you’re a Neanderthal,” she said quietly.

“No, you just think I’ve got women stashed everywhere,” he said wryly.

“I heard you say it,” she said. “You said Sharon.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “I can explain that.”

“Go ahead,” she said. She waved her fork in a game show type gesture and he gave her a flicker of a grin.

“Sharon is a SHIELD agent. She does high-profile undercover work managing our, uh, less-than-compliant assets,” he said.

“What’s that mean?” Darcy asked.

“She observes people who have or would decline SHIELD protection but need it anyway, usually. That’s why I didn’t introduce you. If you ran into her with her assigned individual, it could be very, uh, difficult if you greeted her by name,” he said. “The assets in question doesn’t know her as Sharon, obviously. She needed some friendly, nonjudgmental advice about a tricky work thing. She’s in a difficult situation.”
“What did she do? Shoot somebody or hack a database?” Darcy asked. He laughed.

“What did she do? Shoot somebody or hack a database?” Darcy asked. He laughed.

“Have I told you that--aside from assuming I’m a caveman--I like the way you think?” Brock asked.

“You’re stalling,” she said. He sighed.

“No,” he said. “She didn’t shoot someone. She developed feelings for the person she’s supposed to
be keeping a discreet, non-romantic watch on. They’re dating, only the guy doesn’t know she’s an
agent. Asset is the upstanding, honest type, who’d feel righteously offended at the very idea that
SHIELD was keeping an eye on him, much less that the girl he’s crazy about is an agent. So, she’s
terrified he’ll leave her if she tells him the truth, Fury’s madder than a wet rattlesnake about it--”

“I didn’t shoot someone. She developed feelings for the person she’s supposed to be keeping a discreet, non-romantic watch on. They’re dating, only the guy doesn’t know she’s an agent. Asset is the upstanding, honest type, who’d feel righteously offended at the very idea that SHIELD was keeping an eye on him, much less that the girl he’s crazy about is an agent. So, she’s terrified he’ll leave her if she tells him the truth, Fury’s madder than a wet rattlesnake about it--”

“Fury knows?” Darcy asked. The man Brock was describing reminded her a lot of Bruce Banner,
when she thought about it. Hadn’t Bruce declined protection? She hoped it wasn’t Bruce...

“Yeah,” Brock said. “He knows. It’s complicated. Sharon is sort of an asset of her own. She’s
second-generation SHIELD from a prominent family, so if she’s punished, it’ll get much wider
play in the gossip mill than if he punishes any other agent. Sharon’s afraid she’ll be demoted, she’s
facing a very awkward Thanksgiving with her disappointed parents, and she’s terrified the guy that
she’s in love with is going to hate her.”

“Fury knows?” Darcy asked. The man Brock was describing reminded her a lot of Bruce Banner,
when she thought about it. Hadn’t Bruce declined protection? She hoped it wasn’t Bruce...

“Fury knows?” Darcy asked. The man Brock was describing reminded her a lot of Bruce Banner,
when she thought about it. Hadn’t Bruce declined protection? She hoped it wasn’t Bruce...

“No,” he said. “She didn’t shoot someone. She developed feelings for the person she’s supposed to
be keeping a discreet, non-romantic watch on. They’re dating, only the guy doesn’t know she’s an
agent. Asset is the upstanding, honest type, who’d feel righteously offended at the very idea that
SHIELD was keeping an eye on him, much less that the girl he’s crazy about is an agent. So, she’s
terrified he’ll leave her if she tells him the truth, Fury’s madder than a wet rattlesnake about it--”

“No,” he said. “She didn’t shoot someone. She developed feelings for the person she’s supposed to
be keeping a discreet, non-romantic watch on. They’re dating, only the guy doesn’t know she’s an
agent. Asset is the upstanding, honest type, who’d feel righteously offended at the very idea that
SHIELD was keeping an eye on him, much less that the girl he’s crazy about is an agent. So, she’s
terrified he’ll leave her if she tells him the truth, Fury’s madder than a wet rattlesnake about it--”

“Fury knows?” Darcy asked. The man Brock was describing reminded her a lot of Bruce Banner,
when she thought about it. Hadn’t Bruce declined protection? She hoped it wasn’t Bruce...

“Fury knows?” Darcy asked. The man Brock was describing reminded her a lot of Bruce Banner,
when she thought about it. Hadn’t Bruce declined protection? She hoped it wasn’t Bruce...

“Come clean to the guy first. If he’s okay with it, Fury will let it slide. Her parents might still think
she’s besmirching the family honor, but--”

“Besmirching the family honor?” Darcy asked. “Are they religious conservatives or something?”
Who talked about family honor?

“They’re British,” he said. “And a very big deal in SHIELD’s history, so there is a lot of pressure
on Sharon to live up to her family’s example. Probably too much.”

“They’re British,” he said. “And a very big deal in SHIELD’s history, so there is a lot of pressure
on Sharon to live up to her family’s example. Probably too much.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. Ian’s family had been full of British scientists. They’d engaged in weird,
passive-aggressive dinner conversations over whose research was the most significant. Darcy had
always felt particularly sad for Ian’s sister, who was getting the British equivalent of an early
childhood development degree and was treated as the family disappointment. “It’s not Bruce
Banner, is it?”

“Huh? Brock asked.

“The asset?” Darcy prompted.

“Uh, no, but it’s that kind of a person, yes. Someone who’d have a moral objection to being
misled,” he said quietly.

“Good,” Darcy said.

“Hmm?” He looked curious. “Why do you say that?”

“Because Natasha and Bruce have an ambiguous thing and she might murder your friend for doing
him wrong,” Darcy said. “If she is just your friend.” She said it as archly as possible. She wasn’t
entirely sure if he was still trying to snow her or not.

He sighed. “All right, yes, we dated for a few months two or three years ago, but it was a brief
“thing,” he said. “She wanted to talk to me because she knew I wouldn’t judge her.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “See? So, I was right to be suspicious.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was your ex then?” Darcy said.

“Didn’t seem relevant,” he said dryly.

“No?” Darcy said. “Seems pretty damn relevant to me.”

“You want to argue with me tonight, huh?” Brock said.

“Better than sitting in silence,” she said. He sighed and shook his head.

“You don’t exactly trust me, do you?” Brock asked.

“I don’t know you well,” she said honestly. “You’re not exactly open and transparent, either.”

“Bad habit,” he said. “Before STRIKE, I did undercover work for a long time. I still have some of the old mannerisms.”

“The kind of work that Sharon’s doing, sliding into someone’s life without their knowledge?” she asked.

“Some,” he said cryptically. “Other things, too.” He rubbed his jaw.

“What’s that like?” she asked. “Pretending to be someone else?”

“Stressful mostly,” he said. “It’s difficult to keep both sides--your real life and your fake life--separate in your head. You naturally get bleed over. That’s what Sharon’s going through right now.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I struggled with a different thing,” he said. Then he ate his risotto and lapsed into silence again.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “You can’t just say that and not elaborate! It breaks the storytelling contract. And it’s bad date form,” she said.

“I don’t want to scare you,” he said quietly.

“I tased Thor,” she said. He chuckled and ate a spoonful of food before he spoke again.

“Okay. You know that term shadow self?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “It’s Carl Jung, isn’t it?”

“I dunno, ask your genius archivist friend, he probably knows,” he said. “I got it from my SHIELD therapist. But that’s my undercover challenge. I get too in touch with my shadow self,” he said. “He’s not a nice guy. Which is why I work hard at being a fair STRIKE Commander. I’m trying not to feed that part of myself. He doesn’t need to be stronger.”

“What’s wrong with your shadow self?” she said.

“He’s dark, sweetheart. You’ll never see him, if I can help it,” he said. He wouldn’t elaborate.
“Fine,” Darcy, “be all mysterious. Just because you’re sexy, that doesn’t mean I’m falling for it.”

“You think I’m sexy?” he asked, looking unaccountably pleased.

“Pffht,” she said, “don’t change the subject again.”

“You think I’m sexy,” he said again, smiling.

“Like you don’t know how handsome you are,” Darcy told him. “I’ve seen how often you have your hair cut.”

“I like to keep my fade neat,” he said wryly. He spent the rest of dinner looking almost smug. But the risotto alla Milanese was really good.

“You could at least tell me about your day,” she said.

“I spent some of it with you,” he said. “That was the good part. Then I yelled at Fury, hit some things in the gym, and bought saffron and arborio rice. You know the rest,” he said, shrugging.

“Do you just hate talking about yourself?” Darcy asked. “It’s almost pathological. I’ve never met someone who didn’t like to talk about themselves a little.” He laughed and then shrugged.

“I really don’t think what I do would impress you, sweetheart. You’d see right through me,” he said. “I want to take this slow,” he said when he kissed her goodnight. She bit back a sarcastic response about how he couldn’t take it much slower, considering that he was Mr. Cryptic and Only A Tiny Bit Affectionate. Maybe in four or five months, he’d graduate to actual sharing of information about his day or whatever.

“Uh-huh,” she said.

“Friday,” he said. “If I don’t see you at work tomorrow.” He paused and looked at her illusion necklace. “What’s that?”

“I made it,” she said. “It’s an inexpensive cubic zirconia copy of the nice diamond ones from when I was twelve,” she explained, telling him about how she’d wanted one. He ran his fingers over the fishing line and she shivered slightly. He grinned.

“Sexy, huh?” he said.

“Get out,” she grumbled. He laughed and kissed her forehead.

“Friday,” he said.

She stood in her doorway and watched him walk away, wondering about the whole Sharon thing. She had a nagging feeling he wasn’t ever entirely truthful with her. Being a STRIKE Commander couldn’t be that boring, could it?
The next week or so was fairly uneventful. Brock canceled their Friday dinner with a brief note about being called away and Darcy felt oddly relieved. He’d been a little more honest with her by the end of the evening, she was beginning to realize, but it was hardly the kind of thing she imagined as a real date. Real dates had conversation. She had dinner with Jane, Thor, and Loki on Friday instead. Jane was prepping for a week-long science and tech conference in upstate New York that began on Saturday. Thor was taking her with Mjolnir. Tony had decided to host it and Pepper had thrown it together at the last minute. Still, it would probably be fabulous. Pepper usually insisted that Tony give her a nice budget to compensate for the last minute quality of his announcements.

“I wish you were coming,” Jane said, “so we’d both have Thor for security.” They’d talked about what Brock had told her and to Darcy’s surprise, Jane had decided that he was right about her needing security. She’d marched up to Fury’s office on Thursday with Thor and demanded a security detail for Darcy. Fury had given her the brush off, too. It was weird. Fury had told them to table Sokovia until STRIKE Alpha completed another mission, too. But Darcy had volunteered to pet-sit for one of their SHIELD colleagues and wouldn’t be accompanying Jane for the first time in ages.

“I know! But Loki will be with me,” she said. “And you should go. This is more of a fun jaunt, anyway. Are you going to stay with Tony?” Darcy asked. Tony was renovating a facility upstate and had been eager for them to see it. He kept sending Darcy emails at 3am asking how she felt about the recycled bottle glass countertops that Pepper was interested in. Darcy had voted for the ones with the chunks of blue-green bottles embedded in the base. They reminded her of sea glass. She thought they might be old Coke bottles or maybe wine bottles? Anyway, Ed Begley Jr. had them, Tony had told her in the email.

“Yes, Tony of the Starks has offered us a most luxurious accommodation,” Thor said cheerfully.

“What I want to know,” Loki said in her ear, “is who gave him my phone number? He sent me three messages last night asking if I thought oiled bronze was an attractive faucet finish?”

“That,” Darcy said, “means he likes you and covets your good opinion, my prince. You’ve become a friend of Stark.”

“Oh, how jolly,” Loki said. “I am looking forward to the pet-sitting, however.” Darcy and Loki were pet sitting for Linda from the labs. She had two whippets, Onyx and Anubis. Darcy was super excited about it. She loved dogs. She’d convinced Loki to be okay with after she explained that he would like whippets; they were very stylish and elegant. A friend of hers had had a whippet once.

They saw off Jane and Thor, then Linda brought Onyx and Anubis over that weekend. Onyx was a black and white female, while Anubis was a male. He was mostly white with brindle stripes that reminded Darcy of some exotic stone or mineral. Both of them had almond shaped brown eyes and solemn faces with all the remove and beauty of an old film star. They were the Garbo of dogs. Or the Nefertiti and Ahkenaton of dogs, really. Very glamorous.

“These are not what I expected,” Loki said, as the dogs gazed at him silently from the sofa. Onyx and Anubis were very fond of blankets, Linda had said. They got cold because they were slender and short-haired. Darcy put her softest throws on the furniture and watched as they settled themselves into the centers of the blankets, as if she was naturally their esteemed servant and blanket provider. Anubis--Darcy didn’t know if it was his natural expression or his paler colors--
seemed to be even more removed than Onyx and gave Darcy a look that was half-bored, half-regal. Onyx merely looked compact and elegant, curled into a little ball.

“They’re very you,” she told him. “I don’t even think they bark much. They have these special Martingale collars,” she explained. “Their necks are too long for regular ones and they can get loose, so they need these.” Both of their thick collars had rhinestones.

“I thought all Midgardian dogs were like Thor, loud and bouncy, and overtly affectionate to strangers,” he said. “These are aloof and fastidious-looking creatures. Even their collars are superior to the norm.” He sounded fascinated.

“We have to give them back to Linda,” Darcy said. “But, yeah, they’re sight hounds. They hunt game by watching.” The dogs regarded them calmly.

“Must we?” Loki asked. “I rather like them.”

“You could always get your own,” Darcy said.

“Excellent idea,” he said. “Do they require anything I could provide?”

“I could use a non-carpeted floor,” she said. “Tile, maybe? They’re pad trained, so Linda says they sometimes have accidents.” She thought he might object, but he merely shrugged. She’d already put the pad down in the bathroom. Linda had given her a box of them.

“A small price to pay for such refined companionship,” he said. He magicked her up a beautiful tile floor in an intricate black and white pattern.

“Oooooh, pretty,” Darcy said. It was very Gatsby, that floor.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm,” Loki said. “It is one of your most winning qualities.”

That night, Darcy caught Loki feeding the dogs air-popped popcorn while they watched After The Thin Man. It was very charming. Onyx gazed at him with an expression of delicate sweetness, like a canine ballerina, and ate her popcorn very slowly. Darcy had to stifle a laugh.

***

Darcy had assumed they’d have a quiet weekend with the dogs, but fate had a way of surprising her. On Sunday afternoon, there was a sudden noise in the apartment that made the dogs jump. A golden sheet of paper floated down from an atmospheric disruption in the apartment ceiling. “A note from Asgard,” Loki said mournfully. “My father requests my presence immediately.”

“Uh-oh,” Darcy said, “does it say why?”

“No,” he said, looking slightly nervous. “I am very sorry to leave.”

“It’s okay. Good luck,” Darcy said sincerely. “I hope it’s a good meeting.” She and the dogs watched him go sadly. “Well,” Darcy said to Onyx and Anubis, “it’s just us, kids.” She texted Jane with developments--Tony’s Instagram looked like fun--and cozied up on the couch to watch TCM. In a rare display of affection, Anubis curled next her and draped his elegant head across her lap.

Darcy worked alone in the lab that Monday. Jane was checking readings occasionally and with STRIKE Alpha gone Steve was gone as well, so that meant she was mostly checking sites and straightening up their workspace, then going home to Onyx and Anubis. Linda was gone on a two-
week Alaskan cruise, but Darcy thought spending time with her dogs was probably more fun than snowy mountain sunsets and salmon. Or whatever. Onyx was increasingly sweet and had graced Darcy with a funny trick: when she got excited she raced around the room. Darcy recorded it on her phone for Loki. His cell service was spotty on Asgard, though, and she couldn’t send it yet. She hoped he and his father were getting along. The only dark spot on the horizon was a big, too-early tropical storm that was forecast to dump lots of rain on DC that week. Darcy didn’t think Onyx and Anubis would like that much. They seemed disinclined to enjoy getting wet.

On Tuesday, one of the ladies from accounting, Ashley, stopped her in the elevator as she came back from getting lunch. “Are you going to stay in town?” Ashley asked.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving,” Darcy said. “I’m pet sitting. Isn’t it just a minor tropical storm now?” It had been a weak hurricane when it scraped the barrier islands of North Carolina and headed north a day or so before. May was off-season for storms, so it had snuck up on Darcy.

“Oh,” Ashley said. “Well, get bread and water. Fill up your tub. DC is still weirdly southern in some ways. It tends to shut down in snow and parts of the city are low enough for road flooding. We lose power a fair amount because it’s so swampy here.”

“Oh, okay,” Darcy said. She honestly hadn’t been all that worried. She’d survived a few hurricanes at Culver. But she watched the news on her phone and realized they were forecasting a big power outage, between the heat and the potential flooding. As she was making sure to secure all the lab stuff that afternoon, there was a knock on her glass door. A delivery person was standing there. She opened it.

“Darcy Lewis?” The delivery woman asked.

“That’s me,” Darcy said.

“Here you go,” the woman said, handing her a bag. It wasn’t flowers. Huh, Darcy thought. Must not be from Rumlow. Had Tony sent a gift? It would be like him. When she opened the card, she was surprised to find it was from Brock. He’d included a note:

*I wanted to bring these in person. Oh well. Enjoy your conference, sweetheart.*

Huh, Darcy thought. How had he known about Jane’s conference? Also, he wrote the weirdest notes. Even Jane would laugh at this one. She looked in the bag. Inside was a box of chocolates. Truffles. She grinned. She did like chocolate. That wasn’t so bad. Then she realized there was another, smaller box inside. When she saw the name on the outside of that box, her heart sank a little. Uh-oh. Not good.

On her way home, Darcy got bread, water, and batteries with all the other DC residents. She texted Jane to say they would stay put if it was too tricky to go into work. She also sent her photos of Rumlow’s presents.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Jane! It’s a crisis.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What? Also, please change my display name before Thor sees it.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Brock sent me chocolates.
HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Yay? You love chocolates.

World’s Okayest Assistant: But he also got me this [photo]. It’s one of those terrible brown necklaces we make fun of the ads for. Ahhhhhhhhh! What am I supposed to do? It’s a heart with brown stones. A poo heart.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Oh no. It is a poo heart.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: But it might go okay with your hair?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Jane, are you saying my hair is poo hair?

HRH Queen Jane if Science! And Asgard: The white part is nice?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Ughhhhhhhhh.

Darcy looked at the necklace. It was a rose-gold double heart. One heart was all chocolate stones and the other was all white ones. We’re they actual diamonds? Or did sapphires come in brown? Quartz? It was impossible to tell. The shape of the necklace wasn’t so bad, Darcy thought. She could tolerate it. But why was Mr. Take It Slow buying her jewelry, anyway? Wasn’t that a little much? It was very confusing. It would have occupied most of her thoughts, had her power not flickered and then gone out after she climbed into bed. “Uh-oh,” Darcy said to Anubis and Onyx in the pitch dark. She’d left her flashlight in the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Darcy's necklace (it's not THAT bad, but not her taste) https://www.zales.com/smoky-quartz-labcreated-white-sapphire-ribbon-heart-pendant-sterling-silver-14k-rose-gold-plate/p/V-20041635
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Reading with dogs in the rain.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and support! Y’all are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first, Darcy thought she and the whippets were handling things with aplomb. She put batteries in her alarm clock in the morning and tuned it to a local station. She'd charged her phone the day before, so she had a full battery and a fancy battery powered Stark charger platform from Tony, too. She texted Jane to say Loki was gone, but downplayed the weather stuff. She didn't want Jane to worry. She could ask Tony to get her, but Tony wasn't a dog guy. She looked at Onyx and Anubis. “I'm certainly not leaving you both,” she said. She'd received an email saying SHIELD was closed to nonessential personnel; someone had texted a rumor that Triskelion was running on high tech Chitauri generators. She didn't count as essential, thank God. The radio said the Metro was experiencing flooding at some locations and service delays across the board. She would stay home.

Time moved much, much more slowly without power, though. Darcy was constantly checking her radio, only to discover that it had only been twenty minutes. It felt more like two hours. The worst part was the stuffiness in the apartment. The humidity meant that the tile floor was slick and when she tried cracking a window for some air, rain blew in sideways. “This is a freaking mess,” she said to Anubis and Onyx. Anubis yawned. They were supremely calm, if a bit panty. She made sure they had plenty of water and ate all her remaining chocolate in the sticky gloom. It had started to melt. That was a little sad. The light from the living room windows was greyish and faint, even at noon. She was fretting about how she'd ration out her towels if she wanted to open the windows later. Thank goodness she didn't have much in the fridge. She would probably lose her half and half, she thought. No hot coffee, no half and half. That was distressing. She tried brewing a cup with tap water in her French press. It turned out okay. She could handle this. She would be just fine. She drank a second cup of cold French press coffee and decided to make a list of things for work by flashlight.

By the second full day without power --somewhere near three am--Darcy had a work list, fed Onyx and Anubis, read an entire Agatha Christie (The Moving Finger) by flashlight, and was curled up in her hot, sweaty sheets. Anubis and Onyx were excellent company. Unfortunately, when your power was out, you got drowsy at eight pm and then spent interminable hours lying there, unable to sleep for the heat. The darkness stretched on forever; sunrise was listed as being thirty minutes
or an hour later than usual on her weather app. Was it possible the apartment was getting even more humid? She got up to throw away Anubis and Onyx’s little potty pad in the bathroom because she thought it smelled funky and it was reaching her in the bedroom. On the way, she almost slipped in the dark. “Shit!” Darcy said. Thank goodness she’d put on shoes. Had the dogs peed on the tile floor? She shined her flashlight down at the floor. It was wet everywhere. When she aimed her flashlight up, she realized water was dripping down from the apartment’s tiny storage attic hatch.

**Drip. Drip. Drip.**

“Oh, no,” Darcy said in horror. They’d sprung a leak. She dried up the water as best she could and then put down more towels and containers to catch the drips. A nervous Onyx paced in a line as she cleaned by flashlight. “Oh, it’s okay, sweetie,” Darcy said comfortingly. She need to make sure no fiberglass insulation came down when she opened the hatch tomorrow in the day time. She wasn’t going to open it in the dark and risk falling off a ladder or something. She washed her hands well, splashed her face with cold water, and misted herself with her favorite inexpensive lemony-sweet body spray (Sunshine by Drew Barrymore, oh the irony!) and crawled back into bed. Onyx followed her, seemingly less nervous. Anubis had stolen her pillow. She suspected that he farted on her when she scooted him over gently. It was the funniest thing to happen during the entire storm. She lay there, trying to sleep. From the other room, she could hear the water dripping more loudly as it hit the containers.

**Plonk. Plonk. Plonk.**

That, plus the increase in hot, stuffy moisture was going to drive her crazy, so she turned on her little battery-powered radio. On the radio, the local hosts were getting a bit antsy, too. There was an intense discussion about a favorite local grocery store’s pork products and locally famous football players. At four am, an elderly woman named Eunice from the suburbs called it to say that she’d been woken by someone shining a flashlight in her window, but they’d “hauled ass down the road” when she waved her 22 shotgun at them. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Eunice said, “I didn’t mean to say that on the radio!”

“It’s all right,” the local host said, laughing. “You be careful now, Miss Eunice.” That evolved into a long discussion about the police and DA’s office vowing to prosecute anyone caught looting during the outage.

“They have cleaned out the jail,” the second radio host said. “So, they’ve made room to charge you if you make a mistake. Please don’t loot.”

“It is not worth it, folks,” the other host said. “You don’t need that TV with no power.”

Darcy decided these overnight guys were her favorites--the radio station was rotating two man teams throughout the day and night--when one of them brought up Prince Harry as they went over celebrity birthdays and international news. That evolved into a random, dude-ish discussion of how no one in the Royal family could go to bed before the Queen.
“How do they do that?” one host said to the other. “Is there someone who texts the other royals to tell them it’s safe to go to bed?”

“I dunno, man,” the second host said. Darcy almost got the church giggles. It was such a guy conversation. She was about 99% sure that the factoid he’d misinterpreted had been that no one could leave the holiday celebration before the Queen at Balmoral at Christmas. Not 365 days of the year. She fell asleep as they were arguing again about the grocery store.

Host one was again debating the merits of a Virginia Piggly Wiggly with host two, who was not at all impressed that you could buy a whole hog’s head at the store. “It’s their cute mascot!” he said. “If you want me to like the cute mascot, don’t sell me it’s head. My child would be traumatized if I put that in the cart.”

“You can also buy a whole pig,” host one said.

***

“How do you guys feel about Piggly Wiggly?” Darcy asked Onyx and Anubis when she woke up later. There was dim light coming in through the windows. Onyx looked at her with interest. Anubis sighed. Outside her bedroom, the water dripped into the containers more slowly.

Plunk. Plunk.

The storm appeared to be stalling out and dropping lots of rain over DC. Rain and more rain. It wasn’t safe to go out, the radio said. They reeled off a list of flooded intersections. Some mall, famous for being low lying and flooding during storms, had apparently filled up like a bread bowl. She got up and futzed around, feeding them breakfast, changing their potty pad, and making her cold coffee again. At least she had running water and her Stark charger. She opened the attic hatch, expecting a rush of water and found...nothing but a drip. Still, she put a plastic bin up there to catch water. The winds seemed to have blown water in through the leak willy-nilly, rather than in a straight through-line. She went into the fridge once for half and half. It smelled fine and the container was still cold. She’d risk it, just for a caffeine fix. Then she sent Jane a brief text, so she’d know they were okay and mentioned the roof leak. She asked if Jane wanted her to check their apartment, too. She had a spare key. Jane replied with a string of freaked out emojis.

“I didn’t know that the cop emoji could look so terrified,” Darcy told the dogs.

They gazed at her placidly. They were good dogs. They played with them for a bit, until the slippery floor made her afraid they’d break a bone. They had such tiny, long leg bones, like supermodels or something. Onyx kept bringing back her squeaky for Darcy to shake it, though. Once Darcy had given it a shake and a happy noise, Onyx would take it back and give it a fierce back and forth shake of her own. Darcy was pretty sure that would be the moment when a sighthound’s prey met the bitter end or whatever. With nothing else to do, she sat on the couch with them and read another Agatha Christie. Sleeping Murder.

“I wonder if Gwenda was a common name back then?” Darcy asked Anubis. He yawned casually. They sat quietly together. She read, they dozed, the humidity grew ever more stifling, and the ceiling dripped.
Before it got dark, Darcy went over to Jane and Thor’s down the hall and found their attic hatch similarly sluicing out water, drop by drop. She put containers and towels under it, shook her head at the damp carpet, and liberated their Pop Tarts and Cheez-Its. What was a little light looting amongst friends? Besides, Jane still had strawberry frosted. She loved strawberry frosted.

Darcy was reading by flashlight when a light outside the window caught Anubis’s eye and he stretched his neck out--really, it was like his neck was twice as long suddenly--to focus intently for a moment. His ears went sideways and he looked poised to spring off the sofa. Darcy went and looked out the window. It was a tall military-type SUV driving past the apartment complex. One of those Army-type jeeps, she thought. The city was under curfew and with no power, one set of headlights made a real impression in the dark. Probably someone working in disaster relief, Darcy thought, returning to her sofa. She hoped her soft furniture wouldn’t get damp. She settled back into her book and Miss Marple’s spry observations on village evil.

***

A few minutes later, there was a pounding at her door. “Darcy?” A familiar-sounding voice called. “Sweetheart, are you there?” Brock Rumlow’s voice said from the other side of the door.

“Brock?” she said.

“Are you okay? Open the damn door,” he grumbled. She swung it open. He was standing there, soaking wet.

“What are you doing here?” Darcy said.

“Come on,” he said, “I’m evacuating you to a safe house in the suburbs. Get your stuff together.”

“I can’t leave,” she said. “I’m dog-sitting.”

“What?” he said.

“For Linda. I’ve got Linda’s dogs with me,” she explained. He swung his flashlight into her apartment and Darcy heard Onyx skitter to chase the beam. She liked chasing lights.

“Jesus Christ,” Brock said. “What the hell is that?” He’d found Anubis standing on the arm of the couch.

“Don’t shine your light in Anubis’s eyes,” Darcy scolded. Anubis did one, slightly woeful bark. “Come in, you’re soaked,” she told him. “I still have water, you can rinse off in Loki’s shower. What happened?” His pants were dirty and grimy, she could see now, as she ran her flashlight down his body.

“I liberated a jeep from a semi-flooded auxiliary SHIELD garage,” he said.

“You looted?” she said.

“Technically, I saved an expensive piece of equipment from being totally ruined. Your parking lot is dry,” he said. “It’s safer here. You’re really not going to evacuate with me? It’s tall enough, we can get out.”

“No,” she said firmly. “The radio says the major highways are all flooded. I’m not driving in the damn dark. We could drive straight into a creek, it’s too dangerous. I’m responsible for these dogs
and I’m not risking them, either. You want to try tomorrow in the light, I’m game then. But I’m staying put tonight.”

“Fine,” he said, then he turned on his heel and marched down the hallway. He was actually leaving in a huff? It was incredible. She beamed her flashlight at the back of his retreating head. He was all muddy.

“Goodnight to you, too,” Darcy called after him.

“You think I’m fucking leaving?” he said. “I’m getting my shit out of the jeep,” he grumbled. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He showed back up ten minutes later with a truly crazy number of supplies: SHIELD flashlights, towels, blankets, MREs, clothes, a laptop that had a data package. She thought there might be a pop-up shelter in their somewhere, but he was too irritable for her to joke about it. “You’ve got a roof leak? Of course you have a roof leak,” he said bitterly. “This complex leaks like a pasta strainer and nobody told you.”

“Jane and Thor do, too,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he said coldly. “I talked to Jane. I called her, thinking I would get you, because your phone wasn’t answering.”

“I’m conserving battery power. I have a charger from Tony and it should get me through a few days,” she said.

“If you won’t evacuate with me tomorrow, at least come back to my place? We don’t have power, but it’s dry,” he said.

“Can we bring the dogs?” Darcy asked. He shined his flashlight at them on the couch.

“Those aren’t dogs, those are a living exhibit at Jurassic Park,” he said.

“Hey,” Darcy said. “I love them.”

“Of course she does,” he muttered to himself.

“Well?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, I will sneak your velociraptor dogs into my apartment tomorrow, baby,” he said. “Where can I shower?”

“My tub is filled with emergency water, but Loki’s shower is free,” she said, walking him over to the linen closet. “I sort of hoped this space would be independent of regular Midgardian physics, but no such luck. The power’s out here, too. Bring your towel and clothes.” She opened the door and he followed her, running his flashlight over the supernaturally-expanded space. The walls were vaulted and made of stone, but Loki’s torch lighting had gone out when hers had. The air was similarly stale, but it had an incense scent, like an old church.

“He’s got rooms in your SHIELD linen closet that look like a Scottish castle?” Brock asked, incredulously.

“I think it sort of looks like Harry Potter, but I guess that is Scotland? Wait until you see the bathroom,” Darcy said.
Loki’s bathroom had a huge claw foot tub--Darcy had filled it with emergency water--and a sparkling mosaic shower.

“It’s all gold,” Brock said, shocked. The tiles shimmered in the beam of their flashlights.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “He likes fancy stuff. I’ll leave you to shower.” She turned and realized he was already taking his shirt off. Oh God, she thought. The man was cut and dirty and they were alone in the dark. She reminded her ovaries that he had truly awful taste in jewelry and told them to stay strong. Then she hurried out of there.

Chapter End Notes

I was so afraid I'd hurt somebody's feelings with the poo necklace thing, but it turns out a lot of y'all feel similarly about brown stones

(On the other hand, I love a good wooden mala style necklace or jasper or other stones in earth tones, the style just has to fit)

All that radio stuff? Legit what I was listening to this weekend. Alllllllll I had!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

A Bess thing.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments & kudos! Y'all are the best.

Darcy went back to her own bathroom and sat a flashlight upright on the counter, scrutinizing her appearance in the dim light reflected in the mirror. She looked horrible. The humidity had turned her hair into a triangle of frizz and—despite suffering through her own agonizingly cold dip in Loki’s shower that day—she was shiny faced and faintly grimy-looking. Ugh, she thought. She washed her face, combed her hair, and put on a little of her favorite lipgloss, Smith’s Rosebud Salve. It wouldn’t look so obvious. Also, she put on some deodorant. “Do I stink?” she asked Onyx. The whippet wagged her tail happily. She liked men, Darcy had gathered. She had been giving Brock those same tentative, half-sweet, half-shy faces she made at Loki. “Are you a better flirt than me?” Darcy asked her. “Probably,” Darcy said, answering her own question.

On her way out of the bathroom, Darcy spotted the poo heart sitting on her nightstand. It was sparkly in her flashlight’s beam. Should she wear it? Responding to bad gifts was a subtle thing. You could hurt someone’s feelings if you didn’t respond positively enough, but respond too enthusiastically and they’d buy you a bunch of it. She could end up with the entire poo jewelry collection and then Brock would want her to wear it to SHIELD things and then everyone would tell her jewelry was “so pretty” while they rolled their eyes as soon as she turned her head.

Wait, Darcy thought, why am I acting like we’re really dating? Are we really dating? She honestly didn’t know, but she was pretty sure that no one looted SHIELD jeeps and came to get you in a hurricane out of casual indifference. Darcy put the necklace on with a sigh. It might be better, though, if she reserved her feelings until she was more certain of his.

***

She was sitting on the couch reading by flashlight again when he came out of Loki’s rooms. “Hey,” she said, “feel better?”

“Oh yeah,” he said grumpily, “ice cold showers make me feel fantastic.”

“Well, come sit. I have some food here,” she told him. “It’s pineapple tidbits and mango and peaches slices that were in the freezer, cinnamon bread, nuts, and some soft goat cheese that I stuck in a cooler with ice and the thawing fruit.” Darcy figured he wouldn’t want Cheez-It's and
Pop Tarts. These counted as real food, right? She had also moved some of the LED candles from her bedroom into the living room and replaced their batteries--she’d gotten into a hygge phase in Norway and Jane was too easily distracted for real candles--but she didn’t mention those. That might look, uh, romantic? Was she getting all messed up over him? It was the abs, she thought. Even by flashlight, they were incredible. She let her imagination wander for a second.

“Great, girl brunch food,” he said. “Do I look like I just finished a really tough shopping marathon? Bought a lot of shoes?” He slumped down on the couch next to her with a heavy sigh and ate some peach slices.

Darcy laughed. “I do have wine and amaretto I could add to the fruit, but I thought you'd like to stay sober.”

“Uh-huh,” he said.

“You’re actually weirdly attractive when you’re grumpy,” she said. She could see him in the light from his flashlight. His eyebrows went up.

“What?” he said.

“You’re showing real emotion and stuff,” she said. She put cheese on a little cinnamon bread and gave him half. “I find that appealing,” she told him. He shook his head.

“I’m just really goddamned tired,” he said. “I was in Nigeria the day before yesterday. They flew us back to DC by way of Pennsylvania, so we’d avoid the storm bands, then we came down in a military convoy and I got a few hours sleep at the office. I assumed you were safe at Tony Stark’s,” he grumbled. “But no, you’re here with the world’s two weirdest-looking dogs, putting down Rubbermaid to catch leaks, and don’t want to leave with me?” He ate the bread with a kind of energetic annoyance, as if the bread itself had told him his abs were subpar.

“Just at night,” Darcy said. “Tomorrow, we’ll go, okay? But be nice to Onyx, she’s giving you her flirty face.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, “don’t you need to feed them or something? I can see the bones in her spine and I don’t even know what’s going on with him.” Brock gestured at Anubis, who glared at him from Loki’s favorite chair as if he understood he was being insulted.

“No, I did already today. Breakfast and dinner. Linda assures me they’re supposed to be that thin and they are in peak condition. They lure course at weekends,” she said.

“What?” Brock asked.

“It’s this sport where they chase down fake game. They’re actually area-ranked coursers, according to Linda,” Darcy told him. “They like to go fast,” she cracked, channeling Will Ferrell.

“These are elite dog athletes?” Brock asked. “That one”--he meant Anubis-- “looks like a damn ghost.”

“Shh, he’ll fart on you, he understands language very well,” Darcy said, laughing. “He steals my warm spot in the bed and then revenge-farts on me when I move him.” Brock looked at her and then suddenly frowned. He picked up his flashlight and shined it at her. “Hey, hey, you’re blinding me,” Darcy complained.

“Oh God,” he said, sounding horrified.
“What?” Darcy said. Was he talking about her face?

“That necklace,” he said miserably. “It’s the ugliest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I ordered it without seeing it. I was on the plane to Nigeria. The saleswoman told me it was their most popular design.”

“Oh,” Darcy said, unable to keep the note of relief out of her voice. This wasn’t his taste. “It’s not that bad,” she told him. “I mean, I get that you were going for a chocolate theme and I really do love chocolates, so, uh, A+ for thematic effort?” He groaned.

“Give me that,” he said. “I’m returning it.”

“Don’t feel bad. I like it some,” she said. “It might grow on me! I really loved the actual chocolate. I ate all of it yesterday. It was starting to melt.” He shook his head.

“You’re just being pity nice,” he said. “First, I send you flowers with a fucked-up name, then I get you a coconut orchid when you hate coconut, and now I’ve given you the world’s most hideous jewelry. It’s like I’ve been jinxed.”

“But you sent me all kinds of beautiful flowers. They were all perfect,” she assured him. “Even the carnations. I thought those were just gorgeous.”

“Even the carnations,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said, patting his arm. He looked so bereft that she leaned over and kissed him impulsively. He kissed her back, shifting his body to meet hers. He tasted like peaches and cinnamon bread. It was totes yummy, she thought. She was very into it.

He pulled away. “No, no,” he said firmly.

“What?” Darcy said.

“Not here, not like this,” he said. “I’m not having sex with you for the first time in a leaky, stuffy apartment with no goddamn electricity and an audience of strange dogs. Not the first time.”

“Not fair,” Darcy complained, her hands still around his neck. “That’s meaner than the necklace.”

“Give me that,” he said again. She took it off.

“I have the box, too,” she said. “It’s on my nightstand. But I guess you won’t be sleeping in my bed tonight?”

He laughed bitterly. “Nope,” he said. “I’m sleeping on the couch with the weird dogs.”

“Oh, they sleep with me,” Darcy said with faked innocence. “It’s a really big bed.”

“Are you torturing me now with the knowledge that ghost dog gets to be closer to you?” he asked sarcastically.

“I don’t see why you’re objecting to sleeping with me now, anyway? What, does no electricity ruin the fantasy, too?” she teased. He groaned.

“I’m never going to live that down,” he muttered.

She grinned. “I’ll get you that box, Brock,” she said, standing up.
“Fucking Rogers and his big mouth,” she heard him muttering as she went into the bedroom.

He was working on his SHIELD laptop, when she brought the jewelry box back to him. “C’mere,” he said, indicating the spot next to him. She sat down and he put an arm around her. “I’m checking my email now,” he said. “This thing will hold a charge for three weeks of solid use in the field. Give me a sec.”

“How?” Darcy asked. “I can’t believe your laptop works like that.”

“Fury doesn’t share all his cool toys,” Brock said.

“I could have used that when Jane and I were in a Cambodian Internet cafe,” Darcy said.

“Bet so. Okay,” he said, shifting the laptop over to the coffee table and pulling her towards him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I want you to show me exactly what kinds of jewelry you like,” he said.

“Isn’t this the kind of intimacy that leads to sex? Or dancing?” she asked, curling up against him.

“Eventually,” he said, rubbing her hip. “Just not tonight.”

They ended up sprawled on the couch together, looking at jewelry websites on the laptop. It was strange, Darcy thought. He clicked her through Tiffany’s webpages with a kind of focused energy. “This?” he asked. “This seems very you to me.”

“It’s three-thousand dollars!” Darcy said. It was extraordinarily pretty, though. A vaguely orchid-inspired pendant with diamonds and tanzanite. She was too afraid to say she liked it with him in this mood; he might actually buy it. Still, it made her feel better about his taste. No brown in sight.

“So?” Brock said.

“I mean, I barely wear jewelry anyway. I don't have much. I mostly wear yarn things as accessories,” she said.

“What?” he said. “Yarn things?”

“Like, scarves and hats?” Darcy said. “I got very into confetti yarn last year. I have a big scarf collection. Jewelry-wise, I wear Loki’s bracelet, my DIY illusion necklace, and a few pairs of silver earrings. I like light metals. Silver or white gold. Yellow gold makes me look paler. But you don’t have to buy me jewelry, just because it’s what people do.”

“Jesus,” he muttered. “I'm not buying you yarn as a romantic gift. That's not right.”

“Why isn't it?” she asked.

“Because,” he said. “There are some things that deserve the right kind of attention.” He ran his hand up and down her hip. He'd been doing that for the last thirty minutes. It was very distracting.

“You're weirdly driven,” she said. She should expect it, she guessed. No one became a STRIKE
Commander because they were relaxed and groovy.

“You don’t see anything you like?” he asked.

“It’s too expensive,” she said. “I don’t want you spending crazy amounts of money or anything.” She’d looked up the prices on some of his flowers; he didn’t cheap out on flowers, so he wouldn’t cheap out on jewelry, either.

“Oh, but Prince Caspian can buy you Cartier?” he asked pointedly.

“I own zero Cartier,” she told him, laughing. “And Prince Caspian was from Narnia. Fictional character. Are you really jealous?”

“I just want to get this right,” he said in a low voice in her ear. It was wildly sexy.

“You get flowers right,” she said. “I really love that flower tote.”

“It’s because I have experience with those,” he said. Did he not buy jewelry for girlfriends, she wondered?

“Do you really think I’m a Cartier person?” she asked, puzzled. “Do I seem fancy jewelry-ish?”

“Hmm,” he said, flatly. The hand on her hip traced circles.

“Also, I’m offended you have the willpower not to jump my bones,” she said. “I feel insulted. We’re totally alone in the dark. There’s nothing else to do. Hundreds of people are totally getting some right this second. Is it because my hair is frizzy?”

He laughed. “Show me a piece of jewelry you’d like, sweetheart,” he said. “Just one, to make me happy.”

“Ughhhh, you’re so stubborn,” she told him. “I refuse. I want to see your taste. Pick something out for me that you’ve actually seen. Surprise me.”

“Haven’t we established I do that very badly?” he asked.

“Only over the telephone,” she said. “Telephones and sales associates apparently hate you, but you pick gorgeous flowers.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. Then he sounded happier. “You’re being uncooperative because you want me to sleep with you?” he asked. “I want to buy you expensive jewelry and you wish I was nailing you in this miserable heat instead?” He laughed.

“Not if you laugh at me!” Darcy said. That only made him laugh more. “Fine,” she said, sitting up. “I’m going to bed. Alone. Also,” she said, feeling that strange urge for revenge again--this time on his back account--”please return the terrible brown necklace and buy me something so painfully expensive and stunning that you have to eat ramen for a month and can barely pay your light bill.”

“But what do you want it to look like, baby?” he called, as she stomped into her bedroom. The dogs followed her.

She lay in her faintly sweaty sheets, unable to sleep, so she texted Jane instead. Rumlow had charged her phone with his secret SHIELD tech laptop:
World’s Okayest Assistant: You ratted me out to Brock?! Traitor.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I didn’t want you to be alone. But it’s 3am, Darcy.

World’s Okayest Assistant: He refuses to sleep with me.

World’s Okayest Assistant: But he hates the poo necklace—he needs to stop phone ordering things, apparently—and wants to buy me some absurdly $$$ jewelry?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What? Have we 100% confirmed that he’s straight?

World’s Okayest Assistant: No! (see above)

World’s Okayest Assistant: He does pick out good flowers, too……

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What’s he doing now?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Snoring. He’s snoring on my couch, Jane.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Also, his abs are incredible. I think he has double the number of like, other humans?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I thought you weren’t that impressed?

World’s Okayest Assistant: By his *talking.* Because he didn’t talk to me. Apparently, he broke some of his conversational muscles doing sit-ups. He was funny tonight, though. He thinks the whippets look like dinosaurs?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: They DO.

World’s Okayest Assistant: What should I do?

(5 minutes later)

World’s Okayest Assistant: Did you fall asleep?

World’s Okayest Assistant: You fell asleep. Why can’t I sleep? Everyone is asleep but me.

***

When she woke up the next morning, Brock was gently shaking her. “Get up, sweetheart,” he said. “Time to go.”

“Ughhhhhhhhh,” Darcy groaned.

“Do you want me to pack your stuff?” he asked.
“No, no,” she said, “I’m getting up.” Of course, he came and woke her up again ten minutes later and she shuffled out of bed to find that he’d already packed his own things. He seemed much better rested than she was. When she said something about it, he grinned smugly and asked her if she thought he’d always slept in an air-conditioned place on missions?

Darcy packed everything she thought she might need and he wouldn’t have--her clothes, toiletries, glasses, the dogs’ stuff, even her Pop Tarts--as quickly as possible. She could sense that Brock was ready to bail on her leaky apartment, so it surprised her to find him emptying her water leak containers and putting down fresh towels before they left.

“Put all your stuff by the door,” he said. “I’ll start taking it downstairs.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Thank you.”

“We might get power back sooner at my place, so bring anything you want that needs electricity,“ he said.

“Like what?” she said, puzzled. She was still sleepy.

“Your coffee, movies, whatever,” he said. “Anything you want.”

“Oh,” Darcy said.

“I’ll need to go back into the office, so you’ll be bored,” he said, grabbing the bags with Onyx and Anubis’s potty pads, food, toys, and bowls to take to the jeep. He’d already put their collars on, she noticed. They seemed excited. Had he actually made friends with them while she was asleep?

She was so busy wondering about that as she grabbed a few things--a couple of books, her mini travel sprays of a comforting perfume or two, a bag of her favorite coffee--that it didn’t occur to her until she was waiting for Brock with the dogs that he seemed to think they’d be staying with him for awhile. “You ready?” he said when he came back. She’d put Onyx and Anubis’s leashes on.

“Yup,” she said. “Oh, wait! My orchid,” she said.

“I got it,” he told her. “C’mon.” He held the dog’s leashes and a flashlight for the dark hall--there were no windows--while she locked up.

They made their way down the stairwell very carefully and he led them to the jeep. The back was packed with her belongings. He’d wedged the orchid in between two bags to stabilize it. Brock lifted Onyx and then Anubis gently into the backseat, then boosted Darcy into the passenger side. It was a tall vehicle. In no time at all, they were leaving her apartment behind. Darcy looked over her shoulder at the complex. “It’ll be fine,” he said flatly. “No one is looting your apartment.”

“Oh, wait! My orchid,” she said.

“I got it,” he told her. “C’mon.” He held the dog’s leashes and a flashlight for the dark hall--there were no windows--while she locked up.

“Yeah,” she said. She would miss her perfume collection and her books. But books were heavy, perfume bottles didn’t travel well, and it was rude to wear a bunch of scents in someone else’s house, right? Still, that was her regular activity to alleviate boredom--spritz one perfume spray in elbow, find book, read, sniff, repeat as necessary--so, she would miss it. “Are you sure driving is safe? What about downed power lines?” she asked. It was raining again and the sky was overcast.

“I called into Triskelion and got one of the techs to map me safe routes,” he said. “Our cameras are working. I’ll take you and the dogs upstairs at my place, then come back for your stuff.”

“No, let me help,” she said.
“Nope,” he said flatly. “They’ll be nervous in new place, it’ll be better if you stay with them,” he said, gesturing to the dogs. Onyx was trembling slightly and Anubis had his front feet on the backseat armrest and was peering around. Darcy hadn’t had anything to buckle them in with, which bugged her.

“Okay,” Darcy said reluctantly.

“Did I mention it’s four flights of stairs?” he said wryly. “Unless you’d like to try a safe house?”

“Won’t that put you farther out from work?” she asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Technically, yes, but it’s up to you.”

“No, let’s stay with your place, commutes are stressful,” she said.

“All right,” he said.

“How is your garage not flooded?” Darcy asked, as they pulled in past the gate.

“State secret,” he said cheerfully. “A Bess thing.”

“A what thing?” she asked curiously.

“Bess Schumacher. She is my eighty-two year old neighbor,” he explained. “Her continued tenancy in the apartment complex means that all the residents get certain perks, like solid anti-flood maintenance in the garage and priority on the power restoration lists.”

“Why?” Darcy said.

“Bess Schumacher is the aunt of Congressman Alvin Schumacher,” he said, pulling into the parking space marked with his number.

“The Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee?” Darcy said. “I saw him on TV the other day.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Bess is pretty frail and on oxygen, so she does legitimately deserve to be on the priority restoration lists with other eighty year olds, but it’s a nice perk for the rest of us that whenever Schumacher yells at the building manager, people sit up and take notice. She’s lived here for thirty years and refuses to go to an assisted living, bless her.”

“Oh my God,” Darcy said, as he got out of the jeep and came around to help her get down.

“What?” he said.

“You people are going to prop that woman up like Weekend at Bernie’s if she dies, aren’t you?” Darcy said in a whisper, as he set her on her feet. Then he got Onyx down, handed her leash to Darcy and coaxed Anubis over and did the same. He grabbed the dog bags.

“I love the way you think, sweetheart,” he said, chuckling. He locked the jeep and led them to the stairwell. Darcy was slightly nervous.

“What if we get caught with the dogs?” she said.

“Eh, I’m intimidating,” he said casually. They climbed upstairs in the dark. When they got to his
floor, Darcy felt a weird nervousness. She kept turning her head when they reached his door, waiting for someone to pop out and declare the dogs verboten. “Here you go,” he said, opening the door. She took the dogs in first and he followed.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Somebody requested music in the comments, so I feel obligated to tell you that the soundtrack to this chapter is Pink Martini and the Von Trapp Family's covers of "Le Premier Bonheur du Jour" and "Dream A Little Dream of Me"

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and support!

Darcy didn’t know what she’d expected in Brock’s apartment. The typical single guy combo of black leather sofas, dirty sneakers, and a big flatscreen, maybe? He’d chosen tobacco brown leather for his furniture, not black, but there was a big TV. The real surprise was how clean and tidy and neutral everything was. Not a speck of dirt or clutter, no piles of paperwork or books. The wood floors practically gleamed under her flashlight. She felt a frisson of embarrassment over her own poor housekeeping skills. “Wow,” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re clean,” she said. He chuckled.

“I’ll make the first run downstairs for your stuff. If we get lucky, the power will be on soon. I’ve got the fridge running on a SHIELD battery, so it’s okay, but I’m keeping it closed anyway, in case the battery dies. Bathroom and bedroom’s on the right,” he said, before he left again. Darcy got the dogs’ stuff unpacked and went to the bathroom he’d mentioned. As she scanned with her flashlight, she realized it was his bedroom and bathroom. Everything was so organized. Minimalist. Half-curiously, she peeked into his bathroom cabinets. Rows of folded towels and washcloths. Toothpaste. Extra soap. A few hair products. A rounded bottle of Guerlain fragrance. Wasn’t Samsara a woman’s perfume? Was this Sharon’s or some other woman’s, she wondered, feeling a flare of suspicion. She sniffed the sprayer.

“Mmmm,” Darcy said, inhaling deeply. Sandalwood. This was his cologne. Brock Rumlow smelled so damn good because he wore something originally marketed to women, not men. Was that a clever seduction technique--appeal to women by wearing something designed to appeal to women--or just a personal preference? She guessed that was why he never smelled aggressively masculine; she and Loki had discovered that lots of men’s colognes radiated like Chernobyl and were lethally pungent and metallic. This was creamy-smooth wood and waxy jasmine sweetness, like a wooden sculpture rubbed with flowers. “Who would have thought Brock Rumlow wears freaking Samsara?” Darcy said to Onyx. She had followed Darcy into the bathroom. Onyx wagged her tail happily. Darcy stopped snooping when she heard the apartment door opening again. “Be cool,” she told Onyx, before walking back out into the living room. Very casually.
“Let me help you with those,” she said, feeling guilty as he lugged in her bags and carried a flashlight. She’d been sneaking around his darkened apartment.


“Sure,” he said. “I’m giving you the bedroom.” He carried her things into his bedroom.

“Wait,” she said, “I can totally sleep on the couch.”

“Nope,” he said casually. “Besides, I’m going to be gone a lot.”

“You are?” Darcy said, as he returned to the living room.

“Did you think I was nonessential personnel?” he said dryly. “I had to bribe Sitwell with Nationals tickets so he would cover for me with Pierce last night.”

“Oh, no,” Darcy said, “I’m sorry. You like baseball?”

“No,” he said. “They weren’t my tickets, sweetheart. I don’t have the attention span for baseball. I’ve tried. It bores me.”

“I’ll pay you back for them, I swear,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I’m going to get your orchid and then I have to go in. Be right back.”

He brought the coconut orchid back, set it on the kitchen counter, gave her a brief kiss, and turned to leave. “Oh,” he said. “Spare keys are next to the coffee pot, if anything happens. House key and car key, if you have to leave once the water’s receded. My car is downstairs, too.”

“How did you get to the SHIELD garage?” Darcy said, confused. If he’d ‘liberated’ the jeep, how had he gotten there? On foot? He laughed at her expression.

“Jack dropped me off,” he said.

“You made him an accessory to Grand Theft Army jeep?” Darcy asked.

“Sure,” Brock said. “All in good fun, sweetheart. It’s not the worst thing we’ve done together. I hope all that mud didn’t fuck up the upholstery in his new SUV.”


“You’ll get over it. I might be back tonight. It depends. Use that extra SHIELD charger on my nightstand. I’ll call you either way. Leave your phone on,” he said. “I don’t like being ignored when I call you.” He said it in an almost playful voice.

“Wait,” Darcy said, suddenly feeling like she owed him a hug. He must still be tired, even though he hid it well. She crossed the room and wrapped her arms around his waist. “I really, like, appreciate you checking on me and taking us in everything. And I’m sorry about the necklace.” She rubbed his back and leaned into him.

“Sweetheart, we never mention that necklace, okay?” he said. “It never happened.”
“Okay,” Darcy said, laughing. She didn’t let him go for a second and he sighed. It sounded like a happy sigh. Which was weird. How could a sigh be happy?

“You gotta let me go,” he said finally. His voice was quiet. He kissed her forehead gently.

***

Once he was gone, she resumed snooping. If he was going to leave her here, she wanted to know more about him. What better way than to study his bookshelf, she thought, looking at the one in the living room. He seemed to have a lot of sports books. Darcy leaned in closer to read the titles, frowning as she scanned titles and subtitles. There were a handful of SHIELD procedural manuals, a couple of airport paperback thrillers, and lots of sports books. “Oh em gee,” she said out loud to Onyx and Anubis. She realized all his sports books were actually about various forms of fighting: mixed martial arts, krav maga, and Thai boxing. There was even a book about capoeira. “Nothing about golf or yoga or anything where you don’t hit the other guy?” she said out loud. “I mean, at least capoeira is graceful and has music, but really?” Anubis yawned and put his head on the couch arm. He’d claimed half the couch already. His bored expression seemed to suggest the whippet was thinking something like, ‘well, what did you expect, Darcy Lewis?’

“Is he always like this?” Darcy asked Onyx jokingly. Then she looked in all the kitchen cabinets.

A search of the kitchen convinced her that he probably wanted to hit people a lot because he was hangry. She thought he’d possibly moved into some really advanced, end stage of hangry that required him to hit people creatively. Everything he ate was healthy. There were dried legumes and several kinds of protein powder, but no junk food. Zero white flour or sugar. “Did y’all know protein powders can be made from freaking algae?” Darcy asked the dogs, shuddering as she read the fine print on a container of spirulina by flashlight. She did find a barely-touched bottle of agave syrup and some freaking quinoa, though. “I’m gonna cry,” she told Onyx, “if the power comes back on and I have to eat quinoa cold and pretend everything’s okay.” She’d had a traumatizing experience in a fancy restaurant with Tony and the Avengers crew when the waiter had recommended quinoa and she’d fallen for it. Darcy hadn’t realized that it wasn’t served warm, like brown rice. But Brock didn’t even have brown rice. That wasn’t healthy enough. “Operator, get me Jesus,” Darcy muttered to herself, when she found another bag of dried legumes and a container of low-sodium nuts. “Low sodium nuts have no taste,” she told Onyx. “None! Is that how health fanatics stop themselves from eating too much?” Onyx stood on her back legs and sniffed delicately at the bag of legumes. Darcy was tempted to open the fridge, but she bet there was a ton of meat in there. Had to be. “Skinless, boneless chicken breast, eggs, and expensive grass fed beef, I’ll be you five treats, kiddos,” she told the dogs. “We’ll settle up when the power comes back on.”

More strikingly, she realized that Brock had somehow picked a bunch of brown and beige furniture that expressed nothing about who he was—there were no personal photos or weird items—but made the place feel oddly calm and streamlined. With her orchid on the dining table, it looked a bit like a furniture showroom, but more masculine. What was it the Fields guy at work had said, that Brock was more “SHIELD implement than person”? It made perfect sense to her now. This was the space where you went to rest without thinking too much or being reminded of anything in particular. Maybe you read your krav maga books or your procedural work stuff, but you didn’t keep stuff from your childhood out to look at or let things get too disorganized because that might pull you
out of work mode? How sad, Darcy thought, comparing it to her brightly colored kitchen and mismatched furniture. Everything in her life was a jumble, but the jumble had memories in it. Her work life and her personal life were all enmeshed, but it wasn’t like this. More worryingly, it occurred to her as she sat on his couch that she might be a distraction for him. He pared down his life so much, just to keep himself focused and fit, obviously. No one wanted to eat that much protein powder for fun. He was goal-oriented. She was half-thinking about it when Jane texted her.

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Everything okay?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Yup. Settled in at Brock’s.

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What’s it like?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Very minimalist. He has FIVE kinds of protein powder.

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: That seems...right?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Do you know about spirulina? I am traumatized.

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Hahaha. I’ve eaten that.

World’s Okayest Assistant: When?!

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I was vegan for a while in middle school, but my parents staged an intervention when I protested family holiday dinners.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Really?

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: My protest signs probably went too far.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Jane, did baby you chant “meat is murder” and march around the dinner table?

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Worse. I staged a kitchen raid and ruined the turkey.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Do you think I’m maybe too much of a distraction for Brock? Like, maybe, I’m not right for him?

Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What makes you think that?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Just a feeling….

***

“You’re late, boss,” Smith said to Rumlow when he buzzed him into the bank.

“How’s it going?” Rumlow said.

“Looks like we’re might to need to move him,” Smith said, “we’ve got water seeping into the vaults. It hasn’t reached any higher than the Asset’s calves yet, but they already disassembled the
chair last night and moved it upstairs, just like you said.” He handed Rumlow a pair of waders.

“Pierce wants the Asset protected from electrocution and drowning, so we’ll get it done,” Rumlow said. “What’s his mood like?” Rumlow asked.

“Dunno,” Smith said, shrugging. “You’re better at reading him than me. Rollins said the scientists gave him more treatments last night before they’d decided to move the chair.”


“Rollins,” Smith said.

“Good,” Rumlow said. “Never let Sitwell supervise. He gets them to over juice.” Smith looked at him skeptically.

“You sure that’s not a misplaced impulse of humanity, boss?” Smith asked.

“It’s not about fairness, Smitty. One day, we’ll need that chair to work. Really work. If he builds up a tolerance, it’ll make our jobs more difficult later. It’s smarter to get him to work with us without it,” Rumlow said, using his teaching voice.

“If you say so,” Smith said doubtfully.

“How many we got?” Rumlow asked.

“You, me, Rollins, Sitwell, and the science crew upstairs,” Smith said. He swallowed. “All missions are suspended because of flight conditions, so that’s everybody who can plausibly be gone at the same time without Fury noticing. You think we can do it?”

“Yeah,” Rumlow said. “We’ll be fine, Smitty. You just keep your eyes on him. I’ve got an idea.” He put the waders on.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it?” Sitwell said, when Rumlow found him sitting in the antechamber, having lunch. He had his wader clad feet propped on the desk so he wouldn’t get them more wet. The water in the room was calf-deep.

“Yeah?” Rumlow said neutrally. His gaze was focused on the room beyond, over Sitwell’s shoulder.

“Pierce didn’t want him electrocuted down here,” Sitwell said. “Electrocuted,” he said, chuckling. “Like he can’t take a little shock.”

“You shouldn’t have your back to him,” Rumlow said. “It’s a security risk.”

“Aww, I’m touched you care,” Sitwell said. “He likes me, he really likes me.”

“Maybe I don’t want to swim in your brain matter, Jasper,” Rumlow said dryly. “What there’d be of it.”

“Hey, you get those tickets yet? You get anything last night?” Sitwell called jokingly over his shoulder as Rumlow walked away. The water sloshed with his movements, creating a current.

“What do you mean?” Smith said to Sitwell.

“He’s getting me Nationals tickets,” Sitwell said. “For covering while he spent last night evacuating Darcy Lewis out of town instead of being down here. Lucky sonofabitch.”
“What do you want to do about the water, mate?” Jack asked, when Rumlow joined him inside the vault.

“We’ll float the cage,” Rumlow said. He handed Jack his bag and retrieved a few items: chains and underwater lift bags. “I’ll secure the gear by myself. Stay back in case anything goes sideways.”

The man in the metal cage looked at him with surprisingly blank blue-grey eyes as Rumlow moved closer slowly. Then Rumlow spoke to him in Russian. “Yasha,” he said, “we are moving you now. It will be dry. Understand?”

“Da,” a quiet voice said, as if from far away, and the man nodded blankly.

“Stay seated,” Rumlow told him in Russian. He nodded again. Several feet away, Rollins and Smith had drawn their guns and were poised to shoot if necessary. Rumlow knelt and secured the inflatables to the bottom edge of the cage. There were four of them. He alternated sides, so the cage wouldn’t tilt too much and cause the man inside to panic. Pierce had schooled all of them in the minute details of keeping the Asset calm when he was out.

“I wish it was still in the deep freeze,” Smith said to Rollins, as they watched Rumlow secure chains to the cage carefully. Even as he spoke, Smith’s gaze didn’t stray. “There ain’t nothing it can do that we can’t do ourselves, except shoot that fucking arm, and I don’t see how that’s worth us getting killed trying to do routine shit like move it. We don’t kill each other. That thing’s too goddamned dangerous. It’s like a fighting dog that’s too far fucking gone.”

“Quiet,” Rumlow said in English over his shoulder. “He understands English.” He secured the last chain and retreated back to the other men.

“How’d you figure it, mate?” Rollins asked. They’d barely heard the Asset speak at all.

“I played the radio,” Rumlow said flatly. “Now we start pulling the cage. Keep a six-foot distance. Rollins, you’re the best shot, so Smitty and I will do the labor while you keep lookout.”

“Yeah,” Rollins said quietly. “What about the doorway? It’ll be tight. You might have to shift the cage by hand.”

“It’ll be fine,” Rumlow said.

They started yanking the cage forward slowly. “Easy, easy,” Rumlow said to Smith. “We don’t want it to tip.” He moved the cage forward another few feet. The man inside stayed seated, but moved his hands nervously. Rumlow spoke to him in Russian. “Yasha, breathe,” he said quietly.

“Da,” the man said back, so softly that Smith barely heard it. They brought the cage all the way out of the room, but Rollins had been correct: it got caught on the doorframe. They were carefully moving it by hand when Sitwell came to help.

“Why not just knock him out with the taser rods and move him on a cot?” Sitwell offered.

“Not necessary,” Rumlow said grimly.

“I can get o----” Sitwell said half-turning, but he was cut off when the man in the cage seized his arm. Sitwell screamed.
“Quiet,” Rumlow said to Sitwell.

“Hit him,” Sitwell said. “Hit him!”

“Shut up, Jasper,” Rumlow said evenly. “No one is to hit him, understood?” The metal arm holding Sitwell’s wrist hadn’t moved at all. It was perfectly still. “Yasha,” Rumlow said in Russian, “I will not allow him to tase you.” There was a long moment when no one moved. Sitwell trembled, Smith had frozen, and Rollins--from several feet away--kept his gun steady. Finally, Rumlow reached into a vest pocket and pulled out something small and white. Then he leaned his arm through the bars of the cage and held his palm open. “Here,” he said in Russian. “Let him go.” The man released Sitwell’s hand and took the item, tucking it into his ear. “Ready?” Rumlow said quietly in Russian, as Sitwell staggered back, breathing heavily.

“Da,” Yasha said, nodding again as he shifted back to his metal seat. Rumlow hit a few buttons on his phone and the man closed his eyes. Through the earbuds, Smith could hear a woman singing “Que Sera Sera.” Rollins stared, surprised.

“He could have torn my arm off,” Sitwell said.

“Get back to work,” Rumlow said, still using that calm teaching voice. “You’ve still got your arm.”

***

Once they’d moved the cage into another, unflooded room, Rumlow pulled Rollins aside and carefully handed him a flash drive. “These are all my notes on him,” he said quietly. “Study them, in case you need them when he gets moved back. I don’t know how big of a fuss Sitwell will make, but if Pierce pulls me off vault shifts because he got ahold of Jasper, you’ll just have Smith. Smitty can’t run point, he makes him too nervous, but he’s at least steady and will follow instructions. But never hit him. Pierce slaps him, but Pierce has handled him for thirty years.”

“Thirty years?” Rollins said. “How?”

“He’s older than he looks,” Rumlow said dryly. “Much older, I suspect. He’ll outlive us, that’s for fucking sure. I’ve seen men die thinking they could treat him like Pierce does. Happens so fast, they’re dead before they hit the ground. Nothing you can do. I found other ways. Start brushing up on your Russian.”

“Russian’s better?” Rollins asked.

“Much better,” Rumlow said. “He’s more tractable in Russian, for some reason. He understands English, but it makes him more resistant. I don’t know if it’s a second language issue and he’s got sensory overwhelm from the work of doing English-to-Russian translation, but Russian keeps him more relaxed. So does old music. There are playlists on the drive. He likes Jo Stafford and Doris Day.”

“Doris Day,” Rollins said, looking stunned.

“Doris goddamn Day has saved my life more times than I can count,” Rumlow told him. “I should probably send her more flowers.”

“Is she still alive?” Rollins asked.
“Yeah,” Rumlow, “She’s like a hundred. Her people send out autographs, so I sent her flowers and got him one once I realized he slept more when I played the big band shit on the public radio station. He was so happy, he didn’t grab anybody for three weeks. Fuck. I wonder if it got wet? I hope not. That’ll upset him.”

Chapter End Notes

Guerlain has put Samsara in their unisex bee bottle—a nineteenth-century style glass bottle with a bee motif—so I think I guy could totally buy it without much fuss: https://www.guerlain.com/us/en-us/fragrance/womens-fragrances/samsara/samsara-eau-de-toilette

Le Premier Bonheur du Jour: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mgm3Ri8ajNQ

Dream A Little Dream of Me: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBezGDMzNjA

*that’s probably Thomas Lauderdale, Pink Martini’s founder and pianist, playing Clair de Lune snippets at the beginning and end of “Dream.” Cool, right?
In the hours since he’d left, Darcy had discovered that she and Brock Rumlow had very few things in common, food and book-wise. But he did have comfortable-looking sheets, good taste in fragrance, and--most surprisingly, since he hated ties--a handful of really nice winter scarves hanging next to his no-tie suits. “Do you think this is cashmere?” Darcy asked Onyx, looking at a soft scarf in his closet. She couldn’t read the tag with just her flashlight. But he’d worn the scarf, she knew, because it smelled like him. “Mmmmm,” she said, sniffing deeply. “That’s so nice.” She thought about him for a second. “I wonder if he wears boxers or briefs?” Darcy said out loud.

Darcy was shamelessly poking around in Rumlow’s dresser drawers, when the light above her head flickered on and the fan started to spin. The air-conditioning kicked back on with a whir. “Thank you, Bess Schumacher!” Darcy yelled, doing a happy dance. “We’ve got power! Woot! Woot!” Onyx stood on her back legs and waved her feet in the air happily. Darcy caught them and gently swayed the whippet in a dance. “Onyx,” she said, “let’s make sure the air is set on seventy-two degrees like we’re rich people.” She took off down the hallway with Onyx at her heels. “Seventy-two, baby!” Darcy called to Anubis. He was standing on the couch, watching the ceiling fan increase speed in fascination.

Darcy looked around the living room and kitchen in the full light. “Oh em gee, this place is so clean,” she said. “I bet you can see your face in his sink.” She walked over and peered into the kitchen sink. Onyx trotted after her. “You totes can, Nyxie,” she said. That was one of the current nicknames she used for Onyx, along with Sillyface, Cutie, and Little Bug. She picked Onyx up. “Look! Who’s that pretty girl? Who’s that pretty girl? Is that yooooooou?” she asked Onyx. Onyx looked a little nervous at being held in the air over the sink. “Is this making you uncomfortable? Okay, I’ll put you down,” she said. Darcy set her down and a relieved Onyx did happy zooms around the living room. Darcy had been carrying on entire conversations with the dogs to stave off her stir crazy. Mostly Onyx. Anubis acted alternately bored or insulted by her chatter, but Onyx usually seemed to be interested and would wag her tail happily whenever Darcy talked. “Oh my God, Sillyface, that reminds me of a joke. After that crocodile dude died in Australia, I saw the funniest meme of animal responses. There was a koala with a speech bubble that said, ‘he touched me inappropriately,’ so Jane I say that all the time now. I touched you inappropriately, didn’t I? I should call Jane,” Darcy said. She picked up her phone and dialed.

“Hello?” Jane’s voice said. She sounded deep in Science! conferencing.
“Jane, I have power!” Darcy said. “Because of the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee!”

“What?” Jane said.

“His aunt lives in Brock’s building. You remember, that congressman with the nose hairs who reads straight from his notecards all the time?” Darcy said.

“Don’t you heckle him?” Jane said distractedly.

“Jane, he’s the reason I have A/C now, I might be in love with him,” Darcy said. “Even if he looks like a balding ferret. Why do nose hairs grow more when a man loses the hair on his head anyway?”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said.

“Are you sciencing while phoning? I thought we discussed what a bad idea that is?” Darcy said. “Remember the London Lab Fire of 2013?”

“I was just making eggs in my mom’s kitchen,” Jane said stubbornly.

“Also, our lab at the time,” Darcy said. “We were very lucky you weren’t making bacon, so there was less chance of the fire spreading to the explosive equipment stuff.”

“Yeah,” Jane said.

“All right, fine, I’ll let you get back to your Sciencing!, I just assumed you’d be as happy as me about hot water showers and coffee,” Darcy said teasingly.

“Kay, love you,” Jane said distantly.


***

Next she called Brock. “Hello?” he said, as if he didn’t quite know who was calling.

“Babe, we have power,” she said happily. In the background, she was playing a Youtube mix. Even the internet was back on. God bless Congressman Schumacher’s aunt.

“Oh,” he said flatly. “Good. That’s great.”

“You sound like I just told you that your car was flooded out or something?” Darcy said, confused by his remote affect.

“Work stuff,” he said coolly. “Lots of people running around.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, then grinned, “do those people, perhaps, not realize there’s a girl at your place?”

“Uh-huh,” he said neutrally.

“Also, two contraband dogs,” she said, tossing a toy for Onyx, who practically flew down the
“What was that?” he said.

“Indoor fetch in your hallway,” Darcy said. “We started in your living room after I had my second cup of coffee, but there was a near-death thing with your wooden lamp and I thought it might end in tragedy.”

“And that music?” he said.

“The internet’s on! I didn’t even know Louis Armstrong did a cover of “La Cucaracha,” but it feels very celebratory and appropriate when you get electricity through your proximity to the right politically connected neighbors,” Darcy said. He chuckled. “Hey, what should I do about your fridge? The battery thing?” she asked. “Should I futz with it?”

“Yeah,” he said. He walked her through checking the fridge for power and then disconnecting the battery. “All the food should be fine, since the fridge never lost power. You got it?” he asked when they were done. It had taken a flathead screwdriver to disconnect the battery and scissors to cut the tactical tape.

“I feel very MacGuyver,” Darcy said. “Hey, is this your bullet hole patching tape? Hmm.”

“Probably. Why?” he said.

“It’s less sticky than I thought it would be,” Darcy said. “ Doesn’t hurt your skin at all,” she said into the phone, peeling a stray hunk off her arm.

“You’re less impressed with me by the minute, aren’t you, sweetheart?” he said wryly.


“I’m working a night shift,” he said. “But, uh, eat anything you want. There’s grass fed beef in the fridge.”

“I knew it!” Darcy said. “I owe the dogs five treats.”

“You had a bet with them?” he said wryly.

“Yeah, we figured you’d have meat in the fridge. I don’t actually like beef,” she admitted.

“What?” he said.

“It’s just not my thing,” she said. He scoffed. “But I will happily hog your bathtub and sleep on your very nice sheets.”

“That right?” he said in a low voice.

“Ooooh, someone’s interested,” Darcy said. “What are your sheets made of? They’re so soft.”

“You been looking at all my stuff?” he asked wryly.

“Oh, absolutely. I’m very nosy. I’ll probably steal one of your fancyman scarves and a John Grisham before I leave or something,” she said.

“The term is liberate, like we do in other countries,” he said. “We’re refined, sweetheart.”
“Not me,” she said, giddy with the joy of air-conditioning. She flopped onto the couch next to Anubis. “Oh, thank God. Leather sofas are miserable without air-conditioning. Your thighs stick,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“You’ve never ridden in a car with leather upholstery in short shorts, have you?” Darcy said.

“No, I can’t say I have,” he said. “Listen, I should go, but I’ll see you soon, all right?” he said.

“Okay,” Darcy said cheerfully.

After they hung up, she looked at Onyx. “I’m going to take the most luxurious freaking bath, if he’s not coming back. You think he’s got some manly bath oil stashed someplace?” The two of them went into the bathroom and Darcy started opening all the drawers. “No luck,” Darcy said, sighing. “Just Tiger Balm and a terrifying assortment of Fighter Fix liniment and Thai oils for bruising and stuff. Well, I guess you can’t expect everything? I wonder if he has white wine?”

Twenty minutes later, Darcy was relaxing in a hot bath with a glass of chilled wine, while Onyx and Anubis stretched out on Brock Rumlow’s bed. Darcy looked at them from the tub. “We’ll just stay until he gets back,” she said firmly. She’d caught up on the news. They thought it might rain for a day or two more. She didn’t want to disrupt his routine too much, but if he wasn’t home, what could it hurt to stay? She wasn’t looking forward to apartment repairs sans Loki. It was a good thing she’d left him a note on the fridge. When would he be back, she wondered? Hopefully, his dad hadn’t thrown him in jail. Again.

***

“Can I eat in here where it’s dry?” Sitwell asked Rumlow, appearing in the doorway.

“That’s fine,” Rumlow said. Sitwell dragged a chair across the room down the hall from the vault with a wince-inducing screech.

“So, how was it with Darcy Lewis the lab hottie last night? Taser girl?” Sitwell asked. “She finally realize you were interested?”

“She knows what she needs to know,” Rumlow said without emotion.

“She’d shit a brick if she knew about the real us, though,” Sitwell said. “Unless you think you could get her into the org? Is Pierce interested in recruiting her or Foster?”

“He’s interested in the work, but it doesn’t matter how we get it,” Rumlow said.

“Huh,” Sitwell said. “Still, she’s fine. Fiiiiiiiiine,” he said with exaggerated lasciviousness. Then he began to chew noisily and Rumlow rolled his eyes. “Really fine,” Sitwell said. The man in the cage leaned his head back against the bars and began to hum off-key.

“What’s that noise?” Sitwell asked. Rumlow looked up from his phone. He was jewelry shopping online.
“Asset hums sometimes,” Rumlow said. “Good sign. Means he’s more relaxed, Jasper.”

“It’s creepy,” Sitwell said. The Asset looked at him briefly, then flicked his eyes away, and continued humming.

“What, you prefer the sound of water leaks dripping?” Rumlow asked.

“You study that creepy-ass Soviet relic like he’s Koko the gorilla, you know that?” Sitwell said. “I’m surprised you haven’t bought him some finger paints and a kitten.”

“It’s part of the job,” Rumlow said coolly. Sitwell shook his head and returned to eating. The Asset continued to hum off-key. He hummed louder. Sitwell finally put his sandwich down and sighed.

“I can’t take it. You like your job too much, I’m getting out of here,” Sitwell told Rumlow, before he left. The sound of water sloshing signalled his retreat into the other rooms. Rumlow watched him leave and then turned back to his phone.

“Thanks,” Rumlow said in Russian. The Asset looked at him and then looked away. Rumlow studied a diamond necklace on his phone. Across the room, the man in the cage began humming “La Cucaracha” quietly to himself. He was perfectly in tune. Rumlow gave him a brief look and returned to his jewelry shopping.

When Brock returned to the apartment the next morning, the dogs met him at the door. He shifted his bag onto the coffee table and patted Onyx gently. Anubis was already going back to bed. He moved quietly through the rooms, doing a few things. It was blissfully cool and dry in his apartment. Darcy had left the hall light on and he walked silently towards the bedroom. She was asleep in his bed. Her hair was pooled around her face, like a dark halo. He stood over her for a long moment and watched her sleep. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed gently. The dogs both jumped on the foot of the bed and settled themselves in familiarly. Rumlow traced the edge of Darcy’s hair with his hand. “Sweetheart,” he whispered, “I’m back.” She murmured something in her sleep and he smiled at her. Then he reached down and began to unlace his heavy boots.

***

When Darcy woke up, a freshly showered Brock Rumlow was asleep next to her. She blinked in confusion. Was he really back? “Hey,” he said softly, opening his eyes when she moved.

“You’re back,” she said. Intelligently.

“You okay?” he said, propping his head up on one elbow. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I’m good,” she said, wiggling so she could turn to face him. “What?” she asked, when she saw his expression.

“Nothing,” he said cryptically.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Nope. You don’t get to be all secretive. I’ve seen your drawers, babe. I know

“Nothing,” he said cryptically.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Nope. You don’t get to be all secretive. I’ve seen your drawers, babe. I know

“Nothing,” he said cryptically.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Nope. You don’t get to be all secretive. I’ve seen your drawers, babe. I know
all your secrets now.”

“All my secrets?” he said, looking amused.

“I know what perfume you wear and what sad, sugarless food you eat and that you have a vast collection of Tiger Balm-type products,” she said, ticking them off on her hand. “I’m very impressed by the Samsara, by the way,” she said. “I was trying to figure out how you smelled so good.”

“You think I smell good?” he said.

“Yup,” she said, grinning. “Now spill. What are you thinking?”

“That I should tell you something important,” he said, leaning closer.

“Yeah?” she said, biting her lip.

“I took a shower when I got back this morning,” he said, brushing her face with his mouth, “so I smell pretty good right now.”

“I probably need to judge that myself,” she told him, “just to be sure.”

“Not a bad plan,” he said, kissing her. He was trailing kisses over her collarbone and down her chest when she asked how long he had before he went back to work. “Hmm,” he said, sighing and leaning his cheek against her cleavage. “A few hours,” he said.

“They’re working you to death,” she said.

“Not really, sweetheart. I hurry up and wait, mostly,” he said, cupping her other boob with his hand.

“How many hours?” she said. God, his hands felt so good, she thought. Focus, Darcy, she told herself. Focus.

“Uh, two and a half?” he said, looking at the clock. “Why?”

“Roll over,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“Roll over,” she said, giving him a little shove. He laughed and then rolled over onto his back, putting his hands behind his head.

“What, baby? You want to run the show? I don’t mind,” he said, smiling. Then his smile fell. “You’re getting up?” She threw the covers back and slid out of bed. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m going to let you sleep,” she said. “You’ve been working for days and this is the first time you’ve been able to sleep somewhere comfortable and normal.”

“What if I don’t feel like sleeping?” he said.

“Tough luck,” she said. “This is me running the show.”

“At least stay with me?” he said, reaching his arm out.
“Nope,” she said. “I’ll wake you when the food is ready.”

“You’re very bossy,” he said, sounding oddly pleased.

“Yeah, Jane says that, too. Usually when I’m telling her to eat or sleep,” Darcy said, as she left the bedroom. “Go to sleep!”

She fed Onyx and Anubis their breakfast. Brock must’ve changed their bathroom potty pads when he got in, she noticed. He was so good with them, despite his protests. She smiled. Then she started pulling things out of the fridge. “Yes!” she said to Onyx, cranking the oven up to 425. There were pre-cubed sweet potatoes. Darcy actually loved sweet potatoes. She rinsed them, drizzled them with olive oil and, and popped them in the oven once it dinged. Thank God he actually owned olive oil. Did he have ginger, she wondered? He did. She put her oven mitts on to pull the pan back out and then sprinkled the sweet potatoes with ginger and garlic powder. To her delight, she discovered mushrooms and French green beans in the fridge, too. She washed the mushrooms, chopped some onions, and set them in a bowl. She could cook the beef with the mushrooms and onions and blanch the green beans first. She started to trim them. “He keeps really sharp knives,” Darcy told Onyx. “Would you like a raw green bean? You can have that, but no onions, grapes, raisins, or chocolate. I’m very sorry about the last one, Sillyface. But I guess chocolate loses its allure when it’s actually poisonous?”

She waited until the sweet potatoes had softened and grown crunchy on the outside to begin stir-frying the beef and vegetables. He shuffled out a little later, looking sleepy and confused. “That doesn’t smell like Pop Tarts, sweetheart,” he said. He stopped. “You made steak? You don’t eat steak.”

“Yes, I love Pop Tarts and Cheetos, but Jane sometimes gets low iron issues, so I can cook steak. Thinly sliced beef with onions, green beans, and mushrooms and ginger-garlic sweet potatoes,” Darcy said.

“Jesus Christ,” Brock muttered. He looked wide-eyed, she thought.

“I’d usually serve green beans separately with butter, but you don’t have butter, you sad, sad man, so I threw them in the stir-fry at the end,” Darcy said. “It’s tragic to me that I can’t feed you green beans with butter or steak with blue cheese.”

He stared at her. “Yeah,” he said finally. “It is.”

“Sit,” she told him. He sat down and she stuck a plate in front of him. He looked at the plate, then back at her for a second. “You have less than an hour, eat,” she scolded. He dug in and she caught him softly moaning in happiness a few seconds later.

“Why’d you do this?” he said eventually.

“Maslow’s hierarchy of needs,” she said, “food and shelter outrank sex. You needed sleep and feeding more than I need to get laid.” She caught him staring at her again as she boxed food up for him to take to work and turned on the tv, so he could hear about the weather. “You can take all this with you, so you have food that’s not an MRE. What?” she said.

“Nothing,” he said, looking back down at his plate and scraping up the last bit of sweet potato.
“Spill,” she said. “What were you just thinking about?”

“Kidnapping you, mostly. Trying to figure out logistics, so you’d never leave this apartment. I’d let you keep Linda’s skinny dogs, too, if I was already committing one felony,” he said calmly. “You’d want company when I was at work. Maybe I’d need to move. Get a house with a fence, so we’d have some privacy and the dogs would have a yard.”

“I couldn’t do that to Linda,” Darcy said. “She loves them.”

“No on the dognapping, then?” he said.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I’m not that kind of criminal. I have scruples. At least one: don’t steal other people’s beloved pets.”

“I don’t have many,” he said, looking at her with a kind of intense hunger that she knew wasn’t about food. She blushed.

“No?” she said.

“No, my lack of idealism is a character flaw,” he said. “You have any feelings about architecture? What kind of house would you want, sweetheart?”

“Cut it out,” Darcy said, laughing.

“She thinks I’m kidding,” Brock said to Onyx. “Isn’t that cute?” Onyx wagged her tail at him.

“How long is your shift tonight?” she asked.

“Twelve hours,” he said.

“You realize these are illegal, right?” she said.

“Huh?” he said, chewing a green bean.

“Most states have labor laws that say you have to schedule people’s shifts at least eight hours apart, so they’re theoretically able to sleep for eight hours, even though that ignores travel time home, eating, and oh, every other fucking thing in life. SHIELD’s not even maintaining the fiction. I’m sure Phil Coulson would not approve,” she said. Darcy imagined that Phil’s staff scheduling had probably been excellent. He was that kind of guy.

“How do you know that?” he said.

“I worked retail one Christmas, pre-Thor and Jane,” she said. “We figured out that it was illegal for them to ask me to work a closing shift until midnight and then an opening one that started at five or six. I got my schedule changed to all night shifts when I threatened my manager with the Virginia Department of Labor.”

He chuckled. “I don’t think I can do that, baby,” he said, shaking his head.

“And they gave you a gun,” she said. “You’re sleep deprived with a gun.”

“Several, usually,” he said, grinning.

“That’s funny?” she said.

“You’re fretting about my safety,” he said.

“I’m more used to other people being worried about their safety when I show up,” he said dryly.

“Sure,” Darcy said sarcastically, “you know six ways of killing someone with your baby toe, blah blah blah, tough guy. You can’t tell me the majority of SHIELD injuries aren’t just tired people falling down, twisting their ankles, or accidental discharge of weapons. I bet I can get a stats number from Jessa in HR, once the storm clean up is over.” Power was already been restored in some parts of town, but residual flooding meant that many businesses were closed. The news was showing people lined up at the grocery stores.

“Did Jessa give you my home address?” he said, grinning.

“To tell you anything might compromise my informant,” she said. He came into the kitchen and wrapped his arms around her, grinning.

“I’m glad,” he said, “that you did that. I wasn’t sure if you liked me all that much beforehand. Felt like all our dates went slightly sideways.”


“If I didn’t have to go into work, I’d make you pay for that remark…..” he said in a low, teasing voice.

“Yeah?” she said. He kissed her. Eventually, she sighed and let him go. “I don’t want to be a distraction that gets you hurt,” she said gently. He shook his head.

“Not for you to worry about,” he said cryptically.

“I’m not a disruption?” she said. He didn’t answer.

Before he left again, he patted the dogs and told her that he’d already filed an electronic damages report for her apartment. “You did what?” Darcy said.

“I’m taking care of it,” he said, as he put the container of leftovers in his bag and kissed her. “You can stay here while they patch the roof and re-paint. I’m meeting them for a walk-through at lunch. The maintenance guys and the building manager are more afraid of me than you.”

“Wait, are you saying they aren’t afraid of me or I’m not afraid of you?” Darcy asked.

“Both,” he said. “Be back when I can, sweetheart.”

She hurried to the door a second after it shut and she heard him lock it. “Don’t you need a key to my place?” she called to him in the hallway, reaching into her purse. He turned, grinning.

“Oh, I liberated your keys already,” he said, stepping into the elevator. They were in his hand.

“He stole my keys,” Darcy told Onyx. Anubis slumped sideways on the couch, stretching, and Onyx wagged her tail. “He actually stole my keys and is fixing my apartment?” she said out loud. “I hope that means he was kidding about kidnapping us. I had a second of doubt there, Cutie Bug. He looked totally serious. It’s probably just because I fed him. I didn’t tell him about all the olive
oil on those sweet potatoes, either. I took the cap off that dieter’s spray bottle thingy and poured it on straight, I bet he never does that.” She giggled. “What will the other STRIKE guys say when they see my Minion keychain?” She texted Jane.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Brock has taken over the repairs on my apartment? He stole my keys.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Remember when you thought he was a total asshole?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Uh-huh.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What prompted this?

World’s Okayest Assistant: No idea, but he did threaten to kidnap me today? I made him that steak and mushrooms thing you like. I had to use jailbroken olive oil from a salad mister. It was sad. He owns no butter. No butter, Jane!

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Shudders.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: If you’ve made him that, I may never see you again.

World’s Okayest Assistant: In the event of my kidnapping, take care of Loki.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Has Thor heard from him?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: He got a raven yesterday. He sent it to the apartment first, but you weren’t there and he was worried.

World’s Okayest Assistant: I left a note, but I guess ravens don’t read. What’d he say?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Loki and Odin are hashing some stuff out, but Loki hasn’t stabbed him and Odin hasn’t put him in chains, so Thor’s optimistic.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: But, you know….

World’s Okayest Assistant: He’s always optimistic, bless his heart. How’s the Science! Going?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: It’s Tony Science!, so it’s mostly long stretches of party followed by brief bouts of Science!, really.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What are you going to do today?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I’m soaking Brock Rumlow’s super fancy tub again. It has heated jets.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I thought he was cheap?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I think it falls under the same category of pain relief as his twelve kinds of Tiger Balm and truly spectacular ice pack collection. Whole top shelf of the freezer is just ice packs. He spends money not to hurt.
“Bye, Tasha. Talk to you soon,” Clint said, hanging up the phone. He tapped the steering wheel as Tulsa came out of the gas station.

“When we meeting Fury?” Tulsa said to Clint, when he got back in the truck. He passed Clint a cup of coffee. They were in West Virginia, looking for a HYDRA base hidden in an old mine site. Their regular support team—a handpicked, vetted team of agents that Fury had selectively retired or “disappeared” over the years for just such an emergency---would meet them in five minutes by black ops helicopter once they’d run recon.

“Three days. Outside DC. He’s bringing Hill in. Thinks she’s trustworthy,” Clint said.

“Of course she is,” Tulsa said. “Maria’d be at the pearly gates kicking St. Peter in the shins before she’d fall for some Nazi bullshit,” Tulsa said, with evident admiration.

“Still won’t give you the time of day, though, will she?” Clint said, sipping his coffee.

“I’m patient,” Tulsa said. “She spoke to me a few weeks ago.” He took a deep slug of his gas station coffee and recoiled. “Tastes terrible,” he muttered. “Like goddamn maple syrup?”

“Real breakthrough there, coffee snob,” Clint said wryly. “She finally remember your name?”

“What else did Auntie Nat say?” Tulsa asked, ignoring the question. She totally hadn’t remembered his name, Clint thought, snickering internally.

“Our math is solid. We’ve got them against the ropes, numbers-wise. Fury was right. There aren’t hundreds of them. Maybe a few dozen in pockets here and there,” Clint said. “But there’s even better news.”

“What?” Tulsa said, sniffing the coffee tentatively and frowning.

“Nat has sabotaged the entire Project Insight program from the inside. It won’t work. Can’t raise the helicarriers or run the programs. All the techs are freaking out because they can’t fix it,” Clint said.

“How’d she manage that?” Tulsa asked.
“Old Soviet bugs re-coded in an archaic form of Slavic grammar. Nobody’s even recognized it. We don’t have enough Russian speakers since the Cold War ended. All the most ambitious baby agents take Mandarin and Arabic in college now,” Clint told him. “Whole thing won’t fly. And I’m not sure she’s done yet. She was asking me for an old explosives source we used to use on missions.”

Tulsa chuckled. “She’s a clever woman, your children’s godmother,” he said.

“Fury wants to figure out who’s pulling the strings from above with Pierce, though,” Clint said. “That worries me.”

“You’re worried about him. Ain’t that sweet?” Tulsa asked. “You gonna send him a card when this is all over?”

“Shut up,” Clint said, cranking the truck. “Let’s go shoot some Nazi assholes.”

“I’mma shoot some of them thinking about this godforsaken coffee,” Tulsa said. “Makes me miss damn Juan Valdez.”

“We still haven’t figured out who to trust on Alpha, though,” Clint said quietly, as they pulled out onto the two-lane highway. “Except Rollins. Fury had to go to fucking Perth to find a clean guy to put on SHIELD’s most elite team,” he said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe this is happening to my company.”

“That’s why company men get hurt, pal,” Tulsa said sympathetically. “Rollins don’t know who is and who isn’t?” Tulsa asked.

“Rumlow runs a tight ship,” Clint said. “They don’t talk about HYDRA outside the vault. Nobody slips on his crew, shows their hand. All of them could be loyal to HYDRA or a few could be thinking about going to Fury and we wouldn’t know. Thank God Rollins knows some Russian. Rollins can’t fucking tell if Rumlow is trying to tell him something with that whole flash drive business or if it’s some sort of elaborate HYDRA loyalty test. Still, he says he saw Rumlow pass something to the Winter Soldier the other day and nobody else knows. You won’t fucking believe this.”

“What?” Tulsa said.

“He put it in a brownie that Darcy made him and gave to him through the bars. Told him to chew slowly,” Clint said.

“A weapon?” Tulsa said.

“No, Rollins said it looked like a key. A little key! The guy’s in a cage in a vault. What’s it do, let him open a deposit box?” Clint said.

“If he lets this guy loose, there’s no telling....” Tulsa began.

“I know, that’s why Fury doesn’t want us to try to get him out. Fury’s afraid he’ll kill all of us and it’ll destabilize the whole effort to save the organization. Rollins wanted to try to talk to him, let him out during the storm when Rumlow left for some reason and it was just him and Sitwell, but Fury said he couldn’t risk it. Nat’s met him before in the field and thinks we might need to send in Cap and Stark and whole Avengers team to subdue this guy. We might have to keep Rumlow alive just to handle him when we get Pierce. Maybe that’s his fucking plan—he keeps himself valuable, plays both sides?”
“What’d you think of him before Fury retired you?” Tulsa asked.

“He was professional. Careful. Always calm. There was some gossip that he got too far in working undercover on a mission involving some cartels smuggling alien weapons technology on the Texas border, but Fury put him on STRIKE anyway. Said he didn’t think the lives of a bunch of guys smuggling drugs were worth crying over,” Clint said.

“He killed the cartel guys he was embedded with?” Tulsa said.

“The rumor was that he took over the cartel by means unknown, skimmed a bunch of money off the top for himself, called in SHIELD helicopters to burn out the coke plants, and smuggled the alien weapons directly to SHIELD by hiring a bunch of fucking college girls from UT-El Paso to drive them to the Atlanta field office,” Clint said.

“College students?” Tulsa said, eyebrows raised. “Like hot ones?”

“The kind cops don’t stop,” Clint said. “He told them they were moving sex toys through Alabama, where sex toys sales are still mostly illegal, so they shouldn’t ever open the U-Hauls and they’d have legal deniability if they were stopped later.”

“That shit worked?” Tulsa said.

“Perfectly,” Clint said. “He had Phil meet the trucks in Atlanta and all the weapons were accounted for. Phil told me that part himself. But nobody ever found the money he supposedly stole.”

Tulsa whistled. “I don’t know about you, but I wish we knew what fucking side he was on,” he said.

“His own side,” Clint said. “Probably. It was millions in drug money. We’ve never found a trace of it, not even in the HYDRA accounts. Makes me think he’s an opportunist.”

“Ain’t Alabama fucked up, though?” Tulsa said a few minutes later. He’d been thinking. “Makes me glad I was born in Oklahoma.”

“Iowa’s still better,” Clint muttered. They bickered all the way to the site, then called in the helicopters. They took down the entire HYDRA base without settling the Sooners versus Cyclones debate.

***

“Hey, honey, how’s the hospital?” Steve asked Kate when she answered the phone. He’d called twice before and left messages.

“Fine,” Kate said. “Busy. We’re, uh, running on backup generators. Sorry I couldn’t answer before.”

“Us, too,” Steve said, smiling. He was in the Triskelion with half of STRIKE Alpha, Fury, and all the other essential personnel. Rumlow and Rollins had been working with teams to move SHIELD equipment—like their tactical jeeps—to the Triskelion and fishing stranded motorists out of the water for several days, Smith had told him. Smith and the teams moved in and out. Steve wished he could help, too, but Fury had instructed him to stay put. He’d told Steve he was concerned about
needing to evacuate the essential personnel if they were flooded by the river and Steve’s serum-adjusted help would be priceless in an emergency. He could hold his breath for a long time if they needed water rescues within Triskelion itself. It left Steve antsy, but he didn’t want to leave and then have something happen. He couldn’t get back to the building quickly on wet streets and the quinjets were on fuel rationing. “It’s okay. I don’t want to keep you,” Steve said quietly to his girlfriend, “but I wanted to check on you, hear your voice.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Kate said, wiping her eyes. “It’s good to hear your voice, too. I want to see you as soon as this is over,” she said, a tremor in her voice.

“First thing I’ll do,” Steve said. “I love you, doll.”

“I love you, too,” she told him.

“Can’t wait to see you,” he said happily.

When she’d hung up the phone in her SHIELD safe house, Sharon Carter let herself weep. She was going to tell him the truth and he’d never call to check on her again.

***

Darcy was in the bathtub when Jane called. She put her on speaker phone and rested the phone on the bathroom counter. “Did we text today?” Jane asked quizzically. “Or was that yesterday?”

“That was today,” Darcy said, laughing. She scrubbed between her toes with soap. It was so nice to be clean and not sticky with humidity. The best feeling.

“I’m losing my mind without you,” Jane said.

“Are you sure that’s not Tony getting you drunk?” Darcy asked.

“Possibly,” Jane said, “but I miss you anyway. Time’s all weird in the booze-filled funhouse that is a Tony conference. Someone gave a paper on thermodynamics at 3am yesterday after there were a bunch of fire eaters?”

“That actually sounds awesome,” Darcy said. “Go Pepper party planning. I really think she missed her calling sometimes and should have been a campaign consultant. All her candidates would have won.”

“Maybe she can manage Steve’s career when he runs for office?” Jane said.

“You see Steve in politics?” Darcy said, baffled. “I don’t think he’d enjoy it at all. He likes doing things, not talking about them.”

“Doesn’t he seem like someone that people would convince to run for office?” Jane said. “Plus, you know how he loves babies. I wouldn’t be surprised if he settles down just for kids. He could be president.”

“Hmmm,” Darcy said. “He does love babies, but wouldn’t it hurt his candidacy if he married a Russian spy?”

“You’re still on that?” Jane said.
“Brock thought it sounded shady, too! Where is Steve, anyway?” she asked. Darcy hadn’t thought about Steve in days and days. She’d sort of lost track of him, honestly. How odd not to think of him at all. But she’d been busy with the dogs and the hurricane and the leaks and the, uh, looking in Brock Rumlow’s underwear drawer.

“You don’t know?” Jane asked. “I thought you put GPS in Steve’s shoes.”

“Shut up, I did not. Just because I asked JARVIS to alert me when he was swimming at Tony’s that one time, doesn’t mean I spy on him all the time. I felt guilty later!” Darcy said.

“Did you?” Jane asked archly.

“No,” Darcy admitted.

“I assumed he was at the office?” Jane said.

“Probably,” Darcy said. “He seems like essential personnel to Fury and Hill.”

“So, you haven’t thought about Steve?” Jane said in a funny voice.

“What?” Darcy asked.

“Brock Rumlow is really good in bed, isn’t he?” Jane said, laughing.

“I still don’t know!” Darcy said. “We haven’t...yet. He wanted to this morning, but I made him sleep because he had to go back to work, okay?”

“Oh my God, you like him, don’t you? Genuinely like him?” Jane said. “As a person and not just a puzzlingly antisocial sex object?”

“What makes you say that?” Darcy asked.

“Because, normally you’d get some and not care if he was too tired to work later?” Jane said.

“Oh,” Darcy said.

“You’re, like, mama duckling him now, aren’t you?” Jane said. “You’ve got him in the food line behind me and Thor and you’re worried about him crossing the street alone, aren’t you?”

“Uhhh,” Darcy said.

“Oooooooh,” Jane said. “It’s an actual thing.”

“Is not,” Darcy said stubbornly.

“I’ve gotta tell Tony, he’s been making jokes about you hooking up with Agent Rambo all week,” Jane said. “Ever since Thor accidentally mentioned you were staying with him.”

“Ooooh, no,” Darcy said. “Not Tony, too.” Once it got to Tony, she’d be getting joke texts from him, Rhodey, and all of Tony’s crazy poker buddies. She’d played one game with them and never been able to get off the email chain of dirty jokes. Really dirty jokes. She hoped there were no dirty Sylvester Stallone jokes, but these guys were old enough to remember.

“You made him beef, didn’t you?” Jane said. “I remember that from today!”

“He had it in his fridge,” Darcy insisted.
“You don’t even like to touch beef. You only make it for people you care about, like me or your mom,” Jane said. “You are so busted!”

“Shit,” Darcy said, once she’d hung up. “Am I in trouble emotionally?” she said out loud. Onyx bounced into the bathroom and wagged her tail. “I should probably shave my legs,” Darcy said. She decided to text him.

World’s Okayest Assistant: How’s your day going? Status update on my apt?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: Damp. Power’s back on today, but you don’t want to stay here.

World’s Okayest Assistant: That bad, huh?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I’ve got water damage guys drying it out and a moving company putting all your stuff into storage for the time being. Anything you want? I’ve already got your girly stuff and some clothes being sent over. Romanov is bringing them.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Oh, cool. I’ve missed Nat. Girly stuff??

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: Your jewelry box, perfume bottles off the dresser, and the rest of the stuff you left in the bathroom.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Oh no.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: What?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Did you pack my tampons?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: So?

World’s Okayest Assistant: [embarrassment emoji]

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: It’s not a big deal.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I’m secure enough to touch tampons, baby. And I know you’ve had your hands on my boxers.

World’s Okayest Assistant: How?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: You aren’t good at re-folding, sweetheart.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Oh. Sorry.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I’m real broken up about it, as you can tell.

World’s Okayest Assistant: I sorta wanted to be all pretty and ladylike before we got to the unshowered, frizzy-haired Darcy + tampons stage of things, though. We haven’t even slept together and you’ve seen me looking bonkers and know about my heavy flow days? This sucks.
STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I’d like to note that if it was up to me, we’d have slept together already and you’d be too tired right now to have this conversation.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Are you actually bragging about being good in bed now?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: It’s not bragging if it’s true.

World’s Okayest Assistant: This is not helping my tampon complex.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: Did you think I wasn’t aware you’re female? I’m very aware, baby.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I’d like to turn that theoretical knowledge into something more hands-on soon though.

World’s Okayest Assistant: The tampons don’t ruin the fantasy?


STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: No. They don’t. You’ll know that soon.

World’s Okayest Assistant: How soon?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: 2-3 days, max.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Totes illegal work schedule.

“Ughhhhh,” Darcy said, burying her face in a couch cushion when she read his texts. “Onyx, I’m in so much trouble. He’s seen me looking like a hot mess and he’s touched my tampons and seen my bad housekeeping and he’s hot and clean and his hair even looks cool in the morning. His only flaw is that he eats too healthy and that’s key to the perfect abs or whatever. Why couldn’t he have, like, a real flaw?” she whined out loud.

Onyx wagged her tail and rested her head on Darcy’s knee sympathetically.

***

A little while later, the doorbell rang. There was a flash of red when Darcy peered through the peephole. She opened the door. “Natasha!” she said, “Come in! I missed you.”

“Hello, milaya ,” she said, hugging Darcy and kissing her cheek. She smelled elegant and clean. “I will get the cart,” she said. She rolled in a hand truck with several boxes. Three were labeled neatly in what Darcy now recognized as Brock’s handwriting. “Where would you like these?” Natasha asked. “The bedroom?”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, biting her lip. “End of the hallway.” Natasha smiled, but her eyes scanned the apartment curiously.

“He is much neater and more sophisticated than I would have expected,” she said. “I had imagined gym equipment in the living room.”
“Did you want to snoop around?” Darcy offered.

“You would let me?” Natasha said.


“Cryptic?” she said. “He is completely in your hands, milaya. You must see that.”

“You think so?” Darcy said. “Even with all his other women?”

“Yes,” Natasha said, rolling the hand truck down the hallway. She studied everything as she walked. “Hmmm,” the Russian said, when she’d flipped on the bedroom light. “A very nice bed?” she said to Darcy.

“Technically, I haven’t seen action on it yet,” Darcy admitted. “He wants to take things slow.”

“Does he really?” Natasha said, a cat-like gleam in her eyes. She laughed. “You are very naive.”

“What?” Darcy said, unpacking as Natasha looked around. Her perfumes had been bubble wrapped. She put them on his dresser. Then she set the box with her tampons and other bathroom stuff on the counter.

“He would not take it slow if he did not care,” Natasha, rooting through his closet. “Ah,” she said. “Here it is.”

“What did you find?” Darcy said.

“A hidden panel behind which he has placed weapons, go-bags, and cash,” Natasha said. “It appears the latest addition is a go-bag for you.”

“What?” Darcy said, peering in the closet. Natasha held up the fake ID and passport. They had Darcy’s photo, but another name. “When did he do that? I--I--Jesus,” Darcy said. “I’ve barely been here a day and a half, Natasha. Did he do that before I got here?”

“Possibly, but I think it is more likely that they were made last night. The glue still smells fresh,” Natasha said, holding them to her nose. “As it cures, that odor dissipates.”

“Why would he do that?” Darcy asked.

“An abundance of caution perhaps? There is also a significant sum in the bag and a handgun that would appear to have been chosen for an inexperienced user,” Natasha said thoughtfully.

“ Weird,” Darcy said.

Natasha shrugged. “This is perhaps how he thinks,” she said. “Of strategies for evading danger and threats.”

“How many of these go-bags and fake IDs do you have?” Darcy asked.

“Several,” Natasha said.

“In your apartment?” Darcy said.

“And other places,” Natasha said, stowing the go bags away again. She looked at his clothes, then pushed them aside. “I’m very sorry about your closet, milaya.”
“What?” Darcy said.

“He did not tell you?” Natasha said. “There was unfortunately a leak. All of your clothes will need to be cleaned. The last boxes are clothes that I chose for you.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “Thank you. I didn’t know.”

“I think you will like them,” Natasha said. “He paid for them, of course.”

“They’re new? I thought you brought me loaners from your closet?” Darcy said. “Where did you find new ones?”

“It was very easy. I called Pepper in New York and had her recommend a local store, then met the woman and chose the clothing from the items she had on hand,” Natasha said. “She was exceptionally happy to have a paying client without power. All the businesses are extremely concerned about lost revenue.”

“How much did he spend?” Darcy said. Natasha laughed.

“If I told you, you would be upset. But I think they will fit you,” Natasha said. “Let’s look at them on you.”

Darcy tried them all on. The clothes Natasha had chosen were flattering and comfortable: pants and jeans with stretch, scoop and cowl-necked tops that draped elegantly over her cleavage, rather than gaping, even a very cool-looking jacket. “You are freaking awesome,” Darcy said. They looked like Natasha’s clothes, actually. Darcy had always liked her outfits. Only she’d chosen different colors for Darcy than she would for herself, Darcy guessed. Natasha’s clothes were usually black or neutral, but these were teal, raspberry, or purple. There were even several deep crimson tops.

“I think it is important to have clothing that is both practical and beautiful. There is nothing beautiful in being self-conscious in ill-fitting or restrictive items, milaya,” she said.

“I really appreciate this,” Darcy said, assuming they were done. It was at least a dozen pieces of clothing.

“This is not all. I have also brought you other items. Some sleepwear and more intimate things,” Natasha said.

“Holy crap, you brought me fancy underwear?” Darcy said, holding up something silky and the color of wine.

“The correct lingerie is crucial in a new relationship,” Natasha said.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a little like the assassin trainer in La Femme Nikita? The original French one?” Darcy said, after Natasha had unpacked several things made of delicate lace.

“Oh, yes?” Natasha said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “She calls femininity a key weapon for a female assassin.”

“She is correct,” Natasha said. “Also, I will take you for a proper bra fitting at a future date.”

“Does my bra not fit?” Darcy said.
“It does not,” Natasha said. “These are your perfumes?” she asked, looking at the dresser.

“Yeah, it’s my hobby. Sort of,” Darcy said. “You know, different perfumes for moods or activities? Does that seem silly?”

“No, I approve. You must learn to treat your clothing with the same level of attention,” Natasha said, as if she was imparting something of great significance.

“Okay,” Darcy said, laughing. She mostly liked sweaters and t-shirts.

Natasha declared her Shalimar elegant (“very artistically constructed”), raised her eyebrows at Loki’s favorite banana thing (“only for vacations in the tropics, milaya”), and opined that Brock would probably like her Cashmere Mist (“it concurs very well with his taste for neutral things and shades of brown”), much to Darcy’s surprise. “You really think he would?” Darcy asked. It was very powdery and Darcy wore it when she was cold or stressed and wanted something that would hum quietly in the background. Mentally, she thought of it as a scarf scent—something to wrap up in and be comforted by. Not necessarily sexy.

“Look around you,” Natasha said. “He is not a frat boy, he does not wish you to smell like some vodka-cranberry concoction or a cupcake.”

“Huh,” Darcy said. He had said nice things about her Beyond Paradise, she remembered. And that wasn’t a sugary-sweet thing, either.

They sat on the couch. Natasha seemed in no hurry to return to work; she’d merely shrugged when Darcy asked her about being essential personnel and kept looking at Rumlow’s things. So, Darcy got her wine and they talked. “You like him?” Natasha asked.

“I do,” Darcy admitted. “I just hope I’m not too much of an adjustment for him, with all my weirdness and my Pop-Tarts and my dog-sitting, you know?”

“Why worry?” Natasha said.

“It’s what I do when I like someone!” Darcy said.

Natasha smiled enigmatically and looked at Onyx and Anubis. “These are very elegant dogs, too. For a brief period in Kiev, I housesat for a man with Borzoi. I grew very fond of them. They were called Nadya and Anatoly. It was unfortunate when I had to shoot their owner,” she said.

“You shot Nadya and Anatoly’s owner?” Darcy said, horrified.

“He was a member of the Russian mafia. I shut the dogs in another room, so they would not be frightened, of course. Then I made sure they had new owners, but I was very sad I could not take them with me. They would have been too conspicuous,” Natasha said.

***

When she left the apartment, Natasha called Nick Fury on a secure line. He answered on the second ring. “I’m eating dinner, Romanoff,” he said.
“If you want to squeeze Alpha, Darcy Lewis would be excellent leverage,” she told Fury.

“You think Rumlow would crack if we threatened her?” Fury said incredulously.

“He has already made her a go-bag. Wherever he is going, he intends her to go with him,” Natasha said. “What if we prevented that from happening?” she offered. “Would he panic, I wonder? Be cooperative?”

“How big is our window?” Fury asked.

“He has told her that he will be away for two or three days,” Natasha said. “I can monitor the apartment.” Fury sighed.

“Get it done,” he said. “But for Christ’s sakes, don’t injure her too badly if she fights. Jane Foster’ll have that hammer of Thor’s up my ass when she finds out.”

"If he is HYDRA, she will perhaps be grateful once you explain you have moved her friend out of the apartment of a known Nazi," Natasha said coolly, then hung up.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter mood music: Chris Isaak's "Nothing's Changed"
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T66m6EkpSYc)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Have you picked up on the fact that Brock is gone so much because he's working real SHIELD emergency shifts and then watching Bucky with a skeleton HYDRA crew? Even more skeleton-ish lately, he's noticed, but Pierce is being cagey about where he's sent everyone....

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments, y'all are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy was in bed that night when she heard the key turn in the door and Onyx and Anubis took off on silent feet down the hallway. “Brock?” she said out loud. It was 4am.

“It’s me,” he said. It was funny, she thought; you couldn’t hear his footsteps at all. She’d never met anyone so quiet. She heard him talk to the dogs, though.

“You’re back early,” she said happily. He clicked on the hall light and came to stand in the bedroom doorway. With the light behind him, his expression was unreadable, but she noticed that his hand was gripping the doorframe. She’d worn one of Natasha’s purchases to bed.

“Just for a little while,” he said. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“How long is a little while?” she asked.

“An hour,” he said. “I think this is technically my lunch break. I’ll shower and let you go back to sleep.”

“We have a whole hour and you’re going to waste it like that?” she teased.

“You have other ideas?” he said. He stepped closer.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said.

“I’ve been wading around in who-knows-fucking-what, baby,” he said. “I’m disgusting.” He did, actually, smell slightly of mildew and sweat, even from the side of the bed. She turned the lamp on. He was covered in what looked like water and mud again.

“Oooh, a flaw,” she said happily. “You think you can manage a very brief shower?”

“I think so,” he said coolly. “Leave the light on,” he said, over his shoulder as he disappeared into the bathroom.

“Yeah?” she said.
“I want to see you,” he said.

“Oh my God,” Darcy said, when he emerged from the bathroom five minutes later, wrapped in a towel.

“What?” he said, grinning.

“Are your abs more cut than they were yesterday? Is that possible?” she said.

“I dunno,” he said, laughing. “I’ll put you in charge of monitoring them, baby.” He dropped the towel and crawled in bed with her. “Remind me to thank Romanoff for this,” he said, running his hands over her negligee.

“She got more than one,” Darcy told him, kissing his mouth, then the slight stubble on his chin, and the edge of his jaw. His hands were busy removing her underwear, but he smiled anyway.

“Good,” he said, tossing her underwear away, and reaching for something in the nightstand. Condoms. She didn’t even have to ask him to wear one.

“You’re too perfect,” Darcy told him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and kissing his neck. Even the muscles there felt sturdy.

“Am I?” he said. “I just walked in smelling like old socks in the middle of the night and you think I’m perfect? It’s 4am. You’re not going to ask questions?” He gave her a look that was half-scolding, half-happy.

“I trust you,” she said. “Besides, I know how you hate to talk about jumping out of planes or rescuing kittens from trees or whatever heroics you were doing tonight,” she teased.

“You’re too easy to please,” he murmured again, kissing her face. “You trust me.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, feeling him move her knees apart. “I usually don’t end up without my underwear in the apartments of mysterious people without a little trust being established first. I mean, there was Paul in New York and Rodrigo in London and Mattias in Norway and all those guys whose names I don’t precisely remember, but...” He was staring at her and she laughed. “Did you think those were real for a second?” she asked.

“No jokes,” he grumbled, sliding into her and gripping her thigh with one hand. Her breath caught. He’d surprised her. Just a little.

“So, this is serious business, huh?” she said, biting her lip as he began to move. She hoped her voice didn’t stutter. She didn’t want him to see how flustered she was.

“I can be very serious,” he said. His face was close to hers, his stare direct. That was different, Darcy thought. The continued eye contact was...intimate. She could feel a blush rising up her cheeks. He wasn’t closing his eyes or going somewhere else or totally focused on her tits in the lingerie or imagining another woman, she realized. He was watching her face closely, every micro-expression, every twitch of her mouth, dilated pupil, or flush a signal about how he felt to her as he moved. She felt more exposed by the way he looked at her than she ever had from taking her clothes off in front of somebody before. Technically, she was still wearing clothes.

“You’re freaking me out a little,” she said after he stared at her for what felt like forever.
“Mmm, sorry,” he said. He leaned down to kiss her and finally closed his eyes. She relaxed and he laughed against her mouth. “I just like to look at you, baby,” he said quietly.

“That was a lot of looking,” she said, flicking her gaze between his tanned collarbone and those green-brown eyes.

“Not enough for me,” he said, increasing the pace of his thrusts as he kissed her neck. “Such a pretty face. All I wanna do is see is your face while I fuck you,” he whispered in her ear. “Feel you while you fuck me.” His voice was low.

“This is dark you, isn’t it?” Darcy said, stuttering slightly. She saw a flash of teeth in her peripheral vision when he grinned in response.

“Does that scare you?” he asked, putting one hand through her hair. She was almost pinned down. He nuzzled her face.

“Not like it probably should,” she admitted, instinctively rocking against him. He laughed.

“Good,” he said, pressing himself into her with more force.

“Oh God,” Darcy moaned. He’d hit an angle that sent waves of pleasure through her body.

“You like that, huh?” he asked and grinned down at her. His expression was almost wolfish.

“Yeah,” she said. He kissed her, wrapping his hand behind her head.

“Look at me,” he said. “Don’t look away, sweetheart.” He held eye contact with her as she fell apart underneath him. It made everything more passionate, Darcy realized. It was almost frightening to feel this much and be so erotically aware of another person’s gaze. She felt overwhelmed by him and his intensity.

Afterwards, he pulled her against his chest for a few minutes. She felt like she was having trouble using her lungs normally and simultaneously like she wanted him to keep holding her and not let go. Seeing her face, he chuckled. “I didn’t want to rush you and scare you away, baby,” he said.

“You’re always like this?” she said.

“Sometimes,” he said.

“So, how many people have you fucked literally to death?” she teased.

“Five, maybe six,” he said dryly, kissing the top of her head. “I’m gonna keep you alive, though, don’t worry.”

“Until you get tired of me?” she said.

“I swear to God, if you make another joke about something ruining the fantasy, I’m gonna beat Cap to death with his own shield,” he said hotly.

“The death of a national icon on my conscience? How dare,” Darcy joked, leaning against him. They were both quiet for a minute, but it wasn’t a bad quiet, she thought. Her breathing returned to normal. He rubbed her back gently.
“I have to go,” he said suddenly, as if he’d just remembered he had a job. He kissed her shoulder. “But I got you something. FedEx is running again, so it should be here tomorrow.”

“You have to stop buying me things,” Darcy said, trying to sound serious and not all wrecked and ditzy over him. “Natasha brought me a whole wardrobe today and said you paid for it.”

He shrugged. “It’s my money,” he said, rubbing her inner thigh and between her legs. “You can’t stop me, sweetheart.”

“You’re a federal employee,” she said, resisting the urge to melt against him helplessly as he touched her. This was a serious conversation. “You can’t be spending money like this.” He chuckled.

“I think I can,” he said, licking his fingers casually.

“You did not just do that,” Darcy said.

“I like the way you taste,” he said, as if she was a particularly good wine or meal.

“Seriously?” Darcy said.

“I think you’ll like this necklace better than the last one,” he said casually.

“Why?” Darcy asked curiously.

“A feeling,” he said cryptically.

“You’re going back to being all mysterious again,” she said.

“I don’t want to make it weird,” he said. Darcy looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Because our lives aren’t weird? Spill,” she said.

“All right,” he said. “I might—theoretically, of course—be older than you by a few years,” he began.

“No, you’re kidding,” Darcy said sarcastically, feeling more like herself.

“Shut up and let me finish, sweetheart, this is a moment of intimacy,” he said. She grinned. “I didn’t spend as much money as I wanted to, but I got you a little Elsa Peretti necklace,” he said. “Because you wanted to know my taste.”

“You like someone called Elsa Peretti?” she said, confused. He didn’t wear jewelry, she thought.

“Shh, I’m getting there. When I was a little kid, we lived in New York and my mother worked for the florist, yeah?” he said. She nodded and he went on. “This was the eighties, but Ma was still very into the whole seventies minimalist thing. She’s very stylish, my mother. She bought herself these Peretti silver bracelets as a gift when she got a promotion at work. Wore them whenever she went out or to anything fancy. She used to say goodnight to me and Teri whenever we stayed with the babysitter in her black dresses and her silver cuffs and her perfume. It’s the first time I remember thinking I knew someone who was glamorous, you know? Made an impression on me. So, I picked out something for you. It’s subtle, not big,” he said. “No brown diamonds, either.”

“Yeah?” Darcy said. “You’re not not going to tell me what it is?”

“Nope,” he said.
“If I google, can you show me your mom’s bracelets?” she said. She took the phone off her nightstand and typed in a few words.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s them.” He pointed at the screen.

“That’s really cool,” Darcy said, honestly. It was a photo of Sophia Loren in a thick cuff that was shaped to flow like water.

“Oh it was a whole thing,” he said, “because she and my dad had split up briefly, so everyone was like ‘Renata bought herself something from Tiffany’s to celebrate her divorce!’ like she was this scandalous woman,” he said, chuckling and rubbing Darcy’s back. “Of course, dad came crawling back eventually. He couldn’t stay away.”

“They still together?” she asked.

“He passed away a few years ago, but yeah,” he said.

“Do you get to see her enough?” Darcy asked carefully, running her fingers through his hair. He sighed.

“We talk on the phone,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “About your dad and that you don’t get to hang around the florist shop with your mom, too. She sounds cool.”

“Price of doing business. I gotta go, baby, it’s almost five,” he said. She kissed him gently and he shifted her back onto the pillows and got out of bed. He went to the bathroom--she heard him humming as the water ran and the sound of him brushing his teeth and washing his hands--and then returned again. Darcy watched him dress. He’d checked his guns and the knife in his boots before he reached over and turned off the lamp. She lifted her head and he kissed her. He tasted like cinnamon toothpaste and smelled like Samsara again. Hot spice and warm sandalwood, she thought.

“Mmmm,” she said. When she opened her eyes, he was looking at her with a flat expression. “What is it?” she asked.

“You trust me,” he said calmly. “One day, you might need to listen to me even if it doesn’t make sense, sweetheart. You think you can do that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Darcy said.

“There are go bags--” he began.

“--hidden behind a panel in the closet,” Darcy supplied. “I know.” She omitted the part about Natasha. She didn’t know how he’d feel about that. He grinned.

“Good,” he said. “Get some sleep, baby.”

“I would have preferred a taser to a gun, though,” she said, as he reached the bedroom door.

“Rookie mistake,” he said over his shoulder. “You’ll learn.”

“I want to meet your mother,” she said.

“Don’t push your luck,” he said, disappearing down the hallway. She heard him say goodbye to the dogs.
“You’re just letting him go up there?” Clint said to Natasha. They were on the phone again. She had found a spot on the roof across from Rumlow’s apartment.

“Rollins told me he was going to lunch,” she said. “He was supposed to be gone fifteen minutes or so from Triskelion. He has been up there forty-five minutes. He will leave soon.”

“What if he’s up there killing her right now?” Clint said.

“He will not kill her,” Natasha said calmly. “They are doubtless having sex.”

“Did she just say what I think she said?” Natasha heard Tulsa say somewhere in the background.

“Yes. She told me tonight that they had not had sex yet, so this is what I am hoping, Tulsa,” Natasha said. “I should have planted a bug in the apartment to be certain, but I used my last one in Sitwell’s office this afternoon.”

“What?” Clint said. “You could have asked her leave tonight.”

“It is a calculated risk, yes, but I thought it worth it,” Natasha said.

“I don’t get it,” Clint said.

“He will be more attached to her,” Natasha said. “The emotional effect of losing her afterwards will be increased. Possibly.”

Clint scoffed.

“You remember what you felt like the first time you spent the night with Laura?” Tulsa said in the background. “He was walking on fucking air the next day, Nat!” he called. “Big ass smile on his face all day.”

“This ain’t like that. She’s my wife, I love her,” Clint groused. “Don’t talk about it like that.”

“You see?” Natasha said coolly. “He will be happy and when he comes home to find his apartment empty, how do you think he will react? If Laura had disappeared without a trace, how do you think you would have responded, Clint?”

“Panic,” Clint said. “I would have panicked.”

“It is possible we could increase that feeling,” Natasha said. “Are the members of your team here?”

“Yeah, why?” Clint said.

“May I borrow them?” she said. “Just two men.”

“For what?” Clint asked.

“To destroy his apartment and leave blood on the floor,” she said.

“They don’t have blood to spare, Tasha,” Clint said.
“Of course not. But I do,” she said.

“Who’s blood?” Tulsa called.

“She banks her own to stage her death sometimes,” Clint said with a sigh. Tulsa whistled.

“That’s impressive, Mother Russia,” the Oklahoman said. “He’s gonna freak the fuck out, isn’t he?”

“Here he is,” Natasha said, spotting Rumlow leaving the building and climbing into the jeep. She snapped photos and then emailed them to Clint. “What do you think?” she said.

A minute later, Tulsa grabbed the phone. “I see a smirk!” he called. “Looks like somebody got some.”

“I concur,” Natasha said. “As soon as they are fully occupied, I will move her,” she said.

“How you gonna do it?” he asked.

“It is simple enough,” Natasha said. “She trusts me. I will go to her and say that he wanted me to move her to an undisclosed location and take her to my safe house. We will bring the nice dogs and she will be perfectly safe. By then, he will be out of contact. She will be worried about him and too eager for me to return to help him to object, too. They genuinely like one another.”

“You are cold, Mother Russia,” Tulsa said. “Darcy’s a nice person. That is just mean.”

“Am I? Even if his sympathies are with us, he is taking a risk leaving her alone in his apartment, is he not? He will see that soon,” she said. She smiled to herself. Then she left to meet her dive team. They were going to blow up the helicarriers and disable the phones of the STRIKE teams they distrusted. STRIKE Alpha would be busy soon enough, she thought. Too busy for lunch breaks.

***

Rollins returned to the vault that night at 5:52am after checking things at Triskelion. They were trying to be inconspicuous, so he’d left Sitwell and Smith with the Asset, despite his misgivings. The vault was still half-full of water. He found Sitwell floating in the hallway. “Jasper!” he yelled, flipping the agent over and drawing his gun. “What’s going on?” Jack said in a low voice.

Jasper coughed. “Rollins? I slipped when I ran,” he said in confusion. There was a bruise on his forehead. Jack shoved him into an adjoining room.

“Lock the door and wait for me to call you,” Jack hissed. He tried to move as quietly through the water as possible. He found a battered Smith alone in the room where the Asset had been. The cage was empty. Smith had tried to stop him. His face was evidence of that. “Fuck,” Rollins muttered, swallowing a gag. Smith groaned.

“Out, out,” the man with the bashed in face said. He made a choking sound and Rollins began fishing the teeth out of his throat in horror. “Jasper!” Rollins yelled. “He’s still alive.” Rollins heard Sitwell splashing in the water. He appeared in the doorway.

“He’s needs an ambulance,” Rollins said. “We need to move him out to the street.” He had a
fistfull of Smith’s bloodied teeth in his hand. “Get his other arm.”

They carried Smith through the water. “Pierce would shoot him,” Sitwell said. “Let him go.”

“You do that, I’ll fucking shoot you, you weasel,” Rollins said. “He put himself in that thing’s way while you ran like a coward, didn’t you? Didn’t even shoot your goddamn gun. You call 911 and say he was mugged by looters he tried to stop, you understand? Nobody saw anything.”

Rollins had known Smith was clean for a few weeks. Neither of them could figure out Rumlow’s true allegiance, though Smith had been more optimistic than Rollins. Jack did not want his friend to die. He cursed himself for leaving Smith alone with the Asset. Fury had told them to slow the Asset down if he was released again and Smith had listened. “I fucked up, I’m sorry,” Jack said quietly in Smith’s ear when they reached the sidewalk. Sitwell was already dialing 911. Jack squeezed Smith’s hand and--to his surprise--Smith squeezed back. “Hold on, mate,” Jack said.

They were waiting when Rumlow arrived to take over at 6. “Fuck,” he said. “Get him in the truck. Don’t wait on the goddamned ambulance. Hospital’s only a mile and a half away, use your head.” Rollins followed his instructions, hoping it was the right thing.

***

Darcy was making breakfast for the dogs at 9am when the apartment’s intercom buzzed. “I wonder if that’s FedEx?” she asked Onyx. It was. The doorman had her package downstairs. “I’ll come get it,” Darcy told him politely, when he offered to bring it upstairs. She threw on some yoga pants and a t-shirt and went downstairs.

“Here you go,” the doorman said, grinning. “I think that might be a little blue box, miss.”

“How’d you know that, Frank?” Darcy said.

“I happened to run into Mr. Rumlow the other morning, he asked my opinion on something pretty from Tiffany’s,” Frank said. “I been married thirty years. What’d he do wrong, anyway?”

“He ordered a necklace without seeing it first and it turned out to be hideous,” Darcy said, laughing.

“Oh,” Frank said. “That bad?”

“So bad. Do you need coffee down here?” she asked. “I’ve got plenty?” she offered.

“We’re all good,” he said, “got a pot brewing now.”

She carried her box back to the dogs. Onyx wagged her tail when Darcy returned and Anubis gave her a half-wag. “Awww, look at you, warming up!” Darcy said. “I bet this is expensive. I’m almost afraid to open it. Almost,” she said, cutting the box open with one of his too-sharp knives. “Good thing I’m too nosy to let myself be overcome by fear,” she joked. She opened the cardboard flaps.
“It is a little blue box,” she said with an inhale of surprise. “He so spent too much money. How can he afford it?” she wondered out loud. “Has he just stashed up a bunch of salary by driving a Honda and living in a one bedroom and having no personal life to spend money on?” she said. Anubis yawned. “Yes, I know, all my questions bore you utterly. But you want to see this, don’t you?” she said to Onyx. Onyx looked happily up at her. Darcy reached in and took out the blue box from inside the cardboard one. Before she opened it, she texted Jane.

World’s Okayest Assistant: He got me something from Tiffany’s! What do I do?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What is it?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I don’t know. I’m a little scared it’s something $$$$$$? Also, he snuck home so we could have sex last night. Or I talked him into it? Either way, sex happened.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: OOOOOH. Good sex?

World’s Okayest Assistant: It was amazing. But also crazy? Crazy amazing.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What, like weird position circus contortionist sex?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Um, no? Is Thor more flexible than I realized or something?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Maybe.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Janey, he maintained eye contact. It was kinda freaky? Men don’t normally look in my eyes that much during sex, you know?!

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Not with your boobs.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: OPEN THE TIFFANY’S, you goof.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Okay, okay, okay. Oh gosh, Jane, it’s cute and not scary-expensive looking at all. [photo]

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Is that a flower? A ribbon?

World’s Okayest Assistant: it does look like a ribbon, doesn’t it? I’m relieved it’s not all diamond-y. I was afraid after the poo necklace.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: OMG, yes. You could actually wear that wherever.

World’s Okayest Assistant: He told me he picked this out because his mom wore Elsa Peretti when he was young and he thought it was glamorous when he was a little boy? I think that’s weirdly sweet. Also, his mother is named Renata?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Renata Rumlow sounds terrifyingly glam. Like she would wear 4 inch heels and stuff.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Oooh, I’m gonna google, see if I can find a photo.

World’s Okayest Assistant: That’s funny. I can’t find anything? Will you ask JARVIS?
[5 minutes later]

**HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard:** JARVIS can’t find her either.

**HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard:** You think he lied?

**World’s Okayest Assistant:** Maybe? Unless she has a different last name now?

**HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard:** That’s a shame. I really wanted you to have a scary mother-in-law named Renata Rumlow. She would def think your shoes were too mannish.

**World’s Okayest Assistant:** JANE, no. Too soon!

Chapter End Notes

Here is a gif of Frank Grillo saying "what?!" which I find delightful:  
https://goo.gl/images/MJQrYt

Sophia Loren in Elsa Peretti's Bone Cuff, aka, Brock's mama's favorite jewelry:  
https://pin.it/bqoewpssuenw

Also, this is Darcy's new necklace. She hasn't found it on the website yet....for reasons:  
https://pin.it/v6sjzih3vefqye
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Cara means "dear" in Italian.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Y'all are the best, though!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The man in the baseball cap stopped when he reached the correct locker at the train station. Inside his pocket, he had a small key. It still smelled of German chocolate brownies, he could tell. The serums he’d been treated with improved his sense of smell, so he was acutely conscious of the dirt and blood on his clothing. He unlocked the small locker. Inside, there was a go-bag. He unzipped it a fraction: money, clothes, a new set of IDs, weapons, a set of car keys. Everything he would need for a road trip to Cleveland. That had been the plan. He fidgeted. There was one thing he wanted to do first.

He smiled. He had a good smile, a passing woman thought. Pretty blue-gray eyes, too. There was something sweet about that man.

***

Darcy goofed around for the rest of the day after her new necklace arrived. She played with the dogs, tried on her new clothes, and worked on her laptop.

World’s Okayest Assistant: I just got a call from the building manager. Brock has them fixing your apartment, too. [photos 1, 2, 3]. The manager must be terrified of him because he was really nice to me.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I’m beginning to like him, even if he is weirdly cryptic.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Me, too.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Aha! You admit it!

World’s Okayest Assistant: Did I tell you about the go-bag? I have a whole fake identity now.
HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What’s your fake name, anyway?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Cara Smith. It’s very generic-sounding, but Cara is pretty.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: There’s probably a reason for that.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Like, you need to be inconspicuous?

World’s Okayest Assistant: Little ol’ wallflower me?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: [photo]

World’s Okayest Assistant: What’s that face?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: My expression of scorn.

World’s Okayest Assistant: I miss you! [hearts emoji]

***

“Project Insight will be over in a few days, hours if we are lucky,” Natasha told Fury. She was meeting with him, Tulsa and Clint in a warehouse.

“Our next objective is Pierce,” Fury said. “I think they’ll come for me, but I want you all to stay on Pierce. I am an acceptable loss, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Clint said politely. He knew this was directed at him and Natasha.

“What about the Asset?” Tulsa said.

“Gone,” Fury told them. “Rollins called me from the hospital. Smith was injured when he escaped, but they’ll think he’ll recover---eventually. The Asset is an unknown variable. We don’t know if he’ll show to help Pierce tomorrow or not. If you see him, you are authorized to kill him. We’ve got no time to win him over.”

“Yes, sir,” Tulsa said.

As they left with Natasha, Tulsa looked at Clint. They knew Smith. “You think Smith’s an acceptable loss?” he asked the Iowan.

“He’ll pull through,” Clint said stubbornly. “He’s hard-headed.”

“Maybe not the time for that particular remark,” Natasha said. “We are going to activate the devices in the early morning when the staff numbers are lowest.”

“Shift change,” Tulsa said.

“Yes,” Natasha said. “Then I will go retrieve Darcy. Give him time to go home for her--if he bothers--and then pick him up the day after, if the first operation is successful.”
“That long?” Clint said. “He could flee?”

“Yes,” she said. “We go for Pierce first. If Rumlows comes to help Pierce, you tell him that we have her, understood? If not, then we will pick him up later and be able to leverage her for everything of value he knows. It will be considerable.”

Clint sighed. “I have this fear that it’s all going to go to hell,” he said.

“Some things will,” Natasha said.

“You?” Tulsa asked.

“They always do. But in following our nature, we become our original nature in the end,” she said calmly. “We will do our jobs and things will fall into place.”

“You get that off a fortune cookie?” Tulsa asked.

“No,” Clint said. “It’s from an old movie Darcy had us watch. I hate that we’re doing this to her, Tasha.”

“We are removing her from a potentially volatile situation, you must remember. She will be safe and she is a very forgiving person,” Natasha said. “She will forgive you, even if she does not forgive me.”

“Another acceptable loss?” Tulsa asked, as they got in the SUV.

“You do realize that the first assignment of Project Insight is the deaths of seven-hundred-thousand innocent people, including Tony Stark and Bruce Banner? She loves them both,” Natasha said. “Pierce also would want Jane’s research. Against HYDRA many things are acceptable, my friends. Sentimentality is for children,” Natasha said.

“We’re lucky she’s in New York,” Tulsa said. “Real lucky. I wouldn’t mind Thor, though.”

Clint laughed. “Somebody put a bug in Tony’s ear about a conference, didn’t they?” he said, looking at Tasha.

“Perhaps. It was my original intention that Darcy and Jane both be in New York,” she said. “I do not always know everything. But I will take one in New York and one in my safe house also.”

“She’s right,” Clint said, sighing. “I hate doing it, but we gotta wipe these people out, even if Darcy feels like we tricked her. And we gotta shoot that poor Winter Soldier bastard if he gets in the way, too.”

“If you see him, I would advise you to flee and live to fight another day,” Natasha said coolly. “Do not bother trying to stop him unless he is directly assisting Pierce and you have no choice.”

“Yeah,” Clint said.

“Slide over,” she told Clint, “I am driving.”

“I feel like you’re always in the driver’s seat, Mother Russia,” Tulsa said cheerfully.

“This is what I expect men to think, usually,” she said.
She’d hoped that Brock would surprise her again that night, but Darcy got a text from him at midnight, saying he would be working into tomorrow. They were looking for missing equipment, he said. It was dangerous, important equipment.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Please be safe.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: I can’t guarantee that, baby. This is serious.

World’s Okayest Assistant: That bad, huh?

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: Yeah. You like your necklace?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I love it.

STRIKE Alpha Cmdr. Brock Rumlow: Good. Wear it for me ‘til I get back, sweetheart.

Darcy was woken up at 4am that night by a second text message. Blearily, she grabbed her phone, expecting it to be Brock. It was from Jane.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Have you heard from Brock? Did he say anything about the news?

World’s Okayest Assistant: What news?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Those chemical leaks near the office that just happened? Some sort of hurricane damage? They evacuated the whole building when stuff went boom in the river.

World’s Okayest Assistant: WHAT? Holy shit. I’m calling.

Darcy called Rumlow. His phone rang and rang. For a minute, it sounded like someone was going to pick up, but the line went dead. She couldn’t even leave a message. “Well, I am just gonna be freaking out,” Darcy told Onyx and Anubis, then texted Jane again.

World’s Okayest Assistant: I can’t get him on the phone, Jane. I’m kind of freaked. He usually answers.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Oh, shit. You want me to send Thor? Or Tony? Let someone come get you and we’ll figure this out.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Can’t leave the dogs.
HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: What if I send both of them? Would the dogs let Thor carry them?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I don’t think so and they’re too big for bags. What do I do? I’m trying to stay calm, but ughhhhhhh. He said they’d lost important equipment. What if it was explosives?

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: I don’t like this at all.

World’s Okayest Assistant: Me, neither. Wait, there’s someone at the door.

World’s Okayest Assistant: It’s Natasha. She’s going to move me and the dogs to a safe house farther from the office. Brock asked her to.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Okay, that makes me feel better. Call me soon?

World’s Okayest Assistant: I will. There’s something crazy happening at SHIELD. Natasha says to stay in NY with Thor, don’t come back yet.

HRH Queen Jane of Science! And Asgard: Okay. We love you! Stay safe!

World’s Okayest Assistant: Love you too!

World’s Okayest Assistant: Will call when I’m at the safe house.

Natasha drove through the still-dark streets of DC at excessive speeds, Darcy thought. “I think we’re supposed to stop at red lights!” she said.

“Really?” Natasha said coyly. “There is no one here. Also, the dogs seem to be enjoying it.”

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” Darcy asked.

“It is complicated, milaya ,” Natasha said.

“Give me the Cliff’s Notes version?” Darcy asked. Natasha explained the basics to her: SHIELD had been infiltrated by remnants of HYDRA. Clint and Tulsa had been fighting them and had managed to root out most of the tactical corruption, but headquarters was a mystery. Brock wanted to her to stay safe, Natasha said; it was better if she didn’t contact him yet. She, Clint, and Tulsa were going back for Alexander Pierce, who was the person moving the strings and not to be trusted. Darcy should suspect everyone and not answer the door. She would be valuable to anyone who wanted Jane’s weapons location program. Brock had been right.

“Even my friend Dave the archivist?” Darcy said sadly, once she’d thought about it for a minute.

“No,” Natasha said, smiling enigmatically. “Not David. He has been helping me distribute bugs within the archival files. Both electronically and physically. Everyone checks out files, but they never read all the way to the end.”

“Natasha, did you sleep with him?” Darcy asked.

“A lady never tells,” Natasha said, suddenly turning into an alley behind a row of brick townhouses. “We are here. I will do a check and then leave you here safely.”

“All right,” Darcy said. Natasha got out, locked them in the car, and then went inside. “How do
you guys feel about this?” Darcy asked Anubis and Onyx. “Cause I’m truly, really freaking out.” She toyed with the necklace at her throat.

***

The explosions caused a minor panic amongst the HYDRA crews recruited to man the helicarriers. A crew chief ran to Alexander Pierce’s office in the dark. “Sir?” he asked.

“Remain calm,” Pierce said. “Keep working on the debugging. We can still repair and raise them if the computers work,” he said. “The World Security Council arrives tomorrow. When you remake the world, you can expect delays, son.”

“Yes, sir.”

Then Pierce called STRIKE Golf on a secure cell phone. “ETA?” he asked.

“We expect Fury at the intersection in approximately four and a half minutes,” the man said. “We’re short-staffed, but we anticipate that he is tired and will be easy to overpower.”

“Don’t underestimate my old friend,” Pierce said. He hung up the phone and called Jack Rollins. “Rollins?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Rollins said.

“Any word on our missing equipment?” Pierce asked.

“Not yet,” Rollins said. “Rumlow has gone off on a lead.”

“Alone?” Pierce asked.

“He insisted, sir,” Rollins said. “He thinks Sitwell agitates the Asset.”

“His instincts are usually correct,” Pierce said quietly. “If we cannot find the Asset, we will proceed without him and retrieve him at a later date. All in due time, agent.”

“Yes, sir,” Rollins said, repressing the nausea he always felt at the sound of Pierce’s smooth, polished voice. Before SHIELD, he had not known that evil could sound so reasonable and compelling.

***

Brock Rumlow was pretending to look for the Winter Soldier. With any luck, Yasha was halfway to Cleveland by now. He was going to rendezvous with a contact person who’d help him get the book back. Old, trustworthy friend. Brock was going to check on Darcy. He missed her. When he turned his key in the lock and pushed the door open, it caught on something. “Baby?” Brock called, pushing the door open. It was stuck. “Darcy?” he said. He realized there was something dark and gritty under his feet and pulled out his weapon, then flipped on the light.
Horrified, he froze. The entire apartment had been trashed. He was standing on the remnants of Darcy’s coconut orchid. It had been thrown to the floor. The couch cushions had been slashed. The bookshelf was turned over. His rug was missing. There was no sound inside the apartment but the rotation of the ceiling fan. He crept silently down the hallway, trying not to shake. He pushed the bedroom open slowly. Red. He saw red. His bedroom carpet was soaked with blood. So much blood. It stretched from the nightstand to the foot of the bed, on the side where Darcy usually slept. He stood there for a long moment. She could not have left on her own after losing so much blood. The significance of the rug became clear. He slumped slowly to the floor.

“No, no, no, no,” he murmured, weeping. “Who did this to you, baby?” He rocked back and forth, his brain awash in images of a dead Darcy, lifeless and pale inside that rug. There was movement in his peripheral vision. Someone was standing at the end of the hallway.

“Did you fucking do this, Yasha?” Brock asked, looking at the barrel of his gun. He had it pointed towards himself, not the other man.

Chapter End Notes

The movie is, of course, "The Lady from Shanghai." Tasha is paraphrasing Rita Hayworth as Elsa:

Elsa: "One who loves passionately is cured of love, in the end...There’s more to the proverb: Human nature is eternal. Therefore, one who follows his nature keeps his original nature, in the end."
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The list of military alphabet acronyms (that I’ve borrowed for the off-canon STRIKE teams) goes: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliett, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X-ray, Yankee, Zulu. I doubt there are as many STRIKE Teams as acronyms, but it was fun to pick and chose names from the list.

Chapter mood: Pink Martini’s Que Sera, Sera for...reasons.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Y’all are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No,” the surprisingly soft voice said. Yasha stepped closer, peering into the bedroom. With sudden violence, Brock Rumlow stood and shoved the other man against the wall.

“Do you kill her?” he said intently. “Did you fucking do this to her?”

“No,” Yasha said, oddly calm. “I didn’t. Think.” He shook the other man slightly. Brock looked at him with wild eyes, then seemed to recollect himself.

“I know, kid, I know,” Brock stuttered. “Fuck. I’m sorry. Shit.” He was shaking.

“Don’t feel too bad. I’ve done worse things to wives and girlfriends,” Yasha said grimly. He brushed Rumlow away without concern and stepped into the bedroom. Under his feet, the carpet squelched wetly. It was saturated with blood.

“Oh God,” Brock said in response to the sound, running his hand through his hair. “Stop. Stop That’s--that’s-her blood, for fuck’s sake. Her blood.”

Yasha looked back at him flatly. He sniffed. “Something is wrong,” he said.

“It’s Pierce, isn’t it?” Brock said wildly.

“I recognize this somehow,” Yasha said. “I don’t know from where, but I know this.”

Brock leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. “They slit her throat, oh God,” he said in an agonized voice, gagging. Yasha’s footsteps made a squishing sound like stepping on wet, soaked grass. He was looking around the room.

“There is no arterial spray,” Yasha said flatly. “No one’s throat was slit. You would find a pool of blood like this only if she was suspended upside down from a beam or a ladder and then stabbed, so that all her blood ran down and out. I do not think that happened. I have only known two men
strong enough to do that and I killed them both. Where are the dogs?” He looked up at the ceiling again. There were no beams. There were no marks from a ladder, either. There would be impressions in the carpet when a body was left there for long enough for this much blood to drain.

“I can’t--I can’t,” Brock said. He stumbled away, threw up in the hall bathroom, and then crouched on the floor, sobbing. “He took her from me,” he choked out. “That son of a bitch did it, I know he did. Oh God, does he know?”

Yasha looked at him seriously. “Where are the dogs?” he repeated. “She was playing with dogs on the phone, I heard. They would shoot the dogs, too.”

“Do you think I fucking know?” Brock said, furious and weeping. “Probably in the damn rug with her.” Yasha shook his head. He went back into the bedroom, sniffing. He knelt on the floor and put his nose close to the carpet. “It is cold,” he said to himself. “Actually cold.” He tried to remember the precise scent of anticoagulant.

“So much fucking blood,” Brock muttered from inside the other bathroom. Yasha heard him gag and retch again.

“Put your gun away,” Yasha said. “Or give it to me.” He stood up--there was blood on his hands and knees now--and went to the bathroom. Brock was kneeling in front of the toilet. Yasha gestured at him. “Let’s go,” he said. “There is nothing here.”

“You were supposed to go,” Brock said, as if he hadn’t spoken. “You were supposed to go, I’d fucking get Pierce, she’d be safe. She just--she was just here. She was here.” He was beginning to babble. His knuckles were white around the gun in his lap. Yasha leaned down and pried it out of his hand.

“You cannot get Pierce alone now,” Yasha said flatly. He grabbed Rumlow by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. “He had not left the office when I waited at the usual time.”

“Don’t touch me, don’t fucking touch me,” Rumlow said. “The fucking blood. Blood everywhere.” He struck at the other man half-heartedly. Yasha’s hands were still red and damp. Brock staggered and gagged again. “Her blood,” he sobbed.

“We’ll get Pierce,” Yasha said flatly. He washed his hands in the sink and then steered Rumlow out of the apartment by the elbow. “You need to rest now. You are going into shock. I will deal with this later,” he said, stepping over the trampled, broken orchid.

***

Nick Fury and Maria Hill were riding in an armored SHIELD SUV in the dawn light. “You read in Cap when we get to Triskelion,” Fury said. “It’s time. Even if I don’t make it there, you keep going. I’m the primary target.”

“Do you see someone?” Hill asked, looking back. The streets were still mostly deserted, between the early hour and the residual hurricane flooding. They’d been at a secondary safe house with Agent 13 when Natasha had notified them that the explosions had begun. Sharon Carter had gone ahead alone, while Fury and Hill transmitted essential evidence of HYDRA’s existence to the still-alive Phil Coulson. They didn’t want Pierce to evade prosecution, if he survived and they failed.

“No, but I can feel these assholes watching me,” he said crisply. “It’s only a matter of minutes. Like an itch on the back of your neck.”
Suddenly, they heard police sirens. “DC Metro squad cars,” Maria said, pulling a long gun from the backseat. “Except the shape of the blue lights is all wrong. Sloppy mistake.”

“Pierce’s daddy wasn’t a cop like yours, Hill,” Fury said accelerating. “Maybe he doesn’t notice important details.”

“Oh, he’s a real big picture guy,” Hill said flatly, firing out of the SUV’s special gun hatch.

“Remind me to tell him that,” Fury said, banking left abruptly.

“It’s STRIKE Golf,” Maria called. “I recognize them!”

“I used to like golf,” Fury told her in a pissed-off voice.

***

Several hours later, Brock Rumlow was sitting in a hotel room, looking out a window. There was an empty glass still in his hand. “She is not dead,” Yasha told Brock suddenly. The other man looked him flatly. Yasha was packing.

“No one could lose that much blood and live, Yasha,” he said. Brock was numb. Had she suffered horribly because he let her into his life? He stared at his phone as if it were a grenade. There was one number that he was too terrified to call. As long as he didn't call, he didn't know. If he didn't know, it was like it had not happened--yet.

“It was staged,” Yasha said. “I have seen it done before. I remember now.” Brock stared out the window. “It was the special talent of my favorite student,” Yasha said. “Natalya.”

“I don’t know any fucking Natalyas, kid,” Brock said.

“Natalya Romanova,” Yasha said. Brock froze, then looked at Yasha.

“Fuck, fuck,” Brock said. “They’re friends. She would go with Romanov.” He put the glass down and pulled out his phone, suddenly more clear-headed, and tapped a few keys. He kept his apartment under surveillance via the hidden in-house security system. He’d subtly suggested it to Congressman Schumacher and done his own access point. How could he fucking forget? He was out of his goddamn mind. He pulled up the images from the hallway and saw a flash of red hair, then two women leaving together. The dogs trotted happily in front of them. A few minutes later, two men that he recognized as dead SHIELD agents appeared onscreen. One was carrying a cooler.

“Motherfucker,” he whispered. “She’s safe, she’s safe,” he said out loud. “They’re both safe.” He was suddenly weeping. He put his face in his hands.

“Good,” Yasha said. “That’s good.” The man next to him started to shake. Then he began to beat the nightstand with his fist.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. That redheaded fucking bitch is trying to play me,” Brock yelled. “She is doing this for that one-eyed asshole.”

“Natalya,” Bucky said, smiling with a kind of affection and teacherly pride. “She used to draw her own blood and refrigerate it. She’s also very fond of dogs and wouldn’t shoot them. Unless one was attacking her.”
“What do they want?” Brock said, raking a hand through his hair.

“To frighten you or distress you into making a mistake because Fury thinks you are loyal to Pierce,” Yasha said. “It is what I would do.”

“Shit. Fuck.” An alarming thought had occurred to him. Brock rewound the video and watched it again. Darcy looked nervous, but not upset. She was toying with her necklace as they waited for the elevator. “They didn’t tell her I was HYDRA?” he said.

“Why? All she had to say is that you wanted Darcy moved and she would go willingly. To explain everything would take time,” he said. “It is clever. Natalya was always a good student.” He smiled sweetly.

“The both of you are deeply, deeply fucked up people, you know that?” Brock said. He dialed a number on his phone, breathing heavily in relief.

“Who are you calling?” Yasha asked. Brock waved his arm dismissively.

“Ma,” he said. “Where’s Pierce now? Shit. Okay. I want you to leave as quickly as possible, all right? Just get in the car--yes, I know you know what you’re doing, but in case he decides to run, I don’t want you in his house, goddammit. Sorry. Yes, I know, language. We’ll talk soon.”

“You are calling your mother now?” Yasha said.

“She’s been working as Pierce’s housekeeper for the last month,” Brock said quietly. “He’s holed himself up at the office. We could go now or we could wait until we know if he’s got the WSC?”

“Your mother?” Yasha said. “I thought she was a florist?”

“She’s the chief manager at the oldest florist shop in New York, okay? They have six branches across the Tri-state area, it’s a multi-million dollar company. And Ma knows what she’s doing. She was a SHIELD agent before she got married,” he said defensively.

“Oh,” Yasha said. “She left SHIELD for flowers?”

“It’s all shipping logistics and supply and demand,” Brock explained. “She managed SHIELD’s supply chain first. It’s probably easier to get guns into America than it is to get tulips from fucking Holland through customs, actually.” He chuckled wryly. “She might be a better poker face now that she’s spent thirty years with the bridezillas, too. Peggy Carter was really pissed, though. She didn’t like the way they used to push out the married female agents in the 1970s by refusing to provide childcare and shit,” Brock said.

“Where does the florist think she is?” Yasha asked curiously.

“Family medical leave for an elderly aunt,” he said.

***

At ten o’clock in the morning, Darcy paced the living room of Natasha’s safe house while Anubis watched her. Back and forth. Back and forth. She hadn’t been able to sleep at all the night before. She wanted Brock. She’d broken the rules and tried calling him once while she watched the news anxiously, but his phone was obviously broken. She hoped that was all. But there were reports of a shooting involving DC police and what looked suspiciously like Nick Fury and Maria Hill on
security cameras. The news was referring to them as suspected bank robbers, which would have been hilarious, if she wasn’t terrified. “I’m so worried. It looks like Fury and Hill survived. I hope everyone is all right. Where is Steve? Where is everybody? Nat totally slept with Dave, by the way,” she told Onyx. Darcy resumed her pacing. “What do I do? I feel like I should be doing something? Should I call Tony? God, I hope Brock’s okay. If I could only leave him a message!”

Onyx wagged her tail and looked sympathetic.

“I can’t just freaking sit here!” she told the whippet. Darcy picked up her phone and dialed.

“Emperor of Awesome and King of Handsomeness,” Tony said, when he picked up from inside the suit.

“Tony! Oh thank God,” Darcy said. “Something’s happening at SHIELD.”

“I know, Itty Bitty,” he said. “Capisce called us. Thor and I are headed that way now. Are you safe?”

“I’m safe. I’m--I’m in Natasha’s safe house,” Darcy said and burst into tears.


“If I may assist, what appears to be the problem, Miss Lewis?” the AI said.

“I’m okay,” Darcy said, wiping her eyes, “I’m just so glad you’re coming, Tony.”

“Well, you know, I have heard that many, many times before---” Tony said lasciviously.

“Oh God, shut up, you schmuck,” Darcy said, realizing why he’d leered. “Just save all my friends and my boyfriend, okay?”

“Hey, speaking of Agent Rambo, did you hear the one about the time I met Stallone and Brigitte Nielsen?” Tony began, but Darcy cut him off.

“I’m hanging up now. I love you, even though you’re such a child,” Darcy said, still crying a little.

“How could you not?” Tony said cheerfully. “See you soon, Itty Bitty!”

When the phone had gone silent, she looked at the dogs again and burst into tears of relief. “They’ve got help,” she said. “They’ve got Tony and Thor and Mew-Mew and Steve.”

It would be okay, she thought. How could it not be okay?

Chapter End Notes

There is a hilarious supercut clip of all the times Frank Grillo swears in S1 of
Kingdom. It's definitely NSFW, but very colorful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DETa6shjjmo

I got into the habit of spelling Romanov with a v, instead of Romanoff because it looks prettier to me that way. I don't know why.

Pink Martini's Que Sera, Sera, the creepiest cover: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVbrycPKXZQ
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Rise up. Fall down.

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Y’all are the greatest readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At Triskelion, they fought back against the sudden, but not unanticipated HYDRA uprising after the attempt on Fury’s life. “Is that Cap?” Tulsa said, firing at a HYDRA agent. He could hear a voice over the intercom system. Between the bullets, it sounded very inspiring.

“The Maria must have told him!” Clint said on comms, firing an arrow from the ducts in one section of the basement. The remaining HYDRA-ridden Project Insight crews had been driven down into the basement levels where they’d built the now-sabotaged helicarriers. With no helicarriers to launch, they were trying to kill as many loyal SHIELD agents as possible. Unfortunately, the basements were a warren of rooms perfect for ambushes. Clint was doing recon through the ductwork, making arrow notches and planting cameras as he went. Somewhere upstairs, Pierce had holed himself up in his office. They had intercepted the World Security Council, however. He had only SHIELD employees for hostages. But there had been a skirmish on the tech level when someone had tried to raise the disabled helicarriers.

“She told me she was going to read him in, after Pierce tried to come for Fury at an intersection with STRIKE Golf,” Sharon Carter yelled over comms. She was fighting her way towards Pierce upstairs. “They were masquerading as cops, but Fury told Hill to go and led them into a trap alone He’s hurt, but alive. The Asset never showed up!” Sharon had been guarding the techs that morning, while Hill and Fury did backups for Coulson. Sharon was secretly proud of her techs: An analyst named Cameron Klein had hit Jasper Sitwell with his heavy electric stapler and duct-taped him to a chair.

“I ain’t surprised,” Tulsa said. “I always hated those Golf assholes. That just leaves STRIKE Foxtrot and India.” Tulsa had been taking a mental roster of potential enemies.

“Steve got India!” Sharon yelled. Maria had just updated her.

“What about STRIKE Whiskey?” Clint called.

“They ain’t HYDRA. They take their name too seriously,” Tulsa said. “See? I knew it.” There was a chorus of yells over the comms.

“What the hell was that?” Sharon said.

“STRIKE Whiskey was living up to their name by getting drunk in the storage room next to the
basement during their essential personnel shift. They just hit one of the Insight Crews from behind,” Clint said.

“With a goddamn Molotov cocktail,” Tulsa said. “Hey, idiots, loyal agents next to the explosive chemicals!” he called out.

“Sorry!” a voice said. “Incoming!”

“Tulsa duck!” Clint yelled from the rafters. There was a boom. “Are you all right? Tulsa!”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said. “But I think my hair got singed. Where are your guns, assholes?!”

“We left ‘em upstairs!” one of the Whiskey guys yelled.

“Take one off the dead guys, Jesus,” Tulsa said.

“Oh, yeah! Good idea!” the other man said.

“What does jumping out of a plane do to their damn brains?” he muttered.

“You have this under control?” Sharon said, pausing in the stairwell.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “We got it!”

“I’m headed up to Pierce,” she said. “We think he’s walled up some of the staff in his office with some of Foxtrot and Alpha. Jack’s there and waiting for my signal. I’m worried he could use the employees as human shields to escape.” They knew about Foxtrot, but not Alpha. Jack didn’t have the numbers to rescue the employees himself, if he was the only armed not-HYDRA person in the room.

***

There were three people in the control room with the intercom system. “Steve, it’s time to go,” Maria Hill yelled. “Upstairs! Agent 13 says STRIKE Foxtrot is with Pierce.”

“Yes’ ma’am,” Steve said. Steve didn’t know Agent 13, but he knew Maria trusted her, whoever she was. “Sam, can you get me up there quickly?”

“Uh-huh,” Sam said. “Use that thing of Maria’s to get a hole in that window and I’ll drop you off upstairs.” He’d called his friend Sam in for help, as soon as the melee had begun this morning and they’d had to fight their way to the intercoms to warn the loyal employees. Steve had personally taken out several Project Insight crews and a STRIKE team, with a little airborne assistance. Sam had a flight suit. Steve had also called Tony and Thor, over Maria’s objections. They were en-route to DC. He wasn’t an idiot. Backup was always a good thing.

“I’ll see you in a bit, Maria,” Steve said, before Sam seized him and hauled him into the air through a neat circle in the nearest glass window.

“You’re heavy, you know that?” Sam yelled as he flew.

“I didn’t know we were having a HYDRA Uprising when I had breakfast!” Steve yelled back.
Alexander Pierce paced the conference room next to his office. “The carriers can’t be raised, sir,” the STRIKE Foxtrot Commander told him. “We lost Sitwell and several of our other moles.”

“Setbacks will happen,” Pierce said. “I am disappointed, but I did prepare for this moment.”

“You asshole,” the employee on the floor said. It was Pierce’s secretary, Janice. Jack Rollins had zip-tied her as comfortably as he could manage.

“Janice,” Pierce said in a calm voice. “I wish you would see this from my point of view.”

Pierce’s phone rang. “Hello?” he said politely. “I’m in my office. Excellent. About 5 minutes?” He hung up the phone.

“Sir?” Jack said. He still had his hand on his gun.

“Rumlow and the Asset are going to evacuate us out of here,” he said. “Unfortunately, Janice, I’m going to have to use you as a human shield. Let’s go, Jack, Thomas, Kyle.” Pierce hauled Janice to her feet and Rollins and two of the STRIKE Foxtrot HYDRA stepped forward.

“Yes, sir,” Jack said.

“I want the rest of you to maintain the illusion that I’m still here. Put my photostatic veil on one of the employees,” Pierce said. He looked at the people zip-tied on the floor. “I do apologize to whicheveer of you that is,” he said, before pulling on a ski mask and dragging Janice out of the room, flanked by Jack and the two men from Foxtrot. They disappeared down a stairwell. Above them, Steve was being dropped on the roof. Below them, Agent 13 and Maria Hill were climbing another stairwell.

***

“God-fucking-dammit, I can wait for you,” the helicopter pilot called, as the Triskelion came into view.

“It’s not safe,” Rumlow said. “It’s too light out for you, motherfucker.” He grinned. The side of the helicopter was painted with the insignia of the pilot’s old special forces aviation unit, the Night Stalkers. Their motto was “Death Waits in the Dark.”

“Jokes not funny, pal, you’re about to assassinate the guy who turned down a fucking Nobel!” the pilot said. “Place i’ll be crawling with cops in no time, even if you make it out!”

“I’ve shot plenty of nicer people. We’ll get out on foot, meet you at the rendezvous point. Just get me as close as you can to the 41st floor.”

“Affirmative, you dumb fuck,” the pilot said. He eased the helicopter as close to the high-rise building as he dared. The sounds of gunfire were audible.

“I’m ready,” Yasha said grimly. “Don’t roll.” He fired something from his metal arm that shattered the window inward. Then he launched a wire to one of the interior columns.

“He creeps me the fuck out,” the pilot said, as Yasha zip-lined across and disappeared into the hole.
“Uh-huh,” Rumlow said, clipping his harness onto the line. There was a loud boom and a faint shudder within the building and it began to list slightly.

“What in hell was that?” the pilot said.

“Dumb fucks in accounting thought it was more cost-effective to store the explosives in the sub-basements instead of off-site,” Rumlow said grimly, seizing the line. “Mistake. See you around, Ray!”

“Good luck, asshole!” Ray the pilot said. Rumlow slid across the line with a whir. “Oh fuck,” Ray whispered, before he cut the line and flew away. “Shit fuck. That building’s coming down,” he said out loud.

***

Pierce came into the room where they were standing near the hole in the window, still using Janice as a human shield and wearing a ski mask. Three men trailed him. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, Commander,” Pierce said. Yasha’s fist clenched involuntarily.

“I had to send the helicopter away,” Rumlow said. “But we’ll make sure to take care of you, sir. We don’t need her,” he said, meaning Janice. “Jack, why don’t you take care of that?” he suggested casually, nodding towards an adjoining room. At that moment, Janice pulled a gun and her photostatic veil.

“I don’t think he will be,” Natasha said quietly, pointing her gun at Pierce. Everyone froze.

“Disarm her,” Pierce said to the Asset. Yasha shrugged.

“I know her,” he said. “I know her.”

“I hate to break up this pleasant reunion, especially since we have unfinished business about what you did to my apartment, Natalya,” Rumlow said coolly, giving Natasha a look, “but I’ve got a man to take out of this organization. Pierce, let’s go.”

“No,” Jack said. “I can’t let you do that, Brock.” The guys on STRIKE Foxtrot swung their guns away from Natasha and at him in surprise.

“Now’s not the time to play hero, Jack,” Rumlow said. “Stand down. You and Romanov are outnumbered.”


“Sir, we don’t need that,” Rumlow said grimly. The Asset twitched.

“Make him stop,” Yasha said to Rumlow in Russian.

Pierce said a second word in Russian—”rusted”—and Yasha stepped backwards, closer to the edge.

“Pierce, let’s go,” Rumlow said. “Stop. It’s too dangerous to unleash him here.”
“I can’t let you go,” Jack said grimly, leveling his gun at Rumlow.

“Jack, I hope you fucking prepped like I taught you this morning,” Rumlow said, pulling the trigger on his weapon. In a moment, there was a blaze of gunfire and several bodies lay on the floor. Rumlow and Yasha had both shot at once.

Jack groaned, but there was no blood on his shirt. Rumlow had always made STRIKE Alpha wear vests, even when they bitched and moaned about the heat and discomfort. Natasha was wearing a vest as well, Rumlow knew. She was no fool. Yasha leaned over and shot Pierce again.

“Hail HYDRA,” Pierce whispered, fading, as Yasha looked down at him blankly. The breeze from the hole in the window stirred his hair.

“You okay?” Rumlow said.

“Yeah,” Yasha said.

“We need to move,” Rumlow said, seizing his arm. “Beating his corpse would be overkill.” Yasha looked faintly disappointed. “I’ll get you ice cream or something, kid,” Rumlow said.

As they turned towards the door, a figure appeared. Steve froze. “Bucky?” he said, shield in hand.

“Who the hell is Bucky?” Yasha asked Rumlow in Russian.

“No fucking clue,” Rumlow said back in English. “Cap, hold onto the shield!”

Just then, the surviving man from Foxtrot--Kyle--raised his bloodied torso and fired at Rumlow and Yasha. His shot went wide and hit Rumlow in the shoulder, but it caused a string of chain reactions: Rumlow stumbled backwards a step, Yasha turned towards Kyle, and Steve threw his shield at Kyle. Yasha attempted to block more bullets from hitting Rumlow as Kyle fired again, but had to duck to avoid the shield. It hit Kyle, but not before a second shot got Rumlow low in his rib cage and propelled him backwards. Yasha grabbed at him. They were very close to the window. So close that a second explosion in the sub-basement was enough. Just as Jack lifted his head, both men disappeared from his sight.

A horrified Steve ran to them, but was a fraction too late: he watched as both men fell from the window and down into the river, forty stories down. He heard the splash.

“Evacuate, evacuate, Pierce is dead,” Steve called. “Sam, where are you?” Steve said into his comms. “I need to be on the ground!”

“I’m evacuating people on Pierce’s floor!” Sam called. “Tony Stark and Thor are helping!”

Steve’s heart lurched. He wanted to get to Bucky, but he knew he had responsibilities. Steve knew that 40 stories was too far to dive and he couldn’t leave Nat and Jack, so he wrenched down the rappelling line from the nearest pillar. If he secured it to a railing and slid down once he’d gotten them to safety, it would give him an extra twenty seconds to get to Bucky. Then he lifted Natasha over one shoulder and supported a groaning Jack, who was regaining consciousness. “What happened?” Steve asked.

“Rumlow shot us?” Jack said, dazed. “Pierce?”
“Pierce is dead,” Steve said, hustling down the stairwell. Over his shoulder, Natasha stirred.

“He shot everyone?” Jack said in confusion.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “I was too late.”

***

Brock had fallen before. He had thousands of hours of parachuting experience, so he knew what it would feel like to fall. It was slower than you’d expect, always. He just didn’t know how to land. He’d forgotten his ‘chute. “Rookie mistake,” he whispered to himself, smiling, looking at the blue sky as he fell and fell and fell. It was a beautiful day. The storm had finally gone back out to sea. On a clear day, the blue sky was endless. He concentrated on that blue until the pain hit and everything went black.

***

The pilot landed the helicopter in the clearing, but only one man emerged from the shadows. It was not the one he wanted to see. Yasha was carrying a limp and motionless Rumlow. “I could not leave him in the river,” Yasha said flatly.


“Yes,” Yasha said, laying the body down gently in the helicopter.

“I’ll take you to Phil,” Ray said. “Goddammit. I should have waited for you. Goddammit!”

“Phil?” Yasha said blankly, once they were in the air.

“Old friend. He was supposed to meet you in Cleveland. When he”--the pilot looked at Rumlow’s still body in grief--”didn’t know if Fury was too compromised by his friendship with Pierce, he went to Phil.”

***

Steve emerged from another search of the Potomac alone. He was wet and forlorn. A woman was waiting for him on the bank. “Kate?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m Agent 13,” she said, swallowing. Behind her, the Triskelion--half-submerged in the water--burned.

“What?” Steve said.

“Steve,” Sharon said. “Let me help you search.”

“Kate--” he began.

“Also, my name is Sharon. Sharon Carter,” she said in a burst of words. “I’m Peggy’s great-niece.”
“You’re Peggy’s great-niece,” he said, rocking back on his heels in shock.

“You need to talk about Bucky with Jack. He’s been embedded with HYDRA, he knows...things,” Sharon said.

“What things?” Steve said.

“Threads you may not want to pull,” a quiet voice said behind them. It was Natasha. Behind her, the flames and smoke of the building silhouetted her hair.

***

Darcy was waiting in the safe house when Tony and Thor arrived. Darcy threw herself at Tony—he was the first one through the door—and squeezed him tightly. She was crying in relief. He looked at her sadly. “Itty Bitty,” he said in a tired voice she’d never heard before.

“What’s wrong?” Darcy said. She looked at Thor. He was looking at his feet.

“We couldn’t save Rumlow, honey,” Tony said gently. “They’re looking for him now. It’s a recovery effort.”

“Is there a chance?” Darcy asked.

“No,” Thor said. “He went out a window on the 41st floor. No Midgardian could survive such a fall into the river.”

“They’re sure it was him?” Darcy said.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, honey. It’s very complicated. This Winter Soldier assassin that HYDRA had is—was—Bucky Barnes,” Tony said. ”He’s gone, too.”

“Steve’s Bucky?” Darcy said, confused.

“They’d had him, all these years,” Tony said. “In a freezer, Jack says. They both fell into the Potomac.”

“Steve was present,” Thor said solemnly. “He could not stop it. Neither could Jack.”

“Oh, no,” Darcy said. “Poor Steve.” She kept repeating it. “Poor Jack.” They looked at her with pitying expressions. “Poor Steve,” she said again.

Tony helped her up to a bedroom and gave her something for anxiety. She couldn’t stop saying “poor Jack” over and over. She lay down with the dogs and listened to the sounds of everyone arriving at the safe house: Steve, Clint, Maria Hill, Tulsa, even Jack Rollins. A few minutes later, there was a knock. “Darce?” Jack said.

“Come in,” she said numbly.

Hello, love,” he said. He sat down at the foot of the bed and sighed, putting his head in his hands. Then he explained everything. Darcy didn’t know it was possible to cry and vomit at the same time. She hadn’t realized Brock had been suspected of being one of them. A Nazi. It hadn’t even occurred to her that it was possible.

“I’d—I’d been holding out hope, you know?” Jack said in a strained voice. “Now we’ll never
If you can't tell, battles are my least favorite--and the most difficult--scenes to write. So, there's a lot happening in this chapter.

Mood music: Lord Huron's Strange Trails album. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiwWgN5O3WQ&t=1501s


The Night Stalkers are a real Special Forces thing: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/160th_Special_Operations_Aviation_Regiment_(Airborne)
Darcy and Jane left DC a few days after the HYDRA Uprising. Natasha volunteered to watch Onyx and Anubis until Linda returned from her cruise. Tony thought it was safer with various Avengers and SHIELD agents hunting HYDRA cells to send them to a hidden, little-used Stark lab on Baffin Island in Canada for the foreseeable future. The used multiple aliases as they moved from DC to New York to Quebec and finally, north. “Tony has a funny sense of humor,” Darcy told Jane, looking up from her phone as their small plane landed at Arctic Bay airport on the coast. They were above the Arctic Circle now.

“Why?” Jane said. It was just the two of them. Thor had gone with Steve to hunt HYDRA cells. “Our new names?” On Baffin Island, Jane would be Jane Blake--another of Tony’s jokes--and Darcy would be Lizzy Stark. He’d managed to make her an honorary Stark.

“Nope. Worse.”

“What?” Jane said.

“One, this island was a staging point for some of Howard Stark’s searches for Steve and his plane, hence hidden lab,” Darcy said. “Two they have some very interestingly named peaks on Baffin.”

“Yeah?” Jane said.

“Mount Thor and Mount Asgard and Mount Odin,” Darcy said.

“You’re kidding,” Jane said.

“I’m not kidding. See? Wikipedia says so,” Darcy said.

“Really? Why? Do you think Thor was here before?” Jane said.

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure Tony’s going to ask you about Mount Thor in the dirtiest way possible at a later date,” Darcy said.

“I hope he doesn’t know about Mount Odin,” Jane said with a shudder.

“Also, the sun isn’t going to set normally until sometime in July,” Darcy said.

“What?” Jane said.

“We’re in the Arctic Circle, Jane. Be happy it’s not December. That’s when it’s totally dark for a month.”
Arctic Bay was an Inuit town of less than nine-hundred. It had the most unusual bay Darcy had ever seen in a small town: the low harbor was ringed by high peaks, so that when you went out on boats--she and Jane met a supply boat with a local fisherman once--the little buildings looked even more doll-like and tiny against the dark masses.

One morning, she gave her Beyond Paradise to their sweet new landlady, Mrs. Qamaniq. Darcy couldn’t stand to smell it on herself any more. It made her too sad. But Mrs. Qamaniq was happy; it was hard to get beauty products to try in Arctic Bay. Apparently, the supply pilots of the little Twin Otter de Havilland planes had once had to use main street as a landing strip, before they built the world’s smallest airport. “What about traffic accidents?” Darcy asked. Mrs. Qamaniq laughed.

“What traffic?” she said. “Everyone was waiting on the planes! You be more careful of hunters on your walks, dearie, now that it’s light at night, they’ll be after the bears. Are you sure you want to give this to me, really?” She gestured towards the still-full square bottle that Darcy had placed on the little kitchen table.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “It, uh, reminds me of a guy, you know?”

“Not a good one, then?” Mrs. Qamaniq said. “He doesn’t call you up here like Jane’s man does.”

“He won’t be calling here,” Darcy said softly.

“Well, dearie, there are lots of men. You could have your pick of bay men, pretty as you are.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said, before departing for their little metal-sided lab. Darcy spent a lot of time trying not to think about Brock. It was difficult not to think with your sleep cycle disturbed, anyway.

They’d pulled a few bodies out of the Potomac in the search for unaccounted-for agents, but none of them were a DNA match for Brock Rumlow. Darcy checked the SHIELD casualty lists everyday; Maria Hill had come quietly into her room as she packed to leave DC and given her an access code. “I thought you might need this, no matter where you go,” she’d said.

“What do you think?” Darcy had asked. “Was he HYDRA?”

“I honestly don’t know. He definitely shot Pierce,” the other woman had said. “We have him to thank for that. The bullets are a ballistics match for his SHIELD gun and another SHIELD gun that disappeared from the range six months ago. He broke out Barnes, evidently. We’ve got train station footage of Barnes picking up a go-bag that Rumlow left. And, uh, Barnes was with him when he went back to his apartment after Natasha moved you. Barnes appears to be comforting him,” Maria had said emotionlessly. “But no one knows for sure what they were planning. It could have been a hostile takeover from the inside, given Rumlow’s history with the Muertos Inquietos cartel.”

“Didn’t he give all those weapons to SHIELD?” Darcy asked. Clint had told her the U-Haul college girls story the day after the Uprising. She suspected he was trying to give her some bit of hope to hang onto.

“But not the cash,” Maria said. Then she’d left the room.

Darcy had forgiven Natasha for tricking her--she knew it was a way of keeping her safe--but was upset when she heard Natasha had made Brock think she was violently kidnapped or dead. What had that done to him in his last hours, if he had cared? Had he cared? She thought he had. Brock
was a blank space. Or maybe just a symbol, she thought, when she saw her ribbon necklace in her jewelry box as she was getting ready for work every day. Still, she couldn’t throw it away. She started wearing it again, hidden under her clothes, just because. The Barnes thing was an oddity. Had he been planning to break out Bucky Barnes for six months, Darcy wondered, once she’d had time to think the SHIELD gun theft through? That meant Brock was in the middle of a plan when they’d met. Jack had told her that he’d wanted to break out Barnes, but Fury had forbidden it as too dangerous. Then at Triskelion, Pierce had told Barnes to shoot Nat and he’d apparently refused. It was all very perplexing. Jack told her that Brock had tried to make sure Bucky was treated kindly, so she tried to believe that maybe they’d been friends. Murder besties, maybe. It was impossible to figure out. She tried to stop trying. But there was a constant feeling of not-rightness. They hadn’t found the Winter Soldier’s body, either.

***

Every morning, she had to get through the worst part of her day. In the lab with Jane, Darcy paused over her laptop and clicked the grey okay button. She scanned the day’s SHIELD lists and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Jane said. “Did they--?”

“Nope,” Darcy said. “But they’re still searching for everyone. Jack told me it could take weeks. With the storm rains, the river was higher than usual and the current was stronger. His body might not surface until July or August, apparently.”

“Oh,” Jane said. “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

“Janey, I’m going for a walk, okay?” Darcy said.

“Please be careful,” Jane said seriously. They were being careful now, but Darcy liked to walk the cliffs near the bay when she felt most anxious. She left Jane working on her readings and took a long walk alone.

After DC, she’d started dreaming about him. In dreams, Brock was always just ahead of her and she could see him and call out to him, but he never turned back. At first, they’d been dreams where she followed him through the smoke-filled Triskelion, catching glimpses of his back through the haze. As she ran faster, he got further and further away. Now they were dreams of him being ahead of her on the high cliffs near Arctic Bay. In those, he was always running away from her in the distance and she lost him in the orange glow of the midnight sun. In the most recent ones, Darcy had to stop just before she went over the cliff’s sharp edge to the sea below. When she’d been gone more than an hour, Darcy turned away from the view that haunted her and went back to the lab.

It became a daily ritual for her on Baffin. It was a long and strange few months. Even Jane began to complain about the effects of near-constant daylight on her nerves. They never found Rumlow or Barnes.

Eventually, Tony called one afternoon and asked if they’d like to spend autumn in New York. “Oh God, yes,” Darcy said, desperate to have more to do and stop the sad swirl in her brain. “Jane! We’re going to New York!”

“What?” Jane said. “I have research. I’m not--”

“Tony made you a new lab! New equipment and everything,” Darcy said. “All new.”
“Okay,” Jane said.

“Good, because otherwise I would have tased you and stuffed you in a suitcase,” Darcy said. “Mrs. Qamaniq would have totally helped me get you to the airport if I told her it was a surprise for Thor. You know how much she likes Thor.” Thor had visited once and Mrs. Qamaniq was putty in his hands.

“Darce, that was super dark,” Jane said.

“What? I want Chinese food,” Darcy said. “And a normal location relative to poles and equators and whatever.”

“Still, dark,” Jane said.

“I get dark when there’s no dark, babe,” Darcy said.

***

In the weeks after they returned to New York, Natasha kept trying to set her up with people, but she adamantly refused to be beguiled again. Tulsa came to dinner in the city a few times, but Darcy felt relieved when he and Maria Hill finally paired off down in DC. SHIELD was rebuilding, though they were making the Triskelion’s footprint more green. She listened to a lot of Fiona Apple and Leonard Cohen and painted her Tower room a Tuscan orange the color of the midnight sun over Arctic Bay. Frank Sinatra had called sunset orange “the happiest color,” but it wasn’t doing much for her. Chinese food helped a touch, but the funk she’d assumed was fifty-percent Canadian isolation was really all Rumlow. It didn’t help that lots of New Yorkers sounded like him, too. She was constantly turning towards voices or faces that seemed like him and then realizing it couldn’t be.

Loki visited when he heard the terrible news, trying to cheer her up with pranks and new (old) laminate countertops that Tony despised as unsophisticated. He and Odin had finally reached some sort of crucial milestone; she suspected Frigga’s death had made Odin re-appraise some of his bullshit, but she didn’t say that to Loki. He was with Sif now, thank the stars. Darcy told him that he should enjoy his time with Sif on Asgard as much as possible. They’d finally gotten together, shockingly, with Odin’s help. “Odin really set you up?” she asked. Thor had told them by raven, but Darcy had been skeptical. Had Thor really gotten it right?

“I came to what I thought was a dinner with my father and found her sitting at the other end of the table,” he said. “Apparently, my admiration for Sif has raised me in my father’s estimation. He finds her a queenly warrior.”

“Is this a subtle way of saying he still compares Jane to a goat?” Darcy said.

“Oh,” Loki said, looking sheepish. “I like Jane! She is intelligent and principled and has many fine qualities...”

“Oh em gee, your dad,” Darcy said, shaking her head.

“He is an impossible man to please,” Loki said. “I should know.”

“It sounds like you’re making headway. You ought to go back ASAP,” she told him. “I’ll be fine.
Spend all the time you can with her, okay?” she said. You never knew how long you had. Or if you had at all.

“This is no good for you,” he said. “I feel responsible for pushing you towards that man.”

“I made my own choices,” Darcy said. “Besides, we were barely together. It’s the shock of the whole situation, really. I just need time to process that Nazis are back. That’s my real problem, not him.”

Loki gave her a long, considering look. “Is that so?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said.

“You know that I can hear lies, do you not?” he said, sighing.

“I’ve always wanted to ask, what do lies sound like?” she said. “Do they sound different?”

“They sound like colors,” he said. “Innocent lies are soft blue. What you are doing—lying to me and yourself—is a midnight blue lie, like the sky at night during a snowfall. You are resting on a veritable landscape of lies.”

“A snowscape of lies?” Darcy asked.

“Yes,” Loki said. He looked suddenly strange.

“What?” Darcy said.

“I have just realized that was a very Jotun metaphor. Sif has suggested I do it unconsciously,” he said. “Damn and blast!”

“Why does it matter?” Darcy asked.

“We have a bet. I have just lost,” Loki said.


“Heimdall will,” he said glumly. “She is forcing me to go as Thor for Midgardian Halloween. Everyone will know.”

“This I gotta see, please invite me to your party,” Darcy said. “Come spend Christmas here with Sif, too,” Darcy said. She made him promise.

“Of course,” he said. Then he surprised her by giving her a hug. It was really rather sweet. She didn’t even mind that he’d used to the opportunity to magically pin a sign to her back that said, “ASK ME ABOUT TASING THOR” in fancy green script.

***

One afternoon, she ran into Steve on one of the Tower’s roof gardens. “‘Sup, Stevie,” she said.

“Nice spot to think, Darce,” he said. “You thinking about anything in particular?”

“Same old thing, Steverini,” she said.
“Yeah?” he said. “Do we ever really know anybody?” There was a note of bitterness in his voice. Steve had heard about Bucky Barnes’s true fate in the reports that Fury had drawn up after the quelled Uprising. Steve’s conviction to destroy HYDRA remained undiminished, but after that, he was done with SHIELD. He felt manipulated and screwed over by Peggy’s whole legacy, poor man. Steve had been struggling to process that his childhood friend had been turned into a vicious assassin. It had been a double blow, along with the Kate-Sharon reveal. The whole thing had been a lot for Steve to take at once.

“You know Sharon,” she told him. “She lied for Fury about her name and her job, but she didn’t lie about her politics,” Darcy told him. “Or who she really was, not in essentials.” Sharon was running a revamped STRIKE Alpha Team in DC now. It was impressively badass, Tulsa had said.

“You say that like it’s a small thing,” Steve said.

“That’s up to you, pal,” Darcy said gently. “But Steve,” she said, “I think you should forgive Sharon and see if there’s a there there.”

“What?” Steve said.

“Go talk to her, you ridiculously handsome grandpa,” Darcy teased. He smiled.

“You think so?” he said.

“Until you figure it out, you’re going to wonder. For the rest of your life,” Darcy said. “Assuming she’s not dating someone else she's serious about already.”

“What?” he said, looking suddenly anxious. He was so hung up on Sharon he hadn’t so much as looked at another woman. Darcy could see him internally panicking at the idea that she’d moved on.

“She’s an attractive lady with lots of options, Steve. There’s a lot of men on that STRIKE Team she’s running. A lot of really cute guys at SHIELD in general. Jack and Smith, too. Tulsa told me they’ve reconstructed his whole face with some of Helen Cho’s new equipment. And my buddy Dave is really popular now that he single-handedly took out all those Nazis when they tried to hide in the Archives and he pushed an entire stack on them,” Darcy said, with perfect innocence. She wasn’t mentioning that Jack and Smith were totally together now. “Dave told me they’re still trying to get the blood stains out of the library carpet, though. Hardbound books can really crush a person.”

“I think I--uh, I better go,” Steve said suddenly. “I need to call Kat---Sharon.”

“Good luck, Steve!” Darcy called, as he practically ran away. Men were really simple. Well, some men. She went downstairs to flirt with Bruce Banner and refill Jane’s coffee. On the elevator, there was a woman carrying a flower tote. Darcy stared at it, wondering if it was a figment of her imagination. It looked almost identical to the one she’d received. “Excuse me, where did those come from?” she finally asked.

“A place in Chelsea on 28th Street. Prentiss Flowers? They’ve been there forever,” the woman said. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Yes,” Darcy said. She didn’t go back to the lab; instead, she rode the elevator to the lobby and took the subway to the flower district.

***
Prentiss Flowers had a green and gold awning. A little bell rang and the woman behind the counter greeted Darcy distantly. She was arranging a bouquet for the customer in front of her. Darcy wandered around the shop, feeling strangely sick. It was much bigger and grander than she’d expected, really. Once the customer paid, the woman looked up at Darcy. “Can I help you with something?” she asked. She was crisp and business-like. Darcy’s eyes wandered to her wrists, but there was nothing there to signify.

“Oh, I’m, uh, I was wondering if you made flower totes? I just saw someone with one and she said it was from here,” Darcy said, swallowing.

“Yes, we make them, they’re very popular,” she said, finally smiling. “Is that what you want?”

“Actually, I wanted to know if you made this one?” Darcy said. She slid her phone across the counter. On the screen was a photo she’d taken of the one Brock had given her.

The woman frowned. Something in her manner shifted. “No,” she said crisply. “That’s not our box. That’s Schulberg’s in DC. They’re a sister florist. We both make them. Sorry,” she said. “I can make something similar for you?”

“I’d like that,” Darcy said. She paid for the flowers and then put her real name and Avengers Tower address on the invoice. She’d been traveling under an alias with Jane. They’d carefully hidden her and Jane’s identities because of the HYDRA threat.

“Would you like them delivered there?” the woman said coolly.

“To that address, yeah,” Darcy said. “I live there, too. Work and home for a little bit.”

“All finished,” the woman said. “Should arrive tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said. She must have been strikingly beautiful when she was young, Darcy thought, because she was still striking now, with her elegant short hair. She reminded Darcy of a French actress whose name Darcy couldn’t remember. The one who’d played Catherine Deneuve’s sister in law in 8 femmes. Or Maria Callas. It was difficult not to stare. The woman’s eyes—a familiar green-brown like a forest floor—were watching her warily. Darcy suddenly realized she was holding a pair of pruning shears under the counter. She stepped back carefully and took a long look around the florist’s shop. “I really liked all the flowers, Renata,” she said quietly. “I’ll go now. I won’t bother you again, I just needed to know.”

“Needed to know what?” the woman said tightly.

“What’s real and not real,” Darcy said.

She left and the woman behind the counter watched her like she was a snake. Or maybe an octopus. Darcy stepped out onto the sidewalk and repressed the urge to burst into hysterical tears. It was funny and sad. Brock Rumlow’s poor mother probably thought she was a HYDRA assassin or something. Had he warned his mother about HYDRA? Obviously, the answer was yes. Maybe he’d been a good son, after all. That was oddly comforting.

***

Wakanda
“Fucking sink,” he said. “How do you work these goddamn fucking sinks, Barnes?” the man stomping across the royal compound’s cafeteria said. People turned to stare.

“You’re just a ray of sunshine, aren’t you?” Bucky joked casually, looking up from his breakfast. “I don’t know, I wave my one arm underneath the thing and it works. Does it not like you?” Bucky said wryly. Bucky’s metal arm was being re-made. He was also undergoing sessions to progressively de-program his Russian brainwashing. It was going well. They had three words left. Phil Coulson had pulled strings and Everett Ross had--with the permission of Crown Prince T’Challa, a friend of SHIELD since he’d met Phil to negotiate vibranium usage and discuss HYDRA threats at an undisclosed location--offered Wakanda assistance and shelter to the ex-Winter Soldier.

“Fuck you. I can’t work anything in this place,” the other man said, poking angrily at the nearest coffee maker.

“You’re just not holding your mouth right,” Bucky said.

“Keep fucking with me and I’ll call Cap and tell him you’re here,” he said back, marching over and sitting down roughly with a cup of coffee. “It’s bad enough that that we had to do a three-week Soviet stakeout in fucking Cleveland for that book. Who moves from Russia to Cleveland?”

Bucky shrugged; he wanted his memories back and his safety assured before he saw Steve again. Of course Steve would come to Wakanda the minute he knew Bucky was still alive. That was why he and the other man had gone to Cleveland for the Soviet code book, as instructed by Phil after DC went sideways, and then on to Wakanda. He wanted to keep anyone else from dying. Bucky didn’t mind Wakanda at all. It was warm and restful and interesting after decades in cryo. He admired the genius of Princess Shuri and would often hang around in the lab, when she let him. He visited his favorite cryo tank, too.

A passing Prince T’Challa greeted Bucky warmly and nodded politely at the other man. The Wakandas were fully charmed by Barnes. They considered him a tragic victim of wartime imperialism and global bloodlust. Bucky’s sweet smiles and gentle, tentative manner--in concert with his impressive sparring skills--had even charmed the Dora Milaje. They were less than thrilled with his SHIELD-mandated minder, however; he was a particularly grumpy American who seemed to view Barnes as an irritating younger sibling he’d been saddled with baby-sitting. This colonizer swore a lot, the Wakandans said, and seemed highly agitated, especially if you made jokes about his name. He dismissed their suggestion that he replace his workouts with more soothing forms of Wakandan meditation and movement training. He was so aggressive that he broke the flight simulators. However, Princess Shuri had been overheard saying she particularly enjoyed watching him call Everett Ross “a fucking shitfuck weasel-faced piece of shit,” when he and Ross disagreed over whether or not Barnes was safe to be around.

“You would think that he and Sgt. Barnes hated each other the way that they are always bickering, but he was deeply offended when Ross suggested that Barnes be put in detention for his own safety and insisted that Ross would have to go through him to put Barnes in a cage again,” the princess had said to her brother. "Because of his loyalty to the colonizer Rumlow."

"Yes," T’Challa said. Barnes had told him that the ill-tempered pilot had been deeply upset when they pulled Rumlow's body from the Potomac.

Just then, Everett Ross appeared across the cafeteria, looking at them significantly. He was doing a weirdly polite nod thing. “Oh not this shit today,” the other man said. “What the fuck is he doing?”
“You know he’s really British-American, right? American accent’s phony--” Bucky began.

“It’s fucking lousy is what it is,” the other man said. “Worse fake accent I’ve ever heard and I’ve seen guys from Arkansas try to pretend to be from Pakistan. Also, I know you’re the one who started that rumor Ross and I used to be a couple before he dumped me for another CIA agent, Barnes,” he said, grinding his teeth. “You’re a damn troll. The Queen expressed her sorrow for me yesterday at being in such close proximity to my ‘former paramour.’ When they finish that new metal arm, I’m going to beat you with it.”

“I think you need to think about your internalized homophobia, pal,” Bucky said, not feeling an iota of guilt. It was too much fun to mess with the pilot. “That’s what the kids call it now.”

“He’s short, for fuck’s sake, like a damn Hobbit,” the other man said. “I’m nice-looking. I just think I could do better if I wanted a boyfriend.”

“You ain’t exactly tall,” Bucky said dryly.

“I’m average height, asshole,” he said. “5’10 and a half!”

“Raymond, a word?” Ross said, having given up on politeness and finally walked over to their table.

“That’s three words, Everett,” he said.

“Phil Coulson would like to speak to you via the satellite telephone,” Ross said stiffly. “About the ongoing events.”

“Well, just fucking say that to start with,” the American said, setting down his cup with a thump and stomping off.

“He is highly unpleasant,” Ross said to Barnes in his strangled, odd voice. “Highly unpleasant.”

“Yup,” Bucky said, chewing his Wakanda bacon happily. He’d missed bacon in cryo while they sorted out his HYDRA brainwashing therapies.

“Well, then,” Ross said. “What is his fucking problem?”

Bucky shrugged. “Maybe he's just like that or maybe what happened to Rumlow got to him, he won't tell me. Also, I give him the creeps.”

Everett decided not to respond to that remark.

“I need a favor,” Bucky said suddenly. “Can you come to my place tonight? I ask because Princess Shuri says you’re all right and I trust her word.”

“Yes, well, I trust her, too,” Ross said. “What kind of favor?”

“A spook kind,” Bucky said. “I’m looking for somebody.”

“Where?” Ross said.

“I was hoping you’d know that one, pal,” Bucky said wryly.
“Is this an assassin or someone who will come after me?” Ross asked.

“Nah, I’m looking for a doll who works in a lab. I need to tell her some things. She did tase Thor once, though,” Bucky said. “She’s sorta famous for that, according to Phil.”

Chapter End Notes

Check out Arctic Bay: https://goo.gl/maps/ZrwZabvrTxs2

The cliffs at Arctic Bay are incredible:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cliffs_near_Arctic_Bay.jpg#/media/File:Cliffs_near_Arc

The midnight sun looks like an orange sunset, very glowy and striking.

The actress Darcy is thinking of is the very mysterious and beautiful Fanny Ardant.
When she got home, Darcy had JARVIS cross-reference Renata and Prentiss Flowers, just out of curiosity. “That would be Renata Soldano, 68, widow of John Soldano, Sr.,” JARVIS said after a minute. The AI pulled up a photo of a *New York Times* article about the flower shop’s history from a decade ago and displayed it on her SI television. In the photograph, Renata Soldano was wearing her silver bracelets and smiling. She was very beautiful when she smiled.

“Any kids?” Darcy asked.

“A daughter, Teresa, born in in 1981 and a son, John, Jr., born in 1976. Teresa is a nurse at Bronx-Meridian hospital,” the AI said, bringing up a hospital ID photo. Teri the nurse who’d worked dialysis, Darcy remembered. That had been true, too.

“And John?”

“John Soldano Jr. was a career US Army officer who was killed in a traffic accident in 2003,” JARVIS told her. “He had previously served in a Special Forces unit in Afghanistan, but was home on leave near Fort Bragg, North Carolina at the time of his death.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, looking at Brock Rumlow’s face on her screen. This was his enlistment photo at twenty. He looked different then--his face was fuller and somehow softer and less guarded--but it was unmistakably him. “What kind of special forces?” she asked. He'd said he was Navy, but he'd actually been Army? They made you change branches when they faked your death? What was the point?

“I believe they are colloquially known as Delta Force, Miss Lewis, and primarily serve as counter-terrorism units,” the AI said.

“Thanks, J-Man,” Darcy said, turning off the television.

“You’re welcome, Miss Lewis,” the AI said. Darcy turned on some Lucinda Williams and decided to take a bath. It was only when she looked at the little silver necklace on her dresser that it dawned on her why she’d never seen a ribbon necklace on the Tiffany’s website, either. She double-checked her suspicion. It wasn’t a ribbon or a stylized flower at all. It was the letter S. She
put it on and looked at it in the mirror.

“Well, mystery solved,” Darcy said aloud. “I know his name and what the necklace is and that he actually had a mother, so maybe this will stop bothering me now.”

“Did you need assistance, Miss Lewis?” the AI said politely.

“It’s nothing, JARVIS, thank you,” she said, wishing she had a dog to talk to, very suddenly. JARVIS was a pal, but he lacked canine sympathy. Dogs were non-judgmental when you wanted to hash out your issues about your dead possible Nazi boyfriend. But Tony wouldn’t let her have a dog at the Tower. Loki had sweetly offered to magic her up one. However, Darcy thought that even magical dogs were beyond Tony’s tolerance. Then a strange note had arrived from Clint about pet care and a good local groomer. It was weird. Clint didn’t even have a dog? It didn’t really matter, Darcy thought. Soon, she and Jane would be leaving New York for a six-month stint at a observatory in Riga. Tony had offered to get her skiing lessons as prep, bless his heart. She tried to think about Riga as she took a bath.

When she got out, she asked JARVIS to send her copies of John Soldano Jr.’s military records. Most of it had been redacted, of course, but Darcy noticed that the Army medical records indicated he’d been treated for minor injuries on December 12th of 2001 in Afghanistan. Not in a hospital, either. It had been signed by a field medic. Google helpfully informed her that Delta Force units had been fighting the Battle of Tora Bora in the mountains of Afghanistan in the first weeks of December of that year. Supposedly, they’d almost caught Osama Bin Laden. Of course, other people said Bin Laden was already in Pakistan at the time. It was controversial. But maybe the perfect training for a STRIKE Commander.

***

“We were barely together and he was evil. Probably,” Darcy muttered to herself as she returned to the lab to check on Jane that night. Jane loved the shiny new lab stuff. “Why can’t I put this behind me?”

“What?” Jane asked distantly.

“Nothing,” Darcy said.

“You’re Londoning,” Jane said. They’d coined that when Jane was moping over Thor.

“Except Thor was worth Londoning over,” Darcy said.

“Why not go on a date with somebody?” Jane offered.

“No,” Darcy said mulishly. “I’m through with love.”

“You’re just quoting Marilyn Monroe songs now,” Jane said.

“If it’s really cold in Latvia, will I be too cold to be this sad?” Darcy said, fixing Jane some Pop-Tarts as a snack. “We were barely together. I mean, not at all if you consider that I didn’t know his real name until this afternoon.”
“Wait, what?” Jane said.

“Oh, yeah, I went down to the flower district, saw his mom, she probably thought I was HYDRA, ‘cause she was hanging onto pruning shears like it was about to get all Hitchcock in that flower shop, his name is John, whatever,” Darcy said.

“His name is John?” Jane said.

“Was John,” Darcy corrected.

“Why didn’t you ask me to go with you?” Jane said.

“I saw somebody with my flower tote, I asked about the florist, remembered his mom, and got on the subway to Chelsea to see the shop. It was more of a fugue state thing,” Darcy said. “Not planned. She pretended not to know him, but she knew.”

“Oh,” Jane said. “So, how do you know she’s really his mom?”

“Exact same eyes,” Darcy said. “Very distinctly. Renata Soldano of the Bronx also had a son whose Army enlistment photo has his entire face. Ask JARVIS.”

“Oh. So, that was her real first name. That sounds....upsetting?” Jane said.

“I need to get over it,” Darcy said.

“You can’t rush it,” Jane said.

“Do you think Tony could mind-wipe me like Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind?” Darcy asked.

“No,” Jane said, chuckling. She paused. “Dear God, do not ask him to do that!” She sounded anxious.

“Oh, Jane, what’s a little accidental memory loss between friends?” Darcy joked.

***

The next afternoon, she went to Nordstrom’s to smell perfume. She felt like she needed warmth for her trip to Latvia. “I can make you a sample?” one of the sales associates offered, when she paused with a strip of Chanel no. 5. It was very clean and soft-smelling. Like soap, but really nice, fancy soap. Somehow luminous. Wildly expensive, though. She took the offered sample vials and thanked the sales associate. Darcy didn’t feel like being fancy or expensive at the moment. Maybe she should just go back to Island Gardenia or find a cheap cozy scent that soothed her? Loki had left a bottle of cotton candy-sweet Pink Sugar as a parting gift. Jane said it was “yummy, like Pop Tarts,” but it was so tooth-achingly sweet that it made Darcy crave cupcakes whenever she wore it. She was actually craving cupcakes now because she got faint wafts of it from her scarf. She might just wear Shalimar all the time. They were going by quinjet, so she could take her Shalimar bottles. Wearing Shalimar was like being wrapped in dry vanilla and face powder, even if Jane said the first thirty minutes smelled weirdly like Band-Aids. Darcy didn’t get Band-Aids, actually.
She walked past the Guerlain counter, then froze. The sight of the Samsara bottle on the counter suddenly made her want to cry.

She went to the nearest bathroom to take a second and calm down. It was one of those fancy bathrooms with a attached sitting area and soft furniture. Darcy slumped on a couch and wiped her eyes. A few women came in and out and a woman sat at the adjoining vanity to apply lipstick, but none of them looked at her as she sat there, feeling slightly numb and tired. She closed her eyes for a second and breathed in calmly. There was a faint waft of some elegant perfume from the woman at the vanity.

“I didn’t expect you to be so young,” a voice said and Darcy’s eyes shot open. Renata Soldano was looking at her carefully in the vanity mirror. She’d finished with her lipstick. “May I take you to lunch?” she asked in a careful voice. “They do a very nice salad in the cafe upstairs.”

“Sure,” Darcy said, stunned. A part of her wanted to laugh. Of course, Brock’s elegant, poised mother was a salad person. Darcy wondered if she was a murderous salad person or just a regular one. Impossible to tell, she thought, as she followed the other woman to the escalator. Renata had excellent posture. She was doing that thing Darcy could never manage, using a large scarf as a shoulder wrap. Darcy could never keep her scarves on her shoulders for some reason.

Renata had a habit of staring, it turned out. She watched Darcy like a hawk. “I had to make sure you were who I thought you were,” she said to Darcy.

“That’s fair,” Darcy said. “You knew about me?”

“Yes,” she said calmly. “I assumed you couldn’t be her when you showed up at the shop, because I’d been looking for Darcy Lewis and hadn’t found her.”

“I’ve been traveling under aliases for safety,” Darcy explained. She didn’t mention Jane. If Renata was innocent, Jane was irrelevant, and if she wasn’t, she didn’t need to know. The other woman nodded and her eyes swept Darcy, taking in her pilly, un-elegant teal sweater and her glasses and the S necklace at her throat. Darcy felt a little judged, as if she was less attractive than Renata had expected her to be. Well, Darcy, thought, Renata and Brock--John, she mentally corrected herself--were both insanely good-looking. His eyes had come from his mother. Had his father been dark and gorgeous, too?

“Inconvenient for me, but perhaps not unwise,” Renata said. “Never married? No kids?”

“No,” Darcy said. “No kids.” They lapsed into a weird silence. Darcy watched the shoppers pass, thinking of TS Eliot. Renata kept flicking her eyes from her menu to Darcy’s face, alert.

“What are you thinking?” Renata asked, folding her hands together.

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Darcy said. “That line about how ‘the women come and go, talking of Michelangelo,’ you know? The poem? I think we’re supposed to see the women as remote or maybe boring, but they’re the ones who always interested me, not Prufrock.”

“I don’t really understand poetry,” Renata said. “I majored in business.”
“But you’re very good at flowers,” Darcy said politely.

“I don’t see the connection?” Renata said.

“A poet is just someone who puts words in pleasing or interesting shapes, not unlike a florist does with flowers,” Darcy said.

“Interesting shapes?” Renata said. “What is an interesting shape?”

“Anything that isn’t just pretty,” Darcy said, “so most everything,” watching a mother navigate around a display with a stroller. “Her wheel’s sticking,” she told Renata.

“Most everything,” Renata said, frowning.

“He sent me birds of paradise first,” Darcy said. “They’re beautiful and interesting, not just pretty. Pretty isn’t big enough for them.”

“So pretty is what?”

Darcy shrugged. “Inexpensive roses? Baby’s breath? You’d know better than me. I’d say pretty is poems they put on plaques in gift shops and Pottery Barn and things without edges. Clinique Happy, which is actually a nice perfume, but totally inoffensive and very polite. Pretty makes people feel safe. Rose gold is pretty. Blake Lively is pretty. He gave me things that were more than just pretty.”

Renata nodded. “I think I understand,” she said.

“I’m glad one of us does,” Darcy said. “I don’t feel like I understand much anymore.”

“I had to decide if I could forgive you, of course,” Renata said finally, once the salads arrived. She sliced a tomato cleanly. “It was a very cruel thing you did to my son when you faked your death. I have been told he was distressed.”

“I didn’t know,” Darcy said. “Natasha told me that he wanted me to leave the apartment, so I left. That happened after I was gone, they told me.”

“So it was Natasha who staged it,” Renata said grimly. “I had wondered how you had blood on hand. I thought your friend Jane might have animal blood in her lab.”

“Blood? God no,” Darcy said. “Never. We use telescopes and stuff, not animals.” She felt horrified by the implications. “Was it...that bad?” Darcy asked. She hadn’t really thought about logistics. She’d sort of assumed they’d left the apartment eerily empty or left bullet cases or something.

“There was a great deal of blood,” Renata said. “I have seen photographs. You should see them as well, I think,” she said, reaching into her handbag. “This is what your friend’s trick looked like to my son.” She pushed a manila folder across the table. Darcy opened it and saw her crushed orchid.

“The broke my coconut flowers?” she said sadly. “Why?”

“To make it look like you fought for your life,” Renata said coolly.

“Oh,” Darcy said. She flicked through the photos of the wrecked apartment, frowning. “Oh my God,” Darcy said, when she got to the bedroom. It was horrifying. There was a huge dried bloodstain on the carpet. It had been tracked through by someone, but what was most disturbing
was that the stain was so thick and gruesome. It had dried in such a way that it made the carpet clump. She shuddered. He’d seen this? “So, did he care about me?” Darcy said. “He didn’t just want Jane’s work?” Renata gave her a sharp look, but said nothing. Darcy waited a beat. This damn family, she thought.

Renata stabbed a crouton with her fork. “I guess you’ll want to know his real name?”

“I did a search after I met you,” Darcy said, touching the necklace unconsciously. “Found out then.”

“I suppose that was a hint,” Renata said. “He was always cryptic.”

“A family trait,” Darcy observed. Renata actually smiled.

“He gets it from me, not his father,” she said.

“Which thing?” Darcy said. “The cryptic-ness or the natural ability with sharp objects?” Renata actually laughed.

“Even when he was little, he was a gifted liar. They were always well-constructed stories, always believable. It used to worry his father. My husband was an honest man. He wanted Johnny to be the first Italian-American president,” Renata said. “But Johnny had too much fun being cryptic, shall we say?”

“What did you want him to be?” Darcy asked, curious.

“I thought he would be a hedge fund manager or someone at Goldman Sachs,” she said. “He was clever and he liked money. Having money. He had a little piggy bank and he used to hoard all his change when he was small. If you told him that he could spend it on whatever he wanted, he would scrunch his little face up and shake his head. No, no,” she mimed. “He was saving it for some future event, even at four. He was very careful about how he spent, always.”

“Yeah?” Darcy said, feeling a little lurch in her stomach. He’d practically thrown money at her. There had been lots of cash in that go-bag, too.

“It’s one of the reasons I wanted to find you,” Renata said. “His sister and I were still his primary beneficiaries, but he left you something. He’d ordered it and left a note about it for me.”

“Did--did they find him then?” Darcy said, suddenly feeling overcome. You couldn’t read a will without a body. Had they found his body?

“What?” Renata said, watching her carefully.
“It’s just upsetting,” Darcy said. “It’s so final.”

“Even if he was HYDRA?” the other woman asked.

“Yes,” Darcy said. “How? How did he end up with them? That’s what I want someone to tell me.”

“I don’t know exactly,” Renata said. “Does it matter now?”

“It does to me,” Darcy said hotly. “I keep wondering how a decorated ex-Delta Force soldier ends up there. I read his official records and his SHIELD records. He was brave. He’d saved people’s lives. He did crazy things to get people to safety during multiple SHIELD missions. How did that turn into joining a plot to commit mass murder?”

“There’s your answer,” Renata said. “He did crazy things.”

“But these were crazy good things,” Darcy insisted. Renata looked at her seriously, as if she was particularly dim.

“He started to go, well, not wrong, precisely, but different when he was a teenager. He became difficult. He felt things more intensely than other people,” she said. “He felt everything. It confused his father, but it didn’t surprise me. It was a family trait. My family. So, he started to self-medicate,” she said.

“Self-medicate?” Darcy said.

“A little drinking, a little marijuana. I knew, of course, but it helped him take the edge off. I worked, his father worked. It made him easier to deal with. I turned a blind eye. His father panicked, though. Thought it would ruin his life. John--my husband--was very straightforward. He didn’t understand Johnny at all. Teri was more like her father, so they never had any trouble. But everything my husband adored about me, in Johnny it made him crazy with worry. The lack of transparency, the strong emotions if pushed. Ironically,” she said, “he sent Johnny to a gym. He thought that would help with his emotions. So, Johnny became a teenager who could hit people really hard and liked to drink,” she said, scoffing. “I would have told him to buy him more pot. He didn’t need to become an adrenaline junkie with a mean left hook, too.”

“What happened?” Darcy said.

“He got busted with a little pot right after his eighteenth birthday,” she said. “He and his father had a big screaming match about his lack of self-control, he moved out. We didn’t see him again until after he enlisted.”

“Wasn’t that when he was twenty?” Darcy said. At Renata’s sharp look, she said, “I’m a good reader. How was he even able to enlist with a record?”

“They wiped his arrest because he became a confidential informant. I believe the kids would have called him a narc,” she said. “But eventually, he became very useful to particular group of police.”

“Are you saying he spent the better part of two years working as a confidential informant when he was eighteen? Can people even do that?” Darcy said.

“He could,” she said. “A gifted liar, remember?”

“With drug cartel tattoos,” Darcy said out loud, thinking of his Santa Muerte. “They put him in a cartel?”
“Maybe you actually are as smart as he claimed you were,” Renata said.

“Why are you not more mad?” Darcy asked. She was pissed and she wasn’t his mother. Renata looked at her curiously.

“He had a gift for it, as it turned out. Being able to disappear into a part. That’s when he got good at self-control—because it mattered when he was pretending to be someone else. He was happy, in his way. He needed that mission-driven structure, I think. He told me later that he enlisted to expand his weapons skill set. His idea of a joke,” she said. “Eat your salad, you look pale.”

“I’m just pale,” Darcy said defensively. “Alexander Pierce recruited him because of his past, didn’t he? He knew he wasn’t….straightforward?”

“That’s a very polite way of putting it,” Renata said. The ate their salads quietly.

“I miss him,” Darcy said.

“I know,” Renata said. Finally, Renata reached into her purse and pulled out a box. “This is what he wanted you to have,” she told Darcy.

Darcy opened the box. “Oh God,” she said. “It’s beautiful.” It was a bracelet from Tiffany’s. A segment of an olive branch on a delicate chain. Why had he wanted to give her an olive branch? Did he think she would forgive him for HYDRA?

“Yes,” Renata said. “Your flowers should be there now. This will take care of the bill,” she said, putting cash on the table.

She left Darcy sitting at the table, staring at the jewelry he’d left for her and the note in his handwriting: *Trying this jewelry thing again, baby. Hoping you like it and the symbolism holds up.*

What did that mean?

Chapter End Notes

Darcy's bracelet/last gift from Brock is either a.):


Pick your favorite. Ironically, I sort of prefer the much less $$$ option A.

Chapter mood song: Ella Fitzgerald's "These Foolish Things."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mshV7ug8cdE
A clip of Fanny Ardant speaking English from some years ago, if you need a visual for Brock's very scary mother: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-ZsP-smFeU&t=107s
“Jane, you were right,” Darcy announced, when she was back in the Tower. JARVIS had told Darcy that Thor and Jane were watching a movie in the common room.

“What?” Jane said, lifting her head up from Thor’s shoulder.

“Renata Rumlow would have been the world’s most terrifying mother-in-law. I legit thought she was either going to murder me or put a curse on me at lunch. You should see what she did to a helpless cherry tomato.”

“You went to the flower district alone again?” Jane said. “I thought I said--”

“Jane, she found me at Nordie’s, okay? I went to the bathroom and boom, there she was,” Darcy said. “He left me something.”

“He left you something?” Jane said. “Like a note?”

“No, it’s mostly Tiffany’s. I am the recipient of likely Nazi jewelry, Jane, envy me,” Darcy said with a dry bitterness. She wanted to joke so she wouldn’t cry. She pulled up the sleeve of her sweater.

“You could return i--oh, wow,” Jane said. “It’s so pretty.”

She found the flower tote waiting in her apartment. It was very Renata: blood-red roses in a black tote. There was something else, too. Renata had sent her a perfume. It was the Chanel no. 5 she’d gotten the samples of and debated over.

There was a note, too:

_This is much better than that loud cotton candy thing you were wearing. That’s all wrong for you. Give it to a twelve year old, honey, you’re not a kid anymore._
“That is weird,” Jane said, when Darcy called her to look at it. “It does smell really pretty, though. I’ve never smelled it before.” Darcy had spritzed her arm with Chanel no. 5.

“He got it from her,” Darcy said. “The cryptic aggressive thing. Should I return this?”

“He wasn’t ever this scary,” Jane said, looking at Renata’s slashing handwriting. “And we knew he was armed.”

“I’m fairly sure Renata could kill me with a butter knife,” Darcy said. “Or her mind.”

“Do you really want to go?” Jane asked. “To whatever this is?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “I do.” She couldn’t let go.

“Well, you’re not going alone,” Jane said firmly. “Thor and I will go with you. What if she’s HYDRA?”

“She could single-handedly defeat HYDRA,” Darcy said, looking at the sharp note.

***

The three of them met Renata at the helipad. “You’re late,” Renata said.

“We’re on time,” Jane insisted. It was 10:01 am. Darcy and Thor exchanged a look.

“Who are we waiting for?” Darcy asked. The landing pad was empty.

“It’s not who, it’s what,” Renata said. Darcy looked up. A plane of some sort emerged between the clouds.

“That’s not a SHIELD quinjet,” Darcy said.

“No,” Renata said. “It’s a Wakandan plane.”

“I thought Wakanda was isolationist and primarily agrarian?” Jane said.

“Aww, Janey, you paid attention during my civics lessons,” Darcy said. “High five.” At Renata’s look, Darcy said, “this is a real breakthrough for her. Usually, I lose her whenever I go over the SHIELD country fact sheets.”

“I pay attention,” Jane said stubbornly. “Sometimes.” Thor patted her arm and smiled encouragingly.

“Wakanda’s a little...different from the fact sheets, or so I’ve heard,” Darcy told Jane.

“From who?” Renata said.
“Steve--Captain America--met the King of Wakanda at a UN public relations event and invited him
to a Tony Stark party. Much Asgardian mead was consumed,” Darcy said, giving Thor a look.
“Rumor has it that the Wakandans have more vibranium and technology than they let on.”

“I don’t remember this,” Jane said.

“Yeah, you were on a Science! Binge at the time, so I left you in the lab, made sure nobody needed
their stomach pumped, and then slept in my office chair.”

“And you knew Wakanda made things,” Renata said, “but didn’t tell her?” She pointed at Jane.

“Why?” Darcy said. “She doesn’t need to buy any vibranium. I wasn’t certain and if it’s their stuff
and they want to keep it, that’s their business, not mine.”

Renata looked at her thoughtfully as the ramp was lowered on the Wakandan plane. It did have the
royal insignia, Darcy saw. A woman stepped down from the ramp. The Queen of Wakanda.

“Renata, it is good to see you again,” the queen said, holding out her arms. Darcy was momentarily
surprised when Renata hugged the queen warmly.

“Ramonda,” the other woman said. “Any news?” The queen shook her head and Renata’s face
went tight for a fraction of a second. The queen turned away and glided towards them.

“Prince Thor, Dr. Foster, and Miss Lewis,” she said, greeting them by name. The Queen looked at
each of them in turn, waiting; Darcy did an awkward curtsy and Jane an elegant, I-studied-ballet-
onece one, while Thor did a deep, sweeping bow that seemed to please the queen.

“Please come with me,” the queen said. “You are quite safe.” She gestured gracefully for them to
follow.

“I like your hat, your majesty,” Darcy said, as they went up the ramp.

“Thank you,” the queen said, looking over her shoulder.

“Darcy,” Renata said.

“What? It’s a great hat,” Darcy said.

“Must you--” Renata began, but the queen made a noise of disapproval.

“She is quite correct, it is an excellent hat,” the queen said. “All of my hats are superior.”

“And not everyone can wear hats,” Darcy said. “You have to be elegant and confident to wear a hat
like that,” she said. The queen’s hat was an elaborate basket weave that haloed her head. “I’m not
tall enough for anything higher than a beret or a newsboy,” she confided in the queen sadly.

“Thank you,” the queen said again. “I am sorry you are so short. It is unfortunate.”

Thor chuckled. “Darcy has charmed the royalty again,” he whispered to Jane.

They sat in the Wakanda plane. The pilot was a bald female warrior who watched them without
seeming to watch them. “It will be a few hours,” the queen said, sitting regally. “You may rest, if
you like.”

***

It was after nightfall when she woke up, she realized, looking out the window across from the bed sleepily. Darcy had been left in a room. “Jane?” she said. “Thor?” They must have landed in Wakanda. She got up and went to the window. There was an empty courtyard below. She went to the door and opened it. The hallway was dark at either end. She went right, trying to find someone. Why was everything dark? Why was she even here? Darcy stepped into a huge room with a long table lined with chairs. A banquet hall. Darcy caught a glimpse of a familiar-looking back disappearing through a door thirty feet away. “Brock!” she called. “Shit. Johnny! Johnny!” she called again when he didn’t turn. She tried to chase after him, caught her toe on a chair leg, and tumbled with a yell of dismay.

***

Darcy woke up with a start. She was still on the Wakandan plane. Jane was sleeping on Thor’s shoulder opposite her and Thor had his head back and was snoring gently, like a bear. The queen appeared to be resting with absolute calm and stillness, her eyes closed and breathing even.

Only Renata was awake, watching Darcy with an ambiguous, unfriendly expression. “We’re almost there,” Renata said. She tossed a hairbrush at Darcy.

“Ow,” Darcy said. At Darcy’s sound, Jane opened her eyes.

“Darce, what’s wrong?” Jane said.

“She hit me with a hairbrush,” Darcy said, pointing at Renata with the brush.

“Your hair is a mess,” Renata scolded.

“Her hair is fine,” Jane said.

“We’re meeting royalty,” Renata snapped.

“She’s met royalty before,” Jane said loyally. “They love her. By the way, Darce, I forgot to tell you that Tony and Pepper saw Prince Christian of San Lorenzo at that AmFAR gala last week and he wanted to ask you to dinner.”

“You know Prince Christian?” the queen said. She had apparently woken up and was looking at Darcy.

“A little, we met at a party once,” Darcy said.

“What?” Renata said.

“Aye,” Thor said, “my Lightning sister is quite popular with royals. There is Prince Christian, my brother Loki--”
“Who is my good friend and also with Sif now,” Darcy said, catching Renata’s lethal expression.

“And that other prince. What was his name?” Thor said.

“Jean Louis?” Jane said. “Tony still thinks you should marry Prince Christian, by the way. He offered to negotiate a pre-nup again.”

“I know he loves me, but he treats me like I’m his heiress daughter, Darcy Consuelo Vanderbilt-Stark or something,” Darcy complained. “He keeps trying to marry me off for a title.” The queen laughed.

“That is an amusing idea. He has no children of his own?” she asked Darcy.

“No, no family,” Darcy said sadly.

“Perhaps you ought to consider it,” the queen said. “There are worse things than an arranged marriage.”

“I’m not marrying anyone, your majesty,” Darcy said. “My current plan is be Jane and Thor’s nanny. I’m going to spoil their kids and let them eat cake for breakfast.” She was not going to look at Bro--John’s mother. Nope. Nuh-uh, baby. The queen looked at her and smiled gently.

“Howard would have just tried to get in your pants,” Renata said suddenly.

“You knew Howard?” Darcy said.

“I worked for SHIELD in the seventies,” Renata said.

“You were SHIELD?” Darcy said, shocked.

“For awhile,” she said cryptically, “until I wasn’t. Then my son was. Now he isn’t.” Jane frowned.

***

“Comb your hair,” Renata told Darcy, as they landed. “Someday your prince will come,” she said with asperity, standing up after the queen did.

Darcy stared at the two women as they left. Jane made a face at Darcy.

“She’s mean,” Thor mouthed to Darcy, looking at Renata’s back.

Darcy shrugged dramatically and scrunched her face.

“She’s a total B,” Jane whispered. “Why is she being so hateful to you?”

“No idea,” Darcy said. “All I can think is that she thinks I’m not glamorous enough to be her son’s...whatever I am,” she said. “Maybe you were right, Jane. It might be my shoes are too manly?” Darcy looked at her feet.
“I think your shoes are cute,” Jane said. Darcy was wearing Jambu slip-ons and multicolored socks printed with little espresso cups. The shoes were made for walking. She'd been less interested in being fancy-pretty for awhile now.

“Do you know what this is about?” Thor asked the pilot, as they unbuckled their seatbelts and stood up to follow the two women. The Wakanda pilot laughed.

“It is not worth my life to betray the confidences of Wakanda for such petty colonizer matters,” she said to Thor.

When she, Jane, and Thor stepped out into the Wakandan sunlight, a man was waiting. He was wrapped in Wakanda robes that revealed his missing arm. He looked nervous and tentative. Darcy recognized that face from her 20th-Century American History seminar at Culver. “Miss Lewis?” he said. “Miss Darcy Lewis?” He was looking at her closely.

“Are you James Buchanan Barnes?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, giving her a soft smile. “You can call me Bucky.”

“Hello, Bucky,” Darcy said softly. He didn’t seem dangerous at all, really.

Chapter End Notes

The second flower tote: https://www.bloomdf.com/collections/totes/products/tote-ruby?variant=6902522085409

Jambu shoes are super-cute, if you ask me (and not Renata): https://jambu.com/wildflower/

Bucky led her to a spot in a Wakandan garden. They sat on a bench. “Can you tell me who he really was?” Darcy asked quietly.

“A good man,” Bucky said.

“A good man,” Darcy repeated, feeling overwhelmed with relief.

“He saved me from HYDRA,” Bucky said quietly. “Alone.”

“I was hoping that you were friends,” Darcy said. “That you had a friend. That he had a friend, at the end. Especially when he found the apartment without me--I-I didn’t know it would be like that,” she said. “I wouldn’t have consented, if I’d known.”

“Natalya can be very persuasive,” Bucky said, grinning.

“You know her?” Darcy said.

“I taught her,” he said. “In Russia. She was my student.”

“Oh,” Darcy said, “wow.”

“Also, I shot her. Later on. I was under mind-control at the time and she was SHIELD and moving someone I was assigned to kill. One of many someones,” he said, rubbing his metal arm self-consciously.

“That’s not your fault,” Darcy said. “Jack told us about it.”

“I did it, though. I gotta make amends. Especially to some people. You know Tony Stark?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Darcy said.

“I need to talk to him,” Bucky said quietly. “I have a lot of things I remember now, they weigh on my mind.”

“I’ll get you a number,” Darcy promised. “I’m really sorry.”
“Why are you apologizing to me?” Bucky said, shaking his head. “According to everybody, you’re a real nice girl. Never hurt anyone. Phil says you saved puppies?”

“Phil? Phil Coulson?” Darcy said, shocked.

“Oh, yeah, he’s alive, too. There are a lot of us floating around,” Bucky said dryly. “Phil got me here, so they could help me with my mind control. I’ve got one word left. Rumlow, he didn’t know if he could trust Fury not to be HYDRA or too close to Pierce, so he went to Phil and then, after everything, Phil got us here. I owe them both. If I’m ever safe to be with Steve again, it’ll be because of Brock and Phil.”

“Steve would see you, no matter what,” Darcy assured him.

“I know,” Bucky said, finally laughing. “Punk’s more hard-headed than a mule. He’d stick to me like glue. I was afraid I’d hurt him. I want to feel as safe as possible before we see each other, you know?”

“I understand,” Darcy said. “You want to be careful.”

“I’m afraid he’ll be hurt,” Bucky said quietly. “Won’t understand.”

“He’ll forgive you,” Darcy said. At Bucky’s skeptical expression, she grew insistent, “he will!” she said, smiling. “He loves you and when you love somebody, you can forgive a lot.”

“Can you?” Bucky said gently. “Would you?”

“Absolutely,” Darcy said.

“Can I show you something?” Bucky said. “I’m not supposed to, but I never minded the rules so much,” he said, grinning.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. He had a great smile.

***

She followed Bucky Barnes into a part of the palace that was sleek and modern-looking. A science facility or a laboratory. There was a young girl working on a touch-screen. “Princess Shuri,” Bucky said, bowing gently.

“Sgt. Barnes, how are you today?” the princess asked.

“Very well. This is Miss Lewis,” he said, gesturing to Darcy. Princess Shuri looked at her curiously as Darcy did another awkward curtsy.

“Hi!” Darcy said. “I met your mom. Also, a few years ago, your dad and your brother, but they might not remember me. It was a Tony Stark party.”

“Oh,” Princess Shuri said, rolling her eyes, “I have heard that story. Many times. Tony Stark is a deeply foolish man to destroy his brain cells with alcohol, when he is so gifted.”

“Yeah,” Darcy admitted.
“Is it okay if I take her downstairs?” Bucky asked carefully.

“It is your funeral, Sgt.,” Princess Shuri said. “I would not cross Renata.”

***

As they descended the escalator, Darcy looked at Bucky. “Renata Soldano is a very scary woman. You probably should have waited until you got your arm back,” she told him. She had no idea what he was showing her. She suspected it might be something of Brock’s--his things? A recording? A note or a letter?

“I have no fear of Renata,” Bucky joked.

“Liar,” Darcy teased.

Bucky laughed. “Yeah,” he said, shaking his head. “Yeah.”

The temperature seemed to be dropping as they descended to another level. The room they entered was very soothingly-painted in shades of pale blue. There was a row of tanks. “What is this room for?” she asked. She’d been expecting personal belongings, but this was a storage room, basically. Were those some kind of high-tech safe?

Bucky didn’t answer her immediately; instead, he led her to the rounded white tank in the middle. It stood upright. The glass seemed to be frosted, but there was something large inside. Darcy looked at it curiously.

“This is a cryo tank,” he said. “They put me in one when I first got here for safety. It freezes you.”

“Oh,” Darcy said, “that sounds painful.”

“It’s not, really,” Bucky said. “You sleep. It’s like no time passes. They let me out once they figured out how to undo my code words.” He sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Darcy said.

“I’m not supposed to do this,” Bucky said grimly. He walked to the cryo tank, reached his hand up, and wiped the glass with his palm.

What Darcy thought was frosted glass was actually condensation from the coldness of the cryo tank. She realized it as soon as she saw Brock’s face under the glass. He was in the tank.

“Is--is he alive?” she said, her voice rising. She looked at Bucky desperately. “What’s going on?” she asked him.

He looked back at her with tears in his eyes. “Oh, doll,” he said softly, “I wish we knew for sure.”
Darcy reached out and put her hand on the glass. It was very, very cold. Inside, he was completely still.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter mood track: Lord Huron's "A Ghost on the Shore" --
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QthMaFm6-g
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

February/May

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a sound behind them. Renata was standing at the other end of the room. Darcy froze, expecting her to be angry. “Sgt. Barnes,” Renata said softly, “will you give me a moment with Darcy?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said politely. He gave Darcy a sympathetic look, then left.

“He is alive,” Renata said. She laughed bitterly. “Technically-speaking, HYDRA saved him.”

“HYDRA?” Darcy said, confused.

“He’d been pumped full of HYDRA serums,” Renata said. “They did experiments on him,” she said in an pained voice. “He let them. He allowed them! He let them try things on him to make him stronger or faster or whatever they wanted. Phil told me that only 20% of the HYDRA subjects survived those, according to what they’ve found out. Johnny never told anyone. No one had any idea. He was barely alive when Barnes pulled him out of the Potomac, but Phil thinks the serums kept him alive.” Renata paced in front of Brock’s tank. Her face was furious, her voice biting. “Everyone thought he was dead. They didn’t even realize he had a pulse until they had him on the Bus with more equipment. By then, he’d spent a period of time with horrific fractures and injuries from the fall.” She paused and her face twisted in grief. Darcy reached out to her, but Renata was staring at her son’s face in the cryo tank and didn’t notice. “They used some SHIELD version of Helen Cho’s Cradle technology on him to repair the tissue and bones, but that fall…”

“Was horrific,” Darcy supplied, thinking of the view from the Triskelion’s elevators. “My mother’s a nurse. He must have broken most of his bones.” Fractures would have led to internal organ damage, she thought: broken ribs that punctured lungs, skull fractures that potentially impacted his brain, a broken pelvis or femurs that might keep him from walking again, provided he hadn’t broken his spine and been instantly paralyzed. Not to mention massive internal bleeding. She’d paid enough attention to her mother’s work life to know that his injuries would have been called catastrophic after a fall one-tenth of the one he’d actually experienced. Hitting water was like hitting concrete sometimes. Bodies were fragile, even his body.

“Yes,” Renata said. “SHIELD’s cradle fixed everything, technically, but he was unresponsive after the swelling in his brain went down. There was extensive damage to his brain tissue. He never woke up.”
“When will he wake up?” Darcy asked softly, looking at his face.

“We don’t know,” Renata said. “The Wakandans have been treating him while they lowered his body temperature to promote healing,” she said, her voice breaking on the last word.

“Like a medically-induced coma,” Darcy said. “To let his brain heal?”

“Yes. His brain scans are better. There’s more activity. At some point, they want to try to wake him up,” Renata said.

“How soon?” Darcy asked.

“A week or two,” Renata said. “If he’s non-responsive, they’ll put him back under.”

“Okay,” Darcy told her. Darcy walked closer to the tank. He looked oddly perfect inside the ice, like a male version of Sleeping Beauty. He’d hate the way his hair had grown and his nails were all long, though. When he was out of the tank, she’d trim them. If his scans were improving in there, she believed, he was going to wake up eventually. He just needed time and rest. He might have had a little help from HYDRA’s serums, but Darcy’s gut told her that he’d survived the fall—and the experiments beforehand—because of who he was, not because of some experiment.

“It’s why I’ve been looking for you,” Renata said suddenly. “I thought if you were here, that might help him come back.” She looked at Darcy and burst into tears. “I don’t know what I’m going to do if he won’t come back. I don’t want this to be the end,” she sobbed.

“It’s not, it’s not,” Darcy said, taking Renata by the arms. Her voice was firm. “It’s not the end. Listen to me, I will call in every favor I can if what the Wakandans want to do doesn’t work. Tony will get me Helen Cho herself. He’ll help. We can have every doctor here in the world, okay? And every healer on Asgard. We can take him to Asgard, even. Thor would do that. They were friends.”

“They were friends?” Renata said, staring at Darcy with a kind of wide-eyed helplessness.

“They were friends,” Darcy repeated. “He has lots of friends. You’re not alone in this.” That seemed to make Renata cry even more. “He’s going to wake up,” Darcy promised.

“You don’t know that,” Renata said, weeping like a baby.


***

Darcy did what she always did when Jane melted down: she sat Renata in a chair by Brock’s--she still had trouble calling him Johnny--tank and went to get caffeine and food. Bucky, who’d been up in the lab with Princess Shuri, took her to the cafeteria, bless his polite heart. “You sure you don’t need some help with her, doll?” he offered.

“Nah, I got this one,” Darcy said. “It turns out she’s not that scary.”

“If you say so,” Bucky said, looking doubtful.
“She’s a total Jane. They’re hard shell chocolates, my friend. Crunchy, opaque-looking exteriors hiding all kinds of soft, gooey emotions,” Darcy said. “It’s probably all down to being brilliant and beautiful in male dominated environments, really.”

“That so?” Bucky asked, carrying the coffee.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “When you’re that pretty and that smart, you get all these sketchy dudes using your professional accomplishments to butter you up, so it makes it difficult to trust and you start to doubt your own abilities sometimes. You have to build a hard shell as a defensive mechanism.”

“Like a crab?” Bucky said.

“I was thinking of M&Ms,” Darcy said.

“What are M&Ms?” he asked.

“Oh, honey,” Darcy told him. “When I get you back to Stevie and Brock comes home, we’re all going to have movie night. I can’t believe you’ve haven’t had them yet. They’re a delicious candy. You, me, Steve, and Brock, okay?”

“You’re pretty sure about this,” Bucky said.

“Yup,” Darcy told him. “No room for doubt in the foxhole.”

“I thought it was no atheists in a foxhole?” Bucky said.

“I try to make everything non-denominational, just so no one will be offended,” Darcy said. “But my faith in M&Ms is strong. Him, too.”

“Yeah?” Bucky said.

“He’s alive, so he’ll come back to me,” Darcy said simply. “I just need to give him time to get better.”

***

When she brought back coffee and pastries, the other woman seemed to have calmed down some.

“I didn’t know if you liked cream or sugar, so I brought them separately,” Darcy said, “but drink this. It’ll help. When did you last eat?”

“I’ve been having trouble with nausea,” Renata said. “Especially when I see him like this. I’m sorry I got upset.” She looked at her son in the tank and blinked rapidly again.

“That’s okay,” Darcy said. “Would you like to see some pictures I have of him?”

“Yes,” Renata said.

“This is from when he kicked my ass at mini golf,” she said, showing Renata a photo. “He didn’t know I took this, he was too busy evading the swinging Abraham Lincoln top hat at the time.”

“Mini golf?” Renata said.
“That was probably our best date,” Darcy said. “At least Thad Ross wasn’t there.”

“What?” Renata said.

“Oh, we had some interesting dates,” Darcy said.

“Interesting how?” Renata said.

“Really awkward dates,” she said laughing. “Once we both figured out that he was trying to ask me out. That took awhile.”

Darcy told her about the mystery of “Barack Romolou” and the beautiful flowers and how she’d been post-Asgardian hungover when Brock had figured it out in an elevator and sent her magnolias. “They were really amazing magnolias,” Darcy said, showing Renata a photo. “The lab smelled wonderful for an entire day until Jane accidentally set a fire. That lemony-sweet smell?”

“Yeah,” Renata said, smiling. She’d eaten a little, which Darcy considered a good sign.

“He’s really good at flowers, you should be proud. This is him with Linda’s dogs. I was pet-sitting when he showed up to evac me during the hurricane. He made lots of funny jokes about how they looked like the Jurassic Park raptors, but I bet Onyx misses him,” Darcy said.

“I didn’t know he was even good with dogs,” Renata admitted. “We had cats when he was young.”

“He was great with them,” Darcy said. “Does he like cats?”

“Yeah,” Renata said. “We had a Siamese--it was supposed to be Teri’s cat--but Moo-Shu picked him. She used to sit on his shoulder a lot and just make all these damn noises.” She wiped her eyes. “I had no idea that a cat could cry like a baby.”

“Moo-Shu?” Darcy said. “You named a cat after Chinese food?”

“He did. His idea of a joke,” Renata said.

“That’s awesome,” Darcy said.

“This is why he loves you,” Renata said, rolling her eyes, “because you think that’s funny and not disturbing.”

***

Princess Shuri thought Brock needed two weeks more in the tank. So, Darcy waited for the Wakandans to okay releasing him from cryo. Jane and Thor decided to stay for a bit, too, because Princess Shuri and Jane were bonding and Thor really liked the Dora Milaje. He and Bucky sparred and Bucky underwent treatment for his last word. Ray the pilot—who eyed Darcy up and down and declared her “a choice cut, baby”—continued to cuss out all his Wakandan appliances and Everett Ross. Darcy waited. She could be patient, when it mattered.
Bucky confided in Darcy about Howard and Maria Stark, once he realized she and Tony were close.

“How do I tell him, doll?” Bucky asked, clearly terrified.

“We need to get him prepared,” Darcy said, “with his people.” She made a few calls and told Pepper to get Tony a therapist, because they were coming back from Wakanda with news about how Howard and Maria died, as soon as Bucky was ready.

“HYDRA had them assassinated, huh?” Pepper said. She was no fool.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “How’d you know?”

“Howard is Tony to the nth power and I see how people are always, always trying to kill Tony,” Pepper said. “Why Maria, though?”

“Wrong place, wrong time,” Darcy said.

“The Stark family motto,” Pepper said, sounding both sad and tough. “Give me a few days.”

Once the time had elapsed, Darcy called home and told Tony that Brock was still alive and so was Bucky, but made him promise not to tell Steve yet. She explained that Bucky was still undergoing memory treatments to reverse his brainwashing and wanted to talk to him soon.

“Pep told me it’s about my parents,” Tony said. “I can put two and two together.”

“Tony--” Darcy began.

“Genius first, billionaire playboy philanthropist second, Itty Bitty,” Tony said quietly. “I’ve been living in denial about this for a long time, but I think a part of me always suspected my dad didn’t just have an accident. He drove drunk for forty years, for God’s sake, and never crashed. Hell, he flew planes drunk. Why?”

“He’d recreated Steve’s serum. It was in the car trunk,” Darcy admitted. “HYDRA wanted it.”

“And he was traveling without security and with my mom,” Tony finished. “Stupid, stupid, stupid Howard.” It sounded like he was crying.

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Darcy began.

“He was so arrogant,” Tony said weepily, “he thought he could survive anything.” Darcy heard him sniffle. “Pep keeps looking at me pointedly when I say that to the therapist and it’s starting to hurt my feelings, Itty Bitty.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said--she was also crying--”well, you can tell the therapist that Brock’s mother thinks you’re much nicer to me than Howard was to her back in the day.” Renata and Darcy’s coffee sessions in front of the cryo tank had turned into coffee and booze sessions and Renata had started to confide in Darcy.

“Really?” Tony said.

“Apparently, he attempted to slap her on the ass and she dislocated his shoulder. It’s one of the reasons they drummed her out of SHIELD,” Darcy said. “Renata studied martial arts in the sixties. She used to ninja the hell out of all the old pervs when they got obnoxious.”
“Good,” Tony said firmly. “I’m sure he deserved it. They all did.”

Five minutes after they hung up, Tony called her again. “What happened to the serum?” he asked.

“Shit,” Darcy said, “I don’t know. I’ll get Bucky.” She ran to get him and put him on speaker with Tony. They were discussing the Siberian outpost’s location and what to do when there was a sound in the background on the other end. It was something between deep inhale and a cry.

“Bucky?” Steve’s voice said.

“Uhhh, Capiscle, hi, this is just my California doctor. He’s thinking I might need to go overseas to reverse my, uh, vasectomy, yeah,” Tony said, lying frantically in an attempt to scare off Steve. Steve got nervous whenever people discussed birth control in public.

“Punk,” Bucky said quietly.

“You’re alive?” Steve said, his voice going from sad to joyful in two words.

“So they tell me,” Bucky said.

“Where are you?” Steve said.

“Someplace safe for the time being,” Bucky said gently. “I can’t see you yet. It’s not safe. I’m afraid it’ll trigger some HYDRA code to hurt you.”

“I’m not afraid,” Steve said.

“I know,” Bucky said, laughing. “You never had any damn instinct for self preservation, you little idiot. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Soon?” Steve asked.

“Soon,” Bucky promised. Darcy noticed he didn’t mention her, Thor, or Jane. Or Wakanda. Steve was going to be so bent out of shape when he found out everyone else had seen Bucky first. For the time, though, the New York-based Avengers were going to check out that Siberian base.

When the two of them transferred over to another line to talk privately, it was just Darcy and Tony. “Is it just me or was that really romantic?” Tony asked her.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “Totes in love. That gender studies professor who wrote the book about them being secret lovers will be vindicated.”

“Sooooon,” Tony said, mocking them.

“Bad Tony,” Darcy said.

“You think Sharon will be in on it, too? Like a threesome?” Tony asked, sounding speculative.


“Hey, Barnes murdered my parents first, I reserve the right to mock him for making googly eyes at the other creaky relic,” Tony said, sounding utterly like himself.
“I love you,” Darcy told him. “Did I mention that Brock had a cat called Moo-Shu once? He named it.”

“He’s your Pep, Itty Bitty,” Tony said.

“Yeah, you think so?” Darcy said.

“Uh-huh. She named her pet pig Bacon,” Tony said. “And she would totally take over a cartel. That would actually be kinda hot. Crime boss Pepper.”

“I’m hanging up now! Love you!” Darcy told him.

***

The morning that they released Brock was a sunny, beautiful day. Darcy took it as a good omen. She believed they would be lucky. She wore his jewelry for added good feelings and followed Renata and Princess Shuri down into the cryo room. The Queen was waiting for them. Bucky was with them, too. He was leaving the next week to go meet Steve. They’d gotten his last word and finished his arm. When they’d all gathered in the room, Princess Shuri and Queen Ramonda looked carefully at them. “He could be non-responsive,” the princess warned. “There could be ongoing issues with daily functioning and memory as well,” she said. “He will need physical and cognitive therapy, even if he is much improved.”

“But we will put him back into cryo immediately if there is no change,” the queen told Renata. Darcy squeezed Renata’s shoulder. She could tell Renata was trying to hold herself together. Bucky merely looked nervous.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Renata said. “I’m so scared.”

“You can,” Bucky said. “Hold onto to me,” he said, offering her his metal hand, “squeeze as hard as you need to.”

“Okay,” Renata said, blinking.

“We’re ready,” Darcy said. The queen nodded at Princess Shuri and she plugged a code into a tablet. The cryo chamber opened slowly. Renata and Bucky stood on it’s right; Darcy stood on the left. They waited.

Darcy felt like she couldn’t breathe. She was shaking. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from Brock’s face, but somehow she knew Renata was weeping. As the freeze retreated, he looked as he’d stepped out of the shower and gone to sleep. There was a tiny flicker of movement. His eyelids.

The green-brown eyes opened and slid right. “Johnny?” Renata said in a trembling voice.

“Ma,” he whispered. “It’s good to see your face.”

“Oh thank God,” Renata said, succumbing to tears of relief. She sobbed on Bucky’s metal
shoulder. The queen and Princess Shuri smiled.

“We will give you a private moment,” the queen said, gently leading her daughter away.

“Hey, kid,” Brock said to Bucky. “We made it out okay?”

“You gave me a scare,” Bucky said softly, patting Renata’s arm. She was still hysterical.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he said, in that same gravelly, unused voice. “Ma, why you crying?” he asked. “I can feel my toes, so I can walk,” he said, stretching slightly.

“Because I’m so happy,” Renata said. “I’m so happy!” she said, clinging to Bucky’s shirt. Bucky smiled gently at her.

“Where am I?” Brock asked.

“Wakanda,” Darcy said. He turned his head towards her for the first time. Those eyes went wide for a fraction of a second.

“Taser Girl?” he said.

“Hey, handsome,” Darcy said softly. “You scared me.” She brushed the hair away from his face and he seemed to study her for a long moment.

“You’re even prettier than you look in photos,” he said, “I didn’t know that was possible.”

“Photos?” Darcy said in confusion.

“Your file photos,” he said.

“Johnny,” Renata said. She’d frozen. She looked at Darcy in horror.

“Yeah, Ma?” he said, turning.

“What month is it?” Renata asked.

“It’s February, right?” he said.

“Oh,” Darcy said. “Oh.”

“When did you meet?” Renata asked.

“May,” Darcy said. She wanted to throw up. “We met in May.”

“Did we?” he said. “How?”

Chapter End Notes

Have you heard Siamese? They’re chatty: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwSYm1NPHP4
Chapter Mood music:

Courtney Love's Hold Onto Me for Renata & Bucky & Steve & Tony: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_mXhRA80YQ

Stevie Nick's Crystal for Darcy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Of6OYicAQFI

Tom Petty's Square One for Brock: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe2JmhjeQBY
“How long have we been dating?” Brock asked Darcy, once they were finally alone.

“How long?” Darcy said. They’d moved him to a regular bedroom in the compound.

His mother—exhausted from crying—had left after several hours of fussing over him, plying him with food, and getting on his nerves. He’d eventually gotten a little terse with Renata when she fluffed his pillows for the fifth time and tried to make him eat the Wakandan equivalent of Jell-O. Which was actually much better than Jell-O, but apparently was some sort of mother-son argument trigger.

“He won’t eat,” Renata had said mournfully to Darcy. “Please tell him to eat!”

“If he doesn’t have an appetite back, it’s probably a sign that he shouldn’t eat yet,” Darcy had replied. “Your body’s good at telling you when it can handle solid foods again. I’ll eat that, though.” She’d taken the Wakandan food—it was like a cinnamon and nutmeggy sweet potato pudding and delicious—and eaten it happily. She’d been starving; she was too anxious to eat before they got him out of cryo. Then Bucky had finally coaxed Renata away. Bucky, Darcy realized, was invaluable in a stressful situation. She was really going to miss him. Had he babysat his younger siblings? She seemed to remember that from the 20th Century American History Seminar textbook, she thought, eating the last of the sweet potatoes.

She caught Brock looking at her and smiled. “I’ll get the recipe for that,” she said. “It’s very good, you’d like it.”

“Would I?” he said cryptically. He was doing his unreadable face, she realized.

“I made you garlic-ginger sweet potatoes once, you liked them,” she said.

“I thought you and Foster lived off Pop Tarts?” he asked quietly.

“Jane had iron issues in Norway, so I learned to cook a few things,” she said. “When I have a real stove and feel motivated, I can cook.”

“Hmmm. How do you know that thing about eating?” Brock asked curiously.

“What thing?” she said.
“The stomach thing?” he said.

“My mom’s a nurse like Teri,” she told him. “She always says you shouldn’t eat if you still feel like food is repellant, to trust your appetite.” He nodded.

“Have you met Teri?” he said.

“No, you just mentioned her some,” Darcy said.

“But you’ve met my mother?” he said, sounding doubtful.

“Yes, but only after you di-disappeared,” she corrected herself, “I was in New York and saw someone with a flower tote—you bought me one—and asked where they’d got it. I stopped by the florist shop and recognized your mom. You’d mentioned her and her first name. Renata’s distinctive.” Darcy looked at his hands on the sheet. Why did he look tense?

“How?” he asked. “How would you recognize my mother?”

“Your eyes,” she said, looking into his. “You have the same eyes. I never thought I’d see them again.” He shifted uncomfortably and looked away for a second. There was a long pause.

“Can I ask you some questions about us?” Brock said.

“Yeah, Bro--do you want me to call you Johnny?” she asked.

“No, Brock is fine,” he said. “How did we meet?” he asked without preamble.

“Jane and I were playing Indiana Jones for Fury and we fell down a pyramid shaft after being chased by some guys. You and Jack Rollins were part of the rescue party at Giza,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “That seems plausible. Anything else happen on that mission?”

“I called you an asshole for moving the quinjet without Steve and Nat and then you carried me to a SHIELD infirmary and I was half-asleep and I told you that you smelled nice,” Darcy said, grinning, hoping to trigger a memory.

“So, it was love at first sight for you, too, huh?” he said dryly. He remained resolutely un-triggered, but he did ask her all kinds of questions. Even about their sex life. He was oddly blunt. When she told him that he’d wanted to take it slow and that they’d only had sex once, but she’d been staying with him, his eyebrows went up.

Only later--she was trying and failing to sleep--did it occur to Darcy that maybe he was suggesting he wasn’t all that impressed with her at the moment when he’d said the ‘love at first sight’ thing.

***

“Jesus Christ, kid,” Brock muttered to Bucky. “I go to sleep and wake up and you’re Bucky Barnes, we shot Pierce, fell out a window, five months have gone by while I was in cryo, and Taser Girl is the girlfriend I don’t remember? It’s a mindfuck,” he said. He shook his head. Brock had assumed that he and Bucky had merely escaped from the vault and he’d been hurt. The full story was much more complicated than he’d realized.
“Getting out of cryo is disorienting,” Bucky said. “It takes a week for the vertigo to subside and for me to feel one-hundred percent in my body, usually.” Bucky and Ray were walking with him. They’d stopped for Brock to rest in a courtyard. Daily walking was part of his physical and cognitive retraining. He was still building up his endurance and coordination. The cognitive therapies were the greatest struggles; he was often frustrated when he couldn’t remember words and phrases.

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Ray said. “She’s hot. I’d be fucking her brains out right now if I was you, asshole.”

“Hey,” Brock said. “Cut it out. I don’t know her. It’s weird, goddammit. I was buying her jewelry and flowers and shit. I’d made her a go-bag and practically moved her and some weird-ass dogs into my apartment. And we were taking it slow, whatever the fuck that means?” He’d looked back at his cloud-archived text messages to Darcy, asked her a thousand questions, and was still lost about the true nature of their relationship. His phone browser history was full of jewelry and flower searches, too. He didn't remember any of it.

“Since when do you take it slow, motherfucker?” Ray asked.

“You did like the dogs,” Bucky said sweetly.

“Exactly. Exactly.” Brock said to Ray. “It doesn’t feel like anything I’d do. It’s weird. I keep waiting for her to go all Total Recall and spring at me with a knife ’cause she’s a HYDRA, uh, uh--fuck, what the fuck are they called?” He rubbed his forehead in frustration.

“A HYDRA plant?” Ray offered.

“What is total recall?” Bucky asked.

“Movie where the guy’s wife turns out to be a plant. Sharon Stone. Also hot,” Ray said. Brock sighed heavily.

“It’s--it’s, I don’t know,” Brock said.

“Have you told him that he shot Kangaroo Jack yet?” Ray said cheerfully.

“I shot Jack?” Brock said.

“He’s fine, he was wearing a vest,” Bucky said. “You had to do it; Pierce was saying my words and Jack wouldn’t let us leave. You saved his life. Sorta.”

“Good,” Brock said, relieved.

“You also shot Romanoff, but you were pissed at her for faking your hot girlfriend’s death at the time,” Ray said brightly.

“She faked my girlfriend’s death?” Brock said, looking stunned.

“She thought you were Pierce’s man, so she told Darcy you wanted her in a safe house and then got some of Fury’s secret squad to trash your apartment and dump blood everywhere. Your mama has the photos, but you do not want to see them,” Ray said.

“I don’t?” Brock said.

“Nope,” Bucky told him.
“Nuh-uh. You think Okoye would give me the time of day?” Ray asked, checking out the beautiful leader of Dora Milaje. Ray liked tough women.

“No,” Brock and Bucky said in unison.

“Hey, assholes, I bet I’m more charming and upstanding than her current man. Something’s not right about that fucking dude, I keep telling y’all. Maybe she would like some of this, motherfuckers, you don’t know,” Ray said, rising to talk to Okoye.

“She’s gonna kill him,” Bucky said, grinning.

“Was I in love with her, Yasha?” Brock asked Bucky as Ray walked over.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, sighing.

“Why don’t I feel it now?” Brock said quietly.

“It’ll come back,” Bucky said. “Give it time.”

They were both quiet for a minute. Brock gazed into the middle distance, thinking. Bucky looked at Ray. Okoye was giving Ray a deeply skeptical look across the courtyard. Some of the Wakandan children pointed at him and laughed.

“How do you know I was in love with her?” Brock asked suddenly. “Did I even say that? Maybe this is all exaggerated? I’ve never been a romantic guy, not really. We’d only been seeing each other for, what, two weeks?”

Bucky looked at him, opened his mouth, then shut it again.

“What?” Brock said.

“You panicked when you saw the faked murder in your apartment. Cried as I was carrying you out and kept saying you loved her and hadn’t told her yet,” Bucky said.

“Oh,” Brock said.

“And wasn’t she your work fantasy girl for a couple of years?” Bucky asked, raising his eyebrow.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you had a pin-up girl in your damn locker, Yasha,” Brock said. “That doesn’t make it real love.”

“Sure,” Bucky said. “I wouldn’t minded meeting Rita Hayworth in the flesh, though.”

“Yeah,” Brock said. “Lewis is nice to look at.”

“Also, you vomited on my shoes. Twice,” Bucky told him. “While crying.”

***

“I’m officially going insane,” Darcy said. She was sitting on Jane and Thor’s Wakandan sofa,
"You should see how he looks at me."

"It’ll be fine. It’s only been a few days. Give him time, he’s had a big head injury," Jane said gently.

Darcy groaned and flopped down. "This sucks eggs. Like giant ostrich egg levels of sucks eggs. My not-dead boyfriend *hates* me now," she said.

"No, he can’t. How does he look at you?" Jane asked.

"Like I’m weird and scary and disturbing. He practically recoils when I hand him things. Today, I handed him a cup of coffee and I swear to Frigga, Jane, he didn’t want to touch my hand. My hand! Then he sniffed at the coffee like he thought it might be poisonous," Darcy grumbled.

"I’m sure that isn’t true," Jane said. "He’s relearning all these things! He probably forgot the word for coffee. Or thank you."

"It’s just so unfair! He remembers everyone but me and you: Bucky, his family, his SHIELD coworkers, Ray. He even remembers Thor a little because SHIELD had STRIKE Alpha do VIP evacuations during the Loki-Chitauri deal. I mean, I can literally see him relaxing more around Thor than me,” Darcy said. "He thinks I’m weird. Like, my personality actively repels him."

"That cannot be true," Jane said. "He was incredibly into you from the moment you met and you called him an asshole." Darcy shook her head.

"Not anymore. I’m going to go pet the war rhinos," Darcy said glumly. "I feel like he’s on the verge of dumping me, honestly. But he can’t walk all the way out there yet, so it’s a safe place to hide."

"He is not dumping you," Jane said.

"He’s going to give me a ‘it’s not you, it’s my memory loss speech,’ I know it," Darcy said. "The face he makes at me, Jane?"

"Yeah?" Jane said, frowning.

"It could literally be the poster for *He’s Not That Into You*. I had no idea how into me Old Brock was until New Brock started looking at me like he has no freaking clue where I came from,” she said, sighing. "I miss that cryptic awkward guy. Ugh. He was so cute with his no-ties and his not-laughing at my jokes. He is gone forever."

"That is revisionist history—you joked about the no-ties—and you’re catastrophizing," Jane said, as Darcy departed for the rhino enclosure. That was the fancy therapy term Jane used when Darcy spun out into a negative thought spiral.

"Phhhft," Darcy said. "Even when I didn’t realize that dude wanted me, he totally did. New Brock does not. At all."

"I don’t believe you," Jane said.

"He used to call me baby or sweetheart, Jane. You know what he calls me now? Lewis. Not even Miss Lewis, all sweet like Bucky or Steve. Just Lewis!" Darcy said. Jane winced.
Darcy snagged Thor on her walk to see the rhinos--Thor loved the rhinos--and they met Prince T'Challa at the enclosures. “Your royal highness,” Darcy said, doing a slightly improved curtsy. She thought she was totally mastering it, until she lost her balance slightly and Thor had to catch her. T’Challa laughed. “Whoops,” Darcy said.

“Miss Lewis, Prince Thor,” T’Challa said smoothly. “How are you and your companions?” he asked.

“Quite well!” Thor said cheerfully. Darcy nodded. T’Challa and Thor began talking Avengers type stuff--Wakanda was involved in supplying some vibranium gear and Darcy got the impression there was more stuff she didn’t know about--so she wandered down the pen lines to pat a baby rhino. There was no point in making them talk in code. Thor struggled with that, anyway. She sat down at the edge of the pen, so she’d be at the rhino’s eye level. The baby rhino huffed at her.

“I am so bummed out right now, little dude,” she told the rhino. “My boyfriend is back, but I don’t think he wants me now.” The rhino snuffled contentedly. Darcy wished she could be that happy.

“What do I do?” The rhino sniffed at her fingers. “I don’t know what to do,” Darcy told the rhino.

A shadow fell over her. Darcy looked up. Renata and a man were standing there.

“My first suggestion is that you not sit in the dirt and talk to yourself,” the man towering over her said.

“Dude!” Darcy said, rising. “You’re M’Baku! You’re my favorite person. Your tribe grows that good mountain coffee. What is in that?”

“Is it coffee,” M’Baku said. “Is your coffee not so good?”

“Oh em gee, no,” Darcy said. “Your coffee is incredible.” To Renata, she said, “It’s like that Starbucks Casi Cielo had a beautiful baby with Hawaiian Kona and this Nicaraguan shade-tree blend Tony got me once. Jabari coffee is the best coffee in the world.”

“She really, really likes coffee,” Renata said.

“Seriously, if I wasn’t in love with her son, I’d be proposing to you right now,” Darcy told M’Baku. He laughed.

“Little one, you are not fierce enough to propose to M’Baku,” he told her, laughing. He gestured to indicate her petite height. “My children were taller than you at five.”

“Hey, don’t underestimate me ‘cause I’m fun size. I tased him!” Darcy said, pointing to Thor. “He went down like a rock.”

“Ah,” M’Baku said. “That is acceptable. But you should have Okoye teach you throw a spear. Much better range than a taser.”

“How do you know about tasers?” Renata asked curiously. She was under the impression that the Jabari were the most isolated tribe.

“I subscribe to a number of Wakandan publications related to weaponry and self-defense,” M’Baku said. “It is never a bad thing to keep one’s hand in. People tend to underestimate vegetarians as well.”
She was helping Bucky get ready to go to New York to meet Steve and Tony when her Stark phone rang. “Itty Bitty!” Tony said, his face filling the screen. “Where is Soviet Murderbot?”

“Tony, no,” she said. “Bucky’s here.”

“Hello, Mr. Stark,” Bucky said politely.

“I have a surprise for both of you!” Tony said cheerfully. “I’m throwing a shindig.”

“What?” Darcy said.

“To celebrate the reunion of the Capiscle and his pal and you and your Rambo,” Tony said. “We’re flying you all to Cannes tomorrow. It’ll be a recreation of my South of France party. Invite all the cool Wakandans.”

After he’d hung up, Darcy looked at Bucky. “Oh God,” she said.

“You got a bad feeling about this, too?” Bucky said.

“Very bad,” Darcy said. The two of them went to the others and made the party announcement. Thor beamed, Renata seemed pleased, T’Challa accepted on behalf of his family, and Brock refused to make eye contact with Darcy. The only bright spot was the arrival of a courier with 3 lbs of Jabari coffee. M’Baku sent it with his compliments at her good taste.

Pepper and Tony emerged to meet their quinjet when it landed on Tony’s wide lawn in the hills above Cannes the next day. Tony had called Darcy to say Steve had been marching up and down the gravel drive since ten am. Darcy thought that was rather sweet. “He’ll be all sweaty,” Tony pointed out.

“Have you never seen him in the gym?” Darcy asked. “It’s a good look.”

“Why can’t I be the kind of guy people say that about?” Tony groused.

“What about Sharon?” Darcy whispered, curious.

“Oh, she’s here. It’s very erotically charged,” Tony said.

“No way,” Darcy said.

“I overheard her tell Pep that Barnes has impressive thighs yesterday,” Tony whispered back.

“He really does,” Darcy said. “Thighs for days.”
“Punk,” Bucky said when they stepped off the plane.

“Bucky,” Steve said back. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“This is so romantic,” Jane said. Thor grinned and put his arms around her.

“Awww,” Darcy said.

“Seventy years,” Renata whispered.

“Very romantic,” Prince T’Challa said, looking at Nakia significantly.

“Get a room,” Ray muttered from the back. Darcy shot him a look, but accidentally made eye contact with Brock. He looked away.

Pepper elbowed Tony. “Say something nice to them,” she said.

“You guys want to take a walk?” Tony told Steve and Bucky. “We’ve got two acres of gardens, very pretty, yadda, yadda, romantic, privacy.”

“Yeah,” Steve said in a husky voice, slipping his arm through Bucky’s metal one. “Buck?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, not taking his eyes off Steve’s face. They walked away. Darcy watched them go.

“The olive trees are the best sex spot!” Tony called. “Right, Pep?”

“Tony,” Pepper said. “That was not me.”

“It wasn’t?” he said. “Clearly, I was thinking of you.” Pepper turned to greet the guests. “That’s sort of the same thing, isn’t it, sweetie? Pep? Pep?”

Once they deplaned, Darcy tried to give Brock some space. “What is going on with you?” Renata said, when Darcy backed out of the dining room with her after brunch. “Stay with him! You’re in the South of France, it’s romantic,” Renata said.

“It’s nothing,” Darcy said. She hadn’t told Renata her fears about Brock. “I don’t want him to get too tired,” she lied. “He needs rest after our trip. Let him stay in there and hang out with the guys. I’m going to check out our room, make sure it’s comfortable, take a bath.” Tony had put them together. Brock had glanced at her when Tony told everyone the room arrangements, but said nothing.

“Oh,” Renata said. “Are you having sex?” she asked suddenly.

“No,” Darcy said. “Not since he woke up.” Darcy didn’t have the emotional wherewithal to lie.

“Really?” Renata said, sounding surprised.

“I’m not pressuring him, for God’s sake,” she said sharply. Then she went upstairs to take a bath. Thank God Tony had arc reactor-powered water heaters, so there was plenty of hot water. She wanted to boil her anxiety away. Her whole body was tense. Also, Darcy was really distracted by Brock; she might leave him cold now, but she was still gone on him. She’d sworn that she caught
him staring at one of Tony’s local guests—a beautiful brunette model, there with a hotelier—and it had made her feel like stabbing the other woman with a freaking oyster fork at brunch. And now they’d be sharing a bed? Was it possible to die of sexual frustration, she wondered? She guessed it was a leading cause of office workers going postal, but you couldn’t really spontaneously combust, could you?

***

Downstairs, Renata looked at her son. He was sitting out on one of the wide patios with Ray, Thor, Tony, T’Challa, and Rhodey. Renata suspected they were trying to catch Steve and Bucky’s walk of shame back into the house. The two had disappeared somewhere on the grounds. She was just about to tell him to go see Darcy when her attention was arrested by Pepper waving. “Have you seen Darcy?” Pepper mouthed, her hand over the receiver of her cell phone.


“I’m afraid she’s indisposed and can’t come to the phone, but yes, she is here. She’ll be at the party. I’m so glad you and your mother and sister can come,” Pepper said in her smooth, professional voice. “I’m sure she’s looking forward to seeing you again.”

Pepper hung up the phone and marched past Renata. Renata followed her out to the patio. “Tony,” Pepper said, “please tell me you did not just invite Prince Christian to a party to celebrate Brock Rumlow being alive?”

“Well,” Tony said. “I forgot he was on the last guest list. But Chris won’t make a scene, he’s a good dude. Look at where he’s been.”

“What has he been doing?” Thor asked Rhodey.

“Since he graduated from that British military academy, his dad gave him a rank in San Lorenzo’s military and then he insisted on volunteering to be a part of a UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur,” Rhodey said, chuckling. “He lived like a normal peacekeeper for several months, until his cover was blown by the media. His dad did not like that. That royals in the military stuff is usually for show, you know? He came around once Chris got all the good press, though.”

“Who is Prince Christian?” Brock asked. The name seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place it.

“He has been in Sierra Leone recently, I believe,” T’Challa said to Thor. “We met a few months ago. Nakia has worked with an NGO that he is a patron of. She speaks highly of him.”

“Why should this guy care if I’m back?” Brock asked again. Thor shifted uncomfortably. In the distance, a doorbell rang.

“I’m sure this is something that will only cause problems,” Pepper said, turning on her heel.

“What does she think it is?” Ray said.

“Last year, he sent a bunch of flowers and Cartier. She sent them all back because she thought he was a baby playboy and just wanted to get in her pants,” Tony said. “It turns out his mother and
sister are doing a big charity campaign with Cartier. Proceeds go to Mei’s foundations.”

“Ooooh,” Ray said, “you mean Mei Lin?” He looked at Brock. “This dude is Mei Lin Des-whatever’s son. The Chinese-French movie star?”

“Desjardins,” Tony supplied.

“She was in one American movie, the Scorsese one, before she married that prince. I thought she was so hot when I was a kid,” Ray told Brock.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said. “Mei is very attractive. She divorced the prince ten years ago. Lives down here and does charity work now. Adopted several kids as a single mom, sort of like Josephine Baker.”

“It’s Cartier,” Pepper said, stepping back out onto the patio.

Tony looked at Brock. “Sorry,” he said. “He still thinks you’re dead. When we saw him at that AmFar gala, he asked about giving her a mourning period before he tried again.”

“Can I see it?” Renata asked Pepper. Pepper handed her the leather case and she opened it. It was a stunning bracelet: diamonds and inlaid stones in a floral design. Cherry blossoms. “Oh, no,” she said, holding it an angle. The diamonds flashed in the sunlight.

“It gets worse,” Pepper told Renata. “He’s grown a beard and looks closer to her age. He’s one of the few men in the world who looks even handsomer with facial hair.” She showed her phone to Renata, who blanched. He was extremely good-looking.

“Oh, cool, like me,” Tony said cheerfully, when Pepper passed him the phone.

“Oh, man,” Rhodey said, shaking his head, “Tony, you fucked up.”

Brock blinked. “I don’t get it?” he said. Everyone looked at one another.

“Well—” Tony began. Pepper sighed.

“The most eligible royal bachelor in all of Europe is chasing your girlfriend, Johnny, you idiot,” Renata snapped at Brock. “And you’re not even having sex with her!”

“Ma, for Christ’s sake,” he said, “not in front of everyone.”

“When will it be appropriate? When she’s left you because you keep giving her the cold shoulder? When you finally remember, you’re going to be miserable!” Renata said. They proceeded to have a whispered argument a few feet away. Renata waved the diamond bracelet in his face.

“Whoa,” Tony said. “That brings back memories. My mother threw a pair of her earrings at me once. I’d crashed a car.”

“I’m a little uncomfortable,” Rhodey said.


Chapter End Notes
Head canon casting: The gorgeous Philippe Day (from Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries) with a beard as Prince Christian of San Lorenzo. He has Darcy's weakness—gorgeous green-brown eyes:
https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4978649/mediaviewer/rm605400576

Darcy's Cartier bracelet: https://diamondsinthelibrary.com/art-deco-cherry-blossom-bracelet-by-cartier/. I'm riffing on the symbolism of cherry blossoms in Chinese culture (female beauty and sensuality) = Christian is trying to compliment Darcy with the design.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The Queen of Cartier Island

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy finished soaking in her bath and listened to mopey music--Fiona Apple’s “The Child Is Gone”-- while she put lotion on her freshly shaven legs. Pepper had stocked all the bathrooms with really fluffy towels and nice bubble bath and the bathroom was at least a quiet place for Darcy to think. She felt like she and Brock had somehow gone off the right path--got lost somehow--and she didn’t know how to get them back on track again. She sighed and dried her hair. “Party face,” she muttered to herself, faking a smile in the mirror. At least that wouldn’t be until tomorrow night. She looked at the dark shadows under her eyes and frowned. How was she supposed to look cheerful and happy, like he remembered her when he didn’t know her at all? Worse, he didn’t seem to want to know her.

Darcy had unpacked some of her things before she got in the tub. She applied a little lip balm and moisturizer, just to see if it made her look more rested. She spritzed on some Island Gardenia; Darcy had given Renata back that bottle of Chanel no. 5 when Brock made some cryptic comment about his mother trying to turn her into a little Renata. Maybe if she wore the things she’d worn when they were together, it would spur something, she thought. Pepper had brought some of her and Jane’s clothes, too. They’d left for Wakandan without taking anything with them. If she was lucky, her first date dress might be in there. She’d worn her Shalimar and Island Gardenia when she’d stayed with him in DC, too. He didn’t seem to mind or recognize them now, either way. Her Beyond Paradise was living happily with Mrs. Qamaniq on Baffin Island. God, things were so different from when they’d lived in Arctic Bay, but she was still so sad. How was that possible? She’d imagined that even finding out he was a good person would make her feel better. Now she knew he was a good person with absolute certainty and he was alive and yet--and yet--she was possibly more unhappy than she’d been in Arctic Bay. She stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and almost jumped out of her skin.

Brock was asleep in the bed. He’d come in without her hearing him. He was still incredibly quiet, but Darcy had noticed that he slept more now and often seemed tired and frustrated at his inability to do things like he used to. It was one of the reasons she’d been trying not to pressure him for anything he didn’t want to do--long conversations, affection, whatever. He was still recovering. She crept quietly over to her bag of clothes from Pepper. It was empty. Where were her clothes?
She tried not to panic. She looked around the room.

“I unpacked your, uh, your stuff,” Brock said suddenly. “I can’t remember the word.” Darcy was so startled she almost dropped the towel. She’d thought he was asleep. His eyes were only slightly open. He’d changed from the clothes he’d worn on the trip into a pair of boxers and a t-shirt.

“Oh,” Darcy said. “Thank you.” She went to the closet. Her clothes were hanging in a neat row. There were even some beautiful additions; Pepper had brought party dresses.

“You want to take a nap? I’m tired,” Brock said quietly.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “That was my plan, too.” Only she hadn’t expected him to be in the bed with her. She got a pair of underwear and took down a soft, comfortable nightshirt—it was a gift from Jane and said “I Make Bad Science Puns Periodically”—and went into the bathroom to put it on. It felt weird to be undressed around him if he wasn’t into it. Which sucked; she’d never really felt self-conscious around him that way before.

When she emerged, Brock looked more awake. “Hey,” he said. “Nice t-shirt.” He pulled the blankets back a little for her; he’d moved to sleep underneath them.

“It was a gift from Jane,” Darcy said, feeling awkward as she climbed into bed with him. They’d been sleeping in separate rooms in Wakanda. She looked up at Tony’s ceiling. It had one of those fancy chandeliers. She stared at the ceiling and tried to channel someone calmer and more together. She’d tased Thor. She could handle sharing a bed with her undead, suddenly indifferent boyfriend. It was like having a sleepover with a friend. A sleepover with a friend.

“Did we do this before?” he asked suddenly. “We must have.”

“What?” Darcy said, turning her head to look at him.

“Sleep in the same bed. My apartment’s only one bedroom,” he said. “So, we must have.”

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “You were working a lot during the hurricane, though. Bucky says you were working regular SHIELD shifts and then trying to stay with him in the vault, so there’d be one less guard to worry about when he tried to go. It was mostly me and the dogs.”

“Oh,” Brock said. “What happened to them?”

“They were Linda’s. She was on a cruise. Natasha kept them until Linda could pick them up when Tony sent us away. They’re okay,” Darcy said. “She sent me photos.” She sat up and reached over his body for her phone on the nightstand. As she was leaning, he reached out to stabilize her by putting his hands around her waist. Those hands were warm and familiar. She picked up the phone and slid back onto her heels and he let her go. “Here they are,” she said, handing him the phone. “Linda keeps me updated.” She crawled back under the covers and realized he was flicking through her phone.

“I did like these dogs, huh?” he said. She’d taken a photo him asleep on her couch with a happy Onyx and a slightly-miffed Anubis. Anubis liked having the couch to himself.

“Yup,” Darcy said, trying hard for breezy. “That’s my leaky apartment in the SHIELD complex.” She’d rolled over to face him.

“I came and got you, right?” he said softly. She’d told him that the first day he was out of cryo. He
“You liberated a SHIELD jeep,” Darcy said. “And then scared the building manager into fixing my place and Thor and Jane’s. They were at a conference, but I stayed for the dogs.”

“Why weren’t we sleeping together?” he asked.

“You didn’t want to,” she said. “I don’t know why, but you objected to sleeping with me for the first time in an un-air-conditioned, leaky apartment with no lights?”

He looked at her. “I think I wanted it to be special,” he said. “That’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“You think so?” Darcy said. “I had frizzy hair and was really sweaty at the time, so I don’t know. It might have just been a B.O. thing.” He laughed, then grew serious.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could be that fucking guy again,” he said grimly. He looked away. “I just want you to know it’s not you--”

“It’s not me, it’s your memory loss?” Darcy said, feeling like she could cry. This was it. The breakup speech. Her chest hurt.

“Yeah,” he said. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“What?” Darcy said.

“We’ll figure it out,” he repeated, handing her back her phone.

“You’re not breaking up with me?” Darcy said, stunned.

“No,” he said. “Of course not, Lewis. Let’s get some sleep. I’m not looking forward to dinner with all those other people.” He closed his eyes. Then he stopped. “Oh, you got a gift,” he said, reaching over and handing her a red leather box from the nightstand.

“You got me a present?” Darcy said, brightening.

“No,” he said. “Prince Whatshisface got you a present. He’s anxious to see you.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “Which Prince?”

“There’s more than one?” Brock said.

“Kinda,” Darcy admitted.

Brock rubbed his forehead. “Prince, uh, Christopher?” he said.

“Christian,” Darcy said. “It must be Christian. His mom lives a mile or so away.”

“He was apparently giving you a period of mourning for me before he started sending you bling,” Brock said dryly. “Sounds like a real stand up guy. Open the box.”

“Oh. Wow,” Darcy said. The bracelet was series of pavé diamond panels with inlaid gems in a cherry blossom pattern. It was very beautiful. “I mean, it’s nice,” she began.

“You’re a terrible liar, Lewis. Just awful. It’s fucking astounding, is what it is,” Brock said. “That thing’s probably worth a small fortune. But apparently that’s the reaction you provoke in men.” He
chuckled. “My whole damn search history is all flowers and jewelry and, uh, chocolates.”

“You bought me these,” Darcy told him, gesturing to her S necklace and olive branch bracelet. She’d put them on in the bathroom; she hadn’t stopped wearing them since she got to Wakanda. “This is an S, so I assume you were hinting about your real name,” she said. “None of my initials are S. You said something in the note about the symbolism of the bracelet?” she told him. “It’s an olive branch.”

“Huh,” he said. “What do you think I meant?”

“I don’t know,” Darcy said. She put Prince Christian’s bracelet on her nightstand. Brock was looking at her when she turned back. “I wondered if you wanted me to forgive you for not telling me about what you were involved in or…”

“Or?” he said.

“Maybe you were just wishing for some peace?” she said softly. She looked at him.

“It’s not a bad guess,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” she said softly, touching the bracelet. Darcy rested her head against the pillow, studying his collarbone on the pillow next to hers. She knew eye contact still made him uncomfortable and also, she loved that damn collarbone. He had a gorgeous neck and shoulders. She’d dreamed about those shoulders, longed for them. She was trying not to cry when he spoke again.

“Did you ever fuck Prince Whatshisface?” he asked suddenly.

“No!” Darcy said, turning her head to look up at his face. “He’s a baby. He had just turned twenty one when we met, I think? Twenty-two?” she said.

“Great,” Brock muttered. “A really young handsome rich guy with a fucking title.”

“Oh, it’s not just a title,” Darcy told him, feeling a little insulted by the way he’d said fuck instead of sex or make love, even. “He’s like T’Challa. He’ll be San Lorenzo’s head of state one day.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Brock said. “He’s the future king of Cartier goddamned island.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of free time with Ray,” Darcy noted. “Your swearing has improved in creativity and emphasis. 10 out of 10.”

“Oh-huh. He’s a great influence on my cognitive therapy. You smell good,” he told her. “What is that?”

“Island Gardenia,” she said.

“Island Gardenia,” he repeated. “So, if you didn’t sleep with this guy, then he wants you to? Really wants you to?” he asked. “Why?”

“I dunno,” Darcy said. “We met at Tony’s party. I barely remember him. Maybe that’s just the reaction I provoke in men,” she snarked.

He chuckled. “Lewis,” he said, “don’t tease me, I’m not a well man.” He reached over and turned off the lamp, so that the only light in the room was the sunshine coming through the curtains. They lay in silence for awhile. The room was half-dark and cool.
He suddenly laughed. “You thought I was dead for months!” he said. “Why aren’t you the queen of Cartier island by now? The future head of state obviously wants to be with you.”

“I didn’t wanna be the queen of Cartier island,” she muttered. “I missed you.”

“Yeah?” he said. “Are you high?”

“Shut up,” she said, giggling.

“That seems like a serious life mistake,” he told her. “Think of all the jewelry you’re giving up and the fucking mansions and the famous people, just to spend your time patching me up with Fighter Fix and helping me when I forget my own name.”

“Shit,” Darcy muttered, raising her head to look at him, “do you need your collection of Thai stuff and Tiger Balms? Are you sore?”

“Lewis, I’ve been low-grade injured since about 2002,” he said. “I swiped some Wakandan stuff before we left.”

“Okay, good,” she said, settling back on the pillow.

“You really don’t want to grab that bracelet and run towards whatever mansion Prince Cartier is waiting for you in?” he said, sounding incredulous. “That makes no sense. Have you really thought this through?”

“You tried to take me to a fancy French place in DC for our first date and I made you leave and get pizza,” she said. “Everyone at the French restaurant was like a hundred year old goblin Senator. Freaking Thad Ross was there.”

“Is this your way of saying you’d make a terrible queen of Cartier island?” he said dryly. “Because, you know, I’m kind of an asshole and I definitely don’t have my own island.”

“Phhfft. You were always accusing me of being too easy to please,” she said. “You’re not an asshole, but I still don’t understand why you think carnations aren’t pretty.”

“Carnations? Lewis, please,” he said. “That is just sad.”

“You sent me the most beautiful ones,” she said. “They were raspberry red. Deep Velvet.” She sighed.

“So, I’m not wrong,” he said teasingly. “You’re a bizarrely cheap date with low-to-no-standards.”

“You bought me Tiffany’s,” she said defensively. “That’s expensive.”

“Those are not that expensive, I’ve seen the bills. They’re sterling silver. What is wrong with you? You make zero sense as a person,” he quipped. “You should have moved on from me months ago, much less with guys like this around.” He shook his head. “What kind of woman ditches princes in favor of staying with me and some really odd looking dogs during a hurricane?” he asked.

“Excuse me, asshole, you loved those dogs,” she said, laughing.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “You admit that I’m asshole,” he said, sounding triumphant.

Darcy stared at the ceiling, trying not to giggle. “I cooked you steak,” she said. “Once Bess got our power back on. You were very smitten. You threatened to kidnap me. Knowing what I know now, I think you were serious.”
“No shit,” he said. “You probably would have let me, too. No sense,” he repeated, shaking his head.

“I think you’re suffering from low self-esteem if you don’t think you deserve me,” she told him.

“Lewis,” he said, “fucking go to sleep.” He threw the blankets over her head and she laughed.

“You wanted to kidnap Linda’s dogs, too!” she said, in a slightly muffled voice. He scoffed.

***

There was a knock at the door. Darcy was asleep, so Brock answered it. Tony was standing in the hallway, rocking on his heels. “Rambo, uh, everything good?” he asked.

“Tony?” Brock said, confused. “Is something wrong?”


“Look,” Brock began--

“It’s perfectly, uh, normal in high stress situations. Or so I’ve been told,” Tony said, looking at a spot over Brock’s shoulder. “I had a little PTSD for awhile there. Couldn’t really stand to be in close proximity to people after Afghanistan and New York. Then it was any situation where I got warm after the whole roasted alive in the suit by Aldrich Killian thing,” he said. “Made me panic. Pepper was, uh, very patient.”

“Oh,” Brock said. “Sorry.”

“Anyhow, Helen just got here. Helen Cho? She made the Cradle tech that SHIELD used on you, pre-cryo. You might want to talk to her about any, uh, ongoing issues or feelings or whatever.”

“Thanks?” Brock said.

“She’s waiting downstairs for you now,” Tony said. He turned on his heel and walked away, then stopped and turned back. “I’m glad we had this talk, Rambo. I like you and Itty Bitty as a couple. You’ve got something. Much better than her and the Capiscle.”

“Cap? What the fuck?” Brock muttered.

He put on pants and found Helen Cho downstairs. Tony had cleared a room for her to examine him. She was younger than he expected. She looked him over critically. “Your tissue looks healthy,” she said.

“I’m having trouble with fatigue,” he said. “I have memory loss and confusion. Barnes says that’s normal?”

“That’s fairly normal,” she said. “Even though the cryo preserves you, you do stop the mechanics of daily functioning and your brain has to start functioning again normally. It’s taxing when the brain has been slowed for a period. The neurons start firing again, but they’re not perfect. That’s what your cognitive therapies are for, retraining the neural activities. With your head injuries, you’re going experience more confusion and fatigue than Barnes does, because his functioning
returns without his brain navigating the impacts of a head injury. The memory loss is the same. Where is he, by the way?”

“He’s around here somewhere—look for Steve and Sharon,” Brock told her. He paused. She looked at him, waiting.

“Let’s cut to the chase here. Tony says you’re experiencing impotence?” she said abruptly.

“It’s not an equipment problem,” he said defensively. “It’s uh, my libido?”

“How?” she asked.

“I’m just not feeling any desire for, uh, intimacy since I got out of cryo,” he said.

“Not at all?” she said.

“No,” he said softly. “It’s like I can look at my girlfriend and know I should be attracted to her and I normally would be, but--uh--I don’t feel a spark?”

“You feel a spark with anyone else?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “It’s like I’ve got no desire.”

“So, it’s a software issue, not hardware,” she said. “Huh. Interesting. Take your shirt off,” she said. When he hesitated, she rolled her eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself, you’re no Thor.” She checked all his reflexes and poked him roughly.

“Ow,” he said, when she dug her thumb into his calf. “What are you doing?”

“Checking your capillary refill. Your circulation appears fine at the subcutaneous level,” she said. “I’d need to do an ultrasound to check your major arteries for good blood flow--”

“I think they did that in Wakanda?” he said. “Shoved an ultrasound wand practically in my crotch to check my legs,” he grumbled.

“The major arteries that feed your legs are here,” she said, pointing near the tendons where his leg met his groin. “They scan you here?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I want to see all your records, but if you’re describing a more general lack of desire, rather than an erectile dysfunction”—he winced at the words—”then this probably more a result of fatigue than anything else. You’re just tired.”

“Just tired?” he said.

“Yeah, you’ve been through a lot, even if you don’t remember. You’re still repairing, relearning to function. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs isn’t that far off, for psychology, in terms of your body needing to rest and repair before it’s ready for emotional and physical intimacy,” she said.

“Maslow’s hierarchy?” Brock said out loud. It seemed strangely familiar.

“Uh-huh,” Helen said. “My advice to you is to rest. Take your girlfriend and go somewhere relaxing and do nothing for awhile, if you can do that financially. Tony has a great place in the Maldives, he sent me there for my last birthday.”
“Yeah,” he said. “Will my memories ever come back?” he asked sadly.

“They could--but they might not,” Helen Cho said. “Sometimes, they never come back. At this point, your mind could be protecting you by walling off things that are upsetting and hurtful. In that case, they might. But it could be that you sustained an injury to the part of the brain that stored those memories and they’re lost. But you can always make new ones.”

***

When Darcy woke up, Brock was in the shower. “Brock?” she said.

“Yeah?” he called.

“What if we sneak off to have dinner in town together?” she said. “Just us?”

“Are you asking me on a date?” Brock called out. He was teasing her, she thought.

“Fine, go to dinner with everyone downstairs,” she told him.

“You win, weirdo,” he said. He was definitely teasing her. Right?

Chapter End Notes

Fiona Apple's The Child is Gone: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC7svmK0uBs
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Second first dates

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos! Y’all are the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brock wanted to turn down Tony’s offer of a driver and walk or take a taxi into town, but Darcy insisted. She didn’t want him to get too tired and Tony’s driver would either stay or come back for them immediately. Brock seemed slightly bugged by the expensiveness of Tony’s lifestyle, she realized, and was inclined to do something that might leave him hurting to assert his independence or whatever. She pointed out that neither of them needed to get lost and walk a bunch in a strange town. “Um, you’re still in recovery and I have a bad habit of falling down tomb shafts and getting attacked by aliens?” she suggested. “I think we should take the car.”

“You’re worse than my mother,” he grumbled.

“You liked it before,” she told him. “When I fussed over you, you seemed pretty happy.”

“Are you making that up because you know I can’t know any different?” he asked, as they rode into the city below in some sort of town car. After dark, the city seemed more empty. Darcy had heard that lots of people went to the casinos in the evenings or the fancy hotel restaurants.

“Nope,” she said. ”Ask Sharon about how I made you brownies as a surprise and you practically tackled me in a hallway and then made out with me in front of your neighbors,” she told him. “You were very into my domestic goddess routine,” she said. “I felt like Nigella Lawson for about a minute.”

“That so?” he said, tapping a pattern on the car’s door handle. She nodded. He looked at her and shook his head.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing,” he said. After a second, he pulled out his phone with his other hand.

“Whatcha doing?” she asked.

“Texting Sharon,” he said teasingly. “I want an impartial witness to this so-called story.”

Darcy laughed. “You’re going to miss me when I’m making German chocolate brownies for the San Lorenzo royal family,” she snarked back.

“That’ll never happen,” he said. “You don’t have the sense to actually leave me for the perfect
Darcy rolled her eyes. “They were German chocolate brownies?” he asked suddenly. “I love German chocolate cake.”

“I know, we talked about it before I made them,” she said. “I did it for you, baby,” she said in an obnoxious voice. He chuckled.

Brock looked around when the driver dropped them off. “What, no four-star Michelin place?” he commented dryly.

“Nope, I picked this one,” she said, leading him into a little restaurant. It was a little seafood place with plastic tables and chairs, but the patio overlooked the ocean. You could still hear the water lapping in the dark and smell the salt air. She loved the salt air.

“Even the food Tony serves is rich,” he said suddenly.

“It’s a lot for you, isn’t it?” she told him, once they were seated at a white plastic table. “The whole thing. The food, the mansions, the whole deal. You wouldn’t spend money the way Tony does.”

“Says who?” he asked.

“Your mama does a great impression of you as a toddler refusing to spend your piggy bank money. It’s cute,” she said. She mimicked the scrunched up face Renata had done for her.

“Jesus, Ma,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Okay, yes, it’s weird to be here. It’s especially weird when you just get out of cryo. A lot of overload.”

“Well, just sit for a bit,” she told him. “Listening to the water is probably good for you or something.” She got him water and her a Diet Coke--she was not getting drunk and then making an ill-conceived pass at him that he would shoot down, Dear God--

“This isn’t so bad,” he said suddenly. He’d relaxed, she realized.

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I assume they have steamed vegetables in France, so you can continue starving yourself as normal.” He raised an eyebrow at her, but he did order steamed vegetables and fish.

“Um, the moules-frites, s’il vous plaît,” Darcy said to the waiter.

“You speak French?” Brock asked her.

“I took enough in high school to know how to say thank you and ‘mussels with fries,’ along with some of the names of desserts,” she joked. “I retained all the really important stuff.”

“You’re intelligent,” he said quietly. There was a weird note in his voice.

“Oh, I’m a stealth genius, watch out,” she said, trying to get him to smile. He blinked at her.
“It’s in my notes,” he said.

“You took notes about me?” she said, baffled.

“I took them during your presentation about the, uh, stuff you and Jane did,” he said, looking around quietly.

“Oh,” she said.

“I was very upset,” he said, clenching his jaw slightly. “I know that. I was furious at the way Fury put you in danger.”

“That’s in the notes?” Darcy asked.

“I sent him an email during the meeting,” he said flatly. “And then we apparently had a heated discussion afterwards that was the subject of a long email chain of office, uh, whatever. Gossip. He threatened to demote me and I told him to go fuck himself, according messages between me and some of my team.”

“Brock,” she said, “was this the same time you showed up at my house and made me risotto?”

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging and looking away. “I didn’t tell people when I was seeing you, I don’t think.” A muscle jumped in his neck.

“Oh, honey, please don’t get upset, I won’t ask about it again,” Darcy said, reaching out and putting her hand over his. She expected him to pull away, but he didn’t. He relaxed slightly.

“Yeah,” he said. He held her hand until the food came.

She let him sit with his thoughts, whatever they were, while they ate. She caught him watching her as she pried a mussel out of its shell and ate it. “Your food okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He was looking at her oddly. “You’ve got a little butter sauce,” he said gesturing to indicate her mouth and chin.

“Whoops,” Darcy said. “I forget you’re not desensitized to my bad table manners anymore. I like to eat and I’m messy.” She wiped her mouth. “French fry?” she asked.

“No, no, thanks,” he said. “What kind of risotto did I make?”

“Milani?” she said. “It was really good.”

“Milanese,” he said, grinning.

“What?” she said.

“I was trying to impress you,” he said. “With my fanciest-looking risotto and Tiffany’s and flower totes.”

“I was really impressed,” she told him. “Those were all beautiful. Look at those flowers,” she said, showing him a photo on her phone. “Gorgeous flowers. But I was a little miffed at you, too.”

“Why?” he said.
“You wouldn’t kiss me for our first few dates and then you were all ‘take it slow’ and I couldn’t figure out if you actually liked me or not,” she said playfully. To her surprise, he sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“Shit. Fuck,” he muttered, pressing his palm into his hair roughly.

“What’s wrong?” Darcy asked, worried.

“It’s--it’s, look, I need a minute, okay? Stay here,” he said, standing up. She watched him walk down the waterfront path that was linked to the restaurant’s outdoor seating, stop, and lean against the railing for a minute. She she call Bucky, she wondered? Bucky was really good at helping Brock. Why couldn’t she be good at helping him? She’d actually dialed the number for Sharon and had her finger over the call button when Brock came back and sat down with a heavy sigh. He looked at her. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This is our second first date and I ruined it.”

“No, no,” Darcy said. “You’re trying to relax and it was working until I started reminding you about work stuff and everything. I’m sorry. How can I help? Do you want some chocolate or to go for a walk or something?”

“Chocolate or a walk?” he said.

“Those are my big coping strategies,” she told him, “in Arctic Bay all I did was dip Hershey’s chocolate bars in my coffee and march around the cliffs when I had the sads.”

“The cliffs?” he said.

“Oh, yeah, big cliffs,” she said. She showed him a photo on her phone. “See? Really pretty. It was light until midnight and stuff in the summer.” He frowned.

“Baby, I don’t like that,” he said. “That doesn’t look safe.” Darcy looked up at him and her eyes filled with tears. “What’s wrong?” he said urgently.

“You haven’t called me baby since before,” she said, wiping her eyes and smiling.

After dinner, he wanted to walk around a little. “I feel okay, really,” he said. “Not that tired.”

“You just don’t want to go back to the house,” she teased. “Tell the truth, what makes you more crazy: me, your mother, or the jet setters?”

“You don’t make me crazy,” he said softly. They were walking around the old city. There were a few little shops open. “Is there anything you want?” he asked.

“Tomorrow, I want to escape the party-planning madness and look for cheese,” she told him.

“Cheese?” he said.

“I feel very sad for you that you have such an adversarial relationship with cheese,” she said. “They have cheeses here that we can’t get because of the pasteurization laws, I think?”

“Adversarial,” he sounded out.

“Awww, hey, that reminds me, you probably don’t remember, but Loki and I had a book club going. It kinda fell off for a few months while he was in Asgard and I was hiding out, but we’re going to restart. Would it help you to read with us?” she asked as they walked along.
“You and Loki? Thor’s brother?” he asked, frowning.

“Yeah, he was my roommate at the SHIELD complex,” Darcy said. “His dad exiled him for a bit, but they are doing so good now. I’m so happy for him.”

“Loki?” Brock repeated.

“You were kinda buddies, actually. I think he used to drop hints about where to take me on dates; Jack told me he would wander by y’all in the gym and say weird, random stuff about like, mini golf, and you took me to mini golf?” Darcy said.

“He helped me figure out where to take you on dates?” Brock said.

“And you took a shower in his shower during the hurricane,” Darcy told him. “We made him a magic apartment in the linen closet.”

“What?” Brock said.

“I’ll show you pictures sometime, it was so cool. He had to unmagic everything when Jane and I had to vacate. The landlord was not happy,” she said. “He bitched for days about my good kitchen laminate. People have no sense of fun.”

“Okay,” Brock said. He frowned.

“You know, I’d blame that confused look on your memory loss, but you always looked like that when I talked about Loki,” Darcy told him.

“Let’s go in here,” Brock said suddenly, guiding her into a store.

“Do you need to sit down?” Darcy asked, worried.

“No,” he said. “I want to buy you a present.”

“Baby, you don’t have to buy me a present,” she said.

“What if I want to?” he said, putting his arms around her shoulders. Darcy leaned into him. God, she’d missed him. She didn’t want presents, she wanted to go make out with him somewhere. For days.

He picked her out a scarf. “You wear these, right?” he said, draping a super-soft chenille one around her neck. It was blue. Very simple and inexpensive, but extremely comfy and exactly the kind of thing she normally wore.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I do.” He apparently didn’t think yarn was unromantic anymore? He was so different sometimes, she thought. As they were browsing through the store, she stopped and spritzed on a sweet vanilla perfume. It was a $18 scent from a European company called Outremer. “What is it?” she said, when she caught him looking. She offered her arm for him to smell. “It’s called Vanille,” she said.

“I like that,” he said. “It’s smells...soft. Warm.”

“You like this?” she said. She’d assumed he wouldn’t. It smelled like vanilla-laced marshmallows.
“Yeah, why not?” he said.

“Your mom told me to ditch a cupcake-y vanilla thing I was wearing and bought me that Chanel because I’m not ‘nineteen anymore’ or something?” she said, doing air quotes. “I assumed she knew your taste better than I did? Also, Natasha suggested you didn’t want me to smell like candy once.”

“I love my mother very much,” he said dryly, “but I do not want you to smell like her or the things she likes.”

Darcy laughed. “No?” she said.

“She’s very, uh, formal--and the less said about Natasha, the better,” he said grimly.

“I’m sorry,” Darcy said. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.” She kicked herself internally. Whenever she mentioned anything to do with work, he seemed to get stressed.

“That wasn’t your fault. Wear the cupcake thing. I want you to feel warm,” he said. “Warm and, uh--” he paused. “I can’t think of the word.”

“Sweet?” she said.

“Held,” he said. “I want you to feel held.” He looked at her with a weird intensity. Then he insisted that he buy her the perfume and the scarf. It was strange, Darcy thought. Why would you need your girlfriend to feel held, instead of saying you’d hold her?

She was still thinking about it when they called for the car and then rode back up to the house. He’d draped the scarf around her neck--it was cooler as it got dark by the waterfront--but he seemed surprised when she interlaced her fingers with his. “This okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He rubbed his thumb over her hand gently.

“You’re picking out things I really like,” she told him softly.

“Did I not before?” he said, frowning.

“No, you did, you just said yarn wasn’t romantic enough. I think you took your romantic moves pretty seriously,” she told him, gently bumping his shoulder.

“Things were different then,” he said. There was a weird edgy note to his voice that she didn’t understand.

“Talk to me,” she said. “What’s bothering you? Should I not mention DC? I feel like I’ve hurt you, but I don’t know exactly what I do wrong,” she said quietly.

“I--I--feel like I know, but I don’t know,” he said. He sighed and rubbed his jaw. “I’m fucked up, I think.”

“No,” she said, insistent. “Nothing’s wrong with you. Bad things happened to you, but they aren’t you, okay?” She pushed his hair back gently. “Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. He sounded less certain.
The car stopped in front of the house and he put his hand on the door handle. “Brock?” she said softly. He stopped and she leaned over and gently kissed his cheek. “I want to be with you,” she said. He swallowed.

“Even if things aren’t perfect?” he asked. “Or like they were before?”

“Yeah,” she said. “But if you want a couple of weird-looking dogs, we can totally steal Linda’s,” she joked. He flashed her a grin that looked so much like his old one that she wanted to weep.

***

Once they were inside, Sharon called his name. She was sitting out on the patio with Bucky and Steve. “I’ll be back,” he said, letting go of Darcy’s hand. “Just work stuff.” Darcy thought Bucky was frowning; she hoped it wasn’t bad news about HYDRA cells.

“Oh, I think I’m going to raid Tony’s fridge. Meet you upstairs?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said.

In the kitchen, she ran into Helen Cho. She was sitting on the counter, drinking a glass of pink wine, talking to someone. Darcy went to the fridge and found some vanilla ice cream. “Score,” she whispered. Tony always kept ice cream on hand. The guest walked away and Helen turned to her. They were alone.

“Darce!” she said.

“Hi,” Darcy said, waving with her spoons. “You want ice cream? Tony’s got vanilla, rocky road, strawberry, and, uh, sea salt caramel?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Helen said, gesturing with her wine glass. “This is from Brad and Angelina’s old vineyard!”

“Awesomesauce,” Darcy said.

“I met your new guy. I didn’t realize he was your guy, but seriously, high-five. Those abs!” she said.

“You saw his abs?” Darcy said, laughing. “Did you just ask to see them?” She and Helen had previously bonded over finding ways to get Steve to take his shirt off or wander around in one of his tiny tank tops.

“No, no, Tony brought me in to consult,” Helen said. She lowered her voice. “I’d lose my license for doing this with anybody else, but don’t worry, honey. It’ll be fine. Lots of guys have trouble with their sex drive after major injuries. It’ll come back in no time. Get yourself a Hitachi and make sure he relaxes, okay? Relaxation is key. It’s just like when people can’t get pregnant, you know? The more he thinks about how he doesn’t feel like having sex, the more he gets tense, and then the more he doesn’t feel like having sex. It’s a vicious cycle. Get Tony to send you somewhere tropical, lay on a beach, get massages, or something.” Helen sipped her wine. “God, this is good. It’s so sad about Brad and Angelina. All those kids, you know?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, feeling stunned.
“Milaya, you are here. It is so good to see you,” a voice said. It was Natasha. She hugged Darcy.
“Are you all right?” Natasha asked, frowning.

“We were talking about Brad and Angelina,” Helen said. “Isn’t it sad? You want some of their wine?”

Darcy made her excuses and carried her ice cream carton, spoons, and her little shopping bag of perfume out of the kitchen. She had an uneasy feeling about how Renata and Brock would respond to Nat’s presence.

And Brock couldn’t or didn’t want to have sex with her? She shifted the dewy carton against her arm and trudged upstairs, sighing. She’d really been hoping he’d want to eat ice cream in bed with her and fool around a little.

Chapter End Notes

Outremer's Vanille is inexpensive and delicious: https://www.anthropologie.com/shop/outremer-eau-de-toilette2?category=beauty-fragrance&color=005&quantity=1&size=One%20Size&type=REGULAR. It reminds of those big fancy flavored marshmallows they sell at gourmet stores, like Williams-Sonoma, around the holidays. Do they still have those?

Chenille scarf= so cozy. I imagine Darcy's is something like this and that she is a big chenille fan: https://www.gap.com/browse/product.do?pid=338901
“Hey, I’ve got ice cream, babe,” she said, sliding into the room. He looked up from the bed.

“Yeah?” he said. He looked upset, she thought. She handed him the carton and spoons.

“Feel free to get a few spoonfuls in before I kill that, I’m getting into my pajamas,” she said. When she came back out, he was reading. He’d put the ice cream on her side of the bed. She crawled in next to him and took the cardboard lid off the ice cream. He was reading SHIELD stuff on a tablet, she realized. He sighed, shifted slightly, and seemed to notice her for the first time as she licked the spoon.

“Did I let you eat in my bed?” he said dryly.

“Yes,” she said. “Or I didn’t ask permission and the dogs knew snitches got stitches and didn’t rat me out,” she told him. “Ice cream?” she said, waving the spoon at him.

“You just assumed I’d be okay with it?” he asked, shaking his head.

“I think you spotted the Cheez-its crumbs once, but you didn’t say anything. In retrospect, I think you were very in love with me at the time,” she told him. “Are you sure? This is very good ice cream.”

“At the time? You think I’m not in love with you now?” he said in a strained voice.

“You just re-met me the other day,” she said. “It’s okay if your feelings aren’t, you know, the same? Or they’re less intense right now or whatever.”

He looked aggrieved, as if she’d insulted him. “My feelings are intense, okay? Give me some of that fucking ice cream,” he said grumpily, swiping her spoon. He ate a huge spoonful.

“Oh no, am I making you stress eat sugar and carbs?” she said. “I don’t think you normally eat those in that size spoonful.”

“No shit, baby,” he said. Then he flicked at little ice cream on her nose.

“Are you food fighting with me now?” Darcy said.
“Serves you right,” he said.

“For eating in bed?” she asked, wiping the ice cream off her nose and licking her fingers.

“For questioning my fucking devotion,” he said.

“Excuse me, you spent the first week out of cryo acting like I’d put arsenic in your coffee!” she said.

“I didn’t think you’d put poison in the coffee. I knew you’d never do that to coffee,” he said. “I thought you put it in my rice pudding.”

“Why?” Darcy said, laughing.

“I thought you might be HYDRA for a day or two,” he said. “It seemed too good to be real.”

“Did you think I was actual me or someone they’d sent who looked like me?” Darcy asked curiously.

“What?” he said.

“There was this movie where Ben Affleck had memory loss and they sent an Uma Thurman lookalike to trick him and pretend to be his pre-amnesia girlfriend. I wondered if you thought I was a Darcy doppelganger?” she said. He rolled his eyes. “What?” she said. “Who would HYDRA get who looks like me? Rachel from Tactical Support?”

“No,” he said. “What the fuck? She looks nothing like you. You’re much prettier than her.”

“They’d definitely have to pad out her clothes a little,” Darcy said, stealing back the ice cream spoon. Apparently, he wanted to share one. He scoffed.

“I would know real you from a fake you,” he said firmly. “Give me that spoon.”

“Exactly how much time did you spend with my file photos from New Mexico?” she teased.

“It’s cute that you think everyone stopped watching you after Puente Antiguo,” he said. Jane may be upset,” Darcy said. He ate ice cream, then shook his head.

“Are you admitting that SHIELD surveilled us? Jane may be upset,” Darcy said. He ate ice cream, then shook his head.

“Not SHIELD. I liked those Instagram photos you did with dogs everywhere you went to conferences,” he said.

“Oh my God, you social media stalked me?” Darcy said. “I don’t remember you on my followers list.”

“Of course not,” he said. “I pretended to be an older grad student named Greg studying in the UK. That seemed to be your type. You were with the Ian guy then.”

“You were Greg? I liked Greg!” Darcy said.

“I know,” he said. “That was the idea.”

“I was supposed to meet him for coffee in London once and he sent me Norah Jones concert tickets when he had a TA-ing emergency to apologize for standing me up...oh my God, you sent me concert tickets,” Darcy said.
“It was a SHIELD mission, actually. We got diverted from doing security in London to an emergency in Abu Dhabi. You were always very careful about your address, thank God,” he said. “It was smart to use off-site PO boxes and stuff. I worried about that. But you mostly got mail from the other perfume maniacs doing sample swaps and science people, not anybody dangerous.”

“Wait just a freaking minute,” Darcy said. “You kept this from me before! You had multiple secret identities. You intercepted my mail?”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “I didn’t do the mail thing, SHIELD does some mail surveillance. I just accessed the system to make sure no one sending you perfume samples was a serial killer. They were all who they said they were. The perfume women.”

“What would you have done if we’d met for coffee? Just pretended to be Greg forever?” she said. “Told me you had a new job teaching art history in Yorkshire to explain why we couldn’t see each other all the time or something?”

“Maybe,” he shrugged. “I hadn’t thought it through. I made the account impulsively one night when I’d had too much Johnnie Walker. But you talked to me and sent me introvert memes. It took me a few months to stop responding.” He looked thoughtful, as if he was seriously considering the logistics of being Greg while running STRIKE Alpha.

“You catfished me on Twitter and Facebook!” she said. “Actually catfished me. That is so messed up.”

“I didn’t actually intend to do anything other than meet you for coffee,” he said. “You were with Ian.”

“Sure,” she scoffed. “You just planned that so we could share memes face-to-face, not so you could have crazy sex and disappear on me.”

He grinned. “I wouldn’t have disappeared forever,” he said, scraping the side of the ice cream carton.

“You looked so different,” she said. “Did you steal somebody’s photo?”

“No, that was just a photo of me with a less-good haircut and a beard from a long field mission in Pakistan from when I was younger, baby. I wanted you to be more impressed with me in person,” he said. “I’m better-looking now, obviously.” He winked.

“That is insane. Insane,” Darcy said. “Did you practice a fake British accent, too?”

“No,” he said. “Greg was originally from Orlando, FL, remember? He was just studying in the UK.” He ate a spoonful of ice cream and looked at her.

“What?” she said. She hadn’t seen that look since before.

“I couldn’t quit you,” he said slyly. “My SHIELD therapist and I had several conversations about my ‘worrying tendency’ for deception,” he said, using air quotes. “The therapist told me I should stop talking to you as Greg.” He sighed. Darcy snatched the spoon out of his hand and reached for the ice cream in his lap.

“Give me that damn ice cream. What if I’d fallen for you as Greg? What about my feelings?” she said, pulling back the carton.

“I’m sure we would have worked it out. It’s not like I was secretly a terrorist or anything,” he said.
“Compared to some of the things I’ve done at work, that was pretty mild.”

“I liked Greg. He sent me cat videos,” Darcy said. “And that one of the laughing baby.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And the hamster on the piano.”

“Wait, is that why you didn’t want to meet me at SHIELD? Because you were afraid I’d recognize you as Greg?!” Darcy said.

“Possibly,” he said. “It was probably in the back of my mind.”

“When you made me risotto, you claimed that the File Fixation thing was no biggie and that you hadn’t been stalking me or anything, that you did it as a team-building exercise,” Darcy said. “You lied!”

“I have no memory of that,” he said, trying to steal back the spoon.

“I cannot believe you,” she said, giggling. “That time I was really sad about being stuck at Jane’s mom’s house, you spent three hours texting me art forgery stories! They were actually good stories, too.”

“I’d been reading about that at the time,” he said. “I was so fucked when you asked me to explain British politics to you better because I’d lived in the UK longer, though.”

***

“Why didn’t Loki know? He can see lies!” Darcy wondered out loud a few minutes later. She was scraping the bottom of the carton thoughtfully, making little patterns in the melted vanilla. She picked up her phone and dialed.

“You’re calling him now?” Brock asked. “You’re wearing pajamas.”

“Roommate’s seen me at my worst already,” Darcy said casually, as Loki’s face popped up on the screen. Tony had figured out how to get him cell reception on Asgard.

“Darcy, darling!” Loki said happily. “Commander Rumlow, I’m delighted to see you are not dead.”

“Thanks,” Brock said.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “Can you explain why you never mentioned that he bears a striking resemblance to Greg the art history grad student?”

“Oh,” Loki said. “Coincidence?”

“Nope,” Darcy said. “You knew and you didn’t tell me!”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, I rather liked that about him,” Loki said. “And it was just a few months, years ago. Water under the BiFrost?” He shrugged expressively on the screen.

“Perfectly honest?” Brock said. “You do that?”

“Somewhat honest?” Loki said. “I found it charming that he would use such elaborate ruses to send you that video of the hamster eating popcorn. He read multiple books on pigment and paint history, just to sound more convincing. It reminded me of myself.”
“Do you see what you’ve become?” she teased Brock, once they’d hung up.

“Some of the fraud stuff was good for work,” he said defensively.

“Liar,” she snarked, but she realized he was smiling happily at her.

“I had a great time being Greg,” he said, putting his arm around her. “It was hard to give that up.”

“Uh-huh. How many people you got in there?” she said, poking at his abs.

“A few,” he said, shrugging.

***

When she woke up, it was warm in the bedroom and their limbs were all entangled. The clock said 3:45 am. She was laying on her belly and Brock was half on top of her. Even after months in cryo, he was a wall of warm muscle. His endurance issues were more related to mental exhaustion than muscle loss, she’d been told. God, he felt so good. Still, she needed to give him space, not freak him out. If he was having emotional conflicts about sex, she didn’t want to make it more difficult for him. She tried to wiggle sideways a little, get out from under him. “Where you going?” he said suddenly, holding her tighter.

“I thought you were asleep, didn’t want you to feel crowded,” she said. “You want me to move?”

“No. Don’t go anywhere,” he said. “Feels good.” It did, she thought?

“Okay,” she said.

“Would feel better if you were closer,” he said in her ear, turning her on her side so he could spoon her. She wiggled up against him and he chuckled.

“Okay, okay,” he said, “if you’re trying to prove that you’re intensely fuckable, that does it.” He stroked the back of her hair, then moved one hand down to her thigh.

“Stahpppp,” Darcy muttered. “I haven’t had sex since us, it feels like forever.”

“Oh, yeah?” he said.

“Mmmph,” she said, noncommittally.

“You know what’s funny?” he said.

“What?” she said.

“That whole time we were talking about Greg, I didn’t have one fucking headache. I’ve been having terrible headaches since I got out, but when we were talking about that, I was fine,” he said.

“Huh,” she said. “Maybe we should just talk about Renoir fraud or something?”

“Yeah,” he said, putting his hand between her thighs. “I think Greg has different ideas,” he said in her ear, moving his hand between her thighs gently.
“Are you sure--” she began.

“Shh, don’t think about now, think about then. Now hasn’t happened yet,” he said warmly.

“Okay,” she said.

“Hey,” he said, “tell me what you liked about Greg?” He continued touching her in soft, easy strokes.

“He was funny,” Darcy said, feeling her heart rate increase. “He had a great sense of humor. He was smart and interesting. I was totally taken in.”

“Yeah?” he said, kissing her ear. “You were having trouble with Ian then,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said, feeling a little swoony. “How did you know---ohhhh, God.” He’d moved his hand in a way that felt really good. He chuckled.

“It was obvious,” he said. “All your selfies were of these beautifully sad London sunsets and you never mentioned him. Made it easier for me to slide into your life.” He shifted his body so he was pressed more against her back.

“You timed that coffee date to the end of me and Ian, basically?” she said breathlessly.

“Mmm, no,” he said, sucking at her neck. “I just needed to be in London for work, wanted to see you. Abu Dhabi fucked it all up. Put me in a bad mood for months.”

“Months?” she said, surprised.

“That’s how I ended up with the SHIELD therapist. I was so damn grumpy that Phil thought I was experiencing burnout,” he said. “I had to tell the therapist so they wouldn’t think I was endangering the missions.”

“And the therapist told you to stop being Greg?” she said, arching her back a little.

“Yeah,” he said. “I resisted for awhile, but I couldn’t keep pretending to be in Oxford doing archival research when I was really in DC every time we talked about getting together. Plus, the time difference was fucking up my sleep schedule.”

“It’s like four hours!” Darcy said.

“Five,” he said, chuckling.

“I waited an hour and a half for you the day you stood me up, you know that?” Darcy said. “I feel like I should be really mad at you right now.” He laughed and kissed her neck.

“What did you think happened to Greg when I finally quit sending you cat videos and deactivated the accounts?” he asked.

“Oh, that the friendship fizzled out because you got a real-life girlfriend, like all men talking to women on the internet,” she said.

“How was the Norah Jones concert?” he said.

“Good. It was good,” Darcy said. She kissed him gently, then stopped him from reaching to get a condom. “No,” she said softly.
“You don’t want to?” he whispered.

“Greg stood me up. I’m not sure if I can forgive him yet,” Darcy said. She didn’t think Brock needed to compartmentalize himself so much that he could only have sex as Greg the fake grad student. It wasn’t healthy.

“C’mon,” he said. “Forgive Greg. Just enough to fool around with him a little?”

“Nuh-huh, I’m very serious about my current boyfriend,” she told him. “His name isn’t Greg.”

“‘Shit.’ He sighed. “I don’t want you to think I’m not interested, like before, but I’ve been having trouble with, uh, intimacy, baby.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s okay. I’m not in a hurry.”

“You know? Did my mother--” he began.

“No, Helen and I are friends; she told me that you needed more rest and relaxation and that you’d be fine,” she said, sanitizing as much as possible. “But that I shouldn’t worry, you’d be okay.”

“I’ve never felt like this before. Zero sex drive. It’s like there’s a big sheet of glass between me and my emotions,” he said. “I can see how I should feel, but I can’t reach it.”

“You just need to give it time,” she told him. “We’ll figure this out. There’s no rush.”

“Damn it,” he muttered. “It’s really fucked up that I feel fine pretending to be Greg, isn’t it?”

“Yup,” she said. “I’m kinda worried about it, personally. I don’t want you to box away your emotions like that. Doesn’t seem good in the long term.”

“You think Tony has more ice cream?” he said, sighing.

“I’ll go look,” she said, getting up to put on a bathrobe.

***

Downstairs, she ran into Bucky raiding the fridge. He was tucking can of whipped cream under his metal elbow. “Good night?” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said, winking. “Did you need one of these?”

“Nope, I’m here for my pals Ben & Jerry,” Darcy said. “We’re eating our feelings tonight.”

“So, not such a great night?” Bucky said, looking at her sadly.

“Hmm,” Darcy said. “You know what? It’s not bad. I’ve done this plenty with Jane. I’ve never had a boyfriend that I did this with, though. It’s kinda nice as a couples activity, in a weird way? I’m sure it’s just temporary. He’s blocked, emotionally-speaking.”

Bucky shook his head. “I have a theory,” he said, in that same sad voice.

“Seeing what Natalya did to his apartment messed him up bad. I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s why he can’t remember you two,” he said. “It was ugly, Darce.”

“That would make some sense,” she said, sighing.

“That’s why I’m worried about her being here,” Bucky said. “Renata’s already all steamed. Something’s gonna happen there.”

“Renata can handle herself,” Darcy said. She realized she didn’t care if Renata and Nat had a confrontation. Let Renata get it out there and let Nat defend herself. Darcy wasn’t going to intervene. Her priority was Brock’s well-being. “I’m going to get him out of the house tomorrow. If I didn’t think it would hurt Tony’s feelings, I’d check him into one of the hotels in another town, just skip the fancy party, let him chill for a bit.”

“If you decide to do it, I’ll have Steve and Sharon talk to Tony,” Bucky offered sweetly. “He’ll listen to them.”

“You’re a gem and I’d steal you if Steve and Sharon wouldn’t kill me dead,” Darcy said, kissing his cheek. He grinned. “I have a theory, too,” she told him, a little naughtily.

“Yeah?” Bucky said.

“Everybody thinks you and Steve are dating Sharon, but it’s really that you and Sharon are dating Steve?” Darcy said. “Because he needs looking after from both of you to survive, he really does.”

“Uh-huh,” Bucky said. “He does. I heard how you caught Sharon fibbing in five minutes and he argued with you for weeks.” He chuckled. “He’s always been like that. Punk needs all the help he can not to get himself killed,” he said, with evident fondness and affection.

Darcy was really glad that the three of them were happy together.

***

“This doesn’t seem very emotionally healthy, either,” Brock said, when she came back with sea salt caramel ice cream. “Does this stuff have trans fats?” he asked.

“Shut up, Greg,” she said. “These are just pints. Talk to me when you can handle your second gallon.”

Chapter End Notes

I thought it was important that we get verification of Renata's stories about Johnny and
his particular skill set (deceit) and, uh, more flexible ideas of morality?

Has everybody seen hamster on a piano? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDMNHvnIxic

And the laughing baby? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjXi6X-moxE
“So, how many other times did you catfish me?” Darcy asked, when they were in a cheese shop the next day. She had rushed him out of the house to avoid any Nat and Renata streetfights. A small, wickedly selfish part of her was regretting her ethical restraint from the night before. He looked especially delicious next to cheese. It was seventy-degrees and sunny. She’d also brought a blanket, in case he wanted to go sit on the beach. She’d decided that keeping him away from the house was the best idea.

“It was just the once,” Brock said.

“You sure?” Darcy said.

“I’m not saying I didn’t lurk,” he said, trying a crème épaisse. “I lurked, but I didn’t catfish. Come try this.”

“Why?” Darcy asked. “Oooh, that crème épaisse is good.”

“I liked you,” he said, putting it in their basket.

“Why?” she said.

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why’d you like me?” she asked.

“Really?” he said.

“Why, why why?” she said.

“Are you five?” he teased.

“No, seriously, what did you like about me, besides the obvious stuff, like boobs, hair, and lips?” she said. “Here, try this cheese,” she said, offering him a spoonful of goat’s milk cheese.
“That’s not enough?” he said, looking sly again. New Him was very sly, she realized. Was this the much-mentioned Rumlow sense of humor emerging? She’d heard about it at SHIELD, but hadn’t witnessed it much first-hand, other than at mini golf. Maybe this was what he was like when he wasn’t being a super secret triple agent whatever. He eyed her appreciatively as he ate the cheese. “This isn’t bad?” he said. “I haven’t eaten stuff like this in years.”

“Well, I guess you’re right,” she said back, “I mean, if you lost all your hair and those great abs…”

“Hey,” he said. “Mean. I’m an invalid, remember?”

The took their snacks to the public beach, the Plage du Midi. From the sand, you could see mountains across the bay, but they looked hazy and almost unreal. “What are those?” Brock said. “Am I seeing what I think I’m seeing?”

“Yup, your eyes do not tell lies. Those are the Massif de l'Esterel. A coastal mountain range. Highest point, Mont Vinaigre, which means Vinegar Mountain in French, I think,” Darcy said, reading from her phone. “Isn’t that funny?”

“How’s it funny?” he asked, adjusting his sunglasses. The man wore sunglasses well. He was so handsome.

“Well, if you wanted to create a shorthand for a character--say, Greg’s country cousin--that identified him as a bumpkin, he’d totally be from Vinegar Mountain, so it’s funny to see that name in fancy-schmancy Cannes, no?” she said.

“You’ve spent too much time in France,” he said. “You’ve started adding no to the ends of your sentences.”

She giggled. “But it is very cute, non?” she said.

“Ugh, God, Lewis,” he muttered. “You’re lucky I’ve been crazy about you forever.”

“Can I kiss you?” Darcy asked him, once they were settled on a blanket, watching the waves.

“You’re asking my permission?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course,” she said. “I want enthusiastic consent,” she said. In answer, he leaned over and kissed her. She kissed him back, very gently and softly. She was alert for any sign of hesitation or reluctance, but he surprised her by pressing her down into the blanket. She looked up at him, squinting in the sunlight, when he released her for a second. “You okay? No headaches?” she asked.

“Uh, no,” he said, gently sucking at her bottom lip.

“Is that you, Greg?” she said teasingly. “You better not be kissing me under false pretenses.”

“No,” he said. “Kissing is good today.”

“You’re sure?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “This feels okay. This is all me.”
“I’m still not sure who all that is,” she admitted tentatively. “You didn’t want me to call you Johnny in Wakanda. Is there a difference between Johnny and Brock?”

He folded his arms over her body and rested his chin on her cleavage, looking thoughtful. “Johnny was taller,” he said. “Only I jumped out of a plane and my ‘chute didn’t deploy correctly, so they had to reconstruct my legs. Now I’m shorter by, uh…”

“Shut up,” she said, grinning. “You’re a compulsive liar. I’ve seen your bone scans.” He grinned.

“Are you letting distrust seep into our relationship, baby?” he said. “After all our time together?”

“Me?” Darcy said. “Oh Greg, babe, no.” He shifted so she was more underneath him and twirled a bit of her hair around his finger.

“There’s no real difference between Johnny and Brock,” he said, sounding more serious. “Only my mother always hated my new name. I should have kept John and just asked for last name change, really. It bugged her that I gave up my dad’s name. I always thought my name was too obviously Italian, though.”

“Too Italian?” Darcy said, confused. She thought he meant John.

“Johnny Soldano? I might as well walk around introducing myself as Vinnie Knee caps Gambino or some shit,” he said, chuckling.

“Would Vinnie kneecap other people or have his kneecaps been done?” Darcy asked.

“Both probably. Anyway, there’s no space between them for me, so don’t worry about it. I’ve been Brock for so long, I’m used to that,” he said.

“No?” she said, touching her necklace thoughtfully. He frowned.

“I’m sure I gave you that because I wanted to tell you my real name and everything that was going on,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean you need to worry about calling me Johnny. I was probably trying to bribe you before you met my mother,” he joked.

“I like your mom, even if she’s scary,” Darcy said.

“That’s because you’re the long-suffering girlfriend of her screw-up son,” he muttered, turning his head. She thought he might be looking towards the ocean.

“Oh, no, you should have seen her when you were still in cryo,” Darcy said. “I thought she was going to stab me in a Nordstrom’s cafe. She beheaded some lettuce in a very threatening manner.” Brock laughed.

“Did she now?” he said.

“I felt like she was expecting me to be tall and glamorous and much more beautiful,” Darcy told him. He lifted his head and looked at her.

“Really?” he said.

“Yeah,” she told him. He brushed her hair back from her face and stared at her for a long moment.

“What?” she said.

“I don’t think you could be more beautiful,” he said.
“Ahhhh, that is insanely romantic, cut it out. Go back to your scary mother,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I’m supposed to be valiantly resisting the urge to jump your bones and if I sex-break you somehow, Renata would murder me,” Darcy said.

“She scared you, didn’t she?” he said, chuckling.

“Oh em gee, Jane and I were in agreement that she was scarier than you and we knew you carried guns and knives,” Darcy said. “Her notes were scary. Even on paper, you have a really terrifying mother!” This made him laugh harder.

“That woman taught me everything I know,” he said, sprawling out next to her so they could both watch the waves lap on the thin shoreline.

“But not everything she knows,” Darcy muttered.

“Nope,” he said. They watched the tourists stroll along the shoreline. Since it was fall, the beach was quieter, but the lounge chairs were populated by tanned people.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” she said quietly.

“Hmmm?” he said.

“You can tell me you know,” she said. “If kissing doesn’t feel good for you, I don’t want you to kiss me.”

“Stop that,” he said. “We’ve worked out kissing, kissing is fine.” She looked at him doubtfully. “What, you don’t believe me?”

“I think you’d lie to protect me from being hurt,” she said, watching the tourists. He was quiet for a long time. Then he leaned over and kissed her forehead gently.

“I don’t want to stop kissing you,” he said. “But I’ll tell you if it starts being...upsetting, okay?” Darcy nodded.

“Did you pick Brock?” she asked curiously, after a pause.

“No,” he said wryly. “That’s Fury’s idea of a joke. I told Phil I wanted a more ethnically neutral-sounding name at SHIELD. Fury came up with ‘Brock Rumlow.’ I think he does it to fuck with people, because he also changed my military affiliation.”

“From Army to Navy?” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “He did that to everybody. Made the Army vets pretend to be Navy, made the Navy guys pretend to be Army. Sometimes, he made the Air Force guys fake being Coast Guard. The man’s just mean.”

“Is that meaner than Brock Rumlow?” she asked.

“Yes. Do you know how serious the Army-Navy rivalry is?” he said. “I had to pretend I went to Annapolis,” he said. “I’ve never even been to goddamned Maryland.”
“I hear they have nice crab cakes?” Darcy said. He rolled his eyes.

“Phil has always said I’m lucky I didn’t get renamed Rock McMuscles,” he said.

“You do have those good muscles, whatever your name is,” she said.

“You’ll have to decide which name you want to call me,” he said casually.

“Oh, I’ve already decided. I’m going to be like one of those obnoxious bloggers who calls you “dear boyfriend” or something,” she said.

“Dear boyfriend?” he said.

"DB for short,” she said, then stopped. “Oh em gee, why didn’t I think of it before?!” she said, pretending to clutch her chest in delight.

“What?” he said, grinning.

“You can be Mr. Darcy!” she told him. “Isn’t that great?”

“I’m not kissing you anymore,” he grumbled. “I don’t care if it feels good today.”

“Does Greg want to kiss me?” she asked innocently.

“Nope,” he said, reaching into their bag of groceries. “Greg is gonna eat some damn cheese,” he said. “Mr. Darcy,” he scoffed.

“Okay,” Darcy said.

“Why don’t they wrap the bread in this country? It’s just all out there,” he said. Darcy giggled.

“Oh noes,” she said. “I didn’t sex break you, I did something worse. Much worse.”

“What?” he said.

“I taught Mr. Health Food to eat carbs! You didn’t own butter when I met you!” she said. “Now you’re eating baguettes and cheese!”

***

Natasha was standing next to Tony and Pepper after lunch when Brock’s mother approached. “I want to speak with you,” Renata said coldly. She was holding a file in her hand.

“Of course,” Natasha said calmly. They left the room and went to stand on the patio. There was a beautiful view of the harbor. “I assume that you want to speak to me about Commander Rumlow’s apartment,” the Russian told Renata.

“What you did was unforgivable. Unforgivable!” Renata hissed.

“Yes, I agree. I accept full responsibility for the things I did,” Natasha said. “I would understand if he and Darcy could never forgive me, with or without his innocence. To find that he was innocent all along and working to secure Sgt. Barnes’s release upset me greatly.”
“It was horrific,” Renata said. “Bucky suspects that it caused Johnny’s memory loss. He doesn’t remember her! He has no memory of their whole relationship! How could you do something so awful?”

“I have done many horrific things,” Natasha admitted. “To innocent people and guilty alike.”

She took the file from Renata and flipped through it. Renata stared at her.

“Well?” Renata said, after a moment.

“It would not surprise me to discover that this is the cause of some trauma,” Natasha admitted. Her voice was soft. “I did not intend for it to be quite so disturbing in impact. I apologize for the distress I have caused your family. As I have discovered, it is impossible to undo what has been done. However, I am willing to make amends to you in any way that I can.”

“Apologize to my son, make your amends to him,” Renata said. “He needs help with his amnesia.”

“There may be something I can do for him now,” Natasha said. “Give me time to contact someone. I am sorry the past cannot be undone.”

Renata stared at Natasha as the redhead left. She felt oddly deflated. What was the point of confronting someone who didn’t deny that she had done terrible things? Renata had expected Natasha Romanoff to argue her point of view or the necessity of doing it for SHIELD when Johnny’s allegiance was in doubt, but instead, Natasha had seemed as though she expected it. Resigned, that was the word. There was no sense of superiority or an attempt to wiggle away, merely a flat resignation to the existence of evil. Personally-committed evil, not distant, far-off evil. For the first time, Renata felt suddenly grateful to all the good ol’ boys who had drummed her out of SHIELD so long ago. She had made a lucky escape, she thought, suppressing a shiver at the look in Natasha’s eyes.

When Bucky found her, Renata was still looking at the ocean. “You all right, ma’am?” he asked.

“Who made Natasha Romanoff the way she is? So ruthless, but totally without self-justification?” Renata asked quietly. “Did SHIELD do that?” She trusted Bucky. He looked at her with sad eyes.

“I did,” he said quietly. “I was her teacher. She was my best student.”

***

“Where do you want to go after this?” Darcy asked. She thought he might want to go for a walk again. They were getting pink in the sun. It was nice, though.

“Home,” he said. “I want you to move in with me.” He took her hand. “Fury called today to offer me a desk job or analyst work until I’m healed, but I’d be miserable in DC without you.” When she stared at him, he grinned. “At least I think I’d be miserable. What was your name again? Debbie? I
“Hahaha. Very funny. You’d go back to SHIELD?” Darcy said, blindsided. “After everything?”

“Of course,” he said. “I did everything to keep HYDRA from destroying all the work we’d done, tearing us down. I mean, I did it because it was right, too. Right to get Barnes out. Right to try and stop HYDRA. I don’t know if I’ll be well enough to, uh, run a STRIKE team again, but I can do desk work. He wanted to know if I could start in two weeks?”

Darcy was stunned. Two weeks? It seemed too fast for him to return to work, but perhaps that would help him? Darcy felt a pang of worry. Not about living with him, but about the work. Was he really ready? She’d been thinking they could go with Jane and Thor to Latvia or maybe some warm-climate observatory. She hadn’t expected him to want to go back to DC.

“You’re surprised?” he said, taking off his sunglasses and threading them through his shirt collar.

“I was sort of thinking about what you wanted to do between now and the party--you want to live with me in DC?” she said. “For real? In two weeks?”

“You think you could handle that? Even if things, uh, intimate things, were rocky for a while?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m not worried about that at all.”

“I’m glad,” he said, squeezing her hand. “Makes one of us.” He looked at the ocean.

“Hey, hey,” she said. “We’ve always got kissing, right?” He turned to look at her intently and leaned his face down to meet hers.

“I want it all back,” he said. “I want everything back: my memories of you, our first date, all those flowers I sent you, what it all felt like…” He ground his jaw. “I’m going to get it back,” he said.

“Even if you don’t, I still want to be with you,” she told him, leaning against his shoulder. They sat for several minutes in silence.

“Brock?” Darcy said.

“Yeah?” he said.

“Have you told your mother?” she asked.

“Shit,” he said.

Chapter End Notes
The Plage du Midi is a real public beach in Cannes: https://goo.gl/maps/69K796NRjdv
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

The secret to happiness

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your comments and kudos! Y’all are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He wants to go back to DC?” Jane said in shock, when she and Darcy were changing in Jane’s room that night before the party. Their dresses had been accidentally put in the wrong rooms. Thor was downstairs, probably leading the first guests in toasts.

“Yeah,” Darcy said, stepping into her dress.

“How do you feel about that?” Jane said, frowning.

“Worried. I had no idea he’d want to go back to work like that. I thought the four of us could go to Latvia and he could rest for more time, maybe help me move the big stuff in the lab while Thor was out Avenging, you know?” Darcy said. “I was gonna cover him in blankets and bring him hot cocoa and go all hygge.” She had envisioned getting to nurture him a little and the two of them having lots of cozy time together—without jet-setters, SHIELD, or anything more stressful than Jane’s Science! Binges and burned Pop Tarts.

Jane sighed. “That sounds nice,” she said wistfully. “I wish he wanted to do that. Fury called me, too, and left a message about coming back. I’ve been dodging him. I guess we’ll all go back.”

“Jane, you don’t have to--” Darcy began, but Jane waved her arm. She was pulling her dress over her head. There was a dim roar below; Thor was definitely getting the party started.

“I’m not going to Latvia without you,” Jane said, wiggling the skirt down. “And you need support, too. Do you think none of this has impacted you?”

“Umm,” Darcy said. Intelligently.

“You were so depressed for so long that I called to see who was the nearest psychologist in Arctic Bay,” Jane said quietly. “But he was three hours away and I didn’t know if you’d want to go. You keep insisting you’d be okay.”

“I didn’t know you’d done that,” Darcy said.

“Did you think Tony called out of the blue? I called him first,” Jane said. “Asked him to let us know as soon as it was safe to come back. Told him I was worried.”

“That was a ruse? I thought you didn’t want to leave Baffin!” Darcy said. Jane smiled.
“Did you really think I wanted to stay in a fifty year old Arctic lab instead of New York? I missed Thai food, too,” she said. “But you sprang into action and seemed like you were excited to go, so I thought that might help you.”

“I am surrounded by sneaks,” Darcy said. “Everyone around here is a sneak besides me. Can you zip me?” she said to Jane.

“Uh-huh,” Jane said, going behind Darcy to zip up her dress. “You look pretty. Anyway, that’s not true.”

“It’s not?” Darcy said, raising an eyebrow.

“Thor never lies. He’s terrible at it,” Jane said.

“Oh my God, yes, remember that time he tried to prank Steve and then he kept doing that tiny giggle?” Darcy said.

“Like a five year old girl,” Jane said, shaking her head. “It was just a whoopie cushion.”

“I did think the Iron Man pattern was a nice touch,” Darcy said.

“I wish you could’ve seen how happy Tony was when he got Rhodey with it afterwards,” Jane said. Darcy looked at herself in Jane’s mirror and sighed. “What?” Jane said.

“This is too sexy,” she said. “Unzip me. Where is that loose hippie one that looks like a rich lady muumuu-slash-beach cover up?”

“You want to wear that?” Jane said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said. “I don’t want to stress Brock out too much. I was googling while he napped before the party. Did you know they think some PTSD sufferers have trouble with intimacy because the hormones involved in sex are basically the same ones as fear?” Jane, like everybody else in the house, had heard about the no-sex thing after Renata’s patio squabble with Brock. It was one of the reasons Darcy had gotten Brock out of there as much as possible. But Darcy was secretly grateful to have Jane to talk to--she was level-headed about stuff like that.

“When we get back to DC, I think you should seriously consider couples therapy or even get your own therapist,” Jane said. “You need someone who understands how to navigate this to help you, you know?”

***

Brock was buttoning his shirt when she came back into the room. “Hey,” Darcy said. It was difficult not to stare. She knew she probably freaked him out sometimes, but she’d missed him for so long that his just being there was somehow fascinating. Not to mention all the handsomeness.

“You look nice,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said, leaning against the wall while he put on a jacket. She noticed something that made her smile.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing,” she told him.
“Who’s being cryptic now?” he said. “C’mon, tell me.”

“The whole no-tie thing brings back memories,” she said.

“Huh?” he said. “I hate ties. Make me feel all choked. My dad was the same way. Haven’t worn one since I got to mothball my service dress ties.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. “I’m going to check my hair now.” When she passed him on the way to the bathroom, he ran his hand down her bare arm.

“You do look nice,” he said quietly. “You know that, right?” There was a sad note in his voice. She scrunched her face up.

“Eh, you should see me in sweatpants, that’s really my look,” she said. She’d purposefully chosen a less-sexy dress and given the most stunning one of the bunch to Jane.

***

In another room, Natasha was making a phone call. “Yes, I know what I am doing, Tulsa,” she said. On the other end, the Oklahoman made a scoffing sound.

“You want to see that guy? He’s a lunatic, Mother Russia,” Tulsa said. “Oh, man, I cannot wait until Barton finds out what you’re up too. I’d tell him now, but he’d probably crash a tractor or something. What time is it in Iowa?”

“Please stop speaking when I am speaking,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “I will need access to the Raft. See that Fury gets it to me. If he demurs, remind him that he owes Rumlow his life for preventing Pierce from being able to get Bucky Barnes to kill him.”

“Uh-huh,” Tulsa said. “I’ll make sure to soften that a little for you.”

When she hung up the phone, Natasha looked out the window for a long time at the dark sky over Cannes. She had genuinely believed that Brock Rumlow was HYDRA. She had also genuinely believed he loved Darcy. She had been right on one count, it appeared.

***

Darcy came downstairs with Brock. The party was in full swing. They looked at each other. “What do you want to do?” Brock said quietly.

“Run away?” Darcy said. “But it might hurt Tony’s feelings.”


“We’re very simpatico as a couple,” she said. “I feel like we’re closer now, in a weird way.”

“Were we not before?” he said.

“I think you were juggling a lot of secrets,” Darcy told him. She slid her arm around his. “You were more serious then. What if we go outside?”
They went out into the gardens. The temperature had dropped some. Brock stopped and put his
coat over her shoulders. “Thank you,” Darcy said.
“You feel like sitting?” he asked.
“Yeah,” she said. “You’re not tired, are you? We’ve been busy all day.”
“Lewis, we ate cheese on a European beach. Unless you count the time you almost threw your
back out laughing after we saw all the guys in the terrible speedos, there wasn’t a lot of activity,”
he said.
“I just can’t believe people really do that. It’s almost November!” she said, laughing.
“Warm, though,” he said. “Unusually so.”
“What’s wrong?” Darcy asked. She didn’t like his expression.
“I believe your friend Prince Whatshisface has arrived,” Brock said. There was a man in a tuxedo
moving towards them from the patios. Brock stood up. “I’ll give you a minute,” he said in a low
voice.
“Um, no,” Darcy said. “There’s no reason for you to leave.” She took his hand. “Please don’t go, I
hate watching you walk away,” she said.
“Oh, that is emotional blackmail, Lewis. Blackmail,” he said, sitting back down. “You’re not
wearing that bracelet?” he said. “Just mine and uh,...”
“My protective one from Loki,” she said. “I sent the other one back this morning.”
“You’re insane, you know that?” he said, shaking his head.

The man who strolled out to meet them was tall and slim and elegantly dressed in a tuxedo. “Hello,
your royal highness,” Darcy said, feeling the strangest urge to giggle with Brock next to her. Royal
titles were hella weird, when you really thought about it.
“Miss Darcy Lewis,” Prince Christian said politely, reaching for her hand. He gave her hand a
gentle squeeze with both of his own. “I understand this is a very happy party for you. And you are
Mr. Rumlow?” he asked. He did not seem displeased or upset, Darcy thought. He was smiling in a
friendly, open way. His beard was very dashing.
“So I’ve been told,” Brock said, shaking his hand.
“It’s very nice to meet you,” Prince Christian said, as if Brock was the prince. Darcy saw Brock’s
eyes widen slightly.
“Thank you?” Brock said, arching an eyebrow.
“You seem skeptical, Mr. Rumlow?” Prince Christian said, almost playfully.
“You just sent my girlfriend a very expensive bracelet,” Brock said wryly.
“Which she sent back to me,” Prince Christian said.
"Yeah," Brock said.


“I have a feeling you’re a good person, Mr. Rumlow, so if there is anything I can do to help you, let me know,” the prince said.

“Really?” Brock said.

“Of course,” Prince Christian said. There was no sense of irony, sarcasm, or mocking in his tone. Brock tilted his head sideways and looked at Christian carefully.

“Why don’t I give you two a minute to catch up? I think, uh, Sharon needs to talk to me about S.H.I.E.L.D stuff, anyway,” Brock said. He stood and walked over to where Bucky, Steve, and Sharon were engaged in conversation. Inwardly, Darcy cursed him for bailing on her.

Prince Christian sat down next to Darcy and smiled. “I’m sorry if my gift caused any difficulties for you,” he said.

“It’s okay. He was very impressed with your taste, actually. He thinks I’m crazy for not running straight towards you and the Cartier store or something?” Darcy said. “It’s a beautiful bracelet.”

“That might be where we disagree,” Christian said quietly. “I’m very happy for you, Darcy.”

“You are?” she said, surprised by his evident sincerity.

“Do you know why I sent you all those flowers and jewelry before, back when you thought I was a hopeless playboy?” he said, smiling. “Because you’re a nice person. A fun person.”

“Because I’m fun?” Darcy said, slightly stunned. It seemed like a lot for fun.

“You think that’s not important? I spent my childhood in and out of boarding schools and formal dinners and ribbon-cutting. Not a lot of fun there, unless you count the old Etonians sneaking out to binge drink and that was never my thing. It’s a little awkward in England when you’re already the casino prince whose mother did a nude scene in a French movie,” he said dryly. “I didn’t want to be the drunk casino prince.”

“That’s an issue?” Darcy said. “Really?”

“The British think we’re trashy and the French would dearly love to re-annex San Lorenzo for tax purposes,” he said. “Under some sort of Napoleonic treaty that will I have to become an expert in at some point. In French and English.”


“This is why I liked you,” he said. “I find it impossible to predict the things you’ll say.” He reached out and put something in Darcy’s hand. It was the bracelet box.

“Christian--” Darcy began.

“I want you to keep it,” he said quietly. “As a gift to celebrate the fact that you’ve got him back. He’s lucky,” Christian said, looking over at Rumlow. He stood up. “I can’t say I don’t envy him, just a small fraction. I’ll let you celebrate your evening.”

He’d walked a few steps away when Darcy thought of a question. “If you didn’t want to be the
drunk prince, why were you at a Tony party?” she asked curiously. He turned on and smiled at her.

“My mother wanted me to convince Tony to do a charity gala with her,” he said. “She was very upset when I came home and only talked about you.” He gave her a little wink.

“I’ll get Tony to do the next one,” Darcy said, grinning.

“I’d appreciate that,” he said, before he rejoined the party.

“He’s a very classy guy,” Brock said, when he returned to Darcy. “I’d hate him for his perfect hair and his perfect clothes and his fancy title, but he actually seems decent.”

“He’s really nice, it’s totally weird,” Darcy said. “He wants me to keep the bracelet to celebrate you being back.”

“Jesus,” Brock said, shaking his head. “This is what I’m signing up for?”

“What does that mean?” Darcy said.

“A lifetime of other men giving you bracelets because you inspire a truly bizarre level of instant devotion for someone who loves Cheese Puffs so much,” he said.

“How do you know about my relationship with Cheese Puffs?” Darcy said, wondering if he remembered something.

“You monologued about it extensively to me when I was pretending to be Greg. Also, that they’d ruined Cocoa Puffs by eliminating some of the sugar. I learned a lot about Puffs of all types,” Brock said.

“Oh,” Darcy said, slightly disappointed that it wasn’t a more recent memory, “that’s true about Cocoa Puffs, though. They used to be so good and they aren’t the same now.”

“Are you seriously telling me you’d rather have the old Cocoa Puffs than Cartier?” Brock said.


“Why are you giving this to me?” Brock said incredulously, looking at the bracelet.

“Because you’re going to need something to soften the blow when you tell your mama about SHIELD, babe,” she said.

“She’s gonna be so pissed at me,” he said. “I should go find her.”

“No, let’s let her enjoy tonight. I saw her dancing with a Greek shipping tycoon. You can tell her tomorrow,” Darcy said.

“A Greek shipping tycoon? Like Onassis?” he said.

“Oh, no, this guy was much handsomer. Maybe you’ll get a new dad for Christmas,” she teased. He scoffed, then grinned.

“She might be easier to be around if she was in love with somebody. What did you want to do tonight?” he asked. “Dance or something?”
“God, no, I want to steal some food and go hide in our room,” she said.

“Good idea,” he said, looking relieved. “Who we stealing the food from?”

“Oh, I think this is a Darcy job,” she said.

“Nuh-uh,” he said. “Not with all my technical experience.” He insisted that he help her. “I have a plan,” he said, taking her hand and leading her into the house.

“What’s the plan?” Darcy said.

“You distract the kitchen staff with your amazing boobs and I steal the food,” he said.

"Um, yeah, I just wanted to know if these were gluten-free?” Darcy asked the waiter as Brock crept into the kitchen behind him. Brock winked at her.

"Gluten-free? They are gougères. Pastry and cheese with French onions, caramelized,” the French waiter said. “I do not understand, madame?”

“Umm, it means, like super healthy. You know, like green juice?” she said in her ditziest voice.

“Green juice?” the waiter said, frowning. Over his shoulder, Brock pointed at a tray.

“This one?” he mouthed.

“Umm, yeah?” Darcy said, nodding. Brock flashed her a thumbs up sign and grabbed the tray.

"Madame, I do not know green juice,” the waiter said. "Is it a sauce?” He pronounced "Juice" like jus. It was very cute, Darcy thought.

They managed to take two trays out of the kitchen and sneak upstairs. “I feel like Ferris Bueller,” Darcy whispered to Brock. “That was awesome.”

***

“You think my boobs are amazing?” she asked, eating a French onion gougère as she pulled the muumuu dress over her shoulders, then her head. She’d decided to relax about changing in front of him, at least down to her bra and underwear. If they were going to live together, she thought that would be a good idea. She was going to pretend like it was a totally unsexy activity and let him see her looking scruffy and with unshaven legs or whatever. She’d wear sweatpants at home and avoid anything too revealing or exciting. That was low stress, right? She was wearing her boringest bra tonight, too. It was beige.

“I’m not blind,” he said gruffly. “Not that that dress does them justice. It’s like a bedsheet.” He’d taken his jacket off and was now unbuttoning his shirt. He looked at the dress she’d just flung over the chair, then at her. She shrugged.

“I wanted to be comfortable?” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he said, skeptically. She caught him eyeing her body as she looked for a nightshirt. He
came up behind her and unclasped her bra.

“Hey,” she said. “Whatcha doing?”

“I have this feeling that you hate this thing,” he said in a low voice.

“Oh, yeah, underwire is Satan’s implement,” she said, as he slid the straps down over her shoulders. She closed her eyes for a second, holding her breath slightly. Just being touched by him wrecked her a little bit. He slipped the bra off her body gently, then kissed between her shoulder blades. For a split second, he pressed his chest against her back and held her. She leaned back against him and relaxed. After a moment he released her and helped her pull her nightshirt over her head.

“There,” he said, kissing the top of her head softly. “C’mon,” he said, leading her to the bed. “I think you probably enjoy fancy party food more in a reclined position, too.” She crawled into bed and watched him strip down to his boxers as she ate another hors d’oeuvres.

“This might be my favorite Tony party,” she told him. “Stealing food and snacking with you in our room.” He looked at her.

“Lewis, that is just sad. Terribly sad. What happened to you that you have such low standards?” he said, grinning.

“I’ve always thought my low standards were the secret to happiness,” she said.

He got in bed with her and grinned. “But what about your longing for the old Cocoa Puffs, baby?” he said teasingly.

“I have to be happy with Chocolate Cheerios,” she said. It made her heart ache a little whenever he called her baby. He still hadn’t called her sweetheart yet; she missed that most of all. “I did have Chocolate Frosted Flakes once,” she mused.

“Yeah?” he said, leaning over and kissing her forehead.

“I did,” she said, smiling. He kissed the bridge of her nose.

“What else?” he asked.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fascinated by cereal, keep talking,” he said, nuzzling her. “When we’re living together, I’ll be keeping you in your Raisin Bran or whatever?”

“Ew, babe, my grandma loved that stuff. And Total. They’re awful,” she said.

“Which ones do you like?” he asked.

“Umm, Cinnamon Corn Flakes are excellent, but they leave that sticky residue in the bowl like Cinnamon Toast Crunch?” she said.

“Oh yeah?” he said, rubbing his nose against her cheek.

“Special K Pumpkin Spice is my favorite fall one,” she said. “The Pumpkin Spice Cheerios are too spicy. They taste like Red Hots.”

“Red Hots?” he said teasingly.
“Did you just turn candy into an innuendo?” Darcy said.

“Mmm-hmm,” he said warmly. He was smiling at her when there was a sudden knock at the door.

“Johnny? Johnny, are you hiding in there?” Renata said through the door. “I need to talk to you now.”

“Oh God,” Brock said. “Fuck.”

“You want me to get it?” Darcy said.

“No,” he grumbled, getting up. He went to the door and opened it a fraction. “Yes, Ma?” she heard him say. Darcy was sort of busy ogling him from the back.

“It is true?” Renata said in a quiet, lethal voice. “Sharon said you’re going back to SHIELD? I saw you leave Darcy with that prince and I find out you’re going back to DC? No one can find Darcy or Prince Christian! Are you hiding from her up here?”

“Yes. No. I am going back to SHIELD,” he said.

“Johnny--” she said.

“Ma, Fury’s offered me a desk job. Totally safe,” he said. Darcy saw him rub his forehead.

“Babe,” Darcy said, loud enough for Renata to hear, “why don’t you let your mother in?”

“Yeah, okay,” Brock said, opening the door more widely. “Come in, Ma. I’ll get a robe or something.” Renata stared at Darcy in the bed in her pajamas, then actually looked embarrassed. She even turned a little pink. Darcy realized Brock was grinning wickedly.

“Oh. I didn’t realize I was interrupting,” Renata said. “I didn’t think you were here.”

“I am,” Darcy said cheerfully. “We stole some hors d’oeuvres, if you want one?”

“C’mon on in, Ma,” Brock said wryly. “Have a cheese thing.”

Chapter End Notes

Jane gets the gorgeous Marchesa Notte out of the stash that Pepper bought: https://www.neimanmarcus.com/p/marchesa-notte-organza-ball-gown-w-3d-floral-embroidery-prod212330070?icid=&searchType=EndecaDrivenCat&rte=%252Fcategory.jsp%253FitemId%253Dcat59990771%2526pageSize%253D30%2526Nao%253D0%2526refinements%253D&cmCat=product

Darcy snags the much more casual Johnny Was rich hippie thing (I actually like it): https://www.neimanmarcus.com/p/johnny-was-timmie-short-sleeve-floral-print-maxi-dress-petite-prod209470110?childItemId=NMTWVT2
“Darcy’s coming with me,” Brock said to his mother, tying the belt to his bathrobe. “We’re moving in together.”

“You’re going with him to DC?” Renata said, looking from Darcy to Brock. Her voice did a weird thing where it started out surprised and anxious on the you’re but escalated to delight at DC.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, smiling and trying not to laugh at the way Renata’s face was moving between shock and happiness. That would be rude.

“How soon do you start back?” Renata said, sitting down on the bed.

“Two weeks,” Brock said cheerfully. “We’ve got to get back to DC, get stuff out of storage. Baby, can I get a cheese thing?” he said to Darcy. She threw one at him, badly, and he caught it with a grin. Renata looked at both of them oddly. “What’s wrong, Ma?” he asked.

“I thought you weren’t getting along,” Renata said. “You weren’t at meals. I’ve barely seen you together since we got here--”

“We’ve been going out together,” he said. “It’s been a day and a half, Ma. Not even a full two days yet.”

“We went to the beach today,” Darcy said. “Did you want to see some extremely old men in speedos? I have beach pictures on my phone.”

“What?” Renata said.

“She doesn’t really have any of the speedo guys,” Brock said.

“Only because he said it was a privacy invasion,” Darcy said. “Funsucker.”

“It is a privacy invasion,” Brock said.

“My counter-argument is that someone who wears a speedo in public isn’t a really private person,” Darcy said, munching on a gougeré. “Despite your many, many protests that taking photos of strangers is weird,” she said, giggling.
“I forget why I made that particular argument,” he said.

“You were very intense,” Darcy said.

“I was probably thinking about some creeper taking stealth photos of you,” he said.

“Are you getting all macho and protective on me?” Darcy said.

“Eh,” Brock said, shrugging. He scratched his nose and grinned at her.

“Oh, oh!” Darcy said. Renata looked at her in alarm. “He ate so much cheese. I bet his bloodstream is half chèvre at this point,” Darcy said.

“They have this really good one that they wrap in, uh, leaves?” Brock said. “What was that called? Tasted like mushrooms, Ma. We’ll get you some before we go.”

“Chestnut leaves,” Darcy said. “It’s called Banon cheese. We should get some tomorrow.”

“Are--are you leaving tomorrow?” Renata said.

“Day after tomorrow,” Darcy said.

“Yeah, Cap, Sharon and Barnes are going to debrief at SHIELD, so I thought we’d tag along,” Brock said. “Tony and Pepper are staying a few more days, so you’re welcome to stay behind with them, Ma.”

“Jane and Thor are going back, too,” Darcy said. “We’re all going back to work.”

“Where will you live?” Renata said.

“You haven’t sold my place yet, have you?” he asked. “I own it,” he told Darcy.

“No, no, no,” Renata said. “You will not live there. I forbid it.”

“You forbid it?” Brock said, sounding incredulous.

“It will be too traumatic for you,” Renata said.

“She does have a point,” Darcy said. “What about a fresh start?”

“Huh,” Brock said. “I wonder if we could find a different place within the same radius?” he said.

“I will go with you and start the apartment search,” Renata said firmly. “I don’t want you in that apartment.”

Brock shrugged and rubbed his forehead. “Baby, what are you thinking?” he said to Darcy.

“What’s the time difference between here and Iowa?” Darcy asked.

“Iowa?” Renata said. Darcy was already dialing on her phone.

“Laura!” she said. “It’s Darcy. Did I wake you? Ok, good. Is Tulsa Jones still subletting Clint’s place? I heard he was considering moving in with Maria. Brock and I need a place to live now. Awesome. Just email me the paperwork and I’ll email it back to you? We’re coming back the day after tomorrow.”

“What’s going on?” Renata said.
“My guess is that I’m subletting Clint Barton’s place in DC,” Brock said. He chuckled.

“Housing situation’s all handled,” Darcy said cheerfully. “Nobody needs to worry. This place is furnished, too. You’ll just need clothes and toiletries and whatever you need for work.”

“All my stuff’s in DC storage, right?” he asked his mother.

“Yes,” Renata said. “The new place is furnished?”

“Uh-huh. It’s about two miles farther from the office, but Clint is a great landlord,” Darcy said.

“That’s still pretty close,” Brock said.

“And it’s near a Metro line,” Darcy said. “Do you still have your car?”

“Yes,” Renata said. “I put it in a garage in the suburbs. Your friend’s.”

“George’s?” Brock said. His mother nodded.

“I need to lease a car for Jane, too. They’re going back to the SHIELD apartments, she texted me a few minutes ago. So, it’s all worked out,” Darcy told Renata. “You can stay here for a few more days, if you want?”

“It’s up to you, Ma,” Brock said.

“You’ve got it all arranged?” Renata said, looking baffled.

“Yup,” Darcy said. “We’ll just need to liberate your clothes and books. Mine, too.”

“All right,” Renata said, looking faintly stunned.

“Oh, Renata,” Darcy said, handing her the bracelet, “you should wear this, if you’re staying. Is Mr. Spiros taking you to dinner?”

“He did invite me,” Renata said doubtfully. “Would it all right if I stayed behind?”

“Of course, Ma,” Brock said.

“Keep the bracelet!” Darcy said. “It’s very you.”

When Renata left the room after he kissed her goodnight, Darcy looked at Brock. Brock looked at Darcy. “She was completely blown away by how quickly you got all that organized,” he said. “I can’t believe you got her to stay and go out with Spiros!”

“We broke your mother!” she said. “Your scary mother!” She dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“It’s my proudest moment, really,” he said.

“Wait until she sees Clint’s furniture,” Darcy said.

“Oh yeah?” Brock said.

“I have been told he collects stuff from the old Dubuque Star Brewery ‘cause his grandad worked there,” Darcy said. “There might even be a neon light.”
“She is gonna love that,” he said, climbing back into bed with her. “Sorry she interrupted us.”

“It’s okay,” Darcy said. “There’s still time for you to enjoy the primary perk of our relationship.”

“Yeah?” he said, looking at her curiously.

“Uh-huh,” she said, grinning. “Getting to feel my cold feet on your legs.”

“Ahh, Jesus,” he muttered, when she rubbed her toes against his calves. “I’ll get you the other blanket from the closet. How are you so cold?!” He got up to get the blanket.

“I was supposed to wrap you in blankets,” she said. “That was my plan if we went to Latvia. You’d get blankets and hot chocolate.”

“And you thought I wouldn’t be bugging you for stuff to do?” he said.

“I’d have let you move the big lab stuff,” Darcy said as he tucked the blanket around her.

“Hey,” he said, once they were facing each other in bed, “tell me something I don’t know about you?”

“No, no,” Darcy said. “I want to know about you. What are your favorite things?”

“Hmm,” he said, rubbing his chin. “I like...I like, uh, God, I don’t know. I never think about what I like.”

“Seriously?” Darcy said. “You realize that’s messed up, right?”

“I like a few things,” he said, grinning slowly. “I like the smoky taste of scotch, I like the pizza from one particular place on Arthur Avenue in the Bronx--”

“Which place?” she asked.

“Gino’s,” he said.

“What else?” she said.

“Thai martial arts, Samsara, fresh combat boots--”

“Fresh combat boots?” she said.

“New shoes, Lewis. I supinate a little with my left foot, old ankle injury, so I gotta replace my shoes when I wear out the tread. Are you always gonna be interrupting me?” he teased.

“Okay,” she said, clasping her hand over her mouth. She smiled at him around her hand; he smiled back.

“Tattoos, aviators, and, uh, saving money,” he said. “There’s something nice about knowing that you’ve got that something to fall back on.” He paused. “I just said fall back, didn’t I? Shit.”

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, nodding.

“Ironic. Wait, I’m forgetting things. Clean sheets and towels fresh out of the dryer,” he said. At her raised eyebrow, he grinned. “What? I do my own laundry. And, uh, I actually like Norah Jones’s first album. Hmm. I feel like I’m forgetting something important...is there a girl? I think her name is Debbie,” he said. Darcy burst out laughing.
“This is so nice,” she said. He rubbed her arm under the blanket.

“What?” he said.

“You wouldn’t talk about yourself before, I couldn’t get you to tell me anything,” she said. “You were the only man I’ve ever met who didn’t like to talk about himself, did I tell you that already? You’re talking to me now.”

“You’re happy with this?” he said, frowning. “I mean, we’re just talking, uh, about my favorite goddamn boots.”

“I’m really happy,” Darcy said.

“You don’t miss it?” he said quietly, swallowing. She shook her head. He sighed.

“What?” Darcy said.

“I miss fucking,” he said glumly.

“Really?” she said. “I thought you were, uh, having trouble with the wanting part--” she began, trying to phrase it delicately.

“The memory of it,” he said.

“Technically, you don’t remember having sex with me, so you’re missing sex with other women,” she said. He shifted and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

“Do you know how often I thought about you naked?” he said, almost grimly.

“I dunno, Greg, you stood me up,” she teased, rubbing his arm, trying keep everything light.

“Unfair,” he said, putting his hands around her face. “What if we tried fooling around?”

“Are you ready for that?” she said frowning. “How do you feel? I don’t want you to rush.”

“Like I want to try doing a little more,” he said, swallowing. She thought he looked nervous.

“Okay,” she said, leaning over to nuzzle him. He kissed her back and then climbed on top of her.

“You’re wearing too much,” he said, reaching for the edge of her nightshirt and pulling it up. She wiggled it over her head. When she’d tossed it on the floor, she realized he was staring at her.

“You okay?” she said. His gaze was glued to her body.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. He pressed his body against hers and kissed her again. They’d been kissing her several minutes when she felt him freeze. She stopped moving and pulled back.

“Honey?” she said gently. He blinked down at her and shook his head.

"I, uh, I,” he stammered.

“Let’s stop for a minute, okay? Let you catch your breath,” she said. He looked pale. His expression worried her. He rolled off her and put his hands over his face and groaned.

“Fuck. Fuck,” he muttered. “I was kissing you and I was fine and then I wasn’t,” he said. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”
“Brock,” she said, “I think that’s more normal than you think.”

“Yeah?” he said.

“The same chemical processes in your brain that are, uh, linked to arousal are linked to fear,” she said. “So, we start fooling around and you feel panic.”

“And you know this, how?” he asked.

“I’ve been reading up on PTSD and triggers,” she told him. “I think we should consider seeing someone together when we get back, just for advice on how to safely fool around,” she said.

He looked at her with a serious expression. “I wasn’t just panic. You’re right, I felt panic, but there was more,” he said, swallowing.

“Yeah?” she said.

“When I closed my eyes, all I saw was blood. Blood everywhere,” he said.

***

“Romanoff,” Fury said when she picked up the phone. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Have you ever known me to kid, Director?” she said.

“We can’t let him out of the Raft, I don’t care if I do owe Rumlow my life. There’s a reason that he’s too unsafe to be let out.”

“It would merely be a consultation,” Natasha said. “I would go to see him first, see if he had any advice. He is the person most familiar with the impacts of HYDRA serums on memory. He devised the serums they used on Rumlow, according to the HYDRA records we found in Sokovia.”

“Fine,” Fury said. “But he stays underwater. If you want him to consult with Rumlow, you take Rumlow to him.”

“Yes, sir,” Natasha said.

“And Romanoff? You know that the occupancy of the Raft is strictly need-to-know. Don’t nobody else need to know,” he said. There was a click and then a dial tone.

***

“Hey, babe,” Darcy said in the morning, “have you thought about doing a Frankenstein-inspired outgoing voicemail message at our new place?” She was packing up some of their stuff and then they were doing some touristy things before they left the next day. Darcy had insisted they skip day two of Tony’s mega party after Brock’s scare the night before. He seemed fine after they’d slept a few hours, but she wanted him to do non-stressful things.

“Frankenstein?” he said, leaning out of the bathroom. He was brushing his teeth.

“You know, ‘I’m alive! I’m alive!’ or something?” Darcy said.
“No,” he said, grinning. “But I’ll let you do it.”

“Oooh, goody. Jane does the best background shrieks,” Darcy told him. ‘I need to take back her shoes, but I’ll be right back, okay?’

“Darcy,” he said, sighing, “I’m going to be fine, okay? You don’t need to hover.”

“What if I want to hover for other reasons?” she said.

“Sure, you’re hovering for other reasons,” he said dryly.

“You’re a very attractive man, I need to keep an eye on you,” Darcy said. “Maybe fight off a few European heiresses or Prince Chris’s little sister.”

“I bet his sister is very pretty,” Brock said, wiggling his eyebrows. When Darcy frowned, he laughed. “You’re much more jealous than I am,” he said casually, leaning against the bathroom door frame. She’d filled him in on the Sharon thing when neither of them could sleep at 3am the night before. He’d laughed at her then, too.

“Yeah, so, you better watch yourself. I might cut somebody,” Darcy said, moving towards the door.

“With what? Your Minion nail clippers?” he said.

“Shut up, Greg,” she said. “I’ll have all your knives when we live together. Community property.”

***

In the hallway, Darcy met Steve. “Steverini!” she said, hugging him. “You’re going back to DC, too?”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Shar and Buck talked me into it.” He looked a little sad, Darcy thought.

“What’s bugging you?” she said.

“I still have mixed feelings about SHIELD,” he said. “Don’t trust ‘em entirely anymore. I can’t believe Fury okayed Project Insight to start with. But Sharon’s running Alpha, they’ve offered to help reintegrate Buck into society, and Fury wants me back. And I’m not going to ask my girl to quit when she’s the first woman to run a STRIKE team. Peggy’d rise out of her grave and wipe the streets with me. She was so happy when she found out about Sharon’s promotion.” Peggy had passed away in her sleep while Darcy and Jane were on Baffin Island, but had lived long enough to see her great-niece achieve a milestone.

“Yeah, I understand,” Darcy said. “Brock’s going back to work. Fury wants him to be an analyst until he’s cleared for field work.”

“And you have doubts, too?” Steve asked quietly.

“Uh-huh. But he wants to work,” she said. “So Jane and I are re-opening the SHIELD lab, going back to our old project.” Fury had apparently handled the Sokovian readings with a clean STRIKE team while they were on Baffin; it had turned out to be one of the HYDRA bases, according to her buddy Dave the archivist. Dave had kept her updated while she and Jane were in hiding.

“Bucky and I will keep an eye on him, too, Darce,” Steve said reassuringly. “He’ll have friends
around. Sharon says everybody’s asking after him. Smith and Jack, all the our old guys on the STRIKE teams.”

“Good,” Darcy said. “I’d appreciate that.”

***

After she dropped off Jane’s shoes, she went back to Brock. “One last hurrah for cheese and people-watching?” she asked him. He was sitting on the bed, dressed and seemingly lost in thought.

“Yeah,” he said, standing up. “Let’s go. Where are we going again?”

“I want to check out Marché Forville,” Darcy said. “It’s the covered market. Supposedly, they have the good cheese and vegetables.”

“You eat vegetables?” he teased. They left together and took a car down into the city. It was sunny out.

The covered market was amazing. “I wonder if it’s an issue if we bring back cheese?” Darcy said out loud.

“Customs won’t check the quinjet,” he said casually. “Buy the cheese.”

“Really?” she said. “Not even a random search?”

“Nope,” he said, putting more cheese in their basket. The already had a carton of raspberries and two peaches. He handed the vendor some euros.

“What have you smuggled?” she teased.

“Oh, the STRIKE teams smuggled lots of things, baby,” he said. “Liquor, pirated DVDs, gold bars—”

“Gold bars?” Darcy said.

“Sometimes terrorists drop things. Heavy things,” Brock said.

“Oh em gee,” she said. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. “What?” she said.

“I’m going to buy you a present,” he said. “Wait here.”

He came back with flowers. Big yellow sunflowers. Darcy burst into tears. “Baby, what’s wrong?” he said, concerned. “You don’t like sunflowers?”

“I--I just, oh God,” she said, leaning against him and crying against his t-shirt collar. “I never, ever thought you’d buy me flowers again. I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just a weird mix of relief and joy and feeling utterly wrecked sometimes. It comes and goes.”

“Yeah,” he said, putting his arm around her neck. He kissed the side of her forehead and leaned
close to her ear. “Try waking up to find out that your fantasy girl is your girlfriend now and wants to stay with you, even though you have no memory of how you tricked her into dating you in the first place.”

“Tricked?” Darcy said, sniffling into her flowers.

“Oh, it had to be a trick,” he said. “You smell really good. Like marshmallows.”

“I don’t think your mother would approve,” Darcy said.

“No,” he said.

“Also, I can’t believe I’m crying in a French market, like some sort of romcom character,” she said. “I’m freaking Diane Keaton now.”

“Mmm-hmm,” he said, grinning.

“I love you,” Darcy said. He paused. Around them, tourists and locals milled in a gentle stream. “You’re not going to say it back?” she said.

“Nope,” he said. “Not yet.”

“That’s just mean,” she said.

“C’mon, let’s go to the beach again,” he said, leading her out into the sunshine. "Bring your, uh, crying flowers."


Chapter End Notes

Do you ever wonder what the STRIKE teams might have smuggled on their missions?

She fell asleep with her head on Brock’s shoulder during the quinjet ride back to DC. When she woke up, she was leaning against a metal arm on the other side and Bucky was grinning at her. “You hanging onto that cooler, doll?” he asked. She had her arms wrapped around their cooler of cheese.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said, prying a bit of her hair out of her mouth. She must’ve drooled a little. “Cheese stash.”

“Right,” Bucky said, smiling broadly.

“Where’d Brock go?” she asked.

“Talking to Sharon, I think?” Bucky said. “She has everyone’s paperwork.”

“Oh,” Darcy said. “I guess I’ll forgive him for leaving me if he fills out my forms, too. I’m going to look for him.” She stood up slowly—she was a little stiff—and Bucky held his hand out.

“You want me to be the bodyguard for your cheese?” he offered.

“Yes,” Darcy said firmly. “Under no circumstances is one Steven Grant Rogers to see or touch the contents of this cooler. You know how he eats.”

“Like a horse,” Bucky said. “Always hungry.”

“Thinks Camembert and cheddar are equally good, as long as they’re on a burger, too,” Darcy said, grinning. Steve wasn’t picky. He liked simple food. Vaguely, Darcy remembered finding that charming. Had it been that long ago? It felt like forever since she’d really thought about Steve like that.

“Yup. Would probably put all this fancy cheese stuff on a hot dog,” Bucky said, grinning.


“I’ll keep ’em safe,” he said.

“I have your word of honor, sarge?” she asked.
“Yes, ma’am,” Bucky said solemnly. They formally shook hands.

She found Brock filling out paperwork with Sharon while Thor, Jane, and Steve played cards. “I win!,” Jane said.

“Ah, this infernal game,” Thor grumbled. “Why must I always lose?”

Steve shrugged. “No idea,” he said. “I’d say you have an affinity for the Old Maid, but Miss Jane might find that offensive. No offense, Jane.”

“Ha! I’m crushing all of you,” Jane said, eyeing the candy in the center of the table. “I’m unbeatable.” She swiped the bag of Reese’s Cups and passed Darcy with a high-five. “Victory!” Jane called.

“Save me some,” Darcy called back.

“How does she always win?” Steve said, looking perplexed.

“My brother denies spelling the cards, although I have asked,” Thor said thoughtfully.

“She wins because Darcy marked the cards,” Brock said suddenly.

“What?” Steve said.

“How dare, Greg, how dare,” Darcy said.


“I’m Greg,” Brock said.

“How have the cards been marked?” Thor said.

“There’s a tiny smudge of nail polish on the back of the Old Maid,” Sharon said grinning.

“Why accuse me?” Darcy said to Brock.

“What color are your toes painted, baby?” he asked.

“Shit,” Darcy said. She was still wearing her ‘I’m-in-the-south-of-France’ sandals from Pepper.

“It’s a pretty color,” Sharon said thoughtfully.

“OPI’s She’s A Bad Muffuletta,” Darcy told Sharon. Brock laughed.

“Go change your shoes, honey,” Brock said. “It’s colder in DC, your little toes will be frozen. Jane helped me finish your paperwork, just sign here.”

“Okey-dokey,” Darcy said. She wasn’t going to argue if he wanted to fill out paperwork for her.

Darcy went to find her boots. “Where’d you hide the cooler?” Brock asked, appearing in the doorway of the bay where’d they’d left all their luggage.

“Bucky’s volunteered to be the cheeses’ bodyguard,” Darcy said, tying her laces.
“Can we trust him?” Brock said, grinning slightly.

“He gave me his word of honor,” Darcy said. “We shook on it.”

“Oh, yeah, totally sound logic there, Lewis. Why not pinky-swear with the former Winter Soldier?” Brock teased. “Hold on, you could tie that better.” He bent down at her feet and started unlacing her boots.

“Are you retying my shoes?” she said.

“This is a ladder lace. Paratroopers use it. It’s a little more secure,” he said. “Watch.”

“You’re retying my shoes,” Darcy said, feeling oddly delighted. “First you do my boring paperwork and then you retie my shoes?”

“Yeah, so?” he said.

“You want to do these things?” she said.

“Sure,” he said. “My favorite things to do on dates are paperwork and shoe lacing lessons.”

***

Natasha Romanoff looked at the man inside the cell within the Raft. “You will not help in exchange for something you need?” she said wryly. “Better food? Books? Your favorite martinis, Dr. List?”

“As if I would help you with a traitor,” List said. He spat at Natasha and she cocked her head quizzically. Fury had given her access to his file. She’d used that access to hack all the other Raft files.

“Suit yourself,” Natasha said. She wandered down the row of cells. A young man--speeding rapidly around his cell--paused to stare. Natasha nodded at him. He went back to pacing at his cell. At the end of the row, a young woman looked up at her.

“You are a friend of Tony Stark’s,” she said venomously.

“How do you know that?” Natasha asked, though she knew already. Never ask questions to which you don’t know the answer. It was a lesson of her training. A training similar to the Maximoffs’ own.

“I see everything in your mind,” the woman said. “List will not help you, either.”

“If you see everything in my mind,” Natasha said coolly, “look closely.”

“I do not trust you,” the young woman said.

“You will not have to, when the times comes,” Natasha said. She stood in front of the woman wordlessly for several minutes, then walked down the row of cells and exited the Raft. Wanda had realized in a few seconds that Natasha and she were terrifyingly similar. But Natasha’s quiet inner voice had whispered that it was not too late for Wanda to step away from this world, to be a person, rather than a tool. Wanda had a choice. Natasha’s choices had been stripped away in the Red
Room. Now she was a person who operated within certain clearly defined parameters: she’d lost her chance at recovering her family, but Wanda still had Pietro……

“Wanda? Wanda?!” Pietro cried out, as Wanda slumped to the floor in tears. Had they been so wrong to hate Tony Stark and the Avengers? All those years, all that hatred, all that searing pain under the Sceptre’s blue glow, Wanda wondered? The Tony of Natasha’s memories was not the monster of Wanda’s own. “Wanda, what did you see?” the young man said to his sister is Sokovian. She replied in the same language.

“The Black Widow will come back for us. We must wait. Help is coming.”

“From them? From the Avengers?” he said, horrified.

“Yes,” Wanda said, heartbroken. She had seen it all in Natasha’s mind--the Red Room training, the HYDRA past, then Clint Barton’s weathered, smiling face--Natasha’s voice saying “I have red in my ledger.”

“We cannot escape from here,” Pietro said in Sokovian.

“No,” Wanda said, touching the collar at her neck. But they would not be doing it alone.

***

Red. Red. Everywhere. Blood pouring down the walls, oozing around the window frame, squelching up through the carpet…”Babe, babe!” Darcy’s voice called, as if from a great distance. Brock woke with a shout. He was panicking and pouring sweat.

“Darcy?” he said, confused. He was alone in their new bedroom. He got up in the dark, walking past Clint’s brewery signs. When he touched the hallway light switch, the lights didn’t come on. “Damn bulbs,” he muttered. “Honey? Darcy?” He walked further down the hallway. He could see blue light from the television. Was she watching tv?

He turned the corner and saw the top of her head above the big armchair she’d added to the apartment so they could sit together and cuddle. “Baby, I been calling you,” he chided, leaning down to kiss the top of her head as he approached the chair from behind. At the touch of his mouth, she slumped sideways and he saw the deep gash along her throat and the blood drenching everything below. Her lifeless, glassy eyes stared up at him, illuminated by the glow of the television news. “The Avengers latest mission on behalf of SHIELD…” an anchor was saying smoothly.

He jerked awake, gasping. Darcy was caressing one of his arms softly. “Are you okay?” she whispered gently.

“Yeah, yeah, bad dream,” he said, laying back on the pillow. She stroked his hair tenderly and he looked at her. Darcy knew he was having bad dreams, but not their content. They were all about her. He’d been having horrific nightmares since they returned to DC less than two weeks ago. Each was worse that the last. Even in a new apartment and with Clint's pool table, the familiarity of DC seemed to be a trigger: the old streets and locations, the new ad-hoc SHIELD complex in
Arlington—the Triskelion was being rebuilt, somehow, SHIELD was limping along as an organization-- and his coworkers like Steve, Jack, and Natasha seemed to be triggers for his unease. He’d talked to his SHIELD therapist about it some; they both guessed it was about his repressed memories, but there were no easy solutions. Assured he wasn’t delusional, the therapist had recommended he take Ambien on his off days and try to rest as much as possible.

“I’ll get you water,” Darcy said. He was keeping something from her, she knew. He might’ve forgotten her, but she hadn’t forgotten him. Not at all.

She was getting water from the refrigerator when doorbell rang. “I’ll get it,” Darcy called out, leaving the cool water on the counter.

“No, no, let me,” Brock said. He stomped down the hallway as she reached the door. “Darcy--” he began, then stopped. He needed to modulate his tone. He’d almost spoken harshly, worried about her opening the door alone. Darcy was so patient with him, he thought, repressing a sigh. What had he done during their brief relationship to earn that?


“Oh,” he said, swallowing. He’d been cleared for missions on his first week back, but he was beginning to doubt himself. Could he handle it in the field when he couldn’t sleep? He reached over and drank some of the water.

“Hello, Natasha,” Darcy said, opening the door.

“It is time to have a conversation, milaya ,” Natasha said to Darcy. “About you,” she said to Rumlow.

“What about him?” Darcy asked, frowning. She’d automatically moved to put herself between Brock and Natasha, Brock realized. She was protecting him now? It would be funny, if he didn’t feel so unmoored.

“I think I have a solution to your memory loss,” Natasha said quietly. “It may also help you rest.”

“Who says I’m not resting?” Brock said.

“You are awake, are you not?” Natasha said. “It is all my fault, I admit.”

“You know, I think I would prefer it if you denied responsibility,” Brock said wryly. He sat down on the couch with his water and tried not to look at the armchair. Darcy came and sat beside him, slipping her hand through his. Natasha slid into the armchair silently.

“I have news. It will perhaps upset you,” she said to Brock and Darcy. “But I would like your help.”
“Upset him?” Darcy said, not moving from where she had automatically half-shielded Brock. He put an arm around her gently.

“I believe there is someone who can remove your mental blocks,” Natasha said. “They are the cause of your memory loss and why you cannot remember being with Darcy.”

“What’s the catch?” Brock said.

“We will need to break the Maximoff twins out of the Raft,” Natasha said coolly.

“The ones Fury found when he investigated my and Jane’s energy readings?” Darcy said. Natasha nodded. “Aren’t they dangerous?” Darcy said. The Maximoff twins had a vendetta against Tony, everyone knew, and had been some of von Strucker’s experimental subjects in his Sokovian fortress. They were being held in an undisclosed location.

“Yes,” Natasha said. “But I believe Steve will help us, once I have shown him what the Raft is like.”

“Tell me what it is again?” Brock said, rubbing his forehead. The name sounded familiar…

“Underwater secret prison,” Natasha said. “We will need to move quickly, get them out within seventy-two hours. Thad Ross has scheduled an inspection next week.”

“This will cause some shit,” Brock said. “Embarrass SHIELD, it’ll be a mess, Natasha.”

“I know. However, I think the Maximoffs can be persuaded--”

“No, absolutely not,” Darcy said. “No. I forbid it.” Natasha looked at her, then Brock.

“Will you give us a minute?” Brock said. “Go see Clint’s back deck license plate art or something?”

“All Midwestern states,” Darcy said, blinking back tears. Once Natasha had stepped outside, Darcy started to cry in earnest. Big choking sobs.

“Baby, baby,” Brock said, “please don’t cry.”
“Brock, I’ve read those files! Those twins are devoted to the idea of hurting Avengers. They blame Tony for the loss of their parents! You were Cap’s second for years and you infiltrated HYDRA, she could do God knows what inside your head--”

“Still--” Brock began.

“Still nothing,” Darcy said, losing her temper. “I lost you once, I’m not letting someone from HYDRA touch you.”

“It’s not your choice,” he said. “Darcy, I want my memories back. I’d risk anything--”

“You haven’t risked anything,” she told him sharply. “You fell out of a building and went into cryo. I lost you, your mother lost you. You didn’t feel that. You slept through it!” She was yelling now.

“I know what I lost!” he said, slamming a hand onto Clint’s kitchen counter. The brewery sign above them rattled. He took a deep breath. “I know what happened to me, even if my memories are shot, okay? And I want them back. I want to be whole again. I want to sleep at night, goddammit.”

“Please don’t do this, it’s too crazy,” Darcy said. “There’s too much risk. I’m happy--I’m happy just having you back--”

“For how long?” he said.

“Forever. You were dead for months. I thought I’d never see you again. This is enough,” Darcy said. “This is enough.”

“It’s not enough for me,” he said bitterly. “I’m going to discuss logistics with Nat.” He turned to walk outside to the deck where Natasha was waiting, probably purposefully looking away.

“Oh, she’s your friend now?” Darcy challenged.

“It hasn’t escaped my notice that she was your friend all throughout this,” he said lethally. Darcy felt like he’d stabbed her. She stared at his back for a moment, then fled into the bedroom crying.

***

“I’ve caused you more problems,” Natasha said quietly, when he stepped outside.

“If this works, I won’t have any. I can’t sleep. I dream she’s dead, Romanoff,” he said. “Usually, that it’s my fault somehow.”

They stood in silence for a minute. It was not yet dawn, but the light had begun to take on that lighter blue quality indicative of sunrise.

“Tell me about the plan,” he said. “Then we’ll go get Cap.”

“There may be a possibility we’ll lose our jobs, need to hide in Wakanda,” Natasha said.

“Noted,” Brock said.

“You should warn Darcy of all that,” Natasha suggested mildly.
Darcy was sitting on the bed when he came back into. “I’m going to Cap’s tonight,” he said, pulling a go-bag out of the closet.

“You’re doing this now? Not even discussing it with me?” she said.

“We have a limited timeline,” he said. “I’m sorry, baby,” He tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away.

“I’m furious at you right now,” Darcy said. She’d moved from crying to shaking with rage and helplessness. He knelt down in front of her.

“Think about what we’ll get back,” he said. “You’ve still got it, but I want it, too: the first time I saw you in person. I really want that back.”

“Shut up,” she said, starting to cry again. “I just want you. Just you. It doesn’t matter if you don’t remember my stupid face, okay?”

“It does to me,” he said, kissing her again. She leaned into the kiss, clinging to his shoulders.

“Don’t, please. Don’t.”

“I’ve got to, baby,” he said.

***

“These are children,” Steve said. Bucky and Sharon watched him pace the asphalt. They shared a look.

“I’ll go with him,” Bucky whispered. Sharon nodded and mouthed thank you.

“Technically, they are twenty-three and twenty-one,” Natasha said coolly. She’d brought Brock to a remote DC park and asked Steve to meet them. It was dawn now.

“Still, they were held from childhood, this was not a choice,” Steve said. “They didn’t know HYDRA was HYDRA.” He was livid. “An underwater, extra-judicial prison?”

“Yes,” Brock said quietly. “Which why we had to meet in this park, Cap. Keep your voice down.”

“Yet again, SHIELD--” Steve began, then stopped. He threw his arms in the air. “When can we get them?”

“Today,” Natasha said. “Tony is sending a plane. We need you to make contact with T’Challa.” She handed him an untraceable phone. Steve dialed. A moment later, he spoke into the phone receiver.

“I feel like I’m always doing this to you,” he said to the Wakandan prince.

***

Brock came home around noon. They’d already moved equipment from their various stashes
across DC. He needed more clothes. He wanted to talk to Darcy. Maybe he would call his mother. “Baby?” he said, when he unlocked the door. The apartment was still. Darcy had left a note.

*Gone to Jane’s, be back at two--D*

“Dammit,” Brock muttered. He’d have to go to Jane’s. He didn’t want to leave without seeing Darcy. He grabbed the clothes and stuffed them into his go-bag and left Clint’s place.

He pulled into Jane’s new townhouse complex, calling Darcy on the phone. “Baby,” he was saying into her voicemail, “I’m in the parking lot--” when a door opened in front of him and Jane came out, jogging towards the street. Brock stepped out of the car. “Jane, where’s Darcy--” he began. She hit him with a resounding slap.

“You asshole! You complete asshole!” Jane yelled.

“Jane, stop!” a voice said behind them. Darcy, red-eyed and wrapped in a damn blanket with sleeves, was running out to the curb. She threw herself at Brock and he caught her in his arms. “I’ve been crying on her couch, she’s upset on my behalf,” Darcy said hurriedly.

“Hell yes, I am,” Jane said. “I cannot believe you would do something so stupid, so thoughtless--”

“And why have you not asked me for help?” Thor--looking wounded--was standing in the doorway. “I am deeply grieved. I would help you.”

“Oh, no you wouldn’t!” Jane said, whirling on him. They began to bicker.

“I was worried you’d left already,” Darcy said, staring up into Brock’s eyes. God, he loved her so much. Even half-knowing things, he knew that.

“Didn’t want to leave without seeing you. We could use Thor, though,” Brock said.

“Uh-huh,” Darcy said. She kissed Brock, her mouth trailing down. He leaned into her, breathing slowly.

“I don’t want you to go,” Darcy said, her head buried against his neck. “Don’t go. Please.”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The Raft seems highly impractical for a prison, doesn't it?

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for your comments and kudos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brock left for the Raft mission in a stealth quinjet with the others. Thor went with him, but recalled Loki to Midgard to act as Darcy and Jane’s security while everyone else was gone. When he appeared suddenly in the living room at Darcy and Brock’s, Darcy rushed him in a hug. “I’ve missed you,” Darcy said. “Really missed you.” She held him for a minute. He’d gone tense in surprise, but then relaxed and ran a hand gently down her back.

“Life lacks some verve without me?” he said archly, pretending indifference. Darcy could tell he was secretly pleased.

“Totally lacks style,” Darcy said.

“I can tell from the contents of this apartment,” he said dryly, eyeing Clint’s furniture.

“It’s Clint’s,” Darcy explained.

“That explains many things,” he said.

“What explains how the people we love have much stupider ideas than you?” Jane said grimly. “I’m afraid this is going to end badly.”

“Oh, well,” Loki said, shrugging fluidly. “My brother is uncommonly lucky for someone whose plans usually boil down to throw the magic hammer at it. Perhaps this will not require too much sophistication? What are they doing? Thor did not explain...”

“Brock is letting someone from HYDRA try to unscramble his memories,” Darcy said angrily.

“Someone they are breaking out of a secret prison,” Jane added.

“I see,” Loki said, steepling his fingers. “That does sound...misguided.”

“And there’s nothing I can do but sit here,” Darcy said glumly.

“I think we should perhaps pretend that everything is normal and go to dinner,” Loki suggested. He clapped his hands together. “Waiting on dire news calls for banana daiquiris,” he said.

“Is there an occasion you don’t think calls for those?” Jane asked.
Loki paused thoughtfully, considering.

“A funeral,” he said finally, “one would not drink those after a funeral. Unless the deceased is an enemy? Then one might wish for a banana daiquiri of celebration? I know quite a few people whose deaths...”

“Would be the cause of some celebration,” Darcy finished, thinking of Thad Ross. “Let’s get a daiquiri and then pray no one dies.”

***

They went to their favorite DC place. Darcy sipped her banana and ate indifferently. Jane’s shoulders were a little tense and hunched. Loki sighed. “What can I do to cheer you?” he asked, looking from one woman to another. He was very disappointed to find everyone so miserable. He’d hoped his return would be a happy occasion.

“No clue,” Darcy admitted.

“Nope,” Jane agreed.


“It was a good trick,” he said. “I appreciated it.”

“A good trick,” Darcy mused. Sometimes, her whole life with Brock felt like one: who he was, what their relationship would be. A sleight of hand by the universe. It made her think of Loki’s clever tricks. “Wait, can you get us a live feed?” Darcy said. “Could you do that with magic?”

“There is nothing I cannot do with magic,” Loki said.

***

Back at Darcy’s, Loki was fiddling with Clint’s tv remote. “Hurry, hurry,” Darcy said.

“I am hurrying, these infernal buttons are tiny. Where is input? I need to magic the input button,” he said. Jane took the remote from him and he made a noise of protest. “You are far too impatient to be a true scientist,” he said sharply.

“Bite me,” Jane said, pointing. “There’s input.”

“Thank you,” he said, sounding slightly mollified. A few moments later, Darcy was looking at the feed of a high-security, underwater prison. “I have hijacked the feed, it will not be visible to the prison operators.”
“Thank you,” Darcy said, squeezing his hand. "It all looks...normal?"

"It does," Jane said, frowning.

The three of them sat, transfixed, before the screen, until they saw Steve’s broad shoulders on camera. “He looks damp,” Jane said.

“He was planning on swimming underwater and then raising the prison. He can hold his breath for a long time,” Darcy said. “Brock told me.”

“A useful skill, I suppose,” Loki said dryly. They watched as other, familiar figures appeared on screen after the Raft had been raised above the water. Natasha’s hair was like a burning ember, Darcy thought, as she stepped down behind Steve. Then Brock descended into view. Darcy could see the tattoos on the backs of his arms.

“There he is,” she whispered to Jane heatedly.

“Ow,” Loki said.

“Sorry,” Darcy said,

“You injure me,” he complained. She’d been squeezing his hand involuntarily. He gave her a fractionally tender look, but she missed it, she was so intent on the screen. “It will be all right. I’m sure everything will be fine,” he said comfortingly. Jane was so surprised, she actually stared at Loki.

They were still watching when the two slender figures--the twins--were freed. Natasha walked Brock over to the tiny person that she recognized. “That’s her,” Darcy said to Loki.

“Wanda Maximoff,” Jane said, as the small hands went to Brock’s forehead. “They’re doing that there?” Jane said, sounding fearful.

“No,” Darcy whispered. It seemed wrong to do it at the prison. They needed to leave, go somewhere safer. Loki’s gaze went tight. Darcy felt like she couldn’t breathe. “They need to leave,” Darcy said. “Why aren’t they leaving? This isn’t safe! They need to go!”

Red beams of light flashed briefly from Wanda’s fingertips and--Darcy’s heart stuttered--Brock sank to his knees. To her utter horror, he collapsed sideways. Just then, there was the sound of distant gunfire on the feed.

“Oh no,” Loki said. On screen, a mad scramble for cover was taking place. People were trying to move. The feed went a little fuzzy.

“Is he getting up?” Jane said, leaning forward to squint.

“No,” Darcy said. “What do we do?” She looked at Loki, fully panicking. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You need to leave, go and help them,” Darcy told him. Loki looked at her, his eyes sad.
“I have promised my brother I would not leave you unguarded,” he said. “I cannot leave you. I gave my word.”

“No, no, Loki, you can go!” Darcy insisted.

“I am sorry,” he said quietly, rubbing his temple. “My mother’s last bit of magic was with an eye to forging brotherly bonds,” he said wryly. “When I give my word to my brother, it is fast, unless he is non-specific enough to give me some plausible deniability. He was very specific that I not leave you. I cannot--I cannot think of a loophole.”

“I can,” Jane said. “Take us with you.”

“Into a pitched battle?” Loki said, incredulous. “Have you gone mad, Jane Foster? Thor would see me dead!”

“Please,” Jane said. “He’s a damn puppy.”

Darcy--looking at Brock’s motionless figure on screen--turned back to them. “Let’s go,” she said. “Now. We have weapons hidden here, we’ll take them.”

“Do you know how to use them?” Loki said.

“Point and shoot,” Darcy said. "Just like my Kodak camera."

Chapter End Notes

I was feeling in a File Fixation mood today....
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

"The darkness drops again; but now I know"--WB Yeats

Chapter Notes

I own nothing! Thanks for all your support on this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inside the Raft, a pitched battle was taking place. Natasha had wrestled several guards into submission with her thighs, a sight that made even Pietro pause, while Steve tossed his shield at several more. Wanda had dragged a prone Brock around a corner, but the anxiety of battle was a new experience for her and she was frightened that her skills might backfire. There were more guards than the Avengers had counted on. Thad Ross, acting on a tip from List, had tripled security. It meant that Thor and Bucky were having to knock them down like bowling pins to secure the exits. “We’ve got to raise this thing to get out!” Steve yelled to Natasha. “We only have minutes!”

“I’ll go,” she said. “Help Wanda move Brock!” she called, before taking off in a sprint. She made it to the control room and was hastily tapping buttons when all the security monitors fuzzed out. “Well, I didn’t do that,” Nat said out loud. She assumed it was Wanda’s work.

“No,” a voice said suddenly. “I did.” Loki materialized at her elbow, Darcy and Jane landing more awkwardly on the floor.

“Ow,” Jane said.

“I did tell you to hold on,” Loki said.

“Where’s Brock?” Darcy said.

“Downstairs. Steve is trying to move him. We’re slightly overwhelmed at the moment. More guards than we knew. We need to raise this to get out,” Natasha said. “You should do it, while we get everyone to the exit.”

“We can do it,” Jane said. Natasha nodded. She reeled off instructions to Darcy and Jane and then looked at Loki.

“Come with me,” she said. “I’ve got Loki,” she said over comms. He looked back at them.

“We’re in the same location,” Darcy said.

“We’ll lock ourselves in. Go! Help your brother,” Jane said.
Thor was slamming Mjolnir into the ground to stun several assailants when they came around the corner. “Brother, what are you doing here? I have forbidden you to leave Jane and Darcy--”

“Technically, I haven’t! They are upstairs,” Loki said.

“Loki,” Thor began scoldingly, before Loki’s knife shimmered into view. “Are you planning to stab me with that?” Thor asked, putting his hands on his hips. “I’m quite tired--” Loki threw the knife mid-sentence. It landed in the chest of a man preparing to shoot Thor from the corner’s edge.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“That was quite a good throw,” Thor said, pleased. Behind them, Natasha twisted her legs and rendered someone unconscious with an audible pop. He slumped to the ground and she rolled off smoothly, rising to her feet.

“If you’re done bonding, we really need to get out of here,” she said.

“Yes, yes,” Loki said. “I do so hate prisons.”

“If you behaved better--” Thor began, but was interrupted by a platoon of armed guards. Natasha kicked the first one into the wall.

“There is a double standard in our family,” Loki said, slicing efficiently.

“I thought you and father were doing better?” Thor asked, whacking at an assailant, who slumped down with a groan. Two of the remaining men turned and ran.

“Marginally, yes,” Loki said. “Are you just running away?” he called. In their panic, one of the men half-slipped and started to run-crawl away.

“I love when they just see me and run,” Nat said.

“I like a good, pitched battle, it is more sporting,” Thor said. Loki rolled his eyes.

“I prefer being millions of miles away and having someone else do it,” he said. He looked down at his battle armor. “Oh, I’ve got blood again.”

“Millions of miles?” Nat said, curious.

“I’d much rather write, if I’m being honest. Or bake. I like baking. Crafting is dreadful,” Loki said.

“Darcy’s hot glue gun?” Nat said, doing a half smirk.

“Worse than the tortures of Asgard,” Loki said.

Upstairs, Darcy and Jane had entered all the codes and using the photostatic hand Natasha had left
behind for clearance. They felt the Raft beginning to rise. It was an eerie feeling, a lurch accompanied by the grinding and whining of machinery. The underwater prison was creaking to life. It reminded Darcy, weirdly, of Yeats’ line about “rough beasts” in “The Second Coming.” She felt the building breach the water with a metallic groan and could hear the water pouring off the sides dimly.

The two women looked at each other. “We did it,” Jane said.

“We did,” Darcy said.

“What now?”

“I’m going to get him,” Darcy said. She didn’t trust Wanda Maximoff. She brought out the gun holstered at her hip.

“I’m going with you,” Jane said. They both were armed. Jane unlocked the door.

“I’ve never actually shot anyone before,” Darcy whispered, once they were in the corridor.

“Aim for center mass. The torso,” Jane said.

“Did you learn that from Thor?” Darcy said.

“No,” Jane said. “From physics class. Where are we going?” Darcy had taken the time to memorize the route to Brock.

“Next left.”

***

The sounds of a firefight and Steve’s shield intensified as they followed Darcy’s mind map towards him. “This is it,” Darcy whispered to Jane, slightly dirty and shaking. They’d managed to get through without having to shoot anyone, though Darcy had thought she might have to at one point. She didn’t actually want to kill anyone.

“Ready?” Jane said.

“Yeah,” Darcy said.

“Jane? Darcy?” Steve said, stunned, when he saw them in the doorway. That was when Darcy saw part of Brock’s shoulder visible behind a corner. And the pool of blood. She screamed and ran.

“Darcy, no!” Steve yelled. He attempted to grab her, but was too late. She heard the bullets, rather than felt them, as she stumbled beside Brock. Steve’s shield and Wanda’s magic took out the guards who’d fired at her, but she didn’t notice.

Brock was still unconscious, Darcy realized, as she landed on her knees. A pale, solemn girl looked at her.

“You are her,” she said softly. “And you are hurt.” Darcy looked down. Red circles bloomed on
“I’m hurt,” she said flatly. Brock’s eyes flickered open slowly, then focused on her.

“She?” he said. “Darcy?” He hadn’t called her that since Triskelion.

*He remembers me, he remembers me, he remembers me...* she thought wildly, before the blackness took over the edges of her vision and she fainted. Dimly, she heard Brock say her name again.

Chapter End Notes

Full text of Yeats' "The Second Coming," such an awesome poem--
https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/second-coming
“Let me help!” Wanda said, shoving him aside. He’d moved instinctively when he saw the blood spreading on Darcy’s shirt. Wanda’s fingers moved and a red glow emanated from her hands again. “This will slow the bleeding, but we must get her out of her,” Wanda told him.

“Yeah,” Brock said, “yeah.” His brain was still dizzy with recovered memories. Adrenaline, heartbreak, and fear almost paralyzed him. He looked around their makeshift barrier to the rest of the room. A second wave of attackers had arrived as Wanda staunched Darcy’s bleeding. Cap was throwing his shield at them. He’d shoved Jane to an unexposed corner.

The bullets still pinged and ricocheted against the walls. There was no safe means of escape unless they stopped.

“Fuck,” Brock muttered. “Fuck.” He did the only thing he could think of. “Loki!” he yelled. He screamed the Asgardian’s name. There was no immediate response, but more gunfire.

“Wait,” Wanda said, stopping him. “I think--?” she said, looking anxious. He watched, nervous, as she utilized her powers---her hands shook and she appeared drained--to halt the bullets. The effort must’ve been enormous. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead as she dragged the metal cylinders back towards their origin point. “Ahhhh!” she yelled, using a final push to actually take down the Raft’s guards. Then, panting, she sagged to the floor.

“Thank you,” Steve said. Jane emerged, shaking and ran to Darcy.

“Will she be all right?” Jane asked. It was the first time Brock had ever seen her look so frightened.

“If we get her out,” he said. “Come on.” He gathered Darcy up carefully in one arm and then reached for Wanda.

“Leave me,” Wanda said. “I can stop them from pursuing you.”

“Hell no, kid. You just saved both our lives, you’re getting the fuck outta here,” Brock said. With a grunt, he dragged an exhausted-looking Wanda to her feet. “Lean on me,” he told her. “We’ll find your brother.”
“I’ll help,” Jane said. She took Wanda’s elbow and Wanda smiled nervously.

Cap took the lead. They ran through the hallways, trying to find the others. Finally, they rounded a corner.

Thor and Loki were battling guards leading to the exit. “Stay back,” Steve said. He entered the fray. They were outnumbered, but Cap was putting a dent in their forces. Brock felt something bump his elbow and turned with a jerk. A man with curly blonde hair grinned at him.

“Pietro!” Wanda said.

“Other side is clear,” her brother said. “They need me.” He ran so rapidly into the firefight that Brock blinked. He didn’t know what to do. So, he looked at her. He loved her so much. Darcy’s eyelids seemed to flutter---

“Brock,” Jane said.

“All clear,” Steve yelled, gesturing for them to use the escape exit.

“Go,” he told Jane. She ran. He followed. Jane went up the ladder first, then helped Brock carry Darcy to the level where the quinjet waited. They ran up the ramp. There was a flurry of activity as people joined them and the quinjet readied for takeoff. But Brock’s attention was on Darcy as they loaded her onto a stretcher.

There were some medical supplies onboard, but she needed more treatment, Wanda told them.

“We’ll go to Wakanda,” Steve said. “Safest place.”

In the bay of the quinjet, Brock held Darcy’s hand and talked to her, trying to control his spiraling terror. She was so pale and still. “I love you, sweetheart. It’s gonna be okay,” he said, stroking her hair. “It’ll be okay. It’ll be okay.”

***

They had crossed the Wakandan protective border and Brock had breathed a sigh of relief when the monitors hooked to Darcy began an ominous series of wails. “What’s going on?” he yelled. People had immediately moved towards them. On the stretcher, Darcy jerked. She was seizing, he realized, wanting to vomit.

“She’s bleeding internally,” Wanda said, staggering to her feet to try and stop the injuries. A terrified looking Loki joined her. Their hands moved over Darcy’s body.

“Hold,” he told Wanda as they worked in unison. “You must hold. It is dire.”
A powerless-feeling Brock watched, unable to do anything, as Darcy slipped into coma. Beside him, Jane wept in Thor’s arms. He felt someone touch him gently. Brock looked at Captain America. Steve looked all his seven decades, suddenly. Weary and old. “T’Challa’s sister will help, they have all the technology,” Steve said. “You know they can help.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

In Wakanda, the rest of the world tends to fade away...

Chapter Notes

*I own nothing!

Several weeks later

Brock left the meeting as Steve bickered with the Congressman on a secure line. Tony was trying to negotiate their return to the US after the Raft battle. Steve was refusing to go without the Maximoffs. He had principles, he insisted. They included not leaving kids who’d been experimented on by HYDRA to rot in covert prisons. Or stateless. He and Tony were pushing for US citizenship, but it was difficult, since they’d technically liberated a prison and were fugitives. But Natasha had been covertly planting positive stories in the media and had swayed public opinion. That had put pressure on the politicians. As Brock shut the door quietly, he met Natasha. “Hi,” he said awkwardly.

“How is she?” Natasha asked, meaning Darcy.

“Same,” he said. “I’m visiting now.”

“I won’t keep you,” Nat told him. Her voice was gentle. Brock knew she meant well. She always had. It was just difficult. There was a constant gnawing feeling in his stomach now. He ached. “Tell Barnes hello if you see him at dinner.” He knew that Nat was staying near Barnes and Rogers, who were waiting on Sharon Carter’s next visit. Brock kept up with Barnes; they had meals together when he wasn’t eating in the room.

“I will,” she said. He got several feet away, then half looked back.

“You like the goats?” he asked her.

“Yeah,” she said. “They’re Bucky’s. How did you know?”

“You’ve got goat hair on your sleeve. When she—-one day, you’ll have to introduce them to her,” Brock said. “She’d like that.”

“I will,” Nat said. “It’ll be okay, Rumlow.” He nodded. That was all anyone seemed to say to him these days.
On the way, he stopped. The Wakandan rhinos that had so charmed Darcy on her last visit--back when he’d been terrified and uncertain of his own feelings and memories--were huffing in a nearby enclosure. He moved over carefully and patted the closest baby rhino, who sniffed him. “Hello, colonizer,” a female voice said.

“Okoye,” he said in a quiet voice. They stood in silence. Finally, she let out a sigh.

“You do not have faith in us, even though we healed you,” she told him and then turned away.

“That right?” he called after her. “That all you want to say?”

“You are stupid,” she said. He laughed. The motion was so unfamiliar, it almost hurt. Then that deep ache in his chest returned and he felt guilty for laughing. There was nothing to laugh at without her.

Brock went through the complex and down a familiar set of stairs. He could walk here blindfolded now. He visited several times a day. The metal stairs rattled under his feet. The lights were soft here, though. He’d insisted on that. Soft pink and purple lights. Darcy’s favorite colors. He sat down and began to talk. “So, sweetheart, I think Cap is telling the head of the Congressional intelligence committee to go fuck himself,” he announced. Then he unwrapped his sandwich. “Barnes has more of those goats again. A black one, if Romanoff’s sweater is a clue.” His paper crumpled loudly. “Said hi to those rhinos you liked, too. My Ma’s coming in a few weeks. Wants to see you. I think she wants to read you the riot act for trying to rescue me, but I won’t let her go overboard,” he said. “I’ll, uh, protect you,” he said, blinking. He tried never to cry when he was here, in case she could tell. He chewed and glanced at the cryo tank in front of him.

Darcy floated, long hair streaming behind her, in the new cryo liquid that was supposed to be bringing her out of the coma. Her eyes had been closed for weeks. Like Sleeping Beauty, she was impossibly perfect--and still. He longed for her to move, to talk, to make funny faces. To yell and scream at him, even.

“Two more weeks ‘til the big day,” he said, swallowing. “I keep wondering, will you remember me this time?” Brock said. Her face didn’t change. There was no answer in the silent room.

***

Darcy’s eyes opened slowly. The room swam in front of her. The last thing she remembered—there was a familiar face there, too. Wide brown eyes looked at her in alarm. “Jane?” she said. Her voice came out like a croak.

“Darcy,” Jane said, beginning to cry. Thor and Loki were standing behind her.

“Where am I?” Darcy said.

“Wakanda, sweetheart,” a voice said. She turned her head slowly. A pair of amber brown eyes,
flecked with green, watched her warily. His face, resolving out of blurriness, was handsome.

“Your eyes are so beautiful,” she said to him.

“You think so?” he asked, sounding choked up.

“Eyes are very cool,” she said softly.

“You told me,” he said. “You remember that? At SHIELD? I was trying to ask you on a date and, uh,” he said, hesitating. His expression was pained.

“The only thing more awkward than you asking me on a date is you taking me on one, Barack Rumolou,” she cracked. When he realized that she remembered him, he broke down.

“Oh God,” he was sobbing. “Oh God,” he repeated, body shaking as he cried.

“I remember that, too,” she said. “He does a very intense sex face, Janey.” She smiled at Jane.

“Darce, don’t torture him,” Jane scolded.

“He forgot me and he got me shot,” she said.

“I did,” Brock said. “I’m so sorry, baby. So sorry. I was frightened as fuck.” He wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his arm.

“Technically, I went,” Darcy said.

“With my brother’s help,” Thor said, sounding disapproving. Loki shifted.

“Don’t be mad at Loki,” Darcy said, stroking Brock’s hair gently as he trembled against her shoulder. She kissed the side of his forehead. Loki’s expression shifted between guilt and softness, but she smiled at him anyway. "I made him," she added.

"Made him," Thor grumbled.

She spent the next few days seeing everyone. Brock hovered. Darcy sometimes got the feeling he was afraid she would disappear.

***

Renata arrived by stealth quinjet several nights after Darcy woke up. He had called his mother with the good news that she was back. Darcy had sworn Brock to secrecy about her memories, however. “Why?” he repeated, for the millionth time. It puzzled him. They were waiting on the porch. He had fusssed over Darcy and was making her let him push her around in a wheelchair until her strength returned.

“Because,” she told him. “It’s a surprise. You gotta wait for it.” The quinjet landed a distance away and the ramp came down slowly. Renata was standing next to Natasha.

“Oh, honey,” Renata said, as she disembarked.

“I’m sorry if I don’t remember you,” Darcy said to his mother. “My memory is fuzzy.” Her
memory was actually perfect. Nat gave her a confused look, but passed into the palace complex when Brock winked.

“That’s all right,” Renata said. “I know whose fault that is--”

“Ma,” Brock began.

“How did we meet?” Darcy said to Renata.

“Oh,” Renata said. “Well, I adored you immediately--” she began. Darcy grinned at Brock. He had to hide his laughter behind his hand. His mother shoved him aside to push Darcy’s chair. She talked rapidly about their first “meeting.”

“That’s right,” Darcy said, as Renata talked about how well she and Darcy had gotten along.

“You came to see me,” she was saying, “and I knew this was Johnny’s girl, Johnny’s lovely girl.”

“You mean you didn’t threaten me with pruning scissors?” Darcy said innocently. She was wearing Brock’s olive leaf bracelet. Nat had brought some of her things.

“Oh,” Renata said. “Well.” Brock laughed for real then. He hadn’t thought he could still laugh like that. “Be quiet, you,” his mother said.

He spent all of dinner watching them, torn between surprise and delight. He couldn’t believe it was real. Darcy must’ve caught his expression. “We’re okay,” she told him.

“You’re fugitives,” his mother said. “Have you forgotten?”

“But this place has the good coffee,” Darcy pointed out.

“She’s not wrong, Ma,” he said. The rest of the world seemed very unimportant.

***

Brock couldn’t sleep, though. She found him in bed that night. “Can I sleep with you?” Darcy asked gently, rising out of her wheelchair.

“Yeah, of course,” Brock said. “We haven’t--” He hadn’t wanted to pressure her. Or himself.

“I know,” she said. “We’ve got time. We’ll take it slow.” She curled up against him.

“Oh,” he said, half-relieved, half-disappointed. He found himself wanting her to pressure him. He was a little frightened to initiate. What if he failed?

“Mmm-hmm,” she said, kissing his collarbone.

“I love you,” he repeated.

“I love you, too,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “You can, uh, ask me for it, if you want?” he said, smirking. She grinned.

“I can?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, voice going warm. He was kissing her when she spoke again.
“I’m bringing home a goat, I think,” she said. “I wasn’t going to ask for it.”

“I meant fucking,” he grumbled.

“Yeah, well, you’re getting a goat,” she said. Then she smirked at him.

“What?” he said, as Darcy wiggled. “Oh.” She’d shifted her weight on top of him. “Are we going to?” he said, looking at her.

“You feel ready?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, reaching up to touch her face. “I feel ready.”

“Okay,” she said. She nuzzled him, then kissed his nose. “Stop me if you feel uncomfortable, okay?”

“I will, baby,” he said, voice husky. She trailed kisses along his jaw. Her mouth felt warm and plush. He shivered in response, feeling an array of emotions: he was anxious, until his memories of her touch came flooding back, followed by a jolt of arousal that made him roll his hips, as she settled on top of him. “Oh God,” he whispered, more to himself, as she moved.

“You remember that?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

***

“Which goat is our goat?” Brock asked Darcy, when he found her sitting with Barnes one afternoon. They were watching the smallest goats. One of them headbutted a rock, then fell over.

“That one?” he asked.

“Nah,” Darcy said.

“We named that one Steve,” Bucky said, reaching down to let Steve headbutt his arm.

“That’s the one we named after you,” Darcy said, pointing.

“The one getting romantic with a log?” Brock asked.

“Uh-huh. That’s goat Brock, he’s a little slutty,” Darcy said.


“You’re messing with me,” Brock said.

“Bucky’s going to build steps for them to climb so they can get on top of his new rooms,” Darcy said.

“And land on people going by?” Brock said.

“They would never,” Darcy said.

“Yeah, they will,” Bucky said. He looked at Steve the goat. “You will, won’t you, punk?”

“Do people really think I’m the horny goat?” Brock wondered out loud, as Okoye walked by.
“It is all the loud noises the both of you make, the whole palace has heard your moaning and groaning,” she said sharply. Bucky laughed.

“Those are all me!” Darcy yelled at Okoye’s retreating back. Brock thought he saw a grin on Okoye’s face for the briefest second. He looked back at Darcy.

“Jesus,” Brock said. “What’s gotten into you, sweetheart?”

“At last check, you, pal,” Bucky muttered. Darcy snorted.

“I don’t know why you should get all the credit, I like sex, too,” Darcy said. “Where’s Loki? We’re going to do some crafts and decorate my chair and maybe find some glitter magnets for Bucky’s arm.”

“Oh, we’d take them with us,” Darcy said. She giggled at Brock’s expression. “And you thought Linda’s dogs were weird!”

“I just did sad eyes,” Darcy said. “Like this. Everyone does what I want. Do you want anything?” She looked at Brock, wide eyed and vaguely lost-looking.

“Just you,” he said, pushing her hair back a little.

“Ask for something reasonable, like a pardon,” Bucky said.

“Nope,” Brock said. “Wouldn’t want to deprive you both of your goats.”

“I just did sad eyes,” Darcy said. “Like this. Everyone does what I want. Do you want anything?”

“I miss those dogs,” he said, suddenly realizing he did. "Can we get one of those instead of a goat?"

"Maybe," Darcy said, looking canny. She grinned at Bucky.

"What are you planning, doll?" Bucky asked in a low voice. Darcy shrugged.

"I might have plans. Or things I want?" she said, rolling her eyes up at Brock. He looked a little flustered.

"I don't think a goat'd do well in Clint's place, sweetheart," Brock said. Bucky snorted. "But if you want to get married I was already going to ask you," he added, then looked like he'd said something he shouldn't have.

"Whoops," Bucky said.

"What? Really?" Darcy said.

"Yes," Brock said. Then he frowned. "What were you hinting at?"

"I wanted some of the good coffee," she said. "From M'Baku." Bucky pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

"Oh," Brock said.
"I think I'm way too young to get married," she said. "Did your mother put you up to this?"

"No," Brock said, looking itchy. "I mean, maybe she said something the other night, but..."

"Besides, who am I even marrying? Are we doing your real name or what? I have questions," Darcy announced, as he rolled her away.

Behind them, Bucky laughed until he cried.

-The End-

End Notes

This is basically a plot bunny spun off from another plot bunny (my "Welcome To Vampireville, USA, Darcy Lewis"). An AU from an AU, if you will.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!