Mixed Blessings

by cat_77

Summary

The stupidity of Hydra mixed with the stupidity of her matches mixed possibly of a bit of her own throws Darcy a curveball, and any carefully constructed plans to the wayside.

Notes

A soulmate AU in which people are marked where and when their match first touches them. Not AOU or CA:CW compliant (or anything past that, really).
"Buy you a drink, sweetheart?" And there, right there, her hackles were up. She had been having such a good night, too.

She and Jane had decided to have a Girl's Night. It was their first since the little adventure that had earned Darcy both a surprise trip to Asgard and a room of her own at the tower and by earned she meant the hard way. Getting Jane away from her research was one thing, and a thing Darcy had gotten quite good at, really. Getting Darcy herself away from her protective mark matches was another thing all together.

Compromises were made. Whereas in times past they would hit some shady bar with questionable cleanliness and damn near bottomless margaritas, enhanced standards were put in place. Said standards were that it had to be a place approved by both The Boys and Stark Security as well as located to allow for minimal response time in an emergency. Oddly, this left only two places as far as overprotective governing bodies were concerned: Tracy's that was about a block over, and Iron Respite which was a new addition to the tower itself - named such because Stark never did learn how to do subtle. They opted to stay in the building as a way to give their significant others and themselves some peace of mind and to hopefully only be tracked electronically versus stalked by well-meaning lurkers.

IR as it was beginning to be known as was more of a cocktail lounge than a real bar, with fancy-ass expensive drinks and food options better seen at a corporate fundraiser than a Friday Night Frenzy. The setup itself wasn't that bad and it might have even made a decent club if it wasn't so open and sparse and if the rich people who apparently frequented it in hopes of rubbing elbows with greatness could actually dance. It was way above Darcy's preferred price range, but did have the benefit of likely being funded by Stark himself what with the fact they had yet to be asked for any sort of credit card and the drinks kept coming.

Well, maybe not drinks plural. Janie was on her third but Darcy was still sipping away at a virgin concoction that was rich in flavor but not in alcohol. She wasn't ready to lose control and lower her defenses quite yet, not after surviving a kidnapping fiasco and not when it was still up in the air as to whether Thor's blessing meant the possibility of carrying kidlings within her. Yes, she could just take a damn test and know for certain, but there was no way she could sneak that past her watchdogs anytime soon.

Anyway, back to the douche dumb enough to try old and overused pick up lines. He prattled on in his attempts and either didn't notice the lack of interest or outright ignored it. Darcy tried flipping her hair over her shoulder to reveal her bright and obvious soul mark, but that didn't deter him in the least. In truth, it almost looked like his eyes lit up even more.

The hackles? They grew.

She reached into her ever-present bag to grab her phone and the man's poor attempts at flirting halted. "No need for that, I swear," he insisted, hands up and everything. "I crossed a line, and I'm sorry. At this point, please just let me buy you a drink to make up for my screw up?"

Jane narrowed her already squinty eyes. "If we didn't want one from you before, why would we take one now?" she asked. Darcy was proud, there was barely a slur.

The man smiled, and her skin itched from it. He seemed more pleased at Jane's outward drunkenness than he had any right to. His eyes darted to the side, just for a moment, and Darcy's followed. She
only wished she was surprised to see two guys in suits that practically screamed their identity of thugs for hire.

She reached for her phone again to find it gone. The man's hand slipped into his pocket and she had a fair idea where it went.

"Are you stupid?" she asked. She tilted her head to the side as she contemplated him, sized him up the way she had been taught to and had been damn near quizzed on. She wasn't really that impressed, but knew better than to think that meant she and Janie were safe. "Like, really stupid?"

The men stepped closer.

Jane kicked her foot against the table leg three times, their agreed upon sign that shit was just idiotic and she was more than ready to leave.

"Why would you assume that?" Douche asked, the faintest hint of what was probably supposed to be menace to his tone. Given that one of her soulmates was one of if not the most famous assassin in the entire world, she wasn't impressed.

Instead, she turned to Jane and asked, "It's Friday, right?"

Jane nodded hard enough that she listed slightly to the side upon completion. "Only Friday," she agreed. Her brow furrowed a little as she concentrated enough to spell out, "F-R-I-D-A-Y."

"What does the day of the week have to do with anything?" Douche asked, clearly confused. He recovered enough to try a smirk when he added, "Other than to give you girls a reason to go out drinking alone after a long, hard week of science."

Jane turned to Darcy now, enough of a gleam in her eyes to let her know she wasn't nearly as far gone as she was pretending to be. Darcy hadn't thought so. The night only three jiggers of tequila put Jane under was the night that would herald a Midgardian mini-Ragnarok. With an innocence she knew not to trust, Jane asked, "Did I tell him I was a scientist? Did you?"

Darcy shook her head and made sure to pop the p-sound when she said, "Nope. See the part about them being stupid."

"Would that be the part where they stole your phone but not mine? Or the part where they are dumb enough to not know all we have to do is shout for Friday to call The Boys?" Jane asked. Then, just in case the AI assigned to this little section of Stark's world didn't pick up her request over the background noise of the rich getting sloshed on overpriced drinks, she did just that.

Darcy smiled when she took a sip of her now more watered than iced drink. She set it down and propped her chin up on one fist before she repeated, "Seriously, stupid."

She didn't know if she should have expected them to run or maybe pontificate about some bullshit for a while. She belatedly realized it really shouldn't have been a surprise when Douche made a grab for her and his lackeys moved in to do the same for Janie. Unfortunately for him, while he had been distracted with Jane's spelling skills, she had managed to grab Little Lightning from her bag. This meant that, before he could even lay a single finger on her, she tased the ever-loving shit out of him.

He jerked backward and did an adorable little flopping thing, but it didn't take long for one of his lackeys stepped in to take his place. She was trapped in the booth with no other way out, but was oddly calm about the whole thing. Her taser was awesome, incredible recovery time and could generate more volts than was precisely legal, so she just readied herself to push the button again even though the guy now knew she held a weapon in her hand.
He was significantly larger than her and had the corresponding reach to go with it. He grabbed her forearm to wrench it away and probably knock her favorite toy out of her hand. Instead, she bent her wrist and glanced a charge against his elbow. It wasn't much, really. Just enough to make his arm spasm slightly and for her to feel some of it where his fingers connected with her skin.

But he let go anyway. Curiouser, he kinda flew a few steps back and away before a far more significant charge made him dance in place for a second and drop to the ground next to his companion.

She peered around a dark henley stretched over a well-muscled chest she would know damn near anywhere and was in no way surprised to find Thor himself, Mew-Mew in hand, looming over the scene. Most of the other bar goers stood around in shock, but some had the piece of mind to take selfies.

"Friday, could you maybe make it so that none of those tweets or snapchats make it to the internetz?" she asked the air around her. The resounding disappointed murmuring answered that for her more than any affirmative.

A shadow settled before her, successfully blocking her view of the room and making her crane her neck upwards to meet the gaze of a rather concerned looking soulmate. "You okay, doll?" James asked. He reached forward to tuck a strand of hair back from her face and she in no way used the opportunity to sneak a kiss against the mark on his wrist save for the part where she totally did.

"I'm fine," she reassured him. She tossed her taser away into her bag and resisted the urge to rub at where the guy had grabbed her arm. Sergeant See-it-All seemed to hone in on the spot anyway, and she resigned herself to either having bruises or him to amp up the protective mode, or both. Given their history, she was opting for both.

"What happened?" a different voice demanded. Steve. He stood with Thor, both looming over some seriously unconscious bodies.

Jane wasn't talking, only making eyes towards her mark match who looked seconds away from scooping her up and absconding to parts unknown - aka their rooms - so Darcy took it upon herself to reply, "Douche and the Douche-ettes over there tried to make a grab for us. Offered drinks and kidnapping in a two-for-one kind of deal. Not sure if they're Hydra because I'm kinda assuming everyone is at the point, or someone else. Hydra mentioned wanting Jane last time, but it's possible some other group was dumb enough to make a grab while we were physically in the tower itself."

"We'll sort it out," Steve promised. He gestured behind him where several guards from Stark Security had gathered and she figured they had it well in hand.

"Wanna blow this joint?" James asked with a quirk of his head to the side. He offered a hand to help her to her feet, but quickly wrapped it around her waist instead when she damn near faceplanted instead. "What's wrong, Darce?" he demanded, holding her close.

The room swam and the lights dimmed except where they seemed bright and sparkly and she was pissed. Worried too, but mainly pissed. "Did you fucking roofie me?" she asked the unmoving body on the floor. She pried herself away from James, mainly because he was more concerned about hurting her than actually trying to keep her in place. She kicked Douche in the ribs, hard, and sputtered, "For fucking real?"

"Not just tequila?" Steve guessed.

"Considering I've been drinking the equivalent of fruity water all night, no," she confirmed.
She ignored the look she received for that and turned to storm off, balance so far off from steady that it wasn't even funny. Thor held out an arm to support her, as did Steve, but James was closer and scooped her up the precise way she had been expecting for Janie only moments before. "I got you," he whispered against her hair, voice rough and accent heavy the way it got when he had too much emotion to deal with. She could only imagine what was going through his mind, especially after the events from only a few weeks prior. Hell, her own mind was spinning in ways she most definitely didn't like.

She was held steady but could hear a slight impact of boot against flesh before she heard Steve chide, "Buck..."

"He laid hands on her, and that one drugged her. They ain't getting nothing they don't deserve," came the almost petulant answer. The fact that there was no counterargument and they were allowed to leave was reply enough as far as Darcy was concerned. Steve had assigned himself cleanup duty and James got nursemaid duty instead.

They had made it all the way to the main lobby before he stopped to ask, "Is this something that will wear off on its own, or do you need Medical to take a look at you?" He still held her tight and she knew the need to keep her close was warring with the need to make sure she was safe. He probably knew a thousand and one drugs that could do the same thing to her, and how to counteract them with crap found in their kitchen, but a trained professional with top of the line diagnostics was also available if needed.

Her own mind was increasingly foggy but she couldn't help but think of the unknown chemicals in her blood, what they could be doing to her. Mix that with the whole question of was she or wasn't she actually knocked up, and she relented with a, "I think this is a needing to be checked out situation."

His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned, but he took her directly to the Medical floors, no questions asked.

Blood was drawn and an IV set up despite the fact she wasn't actually dehydrated. She figured it was probably just an easier way to distribute a counteragent if needed and didn't argue the point. She dozed for a little bit, the drug fighting with her own innate adrenaline, and it made her wonder just how knocked out she would have been or if they had been counting on the alcohol or larger dose to play a role. James stayed right by her side the whole time, and she was only slightly disappointed that the doctors didn't give her another one of the comfy fancy pajama sets and let her stay in her street clothes instead.

The problem with Jimmy Boy being right there was that she didn't exactly get a chance to ask what she kind of really felt the need to. He kept cajoling her to sleep, and she really wanted to, but she also couldn't pass up any opportunity that he might wander, even for a moment, to give her a chance to voice her concerns without him. Finally, she heard the familiar voice of her best friend in the hallway outside her door, protesting that she was fine and not drugged and, really, no, she was barely drunk, and it was the opening she was waiting for.

"Can you please go tell Jane to just sit down and let them run the test?" she asked. "Tell her a very sleepy Darcy is asking her to do this and that said sleepy Darcy knows where she hid the French Roast for the morning. I'd text her, but Douche took my phone."

James smirked and left to do so, closing the door to her private observation room behind him and promising to get her phone back as well. She knew she didn't have long, so she dug in her bag to find a scrap of paper and scribbled her request as fast as she could. She looked around frantically for a place to put it where it would actually be found, and settled for tucking it beside the tablet at the
foot of the bed that housed her records, flipping the cover down to make it that much less obvious.

James returned soon enough, and one of the nurses shortly followed. "Good news," the woman said. "The drug they gave you is already breaking down in your system. It was probably only intended for short term disablement. We can give you something to speed up the process, or you can choose to sleep it off. Either way, you're going to be a little groggy in the morning."

Darcy knew she had one chance at this, just as she knew she would probably look suspicious as all hell to the ever watchful eye of James, but she had to try. "And I'm not allergic to it either?" Given she had no known reaction to damn near anything, it was a stupid question to ask. Thankfully, James must have chalked it up to her being overcautious after everything else that had gone on recently and didn't seem to notice a thing.

"You shouldn't be, but I'll check," the nurse promised. She grabbed the tablet from the foot of the bed and Darcy grabbed James' hand as a distraction. Thankfully, the nurse was quick on the uptake, or totally understood the keeping secrets thing in a world of heroes with varying abilities and reactions, and barely blinked before she said, "You know, it does look like I need to check one more thing. It'll just be a moment."

She left and Darcy tried really hard not to breathe a sigh of relief. James picked up on her tension though, and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Just tired of Hydra and bad guys and stupidity and I'm pretty much a no one, so why the hell do they keep going after me? Not that I want them to go after Jane or you or anyone else, but, you know?" she babbled. She ran a hand through her hair and frowned when she realized it was the one with the IV in it. There was a weird glove-thing around her hand to prevent accidental touches, and the extra friction of the fabric just made everything worse.

Bucky carefully untangled the tubing from a snarl of a curl and then held both of her hands in his own. "You're not no one, doll," he insisted. "Some of the extra attention is from who you matched with and I'm sorry for that, really I am. But you've got to know you were already on the radar from working with Foster. She's said time and time again that she can't do anything without you, and that means something to anyone looking to use her. Beyond that though, you're you, and all the craziness that's rolled up in that. I might be biased, but I think that's pretty damn special."

She snorted and resisted making a remark about Steve's inherent corniness rubbing off on him as it would inevitably lead to crude jokes. Instead, she just muttered, "Dork."

He smiled, wide and true in the way he only reserved for her and their third. "Yeah," he agreed. "But I'm your dork."

She yawned, but still fought the draw of sleep. "Where is Dork 2.0 anyway? He's not in Hover Mode, and that's just weird."

Dork 1.0 rubbed his thumb across the back of the hand without the port in it. "Stevie wanted to make sure the men who made the attempt against you and Foster were properly apprehended and questioned," he told her, and she resisted the urge to snort.

"Questioned or interrogated?" she guessed.

He shrugged, but there was a hint of a smile that remained. "I say potato, you say..."

"French fry?" She loved the way his brow furrowed when she tried to throw him off. Like he couldn't tell if she were serious or a little touched in the head. Maybe both. She was saved from
having him try to figure it out by the nurse reappearing, sans any syringes of expediency.

"There is a slight elevation of HCG and, given the unknown and likely experimental factors of what you were dosed with, the doctor has decided it would be best to let it run its course with thorough observation," she explained, meeting Darcy's eyes carefully. They darted to James for just a second, and then back again, pleasant look of non-concern firmly in place.

Darcy, for her part, blinked. She was a research assistant for a reason and that reason was that she was damned good at assisting with research. This meant she was damned good at researching for non-business ideals as well. This meant she had a fair idea of the importance of the three little letters that the nurse had just uttered. She licked her lips and pretended that the cup of water James instantly offered was exactly what she was looking for before she managed to ask, "Are you positive?"

The nurse met her gaze and held it steady. "Very positive," she affirmed. She then turned to James and even sounded apologetic when she said, "Ms. Lewis should remain here for the evening. We'll check her levels again in the morning, but we don't expect any complications."

"But the stay?" he prompted.

"Precautionary only," she assured him. She shook her head and did the half-smile/half-frown thing that Darcy herself had never mastered. "If there is anything she might want for the night to be more comfortable, I can stay with her while you retrieve it."

Before he could truly protest, she rattled off, "PJs, slippers, a hair brush, and bonus points for a toothbrush and toothpaste that don't reek of antiseptics." He frowned, so she continued, "Thor is totally next door with Jane and we are at home in the tower. I'm perfectly safe."

"Being in the tower didn't help you an hour ago," he pointed out, but he stood anyway. He himself knew just how secure the upper levels were, especially Medical. The draw of injured super heroes was just too good to allow for anything less. Both he and Barton had separately tested the latest system just last month, both for entry and escape purposes. It was as safe as he could make it, and he knew it as well as she did.

"I'll be fine," she promised. She even punctuated it with a yawn.

He kissed her forehead and reluctantly retreated, closing the door softly behind him but not until she heard the familiar rumble of a certain Thunder God's voice as confirmation of the big guy's presence.

The nurse opened her mouth as if to speak, but Darcy shook her head. "Super soldier hearing," she mouthed.

"Give it a few." The nurse nodded, but did whisper, "You know, we did test these rooms against Steve Rogers himself. He was far too curious about the welfare of his teammates to deal with pesky things like privacy protocols."

This time, Darcy gave in to the snort. "You do know that he's a lying liar who lies and probably just played pretend so he can still snoop, right?" she asked.

Her response was a dramatic sigh, followed by, "Well, I just lost a ten." She glanced down at the tablet she still held in hand and announced, "Carly confirmed he entered the elevator; that's past any test we ran with Rogers. Wanna talk about it while you have the chance?"

Darcy bit her lip before she burst out with, "You're certain? Like, really certain? Like, not just messing with me certain?"
The nurse set her tablet aside and leaned up against the thin yet comfy mattress. "As certain as we can be," she hedged. "There's a lot of variables right now, a lot of unknowns. This simply just isn't your every day occurrence. Even for this lot."

"I get that," Darcy said, and she did, she really did. Her stomach flip-flopped and she pressed a palm against it as if that would settle everything. "Butterflies," she said by way of explanation. "Probably more than butterflies, right?"

The nurse simply smiled. "There is no way you should be able to feel anything. Not yet. This is your chance to think things over and decide what you want to do, without the influence of anyone else, no matter how well-meaning that person may be," she assured her. "We'll still run another test in the morning just to be on the safe side. I'd hate to get you this worked up only to have a false positive."

"But... if it isn't?" she asked, and wondered when her voice had gotten so small. She cleared her throat and tried to sound somewhat normal. "A false positive, that is," she clarified.

"You still have time to decide." She smiled again and Darcy wished she had bothered to pay attention to her name, if she had even given one at all. Super Hero Bullshit was one thing for her to have to deal with, possible Super Hero Baby Mama Bullshit was another thing entirely.

"My head hurts," Darcy said petulantly. She was avoiding dealing with everything and not even try to hide the fact. Thankfully, Miss Nurse didn't seem to mind.

"Probably from fighting whatever they gave you as much as anything else," the nurse confided. With a seemingly good natured grumble, she added, "Because the match mates being as stubborn as the Avengers themselves comes as such a huge surprise. Look at me hold back my shock and awe at it all."

Darcy winced and offered what was probably a belated, "Sorry about that."

The nurse waved it off though. "Don't worry about it - I pulled the easy duty tonight. Rumor has it Stark himself got dragged down an hour ago for what he insists are only minor burns." Her tablet flashed beside her and she grabbed it once more as she stood. "Your boy is coming back. Fast little sucker, isn't he?"

She smiled despite herself and flopped back against the pillows. "He gets that way when he's all protective-like. So, you know, pretty much always," she explained.

The nurse huffed a laugh and shook her head. When she looked back at her she said, "Whatever you decide, no one here is going to hold it against you and no one here is going to share it with anyone, and I do mean anyone. I do hope that you feel them out for possible opinions though, keep it vague if needed, but it might help bring you some peace of mind, no matter which way you go with this."

Darcy nodded, but didn't get to say more before there was a knock on the door. Clearly it was just cursory as it opened almost immediately to reveal James with the requested items in hand. He paused at the matching looks he received, and asked, "Why do I get the feeling you were talking about me?"

"Just talking about feeling you up," Darcy promised with a lascivious grin.

"Out," the nurse requested with a roll of her eyes. "Feeling you out for opinions on things."

"What things?" Mister Curious had to ask.

Thankfully, the nurse had far more experience at obfuscating than Darcy, or perhaps was just not having to try to do so while fighting off unknown chemicals and a boatload of worry. She strolled
towards the door as though without a care and said, "I still think she should stay here tonight and have full monitoring versus going home and coming back in the morning."

Darcy hadn't suggested any such thing, but the phrasing was precise to imply only and not actually lie. It worked well enough for James to protest, "Come on, doll, if that's what the docs think is safer, we should go with that. I'll be right here the whole time."

She huffed and crossed her arms, the damned IV line once again getting tugged and tangled in the process. "Fine. I'm staying here tonight," she promised. Then, because she could, she added, "But I expect compensation in the form of a full pancake breakfast in the morning."

"I'm sure that can be arranged, doll," he agreed readily enough.

He offered her a kiss on the forehead for her good behavior and straightened the line with a single quick flick of his hand. With his back very briefly to the door, he didn't see the subtle thumbs up Nurse Awesome offered before she slipped back out to the hallway.

Darcy awoke the next morning to a fair deal of confusion. She was in her own jammies, decently warm, and decently comfortable. However, the feel of the mattress beneath her and the weight of the blankets on top of her weren't quite right. Mix that with the sharp prick against the back of her hand and the fact the room she woke up in was all muted shades of gray and white instead of the multicolor mixture she was used to, she had a fair idea "home" was not the answer to the question she was about to ask.

"Where the hell am I?" she demanded. Well, demanded as much as one could when one could barely get a word out around a yawn. She tried to scrub a hand down her face, maybe rub some of the sleep out of her eyes, but quickly discovered her hand hurt from a damned IV which led her to mutter, "Fuck. Medical."

"Ah, there's our precious princess," came a familiar voice from off to the side. "So pure, so innocent," another equally familiar voice chimed in.

She wrenched her head to the right to find her Boys smiling down on her with identical grins. "You are way too chipper for it being o-fuck-thirty," she complained, which only made them grin wider.

Steve decided to be extra obnoxious and leaned down to kiss her cheek with a decently loud smacking noise, or at least decently loud in the quiet of the room. "Did you want me to see if you can have coffee yet? Or if they need to wait until after you're freed?"

"God among men, yadda, get me my mocha?" she tried.

James stopped his exit with a raise of his hand. "They were going to run one more blood test this morning," he said as if that was something she should remember. "Probably don't need the caffeine mucking it up."

She pouted because she could, but relented enough to ask, "What's the test for?"

Both of her boys paused at that, but it was the one who avoided anything and everything Medical-related if he could to stave off flashbacks of the unpleasant type who answered, "Honestly, I'm not sure. Nurse Ryan insisted on it before her shift ended. Don't worry, mocha and pancake breakfast are still incoming. We keep our promises."

"Ooh, pancakes and everything? Must have been an Event of the capital E sort to earn that," she
mused with a grin.

If they paused before, they came to a dead stop now. "Darcy," Steve said in the voice he usually used to talk James down from a killing spree or Jane down from too much caffeine and too little sleep. It keyed all sorts of warning bells off in her head. "What do you remember of last night?"

The fact he was asking was problematic. The fact that, upon reflection, her answer was missing a crap ton of details was more so. She pieced together what she could, tossed a random memory of maybe waking in the room earlier to the side since it was so nondescript, and finally replied, "Janie and I went out for drinks, well, not out-out but to the place downstairs. Some asshat wouldn't go away and I think we even called Friday for help which is just hella embarrassing for a Girls Night Out. Vague recollection of getting dizzy, so I'm guessing that's why I'm here? Mr. Asshat totally roofied me, didn't he? Damn it. What is it with bad guys and drugs?"

Sergeant Overprotective motioned to Captain Cautious and didn't even try to hide his worry when he said, "We're going to get the nurse, preferably the one from last night that told us everything was fine."

She pushed herself up to a more sitting position against the pillows and winced as a sharp pain ran through her. "What the actual fuck?" she asked no one in particular.

James adjusted the pillows and then the IV line and then tucked the thin blanket around her just so. He kissed her forehead and smoothed back her hair with a lingering touch against her mark and was back to holding her hand by the time one of the doctors entered, followed shortly by Steve. As a surprise to precisely no one who knew her, Jane barged right in and sat herself at the foot of the bed with an expression that dared anyone present to try to move her. It was sweet in a way, though the fact Darcy couldn't remember if Jane herself had been sequestered in a room due to the night's events was not.

"I hear we're having some memory issues," the doctor said as he pulled out the chart and flipped it open to reveal the standard data pad. He read it and immediately frowned. He didn't even give her the chance to make a snide remark before he said, "The drug they gave you was chemically similar to ketamine, so this is not truly a surprise. It should have burned through your system far faster than this, though. Let's run another draw and see what's going on."

It wasn't exactly unexpected given she had already been told they were going to run another test, but she never quite liked being poked and prodded with sharp objects - she was funny that way. Also, with both matches right at her side and a nosy bestie at her feet, she had no idea how to ask what she really wanted to know. Like, really, really needed to know. Her mind wasn't quite firing on full cylinders quite yet, hazy from sleep and lack of coffee and possibly more, but it was already cycling through possibilities and options and it was really sad that she was hoping for a minor disaster to call her Boys away for long enough to have some privacy. She could bribe Jane easily enough, especially if Thor was still around.

The doctor took the draw himself and her Boys held her hand through it all. Well, Steve held her hand and James stroked her hair and they both continued to do so while she contemplated spontaneously learning telepathy to ask the doctor to do one more test. She figured it was that or summoning Red Skull from beyond what she hoped to be the grave because that would be the only thing to get her Super Protectors to leave the room.

A vaguely familiar looking woman entered wearing the standard Medical attire and smiled somewhat reassuringly in her direction before she began to confer with the doctor in whispered acronyms and random jargon.
"That's Nurse Ryan from last night," James explained in a tone that she knew was supposed to be soft and soothing. She didn't know if she found it reassuring or aggravating, but had the feeling it wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

She offered a half-hearted wave and moved to adjust herself on the bed again as sitting still was never her strong point, only to be stopped by the same sharp pain as before. Nurse Ryan was about to be nicknamed Nurse Hyperaware because her head whipped around her eyes narrowed pretty much immediately. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

She damn near had to push her Boys away before she answered, "My stomach hurts like fuck. No one's given me a rundown from last night so I'm guessing something happened between Roofie-ville and sunrise."

At that point, multiple things happened at once. James and Steve blathered about nothing happening to their knowledge, the nurse and the doctor grabbed her pajama shirt with their thankfully gloved hands and yanked upwards, and Jane took advantage of the open chart with her usual curiousness and ask, "Why were they checking your HCG levels - oh my god, you brat! No wonder it was only mocktails last night!"

For her part, Darcy was distracted by the freshly revealed roughly half an inch long cauterization scab sitting smack dab in the center of a deep purple bruise. "What the actual fuck?" she demanded.

The doctor palpitated the area gently while the nurse looked extremely apologetic when she said, "I'm sorry, but I don't think you're going to be able to keep this one a secret after all. We'll run tests, but it's going to be pretty obvious in about a minute."

"What? What's going to be obvious?" James demanded, his voice little more than a growl.

Steve sat back slightly, face pale and hand shaking where it still gripped on to hers. She'd say it was to give the doctor room, but she had a feeling Boy Genius put two and two together and needed something solid under his butt so he didn't fall on it. "You..." he managed, and it was pained, almost betrayed. "You... and you weren't going to tell us? But..."

"I didn't know!" she insisted. She wished she could flail her hands but one had an IV in it and the other was still gripped with restrained super strength. "I thought maybe, but wasn't sure! I was going to ask them to run a test but couldn't figure out how with you two still here and all clingy! There was no need for hopes, up or down, until I knew and then..."

"And then you were going to make a decision without us," Steve guessed. His eyes were so big and round and utterly betrayed, suspiciously moist in a way he would never admit.

James shoved him bodily to the side to shake him out of it before he offered his own relatively meek, "Doll?"

Jane, wonderful Jane, who had totally just given the game away but thought on her feet like nobody's business, threaded her way through to Darcy's side and snapped an extremely bitter, "It would have been her choice, soulmates or not. Get over your big bad selves and figure out what happened."

"There's no way of telling if something was implanted or removed without further testing," the doctor warned.

Steve found his words enough to offer a pained, "Logically... I mean, Hydra would want to take..."

"Or they could try to begin their alterations while the kid was still inside her," James cut in. His panic
was more restrained, almost resigned, as though he had always known he would never be free of Hydra's interference and it was his legacy to pass on to anyone he came close to. She felt for him, and would have tried to comfort him, but she was too busy obsessing about her own fate and every possible iteration of it.

"There are no absolutes, not yet," the doctor insisted, and Darcy's head filled with images of augmented super soldier babies, loyal to anything and everything evil and intent on destroying all that was good and wholesome be they be birthed from her or some elaborate lab and she was done, completely done with all of this.

"Like fuck there isn't," she grumbled, finding determination out of sheer force of will. She looked to the ceiling even though she knew it wasn't necessary and ordered, "Friday, video footage of this room. I want everything from when I was checked in until now. You have my authorization to break my privacy protocols on this. I want answers." Her voice shook far less than she had thought it would, and she took her victory where she could grab it at this point.

"There's not supposed to be-" the doctor started, she cut him off before he could even get going.

"And there's not supposed to be full monitoring of the labs for the same exact privacy reasons and yet we've used that footage to recreate events when we're missing important minutiae, like a pesky variable or whatever. It's there, it's stored, it's scrubbed unless you want the full shabang and/or specifically request it deleted. I think the auto-delete time is a year or two," she rattled off, finding comfort in data even if it was for crap like this. This was a known, and so much better than an unknown. Her life was currently filled with far too many of those. Knowns you could at least hold on to, sink your fingernails into and refuse to let go.

Much like a certain Possible Baby Daddy’s hand, so she made a conscious effort to loosen her grip.

"And you know this because?" Nurse Observant prompted. She didn't seem doubting in the least, more like she was proving a point to Doctor Dipshit.

"Because she's smarter than she pretends to be and does things like read tech manuals as much as play Bejeweled while waiting for our data to compile," Jane answered for her.

"I have an image to maintain," she protested, followed by, "Friday? Footage?"

"My apologies, Ms. Lewis," the carefully modulated voice replied. For one horrifying second, Darcy feared the system had been hacked and they were back at square one. At least right up until she remembered this was a Stark System and therefore pretty much the best there was in the world as a whole. As proof to her thoughts, the system replied, "I needed to verify with Sir that this was permissible. He has authorized it and requests permission to personally review the footage should anything be found."

"He takes it personally if anyone hacks his place or people," Steve explained. He rubbed his free hand over his eyes and she had the distinct feeling data calmed him as well, or at least having something solid and steadfast like Stark being proprietary with things did. "Talking him down with the intruders last night was... interesting."

She'd say she was happy to be thought of as one of Stark's people, but she was far more interested in the footage that now played out on the previously blank wall in front of her. A quick command muted the feed, and another scrolled forward past what was apparently a private conversation between her and the nurse while Buckster grabbed her current attire. She didn't even blush with him getting mock-handsy with her while he helped her get changed. It was after that, while said Buckster snoozed on the chair beside her that a completely different nurse came in and James left that she
slowed it down again.

"You actually left me alone?" she asked, surprised.

"There was an escape attempt, multiple hostiles in position to assist. She said Thor was next door and offered to stay with you, just like before," he defended himself. It was followed by a muttered, "See if that happens again."

Jane, for her part, verified that she had gone back to her place with Thor nearly two hours before the time stamp on the video, but had not wanted to wake anyone so she had only sent a text to Darcy's phone. Darcy had the feeling shit was going to hit the proverbial fan over that one, both because of the direct lie involving Mr. Godhood, and Jamester not verifying the big Guy's presence before he left.

She was drawn out of that thought when Nurse Ryan shook her head. "That's at least an hour past Carly's shift. What was she still doing here?"

The answer became apparent enough when the woman on screen nearly immediately pulled out a syringe and pushed its contents into the IV line. She waited a ten count, and then readied a completely different instrument from the oversized lab coat she wore over her scrubs. Darcy watched in horror as her own top was lifted and the nurse sliced, diced, suctioned, and cauterized with a decidedly eerie calmness. The sponges used to absorb and clean the tiny trickle of blood were disposed of in the usual chute to be incinerated, the air circulation system kicked in to rid the air of any suspicious scents, and everything was tucked just so by the time James returned to find a bored looking Carly flipping through a tablet looking at gossip sites.

"There was an escape attempt, and Bucky did come down to assist," Steve confirmed.

"It must have been timed to be a distraction," James guessed with a sigh.

Neither noticed she was shaking until Ryan prompted, "Miss Lewis? Darcy?"

Hands were on her and she wasn't sure who they belonged to as it wasn't like she was seeing straight anyway and she buried herself into the first available chest, the crisp scent of Steve's favorite soap not nearly as comforting as it usually was. "They took it. Before I even knew for certain that there was an it to take. They took the baby."

Her sniff became a choked cry and her entire body felt like it seized and shivered. A basin was shoved in front of her right before her dry heaves turned a little less dry and her vision faded to a pale gray against a cacophony of words that made no sense. Promises for vengeance mixed with vague reassurances mixed with a stutteringly logical request for further testing to verify anything they could. It was her Boys' voices, wretched and painful trying to calm her down that broke into her haze.

"Would a blood test give us a final yes or no?" James asked.

"Unfortunately, it would not," the doctor replied and she could almost see him shake his head with that well-practiced frown even though she refused to move to watch him do so. "We test for hormone levels. It's been a matter of hours only, the levels would not be reduced enough to give us a definitive answer, at least not yet."

"The device that woman used, what was it originally designed for?" Steve tried.

"It's nothing I've ever seen," Nurse Ryan admitted. "It was probably made specifically for this task. It would need to provide a stasis chamber of sorts for any zygote or blastocyst recovered. My guess would be she would need to offload whatever she gathered to a far more sophisticated setup as soon
as possible if they were looking to keep it viable."

For some reason, that set her off again. Viable. Hydra would want a viable example of a child produced from a super soldier, be that soldier Captain Wholesome or Sergeant Assassin. The child would be subjected to test after test and conditioning after conditioning and they would shape him or her into whatever they wanted until it was no longer a child but a living weapon. That would be if they didn't try to clone or replicate the cellular structure outright. Her child was never going to get to be a child, was never going to get to be held by a loving mother or have skinned knees tended to by overprotective fathers. Hell, it wasn't even a fetus yet and it's life was already taken. Controlled. Destroyed.

She couldn't breathe. Her hiccuping gasps produced absolutely nothing. Her chest hurt from trying to pull in air and her face hurt from where her tears soaked up all the moisture from her skin and her whole body shook in a way even her Boys couldn't hold tight. She felt a hand stroke her hair, too small and light to be anyone but Jane, and even that wasn't comfort enough. Her best friend and her soulmates simply weren't enough against her own inner horror, her imagination running away with her and sending her spiraling further and further out of control.

She heard those soulmates give the okay for something right before a rush of cool warmth flooded her veins via the IV she was still attached to and then the noise and chaos faded away and the gray that had become her world faded to black.
Chapter 2

When she next awoke, she was pissed. Okay, so at first confused as to where she was and then pissed when it all came back to her. She ripped the IV out of her hand and tossed it to the floor right before she let out a rather undignified eep at just how much that hurt let alone how much blood it produced. She grabbed the blanket that had been draped over her to use as a compress and glared at the rapidly approaching James.

"Doll, you shouldn't... Here, let me help," he offered as he reached towards her.

She released her hold long enough to wave one finger in his direction. "If you ever drug me without my permission again, I will hurt you. I will remove something vital. I... I will cut off your dick." She nodded to herself, satisfied with her threat. "I'll miss it terribly, but that's what the sex toy industry is for and it's not like you're ever going to get a say in anything to do with me ever again after this stunt - I don't give a fuck if you're my soulmate or not."

"Darce..."

"No! You don't get to 'Darce' me! I was drugged and traumatized and so you drugged and traumatized me again? What the hell were you thinking?" she demanded. Semi-joking threats aside, she was beyond livid and believed she had the right to express that.

"We were thinking about you calming down enough so that you didn't hurt yourself," Steve answered from closer to the doorway. "Your readings were everywhere and the machines were going off and we didn't know what else to do."

He motioned to someone behind him and the now-familiar nurse came in to deal with her newly self-inflicted wound. At least she had the weak excuse of following orders, if she was even the one to drug her in the first place.

"Dickless. The both of you. See if your super healing comes back from that," she muttered as her hand was neatly cleaned and bandaged.

"Do I want to know?" a new voice asked. Natasha. Of course she would come when it involved Hydra and eugenics. It was almost surprising that she hadn't been there when she woke up, really.

Darcy glared as much as she could past her Boys, a task made more difficult with her still missing glasses. "They drugged me without my permission. They do it again and I get their dicks in a non-sexy way," she explained.

Natasha shrugged, a slow roll of a single shoulder. "I think I have a knife sharp enough I can loan you," she said easily enough. A pause, and then, "Or dull if that's what you prefer."

Ryan snorted, and then poorly tried to disguise it as a cough. She patted the last piece of tape into place and said, "We'd like to run some scans. Non-invasive, and hopefully enough to confirm that nothing was placed inside of you as well as that there is no internal bleeding to attend to."

Darcy waited for the panic to creep up on her again but, aside from the very edge of it, there was very little. That concerned her almost more than the scans themselves. She thought back to the sarcastic joking tone she had used since she woke up and was extremely suspicious. "What the hell did you give me, by the way?" she demanded. "Not that I want to black out in fear or anything like that, but I'm more mentally numb than anything else right now."
"Part of that is probably the shock," Natasha said blithely. Nothing phased her and, somehow, that settled Darcy more than it had any right to. She motioned to the chart and guessed, "The new P-7 cocktail?"

Ryan nodded in confirmation. "Quick absorption, very few interactions, and tends to work as an anti-anxiety med for about six hours after the patient comes to." She turned to Darcy, who was starting to get annoyed at being spoken over versus to, and added, "That extra padding is usually enough to run tests and/or talk the patient down from a full panic attack. Less stress on the body means easier recovery time for injuries."

"You know I'm right here, right?" Darcy asked, still annoyed even though the nurse had made a rough pass at including her in the conversation. The whole situation was reprehensible, but there was no need to aggravate it with rudeness. She waited through the contrite looks and half-assed excuses before she asked, "Was giving me an experimental drug right after I was dosed with an unknown one the smartest thing you could do? Like, I know y'all tease me about Political Science not being a real science but, logically speaking, that just seems dumb."

"We had already run preliminary tests on what your drink had been spiked with, which is how we found the ketamine connection," Ryan explained. "We had a sample from your assailant as well as your blood directly, though you are correct that we had not yet verified the same drug had been used on you a second time. The assumption had been made that anything they gave you would be mild to not risk the cells they extracted and, again, P-7 has been shown to have extremely few interactions, including with ketamine versus some of the more common sedatives. It has been thoroughly tested and judged safe for the most sensitive of patients."

She wasn't mollified, not completely, but knew she wasn't about to be able to change what already had happened. Instead, she declared, "You've got an hour to run your scanny thing and then I better damn well be drowning in mochas and chocolate chip pancakes."

If the scans were to have taken longer than that, she would never know. Nurse Awesome wheeled away some large contraption at precisely the fifty-three minute mark, giving her seven minutes to clean up to go back to her place. Of course, those seven minutes were spent not just cleaning goop off of her relatively flat and bruised stomach but having the preliminary results explained to her as well.

"No foreign objects that we can detect and no unknown chemical signatures in your bloodstream," the doctor announced. She would have cheered, but he still had that pensive look on his face and his mouth was open to continue. She let him, knowing she might as well deal with the worst of it all up front versus having constant mini doses of fail. He looked to Ryan though, maybe thinking the news would come better from a female perspective, and that had her hackles up like nobody's business.

"There is what appears to be scarring or at least scabbing along one of the Fallopian tubes," she said, not pulling any punches. "It may be nothing and it may have no lasting effects, but there is a likelihood that the damage may cause difficulty with conception in the future."

She swallowed heavily. "So, you're saying that they didn't just take my baby, they made it so that I might never have a baby at all," she confirmed. The lightheaded feeling was returning, but she mentally shook it off as much as she could. She hadn't even really planned on a kid, not yet, kind of hoped the whole thing was a false alarm as she was in no way ready to be a mom and while, yeah, she had soulmates plural to count on, they were still getting used to dealing with each other let alone throwing something extra into the mix.

"We did a preliminary pass over it and the second tube appears perfectly fine," Ryan was quick to remind her.
She breathed out through her nose and willed the bile from her stomach to settle the fuck down for a moment. "Apologies," she said, not even bothering to attempt a civil tone. "You're saying that they took my kid and cut my chances of ever having one in half, and that's not accounting for any damage to the uterus itself from having to deal with a faulty tube and scarring and who knows what else? Yeah, no, we're done here. I'm done. I can't take anymore today or possibly ever." She pushed herself up and away from the exam bed and swatted any hands that attempted to help. James attempted to snap her sleeve as she passed him on the way to the door, but she avoided him with a practice born of many a night spent at the campus bar with guys who were drunk enough to try and sober enough to back off.

"Darce," he protested, and she could hear the hurt in his tone.

She resisted the urge to whirl around and give him a piece of her mind, knowing far too many emotions were too close to the surface. Instead, she managed a simple, "Don't," and left it at that. Don't touch. Don't hold. Don't try to be comforting or understanding. Not yet. Don't try to be what she needed when she herself had no idea what that was just yet.

Natasha of all people seemed to understand, at least a little. "Let her go," she said. Not quite an order, but definitely something to be listened to. James must have been ready to object, because she added, "Give her space to deal with this. It's a lot to take in."

There was a disgruntled mutter in response, but no one tried to stop her when she marched right on out of the room. Yes, she was still in her pajamas with knotted hair. Yes, the admittance bracelet itched where it still hung from her wrist and her feet were cold where the thin socks slapped against the far fancier version of linoleum. No, she wouldn't look anyone in the eye as she made her way to the elevator, not wanting to see the pity, distain, or carefully blank masks.

She was only partially surprised when Natasha entered the elevator with her. It wasn't like she was going to go far, but clearly she wasn't to go alone. The other woman remained silent on the ride to the floor she shared with The Boys, but stepped off with her and stayed precisely one step to the left and two steps behind her the entire way to the door to the larger of the two suites. If she was surprised at the destination, she clearly didn't show it.

Darcy opened the door with her handprint and paused just long enough for Natasha to enter if she felt the need. She then walked right past where Steve emerged from the kitchen, avoiding his questioning gaze even though she could feel it burn against her skin. Natasha apparently had a secret skill of telepathy, as he got out no more than a startled protest before he zipped up and stood off to the side to see what she would do next.

What she did was load up a plate with a stack of the waiting pancakes and douse the load with syrup from the entirely unnecessary carafe. It was just another item to wash to her, but Captain Traditional always insisted they use it. She then picked up the waiting giant mug of chocolatey caffeinated goodness and carried both back to the door. She tried to rearrange to allow her to open said door, but found it was not needed as a hand propped it for easily enough. Smaller than Steve's with a wrist encased in leather despite the casual outfit elsewhere, and she discovered she had a possible ally in her current state.

The door to her own place was another matter all together, but was managed with a sharp, "Friday? Accept voiceprint to unlock?"

"Of course, Miss Lewis," came the instant response.

She still wasn't sure how the actual opening of the door happened as he hands were full and she could have sworn Deadly Assassin Lady was still behind her, but she had other things to worry
about, specifically a ball of fluff propelling itself towards her at approximately ninety miles per hour. "Trip me and starve, furball," she called out. Freckles was, as always, far more intelligent than a standard feline and stopped dead in his tracks to allow her through.

She set her bounty down on the table and turned to grab utensils to devour it with, only to find Natasha still standing in the doorway. There was a shadow behind her and absolutely no question who it belonged to, though she didn't pay it any mind when she asked, "May I enter?"

"Just you," Darcy replied before she really thought about her words.

Natasha took that as her due and simply took something from Steve before she turned and closed the door right in his face. It took Darcy a moment to realize that it was a plate piled high with the remaining pancakes and a great deal of bacon and that she already carried the carafe in her other hand. At her questioning gaze, Natasha explained, "No need to go back for seconds."

She huffed a grin despite herself and grabbed a second plate and a second set of silverware. Natasha smiled outright in response.

Later, after they had both demolished the offering and ignored multiple knocks on the door and the buzz of the intercom and even an attempt at messing with the fancier than necessary flap that could give her cat free reign of the floor, Darcy sat back in her chair and idly pet a drowsing Frecks. It was then and only then that Natasha asked, "What do you need from me? Bodyguard, security system, deflector of well-meaning mark matches? Just let me know and I'll see what I can do."

Darcy thought about it for all of about a second before she blurted, "Just be there?" She hung her head, embarrassed by her own neediness, but found a hand on her shoulder pulling her in for a rather comfortable hug.

"Oh, koshechka, you never need to ask for that," Natasha assured her. She rested a hand on her arm for a moment before her fingers curled into her own palm. It was the most telling sign she had ever seen from the super-spy and so she raised her eyebrows in question. After an apparent inner battle, Natasha clearly decided speaking was more important than keeping secrets for a change and she cleared her throat before she asked, "What do you know about the Red Room?"

"That it was a sucky place that created an awesome person like you?" Darcy tried, even though she knew that to be an understatement of epic proportions.

The edge of Natasha's lips lifted for half a second before she explained, "It made me who I am, yes. But it also took so much away." She looked away for a moment before she offered a curious Frecks a scratch between the eyes. "You were trained to survive. Raised with others, but taught to care for only yourself and your mission. As part of that, all distractions were to be removed. Love. Attachments. Any connection that could serve as a detriment to what was needed to be done. Either you removed them, or the Red Room removed them for you."

"Not big on the warm and fuzzies then?"

Natasha quirked another half-smile but her face quickly returned to the blank slate she used when discussing something less than pleasant. "A child would be a distraction. A child would be... a risk they could not take. Even with training, the brainwashing techniques they used, they couldn't risk that a biological imperative would overrule their own wants." She paused and finally looked Darcy right in the eyes when she admitted, "So they took that opportunity away."

She didn't elaborate and didn't need to. The words and their meaning sunk in almost immediately and Darcy held a hand over her mouth for a moment before she scrubbed it through her tangled curls. "I
am so sorry, Nat," she rushed to say. "I didn't know. I didn't... Here I am all 'poor me' about my chances of having a kid that I don't even know I want and am so not ready for being reduced and then you're sitting there being you and having to suffer through remembering all this shit and I am so very, very sorry..."

Natasha shook her head and pulled her hand free from where it was tugging on a curl with far more force than necessary. "I didn't tell you for your sympathy or sorrow, I only wanted you to know that you are not alone in this. That I understand, at least on some level, and that you can talk to me if needed. Vent or rage or anything else you need to. I'll be your sounding board and punching bag or both."

"I would never punch you," Darcy protested. At Natasha's raised eyebrow, she blurted, "Okay, so even if I ever tried there would be absolutely no way I'd actually get a hit in and we both know it. Plus, I like you and think of you as all nice and protective and everything and would never actively try to hurt someone on my side. It's a thing."

Natasha pulled her into a one-armed hug again and promised, "I'm on your side, in this 'thing' or anything other."

On Natasha’s side apparently meant making a Girl's Day out of it. After a quick wash and change into another pair of pajamas, they watched a marathon of Tiny House shows. Natasha graded the locations based on where weapons and computers could be hidden and Darcy based on whether or not climbing a ladder to bed every night was really a sound decision. Natasha opened the door to the apartment precisely twice; once to shove the dirty dishes at the still hovering Boys and once to let Jane in with a full compliment of popcorn and junk food. Tequila was offered but, after the night before, the thought of anything remotely alcoholic still turned her stomach. The fact Jane hadn't even brought a bottle meant she was totally on the same page.

Thor was apparently on a rampage. Well, a pissed off, stalking kind of thing at least. He had left Darcy in what he had thought to be safe hands and then his own name was used to endanger her. He was determined to find the missing nurse and anything and everything she was tied to. There may have been extra fervor what with the whole fertility angle and his blessing being ripped away and some other stuff. Jane said there was ranting and enough of static electricity bouncing around the room for her to probably get an actual reading on it - a rarity to be sure - before he stormed off.

Satisfied Jane had the current watch, Natasha left to go check in on her teammates' progress. Tiny House became Say Yes to the Dress right up until one of the brides to be happened to be knocked up, and then it became reruns of What Not to Wear instead. Takeout was ordered and delivered by Barton who promised absolutely nothing was tampered with and also that the egg rolls were delicious. If her mark matches were pacing nearby, he made absolutely no show that he saw them or cared.

Later, while Jane crashed on the couch and the screen asked if they wanted to continue to the next episode, Darcy finally tried to put herself to bed. She tossed, she turned, she was too hot and then too cold and she knew absolutely none of that actually mattered. She grabbed a cup of water from the bathroom and debated asking Medical if Advil PM would interact with everything else but, again, knew that wasn't the actual problem at hand.

She met her own gaze in the mirror and flinched away from the dark circles under her eyes and tense lines around her mouth. "Fuck it," she said to no one in particular, and headed for the door.

She wished she was surprised to find Clint in the hallway, but she really wasn't. He sat with his back up against the wall that was shared with her place, with a clear line of sight to both the Boys' place and the elevator. "Do I need to tuck you in too?" he asked, but didn't seem to make any effort to
move. He had a tablet in front of him, a bow resting against one leg, and a quiver braced up against the wall beside him. Total overkill, and she kind of loved him for it.

"I shouldn't be mad at them," she whispered with a shake of her head.

"Sure you should," he shrugged. "You have the right to be mad at anyone you want. You also have the right to forgive them, but I usually prefer some groveling or epic display of gratitude first. Nat usually saves my life at least once, though there was one time she just bought me a goldfish."

She raised her eyebrows at that. "Goldfish?" she asked doubtingly.

Clint looked as solemn as she'd ever seen him and rested one hand over his heart. "May L'il Gupertini rest in piece."

A laugh escaped despite her best efforts and then she was back to shaking her head. "Go sleep somewhere that's not a hallway. We're on a secure floor of a secure building, and I'm willing to bet Stark cranked up a few settings just to make sure."

He stood and stretched before he gathered his gear and a few takeout containers of his own. "Was mainly just making sure they left you alone until you were ready to deal with them," he admitted.

"It's totally appreciated," she assured him. "But I think it's time I put my Big Girl Pants on and dealt with them myself."

He looked her up and down and she knew what was coming before he asked, "Your Big Girl Pants have unicorns on them?"

"Pegacorns. Really, they have wings. Details are important," she corrected.

His lips twitched, but all he did was tilt his head and make his way towards the elevator. "Let me know if you change your mind?" he offered.

"Will do," she promised. He gave her a mock salute before the doors closed on him and she let out an unsteady breath. She doubted she really fooled him, but it was worth a try. She was far from ready to face her personal Overprotective Squad, but it was probably better to do it sooner rather than later so, with a sigh, she said, "Awesome AI that runs this nuthouse? Can you make sure Frecks has roaming privileges so Jane doesn't strangle him in the morning?"

She watched as the two little hidden cat doors glowed briefly to unlock them, and then again as a barrier briefly lit several paces from the elevator doors. "Of course, Miss Lewis," came the expected reply. "Pleasant dreams."

That was the idea, but she had no idea how to get there.

It, like most things in her life, turned out to be a non-event. There was no way super serum enhanced hearing didn't figure out she was on her way, but her Boys at least pretended enough to stay in bed. Steve was spooned up behind Bucky, blue eyes just barely visible over the bare metal shoulder when she entered.

She stood in the doorway to the bedroom for a moment, unsure of what to say. She managed to get out a massively intelligent, "I..." before she trailed off again.

They understood though, or at least tried to. Bucky lifted the edge of the blanket up invitingly and said, "Come here, doll."
Her feet moved without conscious thought and, soon enough, she was tucked up against him, his metal arm wrapped protectively around her and Steve's massive grasp trying his damnedest to hold on tight to them both. "I'm sorry," she whispered. She had only had to deal with the uncertainty and loss, they had the whole possibly parents thing tossed at them in the same breath it was ripped away. She had her own grief, but had to make sure she wasn't blinded to theirs, even if they did fuck up big time immediately after.

"Ain't nothing to it," Bucky assured her. She didn't quite believe him.

"We'll make this right," Steve promised. That, she believed they would most definitely try to accomplish.

She woke up the next morning feeling safe and warm and more than a little sore from laying so still for so long. She knew she should move even as she knew it would be a monumental task. Sergeant Snuggles held on relentlessly, and Captain Cozy was trying his damnedest to pretend he wasn't up and raring to go even though the clock on the bedside table declared it several hours past his usual time to rise and shine.

"Go for your run and do an extra lap for me," she mumbled into a Super Shoulder. He still hesitated, so she added, "Bonus points if you bring back bagels."

Never one to turn down a mission for the good of the people, Steve finally climbed out of bed. It was a matter of a minute, maybe two, before he leaned down to kiss the top of her head, already dressed and everything. "Need anything else?" he asked as he played with a single wayward curl.

"Just for our very own cyborg octopus to let me feel my limbs again," she yawned. Almost immediately the grip around her lessened. The leg thrown over her own took an extra three-count though. "My spine and my bladder thank you," she told him as she began to pull back the covers.

Steve still hovered, she she made shooing motions with her hands until he got with the program and left for his exercise and food run. That meant that she was left with only one pair of soulful eyes to deal with after her morning ablutions. Bucky was sprawled out on the bed, so she flopped down beside him.

Her new wound protested the action slightly, and she pressed her hand against it without thinking, half protective and half wondering just how deep the bruising actually went.

He, of course, didn't miss the action. "How bad?" he asked, and she had to give him credit for keeping it down to minimum growl levels.

"Feels like I've been punched in the gut," she admitted. Then, because apparently her mouth was working of its own volition, she added, "But, you know, with a knife. A knife that was on fire."

There was a fire of a different kind in his eyes at that, but his voice was relatively steady when he said, "The cauterization was probably for the best. Less risk of infection from a wound to that area, less risk of bleeding..."

"Not thanking them," she huffed. She knew he was trying to be reassuring in his own way, and that oddly calmed her. Usually her Boys being awkward did that for some reason. She lifted the edge of her shirt to reveal the bacitracin-soaked bandage atop purple skin. It was supposed to further reduce infection and possibly scarring, two things she really could do without. She did ask, however, "Did they think I wouldn't notice? I mean, I can be an airhead at times, but I do tend to notice things like holes in my stomach, even if they are nice and scabbed over."

His hand reached for her, but he was careful not to touch. "Don't think she cared," he frowned. He curled his fingers into a fist and brought them to his own side instead. "She probably figured on
being long gone before anyone questioned it. Turns out she was right."

And that was why she was having this conversation with him. Bucky had seen the horrors of the world and tended not to sugarcoat the worst of them, unlike Steve who would dwell and fret and a million other things all while promising the return of sunshine and rainbows. Buckster might not get encyclopedic with the details, but he would be blunt while still being kind. It wasn't that he didn't care or that the emotions had been burned out of him. Quite the opposite, really. He felt, and deeply, but to cope and to get by in this world, he faced the facts and moved forward. He'd never forget, but he wouldn't let it keep him from making it right.

The problem was that the infraction had happened to her and not him. This time around, she had a feeling there would be a might bit of vengeance involved because overprotective tended to be an understatement with her Boys. His "making it right" may well involve bloodshed, and she wasn't sure she wanted to stop him. She wasn't sure she wanted to try to talk Steve into stopping him either.

"I am sorry I didn't tell you outright," she told him, trying to bring her thoughts back on track. "I wasn't sure and needed to know for myself before I got anyone else worked up."

"It hurt," he admitted, and she winced. "But I can see your reasoning. I just hope you can see ours"

"You mean when I was worked up about having my rights violated and you violated my rights by making a decision for me without asking me?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"That'd be the one," he agreed. "Groveling. There will be groveling in your future. Wanna send the memo to Steve?"

"Sure, I can attach it to the one where we work out taking watches..." he started, but she cut him off.

"No watches. No hovering. No wrapping our lives around those of assholes because that means they won," she told him. He wore a look of doubt, and of conniving, so she added, "You know Stark's got that AI of his reviewing everything right now. The building's not on lockdown because he doesn't need it to be. There's security everywhere on a good day, and I have a feeling we're not going to call any day 'good' for quite some time."

"Not 'til we find this nurse and figure out exactly what she wanted," he agreed.

"She, and her octopus cronies, wanted another you. Or Steve. Don't think they cared which," Darcy pointed out. "I was a means to an end. A really, really, sucky end."

His hand reached out and just the barest fingertip traced the red star at her neck. The metal was oddly cool and tickled a little, and she knew what was coming possibly even before he did. Sure enough, he sighed and muttered, "I'm sorry, doll. If you hadn't been matched with us..."

She grabbed his hand and held it between her own. "And yet I was," she said as matter of fact as she could muster. "Universe, unknown ways, yadda. I like to think it's so someone can pull your heads out of your self-sacrificing asses from time to time, but what do I know? I just wrote a thesis on this shit."

He huffed a chuckle despite himself, and kept his hand held where it was when he offered, "I am sorry though."

"So am I," she admitted. At his look of confusion, she explained, "Was totally looking forward to a long weekend alone with you two. No life-threatening emergencies, no world view changing"
physics. Just you, me, a man called Steve, and maybe the contents of the little box in the bottom drawer."

His eyebrows raised at that and he got the cutest little hint of a blush on his cheeks. Her Boys did
love the sex, but they still had the tendencies to get all flustered and embarrassed if it was discussed
bluntly. Which meant she did so at every opportunity.

He cleared his throat, coughed, and then cleared it again. "You, ah, in the need, sweetheart?"

"I was, but even not moving kind of hurts, and moving really hurts - like a sting that goes from the
inside out, so I'm guessing the tensing and arching and whatnot are no-goes for now." She sighed
dramatically and released his hand, doing her best to flop even though she was already laying down.

He smiled at that, and she didn't know if it was from her antics or his libido kicking in, but it at least
hit him out of the morose mood that was threatening to attack. "What about kissing?" he asked,
inching closer. "Is kissing a go?"

"Kissing is most definitely a go," she agreed, maybe a little too enthusiastically.

He rolled over completely and bracketed her body, not letting a single ounce of his weight press
down upon her. She was caged in by heat and strength, utterly and completely protected and not
smothered in the least. She loved every minute of it. He lowered his lips slowly, first to breathe
against the little red mark on her neck and then to press to the lightest of kisses to the very tip of her
nose. "This okay, doll?" he asked as he pulled back slightly.

"Dork," she said without heat. She grabbed a fistful of his hair and brought him right to where she
wanted him.

There wasn't much talking done after that.

The rest of the morning after Steve returned and chastised them for potentially aggravating her injury
was spent eating bagels and trying to talk her mark matches into letting her do what she originally
planned.

"No," Steve declared, even louder than Bucky's adamant, "Absolutely not."

"And yet, you don't actually get to make decisions for me..." she pointed out. She knew said pointing
was likely to no avail, but she had to try anyway.

"And yet you were attacked - twice even - within the past forty-eight hours while in the safety of the
tower itself and now you want to leave that safety to put yourself at direct risk?" Captain Protective
counterlighted her argument. Of course, in doing so, he left himself open for the counterattack that she
had been depending on.

"Which makes the tower arguably not that safe now, doesn't it?" She got matching scrunchy faces
for that, which meant that they knew she was right but neither were willing to admit it.

Oddly, the Buckster was the one who always seemed to have the most reasonable argument to lay
out versus his counterpart just mainly stomping his foot and declaring his word law. So it really
wasn't a surprise when he cajoled, "Doll, you were attacked here, yes, but you're talking about
visiting a place proven to be a risk. The last time you were there led to Asgardian intervention to stop
you from death, and that's just something we just aren't very comfortable with."

She sighed and mentally counted backward from twenty. "Look," she started, trying her best at a no
nonsense tone that she really hoped would get through their thick skulls. "Danny just finally got released from the hospital on Friday. I was going to go see him then, but Jane and I ran late due to one of her machines going kablooey. I called to see if he was still up to visitors, but he had already passed out for the night. Yesterday was a wash because of my own drama. I'd really like to go visit the guy who risked his damn life and literally took more than a single bullet trying to keep me safe!"

Okay, so her voice got a little shrill at the end. Sue her. Besides, she was fairly certain that no one had called lockdown as a whole for the rest of her life so, eventually, she was going to get her way. Better today versus when she was truly and completely pissed.

Surprisingly, it was Steve-o that folded first. He gave her a look like he was disappointed that she was all adamant about being a decent human being, but relented, "We'll figure something out. You're not going alone though, and you're not taking the subway or train or whatever other public format you've dreamed up. It's too much of a risk, especially now."

"Give us some time to sort this out?" Bucky requested. He looked pained, as in physically so, which she took to mean she had won.

She clapped her hands together and then pushed herself up from the table, proud of the way she managed to hide the little stab of pain from the movement. She smacked a kiss on each of their cheeks and headed for the door. "You two form your own little think tank, I'm going to go wash up and make a batch of something his doctor would probably not approve of to bring with - never visit the ailing empty-handed," she chirped before she headed back to her own corner of home.

Jane had left some time ago, but had left her a note that she had fed Frecks and that if he argued otherwise he was a lying little furball. A quick check verified she had almost all of the ingredients for chocolate chip cookies. The kitchen on the communal floor had rest though, so she decided to wash up and abuse the available resources for the force of good.

She resolutely did not have a breakdown and cry in the shower and anyone who thought otherwise was as much of a liar as her cat. She smeared more antibiotic ointment on the wound she was trying really hard to ignore and covered it with a bandage from her stash. An older tee shirt was thrown on to prevent that crap from ruining anything nicer, and then a comfy sweater tugged on over that. She had been warned she would likely bleed, and bleed heavily, even though she hadn't yet, so she grabbed a pad just in case. Jeans, boots, and a half-assed bun later, and she was good to go.

Her Boys arrived in the kitchen just as she was pulling out the last tray. She made a triple batch, figuring it served as a sort of apology to the others for using their stuff, even if she used that stuff to do so. Natasha had wandered through and stolen a cookie earlier, and Clint took like five of them and disappeared with barely a mumbled thanks, so she took that as acceptance for now. She tried to hide a flinch when she set the tray down to close the oven door, but realized she failed when two massive bodies of muscle crowded up against her protectively. She sighed and physically pushed them away with her oven-mitted hands. "Tiny hole on the outside but it still goes deep and feels less than comfortable when I move in certain ways," she said by way of explanation. "It'll go away eventually and already feels better than yesterday but, really, not all of us have your super healing abilities."

It didn't mollify them in the slightest but at least they picked up on her lack of subtlety and reluctantly took several steps back. They were persistent little buggers though, so she was in no way surprised when she heard, "Cookies, doll. It hurts to make cookies. If that's too much for you..."

"I'm going, end of story," she replied. She yanked off the mitts with a little more force than was strictly necessary and jabbed at the oven to make sure it was off. Turning back around, she eyed the
jeans and coordinating leather jackets, the heavy boots and the thousand and one places to hide weaponry. Quite frankly, she was surprised that a certain iconic shield wasn't in hand when she guessed, "I take it no one else will do and you two will be accompanying me today?"

“Others offered, and probably had far more elaborate plans than either of us, but it's only right and fair that we get a chance to thank Danny and his family as well,” Steve reasoned.

“And what is your plan, anyway?” she asked, curious.

The Man with a Plan blushed slightly so it was his wingman that replied, “Blunt force and intimidation, mostly. Tossing in a few emergency beacons to wire into the tower should anyone try to make a move on you.”

“You are not lighting me up like a Christmas tree,” she warned.

“Nah, more subtle than that. Stuff like before,” Bucky insisted.

He held out a small box and, for one brief heart-stopping moment, she was afraid it held something else entirely. They were mark matched, tied to each other for eternity, and yet the idea of sealing the deal the old-fashioned way with what were almost her baby-daddies terrified her. Her thesis reasoned bonds of political and opportunistic flavors, unbreakable ties of something just a little more than friendship. Bringing jewelry into the equation was a way of saying that, beyond fate and the universe’s manipulations, you actively made that choice for yourselves. It was a level of commitment that she wasn't sure she was ready for, or at least adult enough yet to experience with two idiots who needed committing of a different type at times.

The box opened to reveal a slim silver bracelet with what looked like blue and red enamel highlights. There was also a pendant that hung from a delicate chain, this one switching things up by having a blue stone with red accents. She swallowed and quickly covered for her anxiety with an enthusiastic, “Ooh! Bling! I love me some bling!”

Steve slid the bangle from the box over her wrist, a quick adjustment made it tighten just enough that it wouldn't fall off by accident and told her it was probably a Stark Special. Bucky made quick work of the necklace, and she found the stone surprisingly light in a way that told her it probably wasn't a stone at all. “Dormant transmitters,” he explained after he stepped back around to her front. “Shouldn't ping on anyone’s radar, and we mean that literally.”

“If you ever need to send an active alert, touch here and here,” Steve explained, pointing to innocuous sections of both. “There's also a failsafe in case someone decides not to take the risk at all. These get yanked off, and a quick signal is sent with your last known location.”

They looked far too pleased with themselves, and she really didn't regret it at all when she asked, “So are we not even going to discuss at all how you just tagged me like an animal without my consent?”

“We're only thinking of your safety, doll,” Bucky Boy protested.

It was not exactly his best argument and, in fact, further fueled her rather righteous low level rage when she huffed, “K, so reason for being upset with you literally a day ago? You not asking permission and deciding what was in my best interests for me. Guess what? Reason for being upset with you right the hell now? You not asking permission and deciding what was in my best interests for me. See a pattern? Because I do.”

“Darcy, sweetheart, we just…”

“Screwed the pooch, man,” Clint finished for him. He stole a cookie and then tried to blow out the
heat of the molten chocolate at the same time he chided, “Consent, man. It's important. And I say this as the guy that planted the earrings last time.” He turned to her and winced, “Technically you at least had the freewill enough to choose to wear them?”

“And technically you used them to track me like a carrier pigeon,” she countered. “But… they saved my life. And I'm sure these would too. It's just…”

“Too much choice has been taken from you lately and you'd like a say in your own life,” Natasha put to words what she herself was struggling with. She also opened up her hand to reveal the exact pair of earrings in question. “They worked before and were unobtrusive. Plus the silver goes with everything.”

She smiled despite herself and took the earrings from her hand. “Can you get the gaudier targets off of me? I'm not know for wearing things that would catch in Janie’s machines, oddly enough.”

Natasha removed them with ease while her Boys pouted off to the side. She placed them on the counter next to a plate of cookies that was now missing another two, and offered, “You might want to keep them; they are nice pieces, if a bit showy. Maybe for a night out when these two idiots are inevitably called off to save the world between the linguini and the gelato courses?”

“You really think they wouldn’t let the world burn for an extra minute or five until they got their third to safety?” Clint scoffed. He completely ignored the glares he received and she completely ignored the chocolate smeared at the corners of of his lips.

That sorted, she finished packing up what was left of the cookies and headed out with her two contrite matches in tow. Soon enough, she found herself standing outside of her old apartment building, willing away the anxiety that threatened to build at the memories of the last time she stood on those steps, and what soon after followed.

“Darce,” Match One started. “You don't have to do this if you're not ready,” Match Two finished.

Thankfully, that was thrown right out the door, and she meant that literally. Geno came barreling out, arms wide open to wrap her in a bear hug, totally ignoring the way her Boys instantly tensed at her side. “D, you made it! Danny will be so glad you came!”

And that was that, really. She was swept up and away to Geno’s place where apparently everyone and their mother were visiting in a revolving door kind of way, Danny seated on the couch in a place of honor, a place beside him instantly cleared for her. Cookies were had and assurances were made that she was doing okay, really she was. She made Danny make those same assurances and he made her stop apologizing for everything that had happened.

“Darcy, it was bound to happen sooner or later and you know it,” he told her. He was still too thin and his skin still seemed too pale, but he was looking a thousand times better than even when she last visited him, and so she counted it as a win. “I'm not dumb enough to think you're dumb enough not to know what's going on in your own building,” he chided.

“Still, you didn't sign on to get shot because someone took an interest in your kooky neighbor,” she pointed out.

“A kooky neighbor with major connections,” he snorted. “Seriously, D, we have yet to see a bill from this and have been told to stop asking. The walls were plastered over before I was out of surgery and the paint was drying before I got out of recovery. I know you work at that fancy tower,
we look out for you, you know? I just didn't know how involved you were with the whole… thing.”

She winced, which put the Boys on alert, but she waved them off. “Thing is a good word for it. Thing One and Thing Two over there totally upped my involvement. Before them, I was not much more than a gopher for someone far smarter than me. Now I'm a gopher with ties to but no actual knowledge of a lot of shit people want to know more about and, trust me, this is not necessarily an upgrade.”

The Boys frowned at that, and Danny chuckled, hand at his side as if he still needed to hold his insides in place. “I think you hurt their feelings,” he pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, Matchbox Boys there are a total upgrade, don't get me wrong. Seriously, you need to see them without shirts, or, you know, other things - wow - but the extra everything that’s involved being connected to anything as major as either one of them, let alone them both? You got a fraction of that, and I will never stop being sorry about it.”

Danny looked at her carefully, as if debating what to say next. When he did finally speak, it wasn't exactly what she was expecting. “I know who they are; I'd be stupid not to. I also know just how high up some of your connections go and why you probably shouldn't ever move back to this little corner of paradise,” he started, which confirmed some suspicions. “I also know that I have been offered an opportunity I would never ever have gotten if it wasn't for you.”

“To get shot and nearly bleed out on some stylin’ linoleum?”

He snorted again, grip tightening on his side at the action. “Got offered a job, a legit one,” he told her, eyes bright with excitement. “Gotta get my GED, but I was only a couple of credits short anyway. Then I've been offered a security position at that very same tower of yours, all training provided. I asked about my record, 'cuz we both know it isn't exactly clean. They basically said ‘what record?’ and moved on. I looked into it - it's gone, D, juvie and everything, completely missing from any system. They wiped it. Clean slate. Wouldn't have ever had that chance without you.”

“That's wonderful news!” She reached over and hugged him, both wincing slightly at the action and both catching each other in the act.

“I thought you said you were good,” he accused when he released her.

She made a face, and then made another one when she saw the way Things One and Two watched her way too closely. “I was,” she insisted. “Until Friday. Someone tried something; someone failed. I got some pain and annoyance in the process, but everything else is fine, I swear.”

“So that's why the guy in the fancy suit said I'd probably be assigned to someone I already know if I took the job?” he guessed.

She glared at her match mates. “Tell Tony I don't need a personal security detail? For fuck’s sake, you guys,” she huffed. When both looked contrite, she hung her head and muttered, “Please say you two aren't the ones who asked for it?”

Both men had the grace to look chagrined. “Didn't ask,” Captain Contrite promised.

“But didn't exactly protest the suggestion,” Sergeant Sorry admitted. He must have finally been picking up on her less than subtle tells, because he defended himself with, “You’ve gotta admit we made you a target, doll.”

“But I don't know anything!” she protested. Geno had all of his guys suspiciously engaged in other conversations, so at least there wasn't as many eavesdroppers this time. The last time they talked
about this, the entire team weighed in and she left with a headache and a hell of a lot of frustration.

“It doesn’t matter, they will still go after you,” Bucky said, not unkindly.

She shook her head and breathed out from her nose. “Really, the only thing I can tell them is the size of your-” She stopped herself when Steve cleared his throat and Geno damned near choked on his drink - so much for the pretending not to be listening in schtick.

“Someday, you will understand the concept of leverage,” Bucky sighed, restating what was now an age old argument.

Because she could, and because he expected it at that point, she smiled brightly and said, “I loved that show.”

Before they could really get started, not that they would, Danny cut in with, “So at least I would be entertained on this gig, so there’s that…”

“That’s the spirit,” she agreed, patting him on the shoulder.

They eventually said their goodbyes so that actual family could have the chance to visit, but she promised to text and email for updates as well as possibly tutoring opportunities to help him get those last few credits. Danny was a good kid and deserved every chance life had to offer. Bonus points if those chances stopped trying to kill him. She couldn’t promise him absolute safety looking after a few nerds in a lab, but could at least up the likelihood that he wouldn’t die in a drug deal gone wrong.

Even that simple trip exhausted her though. Not that she wanted to admit it to Tweedle Dumb and Dumber. She had been told to take it easy and rest and all the usual, and knew that neither one of them would object to an afternoon snuggle session on the couch watching bad tv. If she happened to fall asleep before Alice and John Whatstheirnames decided which house to buy, so be it. If she happened to ignore a voicemail from a certain nurse, all the better.
Chapter 3

She ignored another voicemail the next day, but only partially on purpose. She assumed it was a want to run yet another test to tell her how screwed she was and definitely decided that could wait. She did, however, plan on actually listening to whatever Medical had come up with eventually, but got too caught up with actual work in the actual lab after talking her way out of the apartment and back to reality.

The Boys hovered, she kicked them out. The Boys hovered some more, she kicked them out again. The Boys brought lunch, she stole it and initiated lockdown. The Boys pouted at her through the glass, she pointed to her little stars and made shooing motions. Jane mostly just laughed and gave her updates as to what Thor planned as vengeance the few times she looked up from her work.

She eventually left the lab around seven and made her way back up to the floor she shared with her match mates. She was tempted to just head to her own suite, but they had made her favorite dinner and everything. She took the opportunity of them both being in the same place and having far more manners than she ever did to lecture them while they sat contritely at the table, forks in hand. She wasn’t sure if they actually took in her whole Hovering Doesn’t Help 101 schpeel, but the next day was spent with far more work and far less distractions, or at least the morning was.

Lunch was met with a wall of muscle shaking his far too pretty head at her. “Doll...” said wall chided.

She crossed her arms in front of her and tried a pout of her own. “It’s Taco Tuesday, a sacred tradition in these parts. Literally the best taco truck in town is parked right outside the door. Are you going to deny me both sustenance and a holy rite?”

Bucky just rolled his eyes. “Tacos are not actually a religious experience,” he sighed.

“Clearly you have not had Manuel make you a Classic Combo,” Jane retorted.

He either didn’t have a response to that or never could say no to a woman as he turned slightly to let them pass. He did follow them, but Darcy chose to see that as her chance to initiate him in all that was right in the land of meat, cheese, and corn-based wrappings. He glowered and grumped and huffed while they waited in line, right up until he didn’t.

“Whoa, no go my scary friend,” Darcy stopped him, hand on arm, when he tensed and made to move away from the line and towards something she could not quite see from her less than super height.

“He has his phone out. He’s taking a picture,” her personal protector seethed. She knew he could break her less than actual hold easily enough, but was probably hesitant to leave her on her own in case it was a set up. She wasn’t using that to her advantage except in the way that she was.

“Okay, but did you consider that: A) You rarely leave the tower in a way that is seen by the public, B) The two of us are barely ever seen together aside from the incredibly embarrassing video of how we figured out we were matches, and C) How awesome it would be Manny’s business if an actual Avenger was pictured consuming his wares?” she reasoned. She added a pat to his partially exposed metal arm, itself a rarity to be seen outside of official ops, to drive the point home. There were a ton of reasons for the snap, if it was even in their direction, and very few of them were nefarious in nature.
“Winter Soldier Beats Man to Death for Taco Snap is not the headline you want to see,” Jane agreed in a stage whisper. It earned a snort from the man behind them. Said man was Jimmy the lab assistant from three labs over, so she wasn’t too concerned. The man had once stopped a Stark Stare Off by telling Tony the fancy machine was out of French Roast and was totally on Pepper’s personal payroll.

Her own Jimmy stood down, or at least stopped any attempt to smash some unfortunate kid’s phone. He still glared, which she personally thought earned him the handful of other sneaky snaps from others, though it was kind of cute how he angled himself to try to stop them from getting a good shot of her or her boss. She placated him with food soon enough, even if he insisted they move back inside to eat. He reluctantly agreed that the tacos were in fact awesome, and she reluctantly allowed him to let the computers scroll through multiple feeds to try to quash as many images as possible before they went truly viral.

There were still a handful that made it to the media anyway. Thankfully, most seemed oddly grainy and even a little out of focus. She was betting Stark was at play with that - some sort of filter that scanned and approved images that were technically of his domain, at least those that were being uploaded to major sites and possibly those from within a certain radius. To block them all would be suspicious; to let some through of less than decent quality would be written off as interference from the multiple energy sources within the tower itself and not that surprising.

Regardless, it was confirmed that the former Winter Soldier got his taco on, and that he was escorting a brunette and what may have been his teammate’s soulmate in that teammate’s absence. Rumors abounded, some connections were made, some were debunked, and she was betting that it wouldn’t make it more than a day or two in the worst of the tabloids at most, and never front page.

She was, of course, wrong.

Apparently someone was at just the right angle to get a picture that showed both the little red star on his wrist and the matching one on her neck when he held the tray of tacos aloft and told her she wasn’t getting any until she followed him back inside. It was actually not that bad as far as how horrible the tabloids could be. She was smiling and jumping and he even had less than a scowl on his face. That in itself was a rarity as far as the media was concerned, and they had a heyday with it. It was front, if not center. Thankfully not as major of a story as some royal’s fake mark smearing off in the middle of a state dinner, but big enough for her to want to bang her head on something solid.

Steve was kind enough to get them copies and leave them in prominent areas, like the kitchen counter and the lab the next morning. “Can’t let the two of you out of my sight for a minute,” he teased without heat.

“She was going to go out there alone,” Sergeant Snapshot defended himself.

“Wasn’t alone, Jane was with me!” she protested. She didn’t mention that so were her shiny tracker earrings, but instead brought up, “And you really think Stark doesn’t have some sort of defense system that close to the tower? We were totally safe.”

Bucky looked like he was going to grouse again, but Steve beat him to it. “It was Manny’s, so there was no stopping her. Also, she’s not wrong about the additional security - there’s a reason only certain trucks can get that close,” he pointed out. She was about to do a victory dance, right up until he added, “But Bucky has a point: if they could shoot that picture, they could have shot a lot more. You made yourself a target, like it or not.”

More like being their mark match made her a target, and she knew it. She also knew that they knew it. It was a point of contention between them, and a point of frowny faces. They got into moods
where they thought they had done her some horrible wrong by making the match, destroyed her chance at a real life or some such nonsense. While it was true it would have been so much simpler to be matched to Don the coffee guy, it wasn’t like she hadn’t already garnered extra attention based upon her relationship with Jane and her nutso theories that were totally proven to be correct. Then again, she had already made a tiny name for herself with her own nutso theories on matches, so that was at play as well.

Basically, any way you sliced it, she was probably going to get into trouble some day. The fact she had two Super Soldiers to look out for her really and truly was for the best. That whole universe having a plan thing sometimes worked.

Anything else they were going to ramble on about was pushed to the side as they got a call to assemble. At least that’s what she figured it was when both their phones went off at the same time and they started to grab their things. “Please say you’ll stay inside if not just here while we’re gone?” Steve asked after he gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“I’m lab-bound, and will be for most of the day,” she promised. She hefted her bag as if that proved what she had to say but, considering she was known to bring that sucker to a coffee shop, it probably didn’t. “We’ll order in if necessary. Do we need a Royal Food Taster or Can was assume Stark’s own chefs are good to go?”

“Taster. Try that Jimmy guy from Schultz’s lab,” Bucky said before he gave her a kiss of his own.

“Smartass,” she said without heat. It just proved he knew full well who had been where the day before. They left and eventually she followed after giving Frecks one last scritch before she headed out.

It was a relatively quiet yet busy day in the lab overall. Not like, insane, but busy enough that she knew they’d both forget to eat real food if she didn’t order some in advance. The sandwiches took a little longer than usual, but she didn’t think anything of it until she caught who delivered them.

“Please say he didn’t actually ask you to do a taste test on the foodage, that’s nuts even for him,” she scoffed when Natasha put the bag down on her desk. “Besides, aren’t you all assembling or something?”

Natasha being Natasha, she didn’t quite not answer, but didn’t fully answer either. “I wasn’t needed there, and you didn’t need the horrible mess Sammy made of your lunch. Vic redid them for you.”

“I still get my pastrami?”

“On rye with an extra pickle and a side of fried green beans instead of chips,” Natasha assured her. She was impressed, Vic hated sandwich duty, which meant Sammy messed up big time.

Instead of just dropping things off and leaving, she pulled out a third sandwich and sat down on one of the spare stools, like picnics with assassins were a usual thing. To be fair, they kind of were if you took a certain soulmate into account, but that was totally different. She doubted she could get oral on demand with this one. She also doubted she was dumb enough to even mention it as a joke in passing. She did have some self preservation, regardless of what the Boys like to claim.

Her phone chirped while they were making small talk in a way that was casual enough that Darcy was fairly certain Natasha could get her to reveal her life’s secrets without even trying. She glanced at it and made a face, then reached for another green bean.

“Why are you ignoring Nurse Ryan?” Natasha asked before she took a sip of her iced tea. Of course
she saw who it was. It was Darcy’s fate in life to be surrounded by people who noticed everything, whether she wanted them to or not.

She huffed a breath and stalled with another green bean before she realized it was probably best for all involved if she answered, even if it was a half-assed one. “Because I don’t want to know down to the nearest micrometer just how thick the scarring is or down to the fifth decimal how low my chances of ever conceiving are. Wound is healing. Life is sucking. I am moving on.”

“No you’re not,” Jane said with a shrug to show she didn’t mean it as an insult.

“I’m really not, but I can pretend real hard,” she agreed. It was like the saying that, if you believed in anything enough, you could make it real. Well, she had chosen to believe in avoidance and it was working for her quite well, for now. It wasn’t a permanent solution, but it was one she needed at the time.

“She’s used to haranguing us, I doubt she is going to give in so easily,” Natasha commented.

Darcy reached for the last of her meal and offered a faker than fake smile when she said, “Let’s give it the ol’ college try!”

Natasha raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow and, calm as calm could be, offered, “I could make you go down there, but I believe both of us would prefer if you choose to do so on your own.”

“All three,” Jane agreed around a mouthful of Braunschweiger.

Darcy pouted. “I thought you supported me having the right to make my own choices, unlike Dipshits One and Two.”

“I do,” Natasha assured her. “But when one of those choices has the potential to just get something done and over with without the dipshits ever knowing or having an uninformed and unwelcome opinion versus you accidentally leaving your phone out for them to see the scroll of messages from Medical?”

“You make a persuasive argument,” she admitted. Of course the super spy already knew that because she had leaned back in her chair in victory before Darcy had even opened her mouth. “If I go - if - will you talk the Boys down from the overprotective act?”

Natasha snorted in a very unladylike way. “Even I don’t have that level of skill.”

She huffed, but relented. “I have more faith in Jane teleporting me to Asgard this afternoon than them ever not overreacting,” she admitted. At Jane’s indignant objection, she rolled her eyes and pointed out, “The closest thing you have to possibly working is in literal pieces. Some on the floor. Some on the roof. Some still in the extruder.”

“Okay, point, but harsh,” Jane pouted. She moved past it quickly enough though, and offered, “Want me to walk down with you? Hold your hand? Buy you a margarita after?”

“Oh, I’m good,” Darcy replied. “Though there is a really good chance I’ll snot on your shoulder later if I don’t like what she has to say.”

Natasha, of course, followed her down. She stayed outside of the consult room Nurse Awesome brought her too with the commentary that Darcy had enough of her privacy invaded for now. She sat down and pulled out her phone and Darcy closed the door behind her, only to ask, “What’s the chance Nat’s got enhanced abilities and can listen in on everything?”
Her new favorite nurse showed why she rocked though, by lifting up a tablet of the actual paper kind that said, “Really good, actually.”

The entire visit went that way until the very end with the requisite blood draw. It was only then, after the notes were scribbled on, torn up, and shoved into the incinerator, that Nurse Ryan verbally told her, “We will, of course, need to schedule a follow up. Please try not to act like the others and avoid me?”

Darcy nodded dumbly, still trying to process everything. Stupid life and stupid chances and stupid evil minions and stupid everything. She sniffed and tried to hold back a fuck ton of wetness that gathered against her mascara. She lifted her head to find Natasha patiently waiting for her, and declared, “Hydra can suck it.”

“So you don’t want to hear that we think we have a lead? To where the nurse went at least,” Natasha offered.

Darcy stilled at that. She reached out and placed a hand on the killer assassin’s wrist and was only remotely surprised when she didn’t end up with a broken pinky for her efforts. “Please go. Please get every last drop of information out of her. Who she worked for and with. How she infiltrated. Fuck, what she had for breakfast, I don’t care. Everything.”

Natasha tilted her head to the side in acceptance of the request. “Should I leave her spleen?”

Darcy huffed because it was expected. “Well, we need to prosecute something, right?”

She was escorted back to her floor instead of the lab with the argument that she was not going to get anything productive done any time soon. There, she kicked off her shoes, curled up on the couch, wrapped herself around Frecks, and sobbed where no one could see her. Dinner was a pint of ice cream and a bag of chips. She texted Jane to assure her that she was fine, but needed some time to think, and then yanked the covers up over her head before she cried again.

The next morning, she decided that she needed to put her big girl pants on. She showered and thanked Stark technology that her wound was already not much more than a bruise and only really hurt with direct pressure on it. Her big girl pants were apparently a pair of bright blue leggings with bright red stars on them and yes, she got the irony. She also got one of the Boys shirts to pair with the ensemble, a lighter blue button down that hung to her thighs. She wanted functional comfort, and decided she had achieved it in spades, even if the fashion sense was iffy.

She got to the lab to find Jane fighting with the extruder again. Well, one of them. It was on the smaller side and she hadn’t yet removed the safety casing, so Darcy felt she was probably safe to dig into the emails and reports that were waiting for her. When her stomach growled around nine, she realized she hadn’t actually eaten breakfast yet and just went on the assumption Jane probably hadn’t either. She called over her shoulder to inform Jane in a way she’d completely ignore if she even realized Darcy was there yet, and headed down to the communal kitchen to find something to eat.

There were muffins and scones and something that may have been coffee cake or may have just been cake, she wasn’t sure. It was carb heaven. She loaded some of each into a bowl and called it good. The coffee smelled weird, like someone either left it on a cleaning cycle or added seven mystical herbs and spices, so she opted for tea for both her and Jane which meant she had a tray piled full of goodies because it was easier to carry that way.

Jane didn’t pull her head out of her machines until nearly noon, by which time only a single muffin remained. Darcy blinked, realized she had possibly ate her feelings, and offered a cheerful, “Got you a muffin and some tea, but it probably went cold by now. Seriously, how long were you working on
that thing?"

Jane mumbled something she didn’t quite catch, mainly because her mouth was full of blueberry goodness at the time. She washed it down with a slug of the tea, made a face at the temperature, shrugged, and downed the rest. They had both had worse when they got caught up in things, and they both knew it, so no big, really.

Before Jane dug in once more, she asked the Awesome AI to send up lunch in an hour or so. Stark’s algorithms were good, but Darcy felt the need to clarify the type of food and an actual time. That settled, she went back to the paperwork that she had so far failed to concentrate on at all, just happy that there were no actual deadlines looming anytime soon.

She got a text around four that the Boys were headed back. They had found the nurse, but she was already dead when they got there. They also found bits and pieces of tech that Stark and Banner were going to dig through, but any sign of medical records or what they had stolen from her were nowhere to be found.

This was, of course, followed by a text from Natasha claiming it wasn’t her that offed the wayward nurse. She waited for the inevitable and was not disappointed to receive one that also said it wasn’t Clint on her behalf.

She begged off work early, not that she had gotten much done. That was fine with Jane though, as Thor was incoming as well, which meant not a whole lot of concentration remained for either one of them for the day. She glanced at the clock and figured she had about forty-five minutes to figure out plans for the night that didn’t involve moping or crying or being all stoic in ways that drove all three of her little family members up the fricken wall.

She made her plan of attack and had set most of the pieces in motion when Buckster had to throw it off by arriving about ten minutes earlier than expected. “Darce, you here?” he called when he stepped through the door. As if he hadn’t already confirmed it before choosing where to head to first.

“Yep,” she confirmed from the bathroom. She quickly ran a brush through her hair, not that it would matter to him but it did to her, and he could deal. “Steve-o with you?”

“He’s going to be another few minutes, but he’s coming,” Bucky confirmed. “What did you want for dinner? I could get it started or we could order in if you want?”

She took a deep breath to steady herself before she turned the corner from the hallway to the main living area. As expected, Match the First was tucking his boots away, having already ridded himself of his jacket full of buckles though still in his usual tactical pants. He straightened himself as she approached and readily opened his arms when she tilted her head up for the requisite kiss.

Not so requisite was the way she took control of said kiss and easily pushed him up against the wall to press herself close. He went with the flow, for a while at least. He couldn’t pull back what with being up against a literal wall, so her angled her the slightest bit away to ask, “Not that I’m complaining, but is something up, doll?”

She started kissing along his stubbled jawline instead. When she felt the little square part tense, she knew he was going to ask her to explain herself, especially after the past few days. So, in between kisses, she did just that. “You have things you found out. I have things I found out. Any and all of these things are going to make us emotional and totally fuck up any plans for the night. So, before that can happen, I want this.”

To punctuate her words, she undid his belt and fly with practiced ease. She sank to her knees and
dragged the fabric with her, the weight of his standard non-mission weaponry doing most of the work for her.

“Darcy, baby, you’re injured, you shouldn’t...” he started, but lost his train of thought when she swallowed as much of him as she could in one go. She felt a hand in her neatly brushed hair, tugging slightly to guide her up and away. She shook her head, knowing he wouldn’t dare yank at her, and she smiled in triumph when both hands slapped against the wall to steady himself instead.

He made several interesting noises that she knew he would deny later, one of which in particular when she pulled off just long enough to say, “Everyone wants to make choices for me: Hydra, you, Steve, hell even Tony at this point if not the hazy construct of Fate itself. This is me. This is me making my own choice. This is me setting precedent for here on out.”

She started to lean back in, but found the sneak had ducked down and got his arms under her own where they were still wrapped around his waist. He lifted her with ease and brought her up to his level. Her feet dangled for the briefest of moments before she got the grand idea to wrap them around his now abandoned waist.

By the time Steve got home, they had moved to the couch. Both had lost their pants completely along the way, and her shirt was held on by a single button and maybe a prayer. “Buck! She’s injured!” Captain Predictable protested.

“She’s capable of making her own decisions,” she retorted. She slid from her place straddling the one that actually got with the program already, and landed softly on her knees on the lush rug. She turned to face him and deliberately undid the final button to reveal the tiny purple and red mark that remained before she announced, “She’s also horny, so either join us, or go, like, do the dishes or something.”

“Just had this discussion with her and lost,” Bucky chimed in. She turned back to face him, realized what was presented to her how she was currently situated between his spread legs, and dove back in to her original game plan. If she happened to arch her back and wave her bare ass at their third, well, so be it.

“Yeah, you’re clearly suffering in your defeat,” Steve snarked.

“Didn’t say that,” Bucky managed around a gasp. He always did like it when she did the thing with her tongue. “But I did come to the realization that we’ve been stupid and deciding things for her instead of with her, and that ain’t gonna end well for any of us.”

The last part was met with a grumbling sound behind her that was almost but not quite an agreement. She heard the telltale sounds of a belt being undone and dropped to the floor though, and tried not to do a victory dance.

She felt the heat of him before she felt his hands, gentle and careful, rest lightly on her hips. He pressed a kiss to the base of her spine where her shirt was rucked up, and asked, “You sure, sweetheart?”

She pressed back against him and offered a slurped but no less emphatic, “Yes!”
One hand remained on her hip while the other shifted, fingers skidding down against the curve of her ass to nudge against her folds. “You’ll tell us if it gets too much?” he asked after another kiss to the same spot.

“Not at all,” she admitted cheerfully enough. She felt more than heard the answering harrumph from either side of her, and then felt something far more pleasurable that she found far more important to pay attention to.

Later, sticky and sated and without a scrap of clothing anywhere in the near vicinity, she cuddled close with her Boys, who seemed quite content to continue the barely there touches and random kisses for as long as she would take them. Steve, of course, was the first to break the mood when, between a kiss and what could reasonably be called a distracting grope, he asked, “Do you want to tell us what brought that on? You know the mission was unsuccessful, and that’s hardly a thing to celebrate.”

She sighed and remembered the part where she told herself to put her big girl pants on, then remembered she wasn’t wearing any at all. She pulled herself away from their cuddle pile on the floor to sit up and face them, gaining strength and literal support from the couch at her back when she leaned against it. She decided to bite the bullet, go all in, and every other cliche she could think of to stall a few seconds longer even though she knew neither Boy was that patient. “I had a meeting down in Medical,” she blurted more than announced. “Natasha damn near frogmarched me down there when she saw the requests.”

“Oh, doll,” Bucky frowned. He scooted over to offer a shoulder to lean on, but gave her space if she wanted that as well. “I’m sorry you went through that without us. You’ve gotta know that we never thought we could have kids in the first place what with the serum and all. The chance, well, it was nice, but...”

“We’re here for you, whatever you need,” Steve promised. “We can look into options if you want to, or we can settle down with just the three of us because you already know that’s a handful. No matter what though, we’re here for you and we’re not going anywhere.”

“Well, except when we find the latest Hydra bigwigs and destroy anything and everything about them,” Bucky cut in. “I kinda want in on that and figure you won’t mind having a firsthand witness if given the option.”

“We will find them,” Captain Righteous swore. “Anyone and everyone who was involved in this. We will make sure they never have another chance to hurt you, to hurt anyone, ever again.”

She apparently could only get things out if they were blurted and possibly poorly timed, so she damn near shouted, “I’m still pregnant.”

Stunned silence met her announcement. Just before she was going to nudge them to see if they were still breathing, Steve managed a choked, “What?”

She figured she had one chance at this and there was about a thousand percent chance she was going to blow it anyway, so she rushed in, damned the consequences. “So, awesome speech and I could literally picture the American flag waving behind you and all that, but the reason you can’t find the embryo is because they didn’t actually get it.”

“But the wound, and the ultrasound?” Bucky prompted. He still looked like he had been slapped with a fish, but was at least a little more coherent than his counterpart so she had to give him props.

“Wound on the left and they focused everything on the left with only a cursory review of the right,”
she explained. “Nurse Awesome, er, Ryan, noticed that my hormone levels seemed wiggy and did a
fuck ton of research before she even asked for another sample. She noticed a shadow on the right
and wanted to make sure there wasn’t more damage there. Some zooms and some searching of like
every single angle they got an image of, and she had her suspicions.”

Steve blinked himself back to awareness enough to doubtingly ask, “You fooled Nat? She was on
the warpath.”

Darcy shook her head. “She knew about the first meeting only,” she insisted. “That’s where the
weirdness was laid out and we were trying to figure out what else Hydra might have done to me.
Ryan thinks they were after your baby juice only, figuring we screw like rabbits and they could get
some from me easier than they could hold you down to get a sample, if the timing was right. They
probably didn’t even know about the potential being knocked up.”

“And you’re sure?” Steve verified, likely not wanting to get his hopes up.

“As sure as we can be with me sneaking into abandoned Bio Lab 4, hacking the feed to hide me and
Ryan, and her running the test herself right then and there,” Darcy confirmed.

“And you’re sure your body isn’t just having an adverse reaction to the tech they used?” Bucky
asked, but there was definitely a glimmer of something in his eyes.

“We chose that lab because there was an ultrasound machine in it from when Doctor Shelby tried
breeding trained hamsters or some shit like that,” she replied, letting her own emotions edge towards
the surface. “As of right now, precisely four people know this is a probability, and three of them are
in this room. We totally need to send this woman a gift basket, or just plain cash at this point.”

“And you think we can trust her? We’ve already learned the hard way that-” Bucky started, but was
cut off.

“Her maiden name is Pinkerton,” Darcy announced. When Ryan had revealed that, it took her a
stupidly long time to make the connection and, if she hadn’t done research on her matches, she
probably never wouldhave at all.

“Wait, Pinky had kids?” Bucky asked, more to himself than anyone else.

“Yep, and you should ask her about some of her besties growing up, there may be a few others you
recognize,” Darcy confirmed.

Steve shook his head, though she couldn’t tell if it was in disbelief or objection. “There is no way
she’s old enough. Unless... Grandkid?”

Darcy nodded. “You can check with Stark because I’m sure he’s got proof of lineage or some crap
like that, but there’s probably a reason she was not only hired but given direct access to y’all.” She
smiled a little before she added, “She said, and I quote, ‘Howlies look after their own.’ She also said
you two are behind on the kid front let alone grandkid front unless a rumor about Buckster and a
French farmhand is correct but even someone she called ‘Uncle Denny’ denies that one.”

“Never touched the girl, though her brother was tempting,” Bucky mused fondly. At the thwap he
received against his shoulder, he defended himself with, “You were stuck back in the States and I
thought I was going to die. Nothing came of it, I swear. Window shopping was fine, but I never
purchased the goods.” Steve thwapped him again for good measure, but stopped when Bucky
pointed out, “Can we get back to the important part here? The possibly being parents part?”

He tugged Darcy close and pressed his lips against her temple, only to have Steve tug her right back
to do the same thing on her other side after a brief foray down to the little star on her neck first. “Do we need to have this confirmed officially?” he asked against her curls.

“She said that’s up to us,” Darcy replied. “We can either keep this quiet so literally no one knows until it’s obvious, or make it official and have as many people trying to help us as to off us.”

That was, of course, the completely wrong thing to say. They started talking to themselves, and each other, and almost at her more than with her. Plotting, planning, scheming and all that good stuff, which she probably would have taken more seriously if Steve hadn’t jumped up and started pacing while still without a stitch on him. She had enough around the time he turned and declared, “And of course that taco truck is right out. She doesn’t leave the building without an escort-”

“Stop!” she shouted, cutting them both off. If they continued, she’d mean that in multiple ways. She had fashioned a toga-like robe out of one of the blankets and now sat on the couch, kicking her feet out in frustration. “Remember the part about me making my own damned decisions? Because I do. This is not about you. Hell, this isn’t even completely about me, though I have a lot more to say than either of you. And I will say it. And you will listen. Or I will have Nat toss me so deep into the black that you never find me or the potential spawn again.”

“Darcy...” and “Doll...” overlapped each other as both Boys came to heel at the threat. If anyone could do it, it’d be Natasha. Not that she really wanted to go the single mother route sans her matches, but she was willing to if necessary. New life, new identity, still have Thor see through it all and come for tapas; it could be worse. It also could be better, which is what she was hoping to achieve.

She crossed her arms over herself and glared at them both, enough so that neither dared to sit next to her and rightfully cowered instead. “We do this, and there are going to be ground rules. Number one will be no making decisions without checking with me first. I might decide I don’t want to decide and let you have at it, but it’s still a damned choice. There will be no restriction of movement nor job duties unless the kid and I are at risk at that precise moment. There will be no self-enforced restrictions of your own for what you believe to be our sake either - if the world is at risk, you damned well better save it. Think of it as doing it for the descendent-to-be if needed, whatever gets you through your Wheaties. There will be no hovering and there will be downtime as any or all of us see fit, including downtime from each other. Are these points understood, as well as the caveat that they are to be added to when I can think straight?”

Bucky placed a hand on her knit-covered knee, and promised, “Understood doll.” Of course, that was way too good to be true, because he followed it up with, “But there needs to be some ground rules for you as well. No overdoing it. Rest when you need to. No thirty-six hour runs in the lab without a break.”

“Regular visits to a trusted medical professional. Follow the advice of that professional, even if it means you have to get someone else to carry something or we install a fridge with snacks in your lab,” Steve chimed in. Softer now, and with the damned puppy dog eyes she had a hard time saying no to, he added, “And please, let us try to keep you safe? Not suffocatingly so, just... safe?”

He dipped his head and even did the blinking thing and she knew she was a goner. She glanced over to Buck to find he was doing his own version of The Look and had to actively try not to curse out loud. She managed, kind of, with the announcement of, “You tag me like a fricken penguin in the Arctic and I will have your balls, and not in a fun way.”

“Heart,” they both agreed, far too easily for her liking.

They didn’t actually leave their floor that night. In truth, they barely left the living room until it was
time to go to actual sleep. Steve made dinner and Bucky made her see stars that weren’t just etched into their skin after she pointed out that pregnancy sex was a thing, they had literally just done it, and it wasn’t like it was going to make twins. Steve still seemed doubtful and Bucky was far too gentle and careful and she appreciated their concern but also appreciated that her wants were likely to increase with her hormones over the next few months. Eventually, she may declare herself off limits and curse everything about their existence as her body developed and changed but, for now, she hadn’t reached that point and would really like them to recognize that fact.

In the morning, Jane and Thor emerged from their love nest about the same time they emerged from theirs. Thor took one look at her and his eyes lit up wide and bright. As he picked her up and spun her around and shouted his joy to both the heavens and to those gathered in the common area of a thankfully secured floor, Darcy muttered, “There goes the secret option.”

Both Clint and Natasha were instantly in front of her, arms crossed in damn near identical poses. “Is there something you want to share with the rest of the class?” Clint prompted.

For her part, Natasha mused, “I am impressed by the nurse, assuming this was the news she managed to keep quiet?”

Darcy found herself ushered to a chair like she was some kind of invalid even though she wasn’t even showing yet. There was a semi-circle of intimidation in front of her and her Boys behind her and she felt as trapped as she did protected. “Okay, ground rules before we get started: Back off. Back down. No one goes after Nurse Awesome. No one makes decisions for me without my consent. Someone volunteers to keep these idiots under control,” she rattled off, finishing with a jerk of her thumb towards her matches.

“Probably not. Not a chance. We never would do anything save for give her a raise. We’ll try. And it’s going to take a village,” Tony spat right back at her.

Pepper tried to soothe things over like she usually did and cut in to say, “Why don’t you tell us precisely what is going on versus the assumptions, and we’ll see what we can do?”

That seemed reasonable enough, though she was still doubtful of the actual success rate, so she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and followed through with what had worked so far when she blurted, “They missed the kid.”

People started talking all at once, but she was trained to find Jane’s voice in a crowd, so she concentrated on that when she asked, “But how? We saw the damage. You were literally sliced open.”

She opened her eyes to find a fuck ton of expectant gazes and a sudden lack of sound. “Best guess? They were after Super Sperm and figured they were lucky if they got some of the match’s eggs. It’s why you found no embryo with Evil Nurse - she didn’t have one.”

“But why didn’t this show in the scans earlier?” Pepper asked. If Darcy was a betting woman, and she was, there was a fair chance heads were going to roll for lack of thorough follow up. The stress, the worry, the ramifications. Heads. More than one.

“Everyone concentrated on the left what with the slicing and dicing and the video and all that,” she explained. She held up her shirt to reveal the rapidly fading bruise that she was pretty confident was the shared blood with the embryo helping her along a little faster than the norm. Or maybe it was just her bond with her matches, she wasn’t completely positive. Either way, she went on and said, “Nurse of Awesomeness is the one who noticed the slightest shadow on the right, and thought to check the levels and do the ultrasound and all sorts of whatever.”
“And she’s certain?” about four people asked at once.

“As certain as we can be this early in the game,” Darcy confirmed. Then, because her own emotions were a little high and her filters were a little low, she rambled in a way that she nearly instantly regretted. “She thinks the serum might speed a few things up, or at least change a few things timing-wise. She also thinks this might be a one in a million shot, especially with the damage to the other side. I think we owe her a crate of whatever her favorite whatever is, and possibly make that like a monthly service.”

“One in a million,” Thing One whispered.

“Well, we always did like to play the odds,” Thing Two whispered back.

“And you think they aren’t going to go overprotective on your soon to be pampered ass?” Clint snorted.

“Threat of castration should they cross the line,” Darcy replied cheerfully. “I figure between Natasha and Ryan and I, we should be able to make the threat as real as it can get.”

“Good girl,” Nat said absently enough to mean she was likely plotting something of her own. Darcy just hoped it was of the positive, or at least in her favor, but reasoned there was a chance at something black ops level in the future should things go wrong.

Which they wouldn’t.

Because she wouldn’t let them.

A quick glance around and she was fairly certain she had some backup in that department, whether she wanted it or not.

End.

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