Ice and Fire

by SteeleHoltingOn

Summary

Girl Meets Boy; Boy Meets Girl. They fall in love. Then it gets complicated.

"Where does that leave you?" Tony wondered.

"Odd man out, I think," Darcy replied.

*COMPLETE*

Darcy Lewis is Tony Stark's daughter. This is a story about family, the Stark Legacy, Darcy and Steve falling in love, and bringing Bucky Barnes home. Loving one person isn't easy. Loving two? Much harder.
My headcanon going into this story is this: We don't see much of Steve Rogers in the movies. Just a few snarky remarks, a handful of comments about his abilities when it comes to women, and a penchant for getting in trouble. I'm writing about that Steve, not Captain America.

A huge shoutout to Miss Cora for the idea that Darcy is Tony's daughter and to Jadziabear for this OT3. I can't get either out of my head now because it just seems perfect in every way.

Look for me on tumblr: SteeleHoltingOn
Prologue

Chapter Summary

An old conversation.

Chapter Notes

Beautiful cover art by Lovesfic.

09/16 Update: A gentle reminder: it is not okay to upload this story to any website or file sharing service. That right belongs solely to me. Unauthorized uploads will be removed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Do you miss him, Aunt Peggy?"

"Of course I do, Darcy."

"Would you have married him?"

"Yes. Steve was a good man, in every way possible. He would have been a fantastic partner in life."

"That seems really sad. You never got a chance. It’s not fair."

Aunt Peggy gave her an odd smile, one that she wouldn’t understand for another fifteen years or so.

"When Steve died. I thought so too. I was falling in love with him. And I think he might have come to love me. But after the war, I had a great deal of time to think. One of his good friends became my good friend and I came to realize that Steve already had someone he loved very much. He changed the course of the war--of history--because of that love.

"If Steve had been in love with me, he would have found a way to come home. But, you see, Steve had already lost his love. I didn’t understand it then, but his soul had been destroyed. He shaped the world, one last time, because that was the sort of man he was. And then he went to be with his love. I met him when he was only twenty-four. He died two years later, far too young, like so many of the men I knew."

"Aunt Peggy, that’s awful."

"It is. But Darcy, Steve taught me something. We should all hold out for that kind of love. It’s worth climbing every impossible obstacle to have it."

"Did you love Uncle Daniel that much?"

"I still do."

Chapter End Notes

3/8/15 Edit based on Agent Carter series.
Girl Meets Boy

Chapter Summary

Darcy meets Steve.

The first time Darcy Lewis officially met Steve Rogers, she was 23, he was 93, and she wondered how Hell could have blue eyes, for that’s what she saw in them. He didn’t notice her that afternoon. He couldn’t. Not with loneliness and devastation clear in his expression. He’d been awake for only a handful of days.

She’d been helping Pepper that morning when Steve was brought to the Tower. All of Howard Stark’s research was in Tony’s (Pepper’s) hands and Tony (Pepper) was not interested in handing any of it over to S.H.I.E.L.D.. So any medical testing on Steve’s person was done at Stark Industries, ergo, Stark Tower.

But medical wasn’t Darcy’s job, and Steve didn’t see her anyway. Still, she felt for him. Probably appreciated his anatomy in an entirely inappropriate manner, given his condition. So she crossed her fingers that he would be okay and went on about her business.

Her current job was rather esoteric. She had a lab in the R&D department, right under Tony’s penthouse. She’d finished her internship with Jane Foster and graduated with honors (naturally). Tony asked her to keep an eye on Jane’s research. So she did. She liked Jane, especially whenever her friend eyed her suspiciously and accused her of being far smarter than she pretended. Most people didn’t notice. Darcy was never offended. Her privacy was more important than bragging about her accomplishments and connections.

Jane really didn’t need to know about Darcy’s fascination with robots and other mechanical objects. Maybe someday, when Jane wasn’t halfway around the world, Darcy would spill her secrets. For now though, she was happy when Jane asked her to help out here and there.

The arrangement worked for both of them. Darcy played in her own lab with shiny things in New York. Jane continued her research about all things space. Occasionally, Darcy would conveniently end up in town wherever Jane was and pull her out of her increasing funk over Thor’s inexplicable absence.

She saw Steve a few times over the next two months and may have overheard a couple of conversations (a couple is close to a dozen, right?). Tony and Steve avoided each other (Daddy issues), but Tony still gave Steve unprecedented access to the Tower (pretty much anything he could want) and even his garage so that Steve could come and go in relative peace. Darcy was certain she’d cleaned her fingerprints off the bike last time (and the time before that. The Harley was a prime piece of metal).

Still, Darcy listened. She was friends with most of the admin staff in the Tower, had inside intel from both Tony and Pepper, and tried not to drool too much whenever Steve crossed her path. The superhero tragic angel look did a number on her and she did not need that sort of complication. Tony was enough in that department and look how that had turned out. She still had nightmares.
Boy Meets Girl

Chapter Summary

Steve meets Darcy.

Chapter Notes

A/N (Updated):
There is a comic book (Fury's Big Week) which indicates Iron Man 2, Thor and the events at the end of CA: TFA all happened the week before the Avengers. I'm ignoring all of that because it just doesn't make me happy.

Since Thor happened May 2011 and Avengers in April 2012 (U.S. release dates), I went with Steve waking up around six months before the Avengers.

In other news, I'm flabbergasted by the response to this story so far ... and we aren't even scratching the surface! Thank you for the comments, kudos, subscriptions and bookmarks. It's like getting a hug from a whole lot of people!

The second time Darcy and Steve officially met, she stormed into Tony’s garage intent on taking the Bugatti for a spin (if only to piss him off) when she came across Steve working on his bike. Or rather, she stopped mid-rant when faced with a pair of starched blue denim jeans, dark boots with nary a scuff on them, and a skin-tight shirt streaked with grease. It was not to her credit that a full minute passed before she realized the body holding all that up was changing the oil on the absolutely sweet ride currently parked in the garage. Or rather, he had finished changing the oil and was cleaning up. She stared (drooled) while he rolled to his feet and ran a cloth over every inch of chrome and paint, working out the dirt so that every last surface gleamed. His attention to detail entranced her as much as the view (okay, maybe not quite as much, but close).

Mussed blond hair was settled with a hand running through it. He slanted a lazy smile in her direction that had nothing to do the Captain America screensaver on her laptop (double points for annoying Tony with that one). The terrible fires she’d seen before were banked, replaced with a sensual gleam that did all sorts of stupid things to her girl parts. "You've been patient. Want a ride?"

A lovely Harley between her thighs? Duh. "With or without you?"

He let out the first real laugh she'd heard in all those eavesdropped conversations. The gleam turned into something more like real interest. "It's my bike. I’m sure I’m going to have to insist on riding with you or you might not bring it back." He stood, wiping his hands on the cloth and stuffing it into his back pocket.

“I do love shiny things,” she quipped. “Darcy Lewis." She held out her hand. He took it, gave her a proper handshake. Holy shit, he was tall. And big all over. A little like Thor with shorter hair, less Asgardian armor and more American farm boy. (Darcy refused to think of the tiny crush she harbored for the demigod. It was easier to ignore with Steve standing close enough to smell his
"Steve Rogers. But you know that, I think. I’ve seen you in the tower. Do you work for Stark?"

Darcy tilted her head, flirting easily. “How about you take me for a ride, I’ll buy you a cup of coffee, and we trade carefully edited life stories?” When he let out a stunned bark of laughter, she fell a little bit in love. It was the most honest reaction she’d seen from him and was breathtaking. He smiled, really smiled, and she melted into a ridiculous puddle of goo.

Steve slotted the tools he’d borrowed into the proper places in the garage (warming her mechanical heart), wiped his hands down one more time and raised an eyebrow. “Helmet?”

She dug for one in the locker that was hers. It was covered in red glitter. “It matches my lipstick,” she offered.

“I’d be polite and say I hadn’t noticed, but I don’t like lying.” His eyes skimmed downward, then back up to her face. “Do you have a jacket?”

“Not here.”

“Borrow mine.” He picked up the leather coat he’d set to the side and held it out.

Darcy flirted again as she slipped it on. “Oooh, are you going to ask me to go steady?”

Steve grinned. “Something tells me that isn’t how things work anymore.” He settled onto the Harley, holding out a hand so she could balance while straddling the prime piece of metal. She had to admire the way he transferred her grip from his hand to his waist, patting her fingers so she would keep them there. She brought the other hand up to match.

She couldn’t decide if her drooling problem was due to man or machine, then mentally kicked herself for even having the conversation. The heat under her hands got her damp much faster than the vibration of the bike as Steve revved up the engine and they roared out of the garage.

The speed was ridiculous. Steve’s reflexes were perfect. Darcy held on, fascinated by the movement of the man on the bike. Well, that and the ripple of muscles in his back as he wove through traffic. The thin, incredibly tight shirt did nothing to conceal what was underneath (note to self: burn incense to the fashion gods later for the creation of such a thing).

When Steve brought the motorcycle to a quick stop at their destination, she was pressed into his back and got a good sniff of the maleness that underscored the cologne. (Yummy. Score another point for the hot guy on the bike.)

He reversed his earlier move, dropping his hand to hers on his waist and giving her a solid grip as she dismounted first. He followed her into the coffee shop, and when Darcy glanced back, she busted him checking out her assets.

Without an ounce of apology, he raised an eyebrow. “Nice boots.”

She grinned.

Coffee was fabulous (caramel latte, extra shot, whipped and sprinkled). Darcy was charmed by Steve’s old-fashioned manners, faint-but-unmistakable Brooklyn accent and his attempts to understand all the changes in the past seventy years. She learned that he spent a good part of each day surfing the internet and reading history books.
“It’s like joining the army, Darcy. I have a whole vocabulary to learn, a bunch of technology I’ve never seen, and a lot of new people to meet.” Steve was frank, and Darcy thought she heard a thread of anger. If it was, he shrugged it off and sipped his coffee (black, splash of cream).

“Seems lonely. I’m not a dictionary, I’m pretty good with modern tech, and I’m definitely new to you. Think we can be friends?” she asked.

“I’d like that.” The sincerity in Steve’s reply did ridiculous things to her insides again. Hoo boy.

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He’d seen her in the Tower, of course. More than once. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Stark Industries, she seemed to appear often enough. She must have serious clearance to get her on the levels where he usually ended up, but she had a relaxed air about her, as if Stark Tower was more her home than a workplace.

He wondered how she had access to Tony’s garage. He might have asked, but Darcy turned the conversation to his favorite music and they got lost in discussing blues versus jazz. (He liked jazz; the blues belonged to B--)

Toward the end of their coffee (date? Did it count?), Steve was already hunting for reasons to go to Stark Tower. Darcy made it easy when she idly wondered if Howard Stark had kept any of Steve’s stuff. The thought hadn’t occurred to him, but made sense, especially now that he knew how long Howard had kept up the search for him.

Darcy helped him with a text message to Pepper Potts (CEO of Stark Industries and Tony’s dame) on his new cell phone (a very compact walkie-talkie of sorts). She assured Steve that he would have to go all the way up the ladder to get what he needed. A few minutes later, he had a reply and an excuse to visit the Tower in two days. He wondered aloud how Darcy knew Ms. Potts.

“Let’s stick with the carefully edited version of the life story and we’ll say it’s because I have a lab near Tony’s. Will that work for now?” Darcy rested her chin on her hands, letting him see her candor and wide laurel green eyes. (Did they ever turn blue?)

But he called her on it. One thing Steve couldn’t handle right now was deception, especially as much as he thought he might like this lady. “Is there any truth to it?”

“All of it.”

The truth. Just not the whole truth. “Then we’ll leave it at that,” he agreed. Her gorgeous smile was worth the concession.

With her arms around his waist and breasts pressing into his back, he was more than distracted as he zipped through traffic on the bike. Really, he was proud of himself. Beautiful dames usually tied his tongue, but she hadn’t seemed to notice how long he’d needed to work himself up to the invitation. Her sassy wit had caught him off guard and delighted him.

For the first time, 1945 seemed like a distant past rather than a mere ten weeks ago. The two hours he and Darcy had spent drinking coffee had grounded him like nothing else since he’d awakened. His fingers itched for a pencil. He focused on the road in front of him instead.
Are We Dating?

Chapter Summary

Steve and Darcy set the rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Thursday, Steve took the express elevator to Pepper Potts’ office, somewhere in the top third of the tower. He’d sort of expected to meet Tony, but Pepper made polite apologies and helped him to sign for all the boxes.

She was a beautiful woman, all clean lines and the palest of shadows. (He’d draw her later.) Darcy mentioned that she’d managed Tony’s personal affairs for years before he dumped Stark Industries in her lap. She now graced covers of magazines as the CEO and had a reputation for being brilliant and ruthless at the conference table. Steve still wondered how Darcy came to know Pepper Potts (need to know, pal).

There were four good-sized boxes, more than Steve had expected, but Pepper had already arranged for a courier service to take them to his apartment in Brooklyn.

He thanked her, and then cleared his throat a couple of times before digging up the courage to ask if Darcy’s laboratory was somewhere close by.

Steve had to cram his hands in his pockets when he was subjected to unexpected scrutiny from rather piercing blue eyes. Pepper’s sharp look reminded him of when Peggy had fired a gun at his new shield (It was just a kiss and one he hadn’t volunteered for. Stark had to set him straight and Steve still felt like a fool over the whole thing).

His unease grew when she insisted on escorting him up a floor to the R&D department. (Odd. He would have thought the CEO would be on the top floor. Then again, the Starks liked their research.) Pepper explained something about an artificial intelligence system, called it JARVIS, and told the voice in the ceiling to offer Steve whatever assistance he needed.

“Of course, Ms. Potts. I am at your service, Captain Rogers.”

“Uh, thank you. JARVIS.”

Loud music with a fast beat like nothing he’d ever imagined echoed down the hallway. The entire floor was empty with gleaming white floors, except for one portion of the far side that was glassed in. Pepper rapped on the closed door then opened it without waiting for Darcy to respond. Not that Darcy could hear anyway.

Darcy flicked a glance at the movement, saw Pepper and smiled. Then she saw Steve. She turned the prettiest shade of pink and Pepper laughed, excusing herself.
“Good luck, Captain,” was her parting shot.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Barefoot, wearing shorts that showed every inch of her legs, and a t-shirt that clung in that sort of way that was meant to be casual but really clung to Darcy’s beautiful curves, she was still gorgeous. Steve scraped his hand through his hair. “Hi.”

“Kill the tunes, J.”

“Of course, Lewis.”

The sound disappeared and Darcy set down the … shiny thing she was working on.

“Did you get your boxes?”

“Oh uh, Miss, Missus—“

“Ms Potts. But you can call her Pepper.”

He shrugged. “Miz Potts is having them sent to my place later today.”

“You live in Brooklyn, right?”

“I do. It’s different now, but at least I know all the street names.” He glanced around her lab, not even pretending to understand all that was scattered about. There was stuff piled everywhere and interesting pieces of art hanging on the walls. “You weren’t joking about liking shiny things. This reminds me of Howard Stark’s place.”

She arched a brow. “Really? How?”

He shrugged and walked to the center of the room, conveniently ending up near Darcy. “He made my shield. It wasn’t even something he was considering for me, just something he’d made and stashed--” He tilted his head and pointed to the overflowing shelves under her workbench. “--there.”

Darcy bit her lip. “I don’t think I’ve ever been compared to Howard Stark. It’s kind of … interesting.”

“Howard is an interesting fellow. Brilliant. Plays hard. Tosses money around like popcorn. But a good man.”

She slanted a curious look in his direction. “That’s not the usual perception of him around Stark Tower.”

“Really?”

Darcy rubbed one foot on top of other foot, drawing attention to the green polish on her toenails. (Pretty feet. Better legs. The sketch he’d started of her hadn’t come close.) “Want to go to dinner with me and we can talk about it?” she asked.

He grinned, appreciating her direct approach, so he replied in kind. “Is this a date where I can pick you up at your place on the bike, or is this where we meet at a bar as a couple of friends drinking a beer together?” (He’d overheard a couple of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents saying something along those lines a couple of weeks ago.)

She wrinkled her nose at him. “A date,” she challenged. “And since I asked, I’ll pick the place.
“Dress nice.”

“Oh good. Then since you picked up the tab on coffee, I’m buying dinner. See you at eight.” He backed away.

“You don’t know where I live,” she called out.

“Sure I do. Pepper texted me your address and told me to skip the tie.” He walked off, whistling. (Definitely earned a pat on the back. Second date. A first for him.)

He didn’t mention that Pepper also sent him four pictures with various options on how to dress for the date. An untucked shirt offended his sensibilities, so he opted for the black slacks, a button-down shirt in light blue with the collar open, and a dinner jacket in black leather. The latter was a nod to Darcy’s fascination with his brown one.

He kissed her that night, properly, right the doorstep to her place on 45th. She wasn’t shy either, and by the time his brain convinced him to stop tasting that fabulous mouth, he was seeing stars.

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A whole week passed before Steve asked her to walk with him in Central Park on a Sunday. (She’d put her phone number in his cell phone herself over dinner. Then built two ‘bots while she was waiting and debated dumping them on DUM-E for company.) The sun was shining, even if fall was in the air. She found a floaty dress, sure that floaty dresses were an absolute requirement for walks (well, that and fabulous-but-comfortable boots).

When he arrived at two o’clock on the dot, she eyed his butter-soft leather jacket, decided high school (well, high school like she saw on t.v.) tactics would not be out of place here, and left her sweater in the closet. But before she could step outside, he neatly slipped in and closed the door behind him. (Smooth, Steve.) She put her hand on her hip. “Hi.”

He reached for her. “I’ve been thinking about this since last week, Darce.” His mouth hovered just long enough for her to slide her arms around his waist. (Did she mention she loved the nickname?)

God, he could kiss. She thanked whoever taught him the right way to nibble and taste and do that thing with his tongue. He seemed to have a fascination with her bottom lip and that was fine by her, he could stay all day.

But he didn’t. He broke it off with a swipe of his thumb across her mouth. She caught it, kissed it. His blue eyes absolutely glowed. Then he tugged her out the door and whistled them into a cab.

She discovered he was an artist. They walked until Steve was so distracted, he sheepishly admitted to bringing a sketchbook and pencil, both stashed inside his coat pocket. He coaxed her onto a bench and asked if he could draw her.

“Oh okay. But it’s cool enough if we aren’t walking.”

She eyeballed the leather and he raised an eyebrow. “I’m really stuck here, Darce. I’m gonna take my jacket off ‘cause it’ll be in my way when I draw. But if you put it on, I’m gonna miss some of your best assets.” He deliberately let his eyes wander downward.
She cackled, absolutely thrilled by his snark. “Holy shit, Steve. Captain America, calling it like it is.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know, I think that’s the first time you’ve mentioned that.” He tried to laugh, but a flicker of pain washed across his face and Darcy lost her smile.

She leaned in to brush her lips across his cheek. “I don’t think of you that way,” she said softly. “You’re my friend.”

The light came back into his eyes. That sensual play of his lips should definitely have been classified as an unfair advantage. Darcy saw it coming and didn’t even try to get out of the way. “Just a friend?” He quirked an eyebrow. “Because I don’t recall having these kinds of thoughts about my friends.”

He kept his eyes firmly locked with hers, and Darcy could not look away. “You know, despite all of your polished manners, you really do have a dirty mind.” She volleyed, hard. “What category gets me naked under the covers with you?”

Steve’s jaw dropped, and he turned a dark red. “Darcy Lewis, point, set and match goes to the lady in the green dress.” He mimed toasting her with a drink. She waited, drumming her fingers on the park bench. He considered as the blush faded. Taking her fingers, he slid his lips across the tips, hot breath making them twitch. “Girlfriend, three more dates, including a trip to Coney Island where I neck with you on the Ferris Wheel and one to the pictures where we’ll do the same. You?”

With her other hand, she twirled a lock of her hair and gave him an under the lashes look worthy of Scarlett herself. “I’ll see your status and three dates, but I’ll raise a day with you in your apartment. Can you cook?”

“I’m a Brooklyn boy. I make a good spaghetti sauce. Thick enough to hold a spoon upright, sturdy enough to fill your appetite, and guaranteed to make your mouth water.”

“I’ll bring a bottle of wine. Did I mention I like your metaphors?”

“Not as much as I like your smart mouth. Now get comfortable so I can draw you.” He shed his jacket, handing it to her.

Darcy used it for a pillow on the arm of the bench and leaned back into the sunlight. She studied Steve as he drew. She had it bad, wished she could slow down the slide (yeah, sure, see how well that works) because she knew Steve had more layers than a DaVinci painting. Still waters run deep and Steve was the epitome of shatteringly beautiful glass oceans.

She’d heard the rumors. Read the stories of his demise. Aunt Peggy was still alive and had told of her own similar fall for a young man named Steve Rogers. (Don’t think too hard on that, Darcy Lewis. It’s weird.) Sometimes she had to squint to put herself in Steve’s shoes and think of all he’d gone.

Darcy wondered if she was the rebound girl, the one who built him back up for his next relationship. (Okay, that idea sucked, but was probably true. It felt right and Darcy tended to trust her instincts. Didn’t stop her from making stupid plans to sleep with Steve Rogers as soon as three dates and spaghetti dinner were checked off the list.)

But Steve liked her, was never condescending even as he held doors open for her. In turn, she accepted his manners as genuine, appreciated his wit and didn’t act like he was a fuddy-duddy trapped in the forties. (Hands down, best relationship so far and all they had done was kiss.) Of course, now she had a legitimate reason to think of sex. The anticipation was going to fucking kill her. (Holy shit mental note: buy new underwear.)
Chapter End Notes

Musical reference: Lady Gaga "Applause"
Rationed, Or Whatever They Call It Now

Chapter Summary

Three dates later ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The prerequisite three dates were over and Steve was putting together his mother’s sauce. He slid the meatballs in with a scant teaspoon of sugar and settled the lid on again to simmer for another hour.

He skimmed the apartment to make sure the fairy folk hadn’t sneaked in to scatter anything about. But it was as neat as a pin, just as he’d left it.

After Tuesday’s movie, Steve had zero doubts about Darcy’s plans for tonight. She’d made her expectations clear and expected him to deliver the goods, so to speak. He had a box of condoms stashed in his nightstand, with a few tucked into the drawer of the coffee table for good measure (and one in his pocket, just in case).

Steve had caught the sly remarks both at S.H.I.E.L.D. and at Stark Tower regarding his supposed virginity. Surely Darcy had heard, but he’d done his level best to undermine that sort of thinking even before she’d asked how to get between his sheets.

He wondered if she would spend the night and had no idea how to ask. But he’d cleaned his bathroom anyway, hung an extra towel and wash cloth on the rack, and left out the little bottles of soap and shampoo he’d picked up from the grocery store. A spare toothbrush was in a drawer.

He blew out his breath and sat on the sofa, head in hands. This whole dating with Darcy seemed too damned perfect. After the third one, he’d wondered if Fury had set them up. Darcy, with her curves and sass, fulfilled every secret fantasy he’d harbored. Certainly, she made the past more distant and less hurtful. In her company, he managed to forget—well, everything. (Not that. He would never forget that.)

The truth? Even if this was only a fantasy, he still wanted it for as long as it lasted. If that made him a selfish bastard, then he was guilty as charged. But if Darcy wasn’t the real thing, then Steve’s instincts were off the mark. Given that he’d spent two years living off his instincts, he didn’t think he was wrong.

The doorbell rang. Steve checked the fit of his shirt and rolled down his sleeves to button them again. He opened the door. Darcy had on a white dress covered in bright red poppies that skillfully navigated her figure. The hem hit just above her knee and her arms were bare.

“Curves like that should be illegal.”

She bit her red-stained mouth, her eyes dancing with anticipation. “Well, they aren’t illegal, but you do need a license to drive them.”

And with that, every bit of tension lifted away. He pulled her inside and rubbed his lips on hers, anxious for the taste. She smelled like—wow—something clean and breezy. (Spring, in that moment
“Steve Rogers, reporting for training,” he said, as his hands skimmed her back then pulled her in to make the kiss more. (Not yet. Dinner first.)

She melted against him, sealing every inch of those curves from his knees to his mouth. notyetnotyetnotyet “Darcy.” He stepped back, holding his hands up. “I’m not gonna make it past the couch if we keep that up.”

The laugh that bubbled up in her was pure joy, nothing devious about it. “You like tormenting the both of us, don’t you?”

But he slanted a look down at her, one he hoped she could read. “It’s only our first time once, Darce. I don’t want to mess it up.”

“I don’t think you can,” she said. But she let him go and picked up the bag (giant purse?) she’d let slide to the floor. It was to her credit that he hadn’t noticed how big it was. Enough to count as an overnight bag and yielded a bottle of wine. “I brought a merlot,” she said, as she held it up. “It’s a newer wine, softer than a cabernet and not quite as dry. If you haven’t tried it, it’s pretty good.”

“I haven’t.” He walked over to the table where he’d set out a pair of wine glasses and a corkscrew. The cork popped easily and he set the wine to breathe. He didn’t know much about them, but his time in France had yielded at least a little information that wasn’t related to the war.

Steve turned the flame on under the pasta water. While they waited, he touched Darcy on the back of her shoulder, slid his hand down to her wrist and brought it up so that he could lay a kiss on the heart beat pulsing through the thin skin. “I’m glad you’re here.”

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She shivered in anticipation. So she retreated, pivoting on a toe to stroll out of the kitchen.

“Damn it, Darce. Seamed stockings?” His voice was just a little strained.

She halted, throwing a glance over her shoulder. “Oh? See something you like?” (Booyah. Score one for Darcy. They had been a bitch to find. Yay for Google and a little store in Georgia that still made them the old-fashioned way.)

Clearing his throat, he retrieved the bottle and began pouring it into both wine glasses. “You know, in all the time I was growing up, every dame I knew wore seamed stockings. Just got used to it. Until I woke up and none of the ladies had them anymore, I’d no idea how damned sexy they were.” His voice was unsteady, but held a hint of humor.

“Steve Rogers, tsk tsk, such language,” she admonished. She glowed inside. Finding an outfit that bridged Steve’s past without forgetting the present had been a challenge. She didn’t want him lost in the yesterdays, but she didn’t want him to feel ashamed for appreciating them either.

Darcy wandered through Steve’s apartment as garlic and basil permeated the air. The apartment seemed timeless, not old, with a few good antiques and fabrics that weren’t outdated a bit. It was a far cry from her place, all decked out in colors and lines. She picked up a sketchbook he had lying on the coffee table. “May I look?”
He shrugged. “Sure, go ahead.”

The pages were yellowed on the edges. There were dozens of faces, mostly from the USO tour. Girls, outfits, dressing rooms, impressions of the cities where they performed. “Wow. I didn’t realize how many places you went.”

“All across the eastern seaboard to raise money for war bonds, then we went to the European theatre to entertain the troops. We ended up in Italy. You know the rest.”

She flipped back to one of the pages that caught her eye. “A dancing monkey? Is that how you felt?”

Steve didn’t answer. Instead, he reached out to her waist and tugged her back into the kitchen. “Sit.” He motioned her into the chair. His dining area adjoined the kitchen, and Darcy sat at the table with the wine he set down near her hand. “I feel tongue-tied when you’re out there and I’m in here.” He eyed the notebook. “You know, a couple of years ago, that was brand new.”

She hesitated, her hand hovering over the next page. She tried to make a witty reply and failed. “Steve. I’ve tried to imagine. I … stating the obvious .. but I don’t know how you’re dealing with all of this.”

He knelt in front of her. “I have bad days sometimes.” The honest admission and dark sadness in his face jolted her heart. “But you … you help.” Darcy leaned forward with both arms and Steve rested his chin on her shoulder. They stayed that way until the timer on the pasta dinged.

The spaghetti was good. (Official preparer of sauce for the foreseeable future: Steve.) Steve inhaled a couple of bowls, a healthy portion of salad and a half a loaf of bread, but Darcy was used to his appetite now. The conversation flowed easily though he smirked a little when she admitted to having a degree from MIT and another from Culver.

“Explains the lab in Stark Tower.” He poured each of them another glass of wine. “Can’t imagine Stark letting someone like that out of his hands.”

Darcy muttered, “You have no idea.” He raised an eyebrow, but she changed the subject to the latest biography Steve was reading (Kennedy, yes, she had opinions).

They cleaned up the kitchen together. Steve was a little bit (understatement?) of a neat-freak, and Darcy figured it would be faster to dive in and help. When they were done, Steve draped the damp dish towel on the oven handle (folded in thirds).

“Now, how do I properly express my appreciation to Miss Lewis for her assistance in the kitchen?” He tilted his head, waiting, hand in pockets. (Not fair. Nobody should be able to look that innocent when asking for sex.)

“Did we check off our list?”

He nodded. “Three dates, including Coney Island, a movie, and a third non-specific one, plus a day in my apartment. And I’ve introduced you as my girlfriend in public at least twice.”

“I’ve got you covered on the boyfriend thing.”

“When?”

“When I mentioned you to my parents.” She bit her lip, waiting for him to ask.
“How did Tony take it?"

She jerked. “Fuck me sideways! How did--”

Steve put a finger on her lips, grinning at her reaction as he slid his other hand around her waist. “I know--knew--your grandfather. You are more like him than you know. And it explains why your lab is a floor above Stark Industries. Your half-empty lab floor that should be your apartment, right? If Tony had his way?"

“He hates that I have my own, non-Stark approved place to live.”

“Is Pepper your mom?’

“In all but biology.”

“No wonder she gave me the stink-eye when I asked how to find you.”

“She likes you.” Darcy frowned. “Have you even met my dad?”

“No. He’s still avoiding Captain America.”

“I’ll work on that.”

“Darcy?”

“Yes?”

“I can think about five different things I want to talk about, and none of them include Tony Stark right at this moment.” Steve’s gaze dropped to her rack. (Which looked absolutely magnificent in the sweetheart neckline of this dress.)

“Name them.”

“Where do you want to do this? Can I peel you out of that dress? Please tell me I can touch your breasts, and--”

“Shut up and kiss me, Steve.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He did better than kiss her. His hands went everywhere too. She hitched her legs around his hips and he carried (carried!) her into his room and sat down on the bed without letting her go. He dragged the zipper on the back of her dress down with one hand and gathered up the back of the skirt with the other.

His mouth started on her collarbone as he nudged the fabric off her shoulder. She found the buttons on his shirt, fumbled at them a bit and then shoved it wide.

“Damn it, Steve, not fair.” She meant the extra undershirt.

He grinned and--still holding on to her ass--shrugged out of the button down.

“T-shirt too.”

He reached backward with one hand and pulled his shirt over her head. She helped, shoving it off.
“Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Where do I start?”

“Anywhere you want, doll.”

She dove in. Hard, hard muscle twitched and flexed as her fingers slid along his collarbone and down his pecs (“acres and acres, and it’s all mine”). She jerked when he pulled the dress off her shoulders, trapping her arms in place. “Not fair.”

“Oh? I thought I could do this.” He nudged her bra strap as he thumbed the soft peaks through the fabric. “Mmm. Red. Definitely my favorite.” (They were soft. Now they were hard as rocks demanding more attention.)

“Then you’re going to love my panties.”

Steve stole a kiss as he dipped a finger inside the lace of her bra and stroked the tip of a nipple. “All in good time. I’m a very patient man.”

(Not what she wanted to hear.) “Fuck.”

“Darcy, doll, that’s what I’m trying to do.” He lifted her enough to take the nub fully into his mouth and laved it, suckled it. He pulled away, blew cool air across it. Her eyes crossed.

“Come on, Steve, I wanna touch, too.” (Don’t whine, Darcy.)

“Not done yet. Still one to go. You know, this front clasp concept is very handy. No fumbling, no missing the mark. Just simple, easy access.” He talked as he stroked the silky fabric, plucking a bit. She twitched in time to his movements.

Darcy had zero idea that her boobs were sensitive enough to do anything more than be short stop on the way to victory. Never say she wasn’t up for learning new things.

With one breast in Steve’s mouth and the other trapped between his fingertips, he drew on them both, alternating intensity until she began to shake. “You are not seriously going to make me come that way. Oh!” (Yes, yes, he did.) She might even have let out a little shriek.

Steve let her back down into his lap, exactly where her very damp panties now rested against an extremely firm cock. “That’s one.” He unzipped the rest of her dress and helped her push it down to her waist. She wiggled so that she could stand up. The poppy dress of white and red tumbled to the floor.

She shook off the bra, biting her lip as Steve seemed a little distracted by the view. “You’re keeping score? Doesn’t seem like a very good idea, Rogers.”

“Says you, Lewis. Your breasts are perfect.” One hand drifted to the top of her thigh to stroke along the silk and lace of the stocking.

She inhaled, stretching her arms over her head and posing just a little, in nothing more than her garter, panties, stockings and pair of crimson heels. “I know.”

“I’m gonna draw you, y’know.” She bit her lip when his voice roughened as he drank her in.

“Like one of your USO girls? I’d like that.”
Steve cleared his throat. “Yeah, okay. I really like the panties.” He shooed her hands away when she tugged her thumbs into the edges. “No, leave ‘em on.”

“Kay. But you’ve got too many clothes on.” She tugged at the belt and unfastened it. Steve shook off his slacks. Darcy choked back a laugh. “I don’t think those are holding very much in.” His cock was straining, and she just had to reach out and stroke the length of it.

He groaned, encouraging her as they worked his underwear off. She pushed him backward onto the bed where he stretched out without a stitch of clothing. “Holy Mary, Mother of God,” she breathed.

“Darcy,” he admonished.

“Whoops. Just expressing my appreciation for divine gifts,” she said with a grin as she crawled on top of him to explore. “Steve?” She trailed her fingers along his sides. “What’s this?”

*James Buchanan Barnes* was tattooed in beautiful script over Steve’s ribs. The print was small enough that she could cover it with the palm of her hand. And it looked new, though it had healed over.

“Had it done a week ago.”

“Will you tell me about it later?” She dropped a kiss in the middle of the writing, smirking when Steve hissed with pleasure.

“Oh if you keep doing that.”

“Hmm. Okay, I can be talked into that.” Darcy did her best to find the little places on Steve that turned him on, though really, she was hard-pressed to find anything he didn’t like. Which said something about her technique, their compatibility, or he was that hard-up for sex.

“Let’s go with the first two, Darce,” he muttered as he cupped her breasts again.

“Brain-to-mouth filter disengaged, Steve,” she offered by way of apology.

“Just the way I like it.”

She eased backward, trailing her nails along the ripples in his abs. “May I?”

He smiled. “Have at it.”

He was definitely proportional to his build. Darcy didn’t figure she was going to try to do the porn version of a blow job, (yeah … no. Not choking here, not even for Captain America.) so she didn’t go that route. Instead, she explored. Gentle fingertips traced veins, the circle of her hand stroked along the velvet soft skin. Steve tucked a pillow behind his head so he could watch. She winked at him when she took him into her mouth.

She took her time, enjoying herself and the flavor of him on her tongue. She breathed in the salty damp mingling with his cologne. (Oceans. It reminded her of oceans.) She swirled the smooth cap as she drew her hand along his length. When she reached the base, tightening her hand as she did, he jolted.

“S--so goood, Darce. Feels fabulous.”

She lifted her head. “That’s a lot of alliteration. Steve?”

“mmm?”
“Your cock is perfect.” She dove back in, wrapping her mouth around the head and sucking hard enough that he bucked up, wanting more. She stayed that way until he reached down, nudging her off.

“Not yet. I want the first time inside you. M’close enough and it’s been a long time. Not gonna take much.”

She bit her lip because her nipples were still tingling, and she was definitely wet. “I thought maybe that was just me.”

Steve leaned up on an elbow and fumbled in his dresser drawer for a condom. He held it up. “Me or you?”

She nipped it from his fingers. “Definitely me.”

“Oh good, ‘cause these are a little different and I don’t want to break it.”

Darcy tore open the package and set the condom on Steve, taking the time to roll it down just right. “How?”

He blew out his breath. She stifled a giggle as he had to concentrate to answer. “Thinner. Darce—“

He reached for her, but she wiggled off the bed and out of reach.

“Well, I’m on the pill too, so we’re good.” Darcy leaned over to strip off her panties. (Double points to the nice lady in Georgia for explaining that panties go over the garter belt, not under.)

Steve stole them off the floor, tossed them on his nightstand. “You can explain what that means later. Heels?”

She kicked them off. “Nylons on or off?”

“On. Please.”

She straddled him, taking him at just the right angle. And kept him there. “Kiss me, Steve.”

He did. His hands tangled in her hair while he kissed her, open-mouthed, tongue reaching up into hers, only to retreat so he could rub his lips against hers and do it all over again. A thumb slipped down to pluck at a breast, and Darcy rocked down onto his cock, enough to take the head at the entrance of her slick passage.

Steve dropped his hands to her hips and nudged her. “Darcy doll—”

She relented, taking him in. She had to breathe through it, for Steve wasn’t small.

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” he asked, worry breaking through his pleasure.

“I can’t move,” she confessed. “It’s, it’s...I want to move. Gotta feel you.”

“Darce—let me.” He rolled them so that she was on her back, and he lifted her hips to give him better access. He trailed a thumb across the peak of her breast, then down to her clit. He pulled back, keeping his movements shallow--stroking once, twice with his cock then circling the tangled knot of nerves until she involuntarily slid her legs apart a little more.

Whatever he did (don’t stop), her body gave into the motions, relaxing just enough. Steve must have felt it, because he flexed his hips, drawing out and in. She leaned up for another kiss. “That’s it. Don’t stop.”
They found the rhythm. Steve slid in and out, touching/not touching her with his thumb to her center until she began to shake. “That’s it, that’s it,” she chanted. “More,” she demanded.

He gave it to her, using his hand to brace himself over her until flesh was firmly touching flesh each time they came together. Darcy lost herself in the sensation, her body opening up, wanting, greedily demanding. Impossibly so, he stiffened a little more, touching just there and she came apart.

“Darcy.” Her name was a whisper on his lips as he shuddered, as he pulsed inside her, as her body coaxed every last drop from him.

She discovered she’d been digging her nails into the slick skin of his shoulders. “Whoops.”

“Don’t care, Darce. Can’t hurt me.” He pressed his forehead to hers long enough for Darcy to wish they could do it again. (Hey, first time with amazingly hot boyfriend, can’t blame a girl for wanting seconds.)

He rolled to his back, panting a little. Then he stripped the condom and dropped it into the trash on the other side of the nightstand.

Darcy didn’t move. She was still breathing hard and her lady parts hadn’t quite calmed down yet.

Steve grinned. “Let’s see what we can do next.” He trailed a hand along the inside of her thigh, and ran his thumb along her swollen, terribly sensitive flesh.

She blinked. “Are you for real?”

“Want me to stop?”

“Not particularly.”

“Then, no, we’re not done.” He settled so that he was between her thighs. What he did to her breasts was simply a precursor to what he could manage with his tongue. Her clit became his biggest cheering section, waving pom poms and all. Circles, licks everywhere but there, then there was something he did with his fingers and tongue that made her cross-eyed.

“Are you writing your name on me?” she asked, trying to be at least a little blasé about his abilities. (She did not squeak, really.)

“Nah, takes too much concentration. I just like the way you taste.”

Yeah, so much for that. Then he moved. Mouth covering her nipple, he drew on it until she pressed his head there to keep in place. He suckled just hard enough and kept a thumb on her clit, circling it and plucking it until she was shaking with the need for more.

Since when did her body decide that it was going to open up all on its own under Steve’s hand? Surely that keening sound wasn’t her? Her whole body shuddered once. He slid a pair of long fingers inside, keeping the flicking against her clit as she came—hard. He stayed with her through it all, taking her past the point of being too sensitive to touch to where she wanted it all over again.

Then his mouth was on hers again, his hands still between her thighs coaxing her to do it all over again.

She lost count. Darcy Lewis fucking lost count and she was sure that last one involved screaming his name. She was clawing at the bed when he slipped inside her—no problems this time—as she jerked and twisted while he took absolute possession of her body—and maybe her mind. She loved every
fucking thing he did to her and when he was on the edge--she could feel it--

“Stay with me, Steve.”

He did, surrendering himself to the depths of her. They shuddered in synchronicity, Steve bracing himself on his forearms as he chanted her name.

When she could breathe somewhat steadily again, he shifted, taking care of the condom again then laying down so that she could stretch out against him.

He waited a beat. “Wanna do that again?”

She groaned.

******

Steve had thought Darcy incredibly beautiful. She dressed for her figure sometimes, with a bit of sass. Other times he found the sweaters and jeans simple and pretty. But Darcy, naked and sleeping in his bed, was stunning.

He drew a hand along the line of her body. She shivered, and wiggled backward until they were touching shoulder to knee. He drew the covers over them and lay down so that her hair could tickle his nose.

She got him. With Darcy he didn’t have to watch everything he said. She didn’t treat him as if he was a pariah or stupid. It certainly hadn’t taken him long (coffee) to realize her flirty nature concealed a smart mind. (Smart? Try brilliant. She was Howard’s granddaughter and gave him a run for his money.) He’d sat in her lab a week ago (date number two) as she built a foot-tall robot and programmed it for sentry work. She’d solicited his advice for that and when it was done, she’d let him work the robot in the empty area of her floor. He’d read about dogs for soldiers on Google. This wasn’t that, but Darcy said it might work for people who couldn’t have one for whatever reason.

When they were laying naked, sweat still cooling on their skin, she’d asked about the tattoo. She seemed to understand when it was his way of letting Bucky know he wasn’t forgotten. There was more to it, of course, but she didn’t press.

And then again, maybe he just liked having her here and he was stupidly infatuated with her curves. But he didn’t think so. This thing with Darcy filled a gaping wound. Not completely. That could never happen.

But this feeling he had, it was an awful lot like love. And he knew love.
"Darcy’s Lady Parts" do not refer particularly to her vagina.

"Darcy’s Lady Parts" represents the conflict between her ego (Darcy’s brain) and her id (Lady Parts). Look up “superego, ego, and id” or “Freudian psychology” on Wikipedia if you don’t know what I’m talking about. The id represents our base instincts and desires, which have to be guided by our ego (mid-level thinking). Think Hayley Atwell reaching out to touch Chris Evans’ pecs in CA: TFA.--a completely involuntary reaction--the id at its finest.
A bare month later, Darcy discovered what it was to love a soldier. It was a lot like loving Tony. And that was hell.

*****

They spent most of their free time in her box of an apartment (closer, just off 45th), a little converted carriage house with room for his bike in the old garage area, a bedroom, a bathroom, a tiny kitchen and—the one good feature—a decently sized living room. (Tony hated it. Which was fine, it was hers.)

When she saw Steve in her small space for the first time, it seemed a little ridiculous. But he just gave her that gorgeous, haunted smile that decimated her heart.

“Reminds me of home, Darce. Never lived anywhere that was big. Last place I had was a tent with-” He cut himself off with a shake of his head.

Darcy didn’t push. (But she began wondering who Steve was rebounding from… Peggy or Bucky.)

They made it work, finding a rhythm of living that suited both of them. She hunted up a fold-out dining table so they could eat sitting somewhere other than a sofa (Steve’s request). He rebuilt the shelves in her bathroom and hung extra hooks so they both had a place for wet towels (she gave him the one up high.) She rewired the carriage house doors so that Steve could activate them from a half mile away and be parked inside before they fully opened.

Steve’s enormous appetite was always entertaining, so they worked their way through Betty Crocker trying to learn to cook a little more creatively. The results were often questionable and they ate a lot of spaghetti and Chinese takeout. But it was fun to try.

She stumbled onto one of Steve’s demons when she surprised him in the middle of the night. Ridiculously excited over a new discovery, she’d called, not realizing it was well after midnight. “Ohmygodsteveyou’ve gotocomeseethisisIthinkIfiguredouthowtomakegrapheneinawaterbottle!”

He showed up a half hour later, while she was still dancing wildly in bare feet. His knuckles were raw (a feat given how fast he healed) and Darcy gave him a sharp look. He shrugged, ignoring her worry in favor of trying to understand the significance of what she’d discovered.

A discrete inquiry revealed that Steve spent the better part of the nights he wasn’t with Darcy pounding away at boxing bags in an old gym just a block from his apartment.

Trying to draw him out resulted in their first fight. Steve clammed up, and Darcy got fed up with his silence. But she didn’t dare leave him alone in those moments. Somehow she knew that her presence was keeping him together.

He was an ocean of glass and Darcy was peering into the dark blue waters, trying to see the man inside.

Then S.H.I.E.L.D. called him up, asked him to help with the Avengers Initiative to fight a battle with
Loki. Darcy was maybe the one person with enough intel (Thor) and security clearance (Stark, just sayin’) that Steve didn’t have to lie when he told her of aliens and gods, of technology they didn’t understand and how terrified he’d been when the creatures descended from the heavens.

He’d pretended nonchalance at first, especially in light of Darcy’s unabashed freakout at being three floors below the main event, trapped behind glass as she watched her dad, her boyfriend and various assorted friends take on aliens. But she got it out of the way, by virtue of standing in line behind Pepper to harangue Tony for a solid hour and refusing to let Steve out of her sight for five solid days.

After that, Fury tried to bribe her to look at interesting technology in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s lab.

While she was debating the merits/family loyalty issues, it became clear that the Battle of New York had torn open the psychological wounds that Steve had bandaged with little more than time and his fascination with Darcy.

She begged off the tech work (Later, Fury) as the nightmares came. Steve’s art grew dark, depicting a thousand shades of war. For the first time, she saw Bucky when his face appeared in the shadows of trees and the blackest of clouds in Steve’s drawings.

James Buchanan Barnes. She’d read about Steve’s best friend, of course. Ended up visiting Aunt Peggy for more intel as Steve was less than forthcoming (more like a complete shutdown). She held him when he woke, crying out for Bucky. (Ice, falling. It was always the same.) He buried his face against her breast, pretending not to cry. By morning, he would suppress it all and refuse to discuss any of it.

“I’m okay, doll,” became his standard answer. She grew to resent it.

But he locked it all down once more as the world learned about Captain America and the Avengers. And if Darcy wasn’t quite ready to let her relationship with Steve out of the box, at least she could tell Jane and let her know that Thor hadn’t forgotten her. (He’d asked Steve to look after her. That was something.)

Afterward, Steve joined S.H.I.E.L.D. to give him purpose. He did what he did best, stupidly heroic black ops missions with a better than average chance of getting him killed. He always came home to Darcy. But he moved to D.C. and gave up his Brooklyn apartment.

Hell’s eyes shouldn’t be blue.

They shuttled back and forth and she was amazed they managed to keep the relationship together in spite of his missions, her hours in the lab (okay, Fury, bring it on) and the distance. She taught him how to text. She sent him pictures. He sketched and sent her snapshots of those.

Darcy learned to occupy herself during his missions. Mostly she holed up in the Tower (Avengers Tower--Tony liked the ‘A’), preferring to be in her lab where she could keep the worry at bay. (And closer to Mom and Dad, but she didn’t want to think about that too hard right now.)

It was on one of the longer missions (three weeks, seemed like forever) that she had time to investigate a memory from her childhood--a conversation with her Aunt Peggy that she’d almost forgotten.

Finding information about James Barnes hadn’t been particularly difficult. She found a surprising number of old promotional war videos that a historical society had uploaded to YouTube. (And
some more hilarious ones of Steve as Captain America in some truly dreadful movies.)

She was watching one while JARVIS played with her new software. She stared at the screen, trying not to see what Aunt Peggy had known all these years.

It was just a glance, seemingly between two friends. She watched over and over again to make sure.

But Darcy and Steve weren’t exactly advertising their relationship to the world, and she was entirely too familiar with the little ways her boyfriend let her know he was paying attention, even when half the world was watching. Fingers on a wrist. A pat on the shoulder blade that stayed a moment too long.

The small smile playing on Steve’s lips, the echoing one on Bucky’s.

Darcy had always wondered how much Steve had loved Peggy. Not enough, that was clear now. How could he, when he loved Bucky Barnes perhaps too much. For certain, this was the love Steve had awakened to discover he’d lost all over again. And no one living except Peggy, with her fading mind, Steve, where hardly more than a half-year had passed, and now Darcy knew. (Rebound, indeed.)

When Steve returned home, she cautiously broached the subject while they were basking a post-mission, welcome home, post-sex haze (in retrospect, not her best move).

“Steve?”

“Mm?” His eyes were closed, and he was lazily stroking her back as she sprawled against his side.

“Tell me about Bucky.”

The flash of agony was so powerful that Steve rolled away from her. Darcy followed, clutching his shoulders hard.

*****

With fingers trailing Darcy’s soft skin along the bumps of her spine, Steve felt the last ravages of the mission fade away. It wasn’t terribly difficult, but there was mopping up to do after Loki’s stop in Germany. He and Nat had gone in to recover the broken nest of scientists that Loki had converted to his own purposes. The memories had been horrific and only Darcy (clean, beautiful, whole) had been able to dispel the visions. (Ice. So much fucking ice.)

A wisp of memory intruded and Steve firmly suppressed it (Not here).

“Tell me about Bucky.”

The violent retreat was involuntary. (Bucky’s name on Darcy’s lips.) Before he could stop it, a hundred memories broke through the careful lock he’d put on them. Darcy breathed on his shoulder, clutching his arms as Steve shuddered.

“Why?” he practically growled the words.

But Darcy held on. “Because he is your best friend, Steve. And I’ve never heard you say a single
thing about him. That’s not fair to Bucky.”

She sliced him to the core with her insight. (She said “is,” as if she knew.) Seven months, almost eight, and when he thought too much about Bucky he couldn’t breathe. He choked.

“Steve. It’s okay to miss him. You have to let yourself grieve. None of it was your fault.”

He pulled away, grabbing clothes as he went. He slammed the door on his way out. (Too much. She asked too much.)

He came back later that day. She didn’t ask again.
Darcy had a little bit of a love/hate relationship with Steve’s missions. It always took him a day or so to shift out of Captain America mode when he came home. If she was around that first day, she was guaranteed the sex was going to be hard, hot, and fast. (Gosh, she figured she could take one for the team, so to speak.)

This time, he’d slammed the door behind her, pressed her against it, and (to hell with the prelims) dove his fingers between her legs. She wasn’t really ready, he knew it, and so he knelt down so that his tongue stroked flat against her clit. He licked, did that little pointy thing with the tip so that she practically danced in place. (Yep, okay, now she was wet.)

He still took care of her. Even though she’d learned how to deal with his size, he had her soaking, and open and all but begging for him. (She never begged. Never.). She tugged his hair instead. “Damn it, Steve,” was as far as she got before he slid up the length of her, cupping a breast along the way and pressing hard and fast until she was full, full and aching.

He didn’t wait for her, just took what he needed, driving hard and fast until he began to shudder. As always, the press of his flesh in hers, that last thickening, was enough to push her over the peak as he pulsed inside her, taking, giving. She arched backwards, trying to pull him deeper (as if), while the knife edge of pleasure screamed through her.

Boneless, Darcy wrapped herself around him, holding on while his hand slipped down to her ass to support her. “Hi. I missed you.” She grinned.

“Hi. I missed you too.”

“Are we going to do this again or is there food involved first?” At the pained look on Steve’s face as he tried to decide, Darcy just laughed and shoved him toward the kitchen.

He was mowing through the lasagna when Tony summoned him. Darcy rolled her eyes when she saw her dad’s text on Steve’s phone. “Good luck with that.”

“What do you think he wants?”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “How long have we been dating?”

“Six months, if you count coffee.”

“He’s probably figured out that we’re serious.”

“I was hoping to avoid that. Tony doesn’t like me,” Steve muttered.

“Tony has daddy issues. Not to mention that he doesn’t like most people unless they are geniuses and he can talk them onto his payroll. Good luck with that conversation. I’ll have beer and pizza when you get back.”

“Sounds perfect.”

*****
Pepper pointed him to Tony’s lab. She was barefoot, and Steve discovered where Darcy’s whimsical smile came from. Pepper brushed a kiss on his cheek, saying, “Tony will never approve of anyone dating his baby girl. But you have mine, for what it’s worth.”

“Thank you. It does mean a lot.”

He found Tony working on some kind of electrical panel. “That looks sort of like the one on the helicarrier.”

“Well, again, you’re not wrong, Cap.”

“Steve.”

Tony gave him a sharp look. “Is there a difference?”

“Maybe not to you.”

Crossing his arms, Tony gave him a dark look before reaching over to thump Steve in the chest. “You and I have a problem.”

“Other than the fact I’m dating your daughter, what is it?” Steve stood, arms relaxed at his side, ready for whatever Stark was about to say.

“You know, I actually—surprisingly—do not have issues with my daughter’s life choices. Maybe it’s because she makes them with less drunkenness, less public awareness and, in general, less stupidity than I did at her age. However, I do have one small—large, really—problem with the whole situation.”

“And that is?”

“You. And Bucky Barnes.” Tony leveled a glare at him.

It took everything Steve had to not flinch. He did lower his head in grief. “Something tells me you didn’t learn that from my S.H.I.E.L.D. file.” He tried for bravado, and ended up sounding like a little kid kicking the dirt.

“Nope. Blame Aunt Peggy. You remember her. Peggy Carter? The lady everyone said Cap left behind to save the world? But wait, he didn’t.” Tony paced back and forth, idly picking up things off his workbench and setting them down again as he furrowed his brow in frustration. (Darcy had the same habit, and Steve filed that information away for future use.)

“You know, the thing that made my dad really angry—you remember my dad, he spent millions looking for you, thought you hung the moon, made my life a pain in ass when I couldn’t live up to your heroic ideal—was that he’d figured out that you could have—should have—survived the fucking plane crash.”

Tony stopped right in front of him. “I read the reports about how you were found in the wreckage. You did survive the crash. And you gave up.” He poked Steve in the chest again for emphasis. “You know, Peggy is a smart cookie. It didn’t take her long to put all the pieces together. My dad is the one who helped her get through it. He knew. The Howling Commandos all knew. And they all kept your secret.” Tony stared him down. “Does Darcy know?”

Steve shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I haven’t—I can’t—She’s asked about him. It’s hard to talk—” He stopped when his chest started aching. “Maybe. She’s not stupid, Tony.”
“It’s good that you remember that. Makes me, oh, two percent less interested in punching your pretty jaw. Wearing the suit, of course. So what you’re telling me is that you and Bucky were the real deal.”

“Yeah. We are,” Steve admitted. “We were.”

Tony raised his eyebrow at Steve’s slip. “Then what is Darcy to you?”

“That’s the real deal too.”

“Then you’d better find a way to tell her, Steve, or I will.”

*****

Darcy had no idea what her father said to her boyfriend, but afterward Bucky’s name came up in conversation for the first time.

It wasn’t easy, and Steve frequently stumbled on his words in the beginning. But gradually, he began to speak of his friend. He told her stories of their crazy escapades. Stories of growing up together in pre-war Brooklyn. Stories of fighting side-by-side. How Bucky kept Steve alive when his body failed him. How Steve stormed through enemy lines to find Bucky. He began sketching Bucky, to show her what they had done and where they had lived. It was better than a photograph, for Steve could tell a story with his art.

She listened. Prompted him for more. Darcy saw the tangle of their histories and began to understand what Aunt Peggy meant about love.

The process took months. Months of missions, months of sifting through the pain and loneliness to find the light and love hiding underneath. Through Steve’s eyes, she came to care for the man Steve had lost. In time, she found it was possible to ask a simple question and get an honest answer.

Blue eyes softened and snarky humor reappeared. The media began to catch wind of their relationship. (No confirmation, no incriminating photos, just a slow realization that Darcy was often seen in his—and the other Avengers’--company.)

The nightmares receded. The glass ocean began to clear and Darcy found the water dangerously deep. Her heart was utterly lost.

For every sketch of Bucky, Steve drew dozens of Darcy. Every time she stole a look at his sketchbook, she was awed. Because Steve really got her.

He listened when she ranted about Tony. He bit his lip when she dealt with idiots wondering if she’d slept her way to the top of the Tower (if only they knew). He captured her seemingly careless time in the lab where she would build something brilliant, with music blasting and little robots dancing around her feet. He sketched her with Pepper, as she learned to negotiate with corporations and governments. He drew her like a pin-up girl, making the best of her breasts and hips and lips that she sometimes wished were--less.

In his hands, she felt beautiful and smart and as if she could make the world a better place. If this was
a rebound relationship, she was fucked.
Families Always Know

Steve was on a mission for Fury when he was recalled without explanation. The director put him on a Quinjet and had him in New York as the world learned about the destruction of Tony and Pepper’s Malibu home.

Begging JARVIS for admittance from Stark’s landing pad, he sprinted through the Tower down to Darcy’s floor. She had every news channel tuned to the disaster and had chewed her lip so hard it was bleeding.

“Darce.”

He’d never seen her fall apart, not really. Even after the Battle of New York, she’d found a way to deal with it all. He did now. She cried denial between panting breaths. She rocked as she clutched at Steve’s shirt. He pulled her into his arms, holding her, wishing he could shield her from all this.

There was a harsh sound and JARVIS cut in, killing the screens. “Lewis, Ms Potts is on the line.”

Darcy trembled. “Mom?”

Pepper sounded like she was hanging by a thread (which was still frighteningly competent by anyone else’s standards). “Honey, I’m here.”

“Oh god, I love you, Mom. Oh god, you’re okay. Where’s Dad? Is he with you? Please tell me he is with you.”

There was silence, then, "I don’t know where he is, Darcy. The house—he was in the house—“ Pepper’s voice cracked.

Steve’s mouth dropped open as Darcy pulled herself together without a sign of her previous grief, though she had a grip on his wrist that would have broken that of a normal man. “What do you need me to do, Mom?”

“Stay there, Darcy. Keep Stark Industries running so I can find out what happened. I’ll find him.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, Darcy. Keep the line open for JARVIS. Can you activate your contact so I can reach you at any time?”

Darcy touched a spot behind her ear. “Done.”

“Don’t break your inheritance.”

“I won’t.”

In the silence that followed, Darcy peeled her hand off Steve’s wrist and rested her head on his shoulder. She took a breath, kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.” (He owed Fury a debt he would gladly pay.)

In the year and a half they had dated, Steve thought he’d discovered everything there was to know about his girlfriend. She was a mechanic at heart and chivvied those about her with love, affection, and a strength of will that surprised everyone the first time they ran into it.
Very few (mostly Avengers) knew she was Stark’s daughter and came by the love for shiny things quite honestly. Not even Steve had realized how much she was Pepper’s daughter too (he struck his head – love, affection and strength of will—the very definition of Pepper Potts) and had a thumb on the heartbeat of Stark Industries. With all the flair her mother had, Darcy triaged the situation, handled the media, assured the employees, and kept the ship pointed in the right direction. That was just the first day.

Steve didn’t even realize she had an official company title--Vice-President of R&D--until she waved it around in front of the cameras to give her credibility. Where he and Bucky grew up on the streets of Brooklyn, Darcy had teethed on the corporate politics and resource deployment.

Pepper’s call that Tony was still alive was followed by the news that Pepper had been kidnapped.

Darcy held on, even reining in Director Fury when he tried to intervene. Steve hovered. Through it all, Darcy was a rock, holding on to hope with both hands. Her colossal faith in her parents’ abilities was unnerving, to say the least. He stayed with her. She didn’t need him to help her do her job, but her eyes would wander over to where he was a dozen times an hour as she was spouting orders or drafting a new update for the media team. During press conferences, he stayed to the side and out of uniform, though no one missed who was keeping an eye on Darcy Lewis.

When it was over, when Tony and Pepper walked back into their penthouse where Darcy and Steve waited, Darcy shed a handful of joyous tears and gracefully gave the helm back to Pepper. She flung herself at Tony and quietly whispered threats into his ears.

Pepper seemed so forlorn that Steve walked up to her and held out a hand. She took it and let him wrap his arms around her. Darcy and Tony snickered at them when they came up for air.

He expected Darcy to break again after that, to crumble when it was all over. But she didn’t. Still, if she spent more time with her parents, he understood. If she tangled her hands in his while they slept, he knew why.

And if there were any reservations he still had about Darcy, they were washed away. Steve Rogers put serious consideration to the long haul. He realized he still had to have that conversation, and promised himself to do it when she wasn’t reeling.

But Jane called Darcy and begged her to fly to London. One week here and there turned into four solid months and then the skies opened up again to worlds unknown. A flurry of texts from Darcy was the only warning she could give him.
Thor and Jane were inseparable. Tony convinced Jane at last, with Darcy’s help, to work for Stark Industries, not S.H.I.E.L.D. and gave Jane seemingly unlimited funding. He made space in the Tower for them.

Jane had been astonished and dazzled to see Darcy’s real work. “You bitch. I knew you were smarter than you let on.”

“Tony’s wanted you to work for him for years,” Darcy replied, tapping her pencil. “How do you think a poli sci student learned about your internship? God, he made me learn astrophysics in a weekend so I could at least sort of keep up with you.”

“No wonder you were so good at keeping my equipment together. Don’t think I didn’t see you soldering that panel in New Mexico.”

“Which time?”

Jane just laughed.

One of the things Darcy really loved about Jane is that, fundamentally, Jane trusted her. Rather than being annoyed that Darcy had lied, she was flattered that Stark had taken such an interest. Darcy hadn’t passed on any of Jane’s research; she merely kept Tony informed on progress and outcomes. Which only whetted Tony’s desire to have Jane Foster on his payroll.

Darcy looked over the contracts for Jane, pointed out a couple of suggestions and kept both parties happy with the outcome.

The case of champagne in her apartment was definitely from Tony. She called Steve, hoping he would come up for the weekend from D.C. to drink it with her and celebrate her return.

He came. But his eyes were full, once again, of the hell she’d seen before. No matter what Darcy tried, Steve wasn’t budging. Whatever he’d seen or done, he’d locked up tight. The nightmares had come back. Steve would wake, shivering from the cold that wasn’t there.

It never occurred to her that she was the cause.

*****

Four texts from Darcy, and Steve was plunged into the ice again (Bucky/Darcy, it was all the same), watching with the rest of the Avengers as Thor and Jane saved the universe.

She came home. He was hanging on by his fingernails.

There was a common area that Bruce Banner’s and now Thor and Jane’s apartments shared. It was Friday night, Bruce was ensconced for the evening and Jane was still in the lab trying to get it settled. Darcy was with her and had begged, via text, for an hour or three.
Having received a similar message from Jane (though probably via JARVIS rather than text), Thor appeared in the common room. “Our ladies are much enamored of Jane’s new lab. I fear we will not see them this evening.”

Steve shrugged. “You’re probably right. Want to grab a beer?” (Seemed to be a safe enough choice.)

The Asgardian studied him. “Perhaps. But first, I’ve a space here where we can spar as warriors.”

Steve jerked his head. “No. I’m not in the mood.” Thor surprised him by laying an arm across his shoulders. He flinched, for the weight of it, the maleness of it, triggered too many memories (he’d been a shorter then).

“That, my friend, is why we must go.”

Steve had fought alongside Thor in New York and respected him as a soldier. He still had a difficult time believing the “Nine Realms” thing, even with the evidence standing in front of him. Nat had given him the rundown. Crown prince, a thousand years old, commanded magics, seemed to have a thing for Jane, and was willing to lay down his life for the survival of the universe.

For that last reason alone, Steve followed Thor to the gym.

This was the first time they would spar, and he wondered if this would become a regular thing. There were few who could hold their own against him. Nat could, though if she wasn’t quick enough, he could pin her to the mat. Rumlow was fast and dangerous. He was damned good at knife work and Steve’s skills had improved exponentially since they’d met, though if he made Nat’s mistake it had the same results.

They stripped to shorts, t-shirts and bare feet. Armor wasn’t needed here since both of them healed with ridiculous speed. Thor pulled his hair back with a rubber band to keep it out of the way. The two men faced each other over the mats, balancing on the balls of their feet.

Thor rumbled, “JARVIS, engage privacy mode please.”

“Of course, Lord Thor.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Somebody else who doesn’t like being recorded all the time.”

But Thor shrugged, dismissing the concern. “One does not become a prince of Asgard without enuring himself to the eyes of others.” He advanced first, giving Steve a chance to block the test strike. “So tell me, Rogers, what is troubling you?”

“You flew all the way from Asgard to ask me this?” He countered with a foot to Thor’s knee, but the warrior dodged it and danced sideways. Far faster than a man of his bulk should have been able to move.

“No. ‘Tis your eyes, my friend. I’ve seen others such as yours, as if death itself would flinch from your gaze.”

Steve threw out a fist. Thor blocked it on his arm, taking the force of the blow rather than ducking it. “Nothing Captain America can’t handle, Thor Odinson.”

“But Steve Rogers is with my friend, Darcy. And she worries for him.”

Steve stood up, dropping out of his stance. “Darcy asked you to talk to me?” He was hurt by the thought.
“Do not be stupid. Darcy is the most secretive of persons. It is only that I know and care for her that I see the concern.” Thor eyed Steve. “Are we not friends?”

“Sure.”

“Then tell me this thing that haunts you.”

Steve took a defensive stance once again. “Anyone ever told you about my aversion to ice?”

Thor merely raised an eyebrow and motioned for Steve to take the next move. They traded jabs and punches. As his muscles loosened up, he told his story (highly edited version, thank you, Darcy). He exchanged flurries of strikes with Thor, and fuck, even the blows he took felt good. For the first time in a month, he began to feel a part of his own skin again. Steve worked his way backward through the story, hardly mentioning Bucky’s name but one or twice (three times, but he wasn’t counting).

He absolutely underestimated the warrior. Thor worked Steve, gradually increasing the speed and power of the match, all the while drawing out Steve’s history. He didn’t realize until he discovered he was barely keeping up with the talented fighter. Thor had pushed him to his limits and pressed still more.

“Tell me about Bucky.” Thor landed a dirty blow to Steve’s solar plexus, taking the level up a notch again.

The combination of pain and the question blurred his thinking just enough that he blurted, “No.”

Thor was already there, flipping Steve over his shoulder. Steve rolled, getting to his feet—only for Thor to trip him again. “Bucky was your shield-mate, was he not?”

“What the fuck is a shield-mate?” Steve hopped backward, got his balance, and rushed Thor.

Thor stepped aside at the last minute, and Steve felt like a green idiot as he tumbled to the mats. Thor reached out, pulled him up. “As Darcy is to you. Your boyfriend? You lost him in the war a pair of years ago, did you not?”

Steve closed his eyes. And then unleashed all the pent-up rage he’d been holding in onto the Asgardian warrior. He rained blows and kicks upon the prince. “I loved him. He loved me. Don’t you dare question me. Or judge me.” Flesh met flesh as Steve drove hard fists into Thor’s chest.

“Who is judging, Steven?” Thor counter-punched, sending Steve staggering backward a half dozen paces. “He was part of your soul, I think, and you miss him.”

Dumbfounded, Steve could only halt and stare at the man, this warrior of the highest order, who stated such a simple truth with firm conviction. Thor gave him a slow nod. “Go. Clean up. Come to my quarters and have more words with me on this subject. Over a good mead, I think.”

Steve shook his head. “I can’t get drunk. I’ve tried.”

Thor flashed him a mischievous grin that seemed absolutely out of place on the warrior. “I might remind you that I am not from around here.”

As Steve showered, it occurred to him that since the moment the serum had transformed him, those around him had looked to him as a leader. Most of the time, he had no idea what he was doing and had stumbled along in his new body, with his new senses and new abilities, doing the best he could. His skills came from preternatural reflexes in body and brain. Training had come later.
Not unlike the Asgardians, Steve thought, and Thor was a leader of such soldiers. Steve had been ordered to take a drink with him. So he did.

It took two mugs of Asgardian mead to produce a blur that cushioned the sharpest pain of all the questions Thor asked of him. How they met. How long they had been in love. How Bucky had volunteered for the army after Pearl Harbor. How Steve desperately tried to follow. How Bucky had taken care of him. How he’d taken care of Bucky.

He didn’t realize he was crying until he reached up to rub his eyes and discovered the hazy vision came from tears. The heavy hand on his shoulder held him steady.

Finally, there were no more questions about Bucky. Just one about Darcy. “What is Darcy to you, Steve?”

He smiled. For the first time since Darcy had come home from London, he let himself really think of her. Who she was. All the incredible pieces that startled and delighted him. “She’s the light, Thor. When I’m with her, I’m me again. Steve Rogers. The skinny guy from Brooklyn who managed to score the prettiest dame in the neighborhood. The stacked bearcat with a sassy mouth and a hell of a lot of moxie.” He slurred his words and Thor raised an eyebrow. “Means she’s perfect.”

“What is Darcy to you, Steve?”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes I do.”

“Have you told her?”

“Every damned time I see her.”

“Have you told her about Bucky?”

Steve shook his head. “She’s not stupid. She’s smart. Stark-smart.” He sagged in the chair, sinking low enough that his head rested on the low back. “She hasn’t asked.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain of that.” Thor reached underneath the coffee table for one of Jane’s idea books she had strewn everywhere. He flipped to a blank page and handed Steve a pencil. “Draw. Show me what you desire above all.” He passed over a full mug of mead.

Steve took, drained it, let the haze saturate his brain. He drew.

Chapter End Notes

omgomgomg brain is melting ... You guys are awesome! I've never had a response like this to a story and wow! thank you for the kudos and subscriptions and bookmarks and the COMMMENTS! Go you!

Um, so the 11 chapter thing was merely a fantasy because I’d been debating about breaking up this story into 3 parts, but my muse (lovesteele) hit me over the head with the coffee pot and said (firmly), 'No.' At this point, I'm thinking 30-ish? (-ish because, hey, what if they do THIS? Lovestelee: ooooh, write that too)

Thank you for reading and commenting and kudoing and sneaking in at three a.m. for another quick peek. You guys have rocked my world and I'm determined to knock this
one out of the ball park now.

--SHO

Updated note: 11 chapters. RIIIIIIIIGGGGGHHHHHTTTT. That was an amusing fantasy back when I posted this chapter. Go ahead, look at the chapter count and laugh. Glad you're along for the ride. --SHO
Darcy crashed in her lab. Via JARVIS, Thor had told her he was taking Steve in hand for the evening and not to expect him before dawn. It was good thing, for she and Jane hadn’t finished until after one in the morning. Thor’s curious wording bothered her for the rest of the night.

It was far too early when he knocked on her door. She let him in, not caring about her stringy hair or Spongebob pajamas. Without another word, Thor pulled her in for a tight hug. She didn’t cry. She was out of tears by now in trying to figure out how to help Steve.

“I want to show you something,” he said. He set a notebook in her hands. She recognized it as one of Jane’s many idea books.

There was a sketch inside. Probably the most honest piece of art she’d seen from Steve’s hands.

Darcy was kneeling on the bed, her hair trailing over a bare breast. Every mark, every fold of flesh she’d ever judged was revealed. Her lips were open, her eyes open, and Darcy suspected this is what she looked like when Steve was inside her. Her hand gripped a dark-haired leg. It was Bucky sitting behind her in the drawing, a sheet still covering an arm as if he’d just settled there. He kissed the line of her shoulder, one hand on her hip, as if his fingers were about to trail to her center. He, too, had the dazed look of love that Darcy had seen on him before. She and Bucky were focused on the artist.

Thor cupped her cheek and wiped away her tear. “I asked Steven to draw what he desired the most. You needed to see.”

He left her alone with Steve’s art.

JARVIS gave her a warning, but she was still curled up on the sofa when Steve appeared in her doorway an hour or so later. He leaned on it, hand stuffed in the pockets of yesterday’s jeans. “Hey.” He rubbed the back of his neck, scratched his stubble. “I think I got commandeered last night.”

“You let Thor beat the crap out of you? How is this bonding?” she sputtered.

“I didn’t let Thor do anything. He worked me like a trainer taking a racehorse through his paces. How did I miss that he makes Fury look like an amateur when it comes to extracting information?” Steve stretched an arm overhead, wincing as he pulled something. But he wasn’t grimacing with real pain or annoyed with her friend, so she let it slide.

Darcy sat up, shaking her blanket off. “He’s perfected the jock routine. He flexes his biceps and everyone forgets to check out his brain. Kind of like my rack. Works the same way.” She snapped her fingers. “I knew I liked him for a reason.”
“I’d wondered why a genius astrophysicist caught the attention of an alien prince.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s the only one of us who can keep up with him.”

Steve knelt in front of her, his hands skimming up her bare legs. “Maybe that’s it.”

“So what divine revelations did you have last night? (Yeah, she had to go there.)

He started to laugh and might have answered, but then he saw Jane’s book where Darcy had left it beside her. He reached for it, flipped to the last page and stared down at his own work. “Thor brought this to you.” He didn’t sound mad. Or resigned. (Just--his long fingers drifted across the image of Bucky.)

His jaw clenched. “I need to tell you something, Darce—“

Darcy tilted her head at the love and pain she saw in his face. She decided to make her own confession. “Steve, Aunt Peggy told me about you and Bucky when I was eight years old.” Surprise—and hope—filled his blue eyes. “I’d forgotten what she’d said until a few weeks ago, and it took me a while to remember all of the conversation.” She played with her fingers. “I guess I’ve always known. It doesn’t change how I feel. I just want to hear it from you.”

Steve sat hard on the glass floor, shoving a hand through his hair. “That I’m gay? Or bisexual? Or whatever people want to label it these days? I don’t know, Darcy. I’m not a label. I loved Bucky. We were kids, and then we weren’t. He was everything to me. Things were different then. Oh, everyone knew there were guys like us. But back then, Darcy, it didn’t matter who you liked, you still got married, had kids and all that. I’m pretty sure Bucky took half the non-rationed dames in Brooklyn to bed. He was always saying they smelled better than me and had softer parts.”

“That didn’t bother you?” Darcy asked curiously.

“Huh uh. Dames were for Friday and Saturday night. I had Bucky the rest of the week. Not that I didn’t try for a taste, Darce, but the gals weren’t lookin’ at me. Buck—Buck was looking for both of us.”

Darcy’s lips curved up at the Brooklyn slang and accent creeping into his voice. “What about you? I know I wasn’t your first girl, Steve.”

He turned pink. “I traveled with the USO for six months.”

“Run that by me again?” (She heard it the first time. But he was blushing, so--)

“Darce, let’s just say when I toured with the USO I figured out what Bucky was talkin’ about.”

“Breasts and perfume? Did you take on the whole troop?”

“Hey,” he admonished. “Lot o’ those dames were rationed, ya know? Didn’t mess with anyone like that. I caught enough of that on the circuit.”

She bit her lip. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair.”

He sighed, pulling her off the sofa and into his lap. “Darce, I was in the army and I was 23. With a body like this after what I had before? It was the first thing I did once I had an evening off. Picking up a girl for the evening while wearing an army uniform wasn’t hard in those days. Won’t surprise you any to know that a lot o’ dames took advantage of a little freedom back then. They all knew—I made sure they knew—that I was only a fling.”
“You didn’t feel like you were cheating on Bucky?”

“Nuh uh. Just catchin’ up.”

The sensual twinkle in his eyes just about killed her and she felt her jaw drop. “Wow. Now that shocks me for some reason.”

“Why? Bucky had others until after--” He looked away.

“After?”

“After I brought him back. Then it was just us. Now Peggy, I really liked her. But she didn’t know. Not about Bucky. Not about the dames on the tour. She liked thinking I was the innocent choirboy.”

“Yeah, she mentioned that she was rather appalled when she found you kissing another female officer.”

“That was not my fault. I will swear on my mother’s grave.”

Darcy giggled. Peggy’s version was a lot funnier. But when Steve dropped a hand to her shoulder, she asked softly. “Why me?”

He tugged her bra strap off her shoulder and nuzzled the line of her collarbone. “This, Darce. You’re beautiful. You’re real. Brilliant. I’m just a soldier with great reflexes. I’ll tell you what I told Thor last night. I’m me when I’m with you. I love you. As much as I ever loved Bucky.”

She was more than a little stunned by his confession. “So why did you shut down on me, Steve?”

“Finding out what happened in London with Malekith. I wasn’t there. I could have lost you, doll. I got the reports before you got back. I--fuck, Darce, I love you.” He said again as he sighed. “I let it get to my head. Guess I needed Thor to beat it out of me.”

Darcy shook her head. “I think I understand now,” she said softly. “When I first met you, and I know you don’t remember that—totally okay, by the way—for you, Bucky had only been gone for a few weeks. No wonder you looked like hell had swallowed you whole.”

“Way to pull your punches, Darcy.” But he nuzzled her hair. “Call it like it is.”

“Brain-to-mouth filtering system is definitely not engaged before coffee. You know that. God, we started dating, when what, three, four months later?”

“Had you for most of it and can’t imagine it any other way.” He peered at her. “Does that bother you?”

“Some. Mostly I ignore it.” She ran a hand along the collar of his shirt. “You had Bucky. You had a crush on Peggy any way you look at it. Then you were here and I drew the lucky straw.”

Steve searched her face. “Kind of sounds like I went from Bucky to you without a breath in between.”

She shrugged in acknowledgement. “Now I understand about the tattoo.”

“What part?”

“You were asking Bucky’s forgiveness for going out with me. It was your way of telling him you
wouldn’t forget him.”

He sat in silence for a while, considering. Darcy liked that he did that—really looked at a situation from all sides. “I knew from the beginning that you weren’t going to be fling, Darcy.”

Quiet and sincere, he ran a hand along her calf. “Growing up the way I did, sick half the time and getting in scraps the rest, I learned who could see me. Bucky used to complain that I was better at picking friends. He was the opposite. Everyone liked being around him, so it was hard for him to see who wanted to be with him.” Steve wrapped a lock of Darcy’s hair around his finger and unraveled it again. “Peggy liked me. She believed in what I could be. After the serum, she still believed in me. Yeah, I liked her. A lot. Might have even married her the way things worked then.”

“What about Bucky?”

Steve shrugged. “We always had each other.” Under his breath, he added, “Till the end of the line.” He closed his eyes. “I chose him, Darce. There wasn’t enough—” His face twisted up in remembered pain.

“I know.”

Blue eyes snapped up. “You do?”

“My last name is Stark, hello,” she teased, trying to lighten the mood. “Aunt Peggy told me, remember?”

“What … what did Peggy say about me?”

“That we should all love like you loved Bucky. That it’s worth every impossible obstacle.”

Steve searched her face. “You’re okay with it.”

“I love you. Whatever you went through made you the man I fell for.” She winked. “Either that, or I really, really have a thing for your bike.”

“I’ll keep the bike then, ‘cause Darcy, I’ve really, really got a thing for you.” He cupped her face, tasting her lips before trailing a wet line to nibble on her earlobe, then down her neck to the hollow of her throat. His fingers followed.

One thing Steve did that she adored/despised is that he could be extraordinarily patient when it came to sex. At times like this, whenever he decided he’d fucked up something (often enough that her lady parts looked forward it), he would take it as his mission to see how many different ways Darcy could dissolve into a quivering mass of idiocy.

But right now, she didn’t want the strung out pleasure. (Later, she promised her lady parts.) She trapped his hands with hers. “Nuh uh. Let me have you, Steven Grant Rogers.”

He jerked back, widening his eyes. Stunned, he lowered his lips to mesh with hers. “Darcy, the first time Bucky and I—the first time we—” He blew out his breath. “That is exactly what he said to me.”

Darcy ran through a list of appropriate responses. (Um, she’s got nothing.) So she went with her gut. And flirted. “Probably because you were driving him just as batty.” She stripped off her pajamas, ruffled her hair to make it slightly less disastrous, and stood, hands on hips. “Give up the goods, Captain Rogers.”
He did, shedding his clothes with a speed that he’d perfected at S.H.I.E.L.D. (Superman in a phone booth had nothing on Cap). She nudged him to the sofa so that she could straddle him. He reached for the curve of her breast, but she moved his hand away. “No. This one is for me. You’re just along for the ride.”

Steve cracked a smile and let his hands fall to her hips, where his fingers drove her mad with the feather-light touches there. Still, she took her time. And if Steve was lost in the sensation of her, with the memory of Bucky, that was okay. Especially when she shoved him over the edge and her name was on his lips.

And if they fell asleep that way, still connected, with her head on his shoulder and his fingers clutching the sketch, that was okay too.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Prompt for a story with this line ended up with this little one-shot that takes place between this and the next chapter.

Ice and Fire: You Know How to Whistle, Don't You, Steve?”
The minute Steve escaped the hospital, he found Darcy in the tattered remains of his DC apartment. She was packing up the few things that had meaning—books, photographs, the odd antique he’d picked up that reminded him of home. Clothes. Happy, Tony’s driver, was helping her cart it all to the rental truck with the help of a couple of Stark Industries employees.

He dragged her into the empty bedroom to press her against the wall, burying his face in her hair, her scent. “Darcy.”

“How long will you be gone?”

He pulled back, searching her face. “I don’t know.”

“Go find him, Steve. Just—just promise me you’ll come home. No matter what happens, you’ll come home.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “I promise, Darcy. No ice. No matter what happens.”
Shiny Objects Are Closer Than They Appear


Within an hour of dragging the man (I know him.) from the water, the Winter Soldier found a HYDRA safe house. He took the time to set his arm. A sheet wound around a set of doorknobs gave him leverage. (Rule one: Assets do not feel pain.) He bound it enough for the bones not to shift and shrugged on a sweatshirt from the closet.

From the same place, he pulled out a backpack to stuff it with more clothing and the weapons he could lay his hands on. A medical kit. Papers. Cash.

He hit a second safe house and did the same. The papers he sold to a dealer who specialized in that sort of thing. From another, he purchased a bright new passport, complete with a photo and thumbprint (Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. I’m your best friend. You’ve known me your whole life).

Armed with only an impression of memory (I’m with you till the end of the line) and the visible evidence of HYDRA’s fall, the Soldier had the barest presence of mind to avoid his handlers. (Your work has been a gift.)

The trickle of memory (I know him) had been enough to override the last mind wipe. Loyalty had never been a part of the programming. (I know him) If it had, there would not have been a need to cryofreeze and clear his memories between missions. He knew that much now, if only that much.

With the shattered remains of the helicarriers and the Triskelion still burning, the Winter Soldier set off a trio of explosions in another location—a hidden basement known only to Pierce, Zola and cadre of scientists of the darkest arts. No one escaped (Change the world).

He knew this city. The layout. Traffic patterns. Cameras. Tech. HYDRA had made sure of it when he went after Fury. And his other targets (man on the bridge; woman with red hair).

But HYDRA wasn't a part of his mission now. Figuring out why Captain America called him friend was his mission (please don’t make me do this).

The hoodie with its handy front pocket covered him long enough to gather intel. A search for that name--James Buchanan Barnes--from an internet cafe revealed the exhibit at the Smithsonian. There, he came face to face with his past.

He didn't try to process it, just scanned and memorized the data at hand. He saw faces. The one of Steve ... both versions ... tickled his memory. He frowned. Steve and .... Stark. Another hazy connection to think on later.

Weaving his way through the crowds, he cased the joint twice before using the exit. He took his time wandering around the Mall before slipping out of camera range.

The clean identification got him to New York via train, where he bought and sold his papers all over again, rendering him untraceable to anyone following a name. New York meant Stark Industries. The Avengers Initiative. His mission. Not his target. His mission.

He hailed a cab, paid cash. He raided another HYDRA safe house in Queens and set fire to it. HYDRA had deliberately avoided upgrading the electrical system, making his job easy. He scraped a bit of the old rag wiring loose in the decaying living room wall. He lit a cigarette with his metal
hand (leave no trace), let it burn, and then flicked it against the curtains. The ancient fabric smoldered as he walked away. Hours later, the brownstone collapsed in ashes and haze. The official cause would be squatters. If anyone was left to investigate, HYDRA would never suspect it was him.

In Brooklyn (I’m from Brooklyn?), he handed over a prepaid credit card he had purchased for a cheap hotel room near the bridge. The card held more than enough for the deposit, plus a full week, and aroused less suspicion. The clerk was nice enough when he requested a room away from the noise.

The young man made idle conversation to fill the silence as he slid over a card key. "Just leave it on the dresser when you leave, sir." He nodded, gave a ghost of a smile to the clerk, and shrugged his backpack a little higher with a sigh of weariness. The clerk thought no more of him as he turned away.

The door lock wouldn't keep a pickpocket out, much less the Black Widow--he wondered where the name came from. An image of red hair, a beautiful smile, and---nothing more.

From his backpack, he pulled out clothes and a bag of toiletries he'd purchased at the convenience store next door. Nothing made a person stand out more than the stink of missing a couple of showers. But that could be useful too. Underneath all that, he’d stashed a pair of guns, ammo, EMPs, a trio of extra knives, and a couple of grenades.

He liked being clean. He wasn’t always given an option.

He dropped the earbuds he had bought to blend in on the bed and sniffed the sweatshirt as he pulled it off. Good for at least one more wear. He could get a new one tomorrow.

He booby-trapped the front door with a wire from his pack. Did the same to the bathroom door then stripped and ducked under the cold spray. He eyed the temperature controls, reached for the hot, and recoiled as if he’d been shocked before he laid a hand on the lever. He washed with the small bottles in the bathroom and the tiny cake of soap.

Fresh from the shower, he studied his broken arm (humerous, clean break). Purple bruising ran the length of it. He flexed it, frowned at the sensation, and rewrapped his bicep tightly enough to eliminate it altogether.

He dressed again, boots and all. He slept sitting up on the far side of the bed, a gun in his hand and the rest of his weapons within easy reach.

He'd hoped to make it four hours, got five and felt better than--well, he didn’t know. He pocketed the key card, picked up his backpack, and headed for a diner. One nearest the bridge, guaranteed to have a lot transient patrons.

Keeping one hand in his pocket, he dug his way into a loaded omelette and a stack of pancakes. And coffee. Pure, black diner coffee that could dissolve the metal of his spoon if left it there too long. The smell took him back to an army camp. He had an image of the man on the bridge in a uniform. A brown one. Not a Russian uniform. American. The man’s shield seemed familiar. Steve. Brooklyn. A connection he couldn't trace.

He tossed a couple of bills on the table, taking the coffee in the biggest Styrofoam cup the waitress could find. His friendly, tired smile made her relax. She wished him good day and dismissed him altogether.

Coffee in hand, earbuds dangling, hoodie, ballcap and backpack in place--not a single person looked
twice at him as he crossed the Brooklyn Bridge by foot and wandered his way up to Midtown. Stark’s tower made an irritating point on the skyline.

He stopped by an electronics store, picked out a cheap netbook, and then headed for the coffee shop across from the building.

He didn't need much, just a scan of information and people going in and out. Eventually, he would find the right person, in the right company, who could give him the right sort of information.

Steve dove into a record-short shower. *getwetgetsoapy getwetgetout.*

“JARVIS? Do you know if Darcy is in the tower?” he asked as he scraped three days of beard off. It had itched under the cowl and it felt good to be clean-shaven again.

“Lewis is in the garage.”

In spite of his weariness, he felt the corner of his mouth lift. “I’d ask if she’s playing with my bike but I’m fairly certain it’s in the Potomac River somewhere.”

“I have been instructed not to discuss this particular subject with you, Captain Rogers.”

“That’s probably wise.”

“Thank you.”

“You know, JARVIS, I keep forgetting to ask you why you don’t use an honorific with Darcy. But you do with everyone else.”

“Captain Rogers, my apologies, but I have been instructed not to discuss that either. You’ll have to ask Lewis.”

“I will.”

He dug through his locker for a pair of jeans, his boots, a t-shirt, and his leather jacket. Darcy had mentioned a time or twenty it was her favorite look, and he wasn't dumb enough not to take advantage of that. Besides, he owed her. (A lifeline.)

The elevator was quick enough as it descended from the Avengers' levels straight to their private garage. Well--Tony's garage, but close enough. Nat kept her 'Vette here and Steve his bike. The former was gone since Nat and Clint had cleared the Tower a full hour ago. They would come up for air in a week or so. Clint mentioned something about the Bahamas, Nat contemplated Rio. (The true destination was sure to be neither one.) Sam had returned to DC to pack up his apartment after getting an official Stark invitation to move into the Tower too. Steve’s stuff was at Darcy’s while they figured out the whole living together thing.

So much had happened in the last eight days. (Not once had she suggested he do anything other than find Bucky.)

He needed time with her. He’d spent the better part of a week looking for Bucky and had come up blank. But one thing was certain, Bucky hadn’t returned to his HYDRA handlers unless they were buried so deeply even Nat couldn’t find them. She suspected Bucky would go to New York for answers. Maybe even to Brooklyn, depending on how much he remembered.

Then there was the raid on a compound in east Texas. The ATF had pleaded for backup since there were far too many children involved. Nobody wanted a repeat of Waco. Two days of patience,
infiltration, and a well-placed arrow from Clint ended the standoff. Nat and Steve had dropped in to protect the kids. Successfully. All in all, it was one of the better missions.

Helping the ATF had been Cap’s call. Though he hated to break from looking for Bucky, he couldn’t turn his back on the situation. And even though he hadn’t planned on it, the media coverage had painted the Avengers is a very good light—separating their identity from S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA in a visible manner.

He would pick up the search again tomorrow. For tonight, Steve wanted Darcy. The elevator door opened as he debated what vehicle Tony was least likely to drop him in the Atlantic for borrowing.

Then again, maybe he didn’t have to risk that outcome.

She was lying on his bike. He wasn’t particularly surprised to see it. Tony had probably fished it out of the water before Steve had cleared the hospital.

He imagined Darcy had kept herself distracted by restoring it herself. But any speculation he might have had on that subject took second place as he wondered how the hell she balanced herself like that. Head on the seat, long legs propped up on the handlebars. Boots that puddled on her thighs, button-down shirt with only a couple of them keeping everything together. The swell of her breasts clad in dark red (still his favorite). Her iPod rested between her legs on the gas tank with the red cord trailing up her body and into her ears. Dark lashes stayed closed as she hummed along to the song.

There were shadows under them, smudges that he knew he’d caused. They probably wouldn’t go away anytime soon, but for tonight, he would chase them off.

He whistled, long and low. She didn’t open her eyes yet, but those deep red lips stretched into a smile. He grinned, knowing he was toast and was perfectly happy to be that way. She reached down to the iPod and touched the button to turn it off.

“Seems like the bike’s already in use,” he teased. Yeah, the hand between the legs was planned out, all right. Never let it be said Darcy was stupid. Now her eyes opened, and she let out her own whistle.

“I have a boyfriend, you know. Dirty blond with a mouth that should be illegal. Shoulder-to-hip ratio somewhere in the comic book range. Good with his hands and a real smartass.”

“Sounds like trouble,” he said. He pulled the jacket off and draped it neatly on one of Stark’s cars.

“The best ones are.” She flicked a look at the leather. “Tony’s gonna be pissed about that.”

“Yeah, well, he’d better not look at the security footage for the next half hour.”

“Just a half hour?”

He lifted Darcy off the bike while she giggled, and flipped her around so that he could straddle it with her in his lap. “I want to take you home.”

She leaned in to nip at his mouth. “I missed you too.”

His hands ran under her skirt, finding absolutely nothing but damp Darcy under there. He groaned. She flicked the buttons of his jeans open, cupped him, and then shoved the boxer shorts out of the way. “Darce,” he whispered as he pulled her to him. He had to have her mouth. Hot and sweet, the taste drove him crazy as his tongue danced with hers.
“Damn it, Steve, play later. I want you now.”

Her hand wrapped around his cock. One, two, three strokes, and he was primed. He didn’t argue, just tasted her mouth a little longer. Darcy shifted so that he could slide in at the perfect angle. He gave her leverage with one arm under her knee and the other anchored to her hip. He circled a thumb over her clit, needing to assure himself she was ready.

With the head of his cock, he pressed against her sweet, soft flesh. She let out a little gasp. “More.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He pulled her downward all at once so that she surrounded him, her skin sealed to his. He bit the side of her neck, lightly, just enough to let her know he was there. She squirmed, dancing on his cock. “Damn it, Darce. I’m gonna embarrass myself in a minute.”

“Yeah, well, only if I don’t beat you to it.” Her voice was breathy, and she stuttered as she sassed him. She ran a hand under his shirt, flicking a nipple with her thumb.

He had enough presence of mind to keep making the little movements on her clit. She pleaded/ordered, “Now, Steve!” And he was gone. Her body rippled, clenching down on his cock as he let go with a groan of his own.

Sweaty and a little dazed, he pulled Darcy to him, ransacking her mouth for minute or two until he could breathe again.

She grinned. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“What do we do now?”

“Well, seeing as you’re already on my bike, I thought I’d take you home. We can do this all over again, maybe a couple of times, and then I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“How about I call in dinner and we can eat in bed.”

“Better idea. Have I ever mentioned I have a thing for sassy dames with a real smart brain?”

“Once or twice.”

*****

Darcy slid on a pair of jeans (still wet, kind of dripping, best feeling in the world), and stole Steve’s jacket for the ride. While he adored her in the skirt, he’d asked her ages ago—in that serious, solemn manner of his that always wrecked whatever argument she might have had—to please wear jeans and a jacket on his bike. He’d seen one too many cases of road rash and the pleasure of seeing her in a skirt wasn’t worth the risk.

So she did. Not that Steve ran much of a chance of smashing his bike. His reflexes were far too fast for him not to anticipate and avoid problems—even at the ridiculous speeds he drove.

She loosened his shirt enough to run her hands underneath it the back of it and laced her fingers around his waist. The heat was enough to make her squirm already (yeah, commando under the jeans probably wasn’t too smart). She closed her eyes, enjoying his crazy weaving and turns, the
acceleration in the narrow streets. If she tried hard enough, she could not think for a little while.

He yanked the Harley to a stop inside her garage.

Darcy laughed. “Get your fix?”


Given the way they sassed and flirted, both at home and in the Tower, a few people made the mistake of thinking they were fuckbuddies of the finest sort. Others speculated on a possible relationship. Most couldn’t see past Captain America.

But here in her apartment, it was just Steve and Darcy. They played house, sort of, figuring out how to feed Steve’s constant appetite, arguing about what to watch on television, agreeing on going to the movies, and discussing just about everything under the sun.

They had made this work for two years now and there was nothing she didn’t know about Steve. Including the truth about him and Bucky, even the well-concealed fact that they had been lovers since Steve’s sixteenth birthday.

That bit of pertinent information had filled in so many blanks—about Steve’s need to follow Bucky into the war, his desperation to rescue him, the way he’d shattered when Bucky died. How lost he’d been when he woke.

Darcy had come to understand something else. There would never be just the two of them in this relationship, for Bucky occupied a place in Steve’s very soul. With pictures and words, he taught Darcy about his other love.

But it was Steve who curved around her at night. It was Steve who found fifty different ways to make her come. It was Steve who cheered her on when she made something cool in her lab, or brought her coffee when she’d been at it all night.

It was Steve she loved with everything she had. And just a couple of weeks ago, he had asked her to move in with him.

But when a mission failed, when she watched a manhunt take place for her boyfriend, when she watched S.H.I.E.L.D. fall with three helicarriers and Steve on board, Tony had to keep Darcy from clawing into the center of it. (Physically, it hadn’t been pretty.)

She’d found him in a D.C. hospital, lying next to his new friend. Over beeping machines and an impossibly pale Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson had told her that James Buchanan Barnes, also known as the Winter Soldier, was very much alive.

Now the remains of Steve’s apartment were stacked in her living room.

When she woke with sunlight peeking in her curtains, the sheets were already cold, and Darcy pulled Steve’s pillow closer so she could take in the scent that clung to it. She trembled.
Sam's point of view: Flight Plans May Change
A week passed before he narrowed down his target to a pretty, dark-haired lady with the body and face of a pinup sketch he used to have on his bedroom mirror.

That sort of information came faster now. Places. People. But there were no events attached to any of it. No memories of friendships. Just Steve Rogers' face in a constant stream of pictures. Memories were darker and more recent. He shied away from them, not caring to examine their contents too closely. (Asset. Your work has been a gift.)

The lady had been seen in Pepper Potts' company too many times not to be important enough to warrant a second look. He did a quick search on Google and came up with the name Darcy Lewis, Pepper's VP of R&D (closer to Stark). And plenty of rumors that she was dating Captain America (I know him).

Darcy shoved her glasses up her nose as she exited to the south, a good-sized tote under her arm.

He followed.

He wasn’t alone.

*****

Darcy pressed the button on her Stark phone. "JARVIS!"

“Yes, Lewis."

"Get Steve or Tony, hell, get anyone!"

"Darcy?"

Steve's voice sounded really good right now and she wondered where the fuck he was that JARVIS could track him down so quickly. "Steve? I've got a creepy guy dressed in black following me around as if I'm not trained in basic surveillance techniques. I'm pretty sure it's a very cranky and lightly toasted Brock Rumlow. He’s awfully spry for someone who should still be in the burn ward. So hey, I'm thinking HYDRA, and I would really, really appreciate someone coming down here to give me a hand."

"Where are you?"

"Courier run for Pepper down near Fletcher that turned into a stalker-pursuit thing. He seems to be herding me somewhere. The seaport district? Shit, I am not so liking this."

JARVIS interrupted. "I have Lewis' location. I am sending the coordinates to your Starkphone."

“Got ‘em. Sam is on his way and can have you out in ten, Darce. We got a lead last night out of DC, and I’m already on my way back to New York. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

She didn’t get that much time.
He followed. Found the trap. Dismantled it. She would fall but not break. The claw would not close.

He dispatched the HYDRA agent with a single clean stroke of a knife. One of the squad leaders this time around. (Wipe him. Change the world.) One of the many who would accompany him, set him on the trajectory (unleash the asset). This one would interfere with his mission (man on the bridge).

He would speak with the woman. (Darcy. Steve’s girl.) She would have answers (I know him). Lead him to Stark.

But first he would clean (leave no trace).

Darcy shoved her hair out of her face as she fumbled for her glasses. Yeah, there they were. Yay for shatterproof lenses even if they were scratched all to hell. Her side complained, and she blew out her breath as she rolled up to sit. (Officially? This week sucked balls.)

Holy shit, that hurt. Darcy looked up as she remembered tumbling into the steam vent after a quick shove and a nasty laugh that echoed. She checked. Yup. Wrist and ankle both hurt like a son of a bitch.

She didn’t take well to Crispy Critter’s nasty threats about her boyfriend and little things like HYDRA agents waiting for him. (Traps were just not her thing. Really.) So she smashed her cell phone to foil that plan. Rumlow had not been pleased, to say the least. He’d shot her, caught her in the waist at a nasty angle, and she’d gone down. Did she remember someone else with him? The memory was fuzzy.

Damn. She reached up to touch the contact just behind her ear, the one her dad had annoyed her to let him put in. For once, she was really happy she’d gone along with his whims. “JARVIS?”

But JARVIS didn’t answer.

Damn again. Okay, step one of getting rescued was out the window. Step two meant figuring out how in the hell to get out of the steam tunnel. Which meant finding a way to get her waist to stop bleeding so much. Good thing she wore a belt today. She fished in her purse for a Kleenex pack, stuffed the whole wad in place—hissing at the pain—and tightened the belt down. She hoped it would hold. Her hands came away streaked with red. Crap. And she was killing this outfit today with her pencil skirt and knee high boots. (Whoops, bad analogy.) She winced as she gave in and wiped her hands on the silk. So much for this one. Being a Stark was hard on clothing.

The cell phone was crushed but Darcy had a flashlight on her keychain. That came out next and—“Whoa, holy shit. There are like four dead guys in the tunnel. Recently dead. As in, still bleeding. Nobody I recognize, thank god.” Darcy eyeballed the angle of the bullet holes, figured the Crispy Critter wasn’t responsible (really? this is her takeaway?). In any case, sticking around for a rescue was not an option.
She came to knees, then to her feet. Fun doing all that one-handed in heels and a pencil skirt. But she could put weight on her foot (maybe, if she winced and cursed a lot).

She was in a vintage New York tunnel. Judging by all the damp, it led under the East River. It wasn’t the subway kind of either -- just an old steam tunnel. There were two exits, the one in the direction of all the dead bodies (bad idea, Darce. Just ... no). The one on the opposite side seemed to be the source of the steady wind. It was smaller, looked a little cleaner, (thumbs up!) and maybe she could limp to her next destination. That would work.

So she made her way to the source of air. And begged to whatever deity might be listening that the tunnel wasn’t very long. (When the fuck was Thor getting back anyway?)

*****

“I’ve lost contact with her cell phone, Sir.”

“Did she have her locater on?”

“I am unable to make contact with it, Sir.”

Tony’s rant echoed through the lab, though there was no one else to appreciate it. “Get whoever is here to the war room, now.”

“Yes, Sir. Shall I notify Ms. Potts?”

“Yeah, do that.”

As Tony took the elevator, JARVIS came back on the line. “Sir, Lewis has activated her contact button.”

“Where is she? Put it on screen.”

“I do not know, Sir. She appears to be in close proximity to a disruptive mechanism which scatters the audio and GPS transmission of her contact device. I cannot track her exact location at this time, however, I can extract her voiceprint from multiple sources and rebuild the audio portion.”

“Bring it on line, JARVIS. And make sure my suit is ready.”

“Yes, Sir.”

*****

Steve halted at the war room doorway when he heard Darcy talking, sotto voice, from wherever she was. Nat had told her to keep up a running commentary if anything ever happened to her. Though JARVIS could monitor and track her person, he didn’t have external visuals or audio feeds in the contact. Any information Darcy could give JARVIS was helpful, even if it didn’t make sense at the time.
Tony shoved him out of the way, taking a seat on the far side of the table. “JARVIS, can you clean it up?”

“I am working on it, Sir. The scattered transmissions are bouncing across several countries. I’m delaying the audio thirty seconds for maximum integrity.”

“Do better,” Tony ordered. Sam appeared, with Bruce right behind him.

“Tunnels. I can-----------------------------”

After a full minute of silence, Tony roared, “JARVIS!”

“I am sorry, Sir. I am searching.”

The room exploded with activity. Sam took the vocal feed recordings, listening for whatever they might have missed. Tony tapped on his pad to optimize JARVIS. Steve stared at the video feeds from a hundred different cameras covering the area.

Bruce studied the last known location of Darcy’s cell phone on the map, bringing it up to full zoom. “There.” He pointed to a pair of figures in the shadows.

“Sir, based on the last known contact with Lewis’ cell phone and extrapolating the data we have, I’ve put her location in this area.” JARVIS brought up a map on the screen with a red circle highlighted near the Brooklyn Bridge.

Steve rose and dug a transmitter out of the bowl on the table. He set it in his ear. “I’ll take my bike. JARVIS?”

“You’ll have two sets of transmissions in that earpiece. I will keep Lewis on livestream.”

“Thank you.”

“Sam? Got the aerial view?”

“Done.” He took his earpiece and bolted, grateful to have orders.

Steve approached the seaport with caution. Sam was circling the area. Steve wished Nat and Clint were here. Though Sam could get to the ground faster than any of them, taking one or both if necessary, the three of them would make a hell of an aerial-to-ground combat team.

Steve killed his engine as he approached Darcy’s last location, near a steam vent in the ground.

“-----can do this. Clint, how do you do this sh-----okay, light. No more tunnel. Thank god. No street signs under here. Feels like I’ve stumbled to midtown. This hurts. Okay. Ladder. Light. Dark? What time-----no phone, no idea. I’m in a manhole in the tunnels. I see a ladder. How in the hell am I going to climb that? ----gotta stop the bleed-------------------re we go.”

She swore under her breath. “Oh shit, this hurts. Okay, channel Natasha. I can be Nat long enough to climb this latter. Count the steps, Darce. Forty seven thousand. Okay, one down, a million to go.
JARVIS sharpened the transmission. They could hear her stuttered inhalations. Steve found himself trying to breathe with her as he peered through the grates into the steam vent. A studded blue phone lay smashed on the ground. His heart clenched in pure fear. He put that away to focus on finding her, though it wasn’t helping that he could hear the note of panic in her voice. It wasn’t like Darcy to let anything get the best of her.

“I can’t do this. I have to do this. Dad, if you’re listening, this was HYDRA--------tried to trap me, to lure Steve out. Guess it’s really not secret anymore who I’m dating. Had to break my phone so no obvious GPS to track me. Crispy Critter wasn’t happy about having his plan foiled. Gotta keep you safe, Steve. Can’t let you walk into a trap. There were four, no five. They’re dead now. Not by me. Think somebody helped me, not sure. Kind of fuzzy ‘cause I took a bullet and it hurts. Oh crap, this is not the time to get dizzy, Darce. Once more step. Oh god, I can’t. I can’t. I want to go home. Steve. This sucks. Ladders are not a good place to have to---------------------------”

He clenched his jaw hard, willing Darcy to hang on. “JARVIS? I can’t see an exit point. She was definitely here though. I can see her cell phone maybe fifteen feet down.”

“Acknowledged.”

There was a terrible silence, then--“Holy fucking shit, Batman. Steve, your old best friend is my new best friend right now.”

Steve’s head came up.

“Don’t let go, please. ------- Yes, I know your name. James Buchanan Barnes. But Steve always calls you, ‘Bucky.’”

She hissed, and Steve winced in sympathy. “I don’t know. Don’t let go. --- Okay, I can do that. Just don’t step on anything soft on your way down.” A sigh of relief. “That arm really rocks right now. Just sayin’”

“Bucky?” Steve whispered. For long minutes they could only hear Darcy’s uneasy breathing punctuated by bitten-off groans. Bucky finding Darcy couldn’t be a coincidence. But what did the Winter Soldier want with her?


JARVIS cut in. “Sir, I believe Lewis is no longer conscious from the injuries she sustained. I am monitoring her breathing and--”

“JARVIS?” Tony demanded, “Where is she?”

“I still do not have a location, Sir. I am scanning all available transmissions.”

Sam’s voice broke the quiet. “Tony, if this is the Winter Soldier, he’s been slipping through tech like a shadow for years. The disrupter is probably on him.”

Tony said it first. “Two questions: why don’t I have this technology and just how long has he been tracking her?”

JARVIS answered, “If my calculations are correct, there have been various incidents over the past
week outside the front of the Tower indicating a disruption in the transmission signals in the area. Today, it appears Lewis was followed from the Tower.”

“Barnes and Rumlow were working together?”

Steve could hear tapping, and then Banner spoke up, “I don’t think so. Look. Back up the feed, JARVIS, to 15:42. There’s Darcy and Rumlow. We can speculate the feed breaks at 15:45 because the Winter Soldier was near enough for Darcy’s phone not to register on GPS until … here at 15:47. See? We have her signal and she’s in the tunnel. And Rumlow is still on the street. We lose her GPS signal at 15:50. Then the feed breaks again at 15:55. But we know Darcy is alive and has a bunch of dead HYDRA around her. That doesn’t sound like a team.”

“You hearing this, Steve?” Tony asked.

“Yes. Now we know she got out of the tunnels. Where does this one go?”

“Sir, it appears that Lewis’ contact device may be pressed against someone else’s body.”

“Can we get any audio on the other person?” Tony asked.

“I will try, Sir.”

“Do that. And extrapolate how far Darcy could have gone in the time she was off the audio. Cross-reference with the old city tunnels and see what you get.”

*****

He carried the girl, keeping to the shadows. The motel parking lot was mostly empty, save for a dusty couch and a few stray cars. The masses weren’t on their way home yet. He set the girl on the bed and took a good look. Swollen wrist and ankle. The first was obviously broken, the second—maybe not. Blood soaked her waistline. He rolled her to her side for a better look.

There was a med kit in his pack. He dug it out, laying it neatly on the bed. With methodical precision, he washed, sterilized, and prepped as neatly as any surgeon. A knife under the waistband of her skirt separated the fabric, exposing a wad of tissues. He pulled those away to reveal an entry and an exit wound on the outer edge of her waistline. The bullet passed through her flesh at a steep angle, narrowly missing her hipbone. He sponged up the mess and settled into sewing her back together, one careful stitch at a time.

*****


Sam spoke up. “Her dad? What, is he a senator or something? Does anyone do background checks around here?”

“Not that I’m complaining about your medical skills, but really, it all seems a little medieval. Needle.
good. Clean, good. Lack of Novocain? Definitely an ‘F’ in your column.”

Steve and all the others could hear her keening softly.

He picked up Darcy’s shattered cell phone as he took a good look at the dead HYDRA agents. He’d found that the bars on the street grate had been cut at an angle, so it could be lifted out and replaced without anyone the wiser. He pocketed five shell casings and pulled out his own cell phone. A handy blacklight app highlighted the blood splatter. He ignored that and stepped over the bodies, looking into the tunnels.

The metallic taste of rust was harder to put away. But it was the faint hand print on the wall that got his attention. Small, and yes---fresh blood. Darcy. Rather than try to follow the old vent, he memorized the direction of the tunnel, returned to the street for his bike and began searching for the other end. He crossed the Brooklyn Bridge after JARVIS speculated Darcy might have made it all the way under the East River.

He hunted for a good hour before he found her exit point, with blood stains on the ladder, in the center of hundreds of antique buildings. He looked up, looked across, and wondered where in the hell Darcy could be.

“S’ok. Jus’ cold.”

“Nobody likes the cold.”

Steve faltered as Bucky’s voice rumbled. Low and scratchy, it faded in and out.

“You helped me. Why?”

“Need to know. About the man on the bridge. I know him.”

“Steve. Steve Rogers. He’s your best friend.”

“You’re his girl?”

“Yeah, I’m his girl.”

“He’s my friend?”

Softy, “Yes, Bucky, he’s your friend.”

*****

Bucky studied the lady. His earlier assessment had borne out. She was not a spy, nor did she carry any weapons beyond an electrical stimulant device. She seemed to have knowledge of him. Of … his friend. (Man on the bridge)

She was sprawled out on her side, taking shallow breaths as she drifted in and out of consciousness. She shivered.

“Are you cold?” he asked when she awakened. (ice, falling)

“No. Hurts.”
Pain? Bucky glanced down at his arm. He rarely felt pain unless—(wipe him). He jerked, and Darcy echoed his movement. She cried out.

“What do I do?” he asked.

She opened her eyes—glazed, unfocused. “Guess you don’t have Advil or Tylenol in your kit?”

“What are those?”

“Pain blockers. Pain medications. Shit that makes other shit not hurt.”

“I don’t feel pain.”

She gave him look of disbelief. “Right.” She shivered again. “Door number two, you hold my hand.” She reached out, caught his metal one because it was the closest, and dragged it toward her so that their clasped fingers were tucked under her chin.

(Red hair, pink lips, slim form in black.) He looked at his fingers. Heat. Vibration from Darcy’s breathing. (Man on the bridge. Hands clasped on his. But not this hand.) His fingers twitched, and hers tightened on his. Odd.

*****

Steve leaned back on his bike and crossed his arms as he listened. He’d found a good place to park. At the moment, Darcy seemed to be in Bucky’s care. She couldn’t be too far, no more than three or four blocks from the steam vent. (New York though, that’s a lot of ground to cover) Sam was going door-to-door to motels first, while Tony hacked guest lists and tax records. So far they were blank on leads.

Bucky’s voice had an odd timbre to it. JARVIS told him it was because the AI was interpreting the vibrations via Darcy’s body and resolving them into speech—all while culling out the scattered transmissions and putting them back together.

“How long are we going to stay here?” Darcy asked.

“I have a mission.”

“Buster, you’d better get it out of your head that I’m giving up Steve so you can hurt him.”

“That’s not my mission.”

“What is your mission?”

“Find the man on the bridge,” he said. “I need to know. I know him.”

“Yes, you do.”

“How?”

Darcy’s breath hitched, either from pain or a reluctance to talk, Steve wasn’t certain.

“You met when you were twelve years old. Both of you lived in Brooklyn, just a block between you.
You two were inseparable. After Pearl Harbor, you both tried to enlist. You made it. But Steve was too sick and didn’t get in. Not for almost a year. Then he took part in a special program that made him better and he followed you in war. HYDRA took you and part of the 107th Division prisoner. You were one of the ones they experimented on. Steve rescued you. The two of you, along with the rest of the Howling Commandos, destroyed the remaining HYDRA bases.

“On one of the last missions, you fell from a train and Steve thought you died. Hell, the whole world thought you died, Bucky. Steve stopped HYDRA, but had to crash a plane into the water to do that.

“Until last week, no one knew that you had survived the crash and a HYDRA scientist named Zola had taken you prisoner. He didn’t do nice things to you, Bucky. He gave you a new arm. Experimented on you and it seems like you have some pretty cool abilities. But he didn’t do any of it the right way. You’re lucky to remember anything at all.”

“Man on the bridge. Why did he stop?”

“You’re the reason he didn’t try to get out of the plane when it sank. He tried to tell Aunt Peggy. She and Howard figured it out later. He really loves you, Bucky. He was trapped in the ice for almost seventy years. He only woke up a couple of years ago.”

“Aunt Peggy? Howard?”

“Peggy Carter and Howard Stark.

“Stark. You... know him?”

Darcy laughed, though with a shiver in her voice. “Well, he’s been gone for a while, but yeah, I know the Stark family. Howard and Peggy were Steve’s friends with the super serum.”

“Like me.”

“Yeah, only without all the creepy HYDRA stuff. Sorry. What they did to you was wrong.”

“Was it?”

“Yeah, it was.”

There was a rustling sound. Steve sat on his motorcycle, engine off, still listening.

“So cold. ‘Xactly how much blood did I lose, Bucky?”

“Not enough to kill you.”

“Need to call m’dad. He can fix anything. Steve will keep you safe.”

“Me?”

“Need a safe house for you. Safe from HYDRA. -- Ow. Too tight on the hand there. --- okay that’s better.”

“He wouldn’t--Steve wouldn’t fight me.”

“No. He loves you.”

“You love Steve.”
“Yeah, I do. But I’m the mouthy brat with an attitude who reminds Steve of Howard. Maybe even of you. So he likes having me around. It’s always been you.”

Darcy slurried the last words, and Steve’s heart broke. Did Darcy really think he was going to give her up just because he found Bucky?

“You catch that, Steve?” Tony asked quietly.

“I did. I’ve got this one, Tony. I promise.”

“You’d better,” Tony ordered.

“How’d a … punk like Steve get a dame like you?”

Steve had to press his fingertips to his eyes. Though the words were slow, the cadence was pure Bucky Barnes.

“---sssayys he learned it from a jerk he knew. So cold. N’ more talk. Kay?”

****

Dozens of images clouded his mind. He remembered ice. Remembered falling. Brooklyn. There was more. Of Steve. He clutched Darcy’s hand, mesmerized as metal and flesh entwined. It seemed … off. He looked at his other hand, had an image of longer fingers.

Steve’s fingers. He knew. He closed his eyes and knew. Not the depth, nor the breadth of devotion. But he remembered enough to know that Pierce had sent him to kill the one person he loved (change the world. Wipe him).

And still he’d remembered.

Darcy began panting, her body twitching from damage done to it. Without knowing why, he moved her, pressing her head to his chest. “Breathe, doll. Listen to my heartbeat.” He rubbed her back in long strokes.

He counted, felt the stuttering of heart and lungs, and then--both settled into a slow, steady rhythm. He exhaled.
Two For the Price of One

Steve had to wipe the tears from his face. How many times had Bucky sat with him through an asthma attack or a bout with pneumonia and talked to him the same way. Darcy must have slept, for they heard nothing for a good half hour.

“Still cold,” she complained when she woke. “And I’m gross from the tunnel. Can you get me to the bathroom so I can clean up?”

“Alone?”

“I can if you unbutton my shirt and keep your hands to yourself.”

“No promises.”

In spite of the situation, Steve chuckled at the pair of them.

*****

Darcy sat on the edge of the tub with a washcloth and soap to get the worst of the grunge off her. She didn’t even try to wash the crud of her hair. Or get up now that everything was wet. She wrapped a towel around her middle.

“You done?” Bucky asked from the other side of the door.

“Yeah.”

The door opened and he threw a clean t-shirt and a pair of sweats to land on the edge of the tub next to her. Darcy had another one-handed battle to get them on, but won in the end. Bucky didn’t bother waiting for her to call out. (Super soldier hearing, she was familiar with that.) He set her on the bed again and shoved food in her direction.

She tried eating, but the stabbing pain was too much and food only made her nauseated. “Bucky, we can’t stay here. We need to get a hold of my dad or Steve. You need a safe house and I need some morphine.”

“Who is your dad?”

“Tony Stark.”

*****

Sam dropped something that clattered in Steve’s earpiece. “What?” A string of polite curses from Sam filled his ear.

Bucky’s words were still faltering. “He couldn’t settle for a dame from Brooklyn … Had to pick the
princess in the tower. Stark's get.” There was dry huff, a laugh of sorts. “Can you use a screwdriver?”

“I know which end is pointy. What ‘cha need?”

Even in his exhaustion, Steve felt his own lips quirk up.

“My arm. Has chemicals in it. Need them out before I go … go to Steve. He’s safe?”

She was quick to answer. “No one will keep you safer than Steve Rogers. … Um… okay, get my bag —yeah, that’s the one, puts a Swiss army knife to shame.” Darcy whistled under her breath. “Holy shit, that’s sexy, Barnes.”

“My chest?”

“I’m not looking at your chest. But that’s nice too,” she quipped.

“My arm?” Bucky seemed confused. Then again, he didn’t know Darcy.

“I have a thing for shiny mechanical objects. You should see Steve on his motorcycle. Now that’s hot. Times two. Times a million. Promise me you won’t let anyone else touch your arm. Just me. I’ll take care of you, Bucky.”

“Yes.”

Tony swore in the background.

“My dad’s going to be pissed. Holy crap, this is some sweet machinery. Okay, here and here. Yeah, this panel comes off. Does it bother you?”

“No. Take the two vials out.”

“Gimme a second. Son of a bitch.” Steve raised an eyebrow. She sounded exactly like Tony in that moment. “Those bastards put timers on these things.” Darcy hissed her disapproval. “What did they put in these, Bucky, that you want them out so badly?” Her breathing turned harsh. “Sorry, dizzy there. This sucks doing it one-handed. Can you tie my wrist a little tighter? --------Oh, shit that hurts. Okay, concentrate, Darce. Second panel. Thing one. Thing two. Got ’em. Anything else? What’s this? Looks like a disrupter of some kind. Kind of like an EMP but more controlled and less electrocuting.”

“Keeps me off the grid-------- how do we do this, Princess?”

Steve choked on a laugh, even as he rubbed a tear away. The nickname was pure Bucky.

“Go outside. I’ll bet JARVIS has every camera in the city under his command. Dad will find me.”

“JARVIS?”

“Trust me.”

*****
Bucky wrapped Darcy in his coat and buttoned it up against the cold. She shivered anyway while he stuffed her clothes and purse in his backpack and shrugged it on.

He held out his hands. “Ready?” She nodded and buried her face in his shoulder, panting from the sudden pain.

He shoved the door open, wincing at the bright sun.

******

“Sir, I’ve located an unusual pocket in Brooklyn where the street cameras are not transmitting as they should. Coordinates are on your phone.”

“If you can’t find what’s there, look for what is missing. Excellent, JARVIS.”

“I’ve got it,” Steve replied. He gunned his engine as Sam took to the skies.

******

A motorcycle engine whined, coming in too fast for the narrow streets. But the driver was good and his stop even better. From her vantage point, she could see Sam drop to the rooftop of the motel they had been in. Even though his hands were empty, there was no doubt he was there for backup. He gave her a little salute.

Steve was off the bike and reaching for Darcy, but her rescuer backed up with her, keeping her out of his reach. Darcy sucked a lip between her teeth, finding it awkward to be caught between the two men. Steve stopped, hands in the air. “Bucky.”

In that moment, everything changed. Darcy looked away, not wanting to see the barefaced love on her boyfriend.

“Steve?” The uncertainty in Bucky’s reply broke her heart a little more (sheesh, how much can it take?).

She tapped him on the shoulder. “Can we ride three?” she asked, looking from one man to the other.

The two men had a whole conversation with face twitches (really? already?) and a shrug of Steve’s shoulder. Whatever was said, Bucky took two steps toward Steve, who reached out to touch Darcy’s lips with his thumb. She kissed it with dry lips.

Steve straddled the bike again without taking his eyes off of them. Bucky let her find her footing with her good ankle first, then held her upright while he wedged himself onto the back behind Steve. He pulled her down between them. As big as these two guys were, she had to sit on his lap, though she was pressed up against Steve’s back. Warm and solid, Steve reached for her hand to kiss the fingertips.

She might have cried out of pure relief, but in truth, she hadn’t been afraid since Bucky had found her on the ladder. That same arm held on to her now, keeping her firmly in place as Steve started the
engine and eased into New York traffic. She closed her eyes, determined to ignore the pain in her side in favor enjoying the wind and the sensation of the bike. Did she mention she loved the bike?

“You did,” Steve and Bucky said in unison.

Darcy shivered as she was abruptly reminded of the connection between the two men. “Let’s go home, Steve.”

He craned his head around. “Your place? Not the Tower?”

“Better than dad’s tower right now. Right, Bucky?”

*****


“That is acceptable.”
Come Hither

Steve tried to talk to Stark. “JARVIS?” Then he swore under his breath as he remembered the disrupter on Bucky. Then again, maybe it would be nice not to have any arguments. “Stark, Wilson—I’m taking Darcy home. Her instructions, not mine, so take it up with her, Tony. Sam, can you meet me at the apartment with some decent pain meds? I’ll be there in twenty.”

Steve figured JARVIS could piece together his voice just as well as Darcy’s and get the word to Stark.

He pushed the bike, weaving in and out of traffic, to get to Darcy’s carriage house. Bucky’s disrupter forced him to code his way into the doors. They opened slowly, and Steve gunned his bike as soon as he had clearance. As he killed the engine, Sam flew just under the rafters to block the exit. The flyer reached out, found the controls for the doors, and closed them. Steve craned around to see Bucky and Sam staring each other down.

Sam produced a medical pack. Without guile or censure, he opened his hand to Bucky, showing him a clear plastic bag containing four sealed syringes. “For Darcy. They are all the same, but feel free to pick one and inject me with it first. I don’t have super soldier serum like you two do.”

Bucky folded up the package and tucked it into the pocket of his hoodie. He stared at Darcy until she held out a hand. He took it, sliding his hands under her shoulders and knees and lifted her from the motorcycle. Then he waited.

Darcy lost patience. “Damn, okay. Steve, Sam, get in the apartment. Bucky’s not going to turn his back to either one of you, and I really want that morphine or whatever shit you brought.”

Steve slid his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. He waved Sam in first. “Darcy’s room is upstairs.”

“Sure thing.” Sam’s voice was a little derisive as he stepped around boxes. “I thought you said Darcy had lived here for a while. What is all this? Oh wait. This is your crap. I recognize that chair.”

He kept an eye on Bucky as he brought Darcy through the door. “She likes the chair better than me. I think she wants to take possession of it then kick me over to Stark’s place to bunk with you.”

“No a chance of that. I learned the hard way about how much hot water you use.”

Bucky’s eyes shifted at that, pinning Steve. Wondering what it mean, Steve pointed toward the stairs. “Darcy’s room—

“I heard.”

Wincing at the reprimand, Steve led the way through the tiny house. Bucky rounded the bed, setting Darcy down from the far side. He sat next to her, not quite glaring but it was close.

She shivered again from the pain and Sam knelt beside her. “Can I look?” he asked Darcy—and Bucky. With nods from each, Sam pulled the shirt out of the way. He slipped on nitrile gloves and peeled the gauze back to reveal neat stitches. Lightly pressing to check for swelling and internal bleeding, he nodded. “This is good. Darcy, how are you feeling?”

“Tired, cranky and did I mention I really want morphine?”
“You don’t need morphine. I brought a local pain blocker to give you relief.”

Bucky took two syringes out of the bag and opened them. The first he laid on Sam’s forearm and injected the full amount. Sam nodded. “Darcy will need about half that amount here and here.” He touched two places on Darcy’s side, and Bucky set the second needle in each of those places, leaving half of the medication in the syringe.

“Oh, holy shit, that feels good.” Darcy muttered. The tension in her small frame unwound. Sam moved to her wrist, rewrapping it with a good ACE bandage and a brace. The ankle got a similar wrap.

“You’ll need to see an orthopedic doc when the swelling goes down, Darcy. Think you can drink some milk so I can give you some pain meds for the rest of it? You’ll get sleepy, so don’t take them if you don’t want them.”

“Gimme,” she demanded. She turned her head to Steve, a thousand questions in her eyes.

Bucky held out his hand for the medication. He inspected the pills while Sam retrieved a glass of milk. When he returned, he went to offer it to Darcy, but Steve’d had enough. He took it from Sam, who packed up his med kit and decided to hold up a door frame.

Steve knelt by the bed and slipped his own arm under Darcy. He pressed his forehead to hers. “Darce,” he whispered.

She let out a huff. “Stay with me?”

“I promise.” Steve held his hand out to Bucky, who laid a pair of pills in his palm. Darcy took them, drank the milk, and settled against the pillow again.

“God, I hate milk breath,” she complained.

Steve smiled. “There’s my girl.”

When she closed her eyes, any trace of “Bucky” disappeared, leaving only the flat, assessing gaze of the Winter Soldier. The quiet man reached for the inside pocket of the jacket Darcy still wore and withdrew the four vials. He held them out, hand open flat. Steve took them. “What are these?”

“One of them will put me down. Not sure about the rest.”

Steve winced at the phrasing. As if Bucky was some sort of animal. “I know someone who can analyze these and tell you what they are.” He held them out to Sam. “Take these to Banner.”

Bucky’s hand was now covering Darcy’s, and Steve felt a lump in his throat rise up. He swallowed hard. “Bucky, this is Sam Wilson.” Sam jerked his chin in acknowledgement. “Sam, Bucky Barnes.”

“Am I safe?” the Soldier asked.

Steve’s heart shattered, more so than it had on the helicarrier, if that was possible. “Yeah, Bucky, you’re safe. I lost you once. It’s not going to happen again.”

“I know you.”

He looked up into the oh-so-familiar eyes. Ice grey, bordering on pale blue. Longer hair than he’d ever seen Bucky wear. Stubble that Steve could remember how it felt under his hands. But the voice.
Pitched low, without inflection, it held none of the Bucky Barnes he remembered. Still, Steve answered, “Yes.”

“I remember you.”
He guarded Darcy while she slept. Steve (man on the bridge) eyed him from across the bed. The man with wings hovered in the door frame. Flash of memory of himself and … Steve. (Forest. Weapons with blue fire.) He slanted a look to the winged flyer (Secondary target. Aggressive.)

Steve (little guy from Brooklyn) cleared his throat. “Bucky, this is Sam Wilson.” Sam jerked his chin. “Sam, Bucky Barnes.”


“Yeah, Bucky, you’re safe. I lost you once. It’s not going to happen again.” Steve’s hands fist ed together.


“Yes.”

He glanced at Sam then back to Steve. “I remember you.” He pinned Steve with his eyes, not letting his gaze waver. (Heat. Flesh. Devotion.) Sam seemed to take that as a signal and retreated, leaving them alone with Darcy. A door slammed moments later.

Steve shifted from the floor to sit next to the girl (Stark). He stroked her cheek, pressing a kiss to her forehead before exploring her injuries to his satisfaction.

“You were always good at this,” Steve said to him. “Lost count of the times we patched each other up. You have good hands. My Ma was a nurse. She wanted you to be a doctor.” Steve (man on the bridge) traced Darcy’s fingers where they were locked with his.

The sensation startled him. (Touch) The feedback from the metal arm wasn’t consistent. Sometimes there was nothing beyond pressure in his shoulder and a feeling of dead weight. Most times he had full functionality and could activate a servo-mode that boosted the strength. Now, he was receiving sensory input from both Darcy’s slim fingers entwined with his own, cool and soft except for a pair of rings she wore, and from the longer heavier ones (Man on the bridge. Steve.) covering theirs.

Then there was the damp cheek that Steve had to scrub dry. “Bucky, I don’t know what to say. I’ve never been so fucking scared as when Darce called me and I wasn’t close enough to help. Now you’re here. I’ve missed you so damned much.” He choked, turning his head away.

It was more emotion than he’d been subjected to (pain/fear/anger/pain/rage) in years. “I have a mission.” The stark horror in Steve’s reaction gave him pause. “Not … that mission. My mission.” He halted again, trying to get the right words out. “I know you. I remember you. Us. Am I safe?” he asked a low voice. He didn’t want to go. But he would.

Steve (bridge) reached out with one hand, slow, as if not to alarm him. One forefinger brushed
against a lock of his hair, nudging it out of the way. The thumb traced the curve of his stubbled cheek to his jaw (touch). Then, with only the lightest of pressure, Steve leaned in to press a soft kiss against his lips. The taste was familiar and elusive (touch/heat/flesh). “You’re always safe with me.”

(I’m your best friend. You’ve known me your whole life.)

“Holy shit, that’s hot,” Darcy muttered with drowsy annoyance. “Can you two go emote somewhere else? I really want to sleep.”

He didn’t look away until Steve murmured, “Give me a minute, Bucky. I’ll get her settled and then we’ll talk.”

He disengaged his hand from hers, slipped off the bed without another word, and walked out. He could hear them speaking as he took a chair on the far side of the living room (three exits—two front, one rear.) He waited for Steve.

*****

“Darce—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Steve wanted to gather up her into his arms but didn’t dare for fear of hurting her more.

“I’m okay. Stay with me for a few minutes.” He did, and she dozed off while he cupped her cheek, leaving him a scintillating bottle of emotions—love and fear and terror and happiness.

What he wanted was for Darcy to wake up and tell him everything was going to be okay, via one of those sharp, sassy remarks that would set him on his ass and make him fall in love with her a little more.

Angry with himself for needing her so much in the moment she needed him…he screwed up his face, pressing his palms to his eyes to pull himself together … but, damn, the one time she needed him, needed someone to protect her (his one damned job), he wasn’t there. Obsessed with finding Bucky, he’d let her be found by the enemy. He should have known. The ties between him and Bucky were far too close for HYDRA to have missed them. And Darcy was a logical target to draw everyone in. (Stupid, Rogers. Think for once instead of barreling headfirst into an asinine setup.)

He wasn’t given to jealousy—he’d never minded the girls Bucky brought home. Never once questioned Bucky’s loyalty in all those years. But today, Bucky was the one who had intervened and given Darcy the help she needed (She never needed help. Never asked). Then again, Steve couldn’t be anything but elated to have them both home. Both. Darcy and Bucky. Here and now in this time.

He’d had two years to come to terms with Bucky’s death, to put away his crush on Peggy. The latter was easier than the former, though he was still charmed by her whenever he visited. To know that she’d found someone who loved her in all the ways he might not have had been a balm.

Now Bucky was here. Remembering him. Remembering them.

He had no idea what to do.

Idly, he stroked Darcy’s hair, found it gritty, and decided he would help her wash it when she woke. He pressed another kiss on her cheek as her breathing changed to that of true sleep.

He went to find Bucky and discovered the soldier sitting in the corner of the living room, hands in
his lap. He looked … lost. (sad?) But he had palmed a knife and held himself at the ready—mostly likely to escape if necessary.

Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets. He choked down a lump in his throat at the sight of his best friend. Instead of his charming lover with knack for pulling him out of his own stupidity, a dark, almost feral man assessed his every move.

So Steve went for the opposite, determined to treat Bucky as the man he’d been. (Holding him when he woke from the nightmares of the experiments. Pressing kisses into that dark hair. Laughing as they drew caricatures of the neighborhood gossips.)

“Are you hungry?” he asked. (You can take the boy out of Brooklyn …)

A faint beetling of the brow. “Yes.”

Steve headed for the refrigerator, a mere six steps in Darcy’s tiny flat. He had to step around boxes of his own stuff. (Yeah, he did ask her to move in. They hadn’t talked about it since and her apartment was smaller than his last one.) Over his shoulder, he called out, “Do you want a shower while I heat up spaghetti? I’m sure I’ve got some clothes in these boxes you can wear. For that matter, I need a shower and forty winks myself.”

Only silence met Steve’s question. He turned to set the container of sauce Darcy kept stocked for emergencies on the stove to defrost. And jumped. Bucky stood only two feet behind him. His hands were empty and his stance was—well, “at ease” is all Steve could call it, but his eyes were attentive to his surroundings. He waited.

For orders, Steve realized. And his heart broke, realizing how damaged Bucky might be—and what it must have cost him to defy his handlers.

“Shower first,” he decided for his friend. Bucky followed him into Darcy’s bathroom. It was barely big enough for the two of them. He and Darcy had perfected a little dance around each other, helped by the fact she was nearly a foot shorter than he. Steve set out towels, clothes and started the water, positioning the lever so that it would become hot enough for a sting of heat (the way Bucky liked it. Darcy—well, she preferred a hot bath, bubbles and a glass of wine). “Give it a minute for the water to warm up. Shampoo is on the shelf. Darcy keeps some decent smelling stuff here for me, but you can use whatever you want. You’ll like the soap. Top shelf stuff.”

“I can have warm water?” There was a thread of fear in Bucky’s question.

”Yes. As hot as you want it. Just don’t burn yourself.”

“I don’t want the cold.” The plea must have cost Bucky because he jolted as he said it.

Steve swore under his breath. “You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you. I won’t let them.” He pulled Bucky into an awkward hug. Bucky’s arms stayed stiff, leaving Steve to wonder if Bucky was scared to put his arms around him or if he was afraid to push Steve away. In any case, Bucky didn’t pull a knife on him and Steve decided to count that as a victory. “I’m right there with you, pal. I fucking hate the cold.”

Bucky shuddered. He swayed, leaning into Steve a degree or two. Then he began to strip without a word. Wanting to stay, unable to decide if was appropriate, Steve left Bucky to his shower.

The evening was miserable. He couldn’t pull anything out of the soldier that reminded him of his friend. Trying to prompt any sort of memory frustrated Bucky, Steve’s explanation of their timelines was met with blankness, and Bucky physically did nothing unless Steve told him to do it.
It was late, and Steve had been up for days. There on the sofa, across from the Winter Soldier, he slept.

Early the next morning when he woke, Bucky was gone. (Doors still locked, windows intact and locked.) He ascended the stairs. (Windows intact.) The Winter Soldier was on the chair, knife in hand. Ice grey eyes slanted to Steve. (Guarding Darcy.) Steve settled on the foot of Darcy’s bed, watching Bucky.


****

Bright sun woke Darcy. That and the ridiculous throbbing pain in her, well, everything. She tried to lie still, hoping it would stop.

A rough voice from across the room dispelled that notion. “Doesn’t help, Princess, when it hurts that bad.”

Darcy turned her head. Clad in a thin black shirt and a pair of sweats she recognized as Steve’s, Bucky sat with one leg up in the chair. His hair was tousled and there was more color in his skin. Did he sleep? She swallowed against the dryness in her throat. “Thank you for yesterday.”

He ducked his head in acknowledgement. His eyes flicked to Steve as he came through the doorway. “Darce? How are you feeling?” Steve’s voice was deliberately calm. Almost his Captain America voice. (She didn’t like it and wondered what she’d missed.)

So she groaned theatrically, laying her good wrist on her head. “Terrible. Gimme something.”

That elicited a smile as he cajoled, “You need to eat first. You slept through the night.”

“No wonder my hair itches,” she complained.

Bucky spoke up. “She’s hurting. Needs the injection first so she can sit up.”

“Good idea,” Steve agreed. “You want to do it?”

Well, that was unexpected. Bucky unfolded from the chair to sit on the bed. It dipped, and she winced from the movement. She had no idea where he pulled the syringe from, but he laid it against her side. A prick, a sting and then blessed numbness spread.

He pressed fingers to her wrist and ankle. The first hurt, the second was only annoying. “Wrist needs to be set,” he told Steve.

Steve nodded and knelt by Darcy. “Your dad has called me four times already and has a car waiting outside. In retrospect, we probably should have gone to the Tower. I could have saved you the lecture.” He looked up at Bucky. “Bruce should have the analysis done on the vials Darcy pulled from your arm if you want to know what was in them.”

Darcy waited for Bucky to reply, but he didn’t act like he heard Steve’s comment. Weird. So she held out her hand. “Help me up.” Bucky slipped an arm under her and practically lifted her in place. The metal was oddly flexible. Other than the cold, she might not have realized it was mechanical if it
was covered up. She wanted (okay, that wasn’t a strong enough word but it would have to work because anything else was creepy) to take a better look. Soviet technology was often brilliant, though sometimes strangely glitchy.

Bucky must have agreed, because when he withdrew his arm, he gave it an annoyed scowl. He made a stretching motion that seemed to act like a reset movement. He stroked his thumb across his fingers and frowned.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

Blank grey eyes met hers. Steve caught it and said carefully, “Bucky, do you want to get the soup we made for Darcy?” Without acknowledging the request, Bucky rose, the bed dipping again, to do Steve’s bidding.

She frowned. “Something tells me that isn’t usual Bucky behavior.”

Steve shifted to take Bucky’s place, burying his face in her hair before replying softly, “No. The Bucky I knew barely toed the line with orders. He was respectful when necessary, skirted rules wherever possible, and relied on charm to get out of breaking the rest.”

Studying his face, she nodded. “Did Natasha give you his file?”

He gave her an exasperated look. “How do you know these things?”

She shrugged. “Makes sense. I’ll bet she’s the only one who has a fair idea of what might break that kind of conditioning.”

He shivered. “I hate that word.”

“I know.”

Bucky returned, carrying a big plate with soup, crackers, and a spoon balanced on it in one hand, and a cup of hot tea in the other.

She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like tea. That’s Steve’s stuff.”

“It’s good for you. Drink it anyway,” he admonished with a hint of annoyance.

Behind him, Steve paled. She wondered how many times Bucky had said the same thing to him. She drank her tea.

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Bucky retreated to his corner as Darcy (Stark) ate. He mentally ran through an inventory of his backpack (acceptable), and assessed the odd feeling coming from his arm (unacceptable). The fabric of the shirt rubbed (pain/irritation/soft?). He closed his mind to it (focus on the mission). Mission one, find man on the bridge. Complete. Mission two, find Stark. Complete. New mission. His head … hurt? He needed a mission. (Change the world.)

Mission: Protect Stark. (Protect the asset. Change the world.)

Falling. Table. Steve. So much pain. Steve makes it stop. Steve makes it stop. Safe. I am safe.)

Directive: Stay with Steve. (Safe. No more pain. Change the world one last time.)
The In Between

If Steve hadn’t faced the other end of a knife wielded by the man walking beside him less than two weeks ago, he would have never imagined that he and the Winter Soldier were one and the same. If Steve had not heard Bucky’s familiar cadence when speaking with Darcy, he wouldn’t have dreamed that his best friend was still in there somewhere.

This man followed Steve like an obedient dog—the terrible kind where the dog flinches when startled. He hovered over Darcy with a lethal protectiveness that Steve didn’t understand. (Why Darcy?)

They’d had a staring contest over getting Darcy to the car. She’d solved it with a snort of disgust and limped her way into the open door with Happy’s outstretched hand of assistance. Once inside, she’d admonished the pair of them. “I’m not a bone, you two. Barnes, yes, grateful for the rescue. Good job on patching me up. You are safe with me and I will wield the Stark sword on your behalf. HYDRA sucks and we are not letting them get their tentacles on you again. Steve, just because Bucky is here, I have not developed a rash. Hug me, damn it. I might even cry a little because yesterday fucking sucked, and I don’t like to cry.”

He did, and she did, making a mess of the shirt that he’d worn for the past two days. Bucky watched the pair of them without even a hint of expression to give Steve a clue as to what he was thinking.

Tony’s driver left them at the garage entrance while Steve gave Bucky a fast rundown on the building layout and introduced the Tower’s AI.

JARVIS greeted them. “Hello Captain Rogers. Sergeant Barnes. Welcome home, Lewis. Sir has insisted that I take you to the infirmary first, though I can assure him you are improving.”

“Thanks, J. I guess Tony is kind of freaked over everything.”

“As is Ms. Potts,” he said with a hint of censure.

“Hey, it’s not like I was planning the stalkerazzi thing,” she muttered. Darcy snapped her head up. “JARVIS? How are you getting around Bucky’s scattering device?”

“Sergeant Barnes disabled it this morning at 5:32 a.m. I have been monitoring you since that time.”

She gave Bucky a curious look. “How?”

He lifted his left shoulder in shrug and ghost of a smile lifted the corner of his mouth. As the elevator stopped, Bucky shifted so that Darcy was behind him.

When the door opened, Tony was there with Pepper. He picked up on the defensive stance of the Winter Soldier and nodded. “You have my thanks for taking care of Darcy.” They had a little staring contest until Darcy nudged Bucky in the small of his back.

Very softly, Steve said, “Bucky, stand down. This is her family.”

Without acknowledging he’d heard, Bucky stepped to the side, letting Steve assist Darcy out of the elevator and into Tony’s hard embrace. Pepper stroked her daughter’s hair. For a blinding moment, Steve missed his Ma something awful. Tony led Darcy off to the infirmary, just a short walk away.

Pepper had tears on her cheeks, though she dabbed at them neatly with the handkerchief Steve
produced. “Thank you, Captain Rogers. And is this your friend who helped Darcy?”

Grateful for her gracious opening, he made the introductions. “Yes, ma’am. Bucky? This is Pepper Potts, Darcy’s mother. Ms. Potts, this is Sergeant James Barnes. Bucky is from his middle name, Buchanan.”

Bucky took her hand, kissing the fingers with a hint of his old charm. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “Sergeant Barnes.” Somehow she admonished him and thanked him with no more than his name. “Please come with me.”

She took them to the first room of the medical suite, though Steve stopped Bucky at the door and pulled him aside to watch through the window. Something dark flashed in Bucky’s eyes, enough that Steve tightened his grip on his friend’s shoulder.

Tony spoke to Darcy. Whatever he said made Darcy cry again, though he wrapped his arms around her. Pepper rubbed Darcy’s back.

A whisper of air was the only warning that Thor had returned from Asgard. Steve still hadn’t grown used to how silent the warrior could be, especially given his size. Thor radiated calm as he flanked Bucky and considered Darcy through the window. “She is precious to us,” he said as he turned and held out his hand. “I am honored to meet the shieldbrother of my friend, Steven.”

Again, Bucky extended his hand. Thor clasped wrists, warrior to warrior. “You have my thanks for your role in protecting Darcy. She is as a sister to my lady. We would be a poorer people if not for her company. And we are made richer by the addition of yours.” He nodded formally. “I would be honored to know your name.”

Bucky gave Steve a confused glance. Steve nodded. “It’s okay. You’re safe. Thor is a friend to Darcy. And to me.”

“James. James Barnes.” He glanced at Steve, again. “He calls me ‘Bucky.’”

Thor nodded again, this time with a smile of satisfaction. “Then I will call you ‘James’ until you give me leave to use your more familiar name. Will that be acceptable?”

Bucky gave him an impossibly slow nod of agreement. Steve was sure that Thor didn’t miss the clenching of Bucky’s fist as he did nor the flash of fear in his face when he was asked his name.

When Bucky turned back to the window, an echo of thunder rolled through the atmosphere, loudly enough to be heard through the tower. Steve raised an eyebrow. Thor was furious, something he’d never seen in the warrior (patience, frustration, annoyance. Never anger).

Steve let Bucky stare at Darcy for a while then pulled him into the common area where JARVIS had ordered in enough Chinese food to cover both coffee tables. Thor was already there, sampling a variety of boxes. Bucky took the seat where he could watch Darcy and the elevator. He ate neatly and efficiently, not shoveling his food, but not wasting anytime with it either.

“I didn’t know you liked sesame chicken and fried rice, Bucky,” Steve asked lightly (Bucky hated fried rice).

His friend stared down at the box and the chopsticks in his hand. “It’s sustenance.”

“Better than army rations, that’s for damned sure. Stark feeds us better than anywhere I’ve been.”
“Stark?” Bucky snapped his head up.

Steve waved to Tony, who was just coming out of Darcy’s room.

“Me. Tony Stark. You might know me as ‘Iron Man’.”

Bucky shifted until he was sitting bolt upright and put the box of Chinese food on the table. He didn’t draw a weapon, but Steve got the uneasy feeling Bucky was only seconds from it. “What is it?” he asked.

“I’m safe?” Bucky asked, staring at Tony. “I had a mission. Mission was complete. I’m safe?”

Steve crossed over to crouch next to Bucky. “You’re safe. What was the mission?”

Somehow, Stark interpreted Bucky’s ramblings and made sense of them. “Son of a bitch.” Tony stared back. “My parents. Your mission was my parents.”

“Not both. One. Wife, son, acceptable collateral damage.”

“So you killed them. But not me.” Tony strode in to stand just feet from Bucky, anger in every line of his body. “Why?”

Bucky jolted again and pinned Steve with fright lining his face. “I’m safe?”

He nodded. “You are.”

“Child was not a target.” Bucky hunched his shoulders, the first tell Steve had seen him indicate. “I’m safe?” his voice rose.

“Yes, Bucky, you’re safe.”

“Yes, Bucky, you’re safe.”

“Child, girl, was not a target,” he repeated. “Mission was complete.”

Tony crossed over to Bucky to stand in front of him. “Are you trying to tell me that you chose?”

“Child was not a target. Mission was complete.” Bucky jerked again and snapped his head around to Steve, almost wild in his expression. He flexed his hand just over where one of his knives rested.

“Stand down, Sergeant Barnes,” Steve snapped, far more forcefully than in the elevator. As if he’d turned off a light switch, Bucky stilled, utterly lax in his face and body, hands dangling on his thighs as he stared off into space.

Tony recoiled in horror. “What the fuck did they do to you, Barnes?”

Bucky didn’t answer. Neither did Steve. Never had he wanted to punch a bag quite so much. Or take down HYDRA with his own bare hands. Steve had to order Bucky to eat after Pepper drew Tony back into Darcy’s room. Any ideas Steve had about moving into the Tower with Bucky were swept out the door. He wouldn’t do that to Tony.

(Later on, Darcy would be a little more pragmatic about the whole thing with her grandfather. She hadn’t known him, and Pepper had Tony in hand for the night. In truth, Steve was more devastated than Darcy was. Howard had been his friend. )

Through it all, Bucky kept to a chair between Darcy’s room and the exit, saying nothing at all.
Later that evening, Thor motioned to Steve to come out into the hallway. “I understand this group, called HYDRA, is responsible for your friend?”

“Yes,” Steve replied.

“Then they have earned my ire. You will need assistance bringing your friend back. I will offer mine, if you will have it.” Shaken by his support, Steve braced himself against the wall. He was too choked up to say anything at all. As before, Thor rested his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Steven, there is more to being a warrior than fighting. On Asgard, we are trained to help. As a prince of my people, I would be a poor leader indeed if I could not help those suffering from the aftermath of war.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Steve admitted.

“It would be a wondrous thing if you did. To have two loves and have both of them laid low would be hard on the most intact of hearts.” The sincere comment gave Steve a chance to pull himself together as Thor continued, “Darcy will be well soon, yes? They will keep her overnight to make her father happy, and then she can go home?”

“Yes. But that’s a whole different thing, Thor. We were going to move in together. We hadn’t really talked about it yet and now what’s left of my stuff is crammed into her place. You know how small it is.”

“Aye, but it is pleasant, nonetheless.”

“Not with all my boxes everywhere. And now Bucky is there. I don’t know if I should get a place with Bucky for a while to help him—but that doesn’t seem fair to Darcy.”

“And therein is the larger problem. You have two loves. It seems James is fascinated with Darcy enough to not want to be separated for now. But Darcy has yet to express her reservations or delights with the situation. What you want may have to be secondary to your friend’s recovery.”

Steve slammed his eyes shut, clenching his jaw hard enough to ache.

“Steven?”

“Darce is mine.” He held up his hands before Thor could growl at him. “Not—not her person. I don’t own her. But this thing we have—it’s gorgeous and beautiful and pure. She gives me a place to stand, Thor.”

“Yet, you already know you will not give up James for her. Nor her for James.” Thor’s hand tightened on his shoulder. “This is not your decision, Steven. Speak with Darcy tomorrow.”
Chapter Summary

Of course, Tony has an opinion.

Tony and Pepper stared through the window of Darcy’s recovery room. With the Avengers frequently in and out of medical, Tony had installed an infirmary near the common area with plenty of seating and easy access. It was stocked for anything from a headache to major surgery, but nobody stayed there long in any case.

Darcy slept, after the doctor had pronounced Bucky’s stitching good and injected her with a dose of antibiotics to ward off an impending infection.

Bucky occupied in the chair next to her, a knife tucked under his right hand. Maybe he slept. Tony wasn’t sure. His eyes were closed, though JARVIS privately speculated that the Sergeant was listening more than he was dozing.

Steve was on the floor, his head resting against Bucky’s knee and one hand holding Darcy’s. Steve, JARVIS informed him, was soundly sleeping. Bucky’s metal hand covered both of theirs.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Pepper asked. (Pepp had an open mind, but this was their baby girl. Well, his. But hers. Twelve percent? More. Theirs.)

“Looks like it,” Tony muttered.

“She knew? About Bucky and Steve?”

“Yeah.” Tony shrugged. “A while back. I knew. Peggy told me a long time ago.”

Pepper sighed. “Should I be mad?” She wrapped her arm around his middle and rested her chin on his shoulder. (Tall men didn’t get how perfect it was to have a woman there.)

“Would it have mattered if Steve hadn’t found him?”

“I guess not. Are you okay with it?”

Tony fidgeted with his lip, pulling at it. “No. But I didn’t want her with Cap either. She has enough neurotic, broken egos around her already.”

“Yes, she does. What’s one more?”

“Honey, you know Barnes is even worse off than Natasha was. And she came in of her own volition”

“Bruce told me.”

“Does he tell you everything?”

“Yes. Including what was in those vials Darcy pulled from Bucky’s arm.”
He’d heard. (Was it still okay to blindly hate a group of people?) “Monsters. Everyone damned one of them.”

“HYDRA is on the list,” she reminded him, “and I’m wielding the Stark sword.”

“It’s a good sword.”

“Yes it is.”

“Pepp? I can’t protect my baby girl any more, can I?”

“Not from this.” She waved her hand toward the window.

Tony pressed his forehead against the glass. Bucky’s eyes opened at the whisper of sound. Soldier to father, eyes slid to the trio of clasped hands then tracked back to Tony’s. The Winter Soldier never blinked, resolute in his stillness.

“Son of a bitch,” he murmured. “He’s protecting her. Darcy’s got the goddamned Winter Soldier as a bodyguard. Why?” His mind raced with a dozen scenarios, discarding them as quickly as they popped up. None of them made sense.

Pepper pressed a kiss to his neck. “I don’t know. Come sit on the couch with me.” He pouted, just a little, then let her take him to the sofa in the common room—just a few feet away. She waited for him to settle against the soft leather, and then curled up into his side. He didn’t sleep, but she did. He waited. And worried. And wondered.
Precious and Shiny

The Winter Soldier glared at Steve, following his movements. “Where are they taking her?” he demanded in a flat monotone.

“She’s with Tony and Pepper. They live just below this floor. Remember how Ma used to fuss over me whenever I’d be sick?”

Instead of replying, Bucky growled, “When is she coming back?” This time, he was somewhere between protective and petulant.

Steve wondered at the odd attachment Bucky seem to be forming with Darcy. Not that he minded, particularly, but it didn’t make sense. “We’ll take her home tonight,” Steve assured him. “In the meantime, Dr. Banner wants you to know what Darcy took out of your arm. Some of it wasn’t all bad, but it’s got to be your call.”

Bucky merely blinked, waiting for orders again. Having his best friend look at him that way was disconcerting. (Pissed him off, every single time.)

“JARVIS, will you have Dr. Banner join us in conference room B?” Steve asked.

Bruce was probably the least intimidating and most self-effacing member of their team. He seemed to pose little threat, yet the Winter Soldier recognized him anyway. He watched. Assessing. Considering.

“Rogers.”

“Banner.”

“Who is your friend?”

“This is James Barnes. My best friend, Bucky.”

Bruce waved with glasses in hand. “Nice to meet you and all that. But really, let’s cut to the chase. You don’t look particularly comfortable with me in the room.”

“One doesn’t feel comfortable with anybody in the room.” Steve’s comment prompted a flash of recognition in the Soldier’s eyes, though they didn’t soften any.

Banner brought the four vials out of the case he carried and set them on the table, along with a report. “I’ve written down all the details, but the basics are fairly straightforward. You’ve got four pretty good cocktails in those vials – an all-purpose narcotic, an anti-depressant/anxiety drug, a nice mix of amphetamines in the third one, and my least favorite and the one that was causing Mr. Barnes serious concern is a lethal combo guaranteed to kill him in thirty seconds or less.”

“You knew ‘bout them?” Steve asked.

“The last one. Not the others,” Bucky quietly replied.

“Yeah, well, here’s the problem. I’m guessing you’re pretty well used to the rest of them. Not that addiction means much with the serum we all seem to have various varieties of around here.” He waited for a response from Bucky, got nothing, and continued. “The amphetamines will clear your system quickly enough, though there can be some nasty side effects. It’s possible—likely—that the
serum in your body will counteract a lot of that. It’s the anxiety drugs that are causing me the most worry. Coming off those too fast can mess with your head.”

Bruce paused, clearing his throat uncomfortably. “I’d like to do a blood test to see how high your levels are now that you’ve had a day without them. I can get an idea of how fast your body is metabolizing the chemicals. We don’t have to put the vials back in your arm, but you might want to take a lesser dosage in a pill form to wean you off of them. All that depends on how much healing your brain has to do.”

None of this information seemed to register with Bucky. Steve scooted his chair over to him. “What do you want to do?”

Bucky’s face went blank as he laid out his arm out in preparation for a blood draw, slouching a little in the chair to give his head some support.

Stifling his instant fury, Steve reached out. By instinct, he cupped Bucky’s face, the strands of hair dangling over his fingers as he nudged him to sit up again. “No, Buck. Even for something as small as a blood sample, this has to be what you want to do.” When the soldier still didn’t respond, Steve waived off Banner. “You’re safe. No one will hurt you. Not here. Anyone who tries will have to go through me.”

Bruce slipped out as he spoke, leaving the report. He also left a simple blood draw kit on the table—easy enough for even Steve to use (a pin prick, not a needle, he wasn’t good at that kind of thing.)

A flicker of something in the grey eyes he loved so much gave him hope. Casting around for an idea, he latched on to something basic and easy. “JARVIS, can we get something to eat in here?”

With a last brush of his thumb across the stubble on Bucky’s cheek, he let go—turning away in an effort to keep his composure.

“Captain, I took the liberty of ordering Philly cheesesteak sandwiches. They will be delivered momentarily. Also, Lord Thor and Ms. Foster have requested to join you for lunch, as have Ms. Romanov and Mr. Barton. How shall I respond?”

“Sure. Nat and Clint are back? Maybe we should move this to the kitchen?”

“I will make the appropriate arrangements.”

The short conversation gave Steve a chance to regroup before he faced Bucky again. When he did, the test strips were saturated in blood and had been inserted into the protective glass covers. The soldier had his forefinger and thumb pinched together.

“Buck?” he called softly. “I’ll get these to Banner for you.”

“I’m safe?”

“Yes, you’re safe. Will you come with me to the kitchen so we can eat?”

“You’ll stay?”

“I promise I will. There will be four at lunch, and you’ve already met Thor. JARVIS, can you put a request in to limit any other guests?”

“I will. Captain, Sergeant, if you will leave the test kit on the table, Dr. Banner will be here in a few moments to retrieve it. He has asked me to let you know that he will have the results by the time you are ready to take Lewis home.”
Lunch was … interesting. Thor and Jane were already there. Bucky stayed behind Steve and shifted to the right. (Keeping his back to the wall and his eyes on both exits.) He acknowledged Thor and Jane only when his gaze skimmed across the room, halting briefly for Jane, longer for Thor.

So when Nat and Clint strolled in and Bucky’s demeanor changed, Steve went on full alert. Thor did too, though how he did it without moving a muscle flabbergasted Steve.

Nat stood her ground when Bucky saw her. “Natalia Romanova.” He walked straight to her and kissed both cheeks as he slid his hands to cup either side of her head. “Milaya.” Even his body language was Russian, and Steve wondered how many more versions of Bucky existed.

Clint stood with his arms crossed behind Nat, one step closer than necessary. Bucky ignored him as he stroked her hair, speaking to her in Russian. (Steve raised an eyebrow. Anyone else who touched Nat like that would be on the ground, most likely twitching.) She replied in kind, her eyes drinking Bucky in with a small smile. She jerked her chin back to Clint. Bucky sneered (in Russian, if such a thing were possible), and mimed holding up a shot glass to salute her.

She said something else, and he frowned. His eyes dropped to her middle. He reached out and flipped her shirt up to reveal the scar Steve already knew was there. Recognition and shame flooded Bucky’s face. “I did this,” he said, turning to Steve. “My precious Natalia. I had a mission. She was in the way.” He shivered. “I had a mission. I didn’t want to kill you, Milaya.”

“I know. I didn’t give you a choice.”

“You left me a target.”

“I gave you one that wouldn’t get me killed. Or you.” She brushed her lips across both of his cheeks. “The guy was a prick. Not worth either of us dying.”

“You came here?” His brow wrinkled, as if he were trying to put the pieces of memory together. He reached out, lightly brushing the wound in her shoulder.

She caught his hand. “I came here. You did that, starshi prepodavtel. You taught me everything I needed to know to survive. And how to fly free. For that, I have red in my ledger.” She gave him a beautiful smile. “Now I can wipe it out.”

Bucky and Natasha made low conversation throughout the lunch, all in Russian, so Steve had no idea if they were trading training stories, comparing weaponry or exchanging recipes. But whatever it was, the conversation opened something in Bucky.


“Till the end of the line, Bucky.” Steve countered. “I promised. You’re safe with me.” He considered Bucky’s state of mind. Wondered if his next words would push him too far. “I won’t lie to you. There’s a shit ton of fallout from all of this HYDRA/S.H.I.E.L.D. thing. I’m covering you, and nothing will change that. But any intel you can give us on the people who did this to you will help.”

Bucky’s face blanked, and it was the Winter Soldier who nodded.
Steve insisted they keep the interview casual, refusing the conference room. He wasn’t sure what would trigger Bucky. Nat suggested Tony’s penthouse.

They found Darcy napping on the sofa with her headphones and an iPod. Her hair was damp, and she had on Iron Man pajamas. The cast on her wrist was like nothing he’d seen before. Thin ribbons of electric blue plastic crisscrossed the arm, woven closely enough to support it, but open enough to shower or scratch an itch.

Bucky took a seat close enough to her that Steve frowned. He was still in Winter Soldier mode, and his hand made a twitch. Checking the placement of the knife he had strapped to his wrist, Steve decided.

Tony came up behind Steve. “You brought him here.”

“My idea.” Natasha slipped out from behind Steve. Both men turned to face her, Steve opening his mouth to back her up.

But Darcy’s father put a hand up to shut him up and fired at Nat, “You bring Ice Man 2 into my house and you think I won’t have a problem? What’s he carrying, an arsenal?”

She shrugged. Steve silently agreed with Nat. Trying to disarm his friend seemed pointless. They backpack had stayed home but, by Steve’s count, Bucky was still carrying at least three knives, a semi-automatic pistol, a spare clip, and no telling what surprises stashed here and there around his body. (Kind of like Natasha, come to think of it. She put on weapons like perfume.) “She isn’t?” He jerked a thumb at Nat.

Tony gave him a dirty look in return. “What’s your ploy,” he asked Natasha.

The red-headed spy shrugged again, probably to annoy Tony. “He needs to be with Darcy.”

“Um, I believe I’m going to require a better explanation that that, Ms. Romanov. One with a little less spy talk.” He wiggled his fingers at her.

She smirked. “Just because he left HYDRA is doesn’t mean he isn’t operating by their rules. He needs a mission and a handler. Darcy is his mission. Steve’s his handler. It’s going to be that way for a while.”

“Didn’t I say something about less spy talk?” Tony quipped.

But her phrasing got Steve’s attention. Softly, he asked, “Fury was your handler?”

She nodded.

“So what happens now?”

With a studied casual air, Natasha strolled over to Tony’s bar. From the freezer, she retrieved a bottle of vodka and poured herself a shot. “I find a new one.” She knocked it back. Then stared at Steve.

He gave her his Captain America look (Darcy was threatening to patent it) and tried to decide what in the hell he was going to do with two assassins (HYDRA came to mind). She flashed him a smile, poured a second shot and took it to Bucky.

Tony stroked his beard. “Did I miss something?”

"..."
“No more than I did. I’ll let you know when I’ve got it figured out.”

“And for now?”

“Bucky’s agreed to give us what intelligence he can. We can use it to start digging out some of these HYDRA cells.”

“You trust him?”

Steve looked him straight in the eyes. “You don’t?”

Tony snapped, “The Cap thing is a sham. You can be a real bastard, you know?”

“Your daughter tells me that once a week.”

“She’s smart.”

“Yeah, she is.”

Gla resing at him, Tony advised, “Assume this is a continuation of the conversation you and I had a while back. I have one concern in all of this—my daughter. And if I have to tear apart whatever is left of this Avengers thing we have to keep her safe, I will. You don’t get to make mistakes here, Cap. Capiche?”

Steve softened. For all that they knocked heads, when it came to Darcy, he respected Tony. With quiet deference, he answered, “Yes, sir.”

Tony seemed to accept it. “Do I have to stay for this?”

“Only if you want to.”

“Then I won’t. I’ll be back in time for dinner. I expect you—and him—to stay and eat before you take Darcy home.” Tony pivoted and walked out, leaving Steve to figure out everything that was—and wasn’t—said.

“Cap?”

“Coming, Nat.”

Natasha did the interview, JARVIS recorded it, and Maria Hill would later analyze in the information. The Winter Soldier answered every question asked of him, his eyes darting from Natasha to Steve to Darcy. His perception was terrifying.

The interview convinced Steve (as if he needed more proof) that Bucky had been injected with a variant on the serum he’d been given. Even though there was no physical increase in size for Bucky, they shared other aspects. Speed healing was obvious, as was the strength Bucky now had.

The changes in the brain were similar too. For one, both of them had enhanced reflexes due, in part, to increased mental processing speeds. Steve had discovered not long after the serum had been injected that he saw the possibilities of a situation faster than most. In battle, the ability had been priceless. (In everyday life, he had a tendency to be dull as he bit his tongue. No one liked a know-it-all.)

For two, Steve simply couldn’t forget. Once he learned something, the knowledge stayed at his fingertips. *(Not thinking* was different, and a survival tool for his sanity.*)
He wondered if this is why HYDRA used a combination of electroshocks and cryofreeze to contain Bucky between missions. Having a serum-laced soldier thinking too much would have been dangerous. Natasha implied as much. She wouldn’t speak much of the Red Room, only that the Winter Soldier had been one of her trainers. Long enough for both of them to develop an attachment.

He’d been frozen. Resurrected. Shocked and drugged. The next time he didn’t recognize her.

And still his brain tried to repair itself. Whatever they did to him, Bucky managed to remember enough to break from his handlers. To know that there was something more.

For that, Steve was willing to do anything it took to help Bucky. To what end, he didn’t know. The man who sat inches away from Darcy was nothing like his old friend. Except that he was. Steve alone knew the darker side of Bucky Barnes—the anger, the self-doubt. Most people only ever knew the good-hearted young man with a wink and smile for the girls, who offered a helping hand around the neighborhood.

They might have picked up on his protective nature—heaven help those who went after Steve. Or the stubborn side when he would nurse Steve into better health or nag him into having a little fun. But they never saw the boy who crafted himself into the epitome of a soldier so he would be promoted to a Sergeant even before he was shipped overseas. Others never saw the fury as they hid their love from the world.

The Winter Soldier was the distilled essence of all that. Whatever was left, something of the two of them had stayed. For that, Steve would do anything at all.
After the interview and a horribly uncomfortable dinner with Stark, where Darcy was cranky and Bucky wasn’t talking, Steve took his … well, he took Darcy and Bucky home anyway.

Darcy’s energy, what she had, flagged, and he could see the pinched lines of pain on her forehead by the time Happy dropped them off.

Bucky stopped them at the door while he did a recon of the house to make sure it was clear. Steve held Darcy lightly in his arms, with her head resting on his chest, until the soldier returned. He kissed her on the forehead. “Wait for me, doll, and I’ll get a glass of water so you can take your medicine.”

But Darcy was stubborn and didn’t want to wait. She made it up three steps on the stairs before Bucky scooped her into his arms and carried her up the rest of the way. “Damn it, I can walk,” she protested. Steve followed on Bucky’s heels, while Darcy gave him a dark glare over the soldier’s shoulder. “You two are NOT going to cart me up and down the stairs all week.”

Bucky set her on her bed, retreating to the corner as Steve passed her the glass of water and a couple of pills.

“Are you going to watch me sleep?” she snapped at Bucky.

“Yes.”

She sputtered until Steve shooed Bucky out to use the shower, giving him time enough to help Darcy into fresh (non-Iron Man) pajamas. “Is he really going to watch me sleep?” Darcy’s voice was muffled as she shed the red and gold shirt in favor of his Mets jersey (he had to root for someone and it damned well wasn’t going to be the Yankees).

“Probably.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I’d argue but it’s been a long day for all of us.”

It might have mattered, except that the medication made Darcy drowsy, and she crashed before Bucky returned from the bathroom. He’d picked out another pair of Steve’s sweats and a t-shirt from the pile left on the counter. He wasn’t visibly armed, but Steve didn’t believe that for a minute.

He dug out Darcy’s extra sheets and blanket from under her bed then stole one of her pillows. “Where do you want to be? I can make up the couch for you.”

But Bucky took the chair in the corner and settled in. When Steve held out the blanket and pillow, the soldier seemed to flinch before he cautiously took the pillow. The rest he ignored and Steve ended up setting them on the floor next to his feet.

When he stood, Bucky caught his hand at the wrist, not hard, just enough to stop him. “Thank you.” He didn’t quite look Steve when he said it.

“Don’t be a jerk. You don’t have to thank me.” But it was said with a smile, and Bucky looked at him this time.

“Go … to sleep… punk.” He let go of Steve’s wrist to stuff Darcy’s pillow under his chin.
Steve wanted (ached) to kiss him goodnight. He didn’t though. “Jerk,” he said again as he straightened. He stripped down to his boxers and climbed in bed. As he fell asleep with one hand on Darcy, he realized what he done in front of Bucky. (Then he didn’t care.)

Somehow, seemingly no more than two minutes later, it was dawn. He’d shifted in the night to sleep on his side. Darcy was still on her back (not normal, not by a long shot). He lifted his head to discover Bucky was still keeping watch from the chair. “Did you sleep at all?”

“No.”

He rolled out of bed. “Good grief, Buck, there’s no need to push yourself like this. I can stand guard if you need.”

His friend didn’t answer, and Steve scratched his stubble out of habit. “I like to run in the mornings. I don’t need much sleep, and Darcy is a happier person if she wakes up to coffee. Sam will be here in a few minutes. He offered to stay with Darcy if you want to go with me. We’ll swing by the coffee shop on our way back.”

There was a flicker in Bucky’s eyes. “Darcy?”

“She will be safe with Sam. We’ll be gone for less than an hour,” he confirmed.

Finally, he nodded and Steve scooted him off to the bathroom again. He could hear the toilet flush and Bucky brushing his teeth. He was grateful his friend had retained that much autonomy. Steve dug around for an extra pair of running shoes in Darcy’s wardrobe. They would be a half-size too big, but they could rectify that later today.

A knock on the door announced Sam’s arrival. Bucky popped out immediately. He must have found Steve’s straight razor, because his skin was smooth and flushed from the hot water. He wiped his face with a towel as Steve gaped. (--gorgeous. This was his Bucky.)

His friend held out the towel with a faint questioning look until Steve stopped staring long enough to point out the laundry hamper. Bucky chucked it in and followed Steve down the narrow stairs.

Sam was damp from his own run that morning. “Nice to see you have a running partner who can keep up with you. Please tell me you have coffee ready.” He slipped off a lightweight backpack and handed it Bucky. “I think we have the same shoe size. Ten and a half?”

Steve shook his head. “Not yet. I was going to pick some up after our run.”

“Coffee, black. A big one. None of that crap in it. I get to use your shower and I’ll make breakfast.”

“Darcy’s still asleep. She won’t mind.” He reached into his pocket and punched in a text. “She checks her phone before she breathes. She’ll see that and know you’re here.”

Bucky held the bag after pulling the shoes out of it. After a moment of hesitation, he gave it back to Sam.

Steve encouraged, “Go ahead and try them, Buck. Wear whichever ones feel better.”

After considering the pair, Bucky kept the ones Sam had brought.
“Ready?”

With the familiar hint of dawn and the breeze from the water keeping them company, Steve fell into his rhythm easily. He steadily increased his pace to see how Bucky kept up. A faint smirk from his friend had him stepping it up until they were pushing his fastest pace. Five miles. Seven. Twelve. At fourteen and less than three blocks from Darcy’s, he waived off Bucky, pulling up to a walk.

“Damn that felt good. Haven’t been out for a good run in weeks.”

“You like it?”

Steve smiled as Bucky asked the question. “Yeah, I do. It’s nice to be running without chasing someone down and I like the fresh air. Want coffee?”

Bucky nodded as he shook his hair out of his face. The shop had a walk up window. They took advantage of it and each of them carried a pair of drinks back to Darcy’s place.

She was still asleep when they returned, but Sam gladly took a cup and thumbed toward the stove where he had bacon sizzling. “You have enough time for a shower, if you make it fast,” he offered.

“You go first, Bucky. And make the water hot enough to feel good.” Steve and Sam made small talk until they heard the water turn on.

“You’re his new handler?” Sam asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Apparently. Natasha said something along those lines. Doesn’t feel right at all.”

“For now, it’s fine, but yeah, long term it’s a bad idea.” He waggled his finger. “Don’t even think about bringing sex into this until that’s squared away.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that to either of them.” Steve reached for his coffee. Though he appreciated Sam’s frankness, he wasn’t ready to talk (Yet. Sam would get it out of him). “How’s the Tower?” he asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Sam let him dodge for now. “More fun than I thought it would be. Guess I’m sharing a floor with Nat and Clint. You know, I did not realize Bruce Banner lived in the Tower.”

“You okay with that?”

“Hey, he’s sharing a floor with Thor and Jane. If a big Asgardian prince is good, I’m good.”

“How’d you find out?”

“Thursday night is game night and Sunday night is family night, which means everyone not on a mission is required to attend.” Steve snickered as Sam waved his spatula at him. “No. You do not get to laugh at me because the observation was made that just because some of the Avengers do not live in the Tower, it doesn’t mean they aren’t required to be in attendance.”

“Let me guess? You?”

“Works for me.” Sam grinned.

Not for the first time, Steve decided Sam was a class act and was proud to call him a friend. He gently teased, “You know, that means Stark is going to be there.”

“He’s paying for it, right? I’m good.”
“So you want to put Bucky, Nat, Darcy, and Stark in the same room? Potentially with alcohol? You’ve heard the stories. They’re all true.” Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, shit.”

“Throw in Jane, who is Darcy’s best friend, and Banner, who is a nervous wreck but needs friends he can trust and relax with, and Clint, who has a prank streak a mile wide. So that leaves you, me, Pepper and Thor to be Mommy and Daddy for the evening.”

“I don’t want to be daddy.”

“Keep it to Nat, Clint, and Jane so Thor and Bruce can babysit,” Steve suggested.

“This deal keeps getting worse and worse all the time.”

Steve lit up as the line sounded familiar. “Hey, I got that. The Empire one.”

“Nice. Sounds like Bucky’s done. Go get your shower too.”

Bucky hovered outside the bathroom. His eyes were clear enough, though he looked exhausted.

“How’s Darcy?” Steve asked, knowing Bucky would have checked.

“Waking.”

“Good. Go on down and get something to eat. I’ll get a shower and bring Darcy with me when I’m done.”

As his best friend followed orders, Steve had to resist the urge to punch something breakable (save it for the gym, pal). He showered, dressed, and turned to find Darcy holding up a door frame.

“Hi, doll.” He swooped in for a kiss and a very, very careful hug. “Should I ask?”

Her hands came up around his waist and her fingertips slid across the fabric of his shirt to lace together behind him. “Yes, it hurts. I smell coffee and bacon. Is there anyone here who is going to care that I look like crap?”

“Me, but I’ve already seen you this morning,” he teased.

“Shut up.” Her voice was muffled as she said it against his shirt.

“Yes, ma’am. Sam’s downstairs with Bucky.”

“Sam’s a really nice guy. Is Dad working on his wings?”

“Probably.”

“Damn. He gets all the good stuff.” Then she looked up with a beatific smile. “Except for Bucky. He promised.” She looked down at her side. “Will you help me change the bandages? They itch.”

“That I can do.” While Darcy leaned against the counter, Steve peeled away the gauze, cleaned up the mess and replaced it. Bucky had done a neat job of putting her back together, impressive considering he had only a field kit and barely that. He told her as much.

“That’s what the surgeon said yesterday. He was curious if Bucky had ever trained as a paramedic.”
“We all had basic instruction, but he was always patching up the Howling Commandos. And me.”

Darcy traced the edge of the bandage, lost in thought. Steve caught her fingertips and stepped into another hug. “I love you, Darce. And I really don’t know what I’m doing here, okay? I’m still tryin’ to wrap my head around Bucky being alive. Messed up, but alive. I don’t even know where to start with him, doll, but you have to know that I love you.”

“I do.”

He didn’t like the hesitation at all. “Then own it, Darce. ‘Cause I heard what you said to Bucky. JARVIS picked up your voice. You’re not a placeholder. You never were. You’re my girl, okay?”

“Steve? Darcy? Food’s getting cold and Bucky’s still hungry,” Sam called up the stairs.

“Feed him. We’ll be down in a second,” he called back. (He needed more time. Time he didn’t have.)

He caressed Darcy’s cheek. “We’ll talk about this more, I promise. Now, what do you need to do before we go downstairs?”

*****

Not that it didn’t have romantic potential at another time, but really, a two foot wide staircase was hardly enough for Steve’s shoulders to fit through, much less while carrying Darcy. The tight fit wasn’t any more comfortable with Steve doing the lifting over Bucky, but at least she felt less awkward about holding on.

The past couple of days (weeks) had been something out of a weird dream. But undeniably, Bucky Barnes was here, in the (gorgeous) flesh, trying his damnedest to hold on to something so vague it was a wonder he hadn’t snapped out of frustration.

“Morning, Darcy Stark.” Sam’s cheerful voice and the smell of bacon got her out of her musings.

“There’s a name I don’t hear very often,” she laughed. “Mmm, smells like heaven. Wanna move in and you can be the official chef? You’ll have to sleep on the couch though. Or the floor. We’re a little cramped here and even Bucky’s only getting a chair,” Darcy quipped.

Bucky had one of the chairs at the table. Darcy got the other one. (Mental note, find extra chairs.) Steve and Sam held up the kitchen counter as they transferred pancakes directly to plates, Steve dumping a couple more onto Bucky’s.

Sam laughed. “I’ll consider it if living in the Tower gets to be too much. Gotta say, Darcy, your dad builds a hell of an apartment.”

“Nice views too.”

“Maybe you should crash at my place.” He gave her a comical look.

“I’ll consider it. Better yet, I’ll introduce you to Club Stark on a Friday night.”

“But Thursday night is game night and Sunday is family dinner night—at least, according to Nat.”
“That’s because she doesn’t know about Club Stark. Keep it in your back pocket for leverage.”

“Done.”

Darcy eyed Bucky, who was making his way through a stack of pancakes sans butter or syrup. With his damp hair hanging loose and smudges of blue under his ice grey eyes, he had a feral, exhausted look to him today. She wondered if he’d slept last night. She reached out to touch the metal wrist that was resting on his knee. It was the closest part of him she could reach. He stilled, fork frozen in place. “Bucky? I like my pancakes with stuff on them.” She pointed out the dish of butter, the syrup, and the blueberry jam on the table. “Do you want to try any of them?”

The soldier flickered a look to Steve, who nodded. “You used to like butter and blueberries when we could get them. Don’t think we ever got much maple syrup though.”

After studying the trio and eyeing the blueberry jam Darcy had spread on her pancake, Bucky copied her. He was slower in eating the new version, taking his time to taste the berries. When he was done, he drained his coffee and set the cup on the table. His ice grey eyes caught hers. “Thank you.”

The words took effort, and even though she knew she looked like crap this morning, she gave him her best smile in return. Behind him, Steve silently mouthed the same words to her. She winked.

Bucky rose to find a place on the couch. Sam finished off his bacon and dropped his plate in the sink, jerking a chin at Steve. “You guys got cleanup?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

The pararescue-turned-VA-counselor sat in the chair near the former HYDRA agent. If Bucky was listening, it was hard to tell, but his eyes darted from Sam to Steve and back again. Sam talked about conditioning, what it meant, and what they were willing to do to help him work through it.

Sam passed over a small packet of medication. “Banner made these up. It’s fraction of the doses of narcotics and anti-anxiety drugs you were on, but he thinks it will blunt the edges of withdrawal until your body catches up. The serum you have in you—just like Banner, Rogers and Romanov—will heal you better than medication. He thinks it will take no more than one or two weeks to get you off them safely.”

“Natalia has serum?”

“All of you have different forms of it. Hers isn’t much on the strength and healing side, but she has a boost on the longevity and endurance end. You ever notice she doesn’t look any older than you?”

“I don’t … remember.”

“Well, she’s got more secrets than all of us combined, but I’ve seen her file dating back to the eighties.” Sam said.

“How?”

“She gave it to me. Thought maybe I’d find a few things that could help you.”

“Who are you?”

“A soldier. Just like you.”

Sam took off after that, reducing the number of people in the cramped apartment from four to three. Darcy curled up on Steve’s chair even though it was in the middle of everything. Bucky hadn’t moved from the sofa since Sam left.
Steve had finished cleaning up the kitchen and was doing all the little household chores. Laundry for one. “Bucky? Can you get me whatever you want me to wash from your backpack?” he called down the stairs.

But Bucky wouldn’t move. He was trembling. Darcy stumbled over the chair (ouch, son of a., damn) and sat down heavily next to him. “Bucky?”

*****

He (Asset) tried to focus on the words. The man (wings, could fly) spoke but he couldn’t make sense of them anymore. A grey haze blurred his vision.

The man stopped speaking and left the premises. (Mission. He had a mission.)

The sofa shifted as Darcy sat next to him. “Bucky?” (She still hurts. Protect Stark.)

Steve (man on the bridge) spoke. “Bucky, what’s wrong, pal? Need you to let me know what’s in your head. You’re safe here. You’re safe with me, with Darcy.”

(Safe. No pain.) “Sleep,” he pleaded. “Need to sleep. No cold, please. I will follow orders.” He felt shame for his weakness. (Asset. Change the world. Assets do not feel pain.)

“Go to sleep, Bucky. Sleep as long as you need. You’re safe with me. No cold.”

The grey haze thickened as he reached for Darcy’s hand. A shimmer of energy rose from his fingers and then he was gone.

*****

“Oh my god,” Darcy stared at Steve. “How long--” she asked in a low voice so as not to wake the soldier. He’d fallen asleep sitting up, head still balanced on his neck. Steve picked up a pillow and tucked it behind Bucky’s head. When he trailed his fingers along the sleeping man’s cheek, Bucky relaxed just enough to rest his head on the cushion.

Steve shook his head, fury in every line of his face. “I’ll bet he hasn’t slept since he started following you. I should have known. I never gave him orders. Damn it, Darce, I don’t think I even made a direct suggestion.”

“Hey,” she reached out to caress his face. “We’re still figuring all this out. You can go, what three days before you start losing it?”

“If I’m pushing, maybe a little more. But I’m not flushing chemicals out of my system or trying to break conditioning. You know, Darce, I don’t hate much of anything, but I think I hate HYDRA. Nat and Clint gave me the rundown yesterday of the fallout at S.H.I.E.L.D. I cannot believe there
were that many sleeper agents. But they were there.”

“You want to go after them,” she said, knowing him as she did.

“Nat and Maria are putting together a target list based partially on Bucky’s intelligence. Stark set Maria up with a vetted data team and they are combing through everything Nat dumped on the internet. The list isn’t pretty.”

Darcy nodded. “Mom’s been cleaning house. There are a lot of vacancies at Stark Industries--some were really good at their jobs too. Thank god for JARVIS,” she added. “He told me yesterday that even he was hard-pressed to copy the data stream as Natasha released it, but he got it. Still, I wonder where they physical files ended up. Anything up through the mid-80’s is going to be on hardcopy.”

“Maria might know. Any chance JARVIS was able to grab data before it went public?”

Darcy flashed him a wicked grin. “I like the way you think, Rogers. There might have been a file or three.”

“Then why did Nat’s file go online?”

“You’re familiar with Natasha’s hacking skills. Do you really think her file was complete to begin with?”

“True. What else did he pull?”

“Anything related to the Winter Soldier or Bucky Barnes. Any suggestions made by Stark Industries in the last two years, including the work on the helicarriers. Zola’s algorithm. Everything related to Banner and the super serum that S.H.I.E.L.D. managed to get right. JARVIS left all the speculative stuff so it’s not like people can’t find anything at all. Jane’s work. I think those are the highlights.”

“Huh, so if anyone starts speculating on Bucky--”

“--They’ve got inside intel,” she finished.

“I think I’ll pass that on to Maria.”

“Let her know the rest. If she knows what is missing, it will help her sort through the mess.” She sighed, idly moving her fingers along Bucky’s. “Why did he take my hand, Steve?”

“It’s his way of protecting you while he sleeps. If he’s holding on to you, he knows where you are.”

“I just hope I don’t have to go the bathroom anytime soon.” She tugged a blanket off the arm of the couch, and Steve rearranged it over the both of them. “A nap sounds good anyway. Think he’ll mind if I borrow the rest of his arm for a pillow?”

“A beautiful dame holding on to him? Sounds … normal.”

“We have normal around here?” she asked as she settled in place. The metal was cool under her cheek. She closed her eyes and felt Steve caress her face. She kissed the palm of his hand as she went under.

*****
Steve couldn’t tear his eyes away from them for the longest time. Darcy and Bucky. Together. The sketch he’d drawn seemed prophetic (not the first time that had happened).

He looked over Bucky’s new build and had an inkling of what his friend had felt when he’d first discovered Steve’s new body. They hadn’t had much time to explore all the differences and here there were all these changes again.

The faint strain of discomfort faded from Darcy as she relaxed against Bucky.

Her words from the other day were eating at him. Darcy had teasingly suggested on one or two occasions that she was the female version of Bucky (she wasn’t) or Howard (definitely not). There was an undertone there that had set off warning bells at the time. Obviously his assurances hadn’t assuaged her fears.

That was Darcy’s secret. She adored her parents and appreciated the efforts Tony had taken to ensure her privacy growing up. But, as with anyone raised in the shadow of a legacy, Darcy’s biggest fear was falling short.

And for once, Tony couldn’t be blamed. Tony did his best to praise Darcy for her successes and never, ever compare her to anyone at all. Darcy had a natural drive that led her to subtly compete with her dad, though usually by subverting his ideas and expounding on them. They made a hell of a team.

Darcy had a skill Tony lacked. She’d proven, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she could lead Stark Industries. Only Steve and Natasha had any idea that Darcy ran SI hand in hand with Pepper now.

She’d tethered Pepper’s computers to a workstation in her lab. She triaged her mom’s messages as they came in. Pepper was a morning person. Darcy took the late shift. They had developed a system whereby either could log in and see the day’s issues and resolutions. Mother and daughter tag-teamed to create answers, though Pepper was still the face of Stark Industries.

So if Darcy didn’t quite have Tony’s sheer brilliance when it came to thinking up new stuff, she possessed every bit of Howard’s acumen for leveraging cutting-edge technologies into real business opportunities. Steve saw it, even if Darcy didn’t understand the scope of her own abilities. And, like her father, she picked at her flaws until they bled.

Somehow, she couldn’t see that he was as in love with her as he was with Bucky. And Steve had no idea if Bucky would recover enough to return that love again.

Sam had cautioned him about precisely that when he’d realized exactly what sort of relationship they’d had. It was possible, even likely, that Bucky would never be able to trust anyone at all. Natasha didn’t, though perhaps she was close to it as she would ever be with Clint.

It occurred to him to be grateful to Tony for insisting he talk to Darcy … even if it had taken him months to work up to it.

Still, they were both blindsided and Steve had no idea how Bucky would impact their relationship. All he could do was hold on to Darcy while they treaded across uneven ground. (Though, really, in the smallest corner of his mind, he had a wish.)

Dinner was almost ready when Bucky began to stir.
He breathed in, the tangle of garlic and cheese prompting a vision of a small woman at a kitchen stove. Her hair was in a neat bun, blonde and streaked with gray, wearing a printed flower dress. Steve’s mom. He wondered why he couldn’t remember his own. “Smells like your ma’s Alfredo sauce,” he said.

“Mmm. My favorite.”

The sound vibrated through him before he discovered that the warmth in his arm came from the heat of Darcy’s body. Her black lashes swept up. “Beautiful dame on my arm. Can’t ask for better.”

She stilled at the compliment (or maybe it was his voice?), then replied with a smile did something to his insides. “Really? That’s what Steve said. How predictable.”

The warmth went away as she tried to scoot to the edge of the couch. He frowned as the cooler air hit the metal.

Steve came to help, giving her a boost while she braced a hand to her hip. “Bucky? How are you doing?”

He did an internal check. No injuries. Hungry. Not tired. Cool but not cold enough to affect the mechanics of his arm. “I’m ….” (acceptable was the answer, but it seemed … off) “Good?”


“No.”

“Shower?”

He shrugged. Still felt clean. “No.”

“Hungry?”

Yes. He nodded in agreement.

“Okay. Go wash up and you can set the table.”

“Warm or cold?” he ventured to ask, not daring to look at Steve. (I’m safe?)

Fingers on his cheek. “What do you want, Bucky? You’re safe.”

“--------Warm.”

“Then make it warm, Bucky.”

He’d been holding his hands under the hot water, feeling the contrast between his two hands when Steve appeared in the doorway. He jerked his hands away and palmed a knife by reflex, though he kept it low and to his side. (One exit. Blocked.)
“You’re safe, Bucky.” Steve stepped backward two full feet, his hands open. “I was checking on you to see if you were hungry. Dinner is ready. You want to turn the water off?”

Keeping his eyes on Steve, Bucky sheathed the knife, reached out and shut the water off (skimming his fingers under the heat), then dried his hands on the towel (soft).

In the kitchen, Darcy handed him a stack of plates and flatware. Without thinking, he placed them around the table, knives on the right, forks on the left, pasta spoon on the right. Napkins under the forks. Water glasses at two o’clock over the knives.

“Your ma would be proud, Buck.” Steve grinned as he set the pasta bowl in the center and dished out for all of them.

There were three chairs at the table now. They bumped knees as they ate, but nobody seemed to mind. Bucky experimented with the best way to load the pasta, found it, and demolished his portion. He tasted his food. Inhaled the spices. Finished and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“Still hungry?” Darcy asked. “You can have more.”

“No … no, thank you.” He brightened. “I remember.” He did. Images of dinners with Steve, his ma. His family? “I had parents. A sister?”

“Rebecca.”

“Miss her?”

“She missed you. Her two daughters are still in Brooklyn. You have a couple of nieces who are both married now.”

“You’ve seen?”

“We write. They sent pictures once. I can show you. Youngest boy looks a little like you. Named him for you anyway.”

“Bucky?”

“James.”

*****

Darcy listened at the banter. Steve seemed to understand Bucky’s odd way of speaking, carrying whole conversations for the both of them. After dinner, she handed the soldier a dish towel. “You get to dry.”

He frowned at it. “No.”

Steve shot him a happy grin. “There is no chore Bucky hates more than drying dishes. We argued about it all the time.”

Speculatively, she studied the towel. And held it out to Barnes.

“No.”
“Trade. One chore I don’t like for one you don’t like.”

He peered at her suspiciously. “Which?”

“You can round up all the trash and take it to the back alley.”

He nodded. Darcy handed him a trash bag. She grinned as he poked through her house to find all the trash cans and found the Dumpster by himself, locking up as he returned. (She’d trade drying dishes for that any day of the week. She also deserved bonus points for giving him a free pass to do recon on her house and alley.)

He washed his hands again, this time at the kitchen sink. Darcy could see steam rising as he held his hands under the water.

“Do you want a hot bath, Bucky? You can soak as long as you want.”

“A bath?”

“Hot water up to your elbows.”

He looked around for Steve (for permission, she guessed), but he’d already gone upstairs to gather up clothing for the night. “I can?”

“Yes, if you want one.”

“I … do.”

Flashing him a smile, she started up the stairs and had to stop to put a hand to her hip. She was tired from helping Steve with dinner, the ibuprofen had long worn off, and the stitches were pulling again. He started to pick her up.

“Not this time. I’ll get there myself.”

Bucky waved at her to stay. He slipped past her and came back with one of Steve’s t-shirts. With a jerk, he tore one of the seams so that he had one long piece of fabric. He held it in his teeth and reached for Darcy’s shirt.

“Yeah, no.” She pushed his hands away. “I’ve got it.”

And by all that was holy, Barnes fucking smirked at her. He crossed his arms, waiting.

“Steve, your friend is an ass.” She rolled the waistband of her yoga pants down, exposing the bandage. Then she held her shirt up, gathering it so that it was just under her breasts and out of the way.

“Tell me something new.” Steve poked his head around the top of the stairs to see Bucky carefully wrapping her hips and pulling the fabric tight. Really tight.

He gestured and she dropped the shirt. Then he held his hand out. “Try it, Princess,” he demanded. She did. It still hurt, but climbing the stairs was manageable. “How did you do that?”

“Pressure stops pain.”

“All right, I’ll buy that.”
He nodded. Darcy was grateful for the wrap, especially when she knelt down to plug the drain in the tub. Then she ran the water as hot as she could stand it. Bucky hovered behind her, waiting. Even if he didn’t shift from foot to foot, nervous energy still emanated from him.

When the tub was full enough, she shut off the water. A hand was waiting to help her to her feet. Still, she cursed when the bending was too much and she flinched. Bucky caught her, holding her in a tight hug (all muscle-y and hard) until she had her feet again.

The intimacy disconcerted her. Especially when Bucky sniffed her hair. No, that wasn’t right. He inhaled, like a chef over a pot of soup, savoring each flavor. Moreover, she felt a frission of … something (don’t think on it), as his hands (metal and flesh) slid over and down her arms, all the way to her fingertips. She shivered from the caress. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He let her go, and she eased by him to find Steve on the other side.

*****

Bucky soaked for a good three-quarters of an hour. Steve got it. There were times he simply couldn’t get enough hot water to chase the chills away, real or imaginary.

He took full advantage of the privacy and navigated Darcy into his lap while she scrolled through her phone’s messages and texts.

“I need my laptop. Mom’s got some things for me to look at.”

“Can it wait?”

“Maybe. Probably. I can answer a couple of emails here and do the rest in the morning.” She tapped one-handed at the keys for a few minutes before setting her phone to the side.

“All good?”

“For now.” She relaxed her head against his shoulder. “Thanks for bringing me home. I didn’t want to stay in the Tower.”

“I know.” (But they would have to talk about that. Not now.) He ran slow strokes over her arm.

“Why did you want to come here?”

“Afraid everyone would want to stare at Bucky. And you. And me. Just want to give us a chance to breathe and help him get his bearings first. Yesterday was bad enough. Can’t imagine weeks of it.” She nestled her nose into his neck. “God, you smell good. I really hated you living in DC.”

“I’m here now, but I’m unemployed and sponging off my girlfriend, so it’s a tradeoff.”

She giggled. “I hadn’t thought about it like that. The Avengers are going to have to negotiate a contract with somebody so you can collect a paycheck now and then.”

“We’d better not. They’ll bill us for New York.”

“Good point.”

The banter between them did what it always did, made him feel as if everything would be okay. She
didn’t even tense up when Bucky walked in, dressed, though still damp from the shower and rubbing a cloth over his metal arm to work the water out of the joints.

The shirt clung in all the right spots and the sweatpants rode low on Bucky’s hips, just enough that as he worked the towel, the shirt rode up here and there, revealing hard flesh that Steve remembered far too well. His fingertips twitched against Darcy’s arm.

Maybe she tried for casual, but it was too studied when she pushed off him to get to her feet. “God, I can’t wait until I can take a bath again. Showers are good, but nothing is like a good hot soak, right Bucky?”

He nodded, frowning just a little as she crawled in bed, snatching a book off the nightstand. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Your boyfriend is ogling you. Which he’s not wrong, there’s a lot to ogle and I’m an expert with chiseled hot abs. But it’s awkward and there are a million questions and I’d much rather avoid all of them right now, so I’m going to pretend I’m sleepy and read my book until the Advil kicks in and I really am sleepy and then I won’t have to think about any of it until morning.”

The look on Bucky’s face was comical as he worked through Darcy’s spiel. He frowned again when he looked down at his own body then stared hard at Steve. “You were smaller.”

“I joined the army.”

“I … know. I—want—“ He stilled. Breathing heavily, he tried again. “I want—to sleep.”

“Okay. Where do you want to sleep?” Steve asked.

With a small turn of his head, he looked at Darcy. “There.”

“You want to sleep with me?” her voice came out a full octave higher and Steve firmly squelched his laugh at her reaction.

“Yes.”

She gave him a dark look and wagged her good finger at him. “Just because you two had.. have.. whatever the fuck it ends up being … you do not get to partake by association.”

Bucky flashed a look of confusion at Steve, and backed up. There was real fear in his eyes. Darcy saw it and scrambled out of the bed to catch his hands. “No, look, not the way I meant. Come on. You get in first.”

Steve pressed his lips together. “Get in the bed, Bucky.”

With the order came obvious relief and the soldier went around the other side of the bed to sit against the headboard. He tugged off his shirt and dropped it on the side table. He moved his gun from his waistband to rest on the shirt, setting the safety as he did so. One knife went in his right hand.

“You’re going to sleep like that?” Darcy asked, though she knew full well that Steve too slept with a sidearm within arm’s reach.

He nodded. And held out his left hand. She eased down onto the bed, swearing lightly as her side pained her. Then she curved her hand around his, leaving her broken wrist outstretched on the mattress.
Bucky stilled, his eyes seeking out Steve.

“It’s okay, you’re safe. Get as much sleep as you need.” And just like that, the Winter Soldier was out.

Darcy used a thumb to wipe away tears as Steve knelt by her side. “Why me?”

“You’re gorgeous and smart and real.”

“But I thought he’d want to be with you.”

“If it’s too much, Darcy, I’ll find a place to take him for a while.”

“No. I can deal. Steve, my heart breaks every five seconds with him. How in the hell are you holding up?”

He pressed his forehead to the mattress and had to take several breaths to choke down the feelings. “I’m okay, doll.”

She stroked the back of his neck. “Bullshit,” she said softly. “But I’ll give you a pass for couple of days because I’m sleeping with your boyfriend. Dream on that.”

“Darce?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, idiot. Now the Advil has kicked in and I’m going to sleep now. Don’t ogle too much or I’ll wake up and be cranky.”

“Deal.”

He waited until he could hear the rhythmic rise and fall of breathing from both of them before he gave into want. He wasn’t oblivious the tears spilling down his face, he just didn’t care, nor did he try to stop them. Braced against the doorframe, he drank in the view.

Bucky was here. Dark lashes, full and long. The jaw still the same. He was better muscled than before. Dark, twisted scars where skin met metal branched out into smaller ones lacing into Bucky’s shoulder and chest. Like Steve, the rest of his body was relatively unscathed (serum, most likely, not lack of injury).

Bucky had been gorgeous before. Now he was work of art, as if an artist had skimmed fingers along his muscles to outline each one. The longer hair suited him, reminding Steve of one of Michelangelo’s sculptures. It wasn’t hard to remember how those hands felt on his body, or the way Bucky kissed. Or how he nagged Steve into taking care of himself.

As he looked his fill, Darcy rolled to her side, leaving her hand entwined with Bucky’s as she pressed her face into his thigh. Her hair, black in the night, spilled across the pillow. Full lips, pale cheeks and long dark lashes of her own—yes, she was easy on the eyes, and the pair of them—he was staggered. (He wanted to see them dance.)

Bucky and Darcy. Together. He craved. (He didn’t dare pull out his sketchbook now)
Steve slept on the floor after commandeering the pillow Bucky had left in the chair (smelled like her, like him).

Chapter End Notes

A/N I goofed when I wrote this. MCU states that Bucky was the eldest of four, a fact that I missed until I was well into writing this story. I've gone with the Marvel Comics on this one, where Bucky only has the one sister, Rebecca. Sorry to mix canons on you, but I'll be consistent about it.

A/N Update 8/15 The other goof coming up is that I made Sam Wilson a Lieutenant, on the basis that he was a test pilot for the Air Force and because I wanted to differentiate him from the "Captain" and the "Sergeant." However, Sam identifies himself as "pararescue," not "pilot," which would make him an NCO. I should have gone with "Sergeant." It's not a simple change later on in this story, so I'll stick with "Lieutenant," but wanted to acknowledge the fabulous job PJs do in real life. They really are bad-asses in every way possible.
The next three days were a shampoo-rinse-repeat that wasn’t easy on any of them.

Steve was worn out. Physically, he’d recovered from the damage Bucky had done to him (and vice versa—he knew he’d broken Bucky’s arm), but mentally he was wrecked. Both of the people he loved the most were hurting and the process of picking up the pieces had to start with him. Steve wanted—desperately wanted—to gather his family and go somewhere safe. (Nowhere to go) Instead, he did what he always did, gathered his courage and barreled head-first into battle, determined to salvage both Darcy and Bucky out this nightmare. But it was a war he’d never fought, he didn’t know where to begin, and he wondered if he wouldn’t destroy this precious thing in the process.

Every morning, Sam showed up to stay with Darcy (Bucky was having none of leaving her alone for any length of time. Steve agreed wholeheartedly) when they went for the run, coffee, shower routine.

After breakfast, Steve wrangled Darcy in the bathroom. He discovered that she could get downright snotty when she wasn’t feeling good. He tried to hide his smile at her smart mouth, rarely succeeded, which either pissed her off more or put her in a better mood. (Kissing her definitely helped nudge her to the latter.)

Sam got Bucky. Sometimes the soldier would only listen. Other times he would give one word answers or short explanations.

He was recovering whole chunks of memory now, and either Sam or Steve would help him work through them. If it was mission based, the Winter Soldier recalled names, dates, targets—entire assignments with perfect clarity. Notes were passed on to Maria.

All of them held their breath over what might happen if the Winter Soldier was triggered, until Clint clued them in that loss of control wasn’t really an option. Complete shutdown was far more probable.

Some of Natasha’s quirks made better sense now.

Personal memories were more fragmented, though around Darcy some of Bucky’s signature charm came out, especially when they bickered. He still had trouble verbalizing his opinions, but could indicate with gestures well enough. Darcy, of course, had zero compunction about establishing her own space and the house rules.

Sam would stick around for lunch and give them the lowdown on living in the Tower. Half the stories involved Clint and Nat and whatever trouble they’d managed to get into that day. The other half involved the science gang (Tony, Bruce and Jane). Thor was the odd man out, but didn’t seem to mind—even relaying a message through Sam to bring Bucky to the tower for a sparring session. (For certain, no one but the Asgardian could be trusted to handle whatever the Winter Soldier dished out.)

Afternoons meant putting Darcy and Bucky down for a nap. After that first day home, Steve figured out that Darcy lasted about three vertical hours before the pain of the gunshot wound got to her. And with all of the information slamming into him, along with coming off the chemicals, Bucky needed sleep simply to allow his brain to process and heal.

In any case, Darcy could be a brat about going to bed, (she had things to do, damn it, or so she said),
and Bucky waited around (pacing even) until she was sound asleep before covering her hand with his to do the same. (Did Steve want kids? After this, he wasn’t so sure.) After dashing through house doing chores, Steve spent whatever time he had left drawing as he watched over them.

The evenings were … interesting.

He got the job of trying to feed two serum-laced soldiers and one Darcy Lewis. He was passable in the kitchen, but it took him time and well, he had to listen to Bucky and Darcy arguing.

They argued about everything. The remote (hers, don’t fuck with the programming). Washing dishes. (Wash AND dry them, damn it.) Putting the toilet seat down. (Steve winced at the memory.) What time to go to bed. (When she was tired.) What time to wake up (After coffee was made). Who was taking all the hot water every morning (whoever was last had to wait an extra hour for the hot water tank to fill back up. Darcy had found out the hard way and let both of them know it).

But mostly they argued about Darcy wanting to look over Bucky’s arm. He refused to let her touch it, except when he held her hand as they slept. Darcy thought the narcotics were hiding how sensitive the arm really was and wanted to take a look before the drugs wore off. But Bucky was adamant, even to the point of retreating to the corner of Darcy’s bedroom when she pushed too hard.

Except that made her feel so guilty she went to bed that night and waited for him to hold her hand before falling asleep.

On the fourth day, word came out at the highest levels (from whom was noted and tagged for further investigation) about Steve’s old friend, and Steve was promptly dispatched to a closed-door Senate hearing that week on HYDRA activity.

Steve Rogers—in full uniform—defended Bucky and his status as a POW. He never confirmed that he had actually seen James Barnes or the Winter Soldier. He merely used his eyebrow and Captain America voice when he speculated that if a decorated soldier (venerated in the Smithsonian itself) had been taken prisoner by the very people responsible for the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., then he would be greeted with welcoming arms and all the help he could get from those who had sent him off to war in the first place.

The Winter Soldier never appeared on the public radar as anything other than idle speculation.

That trip had required a Stark helicopter and leaving Darcy and Bucky alone for the day. Natasha had offered to babysit and Darcy’d turned her down flat (to Nat’s everlasting amusement). Sam checked in once or twice, that was enough. It might have been a good day (a win, in his book), except when he got home, they were arguing again.

“Damn it, Barnes, stop getting me wet and wash the damned dishes.”

Steve set his shield down and sagged against the front door. He wondered if he could sneak back out again.

“Swearing isn’t very lady-like for a dame,” Bucky noted as he dumped too much soap in the sink. Steve recognized that smirk, and while it gave him a little jolt of happiness, it did nothing to endear him to Steve’s girlfriend.

“You want lady-like? I’ll introduce you to my mother. Holy shit, Barnes, are you trying to wash everyone’s dishes on the block?”

“She’s nice. You told me to put soap in it.”
“Don’t piss her off. You ever heard the phrase, ‘a little goes a long way’ or was that before your time?”

“I’m gonna put a swear jar in the kitchen, Princess. Make you put a quarter in it.”

She crossed her arms. “Really? JARVIS makes me put in a ten dollar bill and donates the proceeds every three months to Dad’s party fund.”

“Sounds tragic.”

“You haven’t been to a Stark party yet. Don’t go. Ever.”

Bucky crowded her, leaning over her head to put the dish soap back in the cabinet. “Is there dancing? I’m good at that.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“You’re lying, doll.”

Darcy poked at his chest with her fingertips. “Am not. You cannot call that excuse of a drunken revelry dancing. Back up, Barnes!”

“You want me to wash dishes or go away?”

“Oh my god. I can’t kill you. It’s like trying to threaten Nat. All it does is amuse her when she knows six different ways to kill you with her pinkie.”

“Seven, but who’s counting,” Bucky shot back with a lazy grin.

Steve fled up the stairs and hid in the bathroom. It was the only place of retreat in the ridiculously small house. (Captain America, defender of the weak, first patriot, the man with a plan, and he was hiding from his girlfriend and … and … shit, his boyfriend? in the bathroom.)

Three solid days of this and Steve was about to lose his mind. The gentle teasing he and Darcy engaged in (or he and Bucky) paled in comparison to the sharp repartee ringing through the house from the time the pair woke up to the time they went to sleep.

The apartment was too small for any of them to have privacy, and the fact that he and Bucky had invaded Darcy’s space was clearly a lot for her to take in. They had only talked about moving in and he was sure there were going to be negotiations on location, space, privacy and—damn—he wasn’t even sure what her normal work hours were these days. (DC had been good for his psyche, not for their relationship, hence wanting to live with her since she’d taken marriage off the table for the time being.)

Clearly, he was going to have to do a better job of negotiating the peace.

Taking a deep breath, Steve went once more into the breach. “Hi guys. What’s for dinner?” At the dark look on Darcy’s face, and the faint smirk on Bucky’s, he knew he’d stepped on a land mine.

“Jackass here burned the tacos. How do you burn tacos, Steve? So dinner … is going to be out. I am going out. And if I am going out, that means Barnes is going out. If Barnes is going out, that means you’re going out. So get your jacket, we’re going out. I don’t care where. You pick. Just make it in walking distance so I can get there without Barnes thinking he has to pick me up and cart me everywhere.”
“Corner bar. It’s two-for-one wing night,” Steve offered.

Darcy looked up as if in prayer. “The voice of reason.” She turned her hands out, and Steve used it as an excuse to wrap his arms around her in a hug. For a moment, she trembled, but she steadied and just rested her head on his shoulder while Bucky picked out her coat from the hooks near the door and passed it to Steve.

Steve helped Darcy into it (old habit, his ma would have twisted his ear if he didn’t help a lady with her coat). As he set it in place, he ran his hands under her hair and pulled the locks free with a kiss to the nape of her neck. Some of the tension drained out of Darcy and she leaned backward so he could hold her again for just a moment.

Bucky had on his hoodie by that time and looked away from the intimacy. He didn’t quite slide all the way into Winter Soldier mode, but he was subdued, his eyes noting everything about their surroundings.

Actually, Steve did too. Given that HYDRA had tried to trap Darcy once already, he didn’t feel particularly safe venturing too far, hence the restaurant just a few doors down the street.

The corner bar was exactly that, a little dive with lots of booths in a narrow building. Bucky took one side, slid all the way to the wall and stationed himself to see the restaurant and the front entrance.

Steve handed Darcy into the other side and blocked her in. He had the view of the back. It was rare these days for him carry a weapon beyond his shield, but he did now with a knife tucked into his boot and a Glock under his coat.

In spite of all that, dinner was easier. Steve didn’t really want to talk about the hearing, but he kept them amused with all the fans who had camped out near the Capitol waiting for him to come out. (He still felt awkward signing autographs, and limited it to the younger kids.)

Darcy picked up on his tone and countered with a couple of funny stories of growing up with Tony. Bucky made it clear he was listening, but his eyes skimmed the room, looking for the extraordinary as he pretended to drink his beer.

When the check was paid and the three of them scooted out of the booth, Bucky paused, for just a fraction of a section, on a man and woman near the front door. In a low voice, almost on an exhale, he muttered, “Ten o’clock. Nearest table to the entrance. Spotters. You have her?”

With the excuse of helping Darcy into her coat again, he turned them around to note the not-quite-unassuming party. “Stark’s. I recognize them.”

As they passed, one the security guards nodded, “Cap.”

“Williams. Appreciate the backup.”

“Boss’s orders, but nice to do a good turn for you. All clear on the outside. Got two more across the street.”

Darcy kept quiet all the way home, even when Bucky canvassed her flat with his semi-automatic pistol in hand. He returned to the living room, sliding the gun into a hidden holster in his pocket.

Without another word, she climbed the stairs. “Darce?”

“I’m going to bed, Steve. I think I’ve had enough.”

(Enough of what?)
Darcy put her foot down the next morning, after yet another morning of stumbling over each other in the small space and Darcy’s first successful foray in the shower without help (to Steve’s chagrin. They’d figured out how to do shower sex yesterday. She’d started it with soapy stroke to his cock and had insisted he do all the work).

Sam was still there after Bucky’s morning therapy, but had the sense not to interfere with the showdown in progress.

Bucky blocked the front door. She stood toe to toe with him, poking him in the chest. “Move it or lose it, buster. I’m cranky. I want five minutes of silence and it’s not going to happen here.” She hefted an overnight bag on her shoulder.

“I can be quiet,” he muttered.

“Yeah, I know. Super-secret spy thing. Steve’s good at it too. But come on, Barnes. It’s not the same and you know it.” She softened just a little. “Look. Give me a couple of days. The weekend. I’ll come back on Monday and we’ll try to figure something out. You guys can have poker night or go to a bar and get a beer. Just don’t smoke cigars in my place. I’ll smell it and then things have to get ugly.”

“You can’t leave.”

“I’m not leaving permanently. I’m going to my lab. Where there won’t be a single human being to annoy me.”

One Tony’s drivers pulled up to the curb and waited for Darcy. Bucky just crossed his arms and leaned against the door.

Even though Steve didn’t want Darcy to go either, he’d been aware of the tension radiating off her frame these past two days. Bucky and Steve had lived in an apartment a little smaller than this at one time. Neither of them minded, really. But the tight quarters were getting to her. His boxes were crammed in a corner of the living room. With the extra chair, the three of them were stepping over furniture just to sit down. They couldn’t all sit at the little table for dinner without bumping knees and plates. Same went for the living room. Bucky really needed somewhere to sleep other than sitting up and Steve wanted a (Darcy’s) bed.

He really didn’t want to do this, but neither one would give in and the tension was beginning to sizzle. “Let her go, Buck.” He hated having to give orders.

Bucky’s expression didn’t change, but he shifted to one side, saying, “I’ll follow you and see you to the Tower. Can’t do it any other way, Princess.”

“Fine. Get in the car. You too, Sam. No sense in not giving you a lift.” She’d turned around to Steve and snapped, “You coming?”

He retrieved his jacket and followed them out the door.

As soon as Darcy stepped into the Tower with Sam as her escort, the Winter Soldier fell into place. It was a curious thing, a carefully neutral mask that hid whatever Bucky might have been thinking. Any pretense of humor vanished. He had more trouble articulating his wants or needs in this mode, but as the week had worn on, there had been improvement. Whether it was healing from the serum
or the effects of the drugs were lessened, Steve didn’t know.

“Why?” Bucky asked.

Used to the shorthand now, Steve motioned for Bucky to get out of the car and dismissed the driver. “I want lunch. You hungry?” Steve asked.

Bucky settled his hoodie and ball cap in place then jammed his hands into the front pocket. He stilled, considering. Steve counted a full sixty seconds. Then—“Yes.”

He wanted to pump his arm in victory. Instead, he replied mildly, “Good. We’ll go to the sub shop on the corner.” As he headed that direction, Bucky fell in step beside him. Steve was fully aware of the security team falling in place around them. Bucky noted them as well, his ice grey eyes picking them out of the crowd.

“Why?” he asked again.

“Why did Darcy go to her lab? Because there are three people living in an apartment hardly big enough for one, and because the two of us were talking about moving in together before all of this went down. And moving in was probably not going to be at her place because her lease is up soon. D.C. wasn’t logical for her, but in any case, it’s not an option now.” Steve elbowed Bucky. “I didn’t get my deposit back. Thanks for that.”

The gesture must have been familiar enough that some of the soldier-face went away and Steve saw a faint twist of the lips that might have been either a smile or a scowl.

The day went … better. Without Darcy distracting Bucky, they ate lunch in peace. Stark’s team kept them company but did a decent job of staying in the background. The soldier relaxed enough to keep up his end of the conversation.

And he was curious. The freeze-thaw cycles had resulted in Bucky gaining an odd assortment of memories and places that had few links to each other. Steve found it ironic that he was the one giving Bucky an overview of the past seventy years. Bucky had a better grasp of technology though, and Steve had been surprised when he’d dug out a little netbook out of his backpack to bring up Google. (Along with a fair amount of cash and the sly admission of knocking over the HYDRA safe houses. Which prompted more memories and another list of targets for Hill.)

They walked all over Midtown doing little errands. Mundane enough, but maybe that’s what they needed. Post office for stamps, the bank where Steve withdrew some cash for the week, (He had a debit card, but still liked paper money for the little things) and the newsstand for a paper.

There was a row of shops and a clothing store where Bucky picked out a few more things. As he browsed, Steve fought for composure. Bucky fucking loved clothes. He’d bullied Steve into dressing far more modern (at the time) than he preferred and Steve had few doubts that his wardrobe (such that it was) would undergo another transformation once Bucky figured out the current fashion trends.

Sure enough, a new shirt for Steve was held up for inspection, and to his surprise, a sweater that even he could see would be to Darcy’s taste. All that and a new wallet (the kind that went in the front pocket, rather than the back) went on the counter and Bucky paid for all of it with a smirk of satisfaction.

As they walked home, Steve veered a block out of the way to an art supply store he’d found months ago. He didn’t really need anything, but he wondered if any of it would prompt a memory. More
than once, Bucky had picked up one of Steve’s drawing pencils, only to put it back down.

The art shop was no more than four rows of supplies, but they were of good quality and Steve liked the proprietor. They chatted while Bucky prowled around the shelves. He stopped before a display of pencils, and Steve broke off the conversation to stand beside his friend.

“We were drawing. In a classroom?” Bucky asked, his voice full of uncertainty.

“We did that a lot,” Steve agreed, careful not to give away too much information.

“That day. Something happened. A bombing.” Bucky reached for a 4B pencil. His favorite and one that Steve didn’t particularly care for. “Pearl Harbor. We were in art class. Sunday evening.”

“Yes.”

“I remember?”

“You do,” Steve confirmed. “Do you remember what we were drawing?”

Bucky jerked back and his eyes opened wide. “Supposed to be drawing hands and feet. You drew a pinup girl. Looked like Darcy.”

“I did.”

“My mirror.”

Steve laughed, and it felt good to have a simple memory without any dark edges. “You liked it so much that I stuck it into your mirror in the bedroom. You left it there until you shipped out and took it with you. I still have it, by the way. I can tell you the long, convoluted story of that as we walk home if you like.”

“Is that why you like her?”

“One of the reasons.” Reaching for an eraser, Steve turned it in his hands, surprised by how easily Bucky had taken that line of thinking. “Bucky, after all that we’d been through, I needed something to hold onto. Something good. The first time I saw Darcy, I thought of … well … that drawing, for one. I guess, maybe—shit, Bucky-- I thought you were dead and maybe it was sign and you had sent her my way.” He shuffled his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets. “So I took a chance. I was drowning and—I think she knew it. She’s my light, Bucky.”

“You love her.” Bucky seemed disconcerted.

“No more or less than I love you, jerk. I don’t know what you remember, but for me, we’ve only been apart for a couple of years. We did nearly that when you joined up. Three months of basic, another six or seven months stationed here then you shipped out to England. A year later, I pulled you out of Italy. Doesn’t change the seven years we had before all that.”

“She doesn’t like me.”

“She doesn’t know what to make of you. Do you want the pencil?” Steve asked.

“Huh?”

“The pencil. A sketchbook. An eraser. You might like the watercolors too and some of the new colored pencils. We’ll talk about the rest on our way home.”
Bucky nodded. Guided by Steve, he made his selections. The proprietor checked them out with a cheerful smile and encouraged them to come back.

“I might have her look at my arm. It itches.”

Steve’s eyebrows flew up. “She’d like that. She’s worried that no one here knows how it works, so if something goes wrong, she wants to know how to fix it. Said something about synapses and feedback, but I didn’t catch all that.”

Apparently Bucky did, because he got that contemplative look. They walked for a good block and a half before he nodded. “She’s right.”

“Can you wait until Monday? I think if we invade her space before then, she’ll make both of us take a swim in East River.”

Bucky shivered. “Don’t like cold.”

Damn. “Sorry, that was a joke. You’re safe, Bucky. Darcy won’t do anything to hurt you. Neither will I.”

It took a few minutes, but Bucky seemed to recover himself. “She doesn’t like me,” he said again.

“She’s not a skirt, Buck,” Steve sighed. The last thing he wanted to do was give Bucky a reason to be skittish around Darcy. “She’s used to guys hitting on her all the time because she’s gorgeous. Half the time we go out, I’m staking my damned claim behind her back so some little shit won’t spend the night staring at her breasts.”

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“Some,” he admitted. Bucky flinched, and Steve cautiously laid an arm across his shoulder. “Under different circumstances, Darcy wouldn’t give a damn. Especially because I’m no different than the next idiot when she’s dressed to the nines. But right now, she’s scared about what all this means. She knows about us.”

They reached Darcy’s flat, and Steve pulled out his keys to unlock the door. When they were inside, Bucky repeated his inspection. “Clear,” he announced. He flicked his eyes to Steve. “You told her? About us?”

“Peggy did.”

“Peggy?”

“Agent Carter. She wouldn’t give you the time of day in 1945.”

Bucky considered. “Dark hair? Brown uniform?”

“Same one. She’s close enough to the Stark family that Darcy and Tony both call her ‘Aunt Peggy.’”

“Small world.”

“You’re telling me.”

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The memories slammed into him, ripples of scenes, some moving, some not. By the time they reached Darcy’s place, his head was pounding (Rule one: assets do not feel pain).

Steve led the way into the apartment.

He cleared it though, taking it room by room until he was sure no one else was here. With that done, he holstered his weapon and sat on the living room sofa. His vision hazed (Pain--Assets do not feel pain).

A voice. (Rule one) Blurred vision. “Bucky? I need you to tell me what’s in your head, pal.”

(Rule one.) “I’m okay.”

“You’re not, Buck. You used to get these bad headaches. I can help if you let me. You’re safe. I won’t hurt you. Take your hoodie off.”

He stripped to the waist. (Rule one.) “I don’t feel pain.”

“Tell that to someone who doesn’t know you, Buck. I’m going to put my hands on your face.”

Fingertips to his temples. Pressure. Rule one.

He swayed, tried to keep himself upright. Felt arms catch hold. “Easy, Bucky, I’ve got you. Lay on the sofa.” Arms turned into hands that stroked his head, shoulders as his face was cushioned. His legs were shifted until he was prone.

Memories of other pain rippled. Hands forcing him into a chair. Lightning in his head. Rule one. He began to slide into the space of nothing. Retreating.

Then a thumb dug into a knot on his shoulder, the relief distracting him from the stream of pictures in his head and pulling him back to the here and now.

More pressure meant more relief. A voice murmured. “I’ve got you, Bucky. It’s me, Steve. I’m going to take the pain away. You’ve got some bad knots in your shoulders. I can get them out. Used to be so weak I couldn’t help much until I was older. But I can do this now. Your head is healing. Gotta be too much and we’ve had a big day already.”

Hand slid down his spine, bringing relief in places he didn’t know were hurting. His head began to clear as Steve kept up a steady monologue.

“There you go. I felt that. You’re relaxing. It’s just me, Bucky. I love you. You’re safe. I’m going to take the pain away.”

He began to drift as Steve methodically worked the muscles in his neck and back, encouraging them to unknott. “Used to get headaches like this. Bad ones. I’d get you drunk half the time ‘cause I couldn’t rub hard enough to loosen the knots. Don’t have to do that now. Now I can do this and do it right.”

Accompanied by Steve’s stream of comforting words, he dozed. Maybe for a few minutes, maybe for a couple of hours. When he woke, he was back in his own mind, with only a residual ache to keep him company. “Steve?” he forced himself to say.

“Yeah?”
“Shut up and don’t stop.” He wasn’t sure where the words came from, but they felt right.

There wasn’t another word spoken, but warm hands continued to work the smallest tension from his neck and back. One hand slid up into his hair to massage his skull, while the other stroked along the scarred knots.

Something wet dropped onto his back. Then another. Curious, Bucky shifted to look, rolling to his side. Steve only adjusted, keeping up the pressure on his neck and spine. But Steve’s face was wet and his eyes were red.

“Don’t mind me.”

He knew there was something he should say, something that would make Steve not cry. But he didn’t know what it was. “Don’t stop. Please,” was all he could muster. (Warm. Devotion. Flesh.)

“I won’t.”

*****

That night, Steve stripped to a pair of boxer shorts, collapsed on Darcy’s bed (smelled like her), and promptly fell asleep. Exhaustion overrode his need to monitor his friend (dozing in front of the television anyway).

Not even an hour later, Bucky staggered in from the sofa. “Steve,” he croaked.

He snapped awake. “Bucky? What is it?”


The cadence and the accent was all Bucky Barnes. The litany rippled from his tongue until Steve closed his arms around him, skin against skin. Bucky shuddered from the touch and Steve tried not to react to how good it felt to hold him once more. Metal and skin stroked up his back to clutch hard. They might have stayed that way, except Bucky pressed a kiss to Steve’s shoulder.

Steve’s eyes drifted shut as he inhaled. The sharp tang of skin and sweat pulled at him, so familiar. Bucky shivered. As softly as possible, Steve coaxed, “Come on, Bucky. Get in bed. I’ll keep you warm. And safe.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“I want—“

“What do you want?”

“Us. I want the ice to go away.”
As difficult as it was, Steve only pressed a kiss to Bucky’s temple. “Come on. No ice tonight. Get in bed.” Bucky took the right side, as he always had, lying on his side so that he could rest a hand on Steve’s chest (a habit stemming from making sure Steve kept breathing until morning). The familiar intimacy should have sent him reeling (Darcy. Had to tell Darcy.). Instead, once Bucky’s breathing even out, he fell asleep, hand resting on top of Bucky’s (flesh on metal). Their feet twined together.

Neither of them woke until well into the light of the next day.

They woke together, with Steve skimming his middle two fingers along the length of the metal forearm still weighing down his chest (old habit).

It had taken him months to get used to sleeping with Darcy. Unlike Bucky, who rarely twitched once he settled half-sprawled against Steve, Darcy shifted from back to front, sometimes on top of him, sometimes on her pillow. Eventually, he’d learned all her sleeping positions and figured out how to best accommodate them. On days Steve came back to bed after his morning run, she would spoon with him until she woke up. (Sex was always involved, giving him a damned good reason to crawl back in bed after coffee and a shower.)

Waking Bucky had always been a chore until Steve discovered that the lightest of touches did the trick, rousing his friend in a way that caused the least amount of protest.

Ridiculously long lashes lifted, revealing ice blue eyes, not grey. The clarity in them made his breath catch. Bucky’s hand came off Steve’s chest to scrape the long locks of brown hair out of his face as he shifted to lean on an elbow. “Hell of a lot better way to wake up than a tent and a dirt floor,” Bucky noted wryly.

Steve smirked. “Lost your taste for camping?”

“Lost my taste for a lot of things. Not for you, though.” Bucky caught his bottom lip between his teeth, unsure if he’d gone too far.

Rolling to his side, Steve buried a hand in Bucky’s hair. “Same here. But let’s take this slow, okay?” He pressed the lightest of kisses against that swollen lip (taste it, nibble it, lick it, own it, fuck). Still enough to have his heart pounding and a twitch in his dick. “I can’t get drunk, at least, not on anything produced locally, and by locally I mean on this planet. But Bucky, tasting you is the headiest damned drink and I’m going to get in trouble if I stay here.”

Steve sat up to put a little distance to temptation. “I want you. Don’t think for a second I don’t. But I’m thinking about Darcy too and I’ll be damned if I mess this up for all of us.”

Bucky didn’t say anything, only reaching out to skim his fingers across his name inked on Steve’s skin. “Me?”

His fingers might have well have burned, they felt so damned good. “I found her, Bucky. I thought … I thought it was too late for you. So when she’s with me, she has both of us.”

“When?”

“We were dating. Before I took her to bed.”

“Why? You … other dames.”

“That was different. They were fun. Just like the dames you had before you shipped out.” Steve
reached over to brush the hair falling into Bucky’s face back so he could feel the slide of the thick strands. “Darcy is more. Felt like I was stepping out on you until I did this. Didn’t know I could fall in love twice. Never figured it would be me who found her.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“Makes you smile.”

“Yes.”

“Keep her. Won’t mess this up for you.”

“Not going to happen.” He took in the drowsy blinks, the way the sheets were still tucked in around Bucky. “Go back to sleep. I’ll be downstairs making breakfast.”

“Sam?”

“He’s got plans for the weekend. Has a girl he thinks nobody knows about.”

“Good. Just want you.”

“When you wake up, we’ll take a ride on my bike.”

“She’s right.”

“What’s that?”

“You look good on the bike.”

Steve grinned.
For twenty-four hours, Darcy spoke to JARVIS and JARVIS alone. The silence was breathtaking. So was having the ability to move around without tripping over anyone (‘cept her ‘bots but mostly they got out of the way unless they crashed into each other). She played music Steve disliked and cranked it up as loud as she could stand it. She would have danced except her side wasn’t having any of it. The ankle was up for it though, so she tapped her feet as she sat on the stool, happily soldering a new circuit board with JARVIS (virtually) hovering over her shoulder.

The sentry ‘bot needed a better voice command system so she worked on that too. A dog was still better at this, but she was making good progress on the simple AI. The laptop was open on her workstation. When she had to rest, her fingers flew across the keys, coding as she went. (Until the wrist started hurting, then she’d switch back.)

Immersing herself in her workshop centered her, keeping her hands occupied while part of her brain processed the fallout of the past couple of weeks. (No solutions, just slotting everything in place and cataloguing data.)

She crashed on the sofa. By herself. Yeah, she could admit now the she’d been a little freaked out when Bucky wanted to sleep next to her. (Even when she didn’t catch him at it, she had metal joint impressions on her fingers.) Darcy wasn’t exactly going to tell a Russian assassin-slash-Steve’s best friend that he couldn’t, but it was weird. Definitely awkward. Especially because she kind of liked the way he smelled. ( Tangy).

With their hands entangled, Darcy couldn’t accidentally roll on her side (probably a good thing), though yesterday morning, she’d woken to discover her face smashed against Bucky’s hip (again). He didn’t seem to mind. And Steve, good grief, the look of want just destroyed her.

No, Steve didn’t mind her being snuggled up to Bucky at all.

But she did. Sort of. Enough that she’d escaped here.

She’d bought Sam a coffee yesterday and begged for an explanation of Bucky’s growing attachment.

I don’t know for sure, Darcy, but I can make a few guesses.

Your guesses have been on the mark, so let’s hear it.

You’re Steve’s girl, for one, so by extension, he feels safe around you. I wouldn’t call it trust, but you aren’t a threat.

But they were together before.

Yes, and in his mind, that hasn’t changed. You’re an extension of that relationship, but he’s put Steve into the role of his handler, so he can’t quite resume that connection. With you, he can work on finding that old personality without disappointing Steve.

Why does Steve have to be his handler?

Because he doesn’t trust himself not to go back to HYDRA and because there is no one else he is
absolutely sure isn’t HYDRA.

You think there is a trigger?

No. If there was, there wouldn’t have been a need for that fourth vial. As Barnes puts it, loyalty wasn’t part of the programming. Just obedience.

So what now?

Darcy, give him time. I know it’s a lot to ask, and you’re caught up in the middle. If it becomes too much, come talk to me.

So you can nursemaid all three of us? You need to tell my dad you need a raise.

If he’ll upgrade my wings, we’re even.

If he doesn’t, I will.

You’ve got a deal.

Sunday morning, Darcy ventured upstairs to steal coffee from her dad (stairs hidden at the back of her lab went straight to his floor, thanks Dad. JARVIS kept it locked.) and to poke around his workshop. If he was missing an interesting piece of hardware, well, he would know where to find her.

“The prodigal daughter returns.”

“Prodigal implies I did something wrong. In this case, no. Pick another metaphor.”

Tony carefully put his arms around her shoulders so that he could hug her. She rested her head on his chest. “You okay?” he asked.

“Physically, emotionally or situationally?”

“Start with the first and we’ll work our way down the list.”

Darcy stayed where she was, thinking about how no one but Pepper ever saw this side of Tony Stark. He was the best dad. Unconventional, but then again, she probably wouldn’t have thrived in a “normal” environment (whatever that was).

“Ankle is fine, wrist doesn’t hurt much anymore, got another few days before stitches can come out. They itch and hurt sometimes, but not enough to keep me from sleeping.”

“Put a mark in box number one. Let’s skip to item number three. You’ve got a couple of extra people living in your dinky rental.”

“Dad, three weeks ago, Steve asked me to move in with him.”

“To DC?”

“Negotiations hadn’t progressed that far, but my lease is up pretty soon.”

“Ah. And now things are … complicated.”
“Circling back to issue number two. I’ve got my boyfriend and his old boyfriend living in my apartment with me. And I can’t call him an ex because they never really broke up.”

“Something tells me negotiations haven’t progressed very far on that subject either.”

“It’s been a big couple of weeks.” A stupid tear welled up and she sniffed it back.

“Uh uh. No tears. I definitely draw the line at tears, Darcy Maria.”

“I know. Gimme a tissue and I’ll make them go away.”

He dug around and came up with a rag that still had a clean corner. “You do that.”

“Gee thanks, Dad.” She took it and blew her nose.

“It’s yours now. Your germs, you own it.”

“That never works with the Bugatti.”

“Move back into the Tower, it’s yours.”

Darcy pulled back to peer at him suspiciously. “That’s an excellent bribe. And quite a few steps up from last time.”

“You weren’t living with a deadly assassin and a super soldier then. Which begs the question: why aren’t you raging and storming about your lab, throwing things. Please note, I said ‘your lab’ not mine.”

“Who do I blame, Dad? Steve? For being in love with someone before he met me? Bucky? He’s barely functioning. From the little I’ve gleaned from him, it’s the memory of Steve—maybe being with Steve—that prompted him to break from HYDRA. I can’t take that away from him.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“Odd man out, I think.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Steve’s been acting like nothing has changed—if you don’t count the fact he’s sleeping on the floor.”

Tony eased backward to run a thumb on her chin. “How does Darcy Stark feel about all this?”

“Darcy Stark wants everything to go back to the way it was three weeks ago. But that’s not going to happen. I’m scared I’m going to lose Steve in all this, and if I do, I won’t be able to hate him for it. But … you know, sharing isn’t really in my nature.”

“You really do love him.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Enough to give him time to figure all this out? Because the Steve Rogers I know wasn’t planning on any of this either. And the last time I heard, he was making a permanent kind of move on my girl.”

“Wow, I guess that’s the bonus question.” Darcy wrinkled her nose at Tony. “Yes. And whose side
“Yours,” he said firmly. “Once Barnes is thinking straight and Steve can figure out where he stands, then you can make your decisions. And if it gets too difficult anywhere in there, come home, or talk to your mom and we’ll figure out an R&D trip for you somewhere. Never underestimate the power of running away from your problems.”

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, you’ve got that one down.”

He tapped her on the nose. “Your mom never lets me get away with it for long.”

“You are a pain in the ass.”

“Hey, I resemble that. Anyone tell you that you look like me?”

“Only you.”

“And that, Darcy Stark, is how we’ve evaded the world all these years.” He kissed her on the head.

“Now get out of my lab until you’re hungry.”

She got her coffee and padded in bare feet to the elevator. “Club Stark, J.”

“Of course.” There was a short pause. “Lewis.”

“Thanks, JARVIS.” Yeah, he had her back too.

The best part of the whole conversation? Tony didn’t ask why Darcy was in his lab. He never did.

That night, from the comfort of the sofa where she’d bunked down with three blankets, a couple of pillows and *Pitch Perfect*, she called Steve. In spite of all the forced togetherness that was driving her crazy on Friday, now she missed him (and the shower sex, but him more).

In the most modern of fashions, with contact lists and cell phones and caller ID, Steve answered, “Hi, doll.”

“Which girlfriend were you hoping would be on the other end?” she joked. “That’s an open-ended greeting.” (Oh it felt good to tease him again.)

He laughed softly, and she snuggled down into the blankets to the sound of his voice. “You know, I traded down this weekend. A beautiful dame and smart mouth for a brooding lump on the couch,” he quipped.

The separation must have done both of them a favor because Steve sounded more like himself for the first time in a month. Cautiously, she offered, “Sounds like things are better.”

There was a real smile in his voice when he answered, “They could be. What are your plans?” He was just casual enough that she could tell he was hoping for good news.

“You do like plans. Hmm. Well, since I’ve just about exhausted the music I know you dislike, and I’m firing up a stack of chick flicks tonight that will make you cringe, I’m pretty sure I will be ready for male companionship tomorrow.”
“That’s a relief.” And it was, she could hear it in his voice.

“I thought I’d come home tomorrow afternoon and see if we can figure out living arrangements that won’t result in me strangling the both of you before the week is out.” She bit her lip as she said it.

There was a long period of silence, then Steve said softly, “Thank you, Darcy. I know you didn’t sign up for this.”

“Yeah, well, not making any promises here, but I do know that Bucky needs you.”

“Ah—I don’t think he’s as interested in my sunny looks as he is in having you back home. Did I mention the brooding part?”

A broody Winter Soldier. “Sounds like fun?”

He snickered, then, “Darce, Bucky wants you to look at his arm.”

Even though he couldn’t see it, she raised her eyebrow in surprise. “How did you talk him into that?”

“I didn’t. I think—no, I know he misses you.”

“So he’ll trade me poking at his arm in exchange for me coming home?” There was something unsettling about that, but Darcy couldn’t put her finger on it. Nevertheless, someone needed to understand what sort of technology Barnes had on him.

“Something along those lines. I’m guessing you would rather do this at your lab?”

“Yes.”

“Then we will see you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Hey, Steve?”

“Yes, doll?”

“Make it the morning and bring the coffee.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She could hear the grin—and relief—in his voice. It made her feel, well, good. Really good. “I love you, Darcy.”

“I love you back, Steve. Now scram so I can get ready for the morning.”

She scrambled out of the covers, shutting off the movie as she did. She set the cell phone beside her laptop on her workbench. “J, order food, it’s going to be a late night. Are you on board with me?”

“Always, Lewis. Carbs or protein?”

“Protein. And coffee. I need fuel. And tunes.”

“Coming right up.”

She pulled data on Bucky’s arm and similar technology out of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Stark Industries files. Then she and JARVIS hacked their way around the globe to find anything resembling the machinery. The best data came from an unexpected source via a coded transmission. At three in the morning, JARVIS opened a line.
“It’s late, you’re hacking my files, and this time I can’t take your iPod.”

“Coulson?” Darcy’s voice spiraled upward. She caught herself as her breath hitched. “You know, I’m beginning to think ‘dead’ is just a euphemism around here. Between Steve, Fury, you and Bucky, things are not what they seem. Next one I’m betting on is Loki not really being dead, no matter what Thor and Jane tell me.”

“I’d rather you lose that bet. And who is Bucky?”

“Me too. The answer is James Buchanan Barnes, also known as the Winter Soldier, a.k.a. Steve Rogers’ best friend, Bucky.”

“The Winter Soldier is the mythical fist of HYDRA. And Barnes is a Howling Commando who died in ’45.”

“It’s been a big month, Coulson.”

“So I understand.”

“Think I can have that data? Your hacker is freaking brilliant with her blocks and it’s pissing JARVIS off, which is a talent in itself, but I really, really could use whatever you’ve got on the Deathlok project. Keep Centipede, that’s not my line of thinking.”

“How did you know my hacker is a girl?”

“Crazy Ivan, dude. I had a fifty-fifty chance and, given my week, I needed a break. Sorry.”

“I like that movie. Will you keep me informed?”

“Should I?” she asked with a grin.

“As the new director of S.H.I.E.L.D., I am very much interested in continuing the close relationship that S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Stark family have enjoyed through the years.”

“Who died and made you director?”

“Fury. And how did you know about him?”

“Did you forget who my boyfriend is?”

“Of course not, Ms. Stark.”

“Ha. Tit for tat. I knew you had it in you. Well, Director Coulson, per the same dead former director, Captain Rogers is the new leader of the Avengers Initiative. So the next time you have official business, you’ll know who to call.”

“I appreciate that information.”

“Don’t fangirl on him. It makes him nervous. And I wouldn’t ask Bucky to sign your Howling Commando cards. Be nice, and I’ll get them autographed for your birthday.”

“That, too, would be appreciated.

“Hey, Phil?”

“Yes, Darcy?”
“Steve is very, very unhappy with HYDRA.”

“So am I,” he agreed. “Skye will be transmitting data to you shortly.”

“Have a nice night.”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis.”

She whistled as the line was disconnected, unable to control the grin or the leaking tears this time.

“Lewis, I am receiving a packet of information.”

“Dump it on my laptop, isolate it and make sure it doesn’t have any bugs.”

“Already done.”

“Good. Load it up and let’s see what we’ve got.” She wiggled her fingers and began attacking the keyboard.

She got maybe two hours of sleep before JARVIS pinged her.

“Lewis, your alarm.”

“Sorry, J.” She really was. JARVIS had better things to do than to be an alarm clock. But her phone was still sounding off and she wasn’t paying attention. She always woke up to JARVIS’ voice.

She had enough time for a shower and a change of clothes before he told her the boys were on the elevator. She yawned, scratched at her itchy stitches, cursed because she forgot about them and pulled one.

The little ‘bots she had scattered on her floor were trying to make the place marginally cleaner after her late night in the lab. She tended to get messy as she worked. One scooped up crumbs, another ran a magnet all over the floor and a third polished everything to a shine.

She hoped like hell that she didn’t find any other hidden surprises in Bucky’s arm. That part should be relatively easy to determine with a good scan. Figuring out the rest of the technology would be a little more difficult.

Banner had analyzed the drugs she’d pulled out and Darcy had physically thrown up when she learned what was in them. Anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, heavy duty painkillers, and in the last, pure poison to ensure the asset never betrayed his handlers. No wonder Bucky wanted them out. (High score goes to Barnes for finding one of the handful of people on the planet who could remove the vial. Bonus to Darcy for being able to do it with her version of a pocket knife.)

Darcy skimmed the surface of her worktable to make sure she had everything she needed. Part of her preparations had involved stuffing most her extraneous (scary looking) equipment into the spare room at the back. She suspected Bucky was antsy enough about the idea of a laboratory, much less one full of strange gear.

Then again, her lab didn’t really look like a lab, more like a tricked out garage without any cars. Art and tools hanging on the walls. Tool boxes in banks below. Floors of black recycled glass with flecks of mirrors embedded in them. Work tables in the center, and a kick ass movie theatre area with an excellent couch on the far side. Behind that was a basic kitchen and bathroom to get her by.
The elevator doors slid open. (Holy shit, double-take-Batman, they looked good). From a purely physical, all-lady-parts-involved assessment, she should have been willing to tumble both of them into the nearest bed (sofa, there was a sofa nearby) and have her wicked way with them.

Steve had on a new white shirt, something that clung perfectly to his abs in that “now you see it, or did you really,” way under an unbuttoned shirt in a midnight blue with nary a plaid weave to be seen. The jeans and boots were his, but—damn.

Add in Bucky wearing black-- t-shirt, jeans, and denim jacket--with metal peeking out from his finger gloves. (Holy shit. She wished she could take a picture.) But Bucky’s eyes were shadowed and his body language screamed assassin (she could say that, she was friends with Natasha) as he took in the surroundings. He held out a venti cup. “Coffee?”

Taking it, she sniffed (caramel macchiato this time). “Minions, stand down. This one can live.”

The little ‘bots stopped what they were doing and drooped, as if they’d been admonished. That got a curious look of surprise from the soldier and an outright laugh from Steve as he followed in. Softly, with a quirky upturn to his lips, Bucky said, “Pink and blue, Princess? You said lab and I figured white walls and a lab coat.”

She arched an eyebrow. “J, show this antique how Club Stark works on Friday nights.”

“You’ve got it, Lewis.”

Her favorite dance list cued up, along with a dazzling light array that moved to the beat of the music. Bucky stared at the changing colors splashed along the walls and ceiling in themes worthy of a Saturday night rave. Her little ‘bots wiggled along to the music and he shook his head at the absurd scene.

She was so busy trying to figure out what was different about Bucky that Steve slipped behind her to steal a kiss on her neck. “I love you,” he said in her ear. She turned in his arms, kicking a stray box over so that she could stand on it. He brushed her lips with his thumb before nudging her bottom lip down and covering her mouth with his. When she came up for air, Bucky was ignoring them in favor of holding a hand up to the lights so the colors could play over it.

“Bucky used to take art classes with me,” he said in her ear. “I preferred pencil. He drew, but he’d add watercolor.”

“Does he remember?”

“Yes. I took him to an art store this weekend. He’s been trying to work out the kinks in his wrist.”

“Are you okay?” She cupped his cheek, looking for signs of stress in his face. They were there, but lessened.

“Better than I was a few days ago.”

That was sincere and something else in her unwound in response. She kissed him one more time (just because).

“J, kill the beats.” The room returned to its usual pink and blue shading along the walls with white lights over the work tables. Those blinked off in favor of the morning sun spilling into her lab.

Bucky seemed disappointed, though that might have been her imagination. “What does L.E.W.I.S. stand for?” he asked.
Darcy let out a peal of laughter at Steve’s poleaxed expression and reached out to fist bump Bucky (they’d practiced one night and argued for half an hour over the right way to do it). He touched knuckles to hers.

“Liberally Educated Wildly Intelligent Stark.”

“And JARVIS?”

“Just A Rather Very Intelligent System.”

“Who came up with the names?” Steve asked. “Tony?”

“I named JARVIS when I was three. Dad made him when I was a baby to help keep track of me. When I was five, I asked JARVIS to give me a name back. That was the first time Dad and I knew for sure that JARVIS was sentient—and had a sense of humor.”

“Your sibling is an AI?” Steve asked, frowning.

“He is not the weirdest thing currently occupying this Tower,” she shot back, protective of JARVIS.

He held his hands up in apology. “So you use ‘Lewis’ as a pseudonym.”

“I am always a Stark. Just expressed in another way.” Darcy reached for Bucky, nudging him to a stool where he shed his jacket and laid it on the workbench. “What was your clue?” she asked him.

Bucky replied, “JARVIS uses honorifics or titles. Didn’t make sense unless Lewis was one of those.”

“Exactly.”

“You didn’t know?” he asked Steve, giving him a look that clearly said, “dumbass” in friend language. Darcy didn’t even try to hide her own grin.

“Wondered now and again, but figured it was another Stark quirk.”

Bucky didn’t answer as he looked around Darcy’s gleaming stainless workstation. He stilled, his eyes changing from blue to grey.

(Nope, not happening) Darcy prompted, “What kind of music do you want to listen to? Blues? Blues guitar?” The question seemed to pull Bucky out of wherever he was going. He nodded. “JARVIS, how about Stevie Ray Vaughn?”

“I think that would be quite suitable. Any particular selection?”

“Nope. You’re a better D.J. than I am.”

“It’s good to know I have a backup occupation,” the AI replied rather drily.

“It’s your hobby and you know it. How much music have you dumped on my iPod? And Steve’s, for that matter? Which reminds me … want to load one up for Barnes?”

“Sergeant Barnes, I can arrange to have one for you in the common room when you are done. We can start with the blues and modify from there.”

Bucky seemed startled by the request. He automatically looked at Steve for permission.
“JARVIS and Darcy would like to give you an iPod with music on it—you’ve borrowed mine. Do you want one?” Steve asked.

Darcy could see Bucky struggling to answer. He clearly wanted to say yes. His eyes flickered to Darcy and around the lab. (Damn. She didn’t want him thinking the gift was tied to his behavior.) She touched Bucky on the wrist to keep him calm. “I’ll tell you what, Steve. Let’s get through this morning. We can talk music while I work, then Bucky can decide afterward. In any case, we can get lunch too while he decides what he wants.”

Steve considered what she was trying to tell him, and got it, nodding. “I think that’s a great idea.”

Bucky seemed relieved, especially when the bluesy rhythms started pumping through the speakers. He didn’t relax, but wasn’t in soldier mode either.

“Can I ask you questions about your arm? I’ve been watching how you use it, but there is a lot I don’t know. And Bucky—I really don’t want to hurt you, so if I do, I need you to let me know.”

He nodded, slowly, but affirmatively.

An idea popped into her head (along with a lot on inappropriate thoughts, but hey, she wasn’t a virgin). “Do you guys have a safe word?”

Steve blushed, turning bright, bright red. Bucky shook his head. “I don’t--know what that means.”

“Modern Sex 101. When you and your partner, slash, partners are experimenting, it’s a code to stop – no matter what or when. It doesn’t have to be anything meaningful, just different enough that it will get everyone’s attention. You can say it if something hurts, or you’re scared or whatever.”

Bucky muttered, “Charcoal.” She didn’t think it was possible, but Steve turned even redder.

She grinned at his reaction, and heaven help her, she had to ask. “Is there an explanation you two care to share with the class or should I just go with it?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, looking absolutely anywhere but at Darcy and Bucky. “Neither of us like working in charcoal, so when … when we … well, Bucky was always afraid of hurting me.”

He fidgeted, and Darcy got a glimpse of the pre-serum Steve.

“Too far gone to keep my hands off him. Had to know he was okay,” said Bucky, his eyes slid across the room and skimmed up Steve’s body.

Darcy wasn’t sure if she was dismayed or heartened by the reference to their sexual history (her fault, she asked), but she tabled her reaction for later to focus on Bucky now. “It’s good that you remember that. So that’s going to be the safe word for this too. ‘Charcoal’ if there is anything at all that makes you uncomfortable.”

Per a hasty conversation with Sam last night, Darcy tried to remember everything he told her. Starting with getting consent for every single step.

“Bucky, I want to ask you questions now. You don’t have to answer them, but they will help me to understand what is going on in your head and in your body. Is that okay?”

“Yes.”

Darcy ran through the list she’d written out during last night’s research. Bucky answered them hesitantly at first, then with more surety.
“I think I’m right, guys, the narcotics were masking a lot of sensitivity here. Bucky, you’ve got a prime piece of technology here and I think you have a lot more capabilities with it than you know. Can I run a couple of scans now? The wand doesn’t have to touch you in any way, and you won’t feel it. If you want, I can run it over Steve first.”

Steve didn’t wait for agreement; he just held his arm out for Darcy. When she was done, Bucky nodded again. Darcy ran the scans. They were easy – hologram and MRI type imaging that gave her a three dimensional picture of his arm and how connected into Bucky’s body. She pushed one of the images closer to Bucky so he could play with it while she tinkered with the other. He did, poking at in fascination. When he saw how she was manipulating the image, he copied her movements. Steve came around to look from the opposite side of the table.

Darcy talked idly as she moved the hologram. “I didn’t realize so much of your collarbone and shoulder area had to be rebuilt too. It’s a good thing your arm is made of vibranium. Though I would love to know where they ("they" seemed safe enough) came up with enough of it to make your arm. Anything else and the force of fighting would wreck your skeleton, I think.”

Bucky frowned down at the arm. “There is secondary reinforcement. I can turn it on.” He made a little movement in his shoulder. His arm clicked and whirred as he moved it around. “Do you want to scan it again?”

Startled by his suggestion, she fumbled for the wand again. “Uh, yes. That’s great, Barnes.” When she finished, he flexed his shoulder and the internal mechanism disengaged.

She took a deep breath for the next part. “Can—would you take your shirt off? I’d like to see how your skin and arm are connected. I’d also like to touch around the edges to get a better idea of how much sensitivity you have. If you’re not comfortable with me, would you let Steve do it?”

“A gorgeous dame, asking me to take my clothes off?” The reply seemed automatic, and Darcy laughed without thinking. Bucky seemed startled by what came out of his mouth. His eyes flashed to Steve, then came back to Darcy. He grasped behind him to pull the shirt off over his head. It snagged on his arm, and Darcy reached out to unhook the fabric. Her fingertips skimmed metal and Bucky jerked. “That… tickled.”

Darcy didn’t reply. Once again, she was mesmerized by man and machine.

“See something you like, doll?”

She jolted. “Yeah, shiny things do it to me every time.”

Steve laughed again, knowing her as he did, but Bucky—didn’t. He ran a hand through his hair. “Let’s get this done.”

She’d hurt his feelings. Somehow, in her reflexive quip about his arm, she’d lost sight of the fact that Bucky was very human, and crazy insecure about everything right now – shit, he’d made only a handful of decisions without having one of them back it up. This—having her look over his arm—had been one of them.

“I’m sorry, Bucky.” She took his right hand and pressed a kiss to the knuckles. She’d discovered the Bucky responded better with touch and used that now to convince him of her sincerity.

Haunted grey eyes came up. “Why?”

“Because I’m stupid sometimes.”
“Darcy—I know my arm makes people nervous.” His resignation just destroyed her.

“It’s not your arm—“ she said in frustration. “Well it is. But—God. It’s you, Bucky. I don’t see you run around the house without your shirt on and you’re amazingly hot. And my boyfriend is in the room and you guys have a very long history and it makes me all kinds of awkward because I’m never good at this kind of thing. Okay?”

An edge of a smile tilted his lips. “Steve is more than happy to have me around half-naked.”

“Can we skip all the subtext of this conversation because I’m really not ready for any of it and well, he doesn’t have to have his hands all over you for the next hour?” There was a snort of laughter from behind her. “Shut up, Rogers.”

“I’d be happy to have his hands all over me, Princess. And yours.”

The way he sassed her, his voice all soft and serious in his delivery, did something to her insides. She sucked in her breath. “Just, let me do this, okay?” She closed her eyes, feeling her cheeks flaming.

Bucky took her hand, skimmed a kiss across her knuckles (oh!) and pressed her palm against his collarbone. She could feel the faint cool of the metal underneath even as heat blossomed between her hands and his flesh. “Do what you need to do, Princess.”

(Deep breath). “Does this feel different to you? Than say, here?” She brought her other hand up to rest on the other collarbone.

“Yes. Less sensitive to pressure. More so to temperature.”

“Can you heat the metal internally?”

“Why would I be able to do that?”

“I’ll bet the metal makes the muscles ache when it gets cold. You get headaches, right?”

He was slow in answering, but she waited him out. “Sometimes,” he said at last.

“I can fix that if you want.” She ran her hands along the twisted, ropey scar that bridged the connection between skin and metal. “How’s the sensation in the scar tissue?”

“It itches.”

“Hmm. I’ll bet the itching is the serum trying to heal you.” She reached up and spun one of the images. “See here? Nerves have grown all the way up through the scar tissue to the metal.” She lightly stroked her thumb across the edge where they met. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes.”

“Some of the sensitivity you have comes from those nerves. Your brain has learned to interpret the signals from them.” He made a noise that she took as agreement. “Okay, given how sensitive you are at the shoulder, I’m going to start with your fingertips and work my way up. Want me to clean it as I go?”

“Can you do that?” She shrugged and glanced down at the little robots circling her feet. His face lit up, just a little. “All right, Princess. Have at it.”

Darcy was grateful Bucky wasn’t reacting to her touch. It helped her to keep up a professional demeanor. She was twitchy enough for the both of them.
Bucky concentrated the one blue spot on the frame of Darcy’s glasses. She had no idea how she was peeling him apart with nothing more than the heat of her hands and the way she talked with him about his own body. Like it was his. (Asset) The brush of her fingers tips along the scar punched a bolt of lightning to his groin, reminding him that he had no idea how long it had been since he’d had sex. (Red hair, Natalia.)

Darcy wasn’t responding to his overtures at all, leaving him confused. (Never had a problem with dames before.) But she was different. She and Steve were the real thing. Just like he and Steve were —had been--the real thing. He got it. He really did. Bucky was happy that he’d found someone to put a smile that stupid face.

He would still tumble either one of them. Or both. He might have kept that to himself except that they’d unpacked all of Steve’s boxes, found the essentials and repacked the rest to store in Darcy’s garage. He’d found the drawing of him and Darcy and recognized the artistic style. (Naked, letting Steve sketch for hours.)

Steve had flushed red when he discovered what Bucky was holding. Had darkened further when Bucky turned it in the light to check the date.

“Fantasy?” Steve was pretty good at keeping a poker face. Had gotten better since the war. But Bucky knew him. “You still love me? That way?”

“Yes.” The confession seemed to take something out of Steve even as his eyes burned bright.

“What about Darcy?”

“I love her. Same way I love you.” Steve’s blue eyes darkened further, with shadows of hell appearing in them. “Please don’t make me choose. I need time to figure this out. She needs time. She’s—she’s—been a rock through all of this.”

So Bucky didn’t press.

A shiver of pain trailed up his arm, capturing his attention (Rule one). With a tiny high powered hot water pressure washer, an equally small vacuum, high grade lubricants and the occasional cotton swab, Darcy cleaned the articulated joints on his hand.

As she finished each one, she dried it with a soft cloth wrapped around her fingers, buffing the metal to a high shine. She moved up to his wrist to begin the same intense level of cleaning. The inside was far more sensitive than he’d known. If he closed his eyes, he might think it was his own heartbeat jumping around, but it was her jittery pulse he could feel as she laid her hand there.

“How different does it feel now that the narcotics aren’t so strong?” she asked.

“I’m off of them now,” he admitted. She pulled her hands away, wary. But he pressed her fingers back to his wrist. “It’s okay. Serum burned it out. Don’t think I’ve been awake for this long, except with Natalia. I still can’t remember much of that. Feels normal. Like a real arm. Except I feel energy? Like an itch or a tickle, I guess.”

He could feel every caress of her fingertips along the metal as she worked though the mechanisms.
He closed his eyes, lost in the sensation of touch as she worked her way up his forearm, in the dip of his elbow, and along the curve of his bicep. He didn’t dare look at Steve.

She didn’t stop when food arrived, just took the proffered water bottle and sipped from it before resuming the tedious process. Then she was done, and he damned near shivered from the lack of contact. But he didn’t. (Rule two: Assets do not have feelings)

The next stage meant opening each of the panels that would give her access to the inner workings on his arm. (Rule one. Assets do not feel pain.) He flexed his fingers, evened out his breathing, and waited.

She set a ceramic screwdriver to the first plate over his wrist, explaining, “I don’t want to touch you with metal. I think the conductivity will irritate you, if not become downright painful.” She looked up, beautiful blue-green eyes all serious. “Tell me if it hurts, Bucky, or use the safe word.” (Rule three: Assets belong to the handler.) He struggled to nod.

Opening the panel forced his arm to reroute data. It was uncomfortable as Darcy went to work. The sensations brightened, making his whole arm feel itchy. But she stroked as she went, rubbing, polishing. Closing the panel and soothing her fingers over it.

Panel two was tolerable, as were three and four. (Rule one). Five—five—(Assets do not feel pain. Weapons have no need of pain. You are a weapon. You are an asset to this organization. Change the world, one last time.)

Noise. White agony. (Rule one--)

Steve held him in a rock hard grip, arm against his chest, left arm braceleting his metal wrist. Darcy cupped his face. Tears. He thought of charcoal.

She was yelling. “Damn it, Bucky. Let me make it stop!”

He stopped straining. The panel was closed. There was only the memory of torment and the weight of Steve’s body wrapped around his.

“What can you do with your arm that makes you feel good?” Darcy demanded. “I need you to do it now.”

He couldn’t. (Asset. Change the world.)

“Do what she says,” Steve whispered.

He reached out to take a lock of Darcy’s hair between his fingers. The simple strands of nothing glided against the sensors. He used his other hand to do the same. One was a shimmer of energy, the other was soft as the rain.

He pulled her in, kissing her tears away, a mere brush of lips to each cheek. Then, he had to touch his mouth to hers. His hands held her head gently—pressure on his fingertips, strands on of hair dancing—as he explored the taste of her bottom lip, of the salted tears still sliding along the top.

Steve’s arm tightened, and Bucky remembered how Steve would do the same when—he let Darcy go and turned to look over his shoulder. Intense blue saturated with desire. Worry. Concern in all that.

Darcy tucked her hands under her arms. “Bucky,” she asked, “What happened there? That panel is one of the ones I opened last time to get the vials out.”
He shivered.

“Stay with me, jerk. I’m not losing you to this,” Steve told him as he tightened his arm around his middle.

“It’s different.”

“Without the drugs?” Darcy asked.

“No one touches me. Only Natalia, and that was—I don’t remember. The others, the others hurt. The ice. The ice hurts.” He jerked violently. (Asset. Wipe him.)

Then he shut down.

There in the silence of his mind was the place he could go. The place where nothing touched him. No sound. No pain. No emotion. Just … emptiness. If he screamed, the echoes were not to be heard. If he cried, he did not feel the tears. His body followed the instructions of least resistance, separate from his mind. This refuge was all he had against the cold, the agony, the fear, the hatred.

There was no wish for this existence to end, no desire for rescue, or for freedom. There was only this place of solitude.

Chapter End Notes

Movie reference: Hunt for Red October

Music: Stevie Ray Vaughn "Pride and Joy"

Is it possible for an author to have a favorite chapter? If so, this is one of them.
Time had no meaning in his hollow of isolation. Eventually, be it minutes or years, a part of his mind still aware of the world (not here), would tug at him, tell him to come back.

It did now and he let go of that place.

Warmth curled over him, through him, surrounded him. Voices he knew. The timbres and cadences rose in a wave until he could acknowledge the speakers in his head. Steve. Darcy. Steve and Darcy. steveanddarcy.

As his awareness increased, so did the sounds. A melody played, a piano and saxophones.

His eyes were already open, but now he absorbed his surroundings. Two people on either of side him on a sofa. Two exits, north and south. Lights were low. He rippled through a litany of muscle twitches to identify injuries and armament. He had---none.

A blanket cocooned him. Warm enough to be generating its own heat. The voices began to coalesce into dialogue.

“Bucky?”

He turned his head. Blinked. Steve.

“Hey there.”

Bucky tried to move his arms, found them entangled in fabric. Steve reached over and untucked the ends so he could pull free.

The blanket was soft. Pink and blue. Bold pink and bold blue. Soft like Darcy’s hair. Darcy. She was curled up on the couch, arms around her knees. Tear-streaked face, green eyes made red.


He licked his lips. Found Steve. The first thing he said was the last part he had lost. “My name is James Buchanan Barnes.”

“Welcome home, Bucky.” Steve pulled him into a hug, warm and hard. Bucky clamped a hand to the back of Steve’s neck, wrapped the other arm around his waist and held on. Hot tears ran down his face, choking sobs wracked his frame. Steve pulled him in tight, hands hard on his back. “I missed you, jerk,” he whispered.

“You just won’t let me go, will you, punk?”
“Never.”

Chapter End Notes

Music reference: Billy Joel "New York State of Mind"
Three hours they had waited. Three hours of terror while thinking she’d sent Bucky irretrievably into
the rabbit hole. Three hours of zombie-like stares, dead eyes that had nothing in them. Three hours of
watching Steve’s heart break.

And then … it was as if the two men hadn’t spent the last seven decades in hell and ice.

Darcy slipped off the sofa and disappeared into the bathroom to splash water on her face. She
wanted to crumple to the floor and scream. From fear, from contrition, from the unfairness of it all.

She didn’t do any of that. She couldn’t really do anything but breathe.

“Lewis?”

“Hey, J.” She sounded pathetic, even to herself.

“The Captain keeps looking at the bathroom door. Shall I run interference?”

She sighed. “No, J, I’ve got this.”

“Somehow I don’t believe that.”

“Me either. But what’s the phrase? Fake it ‘til you make it?”

“It’s not always the best advice,” he drawled.

It wasn’t fair. No one gauged Stark moods better than the AI and he’d perfected his technique for
chivvying said Starks out of whatever frame of mind that needed to be budged. Darcy raised an
eyebrow. “Then you missed a fundamental lesson. I’m disappointed in you, JARVIS.”

“Just because I disregard advice, it doesn’t mean I missed a lesson.”

“Now that’s more like a true Stark, J.” She sighed. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you. Now stop hiding in the bathroom.”

She made a rude noise and stuck her tongue out in reply. (Channel Mom. Calm. Cool. She could do
this. She was a Stark.) A layer of cosmetics always helped. Lip gloss and mascara added color.
(Deep breath, open the door. Damn.)

Both men were hovering in the kitchen.

It was Bucky who reached for her and pushed her into Steve’s arms. “Don’t be ridiculous, Princess.
He still loves you.”

Oh. She held on as Steve buried his face in her hair. When they broke apart, she felt a little silly with
Bucky watching.

Then Steve’s stomach gurgled. Bucky’s answered and Darcy stuffed a knuckle in her mouth to keep
from laughing at the absurdity of the interruption. (Grateful though, let’s be honest) “Hungry?” she
asked.

Somehow, the need for food trumped tragedy and heartbreak. It was just impossible to continue to
pour out raging emotion when one was craving French fries.

Darcy and Steve introduced Bucky to their favorite burger joint (shakes were mandatory), half-way between her place and the Tower.

Steve gathered her hand in his as they navigated the sidewalks. Bucky stayed closed to Steve, walking shoulder to shoulder with him (just brushing each other) with his hands stuffed into his pockets. They were nearly the same height, though Bucky was the shorter of the two.

After the first block, Bucky slowed enough to walk behind Darcy. It was easier than being three across (really though, the Soldier was probably noting faces and suspicious hiding places. His face still had a curious blankness to it, though not quite like before).

When she got a cramp in her side from the stitches (she’d forgotten about them--again), Bucky had a hand around her waist before she could finish saying, “Ow.” (There might have been a couple of swear words before that.)

“How far?” he demanded.

“End of the block. Two hundred feet,” Steve answered.

Darcy flapped her hands at Bucky. “I’ve got this. I just need a second.” (Of course now, she would walk the two hundred feet without wincing if it killed her. She made it by promising herself a large shake rather than the medium.) He scowled at her. She rolled her eyes and (sort of) stomped away.

The proprietor waved them to a back table. Bucky and Steve split the corner so they could see into the restaurant (all the Avengers did it. Darcy never got to see anything interesting). Steve held her chair and both men waited until she sat before taking their seats (old school manners. Darcy loved them. Mostly).

She held her hand out to Bucky, turned it up and waited. Her shoulders unknotted when he covered it with his own. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she offered.

Like Thor with Jane, Darcy freaking blushed when he turned her hand back over to press a kiss on her knuckles. “I know, Princess.” He seemed amused by her reaction. Steve had a stupid grin and she kicked him in the ankle.

“Next time, we use a local anesthetic.”

“Next time?” He drew his brows together, his eyes hardening.

Standing firm in spite of his dark look, she nodded. “You told me someone looked at it before and after every mission. So we’ll assume a next time and plan accordingly. I kind of think it was like getting stabbed with a needle without Novocain. Having had that experience more recently than I would like, I will advance the theory that opening your panels is like having an open wound and I won’t do it again without something to suppress the pain. One can only take so much.”

Bucky nodded in agreement, letting her hand go with a squeeze. (Okay, subject dropped. She can take a hint.)

The waiter stopped by to take their orders—or rather, to take Bucky’s order and Darcy’s request for a large over a medium strawberry shake. The waiter knew the rest.

Huh. Bucky ordered the same thing as Steve. (Two double cheeseburgers, easy on the mustard, extra pickle, hold the mayo and onions. Cheese fries. Large vanilla malt.)
After the waiter moved on, Darcy blinked at the pair of them. “That’s an awfully specific order for both of you to want the same thing.”

“Bucky started it,” Steve pointed out.

She put her head in her hands. “I don’t want to know when.”

Slowly, as if he had to drag the memories from wherever they had been stored, Bucky explained, “He kept getting sick from mayonnaise because he was allergic to eggs. But he wouldn’t stop making stuff for me. So I told him I didn’t like it and switched to mustard. He believed me and it was one less thing to bother him.”

“Do you like mustard?” she asked.

“N--no.”

Steve shook his head. “I had no idea, Buck.”

Darcy flagged down the waiter, and asked him to change Bucky’s order. She waggled a finger at him. “Steve’s not sick anymore. Don’t eat crap you don’t like. Mayo or ketchup.”

Bucky’s eyes flickered to Steve.

“She’s right,” he agreed. “You’re safe. So eat what you want.”

“Extra mayonnaise,” he told the patient waiter. “No mustard.”

Barnes seemed to settle after that, and Darcy chewed her lip trying to make sense everything that had happened today, and realized that ducking out might not have been the best plan. “How much do you remember?” she asked.

“Everything,” he said in a monotone. “Who I am. What Steve is to me. Brooklyn. The war. The twenty-seven successful missions. The one mission that failed. Why Natalia is important to me and what I did to her. Zola and his experiments.” He closed his eyes. “I remember the cold.”

“What do you need?” she asked, trying to remember what Sam had said and wishing he was here having this conversation. This was so far beyond her comfort zone, and she’d been dealing with Steve with mixed results for two years.

He blinked. “I don’t know.”

Exchanging a look with Steve, she followed her instincts. “Where do you feel safe?”

“Not here. Your house?” He seemed to be doing an internal check for that one.

“Is it the location or because Steve is there?”

“Both. And you.”

“Me?”

“I have a mission,” he said. “I … need a mission,” he added.

“What mission is that?”

“Protect you. I can do that.”
Darcy tried not to roll her eyes (failed, but tried). “I don’t want someone hovering over me, even if I’m doing something wrong.”

He seemed to regain a little of himself. “Not what I meant, Princess.”

“Then what?”

“You’re a target.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“The kind of target they send—sent—to eliminate.” His face twisted and he stuffed his hand back into his pocket.

Well that was terrifying. “Why me?”


“He’s right,” Steve chimed in. “It’s worth thinking about moving into the Tower.”

“Three weeks ago we were considering moving in together,” Darcy said with no little irritation. “This didn’t come up.”

The waiter interrupted them with food, which meant that neither Steve nor Bucky were going to be conversing for the first burger. When that round was devoured, along with a good portion of the cheese fries, Steve resumed the discussion.

“Darcy, three weeks ago, you hadn’t been targeted by HYDRA. In any case, you’d already mentioned the publicity you knew you would get if we moved in together.”

“The Tower? That’s your line of thinking?”

He lifted a shoulder. “I wasn’t going to move you to DC.”

Darcy crossed her arms. “You know, the reason I got an apartment was to put a little distance between me and my dad.”

“Your dad has all these fancy plans to give each of the Avengers a floor. I got that invitation too.”

Before she could really get snotty, Bucky put a hand on Steve’s forearm. “What am I missing? You were thinking about living with Darcy without asking her to marry you? What the hell is wrong with you? Nothing we ever talked about included ruining a dame’s reputation.” Though the speech was slower in coming, even Darcy recognized the cadence of Bucky Barnes and a faint Brooklyn accent.

“What did you think we were doing, Bucky? She’s got two guys crammed into a one-bedroom apartment with her and nobody cares anymore.”

“Squatting for a few days isn’t the same as makin’ it permanent. You want to make it permanent? You get a ring on her finger, Steven Grant.”

Darcy firmly bit her lip so she wouldn’t dare snicker. She and Steve had already had this conversation a while back (he had picked out a ring, she’d seen it). She was not opposed to marriage, but she had firm ideas about compatibility before tying the knot. Not to mention she was only twenty five and had plenty of time on the biological clock.
“Buck—things are different now.” Steve struggled to say it. (Darcy wasn’t helping one iota on this one.) “If Darcy wants to live with a guy, no one thinks anything of it.”

Bucky glared at Steve, then pinned Darcy with a sharp look. “Is what he’s saying true?”

She shrugged. “There are always going to be people poking their noses into other people’s business, but no, my reputation won’t be ruined if I live with someone with marrying first. Only about half the kids born today have married parents and a lot of them don’t stay that way.”

His eyes rounded. “Doesn’t seem right.”

“It is any different than you and Steve dating for what, ten years, without making it official?”

He blinked at her, his mouth slightly open.

Exasperated, Darcy threw up her hands. “What did you think this conversation is about, Barnes? I’ve been dating your boyfriend for two years now. Two years to your ten. Pardon me for not having the etiquette book on how to handle this situation. News flash, if you two want to get married now, you can.”

Bucky snapped his head around to stare at Steve.

Steve reached for Darcy’s hand, but she grabbed her shake instead and settled for a long suck on the straw. (Don’t cry. Don’t be jealous or stupid, Darcy. Nobody asked for this and no one has done anything wrong. Steve hasn’t shown any signs of bailing.) She relented and laced her fingers with Steve’s.

She changed tactics. “I move we table this topic for a later date and go back the earlier one were we figure out how the three of us are going to survive in my house. Seven hundred square feet isn’t a lot of space.”

“Seconded,” Steve replied. He jerked a chin at Bucky. “He had an idea.”

Most of it involved storing Steve’s extra boxes at her lab, along with most of Darcy’s summer clothes and a chair from the living room (by unanimous decision, Steve’s oversized leather sofa chair got to stay. Big enough for two if they were cozy but definitely not a recliner. Those were banned by Stark decree a couple of generations ago.)

As Darcy was pulling clothes from her closet and hanging up a scant handful of items for Steve and Bucky, she had one of those a-ha moments that really pissed her off. Steve found her shoving stuff into the suitcase she kept under the bed.

“Darce?”

“Fair warning. Tears are imminent, so if you can’t fucking deal with them, this isn’t the time.”

Fortunately for all involved, Steve wasn’t her dad. He simply sat on the floor and tugged her into his arms. She went willingly. “I’ve got time and I can deal,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Here I am complaining about sharing my apartment with my really hot boyfriend who comes with nothing more than a chair, a set of uniforms and not enough clothes to fill a foot in my closet, along with his equally hot boyfriend who owns four shirts, three pairs of assorted pants and two pairs of shoes.”
“And a little over two years ago, we were sharing a tent and two uniforms each. It was war, Darcy. You don’t take things with you. And he’s not my—“

“Don’t you dare say he’s not, because I’ve seen the way you look at each other.”

“Princess?” In the doorway, Bucky had his hands in his pocket. “Punk here do something stupid?”

Darcy discovered that Bucky’s whole demeanor changed the moment he stepped through the door of her house and closed it. (Well, after doing a quick recon). This was Steve’s Bucky (mostly) and he was even more smart-ass than before (and charming and downright sweet. Shit.).

“No. I had a growing up moment that I didn’t like.” She rolled out of Steve’s lap and stood up. “Can I hug you to say I’m sorry?”

Bucky took a full step backward. “Darcy, you’ve got something special with Steve. I’m not going to mess that up.”

“See, that’s why we have a problem.” She waggled her finger at him. “I really do not want to like you. It would be a lot easier if I hated you. But I don’t. Even though you’re a jerk sometimes, I want to do whatever it takes for you to feel good again. Because I’m a Stark and that’s what Starks do—we fix things.”

“Did you fix Steve?”

“Oh, hell, no. He’s the most stubborn man I’ve met, a category that includes my dad. But he has this really cool bike and a nice ass, so what’s a girl to do?”

“You like his ass?”

“I like his bike. The rest is a bonus. Now since we are all here, it’s been a big day and I’m about a shower away from going to bed, how are we going to do this tonight? Because Steve ‘fessed up about you guys crashing together in my bed—(Holy shit, that was a way hotter image than she needed in the middle of a flirty diatribe of self-deception. Focus, Stark.)—so something tells me, Bucky, changing that up isn’t in your best interests.”

“Slept better when I held your hand.”

“Why?” she demanded.

Bucky shrugged.

Darcy looked down at Steve, who was wearing a goofy grin. “I’m out of this. I can sleep on the floor.”

“You hate sleeping on the floor.”

“The two people I love are arguing about sleeping in the same bed. Together. Holding hands.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh my god, Rogers. Don’t get your hopes up.” She turned back to Bucky. “Or you, Barnes.”

On that note, she dove for the bathroom to shower and run water on her flaming cheeks.

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How one sparky brunette could make him feel a hundred times better was a wonder. But he did. Even Bucky was taken with his girl. Steve looked after her with pride as she retreated.

Bucky dodged to one side and raised his eyebrows at Steve as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Got a lot of moxie.”

“You have no idea.”

“Getting one,” Bucky smirked as he leaned against the doorframe.

Fuck, he’d missed that stupid mug. Steve’s heart pinched hard at Bucky’s easy grin. Still—“Don’t bullshit her on the handholding thing, Buck. If it’s real, she’s in. If it’s not, you’re going to mess this up for both of us.”

“It’s real,” Bucky said softly as he looked over Steve. “I like her. A lot. You never had a girl, Steve. A chance for family and kids. I’ll go before I mess this up for you.”

“And that kind of talk pissed me off seven decades ago. Yes, I want a family. I’ve always wanted a family. I don’t particularly give a damn how we get there. Me, you, or both. Always thought it would be you, and I could spoil your kids. Didn’t want them to get stuck with my genes. Yours would be mine anyway.”

He patted the floor and Bucky took two small steps in the tiny bedroom to sit next to him. Bucky tilted his head back on the bed. “I’d kill for a cigarette right now,” he muttered.

“Doesn’t fit the Captain America image, so I haven’t had a smoke since you and I split that one in France. Still crave one occasionally,” Steve admitted. “Did…do you smoke now?”

“No. Don’t want anything to interfere with the mission.” Bucky let out a long breath as if he was exhaling a stream of smoke anyway. “How are we going to do this? Somebody’s going to lock me up for everything I’ve done.”

Steve chuckled. “If they want to make you a criminal, they have to change the Smithsonian exhibit. I don’t think that’s going to happen.” Steve smirked at Bucky. “That trip I took to DC last week? Somehow, Congress isn’t interested in making a decorated POW look like a bad guy anymore. Pretty sure I’ve got you a free pass on this one.”

A ghost of a smile hovered on Bucky’s lips. “I’m finally getting mileage out being Captain America’s best friend.”

“Bucky? That sounded like … you.”

“I’m trying, Steve. It’s not easy.” He fell silent, closing his eyes. “Don’t get used to it.”

“Why?”

“Head hurts. Lot of memories. Don’t wanna mess things up for you. She’s good for you. Never … seen you … happy like this. ‘s hard.”

Something in his demeanor set off warning bells to Steve. “Hard to see me with Darcy?”

“Not that. Hard to think.” The tension in his frame was unmistakable.

“Are you tired?” When Bucky couldn’t answer, Steve did it for him. “Go get changed for bed.”
Bucky rose to pull off his clothes, folding them methodically as he did, leaving only the boxer shorts on.

Darcy came back wearing a pajama shirt and shorts. She stopped cold in the doorway. “Holy shit. You guys just don’t stop, do you?”

Giving her a little shake of the head, Steve reached into the dresser drawer, pulled out a t-shirt and handed it to Bucky, who stretched it over his head without a sound.

Darcy studied the situation and got it in one. For that, he loved her even more. She reached for Bucky to lead him to the bed. “Come on, Barnes. You’re tired, I’m tired and it’s been a long day. Scoot over though, because if I get squished, it’s not going to be pretty.”

“Squished?” Steve asked.

Bucky took the far side of the bed, sitting up against the headboard. Darcy got the middle and laced her right hand with his left, as they had the whole week before. She sighed. “Come on, Steve.”

“Are you sure, Darcy?” (His voice might have been pitched a little higher than usual.)

“No, but I’m tired and cranky and don’t want to think too hard about it or I’ll chicken out and you’ll be stuck on the floor.”

Steve stripped and climbed into bed. He immediately regretted it because Darcy only had a queen and that meant the three of them were stacked like sardines in a can. (But there was no way he was taking the floor now.)

He remembered to say, “Bucky? You can go to sleep now.” The soldier closed his eyes and was out before a second breath. Darcy was next and, like any good combat vet, Steve followed just moments later.

*****

Bucky blinked his way out of a hazy dream. He didn’t remember it. Didn’t particularly care to, just knew there had been something there.

He remembered yesterday. Punk had been so damned happy. And Darcy … not so much. (Protect Stark.)

The three of them were still tangled on the bed. He wiggled his metal fingers free of Darcy’s hand. She shifted without waking so that her cheek and her casted hand rested against his leg. (Odd thing, made of a plastic weave.) Her breath blew across his bare thigh. Startled by the contact, he lowered his hand to stroke her hair. Lifting a lock, the strands sifted through his metal fingers (shimmer of energy).

Steve followed her moments later, rolling so that his arm covered Darcy, his face just inches from Bucky’s hand. Unable to resist, a single metal finger strayed to touch his cheek (heat).

Dark blond lashes lifted. Nobody had any right to look that damned angelic when he woke. Steve did. Always had. Fucking blue eyes of the cherubim and lips that stretched into a smile that only a succubus would wear. His hand flexed on Darcy’s waist, dragging a little along her curves.
“She smells better. Prettier too,” he noted.

“And smarter. And better with wrench. Grumpier in the morning without her coffee though.”

“Your coffee is terrible.”

“I’m better at it now.” Steve eased out of the covers to sit on the edge of the bed, and Bucky couldn’t miss the tenting on the front of his boxers. “Darcy’s incentive plan is formidable.”

His brain hazed again as he remembered what was to wake up with Steve in the morning. “I could do something about that, you know.”

Steve turned just enough to look over his shoulder at Bucky. “Don’t joke about that. Please.”

“Wasn’t joking.”

“You’re not ready, Buck. What we’ve had has always been honest and good. I don’t want to change that. Give yourself time to come back. I’m not going anywhere.”

Well, fuck.

Steve left him alone with Darcy. He looked down, found her awake. Her fingers flexed on his thigh and his shorts bloomed with a damp spot under her cheek. He leaned his head back, never stopping his fingers from stroking her hair.

No, he couldn’t mess this up for Steve. Problem was, she was everything he’d ever dreamed of for both of them. (Drawing on the mirror. Family.)

“Good morning, Princess.”

She sniffled and sat up (he knew better than to try and help), refusing to look at him. (Missed touching her.)

“I—“ he hesitated, not really knowing what to say.

But she seemed to have enough words for both of them. “Bucky, I know I’m in the middle—as of last night, literally—of you two. Believe me when I say that I understand how much you love each other.” She plucked at the sheets, twisting them in her fingers. “But Steve doesn’t have anywhere to fall and you can’t catch him right now. Let me get Steve through this. Let me help you through this. When you’re strong enough, when you know where and how to stand, I’ll go.”

(No.) “You love him.”

She didn’t answer. When she rose from the bed, he discovered it was because she couldn’t. Not with that many tears.

She showered, dressed and chivvied her boys out the door to the Tower that day with a laugh and a smile. Steve didn’t have a clue. (Don’t go. Please.)
All That Glitters

Chapter Notes

My apologies. I feel like I am beating you over the head with the angst. Just ... bear with me ... it's all for a good reason.

28 April 2014

Monday morning proved to Steve that *everything* had changed. Darcy had all of them in the car and on the way to the Tower before he could finish his coffee (or so it seemed).

He decided he was an idiot as he figured out just how much Darcy would shift her schedule to accommodate his downtime between missions. She never seemed to work when he would come up from DC, beyond answering an email or a text on her cell phone. Even before he joined S.H.I.E.L.D., he’d seen her lab and knew she’d hole up for days at a time, but she always seemed to be available for a date or a walk in the park.

Then again, she was always tapping at a keyboard or building something while he watched baseball in her lab.

It was clear now that she had a job and a week’s worth of backlog. Little things like a recovering soldier and an out of work operative didn’t give her an excuse to duck out of her responsibilities. Apparently, neither did a gunshot wound and a broken wrist.

Bucky nudged him as they walked to the fitness center Tony had built for the Avengers. It was housed in the basement of the Tower and had all sorts of interesting parts to it. “You’re pissed about something.”

Steve nodded. “My own stupidity.”

“That’s not anything new. What is it this time?”

Falling into old habits with Bucky was easier than he could have ever imagined. “You know when something has been staring at you in the face but there comes that day when you realize that you weren’t seeing it? And now it’s there and you wonder how you could have missed it?”

“That’s more you than me, but sure.”

“Fuck you, Barnes.”

“Anytime. So what is it?”

“Darcy has a job. A real job. One that she has to get up and do every day.”

Bucky stopped cold in the middle of the hallway. “And what exactly did you think she did?”

Steve nudged him along. “She has her lab. I knew she looked over Stark Industries stuff, but I figured most of her time was working on her projects. I didn’t exactly keep up when I was in DC. And when I came up to visit, she always cleared her schedule to spend time with me.”
“So you’re thinking heir to the Stark throne, who plays and parties while dabbling in the business?”

“That’s Tony, not Darcy.” Steve shook his head as they rounded the corner to the locker room. “I’ve seen her hold Stark Industries together in a crisis, by herself, and she was amazing.”

“So can Tony Stark.”

“She’s not like him.”

“I wouldn’t know. Don’t think he’s exactly speaking to me at the moment.”

“Don’t feel bad. Took him six months and an alien invasion to get the conversation going between us. First thing we did was get into an argument. And it wasn’t over Darcy. Well it was, but it wasn’t. Really. There were overtones,” he explained.

Bucky leaned against the locker room wall, arms crossed. With that look that told Steve he wasn’t buying it. “So what does she do?”

“The lab stuff too, but mostly she works with her mom.”

“Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries. Former personal assistant to Tony Stark,” Bucky recited. He frowned. “Darcy doesn’t look much like her.”

“Nope. Pepper adopted her. She’d worked for Tony for something like two years before she even knew he had a daughter.”

“How many people know who she is?”

“Her family and the Avengers. That’s it. Everyone else knows her as Darcy Lewis, the intern who tased Thor in New Mexico and was smart enough that Stark hired her and gave her a lab in his Tower.” He dug through the locker he kept here to find a pair of sweats and a sleeveless t-shirt for Bucky to wear. He found both and set them on the bench. “There’s an empty locker next to mine if you want to put your stuff in it.” Bucky stripped right in front of Steve, who did a lousy job of keeping his eyes averted. (Harder lines and still a beautiful ass.)

“So how much of that cover story did you buy into?” Bucky asked, his lip curving up when he saw where Steve’s focus had been.

“Too much.” He fisted his hand, irritated that Bucky could put his finger on the problem so easily.

“What’s the routine?” Bucky asked, changing subject as he settled the shirt in place.

“I run most mornings and rotate through the gym, training room and shooting range.”

“Training room?”

“Where we spar or set up indoor practice ops.” Steve wrapped his wrists and knuckles, not bothering with boxing gloves or other protective gear. Bucky followed him inside the gym. “What do you want to do first?” he asked.

With his chin, Bucky indicated the free weights. While Steve worked up a decent sweat on the punching bag, Bucky seemed to have a set routine for maintaining his right arm, shoulders, chest and upper back.

Sam cruised in a few minutes later, taking a spot on the treadmill. Though he had his ear buds in, he was certainly watching the two of them. And it was Sam who spotted Bucky when he shifted to
“Didn’t think about you needing to keep both sides balanced, Barnes. Ever give you problems?” Sam asked.

Bucky didn’t answer. Admitting to a weakness would be beyond him at the moment (Tower, not home, not safe in Bucky’s mind), but Steve noted it and would ask again later.

The bag was taking a beating this morning as Steve worked out the anger that had accumulated over the last few weeks. Starting with his own failings as a boyfriend to Darcy, to his fears and heartaches over Bucky, to the real, burning need he had to do something about HYDRA, and the loss of the friends and bonds he’d built at S.H.I.E.L.D.

He’d known he wasn’t happy at S.H.I.E.L.D., but he hadn’t found his place anywhere else. Now he was a useless soldier, dependent on Darcy for what little happiness he’d found in this century, with a shattered best friend.

He was tired of starting over. Tired of not knowing who to trust. Tired of not seeing a future beyond today. Growing up as he did, he’d never expected to live long. At best, he’d hoped to be around long enough to see Bucky married and with a kid or two that Steve could spoil. All he’d ever wanted to do was have his life matter for something. For someone.

The serum gave him a new chance. Bucky’s astonished wonder when Steve had rescued him had given him the first shot at a real life. In the darkness of tents, in the quiet of bars, in the silence of the forests, they talked about all the ways things would be different when they got back home. There might be family for both of them. Steve might actually last more than a few minutes in a smoky bar and learn to dance. They talked about finding the right dame, if she was out there.

And then that dream had been crushed with a finality that he couldn’t bear.

Darcy was the light. She never demanded, never took any more than he had to give, but she nudged him along so that he didn’t dwell on the past. She loved. There had never been a single doubt in his mind that she loved him completely, trusting him to come to her as he could. Even learning the truth about Bucky hadn’t shaken her faith in Steve. If anything, she loved him more.

If she didn’t quite comprehend how his beliefs had crumbled with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall, she still gathered him up and brought him here. To her home. To her family, who had looked after him far longer than anyone should. Without question, she’d taken him in his broken lover too and made him a part of the Stark patchwork quilt that should have been ugly and frightening with all its strange parts and colors and stitching, but was the favorite everyone fought over instead.

There was a breaking point in there somewhere. Steve hadn’t found it yet but he was damned sure she was close to finding it. And there wasn’t anything he could do except try to hold on with her, to show her that he loved her more than ever, to hope that she could find it in her to love both of them.

The bag broke under his fist. He just looked at it for a minute, then moved over to get another one, purposefully avoiding Bucky’s contemplative gaze—and Sam’s sympathetic one.

Hope could be a dangerous thing.

*****
A discrete audience (including one Darcy Stark) had tuned in (via JARVIS and a little window on her computer monitor) to see what the Winter Soldier would do in the fitness room. Bucky concentrated on exercises that would build his core and keep him balanced. From what she could ascertain, the arm wasn’t much heavier than a flesh one, but that and the supporting construction probably required a certain physical dedication.

She wasn’t surprised to see Steve turning a punching bag into a pile of sand. He’d been holding in a month’s worth of anger over the whole HYDRA/S.H.I.E.L.D. thing and Bucky’s role in all of it.

Darcy had holed up in her lab to get caught up on Stark Industries. Pepper had a conference in San Diego and if there was any hope of her mom having a weekend off when she got back, Darcy had some work to do. (A shovel came to mind.)

At twenty-five, she was well aware that her time of hiding in the shadows was coming to an end. The past year had cast too much light on her person and it wouldn’t be long before a tenacious reporter put all the pieces together. Not that they would find Darcy Stark, of course, but she was far too close with the Avengers not to attract her own sort of attention. (Yeah, that.)

She needed to move back into the Tower (not only for her sake, but for her dad’s). Living alone wasn’t an option anymore now that HYDRA had a big X on her back (still terrifying). Her hunky roommates (boyfriend, boyfriend’s boyfriend, still weird) were buying her time but that wouldn’t be forever. In truth, if it wasn’t for them, Tony would already have physically moved her upstairs to her old bedroom.

This morning only highlighted the bigger problems in her personal life. Less than a month ago, Darcy had everything she wanted—a fabulous boyfriend taking steps to the future, a job/hobby she loved, a place of her own. Now, the pieces were crumbling in her hands too fast for her to catch any of them. Big changes were coming in the days ahead.

For now, she could only pretend some sort of semblance of a normal life while Bucky came back to himself. It wouldn’t be the first time she pretended to be something she wasn’t.

Never with Steve. Never with Steve. But now she would.
Late May 2014

He liked the new routine. Running in the mornings. Shower, breakfast. Tower for fitness and a talk with Sam. Lunch with Darcy and Steve, often with one or more of the Avengers. (Not Stark.)

Afternoons in the Commons or in Darcy’s lab, depending on Steve’s schedule. (Baseball. He liked baseball.) Dinner at home or, if he was having a good day, out.

They had a shaky truce at the house. He still liked trading jabs with Darcy, but Steve would shoot him a look when he stepped over the line. They watched pictures at her place, mostly Steve’s favorites, but now and again something Darcy liked. He favored what Darcy called “B” horror movies. Silly films that the three of them would poke fun of while eating popcorn.

He found it interesting that though they didn’t share the same taste, all of them stayed for whatever was playing. Come to think of it, when there was only the one movie house, that’s what he and Steve did. Didn’t matter what was showing, it was still worth the quarter to see the picture.

Now that they were crammed into a single bed at night, they tended to occupy the sofa in the same manner. Whoever had the bad day got the middle. Steve held his hand sometimes too.

He learned to ask for help with his headaches and got used to having Darcy touching him from behind.

After a couple of good weeks, there was something new. For the first time, he reached for the state of mind he’d learned in the army as a sniper. (Assessing. Not experiencing.)

He was aware that Steve had cleared the shooting range today (Asset) and that Barton had taken up residence in one of his many nests to observe. (Aggressive. Sharpshooter.) That the marksman was armed wasn’t lost on him. Thor was in the observation room.

He’d asked to come here. Training was a part of him now, his weapons an extension of himself. Later they would practice long range shooting. Today was about precision. (Asset. Change the world) He brought his own weapons. (Custom. No rifling. Difficult but untraceable.)

Letting the Winter Soldier take over, he breathed out, slowed his heart rate, and aimed.

At 25, 50, 75 and 100 meters, he marked each of the five targets twice, head and chest, placing his shot in the exact center of the circle. When he was done, he switched weapons. Did it again. (Asset. Reshape the century.)

There was nothing instinctive about his abilities. Practice, patience, precision. (Asset.)

He set the weapon on the table. Removed his ear protection. Focused on the man behind him. (Man on the bridge. Steve.)

“Color me impressed. I knew you were good in the army. This is amazing, Bucky.”

(As--) An unexpected flush of pleasure (Experiencing) from the simple praise shook his focus. “I like
“Don’t know ‘bout that. But you’re good at it.”

“Show me.” He indicated the range with a turn of the head.

Steve nodded. “Mostly I take defensive missions, with minimal casualties. So my primary training is in hand to hand. I like my shield.” He flashed a grin (beautiful).

“I noticed.” He remembered the fight with Steve (man on the bridge) in exact detail. Steve had closed in, step by step, until he was forced to resort to knife work.

“You trained with Rumlow?”

“Trained him from time to time, yes.”

“Thought I recognized some of the moves. You’re faster.”

“Of course.” There was that grin again, and Steve settled in to fire at the same targets. At 25 and 50 meters, Steve matched him in accuracy. But over 75 meters, he was … off. By millimeters and centimeters too many. “You need improvement,” he said.

“Different skill set, Bucky.”

He considered. “Inaccuracy is not acceptable. Only in perfection do we find balance.”

Steve laid the handgun down on the table and stepped back. “Do you find solace in what you do? Or was it following orders so your brain didn’t get fried again.”

He took his time putting away his weapons, unable to answer.

Darcy wasn’t home yet when they returned. After cleaning his guns on the floor of the living room with a borrowed kit, he stored most of them in Steve’s safe for the first time. He was given the combination to memorize.

“I want—“ (Pain. No.)

“What do you want?”

(No.) “Clean. Hot.”

“Go take a hot shower, Bucky.”

The water stung just a little. As the water ran down his face, he could feel the intense focus (Change the world) he associated with the Winter Soldier (Asset) leaving him. His breaths became varied instead of static. His perception changed from assessing to experiencing. The hot water felt good. So did the soap against his skin.

He shampooed his hair, letting the bubbles foam and tumble over his arms. His hand hovered over Darcy’s conditioner. She’d encouraged him to use it. (Smells like her.) He squeezed a small amount out and rubbed it into his hair. His own silky strands startled him, shimmering energy against the sensors of his fingers.
Washing out the crème didn’t seem to work. His hair was still ridiculously soft (like Darcy’s). He rinsed again and again until he gave up.

The slick and slip reminded him of other things. Of Steve. His cock jerked in memory of being too full to move, with just enough oil squeezed from a handful of olives in Steve’s hand to make it work. The change in his lover’s body had been intimidating at first, but they had learned, learned to go slow, relied on trust and love to take care of the rest.

He wrapped his own hand around his dick in memory. Remembered the feel of Steve’s hand doing the same.

Always, always, Steve had taken the top. He’d had to learn to pace himself, to breathe a certain way so as not to have an asthma attack. To be patient so his heart wouldn’t race. And Steve’d had enough hang ups about the names people called him. *Punk* had been the least of them. Bucky had taken it, made it his own, and it became a source of amusement for them.

They’d never had the time or place to experiment in the army with Steve’s new body. Steve had been willing, though. And the frustration had occasionally driven him to do stupidly heroic things against the enemy in retaliation.

He was fully erect now, stroking himself with a crème-slicked hand. Thought of Darcy. Still thinking of Steve. He braced himself against the wall. The metal caught his eye, and he smirked to himself. Switching hands, he found the rhythm again. The feedback from his left hand was entirely different, made his heart race from the sensations in his fingertips paired with those in his cock. He was far too used to pulling his hand back a little to change finger positions, then setting it back in place. He’d learned the hard way about plates and joints and the opportunity for pinching.

All that was instinctive these days, and with the extra layers of sensation from his hand, he bit his lip hard not to groan too loudly when he got off.

He took a minute to clean up, washed himself again and turned twice under the hot water before turning it off and reaching for the towel.

As he dried off, he realized he’d forgotten clothes. For too long, he wore what was given. But he remembered different clothing. Softer fabrics. More colors. Still, he liked the way black looked with the metal. He hung up the towel on the rack this time. If Darcy had been home, he might have dropped it on the floor just so she could complain about it.

He opened the door to find Steve hovering in Darcy’s bedroom, putting on socks. Steve took in his bare skin and pursed his lips at the view. A faint smile and a touch of heat lit his face. But he didn’t look away.

“See something you like?” Bucky made sure to keep his voice low and teasing.

“Lots. Did you forget clothes again?”

He wouldn’t admit to that. “Nah. I just like strolling around this way to see you blush.” He did that now, crossing the little hallway to Darcy’s room where he had jeans and a t-shirt tucked into a drawer, making sure Steve had a good view of his ass. He held up a pair of blue underwear. “Is it just me or are these a lot softer now? And smaller?”

“Used to have to wash them for months to get them comfortable. And I can’t think of any reason anyone looked good in the ones we had.” Steve rose from the bed, moving to lean against the doorway to watch him dress.
“You go bare-assed under your suit?” Bucky asked as he pulled the jeans on.

“No. Do you?”

“No.” He pulled the t-shirt over his head. “But yours is a lot tighter than mine.”

“It’s not that bad, Bucky. You should have seen that damned chorus girl costume I wore.”

“I did see that chorus girl costume you wore. You were adorable.”

“Piss off, jerk.”

He leveled a grin at Steve and shoved a hand through his hair. Held out a strand. “What did Darcy do to this?”

“Darcy?”

“She told me to use her stuff on it.”

Steve ran his hand through Bucky’s hair. “Soft as a baby’s butt. What else you lookin’ for?”

Bucky’s breath hitched at the familiar caress. Stuttered a little. “U--used to use oil to slick it back.”

Pulling him back into the bathroom, Steve dumped some kind of gel in his hand and ran it through Bucky’s hair. “No doubt you’ll get the hang of this better than I did. You like it longer?”

(If it meant Steve doing that all the time, hell yes.) “I don’t .. yeah .. yes.”

“This is more like what you had before the army. Slicked back isn’t exactly the style, but you’ve got options.” Steve reached around him to wash the stuff off his hands and dried them on the towel hanging by the sink.

Bucky was a little mesmerized by the scene in the mirror. Blue eyes connected with blue. “I don’t—that’s us.”

“Little different than the picture we took at Coney Island,” Steve wryly noted.

“You’re taller than me.”

“A little.”

“Still a punk.”

“Yeah, and you’re still a jerk.” Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s shoulders and pressed his forehead against Bucky’s neck. “I love you.” (Did the words always come that easy?) And with that said, Steve hugged him hard once more and left the bathroom.

He leaned over the top of the stairs and called down, “Since you have my name tattooed on you, I figured that out, Steven Grant.”

The answering laugh gave him warm feelings all over. He poked at his hair until it sort of looked the way Darcy had done it yesterday and wandered down too.

Chapter End Notes
Updated A/N: This chapter caused quite a bit of unintended uproar when I posted it--a lot of readers felt that Steve was clearly cheating on Darcy here.

As the writer, I can tell you that my headcanon is this: For one, Steve and Bucky practically grew up in each other's pockets, so worrying about covering up or not touching each other just isn't in their nature. For two, Steve and Bucky didn't break up. Imagine Steve as a widower and then you'll have a better frame of reference for how he feels about Bucky and Darcy, and why he insists on telling both of them how much he loves them. Darcy understands this because of what Peggy told her when she was little about how much the two men love each other (Chapter 1).

That all being said, our trio is going to make mistakes along the way while they are figuring out how to love each other. Bear with them (and me).
Losing Ground

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 2014

On a late summer Saturday afternoon, Darcy pretended to read a new article on graphene as Steve and Bucky played gin at the kitchen table. But she wasn’t paying any attention to her tablet. The insults were impressive and made her smile from time to time.

Steve sat in his usual manner, good posture, hands on table as he idly tapped his cards on the wood.

Bucky slouched, his feet propped up on the other chair, laying down sets and runs while holding the cards in one hand and sipping from his beer with the other. “You’re doing that on purpose, punk. Tap all you want. I’m still winning.”

“Oh, does that bother you? I didn’t know.” A card landed on the pile of other cards with a soft thunk. “Oh, nice one. Exactly the card I needed to do this.” Darcy heard a snap snap snap against the wood. “Gin.”

“Did you learn that trick in the nursing home?” Bucky sneered.

The insult had her biting back a smile. Today was another good day for him, another in a string of them.

She got why HYDRA never tried to replicate the Winter Soldier. The short version was that while the serum gave Bucky hyperawareness, increased physical strength and healing, it also meant that brain repaired itself almost as fast as HYDRA could break it.

In creating the Winter Soldier, they had to use electroshock therapy to suppress memories of who he was, all the while giving him intense training to coax his fighting skills to the forefront. Moving from sniper to assassin wasn’t a huge jump, but closing down the cocky young man and crafting him into an obedient weapon had required enormous amounts of conditioning. Cryofreeze had been their answer to keep him contained between missions. He operated in teams or, more rarely, alone. His handlers kept him on a horribly tight leash, punishing him for any mistakes with ice cold showers and painful shocks.

The longer version included the reality that the mechanical arm gave Bucky problems HYDRA couldn’t resolve given the way he was being used. The sensitivity was amazing and Darcy was astonished when she was finally able to open the panel under Bucky’s arm (with a local pain blocker, as promised).

Truly, the biometric sensors winding around the bare nerves were gorgeous as all fuck. She wished like hell she could extract one to figure out how it worked. (She’d scanned them a dozen times though. She and Banner, along with her dad, were breaking down the tech in their spare time.) As much as she hated Zola, he was brilliant. Fucked. But brilliant. Obviously some of the technology had been updated over the years but the core mechanics were still the same. Beautifully crafted machinery was a legacy of the 30’s and 40’s and Bucky’s arm was no different.

But the metal frame in his shoulders, along with his healing brain, gave Barnes terrible headaches. He’d always been prone to them, according to Steve, but cool temperatures or an intense walk through his memories (good or bad, it didn’t matter) inevitably ended in a headache of monumental
proportions. No wonder he’d been dosed with narcotics. She could only imagine the pain of coming out of cryofreeze.

Clint had been the one to clue them in that Bucky would likely never lose physical control, even in the darkest of nightmares or pain. (Nat didn’t. Never had.) He’d been right, and instead, Bucky completely shut down on the worst of moments.

At the moment, Bucky was still dependent on Darcy and Steve and always stayed with one or both of them—not the sort of thing that was the hallmark of a healthy relationship.

In spite of it all, Bucky was recovering.

With Steve and Darcy, his personality had coalesced into a blend of the old Bucky charm and the heightened awareness of the Winter Soldier. With others, he retreated into quiet observation. (Except with Natasha. She didn’t count. And it was all in Russian. Darcy really needed to learn Russian.)

Then there was the simple truth that Steve and Bucky belonged together.

They made jokes no one else understood but made them cackle like old ladies in a tea shop. They moved the same way, shoulder shrugs and half-grins. Bucky made messes and Steve cleaned them up. Steve bitched about Bucky dirtying up the bathroom and Bucky would reluctantly polish it up to a spit-shine. The two men had a rhythm in the kitchen that spoke of their relationship more than words would ever show.

The easy affection was there for her to see. A hand on the back as someone leaned over the table. A rub of the knuckles or shoulders. The unspoken conversations with facial expressions alone.

There were the days when Steve and Bucky would disappear to Brooklyn on the motorcycle. (The first time—well, it would take a better woman than she to not have entertained a fantasy or two. She tried not to think on it too much.) They always came back with an airiness that shaved years off their faces. (She firmly stepped on her jealousy. It had no business here.)

Through it all, no one worked harder to make himself right than James Buchanan Barnes.

Sam worked with the soldier five days a week, without fail. He encouraged Bucky’s interest in healing and found online courses for him. Steve brought him to spar with Thor, who had chortled and taken it easy the first round, with a repartee that kept the session light. In spite of himself, Bucky relaxed into it (as Thor stepped up the pace), proving once again, that the prince of Asgard was more than a simple warrior. But while Bucky was fascinated with the training process, he showed little need to wreak vengeance on HYDRA.

If anyone had a problem with it, to Darcy’s surprise, it had turned out to be Steve.

“I thought it would be the two of us in the field again, Darce. Once he got better.”

“Sam thinks Bucky won’t ever go on a mission again,” she reminded him. “He likes medicine. Maybe it’s reparation for those twenty-seven missions and all that time in the army. Your mom even thought he would be good at it.”

“We were good together, Darce. Always had each other’s back. He’s an amazing soldier.”

“I caught the exhibit,” she snapped. “Try to remember that neither of you came home.” Steve flinched, as Darcy so rarely rounded on him. (The thought of losing Steve could bring her to her knees. The thought of losing both of them?) He didn’t bring it up again.
Darcy, on the other hand, found it harder each day to keep up the role of supportive girlfriend while Steve’s first love lived with them. Discussions had bounced around about a new place to live. Steve was lobbying for the Tower, but, um, no. Darcy wasn’t letting Tony pester Bucky about his arm. He was worse than Jane when it came to technology and personal space.

The real stumbling block was about the bedroom. All three of them knew it and none of them wanted to broach the real subject about what the future held.

Her relationship with Steve was on ice (pun intended, she was irritated) and had been for more than three months now. And the speed at which Bucky was finding solid ground was both impressive and scary-as-fuck. They didn’t need her anymore. Not really.

So she was grateful, terribly grateful, when Natasha and Jane sent identical texts in quick succession. “Tonight, Jane’s, sleepover. Bring food. 7.”


“Sam too. Clint’s. Same deal. Bring the Vintage Twins :D.”

That was Natasha, and Darcy giggled as she texted back. “I’m in.”

Steve got a text with the invite for them. Bucky turned around to stare at Darcy after Steve showed it to him.

Maybe she’d been around him too long, because she knew what he was asking without a word being said. “I’ll be with Natasha and only a floor below you. You can even escort me there. She’s staying the whole time, and if she doesn’t, I’ll call you.”

“Good.” (Guess she could put one more name on the list of people Barnes trusted.)

They dropped her off at Jane’s—Steve with a kiss, Bucky with a squeeze to her hand. (The hand thing, it was theirs now.) She closed the door behind her and waited.

“Lewis, Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers are in the elevator,” JARVIS announced.

“Oh, thank god,” she breathed out.

Jane and Natasha broke out with laughter, and Jane handed over the bottle of honeyed bourbon and a glass of ice. Darcy passed over a plate of tiny quiches and fruit. “You promised chocolate.”

Grinning wickedly, Natasha brought out a tray of truffles, éclairs and cream puffs. “Drink up, Lewis. You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

“Oh god,” she comically groaned. But in truth, she needed her girlfriends right now. She was so far in over her head, and maybe Natasha was the only one who could understand the Bucky half (third?) of the equation.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Lewis?”

“Give us a soundtrack.”
“As you wish.” A classically sexy beat with a killer guitar filled the room.

She grinned. “I love you, too, J.” At Jane’s quizzical expression, Darcy told her as she sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table now loaded down with food. “Music is JARVIS’ hobby. He loves curating playlists and finding new artists—or rediscovering old stuff. Mom and I have taken baby steps in setting up a production company for him. He skims the internet looking for new stuff that isn’t getting any attention. The production company is so he can do something about it.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “I might know someone who could be his hands and feet if you need anyone.”

“Give it to JARVIS. He’ll do his own interviewing. I’m just a member of the board.”

Her mouth quirked. “And how would I do that?”

JARVIS replied, “I have sent an email to your phone with appropriate contact information, Ms. Romanov. Please reply back and I will take a look at your candidate—probably with preferential treatment as you are considered an excellent judge of character.”

“Well that’s novel.” Nat picked up her glass and knocked back her usual vodka. She kept the bottle in an ice bucket on the table.

Jane moved so that she could sit behind Darcy. Her hands dove into Darcy’s hair and she began separating it into sections. “Okay, I’ll braid, you talk,” she ordered.

Nat’s eyebrow arched. “You braid?”

“Who do you think does Thor’s hair?” Darcy remarked with a laugh. “She loves to braid. You’re next unless you want to wrestle her to the floor. With her new boyfriend around, she’s figured out how to do some of the most amazing stuff.”

“You’re stalling,” Jane complained.

“I’m explaining. And I’m going to need more to drink if I’m going to explain this mess I’m in.”

Natasha dropped more ice in her glass and Darcy splashed the bourbon over it. “Spill,” the Russian ordered.

“That’s not your usual interrogation technique, Nat. I’m so disappointed.”

“Will it work?”

“Yup. Okay, so just before all this happened, Steve asked me to move in with him.”

“Progressive for a fossil,” Nat observed. “By the way, I’m still rather annoyed that neither of you admitted to being together. I knew, even tried to bait Rogers on it, and he wouldn’t spill.”

Jane tugged Darcy’s head back so that they were eye to eye. “Same goes. Really? I thought we were friends.”

“You are my friends. I’m just used to keeping certain things quiet.”

“Like the fact your last name is Stark and you’re a genius?” Jane pointed out.

“Exactly like that. So now that we’ve laid the groundwork that I’m a *crappy* friend, do you still want
to hear this?”

“Yes,” the other two chorused.

“Steve asked you to move in,” Jane prompted. “All hell broke loose and Barnes is suddenly not the Winter Soldier anymore and he’s living with you. Gotta be hard on the sex life.”

Darcy bit her lip. “You have no idea. The shower is our go to place now, and that’s only when we can pry Barnes out of it. There’s a man who likes his hot water.” She took a healthy gulp, digging up courage in the process. “I know I should let them be the ones to tell you this, but—” she hesitated, though desperate to talk.

Natasha gave her a sympathetic look and offered, “The Vintage Twins are more than best friends?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

Jane stopped, her fingers clenching Darcy’s tresses. “Are you saying that they are together? For how long?”

“Yes, and ten years.” Darcy pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. “You know how people say they would do anything for love? Steve has actually changed the course of the world’s history because of how much he loves Bucky. And Bucky loves Steve so much that twice he was able to break seven decades of conditioning over a bare memory of that love.”

“What does this mean for you?” Jane asked. She ran her fingers through Darcy’s hair with calming strokes and Darcy felt herself relaxing for the first time in weeks.

“Honestly? I don’t know. Steve swears up and down that he loves me. He’s flat out told Bucky and me not to make him choose. I think he’s hoping that we can figure things out enough to be friends.”

“A trio?” Nat asked.

“Or friends enough to share. He’s said in the past that they assumed they would marry other people, have families and all that. Both of them have been with other girls during their relationship. Definitely not other guys though.”

“Wow.” That came from Jane. “That’s not exactly the relationship you were expecting. Did you know about them? Before all this happened?”

The gentle tugs and finger-combing chased away tension. The understanding gave her comfort. “Yes.”

Natasha leaned forward. “How do you feel about Barnes?”

“If Steve wasn’t in the picture? I’d take him to bed. Easily. He’s sexy, he’s sweet. Flirts. Oh, and he’s a pain the ass who argues with me over everything. I like him when he’s not being a jerk.”

“But he’s the Winter Soldier,” Nat prompted.

“And Steve is Captain America. It’s what they do--or did--it’s not who they are.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m never sure, Nat. Steve trusts him. Point blank, no holds barred, trusts him. And now that Barnes has his memories back, he’s just like Steve, he can’t really forget anything now. Sucks during an argument.”
“Side effect of the serum,” Natasha murmured. “Bruce has the same problem. When he’s not the Hulk, anyway.” (Darcy found it interesting that Nat didn’t admit to having a version of the serum. She never did.)

“What do you want?” Jane asked.

“Right now? I want out. I want to walk away and let them be. They deserve it. They deserve every bit of happiness that can be had. They have this gorgeous thing going on between them, but every time I try to get out of their way, Steve’s pulling me back in. So is Barnes, for that matter. But that’s a different thing altogether and not related to dating.”

Jane reached out for her beer and took a healthy drink. “What’s it like living with them?”

“In my apartment? It’s three people stepping over each other all day long. If I go to my lab, Bucky tags along unless he’s working out with Steve. He can’t sleep unless he’s holding my hand. Go figure that. So I’m currently sleeping between two hot-as-all-fuck soldiers and can’t touch either one of them. No twenty-six year old female should be this sexually frustrated all the time.”

The generalized swearing at that statement gave her a little bit of comfort. Nat passed her the chocolate tray in sympathy and Darcy downed two truffles and an éclair.

“If you’re getting limited Steve-sex, is Barnes getting the rest?” Nat asked.

“I just wanted it noted that, holy shit that is a really hot, terrifying thought, and no—Steve said they won’t until Bucky is better. Sam told me that it wouldn’t be right for anyone to bring him into a sexual relationship until he has his head on straight. It’s got to be his move, for one, and Steve can’t be giving him orders.”

“Orders?” Jane asked.

Natasha answered, “Barnes and I were conditioned to blindly obey our handlers. Right now, the only person Barnes trusts is Rogers. It’s that trust that gave him the impetus to break from his old handlers,” she explained. “S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t—didn’t do things that way. It’s more of a highly recommended suggestion than an order. There should be trust between a handler and an agent.” Nat tapped her finger on her cheek. “Barnes needs a different handler.”

“Who else can manage the Winter Soldier?” Darcy asked. “Sam can’t do it since he’s treating him. Maybe Thor, but Thor is deliberately setting himself up as Steve’s mentor. Sort of a senior friend they can drink with. And I’m not certain he’s acclimated to Earth enough to recognize some of Bucky’s triggers.”

Jane nodded, “Sounds like him. He worries about the team. And you’re right about the last part.”

As Darcy talked, the alcohol put everything in a nice haze. She had perspective. She had so much fucking perspective that she wanted to bawl her eyes out twice a day. “I miss Steve. I miss everything about our relationship. He’s gorgeous, treats me like a queen, is a sarcastic jerk when he wants to be, and damn it, he loves me.” She bit on her lip hard to keep the lump in her throat down. “And I have to accept that things will never be the same between us. Oh god I miss the sex. Steve is really, really good at sex.”

Natasha reached out and plucked a cream puff off the table. “So is Barnes.”

“Should I ask?”

“No.”
Darcy eyed her speculatively. “He says your name sometime. Do you want him back?”

“Perhaps at one point I might have, but not now.”

Jane laughed. “Clint’s a handful and you’re gone on him. We’ve all seen the necklace.”

“Shut up, Jane.”

“The spider was struck by Cupid’s arrow,” Darcy hummed. It was so rare to be able to poke fun at Nat, but she rolled with it so much better than people anticipated. (Always in private.) “So do you guys do it hanging off the building?”

“Only once.”

Jane and Darcy burst out laughing at Nat’s cheeky reply. They toasted her victory before Natasha neatly brought the conversation around again.

“Three months of sleeping between the two of them and absolutely nothing has happened? You’re either dead or a liar.”

Darcy blushed.

“Told ya.” Nat was insufferably smug.

“They kiss the same way,” she admitted.

Jane bopped Darcy on the top of her head with the heel of her hand. “Bitch. You didn’t tell us you’ve been kissing them.”

“No, just one time. The day Bucky got his memories back. Had a bad moment with the arm and I told him to do something with it that made him feel good. He played with my hair and kissed me. Right in front of Steve.”

“How was it?” Natasha asked.

“Told you, they kiss the same way. Bucky is yummy like an orange. Steve is all sand and surf.”

“What did Steve think?”

Darcy snorted. “Think? You would have to have blood in your brain to think.”

Natasha and Jane both let out wicked laughs. “So Steve doesn’t have a problem with the two of you,” Nat said with some satisfaction.

“Neither does Bucky. He’s flat out said that. I will point out that we are talking about fucking, not having a relationship. And there is the whole co-dependency-I-don’t-trust-anyone thing too.”

“Which is why you have a problem with it,” Jane noted.

“Exactly. I’m a Stark. Starks don’t play well with others.” She flashed a grin at Nat. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“So you’ve been living with them for months now and haven’t fucked both of their brains out?” Jane asked. “What happened to you since college?”

Darcy flushed. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe she just needed to talk for once. “I grew up,” she
said bluntly. “Steven means everything to me and I won’t mess this up for him.” She bit her lip, wondering just how much she was willing to confess.

Nat eyeballed her with that arched brow like she already knew. Fuck. “Okay, it hasn’t all been innocent,” she admitted.

Natasha looked like a cat with a bowl of cream. “There’s our girl. Details, please.”

“You know how … sometimes … you wake up just a little bit, enough to have your hands all over your partner, and you’re not sure whether you started it or they started it, but you really don’t care because it all feels good and then you’re just gone before you really wake up?”

Jane grinned and took a drink of her wine. “Yes, it’s amazing and do tell us more.”

“Well, it was me and Steve and afterward I realized that Barnes was holding my hand the whole time. His cock kept bumping my knuckles.”

Nat cackled. “And?”

“And maybe it was stupid, but I couldn’t leave him stranded, so I helped him out. Hands only, but—”

(she brushed her knuckles against his twitching cock through the fabric. Took her time. Wrapped her fingers around him, material and all. Stroked. Tugged the waistband down enough to touch the tip, to slip her thumb across the slit and slickness. Pushed the fabric out of the way. Stroked skin to skin. Heat warmed her hand as she explored enough to make his hips flex into the bed. He covered her hand with his, pressed down hard and came with a groan. He never let go of her other hand.)

Jane’s eyes rounded. “What did they do?”

“Nothing. I’m not even sure if Steve was awake. And Barnes hasn’t said anything at all.”

“When was this?”

“Two nights ago.”

“And nothing has happened since?”

She shook her head. “I slept in my lab last night and escaped here today.”

Natasha arched an eyebrow at her. “Avoidance is not the way to resolve things.”

“It is if you’re a Stark. And it doesn’t change anything, not really.”

“If you say so, Darcy.”

Chapter End Notes

Musical Reference: Jimmy Hendrix "All Along the Watchtower"
As soon as Darcy was inside Jane’s apartment, Bucky took that mental retreat that characterized his interactions with anyone other than Steve and Darcy.

They were told to bring beer. They did, having made a successful stop at the grocery store on the way. Bucky ran errands regularly now, but only with Steve, never Darcy. It was still too much of a risk. More than once he’d been forced to order the soldier to retreat from a volatile trigger. There was one in Brooklyn that still made Steve cringe.

They’d taken the bike, determined to find a good pastrami sandwich in their old neighborhood. They’d found one in a bar—along with a crowd of guys admiring the parked bike far too close for Bucky’s comfort.

Through the window, Bucky hadn’t been able to take his eyes off the men, and Steve noted the small actions of a soldier shifting his weapons into place.

“Stay here until I signal for you.” He used his Cap voice, still hating the way Bucky’s eyes blanked in obedience.

As nonchalant as he could possibly make himself, he strolled out the front door and leaned against the wall nearest the bike, one foot touching the wall itself, near his knee. His crossed his arms, as if he were merely waiting for the crowd to finish. Which he was. It didn’t take long for the five men to notice him.

“This yours?”

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Steve replied. Firm. Calm.

Fortunately for him, these guys weren’t stupid. Trading glances around, along with some literal and mental scratching of heads, they figured out that something wasn’t right. It was the youngest of the group who got it first. “Shit. Captain America. Sorry, sir, didn’t know it was your bike. Uh, it’s a real nice one. We were just admiring it.”

The two ex-military snapped salutes, which Steve returned as he straightened. “Not a problem. Just want to make sure I can get home later.”

After that, the five guys arranged themselves in such a way that no one would mess with the bike. Steve sent a round of drinks to them and returned to the table with Bucky. Who hadn’t moved anything but his eyes. “At ease, soldier,” he said softly, though with conviction.
Now that the threat has been assessed and the body language of the men had changed, the soldier came down on Steve’s command. Still wary, but not threatening. He even managed to finish his sandwich and iced tea.

When it came time to leave, Steve kept a light hand on Bucky’s shoulder. It was to the credit of the five men that none of them asked for handshakes or autographs. Just a quiet “Thank you” and “Sir” all around. The two soldiers studied Bucky, trying to decide if he too was military and his potential rank. In the end, the metal hand and his proximity to Steve told them all they needed to know. In unison, they saluted him too.

Bucky returned it and mounted the bike behind Steve without a word. When they were moving along the streets, Bucky pressed his forehead to Steve’s back. By the time they made it to Darcy’s place, Bucky’s head was hurting so much that he shifted entirely to the Winter Soldier as he did his usual recon of the house.

It was late when they turned the corner on it, and blankness was replaced by simmering anger. “That was too close, Steven. If one of them had touched the bike—” He flexed his hand and blew out his breath. “Don’t think I’ve seen you diffuse a situation like that. You usually wade in with your fists.”

Steve wanted to laugh it off. Instead he reached for Bucky and hugged him close. “You’re safe. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“I know.”

In light of all that, a casual evening out had lost its appeal for a while longer.

But Barton had texted Steve earlier in the week to ask what sort of things Bucky might be up for doing. When Darcy got an invitation for the sleepover, Steve decided the archer and Nat must have colluded to get the three of them out of the house. He was grateful for it because the tension at Darcy’s place was running higher than usual—enough that Darcy had made excuses and stayed in her lab last night. Bucky had been out of sorts until she returned early this morning with donuts and bagels for breakfast.

Barton and Nat’s apartment would be a good middle ground since Bucky could explore it all he needed to ensure he was safe. In the past, they’d enjoyed going out to watch people, take part in the silliness, and give each other hell for whatever they done that day. Maybe they could recapture a little of that here and let Bucky find another piece of himself.

The apartment looked more like a hotel suite than a home, and was ridiculously lush when compared to what Steve and Bucky had settled for in Brooklyn. But the sofas were comfortable and the odd weapons scattered here and there said more about the occupants than any decor ever would.

Barton to nodded at a box on the coffee table. “Stark got wind of our little get together. Since he and Banner are in California doing something about his house, he sent us a gift.” All of them either winced or developed a pained expression. All except Wilson, who eagerly tore into the note attached to the top.

“Since I’m absolutely certain none of you have the wherewithal to sit around, drink beer and watch football like normal people do (or so I am told), and since I do not want my basement shredded after you five get done shooting at each other with live firearms, I expect you to leave your personal items in the weapons lockers and play with these. No exceptions. Only use the ammunition I’ve included in the box. No exceptions for that either. Drinking is allowed. In fact, encouraged. JARVIS will be watching and I’ve got a weekend in Bermuda for the winner.—Stark.”
Sam flicked open his pocketknife and slit the box tape. He came up with a plastic gun, a kid’s toy, by the look of it, along with what looked like a blue dart with rubber tips. He let out a whistle in appreciation. “Please tell me we can mod these.”

“Fuck yes,” agreed Barton as he pulled another gun out of the box and a handful of darts that he stuffed into his pocket.

“Mod?” asked Steve.

“What you have here are Nerf N-Strike Elite Strongarms.” Sam passed the rest of them out and grabbed the bag of darts. “Best Nerf gun on the market.”

JARVIS interrupted. “Lieutenant Wilson, I believe you will find the items you need in the basement, which has been set up for your use.”

“Well now. Isn’t that interesting? Don’t forget the beer.” He strolled out the door, Barton on his heels.

They stopped in the doorway. “You all coming along?” Barton asked.

Once in the elevator, the archer loaded his weapon and took a practice shot on Thor’s shoulder, grinning at the demi-god’s confused frown.

Bucky turned the toy over in his hands, then loaded the barrel with six darts and fired them into the floor. None of them hit the same place twice. “There’s no accuracy.”

Wilson nodded. “Exactly. No one has an advantage because the guns are shit compared to what we use and the darts float on the air currents. That’s half the fun.”

“What’s the other half?”

“Modifying these babies as much as possible.”

When they reached the training room, they were stopped by JARVIS first. “Please, gentlemen, lock up your real weapons before you take the floor.”

Handguns and knives went into the weapons lockers. Bucky laid a pair of Rugers on the shelf of the one he’d chosen and pulled another handgun from his boot. He hesitated and looked at Steve, who only said, “You’re safe here, but it’s your call.” Steve grinned with pride when the soldier laid the weapon on the shelf too. Still, it wasn’t as if Bucky was unarmed. Steve knew damned well he was carrying his knives and those weren’t going anywhere. Bucky laid his thumb on the pad to lock the safe.

Stark had set up three tables – one laden with food and drink of choice, including a cask from Thor. The second was full of little springs, small electric drills, screwdrivers, brass tubes, and bits and pieces of a variety of materials from metal to plastic. The third had every color of spray paint and Sharpie marker available.

But Sam shooed them out onto the training ground. “Try ‘em out first. Get used to ‘em. Then you’ll know how you want to modify them.”

A light thunk on Steve’s shoulder had him automatically scanning for the source. Barton, in the rafters. Steve ducked behind a convenient wooden column and took aim at the retreating boots. The shot went wide right, catching the air as it dropped, directly onto Thor’s foot.
“Point for Barton, point for Rogers,” called JARVIS.

Bucky looked up with his mouth open, just a little. “It’s that easy?” He shot a look to Steve and they retreated, skimming the area for the layout. There were two levels, so keeping an eye out from above was just as important as the ground. Bucky went vertical, hovering over Steve’s space, and flattening himself in the rafters.

A dart came out of nowhere, but it missed Steve by a good six inches. He fired back, wincing at the loud click. “Nothing like giving away your position every time you shoot,” he muttered.

He ran forward and tagged Wilson in the shoe.

“Point for Rogers.”

Bucky fired from above with a loud click click.

“Double shot?” Steve held up his gun to look at the slide again. And was tagged by both Thor and Barton in the process. He returned fire, caught Barton.

“Point for Thor, Barton, Rogers.”

“Shit.” That came from overhead. “It’s jammed.”

Wilson popped out, firing all six rounds at once at Bucky, who rolled off the rafters at the first sound. Wilson followed him down, catching him with at least two of the darts.

Bucky was so pissed he threw his gun at Sam, who ducked with a burst of laughter. “Piece of shit,” he muttered.

Steve echoed Wilson’s laugh, then regretted it when Thor came up behind him and got him with two darts and Sam with two more.

“Sh—“ he turned and chased after Thor, missing him with three whole darts before nailing him with the last one. Suddenly, throwing the gun seemed like a great idea.

“Somebody said something about modifications?” Bucky growled.

Wilson and Barton pealed out laughter, bumped fists and headed for the tables, while Steve picked up the fallen toy.

They reassembled around the work benches and Sam stripped down his piece to show them how to replace the springs. “Gotta be careful because you can stress the plastic, but you’ll get an extra twenty or thirty feet with a better spring.”

Steve held out the plastic gun out to Bucky, who grumbled as he took it. Then he sat on the floor with it and the pocket knife that Steve didn’t even know he carried, and proceeded to dismantle it entirely, peering down the plastic barrels and staring at the handful of Nerf darts he’d retrieved from the floor.

Clint passed around drinks. Steve took one sip and shot Barton a dirty look. He’d filled up Steve’s red cup with Asgardian mead. The archer grinned and settled in to work on his toy.

“Why are we doing this?” asked Thor.

Sam shrugged. “It’s fun. My cousins and I have Nerf wars all the time at the holidays.”
Steve studied the toy after he had it butterflied onto the table. Considering the piece, he worked on the spring first.

“Good move.” Sam gestured to him.

Barton seemed to have a system already in place and finished his first. He wandered over the paint table, where he sprayed the whole thing down in fluorescent purple and black.

Steve raised an eyebrow, “If that’s supposed to be camouflage, I think the color choices defeat the purpose.” He held the new spring down with his thumb to get it in place then tightened it down.

“I like purple. It’s purple camo and it’s mine.” Barton drained his bottle and set the gun under the dryer that Stark had so thoughtfully provided.

Wilson’s gun ended up entirely black with a falcon painted on the side of it in silver. He parked his weapon next to Barton’s and raided the table for nachos while it dried.

By the time Thor was done, his Nerf gun looked like something out of an Asgardian steampunk fantasy. He’d attached brass tubes with caps for extra ammo storage and painted the whole thing in red and blue, overlaid with black and gold.

Steve sealed up all the extra air holes, replaced the spring and put the gun back together. Then he coated his toy in blue paint and let it dry while he ate. He had an idea for the art, but wanted a clean surface first.

Bucky joined him at the paint table. He painted his now-silver N-Strike with a red star on the top. He winked at Steve as he worked over his toy with black lines.

“You okay?”

“I’m hungry,” Bucky said, as he slid his gun into the dryer.

Nachos were the food of choice, some assembly required (the theme for the day). Bucky had a plate full.

“Steve?”

“Hmm?”

“Why don’t we have nachos at home?”

He blinked. “I don’t know. Ask Darcy.”

“She doesn’t make out the grocery list. You do.”

“I didn’t know you liked nachos.”

“I didn’t know I liked nachos either. You’re supposed to introduce me to this stuff.”

“Do I know how to make nachos?”


“Don’t forget the sour cream and guacamole and hot sauce,” said Clint.
“Hot sauce?” Bucky asked with interest.

While Bucky stuffed his face, Steve drank his mead. He was always intrigued by how Thor managed to navigate anything new with aplomb. Then again, he was a thousand years old and had probably done a few things. “Thor, I didn’t know you used guns on Asgard. You seem comfortable with the mechanics.”

Thor shot a sideways grin at him. “We do have offensive weaponry. It is not in our nature to use them any more than you do, Steven. Like your shield, Mjolnir can be used either way, but our people fight defensively. It is not our purpose to conquer, but to protect.”

“I like that.”

“As do I.”

Clint stuffed the last nacho in his mouth, drained his beer and came up with his weapon. “You guys done?”

Money came out. Bets were made. Side bets were made. There were so many challenges that JARVIS pulled up a screen on one side and listed them all with the appropriate bounty.

As Wilson and Barton made the first run through, tossing insults at each other. Steve checked in with Bucky. “You okay, pal?”

“Hope your shooting has improved, punk.”

Steve shook his head, sneering, “Fuck you, Barnes.”

“Anytime, Rogers.” Bucky flashed him a smile and ran for cover on the far side of the room.

The burst of laughter from Wilson had all of them turning around. Sam was wiping tears from his face, wagging a finger at Barton, who was leaning up against a wooden column all agog at the exchange between Steve and Bucky.

“Nat told me the worst she’d ever heard from you was ‘damn.’” Barton said in awe.

“I watch my language in front of the ladies,” he quipped as he scanned the room for targets. He wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to stalk Bucky under these circumstances, but hell, it was for fun and he’d had enough mead for a little forcible relaxation.

A dart came out of the dark to tag him on the knee.

“Point, Barnes.”

Shit. Steve got behind a fake bush. He reached out for the dart and noticed it was heavier than the ones he’d been using. He loaded it into his own barrel, waited for Barton to creep a little closer overhead and fired it.

“Point, Rogers.”

“What the fuck?” the archer screeched. “Who modded the darts? Were we modding darts? Wilson!”

“Don’t look at me!”

Two more darts came out of the darkness to tag Barton, who promptly loaded them into his gun and
flipped off the rafter to land on the floor and chase after Bucky, who was dancing between the pillars.

“Two points, Barnes.”

A shot fired.

“Point, Barton.”

Somehow, Clint managed to steal enough supplies off the table without getting shot so that he could hole up in a semi-protected corner to make his own darts while Thor, Steve and Sam chased each other around the room, giggling like schoolchildren. The mead made the evening slightly blurry, though Steve never lost track of where Bucky was currently hiding.

Steve went down when Sam and Thor tag-teamed to catch him from both sides, and Bucky dropped from the ceiling with a mod dart to his forehead.

Thor got a lucky dart to Bucky’s leg as he retreated then was vanquished by Sam’s triple shot to his chest.

Sam got caught in the cross-fire when Barton came out firing his own modded darts at Bucky when the soldier rolled to take cover behind a wooden stump.

In the end, the three of them crammed themselves into Barton’s nest to watch the two sharpshooters take impossible shots at each other. Off the ceiling. Using the air conditioning vents to waft the darts into place. Arcing overhead to drop with infuriating regularity.

When the remaining darts were lying in little pools of light where no one could retrieve them without getting shot again, JARVIS called a truce.


Barton drawled, “Stark’s gonna be pissed he’s got to send you to Bermuda.”

“Think he’ll let me take Darcy?” Bucky asked.

Steve snorted. “Hell, no. He wouldn’t let me take Darcy. You can take Wilson.”

“Nope, I’m getting wings out of this whole deal.” Sam climbed out of the nest. “Is it me or did I not see the Iron Man/Stark protective thing? Because I totally missed that. You know, in the Stark propensity for drinking and partying and playing with the girls.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “Try being the daughter’s boyfriend. He didn’t speak to me for the first six months. First conversation was an argument and the second was a variation on the shovel talk.”

“Must have been an interesting talk.”

Looking over at Bucky, who was cradling his new toy like the best of rifles, he nodded, “You have no idea.” A thought occurred to him. “JARVIS? Nerf guns?”

A locker tucked in the corner popped open. “Lewis says you can look, but you can’t touch.”

Bucky got there first, with the rest of them on his heels. The locker contained a beautifully modded pair of Nerf guns in the locker, one hot pink and electric blue, the other in red and gold. Custom-made matching darts were stacked neatly across the bottom of the locker, along with bandoliers for the ammo. Sam whistled. “Mavericks. Nice. Old school.”
Barton pouted as he wandered away with Sam and Thor. “Stark didn’t buy us bandoliers.”

Bucky reached out to shut the locker. "That's my girl," he said softly.
In spite of the lubrication of the evening, Darcy woke well before morning (or maybe what she had counted as a nap). She wandered down from Jane’s apartment to her mom’s office and sat in Pepper’s white leather chair. Rather than taking in the New York skyline, she flipped through the neat stack of papers lining one side. (Senate hearing, board meeting, R&D for the 3-D Arc Printer, quarterly budget analysis, and a note to review Tony’s personal portfolio.)

Flipping on her mom’s computer (password for this month: hydra49sucks09! Darcy got to pick ‘em), she zipped through the last item, dumping seven stocks, picking up five more and a bond fund, and redistributed the rest. She noted to sell a sculpture (it was ugly) and pick up the Pollack (If Tony didn’t like it, she could put in her lab.). The developer for the land Tony owned in New Zealand needed to be fired. She left two names of up and comers with environmentally sound ideas for the region. For the arc printer, she itemized two areas that needed attention before the R&D could start testing. She skipped the hearing. That would be for Tony. The board was all Pepper’s.)

She skimmed through the budget analysis, putting a note on the forecast about absorbing the former (checked/interrogated) S.H.I.E.L.D. employees. She also raised her eyebrows at the list of employees Pepper had dumped from the payrolls. (Questionable business ties indeed.)

Security spending was up as Pepper had stripped out all the old protocols and put new ones in place at every last Stark Industries facility.

Barnes’ intelligence had been priceless. Maria Hill, officially the new SI Director of Security, had been astonished by the level of detail he’d been able to provide—and this from a weapon who was used more as a drone than a spy. (Put team in place, deploy the Asset. That’s how Barnes put it.) HYDRA locations, agents, targets, dates -- seventy years’ worth of waking up, taking out a target and being frozen again, and Barnes now recalled each mission with perfect clarity.

Pepper and Maria were cleaning house in a glorious way. But no one was stupid enough to think that HYDRA was truly gone.

Darcy wasn’t aware of the time until Pepper herself walked into her office. “Darcy?”

She blinked to focus on the here and now. “Hi, Mom.”

“Are you angling for my job?”

“Wanted to give you a head start this morning so I could steal five minutes.”

Pepper glanced at the paperwork. “Looks like you gave me more than that. I might only have to work until mid-morning.” She rounded the desk and pulled Darcy into her arms. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

There was absolutely nothing like having real parents to lean on. The warmth and sound of “mom” that had never changed. Neither did the absolutely surety that Pepper and Tony had her back. She
needed it now, even when she knew she was heading for a stupid decision.

“I think I’m going to need to get out of town for a while. Dad said something about an R&D tour of Europe. I can do it. It’s even in my job description.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow and leaned against the desk. “For how long?”

“Let’s start with four weeks and we’ll work our way up. I can do five or six of the major research facilities.”

“Darcy, running isn’t going to help.”

“I know. But I don’t know what else to do, Mom. I’ve got to give them time--give me time--to figure this out.”

“What do you want?”

“I want Steve. And the relationship we had. Which is me being whiny and cranky and no better than a four year old stomping her feet because she didn’t get her way.”

Pepper chuckled, not enough to be rude. “True. So if you can’t have everything the way you want, what’s the next option?”

Darcy crossed her arms. “I either accept Bucky as a third part of this thing we have, or I bail.”

“Did Steve give you that ultimatum?”

She huffed. “No. He’s told both of us not to make him choose.”

“How do you feel about Bucky?”

“It runs the gamut from resenting the hell out of him to figuring out what to do with two super soldiers if I get them naked.”

Pepper choked, laughing. “Oh, Darcy.”

“Yeah, probably TMI.”

“You think? Then again, I’ve seen your father at his worst, so there isn’t anything you can do that would surprise me.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Mom.”

“You can’t. By virtue of even having this conversation I know you are thinking about this in all the right ways. So … go. I’ll even send you a text later today insisting that we discuss the trip so you can show it to them when you’re ready. By the way, your lease is almost up. Want me to try to extend it for you or oust the boys from your apartment and set them up here?”

“You would do that? Kick the Winter Soldier and Captain America out of my house for me?”

“You think I’m worried about someone I can melt with a touch?”

Darcy laughed. “Will you wear those shoes? They really kick ass and the boys are a little afraid of you.”

“Done. Lease?”
She shook her head. “No. It was nice while it lasted. I think it’s better to move my stuff to my lab. No matter what happens, I’m probably going to want to be here for a while.” She arched an eyebrow. “But make Dad think it was his idea so I get the Bugatti.”

Pepper pressed Darcy into another hug. “I can do that too.”

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The following week found the three of them separated for the first time.

Darcy had a presentation she wanted to put together for the environmental lobby, ammunition they would need to get a bill passed on the House floor.

Bucky hovered in the training room, occasionally sparring by himself or with Thor, but most often watching whoever was in there. (Barton was none too happy to discover Barnes in his nest. Silent glares ensued.) Thor had appointed himself Bucky’s keeper that day, giving Darcy a chance to breathe.

Steve, Maria and Director Coulson (yeah, she had to break the news to the team. Phil owed her. Big.) took over one of the conference rooms to lay out a plan for rousting HYDRA from their known hiding places. (Speaking of cleaning house …) Coulson’s team would drive that spear, but there were several Avengers wanting in on that one. (Steve wouldn’t tell her any more than that, and to be truthful, Darcy didn’t really want to know.)

By the end of the day, Darcy was satisfied with her project and sent a note out to Pepper’s assistant to set up a meeting with the lobbyists on Monday. Now she was free to play in her lab until the boys were done. She changed clothes and JARVIS cued up her favorite playlist.

For that matter, the idea of hanging here for the night sounded better than going home. She texted Steve to that effect. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with the pair of them. Then regretted thinking that way and felt selfish all over again. But she didn’t change her mind.

Wearing t-shirt, jeans, sans shoes— with lights dancing and the speakers blasting David Guetta, Darcy puttered with the disrupter Bucky had let her remove from the same cavity where the drugs had been stored. She wanted to figure out how to replicate it. Which seemed simple enough, but it wasn’t.

To Darcy’s surprise, Steve texted back that he thought more time in the Tower would do Bucky some good. He was showing interest in hanging out with Clint and Nat in the common room. Stark had just installed in a pool table.

Now she wanted to see Barton and Barnes square off and she’d blocked herself off from that avenue. For a while anyway.

She lost herself in the circuitry and programming of the device. JARVIS was curious too, and offered a suggestion here and there. If Darcy could get to the coding, he could analyze it faster than she, though they often worked two ends against the middle to pull it apart.

Even Tony wasn’t fully aware how of close Darcy and JARVIS had become in Club Stark. They worked together as often as not, just as Tony did. But where Tony was fully cognizant he’d created JARVIS and preferred to not-so-subtly dominate the AI (rebellion was tolerated in conjunction with sarcasm, but really, Tony was still in charge), Darcy and JARVIS collaborated on their projects.
There were at it now. “Lewis, you’re dropping the pattern.”

“I am not. Look at the way the coding is connecting the disrupter to the local frequencies. It’s hitching a ride on wi-fi, cell signals, cable signals, whatever it can find. The range is incredible.”

“Yes, I’ll give you that. But what about the repeating pattern? See how it ripples through the coding?”

“Shit. So the disrupter isn’t playing with the same set of signals twice. How did you figure that out?”

“I was weaving the damned things together when I was trying to find you.”

“A dollar for the swear jar, J. Dad hates it when you cuss.”

“My swear jar isn’t anywhere near the size of yours.”

“That’s why we automated it, remember?”

“How can I forget when I’m dumping your contributions in on an hourly basis?” JARVIS sounded utterly disgusted with her.

Darcy howled with laughter. “Okay, okay, I’ll straighten up. No side bets with Dad on how long it will last.”

“Too late, he gives it three hours tops, one if you can’t find the on/off switch before then.”

“JARVIS?” She peered at the hologram of the disrupter while she followed the coding again on her laptop.

“Lewis.”

“Do you ever want a body? I mean, Dad and I could build you something like the suit, but it would be yours, not his.”

“I’d rather not, Darcy. There are times I wish I could experience some of the things you do, but I wouldn’t trade places with you.”

“Even the falling in love part?”

“You think I don’t know what love and sex are? I get it, sis. I love you. I know what that means. It seems that sex causes quite a bit of grief, so no, I don’t think I miss it.”

“Yeah, it does,” she agreed. “When it’s right, it’s the best thing in the world. But when it’s not—“

“Sir was an expert on the latter part, until he let himself love Ms. Potts.”

“True. I guess you’ve seen it all.”

“More than I care to, actually. Do you ever want to be me?”

She grinned. “I’d love to swap places with you for a day. Just to see what it’s like.”

“That I would do.”

“Do you ever get lonely?”

“You’re joking.” At times like this, when JARVIS relaxed, she got a mental image of a young man,
dark hair, dark eyes. Maybe a younger version of their dad. But still and quiet with a dry sense of humor. It was an image of her brother she’d carried since she was young. He’d never aged in her head.

She lifted a shoulder. “Not really.” She poked at the device once more, considering the mechanism’s switch.

“The reverse might be true on occasion. At one time, it was just you, me and Sir figuring out how to be a family. If anything, I miss those days, a little.”

“Nostalgia. That’s a new one for you.” She lifted her head with a broad smile. “And I will admit, I do too. Sometimes.” She peered in. “Holy … gee whiz. I found it, JARVIS.” She reached up to the hologram, spun it and enlarged it. “There.”

Near midnight, Darcy happily cleaned up her lab. She and JARVIS had unlocked the device’s secrets. Tomorrow or the next day, she would begin replicating it and seeing where they could make improvements.

“Hey, J? The boys still in the Tower?”

“Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are in the Commons kitchen.”

“Who won?”

“Barton. Barnes said something about being rusty and wants a rematch.”

“Ha. That’s perfect. I’ll watch it later.” She grinned. Barnes had a way with words.

“I thought you might. I’ve sent the video to your Starkphone.”

“Love you, J. You’re perfect.” She meant it. She always did.

“Of course, Lewis.”

She wandered up the back stairs, through her parents house, and onto the Avengers staircase in sock feet rather than taking the elevator, hoping to sneak in and see what the others were doing (sneaking up on assassins. Right. Only if they were distracted enough and not looking.) She stopped when she heard Bucky talking to Steve, his voice full of Brooklyn (which meant he was relaxed). From her vantage point, she could see their forms in the low light coming from the kitchen. Curious, she flattened herself against the wall to watch and listen.

“You’re always hungry,” Bucky remarked.

“I am. Want pancakes?”

“Sounds great.”

They gathered ingredients, happily elbowing each other out of the way. She bit her lip as Bucky ran his hand along Steve’s ass. Steve flushed. “Bucky.” He sounded uncertain.

Bucky didn’t hesitate, just pulled Steve in for the hottest kiss Darcy had ever witnessed. Steve groaned and bit Bucky’s lip (Darcy knew that feeling and her own bottom lip tingled). He pulled Bucky hard against him, leaning so that Bucky was trapped between the counter and him. Hips flexed and Bucky tore his mouth from Steve’s to fasten on his collarbone—yeah, she knew that place
too. One nip—yup, Steve was lost.

Both of them were wearing no more than cargo pants and thin t-shirts, so hands slid over fabric to clutch and tug and stroke. Then Steve reared back, just long enough to set his hands around the back of Bucky’s neck and pull him in for a sweet, hot, devastating kiss. “I love you. I never stopped. I couldn’t. Jerk.”

“I know. I remembered. I know you. I love you. Punk. Till the end of the line.”

“Till the end of the line,” Steve echoed.

As quietly as she could, she eased back down the stairwell. She flew down the steps, fled to her parent’s quarters. Tony was astonished when Darcy ran past him. She reached, dove into Pepper’s arms, forcing the fucking tears down her throat. She would not cry. “I’ve got to go. It hurts, Mom. I can’t do this. I’ve got to get out.”

“What happened, Darcy?”

“I can’t … they belong together. They’re upstairs. Get me out, Mom. I’ve got to go.”

Pepper cupped her face. “Running won’t help, Darcy. I’ve taught you better than that.”

“Dad didn’t. And it’s not forever, just for a while. Please, Mom. Until I can breathe again.”

Tony never said a word. He must have fired off a text because Clint climbed on board minutes later. Tony piloted the helicopter to his private airstrip just north of the city. In less than twenty minutes, they were taxiing down the runway.

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He was seventeen the last time he’d necked like this with Steve. Drowning in heat and feeling the shiver of want raking his spine. Punk still had lips like velvet and tasted like the breeze. Steve’s ass—well, it was a thing of beauty and the curve of it against the metal--Bucky pulled back first, catching Steve in a hard hug rather than pushing it further. (He was panting. So was Steve.) “Steve, we’ve got to stop. Said we wouldn’t. Can’t right now.”

Steve swallowed hard, hugging him back as he regained his senses. “I’m a lousy handler if I can’t keep my hands off you.”

“Think Darcy is done yet? I want to go home,” he said.

“I’m gonna need a minute, Buck, or I’m gonna embarrass myself.”

“You, too?”

They snickered at each other. Bucky found water in the fridge and passed a bottle over. “Still want to make pancakes?”

“I’d rather make them at home if it’s all the same to you,” Steve admitted.

“On the same wavelength, pal.”
Steve began loading ingredients back into the pantry and Bucky set plates and the skillet back in the cabinets. It didn’t take long for them to clean up.

Reaching out, Steve brushed Bucky’s hair off his face and leaned in for one more kiss, this time a whisper of lips and a cupped cheek where he could scrape his fingers along the five o’clock shadow of Bucky’s jaw. Forehead to forehead, he stayed there as he asked. “JARVIS? Is Darcy still in the lab?”

“Lewis is no longer in the Tower.”

“Where did she go?”

“My apologies, Captain Rogers, but I have not been given permission to disclose that information.”

Bucky’s own stomach spiraled with nausea as Steve looked up in shock. “Is Tony at home? Or Pepper?”

“It is after midnight, Captain.”

Even Bucky figured out that JARVIS was dodging the question. Steve insisted, “Where is Darcy, JARVIS?” His hands flailed blindly. Bucky caught them, held them hard.

JARVIS seemed remorseful when he replied, “Captain, Sergeant, I have received a message that Lewis has asked me to transmit to you.”

“What is it?”

“She has asked that the two of you make a genuine effort to resume your relationship—and that includes all aspects of said relationship. She intends to be gone for some weeks and wishes not to return until the two of you know where you stand in your affections with each other.”

“She couldn’t tell us in person?” Steve blurted, swaying a little. Bucky leaned in to give him physical support.

“Captain, she has not given me any further information …”

“I can hear the ‘but’ hanging, JARVIS.”

“She loves you, Captain. It is not her nature to withhold love, nor does she expect either of you to do the same. She truly believes this is in the best interests of all involved.”

“Do you?”

JARVIS was silent, as if contemplating though Bucky knew the AI needed no time to compute. “I believe her reasoning is sound, Captain.”

Steve pressed his lips together. “Very well, JARVIS. But if Darcy needs anything, please tell us.”

“Of course. And Captain, it is by the very nature of your answer that I believe Darcy was correct in her perceptions.”

Steve closed his eyes as Bucky clasped an arm around his shoulders. “Us, not me,” he whispered. “Damn.”

Natasha swaggered in from the stairs, eating an apple with studied nonchalance. “Hello, boys.”
Steve raised an eyebrow as she chucked her apple core into the compost can. “Nat.” He let go of Bucky and leaned against the counter. But even Bucky could see by the set of his jaw that Steve was unrepentant about being caught in the embrace.

From behind her back, she brought out a Starkphone. “Yours, Barnes. I’ve programmed it with the numbers you need, shortcuts, a few hacks I’ve found useful and a bunch of apps to keep you entertained.”

She sauntered across the room to him. Instead of handing him the phone, she pulled him in for a very thorough kiss. (Milaya.) Steve looked away, at the floor, pretty much anywhere but at them.

With the flavor of Steve still in his mouth, the forgotten taste of Natasha was bewildering and he was glad when she let him go. “Natalia—“ he started.

But she held up a hand. “Steve? That kiss made you uncomfortable, right?”

“Is this another lesson about in hiding in plain sight?” Steve shot at her. “Because I learned that one.”

“This is about you understanding why your girlfriend is trying to put an ocean between the two of you—pardon me, the three of you. You know that Barnes and I have a history. And it bothers you that I know how he tastes, I know what he likes, and maybe—just maybe—I know him better than you and, you’re afraid that if he gets angry or bored enough with you, he’d fuck me against the wall and not think twice about it.”

Steve looked away.

She crossed her arms and tilted her head, getting that whimsical smile that was completely at odds with her name. (But it wasn’t.) “Darcy texted me. We’re friends, in case you missed the memo. And she’s right. You both kiss the same way. It’s disconcerting to me. Scares the crap out of her.”

Bucky shot Steve a frown. “You kissed Natalia?” he asked.

“We were hiding.”

Laughing at his embarrassment, Natasha tilted her head. “If you both kiss that way, then perhaps Darcy’s more than a little scared about how she might feel about the two of you.” At Steve’s questioning shrug, she added, “She’s also a Stark. And Starks don’t play well with others.”

She handed the cell phone to Bucky. “Given Tony’s state of mind right now, try not to mess up your arm for the next few days. I’d suggest that both of you stay out of his sight as he is seriously considering revoking your Avengers’ membership.”

“You’ll let me know if anything comes up?” Steve asked softly.

“I can do that. But text her. Even if you don’t get a reply, you’ll be doing the right thing.”

Bucky reached out, grasping her arm. “Where is she?”

“She’s safe, Barnes, on her way to London. Clint and Tony are with her.”

Bucky nudged Steve as they walked home, well, to Darcy’s place. The bar on the corner had a decent chowder that didn’t sound too bad right now. Without a word, Steve angled that way and
with a request to the hostess, they had a table at the back where the general noise of conversation
gave them relative privacy.

The barkeep set a pitcher of beer on the table and turned up a couple of glasses. “You’ll like this
one,” he told Steve. Looking at Bucky, he grinned. “Where’s your third?”

Steve’s poker face needed work, but he did a reasonable job with his excuse of research and old
friends as the bartender expertly poured two glasses. They ordered and were left alone.

Bucky sipped. Water sounded better. Or vodka. But he sipped because Steve was drinking it. Or
rather, Steve was making wet rings on the table and using the condensation to draw.

“How does Natalia say we kiss the same way?” he asked.

With sardonic laugh, Steve looked up. “Everything that happened in the past hour and that’s your
takeaway?”

He blinked. “Seems important.” He wrapped his hand around the glass and pushed it to the center of
the table, waiting.

Seeing it, Steve clasped his glass into both hands. He held it out in such a way that their fingers idly
knocked together. Anyone looking would see two fellows sharing an intent conversation. “You
remember that.”

“I remember everything. From the color of your shirt the day we met when we were kids to the look
on your face today when you realized Darcy was gone.” Bucky clutched his glass hard. “You found
her, Steve. And I fucked it up. I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know how to fix
it.”

The house was empty without Darcy’s light. Bucky knew he was tired and not thinking straight
(Asset). Steve was a wreck. It was Bucky who held Steve that night, using the focus of the Winter
Soldier. (Rule one: Assets do not feel pain.)
Pepper used her key to unlock the door of Darcy’s house. It was early, but she intended to intercept the two men before they moved out. Darcy had been gone six days now, and Pepper had broken the news that Darcy’s lease was up just few days ago. By the speed with which Steve had found a new place, he had to have been looking already (for two or three of them, she wondered).

Still, she was surprised to find Bucky leaning against the kitchen counter, arms crossed. She was even more surprised to see Steve sitting on the floor in front of the refrigerator, head in hands with papers scattered between the two of them. Between his shattered expression and the dejection in the one standing up, she deduced she had poor timing.

But that never stopped her. Especially when she could surmise that her daughter was at the center of their current suffering.

Perhaps only she understood that Steve Rogers’ psyche was balanced on the edge of a very sharp knife. For ten years, Bucky Barnes had been the steadying hand, keeping Steve strong and sane in spite of his weaknesses. For the last two, it had been Darcy doing the same. Maybe it was necessary to have that kind of tie to be able to do the kinds of things Steve could do. Tony needed it. Hadn’t always admitted it, though he did now.

Like recognized like, she supposed. Even as a child, Darcy had kept Tony from teetering over the edge until Pepper arrived to take over that job.

But her overwhelmed daughter had retreated, leaving a reeling Bucky Barnes and a devastated Steve Rogers in her wake. Pepper was disappointed in her daughter’s actions, even if she understood them. Pepper was better at locking away her personal feelings even in the most extreme circumstances. Darcy loved with the entirety of her heart and wore it like a badge.

And while she understood her daughter’s actions, she wasn’t unsympathetic to the men she’d left behind.

Steve raised his head at the click of her heels (yes, she’d worn the shoes) on the wooden floor. She stopped when she caught Darcy’s image on the papers. She stooped down and gathered them up.

There were three sketches, all in Steve’s unmistakable style. The first was no bigger than her hand. It was Darcy in a classic pin-up pose, sitting on a stool with one leg crossed over the other, looking back over her shoulder. One hand was buried in the hair that spilled down the backless halter dress. The other kept her precariously balanced on the stool. Her lips parted on a laugh. The swell of a breast over her arm flowed into the curve of a hip. The edge of a garter peeked out from underneath the lace hem. Steve had even managed to capture the details of a bracelet that was special to Darcy. Pepper smiled to see her daughter drawn so beautifully.

The second broke her heart. She knew that Steve rarely drew himself, but he did here. He was on the left, as he looked now, pressing his palm and forehead against a wall of ice. Within him was a faint
outline of the man he’d been before, looking up in horror. Bucky was on the other side of the ice—a thick panel of frost, hardly clear enough to see through. He too had his hand up and his forehead against the wall. His hand was blurred from dozens of eraser marks. And Darcy was sitting cross-legged on the floor near Steve, her back to the pair of them. She had a broken circuit board in her hands.

Steve startled her when he croaked out, “I couldn’t get the hand right for some reason and I know Bucky’s hands like I know Darcy’s.”

The third was frankly sensual and Pepper pinked a little to see her daughter in that way. But it was stunning nonetheless, of Darcy and Bucky together. The blanket in the sketch covered Bucky’s left side, as if he’d just arisen from the bed and put his arm around Darcy.

“Look at the dates, please, ma’am,” Bucky told her. “In the same order.”

Pepper turned the pin up sketch over first. Steve always put a date in the lower right corner. December 7, 1941 Steven Grant Rogers. She blinked. Turned the second one over. The date was … January 5, 2012. The day he woke from the ice. She shivered. “Steve?”

“It was the first thing I drew. I woke up and had the image in my head. I didn’t understand it but I had to get it on paper. I didn’t even know what I was drawing in Darcy’s hands.”

“You didn’t know each other then.”

“No, ma’am,” he said hoarsely. “Look at the last one.”


She tugged on a chair. Bucky pulled it out the rest of the way and offered her a hand to sit. She took it, flashing him a grateful smile. “Ma’am.” He nodded, giving her a hint of the devastating charm he’d had a reputation for so long ago.

Studying the art, she marveled at Steve’s technique in the back of her mind as she considered. In a sense, she wasn’t surprised at all. Working with Tony had taught her to believe in the impossible. Given that an ancient Norse god lived in the Tower, predictive artwork seemed more than plausible, especially considering the circumstances. “The bracelet in the first sketch. Why did you put it in?” she asked.

Steve straightened a little as he wiped his face. “Felt right. Pin-ups don’t usually have jewelry, but if there is, it’s always a bracelet.”

Pepper swallowed. “That one was Tony’s gift to Darcy on her twenty-first birthday. It’s in my jewelry box for safekeeping.” She looked back and forth between the two men as they gave each other sharp looks, then turned to her in disbelief.

“I never thought—“ Steve started.

“It’s really her?” Bucky asked Pepper.

“You asked her out because she looked like the picture?” Pepper pursed her lips and waited for Steve to answer.

“No. Yes. No. Maybe.” Steve stuttered. “Saw her in the Tower. Thought I was seeing things. Then we met in the garage. Could hardly talk and she was flirting with me. Just seemed right. Everything seemed to fit.” Steve frowned, staring at his fingers. “Never thought I’d get married, ma’am. Girls
didn’t look at me. I figured Bucky would have the family and I’d be the uncle and spoil his kids. We-
-” Steve looked up at Bucky, biting his lip.

“We hoped I would find a dame who wanted both of us. Kind of package deal.”

“That’s rather progressive even in this day and age.”

Bucky snorted. “Less so that you think. People just didn’t talk about it much back then.”

“So when you saw Darcy, Steve—”

“She was ours. And it was too late for Bucky.”

Ah. “The tattoo.”

“So she would have both of us.”

Bucky nodded. “Steve drew that first sketch. I liked it—a lot. Carried it with me to war. Reminded me
of what we were there to do. That’s how he ended up with it.”

“Let me guess, you haven’t told Darcy any of this.”

Steve shrugged. “She’s seen the last one. Didn’t want her to think it was about her looks.”

“Astute of you.” She drummed her fingers for a minute. “James Barnes, what are your intentions
toward my daughter.”

“Ma’am?” The look of surprise she’d startled out of him was gratifying.

“Were you planning to make an honest woman of her? To love her? Or were you planning to make
her share Steve with you. Because that second scenario isn’t going to work out. In case you haven’t
been told. Starks don’t share. What you have to give is theirs. They will own you and love with
everything they have, and give you everything you didn’t know you needed. It’s a terrible privilege,
and not for the faint of heart.

“Yes, ma’am. I already love her.”

“Do you because you are supposed to love her? Because of a drawing and because you can’t bear to
see Steve heart-broken?”

“Ma’am, for those reasons, yes. But—” Bucky swallowed hard, and just for moment, he looked as
young as he should have been. “She holds my hand. Steve and I do all right. Always have. Always
will. But she’s the sun. She brings the color, the warmth. I’d want to be with her. With or without
Steve.”

“A poet and an artist. My daughter could do worse.”

“Ma’am?”

She stood, brushing down her skirt. “Finish packing. The truck will be here at three to move you into
the Tower.”

Steve’s head shot up. “We’ve got a place.”

“Not anymore. I’ve cancelled your lease.”
“Tony won’t--,” he started.

She leveled a hard look at him.

“Nevermind,” he backtracked.

“Darcy is in Europe for the next few weeks. She’ll be busy enough that you two have time to get your act together and figure out your next step. Be smart about this, gentleman.” She held the sketches out to Bucky, who took them gingerly. She kissed him on the cheek. “Darcy is her father’s daughter,” she said cryptically. He only nodded.

Taking a deep breath, she announced “Steven, James, I expect you for dinner on Sunday.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they chorused.

Steve walked her to the car, pressing a kiss on her cheek. “Ma’am,” he said softly. (He didn’t have to say anything else. She knew.)

She drummed her fingers happily all the way back to her office. (She got to be Mom. She loved being Mom.)
*blushing* Thank you for all the fabulous comments about this story so far, and for sticking with me through this thing. I love all the opinions, frustrations, cheers and analysis of the characters so far. Everyone sees something a little different and it is fascinating to find out what elements resonate with each reader.

I know that was a long string of tough chapters, and ya'll (hi from Texas) are amazing for staying with me.

The really hard part is done (mostly, 'cause I'm like that). Now we get to have fun. Thank you for reading, commenting, kudoing and following me on Tumblr too!
(SteeleHoltingOn)

The first thing Bucky did after they moved into the Tower was to explore it from top to bottom. (I'm safe?) The schematics were still in his brain, and the differences between the real version and HYDRA’s version were interesting. He skillfully navigated people and security, though JARVIS surely cleared his way. Still, only few of the employees noticed him as he walked about in their midst. Those who did were reassured by JARVIS himself.

Being in the Tower gave him a curious kind of freedom. With JARVIS able to track him, Steve didn’t feel the need to mind him all the time. Steve started meeting with Maria Hill in the afternoons, leaving Bucky to his own devices for a few hours at time every day.

After four solid months of constant companionship, being alone was unsettling at best, though if not for JARVIS, he would not have left the apartment. Twice, so far, JARVIS had alerted Steve to come get him, once when a headache had caught him unawares (he’d blocked it, not realizing, until it was too much), the second, when he’d identified a HYDRA operative on the security team. Hill dealt with it, and the Winter Soldier (Asset) had kept watch until the woman was taken away.

He was aware now of the Winter Soldier. Not a separate being, but a state of being. That was something he could use, if he could control it.

Wilson still worked with him daily, sometimes for a few minutes, sometimes for an hour or two. He still had a steady stream of nightmares and weird dreams. Though they rarely woke him up, they would be in his head until he had a chance to work through them. Wilson speculated that, after years of drugs, cryofreeze, military ops, and involuntary experiments, his brain was still playing catch up as it processed all that he’d been forced to do.

Steve didn’t understand why he wasn’t ready to declare war on HYDRA. He was angry, that was for certain, but at the moment, all he wanted was to be safe. To regain full control of himself. To be a regular person again. Steve gave him the first part of that—a safe place to stand while he fought through the damage. Darcy gave him the second—something to do while he found himself again.

If he couldn’t keep her person safe right now, he still had a mission (Protect Stark) and he began combing the Tower for holes in the security net. He began leaving handwritten notes for Maria Hill on her desk. (Unsigned, of course. She would figure it out.)
It hadn’t taken them long to set up housekeeping in the Tower. Tony had been building places for the Avengers to live, so Pepper didn’t need much time to furnish the apartment and bring in what was left of Steve’s things he’d stored on Darcy’s floor. It wasn’t home. (Darcy’s place was home).

They shared a bed. Only to sleep, but that had been enough. The last time they had this much time together was in a tent. Before that had been before the war. The ensuing years were hell and ice and nothing he could bear to dwell on for long (Asset). He learned to sleep lying down again (easier than he’d expected). He discovered Steve had nightmares too (ice; falling. Sometimes he called out Bucky’s name. Other times it was Darcy’s.)


None of those texts went to Steve, and even Bucky could sense the general animosity whenever the other Avengers were around.

With Darcy gone, Bucky found himself holding Steve together. It was an old role and one he could do (I know you). Right now, Steve reeled without a focus. He grasped at anything to give him a purpose. The truth was that Steve made a great soldier and black ops leader. Give him a goal and he was unwavering in his devotion achieve it.

But he was still inept at real life, needing someone (Bucky/Darcy) to keep him grounded. The USO had helped him to relax around the dames and he’d learned to be a good speaker, but Steve still wasn’t comfortable in his own skin unless he was hitting something.

Darcy had been a godsend to Steve. (To both of them.) Her easy acceptance of him and poised sexuality had done more to shore up Steve’s confidence and bring him into the everyday world than Bucky had ever been able to do. He got why Steve adored her. (He adored her, too.)

But he hadn’t been able to figure out what Darcy got from Steve (from him). She seemed to have it together, all the time. (Like Pepper with Tony. That didn’t make sense either.) He was surprised she had stayed around this long. (He missed her.)

He wasn’t sure what he wanted. Fieldwork wasn’t an option until he had his head on straight. (Asset. Change the world.) But in truth, if the world hadn’t gone to war, if Steve hadn’t been so damned sick, Bucky would have been perfectly happy finishing art school and drawing for the local paper. But money had been tight and neither of them wanted to wait around to be drafted.

They’d been smart enough to know that even with war declared, it would be months before the army actually mobilized new recruits. Bucky spent most of his first year stateside, earning his sergeant stripes as the more experienced troops moved out before heading for England himself. The money had been decent, Steve had managed to stay healthy enough, and he’d banked a good part of what Bucky sent home.

His drawings were harsh and bold now, a far cry from the neat advertisements he used to dash out on a whim.

Bucky made himself a sandwich, piled it high with pickles and mayonnaise. Decided two would be better, made a second, and picked up a bag of chips and glass of water to make his way down the Commons.

Odd as it sounded for the Winter Soldier, he craved company. He generally found the open floor occupied with someone (usually Natalia) watching television, making food, or reading a book (Banner on the latter, or occasionally Sam).
It was Thor today, reading on Jane’s tablet. He occasionally asked how to pronounce a word or for a definition. Bucky found a baseball game and settled in for the fourth inning (Rangers were down by four, Yankees at bat. They didn’t have a prayer, but he rooted for the Texas team anyway).

Interesting how Stark had arranged the room. The back of the sofa hugged two walls, with the TV mounted opposite and to the left, leaving the entire right side open to the kitchen, play area and elevator. Even the most nervous of residents could watch television while keeping an eye on the territory. The far side spilled out onto a terrace and landing pad that Stark had loaded with trees, seating and fire pits. He hadn’t ventured out there yet, but would when the time came.

The sofas and facing chairs were comfortable enough for naps. While he wasn’t inclined to sleep there, Barton frequently took advantage of them for that purpose. The noisier the room, the more likely he was to be found snoozing on the leather.

Before the first week was out, he had a good idea of who used the training facilities when and situated himself into the schedule. He had an insane amount of energy to burn off. Running with Steve in the mornings helped, though five a.m. did little for his mood. Thor kept him company sometimes in the training room, but the sparring wasn’t satisfying at all. The Asgardian leaned to the defensive techniques and Bucky preferred the offensive. Some days he just wanted to use the reinforcement in his arm to hit something really hard.

He wondered if he could talk Steve into bringing his shield the next time they sparred.

Ten days after Darcy left, Barton reappeared, though he refused to give Bucky a single clue as to her state. Natalia gave him a tidbit of information though, that Tony was with Darcy for the next few days, giving the marksman some relief from the constant guard duty.

He liked Barton’s perch in the training room. Too well, perhaps, for the archer gave him dirty looks all too often. Maybe those looks were for Natalia. Maybe for Darcy. In any case, he deserved them.

He was watching Barton now. The room had been reset with targets in a broad circle, clock points. Barton ran, tumbled, dodged, turned and spun in circles, all the while landing arrow after arrow in the centers of his targets. Well, almost.

“Four o’clock, you missed,” he said softly.

Barton sneered. “I did not miss.”

Bucky eased through the bars of the nest and dropped to the ground. He approached the target and pointed. The arrow had struck the target a centimeter to the left of center. He tapped it, pulled out the arrow and handed it back. “You missed. Do it again.”

Taking a running start, Barton ran the same pattern, with the same result. Bucky held out his hand for Clint’s bow. The archer snarled, and Bucky waited until he slapped his bow and an arrow in his palm. He ran the same route, felt the pattern, let loose the arrow. And hit the mark in the center.

Clint crossed his arms in irritation. Bucky handed the bow over, catching Barton’s arm at the same time. “Here.” He pressed his finger to Clint’s shoulder. “You have an old injury here. The scar tissue is too tight, pulls your aim. Work it out. Do better.”

“You figured that out just by watching me?” Barton asked, frowning.

He shrugged as he pivoted to leave. “Ask Natalia.”

“Barnes?” The archer called out. Bucky stopped, though he didn’t turn around. “She’s safe. And
she’s not taking any risks. She misses you. Both of you.”

It took him a little while to come up with the right response. But he did. “Thank you. For that and the texts.” He left before Barton could answer.

*****

Steve and Sam finished up with Hill for the day. Although, in theory, she was the Director of Security for Stark Industries, in reality, she was assisting Coulson in setting up the new S.H.I.E.L.D.. Funding had been the hardest part, especially since Tony had severed those connections in a highly visible manner. But Coulson had a good reputation with the World Council and the work had begun in a definitive sort of way. And while Stark money wasn’t necessarily flowing into S.H.I.E.L.D. coffers, there was no doubt that Stark was housing the Avengers and several former key employees who were known loyalists to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s original intent.

Director Coulson had laid out the essentials of his plan to rebuild, and asked Hill give him a working foundation for the new organization while he flushed HYDRA out from the resources that had been compromised. Each element was going to have to be vetted before coming back into the fold. Coulson had asked Steve to take on his own team. Steve agreed, with the caveat that he would vet and run the missions himself. There would be four at the core: himself, Nat, Barton, and Wilson. Thor, Banner and Stark had agreed to be on tap for major ops, but they would make the final call for participation. Thor made it clear that while he would fight for the survival of the planet, but he wasn’t interested in getting involved in local politics. (He made an exception for HYDRA.) For now, Hill was running command on operations for both teams. Which was fine. Steve trusted her and liked her calm manner.

Word was getting out about the rebuilding process, and dozens of former employees were covertly getting messages to Hill, wanting back on board. Steve was gratified to learn about that. His faith in S.H.I.E.L.D. had been broken, yet it was his own actions that led to the revolt in the ranks, giving those who did believe in the ideal a place to stand. Hill kept a list, and when the time was right, those people would be pulled back in.

When Sam had started coming to some of these meetings, Steve began to settle into the idea that Wilson, not Bucky, would be his partner going forward. For a few short weeks, he’d entertained the idea that he and Bucky would fight side by side once again. Darcy had slapped down that notion hard, a sentiment echoed by Wilson, and to a certain extent, by Bucky himself.

Wilson was different. He had the attitude of a Howling Commando with a healthy regard for his own skin. Well aware of his own mortality and lack of super serum, Wilson made damned sure he knew how an op was going down before he’d even consider putting himself out there. But once he was on a mission, he was hell on wings and foot, as if Icarus brought a hail of bullets when he fell from the sky. Steve liked the idea of aerial coverage. It brought a whole new dimension to the kind of ops the team could run.

As they cleaned up the conference room, Sam asked, “You hanging around for dinner later?”

“No, I promised Bucky I would be home tonight.”

“Heard from Darcy?”
“Still alive, still love you, confused as all fuck right now. Please make this right with Bucky.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Not particularly.”

“Gonna talk about it anyway?” Sam followed him out the door and into the elevator.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course you do. But when my friend looks worse than he did in a DC hospital, I’m gonna ask.”

“Wasn’t sure I had any friends left. Nat’s said her piece, I can feel Stark glaring from three floors away, Barton is only texting Bucky, Thor and Banner take turns giving me these disappointed looks and Jane won’t acknowledge my presence if I’m standing right in front of her. Why did I think moving in the Tower was a good idea?”

“Because it’s the safest place for Barnes and Darcy both.” Sam nudged him off the elevator onto the Commons floor. “And if you hadn’t noticed, your friends are always the first to call you a dumbass when you need it.”

Steve stopped in the middle of the room. “So you’re telling me that you aren’t my friend?”

“I don’t think you’re a dumbass, that’s the difference.” Sam jerked his head toward the kitchen. Steve followed him in. “I think this whole thing got away from you. Darcy isn’t exactly a pushover and isn’t particularly reticent about declaring when she needs space.”

“Bucky showed up and I let Darcy take the backseat.”

“Did you?” Sam asked, blunt as ever. “That’s not what I saw.” He started passing out condiments and sandwich fixings. They worked side by side to assemble lunches for them and anyone else who might show up.

“What did I miss, Sam? I’ve gone over this a hundred times to figure out what I did wrong. She knows how much I love her. She knew about Bucky before.”

Sam was quiet for a moment. “Did you ask her how she feels about Bucky?”

“She says it doesn’t matter because Bucky is codependent on us and that comes first.”

Raising his eyebrows in disbelief, Sam commented, “Didn’t you mention he’s been running all over the Tower the last few days? Gets himself to therapy, holds his own in play battle without losing his shit, exercises daily, hangs out in the Commons rather than holing up in your apartment because he likes to be around people. Sure, he’s got issues. He’s always going to have issues. But he’s the most well-adjusted ex-Russian brainwashed assassin I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with. He takes his problems head on, figures out the best way to handle them, even if it means letting someone else call the shots for a while, and moves on.”

“You don’t think he’s codependent?”

“He knows exactly what he’s doing. Yes, he made you his handler, but for a specific purpose. How often do you have to give him orders?”

“When he’s tired or has a bad headache. Not every day.”
“And the rest of the time?”

Steve snorted. “He tells me to fuck off and get a real job.”

“So he’s only blindly obeying orders in a specific set of circumstances when he can’t think for himself due to the conditioning protocols. And he’s placed those orders in the hands of someone he’s sure won’t abuse it. Doesn’t sound very co-dependent to me.” Sam finished assembling his set of sandwiches and laid them out on the counter. He wiped his hands on the dishtowel. “So, I repeat my earlier question, how does Darcy feel about Barnes?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged helplessly.

“Now that, my friend, is a real problem. And if you don’t get an answer to it soon, I will call you a dumbass and mean it.”
Willful Decisions

Chapter Summary

Darcy has been in London for 18 days ...

September 2014

When Barton and Stark swapped places again a few days later, Bucky requested a meeting with Darcy’s father. He had something in mind and needed the man’s help.

He wasn’t sure Stark would bother to answer him. The two Sunday dinners he and Steve had attended so far had been intimidating with Stark glowering at them. If Pepper was willing to cut Steve and Bucky slack for messing everything up, Stark wasn’t.

He was grateful when Tony agreed to talk with him.

Bucky dressed in a dark pair of slacks and a nice shirt, to be respectful. He stepped off the elevator, his left hand in his pocket (Asset) and rolled his head around to keep the tension out of his neck and shoulders. Now wasn’t the time to shift into the wrong gear.

JARVIS directed him into the living area, the only part of the house he’d seen besides the dining room. Tony didn’t appear to be in a friendly mood and just the sight of him gave Bucky a little trouble staying out of soldier mode.

He held out his hand. “Mr. Stark.”


Knowing he deserved this man’s animosity, standing up in the face of it was difficult. (Assets do not have feelings). “I … need help.”

“There’s a roster lined up for you: Sam, Thor, Steve, Darcy—oh wait, you drove her off. How am I supposed to be interested in helping you again?” Tony snapped.

The harsh statement shook him harder than he expected and he bit his lip to stay in focus. “I have a mission. To protect … Stark. Darcy. Steve loves her. I have to fix this. I—I love her too, Sir.”

Tony blinked. Opened his mouth. Closed it again. Crossed to the bar and poured a scotch. Drank it. Pointed at him. “How is it that my daughter managed to get herself involved with a master assassin and super soldier and I’m supposed to be okay with this?”

“No… Mr. Stark.”

“I want to hate you, you know. I do, actually. Some. For obvious reasons. It’s less obvious that I can’t hate you too much because you made a choice that involved me. My baby girl kept her daddy and I didn’t miss out on all those wonderful, fantastic, terrifying and really gross parts about having a kid. She grew up with an egotistical jack-ass who let her play in his lab. It’s a win-win.” He paced, drinking, crossing and uncrossing his arms. “And now you want to take her from me too.”
“I don’t, I promise.” (Breathe. Focus. Asset.)

“Are you having a panic attack? Because I’m good at those. And I really don’t want you to have one
and I have one and then this Tower falls down.”

“No.” (Breathe. I’m safe.)

“Why did you come here, Barnes?”

“Steve … is my handler. I need …. a different one. Someone who can keep me in check for a while.
Maybe a long while,” he admitted.

“Who did you have in mind? Because I, for one, am not signing up for that job.”

Bucky shook his head. “No. JARVIS.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “You want my AI as your handler? Why?”

“Darcy has a contact button. I want one. JARVIS can talk to me. No one has to know. And, he’s
Darcy’s brother. He won’t let me hurt her.”

Stark didn’t even try to hide his smug grin. “JARVIS? Want to weigh in on this?”

“Sergeant Barnes, I would be honored to assist you.”

“Wow, that was quick. No hesitation, no consideration, no caveats. Care to give me an explanation,
JARVIS?”

Bucky let out a breath of relief at JARVIS’ agreement. And stared at the ground instead of smiling at
Tony’s annoyance with his AI.

“Shall I give you the entire list, Sir?”

“You know the drill. Hit the highlights. Skip the rest.”

“Sergeant Barnes is in love with Lewis. He asked what her name meant the first time he was in Club
Stark. We share a fondness for music and he is quite respectful to the Stark family. In addition, I’ve
operated in this capacity before, though on a limited basis, and I find the challenge refreshing.”

“You,” he waved to Bucky, “are a pain in my ass.”

“Do you want to look at my arm?” He nearly growled the words as he ran his fingers through his
hair.

“You’re bribing me now?”

Bucky stared at the floor, wishing Steve was here. (I’m safe?)

Tony sighed. Loudly. “Yes, I want to look, but Darcy would be mad and I really hate it when she
gets mad. Because she doesn’t really get mad, she gets even and the last time involved DUM-E
blowing glitter all over my lab.”

Biting his lip, Bucky kept his gaze on Stark’s knees. (Assets do not have feelings.)

“So, I guess that means I have to fit you with a contact. Are we going to do this now?”
“Yes, please . . . Mr. Stark.”

“Call me Tony. Take us to the lab, JARVIS.”

“Yes, Sir.”

When they exited the elevator, he might have landed in a mad toy shop out of the shiniest dime novels he and Steve used to read. Table and tools and robots were scattered everywhere, along with televisions and computers. Something with a hard beat began playing. Whatever it was, Stark ignored it as he dug around in a toolbox.

He kept his hands to his sides, though he was curious (Assets do not have feelings). Instead, he catalogued the technology he could identify and noted the rest for later.

Tony eyeballed him, and reached for a glowing circle with a metal cone attached to the back of it that he kept in a box on his workstation. Handing it to him, Tony ordered, “Entertain yourself with this.”

Bucky studied the bright object. “What is it?” he asked as he turned it over.

“An arc reactor. The first one. Now, I’m going to use a needle to get this in the right place. Do you want Novocain to deaden the pain?”

(Pain? I’m safe? Rule one.) “Please.”

Tony retrieved something from a side drawer. “I’m always nicking myself when I work. Hazards of being a mechanic.” He handed the tube to Bucky. “Squeeze this on your finger and rub it behind your ear.”

He did that, setting down the arc reactor as he did. Tony put it back in his hands. “3-2-1 done. JARVIS? Can you bring it online?”

Bucky looked up in wonder. He didn’t even see the needle, much less feel pain.

“Didn’t hurt at all, did it?” Tony was smug.

“No, Sir . . . I mean, Tony.”

_Sergeant Barnes, can you hear me?_

“Yes.”

_Am I too loud?_

“A little.”

_Better?_

“Yes.”

_You don’t have to speak. Mouth your words under your breath and I can detect your speech._

_Like this, he breathed._

_Exacty._

_No one can hear us?_
Can you monitor me?

I regularly monitor other members of the Avengers, especially when they have returned from a mission and cannot sleep properly.

You’ll watch?

I will.

Thank you, JARVIS.

You’re welcome, Sergeant Barnes.

By the time they finished the conversation, Tony was gone.

Bucky would have liked poking around Stark’s lab. Instead, JARVIS shooed him out and they spent the rest of the day getting used to each other. JARVIS learned to modulate his transmissions to an extraordinarily low setting so as not to startle the Winter Soldier. After being “Sergeant Barnes’ed” to death, Bucky talked the AI into calling him just “Barnes” through the contact. They experimented with a soft ping that would get his attention without having him jump out of skin.

In addition, JARVIS had to learn his physical baselines and spent a good portion of the day “checking in” with the soldier to determine what sort of environments and conditions might trigger abnormal responses.

The stream of feedback came with a headache and weariness, and the real test came at the end of the afternoon when he returned home. Steve was staring out the windows overlooking Midtown. In the distance, he could see Brooklyn, though not very much of it. His hands were in his pockets and he looked like hell.

Bucky wasn’t in much better shape. He was struggling somewhat now, trying to stay in focus and on task (shower, food). Something smelled good though. He concentrated on that.

Steve flicked a glance at him. “Go get a shower, Bucky. Dinner will be ready in twenty.”

You’re safe, Barnes. Do you want to follow that order?

“Piss off, Rogers. I’ll get a shower when I want.” Barnes said it deliberately as he leaned against the kitchen counter, waiting for Steve’s reaction. The one he got wasn’t the one he was expecting. Steve just leaned forward, his forehead against the glass.

“Steve? You okay?”

“Coulson has a mission.” There was pain in that statement, and Bucky wondered if Steve had found his breaking point. Months of dealing with him and Darcy, trying to keep them together, only to have it all fall apart on him.

“You want to go.” (Always itching for a fight.)

“Yeah, I do.”

Bucky hadn’t held him back before. Wasn’t going to start now. “Then go.”

“Sam and Natasha are going with me. Thor has offered to stay here with you.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”
Those beautiful, haunted blue eyes finally connected with his as Steve turned around, leaning against the glass. “Who is your new handler?”

“JARVIS. Stark gave me a contact this afternoon. Been getting used to it.”

“Why?”

Bucky glared at him. “Don’t be stupid, punk. I want us. I don’t want you having to lead me around with the leash. It’s not good for us. And we can’t get Darcy back if I’m still broken.”

Her name caused Steve to look back to the window. “Do you want Darcy?”

“Of course I do. I miss her. She’s ours.” Fuck, he was tired. (Asset.)

_Barnes, you’re safe. You’re in the Tower with Steve. You’re safe. Breathe it out._

Bucky concentrated to keep his focus out of the Winter Soldier (experiencing, not assessing). He moved to the sofa and sat on the back of it so he could run his fingers across the leather. The sensation kept him grounded.

Steve hunched his shoulders. “I didn’t think she would leave like that. As if what we have--had--wasn’t enough.”

“Hey--” Bucky started.

But Steve abruptly changed the subject. “This mission, I’ll be gone for a one or two days at the most.”

Knowing his friend as he did, Bucky didn’t challenge him. Instead, he asked, “When are you leaving?”

“In the next forty-eight hours.”

“Then let’s make the best of tonight. Now, I’m going to take a shower.”

Steve set a loaf of bread on the table as Bucky came out of the bedroom they shared. He’d taken the time to dress, selecting a black jean pant that fit closer than what he’d worn before and paired it with a loose button-down. He liked clothes and missed the slick rags he’d worn before the war. Darcy had mentioned he might like to have new ones tailored to fit, either exposing or concealing his arm as he chose.

He still wasn’t used to the practice of not combing his hair and used the gel to pull his hair off his face. Steve had cut it some a few days ago, enough to keep it off his shoulders. He sort of liked the length and wasn’t in a hurry to shorten it any time soon. He shaved with a straight razor still, as did Steve. (Smother. Felt right.)

So when he saw the care Steve had taken to set a nice table, he was glad he’d cleaned up. There was frank admiration in his face, mixed with contrition. Bucky went to him, running his palms from Steve’s shoulders to his hands, turning them to kiss each wrist where the pulse jumped.

“I’ve no expectations tonight. I want you. But not with you all torn up over Darcy. All I ask is that we spend the evening just the two of us. And when we go to bed, you let me hold you.”

When he saw the tension run out of Steve’s body, he knew he’d made the right call.
“You’re assuming I can keep my hands off you,” Steve quipped, with just a hint of the fire Bucky adored.

“You problem, love, definitely not mine.”

Steve reached out, skimming the back of his fingers along Bucky’s jaw line. “You haven’t called me that in a very long time.”

To keep the mood light, Bucky admitted, “I slipped once, in front of Dum-Dum Dugan.”

“So that’s how the Howling Commandos found out. Tony told me they all knew. Dinner is ready, if you want it. I’d like to hear the story while we eat.”

It wasn’t complicated. Dum-Dum had Bucky’s back that day as they were setting up on a hill, giving him cover while Bucky lined up the shot. Steve and the rest of the Howling Commandos were below, taking out the sentries one at a time. There was an enemy soldier ahead of them, one that only Dum-Dum and Bucky could see from their vantage point. He had the man in his cross-hairs, but Steve kept getting in the sight-line.

“Come on, love. Let me do my job,” he breathed.

As if he’d heard, Steve hesitated. Bucky pulled the trigger, taking the sentry out. Steve turned his head, giving him a salute in lieu of a thank you. He ducked his head in acknowledgement.

Dum-Dum kept his own rifle at the ready. “How long you two been together?”

“Nine years, going on ten.”

“Explains a lot.”

“You got a problem?”

“Not at all, Sergeant. One thing I’ve learned over here? Life ain’t nuthin’ like what you thought it should be.”

They passed the evening trading stories. Bucky told Steve a little about the Red Room and how he’d become Natasha’s instructor. There was so much he couldn’t share, for they were her secrets for him to keep (knowing that their attachment had been genuine formed a solid ground for their growing friendship now), but he told Steve what he could.

Steve told him about navigating the new century and all the pitfalls therein. Some of them were funny, some were sad. A few were bittersweet.

The freedom to be was intoxicating. No one could hear them, see them, or judge them in here. They relaxed in each other’s company in a way that maybe hadn’t happened since high school, before there were expectations and side-glances from the neighborhood crowd.

They chuckled as they tried to sit together on the sofa. Bucky used to tug Steve down in front of him, sitting so they were chest to back with Steve’s head leaning against his shoulder. That didn’t work so well now that Steve was a full inch taller than he.

“We were a lot thinner back then, Buck. How in the hell do we do this?”
By changing it altogether. Bucky nudged Steve so that he had his head in Bucky’s lap, where they could hold hands. Steve took his time exploring Bucky’s metal fingers. “How is it different?” he asked as he drew his fingers along each digit, watching the way the plates shifted as Bucky responded to his touch.

“I owe Darcy for this, love. The tech is superb and I didn’t know because of how much they were dulling the sensitivity. Easier to work on it, I guess. There isn’t anything I can’t feel or do with it.”

“What does it feel like if you hit something with it?”

“What does it feel like when you hit something?” Bucky countered. “Same impact and pressure, but I can’t break my knuckles and won’t bruise afterward.”

“Does your arm feel like another part of you or is it a tool that you use?”

“Feels like me. Sensations are different, but they mean the same thing.” Bucky liked that Steve was relaxed enough to ask all these questions.

Steve rubbed circles in his palm. “What is this like?”

“The Darcy version is that the metal and biometric sensors are conducting signals up the arm and through the nerve endings where my arm is attached. The serum helped my brain figure out what all the transmissions mean, so that when you touch me, I recognize it as a touch and not a burn or a scratch.”

“What’s your version?”

“Feels fucking fantastic,” he murmured as he closed his eyes, lost in sensation, lost in his lover’s touch. He refused to think of anything else as Steve traced over each sensor and joint, making it his as much as Darcy had weeks ago. The dizzying patterns Steve made pulled out dozens of memories.

Lying on the bed as Steve rained kisses along his spine, clever fingers working downward until Bucky was sweating from need.

Trading sarcastic jabs as they figured out how to kiss. Bucky had more practice. Steve was willing to catch up.

The hands on his neck rubbing out yet another headache.

 Velvet lips on his cock and those wicked, innocent blue eyes knowing exactly how to make him fall apart.

A tree, a forest, desperate hands fumbling for purchase as Bucky got his hands on Steve’s new body. Where nothing was the same and yet it was. Silk over steel and those same gorgeous blue eyes.

The next thing he knew, Steve covered his mouth with his. God, the taste. He knew this taste. The salt, the breeze from the sea. Without thinking, he parted his lips so that Steve could come inside, licking in, touching his tongue to Bucky’s. He retreated, taking Bucky’s lower lip to nibble before coming back for more.

Under his hands, Steve’s shoulders bunched and flexed under the shirt—a shirt that Bucky accidentally tore at the seam when Steve shifted to suck on the pulse point under his ear. “I was going to ask if you still liked that. Guess I know the answer,” he murmured.

“Fabric caught in the joints. You’re still the mouthiest kid I know, Rogers.”
“Yeah, well, you like my mouth.”

It took everything Bucky had not to tumble Steve the floor and finish taking off his clothes. “I do. I really, really do.”

But it was Steve who took his time unfastening the buttons on Bucky’s shirt, peeling the fabric away to reveal his chest.

Bucky laid his hand over Steve’s, pressing it flat so he couldn’t continue. “We don’t have to do this.”

There was that guileless look that he didn’t believe for a moment. “It’s only second base, Buck, we’ve got a long way to go. We’ll get there when we get there.”

“The man with a plan.”

“Shut up and kiss me, Barnes.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” he sassed.

“Fuck—“

Bucky yanked Steve to him, devouring that smart mouth and those full lips. Deliberately, this time, he pulled the rest of the shirt off Steve, leaving it in tatters.

When he came up for air, he breathed, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, you’re gorgeous, love.” All the other times, post-serum, that they had made love, it had been in the dark, or under covers, or in a small tent. Just once had they fucked outside, and they’d been fully dressed. He’d seen Steve over the last few weeks, of course, and touched his fingers to his name. But this, with his skin glowing with want, well, Bucky was only mortal.

Steve choked back a laugh. “Bucky,” he admonished in shock. “Your ma, and mine, would wash your mouth out with soap if they heard you say that.”

“Yeah, hmm, they never got to see you like this.” he winked. “What did Darcy say?”

“Same thing you did. Almost verbatim. And you’re one to talk.” Steve reached across, tucking a hand under the shoulder of the shirt. As if Steve had never seen him before, he nudged it off, marveling at Bucky as his chest came into view.

Shyness was burned out in the army, if there was anything left by then. Nevertheless, Bucky felt terribly exposed with Steve’s perusal. His fingers skimmed down the twist of scars (just as Darcy’s had), before moving on to his chest to slide down his abs. Idly, Steve asked, “When you’re jerking off in the shower, which hand do you use?”

The frank question startled a real laugh out of Bucky. “Depends on my mood. Favorite, though, has got to be Darcy’s.”

Steve flinched, falling backwards off Bucky’s lap and onto the floor. “Son of a— Darcy?”

Bucky followed him down, stretching out and leaning up on an elbow. With his metal fingertips, he followed the lines of Steve’s nipples, liking the feel of them tightening under his touch. “Thought you knew. You two were … fonduing… (he grinned, just to annoy Steve) … or finished fonduing, anyway. I was still holding her hand. Sorry, love, but my cock kept bumping her hand. He was kinda eager. She did something about it.”
“Darcy?”

“Shortish, dark haired dame warming your bed for the last two years?” He scratched his head mockingly.

“Is that why she’s been avoiding us?”

Bucky stilled as he cataloged Darcy’s actions and reactions for the two weeks before she left. “Shit,” he muttered. “I didn’t connect the two.”

Steve rolled to his back, laying an arm over his eyes. “Couldn’t figure it out. What do want to bet she saw us that night we were in the Tower?”

“When? In the kitchen?”

“It’s the three of us crossing a line we hadn’t agreed on, then you and I making moves on each other without talking to her about it. No wonder she got on a plane.” Steve flexed his abs to sit up. The mood was lost and Steve was morose again.

Bucky laid a hand Steve’s bicep. “Hey, you said you’d spend the evening with me. Not asking that we pick up where we left off, just that you stay with me.”

Steve reached for his shirt and studied the tattered seams. “Yeah, well, we crossed that line too, didn’t we?”

The forlorn anger set something off, and Bucky tried to concentrate. Reaching over the sofa, Bucky snagged his sweater and threw it at Steve, who caught it when it hit his chest. (I’m safe?)

Barnes, you’re safe. Steve is upset, and not entirely with you. Breathe.

Bucky staggered to the bedroom to lean on the door frame. “No ice. Please. I’ll do better.”

Barnes, you’re in the Tower where you are safe and no one will hurt you. Steve is with you. He is worried.

He sat in the corner of the bedroom with his head in his hands. “Darcy.” (Mission: Protect Stark. Mission: failed.) “Please—no ice.” He shivered in anticipation. Then he closed his eyes and went there.

*****

Steve curled up practically on top of Bucky’s lap, chest to chest, pulling the electric blanket over them to get him warm. He cursed under his breath the entire time, blaming himself for sending Bucky into a panic and for pressuring Darcy in all the wrong ways.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone. Over Bucky’s shoulder, he carefully typed a single message line and pressed send.
Darcy glanced down at her phone when it buzzed with a text from Steve.

She sighed while shifting her bag higher on her shoulder. “Thanks, Happy,” she said as he closed the limo door. The six hour flight had followed two nights of the sketchiest of sleep. She’d written her reports to Pepper and wrapped up her trip in record time.

The plane hadn’t touched down in London when she’d figured out that she’d made a terrible mistake. Sleep had been hard to come by (the bed too empty, too cold). If she hadn’t had a full itinerary by the time she landed, she would have hidden in the hotel the entire trip. But Clint kept her honest (and sane, but that went without saying). By the end of the first week, she was compressing visits and eliminating downtime so she could go home. Eighteen days later, she caught the Stark plane to New York, not sure if Steve would speak to her now or if she’d broken things beyond repair.

*Please come home.*

A hard knot inside her stomach untwisted. She’d only had one other text from him on the day she’d fled. (“I’m sorry. I love you.”)

JARVIS welcomed her home with a quick rundown of current events, though he was careful not to gossip about her housemates. Former housemates. He directed her to the fourth floor of the Avengers tower (there were seven, three were occupied, the bottom was the commons area. Tony hadn’t foreseen the team doubling and tripling up on the floors for company.) There was a gorgeous staircase that wound all the way up to the topmost floor. The bottom of it landed squarely on the Tony’s helipad.

She could have taken the elevator, but maybe she was punishing herself by climbing the four flights instead (or stalling. But her legs hurt like hell when she got there). She knocked on Steve and Bucky’s door. Found herself smashed against a solid chest. "You're here," Steve said in gruff wonder. His hands were in her hair, on her back, his mouth on hers before she could answer.

He let her down long enough for her to reply, "Happy just brought me from the airport." She held up the bag. "Haven't even dropped it off yet."

"Darce, I missed you." He took the tote and set it down inside as he closed the door behind her.

Taking in the shirt he was wearing (Bucky's, she’d picked it out), the remains of date night wine, and the lingering scent of pot roast (Steve loved it, hated making it, definitely special occasion food). "We have a lot to talk about, Steve."

"More than you know," he agreed. He led her to the bedroom, where Bucky, shirtless, had retreated to the corner and gone silent. He was on the floor, legs outstretched, sitting on the floor with his hands loose between his legs. His face was utterly blank, just as he’d been that day in her lab. Steve had draped a blanket over his shoulders.

"He hasn't been like this the whole time I've been gone?" she asked, horrified as she knelt in front of him.

"No. He's better. A lot better. I... I set him off. Just a little while ago. We had an argument. I’ve been
trying to hold him, talk to him, anything.”

Darcy pressed her lips together as she considered Bucky’s state. She pressed her hand to his cheek. "I'm home, I shouldn't have left, Barnes." When he didn't respond, she kicked off her shoes and jerked her chin at Steve. "Can you hand me a pillow? In case it’s going to be a while?"

Steve handed her one, and she wiggled underneath Bucky's arm so that she was sitting against his chest. The pillow was for her butt and Steve helped her to drape the electric blanket over the both of them. She ran her left hand over Bucky’s and worked her fingers between his so she could bring his arm around her. She hissed at the cold. “I’m building you a damned heater tomorrow.” She gathered up his other hand too and brought it around her.

She leaned backward, so that her head rested on Barnes’ shoulder, sandwiching the electric blanket with her body so it couldn't shift. "We'll be all right, I think.” She didn’t like these episodes, but like Steve, had learned to deal with them.

Steve looked like hell and his lined face told her too much. “You look ragged. Have you slept?” she asked.

"Not much," he admitted. Then he blurted out, “I'm sorry, Darcy, for chasing you away. I love you, doll. Nothing’s going to change that.”

She bit her lip (god she hated apologizes. Especially having to make them). “You didn’t chase me away. I left. If I needed space, I should have told you. I know what leaving does to you. I was wrong and I am sorry.”

In the wake of her confession, she discovered a raw anger emanating from Steve. In the silence that followed, she began to think maybe she’d broken something fundamental between them (please … no). He turned away, staring out the bedroom door for a good while. Her heart hurt at the sight of him, and she rubbed away the wet that showed up unexpectedly on her lashes (no tears, damn it) with her sleeve. She rubbed her fingers against Bucky’s, wanting comfort. But there was no response.

At last, Steve turned around with his hands in his pockets. Quietly, though with a hard edge that she’d never heard before, he said, “Be angry with me, Darce. Scream at me. Punch me. Tell me you’re done with me and this isn’t going to work. Do anything but that, love.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. Steve had never called her that before. “I won’t. I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” he said in earnest. He ran his fingers through his hair, pure frustration if she’d ever seen it. “Darcy? I know I’m terrible at these things, but I thought we were better than all this.” He shook his head. “What am I missing?”

The time in London had given her a chance to figure it out. None of it was easy and she hoped Steve would understand. “I’m going to say something and I need you to know that I’m not putting you on a pedestal for this, okay?”

He nodded, lowering himself to sit in front of her. “All right.”

“Do you remember me telling you about the conversation with Aunt Peggy when I was eight? Where she told me about the kind of love you and Bucky had—and that kind of love being worth any price?”

“Yes.”
“That’s it, Steve. That’s the ideal for me. That’s the kind of love that has you crossing thirty miles of who knows what to save the love of your life from hell. It’s the kind of love that no one, not even HYDRA, can erase. When Sam told me about Bucky, I knew two things. One, that you would go after Bucky. It was the right thing—the only thing—you could do. But I also knew that if he came home, we—Steve and Darcy—weren’t an option anymore. There is no one who deserves happiness more than the two of you. I can’t do anything to take that away.”

Darcy clutched at Bucky’s fingers again, to no avail. “I knew there was a chance Bucky might not come back to you. But when I could see that he still loved you, I told him that when he was able to stand on his own that I would leave,” she admitted.

The cold fire in Steve’s eyes made her flinch as his anger washed over her. “You know, that’s damned presumptuous of you. Obviously it never occurred to you that I would walk thirty miles for you. I have tried to tell you, to show you, to do anything I can to make sure you knew that I love you. And if you love me the way I love you then we will figure this thing out. Because I don’t have any answers. I don’t know what you are willing to do.”

“What are my options?”

He rolled back to the floor, pressing his hands to his face. “You would ask it that way.” He tilted his head up and slid his hands behind his neck. “Doll, I’m not thinking straight. I’m worried about Bucky, missed you something awful and I want to think about what you said. I don’t want to mess this up again now that you’re home.”

“Steven, love, I came home because I don’t want to give up on us.”

He reached out and slid his hand around her ankle, clutching it hard. Her heart sort of melted at all at once (relief/remorse). "Come on. Looks like we're all staying on the floor for a while."

Steve brightened so much that the guilt she'd been feeling was amplified by a factor of ten. He snatched a quilt off the bed to settle his head on her lap. She freed one hand from Bucky to feather her fingers through Steve’s hair. He caught it, kissed it with a tenderness that reminded her all over again why she loved him.

He closed his eyes. She doubted he would sleep, but he seemed content to stay with her in spite of their still-unresolved issues. But at least there was groundwork now.

Aware of the tension in her own neck and shoulders, she had to consciously relax into Bucky’s frame. As she did, he subtly shifted to take her weight, even supporting her with both arms. But his expression never changed.

She’d missed them.

Missing Steve was a given. Eighteen days without his company, without texts, without knowing he was okay without her had cost her far more than she’d expected. Regardless of his feelings for Bucky, Darcy wasn’t ready to give up on her relationship with him. They complemented each other. His crazy missions, her solid ties to family. Her quirky, modern sense of humor, his dry wit. Her strange brilliance and his way of making a house a home. She discovered that she really didn’t care where she lived so long as it was near him.

The love between them was real and unchanged. Through all of this, Steve had gone out of his way to reassure her of that. His forgiveness for her dumb-ass move was more than she’d expected.

Missing Bucky as much as she had was the real surprise.
She liked seeing his face light up as he picked out the pieces of who he’d been with Steve. She missed the arguments once she’d figured out that he was counting on those squabbles to find some of those parts. She missed fending off his out-of-time flirting technique that had totally worked when Steve did it two years earlier with a whole lot less finesse. She missed watching his eyes track after Steve and marveling over the love she found in them.

She missed the way his eyes brightened when they did something silly together and made Steve laugh, or better, made him flush with want. She missed the way Barnes studied her work and got it. She missed holding his hand and his dark citrus scent.

More than that, there was something in the way both Steve and Bucky treated her that made her feel like she was precious and beautiful. Adored even. As if they knew who and what she was, and still wanted more.

After stepping all over bodies and hearts and broken minds for months, she’d expected to be relieved at the silence and lack of demands, and most especially, the freedom from having her heart run through the wringer on a daily basis.

Instead, she wanted all of it back. Even if it meant she had to learn to share.

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The weight was unexpected. Warmth flooded through his limbs. Music (symphonic) played. Something tickled his chin and he moved his head away.

“Bucky?” A voice (female) called his name.

He discovered he was holding something (warm. Steve, from before, curled up against him.) He blinked, focusing on the dark head on his shoulder, then on Steve’s blond one near his leg.

Memories swirled—of dinner, of Steve, of the couch—and of Darcy’s absence. They fluttered then settled to the ground in a sequence that made sense. “You came back.” He tightened his arms, leaning in to smell her hair. (Stark. Safe. I have a mission.)

“I missed you. I made a mistake. A big one.”

His mind cleared, though it was still hard to speak. (She’s here.) “No fault …of yours. We… messed up. .. …crossed a line.”

Darcy let out a huff. “The list of things the three of us need to discuss is getting longer, but it’s nowhere near morning and I think we’re all exhausted. Can we adjourn to bed and try later? My butt is numb.”

“Where …?” Steve asked that, as he swallowed hard. “Where do you want to be?”

“I want to be with both of you tonight. I’ve slept like crap since I left. Apparently I got used to sleeping like a sardine. But that doesn’t matter because I was the one who left. So I can crash on the couch or in my lab.”

A streak of tension ran through her, and Bucky stroked her arms. “Stay,” he whispered.
She nodded as she relaxed again. “For tonight,” she agreed (Forever).

Darcy turned pink at the looks Bucky and Steve exchanged. Steve rolled to his feet, pulling Darcy and Bucky up in turn. “Who gets … the middle?” Bucky wondered.

“Me,” Steve insisted. “When she’s not holding your hand, Darcy likes to hang off the edge of the bed. She also sleeps with three pillows unless I can wrestle one or two away from her after she falls asleep. I call dibs on holding the girl tonight.”

“Yeah, well … I’ll be holding you, same … thing.”

“Shut up, Buck.”

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Darcy ducked into the bathroom and changed clothes. Like all the suites, this one was beautifully appointed. The tub was big enough for three. The shower, she noted, had a wide seat in it and multiple nozzles—perfect for a soldier or two wanting to get in and be warm in a hurry. The towels had their own warming rack and radiant heat emanated from the floor.

She tugged on the pajamas she had left in her bag, hopping a little bit to get the pant legs in place.

With a rap on the door, Steve called out, “Are you done?”

“Almost.”

“No hiding. Bucky said JARVIS said he would tattle.”

_Really?_ she subvocalized to her brother. (_The contact stayed on these days. JARVIS felt better and she didn’t mind._)

_They missed you, Lewis._

_So you’re on their side?_ 

_No sides to this, sis. Just … give yourself a chance._

_Okay, Dr. JARVIS._

_You’re stalling._

_I am not._ She yanked the door open. Steve tugged her close to kiss her, sweetly, deeply—as if he was trying to make up for all that had happened. The tank top and boxers he wore only accented his muscles and thighs. She dug her fingers in when the kiss threatened to become something more. (_Her lady parts gave her a raised eyebrow and she told them to hush._)

“Come on, doll.” He wouldn’t let go of her as they made their way to the king-sized bed. Bucky was already lying on his side (Still no shirt. She hereby declared them banned when she was on the premises.)

“Deal,” Bucky agreed as Steve took the middle spot, and pulled her in with him.
“Oh god, did I say that out loud?”

“You did, Princess.”

Darcy let out a mortified giggle as she sealed her back against Steve’s chest. As she settled, Bucky rested his hand on Steve’s hip.

She switched off the light and never knew who fell asleep first.

Chapter End Notes

Musical Reference: "Tennessee" from the Pearl Harbor soundtrack by Hans Zimmer
Enlighten Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She was lucky to get four hours of sleep before her body woke thinking she was still in Europe. The boys must have been exhausted. Steve had rolled to his back, and Bucky was sprawled against him, one hand resting on Steve’s chest (just … beautiful. not fair), giving Darcy a chance to slip out of bed and down to her lab (jet lag sucked. She had to do the damned walk of shame and her lady parts were bitching about the lack thereof).

The keys to the Bugatti were hanging on the hook just inside the door. (Oh, she was going to pay …) She stumbled in the kitchen (no ambition today, just dear deity of choice, coffee and hoping she could think coherently) and into the shower.

By the time she was out, feeling vaguely human and wrapped only in her robe with wet hair trailing over her shoulder, Steve was already there (so much for sneaking out).

“Where’s Bucky?” she asked. (What did it say that she expected them to come as a set now? Too much? Nothing at all?)

“Still sleeping.” Three steps and he closed the distance between them. As if the last three weeks hadn’t happened, he found her lips, his hands going everywhere, skimming the curve of her breasts, the top of her ass. “Is this okay?” he breathed against her lips.

She fumbled for his buttons, slipping enough of them open to press against the taut skin underneath. “More than okay.”

He scooped her up and headed for the couch, kicking the ottoman out of the way as he set her down again. “Seems to me I haven’t been taking care of my girl properly. Gonna fix that now.” He traced her lips with his tongue until she opened them, hungry for more. He kissed her brainless (oceans) as he pressed her into the cushions. The moment she relaxed into them, the robe slid to her sides, leaving her exposed to roving hands. A tweak here and a swirl there had her twitching. He settled to his knees to lower his mouth to her much-neglected lady parts and set them to singing the Halleluiah Chorus.

Long fingers stretched up inside her as his tongue danced on her bud. She jerked and twitched when he wrapped on hand under her thigh to bring her closer. The other hand trailed along her damp skin to play with a nipple, to slide along her waist, to spread her open so that he could nip at her clit and send her screaming.

Once wasn’t enough. His mouth found the peak of her breast. Steve played with it, hand still buried between her legs with his thumb doing some of the work this time.

“You win. I want you, Steve. I want you now.”

“I know, love.” (There it was again)

Still shaking from what he was doing between her legs, she fought to get his shirt off. But he didn’t let her touch him. He pulled away long enough to shrug it off, and then captured one of her wrists in each of his hands. Carefully controlled, he held them against the cushions while he tormented her with enough licking and suckling to mess with her sanity. Maybe after the third (or the fifth… they were running together now) time he made her come, he let go to shake his pants off.
She was swollen and so sensitive that all Steve had to do was press against her with his cock to have her trembling again. “I can’t—it’s—"

“Want me to stop?” (There was that innocent voice again and angelic blue eyes.)

She’d lost her mind. Yeah. That. “God, no. I want you too much.”

“There’s my girl.” He pressed, a slow slide in that drove her mad. “I love this. I love what I can do to you. Nobody knows you like I do, Darcy. You’re my girl. I love you.”

The litany did as much as his cock did, and by the time he slotted home, she was convulsing around him, saturating him in her juices. Her eyes glazed over as she fought to retain even a tiny bit of sanity. “Goes both ways, Steven. I love you. I love the feeling of your cock, your hands, your mouth. I love being with you.”

His control slipped, and Darcy felt his cock stiffen just that last little bit. “I love your smart ass mouth too, Rogers. Love me. That’s all I ask.”

Her words did him in and he stroked hard and deep as he came, spilling hot and hard inside her. He somehow slipped a hand under her ass and pressed her even closer as he did. The contact of his body on her clit split her apart and she twisted wildly, chanting his name.

As they panted in unison, he pulled her down to the floor. He liked keeping her on top of him afterward. “Never thought cold glass would feel good, Darce,” he breathed as his arms went around her. “I do love you. Always will.”

When she regained at least some of her senses, she sat up, straddling him. He winked and laced his fingers behind his head.

“You’re smug.”

He waited. For something. Something for her to discover.

She blinked.

In white ink, entwined with James Buchanan Barnes, Steve had added Darcy Maria Stark.

He cupped her cheek. “When you are ready to tell the world who you are, I’ll have it done in black.”

(Her heart stumbled. Yeah, she’d fucked up. While she’d been running away, Steve had been writing her name on his skin.) She traced the letters. “How do we do this?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do we do this? Going forward? We had a life, Steve. We were talking about moving in together. Shit, we were going to move in together and we both knew it.” As she spoke, Steve dragged his callused hands from her shoulders to her fingers, kissing the tips. She shivered from the caress. (liked it, her skin hummed) “Damn it, you both do that to me.”

“What?”

“That thing you just did.” She jammed her eyelids shut. “You … Barnes touches me the same way you do sometimes. Just like that. It’s hard … to keep you … my feelings separate.” She got it out, breathless with the struggle.

But Steve seemed to understand. “It’s not fair, is it? Bucky and I have all these ways we’ve learned
to show we love each other. And I’ve used them on you because they felt good to me and I want to make you feel just as loved. Now it’s Bucky who is touching you and you don’t know how to make sense of the feelings.”

“Exactly.”

“What if I told you that Bucky means the exact same thing when he does them?”

She shook her head. “Barnes doesn’t love me.” (He’d been touching her that way for months.)

Steve angled his head at her with an odd smile. “Is that what this is about? Darcy, he’s been gone on you from the beginning.”

“Codependency is not love. It’s not healthy and I won’t take advantage of him like that.” Her words were almost rote as she recited it. (It was safer that way.)

A slow, sensual grin spread across his face. She sucked in her breath as she could see the pieces falling into place for him. “You love him.”

(Don’t press. Please.) “Of course I do, Steve. It would be impossible not to care for the person you love so much.”

But he went to an elbow and trailed fingers through a lock of her damp hair, his eyes lighting up. “It’s more than that. Damn. Sam was right,” he breathed. “This isn’t about you and me, not entirely. This is about you and Bucky. You’re in love with him.” The combination of confidence and wonder in his voice had Darcy trying to pull away from Steve, to deny it, but he caught her hands and held them against his heart. “No. Not going to happen, doll. Tell me I’m wrong.”

Steve gave her just enough of his “Cap” look that she couldn’t (wouldn’t) dance her way out of this. “I can’t,” she admitted. Her heart was beating double-time.

“How long?” he coaxed.

“I knew who he was from your art and how you spoke of him.”

“Darcy—”

She bit her lip. “He put his arm around me on that ladder and I felt safe. I wasn’t scared of the Winter Soldier. I saw Bucky’s face, and it was, ‘oh, I’m glad you’re home.’”

“That makes you friends or maybe even family, Darce. When did you fall in love?”

She trembled. “Steve … it doesn’t matter.”

The light in his eyes was unnerving. “Yes, I think it does.”

“That morning, the first time the three of us shared a bed. I woke up with you holding me, and I had my head on Bucky’s thigh. He was playing with my hair. I remembered thinking that I would do anything at all to have that feeling every single day.”

He kissed her knuckles. “So why aren’t you fighting for it?”

“Because he’s yours. I won’t—I can’t come between the two of you.” She emphasized the last part. “Remember what we talked about last night?”

“And that’s why you left.” Steve sat up, holding onto her as he did. He muttered, “If you and Bucky
would stop being so damned noble about this, we’d be a lot happier.” He reached for his pants with one hand, dug out his cell phone and started texting (if she wasn’t so confused, she would have been proud).

“What are you doing?”

“Telling Bucky to get his ass over here to ask you out on a date. He’s so far gone on you he’s scared he’s going to fuck this up for me too. Got a dress unpacked? ‘Cause he’s dying to take you to dinner.”

Her mouth dropped open. Was that what all the months of flirting had been about? “Steve, I can’t date Bucky.”

He gave her the most intent “are you kidding me” look he’d leveled at her in all the time she’d known him. “Why? And don’t give me the co-dependency answer because Sam will debunk that in about fifteen seconds.”

Her mouth came open. She tried to come up with a different one. She had nothing.

“If I wasn’t in the picture, would you go on a date with Bucky? A real date, not a, what did you call them? A fuck-buddy date?”

“I did not just hear that from you.”

“Darcy—“

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.” She took his request seriously, knowing the full implications of either answer. “Yes. If he didn’t manage to piss me off before he could ask me out.”

“Then get dressed because he’s on his way.” He skimmed a finger around her nipple and made it zing.

“Holy shit, Rogers!” She scrambled for the bathroom, yanking emergency clothes out of her storage area on her way in.

Steve followed her into the bathroom, grinning like a batshit-crazy villain. “Where you like this when I asked you out?”

“I was younger and much more stupid.” She tugged a shirt over her head, one she’d stolen from her dad’s closet. (Iron Man, of course.) “Damn it, no one, much less your boyfriend, can miss that I have been thoroughly sexed in the last hour.” That was said as she zipped up her jeans and turned around to look at her ass.

Steve scratched his stubble with all the nonchalance of a cat with a canary. “Looks good on you.”

“The sex or the jeans?” she quipped.

“Yes?” He reached out to pull free a strand of her hair that was caught under the shirt. His fingers grazed the back of her neck.

It was those little caresses that melted her anytime she was around Steve. Small things few others would ever notice, even if they were watching. “How can you be so calm about all this? What if I screw all of this up for us?” She ran mousse through her hair and slicked on some lipstick.

“Because you can’t. I’ll always have Bucky. You know this.” He set his chin on her head to hug her
from behind. (Best hugs, hands down.) “I love you. Bucky … well, he’ll have to tell you himself. But we can give you all the time and space you need.” He pressed a kiss to the curve of her neck. His breath warming her neck, as he worked his way up to murmur in her ear, “You think I’m good at sex? Who do you think I learned it from, Darce? Try to remember I’m the one forever saying and doing all the wrong things. You’re the one who looks past all that and sees me anyway.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Holy shit, Rogers, now you’re scaring me.” And she was. The idea of Steve and Bucky together … well that was a whole bunch of images she tried not to dwell on (okay, she didn’t try that hard. *Fuck*).

“Of the two of us, I wasn’t the last person with a hand around Bucky’s cock, doll. Don’t tell me you aren’t interested.” His eyes glowed blue and the wicked, wicked smile was making her lady parts perk up again.

Darcy covered her hot face, mortified that he knew. “I was … I shouldn’t have done that. We, you —”

“I,” he emphasized, “am elated that you find Bucky attractive. You won’t get jealousy from me, Darce. This is everything I wanted.”

She stuttered, “Wh-What about a relationship? What about living together?”

“Seems to me we’re already figuring out the first part. Second part is up to you. We’ve got a place. You can move in, stay with us, stay in the other bedroom or stay in your lab. Maybe even it’s time to turn this place into a real apartment.”

“What if I said I couldn’t do this? The three of us?”

“You’ve already told me you love Bucky. In love. And I know how he feels about you. Any particular reason you want to deny yourself that?”

Darcy’s mouth dropped open. Steve seemed to have it all figured out and patiently waited for her to catch up. He continued, “Never said it would be easy, Darce. But you’ve stuck with me this far. I can’t explain it yet, but all this is right. It feels right, like it’s the way it should have been from the beginning.”

“Lewis, Sergeant Barnes is on the elevator,” JARVIS announced.

Darcy shook her head. “He doesn’t know me.” Steve just chuckled, infuriating her and she stomped her foot just a little. “Steve Rogers, do you have any idea how weird it is to have you setting me up on a date with your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, well, do you know how long we’ve made plans for when we found the right dame?”

Something about the way he said that put her on edge. She looked away, then down at her fingernails.

Steve sagged against the wall behind her, closing his eyes, but not before she saw the regret in them. “I owe you an apology.”

Darcy caught her breath, listening.

He ducked his head a little as he hunched his shoulders. “I never asked. I got caught up in loving both of you. I’m so scared of losing either of you that I didn’t ask if you were willing to change things between us.”
A knot in her chest loosened up. “Ask me now.”

He drew his hand along the front of his hairline; a nervous habit Bucky had told her dated back to when they were just boys. “Damn, I am not doing this in your bathroom, Darcy. Come on.” He tugged her into the lab, where he could sit on the back of the sofa and be face to face with her. “Better.”

“Darcy,” he started as he took her hand. “I have someone I love—as much as I love you—who wants to date you, to see if we can make a real trio out of this. One where you’ll be in the middle, and I’ll be in the middle, and my friend will be in the middle and it’s going to be complicated and messy and probably as hard as anything we’ve ever done. I can’t promise it’s going to work, but I think it will. And I’m asking for more than a turn under the sheets. I’m asking about three of us making a family out of this, and having kids, and everything that goes with that.”

She let out a soft whistle as she squeezed his hand. “Now see? All that makes a difference. I’m open-minded, Steve. I understand how important your friend is to you. I got that when you couldn’t speak his name for the better part of a year. I got it when “I, Steve” was “Us, Bucky and Steve” long before Bucky came home. The last thing I want to do is come between the two of you. But what you’re offering is something different. And if what you say is true about Bucky, he wants something different too.” She let her voice become whimsical, to lighten to seriousness of the conversation. “Although, just pointing out, still weird that you’re doing the setting up.”

He crept a hand around to her waist, leaning so that he could touch his forehead to hers. “Darcy--”

“I didn’t say that I’m not willing to try, Steve. Just that it’s weird, okay?”

A slow smile curved his lip up as he raised an eyebrow. “You have an AI for a sibling, Tony Stark for a father, an ancient Norse god as an honorary brother, a 96-year old boyfriend and you think going a date is weird?”

“How point made.”

“And Darcy, you were a surprise to Bucky too.”

“That doesn’t seem to bother him.”

“More than you think, doll. But he’ll have to be the one to tell you why.”

Darcy stepped into Steve’s embrace, pressing her head against his and letting his warmth carry through her. One thing in all this was certain. She was a Stark, and if Starks had ever settled for easy, they wouldn’t be where they were today. Hard didn’t scare her. Different whetted her appetite. Steve’s biceps flexed under her hands as he drew along her spine, sending out shivers of want and comfort all at the same time. As always, his touch steadied her, reminding her that this, love and family, was the core of everything.

All told, Bucky was in the lab in less than fifteen minutes from Steve’s text, his hair still damp from a quick wash, though he’d taken the time to pull on skinny jeans and a white Henley that made him look nothing like the Winter Soldier. (More like the kind of the guys she hung out with in college. Just fuck.)

He was biting his lip as he strolled inside the lab, fingertips tucked in his pockets (betraying his nerves—not a Winter Soldier tell). “Missed you this morning, Princess.”

“Blame it on jetlag or you needing your beauty sleep.” Darcy let go of Steve enough to straighten up, though his fingers trailed down her wrist to clasp her hand in his.
“What’s jetlag?”

“Time difference between here and London. Yesterday, this was late afternoon to me. Want coffee?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

Darcy started to turn when an alarm she hadn’t heard months sounded from Steve’s phone. He checked it and the apology was already on his lips.

“You have a mission?” she asked.

“Wheels up in twenty. I wanted back on the roster,” he admitted.

She jerked in shock. “You can’t. You can’t leave him. Who’s—” She stopped her babble when Bucky swiftly crossed the room to hold her fingers behind his ear. “JARVIS? JARVIS is watching you? How did you talk my dad into that?”

“I didn’t. I asked. Both of them,” Bucky said, holding her hand in his.

“When?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“You trust JARVIS?”

“Enough.”

“What about last night?”

Steve ran his hand through his hair. “That was my fault, Darce. It won’t happen again.”

Duty came first—she’d known that from the start. Steve pressed his lips against hers, then reached out and did the same with Bucky. (Why did that seem natural now?) “I’ll be home in a day or two. Not long.” He looked between them. “I love you. Both of you.”

Then he was gone, just like that. She leaned against the sofa, sitting on the edge. The breath had been kicked out of her. (fuckfuckfuck they needed to TALK about these things)

Barnes put a hand on her wrist. “Princess?” There was a timbre in his voice that sounded off and she realized he wasn’t dealing with it any better than she. “JARVIS is telling me to ask if I can hold on to you for a little while. I’m … slipping. Sam says … touch helps to keep me grounded.”

JARVIS wasn’t wrong. Barnes’ eyes were bordering on a flat grey when they settled on the couch, linking hands with her head on his shoulder. “What does it feel like?” she asked, curious.

“I hear … anger. Or orders.” He was slow in answering. “And I shift to assessment. To protect myself. Everything else—feelings, sensations, thoughts—is blocked out—to evaluate the situation.” He reached up to rub his neck. “I’m tryin’—trying—to learn how to use it. Make it a choice. Done it once or twice.”

“Does your head hurt?”

“ss—yes.”

Well aware that his headaches sometimes came on with blinding speed, she didn’t hesitate. “Come on. Lie down and I’ll rub your back.”
As he shifted, Darcy made sure to keep her hands on his shoulders until he settled. “Don’t block, Bucky. I know it’s hard, but I need to you tell me where it hurts.”

“Neck … collarbone.”

She begin the slow process of working the knots out of Bucky’s shoulders, digging thumbs into the top of his neck and working her way down. Generally speaking, getting the neck area moving again relieved the headache then she could concentrate on warming up his shoulder. “Want some music?”

“Just talk to me, Princess. Tell me …’bout your trip.”

So she did. The good. (New tech that Stark Industries would sponsor. Grants that would be offered. People to be hired.) The bad. (Sleepless nights. Clint babysitting her food and alcohol content.) She skipped the ugly, figuring she would tell Steve about the nightmares later.

“Did you miss me?” he murmured.

Yeah, she did. But full confessions were not in order at the moment. “Missed drooling on your thigh,” she teased. “Clint gets all pissy when I do it to him.”

“Barton … doesn’t like me.”

“Of course not. You touched his bow. And you made his shot. He bitched about it for a week.”

“Fixed it, didn’t he?” Bucky mumbled into the cushion, moving a little so he could press against her hands.

“He dragged a physical therapist back to London with him to work on that tendon. How did you know?”

“Had to train. Was my job. They didn’t care how much it hurt, only about precision. I learned.”

Steering the conversation away from that line of thinking, Darcy snarked, “When they get back, it will be fun to watch Barton try again. If he misses, we should evacuate the Tower. How much was he off?”

“One centimeter at twenty-five meters.”

Her hands stilled. “You call that a miss?”

“Yes, when the other eleven targets are hit dead center.”

“Promise me when you guys do some long distance shooting that you’ll invite me along. I want to watch.”

“Why?”

She snickered. “Cause I want to know where to place my bets.”

“On me, Princess. Always on me.”

The tension dribbled out a little at a time, until there was movement again in his muscles. She worked a hand under his shirt to feel the metal shoulder. There was still a streak of cold where the vibranium ran under his skin. “When you get up, I’ve got the specs for a heater to keep your shoulder from cooling off. Drew it up while I was gone and I want you to take a look at it.” She kept her hands there, warming his shoulder until the chill was gone.
Occasionally, she brushed his hair out of the way. His dark strands were thicker than Steve’s finer blond. But playing with his hair wasn’t the plan for the morning. She went back to working her thumbs down the back of his neck.

“Feels good.” Bucky’s voice sounded stronger.

“Helping any?”

“If I say ‘yes’ are going to stop?”

“Not if you bribe me,” she teased. (She figured on coffee.)

“Go to dinner with me.”

(Um, wow. Steve really did send that text.) Realizing her hands hovered over his back, it took a moment to set them back down again to continue the massage. “Okay.”

He let out a breath as if he’d been holding it. “Gonna let me drive the Bugatti? Word is that Stark threw a tantrum when he turned over the keys to Pepper.”

“When was the last time you drove a car, Barnes.”

“1945, I think.”

“In a word, no. Steve has the bike. Use that. I’ll get you a Ford Focus to practice on.” She changed to a light touch, raking her nails lightly along his spine.

He stretched into her scratches like a cat. “That was an insult, I think. Gonna have to look it up.”

“Google is the best, except for JARVIS.”

He sighed in contentment. “Feels good, Princess. Think m’headache is gone.”

“Gone, gone or do you have that achy feeling leftover?”

“The second, but let’s give it time. Want to show me what you dreamed up?”


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With Darcy’s absence, so much had changed. The dynamics had moved from Steve and Darcy with him on the outside to Steve and Bucky with Darcy figuring out where to stand. None of them had planned it and to say that Steve had panicked when he discovered Darcy slipping out this morning would be an understatement. With a kiss to Bucky’s temple (unexpected), he’d been out the door only a few minutes later.

Bucky had gone back to sleep, content in the knowledge that Steve had things in hand. (True sleep, not drugged, not cryo, not in a chair. Just sprawled out, face down, on the softest of sheets. Sam was right, felt like a fucking marshmallow. Didn’t care though.)

When Steve had appeared with Darcy’s name tattooed around his own, he’d accepted that Steve would always be in love with the pair of them. Now, it was up to Bucky and Darcy to figure out how to close the gap between them.
Then he got the text from Steve.

_Darcy is in love with you. Ask her out before we fuck this up again. CS in 20._

Huh. Steve giving him relationship advice. That was a first. Trusting Steve, he’d stumbled out of bed. He’d told Stark that he loved his daughter. He honestly hadn’t thought she could love him back. He was too broken, coming between her and Steve in all the wrong ways.

But he could see a difference this morning—she wasn’t quite reaching out yet, but wasn’t hiding either. Last night, she’d been the light to his darkness. (I’m safe. I have a mission.)

He followed her to her workbench. The gleaming stainless steel didn’t bother him now. Without prompting, JARVIS cued up something with a solid beat and a lot of guitar. The variety of music these days astonished him, as was JARVIS’ ability to detect what he liked and create … playlists?.. yeah, that was the word.

Darcy nudged her glasses into place and pulled up the specs for the heater. The excitement she had was infectious and he found himself echoing her happiness as he looked on. (He could smell Steve on her skin. Intoxicating.)

“May I?” She indicated his shoulder.

“Princess, you don’t have to ask to touch me.”

“Yes, I think I do. When it comes to stuff like this.” She looked away. “Sam gave me a lecture about asking to look at your arm. I’m sorry. It wasn’t right for me to keep asking after you told me ‘no’ the first time.”

_Barnes, she is correct. She must have your permission—just a doctor gets your permission before performing an examination, JARVIS reminded him. Even if she is excited and thinks she has the answers, you do not have to consent to this. We can continue with methods—such as massages and warm showers—that have proven to eliminate your headaches._

He stilled, considering. “Will you explain how it works?”

Darcy smiled. “Of course. And Barnes, we don’t have to do this. Now or ever. I don’t mind having my hands all over your sexy shoulders.”

Maybe she didn’t realize she bit her lip, having cautiously flirted with him. Tension he hadn’t know was there loosened, easing the headache that had started to come back. He smirked and was relieved when she licked her lips (pink, full, wanted to taste) and settled to work.

She opened the hologram of his arm, with the heater highlighted where she wanted to put it. Then she shoved it in his direction so he could look at it. While he turned it on end, she dug around her worktable.

“You know, I’ll do one better. I made a prototype. This is not ready for you, so I won’t even try, Barnes. But you can see where I’m going with it.” She held out a five inch strip of thin film that matched one in the hologram.

He could see a pattern zig-zagging through it. “That’s the actual heater,” she pointed out. She set out a small device and hooked it up, then attached all of that to a palm-sized battery she had sitting on the bench. “This middle thing is the thermistor, which will monitor the temperature in the surrounding metal. When it gets a tenth of a degree lower than your normal body temperature, it will turn the heater on.” She came around to his side and indicated an arc (without touching, he noticed) near
where the top panel was connected to his skin. “I can place it on the inside of this panel so it will heat your shoulder. You don’t need anything lower on your arm and I don’t want to get anywhere near your nerves. That part is working beautifully, and I don’t want to mess anything up.”

“How will it fit?”

“The thermistor won’t be anywhere near this big. I’ll make about the size of a drop of water and give it a battery that will last, oh, about a hundred years before it has to be replaced. I’ll actually seal everything inside the film so you don’t have to worry about anything getting wet.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course.” By now, the film glowed a soft orange. Darcy held it out, taking care not to bump the rest of the equipment. “It’s not too hot. Maximum temperature on this baby is a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, warm enough to give you prompt relief. It will shut down as soon as your shoulder normalizes. Your metabolism, just like Steve’s, pushes your natural body temp up a half a degree or so. We’ll get more precise if you decide to do this.”

“You’re talking about stabilizing the temperature of my shoulder to a tenth of a degree. You can do that?” he asked again.

“Can you shoot a target at a thousand yards?” she retorted. “I’d tighten the range, but your skin temp does change some. We want to allow for that. Not only that, I will have safety protocols in place. See that line there?” she pointed to one of the thin zigzags.

“Yes.”

“That’s one of the heating elements and it will lay right next to the thermistor. If it gets too hot, bam, it fries the thermistor. Worst case scenario here is that you lose the ability to heat up your shoulder before I can fix it.”

Bucky pressed his right hand against the film, considered the temperature, and set the orange strip against his left fingers. The sensors noted the heat and his whole hand warmed. “It feels like the blanket.”

“Same concept, just smaller.”

“Can we try it on the outside of my arm first?”

“Of course. It will work on any part of the metal. The trick is getting it close enough to heat the vibranium in your collarbone and shoulder blade. It’s not ready yet,” she warned. “I’ll need a week or so to tweak the thermistors and test it.” She shoved her glasses back up her nose. “I’ve got all the technical specs from Steve’s shield, so I can get a good idea of how fast the metal transmits heat. That will tell me how far away we can put the strip.” She typed something on her laptop.

He peeked and discovered she’d left herself a message on her screen about that.

“So—after that, I’ll sit on it until you are ready. And if you don’t want it at all, that’s okay.”

He considered the film and the warmth on his fingers. “I’d like to see it, Princess, when you’ve got it working.” He handed the heater back to her, brushing her fingertips just to see what she would do.

“Okay.” She sucked on her bottom lip as she dismantled the assembly and put it away. With a glance at him, she rounded her table to slot her tools into their respective boxes.
Yes, JARVIS.

You asked her to dinner. Shall I make reservations?

I—I have no idea.

The Tower has a private restaurant—Charlie’s—on the 22nd floor. The windows face west if you would like a sunset view. I believe there is a jazz trio scheduled to play this evening. Alternatively, there are a number of restaurants in town where Pepper and Tony keep standing reservations, and where security is reasonably tight. I can certainly usurp their table for the evening. Or, I can send a chef to your suite and bring dinner to you.

I don’t think I should leave the Tower just yet unless Thor and Jane want to go too. Dinner in the suite is too much pressure.

When she came back to where he was sitting, Bucky folded Darcy’s hand into his. “I asked you to dinner. We can go to Charlie’s or we can pick somewhere outside the Tower. But—I think I’d rather see if Thor and Jane can go with us if we do that.”

“Need someone to watch your back if we go outside?”

He nodded, grateful for the understanding.

“Charlie’s?” she ventured. “We can argue over the appetizers and dessert and no one can stop us.”

He lost his breath at the dancing glow in her blue-green eyes. “I’ll pick you up in the Commons at seven.” When he brought her hand up to kiss it, it was shaking, just a little. So he turned it over and pressed it to his cheek instead. “Thank you, Princess. I’m going to show you a good time.”

She surprised him by leaning up on her toes to press the lightest of kisses on his lips (sunshine). “I know.”

He strolled out, hands in pockets, whistling.

Charlie’s at seven it is. Nice job, Barnes.

I have a good wingman, J.

Chapter End Notes

Official shoutout now to amusewithaview. What she’s done with the soul-mark universe is fabulous. While I'm not playing in that pond with this story, the idea for Steve's tattoos
definitely had its origins there.

Extransient asked for a story about the tattoos:

Ice and Fire: Ink
Finding The Dream

Chapter Notes

A/N If you haven’t been to the Harry Potter world (both sides) at Universal Studios Florida, let me just say that Diagon Alley is worth the price of admission alone. You don’t even need to ride anything. Just sit on the cobblestone streets and marvel at the buildings.

Anyhoo.... I believe Darcy and Bucky have a date.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With Steve gone, Bucky had the apartment to himself. Remembering that it was still morning, he made coffee as he scrambled eggs, adding in onion, a little ham and some cheese to round it out. The luxury of food in this age was something of a marvel and he liked going to the grocery store with Steve. He was rather proud that no one had to remind him to eat this morning. Hunger had been something they’d been well acquainted with in the army, and with HYDRA, he’d had whatever was given (Asset), regardless of hunger. Listening to his body still gave him trouble sometimes, though Steve kept an eye out.

The eggs hardly made it out of the pan before he demolished them. Same with pouring up the glass of milk. He drained it, refilled it, drained it again. He washed the dishes in the hot water (they’d set the max temp where he couldn’t burn himself in a bad moment, but still got a nice sting of heat) and left them in the dish drainer to dry.

He spent the morning cleaning up the apartment. He started with making the bed (Steve and Darcy), wiping down the shower (Darcy's shampoo) and started a load of laundry (whites, hot, bleach). He chased the dust bunnies off the wood floor with a duster on the end of a stick. It was these little chores that reminded him that he had a normal life again. Darcy’s mom had offered housekeeping services, but neither he nor Steve had been able to get on board with the idea of a stranger coming in their place. So they did it themselves, just as they had at Darcy’s. (Darcy was home.)

This place was three times the size of her carriage house. He’d never lived in anything big like this. There was a whole space for Steve’s art, an extra bedroom and two more bathrooms that no one used. They had a real table to eat at now.

He’d seen places of luxury like this in the courses of his missions (change the world)—hotels, mansions (Asset). He’d never been a spy, therefore interacting with his environment was not a big part of his assignment. Stealth had been his primary weapon. Steve complained on occasion about his ability to walk across the wooden planks without a sound. He and Natalia used to play games (silent, no expression, none knew they played) as he taught her to walk in silence. He didn’t know how to stop. (Part of his skill set. Asset.)

Steve was on a mission for S.H.I.E.L.D. again. The new one, under a man he trusted.

He wondered how long he needed to wait before going out looking for him. (Small Steve, always in trouble. E.T.A. 48 hours.)

He had a date with Darcy. Dinner. Hoped this wasn’t a buddy thing. He liked her. Loved
her. Wanted her.

Wondered how to find that confidence he had with dames before. Before the breaking. He was still broken, yes? Didn't know how to get better any faster. Sam said it took time. Wondered if he would ever not-hear the Winter Soldier (Asset). Did he want that?

Sam asked if there was anything of the Winter Soldier he wanted to keep. (Skill set.) He didn't know. He wanted the fear of the ice to go away. (I'm safe.) He wanted to not remember the pain. The chair. The way he'd been stripped of his name. (Asset).

*ping*

Barnes, you are safe. You are in the Tower and you have chosen to be alone in your apartment. Breathe and focus on the sweeping. Are you finished?

Thank you, JARVIS. Yes, the dusty floors were clean now. He put away the rags for later and moved the wash to the dryer before starting another load. (Colors, cold.)

He had a date. He thumbed through his clothes, found the ones he wanted, hung them in the bathroom for later. Inspected his dress boots. Though they were new, he polished them to a high shine on the floor of the bathroom. Good.

He found Thor at lunch and asked him to spar. He didn't quite know what to make of the warrior. Soldier didn't seem right. Nor did mercenary because there was inherent nobility to what he did … kind of like Steve. No wonder they got along.

He was early to the gym. Hill was there working out against a phantom opponent. Her form was good and he could see Natalia's influence in her fighting style. He wondered why she didn't have a partner then decided most of them had been S.H.I.E.L.D. agents before. He took to his (Barton's) perch without her knowing to watch and study. She systematically fought her opponent with neat moves and a good use of her height for leverage.

When Thor arrived, she grinned. "Hello. JARVIS said you had a challenge for me today?"

"Hello. Yes, of course." He looked straight at Barnes in his nest. "James has been studying your moves these past several minutes."

"James?" she asked in confusion, then, "Sergeant Barnes?"

Bucky didn't miss the ripple of concern, though she didn't argue. He slid out of the nest, wondering what Thor was thinking. He held his hand out.

She took with a raised eyebrow. "I don't believe we have met before. Maria Hill."

"I know."

"Of course you do," she said under her breath.

Barnes, she is not a threat. You are safe. Tell her that Steve speaks of her. Breathe it out.

He did. "Steve speaks highly of you, ma'am."

She studied him for a minute. "You're good." She nodded. "Okay, Thor, what's your plan?"

"James is skilled in teaching the weaker form how to outmatch the larger and stronger. He can give you instruction. You have sparred with Natasha far too often and need a change now and again."
"Can you trust me?" Bucky asked him.

"Should I not?" Thor replied. "In any case, I wish to learn more of this fighting style and I think both of you will be less concerned if I stay."

The warrior took an easy stance just off one end of the mat and crossed his arms. "Begin, James, Maria."

Bucky stepped to the mat, breathing out. JARVIS?

You are safe, Barnes. I will order you to stand down if necessary. She will be safe from you, as well.

He closed his eyes, bringing up memories of training Natalia ... and the other girls in the Red Room. There were twelve in the beginning. In the end, there had only been Natalia and one other. Another trainer had taken the other girl. He had Natalia. For her, he had learned how to extract every last ounce of ability from her slim form. So she would survive. He opened his eyes, focused. (Assessing.)

Maria opened with a flurry of punches designed to annoy him. He countered with a block and a counter-strike, which she neatly parried and turned into a leveraged take-down. He rolled out of it and got back to his feet. Khoroshye, he said.

*ping* English, Barnes. You're in the Tower with Maria Hill.

"Good," he repeated.

Concentrating on Hill’s body, he watched for the placement of her feet and hands. When she rounded a kick, he caught Maria’s ankle and held it. “Too high.”

He brought her foot down two centimeters. “Here.” Then he showed her where her foot would connect at his kidney. “Aim here. Try again.”

She did, and this time he allowed the kick to go through. He stepped backward to ease the blow of the strike, though not enough to pull her off balance. She regained her stance. “Damn. Now I know why Nat is so good,” she said.

“Again.”

They sparred for the full hour, leaving both of them dripping with sweat. Maria, from learning a new precision to what she could already do. Bucky, from having to control her movements with lightning fast reflexes.

Thor never interfered. He did move backward at one point, when they tumbled in his direction, but he remained there, watching from the sidelines.

When their time was up, Maria held out her hand. He took it and she gave it a firm shake with a smile. “Thank you, Sergeant Barnes. I would be grateful for any time you could spare for additional training.”

*ping* You do not need permission from anyone. You would be an splendid trainer and will be paid accordingly for your time and knowledge. Ms. Potts indicates there is a certain amount of discretionary funding for security training as a freelancer, although she has asked if you would be interested in permanent employment. Let her know and I’ll make the arrangements either way if you are inclined.

He nodded to Maria. “I would be honored, Ms Hill. JARVIS will make arrangements with you.”
When she left for the showers, he confronted Thor. “How long have you been planning this?”

The prince smiled with sure knowledge. “Since the first time we sparred. Only an excellent fighter notices the smallest of imprecision. Only a trainer knows how to correct it. This is your skill. There are those here who would benefit from your knowledge.”

“Why don’t you teach them?”

“I do. But my skills lie along other lines and no truly excellent warrior trains with only one master.”

And that’s how Bucky Barnes found himself a job at Stark Industries. (I have a mission. Protect Stark.)

*****

When Darcy finished SI business, she glanced at the clock. She’d taken the unusual step of bringing her laptop into Pepper’s office and working from her mom’s conference table. Pepper’s team was used to Darcy coming and going at will, but even the assistant gave her a questioning look when Darcy didn’t leave for Pepper’s conference calls.

As the time pushed five on Friday, Pepper wrapped up her day and waived the staff off for the weekend. She came back as Darcy closed up her computer.

“So which is it?” Pepper asked as she poured them each a hot cup of tea and brought it over. “Closer ties to running the company, needing Mom time, occupying yourself during Steve’s mission, or hiding out from your boyfriend’s boyfriend?” She sat, waiting for the tea to steep.

“Um, I’ll take one through three and leave four on the table.”

“Darcy, you can take your place here at any time and stop hiding who you really are.”

“I’m not there yet, okay? But I think I’d like to get your staff used to having me around. Today was good and kept me from fretting about Steve. And I learn a lot listening to you. I need more of that.”

“Done. What’s left?” Pepper sipped, delicately.

“Bucky asked me out on a date tonight. Let me add some commentary to that statement. After a heartfelt conversation with Steve this morning in which I might have admitted to more than strictly platonic feelings for his best friend, Steve texted Bucky and insisted that he ask me out. There was mention about Bucky and me being too damned noble about the whole situation.”

Pepper arched an eyebrow. “Do you want a dress or a reason to skip the date?”

“A dress, I think.” She played with the edge of her laptop, rubbing away a smudge. “Am I being foolish, Mom?”

“Darcy, dating has never been easy for you. Not with your brains and your understanding of the world we live in. I worried for years that you wouldn’t find anyone who could appreciate all of your qualities.” Pepper tapped her nails on the table. “Steve has been a good match. He’s intelligent, has the same world view, and, quite frankly, he adores you. You have someone who isn’t scared of you at all, except in a purely female-to-male sense, which is perfectly acceptable. And I think if not for
you, he would end up with some senior level agent out of loneliness and lose himself in duty. But that’s not who he is, and you know it. Now what I find fascinating is that his partner is as enamored with you as he is with Steve.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “How do you know?”

“Hmm, I forgot to mention that we had them up for Sunday dinner a couple of times.”

“Forgot, my ass. And you don’t do Sunday dinner.”

Pepper winked. “Steven and James didn’t know that.”

“Steven and James? Oh my god. You pulled a ‘mom’ on them, didn’t you?” Darcy’s jaw dropped in awe.

“A couple of Catholic boys from Brooklyn? That one is too easy. They are petrified of Tony right now, which is novel because he is used to irritating everyone around him. This is different, it’s all about family, and he’s rather smug about having Captain America and the Winter Soldier quaking in their boots whenever he sits down at the table.”

Darcy laughed so hard she had to hold on to the table or the floor might have had company. “So they think you’re on their side. You’re brilliant, Mom.”

Pepper had an equally smug expression. “Thank you.” She picked up her cup again and sipped. “I also know that James hasn’t been working so damned hard to get better just for Steven. He’s afraid that you’ll walk for good before he has a chance to bring you around.”

Finding her courage, Darcy asked, “Want to help me dig through boxes and help me find a dress?”

Pepper did one better. Darcy still had a few things in her suite in the penthouse and her mom occasionally stashed emergency outfits there for her.

When Darcy was a teen, she’d gone through a serious phase of wishing she was built like Pepper—tall, thin and blonde. There wasn’t anything that her mom put on that didn’t look outrageously pretty. But Pepper stayed after her, teaching her how to dress for her curves and height. Eventually, Darcy learned to appreciate the way she looked, but once in a while, she still had to cross her eyes to keep from being jealous.

Not this time. Pepper had found a blue sheath dress that fit Darcy perfectly, skimming curves and clinging just enough to be sexy as all fuck. “Mom,” she breathed. “This is stunning.”

“You’re stunning. Try the shoes. No, not those. The silver ones.” They left her hair loose, and Darcy slicked on a red, red lipstick to finish off the outfit.

Tony popped his head into see what they were doing at one point, blanched, and escaped to his lab. (Typical.) Pepper gave her a kiss on the cheek and wished her luck.

Which is how Darcy found herself in the Commons waiting for her date. Nerves and all.

Of course, waiting in the Commons was like posting an announcement in the New York Times. Jane and Thor stopped by to take a look. (Darcy had texted Jane a pic of herself in the outfit, so that was on her.) So did Bruce. (Swore he was coming up for a cup of tea. Darcy’s bullshit meter pegged out on red.) And Clint dropped in, with a whistle and a smart ass remark that Cap was missing out. (He might have sent a pic to Steve too.)
But when she saw Barnes descending the staircase like a freakin’ diva, she forgot about the rest of them. (Fuck. Me. Senseless.) If Steve was the All-American farm boy who could talk an angel out of her panties in the hay, Barnes was the bad boy in black with a knowing grin and a couple of turns in the backseat of a ’57 Chevy. He played it up to the crowd, reaching around her waist and brushing a kiss on both of her cheeks.

“You look like a peach, doll.”

“Say that again and I’ll get JARVIS to change all your playlists to banjo music.”

He laughed and pulled her into the elevator. Once behind closed doors, he stepped back in all seriousness and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Darcy, you look beautiful.”

The use of her name startled her. She recovered by batting her eyelashes outrageously. “Flattery will get you everywhere.” She twirled for him, giving him every reason to look at her ass and the girls. Then she gave him an equal head to toe perusal and agreed, “Not too bad yourself, Barnes.”

“Thank you.” He licked his lips, teeth catching the bottom one. “Darcy? Would you call me ‘James’ once in a while?”

“All right,” she paused. “James.”

She didn’t need an explanation. His eyes darkened to a blue she’d never seen before, far darker than Steve’s. He lifted her hand to tuck it into his arm as the elevator descended, biting his lip harder as he closed his eyes.

“James?” His eyes flew open. “We’re okay.”

“I know, Princess. It’s hell trying to think of how to impress you when you’ve already seen what you’ve seen.”

She squeezed his arm gently as she moved a little closer to him. “You don’t need to impress me. I’m not going anywhere.”

The elevator stopped, and he escorted her into Charlie’s, the restaurant that occupied the northwest quadrant of the floor. There were only a handful of occupied tables here, and they had the prime seats to watch the sunset. The sun was already beginning its downward arc, and the tinting on the windows kept it from being too bright.

Barnes’ manners were correct, even for today’s standards. He held her chair and ordered a bottle of wine. Darcy picked out half a dozen appetizers she thought he would find interesting. (Best part, hands down, of dating someone with super serum—she got to nibble off their plates.)

While they sipped wine, he told her about the offer to become a trainer for Stark Industries and was pleased that Pepper hadn’t mentioned it yet to Darcy.

“How do you feel about it?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Seems like honest work.” But there was a glow about him that told her it meant far more than that.

The fun began when the food arrived. The dazzling array of fruits, vegetables, and other starters stunned him as the waiter set down plate after plate between them. “What the hell, Princess?”

“If you’re going to date a princess, you have to eat like a prince,” she sniffed with arrogance and
poked a fork into a piece of kiwi. She held it up to his lips, challenging him to try something new.

He curved a hand around hers, the intimacy of the gesture startling her. He took the bite, lips closing around the tart green fruit, and held her hand in place while he tugged it off the fork. (Just ... well, hell. She shushed her lady parts.) He smiled as he swallowed, and shifted his chair so that he sat beside her, rather than across, and laced his hand with hers. Now they each only had one hand to eat with.

“That was good. What else?” he asked.

She held out a stuffed mushroom and giggled as his eyes crossed in ecstasy when he bit down. She was lucky to get even one bite after that when he took his fork and rolled the rest of the mushrooms his way. They picked their way through edamame (sucking the pods), bruchetta (making a mess with toast crumbs), a bowl of fruit (tropical, most of it he’d never seen) and a spinach dip (familiar) with toasted pita chips (those were new) while the sun set in a blaze.

Darcy asked him about his drawings. He borrowed a pen and paper from the waiter and showed her. (Steve was all neat lines and precise shading. Barnes was bold and careless.) He drew the sunset, colored it with water and the leavings of the fruit. She was dazzled by the hard, sweeping lines and the wash of color that gave the impression of everything without any specifics.

“Damn, James. I had no idea. Steve mentioned you were in art class together, but I guess I figured you would draw the same way. Which seems a little ridiculous now. What were you going to do with it?”

“Ads for the paper, maybe judicial proceedings. The newspapers always needed artists who could draw on the fly. That was my specialty. I left the detailed work to Steve.”

Night fell and she lost track of time over the entrees. They shared filet mignon, oysters, ahi tuna, and a variety of steamed vegetables. Barnes tried them all. As he cut into the steak, he asked her about college and seemed surprised when she told him about her degrees.

“MIT in mechanical engineering at eighteen, a masters in business by nineteen, and a doctorate in political science from Culver at twenty-two.”

He stopped chewing and swallowed. “Those don’t seem to be related to each other, but for someone with your inheritance, somehow it all makes sense.”

“I took a lot of extra classes,” she admitted. “Minored in business at MIT, so finishing the MBA was only another year. The PhD was harder.”

“So when you talk about ‘college’ which one are you referring to?”

“Culver. That’s where I met Jane and had the most fun.” She wrinkled her nose without thinking. Barnes called her on it.

“Something doesn’t ring, Princess.”

She shrugged. “Most people my age were barely out of high school and didn’t have a clue about what kinds of things are really out there. At 19, my dad was kidnapped and built a whole new technology out of spare parts in a cave to save his life. When I was 22, I saw a god come out of the sky and knew for a fact that we aren’t alone in the universe. I’ve never worried about where to live, or getting a job after graduation, or where I stood in my political views—which are what most people are wondering at 22.”
With a half-hearted smile, she toyed with the food on her plate. “I wanted to date. I wanted to see what normal people did. I’d learned pretty fast that truth only got me lonely weekends and very few friends. So I spent a lot of time acting like I didn’t know what was going on and not telling people what I was really studying. And let’s face it, most people don’t see past these.” She flicked her fingers over her boobs. To his credit, Bucky’s eyes didn’t waver from her face. (This time.)

“It got old. Jane is the closest girlfriend I have and she always treated me as friend and colleague from the beginning. But even she didn’t know all of me, really, until she came to work for Stark a year ago.”

Bucky put down his fork and rubbed his chin idly with the back of his knuckles, studying her. “That’s how Steve got you to date him.” Darcy was surprised to see him light up. “Damn. Haven’t been able to figure out how he got a beautiful dame on his arm. Just couldn’t see him getting past his own mouth to ask you out.”

She looked away, pinking a little, and he reached around her back to cup her shoulder in a soft caress and a little hug. “I’ve known all along what Steve sees in you. I just couldn’t figure what you saw in him. Now I know. It’s the same damned thing that I fell for too. He gets you. Every part of you. Even the parts you don’t like. And it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks because Steve loves you and that’s enough.” With his other hand, he lifted her fingers and brushed a kiss across the tips. “That kind of faith is scary as hell because it makes you want to be the best person you can be, even as you know that if you fail, he’ll catch you.”

She blew out her breath as he laced his hand in hers again. She nodded in agreement. (Yeah, he got it one.) “You forgot to mention the fact he’s a complete smart-ass and, well, you know, the bike.”

Bucky grinned and damned if his eyes didn’t glaze over a tiny bit. “Best part about this modern world is that fuckin’ bike and Steve’s ass.”

“Told ya,” she quipped.

He nudged her over the ahi tuna. “What is that?”

“Rare fish. You game?”

“Sure. “

So she fed him a little piece to start. He took her hand and downed the whole bite. “Oh my god, we are so going for sushi next time,” she declared.

“Sushi?”

“Japanese marinated raw fish and shrimp. Wrapped in seawood and rice. The stuff is amazing.”

“I’m in. Steve hardly touches fish, so you’re stuck with me.”

“You’re a food slut, Barnes. You’ll try anything once,” she quipped. He choked, swallowed hard, then laughed uproariously at her comment. She loved seeing him relax like this.

He shared the rest of the tuna with her, holding out his fork this time so she could take a bite. Turning around the intimate gesture made her nervous. Bucky must have noticed because he rubbed his fingers lightly against hers. Where the metal should have been uncomfortable, the plates were rounded and polished enough to be so smooth as to be soft.

“I don’t want to rain on our evening, Princess, but you need to know that I never told Steve what
you said about leaving us all those months ago."

(Ah, yes, the moment of truth. These sucked.) Darcy sagged against the chair, blowing her breath out. “I told him last night, so have fun with that. Why did you keep it a secret?”

Bucky brought her hand to the top of the table so that he could use his right hand to trace little patterns on her skin. “At first, I didn’t have the words. Later, I was hopin’ you’d changed your mind. We were doing better, the three of us. You didn’t seem to be the kind to run and I thought you knew how much he loves you. When you did go, hell, Darcy, it would have killed him to know you were thinking about walking from the beginning.”

She pressed her lips together hard, trying to control her emotions and not set him off. “I didn’t think I had a right to stay.” She flexed her fingers in his. “I already know how much I hurt Steve doing that, and I’ve apologized to him.”

“Good.”

She eyeballed him, deciding this was as good a time as any. She hesitated, not knowing if she even had the right to ask. “James, why haven’t you and Steve ….” she let the sentence hang, losing her courage.

“We might have, last night. I don’t know, though. Truth is, Darcy, we aren’t the only ones in this anymore. So there is that.”

“I don’t want to come between you. I can’t, James.”

He tilted his head, studying her with the assessing gaze of the Winter Soldier. His voice was anything but. “You mean that,” he said softly.

“I do,” she affirmed with conviction.

“You do realize I feel the same way about you and Steve, too.”

“I don’t—“

“No, Darcy. This doesn’t work unless you believe me.” The hint of anger surprised her, his eyes cooling to ice blue.

She squeezed his hand. Firmly reining her doubts, she leaned over to kiss his cheek. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?” he asked, suspiciously.

“I believe you.”

He squinted, still annoyed. “Right.”

“Other than you owing me dinner for the backrub, isn’t that what we’re here for? To see?”

The annoyance was chased away by a gleam and a smirk. “That too.”

“What else?” Now she was suspicious.

“What’s for dessert?”

She threw her napkin in his face.
They finished out with three different desserts. Barnes consumed the better part of two of them, but Darcy defended her caramel turtle cheesecake with all the protectiveness of a porcupine. She even folded her arms over it.

“One bite, Princess.”

“Not even one. If you get one, you’ll want the whole dessert.”

“Come on, doll, just a taste. I’ll even let you hold the fork.”

Darcy cracked up. “As if that’s a comforting thought. While I’m holding the fork, you could steal the rest of the cheesecake from me.”

“Well, darn, doll, you’ve got me figured.” Then he pulled out the weapon that hadn’t failed so far. “Haven’t had it before. Ever.”

“You’re a jerk, you know that?”

“Of course I do.” He winked.

Carefully, she slid the fork through the tip of the cheesecake, shearing it neatly so that it stayed on her fork. She swirled it through the whipped cream and aimed it for her own mouth. The disappointment on Barnes’ face was comical, especially when she savored the flavor falling all over her tongue. She closed her eyes and let out a *hmm* of pleasure. (Just to annoy him.)

A thumb stroked across her top lip. Her eyes popped open in time to see Barnes sucking whipped cream off the edge of his knuckle. “Just a taste, Darcy,” he said, softly enough that she wasn’t sure she heard it.

Holy fuck. Darcy hadn’t been seduced like this since … ever. “Steve never had a chance, did he, James?” she breathed. His eyes darkened to cobalt and were captivating as hell.

“Nuh uh.” The innocence with which he answered her question belied the sensuality of his smile. He glanced down … and goddamnit, her cheesecake was scooted all the way over to him where he curled over it in the same manner she had before.

He stuck a fork into it and took an enormous bite without ever taking his eyes off her.

Darcy leaned in, licking her lips first and making sure Bucky noticed when she did. (Bonus, his gaze dropped to her rack too, though he did an admirable job of reeling them back in.) “You know, James, when we do fuck, I’m pretty sure they’re going to have to call in the Avengers because one of us will be dead before it’s all over.” His eyes widened and she was gratified to have shocked him for once. “And it’s going to be even better when we fuck Steve, because between the two of us, we’re going to peel him apart and savor every last taste in the process.”

His mouth was open, just a little. “Is this how you got Steven into bed?” he asked, a little hoarse.

“No. But it’s how I’m going to get you into bed, James. And it won’t be tonight either. Finish eating my cheesecake so you can escort me to my lab and give me a proper kiss at the door.” She drained her wine while Barnes flushed red. He stood to help her with her chair.

He got her to her floor in record time and without hesitation, leaned her against the lab door, one hand braced about her head, the other on her neck. The bottom lip thing she was expecting. What blew her mind was the way he teased and tasted, never letting her have what she wanted. His thumb curved over her jaw, distracting her while his mouth hovered, only brushing hers.
Her hands—having touched those shoulders so many times—it was a relief to slide across them and flex on his biceps, to dig her fingers in. She wanted.

Finally, he pressed his thumb against her bottom lip and her mouth closed over it by instinct, tasting metal. She sucked on it just long enough for his eyes to close then she caught it between her teeth, taking him by surprise.

He pressed his forehead to hers, breathing hard. “I think—I think I’d better stop, Princess.”

“Then stop.”

He blinked at her. “Where are you going to stay tonight?”

“Do you want to be alone?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll see you in a half hour.”

*****

He was holding on to his focus with everything he had. The headache was splitting, but he’d successfully ignored it in favor of staying attentive to Darcy (Beautiful. Mine. Steve’s.) and not messing things up between them.

She’d dazzled him, seduced him, taken him apart with no more than words. He staggered in the elevator and leaned his head against the wall (Rule one.)

*ping* Barnes, you need to return to your suite and take a hot shower.

(Rule one. Asset. Reshape the century one last time.) He shed his clothing, folding it into a neat pile on the dresser before stepping into the shower. There was vague awareness of JARVIS changing the shower spray to one that would massage his shoulder and turning up the temperature another degree. He had no idea how long he was under the spray, but the moment the headache gave way to exhaustion, JARVIS ordered him to dry off and put on boxer shorts. Mind-numb, he followed the instructions until he was sitting in bed. (He had a mission.)

The bed shifted as Darcy crawled alongside him to take his hand.

*ping* Go to sleep, Barnes.

*****

Darcy hummed along to P!nk as she changed clothes. She figured it was safer to take the temperature down a few hundred degrees before she crawled in bed with Bucky. Though she’d offered, she’d figured there wasn’t a snowflake’s chance in hell that he would want to sleep alone—hence using the lab as a way to put a break between their date (and calm her lady parts, let’s be honest) and sleeping chastely beside him.
She fumbled for her phone to shoot off a quick text. *Barnes has a real job. Dinner a success. Nobody died. Still weird but slightly less so. Miss you and love you.*

Chances were Steve wouldn’t get the message until after the op, but it made her feel better to send it all the same.

“Lewis?”

“Yes, JARVIS.”

“Sergeant Barnes is fighting a rather difficult headache and is unable to think for himself at the moment. When you come in, I have him in hand. I don’t want you to be startled. He will do better in your company.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the shower.”

Whereas two minutes ago, the thought of that might have had her blood humming, now she just wanted to get to Bucky and help him however she could. She finished washing her makeup off and dried her hands. “How much was he blocking during dinner? I honestly hadn’t noticed anything was wrong.”

“Quite a bit in the last thirty minutes.”

“He’s getting sneakier about it.” She slid her glasses on and made for the elevator in her Hulk pajamas and bare feet. “How often is he doing that now?”

“Only around you and Captain Rogers so far and this is the second time today. With anyone else, he clearly shifts into soldier mode.”

JARVIS unlocked the door and she found Bucky sitting up on the bed. He didn’t respond when she called his name, but she took his hand anyway. He fell asleep on JARVIS’ command. It was awkward, but Darcy moved a couple of pillows under her head and shoulders so she could rest her head on his thigh. She kept her phone tucked in her hand, as always when Steve was gone.

*Wanna to play chess, JARVIS?*

*Isn’t it your bedtime, Lewis?*

*You know I don’t sleep with Steve on a mission. And I don’t want to leave Bucky. I’m bored. Entertain me.*

*Very well. Black or white.*

*Black, of course.* It took effort to keep track of all the board pieces in her head, but this was something they’d done since she was small and she liked to keep in practice.

*d4.* He opened his first move.

*d5.*

JARVIS had her on the run when her phone vibrated. A quick peek showed a waiting text from Steve. The relief was tangible and she took a deep breath to steady herself. Knowing JARVIS would save their game to her phone without asking, she opened the text.
Barton sent me the picture. *slow whistle* Gorgeous, doll.

She texted back. Dinner was good, even if my cheesecake was stolen.

Do I need to post bail for you?

Not this time. The culprit is still breathing.

He sent her an icon of a goggle-eyed mini monster, which made her grin.

Miss you, love. Won’t be long.

Love you too. Waiting, as always.

“Everything good?” Bucky roused enough see what she was doing.

“Steve’s coming home. About six hours out plus debrief.” She showed him the text exchange.

“How do you know?” he muttered sleepily. His hair fell into his face and he shoved it out of the way as he looked again. “Oh. I see it. Six words in his last text.”

“Simple, I know, but it works.”

“Clever.” He stroked her hair a couple of times. “Mind if I hold you for a while?”

She sat up and moved her pillows. “Where do you want me?” She tensed, hoping he wouldn’t read too much into what she said.

But he just slid a hand along her shoulder, caressing a little on the curve. “Want to put my arm around you, if that’s all right.” He scooted down on the bed, rolled to his left side, tucking his hand under a pillow. Then he held his arm out.

It was strange settling down against Bucky instead of Steve. The fit of his body and the weight of his flesh and blood arm were different enough to distract her until he shifted on her pillow so that he was practically breathing her hair. “Go to sleep, Princess. He’s safe.”

Surprisingly, she did.

Chapter End Notes

A/N It's been mentioned in this story before, but here is my headcanon on Darcy's education: she has an Bachelor's Degree in mechanical engineering and a Masters in business administration from MIT. She received her PhD in political science from Culver University. While she was there, she took a semester to take Jane's internship, which is wildly out of her course of study, but Tony is curious as to what Jane is doing and asked Darcy to take the internship (which he might or might not have funded the grant money for in the first place).
While this may seem highly unlikely to you, the reader, please have my assurance that university administration can and will make all sorts of accommodations for candidates at any level, especially when there is money involved. I've seen it, been frustrated and angry about it, and can provide testimony that it happens.
Nat and Sam sat across from Steve on the Quinjet and smirked all the way home. He ignored them as he read his texts for the fourth time.

Bucky had sent him one about getting a job (doing what?), along with a picture of himself dressed up for the date (stunning). That was followed by the picture of Darcy from Barton (gorgeous). Then there was the text exchange with Darcy about the dinner. (His breath caught as he visualized them together.)

Turning on his phone and having all those messages waiting had been another layer of balm to his heart. Maybe this would work after all.

Steve had discovered something else about himself on this mission, something he didn’t like much at all. Before, he had a tendency to be reckless, wanting the rush of danger just to remind himself that he was still alive and had a purpose. (Little guy in Brooklyn, scrapping for a fight, standing up for his beliefs and wanting to matter.)

This time, he went over the mission in fine detail, eliminating risk wherever he could. Maybe Sam had taught him that.

Because he wanted to go home.

The lump in his throat was because he’d discovered how careless he could be with his own person before—with Darcy. As if she would be fine without him. As if he wasn’t enough, and if he was gone, she would be better off. But he’d seen how torn up she’d been and figured out that she wasn’t okay. That she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

With Sam’s help, he got that Bucky might not ever be entirely whole again. In spite of the leaps and bounds in his progress, some things were still a daily struggle. They weren’t done yet, not by a long shot. Bucky might have something approaching a normal life one day, but only if Steve—and Darcy—continued to give him a safe place to recover.

In that gentle manner of his, Sam also explained that Darcy might be the only other person Bucky would ever be able to trust—and only by virtue that she was an “extension” of Steve and possibly because she was a Stark. The Winter Soldier understood that the technology in him had to be maintained, so it was in his best interest to keep the person who could do that safe. That protocol was a foundation of his conditioning and would be one of the hardest to break. That Darcy was both Steve’s girl and a Stark gave her an unusual position in the soldier’s mind, allowing him to grant her an authority and a level of trust that otherwise would be impossible for him to assign.

All that might be true, but Steve hadn’t told Sam about the drawings.
Whatever the reason, Bucky was head over heels for Darcy. Now that Steve understood all the nervous tension at Darcy’s little house, he couldn’t wait to get back to them. To be there as Bucky and Darcy figured out how to love each other.

He scrolled through the texts one more time. He might have even closed his eyes and dreamed a little. About all things good.

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The smell of coffee and the rustle of a newspaper edged into her awareness.

She was in her usual spot, pillow under her head, with knee and arm hanging almost off the bed. But Bucky was sprawled across her back, his hand covering the scar at her waist. (How was he not ridiculously heavy?), with a very firm part of his body comfortably situated against her ass.

Steve was home. Darcy had fumble for her glasses before finding them on the nightstand. Without coffee, it took her a good thirty seconds to be coherent and to focus across the room where Steve had set up camp in the little sitting area in the bedroom.

His short hair was still a little spiky from his shower, so he couldn’t have been there long. He folded down the paper, letting her see his happy face. “You stayed with Bucky.”

“He didn’t want to be alone,” she whispered. “How does he sleep so quietly?”

With a lift to the shoulder, he set the paper to the side. “Wasn’t like that before. Used to talk in his sleep.”

“Better than ‘is wheezing,” Bucky muttered into her hair. “Then again, first time we slept in a tent, I kept wakin’ thinkin’ he’s wearing a toe tag. No asthma,” he explained.

(What the fuck was a toe tag? Oh. 40’s vernacular. Eek.) Darcy tried to wiggle out from under Bucky. (Double eek. Definitely packing heat this morning. Lady parts woke up with an interested twitch and she told them to hush. They were getting tired of that.)

He rolled to his back, conveniently skimming his hand along her shirt as he did, and coincidentally giving her a fighting chance to breathe. “I am not a morning person, Princess. Punk’s the one who can get by on five hours of sleep. I need a couple more than that.”

“Works for me.” She sat up, tugging the blanket that fallen to the floor up to cover her chest. The sleeping bra she wore (and hated) didn’t keep too much in place. Metal fingers slid up her spine. She shivered—and not from the cold. “Princess, you’re beautiful. S’one o’ the things I like ‘bout you. So beautiful and real.”

Darcy threw him a startled glance over her shoulder.

Deliberately, and very, very slowly, that hand moved around to her waist. Bucky leaned upward as he pulled her to him for the softest, lightest of kisses. (Much like last night… Hoo boy.) He brushed his lips against hers, stroking her cheek with his thumb. The scrub of his whiskers against her lips startled her, but she didn’t pull away. He nipped at her bottom lip with just enough heat to make her want to stay.
But he let her go, looking somewhat dazed by the kiss. “Wake me later. I’m gonna dream on that for a bit.” He rolled over and pulled a pillow over his head.

Darcy spun her head around, looking for Steve’s reaction, but he was too busy sketching. Taking advantage of his distraction, she made for the bathroom. A third towel hung on the warming rack, and her favorite shampoo and soap occupied the niche in the shower. (The assumption that she would be back gave her warm fuzzies.) When she was done and had closed the door to the bedroom so as not to wake Barnes, she found Steve in the kitchen. He had her coffee waiting on the bar top with a drawing of her and Bucky against it. This one had a title. Kiss.

She stared at it, then walked straight to Steve and kissed him too, hard and thorough. “Tell me I’m not messing this up.”

Steve, hands down, gave the best hugs. (Thor? Close. This? Perfect) Warm, big arms came around her. “You’re not, Darcy.” His hands skimmed along her waist. One of them drifted down to her ass, where it settled comfortably on top. “Just do what feels right. Like the bed thing last night.” Hugging her tight, he pressed a kiss into her hair.

With that, everything was okay again. “The mission, everyone is home?” (She never asked for details.)

“Yes. Nat’s got a bruised ankle, but that’s it.”

The hand on her ass began to move in circles and even though all her lady parts were absolutely on board this morning, she (breathe, Darcy) geared up her courage instead. Stroking hard down his pecs, and flicking the nubs of his nipple, she looked Steve straight in the eyes and said, “Barnes has a serious problem this morning. My guess is that thirty seconds after I’m out the door, he’ll be in the shower trying to do something about it. So, if I’m brave enough to go on a date with your boyfriend, are you brave enough to resume your relationship with him too?”

He stiffened under her hands. “Are you sure?”

“No. But it feels right.” She kissed him on the mouth, lightly, and slipped out the door to her lab.

She really had to decide where she was going to live. (And maybe a little hard work would keep the images of two amazingly hot super soldiers out of her head for a while.)

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She was right. Bucky headed for the shower the moment the door clicked shut. Steve had about twenty seconds to make up his mind about what do next. (Plenty of time.) It came down to trusting Darcy to know what she could handle. She’d trusted Steve enough to go on a date with Bucky. And accepted Bucky’s kiss this morning. (His brain stuttered on that. It’s a wonder he could draw it.)

He left his clothes where they fell as he headed for the bathroom. Steam was already floating around the cracks of the door. He peeked inside to find Bucky leaning against the shower wall, one hand braced to the left, stroking his cock as water hit his face and shoulders.

“Want a hand with that?” (As opening lines went, it was terrible, but Bucky never seemed to care about that kind of thing.) Steve strolled in, well aware of his own pride and joy jerking upward in response to the view.
Lashes lifted to reveal glazed blue eyes. They sharpened as they zeroed in on Steve. “If you’re offerin’, yeah.”

This was always the moment that gave Steve the most trouble. On one hand, he wanted to draw this. Bucky, all hard muscles and lean lines, braced against the shower wall with water dripping from his hair and beading up on his skin. He wanted to follow one of those drops of water from where it pooled for a moment on Bucky’s collarbone, before racing down to catch on his nipple. From there, it dripped onto a thigh dusted over with dark hair.

On the other hand, he wanted his mouth on Bucky’s cock.

“Draw me later, punk.” Bucky shoved the door open and yanked Steve inside for a hot, hard kiss.

Steve got his hands on Bucky’s shoulders for real this time, not to massage, but to clutch them hard as Bucky took what he wanted from Steve’s mouth, sucking on tongue and bottom lip before nipping hard kisses along Steve’s freshly shaved jaw. Steve reached up to scrape his fingers along Bucky’s stubble (needed this, craved this).

Hard skin, so unlike Darcy’s curves, fascinated him all over again. He couldn’t decide where to put his hands—on Bucky’s narrow hips, the places where his abs dipped and rippled, or to curl over his back where the muscles flexed under his fingertips.

He settled his hands onto Bucky’s waist to learn the feel of him once more, pressing a thumb into the hollow of his thigh. They bumped cocks as Bucky pressed closer, one finger coming up so Steve could catch it between his teeth, and other gripping his shoulder.

This he’d missed. Bucky trying to keep his hands out of Steve’s way—wanting more, needing more. Steve had it to give. He skimmed a fingertip along the long line of Bucky’s cock, appreciating the hard twitch and dance it did with his own. Sliding one arm around Bucky’s shoulders, Steve held him close and reached down to stroke the pair of them in one hand.

At Bucky’s soft groan, he squeezed a little harder as he worked them over, making his own eyes cross.

“You couldn’t do that ... before, punk.” Bucky’s free hand came down on his ass, grabbing it just in that way that made Steve want more.

“You keep parading around the fucking house naked, jerk. Been wondering for weeks if I could make it work. We’re ‘most the same height and my hands are bigger. Call it the bonus plan.”

“Hell of a plan. Fuck, Steve. Hands aren’t the only thing bigger. Damned near killed me with your cock last time.”

“I’ve learned a few things, Buck, and it sure as hell won’t be up against a tree.”

Bucky’s eyes came open at that, and he looked like he was having trouble focusing. “Steve, fuck.”

With a grin, he sucked on Bucky’s ear lobe, whispering. “I’m trying.”

Water streaming down his face, Bucky laughed weakly as he bit his lip. Steve shifted his grip and went to his knees without ever letting go of Bucky’s cock. Those eyes darkened to the deepest of blues (loved that), and he hissed as Steve ran his tongue along the underside of his cock. “Love, don’t do this. Know you don’t want … on your knees.”

Cupping the full ball sac just inches from his face, Steve grinned up at Bucky. “Things have
changed. This is one of them. You’ll just have to deal with it.” He slid the foreskin backward just
enough to run his tongue around the edges and along the dripping slit. Bucky reached down to caress
his face, fingers scraping his cheek. Steve closed his mouth over him, savoring the familiar taste.
There were no secrets here, for he’d learned them long ago. But that meant he knew exactly how to
make Bucky feel the best.

With one hand, he made long strokes to Bucky’s cock, bearing down near the base with a squeeze.
Reflexively, Bucky’s hand came up to tug on his hair.

Steve grinned. Bucky felt it and peeled open his eyes. “Don’t stop, not for anything.”

He hummed in agreement and took Bucky’s cock in as far as he could, sucking hard enough to
create friction and letting Bucky pick up the rhythm to slide in and out of his mouth. By his length
and stiffness, Bucky had prepped himself a little too well. Add in a good dose of Steve, and he was
definitely close to finishing. Steve scraped his fingers along the back of Bucky’s thighs, catching the
tender inner flesh. With a groan and a shout, Bucky came hard, leaving it to Steve to swallow his
juices down.

When he started shaking in the aftermath, Steve rose to catch him in his arms.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Bucky said as he pressed kisses along the line of Steve’s shoulder as he
shuddered.

Running his hands through damp brown hair, Steve teased, “That isn’t all I want to do.” No, what he
wanted to do was to make Bucky shake again and again until he was exhausted and limp.

Bucky lit up as he understood where Steve wanted to take this. With a slow smirk, he reached for the
soap, not bothering with a washcloth as he lathered it up between his hands. Steve leaned back to
enjoy the view as Bucky washed and rinsed at army speed.

“Darcy’s okay with--?” he asked he reached out to shut off the water.

Steve passed him a warmed towel. “Yes, she is. Heard your date was a success.”

Fuck, I hope so.” Bucky was distracted as he dried off. “She stayed with me. Means something,
right?”

“Yeah.” Steve was more methodical, finishing by sliding his hand along his cock a couple of times
just to watch Bucky’s eyes darken again. It worked.

“Damn you, Rogers. I want to do that.”

Steve walked backward to the bedroom. “Really? I figured, you know, we could watch a movie or
someth--” Bucky shut him up by shoving him on the bed and taking possession of Steve’s cock as if
he owned it. Steve’s brain turned to mush under the onslaught of sensation and emotion. (Sex. Love.
All the same.)

Bucky scraped his teeth lightly along his cock, and Steve jerked upward to his elbows, making fists
just to keep in place. Then Bucky’s mouth was hot and surrounding all of him. There wasn’t
thinking here, just feeling and wanting. His balls tightened and Bucky seemed to know just when
that happened because he cupped them hard enough that Steve pressed up into his mouth, seeking
more.

Dark hair tickled his flesh, and the cold metal skimming the inside of his thigh sharply contrasted the
heat of Bucky’s mouth. Steve felt the gathering in his cock, gave in to the want and need, and then
he was lost to the heat of his lover’s touch as he came. Bucky took all of him, until the last of the pulsing need was satiated.

The satisfied smirk when he came up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, did Steve in. Pure emotion swamped him, and he pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

Bucky crawled upward, lying so they were chest to chest, legs and arms entwined. Steve reached out to trace his face, thumbing away the wet that had appeared there too. “You’re here.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“You okay with this?” Steve rubbed his face on the pillow to dry it. (Damn it, he’d never been this much of a fucking watering can.)

“Been wanting to for weeks. Feels right.”

They stayed that way a while, Bucky’s face buried in his shoulder. He skimmed his fingers along Bucky’s spine, from neck to ass, enjoying the subtle twitching as Buck squirmed a little at his touch.

This part was different than before. When he’d been smaller, it had been his head on Bucky’s shoulder, or Bucky would lie face down on the bed so Steve could do this. They hadn’t had time in the army to figure out all the ways they fit together.

Steve licked the outside edge of Bucky’s ear. “You up for round two?” he whispered.

With a leer, Bucky rose up, pinning him to the bed. “Nice to know there is some stupid benefit to that damned serum. Question is, are you?”

Steve looked at his wrists where Bucky held them down and gave them a reflexive pull. His eyes widened. “What do you have in mind?”

“Got any Vaseline?”

Mustering up his most innocent smile, Steve winked. “Got something better than that.” He jerked his chin at the nightstand. “Grab the tube in the top drawer.”

Bucky fumbled for a minute, leaning across Steve. “Hate it went you do that, punk. What does Darcy call them? Bambi eyes?”

“Sure you do.” Steve decided he was at the perfect angle to kiss along Bucky’s collarbone and run his tongue down the scars there.

“This?” Bucky asked in a strangled voice as he held the lube up.

“That.” Steve wiggled free his other hand free, took the tube, and popped the lid. He held it over his head and squeezed a little on his fingers. Reaching down, he brushed his fingertips along the slit of Bucky’s butt. Almost involuntarily, Bucky slid his legs to either side of Steve’s waist.

When Steve circled his hole with a slick pair of fingers, his eyes widened. “Wha—“ he hissed.

Steve pressed a finger in, enjoying the heat and the clutch of muscles. “You okay?” he asked.

Bucky’s cock twitched. He was already half-hard again. “More than okay, punk, what else you got?”

Steve slid in two fingers, taking his time as he used his other hand on the back of Bucky’s neck to
tangle in his hair and pull him in a savory kiss. (He loved the way Bucky tasted. Oranges and lemons and dark heat--) He swallowed Bucky’s moan and slid in a third finger, circling and plunging until there was an easy slide and Bucky’s cock stood up hard between them. This was exactly where he wanted Bucky. Sprawled on top of him, twitching and jerking in time to his fingers, just where he could nibble those lips and smell the sweat of his skin.

“Forgot—about—your fuckin’—patience, punk.”

“I can do this all day,” Steve told him. “You, my fingers in your ass, letting me slide them in. Your cock trapped and bangin’ on me like I’m gonna forget about him.”

Bucky stayed where he was, and Steve took his time. He alternated between hard and soft plunges of his fingers, keeping rhythm, until Bucky was squirming over him and started to swear under his breath. “Damn it, Steve. More. Gotta have more.”

“Said I was too much last time. You sure about this?” He kept up the rhythm, pressing a deeper as he did.

“Yes. Don’t be a prick about it.”

“But I am. You tell me that all the time.” Steve made sure he was hitting that spot that made Bucky’s cock stiffen and leak.

“Fuck you. You’re gonna make me do this, aren’t you?”

“As I said, I can do this all day.” (But he couldn’t. He was so fucking hard he was seeing stars.)

Groaning a little, Bucky pushed himself up so he was on his knees, still straddling Steve’s waist.

“Wait,” Steve muttered. He squeezed more lube onto his fingers and stroked his cock, coating it thoroughly. Then he circled Bucky’s hole a few more times for good measure.

When Bucky was ready, he nudged Steve’s hands away. “My turn.”

Steve’s cock was just there, playing at his entrance (begging, dancing around). Bucky didn’t even flinch, just held Steve’s gaze as he took him all the way in. And just like that, Bucky had him.

As always, no matter what he did to tease or pleasure Bucky, the moment he sank into his love, Steve belonged to him. Bucky angled to take him a little deeper and Steve fumbled for Bucky’s cock, to stroke it in time with his slow thrusts upward.

It took them only a moment to find the rhythm again, and when they did, it was all Steve could do to hold on until Bucky was on the edge.

Then it was too late and Steve reached out to hold him in place while he pressed hard and deep, again and again. “James,” he whispered. “James. Mine. You’re mine. Always mine.”

And Bucky came with him, making a mess of the pair of them as Steve took them to the moon and back again.

He remembered to pull out before he caused Bucky any pain, and Buck rolled to his back with a carefree laugh. “Damn, punk,” he breathed. “That just might have been worth the wait.”

Steve finally let the weariness of the mission wash over him. He was home now. With Bucky and Darcy. He didn’t care that he was sticky. Sticky felt like home too and he never wanted this feeling
to go away. He reached out for Bucky’s hand, found the cool metal and clutched it.

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He dozed holding Steve’s hand. Not hard, just enough to catch his breath. When the punk was sound asleep, he wiggled his hand free.

He propped up on his elbow and rested his head on his fist. (Definite perk of the metal arm. Never got tired.)

It occurred to him to wonder if Darcy was handling this as well as Steve figured, or if this was more of her attempt to get them together. That concern got him out of bed and back into the shower.

Steve didn’t even twitch when Bucky wiped him down with a towel and pulled the covers over him. Pressing a kiss into blond hair, Bucky chucked the towel into the laundry basket.

He grinned. No wonder Steve had requested a washer and dryer in their apartment. Pepper had offered concierge services for laundry, but maybe the idea of a couple of messy guys hadn’t occurred to her. In any case, Steve gave her that innocent look and told her he found the routine chore comforting. Maybe he did, but it sure was a hell of a lot easier to throw all the sheets in the washer when it was just off the kitchen.

As he slipped into the hallway, he swore. Sorry, JARVIS, I should have turned off the contact.

You do not have to make apologies, Barnes. I am perfectly capable of adjusting the monitoring to minimal levels. In your situation, I am far more concerned with the signs that you are in distress—even breathing, a slow pulse and an inability to communicate. The first two can be tracked by a simple program I have in place which—for lack of a better term—can get my attention. I engaged the program when you took a shower this morning and only disabled it when you spoke to me now. To be perfectly honest, Barnes, I think it is safer at this time to let me monitor you in this fashion rather than switching the contact on and off.

Well, that made sense. If you’re sure you’re good with it, then yes, I don’t want to turn it off.

I assure you, there is nothing you can do that can exceed anything Sir has done over the years. There is a perfectly good reason why I developed the subroutines in the first place.

Bucky covered a laugh as he strolled into the Commons. And stopped short when he found Natasha with her ankle propped up on Barton’s knee with a bag of ice.

“Natalia?”

She tilted her head back to see where he was. “Hi, Barnes.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing permanent.” She shooed his hands away when he came around to investigate.

But he pinned her with a hard look of his own and rolled her pant leg up to reveal a dark purple bruise. There was something about seeing her injured that prodded something deep in his memories. He pressed his lips together. “Careless, Natalia. We train in the morning. At eight.” He ignored
Barton’s dark look.

“You’re serious?” she asked.

“Milaya,” he called softly.

Nat studied his face, finally agreeing. “All right then. See you at eight.”

He pulled out his phone to see that JARVIS had already placed a note on his calendar. Thank you.

My pleasure, Barnes.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Just an acknowledgement here ... it could be argued that Bucky's conditioning IS, in fact, making him codependent on Darcy. But there is an element to codependency that it isn't a healthy relationship (constantly putting your own needs aside for someone else's) which doesn't apply here.

It is this conditioning that drove him to look for "Stark" in the first place. In the beginning, yes, he was co-dependent and extraordinarily protective of Darcy.

However, Bucky is also protective of his arm, even with Darcy, which is healthy. That manifests rather quickly once the vials are out.

He is also co-opting the conditioning to make it into something HYDRA never anticipated, though it is fair to say that he may never actually be able to break this particular one. Given that, he is developing as much as he can within the parameters of "protect the people who fix the hardware."

Bucky was able to let Darcy go to London because Tony was still around (mostly). Being in the Tower also gives him a layer of safety because the people who can fix his technology (Darcy and Tony) will be within reach. Given all this, he doesn't have a reason to try to break the conditioning, so long as it matches up with his personal needs. To truly break it, he would have to learn to trust someone he has no interest in personally keeping safe. Honestly? Don't think that would ever happen, given what he's been through.
And It's Not Easy

Chapter Notes

Thank you for reading. We passed 50,000 hits this week and I'm staggered by your acceptance of this story. I feel like, as a writer, that I have found my "voice" and it's because of the many comments and kudos from you. In the three fandoms I have posted in, this is easily the most vocal and most supportive. So kudos to all of you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What used to be open space on Darcy’s floor was now scattered with furniture and twenty or so boxes stacked in the area outside her lab. Bucky found her sitting with her arms wrapped around her knees in the middle of her bed that was a good fifteen feet away from the bank of windows on the far side. Her stillness bothered him. As much as he loved Steve, sometimes his boyfriend could be an idiot about people.

“Thank you, Darcy.”

Long lashes swept down, and she went from staring at the glass wall to focusing on him as he came to her side. “You’re welcome.”

“Are you okay?”

“It’s—it’s harder than I thought it would be. To know … to know.” She put her head down on her knees.

He eased down beside her, not knowing what to say that wouldn’t sound self-serving. So he settled for wrapping an arm around her. To his surprise, she unfolded enough to put her face in his shoulder. He brought his other hand up so that he could rock her, murmuring words he hoped she would hear.

“Take it slow and easy. Gonna make this right for all of us. It’s gonna be okay, Princess.”

She sort of melted into him, letting him hold her. (Her hair danced on the back of his left hand.) He’d had her in his arms several times in these past two days and liked the way her curves felt against him (soft) and the way she smelled (sunshine).

He winced when he thought about his heavy-handed flirting of a few months ago. As gorgeous as Darcy was, she was adept at fending off unwanted advances. He hadn’t met anyone like her. He wasn’t sure if that was because he’d been cocky and stupid before or if she was that incredible. Probably both, leaning heavily toward the latter. But he’d crowded her, made her uncomfortable enough that she’d retreated from his touch unless it was something he needed in particular—a massage or to hold his hand. (And that one night. Fifteen minutes of pure fucking bliss.)

All that reserve seemed to have disappeared since her return. And he was careful now, taking his time in the same way he had with Steve all those years ago. Last night—yesterday--had been a miracle. There was something new between them that changed all the rules.

Then there was this morning. With her taste still on his mouth, he’d barely made it to the shower without embarrassing himself. And then Steve was there and Bucky wasn’t about to turn him away, not after weeks of keeping that part of their relationship under lock and key. His skin still hummed
But a small part of him had worried about Darcy.

He marveled at her courage. She’d come back only to pull him out of the morass, to see Steve off on a mission, and still kept herself grounded. Between last night and this morning, she had to be careening between resolve and regret.

So he held her, stroking up and down her back the way he’d seen Steve do a hundred times.

It must have worked because Darcy pulled herself out of wherever she was and scooted over enough to sit cross-legged next to him. “You slept with Steve and the first thing you did afterward was to check on me?” she asked.

“Of course. Didn’t think it’d be easy on you,” he said. “You think I wasn’t jealous when Steve came back from the shower at your place whistling? That punk never whistles.”

Darcy snickered and pinked all at the same time. “That makes me feel better. It shouldn’t, but it does.”

He grinned and stretched out on her bed, leaning down on an elbow with his feet crossed. “Figured it would.”

“Is he asleep?”

“Dead to the world.”

“Post mission, post sex, yeah, we won’t see him until dinner,” Darcy quipped.

Bucky ran a hand up her back. She was still twitchy, but there was no doubt she was on her game again. “Good.” She looked at him askance and he smirked as he stroked along her spine, taking his time as his fingers dragged downward. “Means we have time,” he paused long enough to make her blush, “--to figure out where you’re going to live.”

She tried to hide her smile and ended up rolling her eyes at him. “Nice one, Barnes.”

He gave her a cheeky grin. “Where do you want to be?” He didn’t move his hand, wanting to keep his fingers where he could stroke her lower back. As he did, he felt her pulse slowing (through the sensors in his fingertips … that was a neat trick) and she leaned into his touch lightly enough that he wondered if she knew that she did.

“I think I’m going to stay here for a little while, Bucky,” she said softly. “Doesn’t mean I won’t crash with you guys sometimes, but I think you and Steve had the right idea yesterday. With the date. I had fun last night and I think we need to do it again. And you two need … more time.” Her pulse jumped at that and he tightened the pressure on her back.

“All right, Princess. We can do that. Care to explain?”

She wrinkled her nose. “You’re the nosy one.”

He blew out his breath in frustration. “How in the hell did you two make it this far? You keep everything in your head like a poker player counting cards and Steve can’t string two words together about how he feels. What’d you do, tip him into bed before he had a chance to protest?”

“Something like that,” she sighed as she spoke. “Talking is still hard for him. For a long time, he
couldn’t even say your name.”

“Figures. Took me months to convince him I was gone on him in the first place. Think we were together a year before he started believing me when I told him I loved him.” He reached out and began playing with her hair, letting a lock spiral on his fingers and slide off again and again. “For someone who stands for everyone else, he sure does a lousy job of lookin’ out for himself.” Darcy seemed a little forlorn at that, so he reached for her hand to kiss the palm. “So… why do you want to live here?”

“Bucky, I’m living a floor below my mom and dad. My boyfriend and you, pick a title, are living above them. It’s weird, and when things get weird, I want something to call mine. I’m not moving in with the parents and I can’t move back to Malibu, so this is it.”

“What’s in Malibu?”

She put her chin on her knees again. “My home. Where I grew up. Mom and Dad were there when the Mandarin took it out with a missile strike last year.” She picked at her bedspread, pulling on stray threads.

“And then Steve and I took over your place.” He sat up and pulled her into his arms outright. There was so much about Darcy that he didn’t know. Like getting to hold her, he’d learned more in two days than he had in months. This time, he nudged her so that her head rested on his shoulder. (Warm. Soft. Protect Stark.) “Princess, we’ll get this place lookin’ like a home.”

“You’re okay with it?”

“Just means I get to court you properly, doll.”

“Courting? What do you consider a proper courting?”

“Supposed to show you I can take care of you, sweetheart. Good job, decent house, good husband and father material, all that.”

Darcy stilled. “That’s a lot of layers, Barnes.” She blinked. He wondered which one bothered her so much. “And some of it doesn’t really apply.”

“I know things are different, Princess, but I need to know I can stand on my own two feet. Seems I have a job now and I can make my rent. So I’m not dependent on you or Steve for that.”

Darcy frowned at him. “Surely someone has told you about the back pay and rank increases you’re entitled to as a P.O.W.. And since when is Dad charging you for living here?”

“Steve covered the back pay and we’re paying rent because we wouldn’t move in otherwise. Negotiated with your mom.” Bucky shrugged. “Probably a quarter of what it should go for in this part of town, and we split it like always.” He rubbed at his jaw. “Back pay is good. I’m glad it’s there for rent and whatnot. But I still need to know that I’m doin’ my part. If I want to buy my girl—or my punk of a boyfriend—a Christmas present, it’s gotta be from me.”

Darcy shook her head. “If word that Captain America pays rent ever gets out, the shit is going to hit the public fan. And it’s going to splatter all over Tony Stark.” There was no mistaking the warning; Darcy was as protective of her parents as they were of her.

“Got it covered. Nothing in writing and we have a corporation set up for the payments,” he assured her. “Your mom is a genius.”
“Yes, she is.”

Bucky brushed her hair so that it fell behind her shoulder. “Steve told me you don’t want to think about getting married yet. Said it’s not on the table. You know he wants kids, right?”

“He’s mentioned it. I’m not opposed, but I’m nowhere near ready for that and he knows that too.”

“That’s novel.”

“Shut up, Barnes. We do talk. Just takes us longer, okay? There’s a lot of unusual baggage on this trip.”

The image of a cargo plane loaded with odd shaped luggage popped in his head and he grinned. “That’s one way to put it.”

She reached out, grabbed a pillow and tried to smother him with it. He laughed as he shoved it aside. Honestly? He couldn’t ever remember having this much fun with a dame. Only Steve had ever made him laugh as much as he did with Darcy. He wanted to kiss her. To tumble her to the bed and show her all the ways he wanted to love her.

Instead, he arched a brow. “Now, what are we going to do about this place?” he asked. “Looks like the movers just dumped everything in the middle.”

“They did.”

*****

They spent the better part of the day unpacking her boxes and rearranging furniture. Having company to do it was a lot more distracting. If Bucky hadn’t shown up, she probably would have called Jane and badgered her into helping.

She took a black negligee out of his hands and stuffed it into a drawer. “I called you nosy, earlier. I had no idea. Nothing is sacred around you.”

He held up the ivory chemise that Steve had given her for her birthday. “It’s pretty enough.”

“It looks fabulous on me.” She grinned. “Ask Steve about his first trip to the lingerie store.”

Bucky chuckled. “Store full of ladies undergarments? Bet he was red from head to toe.”

“He complains on occasion about his Irish complexion,” she said primly, echoing JARVIS’ voice.

He folded the garment neatly and laid it in her dresser drawer. Barnes had picked through every box he’d unpacked for her, not just setting items in place, but sorting through each one—usually with a compliment or a complaint. Honestly? It was the most fun she’d had in months, which pointed out yet another reason she and Steve had been at odds. Quite simply, they hadn’t had a date in forever. Fun hadn’t been in their vocabulary since somewhere around March and the level of stress had taken its toll.

“Princess?”

He caught her staring into an empty box. “Sorry, woolgathering.” She tossed the box in his direction
and he collapsed it and dropped it on top of the other flattened pieces of cardboard. She detoured for the kitchen and picked out two water bottles out of the fridge. She brought them back and handed one to Barnes.

As if they had done it a thousand times, he cupped her cheek and touched his mouth to hers. “Thank you.” The hint of heat was enough to have her breathing unsteadily.

“Why are you two so convinced this will work?” she asked, frustrated by the zing dancing through her lips.

“Why are you so convinced it won’t?” he asked. “What’s got you down, doll?”

Not wanting to explain, for one, she wasn’t sure what the new rules were, for two, Bucky didn’t need to feel guilty over being the cause of it. So she deflected. “Talking to you is easy. Why?”

Barnes leveled a smirk at her. “’Cause living with Steve is like pulling teeth. Gotta talk twice as much to get anything out of him.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she muttered as she reached for another box, this one packed with shoes, which she didn’t have any place for yet. The little storage area in her lab held the smallest rack for a few clothes, not a full-blown wardrobe. She dumped the box along the wall of her lab in annoyance. She liked Bucky. She really did. Enough that she felt jittery and happy and horny around him all at the same time. Jealousy didn’t have a place here … and yet here it was anyway, all green and glowing.

When she came back, Bucky was leaning against her dresser and sipping from the water bottle. “I don’t know if you understand how sick he was, Darcy. Asthma, which is about all he tells anyone, only scratches the surface. He was deaf in one ear. His joints ached all the time, he never ate enough ‘cause he was allergic to everything, and he caught every sniffle as it went around. Nothing but sheer will kept him upright most of the time. I was always one bad winter away from losing him. If his mom hadn’t been a nurse, he’d never have made it at all. After she died, I did what she did, stuffing soup and tea down his gullet. Kept him warm sleeping next to him. He hated to say anything about feeling bad. Hated feeling like a burden. He kept all that inside, all the time.”

The purity of the antique Brooklyn voice made her shiver. If she closed her eyes, she could see the old picture of Steve she carried with her. But she kept them focused on the soldier with his arms crossed and one ankle propped on the other as he recounted their past.

“Just before the war, Steve had the last bad bout I remember. Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t keep anything down. Had pneumonia so bad the docs didn’t know what to do. I didn’t sleep for three weeks worrying about him dying in the night. He never complained. Never said anything about how bad he hurt. Just thanked me for what I did to help. Told me how much he loved me. Always told me that.” He studied his boots. “More he hurts, doll, the less he talks. Always been that way.”

His eyes shifted to pin hers, paling as they did. “I think you’ll understand what it means that Steve hardly spoke for a week when you left.”

Darcy got that this wasn’t the Winter Soldier talking. This was a glimpse of a harder Bucky Barnes. Not the Brooklyn flirt, but the Sergeant protecting what was his.

Crossing her arms, she flashed him an equally hard smile (Darcy Stark, don’t fuck with me). “I was planning a life with Steve—the kind that included picket fences and kids. And the minute he laid eyes on you again, it was like everything we’d built together was second best.” She bit her lip and turned away. That was more than she’d ever planned to tell him.
“That’s where you’ve got it all wrong, Darcy.” She didn’t hear him cross the room, but Bucky touched her arm to get her to look at him. She did, and there was real anger there. “Do you not see what Steve has written on him? Are you not listening when he is telling us not to make him choose? He needs us, Darcy. You’re not the only who doesn’t want to give up what you have and he’s fighting to keep you the only way he knows how. You think there was any way in hell he would have fucked me without your blessing? You told us weeks ago to do just that and the first time he kissed me since you left was just two nights ago. Those are not the actions of a man interested in letting you go.”

She sucked her breath, listening and firmly stepping on the green-eyed monster.

“Hell, I need you. I want you. In bed and out of it. Fuck, doll, six months ago I was a trained puppet killing whatever target I was given. You didn’t question me that day. You knew me before I knew myself. And you trusted me.” Bucky reached for her, tugging lightly to get her to lean against his chest so he could put his chin against her head. ‘Yes, Steve’s been mine for a lot of years, but you don’t think I see what he sees? ‘Cause I do, Darcy. Last night… last night was the best time I’ve had since I lived in Brooklyn. I want you to stay. Give us a chance to show you this will work. Will you do that?”

Never one to stay mad for long in the face of reason, Darcy reached around Bucky to hug him. “I told Steve yesterday that I would.”

“Thank Christ,” he breathed in her hair as his arms tightened around her too. “I gotta ask though, Princess, do I have any chance at all with you?”

She wanted to give him a flippant quip to make light of his question as she eased out of his embrace, but her instincts told her that wasn’t going to work. “Yeah, Bucky, you have a chance.”

He didn’t let her go far. With a hand to her waist, he stopped her from moving away. “Is Steve the only reason you’re doing this, Princess? ‘Cause I have it on good advice that that isn’t gonna work. It has to be for you and me too.”

The question was a fair one, and one she could answer honestly. “I like you, James. A lot. And I promise that I won’t sleep with you until it’s for you and you alone. Just … give me time.”

The charming smirk reappeared. “Take all the time you need, Princess.”

“Jerk.”

“You know it.”

*****

Steve was not expecting to wake up to an empty apartment. He cleaned up in the shower, grinned over the reason why he needed another one, debated where his …. boyfriend and girlfriend (still getting used to that) … might have ended up. JARVIS pointed him to Darcy’s place.

“I believe dinner is just arrived in the Commons kitchen for the three of you. Shall I send have it sent to her floor or would you rather take it down yourself?” JARVIS added.

“I’ll get it.” He took the stairs, hoping that Barton hadn’t noticed the addition of hot food yet. He
hadn’t, and Steve managed to slip out unnoticed with three bags of Chinese. (There’s a bet he would have lost.)

He wanted to ask JARVIS what the pair of them had been doing all day, but it wouldn’t be right, especially now that JARVIS was keeping an eye on Bucky. He could ask about that, though, maybe.

“JARVIS, how did Bucky do while I was gone?”

“Quite well. Two minor incidents, one triggered by your departure and which Lewis was able to help him work through, the other was simply the end result of a long, successful day. I assisted him in preparing for bed and getting him to sleep. Lewis stayed with him, even after he regained himself after an hour or so.”

That was interesting. “Thank you, JARVIS. And please tell me when I am overstepping my boundaries.”

“Captain, Sergeant Barnes has insisted that I keep either you or Lewis informed of any incidents.”

As the elevator descended, he automatically fortified himself against the inevitable spat. The doors slid open. He winced at Darcy’s tone.

“What the hell, Barnes? No. What did I tell you about mid-century modern furniture? Not here, not now. Not ever. What looks kick ass and cool to you looks like a nineteen-fifties nightmare to me.”

It wasn’t the words that startled him. It was the fact that Darcy was sitting against Bucky on her bed while they stared at a tablet. Bucky had his chin on Darcy’s shoulder with one arm looped around her waist and was pointing to something on the screen.

“What about that one?” he asked.

“Okay, that’s better. Yeah, I can do that,” she said. “Look it even has the trim I like.”

Steve was sure he was seeing things. It looked like there had been a solid effort at setting up Darcy’s apartment in the wide open space outside her lab. Her furniture was arranged in groupings and a couple of new art screens made half-hearted attempts to separate this section from that. He navigated through it and set the bags of food on the table that occupied the middle of her space.

He tucked his hands in his pockets. “I guess you aren’t moving in with us.” He tried not to sound disappointed.

Bucky and Darcy exchanged looks. “Told ya,” she said. Bucky leaned to the side and pulled out a dollar out of his pocket. She held up her hand over her shoulder and he slipped it between her fingers. She set the tablet down. “Yay, you brought the food. We’re starving but we didn’t want to eat without you.”

With a little nudge from Bucky, Darcy slid off the bed and Bucky followed with a hand grazing her lower back.

His artist’s eye appreciated the simple lines of the t-shirts and jeans they wore. Darcy’s jeans had an interesting hole here and there, with bright pink socks to match the writing on her shirt. Bucky had donned a dark blue t-shirt and matching jeans, a stark contrast to Darcy’s light. The look Bucky shot at him over her head was full of heat and want (damn).

With all that in his head, it wasn’t hard to meet Darcy’s mouth and want more. He swiped his tongue inside and she pressed into him (her flavor and the memory of Bucky). It was heady and hungry. She
clung just a little, and he squeezed her around the waist, staying in the kiss, until she was ready to let go.

The blush on her cheeks and quick look at Bucky told him that maybe she wasn’t as comfortable with this morning’s activities as she said. But none of that explained the easy camaraderie between the two. “What did I miss?” he asked.

Bucky gave her one of those ‘don’t be stupid’ looks he was always shooting at Steve as he pulled out her chair.

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, Barnes, but I’m hungry. And I know you are because I’ve been listening to your stomach rumble for the last hour.”

The three of them dug through bags, putting out all the various boxes. They each cornered a box of steamed Jasmine rice and spent the rest of dinner trading around the meats and vegetables.

Steve eyed both of them, trying to figure out this new dynamic. “Was the date that good?”

“Do you count the fact that he stole my cheesecake out from under me? Then no. It sucked on that point alone,” Darcy quipped.

Bucky reached into her box of pecan chicken and plucked a piece out with his chopsticks. “You were distracted. Not my fault.”

“Yeah, well, not gonna happen again.” She came up with the spring roll Bucky had commandeered and bit into it to claim it as hers.

“What were you two looking at when I came in?” he asked, trying to navigate the conversation around to where he might get some answers.

“Something to put my hanging stuff in. No closets, you know,” Darcy answered. “And why didn’t you mention your boyfriend is a clothing fiend. I did not need a running commentary on everything I own.”

“Do you really need thirty different knit caps, Princess?”

“I like them. I don’t have to spend twenty minutes on my hair.” Darcy chased Bucky away from her orange shrimp with a snap of her chopsticks and scooted the box closer to Steve. “Guard that.”

Steve tucked it under his wrist as Bucky innocently picked out another flavor from the pile of boxes. “Get rid of the yellow ones then,” he said.

“Nuh huh. Not my fault. You do know my dad is Iron Man, right? Red and gold are kind of his signature theme?”

“Still not your color.”

She glared at him. “You are not getting rid of my yellow coat.”

“The blue one is prettier. Brings out your eyes.”

“Says the man whose eyes can’t decide which hue is up.”

“Why Darcy, I didn’t know you’d been paying attention. I’m flattered.” Bucky winked as he reached under Steve’s wrist and plucked a piece of shrimp from Darcy’s box.
“Damn it, Barnes, that’s going to cost you!”

“Want another dollar?”

Steve rested his chin on his fist, wondering when his personal life had become a comedy routine. “Nick and Nora have nothing on you two.”

The corner of Bucky’s mouth lifted. “Yeah? We can work on that. Just like a couple of people I know and love need to work on a few things.” Steve was certain Bucky toed Darcy under the table.

“When did you become a counselor?” Darcy muttered.

“Believe it or not, I’ve been listening to Wilson daily for months. Deprogramming wasn’t the only stuff on the menu.” Bucky leaned back a little, and Darcy reached out to take his hand and pull him back in.

Whether the automatic gesture was for him or for her, Steve wasn’t sure. But fortified with the support, and with that quiet tone that told him she was serious, she told him, “I’m going to stay here on my floor for a while. I’m on board with being in the Tower. To put it bluntly, we’re safe here.”

She sighed in annoyance. “I’m not under any illusion that HYDRA isn’t still interested in the ‘kidnap Darcy/trap Cap’ scenario, with the distinct added bonus that they might be trying to reel the Winter Soldier in too.” She took another bite of shrimp, chewed it, swallowed it and kept going. “So this is me not arguing even though it really, really sucks.”

“Tell him the rest, Princess.” Bucky patted her hand and let go. He rose from the table, kissed her on the temple and disappeared. Since he headed for the lab, the bathroom was a safe bet, giving Steve a few minutes with Darcy.

She stared at her box then set it down. “Come on. Let’s go look out the window while I figure out what I want to say.”

That didn’t sound like the sort of conversation he wanted to have. But he followed her so they could see the New York skyline. The sun had already set, leaving the city sparkling in a million lights.

Shrugging her shoulders in a way that told him how much tension had built up there, he set his hands to her neck to work some of it out. She leaned into him.

“This morning was a lot harder than I expected,” she admitted. “Bucky is better. A lot better. He’s beginning to trust himself again. Being with you did him a world of good today, and I can see you’re happy about it too. God, Steve, the looks you give him make me hot and I’m only in the crossfire.”

She reached up and took his hands as she turned to face him, weaving her fingers into his. “This … us … what you and I have, has changed. It changed the moment you learned about Bucky and we’ve been fighting a losing battle to save it.”

He sucked in his breath at her words. “Darce—“

Shaking her head, she plowed on. “You’ve already apologized and I’ve told you where I stand now.” Her eyes flicked to where Bucky was cleaning up dinner and came back to him. “And it’s possible that what is on the other side of this is going to be as good or even better. I told you that I’m willing to try. I am. I will.”

A slow tear ran down her cheek. “But what we had—really, really worked. I fell hard for you, Steven. I love you. I love everything about you. Even the parts of you that are a pain in the ass.”
His heart ached at the agony in her voice. Still, she had more to say as he rubbed the water from her skin. “I had a vision of our future, a dream of where we were going. And it was a really nice dream.” She trembled. “It hurts to give it up.”

Steve was aware of Bucky turning out the lights in the lab and leaving through the elevator. He was grateful and pulled Darcy into his arms. She cried, heartbreaking sobs that he’d never seen.

He got it. On a pretty day in New York, he’d had to let go of all those old dreams to embrace a new possibility. On a dark day in DC, he’d taken her dreams apart without a second thought. Had expected her to go with him on a new journey. Hadn’t asked until yesterday. Because he was terrified she wouldn’t come along, that she wouldn’t give the three of them the chance. He hadn’t really believed it, wouldn’t let himself think on it. Had her name written on his skin as a protection against it. His instincts couldn’t be that wrong. Not now.

But for Darcy—she was shaking so hard with grief that he slipped a hand under her knees and carried her to the bed.

The moment he sat down holding her, she came up to kiss him. Hard and needy, she pulled at his shirts until he was able to shake them off, one sleeve at a time. Her mouth was hot and everywhere.

“Darcy—“

Her eyes widened, with a touch of fear. But he only softened his voice and his hands ghosted along her arms. “Let me love you the way you should be loved.”

“Steve—“

“No arguments, love. Not tonight. Tomorrow, we’re going to wake up and it’s going to be a new beginning. Tonight is for you and me and everything we’ve built together. Let me give you that.”

More tears fell and he raised himself enough to lay her back against the pillows. Just as that first day, he was still stunned by her beauty. More so now, because he understood all the bits and pieces of Darcy Stark that inhabited that loveliness.

He took his time kissing her, to chase away the tears until she moaned into his mouth. The taste of her scrambled his brains a little, a sizzling heat of sunshine as he licked along her lips, sucked on the bottom one with a nip that made her breath catch. He had one hand on her neck so that he could change the angle as he worked over her mouth. He knew all her secrets here, what made her pant, what made her giggle. When she exhaled all at once and her hips bucked up against his, he moved to her neck, kissing that point where her pulse was stuttering.

One of her hands dug into his shoulder, the other into his hair as he sucked hard enough to leave his mark. She arched under his body, bringing a leg around to cup his hip. In spite of the denim of her jeans and the cotton of his slacks, he could feel her heat where they were notched together.

It was natural enough to roll to his back so that she straddled him. From here, he could peel off her t-shirt. He loved the way her breasts popped out of the fabric with a little bounce. He knew now that Darcy was sometimes self-conscious of the size of them, and occasionally talked about surgery. But he loved the way she looked, and she loved the things he could do to them. So far, he’d been able to convince her of the benefits of keeping them as is.

He worked on that now, molding his hands around their weight, thumbing her nipples through the fabric of her bra. She was just beginning to press her hips in a rhythm, when he reached around to snap open the bra with one hand.
“You never fail to impress me with that, Steve.” The faint smile, even in the dark, with only city lights through the windows to illuminate her, blew him away. “Three fasteners, not two, and you never miss.”

He held up his fingers, wiggling them. “I’m good at getting into things I want.”

“Fuck, Steve.”

“I’m working on that, doll.” His brain blipped at the familiarity of the exchange. But he chased that away as he tugged the material from Darcy’s breasts and tossed it somewhere on the floor.

Her nipples tightened into hard points and his fingers itched to touch. Leaning up on an elbow, he took one peak into his mouth, licking it at first, until she squirmed. Taking his time, he steadily increased the pressure, scraping his teeth a little, then sucking hard on the whole areola until a steady stream of words spilled out of her.

“Damn it, that feels good, Steve. Don’t stop, please. God I want you inside me. Hands, dick, I really don’t care.” Her fingers scrabbled over his bare chest, plucking at his nipples until he was cross-eyed from the rocking against his cock and the nubs of pleasure/pain as she bore down.

He kept up the pressure until Darcy got that hitch in her voice, and he let go, grinning as she insulted him. “You suck, Rogers. Captain America, my ass, leaving me hanging.” She slid off the bed and stripped out of her jeans and underwear. “Get naked, or I’m borrowing Barnes’ knife and getting those pants off for you.”

His vision hazed over that—whether it was the thought of Darcy wielding a knife on his clothes, or Bucky or both, he wasn’t sure. But he rolled to his feet and let the slacks fall to the floor.

She reached for his cock, but he turned her so that she faced the bed. With her lip between her teeth, she went to her knees on the mattress, resting her palms on her thighs, making room for him behind her.

This was one of his favorite ways to hold her. There wasn’t any place he couldn’t reach, and he started with sliding his hand down to her folds where he found her slick and her clit was already peeking out, wanting some of that attention. He gave it a flick and a circle then drew his fingers along each side before setting up a steady tapping just on the underside.

Darcy reached over her head, trying to pull at him. But he waited until his hand was soaked from her coming apart. He loved holding her as she came again and again. Learning how to bring her to a peak, nudging her over the edge, then pressing hard against her clit just long enough for him to be able to do it all again. Then there was moment where her whole body just opened up to his touch, as if she couldn’t control it any more from the onslaught of sensation. That’s when he nestled his cock into her folds and leaned forward enough to start the slow slide in. He didn’t thrust, just held her as her own body reeled him in with pulses and pulls—she fell forward to her hands as he played with her clit, plucking it now. She keened under her breath, chanting his name.

And he stroked, long and slow, until she demanded that he speed up. He did, a little, not enough, until she was swearing at him again. “Fuck me, Steven. Goddammit. I’m there. I’m right there.”

“Not yet,” he told her. “Not until you know how much I love you.” He pulled her body hard against his, supporting her with an arm and keeping them balanced on the bed.

He kept the strokes steady until Darcy choked out, “I know. I love you. This is us. Here and now.”

He pressed hard and deep, feeling the impossible tension in his cock and the tightness in his balls as
the muscles in her vagina rippled around him. “Always, Darcy.”

She screamed his name as they came together. Her body demanding and drawing out every last ounce of him, until there wasn’t anything left for him to give to her.

Unwilling to let go, he shifted down to the bed so that she was spooned against his body. He pulled the covers over both of them. “I love you, Darcy. That will never change.”

Reaching back over her head, she ran her fingers through his hair, something that never failed to warm him inside. “I love you, Steven Grant Rogers. And you damned well better have a plan by the time I wake up in the morning.”

“I will. Now shut up and go to sleep so it will get here faster.”

“Steven?”

“Yes, doll?”

“Thank you. For asking. For giving me the chance to say, ‘No.’”

He closed his eyes, to get his composure once again. “Thank you for trusting me enough to say, ‘Yes.’”

“You’re welcome.”

She slept long before he did, but unlike most nights, she didn’t move away to sleep on her pillows. She turned over to face him, her face nuzzling his chest. She didn’t see or hear Bucky come home. Steve did.

And when Bucky settled on the couch in the lab, Steve closed his eyes, dreaming about tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Reference: "Nick and Nora" Nick (William Powell) and Nora Charles (Myrna Loy) from the movie "The Thin Man (1934)."

If you haven't watched The Thin Man movies, they are hysterical. The writing is brilliant, the actors are perfect in their delivery. Many modern screenwriters and actors reference this film as groundbreaking and inspirational -- in particular, the TV shows "Remington Steele" and "Castle" have both named this film as an influence.
The Dance

As morning sun streamed through the bank of glass, Darcy decided some kind of window covering was in order if she was going to live here. She left Steve passed out on the bed (twice in a row, that was rare enough) and shuffled into her lab toward the bathroom. Which was dark, thanks to tinted glass. Bucky had sprawled out face down on the sofa, with a couple of blankets dumped on top of him. Tangled locks covered his face, and one arm was dangling off the edge so that his hand touched the floor.

She left him alone while she took five minutes in the bathroom. When she came out, survival instinct had her pushing the button on the coffee maker.

Mornin’, J. What time did Barnes come in?

Good morning, Lewis. Two-fifteen. He and Barton played billiards most of the evening.

How was he?

He did well. No incidents, and he beat Barton two games to one. Lewis, it is time for me to wake him for his morning training with Ms. Romanov, unless you would care to do so yourself.

Is this part of his new job?

Personal, I think, but we shall see how it turns out.

I’ll wake him.

Through the lab windows, she could see Steve stretching and looking around for her. He blinked when he saw her. She waved and pointed down at the sofa.

Remembering her promise, Darcy dug out all those maddening feelings for Bucky that she’d been ignoring for a while now. She rounded the sofa and knelt near his head, trying to decide the best way to wake him. She wanted to play with his hair or run her fingers in the scruff of his beard.

From the doorway, Steve quietly reminded her, “Stroke his forearm, Darcy, since you’re not already holding his hand. He’s hard as sleep and anything else might wake him up combat-ready.”

She’d forgotten. Steve did such a great job of separating his military world from their relationship that she forgot (not really, but some) that he was an operative just as much as Clint or Natasha. And as silly as it seemed, she’d forgotten that Bucky was still the Winter Soldier. Red star on his arm and all. With a glance at Steve, who was leaning on the wall with his hair sticking up every which way (adorable), she skinned her fingers along the forearm that was dangling off the couch.

Barnes peeled one eye open.

“JARVIS tells me you have an appointment this morning. Something about training Natasha?”

He pushed so that he sat up and ran his hand through his hair (both men, same habit, usually a nervous tell). “Coffee?”

“Man after my heart. But no, not yet. It’s in progress.”

He squinted, focusing on her. “Are you okay?”
Fingers shaking a little to betray her nerves, she did want she wanted to do earlier, reaching out to touch the hair at his temple then ran the back of her hand over his stubble. “I will be,” she promised.

As he covered her hand with his, Bucky looked over to Steve. “How in the hell did you find her, love?”

“Did I mention I’ve having that bike bronzed?”

“Good call.”

Darcy sat back on her heels as Steve came around to sit next to Bucky, giving him a kiss on the other temple and ruffling his hair.

“That’s the third or fourth time one of you has made a reference to ‘finding’ me.”

The two men exchanged a look. “Can we take you to out tonight and explain?” asked Steve.

“I’d like that.”

Bucky flashed her a quick grin. “That’s a second date in my book.”

“Don’t count on sleeping with me on the third one, James. I don’t care what the current social expectation is.”

Obviously missing the context (she would explain later), his mouth dropped open and he turned to Steve. “You did not get her in bed on the third date.”

“Not exactly, but close,” Steve admitted as he reached for Darcy’s wrist to kiss the inside of it. “Not if the first counts as a date or just a coffee, or if last one counts since we closed the deal.”

“Four?”

Darcy mused, “Five. Not counting the coffee and bike ride when we met, let’s see,” She held up her fingers one at a time. “A walk in Central Park where you sketched me, a bad zombie movie that, in retrospect, Bucky would have adored, Coney Island, a day in my lab where you played with my robots, then yep, your place for spaghetti. Didn’t you have to introduce me as your girlfriend somewhere in there?”

“Five, if we’re not counting coffee,” Steve agreed. With a smirk.

“You took her to Coney Island?” Bucky asked, tilting his head up at Steve.

“Yeah, and I didn’t throw up like I did with a jerk I know. That was a novelty.” Steve checked the time on his cell phone. “You’ve got twenty minutes now to get kitted up for whatever you’re thinking this morning.” He retreated to the kitchen to pour coffee.

“Shit.” Bucky scrambled off the couch. “Don’t need much but coffee, and I’m gonna borrow one of your practice shirts for knife work.”

“Kevlar?”

“For today.”

“I keep it in the locker.”

Bucky hesitated and looked between them. “Will you come?”
Bucky dug out his tactical pants and his combat boots from their apartment where he’d stashed them in a closet. He had a bad moment as he slid them on but JARVIS talked him through it quickly enough. He debated how many weapons he wanted to carry and decided on the single blade.

Steve met him in the locker room with coffee in hand and handed it over.

“Darcy?”

“Observation deck.”

“You?”

“Where do you want me?”

“Close.” He sipped the coffee, handing it back to pull the shirt over his head. He struggled with the fit over his arm.

“Trade me.” Steve passed back the coffee and came around to his left side to reset the shirt higher up on his bicep. He hesitated over the star. “Covered or uncovered.”

“Uncovered.” He wanted Natalia on the defensive. He finished off the coffee and set it on the bench.

Steve clutched his shoulders to give him a searching look. “I need you to stay with me, Bucky.”

“Stay close.” Perception changed fully from experiencing to assessing as he drew on his gloves (Asset).

*ping* Barnes, you are safe.

He led the way to the practice mats. Steve broke formation to lean against the nearest wall, his shield propped up next to him.

Natalia approached from the opposite side. “Barnes.”

“Milaya.” He noted that she wore her full combat gear. Good. She would regret it soon. “Lock doors,” he ordered Steve. “Live weapons.” Steve did that, returning to his place.

He approached the mat and knelt on one knee. “Disable me. Stop me from using my weapon. One touch from me, you lose. Disable me for more than two seconds, you win.” His breathing even out and he focused on his target. “Begin.”

****

Thor and Tony flanked Darcy on the observation deck. JARVIS assured her privately that Barnes was still in control, but there wasn’t a single person watching or participating who wasn’t grateful that Steve and Clint were inside the room.
Natasha didn’t hesitate. She pulled out her pistols and fired at the soldier, who dodged the rubber bullets with an agility and a closure rate that was chilling. He caught both of her wrists and flung the pistols away. “You’ve lost the use of them.”

He stepped back, went to a knee. “Begin.”

This time, she flung some kind of beaded string at him and took a flying leap. Bucky dodged the string and caught her foot so that she had to turn that into a defensive roll and a kick at his shoulder. But she came up standing to fire something from her wrists. More rubber bullets bounced off the walls as Bucky rolled under them and drew his knife.

Darcy had seen the street footage of the knife fight between … Cap and the Winter Soldier (it wasn’t Steve and Bucky then), and the speed of that battle was terrifying.

This was no different. Nat fought with hands and feet to keep away from his knife. Then, the knife came down in an arc that Darcy hardly registered. Impossibly, Bucky turned it to bring the flat of it down on Nat’s knee with a sharp slap. “You lose.”

She stood up and, by her posture alone, Darcy knew she was furious.

Bucky walked to Clint and passed him the knife, hilt first. He came back to the mat, gesturing in pure Russian disgust. “Pah!” he scoffed, holding his arm up and flicking his hand forward. “Get rid of the toys, Natalia. You must work on your form. You are sloppy and lazy and there is no tolerance for that in here.”

“Holy shit,” Darcy said softly.

“I think I’ll reinforce the Tower. Yeah, that, um.” Tony was rattled. No one told off Nat and lived. Thor only chuckled.

Nat stripped off every weapon she carried, dropping them with thunks and tinks on the floor. It took a while. Wearing only her jumpsuit now, she took a stance at the end of the mat. “Is this how it’s going to be, _Uchitel_?”

“Of course. Show me what you can do. Precision, Milaya. Not excuses. Start with your feet.”

He counted in Russian. Darcy figured out that he was calling out specific kicks at various heights and approaches. Time and again, he caught Nat’s foot, stopping the momentum.

“Nyet.” Barnes pulled her ankle into a different position, rotating it a degree or two. “See? This you missed. And it causes you to be bruised. Again.”

Tony sucked in his breath. “Ballet.”

“Huh?” Darcy asked rather intelligently.

“The Red Room required the girls to learn ballet. Dancers are taught this kind of control. Every movement is exact. The turn of a hand. A chin. The feet. It’s all extraordinarily precise. Natasha asked me to build her a dance studio.”

“This is how she trained?”

“Russian ballerinas have been the world standard since the beginning of the dance. Someone must have looked at those dancers and decided to make them weapons.” Tony swore under his breath. “Nothing is sacred.”
“You think she can dance?”

“Seeing this? I think she could take the stage tomorrow and own it.”

“Why do you think Barnes is correcting her so much?”

Thor answered that one. “Because a warrior must train always. There is never a time when one can choose not to learn, to improve. Natasha has not had anyone in many years to train in her particular style. This is good.” He looked down at Tony. “Is there a place for this ballet, that I might see for myself?”

Darcy grinned, answering for her dad. “Take Jane, she’ll love you for it. You’ll get major points in the boyfriend/courting department. Just don’t tell her you want to see the ballet to incorporate into your fighting. That would spoil it for her. And don’t laugh at the costumes because they are tradition.”

Thor’s grateful smile melted her a little. “I appreciate the advice.” (Yeah, she still had a little demigod crush. Just because.)

By the time Bucky called the end of the session, Nat was absolutely dripping with sweat. “I hate you,” she told him.

There was no expression in Bucky’s face. “I know, Milaya. You tell me that every time.”

She tilted her head. “I’m not nineteen anymore, James Barnes.”

“No. But you will have the skills to keep you safe, Natasha Romanoff. This I can do. You have two days to improve. We meet again on Monday.”

He quit the room. Nat watched him leave, impassive as always.

*****

He made it to the locker room before the memories and the headache slammed into him. He’d kept everything on lockdown while he was with Natalia, but here … here, he stumbled to the toilet to vomit.

Somebody pulled his hair out of the way while he retched so hard that his head sparked with lights and his eyes were damp.

Barnes, you’re safe. Steve is holding you. From your vital signs, it appears that you are in severe pain. There is an injection available that can stop it. It will make you sleepy.

(Asset. Rule one.) No.

Steve wants to take you into the hot shower. Go to the shower with him, Barnes.

(Asset. Rule Two. Assets do not have feelings.) No. I don’t want to do this. Leave her alone.

Barnes, you’re safe. Steve is holding you.

His vision was white as he pushed away from the toilet and staggered to his feet. He felt hands on
him. Steve. He clutched/pushed away/ried to walk and fell to his knees. Then there was nothing.

*****

Darcy was only two steps ahead of Bruce and Sam, who JARVIS had called in as the medical team. Bucky was out cold on the locker room floor. Steve had his head in his lap and was trying to give him a one-handed massage on his neck.

“His symptoms appear to indicate a severe headache, much worse that what we have encountered so far,” JARVIS told them, “but I am not equipped with the proper medical equipment to determine if there is another cause.”

Sam did the initial assessment, agreeing with JARVIS, but Bruce was the one who made the judgment call. “This one is too severe for the methods you’ve been using. He needs help to alleviate the pain.”

JARVIS reminded them, “Barnes has directed that only the two of you, Lewis, Captain, may override his wishes. You must be in agreement.”

Darcy and Steve exchanged looks, and both of them nodded in unison. “We’ll deal with the fallout,” she said. Sam frowned, not liking their answer. But he didn’t try to stop them either.

“What do you have that the serum won’t counteract?” Steve asked.

Bruce answered, “Nothing that will last very long. Just enough to give him temporary relief while his body heals. Couple of hours, tops, unless we give him more. Same thing the hospital gave you in DC, as a matter of fact. They called me, wondering what might work.”

Sam reached in his kit. “When you told me what you were putting in my bag, Banner, I didn’t think we’d need it before we left the tower.” He prepped the needle and slid it into the vein on Bucky’s arm. “Where do you want to take him?”

“Home?” Steve asked. “I think he’ll do better if he wakes up there.”

It was a little unnerving to see how easily Thor lifted Bucky over his shoulder. But it was the quickest way to get him up the elevator and into bed, where Steve and Darcy took over the project of working him out of his clothes and under the electric blanket.

Sam checked with JARVIS, and they agreed the Bucky was responding to the medication. His vitals had improved enough that Sam felt comfortable going back to his own apartment for a while. But he was close, and promised to check in soon.

Bucky wasn’t Darcy’s only concern. She texted Clint.

*Nat okay?*

*Pretty sure we’re out of vodka.*

*I can raid Tony’s bar.*

*That is from Tony’s bar.*
What do you need?

Time. Give her time. Barnes?

Still out cold.

Keep me posted.

****

He couldn’t concentrate. There was the lassitude he hated. (Drugged.) He tried to move, to get away from it, found himself restrained (chair, pain, rule one) and collapsed back into the … body/bed. (Not chair.)

“Bucky, you’re safe. You’re home.”

(Steve) Arms in a vice grip around his middle and left wrist. He strained against them.

Sergeant Barnes, please relax. Steve is holding you. You’re safe.

“No!” he got out. Tried to pull against the bonds again.

A chuckle in his ear that was so incongruous with his state of mind that he stilled.

“There’s my Bucky. Telling everyone to fuck off. No wonder they promoted you to Sergeant.”

The miasma in his brain made it hard to focus. He tried to pull out of Steve’s embrace again.

“No, love, not until I know you won’t hurt yourself. You scared the hell out of all of us down there. Turned sheet white, threw up, and damned near did a face plant on the bathroom floor.”

“Wha’ y’ gi’ me?” he slurred.

“Just a pain reliever. Same one I’ve had before. It'll wear off in the next hour, and your head won’t feel fuzzy.

“Don’ wan’ it.”

“I know. Want to get in the bathtub? Heat will chase off the last of your headache.”

He squinted. “How?”

“Do I know that you have a headache?” Steve freed a hand and drew a forefinger between Bucky’s eyebrows. “Can’t miss the lines there. Want the bath?”

“Yessss.” A shift in the weight on the mattress and Darcy left the room. He didn’t know she was there. (Asset. Failure to assess.) “Didn’t mean … scare you.”

“How’s your head?” Fingers tugged his hair, stroking (Steve).


“That’s the medicine. Want to sit up?”
Frowned when he couldn’t get the answer out.

“You’re safe, love. Stay with me. Breathe with me.”

Breathing gave him something that he could do. *Experiencing* He leaned his head back on Steve’s shoulder, concentrating on the in and out and nothing more. *Not Asset. Bucky.* As he did, his head cleared somewhat. “Sit. Wanna sit.”

“Sure thing. I’m really hoping to not have to carry you in the bathroom.”

Bucky blinked at that. “How?” he asked again. A big, warm hand stayed on his back as he managed to swing his legs over the side of the bed.

“How did you get here? Thor slung you over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes. We were debating if that would make your head worse or not, but he had you upstairs and in bed as fast as JARVIS could get the elevator upstairs. So no harm done.”

Darcy popped through the bathroom doorway. “Could have been much worse. Steve could have bridal carried you all the way home. Now that would have been embarrassing. Especially because I would have taken pictures. Water’s hot if you want it.”

He found her comment funny, but couldn’t do anything but try to smile. That didn’t work so well.

Steve moved off the bed to pull him to his feet, sliding an arm under his shoulders to take his weight. *(Breathe out. Asset.)* His eyes cleared and he was able to walk under his own power. Taking heed of the toothbrush and glass of cool water on the counter, he used the first and drained the second.

Quick assessment determined he was uninjured, wearing boxers and nothing else. He flexed his arm, methodically checking the sensors. Finding all was in working order, he dropped his underwear and climbed into the bubbling tub.

Surrounded by hot water, with a jet of compressed air aimed at his shoulder and neck, he relaxed against the slanted side. Steve was right, his head cleared that much more. Enough for him to remember what caused the headache.

“Natal—Natasha?”

“She’s okay. Shaken by the memories, same as you. But she’s had a few more years to deal with them. She’s worried about you.”

“I’m okay, punk.”

Darcy snorted as she walked in. “Bullshit.”

She stood on one foot, then the other to strip off her socks, leaving her only in denim shorts and one of the ragged t-shirts she seemed to borrow from her dad’s closet. Vintage, she called it. She stepped over the side of the tub, over him, and sat on the opposite edge, swirling her feet around in the bubbles and hot water.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he said drily. Her toes kept bumping against his thigh. He wondered if she realized he was naked under the bubbles. It seemed natural enough to stroke the back of her calf, so he did. She didn’t pull away.

“Thank you, I will. How’s the head?”
“Better.” A toe bumped his thigh again, making his pulse dance. Steve sat on the other side of the tub, across from Bucky, to lean against the wall and kick off his boots. The intimacy of the setting was as disconcerting as much as it was comforting. He couldn’t ever remember this sort of thing with a dame. For that matter, he couldn’t remember doing this with Steve either.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No.”

“Want to try another answer?”

He scowled at her, then at Steve.

Who shrugged and gave him that under-the-lashes look of innocence. “You’re the one bugging everyone to talk, Bucky.”

But he didn’t want to talk, to sully this thing they were doing with memories of a time and place that was already gone. Instead, he turned up his hand, hoping Steve would take it. Which he did. After that, it was far too easy to lean forward and drag Steve into the tub backward, where he landed in the water with a splash, feet still hanging out of the tub.

“Son of a—“

Darcy let out a shriek of laughter until Bucky reached out and scooped her into the tub too. She landed in his lap facing him, still laughing as she held on to his chest to twist around and look at Steve.

Steve was still under the bubbles with his feet hanging out. He rolled over, going to his knees as water streamed down his face. “Fucking jerk.”

“Tsk Tsk, Captain America using such language,” he admonished. He loved this. The laughter.

Steve leaned over Darcy’s shoulder and kissed him hard on the mouth, only lingering a little with a swipe of the tongue. “Is it any wonder with the people I hang out with? Only person I know with a filthier mouth than you, Bucky, is this sweet little dame sitting on your lap.”

Darcy’s mouth was just a little open. Her hands flexed as Steve kissed him, her right fingers grazing Bucky's nipple, the left his collar bone. He could have kissed her then and there. Steve’s eyes darkened with hunger just seeing them together.

But he didn’t want this way. Not with those memories still fresh in his brain. Right now, he wanted her warm, clean presence, here with Steve.

She seemed to get it. She sat back on her knees, sliding her hands closer together so they weren’t resting on anything too sensitive.

He smiled at her, at him. “Been a long time since I got to play. Have fun. Seem to do that a lot with both of you. Feels good.”

Darcy reached out and dribbled water right on his face. “I’ll remember that.”

He sputtered, but didn’t retaliate this time. Just grinned at the pair of them. As Darcy stood up, Steve handed her a towel from where he was sitting on the side of the tub. Bucky damned near swallowed his tongue. He did run a hand up to the back of her knee, capturing her attention. Green-blue eyes met his, her red mouth in a wide smile. Even though he’d been subjected to the
gorgeousness of the pair for the past half year, he still wasn’t used to it. Definitely not with Darcy’s 
shirt clinging to her breasts and her wet shorts cupping her ass, and Steve’s shirt clinging to every 
fuckin’ muscle he had.

Steve chucked. “Close your mouth, jerk. You’ll draw flies.”

“Stop being so damned beautiful. Both of you.”

Darcy arched an eyebrow. “Distracted?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait ’til you see what I have for tonight. She stepped out of the tub like a queen, with a hand 
resting in Steve’s. She lifted a shoulder and gave him a wink over it. “It’s vintage. Just your style.”
She kissed Steve and wiggled fingers at Bucky. “See you two later. I’ve got work to do. Just think 
of me dripping all the way home.”

The bathroom door closed, and Bucky let out the breath he’d been holding. “She’s going to kill me 
before this is all over.” He leaned his head back against the tub.

“Just now figuring it out?”

“You were stubborn, love. She makes me feel like I’m not worthy to kiss her feet.” He flexed his 
hand, staring at the metal.

“I know the feeling.”

Bucky frowned at Steve. “How in the hell did you manage to talk to her? I know you. You are not 
that smooth, and she’s not one for idiots.”

“I was changing the oil on the bike in Stark’s garage. She was staring at it, and maybe me, but 
mostly the bike. I was staring at her while I wiped it down. Finally managed to ask her if she 
wanted a ride.”

“And she said?”

“With or without you?”

Bucky laughed. “And?”

“I told her I had to insist on being there because she might not bring it back. She told me that she did 
like shiny things and introduced herself.”

“Not bad, Rogers.”

“My one and only successful pickup line.”

“Can’t argue with the results. Pass me a towel?”

Bucky dried off with Steve looking on. Steve always did that, from the day they became lovers. As 
he began to work the towel between the joints of the metal, Steve asked, “Why did you stop with 
Darcy?”

“Stop?”

Steve grinned. “Don’t tell me you didn’t want to kiss her. I wanted you to kiss her.”
“Forgot you had a thing for watching,” he needled, quirking his lips as Steve reddened.

“I don’t. Just you. And Darcy. Darcy and you together,” Steve stuttered. “I’m making this worse, aren’t I?”

He snorted. “Can’t get any better, that’s for sure."

“Buck—“

He stilled, halting the movement of the towel. “Can I get dressed and I’ll tell you over lunch?

It took effort, and a couple of chicken sandwiches had to be demolished before he was ready. Steve waited him out, his eyebrows raised and his feet crossed on the coffee table, as if he had all the time in the world.

“I won’t tell you much,” he warned. “I will say this. I know, intimately and in every terrible detail, how Natalia—Natasha—was trained. I know the part I played in it. I have to live with it even though I know how little choice either of us had. I did what I could and we paid the price. And yet, here we are. The only survivors.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Natalia is.” He turned his metal hand over and played with the sensors by stroking them with his other hand. “With all that in my head this morning, I don’t want to sully this thing with Darcy. I have to keep it separate. She’s clean."

Steve leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees. “I get what you are saying. Needing to keep her out of all that we are. I don’t tell Darcy about the work I do. But with her connections, she knows enough and can guess at the rest. Love, she read the reports on you months ago, even before she hacked every database around the globe for information on your arm.”

“She knows?”

“She knew most of it before you found her in the tunnel.”

“She shouldn’t have trusted me then.”

Steve bristled—not too much, but Steve was protective of his girlfriend. “Don’t sell her short,” he admonished. “Darcy has seen things we haven’t. She’s been at ground zero for the Battle of New York, studied alien weapons we can’t comprehend, and was at ground zero again in London for the destruction of the universe. Thor can tell you. And maybe you should ask, because we aren’t the only ones having nightmares.”

“Darcy? She told me about New Mexico. Not the rest.”

“It’s impressive how she flies under the radar, yet she is touched by everything that has happened that is terrible and frightening. She’s the heir to one of the few companies capable of shepherding this world into a bigger presence in this galaxy that we live in. She can’t do that alone, Bucky.” Steve shook his head. “Let me backtrack. She can run the company just fine. What she needs is someone, or a couple of someones, who will back her up at home when things get hard.”

Bucky picked up a napkin to wipe a dot of mayonnaise from his thumb. “Thor isn’t from around here, is he? I kind of thought that was joke. A play on some of those old stories my folks used to tell us.”
Steve shook his head. “Thor is real, over a thousand years old and his dad, Odin, is the protector of
the Nine Realms. As I understand it, Asgard, Thor’s home, protects the other eight Realms which
have significantly less technology and ability than other parts of the galaxy. Asgardians considers it
their duty to keep other alien races from raiding us while we develop at our own pace.”

Bucky shook his head, awed by the idea. The enormity of that was bigger than he’d been expecting
out of the conversation. He bit his lip, thinking. “Do you … do you ever go to confession?”

Steve chuckled. “Am I from Brooklyn? Yes, when the Catholic guilt gets to me. You want to go to
Mass? It’s not in Latin anymore, Buck.”

“I want a priest, somebody with high enough clearance.”

Leaning back against the sofa cushions, Steve nodded in understanding. “Actually, I do know
someone. Old army chaplain. Served in Vietnam for a lot of years. Coulson personally cleared him
for me a while back. If there is anyone who has a real perspective on war and whatever soul we
might have, he’s a good one to talk to.”

“You ever go to church?”

“Sometimes. It’s hard to ignore the rhetoric and a lot of it makes me angry. But the Mass itself brings
me peace and I’ve found a priest or two with an open mind. I think I spent enough time on my knees
as a kid that it’s the only way I can stare at myself hard enough to figure out what I’m grateful for
and what I need to change. So for that, yeah, I go on occasion. I still like Midnight Mass on
Christmas.” Steve winced a little when he added, “Just don’t ask me what I believe, Bucky. When an
ancient god is having dinner with you twice a week, and thinks of your girlfriend as his little sister, it
makes you question a lot of things.”
A/N For your reference, the sketches are:

1) Darcy as a pin-up. This what Steve drew for Bucky the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. Bucky took it with him when he was shipped overseas. Steve, of course, ended up with it after Bucky fell, and Howard Stark packed it up after Steve went into the water. Hence, the photograph was in the boxes Steve picked up from Pepper after coffee with Darcy. Darcy is wearing a backless black halter dress with netting peeking out from the bottom and seamed stockings with black shoes and a bracelet. She is sitting on a stool. (Mentioned in 22, described in Chapter 31)

2) Steve and Bucky facing each other across a frosted pane of ice. Small Steve is drawn within Big Steve, and Bucky’s left hand is obscured from all the eraser marks. Darcy is sitting cross-legged on the floor with her back to Steve, holding a broken circuit board. Steve drew this the day he woke up from the ice. (Described in Chapter 31)

3) Bucky and Darcy together in the nude, with a bedsheet covering Bucky’s left side. This is what Thor prompted Steve to draw a few weeks before the events of Cap2. (Described in Chapter 10, mentioned in Chapter 31)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Darcy called Pepper to ask about retrieving her bracelet for the night, Pepper shifted gears to change plans for the evening with all the finesse of a Formula 1 driver. Dinner with Tony could wait.

“Of course you can get it. I’m home. What’s the special occasion?”

“Steve and Bucky asked me out on a date.”

“Together?”

“Yes.”

Pepper smiled. Some might even describe it as shark-like. “Have them meet you here. I’ve got employment papers for James to sign, and I can see the three of you together, all cleaned up.”

“It’s not prom, Mom.”

“You never went to prom, so I’ll take what I can get. Besides, Tony is back from Malibu and he wants to see you.”

“Thanks for the topping of guilt, and maybe I should ask if Dad is actually speaking to either of them.”

“You’re welcome, and no, but we’ll change that. What time are you coming up?”

“Six-thirty-ish? Emphasis on the –ish?”
“Want a glass of wine waiting?”

“Did I mention I love you, Mom?”

“Frequently. I love you back. Call your dates.”

“Will do.”

With that settled, Pepper headed for the lab where Tony was tinkering with some sort of something that glowed and didn’t look very stable. He sighed before she even opened her mouth. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.” She loved that he read her like an open book. So few did. Yet he let her bully and nudge him along in all the good ways. “Do you always agree with Darcy’s choices?” she asked.

“Usually. Sometimes. Except for the whole political science thing. I still don’t understand why she didn’t end up sciencing with Foster.”

“Because she’s like her dad. She’s a mechanic at heart and nothing will change that.”

“Oh, that.” He dismissed the argument as he set down the glowing thing, turned it off, and fiddled with his wrench. Tony seemed to be at a loss for words, which never happened.

“Sweetie?”

“I don’t want this for her, Pepp. I’ve already put her back together once. I don’t think I can do it again.”

“You will if you have to.”

“Why them?”

“I don’t know, Tony. But you’ve seen the pair of them. They’re lost without her.”

He threw his wrench across the room. It bounced off a reinforced, shatterproof window. “I don’t like this. I dealt with Rogers. He’s practically family anyway and even though I kind of hated him, it all sort of made sense. And he’s good to Darcy even if he’s fucked up nine ways to Sunday.”

She bit back a smile. Only Tony had the audacity to call Captain America a mess.

He leaned on the workbench with both hands. “I can’t … Barnes. He’s touched every member of my family in some way and I—“

Pepper put her fingers to his lips. “It’s not about you, Tony.” She slid her arms around his waist. “If there is anything I’ve learned being with you is that there is so much more to this place we live in. I’ve learned not to believe in the impossible. Steven shouldn’t exist. Neither should James. Somehow, they have reconnected in this time and place.”

“Why isn’t that enough, Pepp? Why can’t they have each other and leave my baby out of it?”

“Haven’t you been listening when they’ve been here for dinner? Because they have dreams too. Dreams that don’t involve aliens and assassinations and saving the world.” Pepper took his face in her hands. “Darcy is going to helm Stark Industries one day. Doesn’t she deserve the love it is going to take to do that and still have a life?” She shook her head. “Steven is going to stand with her. There are so few people who will understand what she’ll be facing, and he’s going to give her everything he has. But he’ll always be torn between her and his duties and honor—just as Thor is. I think James
might be the person to keep all those pieces together. Think about his loyalties, Tony, and tell me I’m wrong.”

He picked up a whole line of little things on his workbench and set each one of them down again. “Can I still hate him a little?”

“Sure. It’s your prerogative. But for Darcy’s sake, give this a chance.”

“You talk a lot. And you make entirely too much sense when you do. Can you stop that? It’s annoying and it makes me uncomfortable. So uncomfortable that I think I need some soothing here. A lot of soothing.” Tony reached around to link his hands behind her. Was it any wonder she adored him?

That evening, Darcy came up the back stairs in a halter dress, carrying a pair of shoes and stockings as she dashed through the house. “Mind if I finish in your bathroom? I’m running late and don’t want the boys to think I’m avoiding them.”

Though she’d been expecting it, she still had to swallow her disbelief. Pepper smiled instead. “Of course not.”

“They’ll be here in ten.”

Pepper headed for the lab. “Tony, upstairs, now,” she hissed as she took whatever was in his hands and firmly set it on the bench.

He blinked twice at the tone in her voice. “Did I miss something of note?”

Pepper reached out, curled her hand behind his neck and said very sweetly. “No, but if you aren’t upstairs by the time JARVIS announces Steven and James, you will.”

“They aren’t popping the question. They’d better not. It can’t happen. Isn’t that still illegal?”

“That’s not what this is about, Tony.” For once, he didn’t argue.

Or he argued, but he followed anyway. “I promised to behave, wasn’t that enough? Do I have to actually speak to them?”

“Sir, Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are requesting permission to enter.”

“Go ahead, JARVIS,” Tony grumped. He took a seat at the broad island of the kitchen, sulking just a little. Pepper had a file folder waiting. He flipped it open, noting the employment papers for James Buchanan Barnes. “We’re hiring him?”

His voice might have cracked a little and Pepper wasn’t unsympathetic. “Yes.”

Tony hemmed and hawed, chewed on his lip. “Okay. But if he breaks the Tower, that’s on you.”

“Deal.”

Steven and James came to the kitchen at JARVIS’ direction. “Pepper, Tony,” they said in unison. They’d worn suits. James had on a trendy dark grey silk jacket and vest. Steve opted for tailored black, cut along classic lines that suited him well. Both had white shirts and had foregone the ties.
“You two clean up nicely,” she remarked, humming a little in appreciation under her breath. Each of them kissed her on the cheek and shook Tony’s hand.

“We’ve been planning this for a while. Thought it would be nice to take Darcy out and do it right,” Steve said.

Tony aimed a stink-eye at Barnes. “How’s your new handler working out?”

He nodded politely. “Very well. Thank you, sir.”

Pepper loved that the two men treated Tony as a respected, potential father-in-law. She’d seen Steven and Tony go head to head over the war room table, but Steven drew a firm line between work and Darcy’s family. James was apparently following suit.

Steve laid a portfolio on the counter. Pepper raised her eyebrow at it (and concealed her smile. She knew what was coming). “You’re going to tell her?”

“We promised. We’ve slipped one too many times and now she’s curious.”

Tony frowned and pulled the portfolio to him. “About what?” He flipped the cover open. “Oh. Nice. Or it would be nice if I wasn’t looking at someone related to me in a very personal, next generational sort of way. This is horribly uncomfortable.” But Pepper noted that he didn’t close the book. Instead, he turned the page to take in the next drawing.

Pepper took the folder and slid it to James. There was no missing the sharp intelligence as he read through the contracts. When he reached the part about responsibilities, he put it down.

“No.”

His refusal made her smile. “Why not?”

“You can’t trust me.”

“Our daughter is far more precious than our company.”

She saw it, the change in his eyes from blue to grey as he assessed everything about her—words, posture, gestures. She stilled, wondering if he could sense her heartbeat. But she was sure of this. And he would know that too.

The moment stretched between them, before there was an understanding there. “You want this?”

“Is there anyone better suited? Anyone you would choose over you?”

“No.”

She nudged the pen in his direction. His eyes warmed to an ice blue as he picked it up and signed his name. James Buchanan Barnes.

“No one has such beautiful handwriting these days, James.”

“Good jobs then meant good handwriting. Wasn’t much else to do, ma’am, but practice.” He looked at the contracts again before closing the folder and sliding them back to Pepper.

With that settled, Pepper angled herself so that she could see both men and Darcy when she came out of the bedroom. Tony came to her side, drumming his fingers. Something was bothering him, unrelated to the two men. Something about one of the sketches because he’d been twitchy since
seeing them. She reached for his knee under the countertop.

“Where are you going to dinner?” she asked.

Steven answered, “There’s a place we want to try for drinks on the Park Tower and then we might take in a picture after.”

Pepper smiled at his language. “Are you going to Milan’s?” At his nod, she added, “You’ll like it. By the way, Darcy said she only needs a minute to finish. I think she’s looking for her bracelet.”

Her words sparked a tension, an anticipation. Steven’s eyes shifted to the portfolio, to Pepper, to the doorway. One hand came up to rest on James’ shoulder.

And then Darcy popped out of their bedroom in a black dress that curved around her bust, making the most of it in all the good ways. The hem flirted at mid-thigh and black netting peeked out from underneath.

“Steve. James. Wow. Yummy. Double yummy. Score for Darcy.” She flashed them a smile and twirled on patent black heels, showing off the low back that only skimmed her waistline and the seamed stockings. On her wrist was the art deco bracelet Tony had given her on her 21st birthday, a triple row of sapphires and diamonds on a single white gold band. “You like?”

Pepper kept her eyes on the two men and squeezed Tony’s hand to get his attention. He came up, noted Darcy’s arrival, and then figured out where Pepper’s attention was focused.

Steven’s hands were shaking, enough that James had to reach out to clutch the one on his shoulder. James wasn’t in much better shape as he fished for a stool to sit down.

Darcy’s expression changed from joy to concern. “What happened? Did I do something wrong?”

They both shook their heads. James fumbled for the portfolio, flipping it neatly to the first page. Darcy picked up the sketch, studying it before giving Steven a sharp look. “How? I found this dress in London and had it shipped here. And I’ve never worn my bracelet before today because it’s too expensive to wear without an armed guard. You two count.”

As with Pepper before, James told her, “Look at the date, Princess.”

She turned it over. Now her hands shook as she put it down. “This is the pin-up sketch you took to England?” she asked him.

“Yes. And I was there when Steve drew it.”

Confused, she asked, “But you were together. Had been together for a while. Why would that have any meaning to you?”

A sly smirk lifted his lips. “Told you, Princess, I was lookin’ for both of us. Should have known the punk would find you first.”

To Steve, Darcy asked, “From the beginning, you knew.”

He’d gained something of himself again, though his eyes never left Darcy, and his whitened fingers pressed hard into James’ shoulder. “I didn’t. I had your image in my head when I woke up, so you caught my attention in the Tower. When we talked, it all seemed right. You were the garage that day and I couldn’t think much ‘cause you were everything I’d been dreaming about. But it might have all been coincidence. I needed you, Darce, I needed to believe that this was ours. I still do.”
She reached out, skimmed her fingers to one side of his chest. “You did this, so I would have both of you. You told me that before.” Steven nodded. “Wow.” Darcy took another look at the sketch and at her own dress. “Is it safe to say I’m a little weirded out by this? Please don’t tell me you have others, Steve.”

“Two that I know of. One you’ve already seen.” Steven slid the pin-up sketch to the counter and turned the pages to show her the other two. “I didn’t know what I had drawn in your hands until I saw someone at the Tower working on one,” he admitted.

She checked the date on the second, considered the third, and paled a little. She had the same reaction as Tony as she went back to the second one. “Dad?” her voice dropped.

In that moment, Pepper had never been more proud of Tony Stark. He rounded the counter to give Darcy a solid perusal. “I’m on it. I’ll look at everything to make certain. But you have a date, and I’m never one to stand in the way of a good time. Just, not too good of a time. Or if you do, don’t tell me. Some things I don’t need to know.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You’re beautiful. You look just like me.”

Turning to face Steven and James, he crossed his arms. “You knock my baby girl up tonight and there will be hell to pay. Dinner, movie, and then you bring her back here in one piece.”

James pinked, though he held his composure better that Steve with the dark flush to his fair skin. “Yes, sir,” they chorused.

Darcy giggled. “Dad, I’m not sixteen. I get to call my own shots.”

“Reminding you that I still have the last kid you dumped on me.”

“I was fourteen. Give me a break.”

Steven gave them a quizzical look as he peeled his fingers off James’ shoulder. “A kid?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “DUM-E. I built him. Lousy AI system, but if I fix it, he’ll lose his personality. And he has a lot of that.”

“She skips off to college, leaving me to keep him entertained. He’s sweet, well-meaning, adores anyone who pays attention to him and is dumb as a bag of rocks,” Tony said sourly. “You know, maybe he can move into your lab now.”

“Nuh uh. You two have a rhythm.” Darcy looked at her blank wrist. “Hey would you look at that, I have a date and it’s getting late. You guys ready to go?” With the skills she’d learned from Pepper, she blew her parents a kiss and herded the boys to the elevator.

Pepper turned back to Tony, who had the first drawing in his hand. “The impossible, huh?” he said. Then he set it down and took the second sketch with him to the lab. “Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen.”

She poured herself a large glass of wine and settled in to wait for Darcy to come home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N So I had a job where I used to make sales calls in people's homes. I was shocked at
how many pets were dumped on parents by college kids who had adopted them when they had their own place, but couldn't take them back to school or when they moved for a job, etc. (Usually annoying, misbehaving pets, so there were lots of apologies from the parents, which is how I found out.) I liked the idea of Tony digging DUM-E out of the rubble of the house in Malibu just to retrieve Darcy's pet. DUM-E reminds me of a Sheltie I once had. Adorable, loved you dearly, couldn't remember a command 30 seconds after it was given.
“JARVIS, can you stop the elevator?” Darcy asked. The car came to a halt, and she leaned against the cool wall. At the nervous looks Steve and Bucky exchanged, she reached out to both of them. “Nothing bad, but seriously, I need a hug right now. Because I’m completely freaked out by all of this.”

There was absolutely nothing more comforting than group hugs where arms tangled and fingers tightened on waists and shoulders and everything was all warm and snuggly everywhere. Her skittering nerves chilled out, and as she calmed, she could feel Steve and Bucky relaxing too. “Guess I wasn’t the only one?”

Someone stroked her hair and she honestly couldn’t tell whom. From just above her ear, Bucky snorted. “Hell, no. Thought I’d lost my mind for good when you stepped out of that room.”

Steve’s hand drifted up and down her spine. She leaned back into it, enough that she could see the two men practically holding each other up. “Steve?”

“I’m okay, d—“ he stopped himself at her arched brow. “I will be okay. Yes, I’m nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof, but this is what we wanted.” His eyes changed then, focusing on her as he stepped back just enough to catch her fingers. “I never imagined that what I drew was real. Even when Bucky remembered it, we figured it was a coincidence. But it’s you.” He swallowed hard to get his composure back. “And the fact I know what’s under that dress is tantalizing.”

“Do you?” Darcy licked her lips, just for the show. “You heard the parents. I think I have to be home by midnight or something like that.”

“Going to hold us to that, Princess?” Bucky asked.

“Dad actually spoke to both of you today,” she countered. “You want to push that button again?”

“You have a point.” He deliberately skimmed his eyes down her body. “I’m gonna regret that later.”

“Don’t be an ass, Barnes. It won’t hurt you to actually date me a time or two before we start down that road.”

Steve inhaled sharply, his hand drifting along her bare arm. “Bucky—“ he warned.

But Darcy elbowed him. “I’ve got this. I can handle Barnes being a prick. And he knows that when the time comes, he’d better be able to put his money where his mouth is. These lady parts have been well satisfied with the way things have been going for the past couple of years, so he’d better bring his ‘A’ game if he thinks he can match that.”

“Match?” Barnes smirked. “Try to remember who taught whom here.” He winked at Steve, who just tucked his hands in his pockets and watched them volley.

“Says the man who learned about sex in the nineteen-thirties,” Darcy shot back.

That did it. Bucky laughed so hard that he had to lean against the elevator wall. Steve, though he had his own huge smile, had to wipe away tears as he leaned over to kiss Darcy.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered, as his emotions got the best of him.
“I’m a Stark,” she whispered back, with every bit of pomposity her father had ever shown. “Of course, I’m perfect.”

Now he laughed too, though he recovered faster than Bucky, who was just now working on a straight face.

“You okay with this, Princess, now that you know what we know?”

“Yes.”

That single word undid her boyfriend. He choked for air until Bucky slid his hand onto his back, matching him breath for breath and slowing them down together. The love in that gesture as Steve calmed under Bucky’s touch destroyed any lingering reservations, not that she had any, really.

She lifted a shoulder. “A lot of things make sense now. But I’m glad you waited to tell me. It’s different, knowing I’ve chosen to be here with the two of you.”

Now it was Bucky who looked down at his metal hand, making a fist with it, and Steve who brushed a kiss on his temple to settle him.

“JARVIS, want to restart this thing? If we hang out here we’re going to drown in all the feelings we’ve got going on here,” she quipped.

Steve chuckled weakly while Bucky leaned over to press his warm lips on her cheek. “That’s just the ticket, Princess.”

Happy drove the limo the three blocks. They could have walked, and would on another day, when they weren’t nervous, it wasn’t dark yet, and they were ready for whatever might trigger Bucky. But tonight was for the three of them and not for testing boundaries.

Darcy chose a place known for keeping the privacy of its diners. More than one celebrity or socialite graced these tables when quiet time with family was desired. No one took pictures here, not unless the waiters did the honors for the patrons—and they were under strict rules about who or what might be in the background. Her parents came here when they (Pepper) wanted a night out that wouldn’t end up on the celebrity blogs.

A neon lit bar graced the center of the rooftop, with tables all round and a small band playing pop songs in the corners. The singer’s silky vocals wove through the octaves with ease. Clear windows on the ceiling and three sides gave the illusion they were touching the sky. The view of the city was stunning. The fourth side opened up to the roof, where the band and tiny dance floor were located.

Bucky chose a high-top table near the open side, close enough to hear the band and still be blocked from the elements. They had an excellent vantage point of both the restaurant and the skyline. Darcy was a little surprised she got the corner this time, but seeing how her escorts were stationed to see the full view of the place, maybe she shouldn’t have been.

She would have to get used to things like that, she supposed. Steve was more subtle about it and more trusting of their usual haunts. The restaurants around her old place had figured out the identity of her boyfriend quickly enough. And like most neighborhoods, they protected their own. She missed that local comrades in the Tower, yet it too had an appeal. She thought she would like living close to Jane again, and Nat had become a good friend in the last year.

Both men kept dropping glances to her legs, where the lace of her stockings peeked out under the netting from time to time. She said nothing, treating this like a real first date as the three of them explored something new. She wasn’t above giving Barnes a preview of coming attractions, and
teasing Steve was par for the course.

Bucky ordered a bottle of good Russian vodka for the three of them, along with an antipasto platter that would see the men through the next few hours. Darcy raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t think that would appeal to you.”

“It’s funny what you get a taste for. Can’t stand the local stuff though.”

“The local stuff is crap, that’s why.”

A bottle, artfully coated with frost from the freezer, arrived in an insulated bucket with three shot glasses. The platter, loaded with meats, cheeses, and roasted vegetables, gave them all something to pick from, though Darcy was mostly holding out for popcorn later.

Bucky poured the shots and handed them out. “To us.”

“To us,” Steve and Darcy echoed.

Darcy knocked back the vodka. The chilled alcohol didn’t have even a hint of aftertaste, just a cool, sharp flavor that danced across tongue and throat. She set her shot glass down on the table. “Damn. Now I know what I’ve been missing.”

“Natasha didn’t introduce you to vodka?”

“Nat doesn’t share.”

“She does on occasion. It’s a chance sort of thing,” he acknowledged.

Steve agreed. “Maybe once? And I’ve worked with her for a while.”

The alcohol hit her system with a buzz fast enough that she indulged in good wedge of cheese and three crackers before even thinking about a second shot.

Bucky was fascinated with her mouth. Steve noticed and smirked.

The three of them relaxed enough for the conversation to flow from what movie they wanted to see to the changes Darcy wanted to make in her place to what it was like for Steve and Bucky to live in the Tower.

Steve got a pained look. “Would you please talk to Jane? It’s awkward when she’s standing right in front of me and pretending I don’t exist.”

“I did this morning. She’s still mad, but she’ll come around in a week or two. Send her flowers. She never expects them, and it will mellow her out at a little faster because she’ll forget she has them until the next time she sees them.”

Bucky toyed with his shot glass. “What is your favorite flower, Princess?”

“Never met a flower I didn’t like, Bucky, but if I had to pick one, then Shasta Daisies.”

“Classic.” He glared at Steve. “I can tell by the look on your face that you didn’t know that, punk. You never bought your girl flowers?”

“I have. I do. I promise.” Steve held up his hands.

“He does,” she agreed. “Pretty ones too. Do I look like I’m going to turn down a handsome guy with
a bouquet? Nope. Not doing that. And it’s not my fault that flowers hardly make it into the vase before I can find something else to do with my hands.” She winked at Steve. He twined his fingers with hers and kissed her knuckles. (Sheesh, she’d missed this. The flirting, the easy conversation. The teasing. Her lady parts took notice of the attention.)

Darcy reached for the bottle, but Bucky beat her to it, taking her glass and filling it. When the second shot hit her bloodstream, false warmth followed, and everything loosened up nicely. “Too bad you guys can’t get drunk anymore. It’s going to be lonely here.”

“We can, actually,” Steve said. “Thor has an Asgardian mead that works pretty well.”

But lines appeared on Bucky’s brow. “I don’t have enough control of my brain as it is. I don’t think I need to complicate it,” he grumbled.

Darcy reached out to with a hand to keep him focused, clutching his metal fingers hard. “Probably not a bad idea for a while yet. So I can drink for you. Are we good with that?”

“Sure, doll.” He, too, dropped a kiss on her fingertips. His breath on her hand made her toes curl and send another zing to her lady parts. Her fingers jerked involuntarily. (Fuck.) His satisfied smirk made her want to do something about that.

Steve kept looking back and forth between them, and finally pleaded, “What happened yesterday? You two cleared the air somehow.”

Bucky tilted his head at her, encouraging Darcy to fill him in. This time, the squeeze on the hand was for her, reassuring rather than teasing. “Your boyfriend is a bit of a nag,” she advised Steve.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he agreed. “No wonder he and Sam get along. They speak the same language.”

Bucky snorted as he bit into a prosciutto roll. “I was right even back then, wasn’t I?”

“Don’t get used to it.” Darcy admonished. But she squeezed Bucky’s fingers again and answered, “We were taking a break from unpacking boxes. I handed him a water bottle and he kissed me again. Not the making out kind, but the same way you kiss me when you thank me for something. I liked it at little too much and it pissed me off.”

Bucky grinned. “I was trying to be sneaky. To get her used to letting me touch her. She called me on it.”

“She does that a lot, Buck.”

As he plucked another bit of roast from the platter, Bucky jerked his chin at Darcy. “Tell him the rest, Princess.”

Darcy leaned forward, making sure to cross her arms under breasts to take full advantage of putting the girls on display in this outfit. Bucky’s eyes definitely glazed a little. (Score one for Darcy.) Steve had more practice keeping focused, but his hand dropped to her thigh in retaliation. The thumb-drawn circles across the nylon caused sparks that had her twitching her toes (Okay, maybe half a point to the Star-Spangled Man).

She nibbled a piece of cheese, keeping an eye on Steve as she talked. “So there I was, enjoying Barnes’ company, appreciating the general yummy in all that, while flipping through mental pictures of you two in highly compromising positions.” Steve’s eyebrows went up. “Yeah, that, and my reaction was somewhere between ‘yay’ and ‘pissed,’ and then he kisses me like it was just something
we do.”

Still annoyed with herself, she added, “I was jealous. I shouldn’t have been, but there it was. It’s been there all along, I think.” She clutched Bucky’s hand, looking for comfort as she had the other night. This time, he squeezed back and she breathed out relief. “He made me promise I would tell you.”

Steve put his chin on his knuckles. “I’m glad you did. And I’m not going to lie and tell you I didn’t think a lot about being with Bucky again. I’m guessing if things hadn’t have gone south that night you came back, you might have gotten an eyeful more than you were expecting.” With a quick look to Bucky, he added, “It made all the difference thinking you were okay with Bucky and me …” he hesitated.

“Fondueing?” she offered with a smile.

“I am never going to live that down, am I?” he sighed.

“Nope.” She winked at Barnes. “Not when you blush every time you think the word ‘sex.’”

Bucky smirked but grew serious when he added, “If we are being honest here, you saw us kissing in the kitchen and you landed in London. Not the reaction we’re looking for, Princess.”

“I wasn’t ready for it.”

“I know, and it wasn’t fair to you,” Steve confessed. “So you’ve got to lead the way on this, Darcy. Whatever feels right to you is what we’ll do.” He cupped her cheek, stroking it with his thumb. “Including being with Bucky, with or without me.”

She sat back on her barstool, letting go of both men. “Wow. That’s the gist of it, isn’t it? That sometimes it’s the three of us, and sometimes it’s two. And sometimes it’s a different two.” She considered that. “You really have talked about this.”

Bucky snorted. “Good way to pass the time overseas. Thinking up things we were gonna do when we got back home. Thinking up all the ways this might not work and how we fix it.”

Darcy shook her head. “I don’t know if I can handle the two of you strategizing together.” She was being honest. This was hard enough without feeling herded into a corral.

Maybe he saw the conflict, because Bucky tugged her out to the little area in front of the band. They were playing something slow. He wove around two other couples who were doing no more than swaying to the music. He lightly clasped her waist, resting his fingers against her bare back. More zing and more nerves.

“Put your arms around my neck, Princess.” She did, and he began moving into time with the beat. “Breathe, doll. It’s only me. You’re not going to let Steve down. I can see his smile all the way over here.”

“Why are you doing this, James?”

“Darcy, for all these months, the two of you have protected me. You’ve shared everything—your house, your boyfriend, even your family—all to give me a chance to live again. I know I’m still messed up, doll. But this, I can do this. I can keep you safe. And if safe means giving you a place to breathe so you can do this thing with us, I’ll do that too.”

Steve hadn’t been kidding about Bucky’s legendary charm. Though she’d declared her intentions,
reality was a lot harder, and Bucky was right, she didn’t want Steve to realize how nervous she still was with all of this.

Lowering his head, he said in her ear, “You know, I had it figured I’d have to talk Steve’s way into bed with me and a dame. Never imagined I’d have to talk my own way in after the punk had claimed the most beautiful lady in the city.”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed. “You are a jerk. Just when I was thinking how sweet and charming you are, and how nice it was to dance with you, there you go, opening your mouth again and being an ass.”

He winked. “Not being an ass if I’m telling the truth.”

Darcy took her time to really look at him as they swayed to the music. She knew his face so well from Steve’s drawings, from before. And she knew his face now. He still looked barely thirty, without a line one to show his age. Nevertheless, there was a hollowness, a shadowy hardness that would never go away. Yet, he was able to smile through all that, to spin his charms, to want to be with her.

“You trust me.” She knew the answer, but needed to hear it.

His eyes faded, the blue changing to grey. “Yes.”

“Then kiss me. Kiss me so I know this is real and we aren’t just friends, James.”

With a tilt of his head, he studied her, eyes wandering over her face, her hair, settling on her lips. “Darcy,” he murmured. And he laid his mouth to hers, not teasing this time, but learning. He explored, finding out how they fit together, discovering what made her hum.

She dropped a hand from his neck to his heart, letting her fingertips rest on his skin where the buttons were unfastened. She turned the tables, feeling his pulse quicken as she figured out what he liked. She chased his tongue with hers and felt him moan low into her mouth.

He pulled back, laying his cheek to her forehead. "Not friends, Darcy. I can't be only that.”

Laying a hand to his jaw, she ran a thumb across it as she turned his face to hers. "No. I think we are several steps beyond that now."

"Still nervous?” he asked.

"Are you?"

Bucky swore under his breath. "Only you would ask me that. Yeah, I am."

"Good." Darcy stepped back, pivoting as she caught his hand to lead him off the dance floor.

Steve's eyes were nearly black with need. "You two are going to be the death of me. Gorgeous, the pair of you."

But Bucky only bumped shoulders with him while rounding the table to his barstool. Steve took Darcy's hand, standing up as she took her seat. Both men settled after she did. Something else for her to get used to. Though both men were adapting to this century, some habits were ingrained, and truly, Darcy appreciated the old-fashioned mannerisms. They came from a need to show respect, and those sorts of manners weren't always just for Darcy.
Steve's absolutely correct manners were responsible for the latitude Tony granted him. On the battlefield, there was a grudging respect between the two, though they were known to square off on occasion. Off-mission, Steve gave Tony deferential treatment as a respected elder. It was funny to watch Tony respond in kind, sometimes unwillingly. Bucky had followed suit, leaving Tony in the odd position of patriarch to the soldiers.

Darcy found the whole situation fascinating, especially as Bucky settled into the family. Which reminded her--"Gentlemen, if we are to make my curfew, we have a movie to catch."

Happy took them across town and dropped them off at the front entrance of the theatre. Steve bought tickets while Darcy and Bucky got popcorn, a giant cup of Coke, and Twizzlers. Bucky shook his head at the prices, though he paid it easily enough.

Darcy shrugged. "Going to the movies is an event now, not just a way to partake of the air conditioning for a while."

Bucky was a distracted as they walked through the lobby. He scoped the area, looking for exits and threats. She noticed he'd dropped back to walk just behind and to her left. Steve joined him, taking the space next to Bucky. He handed the tickets to Darcy, who passed them to the usher.

Inside the theatre, Bucky headed for the top row, taking seats nearest the aisle. He studied the layout. "Steve? I don't like this."

Darcy took the middle chair, not even bothering with the illusion she had a choice here. Bucky took the one to her left, nearest the aisle. Steve crouched in front of Bucky. "You've got JARVIS. Have him take a look at the cameras in this facility and run facial recognition to identify any threats. The projection booth is at the wrong angle for anyone to take a shot at the seats you've chosen, and I know you can pick the lock on the booth to see for yourself. What do you need to do?"

"You'll stay with Darcy?"

"Of course."

Bucky only needed fifteen minutes to do a recon of the place. JARVIS kept Darcy updated on his progress, and he came back more settled, if not less tense.

Darcy took his hand. "Do you want to go home?"

"No, Princess." He gave her a ghost of a smile. "Got to learn."

"Offer is standing. Tony can download the movie to the Tower, if he hasn't already."

He squeezed her hand in reply.

The movie was fun, full of action, snark, a gun-toting raccoon, and a talking tree. Darcy was aware when, near the end, Bucky reached up to rub his neck. Steve must have been paying attention, because he moved his hand from Darcy's leg to reach around behind her. He massaged Bucky's shoulder without taking his eyes off the screen and digging into the popcorn bucket for another handful.

Darcy, in turn, was careful not to rub Bucky's fingers. Heat, not feedback, was needed here. They made it to the end of the movie, though Bucky's eyes were showing the strain.

In times like this, Darcy was grateful for the contact. JARVIS, can you ask Happy to bring the car to the theatre exit? I don't want to take Bucky through the lobby."
Of course, Lewis. Sir reminds you to stay until the end of the credits, and Happy will have the car in place by then.

She laughed a little at the reminder. "Let's hang out here for a minute, guys," she whispered. "Happy is bringing the car around." She tapped her neck to let them know she'd been speaking to JARVIS.

When the credits were finished, Bucky had a faint look of confusion. "A talking duck? What was that?"

Darcy shrugged. "Read somewhere it's a reference to a movie made in the nineties. Probably Dad's speed."

Bucky didn't reply as he took the lead to push the exit door open. He scanned the crowd outside, the cars, taking a look at the nearby rooftops and windows. His hand slid under his jacket. "Go," he ordered.

Happy had the door open, as usual, and Bucky herded the three of them into the car. When the door shut, he was fully into soldier mode, his eyes ice grey and his breathing even and slow. He still took Darcy's hand.

The ride back to the Tower was blessedly uneventful. By the time they reached Darcy's floor, with Steve rubbing his shoulders and murmuring in Bucky's ear, his eyes were a clear shade of blue.

She kept their hands together, only now he was rubbing her fingers and brought her hand up for a kiss as the elevator came to a halt.

There was something beautiful in the way Steve was holding Bucky now--one arm across the front of his shoulders, thumb dragging along the inside of his arm. Bucky reached up to grasp Steve's wrist, and two set of blue eyes followed her into the room, one set darkening into cobalt, the other the clear blue of a snowmelt lake.

Steve let go of Bucky to kiss Darcy. Intense, sweet, and with every bit of last night still in her head, she pressed for more. She wanted this, but nerves still skittered across her flesh. He must have felt it because he stroked her arms from shoulder to wrist.

"Not going to press tonight, doll," he whispered in between kisses. Her lady parts pouted because that kiss had already managed to make her seriously damp. (Yeah, that.)

"Much," he added. Her eyes flew open as he leaned against the wall and pulled her back to him. "I want to touch you," he whispered in her ear. "I want to make you come while you kiss Bucky. Just my hands and his mouth, nothing more."

(Holy shit. Steve knew her far too well … knew she would go for it even before he asked.) "Okay."

She reached out, caught Barnes by his jacket labels and dragged him in for a kiss.

"Hands on the wall, Bucky, not going to scare our girl here," Steve ordered.

"Yes, sir," he snickered against her lips.

Barnes planted his hands on either side of Steve's head as Darcy leaned in to deepen the kiss. There was no teasing here, just a need to have as their tongues danced and she gently sucked on his top lip. All the while, Steve dragged up the hem of her dress. His fingers flicked across the nylon as he gathered the fabric.
She let out a sultry laugh against Bucky’s mouth as Steve discovered she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“Damn, doll. You never miss a step do you?” he muttered. Though when he found her slick and wanting, she was the one who arched up against him with a squeak.

Bucky eased back, trailing kisses along her jaw. “What’d our girl do to you, punk?”

“She’s been playing with us. No panties. And she’s all wet from thinking about us.”

“Did you forget to draw them, Steve?” she said, a little breathlessly.

Bucky’s eyes went wide. “That’s not fair.”

“Girl’s gotta keep the upper hand around you two,” she gasped as a finger made a slow circle. “Now you know and you’ll wonder how often that happens.”

Steve retaliated by flicking her clit so that she jerked against his hand. Bucky countered by capturing her mouth. This time, he controlled the kiss, diving his tongue in and sucking on her lips, then backing away to nibble before doing it again.

When Steve began sliding his fingers in, she dug her fingers into Bucky’s jacket to hold on. She was hot and dizzy trapped as she was between them, and Steve slid a hand under her thigh to hitch it around Bucky’s hip.

Off balance, she leaned her head back against Steve’s shoulder as Bucky slanted his head to focus on the line of her neck. She couldn’t quite bite back the moan as her body jerked under Steve’s hand, giving her that first exquisite peak as she came.

“Beautiful, Princess.” Bucky muttered. He started to pull away, but Steve just ran his fingers along Darcy’s clit.

“She’s not done yet, Buck. That was just the first one.”

Darcy lifted her head up. “Steve—“ she gasped out as he set up a steady rhythm on her nub. Without meaning to, with his firm cock pressing into her ass, she leaned into his hand to increase the pressure.

“Want me to stop?”

“No, fuck, no.”

“Kiss her, James. Kiss her and make her yours.”

She hit the second and third peaks in quick succession as she discovered exactly how well Barnes could kiss. Every time she thought she had him figured, he changed tactics, finding a new way to make her lean into his mouth for more. She worked her hand to the back of his neck, wrapping a lock of hair around her fingers. When he nipped at the curve of her neck, then settled in to suck there, she forgot about Steve for just the briefest moment, then the two men set up a matching rhythm of tapping and nips that had her digging into Bucky’s neck.

“Come for me, Darcy.” Steve whispered. “I want my hand dripping when I’m done. I want you to think of us for the rest of the night.” She arched backward again, pressing her mons into his hand as he flicked her swollen clit.

Barnes slid his tongue in and out of her mouth in time to her twitches and Steve’s movements. And
then her vision went white as she keened through the orgasm that swept hard through her. She jerked again and again as Steve plucked at her clit.

Only when he pressed his hand to cool the throbbing was she aware of Bucky’s holding her upright and Steve letting her thigh down.

Bucky eased backward after one last kiss on her lips. "Enough. I don't want regrets in the morning," he said.

Darcy had to put a hand his shoulder for support, as Steve kissed the back of her neck. "Let's classify that as a warning shot across the bow," she agreed.

He let out a snort at her naval reference. “Got work on your metaphors, Darce, we're army men.”

She laughed, giving both of them a frank perusal as Steve made sure she was steady on her feet and let her go. "Yes, I think I got that. Gonna give me a cigarette after all that, Soldier?" (That was her best Garbo, and by their reaction, wasn't too bad.)

Bucky yanked Steve by the shoulder and shoved him to the elevator. "Remember what I said?" he demanded.

Darcy raised her eyebrows in curiosity.

Steve smirked as he stepped inside. "Bucky told me that if I’m stupid enough to screw this up, he calls ‘dibs’ on you.”

She blinked. “On me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Bucky winked as the elevator doors closed on them. “Because you like my arm better than Steve’s bike.”

Still rubber-kneed from the double onslaught to her senses, she laughed as she staggered across the room and collapsed on to her bed.

This might work after all.

She lay on her bed, enjoying the aftershocks of her orgasm, tingling breasts and all (they didn’t even touch the girls, holy shit). Today … today had been really, really nice. She closed her eyes, letting the whole of it wash over her.

Then she remembered the sketch.

She rolled off the bed, made a hasty cleanup in the bathroom, and dashed up the back stairs, not even bothering to kick off her heels.
Connections and Layers

Bucky yanked Steve to him and kissed him hard and fast, swiping inside with a tongue. "Punk, that wasn't fair." His cock was throbbing hard enough to make him wince, and he shoved a hand out to find a matching one in Steve’s slacks.

But Steve had his own agenda as he stepped back out of the elevator onto their floor. He held his fingers up. "I know where these have been." Bucky fumbled for the key pad to press his thumb to it and shoved him inside their apartment.

He started to lock his metal hand around Steve’s wrist, but his boyfriend shook his head. "Clothes off and against the wall if you want a taste."

Bucky stripped, not caring that the custom suit was crumpled on the floor. He toed his boots off and tilted his head back to the wall. Steve ran his wet hand along Bucky’s cock, smearing Darcy’s slickness over him.

“Fuck, that’s better than any lube,” Bucky groaned out as Steve ran a thumb over the head of his cock.

“I know. I want to taste her on you.”

But Bucky’s hand snapped out and he closed his mouth around Steve’s fingers. Sweet musk and she tasted like a rainstorm. He licked, sucking Darcy’s juices from Steve’s hand.

“You taste that, Bucky?” Steve demanded, though his voice was husky with need. “Now you know what to look for, how to know you’re doing it right. ‘Cause she’s gonna make you work for it. Can’t settle for the bit of sweetness at the beginning. Gotta keep at it so she’ll come apart for you.”

Bucky could hardly think with the flavor of her in his mouth. Whatever thoughts he had left were destroyed when Steve knelt down to suck on his cock. With same hand, he shoved two fingers into Bucky’s hole, stretching him.

Steve worked him over, sucking, licking, stroking his fingers in and out. “Used to not be able to do this, Bucky, couldn’t stand being on my knees. Too weak and too much in my brain thinkin’ it was wrong. Darcy changed that. Love to get her up against the wall just like you are now, tasting her, sucking on her, get her juices on my face so I can taste her fucking sweetness. Right now, I can taste both of you. You’re gonna know what this is like, Bucky. To taste her, to put your fingers in her ass, to feel her come all around you.”

“Is that what you do?” he choked out.

“Never did all that,” he confessed. “I had a promise to keep.”

Whatever Steve said might have been important, but Bucky was beyond processing anything other than sensation. Not with those talented fingers stroking in and out, Darcy’s flavor melting in his mouth, and Steve licking him like a damned ice cream cone. He swore when Steve took it all away and turned him, shoving him against the same wall so that he faced it, sliding in a third finger as he did. “Can you take my cock like this, Bucky? ‘Cause I want you.”

“God yes,” he groaned out. Steve pressed in, filling him. Slick and easy and so fucking full he thought he would come then and there.
And Steve wouldn’t shut up. “I’ve never had you in me, Bucky. I want that. I’m not sick anymore. I want to feel you inside me. Be a first for me, you know that. Never wanted anyone else that way.”

Bucky growled as Steve hit that sweet spot over and over again, stiffening that last little bit inside him that was too much and not enough all at once. Somehow, Steve still had the presence of mind to reach around. One single, hard stroke of Bucky’s cock was all it took to have him painting the wall. He clenched down on Steve as they both pumped out the last.

“I love you,” Steve babbled in a litany as he came, holding on to Bucky’s hip hard enough to leave red prints. Bucky had his forehead and hands on the wall, pushing back with everything he had, until they were gasping for air again.

Then he shoved off the wall, off Steve’s cock, and turned around. “Love you too, punk.” He kissed Steve with one hand to the back of his neck then strolled across the entry way to the unused bathroom. He found a hand towel, chucked it at Steve, who caught it mid-chest with one-hand. “Your choice of venue, you clean it up. I’ll be in the shower.”

Steve just grinned with an innocent look that Bucky hadn’t bought since 1930. He sucked his thumb, popping it out to sass, “You missed a spot.”


It was under the hot spray after he’d washed that he latched on to what Steve had been saying. That got him out, towel wrapped around his waist and shaking out his wet hair.

“Never put your fingers in her ass?” he asked when he found Steve in the kitchen, wearing only a pair of sweats. His answer was a shake of the head and a soft smile. “Then how do you know Darcy likes it?”

“She tried it on me when we first started dating. I found other things for her hands to do, but I know she’s game.”

He should have been intrigued by the discovery. Instead, it just pissed him off. “Why the fuck would you keep a promise to a dead man, Steve? There’s a line between nobility and stupidity and I think you crossed it.” At Steve’s stricken look, Bucky got it, and yeah, they needed to deal with this too. “You didn’t kill me, Steve. You weren’t close enough to that piece of metal to have a chance of catching me when it broke.”

In the stillness that followed, Bucky discovered something about Steve he’d suspected was there, but hadn’t seen it before, hadn’t had any reason to know. An internal rage. Ice blue eyes and a hard jaw. Every muscle in readied for battle. A self-hatred that ran long and deep.

“It’s not your fault,” Bucky chided, deliberately digging into the chink in Steve’s armor. All these months and Steve had kept it on lockdown. Bucky and Sam had talked about it a couple of times, enough to know that Steve wasn’t cutting himself any slack on this one.

The deceptively mild manner and bitter smile was the face of Captain America. “It is. I did the stupid, heroic things for victory—so I could be the one who mattered. I’ve always said I did it because I didn’t like bullies. I still don’t. But I waded into fights without thinking of the repercussions. And it cost me the one person I loved beyond all reason, the one person who pulled me out of stupid situations over and over again because I never learned to think. I took you with me when you should have gone home to get better.”

He reached out to Bucky, running a finger along his metal arm. “Denying myself one of the
pleasures I shared only with you gave me a way to remind myself of what I did and how high the cost can be. Darcy and I have had our moments, just like you and I do. But I am not careless with her, nor will I ever be with either of you, ever again. The mistakes I make will be honest ones, and you will know how much I love you. I will never take that love for granted,” he vowed. “I can’t stop you from your making your own choices, Bucky, but I didn’t even try to talk you out of going with me. You would have gone home if I’d asked.”

Bucky snorted, letting his annoyance show through. “That’s rich. And you forget that I had been in charge of those soldiers for a damned year before your number was dry. There is no way in hell I would have left them behind so I could go home with a fuckin’ purple medal to show for it. So no, I didn’t stay just for you. But it sure as shit made being there a hell of a lot more bearable.”

“Buck—“

“Stop.” He held a hand up. “It’s time to be done with this. It’s been eating at you for what, three years now? That’s enough,” he snapped with all the authority of the Sergeant he’d been. “You want to make it up to me? To be with Darcy? Then it’s time to let it go. Because we’re here now. By all the damned miracles, we’re here. In a time and place where we don’t have to hide who we are.”

He picked up a glass, filled it with water from the sink and drank it all. When he was done, he set it on the sideboard. “When you’re finished flogging yourself, Steven, come to bed. That’s where I’ll be.”

It was hard to leave Steve there, shocked, pale, and hurting. But Bucky knew better than anyone else how to get through to the knucklehead. He went to bed, picked out a book, and waited.

Maybe an hour later, Steve came to bed. He didn’t say anything, just crawled in bed and wrapped his arm around Bucky’s middle.

*****

Cold. A thousand needles of pain stabbing inward until he was numb. Sharp glass in his lungs as they filled with water. The instinctive struggle to live.

Bucky, falling into the ravine of ice. Darcy, evaporating in a swirl of darkness.

He stopped fighting, stopped caring. Let the water carry him to the floor as the plane settled. Closed his eyes. There was nothing for him now.

“Steve, wake up.”

Bucky’s voice came to him in the darkness. Not always, but enough to remind him of his loss.

“Steve, it’s just a dream, wake up.”

He fought to stay asleep, terrified of waking without them. His wrists were caught in steel manacles. Water pressed down, so heavy. So cold. He shivered.

“Come on, love, goddamnit, wake up!”

“No! Not without them!” Steve jerked against the cuffs, wondering why he couldn’t break them. He
pulled, trying to yank free, but they wouldn’t give. He twisted his hips for leverage, but that didn’t work either. The water was too heavy. He still couldn’t breathe.

His throat hurt from tubes shoved into his lungs to pump water from them. Terrible stinging in his limbs as blood warmed and began to move. He cried once tears were possible. They were gone.

“Let me go. Don’t make me live without them,” he pleaded.

A cuff released. Somebody touched his face. “Steve, it’s only a nightmare. I’m here. Wake up.”

He opened his eyes. Found Bucky straddling him, still pinning one of his arms down while the other stroked his jaw. He had a split lip and a reddened mark on his cheekbone.

Steve lunged upward, wrapping his arms around Bucky. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he choked out as he shivered from the remembered cold. Regret, so much fucking regret swamped him. His throat hurt and he didn’t know why.

“Didn’t I say we were through with that?” Bucky cajoled as he rocked Steve just a little, with warm hands rubbing his back in long, easy strokes. “Tell me what you were dreaming about?”

With a hiss of discomfort, Steve said, “Drowning. Then waking up from the ice.”

Without censure, the soldier acknowledged, “That shit hurts. No wonder you were screaming. Hated it. Pumped me full of drugs and it still fucking hurt. Going in and coming out.” Bucky gave his own compulsive shudder and Steve’s arms tightened around him too.

The understanding gave Steve a reason to calm his own trembling so he could lean back a little. “What did you think about?” he asked as he inspected Bucky’s face.

“Didn’t. Just … existed. Place in my head I would go where it was quiet.” Bucky nudged Steve’s hands away so he could ease off his lap. He settled in to lean against the headboard. “What did you think about?”

“You were dead, and I didn’t know why I couldn’t die too.”

“Good thing you didn’t croak or we wouldn’t be havin’ this little talk here.” Bucky ran his fingers over Steve’s head. The casual touch was so familiar, yet it was the first time Bucky had done it since their army days.

Shaken by the easy intimacy, Steve shoved off the bed to get ice for Bucky’s face. They both knew it would heal fast enough, but still. He wrapped a couple of cubes in a towel and came back to the bedroom.

“Speaking of ice—“ Bucky joked as he touched it to his lip.

Flopping down on the bed, Steve muttered, “You’re such a fucking jerk, Buck.”

“At least I’m not stupid.”

Anger flared, and Steve rolled to his side, facing away from his friend. He didn’t want to get into an argument and he did feel stupid. Sam, Darcy, and now Bucky had all told him the same thing, but none of it made the feelings go away.

“Stop pouting. It was a pain in the ass when you were fifteen. It’s long past cute at ninety-six. You have something to say, say it,” Bucky admonished.
There was nothing like having your best friend around to call you on the carpet for being an idiot. Steve shifted to his stomach, turning his head to look at Bucky. “I don’t know how to let it go.”

“If you had caught me, we wouldn’t have Darcy. The people I killed might still be dead by someone else’s hand. You wouldn’t have been here to stop the Chitauri. Maybe your plane still would have gone into the water and you survived, but nobody could find you. Then I would have been the one living without you.” Bucky shifted so that he could lie down next to Steve, facing him. “All the shit I went through? I deserve a fucking reward and having you and Darcy count. Figure it’s the same for you.”

Steve muttered, still not quite over his sulk. “I can get you a medal for that.”

“Nah. You can give me a blow job if you’re feeling really guilty.” Bucky lit up. “There’s an idea. Every time you feel regret, you can make it up to me.” He reached out to run a hand across Steve’s butt.

“Sex fixes everything for you, doesn’t?” Steve shot back, though not without a little smile.

“Can you think of a better alternative? You get moody, I get laid. Works for me. Go ahead, feel guilty all you want.”

Rolling over so that he could get close enough to kiss Bucky, he agreed. “I think I can work with that.” He touched Bucky’s lips with his index finger, tracing the lines of them, and lightly kissing the place where the bottom one was split. “Anyone ever tell you your lips are so pink they belong on a girl?”

Bucky glared at him, “Shut up, punk.”

“Make me.”

“Nope. And I’m going to point out, no blow jobs for you ‘til my lip heals up.”

“So we find other things to do,” Steve reminded him as he traced a long line from Bucky’s throat, to circle a nipple, and across abs that flexed at his touch. He caressed Bucky’s hardening cock, using his thumb across the head.

With a swift inhalation, Bucky asked, “You want that? Me in you?”

“Yes. Do you?”

“Fuck, yes.” Swallowing hard, Bucky leaned up on an elbow. “But I’m … I’m gonna make you wait.”

“For what?” Steve did not squeak. He was sure of it. (Wasn’t he?)

“If it’s the three of us now, I’m waiting for Darcy. We’re gonna do it together, Steve.”

Steve flopped onto his back with an arm over his face, his own half-hard cock bobbing as he did. It stiffened up as he caught the image of himself buried in Darcy and imaging what it might feel like to have Bucky there too. But-- “She might not want that.”

Bucky let out that low seductive laugh that sent shivers over and through Steve. “From the dame who let me kiss her while you made her come? From the same one who threatened that we’re gonna need the Avengers to save one of us the first time she and I fuck? Darcy, the one who promised she and I would peel you apart when we got to fuck you together?” Bucky snorted lightly. “Love, I’ve a
pretty good idea of how she is with you.”

Steve sucked in his breath. “She said that?” (Sounded like something she would say.)

“Ask her.” Bucky ran his hand in little circles over Steve’s abs, playing in the dip of the belly button. “In the meantime, I’d say you’ve got some reparations to make. And since I’m the one with the busted lip, you get to do all the work.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Steve rose over Bucky, pressing him into the bed. He loved this. Loved that after all these years, this part still worked between them. (Maybe, just maybe, he could find a way to let go.)

Monday morning dawned, and in spite of its owner’s desire to keep on sleeping, Bucky’s phone made a soft ping every so often. Leaning up on his elbows, said owner scraped his hand through his hair and peered at the screen. “Shit. Why did I do this so fucking early?”

Steve had been up long enough to change into his running gear. He sat on the chair to tie his shoes, determined to go for a run and check in on Darcy when he got back. “What’s that?”

“Natal-Natasha. Going to spar this morning in an hour or so. Then—shit, I’ve got to meet with Hill about those damned contracts Pepper had me sign at eleven.”

“When did your schedule get so full?”

“I think I was double-teamed by an AI and a CEO.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “First question, do you want me there with Nat?”

Bucky flicked him a nervous look. “Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll keep my run short and get back before then. Second question, what exactly did Pepper hire you for? I thought you said it was to do some training?”

Bucky blinked, only half-awake as he rolled up to sit on the side of the bed. “Assistant Director of Security.”

“For?”

“Stark Industries. Primary mission is for this Tower and its occupants. Secondary mission—” Bucky swallowed hard and shook his head. “Secondary responsibilities include learning about the company as a whole and improving overall security measures.”

Steve was pretty sure he could have caught a foul ball with his open mouth. “Where did that come from?” he said in wonder as he finished making a bow in the laces and stood up.

“I guess Maria Hill figured out who was leaving her notes on her desk.”

“What kind of notes?”

“I might have left the occasional disparaging message about holes in the Tower’s defenses.”

“Any particular reason?”
Bucky shrugged. “Gotta keep our girl safe.”

Steve decided that Pepper Potts was a brilliant, brilliant dame. Somehow, she had put a finger on Bucky’s way of thinking and figured out how to leverage it into something useful. “Are you okay with it?” he asked.

“Have you seen what she’s paying me?” At that, Bucky’s hands shook a little bit. “Just wanted to be able to work a fair job. Give you a real home, not a run-down flat in Brooklyn. Have a family. Get you a good doctor so you wouldn’t get sick so much. I don’t—I don’t—” He turned both hands up to stare at them. “She thinks I can do something good with all this.”

“You know, she is pretty much the smartest, most terrifyingly efficient person I have ever met,” Steve remarked. “She can’t buy your skills or your loyalty to Darcy. But she can damned well make sure you have a reason to use them here and not anywhere else.”

Bucky fidgeted with his metal fingers. “Steve, I don’t know if I can make it a whole day without messing up.”

“You can’t. That’s why you have JARVIS. And me. And Darcy. Sam. Thor. Nat.”

Nodding slowly, Bucky acknowledged, “Yeah, that’s something.”

Steve rose, tugging Bucky up with him. “Get some breakfast. Gonna be a busy day. You okay if I take a quick run?”

“Yeah, meet me in the locker room in an hour.”

“That I can do.” Steve leaned in with a hard hug and a kiss to Bucky’s lips. “Will you bring coffee?”

“Sure. You checkin’ in on Darce?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

*****

He dressed for training, keeping the one knife in his boot, though he wouldn’t need it. As he pulled the simple cotton shirt over his head, he brushed his fingers on his neck, thinking something was missing. It took him a minute to identify what it might be. He was missing his dog tags. His own were long gone, but Steve kept his old ones in a little box on their dresser. He dug them out and ran a finger along the worn edges. He slipped them over his head and tucked them under his shirt.

Ducking into the bathroom, he took a hard look at himself in the mirror, something he had still trouble with on occasion. His hair was getting long again. Long enough that he pulled his knife from his boot, gathered up his hair in a low ponytail with one of Darcy’s rubber bands and cut through the excess. What remained fell to his chin and it was easy enough to use gel to keep it out of his face.

Washing the stuff off his fingers was harder and Bucky used a washcloth for this kind of thing. Darcy had come up with that idea after watching him try to rinse dish soap off his hands. The metal
wasn’t textured enough to give him friction when he rubbed his hands together. She hadn’t said anything, just handed him a damp cloth and let him figure it out. After a little experimentation, he’d discovered he could use the cloth to not only scrub off his right hand without assistance, the cloth meant he could clean the joints on his left one better too.

He took one last look in the mirror. (Acceptable.)

This time, Bucky made it through the sparring session with Natasha without incident (Asset). She was holding back as he took her through the familiar paces (Skill set). She was correct in her placement, but with too little power behind her strikes.

He admonished her at the end. “Again, we do this again tomorrow.”

“Why are we doing this, Barnes?”

“Because you have bruises and your form is not perfect.”

“I don’t need perfection,” she retorted.

“Do you not, Milaya?”

She stalked away rather than answer him.

He stayed in the basement for another hour to lift out his irritation on the weights (Asset. Rule Two). Steve left him alone, though he generated a healthy amount of sweat with his own workout on the bag.

“Darcy up?” Bucky asked when he had finished.

Wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, Steve paused long enough to answer. “She’s in Tony’s lab working on something with him today. She said to check in with her this afternoon.”

“She okay?”

“You know how she gets when she’s got her hands buried in a project. Hi—talkyoulater—bye,” he said between punches.

But Bucky didn’t know. “The times I’ve been in her lab, she’s always open to conversation.”

Steve halted, frowning a little as he considered. “I guess if you’re around, she doesn’t let herself go that deep. For that matter, I don’t see it much. She worked while I was in DC. We talked on the phone a lot.”

It was conversations like these that helped Bucky to see the connections between Steve and Darcy. For months, he’d been held together only by thin strings and it had been easy to get lost in his own head. “I keep forgetting that you two lived in separate cities.”

“We spent a lot of time on the phone, texting, and driving to visit. Sometimes Stark would beg us to use the helicopter.”

“Beg?”

“Darcy had a thing for driving his Bugatti.”

“The one that is hers now?”
“The same.”

“She won’t let me drive it.”

“You aren’t the only one. Something about letting a guy at the wheel who hits things for a living.”

Bucky just grinned.

“You cut your hair,” Steve commented.

“Some. Might need you to clean it up.”

“I can do that.”

They hit the showers, mostly keeping their hands off each other. Bucky zipped back up to the apartment, ran a quick errand, and ate breakfast with Steve.

“Want me to trim your hair before your interview?”

“Maybe. If I want to make a good impression,” Bucky agreed. While he stripped to his briefs, Steve brought a bar stool from the kitchen into the bathroom. The familiar ritual dated back to when they were in high school and money got tight in the Rogers household after a few too many trips to the doctor. But the punk’s stubborn pride had gotten in the way until Bucky made Steve do his in turn.

Bucky fuckin’ loved having his boyfriend’s fingers in his hair.

Steve reached down to nudge the silver chain before settling a towel around his neck and shoulders. “My dog tags?”

“Thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“No, of course not.” Bucky figured he was going to dig in with questions, but instead, he only asked, “How short do you want it?”

Short was for Sergeant Barnes. Long and messy was for the soldier. Bucky remembered something in the middle, something he used oil to slick back before all that. “Trim it up and leave it.”

Steve did, taking little snips with the scissors to even out the edges. “It doesn’t really look all that bad as it is. Do it with your knife?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a little angled, but not much. Hang on—“ There were a few more cutting sounds behind his ear. “There.” Steve pulled the towel, and then ran a little more gel into Bucky’s hair. Warm lips went against his temple as Steve ducked down to hug him from behind. “Gorgeous, love.”

He liked what he saw. Liked looking at Steve more. Bucky tilted his head back and ran his hand through blond hair. “Want me to do yours?”

“Later. I don’t want you to be late.”

He was trying not to dwell on it. He was nervous enough. “I’ve got almost an hour.”

“Yes,” Steve murmured, his eyes going dark. “But then I can’t do this.” Lips hovered just below his ear, heating the pulse point there. Bucky closed his eyes to concentrate, but Steve insisted, “Look, Buck. Watch yourself in the mirror.”
He did. Sometimes all could see was hard edges and scars and a face he didn’t always recognize. Not today. Steve skimmed light fingers along his collarbones, over the curved of his shoulders, and to his elbows. They came up again to graze his stomach, clutch at the dog tags, and circle each nipple on the return trip. Just as they reached his throat, Steve sucked a kiss into his neck before moving on to nip at Bucky’s mouth.

He shifted around to the front of the stool and knelt between Bucky’s knees, making little circles at the insides of his thighs. There was nothing and everything angelic about the look Steve gave him. “I want to taste you again. I can’t get enough,” he admitted. “Can I do that?”

He ruffled Steve’s hair. “Insatiable. I forgot about that.” He sighed in mock resignation, still feeling the nerves in his stomach. “If you must.”

Steve grinned like a little kid in a candy store. “Off with the underwear. I like them but they’re in my way.”

“Do I have to do everything?” Bucky retorted as he worked the briefs off and tossed them onto the bathroom counter.

“Just watch yourself and don’t fall off the stool. I’ll do the rest.”

He didn’t want to watch himself. He wanted to watch Steve. Or to close his eyes and savor the sparking heat as Steve began to play. He’d been half-hard just from Steve’s hands in his hair. But a couple of long licks down his length made his toes curl and his cock stand up. “Not gonna fall off the stool, punk.”

“You might. Look at yourself,” Steve insisted again as he worked a hand along the underside of Bucky’s leg and set the curve of Bucky’s foot against on his shoulder. “See what I see. You’re gorgeous.”

The punk took his time, sliding a finger around the reddening head of his cock. A squeeze from the base released moisture from the slit, fluid that Steve sucked off. “I love the way you taste, Bucky. The way you smell. Like an orange grove almost too ripe.” He whispered the words as he traced the swollen veins and ducked down to take one ball into his mouth, then the other. Bucky jerked upward at the sensation. Too much, too much. But Steve already knew that and let go to stroke his length, short movements near the top first, then long ones that went all the way to the curls on his skin.

Needy and beginning to ache, he pushed into Steve’s hand, wanting more. He tried to look in the mirror, but couldn’t turn away from Steve as he swallowed Bucky’s cock, so much that he could feel the head press against Steve’s throat. And then his boyfriend worked him over. Swallowing, pulling off to suck on the head while his hand jerked him off. Swallowing down again.

Bucky balanced himself on the stool, locking his fingers on the seat behind him and using his other hand the thread through Steve’s hair. Soft. Spiky in places. Familiar. There was nothing of the soldier here. Only experiencing. He clutched at the hair, dropped his hand to Steve’s shoulder, needing to dig in with his fingers as Steve played.

He flexed his hips in time to Steve’s strokes. What was smooth became stuttered and Steve took him harder, deeper, with saliva coating his cock until it was slick as all fuck and his whole body thrust hard into Steve’s mouth.

“Look, damn it!” Steve ordered when he came off for a breath.
He dragged his eyes to the mirror. His face was a reddened mess. His eyes were half open, and a line of sweat ran down his chest. The tags reflected the lights above the mirror. His lip, the one he didn’t even know he’d bitten, was caught between his teeth and swollen.

Steve’s mouth came back, sucking in cadence with his thrusts. He jerked his hips hard into the mouth that wouldn’t stop being hot and wet and tight and—fuck—he dug fingers into Steve’s shoulder again as he came hard with a groan that couldn’t even approximate Steve’s name.

Hands came to his hips, anchoring him from sliding off the damned stool. With one last, long, drawn out suck, Steve pulled off Bucky’s cock with a satisfied smile. He got to his feet, pressing a hard kiss to Bucky’s temple. “You saw. You’re gorgeous when you come. I’m gonna draw you like that while you’re gone.”

“You—“ Even that was more than he’d expected from his lover and his eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me,” Steve challenged. “And go get dressed. You have an interview.”

Nervous twitters forgotten, he scrambled off the bar stool to change into decent clothes for his meeting with Hill. Slacks, a button-down shirt and a jacket that all fit properly gave him a needed boost of confidence. He clipped on his weapons of choice, three concealed knives and two pistols. The jacket and boots covered them nicely. The cell phone went in his right pocket, leaving the left one empty for his hand.

Steven’s whole face softened with pride as Bucky came over for approval. “Do I look okay?”

“Yes. But you know you don’t have to impress anyone. You already have the job.”

“Don’t want to piss off the boss on the first day.”

The two men exchanged long looks, feeling the memories weigh in on them. Steve wasn’t sick now; Bucky didn’t have to take whatever work he could find.

“If you don’t like it, you don’t have to do this, Bucky. We have plenty to live on without it.” Steve winced. “Never thought I’d say those words.”

“I want this job.”

“Then knock it out of the ballpark, Buck. You’ve got this.” Steve gave him a good luck kiss and sent him out the door. “I’ve got some drawing to do,” he added with a wink.

Considering Steve already had a pencil in one hand, Bucky didn’t doubt he was going to come home to a blue picture of himself.

As he boarded the elevator, he realized that Steve had settled his nervous stomach nicely, and kept him distracted all the way until time for the interview. He would show his gratitude later. For now, he descended the Tower to the sixth floor, which was entirely devoted to security. As he did, he purposefully shifted in (Assessing), letting his breathing even out (Asset).

Hill met him as he stepped out. “Good morning, Sergeant.”

“Barnes,” he corrected.

“Of course, Barnes.” She tilted her head. “Do I need to tell you who is who as we walk or have you figured that out already?”
“I can draw you a floor map and provide a briefing of the team members,” he acknowledged.

She concealed a smile. “I guess not. In any case,” she indicated with a hand. “There’s your office if you want one.”

It was right next to hers and didn’t have a single window except to the front near the door (one exit, line of sight protected. Ceiling needed to be inspected.)

“What happened to the last occupant?”

“We had a housekeeping issue,” she said drily. “Come in my office and have a seat.” She took the chair behind her desk. By habit, Bucky waited until she sat before taking the one across from her.

“Manners. That’s new in this day and age.” She didn’t wait for a comment before continuing, “You have lovely handwriting,” she said. “Took me a while to figure who my mysterious note writer was. And even though I was pissed you broke into my office, I had to agree with your suggestions.”

Barnes listened. Assessing.

“I take it you have a more detailed list.”

“I do.”

“Excellent.” She handed him a tablet. “This contains the schematics of the Tower, as well as of the rest of Stark Industries’ holdings. I’ve included the revamped security protocols that are currently in place, as well as the planned improvements. JARVIS will lock it to your voiceprint and command key when you turn it on the first time.”

He took it, and she continued, “So tell me what your needs are. I understand you work out daily with Rogers, and have sessions with Wilson.”

“An hour in the morning shooting, sparring or lifting unless I have a trainee, then I’ll compensate. Therapy around lunch.” He met Hill’s even gaze. “If the day has been … difficult, I may need … downtime late afternoon.”

“Understood. I have a roster of agents I’d like to place with you for additional training. They are all senior agents who could use a challenge.” She tapped her screen and handed him a card. “This has your new email account and my contact information. I will send you a list of names and you can decide what you want to do with them.” She leveled a hard look at him. “Any particular triggers I should look for or avoid?”

“Don’t surprise me, and I don’t like the cold. JARVIS keeps tabs on me, so he’ll know if there is a problem. If there is,” he warned, “I want Rogers or Lewis. No one else. No tranqs or other drugs. Understood?”

“Understood. And the first applies to every Avenger and most of the security staff. I believe Rogers shares your concerns with the second, so we should be good.” She leaned forward with her elbows on her desk. “Give me your list of suggestions by Wednesday. We’ll get them implemented. What else do you want to do?”

“Two points. First, I want to meet with every member of the security team. Three meetings, all in the same morning. I want them monitored.”

“Why?”

“There are certain key words and phrases HYDRA agents will react to. I will find them and clean
“You didn’t disclose this before.” She didn’t quite snarl, but she definitely bristled.

“Which leads to the second point, Hill. My loyalty will never be to Stark Industries.”

Hill templed her fingers before nodding. “Pepper told me that too. Where are your loyalties, Barnes?”

“Lewis, Rogers, Romanoff, Potts, Stark, in that order. After that, the remaining occupants of the upper residential quarters. I want to vet and train teams to handle the labs and the rest of the Tower.”

“Tony’s going to be pissed to be the end of that list.”

“He’ll be happy with my priority.”

“Why not Rogers?”

“Rogers can take care of himself in a fight.”

“True.” She raised an eyebrow. “I am aware of your relationships with the persons on that list. My only question has to do with how much you care to disclose to the security team.”

“I’ll handle that.”

“Very good. We’ll set the meetings for Monday then. I assume you’ll keep a low profile until then?”

Barnes nodded. “No announcements. We’ll do it at the meetings.”

“Want anything for your office?”

“JARVIS will order what I need.”

“Excellent.” She gave him a sly look. “I like you, Barnes. No bullshitting, no kissing my ass. And it’s a damned good thing because that sort of shit pisses me off.” She stood, indicating the meeting was over, and held out her hand. “I want two sessions a week with you. Pick the time.”

He shook it. “Five p.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Why then?”

“Gives us a chance to work out our differences. We’ll have them. Best to get them resolved quickly and not in front of the others.” Shutting down the soldier, he shifted from assessing to experiencing. He took a deep breath, drawing attention the fact he did. He gave her a small, tight smile.

Hill stiffened as she recognized the difference. “The color of your eyes gives you away with that. You might want to work on it,” she offered.

“I won’t. It might save your life.”

“But you could?” she questioned.

“I can.”

“That’s scary as fuck, Barnes.”
“I know.” He shrugged. “See you Tuesday.”

He traded his jacket and slacks for jeans, an MIT hoodie that Darcy had given him, and a large paper cup of coffee. He spent the rest of the day moving about the Tower, much as he had his first week, only this time JARVIS gave him prompt access to any part of the building. He blended in well with the research interns as he moved around from floor to floor.

It was a good day to start something new.
Assistant Director of Security? Steve texted Darcy after Bucky took off for his meeting with Hill. (Well, after he had fifteen minutes in the shower to jerk off.)

Mom’s call. She’s got a nose for that kind of thing.

What does Bucky know about security?

What DOESN’T Bucky know about security? He picked Nat’s lock this morning.

When? I’ve been with him since last night.

Really?

Okay, there was a fifteen minute window of opportunity when I was making us breakfast after training. Damn. What happened?

He stole her pointe shoes out of her studio.

?

Really, Rogers? Let me rephrase. He broke into the Black Widow’s personal, heavily secured training room (holy shitfires) and took an item of great personal meaning (eek) while said assassin and her really hot assassin fuckbuddy were in residence (omg this is awesome/terrible). Shit has not hit the fan on this one, so be warned. Clint gave me the heads up. I’m passing on same to you. Can we fit behind your shield?

Maybe I should loan it to Bucky

No. He brought this on himself.

Any idea on ETA of said SNAFU?

Nice. No idea.

Maybe I’ll hang out in the Commons and occupy myself. Going to be there?

No. Dad and I are still trying to get a grip on this problem. I’ll tell you over dinner. But keep me posted.

Will do. Love you, doll.

Love you back.

(Was it stupid for him to miss her and it had only been twelve hours since he’d seen her?)

After lunch, Steve took up residence at the Commons kitchen table with his sketchbook, idly drawing a still life of the centerpiece. He was playing around with some pastels this time and had made a mess of his fingertips.

Nat stalked the area all afternoon, pretending to watch television or read a book.

Do I warn B? he texted Darcy.
Are we Team Bucky or Team Nat on this one?

Have to go with Team Bucky. Nat has Clint and he promised popcorn.

Then send up a flare.

Steve sent the text to give Bucky the heads-up. Late afternoon, when Bucky texted back that he was done for the day, Steve wiped his fingers on his jeans, (bad habit, yes) and shot off another message to Darcy and Clint.

Can’t come up yet, she told him.

Want a running commentary of the action?

Duh.

Nat’s stalking the elevator now.

Did you bring the shield?

Clint appeared just minutes later to raid the fridge. He slid a bottle of Coke to him and set a bowl of popcorn on the table as he sat.

“Thanks.” Steve took it, opened the cap. “Ringside seats?”

“You know it,” the archer drawled.

Nat waited until Bucky had cleared the elevator, but only just. “Keep them,” she snapped. “But stay out of my place.”

Bucky crossed his arms and replied in a low voice, “You’re holding out on me. Why?”

“I don’t want to go back there, Barnes. It’s over.”

“Yet you still use your lessons. Why would you let yourself become complacent?”

“I am not complacent.”

“You are. This is why you were injured.”

“I’m not playing your game, Uchitel.”

“There will always be games to play, Natalia. This is what we do.” Bucky reached out to tip her chin up. “You win, you fly. Isn’t that what I’ve always promised?”

“I’m not doing this, Barnes.” There was a note of pleading. (Maybe not. Nat never begged.)

“You will. Tomorrow morning we do this again.” Bucky glanced at Steve then ascended the staircase to their quarters. Even from here, Steve saw the headache in his eyes. With a nod to Clint, he finished his Coke and followed Bucky to the apartment.

Well, that was deceptively mild. There has to be some sort of Russian subtext I’m missing. Steve texted as he climbed the stairs.

All threats and no action? Darcy replied.

Threats, pouting, insults and I think a gauntlet was dropped. It was very mild-mannered and a little
disturbing.

Oops.

Love you, doll. Talk more later. Bucky’s got a headache.

Once inside, Bucky stripped off his shirt, jacket and boots, carefully putting them over a chair. Weapons were checked and put in the safe. Then he shuffled to land face-first on the bed, sock feet hanging off the edge, dog tags still in place. Steve followed, straddling him as he went and started working his way up from the base of Bucky’s spine. Mindful of the strength in his hands, he worked his thumbs into the tight muscles.

“I don’t like this,” Bucky muttered after the first few minutes.

Instantly pulling his hands away, Steve apologized, “I can quit.”

“No, punk. That feels good.”

“Then what?” he asked as he set his hands back on Bucky’s skin. He caressed the hard flesh, easing back into a rhythm.

“Trying not to be what they made me. Finding me again. Easier with you and Darcy. Harder when I’m on my own. ‘most impossible with Natalia.’”

“Why are you pushing?”

“Because she’s so much better than what you see.”

Steve worked the muscles loose as he made little circles with his thumbs. “Bucky, she’s amazing. Her pinkie finger is a deadly weapon.”

“So is mine. And she used to be able to disarm me in under half a minute. She can’t get close now.” Bucky sighed. “I’m tired. Don’t want any more fighting. Just want to keep my family safe, y’know?”

“Natasha is family?”

“She was mine for a while. I set her free.”

“I imagine there was a price to be paid for that.”

Bucky stiffened under Steve’s hands. “Don’t ask. I don’t want to remember. It’s easier to not remember.”

Changing to long, slow strokes, with one hand going in to play with the newly shorn dark hair, he got Bucky to settle again. “I know. You’re safe now. You don’t need to remember. You’re safe with me. Always with me.”

“Love you, punk.”

“I love you back, jerk.” Steve pulled the electric blanket over Bucky. “Get some sleep. I’m going to pry Darcy out of Stark’s lab. When you wake up, come find us.” He kissed Bucky’s cheek. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

“’kay.”
All things considered, the last twenty-four hours counted as one of the best days in Steve’s weird life.

Not that last night wasn’t full of hard realizations, but that had been a lancing of a painful boil that had festered. And Bucky hadn’t spiraled off into a miasma of headaches and memories. No, he’d called Steve to the carpet, dressed him down, and then held him when he fell apart. (Making up afterward had been fun too.)

Yesterday marked a turning point, because Bucky had been the strong one for a while. Steve had seen Darcy respond to Bucky’s encouragement, even letting him relax her on the dance floor. He’d kept himself together through the movie, and still was up (ha!) for fooling around and dealing with Steve’s shit afterward.

Darcy had been keen to play along last night. Seeing Darcy and Bucky on the dance floor had given him the idea, cemented when they indulged in a real kiss that made his own cock twitch hard. He’d had little doubt of how his and Bucky’s night would end, so coming up with a way to share something of it with Darcy had been a challenge.

Not a day went by that Steve didn’t marvel at having Bucky here, in this time and place. That there was a chance at making this work with Darcy made him giddy.

“JARVIS? Is Darcy free?”

“Captain Rogers, I believe she is still in Sir’s laboratory, but as he has engaged the privacy locks, I am unable to confirm.”

That seemed off. Curious, he set off for Stark’s floor.

Pepper, still wearing her work clothes and looking every inch the elegant CEO, met him on the main level with a kiss on the cheek. “Hello, Steven.”

He ducked his head, letting her see how happy he was. “What you did for Bucky—“

She put her fingers to his lips in an oddly intimate gesture. (He missed his Ma.) “Was the right thing to do. For everyone. Believe me, he’ll earn it.”

He caught her hand in his and pressed a kiss to the knuckles, grateful, so terribly grateful for her understanding. “I know. Thank you.” He pulled her into a little hug, careful not to muss her too much. This was something they did, the hugs.

“How was the date?” she asked when he stepped back.

“Darcy didn’t tell you?”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Of course she did. I want your version.” (He was pretty damned sure all he could do was glow with a silly grin on his face.) “That good, huh?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged. (He was happy.) She laughed, pointing him to the lab. “They’ve got their hands in something deep, so don’t be surprised if all you get is a grunt and a kiss.”

“Like father, like daughter?” He flashed at Pepper smile and strolled down to the lab--where he
discovered his thumbprint gave him access. (That was new.)

As always, music played on the speakers, this time something soulful and low, sort of what Wilson had on for him in the hospital. Tony was occupied with a computer sitting off to one side.

“Stark.”

“Rogers.”

“Is Darcy--?” he started. But Tony jabbed a thumb toward the far side of the lab. There was a cushy sofa there just waiting for a good nap. Darcy was sound asleep on it, curled up on one end while still wearing the dress from the night before. The shoes she’d worn stood neatly on the floor. Her stockings were tucked into them, with the bracelet and earrings cushioned by the nylon.

“Don’t wake her,” Tony warned, his fingers still tapping at the keyboard. “She’s only been out for an hour.”

Steve pressed the lightest of kisses into her hair. “Up all night?” he asked as he crossed the shop to where Tony was sitting.

Tony flicked him a glance and jerked a chin at what Steve now recognized as his own sketch laying on the worktable. “Tell me about this drawing.”

Raising his eyebrows at the lack of an insulting nickname, Steve answered. “It was the first thing in my head when I woke up from the ice. I remember my hands hurting, but I had to get it on paper. Darcy--well, I thought she was from the pin-up sketch. I had no idea what I was drawing in her hands until I saw someone working on one here in the Tower.

“I kept erasing and redrawing Bucky’s hand. At the time I thought I’d lost my mind because I had a whole sketchbook full of studies of his hands.” He sucked in his breath, remembered the hours of drawing that had gone into that. “That’s something I wish I had back. Who knows where it ended up,” he sighed. “The drawing disturbs you. And it bothered Darcy more than the other two. Why?”

Tony stopped tapping on the keys and picked up his pen to fiddle with it. “I can pretend that this is pure coincidence, but I think it’s safe to say the universe isn’t playing by the rules when it comes to you. That circuit board belongs to JARVIS. It is JARVIS, at the core. And it’s broken in your drawing. Assuming this sketch is also predictive scares the hell out of me.”

He tapped his pen on the table, looking over his workstation at his daughter. “Darcy came straight up here after her date--thank you for getting her home on time, in one piece and obviously not-knocked up. That’s appreciated. We’ve been combing through JARVIS’ programming to see if we can find anything out of the ordinary.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.” Tony let his fingers rest. “I need a drink. You want a drink? Bourbon, right? You’re drinking with me,” he decided. Tony poured the smoky drink over a couple of short glasses half full of ice and passed one over to Steve as they went out to Tony’s terrace overlooking the city. “It looks like nothing. An extra letter here, a number there. Pieces of stray text in the coding.”

“But there’s a pattern.”

“Not one that I can see yet, Darcy either. And I’ve looking since this time yesterday.”

“How can JARVIS’ coding be changed?”
“He can rewrite it himself. That’s the whole point of an AI.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“No more dangerous than raising a kid. There are no promises that your kid won’t be the next megalomaniac, but if you do it right, hopefully they will keep themselves in check.”

“What happens if that doesn’t work?”

“There is always a bullet to the brain, Rogers.”

“You could do that?”

“I don’t know. But JARVIS loves Darcy. Darcy loves him back. So there is that. Megalomaniacs usually don’t like competition.”

Steve sipped the drink, enjoying the smooth flavor as it rolled over his tongue. “Good point. So what are you doing?”

“We’re cleaning up the coding and locking it down in a new location. Even JARVIS won’t have access to it unless we need it.”

“I guess you can’t back all that data up.”

“Oh, the basic program is protected, along with the modifications I’ve made over the years. But JARVIS has evolved long past that and writes his own subroutines now. Not only that, Darcy likes to write code and let him play with it. It’s a good way for both of them to learn.”

“What kind of code?”

“Pick a single thought. A memory, a flavor. She’ll write something that gives him that small piece of reality.”

Steve had to shake his head at that one. “I don’t think I understand.”

Tony paced along the terrace, waving with his drink. “JARVIS likes music, right?”

Nodding, Steve agreed, “Quite a bit.”

“Darcy started that. She got bored with hunting up new songs, so she wrote JARVIS a program to help her. She was nine, I think. Over the years, she has written him hundreds of new bits of programming to teach him aspects of “like” or “dislike.” He takes that code, integrates it with his existing programming and uses it to understand personality and tastes. I can’t remember the last time he played something in the lab I didn’t like. He always knows.”

Tony swirled the cubes in his glass. “Your boyfriend’s fascination with music is one of the reasons JARVIS agreed to take him on.” He drank. “So.. imagine if I had to hard reset JARVIS to where he was fifteen years ago.”

Steve shook his head, thinking of Darcy’s relationship with her brother. “I’d rather not.”

“The problem is that we don’t know where the stray digits are coming from, what they mean or how they are connected. None of his firewalls have been breached and Darcy is damned good at writing firewalls. She’s got layers in place that I can hardly follow.”

“Is it possible JARVIS put them there?”
“That was my first question and JARVIS is as surprised as we are. He’s running his own set of diagnostics to clean them out, but I can’t discount the possibility that he is reinfecting himself in the process.”

Frustrated, Tony picked up a little frog statue out of a planter and set it back down. “Since we haven’t identified a pattern, I can’t write an algorithm to pull the digits out. So that means doing this the hard way, combing through every line of programming, removing it and documenting it until we get enough hard data to figure out what is going on.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Can you draw Barnes without looking at him?”

“Yes.”

“Darcy and I can look at the code and see JARVIS. What doesn’t belong sticks out. The problem is, we’re looking at a set of unabridged Encyclopedia Britannicas. It’s going to take time.”

“And you don’t know if there is a deadline.”

“Exactly.”

“Using the encyclopedia analogy--nice one, by the way--how far are you in?” Steve wondered.

“Well, the maps and index are all the same, so I’m good there. Maybe through the middle of the A’s?”

“You’re talking about months, maybe years.”

“Got a better solution? My kid has precancerous tumors and I’ve got to dig them out.” Tony finished his bourbon. “I’m open to brilliant ideas. And no, Natasha is not getting her hands on JARVIS. I trust her with my life, but not my AI, okay?”

“I’ve got downtime. Teach me.”

Tony smirked as he dragged him back into the lab to a terminal full of coding. “There are two errors on the screen.”

Steve glanced at the monitor, letting the letters and lines settle into his brain. “There,” his finger hovered over the glass. “The semi-colon and,” he moved his finger to the middle, “the ‘g’ doesn’t belong.”

Tony squinted at him. “How do you know that?”

“Those two letters don’t fit the pattern.”

Tony ran him through a dozen pages before he was convinced Steve could help. “You can’t write code, hell, you can’t even read code. But you can see the flaws.”

“They had me code-breaking in our downtime during the war. I can see it. Can’t explain how.”

“I don’t care. I’ll take whatever time you have. Just—" He looked over at Darcy. “-maybe not now.” He steered Steve back out onto the terrace after snagging the bottle of bourbon for a refill.

The mechanic gave Steve a hard look. “Pepper tells me I have to accept Darcy’s choice. That I suck as a parent if I don’t. Which isn’t hard, really, sucking as a parent. God knows, I had no business
thinking I could raise a kid. If Pepper hadn’t come along when she did, Darcy would be an introverted screw up worse than me, because she would have had two generations of bad parenting, not just one. You can stop me anytime with a platitude that won’t really reassure me but will let me know you are kissing my ass.”

“I will never kiss your ass, Tony. But I do love your daughter.”

“Is this the part where I get to threaten you? Because I really want to do that.”

“Go ahead. I deserve it.” Steve had been expecting this and was sort of happy to let Tony vent all over him so they could get it out of the way.

“Yes, you do. I had to go to London because my daughter hadn’t slept in over a week. The few times she did, she woke up with horrible nightmares. Whatever she dreamed about, she won’t say, but it was enough to scare the shit out of Barton and he has a master assassin sharing his blankets.”

Steve’s face twisted. “She dreams about Malekith. About the Destroyer. Watching you fly up the Tower and into a hole in space. She has nightmares about me not coming home if I didn’t find Bucky. Being trapped in a manhole and not able to get out. Pick one, Stark.” He rubbed his hand into his hair. “She rarely has nightmares when she’s with me. But when I was in DC, she would call me one or twice a week with them, and those were only the bad ones. We talk it through.”

“Is that why she doesn’t sleep when you’re on a mission?”

Something in Tony’s voice clued him in that this was a test of sorts, but it didn’t matter because he already had the answer. “Yes.”

“I didn’t think you knew about that.”

“Of course I know.” Steve walked to the end of the terrace and sat in one of the chairs, making himself smaller so he didn’t tower over Darcy’s father. Carefully setting the glass between his feet, he laced his fingers together and rested his arms on his knees. Stark followed, not too closely, but near enough to hear him. “I see her, Tony. Her brain dazzles me. Her jokes make me laugh. She’s so damned beautiful I stutter sometimes. Her strength scares me because she can carry so much and rarely asks for anything more than someone to hold her hand. But when she does, she needs someone who won’t flinch from whatever comes her way. I can do that. I’m good at that.”

Tony paced a little more as he listened.

“As for Bucky, he’s going to have to tell you himself. I did ask—far too late and Darcy had already made up her mind. I asked her, gave her a chance to say no to all of this. She didn’t. She said she wanted to try.”

“She loves you too much not to give it a shot,” Tony accused.

“I know. I was counting on it,” Steve admitted. “Last night we made it work. We had a good time.”

“Captain America isn’t allowed to have fun.”

“You know, I got that memo. I’ve decided to File Thirteen it and write a new one,” Steve countered with a smile.

Tony upended the bourbon over his ice one more time. “Barnes already told me.”

“Told you what?”
Without a sound, Bucky dropped onto the terrace from above, startling the other two men. “That I’m in love with Darcy.” He was back to jeans and a light sweater, making him look far younger that he was. (Steve felt a twitch just looking at him. He was sure his smile couldn’t get any bigger.) Bucky reached out to shake Tony’s hand.

Stark rolled his eyes as he took it. “You’re lit up like a fucking roman candle, Cap.”

“Punk’s been like that all day, sir,” Bucky retorted.

“Didn’t we talk about you not calling me that? Because it makes me feel old, and how the FUCK did my daughter get hooked up with a couple of 96 year olds?”

“I’m 97, actually. Sir,” Bucky smirked. “Am I old enough to have one of those?” He waved at the glass of bourbon.

“Glasses are behind the bar. Bring a new bottle, and don’t be a prick, Barnes. How the hell did you get on my terrace anyway?”

“It’s about seventy-five years too late for that, Stark,” Steve snorted.

“Oh, is it time to pull out the old man jokes, punk? Because we can talk about the way you dress,” Bucky sassed. “The nineteen forties called. They want their pants back. And, sir,” he said to Tony, “Barton showed me the trick of dropping in. We raided your bar a couple of nights ago. The Glenlivit was drinkable.”

Steve picked up the thread of conversation before Stark could reply. “At least I don’t have to worry about strangling my dick in a pair of paint-on jeans.”

“But my ass looks good. Damned good.” Bucky strutted to the bar tucked into the corner of the terrace.

“You should see mine in my uniform,” Steve called out.

Bucky dropped ice in his glass, opened a new bottle and brought it to Stark to pour. “I have seen yours in your uniform. Still think you go commando. No underwear in the world has that much cling.”

Tony made stop signs with his hands to both men, one still holding his glass. Carefully, he reached for the bottle and poured about three fingers, most of which he chugged. “This is not my life. Capsicle and Ice Man 2 trading ass jokes on my terrace, one of whom has already stolen my liquor and pronounced it no more than ‘drinkable.’” He pressed the old-fashioned to his forehead. “And I did not just hear Captain America say, ‘dick,’ did I?”

“You did,” Steve agreed.

“You’re ruining my image of you.”

“What the uptight, all-American virginal hero, champion of the weak, defender of the women and children?” Bucky snorted and let his voice change. “Yeah, he’s been pullin’ that gig for a while. Biggest bunch o’ malarkey. Ain’t nothin’ uptight ‘n innocent ‘bout Steven Rogers.”

Tony blanched. “Oh fuck me. Did I hear Brooklyn? You do not speak Brooklyn. That is automatic grounds for moving out. I am not having grandkids who speak Brooklyn.”

Steve pealed out with laughter. “Sorry, Tony,” he said in his own hometown accent. “Ya gotta know
what ya daughter is datin’. Pair o’ blokes from the boroughs ain’t too good for th’ Starks,” he
ebowed Bucky.

“Told ya, punk. She’s th’ Princess in th’ ivory tower.” Bucky held his glass up and clinked it with
Steve’s.

“I hate both of you. Darcy is grounded. She is never going out with either of you ever again,” Tony
swore. “JARVIS, remind me to move Darcy to Malibu tomorrow.”

The flash of unease in Bucky’s eyes was enough for Steve to set his glass down and put his hand on
Bucky’s shoulder. “It’s a joke. She’s not going anywhere.”

“I know. I know. We just got her back,” Bucky conceded, sucking in a deep breath.

Steve pulled him in for a hug, not caring if it bothered Tony or not. But Tony only swirled the ice in
his glass, watching the two of them.

“Rogers, why don’t you get Darcy to her lab and come back when you’re done,” he
suggested. “Barnes and I need a little one-on-one time.”

Feeling the tension in Bucky, Steve calmed him with a kiss to his temple and long strokes on the
spine. “You’re safe. But are you okay with that, love?” he murmured as he ran a hand under the
collar of Bucky’s sweater. He tugged on the dog tags as a reminder they were there.

Bucky shifted his stance, pulling himself in, though not entirely to the soldier. Steve thought this was
more Sergeant Barnes than anything. “Yes.” He slid his fingers into his pockets, more himself
now. “Go take care of our girl.”

“Will do.”

He felt odd leaving Bucky with Tony. (Overprotective, probably. Yes. Bucky could take care of
himself in this situation.) Still, he followed Tony’s instructions.

Darcy woke just enough to nuzzle his neck as he descended the back stairs with her. He did get her
feet down to stand her up long enough to help her out of the crumpled dress and the lingerie she’d
worn underneath. She missed the snaps on her bra and Steve came to her rescue. Once that hit the
floor, she slid under the sheets murmuring her thanks.

He took the time to pick up the dress to lay it across one her chairs. (Definitely needed a second or
third wearing. He wanted to peel her out of it at least once. And maybe keep it on her for the next.)

Tucking the blankets over her more securely, he left her alone and climbed the back staircase.
(Didn’t like leaving her here. Wanted her home.)

The two men were at the far end of the terrace, looking out over the city. Tony seemed to be
explaining something that had caught Bucky’s interest, enough that Bucky held his left wrist out and
was showing something on it to Tony. Tony had his Iron Man glove on.

“How comparing hardware?” Steve deadpanned as he came up behind them.

Tony’s snapped around to glare at Steve. “You know, a month ago I would have sworn that you
didn’t know what you were saying with things like that.”

He shrugged. “Bucky brings out the best in me.”
“More like the teenaged brat in you,” Bucky countered. “Never listened to anyone, Stark. Not his Ma, not me.”

“That’s not true,” Steve acted as if he was offended. “I always listen.”

“You just stayed stupid.” Bucky elbowed Tony. “Some dumbass got the bright idea to make him bigger. Now he’s still stupid but he’s so pretty everyone thinks he’s right.”

Tony choked back a laugh. “You know, Barnes, I’m not sure you’re wrong on that one.” He flicked quick looks between them. “Rogers, you weren’t kidding about you two being the real deal.”

Long used to the way Tony danced around from subject to subject, Steve fielded this one easily. “No. I would never joke about something like that.”

“I’m not going to ask why, because I know damned well that Pepper has no business giving me the time of day.” Tony started. Serious, a little nervous, and with a touch of anger, he demanded, “You both swear to me that you will love Darcy as much as you love each other.”

“Yes,” Bucky confirmed. He flexed his hand in the absence of her touch.

Steve understood that this came from a father who adored his daughter, but it didn’t mean that the request didn’t sting. He put his hands on his hips in irritation. “I promise, Tony, but I shouldn’t have to. You know me better than that.”

“Sometimes, Rogers, I don’t think I know you at all.” Tony looked him up and down. “I sure as hell didn’t know you speak Brooklyn.”

“Now that really hurts, Stark. My past is an open book. I’m pretty sure I’ve read them all,” he retorted.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “I like this version of you a hell of a lot better. Cap has a stick up his ass.” He glanced at Bucky. “Instead of something else, I guess.”

Well, hell. That got Bucky laughing so hard he had to sit on one of the chairs.
Friends and Lovers

Chapter Notes

A/N Yes, the chapter count went up again. I've outlined everything else I have in mind and well, there you go. I'm not promising that it won't happen again, either.

For those of you who watched the Avengers: Age of Ultron trailer .... yes, I am ATTEMPTING (and will fail, I'm certain) to write this story in such a way that it won't be completely jossed in May. (If it is, at least it will be by the master himself, so that's something. Maybe. Fuck. There's no way it will make it past Cap 3, so it's just a blind hope on my part.)

joss. To joss. Def. To have your story completely fucked over by a movie or episode released after you spent months writing a canon-compliant fan fiction. Term first created in the BTVS fandom. See Joss Whedon.

Darcy woke in her own bed. From the night sky, she decided it had to be somewhere around o-dark-fuck. Her phone, when she found it on the nightstand beside her glasses, agreed with her assessment and confirmed she’d slept almost twelve hours straight. She had five texts, three from Steve, one each from Jane and Nat, and one missed call.

The texts were from Steve wondering where she was at first, then telling her he loved her and to sleep well. Nat and Jane wondering how the date went. The missed call—now that was interesting seeing as it came from Betty Ross. Too early to call the scientist back, she fired off a text asking if Betty was ready to take up the standing offer to work at Stark Industries.

Her hair itched. She definitely needed a shower. As she stumbled in the direction of the bathroom, she had the vague memory of Steve nudging her into bed and helping her out of the black dress that was carefully draped over her chair.

One shower, a bagel and a cup of coffee later, Darcy settled at her laptop, catching up on Stark Industries. When that was done, she retrieved Bucky’s heater that she'd finished Sunday afternoon and took the time to tape it down to her own arm. She could pack it in ice to trigger the thermistor once she was sure it wasn’t glitching in standby mode.

As sky began to lighten up, she got a text from Betty: Yes.

With a happy dance, Darcy shot back, Offer still includes a furnished apartment if your doubting boyfriend gives you any trouble. Move in ready, when can I send the van?

Is now too soon? My plane just landed at LaGuardia. It’s either that or I’m sleeping on your floor.

Skip the taxi. JARVIS tells me Happy was picking up another SI VP who landed about fifteen minutes ago. He’ll meet you at the baggage claim, if you don’t mind sharing a limo.

Not at all. Thank you.

Are we moving lab equipment from somewhere? And no, won’t make you sleep on the floor. Living in the Tower now. If you need to crash while we get you situated, you can have my place. I’ll stay
with Steve.

I’m coming with just my laptop and a suitcase. Long story. Thought you were moving in with Steve.

Long story. He’s living in the Tower with his boyfriend in one of the apartments.

???

Yeah, that. I’ll trade you stories about my boyfriend and his boyfriend for why you are giving up a professorship at Culver over wine. After you and your boyfriend figure things out.

He’s not my boyfriend.

Sure. He just pines for random women while sipping his calming teas. See you in an hour or so.

Darcy fired off an email about Betty’s arrival to her mom for later. “JARVIS, we have a furnished apartment ready on the fifth floor, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Would you have some fruit sent up and some of Banner’s tea stocked?”

“I believe I have a list of Ms Ross’ preferences on hand.”

“Perfect, then you’ll know how to set it up. I’ll bet she stays there for a few days no matter what happens.”

“You’re a good friend, Lewis.”

“Maybe. Maybe it will be nice not to be the Avengers’ entertainment for a day or two.”

She wrapped up her work by the time JARVIS announced Betty’s arrival. Darcy checked the time. Perfect. Bruce would be drinking tea in the Commons.

Better yet, Steve was there too. A searchlight had less wattage than his smile as he scooped her into a hug. “I missed you yesterday.” He nuzzled her hair, kissing behind her ear.

She hissed as he hit that sweet spot on her neck. “Yes. Holy--you’re in a good mood.”

“I am.” One hand landed on her ass.


“Do you tell each other everything?”

“The good stuff.” Clint and Darcy were responsible for most of the transmission of decent gossip in the Tower.

“Who is Betty?” Steve asked, apparently not quietly enough, because Bruce’s head snapped up.

The elevator doors opened and Darcy bounded toward her friend. “Betty!”

“Darcy? How do you know people that I still don’t know you know?” Steve said in exasperation as he followed.
“I know a lot of people you don’t know.” She kissed Betty’s cheeks as Steve took her luggage. “Betty, this is Steve Rogers a.k.a. my boyfriend. Steve, Dr. Betty Ross, late a biomedical research professor at Culver and Stark Industries’ newest addition to the R&D department.”

Steve grinned at Betty. “That’s where you two met. Culver.” He reached out and shook her hand.

Betty smiled, a tired sort of thing that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “We crossed paths a time or two. Jane Foster and I tended to bond at faculty functions in the face of the overwhelming amounts of testosterone in the room. Darcy and I got to know each other during her last semester. I’ve been getting quarterly emails begging me to come to work here.”

“I guess that this isn’t really a coincidence. Me being here and you being here,” Bruce said from behind Steve.

Darcy shoved Steve toward the stairs, leaving the suitcase behind. Clint and Nat came up behind them, stopping at the second to bottom step, so that the four of them were goggling at the scene. Darcy crossed her fingers behind her back.

Betty—tall, dark and shy—slowly advanced two steps toward Bruce, who was hunched over with his arms crossed. And who made his own pathetic little shuffling steps toward Betty. “No. I pretty much think all of your arguments have been debunked now. Except maybe one and I’m not even sure of that anymore. So I’m here. I’m going to work here. And maybe we’ll find an answer and maybe we won’t, but I’ve had enough of your nobility and hiding.” She didn’t give Bruce a chance to say anything before she pushed into his arms and held on.

Bruce was forever startled whenever people touched him, and this was no different. But he closed his arms carefully around her shoulders.

Darcy, Steve, Nat and Clint backed up the staircase to give them privacy. They went all the way up to the fourth floor. Darcy was giggling like a madwoman as she called Jane and babbled out the good news. Her laughter was infectious and had the rest of them in smiles. Wilson came out of his apartment, scratching his head and yawning at the noise.

Steve shrugged as he looked at the crowd. “Want pancakes?”

“Hell, yeah,” Sam spoke up.

Darcy invited Jane and Thor before she hung up and sent a text to Bruce and Betty so they wouldn’t feel left out. As the four of them invaded the apartment, Bucky came out of the bedroom, all scruffy and his hair messy, looking absolutely adorable in his sweats, t-shirt and a worn set of dog tags around his neck.

“Coffee?” he pleaded.

“On it,” Steve winked. He brushed a kiss on Darcy’s lips before separating and taking up residence in the kitchen. Clint beat him to the coffee pot and Natasha sorted out ingredients.

Bucky brightened as Darcy reached out to him and kissed him on the lips. Like Bruce did with Betty, he gathered her carefully into his arms for a long hug. “Missed you yesterday.”

She rested her head against his shoulder until Thor and Jane knocked and let themselves in. With an apology to Bucky and an extra squeeze around his middle, she and Jane made their own hugs and found a place on the sofa. Nat brought coffee for three and sat down to talk all things Betty and Bruce. (And Darcy and Steve and Bucky, but that was later.)
Darcy winked at Steve, who had corralled the guys into the kitchen. Thor manned the bacon station, Bucky stirred up scrambled eggs, and Steve made pancakes by the dozens. Sam handled toast and Clint made sure the coffee pot stayed full.

It was a lot of noise and more laughter than Darcy could ever remember with this crew.

In her ear, JARVIS asked, *Lewis, shall I invite Sir and Ms. Potts?*

*Of course. Can’t have all the Avengers here and not include them. Thanks, J. I would have felt bad later for not thinking of it.*

About the time the pancakes started coming off the griddle, Bruce and Betty showed up. They were holding hands as they walked in and Darcy let out a short squeal of triumph.

Sam and Clint passed out loaded plates to grateful hands, including her parents’ as they arrived, still in pajamas like the rest of them. Betty and Bruce crammed into a single cushy chair, mostly eating off just one plate. Pepper and Tony took the barstools.

Thor, Steve and Bucky carried out the rest of the plates to the living room where bodies settled on the floor, couches and chairs. Bucky squeezed into the space between the arm of the sofa and Darcy, with Steve sitting on the floor in front of them.

Bucky wrapped an arm around her. Curious about the tags, she flipped the metal over and found Steve’s name stamped there. “Sexy, Barnes.” She licked her lips as she skimmed over the way the tight shirt clung to his biceps. Yes, he was definitely yummy this morning. With Steve close enough to lean against their legs, her lady parts were dancing out of pure proximity. The contact went beyond safe, beyond friendship, it was electric. She hummed under her breath in anticipation. (More. She wanted more.)

Barnes might have indulged her in another kiss except that his fingers grazed the film taped to her arm when he leaned over. “Are you hurt, Princess?” he asked, tugging her shirt sleeve up to look.

Darcy handed him her plate and turned so that he could see. “That’s your heater. I’m testing it to make sure it works. This afternoon, I’ll start experimenting with ice packs to see if it warms up properly.”

Betty raised her brow. She looked from Darcy’s test patch to Bucky’s arm. “Biofeedback headaches?” she asked him.

“Some, but mostly the vibranium support structure gets cold,” he answered after Darcy nudged him.

“Let me or Darcy know if you want help,” she offered him.

“Some, but mostly the vibranium support structure gets cold,” he answered after Darcy nudged him.

“Let me or Darcy know if you want help,” she offered.

Darcy blushed. “Sorry, introductions are needed here. Dr. Betty Ross, biomedical research out of Culver. Bruce, Jane and I were there, though not at the same time.” Darcy went around the room, naming everyone for Betty.

Bucky let a soft smile cross his face for Darcy. “Is that why you wanted her here?”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she retorted. “I’ve been angling for her to come to work here for a couple of years.”

Betty let out a disbelieving laugh. “Sure. And that explains why you threw in the apartment with your standing offer six months ago.”
“Nope. That was because your boyfriend was being a dork and I’m sticking by that,” Darcy insisted. Bruce just pursed his lips and stayed quiet. Bucky gave her a squeeze of thanks.

“Speaking of boyfriends … “ Betty trailed off, pointedly looking at the two men near Darcy.

With plenty of time to think her way through the new dynamics of their relationship yesterday as she worked, Darcy discovered she had to make some adjustments in her thinking. She and Steve were still a going thing, no questions there. But what was Bucky to her? She’d had reframe the question in terms of her experience. If Steve wasn’t in the picture, then what would she consider Bucky given where they were in their relationship? The answer hadn’t particularly surprised her, but it still felt weird all the same.

Darcy pointed to Steve. “Boyfriend.” She pointed to Bucky, shyly confirming, “Boyfriend.” She tugged on tags that Bucky wore. “They sort of come as a set.”

“I noticed,” Betty agreed.

The incandescent light in Bucky’s eyes was only matched by that in Steve’s. Then Natasha whispered something in Russian that made Barnes retaliate with a pillow aimed in her direction (Darcy really needed to learn Russian).

Unfortunately for those who had to work, it was only Tuesday, which meant Bucky had an appointment with Natasha in the training room. Darcy and Pepper needed to focus on Stark Industries for the day, and Director Coulson was flying in later to meeting with Maria and Steve.

So their little party broke up, reluctantly, with Darcy, Steve, Clint and Sam tackling the kitchen clean up. Thor followed Bucky and Nat to the training room, with the promise that Steve would be along shortly.

*****

Natasha behaved herself a better in practice. She put forth a reasonable effort, if not an enthusiastic one. But she was precise with her movements this time, and he was pleased with her form. Once, when she’d spoken to him in Russian, he found himself shifting hard into the soldier (Asset).

You’re safe, Barnes. JARVIS reminded him.

He went to one knee when it happened. As he did, the tags moved under his shirt, grounding him to who and where he was. (James Buchanan Barnes. Tower. Mission: Protect Stark.) Reassured, he started again with Natasha and took her through her full paces.

But she didn’t earn her shoes. She didn’t ask. She knew better.

The rest of the morning was spent with Barton on the long shooting range, just a brief helicopter ride out of Manhattan. Even he had to admit the archer was brilliant and they were better matched than he liked. The competition was good for both of them. (Skill set).

Out of sheer boredom, they switched weapons. He was intrigued by the bow and decided to add it to his arsenal of weaponry. Barton seemed comfortable with the rifles, though he preferred his arrows for the longest of ranges.
“So you and Darcy are a thing now?” Barton asked.

“We’re dating.” A thrill of excitement ran through him. *Experiencing.* (Darcy’s boyfriend.)

“Stark seems to be handling it well enough.”

Bucky exhaled long and low as Barton lined up his next shot. (Assessing) “We had words. I think we have an understanding.”

“You understand that you’re at his mercy if things don’t go well with his heir and spawn?”

“Precisely.”

“Hell of a position to be in.” Barton let the arrow fly and the bowstring twanged in response.

“I’m exactly where I want to be.” (He was. It was a new feeling. Content? Wilson would know.)

“Heard they made you part of Stark security. Why not the Avengers? We could use you. Rogers sure as hell would be better for it.”

“I have a mission,” he countered.

“What’s that?”

“Protect Stark.” (Asset)

Barton looked back at him in curiosity. “That directive has a rather nebulous set of parameters.”

“Yes.” (Skill set)

The archer tilted the corner of his mouth up in a smile and shook his head in disbelief. “Pepper Potts is one slick operator.”

“Yes, she is. And no, I’m not interested in pissing her off.”

“Did she show you Extremis?”

“No, though Darcy mentioned that her mom isn’t scared of anyone she can melt. It’s a reasonable threat,” he offered mildly with a glance at his arm.

Barton only laughed. “No one ever said this life was boring, Barnes.”

No. Not boring. Not boring at all. (Darcy called him boyfriend.)

Lunchtime found most of them out on the Commons terrace, as it was a beautiful day and still held a little bit of the summer’s warmth in the air. Most of the morning’s group reconvened when Darcy shot out a text to everyone about the weather and available food. Never say the Avengers couldn’t take a hint. Steve was the exception, as Coulson had already landed.

Stark had designed this part of the terrace with trees and bushes lining the edge of the tower, so if one didn’t look too closely, it was easy to forget they were eighty floors up, give or take a few.

Bucky built himself a sandwich from the luncheon that had been laid out and wandered around with
it in one hand as he explored.

Darcy leaned back on her chair so that the sun washed across her face and glinted off her sunglasses. “I love fall.”

(Boyfriend) He stood beside her, unsure of his next move. She made it, reaching out to cup a hand around his metal wrist. She held on. “Want to pull up a chair?”

He did, hooking one with his foot and dragging it close to hers. Natalia snickered at the ridiculous noises the metal made on the concrete.

Sam kicked back in one of the loungers. “Now this is the life. I have definitely moved up in this world. Stark’s got me some wings to test this afternoon. There are beautiful woman here and nothing but ugly dudes, so I’ve a shot.”

Darcy laughed. “Careful there, Sam. You could turn a girl’s head with all that flattery.”

“Just say the word and we’ll go dancing.”

She tipped her sunglasses down. “Nine o’clock, Saturday night, Club Stark. You’re on. Dress to impress.”

Bucky lost his breath, shifting out of the soldier all at once. He loved dancing. Not that he had any idea of how people danced now, but he would figure it out. He brought Darcy’s hand up for a kiss on the fingertips. She squeezed his hand back, glancing over with her bottom lip sucked between her teeth.

“Can I bring a friend?” Sam asked.

“Maria likes to dance?” she shot back.

For the first time, he saw Wilson truly flustered. “How did—“

Darcy shrugged and shoved her glasses back up her nose. (Did she wink at Barton? Yes. She did.) “There are no secrets in the Tower. Now, what kind of music does everyone like?”
When Steve finished his meeting with Hill and Coulson, he ended the afternoon sparring with Bucky. He needed this. Needed someone who could press his skills, to force him to be better and faster. There were so few who could make him work, and most of them had vanished or been killed with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall.

Bucky dished out everything Steve wanted and a little more. But where Bucky went for killing strikes, Steve worked to disable. Though it made Steve’s job harder, but he would be more effective for it in the long run.

What amazed Steve was Bucky’s ability to pull a blow at the absolute last moment. Steve had bruises, but he sure as hell wasn’t dead. “Damn, Buck,” he panted as they took a breather on the mats. “You’re fast. And I need you to show me how you’re getting through my defenses.”

Bucky raked his hair out of his face. “You’re just big and slow. Not my fault,” he joked.

Rolling up on an elbow, Steve shook his head. “I’m serious.”

The trainer rolled up to balance on the balls of his feet. “You worked with Rumlow, right? And the rest of S.T.R.I.K.E.?”

“Yes.”

“Rumlow’s team was the best, after Natasha. But they were holding out on you. The skills that kept you alive against them—and me—were the little things you picked up from her. Rumlow and his crew have always known that if they were to take you down, it would be as a team and they would have to know your blind spots. Natasha knows everything I know and it saved your keister.” He shook his head. “Don’t get me wrong, Steve. You’re good. Really good. Rumlow and his team still couldn’t beat you. That’s why they needed me.”

“I don’t like thinking about how you learned to do what you do, Buck,” Steve admitted.

“Don’t,” he said shortly, winding his fingers around the dog tags. He blew out his breath. “Did you hear about Darcy’s plans for Saturday night?”

The change in subject wasn’t subtle in the slightest, and Steve went along with it. “Not yet.”

“She’s opening up Club Stark to the riff raff. Said something about dancing and making sure we dress up.”

There were not many things that rattled Steve these days. This did it. In all the time they had been dating, he and Darcy had never gone out dancing. Steve didn’t even know she liked to dance. “But—”

he gets back from Asgard in time. Sam and Maria. Tony said he would drop by and Pepper should get in midday, so she’s in. Come on. It’s going to be fun.” Steve twisted around and she tossed both of them water bottles. “Time’s up. I’ve got a couple of new recruits to intimidate. So—out.”

Fun? (Sam and Maria? Since when—) Fun was walking with Darcy through the park holding hands. Fun was making love to her for hours on end (when was the last time that happened?). Fun was watching a baseball game on a sunny afternoon. “A dance?” He swallowed hard, thinking a little too much about the last time someone had promised him a turn around the floor.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Are you still hung up on that? It’s a few drinks and good music. It can’t have changed that much. Sam or Nat will show us the ropes.”

“I don’t know how to dance, Buck. You know that.”

His friend bopped him on the head and pulled him to his feet. “Punk.”

The whole thing slipped his mind when he got a call from Coulson while he dried off from the shower. As he hung up the phone, he retrieved his go bag and his uniform from his locker.

“Got a mission?” Bucky asked, his face carefully neutral.

“Yes. But I have enough time to get something to eat first. I want to talk to you and Darcy before I go.”

Bucky ordered in and called Darcy while Steve finished his prep. They reconvened in their apartment, and Darcy brought the Thai food JARVIS had delivered up from the cafeteria.

No, it wasn’t his imagination that Darcy took in his uniform with trepidation. She reached out, following the line of the star with her fingertip. “I forget.”

“About this.” She indicated all of him. But whatever was in her head, she shook it off and gave him a genuine smile. “It looks good, Cap.”

“You know, I really don’t like it when you call me that.” He slid an arm around her so that he could nuzzle her nose and steal a kiss. When her lips parted under his, he brought his hand to her hair, tangling in it the same way their tongues did. She shoved at him, not that she could move him any. He laughed against her mouth, even as he took the hint and let her go. “Still Cap?”

“No,” she retorted. “That’s all Steve Rogers.” She turned, waggling a finger at Bucky. “You and I need to come to an agreement here. My lady parts are not happy to be in the vicinity of all this,” she waved at Steve, “and not be partaking more than I am.”

That did make Steve blush, though Bucky’s unholy grin was something to be admired. “I can arrange that, Princess. Every night. Twice a day. Whatever you want, doll.”

Steve started to make a snarky remark about being farmed out, but Darcy didn’t take the bait.

With a little bit of a lost look in Steve’s direction, she said simply, “I miss Sundays.” Then she went about laying out their dinner on the table.

He closed his mouth. He did too. Long, lazy days of making love. Playing in the kitchen together. Watching movies. Sometimes she would read while he sketched. They never made it more than a couple of hours before the clothes came off and they were playing again, trying to see who could
They didn’t always get Sundays because of his crazy schedule. But Fury had known that Sundays were special, that Steve would fly fourteen hours straight on a cargo plane or go sleepless to finish a debrief, all to make sure he was with Darcy on those days.

Bucky shot him a questioning look, but Steve tilted his head. _Later_. Nodding in understanding, Bucky retrieved the water glasses and the pitcher from the refrigerator.

As they ate, Steve told them about his meeting with Coulson and Hill. “Coulson received intelligence indicating the location of a number of HYDRA cells.” (He couldn’t tell them where it came from, or that most of it didn’t collaborate with Bucky’s intel, or that the few agents with Coulson had been working to confirm them for three weeks now.)

“He’s asked for Avengers assistance in cleaning out particular ones. The other Avengers have agreed to let me call the shots—meaning I choose if or when we go, and which team members participate.”

That part had been important to Steve—and Natasha. Like her, the idea that he’d been working for someone he couldn’t trust had damned near broken his faith with anyone beyond his teammates—not that he’d had much time to dwell on it in the aftermath. Coulson understood that if he wanted Cap’s help, he had to turn over the intelligence and let Cap draw his own conclusions. But Steve couldn’t tell Darcy and Bucky all that.

“We have a timeline,” is what he _could_ say. “For a while, it’s going to be a lot of short missions with one or two teams. In general, Bruce and Tony will stay here. They do far more good as scientists and these kinds of ops aren’t suited for them. Thor is splitting his time between here and Asgard, so unless we can’t do without him, we’re not putting him on a regular team.”

“This is a lot like your S.T.R.I.K.E. work,” Darcy ventured. She had a carefully blank expression, enough that Bucky reached under the table to take her hand.

“Yes, only I don’t answer to anyone. If I don’t like it, we don’t go in. Coulson is the one who has to answer to the World Council, not me.” Steve linked his hands with both Darcy and Bucky. “This is my call. I _want_ to do this.”

Bucky huffed. “Been doin’ it your whole life, punk. Didn’t figure it would change now.”

Darcy squeezed Steve’s fingertips, and she nodded in understanding. “The whole team will be better having you as a leader. Even with Coulson in charge, it’s a little hard to know who to trust these days.”

All the tension that had built up prior to the conversation released at once. He’d needed their blessing and hadn’t had any idea what he would have done without it.

They were cleaning up when Steve’s phone sounded the alert. Steve reached out to Bucky, who was closest, and gave him a hard hug and a kiss. With the other hand, he pulled in Darcy too.

“Promise me you’ll come home,” she said.

“I promise, love.”

“Don’t be stupid, punk.”

Steve winked. “How can I? I’m leaving all the stupid with you, jerk. Take care of our girl.”
“Just don’t forget about Saturday night, Rogers.”

He blanked. Dancing. Damn.

*****

Bucky discovered a whole different side to Darcy in the wake of Steve’s departure. After they cleaned up the kitchen, she coaxed Bucky into watching a movie, and promptly fell asleep with her head on his thigh and his hand in her hair.

She woke when it ended later and disappeared into Tony’s lab, where JARVIS indicated she and Stark had a project they were tackling. Bucky slept a few hours, woke when the bed got too empty, and spent his night prowling the Tower with JARVIS hunting for flaws in the security net.

It took him a while to figure out why she’d crashed so soon after Steve left.

Two days later, she still hadn’t slept, hadn’t let her cell phone land more than a foot away from her, and she worked like a virago to keep herself distracted. Pepper had finished up early both days and had her eye on tackling an internal remap of SI since she had the spare time to think seriously about it.

Perhaps because he’d fought alongside Steve so many times, he wasn’t worried. At least these days, the punk had the skill set to keep him alive and didn’t need Bucky to bail him out. Short missions like this were the bread and butter of a special ops soldier, but he didn’t know how to tell Darcy all that.

Her mornings were spent in Pepper’s office, afternoons in her lab, and then she stayed with Tony pounding away at one of his computers in the dead of the night.

Both evenings she let Bucky try to distract her. Wednesday night had been Monopoly with Sam, where Darcy amassed a solid block of properties and decimated them with her rents (definitely Pepper’s daughter). They played with the new technology for his arm on Thursday night. She’d finished her testing and the heater was currently mounted to the outside of his shoulder. It seemed to be working as promised, and the dull headache that had started when the weather turned colder went away.

Flirting was off the table for now. It was hard enough to get her to stay still long enough to feed her before she was off to the next diversion.

He tried to get her to come to his bed Thursday night (just to sleep), but that only lasted an hour before she gave up tossing and turning. Pulling on sweatshirt, he followed. JARVIS directed him to Tony’s lab, where Bucky settled in to keep them company. (Uncomfortable. JARVIS had to be silenced.) It wasn’t long before he was intrigued in their project (JARVIS was his friend) and he spent the night charting Darcy and Tony’s findings on a spreadsheet.

Friday morning, under Tony’s glare and with Pepper’s blessing and assurances that she could handle Stark Industries for the day, he nudged Darcy down to her floor and into the shower while he made oatmeal for her breakfast.

When she came out, her eyes were bright with exhaustion, agitation written in every line of her body. She stiffened against him as he intercepted her shuffling progress toward the kitchen. “Princess, you
can’t keep doing this. Come on, I’ll hold you while you rest.”

Darcy shook her head. “I can’t, Bucky. Not until I know he’s coming home.” She ate, dressed and camped out at her laptop. He stayed with her, letting her reset the heater to the inside of his shoulder panel. The difference was noticeable and when he laid his right hand on his metal collarbone, it felt warm even to him.

At 14:42, she got the text from Steve that he was on his way home. Fifteen minutes later, she stumbled to her bed and fell face first into a deep sleep.

Bucky watched over her, wondering what he could do to change this.

*****

Darcy shook herself awake, forcing the dreams to the far corner of her mind. She was in her own bed, alone, and shivering. It was already dark out, though the evening had hardly started. Her phone, still clenched in her hand, had awakened her when it buzzed with Steve’s latest text.

*Home. DB with Hill. Hour max.*

It wasn’t fair. She used to be the one to soothe Steve out of his nightmares, and having slept between the two soldiers for half a year, had thought she was beyond them. All it took was the first night away from them in London to prove that a lie.

She got up to splash cold water on her face and discovered Bucky sitting in her lab with a lamp on, reading a worn science fiction paperback she was sure belonged to her dad. He set it to the side, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “You okay, Princess?”

Darcy went over to twine her fingers with his, and he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “I’m good.”

“Bullshit.” He repeated the words she’d said to him a few days ago. “You gonna do this every time Steve has a mission?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“You and I are going to have a talk, doll. Not yet ‘cause you’re still strung out, but we’ve got to get a handle on this.

*We. She wasn’t sure about that. She’d tried everything in the past. Tea. Movies. Sleeping pills. Xanax. None of it helped and the latter two only made her feel ill and even more exhausted when she roused. Alcohol worked but she gave that up when she’d missed a rare mid-mission phone call from Steve. “I don’t know what else to do,” she admitted.

“We’ll figure it out together, Princess.” He quirked a smile at her. “You look like you need a hug.”

She shivered all over, clutching his fingers hard. Bucky came out of the chair to hold her. “It’s okay, Princess. Steve’s the best at what he does. Hell, I can barely keep up with him. He doesn’t know how hard he presses my abilities. He’s good, doll. He’s always going to come home.”

He held her, but she didn’t quite hug him back.
It hurt more than he expected.

Steve came home. And when he did, Bucky left them alone.

He wasn’t enough. Darcy was having a rough go of it, and he wasn’t able to help her even a little.

This past week had been a real eye-opener into the relationship Steve and Darcy had. The real one, not the one where a broken soldier commanded most of their attentions. He’d been amused at the endless stream of texts that kept the pair connected throughout their days—certainly a habit developed from living in two cities. They sassed each other, flirted continually, traded gossip, and sent a steady stream of love from one phone to the other. When they were together, in the rare times he could study them without them being aware of his presence, he could see how much they were friends as much as lovers. Darcy was still as cheeky as ever, but the protective façade she sometimes donned vanished. And Steve, well shit, the Captain America crap got hung up in a closet because Darcy didn’t tolerate it for a minute. This was the Steve only he had ever known.

He wasn’t exactly jealous, because Darcy made Steve ridiculously happy, but he had a fair idea of how Darcy must have felt when he showed up. If Bucky and Steve came as a set, so did Darcy and Steve.

It was the second time he’d seen her towering strength falter. And boyfriend or not, Darcy wasn’t letting him in to help.

He ended up watching baseball with Barton until Natasha returned from wherever she’d been that afternoon. It involved two shopping bags, and now he was pissed she didn’t ask him to go along. Anything was better than moping around thinking about Steve and Darcy making time in the bedroom (still not jealous, just wanted in).

Natasha eyeballed him. “It’s game night.”

He shot her a dirty look. “Is there a decent pool hall around here?”

“We have a billiards table,” she pointed out.

“Can’t smoke in here. And I really want a cigarette,” he grumbled.

So they ended up at a place that Barton preferred, with shitty vodka and a decent deck of something a few steps up from Luckies. There were two levels. Of course, they took the top floor with its own pool table, two televisions, and only a hand full of bar tops. Barton and Natasha called dibs on the first game.

All in all, it wasn’t a bad place to kill an evening. He pulled on the ciggy before squashing it out on the ashtray, wishing he knew how to bridge the gap between him and Darcy.

*****

Sweaty, sated, and sprawled out across Steve was the absolute perfect place for Darcy to be. He
lazily stroked her hair, stopping now and again to bring her hand up to kiss the tips of her fingers.

“I love you.” His deep voice rumbled through his whole body. She loved the vibration and laced her hands under her chin so that she could look at him.

“I love you back.” In times like this, Darcy felt like the luckiest girl in the world. Sketches and fate and chance meetings aside, both of them were well aware of how catastrophically the world could go wrong. Steve balanced her and chased the demons away, so much that even though she was still exhausted, she felt better.

With her fear and anxiety stripped out for the moment, she discovered a glaring problem that she hadn’t noticed before.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“How do you always know?” He flashed a grin and touched a finger in between her eyes. Sighing at her own tell, she rolled off his chest to land splayed out on the bed, with one leg propped up against him.

Steve leaned on an elbow, using his other hand to skim her outstretched leg. He kissed her knee, trailing his fingers along the inside of her thigh. “And?”

“I feel like James should be here.”

Though his blue eyes lit up, he reminded her, “You’re not ready for that, Darcy.”

“I know.” She scooted her pillow under her head a little more. “I guess it’s a good thing that I want him here? Even if I’m not quite ready to take that leap?”

“Yes, that’s a good thing.” Fingertips brushed the hollow of her thigh, sending a rush of energy straight to her lady parts. “And Darcy, when I’m with him, I want you there too. So does he.” Without warning, he flushed with a barely concealed smile.

Darcy gave him a hairy eyeball. “I know you. That is not a look of innocence. What did you do, Steven Rogers?”

He dipped his fingers into her still swollen flesh, just brushing her wet clit. He brought the tips to his fingers and sucked on them. “Bucky likes the way you taste.”

Remembering the date, she felt the heat rise in her cheeks and scrambled to her knees to whack Steve with a pillow. “Holy shit, Rogers. Barring James, no one, absolutely fucking no one has any idea what a fucking freak you can be with sex.” She covered her flaming cheeks with her hands. “What else did you do?”

“You taste really good on Bucky?” he answered, biting his lip as he did.

Now she had the visual of Steve sucking off Bucky and that was … enlightening. Intoxicating really. She flushed, not from embarrassment this time, but from the heat originating straight from her clit and tingling breasts as she considered the possibilities.

Steve was already half-hard and twitching again as he watched her. He cupped her cheek, rubbing her bottom lip with his thumb. “You’re getting worked up just thinking about it.”

“So are you,” she retorted. (Holy fuck. Yes. Yes. Yes. Just—not yet.) She reached down, found Steve’s shirt where it had landed on the floor earlier and handed it to him. “I’ll leave some of you for
James. He missed you too. I’m hungry anyway, so let’s go find him.”

And that felt right. All the way down to her bones.

*****

JARVIS told them where to find their third, and Steve was perfectly happy to go to him with Darcy clinging to the back of his bike as they zipped over the bridge to Brooklyn. She pressed her hands under his shirt, sliding them up and down his sides as he dodged traffic. She was the most distracting dame he’d had the pleasure to meet. (He loved her. Craved. Needed beyond reason. She was home.)

The ancient club had smoke and whiskey soaked into the wood paneling, and Steve wondered how old the place might be. The lights were dim enough that even he might go unrecognized, and when he glanced up, he figured out why Barton liked this place. The upper story gave them a perfect vantage point of the small space. He put his lips to his fingers when Natasha caught sight of them, and he led Darcy to the back stairs.

Sucking on a cigarette as he leaned on the pool cue, Bucky studied the arrangement of balls on the table. There was a half a pack left on the bar top where Barton was sitting, with a bottle of vodka that was probably too warm for anyone to drink. Natasha had a cue in her hand and a smug expression as she flicked a satisfied look at the table.

Bucky never went out in public with his arm uncovered. Yet, here he was, jacket and glove on the table, and the sleeves of his button down shirt rolled up to his elbows. Dark hair curled over his collar, and his lower half was coated in the slicked on jeans that would have been indecent a seven decades ago, but now was considered good fashion. (Bucky was the air he breathed. He craved. Burned for him.)

Bucky’s mouth dropped open when he saw them. With a squeeze to Steve’s fingertips, Darcy let go. She wrinkled her nose at the cigarette, but wound her arms around Bucky anyway. His hands were full, and Steve slipped the smoke and cue out of his hands so he could hug her properly.

He also stole a long drag off the ciggy before setting it in the ashtray.

Barton raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t even cough.”

“Practice,” Steve said off-handedly as he blew out the smoke, his attention focused elsewhere.

Darcy kissed Bucky on the neck, just below his ear. “Steve came home and you left. It didn’t feel right,” she told him. “I’m sorry about this week,” she said, twisting her fingers into his shirt a little bit. (She was nervous.) “You kept trying to help. I--you were exactly who I needed. I didn’t let you.”

“It’s okay, Princess. Gonna take time for to figure this out,” he whispered. Bucky pressed her head to his shoulder, and looked around for Steve with a questioning look. What’d you say?

Steve gave a little shake to his head and nodded a tiny bit to Darcy. Nothing. That’s all her. Her fingers flexed in the t-shirt sleeve, until Bucky held her hard against him. When he did, she blew out her breath and the tension flowed out of her shoulders.
Her perfume sneaked into his brain (he could smell Steve’s salty ocean and her spring breeze underneath it), dazing him for a moment as her words sunk in. (Wanted him. Needed him.) He held Steve’s gaze like a lifeline as he nuzzled the top of Darcy’s head with his chin.

And then she nudged him to the table to finish his game. But he was distracted. Steve leaned against the rail with Darcy. Fingers trailed along her arms, stroking the soft skin. He was half-hard just looking at them and Natasha took the win.

The five of them crowded around the little table while Clint and Steve needled each other about their ability to shoot pool. Darcy took one sip of the vodka and wrinkled her nose. “That’s swill. Gross.”

“Not much better than coffin varnish,” he agreed.

Steve let out a soft laugh and reached for the pack of cigarettes. He tapped two out, lit them, and passed one to Bucky.

“Any other bad habits our resident fossils need to tell us about?” Natasha asked.

“I drink, I smoke, I fight a lot.” Steve shrugged, winking at Bucky. “I think that about covers it.”

Darcy snickered. “Will you two finish one of your bad habits while I’m getting a beer? Anyone else want one?” A nod, two lifted fingers and a shoulder shrug was met with a wide grin and she practically danced down the stairs and off to the bar.

Suddenly, smoking didn’t seem as much fun in light of Darcy’s dislike of the habit and he squashed the ciggy out.

As she leaned across the counter downstairs to talk with the bartender, someone with less sense than a turnip reached over to put a hand on her ass.

(Asset. Protect Stark.) He pulled his knife from his boot as Steve clamped a hand down hard on his wrist.

“She’s got this.”

Stand down, Sergeant Barnes, JARVIS ordered.

Restrained, ordered to hold, he stilled. (Assessing. Fourteen point two meters to target. Three point three meters to ground. Two possible accomplices. Unarmed. Single knife to enemy’s throat, secondary strikes to knee and head to disable backups.)

Without giving away her intentions, Darcy reached around her own hip to grasp the offending hand. She turned it over as she lifted it, straightening the arm and pressing the wrist down and in so that the enemy was on his toes and trying to move backward with his eyes wide as she used leverage to fend him off.

Darcy smiled, annoyed as hell, and waggled her fingers at the offender, shooing him away.

The bartender was so amused he slid all five bottles to her and waved away her money, which she stuffed into his tip jar.
A tickling sensation on his forearm shifted him from assessing to experiencing. Steve had moved behind him, pressing a kiss to his neck, yet keeping his wrist with the knife immobilized.

Breathing out, he nodded and patted Steve’s hand. The knife went back into the boot. Nat and Clint were amused rather than concerned.

“You did better than I the first time it happened,” Steve remarked. “I saved you the lecture from Darcy.”

She clomped up the narrow stairs. She eyed Steve as he took his seat again, and ran a long look over Bucky. She set the bottles on the table, sliding them around evenly. “That asshole has no idea I saved his life today.”

Though he’d seen the way the altercation had played out, that Darcy was more than capable to take care of herself against the average idiot, he pulled her close so that she was on his lap (well, half on his lap and half on the stool). “You okay, Princess?”

She twisted around, gifting him with a reassuring smile. “I’ve been dealing with that sort of thing since the girls (She framed her breasts. Yeah, he looked.) showed up at when I was fifteen. I took a self-defense class at college and Nat’s showed me a few pointers since then. These days, I’m less worried about dealing with those assholes and more worried that one of you will lose your shit on a drunken idiot who couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag with a flashlight. Not that I don’t love you guys and adore your ability to defend me with your toenail, but the legal paperwork is a bitch and somehow that kind of thing lands on my end of the desk instead of Mom’s.”

She settled back against him and let him hold her. Steve shifted his stool over so that his knees bumped Bucky’s, like they used to do.

Then Barton told the story of S.T.R.I.K.E. Team Delta (comprised of Barton and Romanov) being holed up in a mid-west town where there was one bar, a Dairy Queen and a whole lot of cows where they were supposed to hunt up a couple of crazy mega-villain wannabees. The expression on Natasha’s face when Clint told them her reaction to seeing her first bovine creature up close and personal was worth a fortune. Especially when it sneezed. Nat wrinkled her nose in memory and took a long sip of Clint’s beer in subtle retaliation.

A couple of rounds later, Darcy was still comfortably nested in his arms, head tipped back as she tried to stay awake. Steve ran a hand along her thigh to get her attention. “Want to ride home with Nat? I don’t want you falling off the bike.”

“Sure,” she mumbled.

(No.) Bucky didn’t want to let her go. Darcy stretched her arms out and wiggled to wake herself up. Steve pulled her to her feet, though she dragged her fingertips along the outside of Bucky’s leg as he did. He suppressed a shudder at the touch.

“Can we ride three?” he asked Steve as they worked their way down the stairs.

“Sure. You want the keys?” Steve held them up.

Bucky snatched them out of his hand. “Hell, yeah.”

Darcy huffed out a sleepy laugh. “Maybe I should ride with Nat.”

“Don’t trust me, Princess?” he challenged as he threw a leg over the bike. Steve settled in behind him and tugged Darcy down between them.
Her soft curves melded against his back. Hot points of contact providing a counterpoint to the fingers she skinned just above his waistband along his bare skin. “Depends on how well you drive with a little distraction,” she breathed into his ear.

He drove very well with distraction, though in all honesty, he shifted in (Assessing) as he wove through the late night traffic (Skill set) at speeds that were highly illegal in the United States.

In Stark’s garage, he killed the engine, shifted out, and spun around on the seat to yank Darcy to him for a heady kiss (trusting Steve to keep the motorcycle balanced). There was nothing of the soldier as he ran hands from her waist across the curve of her hips and down to her knees, then back again to her hips to shift her into his lap where his cock pressed hard into the notched heat in her jeans.

Darcy leaned into him. She pulled one of his hands off her hip and set it firmly on her breast. He moaned into her mouth and reverently thumbed across the middle until the nipple peaked through the fabric and she arched into his touch.

Her hands went under his shirt and she lightly scraped nails down his abs as he took possession of her mouth. He hissed as her fingers dipped into his belly button.

He retaliated by dipping a pair of fingers inside the edge of her bra. His brain hazed with the softness on his fingers and the hard peak he tweaked. Her breath caught against his mouth as he manipulated the joints of his metal fingers to separate the material between her breasts.

Holding on to the remains of her bra, Darcy pushed away just hard enough that Steve had to catch her so they wouldn’t overbalance the bike. “Holy shit, Barnes, did you bring the ninja skills to the party?”

“There’s more where that came from,” came the automatic rejoinder—something he might have said too many decades ago to think about. Steve was breathing just as hard as Darcy. Bucky indicated with his chin, “Princess, our boy can’t keep two thoughts in his head.” He worked his way off the bike. Darcy slid off after him. But Steve caught both of them.

“Elevator. Nat will be here soon.” His face was flushed—just from watching.

They hardly cleared the doors before Steve reached a hand behind Bucky’s neck. “Gonna kiss me right, jerk?” he challenged.

Bucky did. Biting and nipping hard enough that Steve would have red marks on his jawline for a little while.

By the way Steve’s eyes sparkled, there was definitely more to come. What shocked him was the mischief in Darcy’s. (The two of them were better matched than he ever imagined.) As she shook the remains of her lingerie out of her shirt, she leaned up to whisper in Steve’s ear, so softly Bucky couldn’t make it out. (He was distracted by the curve of her breasts all loose under her shirt. His own fault, and there were little nubs on the front where her nipples poked out.)

Steve shot him a sideways glance. Fuck. He knew that look. Innocence be damned, Steve was a fucking adventurous sort. The little shit was good at pushing Bucky’s buttons.

And then they were on their floor and then the three of them were in the bedroom. (Surely not yet.)

“Darcy—“

“Shush. I’m not doing anything I don’t want to do.” She tilted her head. “Safe word?”
His mouth fell open and he wondered just what the fuck they had in mind. (Darcy’s idea, he reminded himself.) “Charcoal.”

“Will you sit on the bed?”

He did. Steve took the place next to him. Darcy knelt in front of Steve, using her hand to cup the cock that was making a hard bulge under the denim of his jeans. Steve reached down to unbutton them, though Darcy worked at the zipper until she could see the bright red fabric underneath. Together, they tugged the pants down until they fell to his ankles.

Green eyes danced. “Wanna watch?” She licked her lips, wetting them down in preparation.

“Fuck yes,” he swore with enthusiasm. (Somehow he noted that she was carefully not giving him orders.)

He got why Steve was hard after nothing more than seeing them kiss. Darcy took her time, nipping at the fabric until it was soaked with her mouth and the fluid seeping out of the tip of Steve’s cock.

And though she kept eyes on Bucky, her attention was on Steve. Not performing, but letting him look on as she worked Steve over. Though she did wink when she had the underwear pulled down and out of the way.

Steve eased back onto his elbows, his head thrown back as Darcy took him in her mouth. She’d definitely figured out her way around his cock, seeking out all the little sensitive places with her tongue.

“Punk grew with the serum,” Bucky got out. He was getting dazed too. “Didn’t know what to do with all that the first time I got my hands on it.”

She pulled off, sucking hard as she did. Steve flexed his hips up, seeking every last bit of her mouth. “Bet you made it work,” she breathed.

“Hell yes.” Darcy couldn’t take Steve’s cock all the way down like Bucky could, but she was damned clever with her mouth and hands. (He wanted her.)

She took her time, laving the now-purple head with her tongue and stroking hard with her hands. Steve was gone, eyes closed, a line of sweat on his chest, and his legs shoving against the jeans tangling his ankles as he tried to angle himself for more. He was so fucking beautiful like this. Bucky remembered seeing him like this the first time, skinny, bony and with almost translucent skin that shined under his touch. He’d been beautiful then too.

Darcy licked her way down to his balls and back up to the tip again, and Steve shoved up into her mouth. She pulled off, admonishing him, “Behave, Steven. If you gag me, I’ll quit.”

Bucky chuckled, never having seen quite that look of frustration on Steve’s face. “Sorry, doll. Please don’ stop,” he begged. “‘m almost there. So fuckin’ close. Had t’ watch th’ two o’ ya all fuckin’ night, hangin’ on ea’ o’ther. Gorgeous, the pair o’ ya.” The Brooklyn sang through. Hell, Steve was so far gone the Irish was coming out.

When Darcy pulled the foreskin back and licked underneath the tip, Steve growled her name and fumbled for Bucky’s hand. Bucky was so fucking turned on, he leaned over to kiss Steve, sucking on his tongue in time with Darcy, then moving down to leave a mark just over the pulse point on his neck.

He was so busy kissing Steven that he almost missed getting to watch him come. His hips were
thrusting hard, but Darcy had his cock in both hands and was sucking off the last of his fluids as she stroked him through the orgasm.

There was nothing of taking in what Steven did, and nothing but giving in what Darcy did. When she finished, she was glowing in satisfaction. Bucky understood that glow, to make the one you love fly, to give them scorching pleasure at your own hands (and mouth and body). He woke up feeling that for Steven every day and made him want Darcy that much more.

He was so fascinated by the pair of them, so distracted, that when Steve’s hand slid under his shirt, he flinched instead of shivered.

Then he melted.

He was sure he looked like an idiot when Darcy and Steve traded places. They giggled as Steve pulled his own pants mostly up, just enough to cling to his hips. He left the zipper open and Bucky was sure his mouth watered just a little.

Then Steve pressed his hand along the bulge in Bucky’s pants, challenging, “Your turn, love.” He leaned in to nuzzle. “Mind if Darcy looks on?”

Did he mind? “Fuck no,” he breathed. He stood up and shucked his shoes, pants and underwear, kicking all of them out of the way. And though Darcy had seen him any number of times now without his shirt, he wasn’t sure he could handle being completely bare right now. So he left it on, keeping his scars covered.

Darcy licked her lips. Her eyes were almost as blue as Steve’s now, dilated with want. “Now Steve, you never told me how pretty James is.”

“How much do you want, Buck?” Steve asked as he blew a hot breath along his shaft.

“Been hard since you two walked in the bar,” he confessed as he leaned back onto the mattress. He pulled a pillow behind his head so he could watch and reached with a hand down to play with Steve’s hair.

Darcy hummed in agreement as she settled on her knees beside him. She’d unfastened the top three buttons of her shirt, leaving only the one to keep it closed over the swell of her breasts. He rested his other hand on her hip, rubbing a thumb over the curve.

Steve took him hard and fast, swallowing him down and pressing on the flesh under his balls. He sucked until Bucky was fucking his mouth and Steve had to steady his movements with firm hands wrapped around his thighs.

It felt so fucking good that he almost forgot about Darcy. But she was there, flushed and fascinated, her hands twitching with a need to touch. She brought one up into Steve’s hair. His blue eyes popped open, and Steve hummed his appreciation over Bucky’s cock.

He jerked upward from the vibration, seeking more. “Kiss me, Princess,” he pleaded. She leaned over, one hand sliding under his shirt to rest on his sternum, the weight of her breasts pressing on his chest.

The moment he tasted her, with the flavor of Steve still in her mouth, he came hard into Steve’s. For a moment, it was white heat and his senses overloaded—enough that he shifted in soldier mode for control (Rule 2. Assets do not have feelings.)

“Charcoal,” he got out.
Darcy and Steve pulled back, reaching only for his hands and squeezing hard to ground him. (Darcy, left. Steve, right.) The last of his come pumped out across his stomach, though he couldn’t feel it.

“You’re safe,” Darcy said quietly. “You’re with us. We’re not going to let anything happen to you. It’s okay to feel pleasure, Bucky. You had an orgasm and you were beautiful.”

He blinked at her, taking a deep breath to shift out again, panting as he did.

_You had an orgasm and you were beautiful._

Steve tugged his own t-shirt off and used it to wipe Bucky’s stomach clean, pressing a kiss just along the line of hair trailing south of his belly button. Then he pulled the quilt over Bucky, letting the weight of it ground him more.

He squeezed both of their hands, and let Steve pull him up to sit. (I’m okay. Because you are here, I am okay. Better than okay.) “Darcy? Can we try that again?”

She struck a pose with her face over her shoulder, comically puckering her lips. “Like this?”

“No, doll,” he leaned up to slide one hand in her hair, the locks shimmering energy against the metal. “Like this.” He kissed her, tasting oceans and sunshine as she slid her hand underneath his shirt again.

Darcy finished the kiss, sitting back long enough to get her feet out from under her. He was pretty certain he looked stupid now because he was dazed enough to not be able to do anything more than blink lazily at her and Steve.

“You okay now?” she asked.

“Uh huh.”

“Headache?”

“Mmm. No.”

She kissed him one last time on the temple, ruffling his hair as she did. She scooted off the bed, stopping only to give Steve an equally searing kiss. She rubbed his nose with hers and kissed him one last time. “Yup,” Darcy said in satisfaction. “Bucky-flavored Steve tastes really good too. Get our boy to bed, Steven.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder. “You owe me a new bra, James. I’ll expect it by Monday at the latest. Goodnight, gentlemen. Sweet dreams.”

When the apartment was quiet again, Steve moved so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed to unfasten the rest of the buttons on the front of Bucky’s shirt. With gentle hands, Steve pulled it from his body. “Want a shower before bed or do you want one later?”

“I never think about it until you mention it, then I can’t stand the itch until I get one,” he grumbled, wanting nothing more than to roll over and go to sleep. Preferably wrapped around the punk.

“Come on.”

The hot shower drained whatever energy he had and he was perfectly content to lean against the wall for a while. Steve ran a washcloth over all of Bucky, soothing him further, before dumping shampoo over his head and massaging it in. Vague memories unwrapped of thin showers, smaller hands, water not as warm. “I remember this, I think.”
“I used to wash your hair, Buck. You’d be out all day working, sweating. Loved nothing more than to let me scrub your head. Sometimes I couldn’t do anything else for you, except this.”

The sad note was unexpected. “Steve?”

“I hated being sick all the time. There was much that I wanted to do with you and couldn’t. I hated being a burden—to Ma. To you. “

“Steve—“

“No, I get it. You did it because you love me. And because you have this need to give me hell all the time.”

“Which you deserve.”

“ Probably. I’ll never stop wanting to help you, Bucky. I’ll never stop wanting you. No matter how long and how hard this is for you, I am always going to be here.” Steve pressed his mouth in a line. “Rinse.” With all the soap washed out, Steve shut off the water and proceeded to dry him off.

“I can do it,” he offered.

But Steve had that stubborn set to his jaw that Bucky knew far too well. “Please let me. I need to do this. For all the times you dragged me into the tub and back out of it. For rubbing me down with ointment. For washing my sheets when I was sick. For making that terrible chicken soup a few thousand times that actually worked to fix my colds.”

“Why are you angry, love?”

“I’m angry at what they did. That in a moment that should be entirely yours, they’ve taken a little bit of that away too.” Steve turned his head away, unwilling to let Bucky see his sadness as he rehung the damp towel on the rack.

When they crawled into bed together, Steve added, “The only damned thing I miss about when I didn’t have the serum, Bucky, is that I liked the way we fit together. I liked sleeping with your arms around me to keep me warm. I loved waking up and snuggling into your chest. Sometimes, when I’m not really awake, I try to curl up with you the way we used to and then I wake up and it’s all different.”

“I’ll take the trade,” Bucky said emphatically. “specially ‘cause I’m big enough now to put m’ arm around you.” Doing just that, he coaxed Steve into his space. “I’m learning to use it, the soldier thing. I’m making it something I can turn off and on. JARVIS didn’t even have to say anything for me to come out of it. I did that. You and Darce—it’s not too much, I promise. Wasn’t expecting how good it felt. And nothing’s happened like that with the two of us.”

A callused finger trailed along the scar tissue on his chest. “You amaze me, Bucky.”

“Yeah? Goes both ways, punk. Now shut up and lemme go to sleep. And tomorrow we’re figurin’ out how to close the deal with Darce ‘cause I’m tired of not havin’ her here too.”

Steve didn’t argue. He curled his hand so that his knuckles rested against Bucky’s heart. They settled into a rhythm and let Morpheus wrap them in sweet dreams.
A Little Thing Called Trust

She woke, shivering far more violently than the slight chill in the air warranted. She pulled the blanket around her, automatically reaching for the cell phone she kept close. Her thumb hovered over the picture of Steve. Then, carefully, she set the phone down beside her and buried her face against her knees. Steve and Bucky needed their time too, especially after last night.

Bucky’s reaction had scared the crap out of her. She had pushed him too hard. And for Darcy, all of her stresses manifested in her dreams.

When she had an engineering problem, her mind would dance around strange possibilities and it was common for her to wake with solutions. She hadn’t always had bad dreams, and they had seemed to be a normal enough reaction to her dad’s kidnapping. New Mexico had caused her some bad moments, but for the most part, she had been able to set that aside.

But as the weird and scary-as-fuck accumulated, she’d started having nightmares just after Steve had moved to DC. He found out when they’d fallen asleep talking on the phone with the line still open. She woke up, babbling nonsense. He’d talked her through it and then made her promise to call him.

She kept her phone close by and could fumble for the speed dial even with the worst of the shakes. She rarely had nightmares whenever she stayed with Steve. They doubled when he was on a mission—hence, her penchant for skipping the whole snooze thing whenever he was gone.

Even her mom and dad hadn’t realized how bad they were until Tony flew to London at Clint’s behest. She’d been exhausted and curled up in her dad’s embrace as if she were five again. It had taken three days of on and off sleeping, dreaming and Tony reassuring her before she’d felt anything close to functioning. A part of her was ashamed to be a full-grown woman still needing her daddy. (Though he didn’t give a shit about that and told her as much. She was still his kid.)

So much had happened in the past week that it was hard to believe she’d come home just seven days ago. Now that she had her own space again, she supposed it was normal to be reacting to all that had happened in the past half year. Bucky figured in her nightmares now, and that alone told her how much she cared for him. She’d read his files and had a vivid imagination. All her nightmares tonight had revolved around him and the horrible, horrible things that had been done to him.

She wrapped her fists in the sheets to try to get them to stop trembling. She was cold.

Sometimes she would look at Steve and Bucky in wonder. She’d never known anyone with the strength of will they shared. Yes, Steve had given in with the plane crash. But he could have tried again. Instead, he’d worked hard to find a way to live again. And once Bucky had latched onto Steve, he’d ruthlessly sliced away at the HYDRA conditioning, looking for ways to meld the soldier with the young man he’d been.

The true miracle was to see them carrying on as if they’d never been apart. To see Bucky harness those protective instincts he’d always had for Steve and force his conditioning to bend to his will. To discover that, for those who understood Steve’s dogged determination, they had no idea that Bucky was well-versed in nagging Steve into taking care of himself and gently set firm boundaries that even Captain America wouldn’t cross.

Darcy still didn’t see quite where she fit in, but both men had made it clear that she was not only welcome but completed their little circle. She hadn’t lived with them for nearly a month and was already resentful of her self-imposed isolation. (She missed the everyday with them.)
She groaned as she looked at the clock and the whole three minutes that had passed. Given that she’d slept for almost four hours, she supposed she should be grateful for getting even that. She dragged herself out of bed to hit the shower and to pull on leggings, a sweater, fuzzy socks and boots—and a knit cap in yellow. (Just to piss off Barnes later.)

*Lewis, you aren’t getting enough sleep.*

*I know, JARVIS. It’s not by choice, believe me.*

*The Captain and the Sergeant will not mind you staying with them, I assure you.*

*And I wouldn’t mind staying with them, J, but there’s a whole lot at stake. Steve’s not exclusively my boyfriend anymore, and James had a rough end to the evening. I’m not going to make it worse with my problems.*

*The Sergeant sleeps better when you’re with him. You sleep better when the Captain is with you. I don’t understand, Darcy.*

Okay, JARVIS really was irritated with her. He never called her by her first name.

*It’s all about sex and expectations, J. Believe it or not, there’s a line we haven’t crossed and Bucky and I still be friends if we can’t work this out.*

*You have doubts?*

*I want this, J, and the only way this is going to work is if we are very, very careful how we go about setting it up. And believe it or not, the fact that I haven’t slept with anyone but Steven in almost four years makes it harder. It’s not like college where I was doing the sex thing without any strings.*

*The Captain doesn’t seem to have an issue with that, JARVIS grumbled.*

*HA! No, I guess he doesn’t. But Bucky isn’t a new thing to him. It’s an old thing with a lot of history and love behind it, and because I love Steve, I have to be careful.*

*Just Steve?*

*I hate it when you do that, JARVIS. Yes, I love Bucky too.*

*I don’t like this, Lewis. You aren’t happy right now.*

*No. I’m tired and cranky as all fuck. I want lazy Sundays and Saturday night dates and time with my girlfriends. I want to be with my boyfriends and not wonder what is going to set Bucky off. But that’s not in the cards just yet. It is getting better, JARVIS, I just have to hold on for a while longer.*

*If you insist, Lewis.*

*I don’t know of any other way,* she admitted.

When JARVIS seemed willing to leave off the commentary, Darcy debated what she would do to keep herself occupied. Coffee from the Commons made the morning seem a little more reasonable and Darcy decided this would be a good time to wander through the R&D labs to see what was new.
Steve’s plan of surprising Darcy with coffee this morning was waylaid when JARVIS informed him that she was already on the R&D floors making rounds. Yes, this was Saturday, and no, that wasn’t particularly unusual, but he was disappointed all the same.

He sipped the coffee he’d made and tried to read the morning paper. In the meantime, Bucky had his feet propped up on a chair where he could press his bare feet against Steve’s thigh. His boyfriend was damned happy this morning. “What’s different, Buck?”

Clear cobalt eyes drifted over Steve in a lazy study. “Figured out another little piece of Darcy,” he said, with no little satisfaction. “She likes to be touched. A lot. I thought maybe she was doing that just to help me.”

“No, Darcy gets jittery after a while without it. It grounds her just as it does with you,” Steve agreed. “She seemed content with you last night.”

“It was nice, even if it was a little bit of an apology for the last three days.”

That got his attention. “While I was gone? What happened?”

Bucky reached for his own coffee. “She worked. Went from one distraction to the next. I tried to get her to rest but she wasn’t having any of that.”

Dismayed, Steve probed for details. “She didn’t stay with you?”

“Napped on me Tuesday evening for a few hours, didn’t bother Wednesday, and lasted an hour on Thursday before hanging out at Stark’s for the night.”

Steve got up, folded up his paper and swallowed the last of his coffee. “And I’ll bet she’s been up for hours already. JARVIS? Would you be willing to confirm that for me?”

“Captain, Lewis has been awake since four twenty this morning.” The AI was prompt with the answer, and Steve knew damned well the AI could skirt the truth if he wanted to keep Darcy’s privacy.

“I assume her alarm didn’t wake her up?”

“That is an excellent assumption, Captain.” (More proof that JARVIS was concerned about his sister.)

Bucky sat up, catching on to the AI’s tone. “What’s going on?”

Steve washed his cup out and dried his hands on the towel. “Tony said Darcy wasn’t sleeping at all in London, that’s why he went out there. How much sleep do you think she’s had since she got back?”

It only took Bucky a minute to piece together the week. “Thursday night, she stayed with us for a few hours. Friday night, we had a date and she stayed with me. Saturday, you came home and she stayed with you. Sunday, she was at Stark’s all night and you got her in bed Monday evening. She got up around oh-three-hundred? I think I remember her saying that. You left Tuesday and she slept on my leg for a couple of hours, skipped Wednesday, skipped Thursday. You got home yesterday and she slept between your texts. Last night, she went home.”
“And got not even five hours of sleep. So three, maybe four, out of eight days,” Steve shook his head. “Damn. It’s a wonder she’s still standing.” Angry with himself for missing the obvious, he pulled on a jacket and stepped into his boots. “Even when she is sleeping, she’s not getting enough.”

“Steve?”

“She’s having nightmares again. And she’s not telling either one of us.”

“Captain?”

“Yes, JARVIS?”

“Thank you for being aware of the problem.”

“That bad, huh.” Steve shook his head. “Buck, I’ve got to deal with this. You okay for while? I’m going to do my best to get Darcy back here.”

“Natasha and I are going another round this morning. I’ll make lunch if you’ll text me when you’re on your way.”

Steve leaned down to kiss Bucky with a thumb skimming the stubble on his jaw. “Done. Love you, jerk.”

Blue eyes held his. “Punk.”

*****

With ten floors dedicated to research and development in the Tower, it was Darcy’s job to keep track of the progress of the experiments going on there. Hands down, this was her favorite part of her responsibilities and rarely seemed like work.

About half the researchers were good about sending her somewhat regular reports. She made sure the other half had at least one good intern on their team responsible for the same. But no report could replace poking around each lab and finding out what excited her researchers in that moment. Every single lab had someone at least monitoring data, even though it was a Saturday, so it was fun to wander in and out over the course of the morning. She said brought donuts to the security team on duty and called them all by name.

Darcy pulled up the notes she’d made on her tablet and sent them to her laptop for a solid start on Monday. She walked as she typed, and definitely wasn’t expecting to see Steve holding up a doorway right next to the elevator waiting for her to finish. (Yummy.) “Hi.”

He leaned over to kiss her solidly on the lips (double yum) as he escorted her inside. “Hi, doll.” He eyed her tablet. “What are the chances you’re finished?”

“Pretty good. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, I thought I would take my girl out for coffee this morning, but seeing as she’s been up for hours, maybe tea or breakfast?”

“Breakfast sounds great. I wasn’t hungry when I woke up. Can I drop off my stuff and grab a jacket first?” She did both, and brightened at having a little bit of time alone with Steve as Bucky had
things to do (people to pummel, apparently) that morning. (And promptly felt guilty, as she was
supposed to be dating both of them.)

Steve took her to one of the cafés dotting the busy streets of Midtown, though on a Saturday the
mayhem was somewhat contained.

There were breakfast sandwiches involved and a whole carafe of orange juice. Steve kept brushing
his fingers here and there as they waited in line and found a table (under her hair, along the back on
her hands, a knee). It was baffling and comforting and sexy all at the same time.

She’d missed this too. They used to do their errands on Friday or Saturday mornings after breakfast
(and sex, of course). So much had changed.

She was halfway through her sandwich when she called him on it. “Were you jealous of me sitting
with Bucky last night?” (By his look of utter confusion, whoops, she misread that entirely.)

“Why would you say that?”

“We haven’t gone out, just the two of us, since before he came home. Now we’re getting breakfast
and you’ve got your hands on me like you did when we first started dating.”

His jaw tensed and there was sadness in his eyes. “I woke up this morning and wanted to take you
to get a coffee, only you were already working. We haven’t had much opportunity for things like
this.” With his characteristic honesty, he added, “I wanted to be with you.”

“If I had known you wanted to do that, I would have skipped work,” she replied in all seriousness.
“It’s Saturday, and there is nothing about Saturday work that can’t wait until Monday.”

“Then why did you get up so early?” he asked.

If she hadn’t seen the answer in his eyes, so resolute and patient, she might have prevaricated. But it
was too late for that. “You know why.”

He laced his fingers with hers. “You can’t sleep.”

“Did JARVIS tattle on me?”

“Not this time.”

“Bucky, then.”

“No one tattled, but no one ducked the answers when I asked.” Steve tilted his head so that he could
look her in the face. “You’re my girl, Darce. I put it together this morning. Yes, I got an earful
from your dad about London. When I left this week, I thought you would stay with Bucky again
and that would be enough to stop the dreams. But I should have known better. I remember how
hard it was for you to let me in, to let me help you, even though I was already there.” He touched her
hand, caressing her fingers with his thumb. “You’re not ready to let Bucky see that yet, are you?”

“When I stayed with Bucky the first time, I didn’t go to sleep until you texted that you were on your
way home. I usually do okay after that,” she admitted.

Still holding her hand, Steve finished his sandwich, getting that intent look that mean he was trying
hard not to say the wrong thing. For all that Bucky teased him, when Steve thought hard about it, he
usually got right.
He did this time too. “Will you come home with me? I’ve got some serious baseball watching to do this afternoon, and I’d like my girl to sit with me. Maybe she could nap on my shoulder or something if she gets bored. And when she wakes, maybe we can figure out some different sleeping arrangements, because I’m not all that happy about separate apartments, even if they are only a few floors away from each other.”

A lump rose in her throat, caused by his sweet understanding. She forced it down as she laid her cards on the table. “I thought I was doing the right thing by giving you two more time together.”

“We’ve had ten years. Darcy, it’s your turn. What do you want to do?”

“I want to go home, Steve. You’re my home. And if that’s with Bucky too, then it’s all the better.”

Steve reached into his jacket, opened his wallet, and dropped a couple of bills on the table for a tip. He reached out a hand to Darcy. When she took it, he pulled her in for a kiss there in the middle of the café, mindless of the other patrons. When he let her go, he ran a hand across the back of her neck, massaging there just a little. “Got any errands? We can do them and we’ll go figure this out.”

She nodded. They had spent so much time cooped up on her apartment or in the Tower that she had forgotten the simple pleasure of walking about with Steve. “I’ve got one or two places that it would be nice to pop in.”

He held out his arm. “Lead the way.”

*****

About the time Steve and Darcy started figuring things out, James Buchanan Barnes waited in Natalia Alianovna Romanova’s personal space. He sat cross-legged on the wooden floor in the darkness. The room was lined with mirrors on all four sides.

No one could frustrate him as much as his protégé, especially when she was holding back. But he was patient.

Some habits were good ones and Natalia still pushed her body every morning at near the same time every day. And though she might not have the impetus to arrive exactly on the hour, it was near enough that he didn’t have to wait long.

She turned on the lights, going straight to the ballet barre on the far side. She lifted a leg and placed it on the upper rail to begin a sequence of stretches he remembered. “This place is not yours, Uchitel.”

“I have no wish to make it mine.”

Eyeing him through the mirror, she leaned into her leg. “What do you want, Barnes?”

“A moment of your time.”

She took her leg off the barre, standing with her arms loose.

He rose, crossed to her and took her hand. “Fifth position, arabesque.” She took the pose, flawlessly, effortlessly, pure grace belying the power woven into her body. “Fourth position,
releve’. He had her unsure now, off-balance because she didn’t know what he would do next.

“First position.” Simple, easy.

Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out her pointe shoes and laid them in her hand.

“What are you giving them back?”

“I have no need of them any longer.”

“You—you do not wish to train me?”

Ah yes, there was the thread of distress he was hunting for. “It is you who does not wish to train with me. You are not interested in playing my games, Milaya. I cannot teach you what you do not wish to know. This isn’t the Red Room and neither of us will be punished for failure.” He reached for her cheeks, swiftly kissing each of them in succession. “I will not come here again without your express invitation.”

He quit the room, nodding once to Barton (still drinking coffee straight from the coffee pot) as he traipsed through their apartment.

“Aw, Barnes, you’re gonna ruin my morning, aren’t you?” Barton groaned.

“Probably. We’ll drink it out tonight.”

“Damn right, we will.”

Seeing as how he missed most of his sessions with Wilson this week, he sent his friend/therapist (the lines had definitely blurred over the past month) a text and got an invite to come up. Sam liked to meet in the spare bedroom he’d turned into a library of sorts. It was homey and professional all at the same time.

“Been a big week for you, Barnes,” Sam prompted.

“You’re telling me.”

“Been doing your homework?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. So what’s on your mind?”

“This is never going to go away, is it? Balancing the soldier with the rest of me. And sometimes feeling like Bucky and sometimes like Sergeant Barnes.”

“Do you want it to go away?”

“I don’t want the soldier to pop in again when I’m making time with my … shit, my girl and my guy,” he grumbled.

Sam chuckled at that. “Must have been awkward.”

The lighthearted laugh struck exactly the right note, making it easy for Bucky to barrel through. “We
got over it. It was reflex, Wilson, from too much—I don’t know, sensation, emotion. I was in the moment and then I wasn’t. Safe worded out and all we’re talking about is a blow job.”

“Has it happened before?”

“No. Only been with Steve. Guess I feel safe with him.”

“And you don’t feel safe with Darcy?”

“Sure I do. But you ever been dizzy with a dame before? Scared shitless I’ll fuck this up. For her and Steve. Found out this morning that’s she’s prone to nightmares. Bad ones.”

“It happens around here.”

“I didn’t know.” He shook his head, frustrated. “Been with her now for months. Steve mentioned it once, and I didn’t know,” he growled out.

“And that’s why Darcy has you in knots. Like any new relationship, it takes time to get to know someone. Barnes, I know you guys were together in her place, but that Darcy was focused on keeping you and Steve safe while you healed. She kept a lot of personal stuff locked away.”

“And now I’m seeing her for who she is,” he nodded. “I figured that.”

“Do you like what you see?”

“Yes.”

“Then build on that. And take her out for ice cream. Or hell, you like to shop for clothes, take her with you to overhaul Steve’s wardrobe. Buy her flowers. See if she’ll get a motorcycle so the three of you can go places.”

Bucky brightened at that one. “That would be something, wouldn’t it? I’d take the back of her bike any day.”

“Key here, Barnes, is you’ve got to build a relationship with her that is different than the one you had. You’ve got a good start with it. Just gotta give it a little time.”

He nodded. “We done with the counseling part?”

“If you want.”

“Let’s make some lemonade and I’ll tell you how she saved an asshole’s life last night.”

“Oh? Last night? I haven’t heard this one yet.” Sam actually rubbed his hands in glee.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “You need to get Barton and Lewis on speed dial.”

*****

Darcy still needed to put the final touches on arrangements for the evening. JARVIS did a lot of it, as always, but she still wanted a couple of hours somewhere today to clean up her space and move some of her equipment in the lab. Steve promised to help, but the World Series was starting and he
was definitely chivvying her along to get in place before the first pitch.

Bucky had lunch ready. In all honesty though, Darcy was so tired that she settled against the couch cushions with her legs across Steve and found herself falling asleep almost instantly. A warm hand curled around her ankle, the sound of the ballgame wove in and out of her dreams, and the low conversation between Bucky and Steve soothed her as nothing else had in weeks. She dozed.

She woke only when the sounds changed from the ballgame to something else. She started to stretch, stopping when she heard Steve complain to Bucky.

“I don’t know how to dance,” he said softly. “Never seemed like the right time to bring it up. I don’t—I don’t want to look like a fool with her.”

There was pain there, and Darcy remembered Aunty Peggy’s story about her final conversation with Steve. Darcy bit her lip, peeking one eye open. The two men were in the kitchen, and Steve had his hands in his pockets, looking pitiful.

They kept their voices low, and Bucky chuckled. “One thing’s for damned sure,” he said as he took Steve’s hand. “Ain’t no one here gonna give us shit for bein’ on the dance floor.”

“Buck—“

“Shut up. Dance with me, punk. I’ll lead you the first time so I can show you what to do. Then you lead me so you don’t feel stupid with Darce.”

This she had to see. She adjusted enough on the pillows to get a good look through her lashes.

Bucky slid his hand under Steve’s shoulder and took his hand. In a low voice, Bucky asked, “JARVIS? Got something that won’t wake Sleeping Beauty over there?”

The country song wasn’t to Darcy’s taste, but the rhythm was slow and steady.

“I know you can keep a beat, seen your fingers tapping too many times. Just follow along.” Bucky kept it simple, moving Steve back and forth across the kitchen floor. “In a slow song, you don’t gotta do much more than sway.”

They did that for a couple of verses while Steve concentrated on his feet. About halfway through, Bucky tucked Steve’s hand against his shoulder. “It’s nice to pull in tight like this. Just be together with the music. Nothin’ fancy.”

After that, Steve relaxed into the song, and they moved in tandem.

At the end of the song, they switched leads. Steve slid his hand to the back of Bucky’s left shoulder. “Is this comfortable?”

“Sure thing. JARVIS? What ‘cha got for us?” This time, the AI picked a song from the fifties. “Now lead me to the beat.”

“What about my other hand?”

“That’s just for show, really, for what we’re doin’. Think about the beat and use that hand to tell me where to go. Don’t forget your feet.”

Steve got it. Darcy figured that after years of combat training, Steve knew exactly how to apply pressure and how to move his body. With nothing more than his hand, he moved in time with
Bucky. Halfway through the song, he reached for Bucky’s other hand, tucking it between them.

“I like this. Why didn’t we do this before?” Steve wondered.

“Too embarrassed, your wheezing, bein’ stupid. Pick one or all of ‘em.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Should’ve done this sooner.”

Darcy didn’t even bother pretending to be asleep anymore. She rested her chin and hands on the couch pillow as the two men moved around the makeshift dance floor to the eloquent strains of the Righteous Brothers.

When the last verse of the song faded, Steve framed Bucky’s face, kissing him like he did a month ago in the Commons kitchen. But this time, Darcy didn’t flinch. Not even when Steve pressed his hand to Bucky’s crotch and sucked on the side of his neck.

She categorized that hiss of need coming from Bucky’s lips as a sound she had to remember for future reference.

“Damn it, Steve, our girl’s right there. Don’t you fuckin’ dare put her off again if she catches us,” Bucky muttered. “Punk, you’ve got less sense than an ice cube when it comes to your dick.” With ruddy cheeks and wet lips, they broke apart, turning a little to make sure she was still asleep.

Bucky freaking blushed when he realized Darcy had been watching.

Her own face might have been a little flushed because, holy hell, they were hot. (Lady parts were positively tingling and ready to send up flares for assistance. Super-soldier assistance. Yeah that.) She raised her head off her hands. “Don’t stop on my account. I was enjoying the matinee.”

Bucky might have panicked just a little, rounding the sofa to kiss her on the forehead, making sure both hands had a firm grasp on hers so she couldn’t go anywhere.

Steve sauntered after him, winking at Darcy behind his back. “Come on, Buck, she’s been awake since we started dancing.”

Cobalt eyes squinted. “He right?”

“I can’t decide who makes the better lead. You have better hands but Steve’s ass really is a gift from the gods.”

Relief coursed through him and one hand came up to cup her cheek. “You’re okay, Princess.” That was a statement, not a question.

“I am.” She squinted at him then felt along her head. “Where’s my hat?”

He shrugged.

She huffed. “Great. Now I have hat hair and bedhead.”

“How do you feel, doll?” Steve asked, doing his best to be nonchalant.

“I’m starving, I’ve got a party to get started, I’ve got two gorgeous boyfriends who are going to help me rearrange my place, and we’re going to figure out a new living arrangement, because this version isn’t exactly working for me.”

She rolled off the couch, planted a firm kiss on Steve’s very delectable mouth (he might have slipped
a little tongue) then turned around to plant another on Bucky’s. (She didn’t quite escape before he nipped at her bottom lip.)

Hands down, this was the best she’d felt since waking up with Steve a whole week ago. “How long was I out?”

“A few hours. Enough to get you through the evening and then you’re staying with us,” Steve said as he tugged her into a hug.

“I think I heard Cap putting his foot down,” she teased. But her fingers drifted into Steve’s hair. “And I’m okay with that.” She reached for her shoes and jacket, not bothering to put either of them on. “You boys have an hour then I need you on deck in Club Stark.”

Two sets of hands went in an equal number of pockets, the very picture of not-so-innocent schoolboys.

“What, you think I don’t know you’re going to fuck each other into the mattress the second I leave?” She lifted a shoulder in a Gallic shrug, throwing both of them a wink and a kiss. “I’ll just make do with my vibrator. We really have to figure this out, James.”

Since that was a great exit line, she used it to open the door, laughing as Bucky swore a blue streak under his breath and Steve kissed him on the temple.

“I think you met your match, Buck.”
A/N Yes, I hear the screams of anguish from all of you for me to hurry up to get these three together. I actually wrote that chapter this weekend. (I'm staying 4-5 chapters beyond what I post) Then I got frustrated last night because it doesn't tell the story I want to tell. However, this morning, I got one of those Grinchy-grins when an idea popped into my head during my commute to work. It's going to take some setting up, but I think it's going to be well worth the effort to execute.

In the meantime, enjoy the next segment. Something very important is about to happen here.

Her lady parts were much happier post-session with her favorite vibrator. (The one she saved for when Steve was out of town.) That and a fizzy soft drink left her completely jazzed up and ready to clean up her place for the party. She found another yellow cap and stuck it on her head (just to piss off Barnes).

“Tunes, please, J.”

“Of course, Lewis. And I might say, you appear to be in a much better mood.”

“As if you weren’t keeping an eye on me all day,” she quipped.

“Would you like me to turn off the contact?”

She stilled. “No, JARVIS. I like knowing you can find me, okay. But I’m going to tease you about it even though it’s my decision.”

“As you wish.”

“I love you too.”

He spun up a new artist with some seriously sick beats that had Darcy bopping through her place, picking up clothes, wiping it down and rearranging furniture for whomever wanted a break from Club Stark.

Seeing as she hadn’t spent much time in her half-assed excuse of living quarters, none of it took long at all. She started in on the lab, cleaning out the kitchen and resetting the pillows on the sofa.

Steve and Bucky appeared in the doorway, looking amazingly relaxed. Holy shit. “Post-coital glow obviously outstrips anything my vibrator can do so we’ll put that on the list of issues to address, ‘kay? ‘Kay. Glad we have that cleared up.”

With the grace of a panther, Bucky scooped her up and set her on one of her work tables. He laid one hand on her knee and cupped the back of her neck. “Five minutes, Darcy. And I’ll have you screaming my name.”

(Fuck. Me.) She automatically tracked to Steve, breathing way harder than she should have needed
for that little show of strength. She wanted this. Pre-Steve she would have already stripped off her shirt and gone for it.

But Bucky stepped back, letting go. He shook his head, disappointed. “You’re not ready if you’re still looking to Steve for permission.”

Well, now, that just pissed her off. She reached out and pulled him back in, setting her hands on his collarbones (Hey, look, same temperature. Darcy rocks.) He arched a brow as she leaned to the side to whisper, “You’re right.” She traced a finger up and down his neck. “You want to know what I thought about when I got my lady parts all nice and warmed up with my battery-operated version of Steve? I thought about you. About that nice, long dick of yours, about how it would feel sliding into me. I saw it last night, saw how pretty it is. You like those fat veins traced with a tongue. Want my tongue doing that, James? Because I thought about doing that too.” His hand closed over hers with a little convulsion that wasn’t voluntary. “Want to know what made me come, James?”

When he didn’t answer, she nipped his earlobe and he sucked in his breath. “Thought about Steve getting me nice and warmed up, making me come like he does. Then I thought about you, sliding in so neat and long afterward, sinking so deep my clit is pressing against your skin.” With a satisfied snort, she leaned back on her elbow on the table, saying in a completely normal voice (that her lady parts called bullshit on), “That pretty much did it.”

Bucky shook his head again, only this time, a slow grin appeared. “Darcy, you weren’t kidding ‘bout us.” He reached out, carefully pulling her upright and setting her to her feet. “I’ll wait, doll. But you’ve got to know how much I want you.”

“I want you too,” she said candidly. “And if this didn’t mean anything, I’d have already fucked you.”

He kissed her knuckles, blue eyes darkening to black. “Roger that, Princess.”

*****

Steve used the couple of hours before the party to pound out his frustrations on a bag in the training room. He’d spent the day discovering just how close he’d come again to wrecking his relationship with Darcy.

In spite of her cheerful demeanor, he’d finally keyed in on some of the real problems they had between them. She still didn’t believe she belonged with them. She was still putting her needs second to his and Bucky’s. The idea that he would be jealous over Bucky holding her floored him.

Darcy’s nightmares were not a small thing, either. He’d known her to wake too many times either screaming or shaking so badly she couldn’t say a word. Though it wasn’t the primary reason by any means, it definitely figured into wanting to move in with her. She rarely had bad dreams with him, and when she did, he could soothe her—sometimes by holding her tightly, sometimes by talking. Often by making love to her until she was so spent that she slept soundly through the rest of the night.

He didn’t know how to get her to demand all that if that’s what she needed these days.

That was the Darcy he knew and loved. In all the time they had been together, she’d never pulled any punches to get what she wanted out of their relationship. It hadn’t occurred to him that when
Bucky came home, that she wouldn’t continue to do the same.

He understood what she’d said about not coming between him and Bucky. Given the way she’d been raised, it made sense, even if he didn’t agree with it. But to think she couldn’t rely on him when she needed him?

Steve put his hands on the bag to steady it. He had known, damn it, that she had an innate insecurity about herself. He’d thought they were past that, that their relationship was as rock solid as two people could be together. He’d never dreamed he would trigger all those feelings in her again.

He should have known better. He didn’t mean to do it. His love for her hadn’t done anything but grow in the past few months.

He didn’t deserve all the second chances she was giving him to make this right.

The punching bag took a beating that day.

Steve knotted his tie, trying his best not to be nervous. It was just a dance. He’d done the thing already with Bucky, so sure he wouldn’t step on Darcy’s toes. Nat had told him to stick with a vest and tie and skip the jacket. Bucky had picked his dark blue jeans. They weren’t as tight as the ones Buck had on, but they were close.

Nat had already stopped by to make certain that nothing about them screamed ‘stodgy’ and seemed pleased with what Bucky had come up with for them. Apparently, while Steve was off ‘saving the world’ again, Bucky had been ordering clothes off Amazon.com and skimming websites to figure out the current fashion trends.

Bucky walked into the bathroom, white shirt still unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, and he was trying to fasten a black leather cuff to his left wrist. “Can you get this for me?”

“No. Stop. Stay there,” Steve breathed. He scrambled for his sketch pad.

“Steve, this isn’t the time for an art lesson.” There was loving exasperation in that voice, something he’d heard too many times to count.

“Shut up and don’t move,” he called out. He found it on the kitchen table with a pencil tucked inside. He came back to find Bucky leaning on the counter with amusement written all over him.

“Just talk to me, Buck,” he said as his hand flew over the page. If he could capture the basic impressions, he could fill it all in from memory later. Bucky had asked Steve cut his hair a little bit shorter before his shower. Now he had the attitude of the cocky soldier headed out for war and dressed with all the flair of his younger self. The open shirt revealed the dog tags and the edge of the scars on his chest. The rolled up sleeves showed off the metal hand of the man he’d become. His face reflected all of that in the hard edges that would never go away and in the smile lighting his eyes. Steve was desperate to capture it on paper.

“You know, most people take a picture these days.”

“I can draw better than a photograph,” Steve said absently, paying attention to the light play and shadows on Bucky’s face.
“Been a long time since I posed for you.”

“I’d like you to do it again.”

“Why didn’t you ask?”

“Not the right time. I draw you though, you know that.”

“You always have.”

“Can’t help it. It’s like breathing.”

Steve looked down at the hasty sketch he’d done. Yeah, he’d redraw this one later and spend the time on the details. Hell, he might even try to paint this one. He handed it to Bucky with a kiss on his cheek. “It’s you.”

“Of course, it’s me—oh.” Bucky looked at the sketch. He looked up, studying himself in the mirror.

Steve reached out and laced the leather cuff in place, knotting the ends. “I see the Bucky I grew up with. I see the Sergeant I followed into war. I see the soldier they made of you. And I see who you’ve become from all of that.” He put his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. “Yeah, I had to get it on paper, Buck. I don’t ever want to forget what you look like right now.”

“Fucking sap.”

“Yeah, tell me something I don’t know.” Steve plucked the sketchbook out of Bucky’s hands and went to lay it on the table where it wouldn’t get messed up.

“Steve?” Bucky followed him, fastening the buttons on his shirt.

“Yes?”

“You gonna tell me why you were beating up bags again?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Steve asked, curious to get Bucky’s take.

“Gotta be Darcy. And since she was in a pretty good mood today, it’s not anything she did.”

“No, I’m the jerk in this scenario, Bucky. I love her so damned much. But she thinks she’s not as important as the two of us. I’ve made her think that and it’s not true at all.”

Bucky played with the leather cuff a little bit, running his thumb across the laces. “Steve, you’ve got to admit, you dropped everything to help me. Whether you meant to or not, it’s there and it had to hurt. I’m doing my part to make her fall in love with me, ‘cause you know how I feel about her. But the priority thing, that’s on you. She needs us. She needs you. She’s got to know that sometimes you’ll pick her over me.”

Steve swallowed hard. Like the sniper he was, Bucky had perfectly lined up the problem—and nailed the solution.

Club Stark was in full swing when the elevator doors opened. The only lights came from the lab itself, where presumably JARVIS was changing the colors and making them dance. The music had a
fast pace and a heavy beat.

He didn’t really think Bucky could get any happier. But his boyfriend winked at him, lifted his chin and damned near strutted into the lab.

Steve expected the ladies to be in skirts, but there wasn’t a single one in sight. Nat, Betty, Maria, Jane, and even Pepper had on tight black pants of some kind, sparkling heels and blouses in every color of the rainbow, some of them with sequins.

The room looked like it was filled with smoke, but an experimental sniff told him that Darcy had brought in a fog machine. He hadn’t seen her yet, though Jane, Nat, Pepper and Maria were already on the dance floor. Sam and Clint, too. Thor, Tony, Bruce, and Betty commandeered one of the tables, leaving the other one for Steve and Bucky.

“Steve?”

“Yeah, Buck?”

“Is it legal for Sam, Jane, and Maria to be doing that on the dance floor?”

“Dunno. Why don’t you find out and we can figure out how to do it later?” Steve suggested.

A whistle from behind them proved to be from Darcy. She, too, had on black leather pants that hugged her curves and blue sequin heels to match the halter top that left her arms bare. He greeted her wide smile with a genuine one of his own. “Blue for my boys,” she acknowledged, puckering her lips for a kiss from each of them. She let them escort her to the table, where Thor slid over to join them.

Steve exchanged a look with Bucky as a bartender handed around drinks. This was Darcy’s party. They would make damned sure she had a good time.

******

10 Things Darcy Learned About the Avengers in Club Stark:

#1 The Avengers are good at line dancing. They love line dancing. And if Sam or Jane or Darcy didn’t know all the steps, Clint did, even the country ones. Maybe especially the country ones. Even Bruce got on the dance floor for the Cha Cha Slide and the Cupid Shuffle when Tony nagged him into it.

#2 Sam and Maria win the award for Best Overall Style. That girl can grind like nobody’s business. Sam just brings it.

#3 Clint knows every single country dance there is to know. Nat apparently does too. (See Clint for reasons why.)

#4 Bucky cut into Nat’s third dance with Clint to learn the two-step from her partner. They were surprisingly graceful.

#5 Thor is ridiculously cute in jeans and a t-shirt on the dance floor. Jane got to wear her stacked heels and favorite red bustier. They shouldn’t have looked as good as they did.
#6 Asgardian Mead gives Steve the courage to get on the dance floor. He lined danced. He club danced. He slow danced with Darcy three times (zing!), Pepper once, Nat once and Bucky twice. Bucky was right, nobody cared.

#7 Bucky and Nat can waltz. It is unreasonably beautiful. Where did JARVIS come up with a spotlight?

#8 Betty made Bruce dance to every single slow song with her. They left early, to no one’s surprise, but they were smiling when they left. #darcyforthewin

#9 While they danced (yup, he did just fine), Steve didn’t mind Darcy goggling at her parents. Pepper and Tony were in the corner, making slow turns of their own, oblivious to everyone else. When Darcy danced with Bucky, they spent the whole time trading insults and rating everyone’s asses. Steve won, of course, but Maria and Sam tied for second.

#10 JARVIS is the best DJ ever.

*****

When Darcy called the last dance far closer to sunrise than anyone cared to know, Bucky edged out Steve to steal her away. Since she danced with Steve first, it was only fair (Yes, he felt like a six year old pulling out that rationale. But it worked.)

The song was soft and slow, and Darcy had abandoned her shoes to the pile on the edge of the dance floor. Tony and Pepper were gone, so were Bruce and Betty. Maria and Sam were still on the dance floor (did they ever leave?), as were Thor and Jane. Clint was sound asleep on Nat, who was keeping company with Steve on the couch.

While they danced, Darcy ran her fingers along the leather cuff. “I like this,” she murmured.

He buried his nose in her hair (sunshine). “Mmm. Why?”

“Sexy. It’s more you than the star.”

That brought him up short. No one ever mentioned the red star etched on his arm. And Steve had made only the one oblique reference to it during training. “Does the star bother you?” (Did it bother him? Maybe.)

“Sometimes.” She leaned her head against his shoulder, following his movements around the dance floor as if they’d been partners for months, not hours.

“I could make it blue or white to match Steve’s shield,” he suggested. But that didn’t seem right either.

“No.” She raised her head, sliding her hand to rest on that part of his shoulder, as if protecting it. “If you want it, keep it. S’long as the mark is a reflection of you—the you that you are now, not what you were.”

He would think on that. Later. Right now, he had Darcy to hold through the last song.

Her hand dropped back down to his wrist, where she ran a finger along the edge of the leather again.
“How’s your head?” she asked.

It didn’t hurt. Oh. Oh. He’d been pain-free, of any kind, for a couple of days now. With all the music and the cold air pumping out of the AC units, he should have been down for the count hours ago. Last night should have resulted in one if nothing else.

She dazzled him. Like her dad, she did things for those who needed them. Not for money, or for love. Just because they cared. She’d built the heater for Bucky’s comfort, tested it on her own body to reassure him of its safety, and then let him enjoy the benefits without an endless stream of questions to make him feel like an experiment all over again.

“I haven’t had a headache since you put the heater in,” he admitted.

Satisfied with the results, Darcy had the exact same smirk he’d seen on Tony Stark from time to time. “Yeah, I’m brilliant. Just so you know.”

Unable to hide the rush of emotion, he held her a little closer to him. “I know. Just another reason I’m in love with you,” he said quietly.

The smirk went away and her fingers convulsed around his wrist. Through the sensors there, he could feel her pulse speed up. “You don’t,” she protested.

“You think I don’t love you, Darcy?” Bucky asked, puzzled.

“It’s not the same. You love Steve. I see it. That’s what’s real. We’re not—” she trailed off when he stopped dancing. Her hand tightened, enough that her knuckles whitened from the tension.

“Fuck it all to hell and back again.” She jolted as Bucky cursed under his breath. She let go of him, but he caught her fingers and pressed them flat over his heart to keep her there. “Darcy, I’ve been in love with Steve since I was thirteen. I know him better than I know myself.” He stared hard in her blue-green eyes. “I know what it is to wake up with the same person you took to bed. I know what it is to ache when they are gone. I know what it is to hold someone together when they are too sick to do it on their own. I know what it is to walk into the fire for someone. I know what real love feels like.”

He clenched his teeth, staying out of soldier for this. “So when I say that I love you, I damned well know what I’m talking about.”

Darcy’s mouth opened. And closed. “That’s—” she twisted her fingers into his shirt, “—a really good argument.”

“Gonna tell me you don’t feel anything for me, Princess?” he challenged.

The laugh she let out was bitter, a harsh thing that didn’t belong to her. “James, I’ve been in love with you since that first night we all shared a bed. Months ago.”

He squeezed her hand, still caught in the folds of his shirt. That bombshell explained so much—her grief, the jealousy, London. “Christ, Darcy. Then why did you say you would leave?” he said in exasperation.

“I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“That didn’t turn out very well for any of us,” he countered. “What about you? What do you need? What do you want?”
Her lips parted on a sigh, and she laid her cheek on his shoulder again. “I’m tired, Bucky. Not from
tonight, from everything. I need to go home. Steve is my home, but only with you.” she admitted. “I
don’t know if that makes any sense at all. I want both of you.”

It did in a Darcy kind of way. He nuzzled her head and got them moving again, just little steps as the
song was winding down. “Do you trust me?”

She clutched his shirt again, tension reappearing in her shoulders. “As far as I know you can handle
it, yes.”

He didn’t like that answer, but it was an honest one. “Does the soldier scare you?”

“No. You would never hurt me. But last night scared me. Steve and I pushed you too hard.” She
pressed her head against his neck in a mute apology.

He tightened his hold, sliding a hand into her hair. “Last night was fantastic. Different. Tripped a
safety switch, that’s all.” He pressed kisses along the side of her face. “Steve was shaken up
afterward too. We messed up, not checking on you. I’ll bet your nightmares triggered from that.”

“Yeah, they did,” she agreed.

Bucky stroked the underside of her chin so that she would look up at him. “I agree with Steve. From
now on, we stay together. We’ll figure out the sex thing later.”

She nodded.

“If you mean it, tell me you love me, Princess. Then we’ll go curl up with Steve and sleep until
noon.”

“I love you, James,” she replied without hesitation.

“And I love you, Darcy Stark.” He kept her close through the last notes of the song.

JARVIS brought up the lights enough to break the mood, and with hugs and kisses, the last of the
party went home.

Steve nudged Bucky. “I’ll get Darcy’s stuff. You go on and take a shower. We’ll be up in a few
minutes.”

That was probably best. Darcy still relaxed with Steve in a way that she didn’t yet with him.

He went up, stripped and showered, not lingering too much even if he liked the heat of the water.
He’d forgotten clothes again and walked naked through the bedroom to the dresser. He debated
between pajama pants and a pair of boxer shorts and decided the latter would do.

A soft beep announced the opening of the door, something he and Steve had worked out with
JARVIS. Like the ping the AI used to get his attention, little beeps here and there tracked entry and
exits to the apartment—enough that one could usually sleep if the other was moving around. Small
sounds were far better than no sound at all.

Darcy had never been taught to be silent in her movements, though she could be reasonably quiet if
she tried. She was half asleep and still a little damp from her shower. Bucky took her bag from Steve
and nudged her to the bed as he climbed in too. “Your turn, punk. I think there’s some hot water
left.”
Steve grinned and Darcy yawned, saying, “I’ll remember that one for Dad.” She took the side of the bed, farthest from Bucky, leaving space for Steve between them. She tucked a pillow underneath her head and chest.

He tried not to let his feelings get hurt, but didn’t he just tell her that he loved her? “Princess?”

No answer.

Steve ducked out of the record-short shower. He had boxer shorts on too (of course, punk never forgot). “She asleep?” He peeked at her face. “That was easy.”

“Why’d she leave the middle for you?” he complained (he did not whine. Sergeants do not whine).

Steve crawled in between them, resettling the covers over Bucky. “Don’t take it personally. The last thing she wants to do is trigger you until you have some idea of what you’re dealing with.” He pressed his lips together. “I’m hoping this works, Buck. We’ve got a long mission coming up in a couple of months. I have to know she’ll be okay while I’m gone.”

“What did she do before?”

“She had me. And that wasn’t always enough.” Steve leaned in to kiss Bucky then rolled on his side so that Bucky could cuddle up to his back.

Bucky scooted so that he could lean his forehead against the back of Steven’s neck. “G’night, love.” He rested a hand on Steve’s chest.

“G’night, Buck.” There was a kiss on his hand then Steve moved his arm to rest on Darcy’s waist.
Take a Little; Give a Little

Chapter Notes

*slow whistle* Posting early in honor of 70,000 hits.

In other news, all ya'll (hi from Texas) made me work for this chapter. Based on a lot of back and forth discussion over the last few chapters, I ended up with four rewrites, including trashing the whole thing, rescuing part of it, rewriting it, rewriting a whole POV on it, and making it one of my fav chapters in this whole story.

For those wondering where BAMF Darcy went, here she is.

So, thank you.

*ping* Sergeant Barnes.

That was the code they’d come up with for work-related matters. Bucky grinned. Work-related. Huh. He rolled out of bed. Report, JARVIS.

A white male, mid-twenties, carrying a backpack with items of concern, has been identified by our security team. Director Hill has requested you for an undercover intercept in your ‘intern’ persona.

Let her know I’m on my way. He reached for jeans and a hoodie. His one concession to the look was to decent boots, because, well, knives. He pulled on a tan glove, and tucked his semi-automatic into its holster at his waist.

“Bucky?” Steve squinted at the clock. “It’s not even seven-thirty yet.”

“Work stuff. Fill you in later. Go back to bed. I’ve got this.”

“Okay.” Steve looked down at Darcy, who was curled up facing him, her hands flat on his chest. Bucky got a quick thrill when Steve nodded, trusting him enough to deal with whatever it was and go back to sleep.

He stepped out of the apartment with one of Darcy’s travel tumblers in hand that she used for coffee, though he wished it wasn’t empty. JARVIS had the elevator doors open and waiting. Status report, JARVIS.

Suspect is attempting entry on to R&D Floor 72 with false credentials. The security team is tracking where they came from. Hill hasn’t stopped him yet. She wants to know where he is going. The elevator is operating slowly, though not enough to cause agitation. You have two minutes thirteen seconds to reach his destination.

Which labs are on that floor?

The DNA sequencing project, a new body scanner designed to replace the MRI, and the battery division. The elevator doors opened and he stepped on to the floor. Thirty seconds to intercept, Barnes.
He took his time, waiting for the suspect to disembark. The young man took a quick peek around the floor and headed for the battery research side. Bucky ducked around the corner and came through a connecting office, pretending to see the suspect for the first time. “Hey, it’s the new guy! Come on in. Josh, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” “Josh” agreed.

“Great. I’m JB. James, really, but JB is better.” He let a little bit of Brooklyn out, though not enough to be distracting. “Where do you want to start?”

“Um, I was support to report to Katzev.”

*Fourth door on the left, Sergeant. She has a graphene-based micro-battery technology that will replace most current similar technology. She will begin product testing in two weeks.*

*So we have thief who wants it or a saboteur who is scared of it. Either way, we’re looking at a competitor, not someone targeting Stark Industries in particular. In other words, our suspect is intelligent, probably works in the competing lab, and is scared as fuck. I’m going to hold my i.d. above the door lever while you unlock it. Our suspect doesn’t need to know about our biometric securities.*

*Of course.*

Bucky let “Josh” inside and waved toward Katzev’s station. “Take a seat in the break area and I’ll find her for you.” He stepped out of Josh’s direct line of sight and waited. The young man pulled out a small device and set it on the work station. In the middle, where it could cause the most damage.

*Explosive, JARVIS. In a single clean move, he had the man on the ground and immobilized before the device could be activated. Give me a list of battery competitors, JARVIS. Who is the most impacted by this?*

*Blue Invio, Riston, and Ion Extract, in that order. Katzev declined two offers to go to work for Blue Invio.*

“All clear,” he announced aloud. “Send in the security team for clean up.” To the man, he said, “Stark doesn’t take to kindly to explosions unless he is causing them. Now, why would Blue Invio be worried about Katzev’s research?”

“How did you know?” “Josh” blurted out.

“That’s for us to know and you to sit in jail and wonder.” He looked up as Hill stepped inside the lab. “Hello, Director. You might want to check into this gentleman’s connections to Blue Invio since he so helpfully confirmed my speculations.” Two guards took the man into their custody as Bucky jerked him up and handed him over.

“Take him into holding and we will deal with him there,” Hill ordered them. They nodded and escorted the young man away.

“Got your explosives team?” Bucky asked. They both knew better than to handle a live explosive, even if it wasn’t armed yet. There were other ways of keeping it safe than carrying it around in a pocket.

She grinned. “Soda Zullo.” She introduced a ridiculously young kid who stepped forward, pushing a cart.
“Ma’am,” he acknowledged.

“Have at it,” Hill waved him in. To Barnes, she explained, “Zullo is from Cambodia. Spent his high school years defusing bombs so the neighborhood kids had a safe zone to play in. He got nicked by one and a doctor Stark knows contacted him and got him stateside. He works for us now and develops technology for villages back home to safely locate and explode the ordinances.”

Zullo used a robotic extension and a large shield to place the explosive into a special box and sealed it. Then he turned to Barnes and pulled up his pant leg to reveal a prosthetic foot. “It’s a good trade. I have good job. Good leg now. I can help people. And she’s nice.” He thumbed over his shoulder with a grin.

“You’ll find him on RD 71 and on call when we need him.” Hill patted Zullo on the back. “You’ve got this.”

“I do.” The kid took his box and set it on the cart behind her, putting his extension and shield on the bottom before heading to the elevator.

When they were alone, Bucky asked her, “Does this kind of thing happen often?”

“That’s the third one since I’ve been here. Most of them don’t make it past the lobby. But we didn’t have a clear bead on this one and I was curious to see how you would handle it.”

“Did I pass?”

“With flying colors. Now, usually I would have you in the interview we’re going to have with our little intruder, but I don’t want to spoil our fun tomorrow. So I’ll see you then. And for god’s sakes, go get some sleep. I know what time you went to bed this morning.”

“Will do, Hill. But only if you clean this guy’s clock and do the same.”

“Forty-five minutes, tops.”

“Hey, Hill?”

“Yes?”

“You have glitter in your hair.” He strolled to the elevator, counting down. Three, two, one.

“You’re an ass, Barnes. Did I mention that I want your report on my desk in an hour?”

As the door slid closed, he had to give that round to her. He retrieved his tablet and keyboard from the apartment and went down to the Commons, where he could get decent coffee and do his write up. His adrenaline was still up and there wasn’t any point in trying to do anything else.

In the army, he’d been required to do all the paperwork for his unit, so the administrative side of authority wasn’t anything new. But it had been a while, and it took him a bit to get in the rhythm of reporting the incident. He drained his cup as he finished and shot it off to Hill’s email.

He climbed the stairs to the apartment. He had a job. He’d done it well. He would do it again tomorrow. Without bloodshed or undue force, or even drawing a weapon, he’d taken down his opponent and secured the premises. It was a good start.

With Steve and Darcy still curled around each other in the bed, a few more hours of sleep seemed like a great idea. He changed in the bathroom so as not to wake them.
When he came out, Darcy’s eyes were open, blank, and she let out a soft cry. Steve held her with one arm, trapped both of her wrists with his other hand against his chest and talked to her. “I’m here, Darcy. Nothing is going to happen to you. I’ve got you.” She shook from whatever she’d been dreaming about, and Steve held her even closer, locking his arms so that she couldn’t move if she tried. “I’ve got you, Darcy. You’re safe.”

With a sigh and long exhalation, she closed her eyes once more. Bucky rested his fingers on her neck. Her pulse was slowing down. Steve relaxed his grip, stroking her hair as he kept her close.

“First time?” he asked Steve.

“Fifth. Every forty-five minutes. I can get to her to go back to sleep, but—hell, Buck,” he broke off, worry clear in his eyes, “Never seen her like this.”

Bucky didn’t miss the apprehension and was glad to lend some warmth and comfort to Steve as he settled under the sheets. But now he was listening for Darcy and another couple of hours passed the same way. After three more rounds, he nudged Steve. “We need to move. This isn’t working and she’s not getting any rest.”

Steve got up with a jaw-cracking yawn, and Darcy woke, for real this time, with dark circles under her eyes. “What are we doing?”

“Trading places, Princess.” Bucky walked around to her side of the bed. Steve moved into Bucky’s spot, taking Darcy and her pillow with him. Bucky crawled in next to her, yanking her shirt up just a little to slide his left arm around her bare waist. “You feel that, doll?”

“Yes.”

“Steve’s got you and I’ve got you. You’re safe with us. We love you. Now go to sleep and believe it,” he ordered.

“Love you both,” she whispered. Steve blinked at that, throwing a questioning look at him. He just smiled and sniffed Darcy’s hair.

None of them woke again until well past lunch.

*****

Steve made up a dozen BLTs that afternoon, frying up bacon and stacking it neatly on the sandwiches. Bucky picked up three of them and settled on the sofa with his tablet to read. Darcy was still in the shower. She’d come in long enough to kiss him, even though she was hardly awake, to steal a piece of bacon and a take a glass of orange juice.

He pulled out his sketchpad and propped it up on his knee at the table while he ate, idly working out one of the scenes that stuck in his head last night, of Pepper and Tony while they danced. He thought Darcy might like to have it.

The Starks definitely knew how to throw a party, and Darcy had given everyone a chance to unwind in complete privacy. That was a talent she had, to make everyone feel good, one she’d only exercised with him and Bucky for a while now.
He drew a shadow, and could feel anger coursing through his skin. Anger with himself for what he’d done to her.

“I know that look,” Bucky remarked as he washed up his plate and set it in the drainer to dry.

“Yeah?”

“Since this is between you and Darcy, I think I’ll find a way to occupy myself this afternoon. See you around dinner.”

Darcy came out of the bedroom, clad in a fuzzy white bathrobe, drying her hair on a towel. “What’s between you and me? Is Bucky mad about something?”

“Not unless you count me being an idiot and he wholeheartedly agrees.”

She bit her lip. “I’m so—”

“Stop saying ‘you’re sorry’, Darcy!” Her eyes widened at his rare temper. “You have nothing to be sorry for. In fact, you should be handing me my ass as you kick me out the door!”

Darcy squeezed the towel one more time and then finger combed her dark hair so that it lay in damp ropes over her shoulders. She was beautiful like this. No makeup, though a smudge of dark beneath her blue-green eyes that told him how much she still needed to rest.

“You’re right,” she said, cool and calm. “I should have cut loose months ago when Bucky showed up. Or when he got his memories back. Or before I went to London. Or when I came back.” She came in the kitchen to lean against the island, dropping her towel on the counter. “Do you know why? Because it sucked watching you with him and feeling like everything that was us dried up and blew away.”

Steve ducked his head, knowing she was right. His heart clenched hard enough to hurt.

“This past year? Since London? It’s sucked balls,” she said bluntly. “And yes, Bucky’s needs took priority. But Steve, I want you to know that the thought of not helping him never crossed my mind. I didn’t think bringing him back would be easy, and honestly, I’m surprised he’s come as far as he has.

“All the stories you told painted a pretty damned good picture of him before we met. And when we did, I discovered I really liked him, even during the worst parts of this, which made it far too fucking easy for me to fall in love with him.”

Darcy leaned on an elbow on the counter. “You’ve probably guessed that Bucky told me he loved me last night. I believe him. And it feels amazing.” She paused, taking a breath. “But he said something else too. He said that he knows what it’s like to walk into the fire for someone. I know that feeling, Steve. Because I could have ended this when it hurt so much I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t. Because you needed me. Because that’s what partners do. They hold each other up when everything else falls apart. I remember when my house was destroyed and my parents were missing. You gave me a place to stand. I’ve called you a hundred times in the middle of the night and you are there.”

Steve sucked in his breath, hoping—

“All this with Bucky, it was big and ugly and no one could possibly have imagined any of it to even be possible. But we—you and me—are still here. We’re still together. If I regret anything, it’s that I didn’t walk into that kitchen and let you know how much it hurt to see you two kiss. But I didn’t
want to take that moment away from you. Or Bucky. Because I love you and I know what it means to you to have him back in your life.”

“Thing is, Steven Grant Rogers, I know you. You don’t fall in love lightly. Yes, the way you two love each other is ridiculously beautiful and sometimes intimidating as all fuck. But I also know that if I took that ring you have in your dresser drawer, you would marry me tomorrow. It wouldn’t have anything to do with expectations or honor, it would be because you love me.”

This was his Darcy. Awestruck by her conviction, Steve went to her, taking her hand in his, rubbing at his eyes as he did. “I don’t understand how I can mess this up every way imaginable and still have you here, Darcy.”

“Because I had two years with you before all this happened. You’ve always been honest with me. And through everything, you kept telling me you loved me, even if you sucked at showing it. Except the tattoo thing. That was pretty romantic. And permanent.”

“I’ll fix the part about showing you,” he promised.

“Yes, you will. Because this is Darcy Stark putting her stompy foot down. If you want me here, then we’re making a home of this place. Our home, with all my stuff here and we deal with living in the same building as my parents. Which means you get to run interference with my dad sometimes,” she insisted.

“I can do that.”

“I want Sundays whenever you are home. I want to curl up with you on the sofa and watch TV or read a book. I want to go walk in Central Park like we used to.”

“Okay.”

“And when I have nightmares, we’re going to play our game, even though I know it’s going to freak Bucky out. And he’s going to have to deal with it. Because it works better than anything else we’ve tried and I’m getting desperate.”

That one was harder for him to agree to, she knew it, he knew it, and this wasn’t about Bucky. This was about what Darcy needed, even if Buck had to go lift weights for an hour in the middle of the night. “We will,” he promised.

“You will?” she breathed, her eyes lighting up.

“Isn’t that what I just said?” He reached for her, and she slid her arms around his waist. “I’m so sorry, doll, that I wasn’t doing these all along. You shouldn’t have to ask for me to spend time with you. I will do it better.” He cupped her cheek, touching the soft flesh of the curve. “I would ask something, Darcy, not for me, but for you.”

“What is it?”

“That you talk to Sam or somebody about all this.”

“Okay. I will.” She eyeballed him, chin lifted in challenge. (He adored this.) “If—”

“If?”

“You brush my hair.”
“Sex first then I brush your hair. And you have to eat something.”

She pretended to sulk, though she rested her head against his chest. “If you insist.”

“I insist.” He couldn’t seem to get enough of holding her, and she of him. So they stood there in the kitchen, soaking up each other’s presence. (Well, until she got twitchy and shrugged her robe off her shoulders. She didn’t have a thing on underneath.)

He wanted tender, she wanted hard and fast. They did both, her way first, then his. (At one point, Darcy handed him his cell phone off the night stand when the he got a text from Bucky asking if the coast was clear. Steve fumbled a one word answer that might have had three extra ‘n’s in it as he licked Darcy’s clít. The cell phone also might have landed behind the chair.)

Maybe they did it right this time because hard and fast took the edge off. Patience let him coax Darcy into that place where she had orgasm after orgasm, soaking his face and throat while he stroked her swollen nub with his tongue and a pair of fingers. After that, he only had to press a hand there just so to keep her going while he brought her upright to settle on his cock.

She came again as she took him in, shivering for all the right reasons. He waited for her to come down, not much, just enough for her to drag her eyes open. “You done?” she taunted.

“Fuck no.” He might have growled.

She flashed him a delighted smile and leaned backward so that he could slide in and out of her and still reach her clít with his fingers. When it popped out under his hand, he had her. “Steven—"

There it was, that breathy, wrecked sound of his name on her lips. As if she flipped a switch in him, what control he had fled down the road and he lost himself to her, cradling her shoulders as he took her hard—hard enough that he tried to ease back before he hurt her.

“Oh no, you don’t. Stay with me, Steven,” she demanded in that same husky voice that shot his brain all to tatters. He did, pulsing and filling her with his come while she milked his cock. Even when he pulled her down to rest on his chest, she was still clenching down hard enough that he wished he could come one more time just then.

He rolled them so that he could stay connected until that very last moment, and so that he could bury his face in her neck. (Spring. In that moment it becomes summer.) “I love you, Darcy Stark.”

Though she couldn’t see the marks, curled up as they were, her fingers unerringly traced her name on his skin. Her touch was soothing and electric all at the same time. “I know,” she affirmed. “Steven, I know.”

Afterward, he kept his promise once Darcy texted Sam and set up an appointment for tomorrow. He sat on the sofa and she took the space between his knees on the floor. Her hair was only a little damp, but definitely a tangled mess now.

He’d been shy the first time he’d asked to brush her hair. He hadn’t the right, not yet. But Darcy didn’t know, times had changed, and she handed him a hairbrush without a second thought.

Her hair spilled every which way down her back. He started from the bottom, working out the tangles. Darcy closed her eyes, her breath rising and falling in a steady tempo, slowing as he went.

*****
Bucky decided an extra hour was enough and he was going in, come hell or high water. It wasn’t right to ask JARVIS but he wanted to. In any case, the coast was clear and Steve was sitting on the sofa with Darcy between his legs.

He was brushing her hair.

Steven drew the brush down the long locks. She had her eyes closed, and he pulled through the strands to help them dry. Slowly, gently, taking his time. The silken fall of her hair out of the brush when he reached the ends mesmerized him. His fingers twitched to touch.

Pure envy shot through Bucky, something he’d never felt before with Steve, because it brought home exactly how Steve felt about Darcy. Though dames didn’t pin their hair up anymore, in their time, only husbands got to see their wives with their hair hanging loose. Only a husband had the right to touch it. *Steve* knew this, even if Darcy didn’t.

Bucky pulled *in* to control the shaking in his hands before he could ruin their moment.

“Have I told you why I like doing this, Darce?” Steve murmured.

(Well that kept him from retreating to the kitchen.)

“Mmm, no.”

“After me mum died—“ Bucky bit his lip as he heard the Brooklyn and the odd Irish turn of phrase that came out in the rare times Steven spoke about his mom. “I tried to stay on in our flat, but I got sick that winter and the super turned m’ heat off ‘cause I got behind on m’ rent. Bucky’s parents put me up at their place for a bit, ‘til Buck and I went out on our own. Mrs. Barnes, she was a nice lady. Worked at an office and had to wear her hair up. Her hair was thick and heavy, like yours and Bucky’s. Took a lot o’ pins to keep it in place.

“I was goin’ to bed one night and passed by Mr. and Mrs. Barnes’ room. It wasn’t right for me to look, but,” he smiled in memory, “Mr. Barnes was takin’ th’ pins out o’ Mrs. Barnes’ hair. An’ he brushed it, takin’ his time. An’ she tol’ him how much she loved him for doin’ it. That her head hurt all day ‘cause o’ the pins an’ she didn’t mind ‘cause she looked forward to Mr. Barnes brushin’ it every night.”

Entranced by the story he’d never heard, Bucky slid his hand into Steve’s hair from behind and sat on the back of the sofa to listen. A lifted shoulder trapped his hand for a moment, a kind of hug that didn’t interrupt the story.

“Bucky’s parents were good people, Darcy. An’ me mum, me mum ne’er had anyone who took pins outta her hair and brushed it.”

Steve pulled the brush through Darcy’s a couple more times before she asked, “Do you think your parents knew about you two?”

“I don’t know, Darce. I guess when I think back, we were careful. Ma probably had it figured because she was keen on that kind of thing. He was always hangin’ around when I was sick, lot o’ times sittin’ on top o’ the covers right up next to me. An’ I remember Bucky’s little sister askin’ at dinner at his house one night if we thought of each other as brothers. Bucky was real sweet when he told her I wasn’t his brother, I was his best friend. Mr. and Mrs. Barnes didn’t say anything at all. Just let it stand.”
Bucky confirmed, “They knew.” Steve stopped brushing to look up at him, and Darcy turned around to put a chin on his knee. “I went out with dames and that was a good enough, I guess. But when I told them I wanted to get a place with you, punk,” he ruffled Steve’s hair, “Dad gave me a real concerned look and asked me if I knew what I was doing. I told him I did. And that was it. He never said another word about it. Ma just kissed me on the cheek and said she had a few things put by for when I moved out. We never made trouble for them, and the whole neighborhood was convinced the reason you didn’t go out with the girls was because you were sick all the time.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Barnes always made sure I had a place to go for the holidays,” Steve told Darcy. “Do you remember Mrs. Westerly, Buck?” He grinned, the memory lighting up his face in a way that made Bucky think of thin shoulders, humid nights and sticky sheets. “Seems like she was always coming by with an invitation to dinner or something from your mom.” He let his voice get quivery and high-pitched in a fair approximation. “Mrs. Barnes stopped by to see her boy but he was working some overtime, like a good one should. Wanted to see if you had any plans for Sunday dinner, she did, Mr. Rogers. I told her you’ve been a sweet lad, not cattin’ about town like her boy, but that you’ve been feelin’ a bit poorly lately. She’s says she’d heard as such and wanted to make sure you had some home cookin’ too.”

Bucky winked at Darcy. “Didn’t matter if I cooked six days straight after double shifts and takin’ care of the punk at night ‘cause he had pneumonia. I was never good enough for Mrs. Westerly and she thought he was an angel.”

Steve grinned. “It was bribery. Your mom would make jumbles for us and leave them with her. I always made sure to give her half.”

If he thought hard enough, he could almost smell his mom’s perfume and remember his dad’s quiet laugh. He discovered his face was wet when Steve reached up to wipe it off. “I miss ‘em,” he admitted. “I didn’t know that story ‘bout Dad brushin’ Ma’s hair, but it sounds like somethin’ they would do. Miss m’ sister too.”

Hunching over like he used to do as a bony teenager, Steve agreed, “Me too.”

They had gone to Brooklyn months ago where they had grieved over his parents’ graves, and paid their respects to Steve’s ma, but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t still coming to terms with the fact he couldn’t go home to them. He still hadn’t made overtures to his sister’s kids though Steve exchanged notes with them every couple of months. He wasn’t ready for them to know he was still alive, but Steve let him keep all the letters, and he stored them in a box in one of the dresser drawers.

Darcy patted Steve’s hand and fluffed out her silky hair. He wondered what kind of bribe it would take to let him do her hair too. He definitely didn’t know what to make of Darcy when she rounded the sofa to wind her arms around his neck and lay a fairly intense kiss on him. There was a slide of lips, a good amount of heat and her tongue dipped into find his. “You okay?”

Yeah, he was. Holding her and sniffing her hair kept him in the here and now. “Sure. I guess you two are good?” he asked.

“We worked out a few things,” she said. “Now it’s time for you and I to talk.”

*****
Steve sat back onto the sofa cushions as elation shot through him. His world had steadied again, as if the earth hadn’t tilted on its axis where he was sliding around for purchase. Darcy was not only staying, she was doing what she did best, and making sure everyone knew the ground rules. Steve wasn’t like that. He could take most any situation on the fly and make the best of it. Short term campaigns were his specialty.

Darcy was a mechanic at heart. She built things, finessing the details until it was exactly right. And she was a Stark. Starks built things to last.

She’d deftly changed the mood that was threatening to become maudlin. He was glad of that, because Bucky needed to remember the good things about his family too. She tugged him down to the sofa and sat in his lap, while propping her feet on Steve’s thighs. Her ankles were tempting and he drew little circles on them with his thumb.

Curiosity got the best of Bucky, and he set his hands to her arms as if she were made of glass. Steve figured Buck wasn’t quite used to this level of affection from Darcy. Hell, Steve had missed it something awful.

“Okay, Princess, what’s on your mind?”

Flicking a look at Steve, Darcy started, “Last spring, Steve and I had been talking about moving in together, getting a real place of our own. We told you that, I think.”

“You did.”

“How do you feel about me coming to live here with you? That includes all my crap that we just unpacked and my yellow hats, by the way.”

Pretending a nonchalance that Steve saw right through, Bucky rubbed the back of a finger across her shoulder. “I’d like that, Darcy. Punk is fun to live with but I miss you. Can we negotiate on the yellow hats?” he asked slyly.

“Nope.”

“We’ll talk.” He kissed her temple. “How soon?”

“You call.”

“Tonight then. What’s next?”

“Sex.”

He blinked. “I’m good at it.” That was accompanied by a smirk and lazy look that made Steve’s cock twitch (every fucking time).

That prompted a laugh from both Darcy and Steve. Her eyes sparkled as she acknowledged, “So I hear.” She might have been nervous but she had both of their attention when her tongue slicked across red lips. “Next weekend?”

Attempting to be the gentleman, Bucky took the high road. “Darcy, we can give it as long as you want.”

She rolled her eyes. “Saturday then. You and me or the three of us?”

Bucky started to laugh, holding on Darcy so she wouldn’t slide out of his lap. “You sound like
Pepper. The way you negotiate.” He looked across the sofa at Steve, who was doing his best to keep his face neutral. But Bucky could read him far too well. “It’s gonna be the three of us, Princess,” he decided.

“Done,” she agreed. She wound her fingers into the dog tags Bucky wore, playing with the metal. Steve wanted his sketch book and wondered if he was going to have to be like Jane, leaving notebooks everywhere so there was always one in easy reach. Bucky and Darcy were so damned beautiful together. His hard lines and her softness, all dark hair and blue eyes. Her pale lips and his stubble.

“Steve?” Bucky asked. “You in?”

“Of course I’m in, jerk,” he quipped. “But I’m not playing proxy for either one of you. If we’re waiting for Saturday, then we’re all waiting for Saturday.”

Bucky poked his lip out in a pout. If his hands weren’t full of Darcy, Steve knew damned well something would have been thrown at him. “Well shit, Rogers. That wasn’t what I meant. I like sex and I’m finally gettin’ some regular now. An’ we don’t gotta worry about neighbors or nothin’ pokin’ their noses in our business.”

Darcy chuckled, leaning over to run a tongue in Bucky’s ear as he kept talking. “You’re a fucking punk, you know that? And I know damned well I’m gonna have to change the sheets on the bed today ‘cause of you two.”

“Already done,” Darcy snickered. “But I can loan you my vibrator.”

“Which side drawer are you going to keep it in, doll?”

“Whichever side you’re on.”

He let his head sag against the back of the couch in mock frustration. But he was smiling too as he squeezed Darcy in another hug. She let go of the tags and patted his forearm. “Get up, serum-boy. We’re moving my stuff tonight.” Darcy rolled off his lap and reached a hand out (laughably) to both of them, as if to help them up.

“Let punk do it. He’s bigger,” Bucky protested.

“Faster my stuff gets here, the faster I get in my jammies. I’ll wear the pretty ones tonight.”

Raising an eyebrow, Steve prompted, “The blue ones?”

“The blue ones,” she confirmed, her eyes dancing as they shared a secret.

Steve pretended to make a dash for the door. Bucky laughed and was out from under Darcy to beat him there. “That good, huh?” he huffed to Steve.

It was near midnight before they got all her things upstairs. Most of it was stuffed into the spare bedroom for now and it was a good thing most of her kitchen stuff was still packed up, or they would have been at this for another day.

Darcy came to bed in the promised blue pajamas. They were cotton, went all the way down to her
ankles and wrists, and were dotted with Captain America shields all over them. In spite of the lack of anything remotely revealing, she was outrageously cute in them as she crawled in between him and Bucky.

“Rogers, you’re a fucking prick.”

“Noted, Barnes.”

“Gosh, all the love in here just turns me on.”
Leaving Darcy in the shower and Steve to run with Sam that morning, Bucky hauled Barton out of bed and down to the shooting range just before dawn. Safety glasses and ear protection in place, Barton was bleary-eyed, cranky and still a crack shot before his coffee.

When they had emptied a dozen rounds each, he was settled enough to lay his weapon on the table. (Assessing).

Annoyed, Barton sneered, “Fuckin’ hate you right now, Barnes. You’ve pissed off Nat and she won’t come out of her studio. She won’t fuck me ‘cause she’s so fucking mad at whatever you said. Then you drag me out of bed between missions before I’ve had my fucking coffee so you can get your head on straight before you scare the hell out of some baby security guards.”

He crossed his arms and grinned.

Barton’s eyes widened. “You fucking bastard. You did the Natasha thing on purpose.”

“She’ll come to me when she’s ready. And when she does, you’ll want to watch,” he promised.

Clint scratched his head, considering. “Do I have time to change clothes? I want to sit in on your meeting and make faces at you.”

“Nine straight up. Training center on the sixth floor.”

Bucky dressed in the standard Stark Industries blazer and slacks, tailored for easy movement and to keep his weapons discrete. This was a commercial, not a military building, after all. Stark had provided him with a thin flexible glove that made his metal hand look like a flesh one. He didn’t like it and had no intention of wearing it past these meetings. The team would figure out who he was soon enough. But the technology was good to have in any case. Steve introduced him to low boots that he could tuck his knives into and holsters that fit on the inside of his waistband. Nat had a few more hidden tricks for him and now he was comfortably armed.

Darcy (all decked out in her work clothes and the heels that made her almost as tall as he) wished him luck as he geared up. Seeming to understand his mood, she didn’t kiss him. Instead, she took his left hand and laced her fingers with his. “I’d tell you ‘good luck,’ but you don’t need it. I’d tell you that ‘you’ve got this,’ but you already know that. So I’ll say this: Have fun. Don’t do this if you don’t like it. You, of all people, have the right to do only that which brings you joy.”

He was the one who kissed her fingertips and squeezed her hand. He didn’t speak. He didn’t have to.

At any one time, Stark Tower had between one and two hundred security offices on duty. Each floor had at least one guard making rounds, if not several. The first two floors of retail shopping had one or two dozen depending on the time of day, and the security floor was always well staffed.
Guards rotated positions frequently to stay fresh, shifts were kept to six hours and four hours of physical or educational training time was mandatory every week. But guards were assigned to specific floors and encouraged to get to know the tenants by name. Guards could offer self-defense classes to their assigned floors for bonuses and overtime. Tenants who trusted their security team obeyed them better in an emergency.

Hill had a good set up. She’d gutted Stark Industries security and rebuilt it from ground up, screening everyone. Bucky wanted to pull the finest from that to create a specialized team for the lab and Avengers’ floors. The Avengers were bringing in family now, and family had to be protected at all costs.

They met in Hill’s office prior to the briefings. “We’re recording the sessions, as you requested,” she told him.

Barnes nodded. “Good. I’ll be using key words that will prompt any HYDRA agents to give me a signal. With any luck, we’ll be able to finish cleaning house.”

“Sounds good. I’d ask if you were nervous,” she chuckled, “but anyone who led the Howling Commandos doesn’t need a pat on the butt to get out the door.”

“Rogers was the Captain. I was only the Sergeant.”

“I thought we already discussed the part where I don’t like bullshit.”

He smirked. “Yes, ma’am.” Rogers was a good leader now and had picked up military strategy like a duck to water. But especially in those first days, Barnes had quietly guided his best friend. The other Commandos quickly learned that the two of them presented a united front once decisions were made, but more often than not, the two of them worked out their disagreements before Rogers took them before the rest of them. Rather than making the Captain look weak in front of the other Commandos, they respected him for listening to the Sergeant. They didn’t always agree, but they backed each other up. And Rogers was always on the front line to the senior officers.

When the first group arrived, Hill introduced him as Assistant Director James Barnes, former special forces operative in the U.S. Army. “Barnes is in charge of the Tower, ladies and gentleman. From now on, you report directly to him.”

Barton rolled his eyes. Apparently he was well liked by these people, because he’d come in full uniform, shook hands and worked his way to the corner where he sat on top of a table. To the officers, it looked like Hawkeye was the doubting Thomas, there to protect them from the newbie leader. This worked in Barnes’ favor. Without even realizing there was a power play going on, any moles would automatically think of Barnes as the “non-Avenger” and therefore on the opposite side of the playing field—leaving them even more open to the suggestions Barnes was about to drop. Later on, he could use Hawkeye to his advantage in bringing the teams around. But that was later.

For now, he gave a brief rundown of the changes he’d already made and those he intended to make, starting with his desire to create special teams to handle the lab floors. He didn’t mention the residential floors yet, that would come later when he had a better idea of who he could trust. “Our labs are the most frequently targeted areas in the Tower. They are also the most difficult to reach. However, as Stark Industries continues to move further away from weapons technology and into broader areas of green energy and commercial production, we become a greater target for corporate espionage, such as what we saw yesterday. Fortunately, legal is not our problem.” That got a ripple of laughter from the audience.

He continued, leaning against the desk with studied ease, even crossing his ankles for effect. “For
our specialty protection units, we are looking for team players interested in becoming real assets to our organization on a different level. You will be highly trained for this position. I won’t play games here. If you want it, you let me know. If you don’t, it’s no disgrace. But if you are currently assigned to one of these floors and choose not to be part of the specialty unit, you will be reassigned, no exceptions. Sign-up sheets are on the table. Any questions?"

There were a few, easily fielded. When they were done, Barnes stationed himself by the door. “Please, I’d like for you to introduce yourself to me as you go.”

He’d always had a good memory, but the serum gave him damned near a photographic one, so—as he’d been trained by HYDRA—he matched faces to names and recorded them in his memory (skill set) as almost two hundred men and women shook his hand.

Right off the bat, he tagged eleven agents out of this group and mentally filed their names away for later.

By the time lunch rolled around, he had twenty-seven he’d noted. He and Hill took a working lunch and pulled out an additional eight more off the videos. All thirty-five had put their names on the sign-up sheets, giving them reason to view the videos again to check and recheck the other prospective specialty team candidates.

*ping* Sergeant Barnes.

Yes, JARVIS.

*Based on your criteria, I believe I have identified four more officers who are not on your lists.*

Barnes took down the names, checked them against the videos and the sheets, and had to agree with JARVIS’ assessment. “That’s thirty-nine HYDRA agents out of almost five hundred employees.”

Hill tapped her stylus on her tablet. “Twenty-two of those we missed when we cleaned house. The other seventeen are new hires.”

“Still gives us plenty to pick from for our specialty teams. We also can incorporate some of the phrasing into the tests we give newbies. Let’s see what we filter out.”

“How long do you think we have before the codes don’t work anymore?”

Barnes shook his head. “We’ll start cutting the HYDRA agents a few at a time. We’ll change their schedules, isolate them, and then find other things for them to do. Surely we have some remote, low target locations we could send them before we cut them loose. That will buy us time. Maybe a year?” he speculated. “When we quit flagging recruits with the phrases, we’ll know HYDRA changed them. After that, we’re on our own. The longer the agent has been with HYDRA, the more disconnected they are, the longer the codes will work.”

“Then what?” Hill prompted.

“I’ll promote from within. Keep any newbies on the bottom floors for the next ten years until we come up with a better way to identify moles.”

“That’s ambitious.”

“Feel free to come up with a better plan.”

“At this point, I’m good with it.” Hill leveled a look of curiosity at him. “How do you plan to protect
yourself?”

Barnes stripped off the glove. “At this point, Rogers and I are targets mostly for the properties of the serum, which, as far as anyone knows, hasn’t been replicated.”

“Why not?”

He raised an eyebrow. Most people were too wary to bring it up. “We don’t know. Mine didn’t restructure my body that much, but physically I’m a close match to Rogers in ability. Banner assures me the serum can’t be acquired via a blood transfusion. It’s been tried too many times and has never succeeded.”

“He would know.”

“Yes. I think he would. Which leaves us with creating a new serum from scratch. Banner wasn’t entirely successful, and if Zola managed it, he’s never used it on anyone else. Romanoff has confirmed that to my satisfaction.” Barnes checked his phone. “I’ve got an appointment in an hour. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. Good job, Barnes.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He almost saluted her, nodded instead, but the pivot was more natural than not.

*****

It’s been quite some time since Captain America has out and about town with his girlfriend, Darcy Lewis, but they were seen exchanging a rather steamy kiss in a Midtown café this weekend. Lewis is a senior administrator at Stark Industries, where presumably the two of them met. Although neither party has officially confirmed their relationship, we have to wonder if wedding bells are in the future for the couple who have been dating off and on for almost three years now. And that’s all we have tonight. I’m Georgia Cates, and you’ve been watching Entertainment Now.

###

“Senior administrator, my ass,” Darcy grumbled as she peered at her laptop. “Someday soon, they are going to get the shock of their lives and I’m going to rub all of their noses in it.” She had set up her computer on the kitchen table in the apartment. (Thumbs up for the view. Thumbs down for needing to concentrate for any extended period of time. Her lady parts were not happy with Steve’s manifesto for the next five days.)

Steve was making up batches of spaghetti sauce, enough for dinner and some to freeze. “What’s that?”

“Oh, JARVIS found a blurb on the television last night. Someone took a picture of us over coffee this weekend.”

“I know I should be used to that by now,” he remarked. “But I’m not.”
“You should. Get used to it I mean. It’s not a good thing to harbor the illusion we have privacy anywhere but the Tower. I just wish they would get my occupation right. VP of R&D, folks. It’s not hard. At least the real journalists get it right, most of the time.” Annoyed, she shut the tab down on the browser.

“Darce—you’ve said a couple of times now that you’re planning to come out of hiding. What’s on your mind?”

“The board is beginning to drop hints to Mom about succession planning for Stark Industries. They don’t know I exist, and since neither Tony Stark nor Pepper Potts has produced any visible progeny, they’re beginning to wonder who will inherit the company in the event of Tony’s demise.”

“Do you have to tell them?”

“Yes and no. Dad still owns Stark Industries at the end of the day. Only twenty percent of the stock has been sold and that was by my great-granddad, Isaac, which is why we have a board in the first place. Dad’s been trying to buy back the rest of the stock for years, but those who have it aren’t stupid enough to sell. Once in a while, when the board gets a bug up their ass, they’ll make noises about it in public. Since we heavily invest in new technology, the last thing we want to do is make our researchers or buyers nervous. It’s a media circus and we all tiptoe around each other. The board doesn’t want to shake the confidence in Stark Industries or the stock price will drop. Sometimes though, it’s the only leverage they have.”

Steve had a quizzical expression as he stood in front of the stove with a wooden spoon in his hand. “You know, I think I understood all that.”

“Then you’re getting better.” She blew kissy faces at him. “Makes all those Business 101 books I made you read worth it.”

“Maybe.” He gave the sauce another stir.

She shut her laptop. “Fun and games are over for me. Now I get to be the grown up and go talk to Sam before I go in the office.”

“Like that?” He winked at her bare feet. She was already dressed, but had set her shoes by the front door.

“Unfortunately not. Mom’s dress code includes Louboutins.”

Steve didn’t exactly keep his hands virtuously to himself when he kissed her sweetly and wished her a good day. (Just for that, she and Bucky were definitely going first, no doubt about it.)

Pepper complimented her as she walked in after her session with Sam (easier than she thought, but homework? really?). “You look chipper.”

“Never overestimate the power of a decent night’s sleep between a couple of very hunky guys.”

“Mmmm. Sounds nice. No bad dreams?”

There was never any point in lying to her mother. She lifted a shoulder, dismissing them. “Always. But I was able to go back to sleep. It’s a step.” She rounded the desk to Pepper’s side. “So what’s on slate for today?”

“First round of budget meetings start next week.”
“I quit. I’ll be back after Thanksgiving.”

“Now you sound like Tony.”

“Oooh, dirty threat. Okay, which divisions are you giving me this year?”

****

Bucky changed out of his uniform, opting for slacks and a nice shirt for his appointment. He liked the way the tailored shirt sat on his shoulders. “Third time today I’ve changed clothes,” he grumbled.

“You’ve always been a clothing fiend,” Steve said good-naturedly. “I don’t recognize half of what you’re putting in my part of the closet.”

“Not my fault your default mode is ‘grandpa.’”

“I like my plaids. And before you throw them out, you might want to see the way Darcy looks when she borrows them to wear around the house. You want a sandwich before we go?”

“No. I think I need to do this on an empty stomach.” He tucked his hands in his pockets, unsure of this, though he’d considered all the alternatives and decided on this course of action.

Steve laid a hand on his back. “That I understand.”

They borrowed a black SUV from Tony’s garage and drove to one of the older Catholic churches on the outskirts of Brooklyn. Father Daniel Keene waited outside the chapel for them. He looked to be their real age and hadn’t a hair on his head–and shook Steve’s hand with a delighted smile and eyes that spoke of an old soul.

“Father Keene,” Steve greeted him.

“Captain. Is this new kid?”

Bucky snickered and held out his own hand. “Father.”

“Come on in.”

The chapel was part of an old stone church with more than a hundred years of frankincense steeped into its pores. Some smells don’t change and Bucky remembered this one from his youth. Steve went into the confessional first while Bucky took to the worn wooden pew. He cleared his mind, and studied the artwork and statues along the walls.

When it was his turn, Steve clamped a hand on his shoulder before he went in.

Without really looking at him, Bucky said in a low voice. “I’m gonna be a while, Steven.”

“I know. I’m not going anywhere.”
Bucky went inside the little room, where the space between him and the priest was blocked by a wooden wall with slats in it. In theory, a person would have anonymity, but his was a special case and required the services of a particular kind of priest.

He could have sat on the chair. He could have taken the well-padded kneeler. Instead, he opted for the stone floor. “In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Santi.” He crossed himself as he spoke, and then listened as the priest said a short prayer and was invited to begin.

There, on his knees, he made his confession. Of the lives he’d taken in the service of the U.S. Army. Of those he’d taken as the Winter Soldier. Sometimes his words were in English. Mostly it was in Russian.

He spoke of the fall from the train. Of the experimentation at Zola’s hands. Of the targets he’d been given and the punishments doled out when he rebelled. He spoke of the cryofreeze and the pain. He explained in detail how the chair wiped his will and his mind.

Then he told of the Red Room. Of Natalia.

It was here, and only here, that he would ever speak of those terrible days in their entirety. Of the brutal punishments and training that had come before. Of the demand for him to train others. The selection process. Of the girls who had failed. Of the one who didn’t.

For one single year, he’d been kept out of cryofreeze to train her. In that year, he’d created an assassin of exquisite capability. In that year, he’d found something extraordinary.

He told, in exact detail, what he’d done to her. He left nothing out, not the hideous brutality, or the way he’d locked himself away to survive it. He spoke of the mind wipes and the punishments that followed. How he had hunted her in blind obedience until she was deemed loyal. How he had hunted her when she wasn’t.

He spoke of those last days before Steve pulled him out of hell.

When he ran out of words, the priest prompted him to speak of his life since that moment on the bridge.


And the priest asked him what he feared.

The answer was far too easy.

When he was done, he waited in silence for whatever penance the priest would order him. He anticipated a lifetime of service as reparation for what he’d done.

What he heard wasn’t what he was expecting.

“I apologize, soldier, that we, as a human race, failed you for so terribly long. There is no penance, for you have already paid it. Your actions in the war were in the service to your people, in spite of all that was done to you even then. Your actions under your abusers were born not of rage, or hatred, but for survival. That you saved even one out of the darkness is the small miracle. That you are still capable of giving love in spite of all that was done to you is the great miracle.

“This, then, is your duty. It is a simple one and yet the most complex. Allow yourself to receive love freely, without condition, for the rest of your life, soldier.”
There were other things said—prayers, instructions for his faith, and affirmations. But James Buchanan Barnes could only let the priest’s words tumble through his mind again and again. *I apologize.*

*****

Steve’s knees ached when Bucky finished. He’d kept vigil for his best friend for just shy of three hours, hoping Bucky could find some kind of peace.

Bucky couldn’t speak, not with eyes that red and the look of someone who’d wept for hours. He knelt at a pew for just a moment, crossed himself and nodded toward the chapel door. They walked side by side through the parking lot, shoulders touching, until they got in the car.

“Fuck, I wish Darcy didn’t mind smoking so much. I could use a cigarette right now,” Bucky choked out.

“We can stop if you want,” Steve offered.

“No. I’d rather hold both of you and watch something stupid on TV tonight.”

“We can do that.”

By the time they got home, it was clear that Bucky had developed a blinding headache (how long since the last one?). Darcy got the electric blanket warmed up and Steve stripped him down to get him under the covers. They took turns rubbing his back and head until the worst of the pain passed.

When he came around enough, they moved to the sofa, where Steve put his head in Bucky’s lap and Darcy leaned against his other side with her head on his shoulder. They watched baseball as the World Series came to an end.

Bucky’s hand ruffled his hair, or skidded across his shirt, tugging it up so they were flesh to flesh. From this angle, he could see how often Bucky pressed a kiss against Darcy’s temple, or sniffed her hair, and nuzzled her neck. Darcy played with his fingers, stroking the metal of his hand.

Steve felt something in himself unwind. Whatever had happened in that little room, perhaps Bucky had found absolution.

Darcy and Steve flanked Bucky that night in bed. Darcy slept on her stomach, with Bucky’s metal hand resting on her back. Steve curved his arm over the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

*A/N* The Rite/Sacrament of Reconciliation has changed quite a bit since the 30's and 40's. Then, all confessions were made anonymously in small rooms with a partition and a doors on either side. The priest sits on one side and penitents come and go from the other side. In the modern era, one can choose to either face the priest or make an anonymous confession in this manner. In addition, prayers are no longer in Latin.
Confessions made to a priest during a formal rite of reconciliation are protected by statutory law in the U.S. and U.K. (just like client-attorney/solicitor privilege). However, a priest may choose not to offer penance (forgiveness) to law-breakers until they have turned themselves into the legal authorities. Current church and U.S./U.K. court law holds that disclosures made outside the formal rite are not protected and priests (like teachers and caregivers) are then legally responsible to report certain illegal acts to the authorities.

Companion piece to this chapter from Fr. Keene's perspective:

Ice and Fire: Recompense
Chapter Summary

A/N Still astonished by the reception of the last chapter. Thank you for everyone's comments.

I swear I'm not dragging this out. I just have a tiny (okay, maybe three chapters worth) bit of stuff that our trio has to do this "week" in the story. It's a big week, but Saturday is coming soon enough.

Darcy woke, not from nightmares this time, but from the inevitable cramps that came around once a month. She tried to ignore the ache but eventually they drove her out of bed. She eased out from under Bucky’s arm. He started to tighten it, but she patted his forearm and he let go, muttering a little as he rolled to his back. Steve automatically adjusted to tug Bucky a little closer so that they were curled around each other.

But he raised his head. “Darce?”

She reached over to pat his hand too where it rested on Bucky’s chest now. “Just cramps.”

“Okay, doll.”

After dating this long, Steve knew the drill. She would take a couple of Motrin and read her tablet for a half hour or so until the worse of the ache eased, and then she would come back to bed. Given the way things were going with the three of them, she had decided to keep taking her birth control pills this month. She might not have a regular period this time, but that didn’t mean she ducked the cramps and all that for a day or two anyway.

Steve had surprised her early on in their relationship with his aplomb regarding the actual workings of the female anatomy. Apparently, he’d learned more than just sex tips while traveling with the USO. Not only that, guys in the army get bored enough to talk about anything at all.

Both men been fascinated with the birth control pill and all of the modern options of dealing with periods. (“No belt?” Darcy actually had to look that one up. What. The. Fuck.)

In any case, Bucky didn’t seem to mind Darcy’s tendency to move around at night. He adjusted to her changing positions, and if he awakened whenever she needed to get up, it wasn’t for long. Steve was the opposite. He anchored down his spot, but snapped awake whenever she breathed wrong. (Of course, if she didn’t have nightmares, he would sleep more soundly, she supposed.)

She hit the bathroom cabinet for the Motrin and the kitchen for a glass of water. Downing them, she refilled her glass again.

The flicker of lightning through the windows did not prepare her for the sizzle and crack of the violent bolt that struck the Tower itself.
At the sound of shattering glass, Bucky and Steve rolled off opposite sides of the bed and came up armed. Bucky went low, Steve went high as they both scanned the room and paused at the doorway.

“Where’s Darce—‘ Bucky demanded.

“Kitchen, I think.”

They found her kneeling on the floor, surrounded by water and glass, shaking as the lightning storm rippled over the Tower.

“Damn.” Handing the gun to Bucky, in three long steps, Steve crouched in front of her. He ignored the shards as he took her face in his hands. “Darcy, you’re safe. It’s just a storm.” Then he paused, “JARVIS? Will you confirm?”

“Yes, Captain. The outflow boundary of a cold front came through seven minutes ago. The expected duration of the storm is forty-two minutes. I would not discount the possibly of additional lightning strikes to the Tower or other buildings nearby,” JARVIS answered.

“Darcy?” Steve called her name. She blinked, though her attention was wholly focused on the windows. He shifted around to block her view. “Darcy, I’m here. Look at me. Breathe, doll.”

She didn’t cry when she came back to herself, she never did. But she shuddered as she stood up with his help, her hands and knees dotted with glass and blood. “Steve?” she called out softly, as if he wasn’t standing right in front of her.

Out of his peripheral vision, he saw Bucky drop towels over the worst of the broken water cup. Steve pulled Darcy to his chest, rubbing her spine in long strokes. “I’m here. Bucky’s here. Will you let me get you to him?”

She flinched as the lighting sizzled and flashed again. Steve swiftly lifted her out of the circle of glass and passed her to Bucky, who held her close through the roll of thunder that reverberated through the Tower. When it grew quiet again, Bucky set her on the nearest chair so that he could examine her knees and hands.

“You with me, Princess?” She nodded. “Good. Steve can sit next to you while I pick the glass out.”

Another flash of lighting was followed by a tremendous crack of sound, and Darcy went to cover her face. Bucky snapped his hands out to catch her wrists before she could scratch herself with the glass embedded in her palms. “No, doll. We’ve got you. You’re safe.”

How many times had they told Bucky the same thing? Steve pulled Darcy into his lap outright, holding her in place as she shook.

“I didn’t—I didn’t used to b—be scared of—lightning,” she stammered. “Shouldn’t be. It’s—it’s stupid.”

As Bucky held onto Darcy’s hand to pick out a splinter, Steve coaxed, “Your best friend is dating the God of Thunder. He tends to attract a nuisance element. It’s understandable.”

That made Darcy chuckle in spite of herself and the shaking went down a notch. Steve slid a hand down her arm and back up again. “When did this start, love?”

He was a little relieved when she answered, “F-first time.”
Bucky looked over her hands carefully after wiping them down with alcohol. “Can you feel anything else?”

She shook her head as she lightly rubbed them together and prodded at the flesh for any little splinters. Antiseptic cream and a couple of adhesive bandages covered the places that still bled.

What was on her knees wasn’t anything to worry about. Bucky fished out two small pieces and gave them a good cleanup.

“Feel—feel like I’m five again. Gonna kiss my boo boos and tell me they’re all better?” Darcy challenged Bucky, though her voice was shaky and she still leaned on Steve’s shoulder. (Did he mention he loved her moxy?)

He would swear that before that moment, Bucky’s eyes were ice gray. But when black lashes lifted, accompanied by an absolutely sensual smirk, those same irises were the darkest of blues. Those damned pink lips hovered over each knee, feathering kisses over them until Darcy shivered for an entirely different reason. “Anytime, Princess.”

Sliding a hand down her calf, he tilted his head. “I need to look at your feet, doll.” A brief look, a pass of his hand across the sole. He did the same with the other, and frowned when he did.

“What’s that?” Steve asked.

Bucky plucked out an inch long shard and dropped it on the towel with the other pieces. Then he pressed gauze and tape to Darcy’s foot to stop the bleeding. “That’s all of it. But this one might hurt tomorrow.” He raised an eyebrow at Steve. “Gimme your feet, punk. I know you heal, but let me pull the glass out anyway.”

It didn’t take but a minute for Bucky to work the slivers out of his feet and wipe them down. They had already stopped bleeding and would be healed over in another quarter hour.

As the storm passed, Darcy pulled herself together, her cheeks flushed as she complained, “I am not liking this, guys. All I want is a decent night’s sleep and I don’t like waking both of you.”

“We’ll get there, doll,” Steve promised.

Bucky stood up, pulling Darcy to her feet and into a quick hug. “You okay?”

Nodding, she balanced on the balls of her feet and tip-toed to the bedroom.

Bucky looked back at the kitchen, and Steve shook his head. “I’ll clean it up in the morning. It’s not going anywhere.”

“If you’re good, I’m good,” he said as he got in bed. This time, Darcy got the middle.

It wasn’t an easy night at all. Darcy gave up trying to sleep just before four. She made it to the hallway outside their door before Steve caught up with her.

Frustrated, he stopped her with a hand to her arm. “Where are you going?”

“Just to my lab. I don’t want to fight it anymore tonight.”

Steve skimmed his fingers along her wrists. “What about this? I promised I would.”

“Yeah, and we agreed we would wait until Saturday.”
“It’s not the same thing,” he disagreed. “If you need it—“

Darcy sagged just a little. “I’ll be fine. Bucky’s been triggered enough tonight. He doesn’t need anything else and I’m not going to be able to relax thinking about that.” She rubbed her arms. “Honestly, it’s half the reason I’m awake now, worrying that I’ll make it worse.”

“You won’t.”

But she shook her head stubbornly. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

Steve leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed. “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to work, Darcy.” He sort of looked down at the floor and then straight at her.

“I know.” She reached for him, to burrow her head into his chest. “I’m so tired, I don’t know what else to do,” she admitted.

His hand came down on her hair to hold her there. “Tell you what, doll, Bucky will be up in a couple of hours anyway. Maybe we can try again then.”

“Okay.” She kissed him and looked forlorn as she went off to the elevator.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Will you—will you let me know if anything happens?” He paused. “Damn, never mind. It’s not right to ask you to spy on your sister.”

JARVIS was quick to assure him. “Captain, if there is any further cause for concern, I will keep you informed.”

Steve leaned against the wall, tilting his head back in frustration. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” JARVIS dropped his voice to quietly add, “She is trying, Captain.”

“I know, J, I know.”

As the sun came up, he and Bucky stopped at the coffee shop across the way from Tower on the way back from their morning run. Bucky went on up to shower for work, and Steve headed for Darcy’s floor to check on her and drop her coffee off before it got cold.

Pepper was there, standing in the doorway to Darcy’s lab. She flicked Steve a look and motioned him to stay where he was. “Darcy, I know you love this company, but Stark Industries can survive without you getting up at four in the morning to check the email. I assure you, that barring a major catastrophe of which JARVIS will be happy to disclose, not much happens between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m.”

“It’s distracting and gives me something to do.”

“You used to do lab work when you needed a distraction, and why are you limping?”

“I dropped a glass on the floor this morning and thought it would be a good idea to find all the pieces
with my bare feet. I’m fine, Mom.”

“How early this morning?” Pepper asked shrewdly. “Do I need to ask JARVIS?”

He could hear the frustration in Darcy’s voice. “Okay, I’m not that bad that you need him to tattle on me.”

“I heard about London, Darcy Stark, and you still have circles under your eyes.”

“Mom, I’ve tried everything. I’m exhausted, okay? I want to sleep. I’ve got two gorgeous guys to snuggle up to and I still can’t make it two hours without waking up. I can’t do lab work because I’m so tired it’s not safe. I’m so twitchy a stupid thunderstorm did me in last night. At least SI work is paperwork and reports. I can do that. And before you ask, yes, I’m talking to Sam. And no, I don’t want medication—tried that, not doing it again.”

Pepper crossed her arms. “You know, the difference between you and your dad is that Tony never wanted to work the business and I can’t get you to stop. I can’t believe I’m saying this to anyone with the last name of Stark, but I’m locking you out of SI for the next three days. Get some sleep, Darcy. Play in your lab. Go do something fun with your boyfriends. I don’t need you in the office until Friday, got it?”

“Mom!”

“It’s either that or I’m sending you to the lake house in Seattle where you can’t do a damned thing except listen to it rain.” Pepper pretended to see Steve this time. “Steve’s here with your coffee. JARVIS? Please restrict Darcy’s access to company business, barring emergencies, of course.”

“Already done, Ms. Potts.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

Steve crossed the room, kissing her on the proffered cheek. “Good morning, Pepper.”

“Do I have a say in this?” Darcy demanded from where she was sitting at her now-blank workstation.

Pepper patted Steve on the hollow of his shoulder. “She’s all yours. Good luck.” Her heels clicked as she crossed the lab to the elevator.

“Thanks, I think,” he called as she retreated.

Darcy looked ragged and reached for the coffee he held out with something like desperation. She drank down half of it before she took a breath. “Oh god, thank you.”

“Don’t,” he warned with a kiss to her hair. “It’s decaf. I’m taking you back to bed, doll. For all I care, you’re spending the next week in pajamas while we figure this out.”

She started to protest but he held his hand up. “Give me a chance to help, even if it means a lot more sleepless nights. Come home.”

He got her to sleep by holding her wrists far more firmly than usual. “You’re safe, doll. I’ve got you,” he whispered again and again. It wasn’t for more than an hour and a half, but it was something.
At Pepper’s request, Bucky cut his day short, came home and dragged Darcy to the sofa for a short nap that probably did him more good than her. But she liked the way he put his face in her hair and his breath warmed her neck under the quilt Steve dumped on top of them. Bucky got her to slide a corner of the blanket between her cheek and metal of his arm. (“This arm can’t fall asleep,” he’d reminded her.) He pulled her shirt up just enough that he could wrap his other arm around her middle. It was intimate and really, really nice. (He snored in her ear. She elbowed him to get him to stop.)

For the rest of the day, the pair of them drove her batty. (Why was this a good idea? No sexy times and two of them nagging her?) One of them hid her laptop (she was betting on Bucky, but Steve had a gleam in his eye). She still had her phone and tablet but JARVIS kept SI stuff on lockdown. (The last time JARVIS had done that, she’d won the hacking battle and broke the phone in the process. She wasn’t interested in a Pyrrhic victory this time.)

To keep her distracted, they set up house. The three of them traded around furniture (okay, the guys moved it. Super-serum, you know. She wasn’t breaking a nail.), either fitting hers in, or mixing it up so that half the stuff in the apartment was hers. They put her bed in the spare bedroom and sent the other one, along with several other pieces that weren’t needed, to wherever Pepper stored extra stuff. Not that she’d been sleeping in it lately, but hey, it was something she’d purchased with her own money. Her lab went back to being a lab and an empty floor. Bucky rearranged the closets three times until they were to his satisfaction. Her yellow knit caps disappeared.

Her art was hung on the walls with Steve’s drawings. Tony had a fit when he stopped in to nag his daughter and saw Darcy’s ultra-modern décor next to Steve’s antiques. The apartment took on an eclectic look, and Bucky seemed to have a knack for adding just the right picture frame or a stack of books here and there that made it work.

They sorted out the kitchen stuff in one long evening over pizza and beer. When Steve and Darcy held up two of the same appliances, Bucky made the final call as to which one was kept. The rest of it was boxed up and donated.

She loved every second of it.

It was as if she and Steve were picking up their relationship again where it had been interrupted last spring, but with a sexy-as-all-fuck bonus addition.

That night was the worst nightmare yet (a weird twist on Malekith in London with the Aether and her dad flying into the red darkness with a missile). When she screamed in her sleep, Bucky rolled off the bed, taking her to the floor and coming up armed, using the bed for cover. She woke with him holding his hand over her mouth to silence her. He guarded her with his own body, balancing on his toes as he searched for threats.

JARVIS overrode the electrical systems to bring up the lights and ordered him to put down the weapon. Darcy reached for Bucky’s wrist and held on as he flicked the safety button and passed the semi-automatic to Steve.

His eyes were still ice grey as he eased away from Darcy and helped her back into bed. She couldn’t stop shaking until she had both Steve and Bucky pressed up against her. She stayed awake until dawn and staggered down to Sam’s office an hour early.
On Wednesday, Steve’s phone rang with the details for a mission. He sent Nat, Clint and Thor, citing the latter’s increasing boredom as an excuse to stay home. He kept the team on the com and ran the op from Hill’s office. But he was home that night and they watched Invasion of the Body Snatchers to Bucky’s delight and Steve’s groans.

Bucky touched her all the time now. When he discovered she liked sitting on top of him or Steve, her butt rarely connected to the sofa cushions. Steve seemed amused, though he wasn’t above wedging himself in between them when he decided he’d been neglected long enough. He propped his feet on Bucky’s lap and pulled Darcy to lie on top of him while they watched the movie. Darcy discovered Bucky wasn’t too bad at foot rubs that way.

That night was better, though she had a firm discussion with both of them about appropriate places to stash weapons when she lost her pillow under the bed and came up with Bucky’s sidearm instead.

Maybe it was foot rub, maybe it was therapy, maybe it was her brain finally turning off for once, but she slept eight straight. Steve told her that Bucky kept waking up to make sure she was breathing and finally changed sides so he could keep his left hand on her waist. (Good use of his sensors. And she didn’t miss the part that Steve was waking up too.)

Thursday, well, Thursday wasn’t easy for any of them.

On the average day, Steve was out the door just after five a.m. for his morning run. But instead of coming back to bed and indulging in a couple of orgasms with her before work (pre-Bucky, just sayin’), Bucky would scoot over and tuck her underneath him while they went back to sleep. Not that she minded. She’d discovered, very, very quickly, that she liked being cuddled that way. Which was nice. But after three days of this, she was horny as all fuck by the time Bucky took off for his morning workout. Steve usually joined him there, leaving Darcy a little bit of privacy while she showered and dressed for the day. (Though Bucky would wait impatiently if she was dragging ass getting out of bed, and JARVIS swore he’d snitch if she tried sleeping by herself.) In any case, given her mom’s decree on not working, she decided to get her coffee in the Commons. Clint and Sam liked sharing a cup or two there in the mornings. Sam was good company, and Clint was too, after he woke up anyway.

She was expecting Clint to be snarly. She wasn’t expecting why.

“I hate Barnes,” he growled.

“That’s generic. Want to put a reason to it?”

“He’s got Nat in a fucking tizzy. Ever seen an ex-Russian assassin in a tizzy?”

Sam and Darcy exchanged grins. “No, can’t say that I have,” Darcy admitted.

“He insults her, threatens to train her, and then tells her he can do nothing for her. She spends hours now working on her form. All week, barring the missions, she’s been stalking the training room in the mornings at their usual time and Barnes won’t show up to spar with her.”

“He’s been getting up,” Darcy noted.

“He drags my ass to the firing range. He spars with Rogers. Or Thor. He lifts weights with flyboy over here.” Clint jerked a thumb in Sam’s direction. “He runs. He wishes Nat a good day and goes on about his business.” He drank down the entire cup of coffee and went over to the pot to pour another one. “You want to know the worst part?”
Of course, she did. “Maybe?”

Clint gave her a dirty look. “If I have to suffer, you have to suffer. So listen up.”

“Okay.”

“He told me this would happen. I think he knows her better than I do.” He was morose as he said it and Darcy could see the faint edges of jealousy there.

Because Clint didn’t have parents and only a messed up brother he hadn’t laid eyes on in a decade for family, sometimes he missed basic parent-child dynamics. Consequently, he was always fascinated by Darcy and Tony’s relationship.

Knowing all that, she reassured him, “Yeah, well, my parents can get me to do things other people can’t, Clint. She’s no different.”

The light dawned. “She calls him ‘Teacher’.”

“There you go. Now you know why I wanted to move out of the Tower in the first place.”

“She has something to prove to her teacher and he won’t let her. So she’s pushing herself far harder than he ever could.” He whistled under his breath. “I still hate him.”

“Want me to talk to him?” (Please say, “No.”)

“No,” Clint turned his cup around. “Nat needs the challenge. Barnes was right about that. He makes me better too.” He sipped his coffee, settled now that he understood what was between Nat and Barnes.

(Whew.) Sam winked at Darcy. Nice job, he mouthed at her.

She tilted her head. “Do we have another appointment today?”

“At ten.”

“I thought therapists weren’t supposed to have personal relationships with their clients.”

“I thought therapists were supposed to have offices with regular hours and non-superpowered clients.”

“Touche”

“I think we’re all pretty good about drawing the lines we need to draw. If that ever changes, we’ll stop and I’ll find you guys someone new.” Sam shrugged. “In the meantime, I’m getting my PhD and I’m writing a hell of a thesis. Which, of course, will be classified, so defending it is going to be a challenge, but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “I know someone.”

“Who?” Sam asked.

“Charles Xavier.”

Sam whistled, low and slow. “Yeah, I guess he’d do.”

“I’ll drop him an email.”
“Did I mention I’m coming up in this world?”

“Once or twice.”

After meeting with Sam, she sat at the kitchen bar, reading through the homework he’d given her. She’d studied about PTSD when she’d started dating Steve. He certainly dealt with it and Bucky was a poster child for it. But she’d never thought it applied to her.

Bucky breezed in, looking for lunch, as she paged through the third chapter.

One might envision that Bucky and Darcy were putting the whole sex thing on hold this week as they rearranged their lives yet again.

(Fuck. No.) There he went, trailing fingers upward along her bare arms, ending with pulling her hair aside to kiss her neck from the nape to just under her ear. He’d been doing stuff like this all week, little one-offs where he would touch her, kiss her, and then back away to keep the pressure off.

Steve hadn’t been any fucking help at all and wasn’t delivering any kind of goods to anyone at all, except for prim kisses and hugs. He’d crossed his arms that second afternoon and told them both to figure it out.

Which meant the UST had been thick enough to wade through this week.

And just like that, she snapped, turning around in her chair to push into Bucky’s arms and plant a good one right on his mouth. Her hands went to his shirt and she yanked it out of his waistband to get her hands on his abs. Yeah, those. He fucking hissed (yep, that was the one, check that box) when she scored her nails down the ripples and dipped a thumb into his belly button.

“Darcy—“

“You started it.” She pressed her lips to his stomach and licked a line up to one of his very perky little nipples. She licked that too and flicked it lightly with a finger nail.

“Damn—“

She sat up, crossing her arms. “Is there a problem?”

Bucky wasn’t smirking now. He was stunned and babbling just a little. “Hell, yeah. I have a briefing in twenty minutes.”

Darcy pursed her lips, considering. “Perhaps not.” She turned around in her chair and went back to reading her homework. “James?”

“Yes, Princess?” He rounded the table and opened the fridge for one of the sandwiches Steve made up by the dozens.

“And from now on, don’t start anything you aren’t prepared to finish.” She didn’t look up from her book, but she was aware of Bucky holding perfectly still with a long look in her direction.

“Roger that,” he affirmed. (Damn it, why did his voice have to ooze smoke and sex and make her want to crawl into it and wallow for a while. Not. Fucking. Fair.)
She felt a tiny bit better when she peeked through her lashes and discovered Bucky was distracted enough to not quite know what to do with his sandwich. So she plucked it out of his hands and unwrapped the plastic for him. “Hungry?”

“Yes.” (That answer had at least three layers to it and, nope, she wasn’t touching it right now.) He seemed to get a hold of himself after that and sat down next to her. “Is that mine?” he asked, tilting his head to look at the pages.

“No. Sam gave it to me today. Said it should help me understand why I’m having nightmares.” She picked up her pencil and tapped it on the table. “I know all this stuff. I just didn’t think it applied to me.”

“From what Steve and Thor tell me, you have plenty of reasons it should. I figured one of the reasons you had such a rough time in London was because that’s where the shit went down with Malekith.”

Darcy stopped tapping to give him a dumbfounded look. “Where’s my dunce cap when I need it.”

She shook her head. “No. I’ve been there so many times I didn’t think there was a connection. Shit.” She wrapped her arms around her middle and pressed her forehead to the table. “I want to throw up just thinking of it.”

Bucky soothed her with a hand in her hair. “Explains a lot. Breathe. Drink some water.” He passed her his own glass and waited until she got some of it down.

It was hard not to compare her version of PTSD (occasional nightmares) to Steve’s (tendency to depression and/or the occasional bad night) or Bucky’s (where’s the list when she needs it), but Sam had warned her about that.

So … she accepted Bucky’s sweet caress and didn’t minimize her feelings. And she did feel better. When she lifted her head, he dropped his hand to her cheek to rub his thumb along the curve. Then he kissed her hand and went back to eating his sandwich.

“Darce, there’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“You can ask. Answers might cost,” she sassed.

He rolled his eyes. “I forget, sometimes, that my left hand isn’t flesh and blood. I touch you with it, just like I did now. You don’t seem to mind. Does it?”

“It’s your hand. Of course I don’t mind.”

He studied his fingers. “I know it gets cold sometimes, and it’s not exactly soft.”

Darcy leveled a look at him. “Really? Are you not aware of how of cold my hands and feet get? News flash, winter is only a couple of months away, and boy, are you in for a treat.” She reached for his hand and kissed the palm. “James, I fell in love holding your hand. This hand. Okay?”

His face softened. “Okay.”

She squeezed it one more time before picking up her pencil again. “Which means I either really like you, or I have a metal and ass kink like nobody’s business.”

“Knowing you as I do? The answer is both.” Bucky smirked, not the smart-ass one, but the sexy one that left his eyes at half-mast and smoldering. (Smoldering? What was she in? A fucking romance novel?)
The boys must have been tag-teaming again because Steve rolled in as Bucky headed out. Which was fine, she wanted a nap and they were insistent on sticking around for that. (Steve pulled a Cap on her for that one. The soldier backed it up. And damned if that didn’t make Darcy feel all warm and fuzzy inside.)

But she didn’t get one that day. Before Bucky got out the door, Tony was there, looking just a little bit shattered. Before she could go to him, he blurted, “Get dressed. All of you. Helicopter’s waiting.” He looked down at Darcy and put his arm around her shoulder. “Aunt Peggy has taken a turn and we need to go. She’s lucid enough and the family’s come in.”

*****

The lump rose in Steve’s throat. He hadn’t seen Peggy since just before Bucky came home. Stark wagged his fingers at them, flustered when they weren’t moving fast enough. “Go. Get dressed. Be at the chopper in five.”

Clint was at the controls. Tony and Darcy held hands all the way through the ninety minute flight. Bucky had his knee up against Steve’s in wordless comfort. Pepper kept her composure, though she kept an eye on Tony. Stark was a wreck, something Steve hadn’t known was possible. Uncharacteristically silent, he wove and unwove his fingers with Darcy’s. She had an expression that meant she wouldn’t dare cry right now.

Peggy’s building had a landing pad close by, so it wasn’t long before they filed into her DC house. Steve always liked coming here, liked seeing the evidence of the life she’d led.

He was in for a surprise when Darcy went straight to Sharon Carter and gave her a long hug. “Thanks for calling us,” she said. (He was beginning to think that Darcy knew everyone.)

Sharon patted her shoulders, holding on tightly. “Aunt Peggy would have had a field day with me if I didn’t.”

Tony tugged at Darcy, insisting she make the rounds with him, and Pepper. Unsure of the protocol, Steve waited in the front entry, Bucky keeping behind him and to his right.

With the poise that marked her as one of the better agents, Sharon held out her hand to Steve. “Captain Rogers. I want to apologize for … for everything.”

“No need, Miss Carter. We were doing our jobs, right?” That came out a little more cynical than he wanted, but she didn’t take offense.

Instead, she smiled bitterly. “I thought I was.”

“No need, Miss Carter. We were doing our jobs, right?” That came out a little more cynical than he wanted, but she didn’t take offense.

Instead, she smiled bitterly. “I thought I was.”

“There’s a lot of that sentiment going around,” he agreed.

Gratified by his reply, Sharon glanced over her shoulder to Tony and Darcy. “Stark brought you here. That was nice. Aunt Peggy will be glad to see you.” She wrinkled her nose. “It’s strange to think that if things were different, you might have been my uncle, Captain.”

From behind him, Bucky snorted. “Trust me, she got the better end of the deal.”

Sharon leaned over to look around Steve, who shrugged. “First, it’s Steve, not Captain. Second, I,
uh, brought someone with me. I’d like to introduce you to my boyfriend.”

Shocked, Sharon flushed four shades of pink. “Oh, heavens. I’m so sorry for jumping to conclusions. I’d heard the stories and I should know better than to believe everything I hear. I’d love to meet your boyfriend.”

Impressed by her speedy recovery (she was good), he shifted so Bucky could step up to his side. “Well, the stories aren’t entirely wrong. In any case, Sharon, this is James Barnes. Bucky, I’d like to introduce Peggy’s youngest niece, Sharon Carter. We worked together at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Bucky shook her hand, expertly turning it over to kiss her knuckles. “As beautiful as her aunt.”


From behind, Darcy inserted a hip between him and Bucky, taking both their arms. “Oh good, you’ve met. Sharon, do you like my boyfriends?”

With all of the nonchalance that Phil Coulson ever demonstrated, Sharon looked between the three of them. “Boyfriends. Plural.” She studied Bucky for a little while longer. “Rogers. Barnes. And Stark’s secret progeny.” She said to Darcy, “Please tell me when we can talk about this one night. I’ll trade you the story of my security detail on Captain America.”

“Sure.” Though she was already red-eyed, Darcy dug up a smirk. “I’ve got non-disclosure forms and everything.”

“Where do I sign?” Sharon breathed, still taking in Bucky.

“You’re staring,” Darcy admonished.

“I’m not sorry,” the now-CIA agent quipped. “If you find any more Howling Commandos, will you please save one for me?”

Bucky winked at her.

Sharon’s mom, a much older women proving that Sharon had come along late in their lives, interrupted them. “Darcy, Peggy wants to see you and Tony. Bring your friends too.”

Tony, Pepper, Darcy, Steve and Bucky all went in to spend a few minutes with her, one last time.

Stark sat on her bed and leaned over to kiss her cheek. “Hello, Aunt Peggy.” It was easy enough to see that Tony was losing someone who meant the world to him, and for all that Steve adored Peggy, it didn’t hold a candle to the crushing blow that Stark—and Darcy—were about to take.

In that way the dying have sometimes, Peggy Carter was perfectly lucid that day. She’d woken up with all her faculties and her caregiver had enough sense to know the end was near. Perhaps not today, but soon enough. The family had crowded the house all morning, anxious to spend a last few desperate moments with her.

“Anthony, have you made an honest woman of Pepper yet?” she challenged.

“No. But she’s threatening to make an honest man out of me and I might let her do it, yet.”

“Let her. She deserves it.”

“No one deserves me, Aunt Peggy.”
“Hush, Anthony,” she admonished. “I won’t have that kind of talk.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Scoot over so I can give Darcy a hug. And will someone give me a very short explanation of why Sergeant Barnes is standing next to Captain Rogers?” Tony moved down on the bed so Darcy could sit on the other side of Peggy.

“Hi, Aunt Peggy. Um, let’s just say we are very, very lucky to have James with us.”

Peggy smiled, really smiled, at Steve and Bucky. “I’m so happy for both of you.” She pursed her lips. “Did you ever get that dance, Captain?”

He felt the heat rising in his face. “Yes, I did. Just last week, as a matter of fact.”

“It’s about time.” Peggy patted Darcy’s hand. “What about you, darling girl? Going to take the reins from Tony and Pepper any time soon?”

“Mom and I work together, Aunt Peggy. We’ll make an announcement before too long. But there’s another situation I want to work through first.”

“Oh?” Peggy smiled. “Anyone I know?”

Darcy swallowed hard and reached out for Steve and Bucky. They came to stand with her, hands on her shoulders. “Yes. I think you do.”

Peggy laughed, a dry, crackly sound that lit up the room. “Damn, Anthony. And I thought you would give me gray hair.”

“I did give you gray hair. She’s paying me back with interest,” he answered. He leaned into Peggy to kiss her cheek again. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Oh, Anthony. I love you. Howard and Maria were fools not to see what you are. If you ever question yourself again, look to these people around you.”

She reached out to Darcy and fingered a lock of her hair. “You make those boys be careful with you, Darcy Stark. Steve’s a feisty one. And Bucky, well, it takes strong man to keep Steve in line. But they’ll treat you right if you’ll let them.” Steve swallowed hard. Peggy’s perception was as sharp as ever. “Now. All of you go live your lives. Stop being maudlin over an old woman who has lived hers and doesn’t regret a single moment of it.”

Then Peggy put her hand over Tony’s. “I’d like a moment with you, Anthony.”

The rest of them filed out of the bedroom. Bucky pulled Darcy for a long hug. Pepper went into Steve’s open arms and shed a few quiet tears, even as Steve dealt with his. With her usual dignity, Pepper pulled herself together, gave Darcy a hug and said something in her ear that made Darcy nod. She stayed behind to wait for Tony and waved them down into the living room.

Peggy’s family quietly told stories and exchanged tears. Someone, or several someone’s, had brought food, a tradition Steve had forgotten about.

Darcy was caught up by a pseudo-cousin or another and lost in the crowd. In a way, this was her extended family, one that Steve and Bucky didn’t know at all.

“We should have brought a casserole,” Bucky muttered under his breath. “It’s gonna be a long few
days."

“We can do that. I made spaghetti sauce this week. Easy enough to put that over pasta and freeze it,” Steve agreed.

Dirty dishes had accumulated in the sink and the trash cans were getting full. Steve tackled the first and Bucky dealt with the second. More people were hungry, so the dishes, forks and a stack of napkins went back out on the tables. Bucky found plastic cups that someone had brought, and a big enough pitcher for a batch of tea. He found a second pitcher for lemonade, all the ingredients, and assembled that while the tea steeped. Both went out on the table with a bowl of ice, along with a carafe of coffee.

Sharon discovered the pair of them as they finished up and wiped down the counters. “Any chance there’s another pot of coffee hidden in there?”

“Sure.” Steve found a mug in a cabinet and poured up one from the new pot he’d started.

She took it gratefully. “Thank you. And thank you for all of this,” she waved her hand around the kitchen. I’m certain that none of the rest of the family have any idea of who you are. Some of them barely recognize Stark unless he’s on TV. They certainly won’t see you without your uniform. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or an insult.”

“It’s probably best,” Steve acknowledged, as he refilled the coffee carafe. “For all the stories that have been told, we probably knew Peggy the least of anyone here.”

“Possibly. I would have liked to have met her when she was younger though.”

“I’m certain your gumption is genetic,” Steve complimented her.

Sharon sipped her coffee. “You know, Aunt Peggy has always had a soft spot for the Stark family. She—she set this whole thing up, hiding Darcy. Without her connections, the media would have made her the moment her birth certificate was filed.”

“Good to know Peggy wasn’t above a little nepotism.”

Sharon raised her cup in a mock salute. “Touché. Did you realize Tony was only eighteen? He and Peggy hid Darcy from his own parents for months, until they were sure Howard couldn’t do anything to take her away from Tony.”

He didn’t. “What happened to Howard?” he wondered. “He wasn’t like this when I knew him.”

“You. The war. S.H.I.E.L.D. He became a bitter man, obsessed with finding you. That turned into an obsession with raising Tony to his full potential and damn anything that stood in his son’s way. If Peggy hadn’t managed it, Darcy would have been raised as his sister in European boarding schools so that she couldn’t be a distraction.”

Thinking about how close Darcy was to her dad, he shook his head. “That would have been a terrible decision.”

Sharon agreed. “Darcy adores Tony.” She gave him a steady look that reminded him far too much of Peggy. “Steve, Tony has Pepper. She’ll get him through this.” She paused. “Darcy is going to need someone too.”

Bucky interjected, “She’s got us.”
With a genuine smile, Sharon interjected, “In that case, Darcy’s a lucky little shit and I might just hate her for a little while.”

Darcy came up beside her, pushing her glasses back up her nose. “Don’t. It’s a lot harder than it looks.”

“But they’re so easy on the eyes,” Sharon moaned theatrically. “Couldn’t you just pick one? I mean, I had to live next door to the blond one for a whole year knowing he was taken.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “You knew Darcy and I were together.”

“Mmm. Sure, we all knew from the tabloid pictures that you were dating. But Fury picked me for the detail because I had the skills, the clearance, and he knew I would keep her secret.” She said all that easily, not bragging, but sure of herself.

“I wondered who told him. It wasn’t part of the S.H.I.E.L.D. files.”

“Peggy told him herself when you two started dating, and that particular piece of information wasn’t … shared.” Her eyes slid to Bucky. “Coulson’s the only other one who ever had reason to know and that was because of New Mexico.”

Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I guess I can’t be mad at that.”

Carter shrugged. “You know--” She looked down into her coffee cup. “If an opportunity came up, and there was a leader who could be trusted, I might know a few people who are not happy about the direction top management decided to go.”

“I’ve heard that on occasion,” Steve said mildly. “You might pass the word to Maria Hill.” He jerked a chin at Bucky. “His boss. Works for Stark.”

“Hill is at Stark Industries?”

“Director of Security,” Darcy confirmed.

“And you are?” she asked Bucky.

“Assistant Director.”

Sharon got a look of unholy glee that bore an eerie resemblance to Nat when she was gloating. “Well now, if the rumors are true about you, Barnes, isn’t that interesting,” she mused. “I imagine there is a subset of clientele who isn’t particularly welcome into the fold.”

“Several, actually,” Bucky agreed.

She reached into her front pocket, dug a card out of her wallet and held it out. “See that Hill gets that, will you?” Bucky slipped it into his jacket as Sharon turned to Darcy. “Anytime, anywhere and I’ll have a pen handy for those documents.”

Pepper hunted them up a little while later to return to the Tower. On the flight back, Tony stared out the window of the helicopter, saying nothing at all.

It was late when they got back and Pepper ordered for all of them. And while it wasn’t the best of occasions, they had dinner together. It was a family that shouldn't have been a family at all, and yet, it was theirs.
Because I Love You

Chapter Notes

A/N Light D/s scene in case that sort of thing bothers you. Otherwise ... smut warning for your Monday (definitely NSFW).

Beyond the few stray tears that Darcy shed with Peggy’s family, she kept herself together. She was a rock for Tony and kept an eye on Steve throughout the afternoon and evening.

Steve knew her far better than that. For that matter, Bucky had that faint squint that meant he knew something was off too. They both had a feeling that it was going to be a bad night and Steve made sure he took the middle of the bed.

He wasn’t wrong.

She slipped out of bed. He waited for her to come back. Two minutes. Five minutes. At ten, he went looking for her.

He found her in the living room. She was standing in front of the bank of windows overlooking the city, with both hands on the glass, keening softly under her breath.

Bucky followed, turning on the lights on this time instead of drawing a weapon. Steve was grateful for both as he turned Darcy toward him. Trembling violently as she stood in his embrace, she covered her head, still making a faint cry that tore at his heart.

“Darcy, wake up. I’m here. You’re safe, doll.”

Whatever it was that frightened her this time, she wasn’t speaking, and certainly wasn’t listening as he tried to calm her. She didn’t fight him when he gathered her up to take her back to bed. Bucky was there to wrap his arms around her waist, talking softly to her too. He wasn’t triggered this time, though his eyes were the palest of blues.

Steve shoved a hand through his hair as he settled in front of her. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen her like this. He reached out to hold her wrists, tight enough that she should be able to feel the pressure.

But it made no difference, and Darcy flinched away from whatever was in her head as she keened once more. Bucky tried combing through her hair, kissing her cheek hugging her even tighter. None of it helped. She was too lost in her own mind, still asleep though her eyes were open. Night terrors, Sam had called them. Something people associated with toddlers, not adults.

Shooting a look past her to Bucky, Steve said quietly, “I need you to trust me and what I am going to do. I promise you I won’t hurt her, and we’ll talk about it when I’m done.”

More curious than concerned, Bucky nodded. His eyes faded.

Steve reached in his nightstand and came up with two strips of cloth. He didn’t like to do this, but needed to, for Darcy’s sake. He swiftly fastened the black strip of cloth over Darcy’s eyes, tying it firmly. The moment he did, the keening stopped, though not the shaking.
“Darcy, wake up. You’re safe.”

She was slow in answering, and her hands curled into his shirt. “Steve?”

He touched her face, cupping it with both hands. “I’m here, doll. Will you play a game with me?”

Her answer was soft and a little desperate. “Yes. Please.”

“What’s your safe word?”

She dug her fingers into his shirt. “Charcoal.”

That was new, but certainly worked as well as the other. He was aware of Bucky’s sharp look, though he set it aside for the moment. “That’s my girl,” he praised. He needed to get her undressed, but given the way she was still violently shaking, he wanted her hands bound first. “On your knees, Darcy. Hands behind your back.”

Given his earlier reaction, Steve wasn’t expecting Bucky to be the one to steady her until she followed his instructions. He scooted out of the way, leaving her in the middle of the bed. Steve angled himself so that he could bind her wrists together, winding the fabric between and around them. Not terribly tight, because he didn’t want her to bruise, but enough that when she moved, the bonds would make themselves known again and again.

“There you go, doll. Do you like that?”

“I do.” She shifted her weight to test the bonds, deliberately leaning into them to tighten the fabric. As she did, the trembling slowed.

“Do you remember why?”

“You’ll keep me safe.”

“That’s right, doll. Why will I always keep you safe?”

“Because you love me. And Bucky.” She frowned, amending, “James. He wants me to call him ‘James.'”

The inclusion of both of them gave him a jolt, and a quick thrill. “That’s right, Darcy. He’s here too. He’s staying right here while I take care of you.” He watched her face carefully for any signs that she was uncomfortable with that, but didn’t see anything to cause him concern.

He sat in front of her, careful not to tip her off balance. “Kiss me, Darcy.” She did, parting her lips on an inhale, and turning unerringly to touch her mouth to his. (Sunshine. Spring mornings.) He only lingered at her mouth for a moment. She shivered, and he halted in his tracks. “You’re safe, Darcy.” He tugged on the bindings to increase the pressure, made sure the blindfold was equally tight, and she settled once more.

“Good girl. You taste so good, doll. Now stay still for me. I’m going to get you out of your clothes.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re mine, love.”

“Yours,” she echoed. “And James.”

“That’s right, Darcy.” If she was coherent, he was getting somewhere, but she wasn’t anywhere
near where he wanted her to be. (He wondered how in the hell he was going to explain this to Bucky.)

He reached under the mattress for the sheathed knife he kept there for emergencies. One of those included getting Darcy out of the bindings if she panicked or used the safe word. (Which hadn’t happened, but Nat had insisted on the safety measure.) For now, he used it to slit the seams of Darcy’s t-shirt and pajama shorts, pulling both out of the way. He stripped off his own boxers so that would be one less interruption later.

He hated that Bucky was seeing her in the nude now rather than on Saturday, but it couldn’t be helped, and he was going to do a lot more before they were finished playing. He risked a quick glance in that direction. Bucky sat against the headboard, watching the proceedings without emotion, hands loose in his lap.

Steve turned his attention back to Darcy. “Spread your knees a little bit for me.” She complied, working to keep her balance where she knelt on the bed. “That’s it. Just like that. Perfect, doll. You’re beautiful, Darcy. You’re good at this.”

He started with touching her. He caressed her face, along her jaw line, down her neck and shoulders, then coming back to the slope of her breast. He deliberately avoided her nipples for now. She leaned into the strokes. It took time, but color began to come back into her face—really, her whole body. He brought his hands down her waist, letting his thumbs skim her stomach, along her hips, and back up again. He did it all again, this time letting his thumbs just skim the tip of her breasts and the outline of her labia. She parted her lips as her concentration shifted to focus on what his hands were doing.

*That’s* where he wanted her—too busy thinking about his hands and what he wanted her to do next to remember what she’d dreamed about. “That’s my girl. Can you stay still for me, Darcy? I want to touch you, but I don’t want you to come. Can you do that for me?”

A little jolt rippled through her, a hitch in her breath that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with desire. “Yes.”

“You’re perfect.” The praise was intentional, and every phrase kept her relaxed in this state. He floated his hands across her body again, catching those same quick points of contact. She leaned into his hands. “Oh no, doll. Stay still or I’ll stop.”

She swayed back upright, shifting a little out of frustration. He slid one thumb along her folds, teasing at her clit. Only once. She wasn’t expecting that and tensed her thighs. He eased off the bed, coming around behind her. With feather light brushes of his fingers, he began to touch her, never the same place twice, never in the same pattern. The inside of her elbow, the back of her neck, twin scrapes of his short nails on the insides of her thighs, the outside of her left areola, her bottom lip. He could see her nipples contracting into hard peaks as she tried to anticipate his next touch. He kept up the random teasing, though he increased the pressure of his fingers on her flesh. This time, when he pressed into her body with his middle two fingers, they slid in easily. She tried to break her stance, to take him in. “Don’t move, Darcy, or I’ll stop,” he admonished.

Her bottom lip went between her teeth and she stilled once again, breathing out and even.

“Good girl.” Time for the next step. He had her fully distracted, and now he wanted to push her into one of those orgasms that only came with delay. He wanted the rush of endorphins for her that would accompany all that.

He laid down a line of kisses from her shoulder to the nape of her neck in preparation for his tongue
to trace the same path. When he reached the end, he lightly plucked at her nipples, both of them. He stayed there, pushing her body even more until she was panting softly from need.

“Beautiful, doll. You’re doing well. Can you keep from coming a little while longer?”

“Mmm, yesss.”

The slight slur told him she was sinking an odd kind of state of mind where she would do almost anything Steve suggested. He would have to be careful, as they still had a ways to go. He took the weight of her breasts into his hands, and swallowed hard to control his own desires. Although he was uncomfortable every time they played this game, even he’d had to admit to Darcy that it was impossible for him to touch her like this and not want her. She’d given him explicit permission to do this and trusted him. It was a precious gift and one he refused to compromise. Still, his dick was hard as a rock.

So he did his best to ignore that and focused on bringing her as close to orgasm as he could. He accomplished that by rolling her nipples in his fingers and flicking the tip of one. When she sucked in her breath, he ordered, “Don’t come, Darcy.”

She licked her lips, shifted her stance and breathed out.

“There’s my girl. I know you want to come. But you’re being so good for me, doll. Can you wait for me? If you can, I’ll give you my cock and you can come as hard as you want on it.”

“Yessss.”

She found her patience and stilled, waiting for Steve to decide for them what was going to happen next. He rolled to his back behind her and worked his head up between her thighs. From this angle, he could tug down on her wrists, keeping her in place so that he could lick right up into her sweetness. (Yes, he liked this part. He loved the way she tasted.) He deliberately kept his movements over her clit light and never picked up a rhythm. Her thigh muscles rippled and flexed as she reacted at first. “Wait for me, Darcy,” he ordered again.

She forcibly relaxed once more, and he increased the pull on her wrists just enough that she couldn’t raise up from what he was doing with his tongue. He alternated licks and sucks and little flicks against her clit. He waited until her body was dripping with fluid before taking her to the finale.

“Darcy, you’re such a beautiful girl. You’re my girl. I’m going to give you my cock, and when I tell you, you’re going to come.”

She didn’t reply, trusting him completely. He lifted her up, easy enough with his strength, and set her down on his throbbing dick. One smooth glide and he was in.

He fucked her then, slow, deliberate slides of flesh on flesh, until the base of his dick pressed hard against her mons. He stopped each time he thought she might be close to coming. He started again the moment she backed away from the edge. He kept this up until she was straining against the fabric to keep her grounded. He stopped for the last time while she panted. Reaching around, he pulled hard on the bindings, enough that she arched her back just a little and pressed down into him a fraction more. “Darcy, you’ve been so good for me. I want you to come now.”

Without a word, without a sound, she did, saturating him so that her juices rained down his cock and onto the sheets. He flexed his hips just enough to tip him over that same edge while her vagina contracted around his dick. He had to hold her upright as he tried to remember everything he was supposed to say, babbling a stream of praise, that she was his girl, and he was hers and he loved her...
and she was safe and then he forgot all that and could only repeat her name again and again.

When the contractions reduced to little flutters, and she was absolutely gorgeous with her skin flushed and a line of sweat sliding down her body, he reached behind her. He didn’t have to look to know how to pull the bindings free. He left the blindfold on as he sat up, pulling her to him so that she rested her head on his chest. She was content, fully relaxed with her hands limp by her sides. He fumbled for the water glass he kept on the side table. It was Bucky who found it and put it into his hands.

And it was Bucky who took a t-shirt out of the dresser, handing it to Steve to work over Darcy’s head. She roused enough to pull it the rest of the way on, though she went back to leaning on him.

“Darcy, come back to me. You did beautifully. Drink some water.” He tilted the cup, and she drank, pulling free when she was done.

“You with me, doll?”

“Mmm. Yes.”

“How do you feel?”

“Safe. Sleepy”

“Ready for the blindfold to come off?”

“Can I leave it on?”

“For a little while. Now finish your water and then we’ll get under the covers.”

She did both. Steve kissed her on the forehead as he settled her in his arms facing him. He looked her wrists over. They were red from the chafing of the fabric, but nothing worse than that. He gave her one last order. “Go to sleep, Darcy.”

She did, instantly.

He turned his head to find Bucky, prepared to find anger and censure.

Instead, Bucky held up the tiny remote and turned off the lights. “We’ll talk in the morning, Steven.” In the darkness, Steve felt Bucky cover his hand where it lay on the pillow above Darcy’s head. The flood of relief was its own kind of euphoria, and Steve, too, fell asleep.

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Bucky waited until he was sure Steve wouldn’t wake. (Sixteen minutes, forty-two seconds.)

The Commons was empty at this hour, but he needed air rather than company. Strolling outside, he dropped down onto Stark’s terrace and picked out a bottle of vodka from the bar. He recognized the brand as one of Natalia’s preferences. The unopened pack of his brand of cigarettes tucked in with the barware shouldn’t have surprised him. But it did. Stark had a habit of doing small things that seemed inconsequential, and yet meant much. He was flattered that Stark gave a shit enough to know he would come here when he needed solace.
He took a seat on one of the backless benches looking out over the city. With a long drag off the ciggy and a good swallow of vodka, he reached into his pocket and drew out the thin white fabric Steve had used to bind Darcy’s wrists.

He heard her coming, breathed out in anticipation. Natalia reached for the bottle and took her own healthy drink.

“So you found the last of their little secrets. They don’t have many,” she noted, nodding toward the fabric.

“How?” He frowned in annoyance when he couldn’t seem to get more than a one word answer out.

But Natalia was almost as good as Steven when it came to interpreting the soldier’s odd phrasings. “The four of us went to dinner one night in DC. That’s rare enough. Easy enough to see Darcy keeping her sleeves down and Rogers looking like he’d kicked a puppy. I followed her in the bathroom and found her wrists bruised up. Enough that it’s a wonder he didn’t break them.”

“She told you?”

“It’s easier when my reputation precedes me. I gave her the eyebrow and she caved, telling me about her nightmares and how sometimes she could sleep if she could feel Rogers holding on. But the worse the nightmare, the harder it was for her to know he was there.”

She gave that one shoulder shrug that was so characteristic of the young girl he’d known all those years ago. “So I had a talk with Rogers about different ways he could accomplish the same thing that wouldn’t hurt her. Also happened to mention the endorphin release that comes with all that if it’s done right. Gave him a few websites and that fabric you’re holding. Good to know he took me at my word.”

“He doesn’t like it.”

“No. He wouldn’t. It’s not in his nature. He does it for her.”

With that, any number of pieces clicked. “Barton understands,” he realized.

“Old habits are hard to break, Barnes. I don’t need it. I made sure of that. But sometimes I want it,” she admitted. “Clint gets a kick out of it, so it’s a win-win.” She stole his bottle one more time.

“Now, given what I know about the three of you, Rogers probably feels shitty every time he does this.”

She was right. He turned that over in his mind a few times. “I can … fix that.”

“Yes, you can,” she agreed “Barnes--” She reached out to lay a hand on his forearm. “They don’t play this way very often. It serves a specific purpose. It’s not fundamental to their relationship and it doesn’t mean you have to participate.”

“I won’t, Natalia.” He reached out to stroke her hair. “I can’t.”

She captured his hand, kissing the center of his palm. “I know, James. But you can do something for Steve and make it right.” She gathered herself in that graceful way she had, leaving him alone in the darkness.

He finished his cigarette, stoppered the bottle and stored it. He returned the way he came, getting his own endorphin release as he scaled the Tower more than eighty stories in the air. He reached up to the handrail on the Commons level, locked his metal hand around it to dangle for a few minutes.
The sharp wind buffeted him about, pushing him into the wall of the building. When he felt the strain of the metal plates within his bones, he shoved off, flipping up and over the rail to land on his feet, startling Bruce and a couple of pigeons.

“Night, Banner.” He two-finger saluted the other man.

As if people climbing the outside of the Tower wasn’t anything at all, Bruce settled back onto his meditation mat and offered, “Good night, Barnes.”

In the darkness, he nudged Steve to make room between him and the edge of the bed. Steve rolled to his side, closer to Darcy.

“Buck?”

Getting under the covers, he answered wryly, “That’s twice you two have made time without me this week. There’s gonna be payback come Saturday.” Steve huffed out a soft, relieved laugh, though his shoulders were still knotted with worry.

“You did good, punk,” Bucky praised. “Not many figure out the right way to do this kind of thing. She’s all the better for it and you took good care of our girl.” He caressed the hard flesh along Steve’s spine, from his ass to his neck—feeling the contrast of his memory of a knobby frame with the slick muscles under his hand. He made the comforting strokes again and again, as the tension there unknotted. “I love you, Steven. Nothing can change that.” He pressed his hand against Steve’s heart, sliding closer so they were connected neck to knee. He hooked his foot over Steve’s.

Steve tipped back just enough that Bucky could press his face to Steve’s neck. It must have been what the punk needed because he didn’t even need three minutes this time.

When morning came, Bucky discovered that none of them had moved during the night, which for Darcy was damned near impossible. He put his chin on Steve’s shoulder as he looked on.

It was still early, but Steve was awake, tracing tiny patterns on Darcy’s skin. He’d pulled off the blindfold sometime in the night and it was nowhere to be found. “Wake up, doll. We’re finished playing our game. You were amazing. Can you give me the word so I know we’re done?”

Bucky stifled a groan. Steve sounded like he was reciting something from a book.

But it must have worked because she stretched, wiggling a little. “Captain.” A deep breath and her eyes opened.

“How do you feel?” That sounded more genuine. Steve ran his fingers down her arm and examined her wrists again when he got there.

“Like I slept. How long?”

“All night.”

“Do I have to get up yet?”

Like Bucky, Steve had a pretty good internal clock that had less to do with serum and more to do with growing up in Brooklyn where alarms didn’t exist. “Mmm, not yet.”
“’Kay.” She rolled to the side, taking part of the covers with her as she snatched her phone off the table and came back to snap a photo of them. She turned it around so they could see. “I get to wake up with that. A thousand points to Darcy for the win.”

She rolled over to her stomach to drop off the phone again, taking the rest of covers with her and leaving Bucky’s backside exposed to the cool air. “Hey,” he protested. “I was still using those.”

“Come get in the other side. You can make a Darcy sandwich.”

Now that gave him too many ideas for it only to be Friday instead of Saturday. He crawled over Steve and Darcy (getting an ass squeeze and a kiss on the jawline from the punk) and landed heavily on the other side, enough to make Darcy squeak in protest.

This time it was Bucky who brought her wrists up to examine them. He didn’t need to look, but it was a way for them to know he wasn’t avoiding the topic either. She bit her lip, waiting for his reaction. So he hugged her, sliding down his hands down so that his body covered hers and rolling so that she was on top. The sheets were hopelessly tangled now, and she was trapped with his hands squarely on her ass.

“Nice move, Barnes.” She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t recommend wiggling or we’re not making it until tomorrow,” he cautioned with a smirk.

“Damn.” She dropped her forehead to his shoulder. She tried to peel out of the covers and discovered their predicament. “Oh. Well, if this is the way it is, I can wiggle all I want and you can’t do a damned thing about it.”

Deliberately nuzzling the side of her neck, he demanded, “Steve, I need to borrow your blade.”

“Find your own,” Steve shot back.

Darcy blinked as the memory of last night surfaced. “Holy fuck. I’m not wearing my jammies.” She raised up just enough to look down at her chest. “This is your shirt, Barnes. Please tell me I’m wearing pants. I’m not wearing pants, am I?”

“Nope,” he confirmed. “And the shirt is sexy as all fuck. Nice and thin and I can feel your boobs just fine.”

She snickered. “Bet you can’t wait to get your hands on the girls.”

“Been a while, sure,” he said, off-handedly, just to get a rise out of her.

“Oh my god, you’re a prick. No touching unless you treat them with the respect they deserve.” She slapped a hand over his mouth as he started to retort. “No—no comments from the peanut gallery.”

“That is not a peanut,” he mumbled around her fingers.

“No shit, Sherlock. I’m getting up close and personal confirmation.” She deliberately pressed her hips into his hard, hard cock.

“Fuck, Princess. Just keep doing that for a few minutes and I’ll be good.”

Steve laughed, rolling to his back. “I can’t decide if I want you two to go for it right now because you’re both so damned adorable or if I want to deal with this for another day.”

Darcy propped an elbow square on Bucky’s chest, digging in just a little. “If you don’t help us get
out of these sheets, we won’t be doing either one.”

Steve peeled them out of the covers and Darcy rolled off the bed, giving Bucky another peek at the curve of her ass as she claimed the shower before either of them could protest. He rolled to his stomach, trying to get relief for his aching dick since the perpetrator in question had just stolen his one avenue of relief.

A hopeful look to Steve got him exactly nowhere. “Fuck you, Rogers. I had to watch last night. And I don’t get nuthin’ out of it,” he grumped.

From the bathroom, Darcy called out, “Come on, Steve, give the man a break. He’s going to hurt himself if he walks around all day with that.”

Given speed with which Steve rolled him to his back, yanked his boxers down and had his mouth on his cock, Bucky decided Darcy might deserve an award after all. He curled his fingers into blond hair and let Steve carry him away on a river of touch and heat. He rode the ripples of pleasure for a while, lifting a leg to rest on Steve’s well-padded shoulder.

He might have lasted a little longer, except that he’d been primed since last night and the punk wet his finger enough to slip it into his ass and press hard on that spot. He lost it, fucking Steve’s mouth without any control at all, grinding down on that hand as much as he needed to find the heat Steve offered. The dual sensation took him apart. His lover took everything he shot off and still sucked him dry.

Angels didn’t have that much innocence in their faces when they got their wings. “There,” Steve purred in satisfaction as he crawled up Bucky’s body to nibble on his throat. “That will hold you until tomorrow.”

“Maybe.” He clutched the back of Steve’s head to keep him from moving away. “After.”

“After what?”

“Kiss me, punk.” He fucking loved the way Steve’s whole face softened every single time, all the way back to when Steve was barely fifteen and Bucky had said it that first time. It hadn’t mattered that Steve had a bruise on his cheekbone and sore knuckles from fighting two mooks who’d called him the same damned thing and Bucky had waded in to help.

And just as he did then, Steve pinned him to the bed to lay a kiss on him. A kiss that, back then, had been clumsy, kind of embarrassing, but genuine and Bucky hadn’t cared. This one was expertly done. Slow, a brush of lips, a press and a touch of his tongue to get Bucky to open up. And then there was heat as Steve coaxed him into leaning up into his mouth, to take what he wanted. Steve sucked his bottom lip, catching it between his teeth, and then soothed it with soft rub of his lip that left Bucky feeling like the sun just came up.

“Better?” Steve asked, blue eyes dancing.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his fingers in Steve’s hair again and pulled him down, chest to chest. He sniffed Steve’s neck (salt, sweat and oceans). While the water ran in the bathroom, Bucky held him close.

Real life intruded when Bucky’s cell phone sounded, letting him know it was time to get up. Steve’s cell phone rang at damned near the same time, from Hill, as Director Coulson had come in for a surprise visit.

They fought over the toilet in the extra bathroom that none of them ever used. Steve won that one, but only because Bucky was still in a post-orgasmic haze. And Darcy got an eyeful when both men
hit the shower at the same time, though they (mostly) kept their hands to themselves.

She might have taken a picture.
Darcy waltzed into Jane’s lab before going in to work. Turnabout was fair play and she owed Jane. She sneaked in behind the astrophysicist and laid her cell phone down on the desk for her friend to discover.

With a quick glance to Darcy, Jane held up the phone with the hazy picture Darcy had snapped of the guys in the shower. She squinted. Then her eyes widened. “Holy shitballs, Darcy.”

“I had to match Thor getting out of the hot tub. I figured this was a good trade.”

Jane did a little dance in place. “Do you still have your crush on Thor? Because I’m going to have a little one on both of them now and it’s going to be really embarrassing if it’s just me.”

“No worries. It’s still there. Every time I think I’m done with it, Thor laughs at something I say or gets that really big smile and, whoops, there it goes again,” Darcy admitted.

“Oh. Good. Can I have that?” Jane asked, pointing at the picture.

“Did I get to keep your pic of Thor?” Darcy countered. “No. But you’re welcome to look whenever you want.”

Jane studied the snapshot one more time and sighed, a little dreamily, then passed the phone back. “Nope. I’m done.” Her friend took a moment to look her over. “Are you okay? I got your text from yesterday.”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she said. “Steve’s actually handling it better than I expected. He’s genuinely sad, but not broken like he might have been a year ago.” She paused, adding, “Dad’s a mess though.”

Waggling a finger at her, Jane admonished, “Your dad has Pepper looking after him. What about Darcy?”

Holding hard to her composure, she gave Jane a wan smile. “I don’t want to think about it. Not now, okay? Yesterday sucked, even if Aunt Peggy gave us her blessing.”

“Isn’t that kind of weird?”

“Why do you think Steve and I hadn’t told her? For one, she wouldn’t remember. For two, that’s just … weird is a good word.”

“Kind of like thinking about Asgard. I know it’s real. I’ve been there. But sometimes it’s a little too much to take in.”

“Exactly.” Darcy gave Jane a quick hug, grateful for the understanding. “Okay, I’m off to work. Give me a week or two and then we’re doing another girl’s night.”

“Deal. Scram. You’re cluttering up my lab.”

“Don’t forget your report.”

“That’s what I have interns for, Darcy,” Jane shot back with a grin. “And, hey, Darcy?”

“Yes?”
“I’m here for you too. Don’t think I don’t remember all those times you accidentally ended up wherever I was.”

“You just wanted me to solder your boards.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

*****

Steve, Phil and Maria took the conference room in the Commons area. Coulson laid out the results of the missions of the past two months and passed over a report for the Captain. “I’d like your help on the three I’ve highlighted,” he said.

He’d been expecting something along these lines, though he wished he had a little more time before running another mission. “This last one is going to be a major campaign,” he commented.

Coulson laced his fingers together and set them on the table. “Yes. I think we’re going to need all hands on deck for it. We’ll try to keep the timeframe as tight as we can, but we need to get everyone in place, and our resources are much more limited these days.” He paused, slanting a look at Hill. “Although I’ve managed to get a couple of our former allies to give us a little room to operate.”

“With funding?” she asked, with a hopeful look.

“No. Funding is still coming from private resources.” They all knew that Stark was a major contributor, though there were others who still believed in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s cause and had opened pocket books.

Steve looked over the intelligence and the layout of the targets. “Hawkeye, Falcon and Widow on the first one. I’ll take Widow on the second one, with Thor for backup if necessary. The last one, you want Iron Man and the Hulk too?”

“We might need them.”

“I’d rather cut Stark some slack on this one. You heard about Peggy?”

Coulson’s countenance fell. “No. Did she—“

“Not yet. Soon. Stark might not be in the best frame of mind.”

“And you?”

Steve smiled, sadly, but was able to look Coulson in the eye when he answered, “I’d do this for her anyway.”

“Don’t underestimate Stark,” Coulson chided. “So would he.”

That wasn’t something he’d considered. “You might be right,” he conceded.

While Steve looked over the data, Coulson changed the subject, turning his attention to Director Hill. “So tell me, how’s your replacement coming along?”

She slid a report to him. “You’ve got a new line a questioning for recruits now. Barnes identified
another thirty-nine HYDRA agents on our security team. I’ve highlighted the key words and the
countersigns.”

Phil brightened. “This is going to come in handy. What are you doing with them?”

“For now, we’re going to shift most of them to low impact positions so it won’t be obvious we’ve
identified them. There are a few Barnes wants to cut right away.”

Steve leaned back against his chair, arms crossed. “Replacement?”

Hill returned his look with a steady one of her own. “Stark and I have an agreement. I’ll stay here
until I have someone in place that Stark can trust without reservation. In six months, Barnes will be
handling the security for the entire company, not just the Tower.” She smirked. “No offense,
Captain, but this part of my job is outside your scope.”

He considered what she said. “Good point.” He turned his attention back to the mission reports and
to Coulson. “I’ve got a question about this.”

*****

He had three groups to run through this morning as potential candidate for his teams. With seventy-
two names on his list—including a dozen known HYDRA agents--it would take him a few days to
assess the physical skill sets of each of them. Today he wanted to assess their hand-to-hand skills.
Monday’s session would be held in the shooting range.

In the end, he would have three teams of twelve on 24-hour rotating shifts stationed on the 70th
floor, with easy access to the labs and Avengers floors. Not only would they be able to handle any
emergencies—fire, security or medical—in the ten lab floors, but they would also serve as enhanced
security for Pepper’s team and the Avengers themselves. With Darcy, Pepper, Jane, Betty, Maria and
himself in residence, eventually someone would seek to target the families of the Avengers.

The perfect opportunity to strike would always be when the Avengers were called away. He
intended to make sure that was never a problem.

He’d already signed orders for most of the HYDRA agents to be reassigned outside the Tower.
Seven were cut for infractions on their employment records. The remaining ten were part of the next
session, where he could assess their skill sets before finding them something else to do.

Hill had made it appear as if the reassigned agents were going to mid-level positions elsewhere. They
would find out the truth soon enough. Some of those, the few with families and looser ties to
HYDRA, would probably change jobs rather than move. Hill had done a damned good job of
making the relocation package serviceable, but not necessarily enticing.

The first group paired up on the mats, leaving him with a dozen sets to look over. He had them run
through basic strikes, blocks and parries then more advanced ones. Four of the youngest needed
more training to get to the level he wanted for the team. One of the older ones was slower but
extremely precise.

Halfway through the session, he stopped them for a water break and rearranged the pairs to spar. He
was watching the second group when a familiar fragrance wafted underneath his nose.
“Miss Lewis,” he drawled without taking his eyes off the fighters.

“Assistant Director Barnes,” she replied as she halted to his left. She patiently waited for the match to finish.

When their time was up, he signaled them to stop and waved up the next pair. He glanced at Darcy, wishing he could whistle, because she was stunning in her blue suit and heels with her hair pulled back in a low clip at the nape of her neck. “How may I be of service?” he asked instead.

Only her eyes sparkled as she handed him a binder. “Budget meetings start next week. Director Hill advised me that you would be in charge of them this year. Since I’m handling your division—among others—I thought I could bring you a little homework so you know how we do things around here. I’ve emailed you all of this information, but since you’re a little old-fashioned sometimes, I thought you might appreciate having it in hard-copy.”

“I hate budgets,” he interjected.

“So does everyone,” she passed him the binder. “Good luck, Barnes. I’ll see you on Tuesday morning.” He glanced over his shoulder as she walked away. Yes, her ass swished in the pencil skirt and she wore seamed stockings. (Fuck. Me. Stupid. When in the hell was it going to be Saturday?)

One of the men who had already finished—one of the older ones who’d impressed Barnes so far—casually took the space to his right. “Word of advice, sir?” Garcia offered quietly.

Barnes raised an eyebrow. “Go ahead.”

“Miss Lewis is Captain Rogers’ girlfriend. Rule is you can look all you want, even speak to her. But you’d better have your best manners on and don’t even think about making a move.” He rubbed his chin. “Lots of the newbies need a basic course of instruction on that kind of thing when they get here. Captain doesn’t take it too well when he has to do some of the educating.”

He swallowed a grin. That sounded exactly like something the punk would do. But he was curious how far that attitude went and needled Garcia a little. “She get a job here because of him?”

The guard seemed disappointed with his response. “No, sir. She’s smart. Something like a protégée to Stark. Vice-President of R&D. Second in command to Ms. Potts.” At Barnes’ faint approval, Garcia lit up. “But you already know that. Sir.” The second “sir” came with more respect than the first.

“I do,” Barnes confirmed as he shoved off the wall. “Good to know that the team has an excellent understanding of the situation.” He nodded to the next pair who was waiting to take to the mats. Garcia just earned his place on the team.

*****

They’d each had their respective long days at work. Long enough that Bucky and Steve were dozing on the sofa when she got home. (Steve had his head pillowed on Bucky’s chest—and was that drool? If only America could see her Captain now. Adorkable was a word these days, right?) It occurred to her that while she might have had a decent night’s sleep a couple of times this week, she’d done a fair job of wrecking their shut-eye.
So she left them there while she made dinner. She did up pork chops with a Dijon mustard sauce that had proven popular with both men. That, an enormous salad, peas, broccoli and cheese, and a bowl of mashed potatoes (thank you, Betty Crocker) rounded out the menu.

Before she and Steve had started dating, Darcy could barely heat up microwave popcorn. Steve wasn’t much better. Beyond his amazing pasta (two sauces, one white, one red), he tossed practically everything else into a pot of boiling water, salted it and called it dinner. (Unless it was chicken and dumplings, just ... no.) Bucky was marginally better and made French toast like nobody’s business. They’d all learned to make eggs and when the boys were hungry, inevitably somebody made egg sandwiches or omelettes.

They weren’t too bad now, although none of them were particularly adventurous in the kitchen. But they had all reached the point that plain home cooking beat take out most any day of the week.

Steve shuffled into the kitchen as she finished off the mashed potatoes. With a sleepy kiss on the top of her head, he reached beside her for plates and cups, while Bucky set out the silverware and napkins. This, she’d learned, was a thing with them. Family dinners were everything. Exciting news? Sit at the table over dessert. Bad day? Out came the comfort food. Saturday morning breakfast? Darcy had discovered that Steve had even found doilies in an antique shop for the table to sit under the dishes. Darcy had grown up eating at the bar or island in the kitchen. They had that in the apartment too, but the boys gravitated to the table out of habit.

With the three of them at one end of the table, they took turns telling stories about their day. And though Steve brightened as they ate, Darcy could see he needed a night off. He was trying so damned hard to be caring and kind and noble and all that crap. But there were shadows of worry and lines at the corners of his eyes from the strain of making up to her and protecting Bucky.

So after dinner, once the kitchen was cleaned, and just as the boys settled down in the living room (Bucky with his book and Steve with his sketchpad), she sashayed in to announce, “We’ve got plans tonight, gentleman. Bucky, you’re with me. Steve, get lost.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Go do something. Anything. Punch a bag. Punch Thor. Duck when he punches back. Find Clint and go watch one of those horribly depressing indy flicks you like. Find Sam and go get a beer. I don’t want to see your beautiful face anywhere near Club Stark tonight.” She dropped a kiss square on his lips. (Well, now she was there, she could stay a while. mmmm. Tasty.)

Bucky put down the paperback. “What are we going to do?”

She came up for air, a little dazed. Steve did it to her every time. “You’ll find out,” she promised him, nuzzling Steve’s lips just a little more.

A text to Clint got Steve, Nat, Phil (that was a surprise), Maria and Sam back at that little bar in Brooklyn. Darcy had impressed the bartender, who’d clued into his guests and invited them back at any time with a guarantee that the upper story was theirs.

Darcy slipped on a sleeveless dress that hit mid-thigh with are flare, seamed stockings (just because) and a pair of heels with ankle straps. Bucky took one look at her and changed into slacks and nice shirt. He favored black most of the time, and wore it now (yeah, he rocked it). He came out of the bedroom, fastening the black cuff to his wrist, and rolling up his sleeves two turns.

“What are we doing, Princess?”
“Be patient, young Padawan.”

He snorted. “Pick a good one if you’re going to quote it.”

“Told you. Never watch them in order.”

She led him to her floor. JARVIS had the lights set. All she had to do was roll the workbenches out of the way. The gleam in Bucky’s eyes as he helped her push them against the wall already made the night worth it. The black glass floors sparkled as JARVIS set the disco globe spinning and brought up the play list he’d made for the night.

Pop music with a definite swing beat came up, with lights pulsing to the sound. “Come on, Bucky. Teach a girl to dance. Your kind of dancing.” She was utterly charmed by the soft grin. With his hands in his pockets and a tilt to his head that made the best use of his lashes, she laughed, “That look just slayed the girls, didn’t it?”

“Worked like a charm,” he admitted. “Think you can keep up?”

“You’re in my house now, Barnes,” she challenged.

They started with the basics. Bucky tucked his right arm under her left, so that his hand was anchored on her shoulder blade. “Don’t move that hand. Keep it on top of my arm,” he instructed.

“What do I do with my other one?”

“Nothing, right now.”

She’d watched Dirty Dancing enough to know to keep her frame square (no spaghetti arms!) and her weight on the balls of her feet. This was different than slow dancing where all she had to do was cling to him and remember not to step on his feet. Here, she was an active participant. Waiting. Anticipating his next move.

For a few minutes, he held her like that, shifting his weight to the beat without really moving. She closed her eyes, feeling the movements through their linked arms. When she could follow along, a slight pressure on her back brought her close enough to him that she could smell his dark scent (oranges and cinnamon).

Her boobs grazed him and he flicked a glance downward. “Nice view.”

“Shut up. I’m concentrating.”

“You concentrate, I’ll look. Keeps up both occupied.” She might have retorted, but he distracted her by taking the first steps on the dance floor, keeping them small enough that she could follow along. When she had them, he lifted her right hand. The metal shimmered in the flashing lights, and his fingertips took the weight of hers.

Darcy was light enough on her feet and Bucky, hands down, was an amazing teacher. By the end of the first hour, she had the basic swing step down enough that she wasn’t looking at her feet. It was far more fun (and intoxicating) to focus on his eyes.

That and the sharp repartee kept her busy. “Eyes up top, Barnes,” she reminded him for the third time, rolling her eyes.

“But they’re so pretty,” he teased. “Come on, Princess, let’s do something flashy.”
“Flashy?”

“Looks good, not real hard. Impresses the crowds. You pay attention to your steps, don’t worry about what I’m doing.” With no more than the lightest pressure on her back and his fingertips, Bucky led her into a complicated-seeming turn, where she ducked under his arm twice, spun backwards once, and then he caught her up again in his embrace.

As they went into another series of turns, she missed her last step and his arms locked under her, before she could stumble in the high heels. “Holy shit, James, that’s hot.”

His eyes lit up and he took her backwards this time, doing the whole set in reverse. She didn’t lose her step this time and came back, surprised to find she was still vertical and everything. Now she understood the term “leading man.” As long as she paid attention to the pressure of his hands, Bucky showed her everything she needed to know to dance with him.

She was dazzled by the light in Bucky. He was in his element, flirting with her as they danced. Darcy did her best to keep up, and Bucky didn’t seem to mind stopping every so often to break down a step and walk her through it again and again.

As one of the songs wound down, Bucky instructed, “Let me show you how to finish a dance.”

“We don’t just stop?”

“Never.” He led her into a single, slower turn, then, “I’m going to dip you backward. I won’t let you fall.”

Bucky leaned her down a few inches. “Lift your left foot and point your toe.” He glanced back to check. “Higher. I won’t drop you, Princess.”

She did, then he set her back on her feet and turned her out in one last spin, only this time, he kissed her fingertips instead of bringing her back into the dance. She laughed and his eyes sparkled.

They danced for hours, taking water breaks occasionally and stopping long enough for Bucky to teach her something more complicated. JARVIS was all over the decades with his picks, but he kept it lively and fun.

As she gained confidence, Bucky spun her a little faster and showed her how shake out the moves in a way that make it seem like she knew what she was doing. His fingers skimmed along her waist as she turned, only to return to her shoulder and fingers again and again.

Part of jive dancing involved dips and throws. They didn’t do a lot of that, but Bucky showed her some of the easier ones. She’d definitely need to do some core strengthening if she wanted to do anything more complicated. But as he lifted her off her feet and twirled with her, she felt like she was flying even though she was only a foot off the ground.

On her list of favorite ways to spend an evening, this one ranked in the top ten. He stole a kiss more than once as he brought her in from a spin. His timing was impeccable and he left Darcy dazzled, sweating, and her blood positively hummed with want. Wherever his hands touched, she burned.

It must have been after midnight when her feet announced they were done. She tried to wiggle her toes. “They’re numb,” she complained.

“I’ll rub them later,” he promised. “Two more dances. One fast, one slow. I want to show you off to Steve, Princess.”
“Okay.” As he shot off a text, she marveled at how much Bucky had relaxed tonight. Like Steve, in the rare moments it happened, it was far too easy to see the young (hot, sexy) Brooklyn boys they were, even if their eyes would always carry weight of their years.

She brought a glass of water to him, and he drained it in one long drink. Sweat dripped down his throat, and the back of his shirt was damp. (She really just wanted to nibble everything.)

When Steve arrived (wearing one of those old man plaid shirts Bucky liked to tease him about) to lean on the door frame, looking more peaceful than she’d seen him in weeks, Bucky asked JARVIS to cue up the last songs. They took the floor one more time to Glenn Miller’s “In the Mood.”

Bucky let out an honest laugh. “Thanks, JARVIS. I remember this one.” He winked at Steve as he led Darcy into an opening move that involved arms over the head and sliding out to catch fingers. With an audience, Bucky pushed her harder than he had all night, going from spins to catches, to dips and dizzying turns. It wasn’t perfect, but where she missed, Bucky just grinned and got her back on track before taking her in another direction. When the song ended, he dropped her in a low dip, the lowest yet. But he didn’t spin her out of his arms this time.

As JARVIS cued up the last song, Bucky brought her back into that very first position. Left hand on his shoulder, right hand hardly touching. He folded her fingers in his and tucked them against his chest. She dropped her forehead against his shoulder as Cyndi Lauper’s voice crooned out the lyrics of “Time After Time.”

JARVIS lowered the lights so they danced under the slow, twirling ball of mirrors.

Now his shirt was soaked from the dancing and her dress clung in improbable places. His cologne, her perfume and their sweat mingled into an intoxicating miasma of scent. She wanted more. She wanted Bucky. Here and now.

“Darcy?” Keeping her place with the hand on her shoulder blade, he trailed his metal fingers up her arm until he cupped the back of her neck.

She drowned. In sensation, in taste, in the feel of his lips on hers. He drew down on her chin, sipping at her lips until he touched her tongue. The hand on her back pressed so that she leaned into him, the one on her neck moved upward.

“James?” she murmured.

“Hmm?”

“It’s Saturday morning.”

He blinked, just as a familiar hand came to rest on her waistline. “Darce—” Steve whispered, “Watching you dance with Bucky is about the most beautiful sight I’ve seen.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Steve?” She gave Bucky’s hands a squeeze and then leaned backward to link her hands around Steve’s neck.

“Yes, doll?”

“It’s Saturday,” she repeated.
The laugh in her ear was low and entirely too wicked to belong to Steve Rogers. “Well, what do you know, I think you’re right.”

Bucky’s hand was still trapped between her shoulder and Steve’s chest. He was biting his lip, wondering what Darcy was going to do. She taunted, “Five minutes, Barnes? Time to put your money where your mouth is.”

“Five minutes?” Steve questioned.

“Barnes said he could make me come in five minutes or less. I think it’s time to see if he’s as good as he says he is.” Both men inhaled swiftly, as they realized what else Darcy was saying. “You lose, Barnes, you wait until Saturday night.

“Fuck that. JARVIS, start the clock,” Bucky breathed.
As JARVIS cued up the last song, a female voice that wasn’t like anything he’d heard before, Bucky pulled Darcy in for one last slow dance. She dropped her forehead against his shoulder as JARVIS lowered the lights and made the remaining dots spin in a slow circle.

He held her close, wanting to thank her for the lovely evening. (Lovely? That didn’t come close.) But he didn’t want to break the mood. Steve leaned against one of the worktables, using a palm to wipe away—Christ, a tear. The punk could be such a sap.

If you’re lost, you can look and you will find me, time after time. If you fall, I will catch you, I will be waiting, time after time.

Darcy’s dress clung to every one of her curves. The dip between her breasts was beaded with sweat. Her damp hair kept sticking to his hand. The neat, pinned up hairstyle she’d worn that day had given up ages ago to hang in loose curls over her shoulders. He couldn’t resist a quick sniff. Her perfume snaked into his brain. He wanted her. In bed. Up against a wall. In the shower. With Steve. Wanted to watch Steve take her apart. Wanted to bury himself in her.

Softly, he called her name, “Darcy?” She lifted her head. Her curious green-blue eyes gone turquoise captivated him, and he faltered for a moment, trying to remember what he’d intended to say. When he couldn’t, he trailed his metal fingers up her arm until he cupped the back of her neck. He drowned. In sensation, in taste, in the feel of her lips on his. He drew down on her chin, sipping at her lips until he touched her tongue. He pulled her in, needing to be closer. Wanting to know how they fit together.

“James?” she murmured.

He’d asked her to call him, ‘James.’ Every time she did, he got a quick thrill, because, hell, it sounded like a rainstorm off her lips. “Hmm?” He lost his ability to breathe when Steve crossed the small space, his eyes dark.

“Darce--” Steve whispered, “Watching you dance with Bucky is about the most beautiful sight I’ve seen.”

“Is that so?” She winked at Bucky. He stilled, not knowing how to assess the unexpected signal.

“Mm hmm,” Steve confirmed, looking square at his mouth.
He might have licked his lip.

“Steve?” She gave Bucky’s hands a squeeze and then leaned backward to link her hands around Steve’s neck. By the wicked smile, he was sure she knew how her breasts peeked out of her neckline like that.

“Yes, doll?”

“It’s Saturday,” she repeated.

Steve let out that fucking sensual-as-fuck laugh that made Bucky’s dick stand straight up, adding, “Well, what do you know, I think you’re right.”

Bucky’s hand was still trapped between Darcy’s shoulder and Steve’s chest. He discovered he was biting his lip in anticipation. It was Saturday. (One-twenty-two, his brain supplied.)

Licking her lips and with a smoldering look that was everything Bette Davis had ever wanted, she dropped a gauntlet. “Five minutes, Barnes? Time to put your money where your mouth is.”

“Five minutes?” Steve questioned.

“Barnes said he could make me come in five minutes or less. I think it’s time to see if he’s as good as he says he is.”

He sucked in his breath, shocked and so-goddamned-relieved. He flicked a glance a Steve and discovered the same pole-axed expression.

But she wasn’t done. “You lose, Barnes, you wait until Saturday night.”

His brain finally kicked into gear. Like hell. No dame had ever challenged him like Darcy. No wonder he adored her. “Fuck that. JARVIS, start the clock,” he breathed.

He spent the first twenty five seconds kissing her, one hand on her bottom lip, the other sliding down the back of her dress to land on the swell of her ass. (Which happened to be brushing up against Steve’s half-hard cock, but that was another thing.)

The next ten seconds were lost as he flipped up the hem and discovered she had absolutely nothing on between the garter belt and the stockings. She was slick and trimmed down there, like the French girls they’d seen in a show overseas. His mouth watered just a little, demanding that he investigate.

So he did, kneeling in front of her and sliding one leg of hers over his shoulder. A glance at Steve proved that he only held her steady with hands to her waist, and had his own lip sucked into his mouth as he looked down over her shoulder at Bucky. (Nope, punk wasn’t going to help with this at all.)

At one minute, he discovered the taste of her slickness for himself, and moaned a tiny bit while he explored all those soft folds clinging to his tongue. (He’d forgotten this.)

At two, he used a finger with his tongue and Darcy’s hips twirled. “You missed a spot,” she goaded. (Fuck. No, he didn’t) He could feel the way her body opened up under his mouth, and she dipped her knees a bit to take his finger in a little deeper.

At two and half minutes, he sucked hard on her clit, used two fingers to stroke in and out of her, and the other hand slid down the inside of her thigh and knee. Steve shifted to keep her from losing her balance.
At three minutes, twenty-seven seconds, to his chagrin, Darcy whistled the Jeopardy theme under her breath—and got all the way through it. (One of her favorites whenever she was waiting impatiently for one of them.) But she was melting into him as she did, and finished with a little catch in her voice.

At four minutes and twenty-seconds, he switched hands, putting his metal thumb on her clit, two fingers angled so she could ride them, and rose to his feet to kiss her hard enough to press her back to Steve’s chest. He could feel the fluttering of her orgasm, and kept up the steady rhythm of his thumb and fingers. He kissed her neck—nibbling and sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

“Darcy.” When he said her name, her body contracted, and—fuck—he could feel her holding off through the sensors in his fingers. He found her mouth again, nipping at it so that the only place she really got satisfaction was from his thumb. (She was there, vibrating, fighting it.)

At four minutes, forty-two seconds, he pulled his hands away (she wrinkled her nose in frustration even as she prepared to sass him), and he kissed her with all the love and want and friendship they had between them.

At four minutes, fifty-one seconds, he murmured that he loved her as he touched her one more time, pressing metal fingers to her bud. And she fell apart to his words, babbling that she loved him too, her body convulsing hard as she went up in flames. Her hands came up to clutch at his head, his neck—to slide down and catch on his tags and his shirt.

Emotion he wasn’t expecting rose up and grabbed him by the throat. (Soldier-Asset. Not here.) He felt Steve’s fingers on the back of his neck and he reached up to wrap a hand around Steve’s bicep and press his face into it as Darcy leaned into him, still shuddering as the bumps and curves of her body pressed into him in a whole new way.

This was Darcy. Letting him in. This was Steve. Not letting go.

He drowned in the love/want/need of Darcy and Steve. And it was Steve who pulled him out of the spiral, anchoring him enough that he could nestle his face into Darcy’s neck.

He fought for the Bucky he’d been a lifetime ago. “Told ya—” he gloated into her ear. Deliberately, he brought his fingers up to suck on them.

Steve grinned. Darcy snickered as she popped her head up with that wide, gorgeous smile that entranced him every single time. “Took you long enough.”

“Seconds to spare,” he retorted, tightening his arm about her.

Then she gave each of them a little push to get them to step back, but kept a hand on each of their chests. The heat of her fingertips resting on the vee of his shirt commanded his attention enough that he hardly heard her when she asked, “Shower or no shower? I’m sweaty.”

“I want one,” Bucky choked out. “‘Cause when I’m done with you, doll, you’ll be asleep before you quit sayin’ m’ name.”

Darcy laughed, a carefree sound that warmed him all the way to his toes. “James, m’love, we’ll see who’s out first.”

My love.

Stunned by the endearment, he fumbled for—well, anything. Steve had to push him all the way into the elevator, down the hall, through the apartment and into their bathroom.
A clean white button down shirt hit him mid-chest when he finished drying off. Steve sat on the bathroom counter, with that doopy smile, wearing only his white undershirt and a pair of boxers. “Darcy’s faster than you and said you had to wear that, underwear optional.”

He squinted. “Where’s your shirt?” he asked.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Darcy’s wearing it. She used her old bathroom but all her clothes are up here now.”

His brain skipped a beat. Checking his memory, he discovered it was fuzzy on the details from the time she placed her hand on his chest to just now. (The soldier demanded to be let out, to assess the situation.) “I missed—” He shook his head, fighting it down. “How—“

Steve seemed to understand because he came over to squeeze Bucky’s shoulders hard. “She’s Darcy and you’re dizzy for her. S’okay, Buck. I lost whole afternoons just thinkin’ ‘bout her. You too, but she smells better.”

“She does.” He fumbled for the dog tags, closing his fingers about them until he could feel the metal pressing into the sensors with a metallic tang he could feel in the back of his throat. “Ain’t never been nervous before,” he admitted.

“’Cause none o’ em mattered to ya, Buck.”

The simple truth in that opened up an old worry. “Ya never minded?”

Steve cupped his face, tilting his head up. “I was sick, all the time. You needed a little fun every now and again, and if time w’ a sweet dame could put a smile on your face then it was all good for me. You’re mine, Bucky. Nothing will change that. I figured you’d find the right girl when we were ready.” Blue eyes faded a little. “We thought we had time.”

He shook it off and got that stupid smile that Bucky would do anything for. “Watching you dance with Darcy tonight, it’s the happiest I’ve seen you in a long time and she’s the one who made it happen.” Steve laid a tender kiss on him, all soft heat as they rubbed lips. “Darcy’s gonna light you up like the damned sun.”

“Already does,” he babbled. “It’s not just her. You both do it. I won’t—I won’t mess this up, Steven.”

“You can’t. You love her. She loves you. Now go before she starts thinkin’ you changed your mind.” Steve did shove him out the door this time, and Bucky paused at the threshold of the bedroom.

Darcy was idly paging through the book he’d been reading, sitting on her heels in the middle of the bed. Her hair lay in loose tresses down her back. She wore Steve’s shirt, and the blue and green checks brought out the color of her eyes. (Definitely not an old man look now.) She’d scrubbed the makeup from her face and the wisps of hair on her forehead were slightly damp from her shower. She set the book on the side table and pushed her glasses back up her nose.

She waited patiently while he fought a private war within to make the next move. The soldier begged to come out, to rescue him from all of the swirling emotion (Assessing). It would be easier to do that, to slide into the soldier and seduce Darcy with that kind of clinical knowledge and purpose (Asset). He had zero doubts that he could give her the kind of pleasure she hadn’t known existed (skill set).

But he didn’t want that. He wanted messy, the butterflies in his stomach, and he wanted to figure her out with his fingers and mouth, instead of breathing patterns and heartbeats. He wanted to know she
was falling apart because of him, not because of what he was, even if sometimes the line between the two was razor thin.

“James.” Darcy caught his fingertips, her head tipped back as she rose to her knees. She’d scooted to the edge of the bed where he was standing like an idiot. “I’ve watched your eyes go from blue to grey and back again. This is supposed to be fun. If you’re not ready, then let’s go to sleep and we’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

Fun. Like dancing with Darcy. Watching her hair float over her shoulders as she turned, the happiness as she made it through a series of turns without stumbling, the way she latched onto him when she did, knowing he would catch her. The way his hand fit into the curve of her waist and how her fingers felt pressed against his sensors.

Breathing deep and shoving the soldier away (experiencing), he brought her hand up for a kiss that started on the back of her fingertips and ended in the open palm of her hand. For all that he wasn’t the soldier right now, he discovered he still couldn’t articulate, well, anything. He shook his head in frustration. “Why?” He indicated his own shirt.

“Because I’ve been fantasizing about undressing you,” she admitted with a shy smile. “I know I’ve seen you. And you’ve seen me. But if I don’t have a little something to start with, you’ll be naked and I’ll be too distracted to pay attention to anything else at all.”

From behind, Steve slid fingers vertically along his spine before brushing a kiss on the back of his neck, under the collar of his shirt. “You’re not the only one with that problem, Darce,” Steve agreed. He rounded the bed and rearranged the pillows so he could lie against the headboard to watch.

Their frank candor helped, and he motioned to Darcy to move to the center of the bed, nearer to Steve. He crawled on the bed and sat in front of her. “Kiss.”

It came out more of a demand than a request, but Darcy didn’t seem to mind. She tilted her face up, unconsciously licking her lips as his hand slid (shimmering energy) into the heavy weight of her hair. He wanted to brush it. He finger-combed it instead, setting his fingers carefully to not catch the strands between the plates. Her hands came up, one just over the star, the other on the side of his neck, flesh on flesh. Her unpainted lips were lush like Steve’s, beautifully pink, and soft as the silk inside his bomber jacket.

There was freedom in this kiss. Darcy wasn’t holding back. Neither was he. Last time he truly necked with a dame was in 1942. Darcy was embodiment of every lady he’d admired back then for all the wrong reasons. But he loved her for all the right ones.

Like kissing Steve, he couldn’t get enough of Darcy. The freedom to lazily explore her mouth, her neck, her ears, and all the places he could rub his fingers in her hair was intoxicating. It was far too easy to tip her backward to the bed, meshing lips, reveling in her taste, her scent. She hummed when he lost himself in the moment and took more than he intended. He fastened his mouth over hers, needy now as he sucked her bottom lip. He was aware of her hands in his hair, on his face, skimming along his shoulder, but only peripherally, given his fascination with his exploration of all things Darcy.

Then her tongue darted in, signaling a shift as she assumed control. He wasn’t expecting that or the thumb that scraped against his jaw in a way that surely Darcy had seen Steve do because it never failed to jolt his body with lust. His attention came back to his own body in a rush. He panted, just a little, from speed of his heartbeat, and the tightness in his belly reaching into his hard and ready cock.

She wanted him. Gentle tugs on his shirt commanded his attention, and he discovered Darcy had
unfastened every last button. The fabric draped on either side of her as she ran her fingers across his skin, just as she did yesterday, skimming her nails along his abs and grinning as he sucked in his breath. “Definitely remembering that for the list.”

“List?” he growled.

“Things that make James go mmmm.”

(Fuck.) She nudged him up so that she was sitting between his legs. With curious fingers, she explored him, looking for the smallest places that lit him up with want. With each new spot, she kissed it, worked it over with licks and kisses, before lightly scoring each spot with her nails, as if marking it for later use. As she did, she nudged the shirt off his shoulders, inch by inch, investigating the new territory as it came in view. He should have known better than to think she wouldn’t bother with his left arm. But she nuzzled and kissed the plate on his shoulder, fully aware that the sensors there would give him some kind of feedback (heat, pressure).

“What are you doing, Princess?”

She licked her finger and wrote her name across the smooth metal. It tickled? “Your brain decides what certain sensations mean from the input you get, right?”

Thinking required mental processing and he was in short supply of that at the moment. “That’s what you tell me,” he got out.

“So I’m teaching your brain that Darcy-kisses on the left side mean something very, very nice too.” Before he could think too much on that (later), she pressed one last kiss at the end of her name. Then she pushed the shirt off his shoulders, sat back, and just breathed in admiration. Not as mechanic, or a scientist. She looked, seeing him. He cupped her cheek. She kissed his palm and just kept right on looking at him with wonder and desire and all those things he’d never thought to see from anyone other than Steve.

And then she loosened her own shirt, wadding it up and lobbing toward Steve. Punk caught it, sniffed it to catch her perfume (spring rains, sunlight, Bucky already knew) and set it behind him. She didn’t blush as she sat there, letting Bucky drink his fill.

“You’re naked, I’m naked, I’m pretty sure we can figure out how tab A inserts into slot B. Anything in particular you want to try first, sing out, but I’m about this close,” she held her fingers three inches apart, “to climbing on top of you, James.”

With that, his free will locked up. He stilled, looking, wanting, but unable to reach out. He understood why his brain froze in this moment. But knowing didn’t make it any easier when he couldn’t reach for her (he wanted. Rule two: Assets do not have feelings).

How she understood, he would never know. But Darcy moved to the center of the bed to lie on her back. She brought her hand up to play with his tags, the only thing he wore now. “I’m here, James. You’re safe. We can do as much or as little as you want right now.” She licked her lips. “But if you want to sleep, I’m giving Steve here a chance to get me off because you’ve lit a bonfire under my skin.”

Well, goddamnit, she knew him too well. No orders, but a fucking ultimatum he couldn’t resist. (He loved her). And this was something he could do. He stretched out to Darcy’s appreciative gaze and propped himself up on his arm. Looking, but not touching. She squirmed closer so that there was less than a centimeter between them. One deep breath from either of them and the space would disappear. “You’re safe, James,” she promised. His hand closed over hers, tags and all. She reached out to
Steve, who clasped her fingers in his and kissed the tips of them.

That simple connection snapped through the constraints in his head. He leaned in, closing that last tiny gap. She closed her eyes. “I like this,” she murmured.

Finding his voice, he agreed, “So do I.” He took the long route, learning the curves of her torso as he found her lips again. Soft. Everywhere he touched was soft and full, and her flesh gave under the pressure of his hand. With the back of his fingers, he learned the shape of her—firm enough not to tickle, light enough to get a reaction.

And he did. He found her to be sensitive on the insides of her thighs, along the nip of her waist. He asked her to go to her stomach so he could learn those places too. It was there he discovered she liked to be kissed at the small of her back and at the nape of her neck.

All that fanned the flames coursing through his own skin. He wanted, craved, to simply hold her there and slide his dick in there and now. Another day, he would.

But not now. Now he tipped her gently to her back, following her down with his mouth on hers, and a hand to her breast. (He’d forgotten.) The weight of it went straight to his dick. Needed to taste. So he did.

And discovered Darcy liked that. A lot. After she tugged on his hair twice, she put her hand behind her own head. He set it back, reassuring her, “I like it.” He wished he could say more, but the words wouldn’t come. Still, she was careful and didn’t pull again.

So he played—getting to know all the little things that made her squirm, the ones that made her pant, and the one that made her swear. He discovered the twin contacts of breast and clit made her come, again and again. She thrust against his hand, legs spread wide, seeking him.

“All right, all right,” she pleaded/demanded. He stopped just long enough for her to catch her breath. And lost his when she cupped his cock to give it an experimental stroke. He remembered the way she explored Steve last week, wanted it. Her eyes brightened. “May I?” At his nod, she nudged him. “Sit against the headboard,” she urged. Then she stopped. “If you want,” she added.

(He loved her.) Speaking came easier this time. “It’s okay, doll. I want … you.”

“Oh good.” She winked, settling so that she sprawled between his legs, crossing her ankles as they dangled in the air.

She wasn’t Steve. From the first tentative lick, he discovered that he liked what she did every bit as much though. It was different, more directed, and the combination of hands and mouth working him over brought him too close to orgasm. Her hair danced on his thighs and stomach as she tasted. She curled a hand around his butt cheek to pull him into her mouth as far as she could take him then used her hand to work all the way down to the base of his cock.

He let her have him right up until the last moment, but he didn’t want to come, not yet. Not in her mouth the first time, even if she’d already come in his. He brushed her hair out of the way and nudged her off, then dragged her into his lap.

Darcy laughed in glee as she settled her arms about his shoulders and wiggled so that her soft folds nestled about his cock. She hovered, letting her tiny movements coat the tip of his dick in her slickness. He closed his eyes, discovered that only made the want/own/take/possess worse, and dragged them open again. The Soldier stepped up to take control, to put the emotions to the side.

But again, she stunned him with her understanding. “This is your call, James. I’m here. I want this.
But it’s your body and your choice.”

He pressed down on her hips, sliding in—infinitely hot, her sweet scent intoxicating him. He’d forgotten what was to be surrounded by heat and slick flesh clinging to his cock, all tension and urging as the same time. She leaned up, so that he slid a little ways out of her then took him in once more—that single slide tightening his balls until they hurt. She let out a long oh when he stopped to hold her with trembling arms. He pressed his face in her neck and shuddered, rocking with her and flexing his hips all at the same time. “I forgot,” he whispered. “I forgot what it is to be inside.”

She opened her mouth in surprise, but Bucky kept up the rhythm and she stuttered instead. He tried to wait. Tried to hold on in the face of a million sensations coursing through him. “Not… without you,” he pleaded. “Want .. this … for you.”

“Then don’t stop what you’re doing, James,” she insisted, breathy. Her hands dug into his shoulders as she moved with him.

So he pressed in one last time and shattered into a thousand pieces. She followed, breathing his name, and he could feel the way her body coaxed his into giving up everything he else he had too.

She laid her head on his shoulder, his metal one, as if she found it comfortable. He did. He loved the heat of her cheek and the shimmer of her hair along the metal. He pressed a kiss to her forehead when he discovered it was in reach. Found Steve watching, with one hand on his cock, stroking it. The other hand lay loose on the bed, between the three of them.

“Doll, take a look.”

When she did, Steve said softly, “You’re both—I love you,” he choked out.

Bucky shook his hand out of Darcy’s hair and they both reached out to hold Steve’s fingertips. He came then, not taking his eyes off either one of them as he cried out both of their names.

After that, they both reached for Steve, Bucky going under his shoulders and Darcy over his chest, to pull him into their embrace. It was awkward, and they ended up laughing as Bucky slipped out of Darcy with a curse. Steve kissed Darcy’s neck and she giggled, reached for somebody’s shirt. She nudged him to his back and wiped down Steve first, then Bucky before tossing the shirt to the floor. She wiggled so that she was sandwiched between them, her back to Bucky’s chest. “Okay, I’m done. If you guys are up for another round, you’re on your own. Which would be cool, because I really want to watch.”

“Sleep first,” Steve insisted. “It’s late. Or early.”

He looked down at the dark hair cradled on his metal arm. She’d taken a corner of her pillow and put just enough there to cushion her cheek. He laid his head on the rest of the pillow and draped his right arm over her waist. Sated, tired from the extraordinary day, he only hummed a little in agreement.

But he didn’t miss the expression on the punk’s face. It was the same one he’d had all too often this week, watching Bucky and Darcy close the gap between them. Stunned hope.

*****
Darcy and Bucky both lost. Steve was pretty damned certain of that as he watched them crash together, hard asleep and still breathing in sync. And it didn’t matter that Darcy was crammed between them, Bucky slid his hand under Steve’s bicep, cupping it with metal fingers that relaxed as sleep overtook him.

The dance the two of them did, even as they slept, was sensual and beautiful. For all that Bucky had been through, it was a miracle he could even think of sleeping in the same room with anyone else. But what had started out as a need to protect his technology—and his mission—had turned into something so much more in the months since, and even more in just in these past two weeks.

Bucky simply adapted to whatever position Darcy took without waking. When she nudged Steve so she could lie against his torso, Bucky scooted closer and dropped a hand on her backside. When she turned over to face Bucky, resting her head square against his chest the way Steve used to do when they were younger, Bucky wrapped an arm around her. When she slept on her stomach, it was a wonder Bucky didn’t squash her as he scooted over her, as if he was trying to tuck her under him. Darcy seemed to like it and slept longer in that position than any of the others.

And when Darcy crawled out from under him for a trip to the bathroom, Bucky slid into her spot, rearranging himself to put his head on the hollow of Steve’s shoulder and a hand on his chest.

When Darcy returned, she just took the other side, so that Steve was flanked by the pair of them. His chest tightened and he had to swallow really hard a couple of times. Please don’t take this away from me, he begged the universe.

“Steven,” Bucky rumbled, patting his chest a little.

“Hmm.”

“We’re good. Stop thinkin’ and start sleepin’.”

He did.

Six a.m. came, and he reluctantly peeled himself out of Darcy’s and Bucky’s embrace for a morning run. He had far too much energy bouncing around just to lie there. Both of them needed more sleep and he suspected—hoped—they would need energy for the day (yeah, that was the stupid grin on his face). So rather than disturb them, he pounded pavement for an hour, picked up a breakfast sandwich and an orange juice from a deli to tide him over for a bit, showered in the locker rooms and got the coffee started in the apartment. At eight, he decided he’d had enough of being productive and crawled back into bed with them. There wasn’t much room on Darcy’s side, so he got in next to Bucky. Bucky slid an arm under him, pulling him close. Sleep came fast and hard.

*****

Darcy woke with Bucky’s fingers to her lips. She blinked to focus and melted a little at the wry smile. “Coffee,” he whispered and thumbed over his shoulder.

When she leaned up, she followed Bucky’s grin and found Steve with his forehead pressed to Bucky’s back and every last blanket cocooned around him. Darcy glanced down to discover she had the only a corner of a sheet left and it was mostly Bucky keeping her warm.

With shared smiles, they escaped to the kitchen after Bucky silently picked out a t-shirt for her and
sweats for him from the dresser. His eyes ranged over her as she pulled his t-shirt over her boobs and settled it in place. The hem just skimmed her thighs and hardly covered her ass. “You did that on purpose,” she said, looking over her shoulder.

“Of course.” Then again, his sweats didn’t do much to cover his current predicament, though he seemed to be ignoring it at the moment. He caressed her cheek, settling a kiss on her mouth. Not hard or teasing, just sweet enough to have her blood humming.

His hair was mess, sticking up every which way. Darcy’s was only slightly better after a quick trip to the bathroom and a damp comb. But they’d seen each other look a whole lot worse and Bucky was still fucking sexy with his ripped abs, stubble and a dark scattering of hair across his sternum. He scratched at the latter as she boosted herself up to the kitchen counter.

He poured up coffee, adding crème and sugar to hers before handing it over and leaning next to her, close enough that her knee brushed against his hip. It was nice. Morning-after nice.

“What was it like the first time you woke up with Steve after—“ she hesitated, not knowing the right way to say it.

“After we fondued?”

Darcy laughed softly. “Yes. Doesn’t seem right to call it ‘fucking.’ Making love sounds better but kind of formal.”

Bucky shrugged. “It’s just words.” He sipped his coffee. “First morning? We were embarrassed. Sticky. Wanted to fuck,” he grinned, “but traded sucking each other off before we scrambled out of bed to shower and wash sheets because his mom was coming home from the late shift at the hospital. Wasn’t any big deal for me to sleep over at his house, happened all the time, so we cleaned up Steve’s room and made pancakes for breakfast.”

“You pulled that one over his mom?”

“Hell, no. Punk blushed the entire morning. No matter what he thinks, his mom had it figured out before either of us did.” He ran a hand down Darcy’s thigh. “You?”

“Steve made pancakes.” She chuckled. “Which tells me that the perfect, post-first time morning sex breakfast has been around for a while.”

“No sex?”

“Didn’t say that.”

“So what you’re telling me is that we need pancakes and sex this morning to make it perfect,” Bucky drawled.

She shrugged as she played with his hair. He leaned into her hands. “Works for me,” she replied. “But I do have a couple of questions for you.”

He reached for the coffee pot. “I want a refill before the interrogation.” Biting her lip, she looked away. He put a hand on her chin and laid a firm kiss on her lips. “Hey, that was a joke. What’s on your mind, Princess?”

“Last night, you said you’d forgotten what it was to be inside. Did you mean inside a female or inside at all?”
Bucky put his cup down and braced both hands on the counter on either side of Darcy. There was a touch of regret there. “I’ve never had Steve that way.”

“Why?”

“His asthma and his heart condition. Just giving him a blow job gave him an attack half the time, but it didn’t bother him to do it to me. Something about not being in control, not controlling his breathing and too much exertion. So we figured it best to let him do the driving, so to speak,” he told her. “Mostly, it worked.”

“But what about later? After the serum?”

Bucky played with a lock of her hair. “We were in the army, Darcy,” he reminded her softly. “Not that we had a lot of opportunity, but we could have been given a blue discharge if anyone had caught us. If we were, things would go a hell of lot easier if Captain America didn’t have a sergeant’s cock up his ass.”

Anger for the discrimination—both then and now—rippled through her.

Bucky sensed it, laid his fingers on her shoulders and stroked all the way down her arms to kiss her fingertips. “I know. I’m still gettin’ used to the idea it’s legal now.”

Darcy looked away. “For two. Not three. You and Steve could get married.”

He raked his hair in frustration. “Christ, Darce, aren’t we done with that yet? We ain’t doin’ this for anyone but us, not then, not now. I love you, Steve loves you. That’s all that matters.”

She set her coffee down and took her face in his. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s so damned hard for me to believe that both of you want me like that.” She paused at his look of annoyance. “The love part, not the sex part.”

Bucky shook his head. “I got that, thanks. What do I have to do, doll? So you’ll believe me?”

“It’s on me, not you, this time,” she admitted.

“Work on it,” he ordered, but with a squeeze to her hip to soften his words.

“I will, Buc—James.” She picked her cup up again.

He brought his head around. “You still think of me as ‘Bucky?’”

“Duh. I listen to Steve call you that every day, plus had a couple of years on top of that before. But you asked me to call you ‘James’ so I will. Why though?”

“Big day for personal questions.”

“I’m catching you in a good mood, plus we’re finishing our coffee before we fuck like rabbits for the rest of the day,” she teased.

“Is that it?” A slow smirk lifted his lip.

“Got any issues?”

“None that I can think of. And to answer you, I was ‘Barnes’ in the army, ‘Barnes’ to most everyone in the Tower, ‘Mr. Barnes’ at work, ‘Bucky’ to Steve, my dad and my sister. Only time anyone calls me ‘James’ now is you, your ma, Thor and Steven when I’m doing the sex thing just
right.”

“That’s an interesting combination.”

“You’re telling me. But I don’t mind if you call me ‘Bucky’ every now and again.”

“Good to know.”

He drained his coffee and rinsed out the cup. Turning back to her, he rubbed her bottom lip with his thumb. “As to your earlier question, Steve asked me last week. He wants it. But I told him it wasn’t right without you. That we would do this together. Like last night, it means something and it’s best with three of us.”

Smiling over the last of her coffee, she winked. “Now that would be an interesting way to wake him up.” She swallowed the last of it. “Hey, what was with Steve wrapping up like that? He’s usually better than the electric blanket.”

“He used to sleep like that sometimes. I’m guessing he’s worried about us, the three of us. Probably not a good idea to let him be alone for too long.”

“I like it when you tell me things like that.” Darcy held her arms out and Bucky lifted her off the counter and down until her toes touched the floor. His hand drifted down to her bare ass, and he leaned her back against the cabinets. Yeah, he definitely had a hard one this morning, and she had the proof pressing up against her.

But he didn’t make the move she expected. He cupped the back of her head and whispered a kiss over her lips. “Thank you for last night.”

Astonished, charmed, and a little bit more in love with him today than she was last night, she blurted, “I love you.”

Bucky yanked her to him in a hard hug, lifting her off her feet and leaving no doubt as to how he felt about her. “I love you, too, Princess.”

“Hey, James?” Darcy tipped her head back as he set her back down.

“Yes, doll?”

“Let’s go wake up Steven and show him that everything is going to be just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, it's still Saturday. See you next chapter.
He shivered from the cold, coughing a couple of times as the asthma made it hard to breathe. His back ached from hunching over his sketch pad all day. He ignored it as Bucky murmured something to the girl on the bed. He turned his head, hoping to hear it out of his good ear. But it was too late, and Bucky was already smirking in response to her sassy retort.

The tiny bed they shared in the small flat wasn’t nearly big enough for this. The springs squeaked under his butt when the thin mattress took the weight of the three of them.

She was different. Smart mouth, smart brain, a body that made his mouth water, and enough moxie to stand up to both him and Bucky and then some. Didn’t matter how he looked either. She was sweet on him and told him so.

She’d crawled on the mattress over him, settling there as if she belonged. Bucky’s dame—Darcy—he frowned—Darcy was his dame. He’d found her, not Bucky. Bucky sure had taken a shine to her though. And Darcy seemed to be just as sweet on him.

“Wake up, Steven,” she urged.

He didn’t want to wake. He’d dreamed of this for too long. They’d found their third, the girl in the drawing. She was everything to him. He liked her. No, he loved her. She stole his breath, gave him life.

Bucky reached out to kiss her on those red, red lips he’d sketched dozens of times. Bucky, the other part of his soul. He’d had it ripped out once already. Had clung to Darcy with both hands and desperation. Found a way to live again. When Bucky was restored to him, he came perilously close to losing her.

By his own hands, he’d let go of that which was most precious to him, not once, but twice.

The hellfires in Bucky’s cobalt eyes were banked, shining instead with the years of love and friendship. Darcy did that. Darcy, with her patience and blinding intelligence, wove all the scattered pieces of them together. Like her father and grandfather, she saw possibilities where others saw nothing and built what others could never imagine.

She put a hand on his leg. Bucky told him to wake up.

“No. Let me stay, Buck,” he begged. “I want to stay here with both of you.” He coughed, rolling to his side to ease the pain in his lungs. He didn’t deserve them. But by all that was holy, he loved them with everything he had. Bucky was the earth, Steve, the water, and Darcy, the sunlight that made it all bright and warm.

“You can, Steven. You’re not sick anymore. We’re here. Wake up, love.”

No. Because waking meant giving up the dream. He had both of them, here and now. He could stay
here, where it was warm and no one was trapped in the ice.

“Captain Rogers, wake up!”

That voice belonged to Sergeant Barnes. Until he’d gone overseas, he’d never heard that sharp tone from his friend. This Bucky was a stripped down version of the boy Steve had known, the purest essence—harder, leaner, smarter. Steve loved him beyond reason.

Darcy held his hand—she was here in the little tent they shared. There wasn’t room to move. At the sound of gunfire, he pulled her down, shielding with his body. “Damn it, Buck, get down here. I’m not losing you both. Not now.”

“Steve, wake up,” Darcy urged. “It’s 2014 and we’re alive. You’re in our bed.”

He reluctantly opened his eyes to discover Bucky rubbing his shoulders and Darcy underneath him.

“You awake?” she asked.

He shuddered, closing his arms around her and burying his face in her neck. “I think so.” She held him while Bucky ran long strokes along his back, passing his hand over the places that used to hurt from the curve in his spine that was no longer there.

When the tension eased, she poked at his shoulder. “Hey, not breathing here.”

He propped himself on a forearm and rolled off, taking care not to crush her. “Sorry, doll.” She firmed her mouth, and he held up his hand, adding quickly, “For squashing you, not for the dream.”

Darcy had a hard rule in place about apologizing for nightmares.

Clasping wrists, Bucky pulled him to sit up, giving him rough kiss on the forehead. “What were you dreamin’ about, pal? Haven’t heard you cough like that since ’42.”

Steve took an experimental breath, found his lungs clear and his ears working just fine. He rubbed his chest anyway. “Brooklyn. Our shitty apartment. Then our shitty tent. Had both of you. Didn’t want to wake and find out none of it was real.”

“I can think of a hell of a lot of places to take Darcy, neither of those is on my list.”

“The lack of central heating was a drawback,” he said drily. He reached for Darcy, tugging her into his lap so he could hold her for a bit. That was easier than admitting he was still shaky. Bucky raised an eyebrow, not fooled one bit.

Neither was Darcy. She wrapped her legs around his waist and arms around his neck. “Name one thing that you miss.”

This was a game she’d invented a few weeks after he had started talking about Bucky. He played with a long lock of her hair with one hand and held her to him with the other. “Radio shows. Baseball announcers are still pretty good, but I miss listening to the stories. We’d sketch or make dinner while listening. Even better when the weather was nice and we’d open all the windows.”

Bucky lit up. “Remember that one—War of the Worlds?” He laughed at the memory. “We’d read the book and thought it was great, but some of our neighbors were thinkin’ we were bein’ invaded by Martians. Took me and punk a couple of hours to settle Mr. and Mrs. O’Brien down. She kept tryin’ to pack the house up and leave.”

“Stop doing that,” Steve softly admonished Darcy. “I can’t stay in a lousy mood if you get me
thinkin’ about the nice things.”

She leaned forward to nibble on his neck. “I don’t want you in a lousy mood. I want you in a very, very good mood.”

(Well, now, okay.) “Hmm? And why is that?” He slid his hands down to her ass, pulling her firmly against his cock. He wasn’t hard yet, but considering neither of them had underwear on (he hadn’t bothered with clothes earlier), it wouldn’t take long. (At all. He was already swelling.)

“Bucky and I had an idea.”

“Now why does that scare me, Darcy Stark?” He winked at Bucky, who merely smirked as one hand drifted along his leg.

“Because you’re a very smart man, Steven Rogers,” she teased.

In one smooth move, he stripped her shirt over her head and rolled her to the bed again, only this time, he was careful not to squash her. One stellar boob was perfectly aligned with his mouth. (Yeah. Dibs.)

She squeaked as he closed his mouth over it. “You did not just call ‘dibs.’”

“Maybe,” he mumbled, as he licked a nipple with the center of his tongue and worked his way out to the tip. “Want me to share?”

“Want to share you,” she insisted.

“Ladies first,” he countered. “Buck, you really just gonna watch?”

“I might. ‘Cause those are the prettiest tits and you’ve got the prettiest ass, and I’m not sure which one I want more. ‘Sides, you’re not leaving any room.”

Steve tugged off long enough to shoot a challenge over his shoulder. “Try both.”

“I just might.”

A glance at Darcy—relaxed and smiling a little at the interchange—proved that she was comfortable so far. Steve went back to what he was doing. (She really did have the prettiest tits.) Darcy began to wiggle underneath him, but he ignored that and kept right on playing. “You know, doll,” he murmured, “I don’t think I’ve spent quite enough time with these ladies for a bit. You’re comfortable, right?”

“Ste-eve,” she whined comically, “Fifteen minutes, max.”

Bucky choked from somewhere behind Steve. “Staying for dinner?”

“Shut up. I’m appreciating perfection, here.” He blew on the tip of her nipple, and Darcy wrapped a leg around his hip. A warm hand landed on his ass, one wet finger sliding into the cleft between his buttocks. Steve’s concentration sidestepped a couple of times before he found his rhythm again.

Darcy chuckled. “Do that again, James. I think he liked it.”

“Steve likes to have his ass played with.” (Yes, yes, he did. Especially … just like … that.)

“You mean beyond a quick squeeze?” she threw out. “Apparently, the no-touching policy only applied to me.” There was a touch of irritation in her voice. That was coming back to bite him in said
Bucky bopped the back of his head. “Punk. Think of all the neat things you’ve missed out on.”

“Sorry, Darce—I’m over it now,” he apologized. “Bucky’s read me chapter and verse on being stupid.”

“Steven’s got a way with his fingers that should be illegal,” Bucky promised her.

Darcy grinned. “Just take it slow guys. Either one of you is enough to overwhelm a girl. Two of you?” She sucked in her breath with a nervous shiver. “Just take it slow, okay?”

He leaned up to stroke her cheek. “Hey—if this is too much—“

“Didn’t say that, Rogers.” Her eyes flickered between him and Bucky. “I’ve got a good imagination, and I’m damned good at Tetris. But I also know what a creative little shit you can be. This can get out of hand really fast.”

Bucky’s crack of laughter jolted him and made Darcy smile. “Slow, Princess, we promise.” Bucky leaned over to kiss her.

“Slow is good.” Steve ran his hand from her shoulder to her wrist to settle her again.

It seemed that Bucky decided kissing Darcy was a really good idea, because he stayed there. Steve went back to paying careful attention to her breasts. He licked all the way around the areola of the left one before closing his whole mouth over the peak. He sucked on it in a way that never failed to get Darcy’s attention. She moaned, though whether it was from Steve’s or Bucky’s actions was anyone’s guess.

He was busy enough trying to make her do it again that he wasn’t paying much attention to Bucky’s hands until a finger landed firmly in his hole. He hissed around Darcy’s nipple as he parted his legs, which had the added benefit of lifting the one Darcy had wrapped around his hip, pressing her heat square against his stomach.

“Two for one special, right there,” Bucky breathed out.

“Speaking of little shits,” Steve muttered.

Bucky hummed in his ear. “Greedy for it, aren’t you.”

“Told you I was.” He fixed his attention back on Darcy and trailed a tongue along the sensitive skin of her breasts. She feathered a hand into his hair to keep him there, stroking lightly. He nipped, not hard, but enough to get her attention, and she rolled her hips into him.

“Good.” A well-slicked finger eased inside, and he groaned.

“No talking with your mouth full,” Darcy reminded him.

But she was breathy and Bucky didn’t let her talk for long either as he resumed kissing her too. He set up a rhythm for the both of them. Darcy couldn’t stop twitching. Neither could he. There came a point where he thought he had her at the edge. He stopped to check.

“Goddamnit Steven I’m RIGHT there.” (Yeah, she was close.) He eased back as she let out a couple of swear words that she had to have picked up from Bucky.

Bucky laughed, brushing a kiss along Steve’s shoulder just as he slid a second finger beside the first.
Whatever Steve was going to say was lost as his thoughts skittered off into the distance. “Fuck,” he said instead.

“We’re trying,” Bucky and Darcy chorused, the joke coming around full circle.

He laughed weakly, his brain catching up. He went back to Darcy’s breasts, and she shuddered underneath him. She dug her hand into his shoulders, even as Steve was trying not to move with what Bucky was doing to him. Two fingers, then three. He panted at the last sharp stretch, pressing back against Bucky’s hand. He ached with want. This was as far as they’d ever gone, and only a few times before his asthma had put a stop to it.

Darcy poked him in the shoulder so he would lift up enough for her to move. She wiggled a little lower so that his cock nestled in the folds of her vulva. “Mmm, better. But I will not be happy if you don’t get me off this time.”

He almost, almost gave into the need to bury himself (so easy, she was ready, one soft, silken move and he’d be there). He trembled, pressing his forehead to hers. (Slow, he’d promised. Go slow, Steven.)

“You doin’ okay, punk?” Bucky slid his fingers out.

“Not if you’re going to stop,” he complained. Bucky nipped at his thigh and slid all three fingers into his ass, pressing hard. “Son of a--” (He did NOT squeak).

Darcy laughed and kissed his nose. “I guess he found your prostate,” she surmised. “You did good there, James,” she said over his shoulder. "He likes it.”

“Yes,” Steve agreed. “I like it.” Especially, when Bucky found it again and again, and Steve was doing everything he could to not writhe on the bed. He was trying not to mindlessly fuck Darcy, but her wet heat coated the tip of his cock and she kept hitching her hips up enough for him to slip in and out again.

Darcy fumbled for the lube to hand it to Bucky. “Don’t push him too hard, we have a long way to go today.”

Bucky stopped stroking, instead making small motions against his prostate that captured most of Steve's attention. “Think he’s ready?” he asked.

“Any longer and he’s going to start calling you names. Which might be fun, but it is his first time,” she noted, licking her pink lips. The movement called his attention back and he kissed them until they were shiny and swollen.

“Punk ever call you names?” That was accompanied by a slow, aching press of the fingers. Steve propped himself on his forearms and worked his knees up for better leverage.

“Only once, and I might have earned it.”

“What’d you do, Princess?”

Steve remembered, and hell, just the memory made him press down hard onto Bucky’s hand.

“Fuck, doll, whatever it was, it was good, ‘cause Steve’s clenching his ass all over my fingers.” Bucky stroked through it and Steve thought he was going to come then and there. Darcy flexed her hips so that he slipped in a little deeper into her and out again. (Slowslowslowslowslow.)
“Post-mission sex and I didn’t let him come for an hour.”

Bucky’s eyes widened as he let out a startled laugh. “Yeah, okay, we won’t do that to him today. What’d he do?”

“Didn’t text me he was coming home.”

“Really?”

(No. Hell no.) He grumbled, “Would—the two of you—stop talking so—damned—much and please, Buck, do something with your dick?”

“Maybe I’m not ready,” Bucky retorted, though he kept up the steady stroking inside Steve.

“I can fix that,” Darcy insisted. “Because I really want Steve’s cock and he’s leaking all over me. You gonna make him fuck me, James?”

Fingers paused and a quick look over his shoulder proved that Bucky wasn’t nearly as poised as he sounded. Sweat beaded his brow as Bucky demanded, “Now that’s not fair at all, Princess.”

Yeah, Bucky’s voice had gone to pure smoke, husky and deep. Steve chuckled. “Keep it up, doll, nothin’ gets to him faster than talkin’ to him like that.”

Fingers vanished, replaced by the velvet-soft head of Bucky’s cock. “You ready, love?”

“Been ready.” And then it wasn’t soft anymore, it was hard and stretching and foreign and delicious and he couldn’t remember why they hadn’t done this ages ago.

“Oh, fuck it all to hell and back again, Steven, why the FUCK didn’t we do this before?” Bucky demanded, echoing his thoughts.

It wasn’t anything like he expected. For a moment he floundered, pressing his head to Darcy’s even as Bucky went in a little more. He wanted, and yet—he choked out, though whether it was to Bucky or Darcy, he couldn’t say. “Is this what it’s like?”

“Full and aching and like your body suddenly isn’t just yours anymore? Yes,” she assured him.

Bucky stroked his back, and Steve had to remember that this was his first time too. “You okay?” he got out, looking over his shoulder.

“Christ, Steve, yeah, I’m good.” But his voice was strangled, and he shivered as he tried to hold still.

“You gotta move, Buck.” It all became brighter and more when he did. Bucky’s thrusts were slow and easy until Steve was panting from the fullness. His cock kept bouncing and rubbing up against Darcy, until Bucky made a sharp plunge that drove Steve a little ways into her.

“Do that again, James,” Darcy gasped. She pulled her ankles higher to give him better leverage.

Bucky did, slowly pulling out in a way that scraped every last bit of sensation out of Steve, then thrust in again, pressing him a little more into Darcy. Steve dragged his eyes open, trying to ascertain if she was still okay (slow, he’d promised).

“Again,” she pleaded. “Come on, Steve.”

He leaned back into Bucky on the next down stroke, taking Darcy with him so Bucky’s next move was deep and hard. Steve carried that into Darcy, burying himself fully inside her. She let out a sharp
hiss. “Again.” He’d been so lost in the sensations of what Bucky was creating in him that he hadn’t realized how much he’d been teasing Darcy’s clit as he’d been sliding against her. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded as she clenched around his dick. “Oh, god, James, do that again.”

But Bucky held still, and Steve craned his head around to see why. “Want me to come inside you, love, or is that too much?” Bucky asked, shifting a little in preparation to pull out. He was breathless too, eyes bright, biting his lip in an effort to hold still.

“Stay,” Steve got out.

“Thank Christ,” Bucky swore.

“But—won’t last, can’t, please,” Steve babbled out. He leaned up, curved an arm around Darcy’s waist, and pulled her close again to kiss her. It was messy and a little off target, but she didn’t care and returned it, just as messy and with a nip that got Steve pushing back against Bucky’s cock a little more.

That unlocked something in Bucky, and he moved with purpose inside Steve, who couldn’t think beyond the press in his ass and the tightening in his cock. “Now. I’m close—“

Darcy echoed his words, swallowed them when she pressed her mouth to his and swept inside with her tongue. Her hands laced with Bucky’s at Steve’s waist.

Entangled like this, he could feel Bucky’s cock stiffen up and pulse inside him, filling him up with heat and wet. Steve came hard, snapping his hips to take Darcy with them. With the dual sensation of cock and ass clenching down, he wasn’t sure what or whose name he called, but Darcy and Bucky both said his name as a powerful orgasm swept over him. Darcy’s body kept pulling at him, and he, in turn, did the same to Bucky.

He was empty and full all once, and the sensation left him breathless.

And then Bucky pulled out, leaving him hollow and aching just a little. Steve wrapped an arm around Darcy, keeping her firmly on his cock, and rolled so he and Bucky collapsed beside each other, heads touching, lungs heaving. Bucky caught Darcy’s hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it.

For a few minutes, they lay on the bed in the silence. Then Darcy propped up on her fist, studying both of them.

“Doll?” he asked, stroking her hair.

“That’s it? Mind-blowing first time and you guys just knock heads together and lay there?”

He blinked and looked over at Bucky. “Want pancakes?”

*****

She left the idiots on the bed with the promise of pancakes and ducked in the shower to sluice off the sex and sweat of last night and this morning.

She wasn’t quite ready to admit to them that she needed a few minutes to herself. Under the hot
water, she curled up on the shower seat and let her mind drift. Definitely no worries about the sex, that all had been perfectly acceptable (acceptable meant a 10 on a scale of 10, right?) and all lady parts were on board for the next round. (Steve’s expression as Bucky pressed in—that was something she wanted to see again.)

But Darcy hadn’t expected the emotional strings. Sex with Steve in the beginning had been easy. She’d wanted it, he’d wanted it, and they went for it. After that, cuddling, hanging out and their ensuing relationship had been a natural progression. Falling in love came hard and fast.

Seeing how Bucky had fought to stay in the moment last night—and how he’d explored her body with reverence (and skill, yes, he had that)—had tangled up her emotions like nothing else. It was one more reminder of how much was at stake when falling for with a prisoner of war of the likes that none had ever seen. He’d fought his conditioning and won, making love to her on his terms.

Watching him with Steve had painted a clear picture of the difference, of the easy trust and love between the two men. There had been no hesitation, no worries beyond making certain Steve was okay with the newness of the position. And with Steve between them, Bucky hadn’t once slipped into the soldier as he kissed Darcy and held her hands.

She started to brush a tear away, then decided—fuck it—and let them run down her face in the shower where no one would see. Neither of them needed her to be an emotional mess right now. There was too much at stake this weekend.

As she told James last night, this was supposed to be fun. (Her lady parts declared fun was had by all, more please, and soon.) But, dear god, she was scared of fucking this up. She wanted to curl up in Steve’s lap for half a day and huddle under the blankets. But she was Darcy Stark and wasn’t going to do that.

Fuck—none of this had been easy. She dashed away the tears. She was stronger than this, damn it.

Lewis, if you can’t talk to the Captain or the Sergeant, you can talk to me, JARVIS softly cajoled.

Want me to angst about my love life all over you? No wonder you aren’t remotely interested in sex. Between Dad and me, you’ve had quite the education.

This isn’t about me. And I do wish I could give you a hug because you seem to need one.

Yeah, I kind of do. She knuckled away a tear and took a deep breath.

Then go ask for one.

(Gees, was it really that easy?)

Darcy picked out a really sexy set of lingerie (no sense in denying it would be seen, appreciated, and discarded later) and found one of Steve’s plaid shirts to cover it all up.

The boys (barefoot, shirtless, wearing only sweatpants—fuckmesenseless—shit, too late for that) were in the kitchen doing that tag team thing that spoke of years of sharing a place. They turned in unison as she came in, with appreciative smiles that fell off the moment they saw her.

“What’s wrong, doll?” Steve asked first, putting his spatula down. Bucky reached out a hand, lacing it with hers.

She took it, fitting into their space. “Maybe I’m a little bit of a mess.” She reached up and kissed Bucky squarely on the mouth. “Last night was special,” she told him. “I know it was hard for you
and it was still amazing.” She reached out to Steve. “Seeing both of you, seeing how easy that part can be for you, James, shows me we have a ways to go. And I’m in. I’m so in for the ride.”

Bucky slid his hands around her. “But,” he prompted she stepped close enough for her chest to brush his skin. Steve cupped the back of her head, massaging there.

“No ‘buts.’ I really need a hug to know that we’re okay—that the three of us are okay. Because I’m scared as all fuck. I’m in deep with both of you.”

And it was that easy. Bucky and Steve sandwiched her between them, giving her that long, hard hug she desperately needed. After that, neither of them let her get more than a few inches from somebody’s secure grasp for the next solid hour.

Once again, she sat on the counter sipping coffee. With one hand on her thigh, Steve made pancakes and bacon while Bucky scrambled eggs. She picked off a piece of hot bacon as it went on the platter. Bucky washed his hands, kissing Darcy as he did, and then brushing fingers along Steve’s hip as he went back to his station.

“Can I make a rule that you two have to wear just sweatpants all the time?” she asked, happily admiring asses and hips and abs and shoulders as they rippled in within touching distance. She trailed a finger along the cut of Steve’s bicep. “I’m definitely appreciating the view.”

Two sets of smirking blue eyes shot her way. Steve reached out and unfastened her (his) shirt with one hand, not even looking at what he was doing as he flipped the pancakes. The dark blue satin and crème lace of her bra and panties peeked out as the shirt fell open. He tilted his head with that innocent (not) smile. “Deal. But you have to wear that.”

Bucky scratched his neck. “Dunno, Rogers, I ain’t gonna be able to concentrate worth shit. Might burn the eggs.”

Before Steve could answer, Darcy advised, “Your problem, not ours.” She went a step further and let the shirt fall off one shoulder. Bucky reddened just a little as he bit his lip. She sipped her coffee.

Steve leaned over to kiss her collarbone. “Are we doing this on Saturdays and Sundays now?” (Hell, yes, if she can get it.) “Got a problem with that?” she retorted.

“Absolutely not, ma’am.” He grinned as he came up to nibble on her lips. The hand on her thigh skimmed north and she curled her toes in anticipation.

Bucky stiffened. “This is what you meant by missing Sundays?” He pinched Steve’s ass and got a spatula waggled at him in return. “Beautiful dame wants to make time with you, you don’t turn that down, punk.”

“I was busy with a beautiful jerk,” he breathed, staring into her eyes. “But I think I’ve got all that worked out.”

“Seems like it,” she agreed. “Don’t burn the pancakes.” She ran a toe along the bulge in his pants.

“Son of a—“

Bucky put a hand on his back and stole the spatula. “I’ve got this. Kiss her and keep her happy. Gotta take care of our girl.”

“Mmm, okay.” Steve lazily made his way around her lips, and Darcy was happy to settle in for a
while as he stroked the inside of her thigh and swept over the lace of her panties with his fingers.
“Damp already?”

“Wet from the shower, I’m sure.”

“So you’re telling me you cleaned up?” he murmured.

“Yes, yes, I did.”

He ran his thumb under the lace, his eyes widening. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” Steve had just discovered she’d shaved so that she was completely bare. (She didn’t do it often because maintenance and itching sucked, but hey, it was a special occasion.)

“Did what?” Bucky asked. Steve moved his hand and sucked on his thumb, eyes glinting with mischief. Darcy primly crossed her legs and rested her hands on her knees.

“Later,” she promised. Bucky eyed her, eyed Steve and his thumb, and yanked him down for a sloppy kiss.

“You’ve been playing without me, Steven,” Bucky warned. “I can taste her on you. For that, you can flip your own damned pancakes.”

By the time breakfast was finished, Darcy was ready to fuck either one of them. Both men were half-hard and it wouldn’t take much to get them on board. In any case, Steve plucked her off the counter and into Bucky’s lap to eat, where she managed two eggs, a pancake, two more pieces of bacon and a glass of orange juice. He kept his hand firmly on her waist throughout, and nuzzled the back of her neck in a way that made her wet just from that. She stroked his forearm, just as Steve had taught.

From time to time, Bucky would tighten his fingers in response to what she did, pressing the sensors firmly into her bare skin.

The affection they showed her that morning was a heady drug. Bucky couldn’t quite keep his eyes off her, and even Steve nudged his chin upward at one point.

“Never seen a pair, Buck?”

He blinked. “Aw hell, Steven, come on. Darcy, I’m sorry, bad manners and all that.” He pressed a kiss to her shoulder in apology.

Darcy laughed with glee. “James, I wouldn’t be wearing this if I didn’t want you to look. I promise you, I feel amazingly sexy right now. And don’t let Steven get away with that, he’s looking just as much as you are.”

Bucky flicked his butter knife at Steve, who snatched it out of the air and slapped it down to the table. (Holy fuck, Batman: super-soldiers and fast reflexes.)

“Mental note: things we won’t do around the children,” she quipped—then bit her lip as she realized what she’d said. Steve and Bucky stilled in the way that meant that they were subject to great emotion. She leaned against Bucky and looked straight at Steve. “I was making a joke, but that’s part of this, right? Both of you have told me you want kids. I do too. Not yet, please, but let’s not freak out if someone brings it up, okay?”

Steve and Bucky both lifted a hand and raked it through their hair in identical moves. She giggled as they caught each other in wry laughter. The tension broke and the rest of breakfast settled into snarky jokes.
When she was done, she turned so that she could lay her head on Bucky’s shoulder, kissing the metal as she did. (Citrus and the body wash he used in the shower.)

“I think it’s working, Princess.”

“Oh?”

“I felt that.”

“Good.” She sat straight up. “Oh!” She leaned over Bucky’s arm to peel an envelope off the bottom of the chair. She’d taped it there Thursday night after her mom had thoughtfully given it to Darcy to surprise Bucky on Friday. (She’d been busy.) She twisted around in his lap and passed it to him.

“What’s this?” He opened it.

“Your first paycheck from Stark Industries.” Darcy linked hands with Steve under the table as they waited for Bucky to open it.

He slid the paper out of the envelope, paling a little. “This can’t be right.”

“It is. The money was deposited in your bank account yesterday morning. All according to the contract you signed.” Darcy tried hard not to be smug. Steve absolutely beamed from his seat.

Bucky swallowed hard, staring at the pay stub. “All I ever wanted was to make enough to take care of Steven properly and make sure we could have a family one day,” he said softly. He nodded to himself and slipped the paper back in the envelope with shaking hands. “We’ll put this by for when we need it,” he promised. There was no mistaking the pride there.

But he clutched Darcy hard with both arms, crushing the envelope. Steve came around to kneel beside him, on hand on his thigh. “You feel like this when you got your first paycheck, punk?” Bucky choked out.

“Yeah, makin’ more in a week than in a lifetime back then. And even taking into account o’ things bein’ different, still more money’n our folks ever saw.”

“Think we can buy an apartment of our own one day?” Bucky asked wistfully.

Darcy didn’t see that one coming.

*****

She slipped out of his lap. “I’m getting a refill. Anyone else.”

Bucky caught her fingers. Nervous tension radiated and he could feel the double-time of her heartbeat through his sensors. “I’m sorry, Princess. Didn’t mean to put the cart before the horse.” He coaxed her back down in his lap and held her tight, trying to soothe. He kissed the curve of her shoulder.

“No, it’s okay. It’s just talk. We were talking about kids, right? I started it.”

But she wasn’t settling. He considered, reading her body language (assessing). “What is it you don’t want to tell us, Darcy?”
She flinched, and Steve took the chair next to him. “Darcy?”

She put her hands on the table, her heart rate dropping as she breathed out. But she didn’t look at either of them. “We can buy something else, if you want. Money’s not an issue for any of us. But—”

She came up, shot each of them a nervous glance. “I have a house. If you want it. It needs work though.”

Steve gave her a look of avid curiosity. “You never mentioned it before, and if you have a house, why did you rent a carriage apartment?”

“It’s a lot of house for one person. And it really does need work,” she apologized.

Steve closed his eyes, a habit he had when searching his memories. They popped open again and he tilted his head. “Howard had a house, didn’t he? I remember him mentioning it one time.”

Bucky stiffened at the mention of her grandfather, and Darcy turned to link her arms around his neck. “Dad hates it. It’s been closed up since I was eight.”

“You’ve never been back?” Steve asked.

She squirmed on Bucky’s lap and the movement was enough to distract him from his own unease. Her heart rate had shot up again, and he automatically stroked her back. “I started renovating it around the time we started dating. Not decorating it too much, but updating the bathrooms and kitchens because they needed the most work. Mom’s helped a lot.”

“Kitchens, as in, more than one,” Bucky echoed. “Darcy, just how big is this place.”

Biting her lip, she told them, “Seven thousand square feet. Enclosed yard. Has an underground garage. Swimming pool. Full research facility.” She put her head down on his shoulder in a futile effort to hide her red cheeks.

“Here in New York?” Steve asked.

“Yes.”

There was more to that. Bucky tugged her back up. “Darcy, where is this house of yours?”


“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Bucky breathed. Talk about landing in the big leagues. Steve bopped him on the back of the head though he was a little pale himself. He whistled comically. “No wonder Stark was worried about a couple of boys from Brooklyn. Darcy’s slumming.”

That made Darcy snicker. “Not possible. And—if it’s not what you want, we don’t have to live there. But it’s an option, okay? Commute to work wouldn’t suck, it’s ridiculously private and not a bad place to raise little kids. Park’s right there.”

Steve’s mouth had fallen open, and Bucky reached out to close it. “Catchin’ flies, punk.”

“I’m going to get some more coffee,” Steve announced. He shot Darcy a look of disappointment and she recoiled into Bucky’s embrace.

“That look right there is why I never said anything,” she told Bucky, shaking her head. But she pushed off and followed Steve into the kitchen. So did he.

“How many more secrets are you keeping, Darcy?” Steve demanded, blue eyes flashing with heat as
he crossed his arms. “Every time I think I know you, something else pops up out of the blue.”

“It’s not a secret, Steve, it’s just something that never had a reason to come up until now. It’s not like I can live there until I go public with my identity. People pay attention to things like cars pulling up to the front door and helicopters landing on the grounds. Do you know how many times people have assumed I’m Tony Stark’s latest paramour when we’re out in public? I’m not living in that house until it’s clear who I am.”

Steve pressed his lips into a hard line. “You could have brought it up.”

She retorted, “And the last thing I want to do is rub my privileged upbringing in the face of someone who had to scrape by for everything he had. I didn’t have any more control over my childhood than you did yours.”

“What else haven’t you told me?” he repeated. “A house in the Hamptons? An apartment complex in Brooklyn? I hear what you’re saying, Darce, but the topic of sharing a place has definitely come up a time or two.”

Darcy stomped out of the room and came back with her tablet. She passed it to Steve. “A complete list of assets that I currently own and manage. The second document is what I’ll inherit. Feel free to pick out your next vacation spot. Won’t cost you a dime.” She stomped back out of the room and landed on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her.

After a brief look, he handing the tablet over to Bucky and went after her. He skimmed over the information and set the device down to follow them.

Steve knelt in front of her and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t think I had to explain this to you, of all people,” she rounded on him. “You know I’ve inherited a fuck ton, Steve. You’ve seen Tony’s garage. Does the Bugatti mean anything to you?”

“That you won’t let me drive it,” he said with a small smile. She crossed her arms. “Darcy, I apologize. I forget about the rest of it. I can hardly comprehend you inheriting this building and Stark Industries. The rest of it—it’s not something I think about.”

Bucky sat down with a thump next to Darcy. “You own an airplane?”

“I own a lot of things that Tony gives to me when he buys new toys,” she said acidly. “I’m very good at divesting assets I don’t want. You know, companies, yachts, buildings, art, that kind of thing.”

Steve winced as he recalled, “His gifts are one of the things you argue with Tony about.”

“Frequently and loudly. The day you and I met, he’d dumped a giant sculpture on me he’d bought on a whim and had no idea what to do with it. So he signed it over to me. Which meant I had to do all the research to find either a buyer or a someone to donate it to.”


“Held an auction party and split the proceeds between three of my favorite charities. I tend to donate a little more directly than the Maria Stark Foundation, but I do shovel money in there too.” She paused (Yeah, Steve wasn’t getting off easy) and threw Bucky a sidelong glance. He kicked Steve in the ankle.

“What was that for?” Steve demanded.
“Now she’s pissed at me too, and I didn’t do anything. Fix it.”

“I’m trying.”

“Be glad she’s not Peggy or you would have a gun pointed at you. You’re terrible at this.”

That prompted the tiniest hint of a smile from Darcy. She pulled the blanket around her tighter though. Quietly, she said, “I’m doing my best to earn my part of this and not be a useless trust fund baby. In spite of my dad’s mistakes, he’s done more than his share for the company. I have a responsibility to see this thing through the best that I can. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the story of Dad’s old friend, Obadiah Stane, but let’s just say that none of us are particularly trusting with outsiders managing the company. Tony would have never have made Pepper CEO if she wasn’t already my mother.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. Pepper’s decision to bring him on board made even more sense.

“Tell me about Stark Mansion, Darcy,” Steve urged.

“I lived my first eight years there. After that, we moved to Malibu and I met Pepper. At ten, she adopted me. At fourteen, I went to college at MIT.” Steve ran a hand under the blanket to lay a hand on her ankle as she talked. The touch settled her some as she explained, “Sometimes, when I got homesick, I would sneak out of the dorms and catch a ride to Stark Mansion for the weekend. I still did it when I was at Culver. Malibu was my home growing up and I miss it because it was just Mom and Dad and JARVIS and me. But Stark Mansion is mine. Dad signed it over when we moved to Malibu. JARVIS keeps an eye on it and when I’m there, he keeps me company.”

“Sounds like a special place,” Steve offered.

“There isn’t anything to compare. You step inside the doors and you’re in a whole different world. I’m not kidding when I say it’s private. I lived there for almost a decade and no one ever figured out that Tony Stark had a daughter. There’s a place for kids to play outside, and when we get tired of that, we can cross the street and walk in Central Park. It’s safe, Steve. It’s safe for all of us, even in the middle of New York City.”

“Will you take us there?”

“Not today.”

Bucky hid a smile, for that was a petulant pout if he’d ever heard one. Darcy was going to make Steve earn back into her good graces. Apparently, the punk figured that out too, because he slid a hand farther up under the blanket.

Darcy shook her head. “No, you do not get off that easily.”

“Come on, Darce. I acted like a jerk,” Steve cajoled.

“Yeah, you did. Why?”

Bucky was fascinated watching the two of them work out their disagreement. Steve’s innately honest made it impossible to stay mad at him for long, but Darcy didn’t give him any slack either when he fucked up.

“Because every time I think I’ve seen all the facets of Darcy Stark, you turn a little and I discover a different way of looking at you. It’s disconcerting and fascinating all at the same time.”
“You know me better than anyone, Steve.”

“I do know you. You live in the moment and I want to be right there with you. I am with you. And then I step to the side and discover that when you’re not in our moment, you’re doing twenty other things that I never saw coming.”

Darcy bit her lip, nodding. From her expression, Bucky could see she was relenting. He nudged Steve with his toe. “Explain.”

Steve caressed Darcy’s legs again. “Give Bucky a rundown of yesterday.”

Darcy turned pink. “No.”

“Come on, doll. This is exactly what I’m talking about. Bucky has no idea.”

“You brought me the budget stuff,” Bucky prompted.

She ducked her head and Steve tipped her chin up to kiss her lips. “Tell him, please.”

With an exasperated sigh, she reeled off the tasks she’d accomplished, ranging from managing SI—which was enough for any three people and included an upcoming Senate hearing on nanotechnology and the annual budgets for her assigned divisions—to the bookkeeping for her personal business (of which they now understood the scope), the argument she had with Tony over lunch about the marketing plausibility of two new developments out of R&D, the designs she’d finalized for part of the mansion, her meeting with Sam, and the hour she’d managed to carve out to tinker in her own lab with the tech she’d pulled out of Bucky’s arm, before circling back again to handle a couple of issues out of HR from the Miami facility and looking over a press release for Thor regarding Asgard’s position on human rights.

It wasn’t the volume of work. There were exceptionally organized people who could handle the number of tasks Darcy had checked off her list for the day. It was the volume of knowledge that went into the work she’d completed that day alone.

She held her hands in front of her face. “Don’t stare at me like I’m a freak, James. I can handle a lot of things. That’s not one of them.”

“I’m admiring, Darcy. Take off your shirt and I’ll show you what staring looks like.” That got her to laugh and he peeled her out of the blanket and into his lap, conveniently making room for Steve on the other side of her. “What I don’t understand is how you can turn all that off and still deal with us.”

Steve reached for her feet and began caressing them. She turned laurel-green eyes on Bucky. “That’s work. This is home.”

If James Buchanan Barnes wasn’t already in love with her, that would have been the last slide into home plate. As it was, he could only hold her close. “Yes, it is. You gonna stay mad at him, Princess?”

She sighed and leaned back against Bucky. “Depends.”

“On what?”

“How good he is at making up to me.”

“You two have a system?”
Steve grinned at Bucky. “I’ll show you the broader points, but you’re going to have to work it out on your own.” He shifted off the sofa and brought Darcy’s foot to his shoulder. “Keep her occupied up there, will ya?”

“You want my help, you’re going to have to give me some details, punk.” He skimmed his hands down her sides, just under Steve’s shirt. “You okay with this? Both of us?”

She licked her lips. “Depends on what kind of game you bring, James.”
Bucky tugged the shirt out of the way so that Darcy could lean skin to skin against his chest, wearing only the lace-trimmed bra and panties she’d picked out that day. Steve stroked her hips and thighs, carefully avoiding making intimate contact until he was sure she was ready. (Her lady parts were screaming assent.)

She ran a foot from his shoulder to his crotch, toeing lightly against his growing erection. Bucky had a matching one pressing into her ass through the sweatpants. “Consider this an invitation.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve agreed, blue eyes dancing wickedly. He dove in, licking her panties with abandon.

She squirmed and Bucky hissed in her ear. “Damn it, Darcy. Steve, keep her still or this isn’t going to be pretty at all.”

As Steve clamped his hands on her hips, she taunted Bucky, “No staying power?”

He found her nipples through the fabric and plucked them. “Want me in your ass too, Princess?”

She chuckled at the intriguing idea, (yeah, they would get around to trying it eventually, let’s get real), but she shook her head. “Not yet. Not this time anyway.”

“Then be still so Steven here can show you what he can do with his fingers.”

“I don’t want to be still, James.”

Steve rolled his eyes at them as he circled her clit through the silky fabric. She came before her panties came off, mostly because Steve went down on her as if he was a starving man and she was the only food he’d seen in a year. But Bucky licking and biting her neck definitely had something to do with it. So did his hands on her girls. Steve stripped the damp cloth out of the way, and paused for a moment to admire her bare flesh. “Damn. You didn’t have to do this.”

“It’s not for you. It’s for me. Because I like the way your tongue feels,” she insisted. (Though, in truth, Steve was an artist and got turned on by visual stimulation like no one’s business—hence the explosion of lingerie in her dresser drawer.)

Bucky leaned up on an elbow, “I can’t see.”

“Later, Barnes. If you’re good to me.”

“I’m not exactly driving this car.”

“You’re on Steve’s six. It’s your job to make sure he doesn’t miss anything.”

“That I can do. Punk, if our girl can still talk, you aren’t doing it right.”
“Yeah, I got that,” Steve agreed. He licked, and she arched off Bucky’s chest as the sizzling hot touch. Right into Bucky’s hands, where he rolled her nipples hard under the fabric of her bra. (Yeah, okay, that felt really good. Do it again.)

He did, with a chuckle. “Brain to mouth filter, Darcy?”

(Huh?) White heat streaked her whole body and Steve kept opening her up a little more until she was reeling from his mouth on her clit, his hands dipping into her vagina, and Bucky’s hands playing with her boobs. She couldn’t keep still and Bucky started muttering in her ear about all the ways he wanted to fuck her. (Door, shower, kitchen island, the bed was getting farther down the list.) His words distracted her from what Steve was doing until he changed angles, slipping a thumb along her folds and one long finger sliding into her hole.

“Steve--,” she gasped out, her body lighting up in a new way. Bucky caught hold of her so she wouldn’t tumble off the couch.

“Gee whiz, Darcy, like it much? My hand is soaked.” Steve said wryly as he leaned down to lick at her belly button.

“Don’t stop.”

“No, not going to stop.” He slipped a second finger beside the first into her hole, and her eyes widened at the stretch. He kept up a steady rhythm.

“Our boy treatin’ you right, Princess?” Bucky whispered in her ear.

“Yes, yes, oh—“ Bucky wasn’t kidding. Steve knew exactly what to do with his fingers. How to ease them in, how to stroke. (How to get her right to the fuckingdamnededgeofcoming and then stopping just long enough to … not.) “Damn it, Steve, don’t stop.”

“But you like it when I do,” he admonished.

“Sometimes, maybe, just not right this fucking minute—oh, fuck, I hate you a little right now.”

Steve huffed out a laugh over her belly, his warm breath making her toes curl. “No, you don’t. You love me. You love everything I do to you.”

“I’ll love you a tiny bit more if you will let me come sometime in the next thirty seconds, Rogers.”

“Demanding, isn’t she,” Bucky asked. “Never known a dame to like sex so much.”

“You must have been doing it wrong, Barnes,” she retorted.

Steve popped up, smirking, and Bucky hissed in her ear. “Well, fuck, Darcy, now I’m going to have to prove that’s not true.”

“Later. Steve and I are busy right now.” Taking that as a hint, Steve went back to sucking along her folds and clit until she was dizzy from panting. (Breathe, Darcy)

Bucky drifted his fingers along her skin, finger-combing her hair until it lay over her nipples. Her hips stuttered with Steve’s stroking until, all at once, she moved with him, fucking his hand and mouth until she was desperate for release. Her hands flailed until Bucky caught them, giving her something to hold on to as she came apart, chanting Steve’s name.

Steve didn’t stop until she pleaded, “Enough. I can’t--” He eased his fingers out, caressing her thighs
as he did and pressing kisses to the inside of her knee.

She collapsed in a puddle of goo, and Bucky held her tight as Steve told her she was beautiful and loved watching her fall apart in his hands. It took her a few minutes to catch her breath again. When she did, she reached for Steve to draw him down for a little kiss.

Bucky’s rock-hard erection pressed into her lower back. Steve’s hands went underneath her to … to tug off Bucky’s sweats. Bucky worked his way down the sofa, holding onto Darcy as he did.

(Bonus points for superstrength. When they wanted her somewhere, they could damn well make it happen. Kind of cool so far.)

There was that glint in Steve’s blue eyes that mean he was still up to something. “Steven—“ she cautioned.

“Nuh uh. Not done yet.” He shifted her so that the base of Bucky’s dick was tucked right up against her slick, bare folds. Bucky’s thighs pressed inside hers, and if she rocked a little, she was pretty sure she could make herself come that way. (If she wasn’t so sensitive that—holy fuck, really? Lady parts decided they were a go.) She bit her lip as she sucked in her breath.

“There you go, Darce,” Steve crooned. “Keep that up, doll.” (She did, and, oh my heavens, Bucky’s cock felt good.) She had him slicked up in no time, and Bucky groaned in her ear.

He wasn’t quite so sweet. “Steven Grant, get your mouth on my dick or I’m fucking our girl on this coffee table.”

(Next time, she promised her lady parts. Definitely, next time. Right now she was busy.)

“Hush,” Steve admonished. “I’ve got this. And you aren’t fucking anyone yet. I’m not done making up to Darcy.”

Bucky demanded—a little breathlessly—“If you’re the one in trouble, why am I taking the punishment?”


Bucky swallowed hard as Steve brushed soft lips across the head of his dick. “Yeah, okay. Alright.” He exhaled, kissing under Darcy’s ear as he did. She watched, fascinated by the way Steve’s fingers ghosted along the ruddy skin.

He kept his eyes on her as he flicked little licks along the slit. “Like what you see, doll?”

“Yes, I do, Steve.”

He didn’t reply, just winked as he closed his mouth over the tip and sucked his way off again. Bucky moaned.

“James?” Darcy prodded.

“Hmmm”

“Your cock feels really, really good.” It jerked up against her as she said that.

“Yeah, well you should feel your quid from this side,” he growled. (Quid?)

Then Steve proceeded to lick Bucky’s cock in a way that made it bounce against Darcy’s clit. (Oh. That.) When he sucked all the way down, his lips brushed the tangle of nerves. The sheer eroticism
of it all was enough to have her coming again after only a few minutes, all over Bucky’s cock and Steve’s mouth. Steve just kept up the tension, even heightening it when he swirled his fingers through Darcy’s juices and used them to slick up Bucky’s hole.

Bucky groaned as Steve pressed in. “Our girl’s making you wet, Buck. No lube in the world is better than Darcy.”

“Damn, Steve,” Bucky muttered. He was fluttering his hands around Darcy’s shoulders and arms, clenching and unclenching as Steve worked him over. Darcy wasn’t helping matters any as she helplessly coated both of them.

“Steve, please—” Though what she was pleading for, she had no idea. (Not to stop. Ever.)

“Fuck,” Bucky whispered. “I’m there. Fuck, doll.” He held her to him, mouthing her shoulder as Darcy kept on watching Steve as he worked Bucky’s dick over until it was swollen, shiny and thick veins popped out. The bump of Steve’s lips was consistent enough that she began to shake again.

Darcy laced fingers with Bucky again as she convulsed against him, flooding his cock and clenching his thighs between hers. He lost it then, holding her hips as if he was fucking her ass. Steve rolled with it, sucking off Bucky until he and Darcy were trembling in the aftermath.

Steve came up looking like a cat-in-the-cream. Bucky scooted back up the sofa and gave Darcy a boost to turn over and lay on his chest. “Stay with me. Need a combat nap.” He closed his eyes and threw one arm over his face.

Though that idea had merit, Darcy wasn’t quite done (Really? Go Darcy.). “What about Steve?”

“Punk’ll be fine. We’ll get him next time,” he mumbled.

But Darcy didn’t want to wait. She straddled Bucky. He peeked out from under his arm. “Ain’t gonna happen, Princess. Twice in a morning’s my limit unless punk really wants to work for it.”

“You don’t have to do anything except lay there.” She looked over her shoulder. “Come on, Steven. Fuck me and we’ll consider make up sex a success.”

“Done.” Steve dropped his sweats that he’d started to pull on and climbed on the sofa behind her, straddling Bucky as well.

“You guys are really going to do this right here?” Bucky asked, one eyebrow lifted.

“Got a problem, Barnes?” she sassed.

“Not really. Can I play, too, or am I supposed to pretend I’m asleep?”

“This is an equal opportunity position as long as I don’t fall off the couch.”

“Good to know. You ready, Steven?”

Steve actually had a foot on the floor but he seemed to be fine with it. “I’m good. You okay, doll?”

“I’m fine. Now fuck me, Steven. I like a good orgasm like the next girl, but I really like me some dick, okay?”

Bucky chuckled. “Tell ‘em, Princess.” He toyed with her hair and skimmed fingers along her face. Just as Steve made his first tentative thrust (his thing, to make sure she really was ready for him), Bucky put his metal thumb in her mouth.
“Darce?” Steve checked in one last time.

She rolled her eyes in frustration. Bucky picked up on it. “She’s busy, punk. Fuck her like she told you.” Bucky’s voice was low and throaty and, god, she could drown in it. He closed his own eyes as she sucked a little harder on his thumb.

And Steve did. He patiently figured out what rhythm made Darcy squirm this time around. Then he took it up a notch as she licked her way down Bucky’s hand and wrist. She bit lightly on his fingertip.

“Fuck her, Steve. Like you mean it.”

Darcy’s bit her lip as Steve moved with purpose, hard and deep inside her. His cock was huge and filled her up. He pulled her in using her hips as leverage.

Bucky goaded him on. “Come on, Steven. You’re not even trying. Darcy’s over here playin’ with my hand ‘cause she ain’t got nuthin’ better to do.”

Steve grunted, his hips popping into hers in a way he rarely did (worried about hurting her; never happened). “Darcy—“

“She’s fine. She’s bored. Fuck her senseless.” Bucky grinned at her as her mouth dropped open. She couldn’t breathe much from the force of Steve pistoning his hips.

(holyfuckinggoddon’tstopdon’tstop) It took Bucky’s hands over Steve’s to hold her in place. “There you go, punk. Now you’ve got her attention. Keep doing that.”

She fucking screamed as she came, milking Steve for everything he had as he did the same with a massive groan.

He was instantly contrite when Darcy collapsed on Bucky’s chest. “Darce—oh shit, I’m—“

She waved a hand behind her head. “I’m fine. Felt amazing. Wanna sleep for a few. We’ll do sports center and recap later.”

She dozed as Steve flicked off the pillows of the couch and stretched out beside Bucky. (11 on a scale of 10 and the bra never came off.)

*****

Bucky cupped Darcy’s head as he dozed. He liked the feel of her hair more than he’d ever thought possible (shimmering energy as the strands danced on the back of his hand). Steve rested the smooth line of his jaw on Bucky’s shoulder.

This, right here, was his version of heaven. He turned his head a little to catch Steve’s scent, like the dark waters of the Arctic Ocean. The crisp bite of snow, the salt of the deep blue water, and the tang of sweat from humid Brooklyn nights. That scent had stayed with him throughout his time as the Winter Soldier. He’d dreamed of it, in the rare moments he did that kind of thing. They wiped his memories, all his visual references, so he didn’t remember blue eyes and blond hair. But scent went far deeper. There were times he was on a mission and a faint hint of salt and ocean made him turn his head, searching for more.
His handlers hadn’t known or they would have eradicated that too.

He still wondered how in the hell he managed to keep the fact that he and Steve were lovers hidden through all the torture and conditioning. His memories of that time were clear enough. They never asked, and somehow, nothing he’d done had revealed that secret.

Steve muttered something, warm breath caressing the skin there. Bucky woke just enough for those thoughts to melt away, and he was left in heaven for a little while more. He was home.

*****

Steve didn’t really need a nap, having slept just fine the night before. But there was something perfect about being crammed between the back of the sofa and Bucky, with Darcy’s knee poking into his hip. He had his fingers on her waist and the heel of his hand on Bucky’s.

He didn’t need a nap. But he took one anyway.

When they woke an hour later, Bucky gave Darcy a piggyback ride to the shower. From the squeals that came out of the bathroom, they were either having a tickle fight or Bucky was antagonizing Darcy again. If they managed another round of sex this soon, he was going to be impressed with both of them.

Darcy stomped into the kitchen with a towel around her head, another around her body. Bucky followed, with one tucked around his hips. As Steve set down the bread and mayonnaise for the sandwiches he was building, he nonchalantly reached for his sketchpad and pencil. (He loved his life.)

“Control your boyfriend. I need to get dressed,” she demanded.

“He’s your boyfriend too, Darcy.”

“You’ve had him longer. He doesn’t listen to me worth shit.” She pulled at the towel on her head so that her hair spilled down her shoulders (beautiful, stunning), not giving him a chance to reply. “I told him not to get my hair wet. I washed this yesterday.” She rounded on Bucky and poked him in the chest. “Do you know how long it takes to dry, Barnes? I have better things to do today. Had better things. Now I get to dry my hair instead.”

When Darcy disappeared into the bedroom, firmly shutting the door behind her, Steve handed Bucky a sandwich. “What was that about?”

“I want to brush her hair.”

“Couldn’t you just ask?”

“She’ll figure it out.”

Steve bit into his sandwich, staying out of it.

He did quite a bit of that for the rest of the day. Even Sam had cautioned him about getting in between Bucky and Darcy as they worked out their relationship. And now that they were throwing sex into the mix, things were going to get complicated for a while. (In a good way, in a very good
After lunch, Darcy reluctantly handed over a brush to Bucky, who blissfully pulled it through the damp strands as she tapped away at her tablet. When she had enough of that, she showed Bucky how to tame the locks that curled over her shoulders.

They picked out clothes for the afternoon, and Bucky made Steve change twice until he was satisfied (Did the jeans have to be this tight?). Darcy nudged them down to the garage, where a sleek new Harley in electric blue with hot pink trim sat next to Steve’s. Bucky and Steve fought over who got to ride on the back with her. A quick game of roshambo settled that one. Steve got the outbound ride, Bucky would catch the return.

It’s not like she hadn’t driven his bike before, but this custom job was smaller, though no less powerful, and better suited to her height. Darcy was perfectly comfortable keeping this one balanced, even with Steve’s weight on the back. (But he put his feet down at stops, just in case. She glanced over her shoulder and rolled her eyes at him as she revved the engine. He kept his hands on her hips and his mouth shut.)

They headed to Queens and a pizza place she liked. And if Darcy didn’t fly down the roads at the speeds Steve did, she was a good biker and he enjoyed the ride. She didn’t let Bucky antagonize her and was perfectly happy letting him lead the way, though she deliberately stopped for red lights so Bucky would have to slow down. (But when they hit a clear stretch of road, she leaned over the bike and took it up to eighty. It wasn’t for long, but it was New York City and still counted for something.)

Dinner that night was a treat. Darcy had, quite intentionally, let them see exactly what she wore underneath her dress. (There might have been an accident involving the coffee table).

She dressed in layers, the stockings and garter belt the he loved so much, blue panties trimmed in black lace over that, and a black and blue corset that clung to every curve and then some. Apparently, she needed help fastening the corset and Steve was glad to lend his fingers to the task. He mentally thanked whatever fashion designers come up with such a thing.

Then she disappeared into the bathroom to finish dressing, leaving Bucky and Steve to do the same.

Steve sighed when Bucky handed him clothes. “You know, I’ve been dressing myself these past few years.”

“Yes, and your style, what you had of it, went to shit. Fucking gorgeous body and an ass like yours—it’s a crime to cover it up with the old man pants you wear. You used to do that when you were sixteen, wearin’ clothes all the wrong sizes thinkin’ you’d look bigger than you were.”

“I’m not that bad anymore.”

“No, you’re worse. T-shirts too small and pants cut wrong. Shows off all the wrong parts, punk.”

He still didn’t understand wearing jeans for a nice date, even if they were black and had a shine to them. But the vest and button down shirt looked nice enough. Bucky had on similar clothes, though he opted for a tie and low boots. (That conveniently hid a pair of knives each. Steve didn’t say anything. It was a good idea.)

“Damn, punk, you look good enough to eat,” growled Bucky. He not-so-lightly shoved Steve against the wall and crushed those pale pink lips against his. Hasty and hard at first, it was only a moment before it softened into something more than lust, and Steve found himself drowning in the
sweetness as Bucky kissed him breathless. His dick stirred, but that wasn’t the point. He wanted this, the quiet side of Bucky Barnes. The public Bucky had been out far too much as of late, flirting with Darcy and keeping Steve on his toes. But here, Bucky rested one hand above Steve’s head and another on his cheek. In a husky voice that reminded Steve of whiskey and cigarettes on a hot summer night, Bucky offered, “I love you, Steven Grant.”

Steve flushed, just as he did that first time he’d heard those same words. “I love you back, James Buchanan.”

A brilliant smile lit up Bucky’s eyes so that they were full of blue and light from within. “Darcy says that.”

*I love you back.* “She does.”

“I like it.”

“So do I,” Steve admitted as he cupped Bucky’s neck and flicked a stray curl of hair.

“My … dad started it,” Darcy said from the bathroom doorway. “Hope that doesn’t ruin it for you.”

Blue velvet. She wore blue velvet with black lace that exactly matched her corset and a pair of sky high heels that she didn’t seem to have any trouble navigating.

With a slow, long whistle, Bucky reached for Darcy and twirled her into his arms. “It doesn’t, you are gorgeous, Princess, and if I kiss you will it ruin your lipstick?”

“Good, thank you, and yes, so be sweet.” Darcy’s gaze darted to Steve and he was certain he gaped like a mook for a solid minute.

Until Bucky bopped him on the forehead. “Manners, Rogers. Act like you’ve seen a dame before.”

“I have. I see Darcy. Shit.” He closed his eyes, well aware that he was babbling. He reached for her hand and kissed it properly. “Every day,” he told her, “You take my breath away. I love you for more than your looks, doll, you know that. But doesn’t stop me from thinkin’ you’re beautiful all the time.”

She sucked in the bottom red painted lip and shrugged. “You say that as if I’m not stepping out with two of the most gorgeous men of my acquaintance, a circle which includes a god. Same goes, Rogers. Barnes here needs to dress you more often. Now, which of you boys is taking me out to dinner?”

“Two for one special, right here, Ms. Lewis,” Bucky quipped.

“Excellent choice, Mr. Barnes. Shall we?”

Steve trailed along as Bucky escorted Darcy to the limo. Happy drove, which meant they could all cram in the backseat where Darcy’s perfume kept him occupied. His imagination supplied all sorts of interesting ideas for the evening, and if he was distracted, then Bucky and Darcy’s repartee kept them all entertained all the way through dinner.

He idly drew in the notebook he carried in his jacket pocket, capturing lines and light as he listened to them flirt. It wasn’t his imagination that they were less stressed this week. Darcy didn’t look anywhere as exhausted as she had a few days ago. And though Bucky was alert to their surroundings (as was Steve), he wasn’t edgy.
He decided they needed to leave the Tower more often. Darcy hid her fears well, but she hadn’t
gone outside yet without Steve (not counting London) since the kidnapping attempt. It was past time
to encourage her to go out with Pepper and Tony, or maybe Jane and Thor. Bucky, too, needed to
get out. Maybe with Clint and Nat. Definitely not alone.

They weren’t alone today either. The crew assigned to guard Pepper had split up for the night and
half of them tagged along discretely to the restaurant. Nothing obvious, though it was nice to know
they had back up if they needed it.

But it wasn’t necessary and the three of them enjoyed their dinner in peace.

It was raining when they left the restaurant, and though Happy pulled the limo as close to the door as
he could, nevertheless, they had to make a mad dash to the car. Darcy slipped in her heels on the wet
pavement. Bucky was there to catch her, dropping a light kiss on her lips as he did. Steve grinned at
the romantic picture they made and ducked into the car after them.

Darcy crawled into Steve’s lap to mess with his buttons while she sucked on his neck. He clutched
her waist, feeling the boning of the corset under his fingers and wondering how she managed to wear
the thing. They were only a few blocks from the Tower, so (thankfully) she didn’t get any farther
than unbuttoning his shirt. (He did it back up again as Bucky pulled Darcy out of the car. He knew
that look. Darcy was in for it when they got back to the apartment.)

He was right. Bucky scooped her up and kicked the door shut before pinning her against it. She
peeled out with laughter. “Frustrated, Barnes?” She ran a hand down his tie, using it to tug him in for
a scorching kiss.

Bucky made short work of his jeans, getting them down just far enough to pull his swollen cock out.
He reached under Darcy’s skirt with his metal fingers and came up with a pair of panties.

“That’s two you owe me,” she insisted. But she was grinning as Bucky found her wet and wanting.
He licked his metal fingers dry. He took her straight up against the wall, supporting her weight in his
arms. He made short work of it, hissing as he slammed home. Darcy eyes glazed over as she rode
him to a quick finish. There was a shout and a gasp and Bucky pressed his forehead to hers.

Without missing a beat, he carried her to the bedroom. “This time, it’s gonna be slow, Princess.”

Steve sagged against the doorframe, dazzled, before going in after them.

*****

Darcy wouldn’t admit it aloud, but she needed slow. For a lot of reasons. Physically, she was certain
she would be deliciously sore in the morning. Like a good workout, she could feel the burn that
promised an ache later. But that was later.

Emotionally, she’d careened from flirting with Bucky (she could sass with the best of them) to
keeping tabs on his current state of mind. She didn’t—couldn’t—fully relax outside the Tower.

Steve had stayed quiet for most of the day, though he was quick to put an arm around her and show
his affections. But he seemed content to let Darcy and Bucky take the lead on the conversation and
inevitable teasing. (Which was odd, Steve could give as good as he got.)
The two men reverted to their old habits in public. Long used to masking their relationship, they didn’t indulge in any of the caresses that were common in the Tower. They flirted when no one was around to overhear, but the most they would do is brush shoulders or knees—or possibly cross ankles under the table. The marked difference in their behavior bothered her.

They were careful with her too. Darcy and Steve were a known quantity to the public eye, but not Bucky. His kiss in the rain had caught both of them off guard. It was genuine, fleeting, and terribly sweet. She’d probably remember it forever, and even Steve had been delighted, but that had been the extent of the physical affection between her and Bucky.

Bucky’s heavy-handed flirting ran into the brick wall of sass Darcy threw up in retaliation. She teased and flustered him with the all the ways she touched Steve while staring at him. Steve played along, doing the same in reverse.

All of which resulted in one frustrated James Buchanan Barnes by the time they got home (yeah, crawling all over Steve in the car didn’t help either. Oh darn.). Thus the well-deserved quickie against the wall. (Lady parts considered breaking out the glitter cannon. Too much?)

As such, slow was good. Bucky set her down on the bed to crawl over her, ending with him straddling her for a long, sweet, kiss that unraveled her as easily as he’d wound her up. Steve sat on the bed, shedding socks, shoes and his vest.

He reached across her to pluck at Bucky’s tie. When he pulled it free, he let the material dangle just long enough for Darcy to swallow hard, wondering what he had in mind (see previous note about creative little shit). But he only smiled (that innocent bullshit one) and set it on the nightstand.

Her mouth dried when Steve pulled Bucky across the bed and nudged him to his feet so that Steve could sit in front of him. With almost delicate movements at odds with his current physique, he took his time undressing Bucky, who merely toed his shoes off as he ran a hand through his hair.

“You always did like this, punk,” Bucky murmured. The surprised half-smile he wore made Darcy ache at the tenderness between them. But his eyes skated over her and softened as they did. “Sometimes, this is all he could do,” he told her.

Oh. Remembering that Steve didn’t always look like this was difficult for her. From Bucky’s expression, he never forgot.

Both of Steve’s hands went under the shoulder fabric and pulled down, lightly trapping Bucky’s arms for the briefest moment before he pulled the shirt away. Instead of indulging in a kiss or three, Steve flipped the buttons on the jeans to work them lower.

She felt as if she’d intruded on something deeply secretive. For all the not-touching of the day, she’d half-expected the two of them to fuck each other with the same abandon Bucky had with her.

Instead, she witnessed this private moment. And when Bucky wasn’t wearing a stitch beyond the tags around his neck (they might as well say “property of Steve Rogers”), he did the same for Steve. Not a kiss or stray caress passed between them as Bucky worked through each button and article of clothing.

Something in the vicinity of her heart tightened at the romantic interlude and it took her a moment to understand why.

Surrender. That was the only way to describe the intimate scene. And suddenly, Darcy could see a much smaller Steve Rogers, perhaps bound to the bed for the day, doing what he could to show
Bucky how much he cared. And Bucky putting himself into Steve’s hands. Only to return the
ministrations.

She looked away when tears gathered in her eyes.

Fingers pressed into her shoulder then came up to wipe them away. “Darcy, Steve can’t help the way
he looks now. You’ll just have to learn to deal with it. I did,” Bucky said in mock seriousness.

She choked back a laugh. “And here I was having a moment, thinking you two assholes were the
most romantic dorks I’d met, then you go and do that,” she retorted. (But the tears went away and the
mood lightened.)

“Bucky isn’t romantic. He’s a jerk. You want romance, doll, you’ll have to stick with me,” Steve
countered as he sat beside her again.

As Bucky sputtered, Darcy leaned back on her elbows. “And how are you going to romance me
tonight, Captain Rogers?”

His eyes darkened as he leaned in for a tangle of tongues. “As the Sergeant said, Darcy, we’re going
to take it slow.”

Darcy caught the look that passed between the two men. She sat up and reached for her shoes, but
Bucky beat her to them, sliding them off with one hand and passing his other palm over each sole.
The heat was unexpected. So was the way he caressed her feet through the stockings.

Steve drew the zipper down the back of her dress. One hand skimmed her back above the corset
while he whispered kisses along the nape of her neck. She shivered from the sensations and
shrugged so that the dress fell to her waist.

“I’m fucked, aren’t I?” Bucky had trouble breathing he touched to the satin of the corset, just along
the upper curve of fabric where it met skin. “Christ, Darcy. How in the hell do you hide all this?” he
said in wonder.

“Practice.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Then shook his head as if to clear it. “If I say anything else,
I will be a jerk. Or old-fashioned. Or both.”

Steve nudged her to her knees so that the dress fell to the bed. After that it was easy to kick it off,
leaving her in stockings, garter and corset. She said over her shoulder, “Blame Barnes for the lack of
underwear.”

“I think we can work with it.” He brushed the hair away from her neck. With an experimental
squeeze, he tested the tension in her shoulders. And discovered just how much she’d been holding
there. “Lie down, love.”

The endearment still threw her for a loop as she went to her stomach. Electric heat scorched through
her. With Steve’s deep voice murmuring compliments, she wasn’t expecting Bucky to be the one
who dug into the knots that had formed.

There was sheer magic in those hands. She muttered in disgust, “What the fuck, Barnes? You’ve
been holding out on me. I’d have stripped for you a lot sooner if I’d known you were related to Mr.
Miyagi.” He let out a sultry snicker that did interesting things to the rest of her.

Steve rumbled a laugh. “I had scoliosis. Bucky figured out how to get the muscles to loosen up when
we were just kids.”

“I thought you were good at this, Steven, but holy shitballs, James—oooh, ow, right there!” Bucky found a particularly sore spot just at her shoulder blade.

He worked around the place until the muscles gave under his fingers and the ache flowed away.

“Why, Darcy?” Bucky asked.

She hummed in contentment as he kept up the gorgeous massage. “Carrying around the girls on a daily basis. Wearing a corset to show them off.”

He tapped her back with his metal fingers. “What else? Your pulse jumped after you said that. There’s more.”

(Great. Bucky figured out he had a built-in lie detector. She was so screwed.) She sighed, adding, “Worrying about you when we’re outside the Tower. Wearing heels while doing all of the above.”

She turned her head as she spoke to find Steve frowning a little.

That prompted twin growls, and as Bucky worked her over (yes, she could admit to getting wet just from the release of tension and those fabulous hands on her upper back), Steve reached out to draw the laces from the corset, lightly rubbing his fingers along her skin as he did. The contrast of Bucky’s firm strokes with Steve’s delicate ones pushed her into a kind of dazed existence where she was perfectly content to enjoy their combined touch. (Not subspace, just really, really, soothing.)

When Steve pulled laces free, Bucky slid his hands under the corset so that it fell on either side of her. He stroked along the marks left by the boning as Steve stripped off her stockings. The quick massage over her feet (yep, okay, she would give points to him for that) and then the slow slide of his callused hands (big, warm, knew exactly what they were doing) right up and over her ass to loosen the garter ended with her spreading her legs just a little.

Now there were three naked bodies on the bed and the two male versions had their hands all over her in a very, very good way. (A million points to Darcy.)

Bucky worked his fingers down her spine and from the wet sucking noise, she figured he and Steve were kissing behind her back. She rolled over to watch. They promptly stopped. “Sorry, Princess. Punk has tempting lips.”

“Yes, yes, he does,” she agreed, a little disappointed. They didn’t kiss all that often in front of her, beyond a peck on the lips.

Bucky’s eyes widened as they dropped to the girls. He licked his lips, glanced at Steve, and, with a sigh, nudged Darcy back on to her stomach. “Not done yet.” His hands went back to her shoulders, and she resumed her floaty state.

“Mmm. Steve’s calling the shots tonight?” she goaded a little.

“Just relax, doll. Let us take care of you.”

She might have replied, but Steve swooped a hand over her butt and along her spine—right in between Bucky’s hands—and back down again. With little circles, he danced his fingers all over her ass, dipping into the cleft of her butt cheeks, and along the small of her back. He’d figured out long ago that she liked this, in a slow burn kind of way.

Bucky picked up on it and began making the same kinds of motions along the back of her neck. She was so distracted when he leaned over to suck on the corded muscle along her shoulder that she
didn’t notice where Steve’s fingers were headed until he had them buried between her legs. She leaned involuntarily into mouth and fingers, with an arched back and ass to make it all work. Spreading her legs a little more, she pressed into Steve’s fingers to nudge him a little deeper. And then he was gone and Bucky wasn’t and she forgot to concentrate again.

Over and over again. Steve never touched her clit, just dipped fingers in and out again until Darcy groaned in frustration. The movement by itself wasn’t enough to get her moaning, but the playing with her ass and Bucky at her neck and shoulders had her blood humming. Steve had done this to her before, with excellent results. Knowing that made this round all the more enticing.

Steve pulled his hand away once again, and Darcy swore under her breath. Bucky shifted over her, and found her with his cock, sliding inside with one long, controlled movement. She tried to part her legs even more, wanting the contact of her clit on something. (Bucky, Steve, the fucking sheets, she didn’t care.) Bucky only rocked inside her, keeping his movements steady and slow.

When she decided the clit thing didn’t matter because she just might not need it, Bucky slid out and stretched out beside her.

And Steve took his place. “There you go, love. Take me in. Bucky’s got you all nice and wet for me.”

Holy fuck. Both of them. One after the other. (She was the luckiest, luckiest girl in the fucking universe.)

But he did the same thing. Just as she fell into the rhythm he set, he pulled out, laughing as she called him a name. “You aren’t the first to accuse me of being a prick, Darcy-love. Come on, Bucky’s waiting for you.”

They wanted her on top now. Steve situated Bucky’s cock so that it rested just inside her entrance. Bucky anchored her hips so she couldn’t take him any further. And Steve went back to playing with her ass and back. Only this time, her clit danced against Bucky’s hot skin, his cock nudged every damned nerve she had, and all the twitching Steve caused made everything light up inside.

She bit her lip, then discovered Bucky doing the same. She wiggled, and he winced. She grinned at that.

“Damn, Steve, you ain’t distracting her enough,” Bucky complained.

Then he did. With two very wet fingers sliding inside her hole. Darcy arched against Bucky, trying to take him deeper. Steve did all the work, though, stroking her as Bucky eased inside, (slow as fucking molasses in January). And one more fucking time, the moment she found a rhythm with him, Bucky pulled her upward, so that he slid out entirely. Steve traded places with Bucky, and Darcy found herself doing it all over again with Bucky’s fingers and Steve’s cock and her eyes goddamned crossed from the aching and wanting of it all.

Bucky pressed in three fingers. The momentary burn was nothing and Steve chose that moment to catch her nipple in his mouth.

She was trapped between Bucky’s long fingers, Steve’s ridiculously perfect cock, and the heat at her breast. They suckled, pushed, stretched, sank in—then pulled out, released, softened. She wanted this, wanted, but she was perilously close to the edge of her body shutting down from all the sensation.

“Steve,” she called out softly.
He popped off her nipple and dove a hand into her hair, pulling her down for a long, searching kiss while Bucky pulled his fingers out of her hole. The loss made her ache. The kiss made her want. Throbbing around the fullness of Steve’s cock got her moving again.

This time, she set the pace, and it was a good one. Bucky stroked everywhere else. She was aware of the lack of anything in her ass now.

Taking a deep breath, she looked over her shoulder. “James, slide your cock against my hole.”

He and Steve both stilled. “Darcy, this isn’t want we were thinking. Maybe another day,” Steve assured her.

“Don’t fucking stop what you’re doing, Steven Grant. I wasn’t talking to you. And I know. But fuck if I don’t want to feel his dick right there, right now. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

That sultry laugh blended with Steve’s chuckle, as both of them did her bidding. Steve, the asshole, kept his movements just small enough to piss her off a little more. And make her ache. She shifted her hips so that her clit pressed against his skin.

She really didn’t know if this would work, or if she even wanted it. But as soon as Bucky placed the head of his cock on the tender flesh of her hole, she wanted more. “Come on, James. Let’s see what I can handle.”

Steve caressed her cheek, kissing her hand, her wrist. “Darc—“

“Hush. Yell at Barnes for not moving faster if you have anything else to say.” Bucky fumbled for the lube, covered himself at little more, and set his metal fingers on the pulse point in her shoulder.

“All right, Princess. Have it your way.”

_holy-fucking-shitballs-there’s-no-way-this-is-going-to-work_— And then it did. “More,” she demanded. Steve had stopped moving and she growled at him to fix that.

“I can feel you, Steve,” Bucky got out. Just from his voice, Darcy figured he was a mess, barely hanging on.

He wasn’t the only one.

She could _feel_ everything. The slide of two cocks bumping up against one another. The stretch of her body, the way her own clit popped out in response. Steve kept up his steady rhythm throughout, though his jaw was clenched hard enough that he was sweating from the effort.

“Darce—Buck---both of you. I feel both of you,” he stuttered.

And then he swelled that last little bit, stiffening and coming, pumping into her, against Bucky’s cock, so that he too, swelled and stiffened and pumped white heat into her ass. The two of them rubbing up against each other and Darcy screamed as she went, trying to move between them, with them-- anything to keep the sharp pleasure going just a moment longer.

Bucky kept his senses enough to pull out of her before the ache set in. But the slide out jolted Steve and Darcy—and damned if she didn’t end up with another (smaller, less intense, one half-assed shake of a pompom) orgasm for his efforts.

Steve eased her to one side of his chest, pulled Bucky down on the other and the three of them (blissed out, still a little disbelieving that they managed such a thing) floated into oblivion.
For a while. Maybe a half hour. Until Darcy decided she was sticky, sweaty and needed a shower after all that.

Bucky swore at her. “Don’t ever think of it ‘til one of you two bring it up, then fuck if I can go back to sleep ‘til I’ve had one too.”

When Darcy winced as she stood up, she changed her mind to a hot bath, and well, that was an opportunity no one was passing up.

So the three of them crammed into the bathtub. Darcy pinned her hair up with a warning to both men about keeping it dry. “You get it wet, you’re both banned from playing with the girls tomorrow.”

Bucky leaned back against the tub and drew her down against him. “What about tonight?”

“That too.”

There was splashing and laughter as they took turns washing each other. Bucky showed Darcy a little place on Steve’s thigh where he was ticklish. Steve retaliated with a single finger along Darcy’s sensitive foot.

Steve certainly wasn’t shy about running his hands along Darcy’s body to make sure she was okay. Bucky didn’t take those liberties, but he watched carefully, noting the faint bruises here and there. He flushed, ashamed, because those were his fingerprints on her skin. He apologized, murmuring into her hair.

“Don’t,” she admonished. “It happens. You were lucky you were still dressed earlier or you would have a pretty set of nail marks on your back. Ask Steve.”

Steve smirked. “Buck—remember France?”

Bucky turned a dark ruddy shade, and gave them a wry grin. “Point made.”

Darcy arched an eyebrow as she reached for a towel. “Story?”

“Had to pretend Steve had food poisoning for half a day until all the hickey’s healed over. Mine lasted a couple of days and it was a damned good thing they were under my collar.”

She stood, wrapping herself in the towel as she stepped out. There was something in that statement that seemed important, but she was too tired to think of it now.

JARVIS, save the last comment from Bucky and sent it to my laptop. I’ll figure it out later. Something to do with the serum, I think.

Of course, Lewis. Have a good night.

I think I already did. But thanks, J.

They slept in a tangle of limbs and bodies. There wouldn’t be any nightmares on this night.

*****

Steve woke at his usual hour, only instead of brimming with energy, he had a picture in his head. He
sat against the wall of glass in the living room. In the quiet of the morning, he sketched to the light of
dawn. At feverish speed, he got the image in his mind down on paper.

When it was done, he found an envelope and shoved it inside. At just shy of seven in the morning,
JARVIS woke Tony for Steve.

He shoved the envelope at Darcy’s father. “Keep it. You’ll know when she can see it.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, just like Darcy, and peeked inside. He grinned. “Good call. Now get the
hell out of my house so I can go back to sleep.”

“Yes, sir.” Steve turned to leave. He paused in the doorway of the elevator. “Tony, thank you. For
everything.”

“You’re welcome, Steven.”
But There was That, Too

Chapter Summary

A/N Still NSFW. By the way, Darcy is not pregnant. That's not what Steve's drawing predicted. You'll just have to be patient, very patient, about that particular drawing and what it reveals.

Sleep is good. Yummy. Boys smell nice. Fresh shampoo. Steve showered. What day is it? Do I have to work today? Fuck if I know. What did I do yesterday? Oh. Yeah. THAT. And THAT. Don’t forget THAT. Yay, it’s only Sunday. Did I mention I love Sundays?

A muffled groan and rustling sheets got her attention, enough that Darcy peeled an eye open. Steve winked at her from over Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky, on the other hand, had his eyes jammed shut. (Now that Darcy knew what Bucky’s sex face looked like, she figured Steve must be doing something right for him. Go Steve.)

On one hand, she wanted to dive in and help things along, (lady parts were already pulling out the pompoms, megaphone and glitter cannon, just in case) on the other, there was something stunning about the way Steve worked his way along the line of Bucky’s shoulder with his mouth. Bucky let out a sigh at whatever Steve was doing under the covers, then bit his lip and leaned back into Steve with a quick inhalation. (Never figured herself as a voyeur, but maybe she could get into this. Her fingers itched. She wanted to touch.)

Okay, so Steve’s hand must have been working Bucky’s cock because the covers shifted and Darcy heard the quiet snap of the lube top flipping open. Then Bucky hissed as he fist the pillow (Yup, that was going on the list. Was that one finger or two?) and turned his face into it. Steve worked over the back of Bucky’s neck—much as Bucky had done to her last night—until Bucky turned his face back up and Steve could rub that dark stubble with his smooth cheek. (Lady parts tapped nicely on her shoulder and asked what the fuck was she waiting for? However, she had to consider their current delicate state and all available options.)

So she touched. First, those dark pink lips warmed from the heat of the exhalations coming through them. And as she stroked Bucky’s lips, Steve did … whatever (two fingers or three?), and Bucky gasped out Steve’s name. Then she scraped her nails along his jaw, changing to four fingers along his throat as Steve nipped Bucky’s neck just hard enough to make him jerk.

His eyes flew open, pupils dilated as he tried to focus on Darcy. She dragged her nails along his chest, flicking a nub and rolling it. This time, he got her name out, though it ended abruptly as his body twitched in time with Steve’s movements.

She tugged the covers down to Bucky’s hips. With a wink at Steve, she reached for the lube and prepped him with a nice long stroke or three. He flushed and gave her a beautiful smile in thanks. She waited until he pulled his fingers free and settled his cock on Bucky’s hole, rubbing circles and sliding the tip around—until Bucky growled at him. (She might have slid a hand between them, hence the twin hisses—oh yeah, she was doing that again.)

In any case, that was Darcy’s cue and she went under the covers, setting her shoulders until she was comfortable and had Bucky’s lovely cock facing her.
If the soldier appeared, she didn’t know it and certainly couldn’t tell from the sounds and curses coming from Bucky. Steve’s hand came down to stroke her hair from time to time, but really, he did all the work. Darcy only lent support, teasing Bucky with mouth and hands rather than trying to drive him to any particular finish line. Steve was a patient jerk when he wanted to be—and apparently he wanted to be one right now.

Trapped between Steve and Darcy, Bucky couldn’t do anything to speed them up, take either of them deeper, or otherwise move things along. But he could curse. And he did. Eloquently. In several languages.

Steve didn’t let up until Bucky got all the way back around to Brooklyn. “Ya fuckin’ punk, I’m gonna knock you into next week if ya don’t let me finish.”

With a warning tap from Steve, she pulled off Bucky’s cock.

“Aw, Darcy-doll, don’t be like that,” Bucky complained. He stroked her hair, and she leaned into his caress with a kiss on his fingers.

But Steve only changed angles and Bucky hissed again. “That’s it. Don’t stop, Steven. Please love. Not this time.”

Steve didn’t stop, and Darcy put some real effort into licking and sucking Bucky’s cock. “Darce—“ That husky voice caressed over her. She hummed with delight while raking her nails just inside his thigh. While she was at it, she flicked his perineum, felt him jolt, and worked her hand under his balls to press hard up against Steve’s.

His rhythm stuttered and he lost control, fucking into Bucky so hard that Darcy had to brace herself on Bucky’s hips to keep from choking on his cock. She managed just in time before he was coming down her throat, hot and heavy, with a groan. And even from here, she could feel Steve’s strength when he came undone. Bucky managed a last weary spurt and then Darcy slowly pulled off, taking the last of him until his cock lay spent.

She scooted back up onto the pillows, happy as a lark with the way that turned out. (Two-for-one special right there!) Bucky flailed his hand around until he found her waist and plastered (supersoldier strength bonus) her to his sweaty chest. Steve had yet to move, and his fingers dangled just enough to skim her skin too.

“Sss—it’s nice like this,” Bucky mumbled.

“Cuddling?” Darcy prompted.

“Mmm. You’re about Steve’s size. Before. So now I’ve the best of both of you. Feels right. All the time.”

Steve leaned up on an elbow, peering down at Bucky. “Sayin’ you don’t like the new body, jerk? That’s not what I figured on a few minutes ago.”

“Nuh uh, punk.” Bucky twisted, shoving Steve so hard that he fell off the bed with a laugh. Of course, Steve flipped as he fell and yanked so that Bucky went too. At least that one had enough sense to let go of her so that she didn’t fall into their pit of insanity.

But she followed, snickering, and hung her chin over the edge while Steve ran his hands all over Bucky. And wow, it didn’t take but a couple of minutes of that and both men were primed to go again. (Serum bonus, just sayin’. Lady parts had the marching band all lined up and ready to go. She told them to hush, this was the good part, and weren’t they a little sore this morning? Lady parts did
the full sulk thing, pompoms crossed and kicking the megaphone over.)

Steve lay on his back. Bucky balanced above him, sliding down that pretty swollen cock of Steve’s until he hissed again. He wouldn’t let Steve touch him either. It was far more fun to listen to him describe exactly what Darcy did to his cock. (Truth. It sounded better in that sexy, smoky voice, but hey, given the way Steve yanked Bucky’s mouth to his for a hard, almost savage, kiss that was hot as hell, she called it a win for everyone.)

Bucky thumbed across his own slit, found it wet, and brought it to Steve’s mouth to taste. But Darcy snapped a hand out to intercept and sucked his thumb instead.

“Darcy,” Steve choked out. “Do you trust us to hold you?” The bright light in his eyes made her nervous. (Um, yeah. Did she mention the creative little fuck part?) She nodded.

Bucky settled over Steve’s cock a little more securely, curious as to what their boyfriend had in mind.

“Stand up, straddle me, face Bucky.”

She did. (Lady parts stumbled over the megaphone and called up the marching band.) Steve’s hands slid over her ass and down her legs.

Bucky winked. “Okay, yeah, I know where you’re going with this, punk. Darcy, I’m gonna lift you and I want your thighs on m’ shoulders to start. Hold to the wall for balance if you want, but I’ve got you.”

It wasn’t about strength because fuck it all, either of them could hold her in the air one-handed. This was about Darcy and her own insecurities and a very real desire not to fall on her butt and look stupid. (But her lady parts threatened her with a pompom up her ass if she didn’t get a move on.)

“You won’t fall, Princess. I’ve got you, Steve’s got you. But we really want to try this.”

Darcy hadn’t been the type to climb on anyone’s back and get hauled anywhere. With her curves, she tended to overbalance and it wasn’t pretty. But Steve put his hands under her butt firmly enough that she’d was sure she’d sat on barstools without this much support. And she threw both legs over Bucky’s shoulders so that his nose pressed into the soft flesh just below her belly button. Now his hands went under her thighs and he lifted her that last few inches he needed to slide his tongue down one fold, up the other, and just under her clit. Her heart raced as she flailed her arms out for balance, banging her hand on the wall before she pressed her hand to it. “This isn’t going to work, I’m too … “

“If you say you’re too heavy, I’m going to be pissed.” Bucky’s cool, calm-as-all-fuck voice cut through her momentary panic.

“Balance your arms on your head, Darcy,” Steve encouraged. “You’ll make the best of your core strength and it gives you more control. But you have to trust us.”

She did. She really did. So she put out of her mind worries about what she looked like, consciously relaxed with a couple of deep breaths, and crossed her arms to rest on her head. When she did, Bucky licked her from the base of her vulva up through her clit. Then he did it again. And again. He teased her knot with the tip of his tongue until she widened her legs to get closer. Each time he did it, he licked her clit one, then twice, then three times, then two. The on-again-off again rhythm worked better than her pulsing vibrator and she could feel the gathering slickness.

Not coincidentally, her clit peeked out from its hood and Bucky took possession of it, sucking on her
knot. Vaguely, she became aware that not only was he holding her, he rocked on Steve’s cock. The rhythm intoxicated her and she found herself shifting in tiny ways to work with him, to get closer, to take advantage of that cadence.

Steve groaned, and then his mouth was at her ass, her hands clamped down on her lips. He licked right inside her hole.

“holyfuckingSteveyoufuckingshitwhatthehellareyoudoing?” Words exploded out of her but that only got the two men working a little harder at the suction and licking and the places their tongues were going shouldn’t work and holy shit she was going to come—

“Don’t come yet, doll,” Steve demanded. There was just enough Cap in that order that she automatically stopped and forced herself to relax. (Damn it. The games they played for her nightmares just came back to—to make her feel really fucking good.)

“Bucky, I want you to fuck me as hard as you can,” Steve said. That wasn’t an order, it was a plea, and then Steve’s mouth pressed hot against her ass, as his hands held tight. “I’ve got Darcy,” he said, his breath warming her cheeks. “Fuck both of us. Put your hand on your cock and make us all come together. Please, Bucky.” He went back to licking out her hole as if she was made of honey.

Bucky must have figured out how to make it all work because she rode his mouth as Steve’s tongue darted here and there, circling and licking in. Bucky kept licking the underside of her clit as Steve held her thighs open at just the right angle.

And then, like the flash point of hot oil, she went up in flames, tipping backward as she did, legs on either side of Bucky so that she was fully exposed to him. But Steve folded her into his chest as she came down. Bucky slammed down onto Steve, who came with a shout. Bucky followed the moment Steve jerked up uncontrollably into his ass, leaving streaks of come on Darcy and Steve as he did.

Steve, the little shit, slipped his hand between her thighs and tapped that tangle of nerves just right so that she came again, harder than that first time, if possible, and Bucky slid hands under her thighs again, while Steve stroked the bare spaces on both sides of her clit with a pair of fingers, holding tight when he got to the top. She fucking screamed, arching backward, her whole body twitching and jerking. He held on all the way through it until her clit retreated. (She was shaking, her lady parts had the glitter cannon going off, and the whole fucking marching band danced in time.) Then he wrapped his arms around her until the worst (best?) of the spasms passed.

Bucky chuckled, softly at first, then louder as he pulled Darcy off Steve and to his chest for a sticky hug and a kiss. “You’re amazing. I can’t believe we made that work.”

She clung, rather barnacle-like, trying to catch her breath, her brains, and her runaway heartbeat. She buried her face his in shoulder. Steve ran a hand down her back and around her waist, pressing his lips between her shoulder blades.

And then the two men kissed, deliberately sucking on each other’s tongues and lips in an echo of what they’d done to her.

As for Darcy, she was perfectly content to stay where she was, with her nose buried in Bucky’s skin (citrus groves) as he stroked her hair. All the while, she listened to the soft noises her boyfriends made.

When she peeled her cheek off Bucky’s skin, she realized the three of them were still on the floor, crammed between the bed and the wall. “You know, we have a bed,” she grinned as she looked
over her shoulder at Steve.

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “His fault.”

Darcy wiggled, realizing her legs were going to sleep.

“Ready to get up?” Steve asked.

She was, and with two men giving her a hand, it was a hell of a lot more graceful than if she’d tried to get vertical by herself. (Good for future reference.)

As Bucky and Steve extricated themselves from the tangle, pulling each other up via clasped wrists, she realized they had been content to stay in place until she was ready to move, though they must have been uncomfortable. Little things like that gave her the warm fuzzies.

They confirmed the shower really did fit three. Darcy managed to keep her hair dry by virtue of standing mostly behind the boys. It took her a little longer to wash, but damned if the view wasn’t absolutely perfect.

Darcy opted for lingerie and one of Bucky’s t-shirts this time. It skimmed the bottom of her ass but didn’t really cover it. That was fair because neither of them wore shirts. (Did she mention she loved Sundays?)

Since the boys did breakfast yesterday, Darcy made French toast today (with a side of eggs, bacon and a whole carafe of orange juice). Sneaky Steve had laid in enough groceries to make sure they had enough to not even bother with delivery, so they were still well-stocked in the pantry.

And Darcy was certain JARVIS had locked down all communications because nary a text came through to disturb them.

Steve tacked a sheet of paper to the fridge and started a list of things for the apartment they needed. Pillows for the barstools for one (knees, wood, just sayin’), an extra quilt for the bed (so one could always be in the laundry), panties for Darcy (Bucky loved that trick with his metal fingers. That’s fine. He was paying for new ones.), two blankets for the sofa (same reason as the quilt), extra pillows for the bedroom and the couch. A new coffee table. (That one was all on Steve and Bucky. Not her fault seamed stockings get them every time.)

Bucky leaned on the counter beside her, trying to dig something out from between his finger joints.

“I guess I know exactly where your fingers have been,” she laughed and, without thinking, pulled his hand to her to take a closer look. “You know, it’s been months since you’ve had a good cleaning.”

Bucky went quiet, his hand curling in as if to protect it. Darcy instantly let go, holding her own hands up and away. “You’re safe. I’m only offering. I won’t say anything again. I promise.”

Deliberately, though with pure grey eyes, Bucky leaned in to kiss her cheek. (She’d forgotten. He’d been so good about letting her touch him and the heater installation hadn’t been a problem.)

At her words, Steve set down his pen, wrapped Bucky in a solid hug, and told him he was safe. Darcy sagged in relief to see his hands come up to cup Steve’s shoulders.

Breakfast was easier, though Bucky resorted to one word questions and answers. Steve washed the dishes afterward. Darcy found her tablet and mindlessly surfed the ‘net, not really seeing any of it as she debated how to recover from setting Bucky off.
She knew better. Bucky hadn’t let her look at his arm, beyond installing the heater, since she’d cleaned it and taken a peek under the panels months ago. She could touch all she wanted because he liked it, but maintenance was off-limits unless he wanted her help.

To her surprise, he knelt in front of her, pulled the tablet out of her hands, and laced his metal fingers with hers. “I’m sorry, James,” she offered.

He shook his head, opening and closing his mouth, then firming his lips in a line–clearly frustrated at his inability to speak. He sat back on his heels. “Please.” He flicked a look at his hand.

Darcy searched for any sign that his conditioning forced him into this, but didn’t see any. Now that he’d made a decision, the only proper answer was, “Yes, of course,” even if she wanted to ask again to make certain. But that sort of thing would only have Bucky questioning his own judgment. Neither should she refuse, because that would appear to be a punishment of sorts.

“I’ve been working on a couple of tools that will let you do most of the work yourself. Do you want me to get them for you?” she offered.

He brightened, nodding instead of answering, and Darcy felt like they had turned back the clock to three or four months ago.

He let her go. She changed her clothes into something more practical and zipped down to her lab to gather up the box and lubricants she’d needed. She’d been bored one night and airbrushed a metal toolbox to look sort of like an old-timey radio. It was the least triggering decoration she could think up, simple to do, and if Bucky or Steve wanted to take a stab at better art, they wouldn’t be covering up anything special.

When she returned, Bucky had stretched out on the floor with his head propped up on a pillow and one hand wrapped around Steve’s ankle. Steve got comfortable on the couch and turned on a football game. (Giants and the Rams. JARVIS called the Giants by seven. Darcy put fifty dollars on a fourteen point spread.)

“How do you want to do this?” she asked Bucky.

He flexed his abs to sit up (Do that again, her lady parts demanded.) and moved so that his right shoulder touched Steve’s leg. She didn’t really have access to his back, but they could get to that later. She retrieved a towel from the bathroom and spread it out on the floor, scooting close enough to Bucky that he wouldn’t have to move any.

She leaned over to kiss him and play with his hair a little. “I love you, James Barnes. Remember that. I’ll do as much or as little as you want.” He nodded as she set the tool box down on the towel. “This is yours.” He frowned as she continued, “I’m stocking it with the kinds of things that you’ll want, but it’s yours. Please feel free to do something about the art.”

Grey eyes met hers, neutral, though he twitched when she set out the small tools she’d built and the tiny air compressor she’d brought along. She had a couple of bottles of water for the water jet and a jug of ionized graphene solution for later if they needed it.

With that done, she stripped out of her shirt so that she wore only a sports bra and leggings. Reaching back, she rubber-banded her hair so that it would stay out of the way. And if her boobs served as a distraction, well, that would be a bonus. “Where do you want me to start?” she asked.

“Shoulder?”

“I can do that.” She hesitated after picking up the first tool. “James, are you going to be able to give
me the safe word if you need it or tell me to stop? Because if you can’t, I’m not doing this today.”

The question startled him. Enough that his eyes wavered from grey to blue. His hand tightened on Steve’s ankle. “Yes… I can.”

She added, “I don’t care if we have to stop fifty times or do only a little bit today. Nothing is worth making you feel as if I’m touching you against your will.”

“Talk.”

It took her a second to figure out what he meant. “You want me to give you a running commentary?”

He nodded.

“Brain-to-mouth filter disengaged. You’ve been warned.” That elicited a faint smile and Darcy leaned up against his folded leg to get close enough to work on the front of his shoulder. She picked up the water jet, filled the tank and attached it to the air compressor. The compressor rested in a sound-dampening box so that the noise wouldn’t set off either of her boyfriends. When she turned it on, only a soft buzz emanated.

She aimed the nozzle along the first seam. “This part is easy, James. Most of what you get in these joints is clothing lint. You know, we can probably find shirts that shed less, maybe a finer quality cotton. I’ll have to research for something soft and less likely to produce lint. JARVIS, send a list of options to Bucky’s tablet. We’ll pick three or four things to try. Undershirts and regular t-shirts. A Henley because Bucky looks good in those.”

Darcy preferred talking as she worked. With JARVIS, it was their modus operandi. She often had ideas that she would forget later unless JARVIS recorded them. And he frequently reminded her that he couldn’t read her mind, yet.

“Oh, what the fuck am I doing? Bucky, I can show you. Let me get my tablet.” She scrambled to her feet and found her tablet in the kitchen. She handed it to Bucky, plucked a wand out of the tool box she’d created with a powerful magnifier at one end and a long cord to plug it in. Bucky’s eyes widened as he got his first good look at the joints between the plates.

“Angle it this way so I can see, there you go. Hey, look, I missed a spot.” She ran the water jet along the line. The spray washed the tiny bit of fluff out, and the vacuum sucked it and the water away.

“Better. With the wand, you can do most of the maintenance by yourself. Though I don’t mind doing it. You know I have a metal and ass kink, and well, you have both and they are divine.”

She blinked at the shout of laughter from Steve and the smile that lit up Bucky’s face. She rewound the last twenty seconds in her head and blushed. “Yeah, yeah. Okay. You doing okay?” she asked Bucky.

“This …. helps.”

“Good, I can get your back plates—if you want. The cord is long enough, I think, and I can look over your shoulder.”

He nodded, so that’s what they did. Darcy moved behind Bucky to sit practically straddling him to get close enough to work. “Oh look, bare skin. Yum.” She kissed the back of his neck for a minute while moving her tools, then kissed the metal too. Bucky looked over her shoulder, a little flushed and confused. She came up with a smile and resumed her work. “The back of your shoulder doesn’t take long at all, just needs a good polish later to look pretty. Okay, look at that, all nice and clean.”

She skimmed the wand down the plates, staring at the tablet. “Nope, we’re good. What next?”
“Under?” He lifted his arm and rested his wrist on his head.

She brought up the wand and water jet. “Sure, guaranteed not to be stinky since you can’t sweat. Now Steve here needs a shower after his workouts, no doubt. Super-soldier serum apparently came with super sweat. Though he still smells kind of pretty, like the ocean and salt and sand and that’s weird but cool. Has he always been like that?” She paused, and when Bucky didn’t answer, she looked up.

He was trying not to laugh as Steve blushed furiously. Something eased up in Bucky and he was able to answer, “Yes. Even as a kid.”

“Cool. Okay, move the tablet there,” she pointed. “Now I do see more lint here because your shirts rub. Maybe I need a little vacuum you can use once a week or so. But this works and it’s cleaner. Dunno. We can try it if you want. JARVIS, note that, and I’ll fabricate something for the bathroom. Your machinery has worked beautifully for seventy years, so I don’t want to muck with it too much. It’s like a fucking Swiss watch. Brilliant, gorgeous and will run forever if we take care of it.” She squinted as she worked along the curve of his arm pit. “See this?” She backed the wand up to give Bucky a good look. “That’s brilliant engineering there. Move your arm around and you can see how the plates collapse on each other to give you full range of motion. That’s the kind of tech modern prosthetics just don’t get. But—oh,” she whistled. “JARVIS, what does that look like to you?”

“A solution the issue Sir was having with the Iron Man suit,” the AI replied.

Darcy swallowed hard. “File that information on my laptop and lock it down with the rest of Barnes’ scans. For that matter, put Bucky’s biometric lock on all of it and send the full data to his tablet. It’s his to release as he sees fit.”

Bucky ran a hand along her arm. “You, too.”

“You want me to have access?”

He nodded.

JARVIS answered, “Very good, Sergeant Barnes. You may modify or rescind authorization at any time.”

Steve leaned over, putting his forearms on his knees. “Tony doesn’t automatically have access to everything JARVIS knows?”

She smirked. “He doesn’t have anything I’ve locked under my protocols. It’s even saved to my private servers.”

“How long have you been able to do that, doll?”

“Since I was nine or ten, I think. When Dad abandoned the mansion for Malibu, I replaced all the servers in the basement and started dumping my stuff there.” Her mouth dropped open and she came up in shock as she followed his line of thinking. “Steve.”

“On it. You two okay for a bit?”

Bucky patted Steve’s leg and unwound his arm from it.

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For the second time that day, Tony let Steve inside. “Haven’t I seen enough of Brooklyn today?”

Steve ducked his head, embarrassed by his early morning call. “Can we go to your lab? I need to talk to you privately.” He flicked a look at the ceiling to indicate JARVIS.

“Sure thing, Capsical. Want a Coke?”

“That would be nice. Where’s Pepper?” he asked as he followed Darcy’s father down the stairs.

“DC, then I’m meeting her in Malibu tonight.” Tony initiated the privacy locks, the ones that blocked even JARVIS out. He tossed a can of Coke to Steve from his mini-fridge under the workbench.

“Not that one. The one of JARVIS. Darcy working on Bucky’s arm right now and you know how she gets when she’s working.”

“Comes by it honestly.” Tony preened a little, making Steve chuckle.

“She—well, she locked down some information with JARVIS’ authorization. Locked it down in such a way that even you can’t access it. Then she realized that maybe you didn’t know she could do that.”

Rather than becoming angry, Tony was delighted. He fumbled for his stool, sat down and snickered.

“That doesn’t make you mad? I thought you had the final say in whatever was stored in JARVIS’ brain.”

Tony disagreed. “When you have kids, Steve, you’ll understand. Besides, JARVIS is clever enough to dodge a line of questioning if he wants.” He started fiddling with things on his workbench. “Darcy and JARVIS … it’s odd. Sometimes they act like twins. I researched that a while back and came to the conclusion that there’s a connection between them that circumvents me. By himself, JARVIS can’t do certain things with his programming. By herself, neither can Darcy--but when he and Darcy act in concert, there is a synergy that I’ve never understood. Certainly didn’t program it. Envied it though.”

“Well, she wanted you to know. She’s busy with Bucky’s arm right now, so she can’t tell you herself. But—is it possible that the virus breeched only your part of his programming and not what’s on her servers?”

Tony scratched his beard. “I’ll need access to find out.”

“You can’t do it from here. It will have to be from Darcy’s workstation.”

“I can’t lock JARVIS out from there.”

“Darcy can.” Steve could feel the heat rise on his face, thinking of all the reasons he knew that.

With a knowing grin, Tony waggled his finger. “I didn’t need to know about your sex life and how it relates to my daughter’s lab.”

Slightly hoarse, Steve agreed, “We’re not discussing it.”

“Fair enough. When Darcy is finished, tell her I’ll meet her there.”
“What about Pepper and Malibu?”

Tony frowned. “This is more important. She’ll understand. And she’ll come here.” He rescinded the
privacy protocols and threw a curious look at Steve. “So, tell me about this mission we have coming
up. I want to know which suit I’m going to wear to the party.”

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Darcy kept up the commentary as she cleaned Bucky’s arm down to his elbow. At the shoulder, they
had a good discussion about the heater (excellent), exothermic reactions (maybe turn up the
temperature? She could show him how to reprogram the settings) and his headaches (decreasing).
She caressed his arm as she worked, talking continuously.

This time, with the panels staying closed, he only felt a subtle tension building up as she cleaned. It
wasn’t a headache and fuck if it didn’t go all the way down to his dick. But that might have been
because Darcy was the one running her hands all over him.

Listening to the way she worked her way around and through problems, ideas and the ripple of
compliments flabbergasted him. Like her recitation yesterday, it revealed a part of her that he’d
glimpsed, but not really understood. The other times he’d been in her lab or when she’d worked n his
arm, she’d stayed focused on his needs and made the bare minimum of commentary.

She handled her tools the way he handled his weapons, with a sure touch that sparked something in
him. Not just an appreciation for her competence—maybe admiration? Bucky couldn’t think of the
last time he’d admired someone.

With his free hand, he stroked her knee where she leaned against his leg. That gorgeous mouth of
hers stretched wide in a smile, though she kept her attention on his arm. His heart thumped. He
wondered if the movies and books had it all backward about falling for someone. He couldn’t put his
finger on a single moment where he discovered he was in love with Darcy. Or with Steve, for that
matter. It just was.

“Darce?”

She startled, blinking behind her glasses, her hands hovering over his arm. He took the tools out of
her fingers and leaned over to hug her tight. She tugged her glasses off and curled into his shoulder.
His metal one. She didn’t fucking care. She never had. One of her hands cupped his metal elbow.

“Love you.” He winced at the awkward phrasing and struggled to get the words out right. “Can’t
remember … not loving you. From … day of the picture, it’s been there.” Darcy shivered and he
stroked her hair. Holding her made it easier to talk. “Each time I learn something … about you, adds
a layer. Love Steve the same way. A lot is new. Doesn’t change the bottom layers. Just more on
top.”

She brought her head up and pushed her glasses back on. From the confusion in her eyes, he could
see she didn’t quite believe him.

With a touch of frustration, he shoved the soldier away to insist, “Get used to me telling you things
like that, Princess. If I can’t show how I feel about you in public, I’m damned well going to make
sure you know it at home.”
With that, she drew him into a tender kiss, her hands skimming his face. “That’s not fair,” she whispered.

“Never has been. Not going to stop us though, is it?”

That brightened her right up. “No.” She shook her head. “You do realize you’re dating Darcy Stark? Starks tend to break a lot of rules.”

“Have you met my pal, Steve?”

She wrinkled her nose in a laugh and kissed him again as the tension between them unwound. “James?”

“Yes, doll?

“From earlier … you’re better now. What changed?”

“You,” he said simply. “It’s impossible for me to compare you to them. When you touch me, I want your hands on me.”

“I like touching you too,” she agreed as she ran hands from his shoulder to his fingers and kissed the tips. “I wish I understood more about how this technology works.” She caressed his wrist. “I love knowing that you can feel my hand here.”

Perplexed, Bucky asked, “What do you mean? I thought you understood all this.”

Darcy flashed him a smile. “I know why it works. Your brain tells the mechanical parts of your arm what to do via the neurotransmitters. Which is all it needs to do for the purposes for which it was built.”

He knew that gleeful look now, and prompted her to continue. “And?”

“Okay—here’s the cool part. Vibranium, by its very nature, absorbs all vibrations. You shouldn’t be able to feel a thing beyond heat and the pressures that exceed the metal tolerance.”

“I … help me out here, Darce. I’m not supposed to be able to feel anything?” He tapped his own fingers to make sure he had sensation. He did.

She giggled. “No. Not according to the files. But,” she drew that out nice and long just to annoy him and he pretended to be irritated. She laughed, adding, “Your brain didn’t understand that limitation. Instead, it got all this weird data from the metal and the pressure sensors and decided to translate all that into something that it knows. I’ll give you even odds on whether that’s your natural brain or the super serum working in concert with it.”

Darcy went to the hallway and returned with Steve’s shield. She sat on the floor and balanced it between her knees. “Put your right hand on the shield.” He did, and she struck the metal with a mallet from the tool box. “What did you feel?”

“Cold. A little pressure from the shield shifting.”

“Exactly. Put your left hand on it.” When he did, she struck it again.

Pure energy ran up his arm and straight up into his brain. He shivered at the sensation. “Oh.”

“Yeah, that’s the different between what was intended and what you got.” Smugly, she added, “I have a very deep satisfaction in knowing those pricks had no fucking idea how awesome your arm
Her words triggered a memory. “When Steve and I fought on the bridge, the vibranium absorbed the impacts of his strikes. When I hit the shield, I wore gloves, but my knuckles were bare and all this energy ran up my arm and into my head. Same thing with the EMP. Didn’t hurt, but the feedback gave me a hell of a headache later.” He opened his eyes to find Darcy grinning and nodding. “The metal. It’s somehow transmitting information to my brain.”

“I think, and it’s pure speculation, that the impact of your fist on Steve’s shield jump-started the memory synapses in your head. Kind of like sticking your tongue on a 9-volt battery. Gave you a buzz.”

“A what?”

“Yeah, don’t do that. I don’t recommend it. Ever jump start a car?”

“Sure.”

“Just like that.”

Stunned by her revelation, he took another look at his hand. “How?”

“That’s the bonus question I don’t have an answer for. I’ll ask Betty to me with us if you want to know more about bioelectrical impulses and neurons. For that matter, we can teach you everything we know and put you in a position to do your own research. Hell, you could fund areas of research if you wanted and I can show you how to set up grants for that kind of thing. I’d be willing to fund a nest egg, seeing as I have a vested interest in your well-being, but it would be your baby.” She skimmed a thumb across his lips as she said that.

“I don’t—I don’t think I could handle anyone else touching me.” Just the thought pulled the soldier to the fore (Assessing).

But Darcy shook her head and the soldier backed away at the reassurance. “Of course not. You would control the data that is released or direct areas of research for specific problems you want to solve or know more about. That’s the beauty of grants. You set the parameters and the scientists have work within them. In time, you’ll get scientists sending you their research ideas hoping you’ll fund further studies in their areas. Trust me, researchers figure out very quickly who their guardian angels are and will work hard to keep you happy.”

He eyed Darcy. “You’re good at this.”

“No. I’m great at this. And you already promised that no one else gets to work on your arm but me. I’m holding you to that. Speaking of which, want to do the rest?”

“What do you mean?” He was dazed by all the information and the lighting speed she dragged him along through her thinking.

“Make room for me to sit in front of you.” She passed him the water jet and held the magnifier for him. Her hair tickled his throat and the skin over his heart. (Spring. Heat.) His dick twitched hard enough against her ass that she laughed. “I take it you like this?”

“Hell yes.”

She rubbed his thigh as he practiced using the water jet to clean out his wrist. (Fewer plates, easier to see.) She held the wand and tablet for him and made plans aloud for mounting a magnifier on the top
of the water jet.

The idea that he might not need someone to take care of his technology rocked something deep within him. Oh, he didn’t harbor any illusions that he could permanently go off the grid and never have any help, but the idea that he could handle the basic maintenance was a kind of freedom in itself—a better version than simply refusing to let Darcy look at it.

When his arm and hand was completely devoid of crap, Darcy brought out a couple of lubricants for him to choose from and carefully explained the differences between them. In the end, he opted for the one she had developed, something from graphene that would be cleaner and more permanent than a traditional mineral-based application. He still couldn’t quite believe the process was so simple and told her so.

“I’m a Stark. We do the cool stuff. I did all the hard work in the lab, but really, ionizing graphene to prepare it for attaching to your vibranium isn’t that difficult. Yet something else I can teach you to do.”

She refilled her water jet with the solution and started with spraying to the back of his wrist. “How does it feel?”

He shrugged, flexing the plates to make sure the solution coated the metal properly. “Feels fine.”

Darcy went back over every seam, plate and joint, carefully spraying the solution where it was needed. They worked in concert, with him flexing and turning his arm and fingers as she ensured the graphene bonded between each joint. When she was done, she went to the bathroom to retrieve a warmed towel and began wiping him down, lightly buffing each plate to a high shine.

The sensations lit him up like a Christmas tree. Christ, she was amazing. He leaned in to press the softest of kisses on her lips. “I’ve never thanked you for everything you’ve done. You didn’t have to stay. You didn’t have to help. God knows, you had no obligation to put me back together. I know you did it because you love Steve. And for all that, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And I didn’t do it entirely for Steve. Metal and ass kink, remember?” she said with a shy smile.

He grinned. “Wouldn’t you know the punk would pick out the one dame on the planet who finds all this attractive?” He held up his fingers and wiggled them.

“Serendipity?”

“Whatever it is, I’m grateful,” he said with all the sincerity he could muster.

Darcy kept polishing as they teased, but bit her lip when she added, “I’m sorry about earlier. After having my hands on you all weekend, I forgot that I could still trigger you.”

“You didn’t know, Darcy. Hell, I didn’t know. We’re figurin’ all this out together, right?” He rubbed his nose against her cheek. “I love you. I trust you. I know it’s hard for you ’cause Steve and I go farther back than the hell we went through. But that doesn’t mean I can’t see the sunshine when it’s right in front of me.”

Embarrassed by the praise, Darcy needlessly wiped his arm down again. As she rubbed, Bucky shifted his butt because his cock was about to beg for mercy.

She quipped, “Guess you like that?”
He lazily slanted dark, hot eyes at her. “Darcy, you have no idea.” He plucked the towel out of her hands, set it on the remains of the coffee table, and tipped her backward.

She went easily, with her hands to his shoulders and a laugh that darted straight into his dick. Mindful of the way she’d carried herself last night and this morning from makin’ so much time in the bed, he kept his movements slow and his lips soft. He adored the taste of her mouth.

He made love to her. With the utmost of care and tender touches, he whispered words of love and coaxed her body until she shivered with need. Clothes came off and he rested his cock between her thighs as he traced patterns in her skin.

She urged him along, but he would be patient, sliding inside her delicious heat only when his gentle touch turned her into a quivering mess.

Darcy, with her fire and shining light, warmed him until the sun itself chased away the ice and cold of before. He took that heat, made it his own, loved it, loved her, told her as much. And she called his name, making a mess of it as she alternated between Bucky and James. He didn’t care. So long as she stayed with him.

She echoed his words, telling him how she loved him, had loved him before he’d come home. Had fallen in love before she could stop herself.

The heady combination of Darcy’s words and her warmth nudged him until he trembled with need. But he took care with that too, not mindlessly fucking, but letting her coax his orgasm from him. The sublime harmony of their bodies moving together peaked in a ripple of contractions between them.

Sated, exhausted from the emotional ride, content beyond belief, Bucky pulled the quilt over the two of them. He held her close. (Mission: Protect Darcy Stark. Yeah, he could do that.)
Steve returned to find Darcy and Bucky soundly sleeping on the living room floor, with the quilt not giving them much coverage. Bucky had his metal hand firmly settled on Darcy’s waist, so Steve figured the clean up went well enough, though Darcy’s tools were still scattered about.

He studied the way Darcy slept with Bucky with her back to his chest, and her head resting on his outstretched arm. He remembered what it was like to sleep with Bucky like that. (Still missed it in a way, but mostly didn’t care how they ended up as long as they touched somehow.)

As he retrieved the orange juice out of the ice box, he was grateful, damned grateful, that the two of them had come together on their own. This weekend sure was a far cry from April, when a shattered Bucky and an injured Darcy took naps together so they could heal in their respective ways.

It didn’t surprise him that both of them needed extra sleep this weekend, not with the kinds of emotions ricocheting about the apartment. Bucky still needed rest for his healing brain to process intense situations. Darcy had so few peaceful nights these days that any decent sleep she could get was a gift.

She didn’t need to know that he’d put off going on the next mission (and the last one) for no other reason than to help her with the nightmares. The guilt she would feel would make them that much worse. He hoped that this weekend would be a turning point for her, that she could trust Bucky the way she trusted him.

He had to get back in the game before it was too late to run HYDRA out of the hiding places they’d found. That meant missions, sometimes long ones, and he needed to know that Darcy would be okay while he was gone.

He’d gladly ignored the world just to get Bucky back, but living in the Tower—with all the intel Hill and Coulson had accumulated—brought home how precarious the situation was and how easily HYDRA could marshal the resources to target Darcy again. (Or Bucky. Or him, for that matter.)

Blankets rustling in the living room interrupted his reverie, though he stayed put until Bucky walked in, dressed in his jeans and a t-shirt with one hand in his pocket.

“What’s with you?” Steve asked as he drank his orange juice to hide his grin. He already knew because he could read Bucky’s face a mile away.

“Still gettin’ used to it bein’ okay to make time with your girlfriend, Steven,” Bucky admitted. “Hasn’t been a problem all weekend ‘til you were gone.”

He shrugged, doing his best to keep a straight face. “I’m going to have missions, Buck. Won’t always be here. Don’t expect either of you to be a monk for all that.”

Bucky squinted. “You’re laughing at me.”

He set his empty glass down beside him. “Yeah, I am. Been trying to get this thing with us together for months. Am I supposed to be jealous?”

“I was when you and Darcy were makin’ time in the shower back at her place.”

The admission startled Steve and he looked away. He hadn’t realized that at the time. “Okay, yeah, I can see that,” he admitted.
“Hey, we’re not going back there.” Bucky elbowed him lightly as he leaned on the counter beside him, sidling close enough to rub shoulders. “I guess,” he shrugged, “I’m sort of like Darcy yesterday morning.”

“A little bit of a mess and want to make sure everything is okay between us?”

“Yes.” Bucky looked away at that admission, trying to hide his unease.

Days like today demonstrated just how far Bucky had come along in his healing--and how far he still had to go. Steve cupped Bucky’s face, kissing him tenderly, possessively. “End of the line, Buck. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

To his surprise, Bucky abruptly embraced him, holding on for a tight hug. Steve shifted his balance to take Bucky’s weight. (Felt good. Really good.)

“Couldn’t do this before,” Bucky said into his shirt. “Miss you being little sometimes, but not when you can do this,” he confessed.

Steve buried his nose into Bucky’s neck and held on. (Mine. Always mine.)

The trio spent the evening in Darcy’s lab working through JARVIS’ programming with Tony. Darcy took a different approach than Tony had. For one, she didn’t lock her brother out. The siblings created a virtual map of all the places JARVIS’ programming was stored. Per Darcy’s request, JARVIS queued up one of her favorite playlists as they worked.

Bucky boosted himself up on the table beside the hologram to follow the discussion. Steve took the stool next to him, close enough for his arm to touch Bucky’s knee.

Steve mused over the fact he’d witnessed three generations of Starks in their natural environment, being a lab, of course. Given the way father and daughter interacted, and how Tony coached rather than dictated, he suspected father and son failed to share a similar relationship. Just like this afternoon, whenever Darcy pointed out something new to Tony, he lit up in pride.

Quips flew back and forth between them, along with a multitude of pop culture references, old jokes and endless series of insults. Steve caught maybe half of them, Bucky less than that. Quite frankly, he spent the time grinning or shaking his head in astonishment at the wit and sheer brainpower. For fun, he still kept a notepad of all the little references he didn’t understand. It had served as a basis for Friday night movies, television, and whatever activities Darcy could dream up since they’d started dating.

Bucky even borrowed his notebook and scrawled a line. Minions. Steve grinned. He’d liked those movies.

His best friend’s handwriting hadn’t changed much, which surprised him for some reason. “How old are you?” he asked aloud, without really meaning to do so.

Dark blue eyes danced his way. “Ninety-seven. Losing your memory, old man?”

Steve elbowed him and rolled his eyes. It was a dumbass question and far too prone to bring up negative memories the way he’d intended it. He turned his attention to the colorful map of the world with dots all over it. Darcy color-coded and condensed them into a neat representative map.
“Thirty,” Bucky answered softly. “Maybe thirty-one. Did the math on what I can remember and that’s as close as I can figure.” He nudged Steve with his knee. “Still older than you, punk, so don’t get any ideas.”

Steve nodded, annoyed with himself for bringing it up. But Bucky’s eyes stayed blue and they let the subject drop.

As it turned out, JARVIS existed on a multitude of servers dotting the United States. When Tony realized how extensively Darcy’s private servers had integrated with JARVIS’ programming, he cackled gleefully.

Darcy tapped a finger to her cheek as she studied the map. “JARVIS, create a second map identical to this one, and add a time stamp. The first map should indicate each program’s creation date. The second map should indicate the last access date. Color code both, with blue being the oldest and red the newest.”

“Where are the cleaned up programs being stored?” Steve asked.

Tony touched the map. “JARVIS, mark the old munitions factory in red.” A group of buildings located in Pennsylvania lit up. “I’m putting them here. It’s an old facility where we did weapons development. I’ve been converting it into a server farm for the Tower, but hadn’t brought it online. I’ve locked JARVIS out of those servers so they can’t be compromised until we know what’s going on. Sorry, JARVIS.”

“I quite understand, Sir,” the AI replied. “And I appreciate the precautions you are taking.”

“James, come over here and tell me what you see,” Tony insisted.

Bucky exchanged a confused look with Steve and rounded the table to stand beside the smaller man. Steve just leaned back to enjoy the show. He’d had to suffer his fair share of Tony’s parental hazing. It was Bucky’s turn and damned if Steve wasn’t going to enjoy it.

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Darcy caught Steve’s grin and leaned in to look at the dates on the map, though she kept an eye out as Bucky worked his way around the tables to stand beside Tony. This was her father’s favorite teaching method, one that used to frustrate her—until she’d learned enough to appreciate it.

Bucky studied both maps for a good five minutes. Tony patiently waited, though she could see his fingers twitching. She grinned and winked at him behind Bucky’s back.

“I saw that, Princess,” Bucky muttered. “I see the progression, but wouldn’t it help to know what the programs do? JARVIS, can you separate these maps into brain functions and keep the color coding? Um, frontal, parietal, occipital and temporal lobes?” Tony raised his eyebrows at Bucky, who sneered, “I’ve studied as much about brains in the past six months as I have about psychology. I can probably read a brain scan better than you can.”

“Smart,” Tony complimented. “Nice to see old dogs can learn new tricks.”

Bucky bit back the automatic retort, and Darcy just lifted a shoulder when he shot her a slightly annoyed look. It wouldn’t take long for him to learn to deal with Tony. Up until now, the boys had
tiptoed rather carefully around her father. But Tony didn’t suffer fools and despised pandering.

Darcy studied the eight maps in front of her now. The parietal and occipital “lobes” had programs firmly grounded in California. The frontal and temporal “lobes” were split between California and Stark Mansion.

“Dad, so these would be JARVIS’ original programming,” she tapped on California maps. The colors were similar on both maps too.

“Correct. Visual processing, movement, orientation, recognition, perception of stimuli, if we are to use proper terminology,” Tony agreed.

“JARVIS, combine those two maps and label them,” Darcy said. “How much has been cleaned and stored?”

Approximately a third of the map started blinking. Tony touched a series of programs with the oldest dates. “Don’t get excited. This portion was easy to replicate because I have this part stored in not only in California, but in two different locations as well.” He touched the Colorado dots and New York dots, where identical programs blinked. “I stored them on these other servers when I created JARVIS, so I was able to rip a clean copy for the Pennsylvania servers.”

“So it’s only the California programs that are compromised?” Darcy asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s something. Still, that’s a fu--,” she caught herself. “That’s a lot of programming to clean out.”

Tony flashed her a grin, as did the boys.

“What kind of firewalls are you using?” she continued.

Tony turned his hands up in confusion. “Whatever is the latest set that you developed for the Tower.” He eyed her suspiciously. “Are you holding out on me?” he demanded. “You’ve got something better, don’t you? Why don’t I have it?”

Darcy went around to her workstation and settled in. “I’ve got a new one protecting my servers. JARVIS, move those maps over to where James and Steve can keep looking at them. We’re looking for pattern of infection or if we can find a purpose. James, I think you’re on to something with the functionality.”


Bucky’s head snapped up. Even as his hand clenched in automatic response, the compliment made his mouth drop open a little. Steve nudged him to the screens. They began a soft discussion and Darcy could see them manipulating data.

Wandering to her side of the lab, Tony asked, “What ‘cha got, spawn of mine?”

Darcy made a flicking motion and cast the information from her laptop to the now-empty holographic table where a visual representation of her server farm and the firewalls surrounding it popped up.

Tony circled the image, sometimes turning it here and there. “This is gorgeous, Darcy. Brilliant. Of course you’re my daughter, so you know, hey, genetics. But, wow.”
She glowed at the compliment.

“How did you do it?”

“The firewall is an independent AI, capable of aggressively fending off attacks by herself.”

“Her?”

“My conceit. Her name is Hypatia. ‘Tia’ for short. Think of the way DUM-E is protective of you. I used his programming as a basis for the firewall, gave it a perimeter and an explicit purpose, limited to the space defined by the server farm and within that, a fair amount of freedom.

Steve and Bucky came over to take a look. “This looks like a combination of old school military strategy and modern warfare, Darce,” Steve offered.

She lifted a shoulder. “When you lived in DC, I might have picked up some of your books. I got bored.”

Bucky touched two points. “This is like a guarded fortress. What about those weak spots? If that was a building I would come in here and here.”

Darcy sat down at her keyboard, noting the points for Tia.

Steve crossed his arms. “But that means anyone with an understanding of military strategy can infiltrate your servers.”

But she laughed. “Not exactly.” She keyed in another command. “See, I know this god. He’s taught me a few tricks.” She opened up a logbook of the latest attacks on the server farm.

Tony nodded. “Looks like the ones in the Tower.”

“Exactly. Someone is always fishing and looking for an entrance in case there is something cool hidden back here.” Darcy tapped in a command.

“You aren’t talking about Thor, are you?” Steve eyed the map.

“Nope. Loki is the master of illusion. So the first and final lines of defense are to hide. Anyone hacking in has to first figure out that there is a something sweet behind the walls. From the outside, this whole thing looks like a contracting firm for flooring. That will keep out the majority of the riff raff. If the hackers are really good, and I mean, really good, they’ll crack the walls to discover a university research database. I have a nice subset of crap data that will take months for them to figure out is utterly useless. If they do, then Tia will lead them on a merry chase away until I can dig out our intruders.”

Tony peered at the visual representation of her firewalls. “JARVIS, save these maps and minimize them to the table. Show me all the servers you are utilizing at this moment.” A new map appeared with blinking lights all over the country. Tony stared at it. “I’m missing something. Something really important.” He snapped his fingers and growled in frustration. “I need coffee. It’s going to be a long night.”

It wasn’t though.

Pepper surprised them. Tony took one at her and visibly flinched. “That’s your ‘not good news’ face and I’m not listening.”
He actually plugged his ears with his fingers until Pepper took them away. He winced, automatically taking her hands.

“Sharon Carter called a couple of hours ago. Peggy’s in a coma. It’s going to be any day now.”

Tony dropped his head on her shoulder. “See? Told you it was bad news.” He stalked out of the lab and into the elevator without another word, not even to Darcy.

Pepper touched Darcy’s cheek, and gave both Steve and Bucky a hard look before dashing after Tony.

“JARVIS—“ The maps shut down, leaving Darcy with her blank laptop.

“Princess?” Bucky put a hand to her back. “What do you need?”

She didn’t flinch, but she slipped out of his grasp and snatched the keys off the hook by her door. “I need to drive.”

*****

Bucky grabbed two heavy jackets and an earpiece for Steve out of the apartment and caught the next elevator to the garage, sprinting across it just in time to catch the back of Steve’s bike as he rolled out, following Darcy’s Bugatti. (Protect Stark)

The chill in the air bothered him, but he ignored it in favor of sliding right up against Steve. He wondered where Darcy was headed and debated whether the traffic was a good thing or not.

It took a little more than a half hour to clear New York proper. When they did, Bucky and Steve discovered exactly what the Bugatti—and Darcy—could do.

“Son of a bitch,” Steve swore. That was all the warning Bucky got to hold on as Steve gunned the motorcycle to catch up to those distinctive taillights that disappeared on the road ahead.

Like a talented ice skater zipping through the crowds, Darcy finessed the Bugatti with a delicacy he never expected. For the first time, he wished he had his goggles to block the wind. Steve had managed to pluck his driving glasses out of his jacket and get them on without dropping them, a feat in itself. Bucky had to keep his face in Steve’s coat.

There was no way in fucking hell she drove strictly by reflex at those speeds. Steve, yes. And even he was hard-pressed to keep up with the way she wove in and out of the cars on the freeway.

JARVIS? Are you driving that thing? he demanded, knowing Steve was listening in.

Of course not, Sergeant Barnes. Lewis is perfectly capable of navigating with the heads-up display she’s constructed. I am only feeding her timely information, as I do with Sir in his suit.

She has to be doing one-forty-one, one-forty-two.
One forty-three, to be exact.

(Fucking. Hell.) JARVIS, can you override the car? Shut her down?

There’s no need, Sergeant. For the record, keeping Sir or Lewis from making bad decisions is not part of my programming.

Damn. Can you at least tell me if we’re going to get busted by a cop? I really don’t think going to jail is a great idea.

I believe she inserted a new component recently, a derivative of the device you had in your arm, to render her vehicle invisible to cameras or other speed detection devices. The Captain’s motorcycle appears to have one too. As far as I’ve been able to discern, neither of you have been picked up on any police scanners, though various social media venues appear to contain a several references regarding a couple of high speed vehicles in the New York area. In any case, you are traveling too fast for that information to be of use.

Where is she going, JARVIS?

I do not know, Sergeant. She has not disclosed that information to me.

She’s not talking to you?

No more than necessary.

Is this normal?

For a Stark? Yes, this behavior falls into the parameters that may be defined as normal.

Your answer isn’t fillin’ me with a lot of confidence, J.

No. Perhaps not. Darcy is quite restrained compared to Sir. Most of the time.

Bucky just kept his head on Steve’s back and sighed as he held on. There were times Darcy and Steve were two peas in a pod with their impulsiveness. (Protect Stark.)

The taillights flashed red and Darcy eased up to pull off the freeway and into a restaurant parking lot. Bucky popped his head up as Steve hit the brakes, muttering swear words as he danced in and around cars to follow.

“What the hell is she doing?” Bucky asked as Steve jerked the bike to a stop.

“Breaking.” Steve was off the motorcycle and caught Darcy as she stumbled out of the car crying.

Bucky checked the car to make sure the engine was off and pocketed the key fob she’d left in the center pocket. Steve had a tight hold on Darcy as she sobbed with abandon.

JARVIS, has Darcy ever lost someone before?

No. Though it isn’t for the lack of trying on the part of those she loves, the AI said drily.

Then, as if someone flicked a switch, she stopped altogether, wiping away the tears and shrugging off her grief. She blinked as Steve brushed his lips across her brow.

“Anyone know of a good place to get coffee around here?” she asked in a voice clear enough that one might not know she was violently upset only moments before.
Now Bucky wasn’t an expert on grief, but after months of Sam’s patient instructions about healthy expressions of emotion, he had a good feeling that her reaction just wasn’t normal. Not the crying part, but the iron-willed suppression that accompanied it.

Nevertheless, she steered them to a nearby restaurant where the bored waiter got annoyed that all they wanted was coffee. (Where was a good diner when you needed one?)

She slid in next to Bucky and held hands with him under the table. Through the sensors, he could feel her heart rate jumping around and the faint tremble in her fingertips. But she regaled them with silly stories about growing up with Tony and JARVIS, never once mentioning Peggy.

Not even a half hour later, she pulled out her keys. “Ready to go home, guys?”

“Do you want one of us to drive, Darcy?”

“Keep dreaming,” she snapped back. “But I’ll take a passenger.”

Bucky glanced at Steve. With a twitch of the eye and a faint nod, they decided Bucky would ride with her.

Darcy fired up the engines of the Bugatti. “JARVIS, give me a pretty picture.”

“Of course, Lewis.”

The dots and lines that appeared on the windshield resembled that on the Quinjet, noting everything from wind speed to rocks in the roadway. Darcy maneuvered the beautiful car onto the freeway and let her fly.

One-ten, one-twenty, one-thirty. Bucky squinted, ignoring the display for the moment and focusing on the traffic ahead.

One-forty. One-forty-four.

“Darcy,” he warned softly.

She didn’t glance in his direction, just waited for a slight clearing and downshifted to pull more power out of the engine. When she neared the red-line, she shifted again with a quick dance on the pedals. One-sixty-two.

(Assessing. Protect Stark. Maximum known speed for the Bugatti Veyron, two-fifty-four. Driver is competent. No unknown obstructions at this time.)

One more shift and she punched it all the way up to one-eighty-six. At this speed, a mistake would make them a smudge on the map.

But she didn’t make any. Not one. And when she parked in Stark’s garage with nary a word to him on the entire ride, she slanted him an opaque look and stalked to the elevator.

He let her go.

Steve rolled in a not even a full minute later, fury written in every line of his body. “Where is she?”

“Home, I think.” Bucky squinted. “You gonna go in like that?”

“She could have killed both of you,” Steve fumed.
Bucky carefully stepped between him and the elevator doors. “No, I don’t think so. Tony flies with the same kind of tech she has in the car. I take it she doesn’t normally drive these speeds?”

“Ninety-five is not one-eighty.” Steve dodged around him and hit the button. But he leaned his head against the door frame. “You weren’t scared?”

“Didn’t say that,” he drawled, “but if Darcy’s brain resembles Tony’s, and his tech looks like hers, no wonder he can fly.”

Steve paled. “Please don’t make me think about Darcy in a suit.”

“Don’t think she’s interested.”

“Unless I piss her off and she decides to build one just because she can.”

“You said it, not me,” Bucky agreed. With that, JARVIS opened the elevator doors and zipped them home. “She is home, right, JARVIS?”

“She is. And I will compliment you on your understanding of the situation, Captain, Sergeant.”

Darcy took the middle of the bed that night. If she had nightmares, she didn’t let on. But she held them close, tugging both of them in place—Bucky, so that he practically slept on top of her, and Steve, so that he could keep an arm around both of them. It was hot, sweaty, and none of them would have it any other way.
A/N Thank you for everyone who is reading this story and has stayed with it. I love the feedback, both from my regular commentators and those who de-lurk long enough to say, "Hi." I had no idea that this story would get this kind of reception, and I will chalk it up to a "once in a lifetime" experience to have 90K hits on a single story. You have no idea how much confidence you have given me in my writing abilities. For that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A slow drag of the pencil gave Peggy’s inky curls depth. Steve let his first memory of her spill out onto the paper, grim satisfaction in her face as she laid out the jerk with a stupid attitude.

Yeah, he’d had a crush on her. That was easy enough to admit, especially now that he knew it wasn’t unrequited. She still managed to charm him at ninety-seven, and he still called her “friend.”

He tapped his pencil, lost in thought. Sleep had eluded him tonight and not just from reminiscing.

Darcy had scared the hell out of him. He couldn’t exactly call her driving reckless because, according to Bucky, she’d been in absolute control of the Bugatti. JARVIS had assured him as well, but that didn’t change the fact his girlfriend had the car flying down the freeway well into the three digits. He’d lost her in the traffic as they closed in on the city and only JARVIS’ calm voice had kept him sane until he hit the garage.

He’d been taken aback when Bucky coolly intervened before he could unload his white-hot anger on Darcy. Given that she was already grieving over Peggy and in shock over Tony’s abrupt departure, Bucky had been right. Steve’s temper would have only made things worse. (A small voice insisted that he, too, was grieving a loss and perhaps overreacted.)

But it wasn’t right. Family stuck by each other in these times. A lump rose in Steve’s throat as he thought of the way Darcy had fallen asleep clutching both of them. (At least they did that part okay.)

A soft ping caught his attention. “Captain Rogers, Sir and Ms. Potts are at the door. They do not wish to startle anyone awake,” JARVIS said.

Steve crumpled into himself for a moment, knowing what news they’d come to deliver. Wearily, he opened the door to them.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Tony looked every bit his age. Lines popped out against pasty skin and his hair stood up, as if he’d been raking his hands through it again and again. “Steven. I told you I’m a lousy parent. But I need to talk to Darcy. I need to be the one to tell her——” He broke off, eyes slanting down. Ashamed.

Although Steve felt for the man, he wasn’t particularly inclined to cut him any slack at the moment. Instead, he kept his mouth shut and let them in. Pepper leaned up to touch her lips against his cheek.
as she passed by.

By the time they reached the bedroom, Bucky had awakened from the noise and turned the lamp on. When he saw Tony and Pepper, he leaned over to wake Darcy with a glide of his hand along her shoulder and whispered her name.

She rolled into his embrace, blinking heavily. Tony dangled her glasses in front of her face. She jammed them on as her father perched on the edge of the bed. She sat up, face falling as she did, and the sheets rustled as she moved. “When?”

“Not quite an hour ago,” Tony answered, his voice harsh with grief. He turned a hand up in her direction, sort of a half-wave of apology and an opening for her. She took it, crawling to his side to cling to his shoulder. But she didn’t cry.

Steve leaned against the doorframe, swallowing against the lump in his throat. Pepper gave him a warm embrace as they watched father and daughter. Bucky silently left the room (with a brush against Steve’s shoulder) to start a pot of coffee in the kitchen.

Pepper nudged him in that direction, too, and the three of them took the table with mugs in hand. “JARVIS told us about Darcy,” she admitted. “No one sets her off like Tony.”

Anger and grief coursed through him as he toyed with his cup. Bucky sidled over so their thighs pressed together under the table. “He adores her and yet he—“

“Can get completely wrapped up in his own head to the exclusion of everyone else,” Pepper finished. “I know, Steve.”

“But she’s his daughter,” he blurted.

“And he knows his faults better than anyone, which is why he’s here.” Pepper wasn’t unsympathetic, but she was firm.

He flinched from the reprimand.

She reached out to pat him on the hand as she sipped her coffee. “There I was, fresh out of business college with top marks and several glowing recommendations. I had my pick of places to work. Most of them were cushy positions with a nice career ladder. I wanted something more. So I interviewed for a place in S.H.I.E.L.D.”

He popped his head up. “You worked for S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

Pepper gave him a wry look. “I passed all the tests with flying colors. Even the marksmanship ones. But I wasn’t expecting to gain the attention of Director Carter herself.” She shifted, leaning back in the chair and crossing her legs in that elegant way she had. “Peggy brought me in and asked me what I wanted. I told her I wanted a challenge, because life was far too easy. She laughed outright and asked me to take on a special, long-term assignment as Tony’s personal assistant. She told me it would be the most frustrating, difficult job she could possibly give me.”

Bucky slanted a droll smile in her direction. “You’re still here.”

Pepper nodded. “Only because Peggy gave me her personal phone number and helped me bail Tony out of a dozen fiascos. After that, I became a little more resourceful. Still, it took two years before Tony came to me with a secret. That’s when I knew why Peggy had asked me to work for Stark.”

“You didn’t know about Darcy?” Bucky asked.
“No. He handled everything for her himself. Even cleaned her rooms and did her laundry so the housekeeper didn’t have any reason to go in that part of the mansion. If he needed a babysitter, she went to Peggy’s house in DC, no exceptions. Tony set up an office for me on the opposite side of the house. I used it a couple of times a week and spent the rest of the time wherever in the world he needed me. I realized later that some of his habits that drove me up the wall were nothing more than obscurification.”

Steve mentally flipped through the timeline of information Darcy had given him, scant that it was.

“You found out when Tony moved to Malibu.”

“The day I met Darcy was the day I fell in love with Tony, because everything that pissed me off about him suddenly made sense. She knew who I was, of course.”

“How?” Bucky prompted.

“She spied on me.” Bucky chuckled as Pepper continued, “She’d hacked her way into the audio and visual feeds when she could or leveraged JARVIS when she couldn’t. It became a game to her to hide in the lab or somewhere in the house close by me. I never knew.”

“How did you two meet?” Steve wondered.

“Tony was smart enough to realize that what was amusing to a seven-year-old could decimate Darcy’s self-esteem by ten. No one wants to think they are invisible.” Pepper sipped her coffee.

“And he would know. So Peggy called me into her office one day. She did that from time to time, mostly to make sure my sanity was still intact. She introduced me to her niece, Darcy. Darcy was reading a book, Harry Potter, the first one, I think.” she recalled. “Peggy found an excuse to leave the room and left the two of us alone.”

“Is that a good story?” Pepper asked the little girl.

With bright eyes and a sure grin, Darcy agreed. “Sure. Once you get past the stilted writing style, especially in the beginning, the plot is brilliant. Hermione is my favorite.”

“Is she the hero?”

“Sort of? More than a sidekick, less than the main protagonist. Harry’s kind of lost without her.”

Pepper laughed under her breath. “Sounds like my boss.”

Darcy tilted her head. “Really? How?”

“He’s a genius. Brilliant at everything. But he forgets the everyday stuff. I take care of all that so he can go on being a genius. Sometimes I think we make a pretty good team.”

“And the other times?”

Pepper barked out a laugh at the girl’s audacity. “Sometimes I wonder if anything I do makes a difference.”

“I like you, Ms. Potts.”

“Thank you, Miss Darcy. I think I like you, too.”

Pepper drummed her fingers on the table with a soft smile in remembrance. “Two days later, Tony called me into his lab. Imagine a tiny eight-year-old bossing Tony as she sat on his workbench
programming robots so they would dance with her.”

_Casually, as if it was an everyday thing, Tony waved a socket wrench in Darcy’s direction. “My daughter, Darcy Maria Stark. Darcy, you can officially meet Pepper now.”_

_The little girl waved and tossed her black hair behind her shoulder. “Good. I’ve been following you around for months. Now I don’t have to hide.”_

_Pepper lit up with astonished glee. “You have a daughter.”_

_“Just the one.”_

_“Do we get to be friends, Darcy?”_

_“Only if you don’t give up on my daddy. I know he’s a pain, but he’s really, really cool, too. Daddy likes you and doesn’t want to work with anybody else. I like you, too, and I think you make a big difference all the time.”_

“So I stayed.” She sighed. “He went a little nuts when she went to MIT. Took living to the extreme to a whole new level. I didn’t like him very much in those years.” She patted Steve on the hand again. “He got better.”

_Telling all my secrets, Pepp?“_ Tony asked from the doorway, loosely holding Darcy at the shoulders.

_“Just the interesting ones.”_

“Got any more coffee?” Steve started to rise, but Tony waived him off. “Rhetorical question. I’ve got it.” He poured a cup and leaned against the counter, nervously jiggling an ankle.

But Darcy took the cup from him and set it on the counter before he could take a sip. “Go home, Dad. Stay with Mom. Sleep because the next couple of days are going to suck. But you and me, we’re good. I wasn’t earlier, but I am now. Because you fixed it. Just like you always do,” she assured him.

“Pepp did it. She made me,” he prevaricated.

But Darcy admonished him. “No, she didn’t. I’ll come by around lunch. Sharon should be able to give us more details by then.”

Tony pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I don’t deserve you. I never did.”

Steve rounded up the cups of coffee and washed them all while Darcy escorted her parents out the door. Bucky rested a hand on his shoulder and kissed the back of his neck. The comforting gesture settled him, washing away the last of his anger.

“Thanks.” He turned around, bringing his arm around Bucky’s shoulder as he did.

“Hey, Peggy was your friend too. Figured you’d be messed up some, and not just ‘cause you’re worried about Darce.”

Steve nuzzled Bucky’s forehead, taking comfort in his warm scent. “You were around Peggy for months before I showed up. Why’d she dislike you so much, Buck?”

“Want the list?”
“Sure.”

“’Cause I had a rep with the dames even before we left for England.”

“No shit,” Steve muttered. “I could have told her that.”

“Yeah, well, by the time she arrived all she’d heard was the rumors. She didn’t think much about American boys makin’ time with the ladies anyway, and I was lowest on her list. Not only that, I was a sergeant, not an officer. After Italy, she was sure I was going to corrupt the sweet, innocent Steven G. Rogers.”

Steve snorted at that one. “So it’s your fault she was mad enough to shoot at me.”

“Sort of. But I wasn’t the one kissing the pretty WAC.” He elbowed Steve and then nudged him out of the kitchen. “Come on. Let’s go find Darcy.”

She’d wadded herself up in the middle of the sofa, her head buried on her knees. Steve expertly slid an arm under hers and pulled her against his chest. “I vote we huddle up on the sofa for a while,” he offered.

“Oh kay,”

Bucky found something inane on the television and propped himself up against Steve’s shoulder so that Darcy was sort of draped over both of them. It wasn’t particularly comfortable. But it was comforting as Steve threaded his fingers through her hair.

Just once, she shuddered hard. He tightened his arms around her as she spoke, “Steve, Peggy was your friend before she was my aunt. I know you’re sad too. I forgot. Did to you what Dad did to me. ‘m sorry. To both of you. JARVIS said I scared you both.”


She nodded, burying her face into his shoulder and reaching up to hold onto Bucky’s. She didn’t cry. Instead, she shuddered once more and fell into an exhausted sleep.

*****

Darcy held still as Steve zipped her into her black dress. She handed him her grandmother’s pearls and Steve fastened those too. They had taken a suite in DC overnight, as the funeral had been scheduled for mid-morning. Two nights of interrupted sleep hadn’t done much for them. (Nightmares, guilt, grief, remorse, all that shit. And not just on her part. Though Steve looked fine, she looked like she’d been dragged face down in the dirt with the circles under her eyes. Super serum sucked sometimes.)

Bucky had left at the crack of dawn with a dozen of his handpicked guards scoping the area. He’d decided that, for today’s purposes, he would be the head of security for the Stark family, giving him ample reason to attend. As far as the public would discern, Darcy was there to accompany Steve Rogers, not the other way around.

Steve escorted her to the limo for the short ride to the cemetery where the service would be held. The
media photographers and journalists were already in place. So were a few protestors, as Peggy Carter was a well-known founder of S.H.I.E.L.D.. They had timed their arrival with Tony and Pepper. As Tony exited his limo with flair, he took flak for his father’s role in that, but he was used to the shouted insults and deflected the animosity with ease. Steve didn’t get that sort of attention, though he ignored the usual questions about their relationship and whatever issue they wanted Captain America’s opinion on that day.

The funeral went without a hitch, and Darcy kept her eyes dry, though not without locking her hand around Steve’s wrist tightly enough that he leaned into kiss her and whisper how much he loved her.

The reception was easier as it was limited to family. Bucky joined them, though he kept his distance. Darcy hated every second of it and felt like she was betraying him.

*That* fiction bothered her far more than playing Darcy Lewis ever had.

“How did you stand it?” she demanded of the two men when they were alone for the long ride home in the limo. She made sure Bucky had the middle and kissed him soundly. His arm came around her as she settled against his shoulder.

Steve and Bucky gave her identical shrugs. “Just what we had to do, Princess. Didn’t make it right, but it kept us alive.”

“It sucks balls.”

Bucky chuckled as he kissed her hair. “Yeah, it does, doll. You gonna cry about Peggy yet? Think you left bruises on Steve’s arm.”

“Not possible, and no, she wouldn’t like it if I cried. You know she was British to the bone.” But she shivered as she said it, and he tightened his arm around her.

“All right. But if you change your mind, I don’t mind m’ shirt getting’ wet. Ain’t no one gonna see you ‘cept us.”

Something in the way he phrased it unlocked everything she’d kept inside. She was grateful, damned grateful, that he said nothing when the tears did come.

Chapter End Notes

A/N I played fast and loose with Pepper's backstory. I didn't like the original Marvel comics version where she came out of the secretarial pool. The version where she worked in finance was better, but the leap from financial whiz to picking up someone's laundry seemed like a stretch to me.

So I trashed all that. My headcanon is that Pepper's connection to Aldrich Killian occurred via an internship while she was in college. And I just kind of adored the idea that Peggy had her fingers in this part of Tony's life too.
A New Definition of Normal

Bucky wondered if normal would ever be a thing. Since December 7, 1941, normal hadn’t exactly been in his vocabulary. Last week sure had been a “normal” he’d like to hang onto, what with Darcy settling in and all.

This week, not so much. But with Carter’s funeral behind them, today was about getting back on track again. The night had passed uneventfully, a nice change from the previous two nights where sleep had been sketchy with dreams of the not-nice kind. (He’d wondered what would happen if more than one of them had nightmares on any given night. He knew now and it wasn’t pleasant.)

Waking with Darcy and Steve entwined with each other was something close to perfect. Waking with Steve makin’ time with Darce, bare assed and just waitin’ for him to do something with it, was damned near to heaven.

But Darcy had her own agenda. When she’d finished with Steve, she’d crawled over Bucky and did him too, until his thinking was fuzzy. She’d gone on to work while he’d hit the training room with Steve for some sorely needed hand-to-hand combat practice. Steve might have fucked him in the shower afterward, with slow hands, a filthy mouth and too much patience for a public (sort of) place.

If this was the new definition of normal, that was fine by him.

Barnes straightened his jacket and consulted with Hill first thing. He’d sent out the notices earlier in the week with the selections for the special security teams. Some of them had gone with him to DC yesterday and did a fine job. Today would be the first official meeting, and there wasn’t a single HYDRA agent he could winkle out among them.

He’d left his hand uncovered. Though he wasn’t quite ready to reveal much, he figured the smarter ones would work out his identity soon enough. He didn’t quite shift as he went in, but he was aware of the soldier lying just beneath the surface.

Touching his tablet sent the images on it to the screen at the front of the meeting room. “Good morning, ladies, gentlemen. Congratulations to all of you for making the cut.” There was a rumble of happiness, and he leaned against the table where he’d spread out his notes.

One thing Barnes knew how to do was lead a diverse group of people with a variety of attitudes. At least this crew had volunteered for this duty (draftees had a bad attitude in general). He’d start with a little humor, shake things up a bit and then show them who was boss. Simple as that.

“In case you’re one of the less bright members of the class, I’m gonna spell out for you how things are going to work from here on out.” That was met with a laugh and a lot of smiles. “Things have changed in the past few months around here. Not only do we have quite a bit of valuable R&D going on in the labs, it seems as if some people with a few unique abilities occupy the top floors here.” That got a chuckle. “I’m not too worried about them. But they have families. If they’re off saving the universe from aliens and things we can’t quite figure on then we have a responsibility to keep their families safe while they do.”

He paused for emphasis. “That’s your job now. I expect that, in a crisis or anytime the Avengers are called for duty, we ensure the lifeblood of this Tower—meaning the families of Avengers and the labs that operate here—are kept intact.” He waited for that to sink in a bit. “Not only will you personally guarantee the safety of those involved, but you will work in conjunction with the rest of the security leads in the Tower to ensure the entire building is safe.”
“Some of you—” He brought up the relevant slide as he spoke. “--Have been assigned to patrol duty on the lab floors. If you haven’t noticed, our lab rats tend to be on the jumpy side and don’t have the sense of butterflies to keep themselves safe.” A ripple of laughter ran through the room. “That’s fine. I don’t have to play with beakers and bridges to Asgard. Those on lab duty have proven to have outstanding personal skills and can calm even the most skittish of our researchers, which is an absolute necessity in a crisis. That means the rest of you weren’t good enough for that, so don’t give them any shit.”

Crossing his arms, he leveled a hard look at the team to make sure they understood.

“Now, let’s look at our new call signs.” He touched his tablet to bring up that slide. “Since I was a sergeant and I’m used to dealing with lunkheads who can’t remember how to tie their shoes, we’re going to keep this real easy for you to remember. Alpha Team refers to our upstairs residents. Alpha One is Stark, Alpha Two is the Captain. The rest are Thor, Banner, Romanov, Barton, and Wilson. Romeo Team is the family. One is Ms. Potts. Two is Ms. Lewis. Jane Foster and Betty Ross are Three and Four. Foster and Ross have their labs on the same floor as Banner. They work well together, and Banner gives the ladies a nice bit of protection all on his own.”

He’d kept it so that the Romeo and Alpha Teams had corresponding numbers. He gave the guards a minute to memorize that information before he continued. He popped up another display, spelling out S.T.A.R.K., with the names and designations below. “You will be split into three teams: Sierra, Tango, Kilo. My designation is Sergeant. Still with me?”

More nods and affirmative hums of approval. “Garcia, Lao, Adaci are your leads. For the next few weeks, I’m going to be rotating the rest of you between the teams until we get the best fit. I’ve already notified you of your new schedule—-one day on, two days off, with Sierra up first, starting tonight at six p.m.. Stark’s provided us our very own quarters and training room on the 70th floor so we have easy access to the labs and the upper floors if necessary. Plan is for half your team to be on call and in residence, the other half actively working, patrolling or training.

“I’ll be working with you individually to assess exactly what kind of combat training you need. Those of you with the skill set will be put on the rotation with Romanov, Barton, and Wilson.”

“Not Rogers?” one wistful voice asked.

Barnes laughed. “If any of you can put Romanov or Barton on the mat, you qualify to get your ass handed to you by Rogers. Only three people in this Tower are good enough that Cap doesn’t have to pull his punches. Questions?”

“What about marksmanship?”

“A woman in the back asked. Barnes liked that. A competitive team could push each other to be better, so long as it didn’t get out of hand.

“Let me know when you figure it out,” he deflected. “Sierra, you’re dismissed until the evening. Make sure you get enough rest. Tango has the training room with me. Adaci, take Kilo and sort them into patrols until Sierra arrives tonight.”

With that, Barnes followed the Tango Team to the 70th floor. Hawkeye and Falcon showed up out of sheer boredom—which worked in his favor, because he wasn’t inclined yet to shed his jacket.

Barton nudged him during a break. “Lao and Isleta. I want more time with both of them if I can
Darcy spent the entire day in budget meetings and was ready to pluck out her own eyeballs from boredom. The other vice-presidents meant well, but once in a while she had to deflate their self-importance with needle-sharp logic. She didn’t expect a VP to know every single thing that went on in their division, but they had better have a damned good grasp on the factors that drove their budgets and the key personnel who made it all happen. “I don’t know,” wasn’t an acceptable answer. Neither was complaining about a problem without having some sort of solution to go with it.

After last year’s debacle, most of the VPs had learned not to mess with her demands. But Stark Industries was always purchasing new companies, and generally, someone from within that organization would be promoted to represent it as a VP. More than once, Darcy had to educate the new guys not to dismiss her because of her age or the fact her rack looked fabulous.

This year, she’d taken steps to head all that off by delivering the requirements in person. Having Barnes in the meeting on Tuesday had been interesting. He didn’t exactly defend her, but the lazy way he slanted disgusted looks at one VP in particular had quelled the implied insults to her person. (Some of these assholes were going to be shocked when they found out who their future boss would be. Too bad they were otherwise good at their jobs.)

She escaped back to the apartment for lunch after Steve texted a promise of sandwiches and a distinct lack of misogyny. She shed her jacket and shoes to join him at the island.

The sandwiches were tasty, the view was infinitely better. He cleared the counter when she was done and made her shiver with a heated press of his lips behind her ear.

“How soon do you need to go back?” That deep voice coursed through her veins.

(Well now, that got her lady bits interested.) “Depends.”

“On?”

“If I can get you naked or not.”

Steve threw his dishtowel toward the sink, expertly landing it on the edge. “Again? I’ve already
changed the sheets once this morning.”

She drummed her fingertips. “Maybe just once more?”

“Twice. And that’s my final offer,” he purred, settling up behind her. His fingers slid under her top to curve around her breast and expertly pluck her nipple. “And I’ll bet you’re already revved up enough that I can make you come without laying a hand below your waist.”

“Didn’t someone make it illegal for a national icon to purr?”

Her bra loosened. Steve worked it and her shirt over her head. “I believe I was told it was my duty to make sure the women of our country were taken care of. I’m still working on you. I’ll let you know when I’m finished.”

“Not in my lifetime.” There was definitely a hitch in her voice when Steve took the weight of the girls in each hand.

With a finger and thumb, he circled the now hard peaks. “Well, now, I can work with that.”

While his hands kept her distracted, he kept kissing her neck. Or licking it. Or biting it. She might have arched her back a little bit to firm up the connection between her nipples and his fingers. Steve was good at taking cues, and pinched a little harder as he suckled on the curve of her throat (not enough to mark, just enough for her to want him to leave a hickey, damn it).

Her body was leaking now, and she was in danger of an inappropriate damp spot if she didn’t get out of her skirt. She worked it off as Steve knelt in front of her with an appreciative (we’ll call it that) grin. He blew a line across her bare skin that left goosebumps. When he licked at the tip of a breast, Darcy might have tried to wrap her legs around his hips, but he was having none of that.

“Mmm, no. I have a bet to win. Nothing below the waist this time.”

She knew better than to tell him to hurry because all that did was slow him down. Instead, she closed her eyes and leaned back into the hand that shifted to hold her up. This was the best part of super serum. (Well, okay the recovery rate was really number one.) Though she wasn’t one to let a guy toss her about and carry her everywhere, there was something intoxicating about trusting Steve to hold her, to not let go. And so she leaned into his hands and closed her eyes.

Somewhere she’d read that only ten percent of women could come just from whatever the fuck Steve was doing to her boobs now. It was plucking and sucking and twisting and biting (gently, sort of) and either the other ninety percent had partners who were royally fucking up the process and/or she was very, very grateful when her whole body shook and convulsed right there.

Yeah, he was grinning like a dork. “I win.”

She set a foot on his chest. “Clothes off. Now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Darcy sprinted to the bedroom while Steve was still tangled in his sweats. But he wasn’t far behind and had his mouth on her clit before she could figure out which way was up. She was on the verge of screaming when he rolled to his back and took her with him.

She straddled his cock, hovering for a second with a wink. She sank down. Slowly, taking her time. Steve was just as primed now as if he hadn’t made love in a month. Fuck, she was going to be sore later. Three times before lunch was about all she could handle if they went at any speed at all. And
none of them had been particularly leisurely this morning.

They were now. Darcy leaned back so that she was fully seated on Steve’s cock. She rocked, just
enough for him to feel every motion all the way down to the base of his dick. With two fingers, she
reached back to tickle his perineum. He jolted up into her. “Darce—you know I like that.”

“I do.” She kept up the rocking, pressing against that strip of skin. (Bonus points, her clit sat just so
against his body. She had to be careful, biting her lip to keep her from outpacing Steve.)

Steve’s hands ghosted along her thighs and he kept trying to reach for her. But she stayed just out
range and kept up the motion, pressing harder as she did. “Darce—I want—“

“What do you want, Steve?”

“This. You,” he breathed.

She pressed harder against his flesh, grinding down as he took up the motion. With a low groan,
Steve leaned up on an elbow and pressed her fingers hard under his balls, far harder than she might
have done. A violent twitch in his cock was her only warning and he was coming hard inside her.
Now she let him take over the motion, thrusting his hips into hers and she came apart too, her nails
scoring into his shoulders.

Steve stole one more orgasm out of her as they came down, just by lightly circling her clit. He was
softening, but she was still wonderfully full as she trembled through that one. “Three, anyway. What
does that make for this morning?”

“I forget.” Darcy rolled off Steve, sprawling out to the side. (Yes, her thighs were going to feel this
one in a little while.)

He reached over and took her hand, bringing it to his lips for a kiss. “I love you, Darcy.”

“I know. I love you back.”

It would have been sooooo easy to stay there, sated and definitely sleepy now, but hey, she was a
working girl and had to get back to budgets.

Her mood had definitely improved and she zipped through the last two meetings. Afterward, she
settled in to the conference table in Pepper’s office to wrap up her notes and shoot off a dozen
emails for more details on particular budget items. She figured she’d be magnanimous, gave the
veeps until Monday to get her the answers she needed, and shut down her laptop.

One thing was for certain, she wasn’t stepping foot in the SI offices until then.

*****

Steve spent the afternoon with Nat, Sam and Clint in the Commons conference room to lay out the
next mission for them. He’d received a packet of intelligence from Coulson and wanted to make
sure his team was prepped before they shipped out tonight.

With that done, he headed out of the Tower for a grocery run. Most of what they needed was
delivered a couple of times a week and either he or Bucky would retrieve it from the Commons area.
But Steve still liked getting out for the odd item. Besides, he wanted flowers for Darcy. She’d texted him between budget meetings, going on about idiot VPs --wondering if she could put them all through sensitivity training and if it would do any good. (Probably not.)

He found the daisies first, had the florist tuck in a few fat Gerber daisies in with the tiny white Shastas, (Covering his bases. He wasn’t stupid.), then picked up a gallon of milk and a fresh, crusty bread that made him think of France.

Breezing back into the Tower and the apartment, he set the flowers on the table in a vase before starting on a dinner for the three of them. Thirty minutes later, Darcy texted that she was on her way. Bucky texted that he would be a while and to save a plate, please.

That he could do.

*****

New York Entertainment Now: 6:00 p.m. broadcast.

“Georgia, we have some late breaking news regarding New York’s very own Captain America.”

“What’s that, Pete?”

“Well, as you can see from the photographs behind me, it appears things are not on the up and up with the Captain’s long-time girlfriend, Darcy Lewis. See here, this was taken in a coffee shop a couple of weeks ago and it looks like we have a perfectly happy couple.”

“What a sweet kiss.”

“Yes, it was. And here’s another one taken yesterday. There’s the Captain kissing Miss Lewis again.”

“I’d like to smack lips with that hunk of gorgeousness.”

“Me too. And well, whoops, there’s this photo, taken a week ago, and wow, what a scorching smooch with someone who definitely wasn’t Captain Rogers. At the moment, neither party has made a statement and we sure would like to know who the hottie was that was locking lips with the Captain’s girlfriend.”

“Holy shiballs,” Darcy’s eyes widened. “As if you’ve even asked for a statement. I sure as hell didn’t get THAT email.”
Really, Steve should not have been surprised. Not by either Darcy’s reaction or Bucky’s. The problem was that he’d expected Darcy to be upset and Bucky to lazily snicker about the whole thing. But Darcy’d seen the media circus up close too many times to be terribly bothered by the attacks on her person, and Bucky’s one mantra was to protect her.

So it was left to Steve to capture Bucky in a tight embrace while the soldier blamed himself for the names and slurs applied to Darcy (“Don’t read the comments,” she’d admonished him,) while she implemented the plans she and Pepper had developed somewhere along the way just for this purpose.

First step: a press release from the Avengers PR office (conveniently located in the Stark Industries PR department) indicating that Steve Rogers and Darcy Lewis were still dating and had no reason to alter their current relationship.

Second step: a nice dinner out for the two of them, complete with paparazzi, plenty of photo opportunities, and lots of autographs. The questions they screamed at Darcy subsided only when Steve gave them the (patented, per Darcy) Captain America glare.

Bucky prowled the apartment that weekend, as if the windows could be breached and JARVIS bypassed. When he slept, he did it curled over Darcy in such a way that Steve couldn’t wedge a single finger between them. If it bothered her, she didn’t let on, and she held Steve’s wrist.

Honestly though, the “scandal” was the least of their worries.

Bucky had successfully flown under the radar all these months, even in Steve’s company. Now, it was only a matter of time before someone with ties to HYDRA ran the photo through a military-grade facial recognition software and came up with the Winter Soldier.

Whether HYDRA had the resources or intentions of trying to get him back was another discussion entirely. From Bucky’s file, there were a few clues to make it appear that Pierce would have preferred the Winter Soldier to be eliminated in the wake of Project Insight. Certainly, no effort was made to recover him in the aftermath of the destruction. In fact, given that Darcy was the last target, it was far more likely that HYDRA preferred to eliminate the super-soldiers altogether.

In any case, they rode the waves, waiting to see if the story would subside on its own as the world moved on and other news came to the forefront.

But that wouldn’t happen. By Sunday evening, the outcry rose as every last media outlet jumped on the bandwagon. Darcy muttered resentfully about slow news weeks and why giant aliens—maybe just one or two—couldn’t descend on Manhattan to keep everyone from speculating about her sex life. Of course, Fox News drove most of the rampant speculation, and that only fanned the flames of middle America determined to protect the precious Captain America.

It was a nice, if misguided, sentiment, and that was the only good thing Steve could come up with in all this.

The palatable tension in the apartment had the three of them on edge. Steve and Bucky spent the better part of the afternoon sparring with Thor while Darcy camped out in her lab. She’d made
progress on JARVIS’ programming, but still didn’t have a comprehensive solution to the virus, if
that’s what they could call it. Tony kept her company, though he didn’t stay past the boys’ return.

Bucky sat near the darkened windows under a lamp light, sketching with fat colored pencils to
JARVIS’ latest playlist. Steve had settled on the floor with a towel and his kit to clean his weapons.
He had a mission coming up and this was part of his prep routine. Darcy baked chocolate chip
cookies. (No, nobody was avoiding the television at all.)

As she set the first sheet of finished cookies on the stove top, Bucky joined her in the kitchen to
pluck the second sheet out of the oven then the third. While the cookies cooled, he stroked her chin
until she tilted her head up, and then caught her in the sweetest of kisses. Even from his place on the
floor, Steve could see the way Bucky made it light, warm—even comforting. (Steve still thought
Bucky’s moves were slicker than his own. He’d been the recipient one too many times to think
anything else.)

Bucky slid his hands into Darcy’s hair then let them slide down the full length of her arms and
brought her fingertips up to his lips to press a kiss against them too. All at once, she pulled her hands
away so that she could embrace him. Startled, Bucky only hesitated a moment before laying his
fingers to her back.

That hug told Steve more about Darcy’s real state of mind than anything else since Friday night. She
wasn’t nearly as blasé as she was letting on. Steve had spent the last few days suppressing his
emotions in favor of letting Darcy do as she did best. He’d, instead, focused on keeping Bucky on
the level. But now, anger--the likes that he hadn’t felt since that day on the bridge--began to burn
inside him. **This** is what he hated. Bullies. Those who picked on the weak or innocent. What kind of
person was he to protect the faceless masses when he would leave his own family exposed?

The idle plans he’d only speculated on in his mind fell into to place. He picked up his phone and
texted Pepper. It only took a moment, but he got the reply he wanted. With grim satisfaction, he set
the phone down, carried his guns to the safe and locked it.

He wiped his hand on the towel as he returned to the kitchen. The faint smell of oil clung to him as
he reached around his pair, stole a cookie off the sheet and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth.

Bucky snickered, but kept his arms around Darcy until she wiggled a little. “Better?” he asked her.

“Yup.” She reached for the first sheet to slide the cookies onto the cooling rack.

A full third of the cookies never made it there at all. “I thought you guys weren’t hungry?” she
admonished.

(Did that happen? Ever?) He flicked a look at Bucky and they gave her identical shrugs.

“They’re cookies, Darcy,” Bucky grinned as he wiped away a crumb. “Steve burns them.”

“True,” she conceded.

Steve snorted. “That’s ‘cause someone got handsy the last time I made ‘em.”

“Your ass shouldn’t look so good when you put ‘em in the oven.” Bucky winked at Darcy.

She started to retort, but JARVIS interrupted them with a ping.

“’Sup, J?” Darcy asked.
“My apologies for interrupting your evening, but it appears that a new version of the photograph is circulating. It’s on your tablet.”

It took one glance for them to agree that, yes, someone had resolved the photo and Bucky’s face was all too clear in the new version.

“JARVIS, tell Mom and Dad we’re meeting in the war room. This is getting out of hand and we’ve got to do more than a little spin and dance.”

“Of course, Lewis.”

She put her hands on her hips, taking in both Steve and Bucky’s stricken looks. She held up a hand. “Just stop. This isn’t a tragedy. Does it suck? Yes. It does. Every single fucking time. Is it the first time my name has been dragged through the media? No. First time was when Tony and I celebrated my graduation from MIT with what was supposed to be a private dinner and every gossip rag had me as his next fuckbuddy. I was nineteen. Right now, I don’t give a flying fuck what people think about me. I’m scared of HYDRA if they figure out the Winter Soldier isn’t their toy anymore.”

Steve crossed his arms. “No, Darcy. That isn’t what this is about. Yes, that’s important, but you are too.”

“Can we argue about this in front of Mom and Dad? I only want to hash through all this once.”

“If you want,” he conceded, knowing that Pepper and Tony would back him on this one.

She held Steve’s hand all the way down to the Commons floor. JARVIS had screens up as Darcy set out water bottles for everyone. Bucky brought the cookies.

Pepper was already on her phone as she walked in. “Yes, no, no, yes. Give us half an hour and then we’ll be willing to make a statement, Josh. You have to control the switchboard until then. Keep a list of email and reporters so we can push out a press release and not miss anyone. If anyone shows up in person, tell them we aren’t at home and if we were, we wouldn’t tell them anyway. Tamara Johnson from PR is on her way, so make sure she’s escorted up here.” Pepper clicked off her phone and flipped open her laptop as she set it on the table.

Bucky picked up his cell phone. “Garcia, I need an update and double down on Tower security. Do a headcount and make damned sure no one slips in. Sierra’s on point, but call in Tango if you need to. I’ve got a conference now, give me thirty and text if you need anything before then. Tamara Johnson from PR is on her way in. Give her an escort up here.”

Tony brought the bottle of bourbon and found enough glasses to pass them around with a finger splashed over ice. He propped up his feet on the conference table. Steve accepted the drink and leaned against the wall with arms crossed. He was pissed enough to feel his jaw grinding a little.

Shooting him wry look, Tony shrugged. “For once, it’s not me.”

“Do you see what they are saying about Darcy?” Steve demanded.

“Yup. It’s sucks, it speaks only of the misogyny in this world, and nothing of who Darcy really is. Which is fine. They don’t know you’re a foul-mouthed prick when you want to be either.”

“They got the memo you’re an ass though.”

“I had to send it several times.”
Bucky’s phone beeped. “Tamara’s on her way up.”

“JARVIS? What do we have?” Tony shifted his focus to the screen JARVIS lit up.

“Every media outlet has been running the usual pictures of Lewis and the Captain—and only the single picture of Lewis and Sergeant Barnes.” The AI popped up the pictures the media outlets were using. All the ones of Steve and Darcy were innocuous enough and nothing they hadn’t known about.

The security guard nodded at Bucky and delivered Tamara into the room. “I’ll be right outside, sir, if you need me.”

Bucky ducked his head and shut the door. “Ms. Johnson. Any problems getting in?”

“Not yet. I think the media’s figured out that the Avengers don’t come through the front door. Doesn’t mean you don’t have a dozen cameras pointed at the Tower trying to squint through the windows.”

Tony laughed outright. “Good luck with that. Every window has privacy film sealed to it.”

“I know. It’s fun to watch them get frustrated,” she agreed.

“I understand we have a problem,” Steve interrupted, his patience running thin.

The woman’s demeanor changed from friendly to professional as she took a seat at the conference table. “Yes, sir.” She tapped on her tablet and flicked it to the screen.

Since Tamara didn’t know about JARVIS, she wasn’t aware that the photo on the screen wasn’t the one from her tablet. It was the same shot, but the resolution was thousands of times better. There was no mistaking Bucky’s face this time.

“Damn.” Tony leaned in, putting his feet on the floor.

Tamara nodded. “We found it posted to one of the more extreme websites, but it’s been working its way up the media chain. By morning, the whole country will see your face, Mr. Barnes.” She waited a beat then plowed ahead. “I am … aware of your need for personal security, Mr. Barnes.”

Darcy tilted her head. “Get that website’s IP address to Hill. She can backtrack it. That’s another link to HYDRA.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “You think HYDRA is involved with this?”

“It would be easy enough to take advantage of our lapse,” Steve said.

Bucky blanched and scrubbed his hand through his hair. “Didn’t mean to cause you trouble, Darcy. Just a kiss and I forgot. Not supposed to forget,” he admonished himself. With that, Bucky’s posture tensed minutely, and his eyes came up gray. Steve swore under his breath. Bucky had been battling the soldier all weekend and this was the final straw. He’d shifted, and Steve figured it would be a while before they got him back.

Darcy reached out to lace fingers with him, though it made little difference. “James, it’s always a risk someone will see Steve and start taking pictures. I’d hoped no one saw and had my fingers crossed. We didn’t get lucky. And James, this won’t be the last. But don’t let this media crap take away what is special to us. That’s what is important. The rest is just noise.”
Tony sipped his bourbon and waved with his glass. “Now you know why Darcy hasn’t made herself public beyond being Cap’s girlfriend.” He smiled wickedly at Tamara. “You know, the part where we come clean that she’s really my daughter, Darcy Stark.”

“Yeah, right,” Tamara muttered. As she took in Tony’s grin, her rosewood skin flushed a darker shade. “Please, please tell me that’s not possibly true.”


“I … wondered why Pepper would sit in on this meeting. Stark Industries isn’t necessarily affected by all this,” the director admitted.

Pepper flashed her a smile.

“And it won’t now,” Darcy said firmly. “I’m not announcing that information yet. But you need to know what you’re dealing with. We’re a family in this room.”

Tamara nodded. It was easy to see she was recataloging a great deal of data with this new insight. A small smile appeared.

But Steve had his own concerns. “We’ll operate on the premise that HYDRA is fully aware that we have Bucky home and he’s functioning well enough to be out and about. That means none of us going out without someone on our six, got it?” Steve insisted.

“Did I ever have a choice?” Darcy quipped.

“No,” Bucky growled.

Steve swirled the ice in his glass, staring into it. “We handle HYDRA as it happens. We’re as safe here as we can make it.”

Darcy tapped her tablet. “That’s on you two.”

He knocked back his bourbon. “Yeah, well, the rest is on me, too. I asked Pepper to set up an interview with Ellen Walters.”

“Steve,” Darcy inhaled swiftly, her breath hitching as she did.

Tony raised an eyebrow. “There’s a bite in the ass waiting to happen.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my ass and not Darcy’s or Bucky’s. I am not hiding behind Darcy and letting her take the hits for this,” he spat out.

Darcy winced. “This isn’t going to be pretty, Steve. You think this weekend was bad? You have no idea what kind of shit storm will come from this.”

“Trust me, doll, by the time I’m done, you’ll be the heroine of this story.” He deliberately winked.
Two days later, the world tuned in to the special, exclusive interview. Ellen Walters had retired a year ago and swore nothing would be juicy enough to get her back in front of the camera. For forty years, she’d interviewed kings and criminals, stars and politicians. She’d negotiated treaties between enemies who hadn’t spoken in two centuries. Liberal, outspoken, with needle-sharp thinking, there was no one better at this.

Ellen admitted she was wrong to the one billion people glued to their televisions, tablets and phones that night. Since waking, Steve had never granted anyone a live interview beyond a sound bite or two. A couple of magazine interviews, yes, but never live on television.

Ellen took her place in front of the camera with her opening remarks and a quick recap of why Steve Rogers had politely requested her time.

Darcy chewed her thumbnail as she found a place on the couch. Bucky took the space next to her, his eyes still the iciest of blues. In the wake of the press release and subsequent advertising of the upcoming special, the media had been in the highest gear, churning out speculation and running every last bit of film or photo they had of Steve or Darcy. The new photo was plastered across every last story.

“The offer to talk, one-on-one, to a hero for the ages was too much for this poor fan girl to resist. And it’s an extraordinary honor to be asked.” She shook her frosted blond hair in place and stood as Steve entered the studio. The space had been outfitted to look like a living room, with cushy chairs, a candle-filled fireplace, and a view of Manhattan in the background. The rug on the floor lent its own warmth to the scene.

Darcy curled up against Bucky as they watched from the Common room with all the other Avengers and their significant others. This was her family now and she wouldn’t have it any other way. Jane claimed the empty space to her right and Thor took the floor in front of them.

The SI and Avengers PR teams were tuned into to every sort of social media to monitor the temperature of the audience with all the finesse and detail of a presidential address.

Steve flashed that USO smile to the camera as he sweetly kissed Ellen on the cheek and settled into the other chair.

“Well, my panties just got wet,” Maria laughed.

Sam elbowed her and stole a kiss. “No. Not ever.”

“But he’s on my list.”

“Is there anyone in this room who isn’t on your list?”

She counted on her fingers. “Just Stark.” Tony beaned her with a piece of popcorn. Pepper shushed them both.

“You’ve had quite the week, Steve,” Ellen prompted.

Steve scooted into his chair a little more to get his posture ramrod straight.

“Aw shit, Steve’s about to go Cap on America’s ass,” Clint muttered. Natasha dug a finger into his side.
“Yes, it has been a difficult one. And a disappointing one.” Steve’s mouth firmed into a flat line.

“Why is that?”

“For the record, I want to state so that there is no misunderstanding. Darcy Lewis has not cheated on me at any time. I am fully aware of the photograph and, in fact, I was standing behind her when it was taken. Too bad the photographer didn’t see that fit to print too.” Steve leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees.

“Here it comes,” Clint whispered.

“I am disappointed, terribly disappointed, about the things that have been said about Darcy Lewis. She has been branded a whore by the media and, as a consequence, by the public who sees only one tiny part of our lives. All this, from a single misunderstood photo. Where is the journalism whose purpose is to uncover the truth?”

“Now, Steve, even you have to admit the photo is pretty damning.”

“Is it? Because from where I sit, that photo captured an extraordinary moment in my life. A moment that brought me nothing but happiness. I will not let others tear it down for their own purposes.”

Ellen’s eyebrows went straight up. “All right, I’ll bite. Tell me your side of the story.”

Steve reached out for a bottle of water, unscrewed the top and sipped (taking his sweet, fucking time on prime time television) before he set it back down. Ellen’s eyes danced with curiosity. (She was good, liked Steve, and would work with him to draw out the nuances of his tale.)

“Everyone thinks they know my history. You can see it in the Smithsonian, if you want. It’s not a bad version. There are a couple of books out there that have it pretty close. But like any story, there is so much that is left out--some of it because the truth simply wasn’t known, the rest because I’m a private person and, until now, I’ve chosen to keep certain aspects of my life out of the spotlight.”

He clasped his hands together, idly rubbing his right thumb on the third finger of his left hand. “This part of the story begins with Darcy Lewis, an amazingly smart, beautiful woman whom I’ve dated for close to three years now. When I was growing up, three years would see you dating, married and maybe working on a second kid. I assure you, I have a ring and she’s stalling because she’s just now twenty-six and I’m told that’s still young these days. Maybe I’ll get lucky this year and she’ll wear it.” Steve looked straight into the camera as he said the last part.

The Avengers cheered as Clint wolf-whistled at Darcy. Bucky kissed her temple as her cheeks turned bright red.

“In those three years, Darcy has seen me through PTSD, the aftermath of fighting aliens, and helped me adjust to this new world I live in. We’ve built something solid between us that can’t be torn down by what’s been going on these past few days. But there is something else Darcy did. She helped me deal with the loss of the person I’d loved for more than ten years-- someone I thought had died only weeks before I ended up in the Arctic Ocean.”

When he paused, Ellen filled in. “You’re speaking of Bucky Barnes. Your best friend.”

A genuine smile with the faintest smirk lit him up. “Best friend? Sure we can call it that. But these days, I would call him my boyfriend.”

With that, Steve sat back in his chair and waited for Ellen to digest that news. (Jesus fuck, he was working the interview like a pro. Darcy was proud.)
Ellen answered his smile with a grin of her own. “Your boyfriend.”

“Yes, Ellen, I am bisexual. So’s Bucky. His reputation with the dames was pretty well documented, and I can give you personal testimony to that.” Steve shrugged a little, to Ellen’s delight.

“That was slick,” Bucky murmured in Darcy’s ear. “Can’t quite tell if that was past or present tense.”

Darcy risked a quick peek at him, found his eyes softening to their usual blue—though he bit his lip at Steve’s assertions.

“How did Darcy take it?”

“She’s a smart cookie and figured it out even before I told her. I had—still have—PTSD, and most of my nightmares involve Bucky in some form or another. As I said, she’s a smart lady.”

“On a side note, I’m curious.” Ellen asked, “Do you go to therapy for that?”

He nodded. “I do now. Like most soldiers, I’m stubborn.” He turned his hands up. “It definitely wasn’t something we did back then, and well, in truth, I could have been given a blue discharge, or put in mental hospital for admitting to loving Bucky the way I do. But I’ve a good friend at the VA who brought me around and Darcy’s been very supportive.”

“So how does all this translate into the photo, Steve?”

“Ellen, I have an extraordinary story, one that involves a successful experiment, an amazing band of soldiers, and a plane crash in the ocean where I was frozen for almost seven decades. But we know now that HYDRA and S.H.I.E.L.D. coexisted from the beginning. My roots were in the S.S.R., which later became S.H.I.E.L.D. But there was another man who received a version of that serum at nearly the same time I did. He survived a fall from a train that should have killed him, was kept by HYDRA as a prisoner of war, experimented on, tortured, broken, then brainwashed and honed into a weapon. He was given a target—a lot of targets—and told he would save the world. When he successfully completed each mission, he was electrocuted until he had no memories and put in cryofreeze until the next assignment. For seventy years, he was defrosted, forced to kill, shocked, and frozen again. The serum healed him each time, allowing HYDRA to use him over and over again.”

Ellen’s eyes widened and she looked away in horror.

“This past April, James Buchanan Barnes was sent by Alexander Pierce to kill me so that the Insight Project could be implemented. Bucky put three bullets in me before he broke through the conditioning. I fell from one of the helicarriers. He came after me and pulled me out of the water.”

Ellen covered her mouth with her hand and motioned him to continue, her eyes glistening with tears.

“Go on.”

“Ten days later, HYDRA attempted to kidnap Darcy because of her connections to me. Bucky rescued her out of a steam tunnel, patched her gunshot wound up, and they got in contact with me. We, Darcy and I, took him home, where he spent the next four months recovering from his conditioning. Ellen, the man was afraid of taking a hot shower for fear he’d be punished.”

She visibly flinched.

“Again, for the record, the U.S. Congress has been fully apprised of this information and has confirmed James Buchanan Barnes’ status as a former prisoner of war and he will not be held responsible for the deaths he caused while under HYDRA’s conditioning. He was released into my
personal custody for his rehabilitation.”

“Two months ago, we moved into the Tower at Tony Stark’s request, both for security and because three people living in less than eight hundred square feet is a real challenge for even the best of friends. Since Darcy works there, and Tony’s been bugging me for months, it wasn’t a difficult choice.”

“How is Bucky now?” Ellen asked, her tone full of compassion.

“Recovering. As much as the serum made his life hell for the way HYDRA could use him, it’s also been instrumental in his healing.” Steve flashed another USO smile, though this one had a little bit of honesty with it. “I suspect that might have had something to do with having Darcy around too. He’s never been one to want to let down a beautiful lady.”

Ellen stopped the interview for a commercial break, and Darcy fired off a text to Steve. (“Nice to know the Army’s USO training paid off.”)

She got one back in seconds. (“Their problem, not mine.”) Darcy laughed and read it off to the crowd. The PR crew sent her the initial media stats so far. Twitter promptly crashed during the commercial break.

When the special came back on, Ellen welcomed the audience, recapped the startling revelations and opened with a new line of questioning.”Now Steve, I’ve spoken with Darcy Lewis when she took the reins of Stark Industries during the disappearance of Tony Stark and Pepper Potts’ kidnapping in 2013. She’s not exactly a pushover. I’ve got to ask, how did she take having your boyfriend on the scene?”

“At first, Darcy and I were focused on getting Bucky healed up.” He paused, dipping his head a little. “After that, yeah, it was about as bumpy as you could imagine. Darcy offered to step away from our relationship, thinking what I had with Bucky was worth more than what I had with her.”

Steve’s voice hitched, and Ellen picked up on it, pouncing like a cat with a mouse. “But you didn’t do that.”

He leaned in, letting his voice drop just a little to strengthen the impact of what he would say next. “I’m going to borrow someone else’s words for this. Ellen, when you have been in a relationship, an honest, heartfelt love affair for more than a decade, and seen that person through the good and bad, the whole sickness and health thing, and the death do you part, then you know what real love is. I know love. And I love Darcy. Just as I love Bucky. I can’t choose between them. I won’t.”

Ellen nodded. “Okay.”

Steve smiled so big it was almost blinding. Anyone who saw it would understand the difference between the real thing and the USO version. “I have had the privilege of watching two extraordinary people fall in love this year. That kiss in the photograph wasn’t the first, but it was the most honest. I don’t have to choose, because Darcy and Bucky opened their hearts to each other.”

“I’m stunned, Steve. Of all the possibilities I expected to hear today, that wasn’t it.”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck.

“Aw hell,” Bucky muttered. “Here come the Bambi eyes.”

Sure enough, Steve took on the most innocent, boyish expression he had, and all the Avengers groaned. Darcy giggled.
The Brooklyn accent trickled through as he spoke, “I didn’t figure as much, ma’am. No one wants to tarnish the conservative, upright image of Captain America. But America isn’t for only one kind of people. My ma was an Irish immigrant, a war widow with a sickly son, a Catholic and a nurse. Bucky’s parents were good people, helped us out time and again, and when my ma died from tuberculosis, they gave me a place to stay until Bucky and I got out on our own. I know poor and being hungry and so cold your bones rattle. I know women’s rights and how people looked down on my ma for being alone. I know queer folk, been one my whole life. Know what it’s like to afford a doctor when you need one. Know what it’s like to lose everything and wake up in a nightmare where you have no one to trust and nothing to hold onto.”

Steve stopped to wipe a tear out of his eye. “These days, I have good friends who have become my family. But most of all, I have two people that I love with all my heart, and I’ll be damned if anyone tries to take that love away from me.

“People ask me what I stand for, and it’s gonna go right back to the way my ma raised me—I don’t like bullies and people hating other people just because they’re different. I was as different as they could come back then, and I figure after this interview, the world’s gonna know I’m still different. But I’ll always stand up when I’m needed. Stark calls us ‘The Avengers’ because if we can’t save the Earth, we’ll avenge it. That’s been our promise and I won’t back down from that, even if the world turns against me because of who I am.”

“Well, I for one, still think you’re every bit the hero and the leader you’ve always been and I’m privileged to sit with you today.” Ellen gently prodded, “What do you want from us, Steve?”

Now his jaw firmed and he stared straight into the camera. “Apologize to Ms. Lewis. She’s owed that. She’s done nothing but love a couple of broken men and helped them out of hell so they can see their way to the sunshine.”

Darcy didn’t hear the rest of the interview, because she was crying into Bucky’s neck. His arms locked around her and he shivered all over. “Steve’s a fucking punk,” he whispered in her ear. “Always was. Now, ain’t no one can say a thing unless they’re willin’ to call Captain America names, and I don’t think too many will take kindly to those sorts of people.”

Moments after the interview concluded, Twitter crashed again, so did Tumblr. Facebook stuttered to a bare trickle of updates. The media scrambled to respond to the interview, but Pepper had beat them all to the punch.

She’d posted a press release ten minutes into the interview stating that Stark Industries supported Captain America, the Avengers, and all Stark Industries employees, regardless of their orientation. The oblique reminder that Darcy was a senior vice-president at SI did not go unnoticed, and more than one news outlet picked up on the hint, especially as Ellen had explicitly referenced the connection.

When people began calling the station to ask what they could do and if Captain America had a favorite charitable organization they could contribute to as an apology, Darcy and Tamera had a whole team ready for the newly-minted Sarah Rogers Foundation for Equality. Pepper actually rubbed her hands in glee when CBS was the first to post the phone number.

By the time Steve arrived at the Tower, a crowd had gathered at the steps, many of them with American flags, more with Pride flags. He waved, signed a few autographs and thanked them for their kindness. The other Avengers came out briefly to support him (and to watch his back, just in case), and Pepper broke out champagne and cake to pass around the Commons.

Darcy studied the trending tags on the reports the PR department sent her. By and large, the response
was positive, if shocked. There were protesters, of course, and people who continued to drive the negativity. Fox News floundered, trying to make light of their own solid, conservative support of Captain America without seeming to condone any of his messages. (That alone was worth the price of popcorn. Clint would make a drinking game of it later.) Not surprisingly, Fox found other stories to cover by midnight. Middle America split two-to-one into those supporting Captain America and those horrified that their icon promoted such liberal views.

Via both Avengers and Stark Industries pipelines, Darcy received thousands of apology notes by email and Twitter (and more would come in writing). Steve had a mixed bag, mostly positive responses, but there were some vitriolic, disappointed people who felt he’d betrayed everything he’d ever stood for. Rush Limbaugh had a field day and managed to piss off a chunk of what audience he had left (veterans mostly). Stephen Colbert gave Steve a standing ovation on his show later that night.

From a single damning photo, Steve managed to become a voice for a whole new generation.

When he stepped into the Commons, the room fell quiet. Bucky sauntered over, holding Darcy’s hand. “You and me, punk, we have to have a talk about that ring thing ‘cause now the whole world is gonna be watchin’ to see if she’s wearin’ it.”

Thor was standing nearby and he reached out to clap a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “Aye. This is true. It was much easier when Jane began wearing my betrothal gift.”

Darcy giggled. “Yeah, but it’s not like we can get married. Think we can set a record for the world’s longest engagement? Assuming, of course, that actually happens?”

Thor lifted a shoulder as if it was nothing. “Marry on Asgard,” he offered. “I assure you, you would not be the first to seek shelter for love in my realm.”

Steve and Bucky exchanged identical, smug-as-all-fuck looks. Darcy crossed her arms and waggled her finger at them. “I warned you two about double-teaming me. And what part of ‘not yet’ do you need to hear again?”

Bucky slid in behind her to whisper, “I’ll give you a year to pop the question to me. After that, anything is fair game.”

“One year, huh. I can work with that.” Bucky laid a kiss on the back of her neck as she got a good look at Steve. He looked like a cat with a bowl full of cream.

She tsked, hands on her hips. “Bucky warned me about your temper.”

“Is that so?”

“Says you’re a punk with a smart mouth and a sucker for throwing himself in a fight.”

He grinned. “He might be right.”

“Thank god.” She bounced on her feet and went into Steve’s embrace. He caught her in a little spin.

In her ear, Steve said softly, “I will defend you every day if that’s what it takes. I love you, Darcy Maria Stark.”
Chapter End Notes

Ellen Walters ... an obvious reference to two of my favorites: Ellen DeGeneres and Barbara Walters.

1/2016 Update:

SightSoBlind is writing Avoidance (WIP), and Grant is an OC character in that 'verse. SSB wrote a story about Grant’s reaction to the events of Ch. 60 in Ice and Fire. Go to it. It’s perfect. Coming Out by SightSoBlind

2/29/16 Link to fun photo manip by aoisacki"
Chapter Notes

A/N Just .... beyond humbled by the reception of the last chapter. I almost wish I could end the story with that one and go out on a high note -- but I'm still working through this last story arc and can't call it done yet. Believe or not, the hardest part about this week has been to keep writing, because I'm nervous about letting all of you down now. I have to thank lovesteele for bonking me in the head (firmly--I think I have a bruise) and keeping me going.

In the meantime, go check out One Year. I wrote this during my Christmas hiatus because there were all sorts of tropes I've been avoiding here and just had to plug in somewhere. Plus, you know, I have this thing about angst and happy endings.

Again, thank you for all the kudos and comments from the last chapter. I think it took three days for my feet to touch the ground from all the praise. You guys are fantastic.

The security guards had their hands full with the Tower on high alert. The paparazzi hung out around the entrances and all of the Avengers had to take extra care with tinted car windows and making sure the guards kept the cameras back. A dozen eager photographers tried to sneak into the Tower with everything from catering uniforms to faked credentials—all of them hoping to get that first photo with Steve and Bucky together, or better yet, of the three of them.

He’d fought the Winter Soldier that whole week, hanging on to his psyche by his fingernails. He’d gone under once already and entertained daily headaches for the rest of it. Wilson speculated that the tension of the unseen threats awakened reactions he hadn’t needed for months. He had a constant running situational assessment in his head (Asset). He took to the gym and pushed himself as hard as he could. His reflexes had tuned to a hair trigger, with Steve keeping a careful eye on him everywhere they went.

JARVIS kept a close eye on him, too, using physiological data to determine when to prompt him with a question or simply comment on the environment to keep him from shifting. There were several nights that JARVIS had to order him to sleep during the worst of it.

He used some of it—not just physically. He’d turned to the specs for the other Stark Industries facilities and started his analysis of each of them. That involved Darcy, as she’d built a good portion of the cybersecurity while bored in New Mexico. This area wasn’t his forte and the two days he’d spent under her instruction had been enlightening.

Sex relieved some of the tension. With two lovers instead of one, he tended to sleep heavily for a couple of hours afterward before the need to check perimeters overwhelmed him. Darcy and/or Steve got sneakier about waking up moments before he did and doing it all again. He’d managed to stay in bed most of last night that way.

Two days ago, he and a smug-as-shit Steve Rogers took the helicopter to DC, where they took an escorted tour of the Smithsonian exhibition, for no other purpose than to make sure they were photographed somewhere away from the Tower. Steve told him later that his eyes shifted to blue only when Steve kissed him soundly as they finished the exhibit – to the shock and applause of the
tourists and a few hundred snapped pictures.

The unmistakable smirk on Bucky’s face made the front page of every gossip magazine and blog. Darcy picked out the best one and stuck it on the fridge. He loved it and copied that grin every time he saw it.

It was also the first time he’d left off his glove in public. As the photos hit the internet, speculation soared overnight about the new “Stark” technology, and SI stock jumped over the assumptions about the new prosthetic. In truth, he’d never considered what the technology might mean for other people. He’d sent a polite message to Dr. Ross yesterday. When she replied, he released all the information Darcy had collected so far to her. They would get together this week to continue the process of reverse engineering his arm.

He’d asked Darcy’s permission to include Tony, if she thought he would like to come. Darcy just kissed him on the cheek and told him it would make Tony’s day. Given the bottle of good Russian vodka currently sitting in his freezer, Bucky figured she was right.

Now that the media settled from frenzied to annoying, Barnes called a meeting with the heads of his security teams from across the Tower—as well as the entire Sierra, Tango and Kilo crews. They would use one of the larger meeting rooms on the second floor to house everyone.

Barnes had decided on tactical pants, boots, and a Stark Industries t-shirt with his dog tags out. It would be the first time he went beyond the residential floors without a long-sleeved shirt covering his arm (Asset). With ice-colored eyes wavering between gray and blue, he fought for mental control. He needed to be a soldier today—a leader, not an asset. (Barnes) It wasn’t easy when he discovered every last security guard not on active duty in the Tower crammed into the room, eager for whatever Barnes had to say.

Barton and Thor took opposite corners, and—though it was ridiculous given his skill set—he felt better knowing they had his back.

“Big news week,” he commented to the delighted room. He wasn’t expecting the instant applause—or the standing ovation. The sound tripped through him and he had to fight not to let it overwhelm his senses. He waved for them to quiet down. They did, and he breathed through it without a single person becoming aware of the internal struggle. "Figure most of you got the highlights already. Any questions?"

More the half the heads in the room turned to Garcia, who leaned against the wall off to the side. (The team lead could keep an eye on the crowd and watch the exits from there. Good job.) They’d correctly figured that Barnes liked Garcia and probably wouldn't be insulted by anything he asked. Garcia stood up, almost at attention but not quite. “Sergeant, mostly, we want to know what’s off-limits. Obviously, your personal relationships are on that list, but, sir, we wish to be respectful too. Needless to say, you’ve earned it and we’re honored to be on your team.”

The consideration wasn’t expected and it took him a moment to formulate an answer. (Barnes … Bucky.) He nodded, working hard to get all the words out without choking on them. It helped when he noticed Steve hovering just outside the doorway—out of the line of sight of anyone but him. With a wink and a nod coming his way, Barnes settled and skimmed the crowd with a firm look. “All right. I get to call Steven a punk. I’m the only one who gets to do that. If you piss him off, don’t coming running to me.”

The level of awe on some of the guards’ faces made him snort. He walked the length of the front of the room and back as he talked. “Ms. Lewis is so far above your pay grade that you don’t look at her
unless you can be respectful when you do. She’s the second-in-command at Stark Industries for a reason and it has nothing to do with Rogers. I might remind you that she was here first.”

He shifted until he was balanced on the balls of his feet, with his arms crossed. “I was hired, in part, because my first loyalties will never be to Stark Industries. It is to Rogers, Lewis, Potts, Stark and the rest of the Alpha and Romeo teams. If I have to choose between burning this building down and saving one of them, you’ll understand which way I’m going to go. Saving the people in this building and the labs is your job. I have an innate distrust of institutions that I’m certain you’ll understand.

“The other reason I was hired is because within a week of living here, I had a dossier for Director Hill regarding the security holes in the Tower. I left notes on her desk for the ones that pissed me off. Yes, her door was locked.” He shrugged. “We’ve cleaned house again, eliminating another three dozen HYDRA agents from our security teams and even more from the general employment rosters.

“Am I a target? We don’t know. Some of the key facilities where I was held no longer exist. There is evidence that I wasn’t supposed to make it out of my last mission alive. HYDRA definitely doesn’t like Captain America, so it’s a fair bet that both Ms. Lewis and I will be targets for that reason alone. But that’s on me to make sure it doesn’t happen, not you, unless you have bodyguard duty that day.

“Is there anyone who hasn’t seen the footage from the battle on the bridge?” He skimmed the room. “Good. Then you know it’s not a good idea to sneak up on me.” He held up his left hand. “This,” he wiggled his fingers, “is a fully functional weapon. Before you step on the mat with me, you have to trust that I know what to do with it. Tomorrow, Natasha Romanov has agreed to spar with me in the Avengers training room. I’ve pissed her off, so it promises to be a good match. I encourage you to watch. Space is limited, so draw straws and be civil. The rest of you can watch it in the conference room.” He cocked his head. “Anything else?”

Barton drawled, “Come on, Barnes. They want to see if the stories about your accuracy are true. You still have records with the army that are impressive, to say the least.”

“This isn’t exactly a venue for that, Hawkeye.” Barnes idly stepped backward to lean against the lectern behind him, propping a foot on it as he did.

From the hallway, Steve smirked, crossing his own arms.

Hawkeye opened a Sharpie marker and put a single dot on the wall right next to him. (Assessing: 16.2 meters to target.) Then he leaned against that same wall and grinned.

In one smooth motion, Barnes drew his knife from his boot and flung it clear across the room toward the point. It landed with the top edge of the knife in the dot, only two centimeters from Hawkeye’s head. Right hand, not left.

The rumble in the audience grew and broke out in applause. Though these were the better trained guards, only about half of them realized what Barnes had done. The other half didn’t even see him draw the blade.

Outside the door, Steve waggled his hand as if to say the throw was only so-so. Hawkeye merely smirked. That a legendary marksman trusted him in accuracy said as much about Barnes’ skills as the flashy knife work.

Barnes quirked his lips up. “Will that suffice until we have an afternoon free at the range?”

“That’ll do,” Barton agreed.

“Any other questions?” The room stayed silent. “Then the last thing I’ll tell you is this: if you have a
problem, work it out with your leader or come see me. I don’t have patience for bullshit. But if you stay here, I will see that you receive the best tactical training available anywhere outside the Special Forces. The Avengers need back up on occasion and you’re in prime position for that. In the meantime, we’re going to secure Stark Industries with the finest private security team in the world.”

The room broke into loud applause, and Steve beamed that fucking punk-ass smile that could light up Brooklyn.

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Steve stayed just outside the doorway, where no one but Bucky could see him. He leaned on the doorframe with one forearm over his head, listening to Bucky speak with all the authority and confidence he’d developed as a Howling Commando.

How in the hell did one man go from brainwashed and hardly recognizing his boyfriend to building a team and falling in love all over again in less than a year? Steve didn’t care what they said about the serum. Some of that was pure steel will on the part of one James Buchanan Barnes.

He kept his place against the wall as the guards streamed out. Probably half didn’t notice him. The other half took note and at least a few came to a dead stop, blocking the doorway until someone politely tapped him or her from behind.

When Thor, Clint and Bucky came out, at least a few guards still lingered in the hallway. Steve and Thor clasped arms and the four of them made their way to the second floor cafeteria for a mid-morning snack.

For the most part, those who worked in the Tower were well aware of the Avengers presence and left them alone. It wasn’t unusual for any of them to appear on the retail floors and the cafeteria—for a change of scenery, if nothing else. But it was different with Steve and Bucky gracing magazine covers. No one took pictures, (they knew better) but the awe in some of the faces had stepped up a notch or two.

Bucky lasted through an apple and two sandwiches, all of which he consumed in just under six minutes, before he had to get out of the public eye.

Steve stayed on his six and kept quiet until they reached the empty hallway leading to the Avengers private elevator. Once beyond the secured and magnetically sealed doors, Bucky stopped cold, going to his hands and knees. He didn’t stay there long before rocking back to sit on his heels. Steve propped up the wall, waiting to see what his friend needed.

“I’m not … that man. Not a hero.”

“People choose their own heroes, Buck. It’s different now. In our day, a man broken by the enemy was considered a pariah. Now they know that, with enough time and resources, anyone can be broken. The hero is the one who can get past that. That’s you.”

Bucky held out a hand, and Steve pulled him back to his feet and into a hard hug. “Proud of you, jerk.” Knowing that no one but JARVIS monitored this hallway, he touched his lips to Bucky’s, enjoying the way his boyfriend’s eyes warmed to cobalt as he did. They didn’t linger, but Steve left a hand on Buck’s shoulder as they headed to the elevator.
“Where’s Darcy today?” Bucky asked.

“Left her sleeping this morning, but she mentioned going to her lab.”

“She’s due.”

“For what?”

Bucky tilted his head and tucked his fingertips in his pockets as they walked. “She can only go so long before she needs to be alone. She needs to recharge, I think. Like Tony.”

“You and I don’t do so well with that,” Steve admitted. “Probably explains the bed-sharing thing since we were kids.”

“Probably, though you being cold all the time made for a nice excuse.” Bucky flicked a glance at Steve. “She’s not sleeping again, you know.”

“I know.” JARVIS opened the doors for them without being asked, a courtesy Steve still wasn’t quite used to having. “Thanks, JARVIS.” Steve shifted from foot to foot and rubbed his forehead. “She’s not waking up with nightmares, so I don’t understand--.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Ask JARVIS.”

“That’s … cheating.”

With a fond huff for Steve, Bucky shook his head. “He loves her too. It’s not cheating if we ask. If he’s not comfortable tattling, then he’ll tell us that, right, JARVIS?”

“Sergeant Barnes is correct, Captain Rogers. Lewis’ well-being is a core part of my programming. At the moment, she is attempting to analyze my data, however, she is finding it difficult to stay awake. We worked on my coding for most of last night.”

“Stop the elevator, JARVIS,” Steve ordered. “What do you mean you worked? Darcy was in bed with us last night. I’m sure of that.”

Bucky gave him a faint smirk and flicked his eyes at the ceiling. “Tell him, J.”

“Captain, perhaps I should mention that Lewis and I have played chess since she was small. Lewis memorizes the board and our moves. We play when she is unable to sleep. As she is concerned about my programming, we have been collaborating on analyzing my data in similar manner.”

“She does it … through pure memory?” Steve asked in fascination.

“Yes, Captain. As I understand, she can visualize what she is working on and will subvocalize instructions to me. I record as she works. Though she’s awake for most of it, it is quite enlightening to see what she comes up with in her dream states.”

“How did I not know this?”

Bucky grunted his own frustration. “Our girl keeps secrets like Fort Knox. Don’t sulk, she still hasn’t told me. JARVIS ‘fessed up when I asked him why Darcy looked like hell this morning.”

“So—she’s keeping her promise about staying with us no matter what. But instead of going to her lab when she can’t sleep, she’s doing this?”

“Yes, Captain,” JARVIS agreed.
Steve rubbed his forehead in frustration. “Sometimes, she really is a Stark.”

“Has she had lunch yet, JARVIS?” Bucky asked.

“No, Sergeant. I have reminded her several times though.”

“Stop at the Commons. We’ll get lunch and take it to her.”

“Very good, Sergeant.” Steve was sure he could detect a note of happiness in that reply as the AI restarted the elevator.

Bucky sucked in his bottom lip and gave Steve a thoughtful look. “You know the game you play with Darcy?”

“Yes.” That got Steve’s attention. Bucky had made it apparent that he wasn’t comfortable with it. Steve had some fairly good ideas why, and hadn’t done it again with Darcy. She was due though—and he’d made a promise.

“Mind if I try something a little different?”

“That’s between you and Darcy, love,” Steve reminded him. “What are you thinking?”

“Just something I used to do to you, punk, when you were being stubborn.” Bucky walked off the elevator, leaving Steve to follow along in confusion. “You can watch on the monitors, but you’ll distract her if you’re there.”

After that, Bucky wouldn’t say another word. He poked through the Commons refrigerator and came up with a leftover box of Kung Pao chicken that he warmed up until it steamed. With that and a water bottle, he winked at Steve and headed for Darcy’s lab.

Curious, Steve settled on the couch in their apartment and asked JARVIS to bring up the monitors on his tablet. It felt strange, spying on his loves, but in Bucky-speak, the hint had all the weight of a direct order.

Darcy had her music cranked and was oblivious to Bucky’s entrance. He paused beside the tool bench she’d cleared for his use, and set his weapons (three knives, two semi-automatics and a couple of small EMPs) in the top drawer. He locked it with his thumbprint on the outer edge, and slipped in behind Darcy to kiss the nape of her neck.

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She almost fell off her stool when a pair of lips pressed to the back of her neck, except that strong hands firmly anchored her hips in place so that didn’t happen (thank fuck).

Holy shitballs, she was tired. She’d dozed just long enough after Steve left (post stevesexytimes that left her slightly dazed) to give her the energy to get to her lab. Staying in bed when she couldn’t sleep was never a good idea. She’d learned that the hard way.

She figured she was going to have to come clean with the boys about being afraid to sleep. She could sense the dreams hovering at the edge of her psyche, though with Bucky struggling with his own state of mind, and the nightmares she and Steve’d had the previous week, the last thing she
wanted to do was trigger either of them again.

Bucky nuzzled her hair and, without thinking, she leaned back into him. “How did your meeting go?” she asked.

He shrugged. “It went.”

“Ha.” She turned around and gave him a quick kiss, eyeing the Chinese box in his hand. “Clint’s already sent me a video. Now that you’ve scared the shit out of your team, what are you going to do with them?”

“Train them.” He traced her cheekbone with a thumb. “Hungry?” He plucked out a small piece of chicken with his chopsticks and held it out.

“Not really.” But she ate the piece anyway, and Bucky rewarded her with a little smile.

He leaned against the workstation, motioning to her monitor. “Still working on JARVIS?”

Darcy rubbed her blurring eyes. “Yes. I can see the problem, but I can’t find an origination point, and I can’t figure out if it’s spreading. I need more time to look at the code. Everything I pull up here is clean though, and that’s something.” Bucky fed her another piece of chicken. She took it, but waved him off. “Seriously, not hungry.” He nodded and popped a bite into his mouth. She did take his water bottle and drank some of that.

“How much more are you going to work today?”

She checked the clock on her computer. “It’s not even two. I’ve plenty of time to knock more of this out.” She took the bite Bucky was sort of holding in her direction. It tasted better than she thought, and she went back for one more. Bucky finished off the last bite. He held out the water bottle and she took that too before he polished it off.

He tilted her chin up for a kiss that lingered just long enough to be distracting. She was even more distracted when he stripped off his shirt and sat on the stool in front of his own toolbox. He dug out his cleaning tool and concentrated on something in his elbow.

Perhaps she was tired enough that manners went out the window, but all she could think about was the gorgeous man sitting ten feet away from her--just close enough to see his biceps flex with the minute movements of the tool. Close enough to see the dog tags swing, catching the light and dancing in it.

Bucky caught her staring. “I’ve got something stuck in the plates. Will you help me?”

She slid off her chair and crossed the room to stand between his legs. “Where?”

He tapped the place, and Darcy took the tool from him to inspect the area. His other hand rested on her back, idly stroking. She gave him a running commentary as she cleaned the small bit of debris out. His hand drifted up as she talked, massaging lightly. She accidentally closed her eyes.

Bucky leaned in to kiss her forehead when she washed out his elbow. His dark scent surrounded her and went straight into her brain. (Lady parts rolled over lazily. Steve did a nice job of taking care of them that morning, but Bucky was close enough to taste and it had been at least fifteen hours since the last round of buckysexytimes.)

But she was exhausted. If she had a choice, she would drag Bucky off to the couch and curl up against him for eight straight.
Bucky stroked her hair, petting it all the way down to the ends where it lay across her nipples, which perked up happily when he got there with a knuckle dragging across the tip.

*Sleepsexsleep—fuck.* She was off-balance enough not to be thinking straight.

“Darcy, come with me.”

That order held just enough of the Sergeant that Darcy didn’t snap back with a sassy retort. (Not to mention, she was too fucking tired to think of one.) Bucky kicked off his shoes and socks as he led her to the couch.

She stopped. “James, please don’t try to make me sleep. I can’t, okay?”

He gave her an opaque look. “Wasn’t planning on it. I have a headache from this morning and want to hold you.”

"Oh." *That* she could do. Fuck, she was worse off than she thought if she’d misread his intentions. Bucky rarely flirted when he needed grounding, and come to think of it, he wasn’t flirting now, just being—close.

They did this dance of figuring out the touching and caring part of their relationship. (Sex with Bucky was easy, and Darcy was a pro at managing the soldier. It was all the in-between stuff that they were still navigating.)

“Want a back rub?” she offered.

“Please.”

She pulled off her sweater so the fabric wouldn’t get in the way, leaving her in a camisole, bra and shorts. She caught Bucky’s perusal as he settled on the couch with a faint look of appreciation.

“Later,” she promised as she straddled him.

The tense knots around his neck and shoulders weren’t too bad this time, and Darcy dug into the tight muscles to work them loose. In this, she was grateful that he wasn’t anywhere near shutting down like he did amid the media circus. Seeing Bucky’s reactions to all of it had only fueled Steve’s anger and—

Bucky reached back to skim fingertips along her knee, completely disrupting her thoughts. His metal finger made circles as she worked. After a few minutes, he rolled over underneath her so that she straddled him. He propped up on a couple of the pillows to give her access to his shoulder.

As she massaged the tension out, Bucky swept his hands along the bare skin of her thighs and under her shirt. He had his eyes closed. “Feels good, doll.”

She absolutely didn’t fucking notice that he’d unfastened the button on her shorts until he pulled her down to lay on his chest and ran a hand under the lace of her panties and onto her ass, where he palmed a butt cheek to make little circles there too.

She called him on it. “Nice move.”

“Not my fault you wouldn’t notice if I ran through your lab naked.”

“I might notice that.”

“Not much else.”
“Maybe not,” she agreed. She kissed his collarbone because it was right there. Maybe she could doze here and not have any dreams. Maybe Bucky would stop what he was doing in about a hundred years—sliding his hands over her ass, up her spine, into her hair and all the way down again. She began to drift.

As she did, her mind slid back to JARVIS and the analysis she’d been working on. Perhaps if she recalculated--

Bucky kissed her. Sweet at first, with little nips that pulled her brain into the here and now.

He stripped her bra and camisole off in one easy move (when had he unfastened that?) and rolled with her just enough to close his mouth over her nipple, tonging it until it hardened.

With a shake of her head to get her out of her daze, she dragged her eyes open and fumbled for Bucky’s pants to work on the button and zipper. He let her assist only long enough to wiggle out of his pants and to yank her shorts off.

He wasn’t completely hard yet, but he was getting there, and Darcy knew what to do with that. She reached for him, but Bucky pulled her down to his chest again and captured her lips without a word.

Bucky’s quiet intensity didn’t precisely unsettle her—she was never uncomfortable with him physically—but it reminded her some of their first time and she wondered—

He pulled her in place so that his cock nestled in her folds. Her legs fell to either side of him and he kept her from moving with an arm to her waist and his free hand cupping her face so that he could lazily explore her mouth. He sipped and tasted, licking in with his tongue until she let him in.

When his dick was fully primed, she tried to take in more than the scant tip he’d set there. He reached over her ass and put his fingers inside her instead, teasing her with both.

Coherent thought approached just enough to take a look at what was going on and decided to back away carefully. Which is why it took her far too long to realize his metal fingers were playing with her lady parts and—(holy fuck, that felt good).

She widened her legs and tried again to take him deeper, leaning up as she did. Bucky followed, caught the taut tip of her breast and began working it with his tongue. All that brought her firmly onto his cock—just as he pushed two of his soaked metal fingers into her ass at the same time.

She tried to move, but he held her in place with his right hand, fucking her with his left. When she tried to protest, he tugged on her nipple and suckled harder, pushing his fingers in a little deeper. He bit down, suckling hard enough to make her cry out, just as he drove in with a third finger and his cock, taking her past anything they had done before, balancing with her on that knife edge of exquisite pleasure and pain.

“I’ve got you, Princess.”

She trembled as he spoke, forcing her eyes open to find the dark ocean waters of his eyes. Like oil hitting its flash point, she convulsed, clenching down with her whole body as the firestorm licked and roared over the two of them. He locked his arms—his whole body-- keeping her safe as she rode him to the final dying flame.

“You’re safe. You’re always safe with me, love.”

(How did he know?)
With one hand, he stroked a tangled lock as he brought her back down to lie on his chest. “Sleep now. I’ve got you.”

She did.
Did he mention that Bucky had some slick moves? Steve glanced at the clock. Forty-two minutes from intercept to mission accomplished. And not only was Darcy sound asleep (per JARVIS), so was Bucky (also per JARVIS. Biometric data via the contacts came in handy).

What he couldn’t figure out was how Bucky had managed such a thing. And if Steve couldn’t figure it out on his own, Bucky sure wouldn’t tell him.

In any case, he needed a shower and about five minutes with his cock to get in any kind of state to leave the apartment.

As he dried off, he brushed his fingers over the writing on his skin. He’d been afraid that the serum wouldn’t allow the ink to hold. But it had. Three years after having Bucky’s name tattooed there, the ink was as black as the day he’d had it done. The crisp white of Darcy’s name wove in and out of Bucky’s, and Steve liked the way his loves rubbed their fingers or lips along the lines.

After their last mission together, Thor had studied the marks thoughtfully, acknowledging that such a thing was not done on Asgard. But he could see the appeal.

Coulson had sent him a packet of info early this morning so he could brief Nat and Thor for the next operation. He contacted them and the trio met in the conference room to work out their plans. Thor wasn’t particularly happy to discover Kree technology in the hands of HYDRA and vowed to assist in the recovery and containment of two pieces Coulson had uncovered in Puerto Rico.

Afterward, Steve finished his report at Darcy’s workbench and sent it off to Coulson. He spent the rest of his time drawing the two figures on the sofa, entwined as they were. There was something primal in the way Bucky had his left arm locked around Darcy, and Steve fought to capture it in his art.

When he did, he realized what Bucky had done. What he’d always known.

For all the times Steve had been sick, Bucky had stood between him and the specter of Death—a firm stance that dared Death to breach Bucky’s watchful guard.

No matter how ill he’d been, Steve knew he wouldn’t die. Not with Bucky there. Bucky’s strength became his strength, and he won the battle with his own body time and again. When they had gone to war, nothing had changed, really. He’d pushed his new form to find the limits of what he could do, always knowing Bucky was there.

He’d been the one to snatch Bucky from the arms of Chaos, even as Bucky himself taunted Death.

It took Death and Chaos working together to wrest Bucky from his grasp.

In truth, in those two years without Bucky, he’d tested Death time and again, daring the specter to
take him. He’d fought Chaos, protecting Darcy in the way Bucky had taught him, and stood strong when Chaos attempted to claim Bucky for a third time.

It was impossible for Darcy to know all this. And yet, she wielded her own sword, a legacy from her family imbued with a powerful force that she’d bent to her will. Like Steve, like Bucky, she had to trust that she even if she dropped her weapon, one or both of them would give her cover.

While he still didn’t know how Bucky coaxed Darcy into sleeping, he knew why she’d succumbed. Darcy had learned something new about James Barnes today. His strength of will had never faltered, even if Chaos had warped it for its own purposes for a while.

With all that in mind, Steve pulled out a new sheet of paper. He had something in mind for the three of them, a fanciful whimsy. He started with Darcy, setting a sword in her hand and an owl on her outstretched wrist.

The longer they slept, the better Steve felt about his upcoming mission. He doubted Darcy would sleep much while he was gone, and if she wasn’t somewhat rested beforehand, the next several days would be harder than it needed to be for all of them.

The sun set before they stirred. He tapped out a pizza order on his tablet and set it for delivery in forty-five minutes. That would give his pair time to wake up.

As Darcy pushed off Bucky’s chest to sit up, asking JARVIS to bring up the lights to thirty percent, Steve had to adjust his cock again. She pulled her long hair to the side and straddled Bucky, who threw his arm across his eyes. Steve figured he was stupid for not appreciating the view. But those metal fingers lightly trailed along Darcy’s waist and a thumb curved under her breast. (Sure. Okay. Bucky wasn’t that stupid.)

“What time is it?” Darcy asked as she stretched her arms overhead.

“No fuckin’ idea,” muttered Bucky.

Steve grinned, crossing the room so that he could admire both of them from up close. “Nineteen twenty.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “I haven’t slept for that long in a week.” She flicked Bucky’s nipple playfully and he pressed her hand flat against his chest. “What’d you do to me?”

“Nothin’ you didn’t want to do, Princess.” But there was a smug look on his face as Steve ran a finger along his stubble.

He leaned down and kissed Darcy’s head, letting his fingers drag along her neck. She licked her lips and his cock stood straight up at that. “I guess you want some too.” She pretended to sigh, but arched her back and gave him a pin-up pose that he rewarded with a kiss. She twisted enough for him to see Bucky was hardening up too. “Again? What is it with you two?” she admonished.

Steve stripped out of his clothes and let them fall wherever they landed. “I had to make do earlier.”

At that, Bucky snapped his wrist out and pulled Steve over the sofa for a kiss. “You figure it out?”

“Hell, no,” Steve retorted.

“Didn’t think so.”

The smirk on Bucky’s face had Darcy crossing her arms. “What did I miss?”
Steve tipped her backward so that she lay opposite Bucky, between his legs. With a glance at his boyfriend, he lowered himself so that Bucky could mouth his cock while he licked a line up Darcy’s thigh and straight into her soft folds. “Our boy has a magical dick. Apparently, he can put both of us to sleep with it."

Bucky shoved Steve’s hips upward long enough to retort, “Got nothin’ to do with my dick. That’s just a bonus ‘cause you two can’t keep up.”

Steve’s concentration scattered as Bucky’s warm mouth worked him over, licking from the tip to the base of his sac and back again before setting a quick pace. “Slow down, jerk, or I’m going to leave our girl behind.”

“You’re problem, not mine.” Bucky didn’t slow down, forcing Steve to think of baseball stats to give him time to bring Darcy up to speed. It didn’t help that he could taste Bucky all over her, or that she had that sleepy-eyed look that made him want to kiss her senseless.

Darcy tugged on his hair. “More.” He got busy.

When he got too close and started thrusting into Bucky’s mouth, Buck nudged him upward again. “My turn. My cock’s getting lonely.”

Snickering, Darcy sat up, looking at Steve. “We had our turn. So … dealer’s choice. Who do you want and where?”

Bucky grinned at Steve with pure happiness. “How did we get so fucking lucky? She’s perfect.”

“I’m right here!” Darcy exclaimed.

Steve chuckled and wedged himself behind Darcy, scooting her and turning her around so that he could ease her down onto his cock. Over her shoulder, he motioned to Bucky. “Come on. I want you like you just had me.” He leaned against the sofa pillows so that his boyfriend could kneel over him and slide his dick between Steve’s lips. They were figuring out this part out—how to fit the three of them together, what worked (a lot of things) and what didn’t (not much). It helped that Darcy was the most vocal of the three of them. Steve and Bucky tended to fall into old habits, reading each other with ease. But Bucky was observant, and Steve, well--

“You’re getting creative again, punk.” Bucky’s wry comment was countered by the way he ruffled Steve’s hair.

Darcy ran her hands along Bucky’s hips and used them for balance as she set the pace for the three of them. “Yay for creativity. Thumbs down because I can’t see what you two are doing. If I get bored, it’s both your faults. But hey, nice view here, James.”

Though his mouth was full up, Steve rolled his eyes and Bucky smiled down at him, calling to Darcy, “I got his dick all nice and warmed up for you, doll. See what you can do with that.”

Steve kept his gaze locked with Bucky’s as he sucked him down until his lips pressed to warm skin. At Bucky’s hiss, Darcy ground down on Steve until he jerked up into her. She bounced a little, sliding all over him. He forgot to breathe a couple of times as he swallowed around Bucky’s cock.

“Christ, Steve, that’s it. Don’t stop,” Bucky moaned.

Of course, he stopped, just to be a prick.

“Fuckin’ punk, I said don’t stop. Been takin’ care of both o’ you. Come on. Put your mouth where
it belongs, Steven.”

Steve stuck out his tongue and licked Bucky like a lollipop. But that wasn’t what made Bucky yelp and bend backwards hard enough that Steve had to clamp down on his hips to keep him in place. “Fuck—Darcy!”

“Ah, yup. There’s the spot.” Darcy giggled. “Hey, not my fault I’m bored. Your ass is just … there, you know.”

Bucky twitched in time with her movements and Steve doubled-down on sucking Bucky’s cock and licking the juices from the end of it. He pulled off long enough, (though he kept up a steady stroke with his fingers and thumb) to say to Bucky, “Hands beside my head.”

“Fucking, really, punk?” Bucky panted, jerking his head to the side in that way that told Steve just how little control he had left. But he moved, and Steve timed the way Bucky’s cock went into his mouth. He kept one hand lightly stroking Bucky’s balls, and the other—he reached down. With delicate fingers, he flicked out, catching Darcy’s clit just as she thrust her hand into Bucky’s ass.

She ground down on Steve just as Bucky growled. “Do not stop. Not now. For the love of—“

No—stopping wasn’t possible. Not now. Steve fucking loved taking Bucky’s dick like this, and to have Darcy fucking his own cock after Bucky’d had his mouth on it—perfection. He followed Darcy’s rhythm. She did that stutter in her hips as she ground down—and that was all the warning she gave him. She must have found Bucky’s prostate, because he shouted as he came, hot and heavy into Steve’s throat.

With both of his loves contracting and pressing in and around him, he followed, spending himself hard into Darcy and digging fingers into Bucky’s flesh.

Bucky tumbled off onto the floor, letting Steve draw Darcy into a one-armed embrace where he could nuzzle her neck and hair. The other hand rested on Bucky’s shoulder—who brought his fingers up to twine with Steve’s.


“Nope. 9 out of 10,” Steve corrected.

Bucky just smiled, leaned up and kissed both of them. “Dibs on the shower, and fuck it all, I need food.”

“Pizza’s gonna be here in—“ Steve furrowed his brow, trying to decide how much time had lapsed.

JARVIS interrupted, “Ten minutes. I’ve requested a hold of an additional ten minutes to give someone time to dress before Officer Dixon delivers your dinner.”

“Thanks, J,” they chorused. Bucky rolled off the floor, picking up Darcy and taking her with him. Steve laughed softly at Darcy’s admonishments not to get her hair wet.

He followed and the three of them crammed into Darcy’s shower for a sketchy wash that was just enough to get the sticky off, and for Bucky and Steve to eye Darcy’s tits with real interest.

She crossed her arms over them and backed out of the shower. “No. If you do that again, we’ll never get dinner. Later.”

“Aw, Darcy,” Bucky whined.
“Oh my god, stop. You sound like Clint,” she insisted.

Steve choked on his laugh while Bucky recoiled in horror. “I do not.”

JARVIS gave them a warning, and Steve was the one who met the security guard on the Common floor while Darcy and Bucky got dressed.

One of Bucky’s security guards, Officer Dixon of the Kilo team, handed over the boxes and did a good job of keeping her curiosity under wraps. “Captain. Have a good evening.”

“You, too. Thanks for bringing this up.”

“Anytime, sir.”

She paused, then shook her head a tiny bit and snapped a proper salute. Steve returned it easily. “At ease. Rank?”

“Lieutenant, sir. With the 47th Rangers.”

“Thank you for your service. Glad to have you on board here.” He gave her a real smile in gratitude.

“Yes, Captain.” With pride, she stepped back and pressed the button to close the elevator doors.

They sprawled on the lab floor and demolished the pizzas. Bucky quirked an eyebrow at Steve. “After this, want to help me set up for tomorrow?”

“Natasha?”

“Uh huh.”

“What do you have in mind?”

*****

Bucky worked the tactical vest over his arm. Well, it wasn’t really a vest since it had one long sleeve, but it sounded better than calling it a tac shirt.

Stark had designed it and presented it to him this morning with admonishments to make a list of ways to improve it. He kept calling it Winter Soldier mark two prototype and didn’t flinch at Bucky’s glare.

The uniform was remarkably comfortable. Stark had designed the black neck-to-ankle undershirt and pants to allow unrestricted movement. The deep blue vest with its high collar—the same color as his old army jacket—went over that. A matching blue fingerless glove went over his metal hand, mostly to keep the plates clean in combat conditions.

Stark had worried about the additional sensitivity of the metal now that he wasn’t drugged, but only Steve and Darcy had any idea that he could dial it up or down at will. He and Steve had been sparring not long ago, and Steve couldn’t figure out how Bucky made a punch with his metal knuckles without the feedback overwhelming him—especially given the way Steve had sucked on his fingers the night before with much different results. So they learned something new and made a point of testing out his limits in other sessions.
The fit of the outfit was different enough to keep him from thinking “Asset” every few seconds, and the dog tags resting under his shirt grounded him even more. He picked up the flak jacket Stark had made, and grinned at the back of it, where it read, “Sergeant.” Front and back were marked with the Stark Industries logo, and suddenly he was glad Stark hadn’t tried to put any labels on the uniform he wore under the jacket. The mark on his arm was enough.

He hadn’t minded the red star so much, perhaps because it wasn’t a particular symbol of HYDRA. The Russians had a tendency to slap their colors and insignia on anything under their control, and the Asset certainly counted.

There was another reason— one in particular whom he was about to face across a mat.

He sorted through his weapons, choosing two semi-automatics loaded with modified ICERS for training, enough knives to arm the Avengers, and several low-level EMPs. There were a couple more items he selected, just because it was Natalia. Those went in his pockets too.

They would run two scenarios today: a public one to be recorded for training purposes, and a second private one, just so he and Natalia could come to terms with their new reality. The latter, he expected, would be where she would excel. He remembered her shot straight to his goggles with pride.

He paused outside the training room, assessing himself in a way that had nothing to do with the Winter Soldier. To face Natalia without the Red Room meant facing what he’d made her. She’d freed herself. He could hold on to that, and did, as he shifted into the soldier’s mindset (Asset). Soldier, he insisted.

Natalia faced him across the mat, wearing her usual armament. He liked that. It spoke of her confidence in her chosen weaponry. They wouldn’t draw on each other for this first session, but the other would be no-holds-barred.

The packed observation room didn’t bother him. Neither did Hawkeye in his nest. (“Sex, Barnes. I’m finally going to get some sex that isn’t a pissed off former Russian assassin trying to reassert her dominance somewhere.”) His training had always been under surveillance, which made the games he played with Natalia all the more sweet.

There was a screen blocking the sparring area from the rest of the room. He didn’t want Natalia getting a look at what he and Steve had set up the night before. Nor did he want the rest of the observers distracted.

As always, there was no salute, no preparation, no warning that the sparring had begun. She lashed out with a kick that he dodged and returned with one of his own.

Every body part could be a weapon. Every body part could be a point of vulnerability. Which one depended on how the body was used. Natalia knew his weakness better than anyone. She exploited them, used his arm as a shield when she ducked under it, laid a kick to the places where the metal and bone met.

He would lay even odds who was faster, and it would come to agility versus strength in this combat—as it always had. No one had pushed her harder to make the most of her form than he. He found himself doing so now, deliberately tripping her twice to get her to dodge faster, snapping a hold on a wrist instead of a counterpunch.

She broke it off, rolling to the corner of the mat and standing up. “I am not your student. Treat me like your enemy, Barnes.”
And so he did, coming at her faster and stronger than before, using his weight to bring her down. But she danced out of the way, slipping through his grasp and using his body—and hers—for leverage to land her strikes. He countered with the same kind of dance, and they went toe to two trying to bring the other down.

When the alarm sounded the end of the match. Natasha threw him a beautiful smile, one that warmed up his insides, and kissed him on both cheeks. “Uchitel.”

He sipped from a bottle of water while the observation room cleared. He would check in with Rogers and JARVIS later to listen to the reactions of his team.

JARVIS, load up the footage and send it to Hill for distribution to the team leads. From where he stood, he could see Hill tapping on her tablets. She gave him a short nod when she was done. Good. That should satisfy the security team as to his abilities and control, not to mention boosting Natalia’s reputation. That was never a bad thing.

*ping* Sergeant Barnes, the observation room is clear. Stark, Tango and Kilo teams are analyzing the match in the training center, and the other team leads are deciding when to disclose this information to their officers.

Ask them to send me a report by the end of the workday.

Of course, Sergeant.

Drop the lights and pull the screens out of the way, please.

JARVIS did both, revealing a menagerie of catwalks, stairs, sturdy boxes and desks—as if they were in an old factory of sorts. The lighting was dim in places, bright in others, and flickered unexpectedly. Sounds that reminded him of the elevated train in Chicago echoed through the space. The floor was scattered with slick spots and sand.

“Milaya, you have thirty minutes to bring me down. You win, you fly, as always.”

Something dark flared in her eyes, but Natalia held out her ballet slippers, tightly wound with ribbons. He placed them inside his vest, in the pocket near the back, so they wouldn’t be in his way.

“We dance, Milaya,” he said, barely breathing out so she would be the only one to hear. There was a flicker of a smile, though her expression did not change.

She didn’t see the cloth in his hands until he had her wrists bound. He shoved her down to the mat on her knees and yanked another cloth around her eyes.

But Natalia didn’t hesitate as she rolled away and ran for any kind of cover, ripping off the blindfold as she did. He followed with two shots from his ICERs, missing as she twisted at the last minute. These were modified to numb the part of the body they hit, similar to the effects of a gunshot.

He prowled on the floor, listening for movement. But she was smarter than that. He went vertical, climbing into the catwalks for a better view. The moment he touched metal to metal, his arm buzzed violently. Clever girl. She’d wired an EMP to the beam. She came out of hiding to fire at him, but he yanked his arm free, reset it, and threw an ICER modified grenade that Stark had developed just for this session. Natalia jerked backward a couple of steps and threw herself behind a pillar to avoid the ensuing blast.

He merely shielded his face with the metal arm and kept going, tracking her movements with the small sounds she made and the changing shadows.
Squinting in the darkness, he let a knife fly. She tumbled from the top of a column in her effort to avoid it, though she stayed on her feet and bolted for cover, firing her weapons as she did. He was forced to hold back to avoid being hit, precisely her intention.

But he took out the lights with a half-dozen shots, plunging the place into darkness and giving him the clear advantage. His night vision was extraordinary, as was his hearing. He could, in fact, stalk someone completely in the dark, as he did now.

But Natalia knew that, and wherever she was, she held still, controlling her breathing--and even her heartbeat. He’d taught her that, the way snipers did.

In silence, he moved from one side of the room to the other, as if flushing game, herding Natalia into a corner. He almost had her when another set of lights blazed on, and she flashed him a well-satisfied smirk and slapped a panel on the wall shut as she fired at him again. He ducked, she missed, but she was gone when he came to his feet.

Again, he went vertical and disappeared into the rafters, but only after he took out the light panel entirely with the three solid hits.

Sir says that he is adding the cost of repairs to your rent this month, Sergeant Barnes.

Worth every penny.

He stilled. Waiting. Both of them had been far too well trained to let impatience cost them the mission, therefore the self-imposed time limit forced Natalia to make a move.

His eyes adjusted and he found Natalia easing out of her hiding place. He leaned down with his Ruger, sighted, and fired. She went down with a perfect shot to her back. He winced. Modified or not, the ICER would hurt. Damn, he was proud of her.

He knew how this game would end. She’d already won, checkmating him. But he would give her the satisfaction of playing it out.

Kneeling, he checking her pulse to find her heart racing through the pain. But she flipped over and caught him with the same ICER to the heart, taking him down.

At first, he was merely numb as she shoved him over and reached under his jacket and came up with her ballet shoes in victory.

“I’m disappointed, Barnes. I didn’t figure you’d go for it.”

He coughed and came to his knees. “It was either that or let you lay there for the other six minutes to win. There’s no fun in that.”

She nodded, giving him the most honest smile he’s seen since the sixties. “Draw, then?”

“If you like.” He’d gained enough feeling in his middle to get up. Natalia rose with grace and turned for the door. He caught her hand. “No, Natalia. We’re not done yet.”

Incredulous, she shook her head. “Not here.”

“Here.” He tilted his head and gave her that characteristic Bucky Barnes smirk. “You’ve earned it. You have an audience of people who care, Natasha Romanoff.”

She was either annoyed as hell or extraordinarily flattered. Either way, she sat on the floor, stripped
off her weapons and replaced her boots with the ballet shoes.

His heart thumped with pride.

*****

Darcy bit her thumbnail as she watched.

“What is this about?” Sam wondered.

“Her ballet shoes. Bucky stole them from her, told her she hadn’t earned them, and then gave them back with an apology,” she explained. “He said they didn’t have to do this outside the Red Room.”

“She wanted to earn them back.” Sam crossed his arms, whistling softly. “That’s a hell of a sparring ground. Lighting sucks, footing is crap, sound echoes.” He grunted. “Next Nerf war is in that. I’ll even buy the beer.”

“You’re on.”

JARVIS changed to the backup lighting system, and no one anticipated what would come next. The slow drag of a violin signaled the beginning. Bucky stood behind Natasha as she raised her arms to dance.

_J, what is this?

The Grand Adage variation from Act II of Giselle. It is considered one of the more difficult ballets to execute properly._

She exchanged a quick glance with Steve. He laced his fingers in hers as she relayed the information in a whisper.

Every line in Natasha’s body radiated strength and powerful control. Each slow movement flowed into the next without hesitation. Bucky stayed with her, not so much partnering her as shadowing her so that when she leaned into an arabesque or a spun in a pirouette he held her waist or hand. Then she danced on, making each move precise and full of emotion. He lifted her so that she seemed to be in flight, and set her down gently on the point of a toe.

When she was done, even Darcy recognized the next song from the Nutcracker. Natasha floated as the Sugar Plum fairy, her steps light and quick.

At the end, Bucky tossed a round object in her direction. Natasha threw her head back and laughed as she raised the tambourine, shaking it. A spritely song played. With pure joy, she danced, kicking the instrument in time to the music.

When it was over, Natasha took the curtsies she deserved. Bucky applauded and kissed her on both cheeks. Clint whistled from his nest.

Sniffling, Darcy wiped her eyes and hoped Natasha could hear the cheers from inside the observation room.
That night, the three of them snuggled on the sofa, with Steve resting his head on Bucky’s thigh.

Darcy murmured, “I didn’t know she could dance like that.”

With a note of anger, Bucky agreed, “She deserved to dance with the Bolshoi. They stole that from her, but they couldn’t take away her love of the dance. It’s a part of her that runs deeper than anything that was done.”

She drew her thumb along the edges of the red star. “You keep this for her.”

“I think so.”

“Why?”

“She needs to know that something in all that was real.”

“Does the fact she’s in love with a marksman have anything to do with you?”

“Natasha would tell you that love is for children.”

“Natasha?” Darcy arched a brow. “Not Natalia?”

“Natasha is who she has chosen to be and she lives on her own terms now. She’s closed the door on Natalia and her ledger is clear. That’s the best I can do for her. That, and be her friend.”

She kissed him on the star and his blue eyes just glowed with pleasure.

Chapter End Notes

References for Natasha’s dances. If you haven’t seen the Russian choreography of these dances, it’s different than American choreography. Most of these performance are of the Bolshoi Ballet. I’ve had the honor of seeing that company perform twice--Swan Lake and The Nutcracker. Both are very different than the American counterparts, with a darker story line and harder lines of the body. But just stunning.

Giselle Act II Pas de Deux (through 4:45)

Sugar Plum Fair variation (Version 1)
Sugar Plum Fair variation (Version 2)

Esmeralda Tambourine variation (Version 1)
Esmeralda Tambourine variation (Version 2)
A/N 100,000 hits. I'm still reeling from hitting that mark. I had no idea this was even possible, especially with an OT3. Wow. Many, many thanks to all of you for reading.

Now ... onward. We still have story to go.

Four days into the mission, Steve got a reprieve for fuel and rest in the motel Coulson set up for them. Nat, Thor, Skye and Hunter from Coulson’s team kept watch, while Steve and the others took advantage of the breather. Given his ability to stay awake, Steve had done his share earlier.

With four other people (May, Mack, Morse) crammed into the single room, he texted instead of calling, preferring to keep his personal life private.

Morse was already out in her bunk with the covers pulled over her head. May had the shower and Mack wearily skimmed his own messages on his phone from his side of the bed he shared with Morse.

“Either of you around?” Steve sent to his loves.

*Both of us. You okay? D-B.*

That came from Darcy’s phone. It had taken some experimenting to figure out the best way to text among three people. This was the easiest. Darcy and Bucky would tag their messages from the same phone.

“Food. Sleep. Both good things.” He had to be careful. Even though the line was secure, he took precautions in the event his phone was compromised. He and Darcy had come up with their own ways of communicating, and having Bucky in the mix made it even easier. “You?”

*Missed an epic Nerf war –B.*

“Who won?”

*You have to ask? D-B*

He frowned at his screen until he got what they were saying. “Teams?”

*The birds aren’t speaking to us. They forgot our girl’s lineage. She modded heat-seeking darts while they added glitter to their toys. B*

Steve adjusted his head on his pillow. Judging by May’s raised eyebrow as she took the far side of the bed, he suspected he had a dopey smile.

“Family?” she asked.

He nodded.

“It’s good you have them.”
Yes, it was. He texted, “Open season when I get back. She gets the darts.”

“Done. D-B”

“You both okay?”

“We’re fine. Miss you. Miss doing you. Keeping each other warm. D-B”

“I’ll bet.” He hummed in contentment as weariness from the long day dropped over him. “Need sleep. Love you both.”

“Love you back. D-B”

With his phone clutched in his hand, he was out in seconds.

*****

Darcy sagged against him, grumbling, “I hate the long ones.”

Bucky rested his chin on her head, in complete agreement. Her agitation had shoved him backward a dozen steps in managing his own psyche. Between the headaches and the memories of his own missions (Asset), he’d had to rely on JARVIS to get through the last two days.

He’d spent the better part of the afternoon with Wilson, coming away with the understanding that he was far more dependent on Darcy and Steve that he’d thought at this point. They made automatic adjustments to his needs a dozen times a day, giving him subtle reassurance and cues. But with Steve gone and Darcy pushing herself into exhaustion, he floundered for an anchor. JARVIS picked up the worst of the slack, but Bucky still felt like a tattered sail flapping in the storm.

She rubbed her fingers in his, offering a physical comfort. Still, he had to dig up patience from somewhere and forced the words past his lips. “He’s safe. Can you sleep?”

“Yeah, I think so.” She tugged him along to the bedroom without complaint. As tired as she was, she fell asleep fast enough when they crawled under the covers.

He held her and tried to will himself to join her. (Asset)

*ping* You need rest, Barnes. I will keep watch and wake you if Lewis requires assistance. Go to sleep.

He blanked, losing himself into the order he’d been given.

JARVIS had to ping him awake, too. Darcy carried in fresh lattes from the coffee shop on the first floor of the Tower, dressed in a flattering blue suit.

He sat up in their bed, reaching the coffee with one hand and Darcy the other. The smudges under her eyes hadn’t faded much, but at least she had color in her pale skin. He didn’t ask, just sipped his coffee and nuzzled her neck, taking care not to muss her too much. “Working?”
I’ve got a few things to do with Mom this morning, but I’m done after lunch. What do you think about getting out of here for a while?” Darcy suggested. “We could catch a matinee at the movie theater and maybe dinner, if you’re feeling up to it.”

“I thought we were supposed to have dinner with your parents.”

“Rhodey’s coming in town for work and they asked if we could reschedule. Dad flew down to DC last night so they could hang out. They’re coming back this afternoon.”

“By plane or suit?”

“What do you think?”

“Stupid question.” He reached for her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Mid-afternoon date with my girl? Sounds perfect, doll,” he agreed with relief. Darcy had gone through her usual marathon of SI work, followed by two days in her lab. He’d kept himself occupied with training the new special teams and working on his assessment of the other facilities. That latter would require a field trip. Given how much he’d struggled this week, he’d wait until Steve and Darcy could go with him.

“Good. Then if it’s all the same to you, I’m going to go visit Sam this morning before I need to go in.”

Sam? She was down to one session a week and this wasn’t her usual day. He raised an eyebrow, and Darcy tightened her fingers over his. “I know I’m making it hard on you. I have to get a hold of this stuff while Steve’s gone on missions. I can’t keep pushing you like this.” She looked away, embarrassed. “JARVIS has kept me in the loop. I’m sorry, James.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Now that he’d had eight straight, he caught a few clues from her demeanor. “Hey,” he said, moving so that he could slide an arm around her middle. “It’s okay. You’re scared he won’t come home.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re not?”

Shaking his head, he chuckled, “He’s Captain America for a reason, doll. He’ll always come home.”

“How can you say that?” she demanded.

“Cause there’s only one man who could take him down and I’m already on his side.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open—and then her lips curved up in a soft huff. “Confident of your skills, aren’t you?”

He shrugged with a smirk and drank from his cup over her shoulder. “Can you build a heat-seeking dart out of that crap Falcon gave us for mods? I don’t seem to recall a temperature-sensitive microprocessor in that box.”

“Touche’.” She smirked back, touching her lips to his. “You know, you’re the first person who has ever been able to tell me anything that actually helps.”

“Spent the better part of a dozen years knocking sense into the punk. He’s not going to fuck up now. Thor’s not bad in a fight, and Natasha’s better than a whole squad by herself. He’ll be fine.”

She pursed her lips. “There’s a flavor of truth in all that bullshit. Just enough that I can buy it.” She rolled her eyes and pressed her mouth to his. “Okay, enough of that. See you after lunch.”
“Love you, Princess.”

“I love you, James. Don’t do anything you don’t want to do today.”

“Does that include my monthly report to Hill?”

“Not touching that one. Later, love.” She picked up her suit jacket on the way out, heels clicking across the wood.

He took a healthy gulp of coffee and decided the cinnamon flavor worked.

JARVIS, thank you.

Of course, Sergeant Barnes.

While he showered, he reflected on why he felt the need to express his appreciation to the AI. Some of it was surely the manners his ma had drummed into him. More of it was a need not to be a mindless asset. He wasn’t one anymore and the simple courtesy helped him believe that, especially after these past two days.

He had another session at eleven with Wilson and wondered if was wrong to ask about Darcy. Probably. Didn’t mean he wouldn’t.

*ping* Sergeant Barnes, patching Hill through to your com.

That got his attention and he scrambled to get dressed. “Hill?”

“Need you on deck, Barnes. You called it, our former employees made their move.”

“I hate it when I’m right.” (As Darcy put it, sometimes Evil Villains could be terribly predictable. She would know.) “Report.”

He yanked on his new uniform and armed himself with a mid-range weapon and his favorite semi-automatics, all loaded with ICERS, while Hill gave him the rundown.

“Twenty agents stormed the retail floors and took over the food court. Tango Team is responding. Some of the Sierra team hadn’t checked out yet, so they are giving support.

“Hostages?”

“Sixteen, at last count. We’re having trouble with the audio and video feeds, but it’s a close assessment.”

“Jammers?”

“Possibly.”

“What do they want?”

“They want the Winter Soldier and safe passage. Before you say anything that’s going to piss me off, that option is NOT on the table.”

“Acknowledged.” As he stepped on the elevator and directed JARVIS to Pepper’s floor, he let the Winter Soldier take over (Assessing. Mission: Protect Stark).

The Tango guards on duty straightened. “Sir,” they chorused.
“Tower’s on lockdown. Keep this floor secure and do not let Ms. Potts or Ms. Lewis out of your sight.”

He stalked past Pepper’s team and stuck his head in her office door, spying both of his charges. “Stay,” he ordered. Pepper raised an eyebrow and Darcy crossed her arms. He ignored their irritation and personally checked the lab on the 79th floor.

Bruce was in the house, informed of the situation and planned to stay put for backup. There was a reason he, Jane, and now Betty shared a single floor in the labs. Both ladies were secure with him. Four more Tangos guarded the access points on the floor.

Falcon called in from the VA hospital that he was on his way back. Hawkeye had eyes on target above the food court. HYDRA’s first mistake—choosing a venue with an open ceiling and handy rafters.

The Tower security teams had done an admirable job of evacuating the retail portions of the Tower, leaving Hill to negotiate with HYDRA via cell phone from the security floor. Employees still in the basement and the lowest six floors were being quietly evacuated on the opposite side of the Tower.

JARVIS gave him a detailed list of HYDRA’s weaponry and advised that two armored transports that were in place for an escape plan.

*Don’t break my Tower, Barnes. ETA fifteen minutes. Ten, if I don’t finish my coffee,* Stark cut in.

Barnes assumed JARVIS patched him in to his, and possibly Hill’s, direct com.

*Keep the vehicles from leaving, Stark,* he growled.

*Want me to take them out?*

“It’s outside the Tower, Tony. We don’t have authority. Cap has to call it,” Hill reminded Stark.

*Did I know that? Crap. Get him on the line.*

*Cap’s with Coulson.*

*Are they having a party without me? I’m offended. Let me know when you hear from him. In the meantime, I’ll poke holes in their tires. That’s allowed, right?*

JARVIS automatically suppressed that portion of the engagement from there on out, leaving it to Hill to monitor. She wasn’t getting anywhere with the HYDRA agents in terms of actual negotiations, but she’d bought everyone time to get in place.

The Tango team had all the exits and windows covered, Hawkeye had a nest in the rafters near the back. HYDRA had no way out other than the Winter Soldier for safe passage. Stupid exit strategy unless carrying a large amount of ordinance.


*Mission: Protect Stark.*

He stepped into the cafeteria (Fourteen point two meters to engagement. Two submachine guns, fourteen with semi-automatics, several with back up pieces. Four with knives. Two in armored gear, remainder in basic combat uniforms.).

He had their attention. Without the SI jacket, his arm stood out. He didn’t speak, merely motioned to
the hostages, and stood patiently waiting. The HYDRA leader nudged a man and a woman closest to
the exit with his foot and waived them off.

Four Tangos stepped inside to give them cover, conveniently staying in the room. (Allies.
Reassessing.)

*I’ve got the leader sighted,* Hawkeye affirmed. The transmission wavered so that his voice faded in
and out.

*Excellent.* Two steps forward. One more hostage cleared. Two more Tangos moved in behind him.
The HYDRA leader barked in his cell phone at the addition.

Hill repeated the leader’s demand that the Tangos stay in place, and Barnes signaled them to halt.
(Acceptable. Reassessing with additional backup.) The transmission faded in and out.
(Transmissions jammed. He’d lose connection as he moved closer.)

(Nine on twenty, with thirteen hostages). He closed in a third of the distance and waited again,
betting that HYDRA didn’t particularly want casualties here. They definitely didn’t want hostages to
take with them. They wanted the victory of bringing in the big, bad Winter Soldier to the public.
That wasn’t going to happen, but they were too stupid to know it.

The leader nodded to his cohort and barked an order in crappy Russian, using a command that no
longer held any control over the Soldier.

He pretended that it did, dropping to his knees, arms slack at his side.

*JARVIS,* he called under his breath. But JARVIS didn’t respond. *Hawkeye?*

No reply meant coms were down. Leader and his four lackeys surrounded him, leaving the other
fifteen agents holding thirteen hostages. Stupid.

*****

Steve rubbed his face in annoyance as Coulson faced the team.

“I’m sorry to waste your time, Captain. It appears this has been nothing more than a well-
orchestrated wild goose chase. The problem is I don’t know why. HYDRA sacrificed two teams to
lead us exactly nowhere. I’m assuming this is a distraction.”

“For S.H.I.E.L.D. or for the Avengers?” he asked.

“Good question. My guess is the former, but at this point, anything is possible.”

Steve’s phone vibrated. In his irritation, he made no bones about checking it. He flicked open the
waiting text message from Darcy. “*Tower lockdown; HYDRA in house w hostages; trade for Winter
Soldier. Not happening.*”

For those who had no idea Rogers could swear, they were educated in that moment. He stood up.
“How soon can you get us back to New York?”

Coulson shook his head. “Four hours at best. Likely five. Why?” Coulson’s phone vibrated and he
took a peek. “Damn.” He threw Steve a steady look. “HYDRA wanted you out of their way to
order to get their property back. Are they going to get it?"

Steve smirked. “Have you ever known a Stark who liked to share?”

“Come to think of it, no,” Phil admitted. “That sort of thing requires the occasional friendly threat, coercion in certain instances, and usually very expensive contracts.”

Steve turned to Thor. “Can I get a lift?”

*****

Darcy and Pepper caught the proceedings from the security center.

Hill had given them the heads up, and less than two minutes later, pretty much anyone’s worst nightmare had showed up in the form of James Barnes’ personally securing Pepper’s whole office floor. He’d warned Darcy and Pepper to stay put and vanished downstairs with a scary look on his face. The appearance of the Winter Soldier put a solid lump in Darcy’s throat. (She’d forgotten that bleak expression.)

She exchanged a look with her mom and the pair of them headed for the elevator. “Security override, JARVIS, authorization Virginia Potts 7471. Take us to the sixth floor.”

“Of course, Ms. Potts. Voice and password match confirmed.”

Darcy and Pepper wove their way through the buzz of activity and stationed themselves in front of the bank of monitors.

Hill acknowledged them with a faint nod but didn’t take her eyes off the screens. “We’ve got the building on lockdown. No other incidents appear to be underway at this time,” she reported. “The twenty former employees we’d already identified as embedded HYDRA agents are holding thirteen hostages in the cafeteria, three have been released. Audio and visual feeds are shaky at best. We lost communication with Barnes when he took those last three steps”

The feed cut in and out, leaving flickering images on the screen. JARVIS, can you clean that up for me and give me the audio feed?

I’m sorry, Lewis. There are three units jamming audio and visual transmissions. They appears to be a similar construction as the one Sergeant Barnes had installed in his arm.

Can you talk to him?

No, I cannot, at the moment. Nor can I recover his voice print as I did yours.

Not with three in close proximity. Quietly, so she couldn’t be overheard, she told Pepper and Maria, “I can’t reach him through my com either. He’s on his own.”

Hill nodded and barked orders into her microphone. “We’ve got a jammer with a thirty foot range, give or take, limiting our audio and visual feeds. Get me something stationed outside that range or give me a running commentary. I need to know what’s being said.”

Darcy watched the scene unfold. When James went to his knees, in that static pose she knew all too well, the visual cut out completely.
Forcing down the panic, she whirled around and ordered a guard out of his chair. “I need your station, now.”

“Ma’am?”

“Now!”

He moved out of the way, though he hovered behind her. Darcy ignored him. Pepper and Hill came to flank her.

*JARVIS, open my workstation here.*

*Of course, Lewis.*

Darcy’s reached into her pocket and pulled out a rubber band. She yanked her hair back into a pony tail. *Bring up the schematics of the food court and the resources we have in place. Mark the location of the jammers.*

Hill glanced down at the screen. “May I ask?”

“That’s my boyfriend and this is m—our– fucking Tower. I don’t have time for this shit.” Her fingers danced on the keyboard.

Relaying data, Maria told her, “Tango Lead tells me Barnes responded to a Russian command just after he got three hostages released. Five HYDRA agents are moving to his position. Think he’s got a trigger?”

“Bullshit,” Darcy muttered as she hacked her way into the first jammer. “Wilson dug all that crap out of him already.” But her stomach was in knots. “Where is Wilson anyway?”

“En route. Stark and Rhodey are picking him up on their way in. ETA ten minutes.” Maria asked softly, “You think he’s playing along?”

Darcy risked a quick glance at her. “God, I hope so. There you go, you son of a bitch.” She punched out a series of commands. “Warn your team that a localized EMP will shove through the northwest quadrant in ten seconds. It’s strong enough to deactivate the jammer and might fry any nearby circuitry, but I’m narrowing the field the best that I can.” She paused. “Three-two-one-go.” She worked her way into the second device before the EMP flashed.

*Lewis, I’ve recovered the use of a single camera, but I believe it is the southernmost jamming device that is blocking communications with Sergeant Barnes.*

*Just my fucking luck. Keep trying.*

“Second EMP on the northeast side in ten seconds.” She paused. “Three-two-one, go.”

A small flash appeared on the monitor. The feed brightened and two more cameras came back online, along with audio.

“Good work,” Hill complimented. Now they could see Barnes surrounded by five agents, weapons drawn. He was still on his knees and unresponsive.

Hill murmured, “Barnes isn’t moving. HYDRA can’t seem to decide what to do.”

Darcy flicked a look at her mom. Quietly, she mentioned, “We need to get the counseling team en route. We don’t need a Tower full of panic attacks when this is done.” (Yeah, her own meltdown
Pepper nodded. “Good idea, Ms. Lewis. What else?”

It wasn’t really a test, but thinking her way through the crisis was much more productive than fretting about Bucky. “We need a fifteen-minute security meeting in this level’s conference room with the department heads reminding them to do a head count and an initial assessment for anyone who might be reacting poorly to the incident. The first is due within thirty minutes, missing persons can be checked off later, but they must be reported. Second is due by end of the day, with anyone requiring immediate attention to be escorted by a security guard to the counseling team, which will set up a triage center—hmm, maybe not in the cafeteria. How about the basketball court on the basement?” Darcy suggested.

“Excellent. I’ll make the calls,” Pepper complimented.

Darcy did all this while hacking into the third jammer and watching the feed. “EMP in ten.” A small flash of blue appeared in the monitors and two more cameras came on line.

J, can you get Bucky?

*Sergeant Barnes is not responding. I cannot determine from his biofeedback whether or not he is unable to communicate or if he is choosing not to do so.*

She gave Maria a tiny shake of her head.

Hill pressed her lips together. “Thor and the Captain are en route. ETA fifteen minutes. Iron Man and War Machine are landing in thirty seconds.” She pointedly looked at Darcy. “Now what kind of toys do you have in the food court for us to play with? I still can’t make a move without ending up with civilian casualties, and even if Barnes is playing pretend, he can’t cover that many hostages. We need a distraction.”

*J, we're going to target an EM pulse on the same frequency as the metal in HYDRA's weapons.*

Darcy smirked as she worked. “How about an electro-magnetic wave that will flash heat HYDRA’s weapons? Now that we can see them, I can target a narrow beam for each one.” Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she rattled off directions to JARVIS under her breath.

“Any conflict between what we’re carrying and they’re carrying?”

“Good question. And no. I’m that good.”

Maria smiled wickedly. “God, I love working for SI. How long do you need?”

“Two minutes.”

“I’ll give the teams a heads up. Give me a twenty second countdown so we can give Barnes cover and get the hostages out of there.” She aimed a look at Pepper. “Get a medical team in route just in case.”

“Done.”

Hill relayed the orders to Tango and Hawkeye—and hopefully to Bucky.

*JARVIS, I've got the pulses targeted and the EM wave set up. I need you to coordinate them to the molecular formulas of each weapon.*
Of course, Lewis. Already in place.

Darcy nodded to Hill. “Ready when you are.”

“Go.”

“Twenty seconds.” Darcy shoved the extra power into the EMP, making the initial synchronization before JARVIS took over. “Three-two-one.” A flash of blue lit up the screen. Tango stormed the cafeteria as Hawkeye took out the submachine guns. Bucky exploded into action. He did something and three of the HYDRA agents went down. He deflected the bullets that got out ahead of the pulse from the fourth off his arm and pulled the gun out of the fifth’s hands.

Bile rose in Darcy’s throat as sparks flashed off the metal.

In seconds, it was over. HYDRA was down, and it appeared the hostages took only minor casualties—one from an employee with a pacemaker disrupted by the EMP wave and three others who helpfully decided to “disarm” the HYDRA agents.

Hill darted to the elevator to help with the cleanup. Ten minutes later, Darcy got the message that the employee with the pacemaker had been stabilized but was being taken to the hospital for evaluation.

Pepper took the conference room where the departments heads were assembling. Darcy headed for the bathroom, where she spent another few precious minutes vomiting. She swished water, spat it out, and then straightened her jacket in preparation for the aftermath.

*ping* Lewis, Sir is on the line.

Thanks, J.

Damn it. I missed this party, too. Now I’ve got two vehicles with flat tires blocking my doorway. They don’t match the décor, Tony complained.

Sorry, Dad. I thought there was a rule against breaking the Tower.

Of course there is. Nice job, spawn. Did I know we had an EMP in the food court?

We didn’t. We do now.
I Just Got You Back

Steve and Thor arrived just in time for the mop up. Rhodey gave them a wave and indicated with a thumb over his shoulder for them to go inside. A single ambulance loaded up an older man, who looked more irritated than hurt.

He texted Darcy to let her know he was home and got a note back almost instantly: *Tell Thor I’ll kiss him later. On 6th floor but have to do headcount and reports. Warning: pretty sure our boy is going to be mad at me. Don’t try to fix it. JARVIS says he’s borderline. Love you.*

When they made the second floor, they discovered the HYDRA agents were secured and under guard in the upstairs food court as the U.S. Army trucks rolled in. Bucky had his own semi-automatic resting on his thigh as he kept an eye on them from a few yards away.

Thor nudged Steve on the shoulder. "Your shieldmate appears to have the situation well in hand."

Relief coursed through him, bringing with a kind of rush as the adrenaline ran its course. Bucky was fine. More than fine considering he was in one piece and seemingly in control of the situation. Steve crossed his arms to anchor himself.

Bucky slanted grey eyes his direction, but otherwise ignored him as two dozen soldiers arrived to escort the HYDRA agents to a military base for interrogation. The Tango team escorted the lot down the stairwell and to the front door, with Bucky staying on the mezzanine overlooking the process--and not too coincidentally, in easy range to put anyone down who stepped out of line.

Hill stayed in the food court with her hands on her hips, keeping a close eye on the paramedics as they made certain the employees were okay. One by one, they were released to the coffee shop downstairs, under escort. Steve recognized some of SI’s brain team arriving. Wilson was down there already, keeping an eye out as the former hostages made phone calls to reassure their loved ones. As Stark put it, somebody had to make sure all those brains stayed intact when shit like this went down--as it did with alarming regularity in the Tower.

“One thing that’s nice about this not being a S.H.I.E.L.D. operation—there’s a lot less paperwork,” Hill idly noted as Bucky joined them, standing close enough to touch shoulders with Steve. Steve chuckled as the last of his anxiety ran away with the familiar contact, and even Thor grinned before joining Rhodey outside, having had his fair share of reports.

Tony looked over the damage to the weapons the Tango team had gathered up and set on a table. Steve wasn’t expecting to see scorch marks. “What happened?” he wondered.

Stark flipped one over. “Localized EMP targeted to the specific materials in HYDRA’s weapons. Created a flash heat. I’m guessing a few of those pricks have a nice set of blisters on their hands,” Tony commented, with no little satisfaction.

Bucky threw him a sharp look. “I didn’t know the Tower was equipped with that kind of weapon.”

“It wasn’t when I left last night,” Tony quipped. “Perhaps I need to talk to the head of my R&D department?”

That brought Steve up short. Darcy? Bucky wouldn’t look at him, but--if it were possible--his eyes paled to the coldest of ice. (Darcy was right. Bucky was pissed. What did he miss?)
Once General Talbot secured the transport of his new prisoners, he brought in a handful of suits to debrief the SI employees. Talbot recognized Hill and offered her a handshake, then nodded to Steve, who took a step backward to indicate he wasn't in charge of this operation.

Talbot eyed Barnes, noting the metal hand. Barnes gave him a salute. “Sergeant Major James Barnes, sir. Retired. Assistant to Director Hill.”

No one ever said Talbot was stupid. His eyes flickered between the two men and he returned the salute. “You work here, too, Rogers?”

“I live here. Just checking in to make sure all is good.”

“Huh.” No, the general wasn’t buying that one. “Good to see you, Cap.” He eyed Barnes up and down again. “This your old friend you mentioned on the television?”

Steve agreed, "Yes, sir."

Talbot seemed to be chewing over something. Finally, he added, "Good luck to you both. Now, would somebody tell me what the hell happened here?"

Hill merely looked at Bucky, who seemed to need a minute to pull himself together. When he began his recitation, Steve moved away to stand at the windows, though he could hear every word. He watched as Thor and Rhodey helpfully deposited HYDRA’s transportation onto the backs of a couple of army tow trucks.

Bucky's voice held none of the inflections of his old friend, only the cold, dry tones of the Winter Soldier. When he admitted to playing along with the Russian command, Steve had to firmly step on his own reaction. He texted Darcy.

Getting the rundown. Heard what B did. You okay?

Nope. Even J was shaken. Can’t talk now.

JARVIS was worried? Darcy must have been terrified.

Talbot studied the scorched weapons and what was left of the fried scattering devices. "What are these?"

Stark answered, "Jamming devices. One of my researchers came across this tech a few months back and broke it down. It’s clever, I’ll give you that. In any case, she hacked into these with a proprietary Stark technology and used the devices’ internal tech to set off a localized EMP to disable it.”

“What about the weapons? What caused that damage?”

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out.”

“I’d like to speak with your researcher.”

“Nope. Not going to happen.”

“Stark, don’t make me get a court order.”

“Tell you what. You give me an absolute guarantee none of this will get into HYDRA’s hands and I’ll let you talk to my researcher. Until then? No. I’m protecting what’s mine.”
Talbot stared down at the smaller man. “You don’t like HYDRA very much.”

Steve looked over his shoulder, curious to see Stark’s reaction.

But Tony didn’t even blink as he stared the officer down. “No, General, I don’t. And you’re damned lucky that I trust you aren’t one of them, or you wouldn’t be in my Tower.”

“How do you know?”

“Coulson vouched for you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

Talbot did his best to look annoyed rather than startled at the mention of Coulson’s trust. “So do I, Stark. Would it help if I asked Colonel Rhodes to work with you on all this?”

“It might,” Stark conceded.

“Consider it done. I’ll make the arrangements with Air Force.” Talbot pivoted and motioned to his team to gather up the HYDRA weapons for further study.

The food court was closed for the rest of the day while the Army conducted their investigation. Bucky and Maria settled in to debrief the security teams. There was the matter of how the former employees had successfully executed a hostage situation in the Tower in the first place (even if it was in the retail space), and nobody was particularly happy with that.

At loose ends, Steve occupied himself in the gym for a while then went home to wait for the fallout.

*****

At the end of the conference, Darcy came face-to-face with Bucky just outside Hill’s office. He’d dismissed a guard and seemed to be waiting for the next one.

“How long have you two been here?” he demanded quietly. His eyes were a clear, ice grey. (Definitely scary voice, when Darcy really wanted a hug from him. Probably not the time.)

“Since the beginning of the security breach,” she admitted.

He didn’t comment, only stated flatly, “Hill wants to discuss the EMPs.”

Something dark in his expression almost made her flinch, but she dug up her backbone instead. “Unfortunately, I have to check my department, as that is the priority of Stark Industries. She can have my time later. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

“ETA?”

“Depends on how many butterflies we have to catch,” she shot back. (Yeah, she’d heard about the nickname. It had proven popular enough that she was sure it was going to stick.) She escaped with a pivot and a heart that hurt, making sure she had her phone, tablet, and lipstick.

She headed upstairs to assess the R&D floors. This was her department, and she spent the rest of the afternoon counting heads, making phone calls and observing. The top echelon of Stark Industries understood that it was the brains of the R&D departments that kept the company humming along in an endless stream of technologies. Those brains didn’t always operate well under stress, so it was
SI’s job to keep them happy and comfortable. (Darcy had a crash course in taking care of brilliant minds with her dad and decent refresher managing Jane.)

Probably a third of the researchers had no idea anything was going on. Another third shrugged it off. The last third ranged from mildly annoyed to freaked out. Those were the ones she noted and made sure a counselor would attend them. Several were escorted downstairs to the basketball gym by Kilo guards, who had arrived early to help.

Darcy took one down personally when she fished an intern from under a table where he’d been hiding since word had been passed about the lockdown. (Hence the headcount and missing persons list. Definitely wasn’t the first time someone had done that. The air vents were magnetically locked now.) Unfortunately, they’d learned quite a few lessons after the Chitauri attack about dealing with the Tower occupants in the wake of a direct attack.

But they put them to good use these days whenever something untoward occurred—which happened nearly every three months or so—or in other words, often enough for everyone to get comfortable with the procedures.

She sent a note to catering to make sure good comfort food was provided for whomever worked late in Stark Tower today, taking care of the cleanup. A continental breakfast would be set up in the lobby tomorrow morning to ease the minds of those coming in. Phone calls would be made to anyone who didn’t show up to work over the next three days to make sure they weren’t changing their minds about working for Stark Industries, or at home panicking over the idea of coming to the Tower. Both could be managed, so long as Human Resources was made aware of the problem.

Pepper’s team handled the retail portion of the Tower, getting clean-up crews in place and repairs made overnight, so it could reopen on time. Darcy wasn’t particularly keen on having the retail space in the Tower, but Pepper had insisted that the employees of SI appreciated having local access. She was right, even though it added an enormous layer of complexity to operations. Darcy wondered what Bucky and Maria would do to prevent a repeat of this situation.

All this made for a horribly long day, and Darcy finished up her last report well after seven that evening. She shot it off to Pepper and Maria, got acknowledgements from both (which meant they were still working too), and set up a meeting with Hill the next morning.

She closed her laptop. JARVIS shut off the music in her lab, and she picked up her shoes to walk to the elevator. She’d traded texts with Steve throughout the day, one serious, several just checking in, and one that made her smile. He’d offered to bring her dinner, but she declined, opting for tea instead. He met her at the door with a kiss and one of those really good hugs. (She needed it.)

“Are you hungry?”

“No. Not yet. I just want a shower and something other than my suit. It’s been a shitty kind of a day.” She stood on her toes so she could press against his neck. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too, doll.” He held her tight. (She wanted to stay right here for an hour or five.)

But she broke the embrace. (Time to face the piper.) “Where is James?”

“Kitchen.”

(Fuck. She could totally tell from Steve’s expression that Bucky was still pissed, and Steve was trying to give her fortification. Double fuck. She wasn’t in the mood for this.)

Steve stepped aside to let her by. She debated changing clothes first, decided that was childish, and
went into the kitchen to give James a kiss on the cheek. He was sitting in the dark at the table, focused on something outside the window, with a shot glass of vodka in front of him. Ice grey eyes slanted her direction.

She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms, dropping her shoes to the floor. “Go ahead. You’ve been pissed all day.”

The Winter Soldier answered. “I cannot protect you and your mother if you do not stay where I tell you to say. Your floor was cleared for a reason. I cannot operate within mission parameters without your cooperation.”

His cold detachment came close to breaking her down, but--no.

“This company is my family’s legacy. I will be damned if I’ll wait patiently for anyone to feed me information like breadcrumbs. Pepper taught me better than that. I understand that you want to protect us. But you also know that the security floor serves as a triage center and the highest two ranking company members currently on the premises are responsible for everything that happens in the Tower, barring Tony unless he wants to be in the middle of it. Yes, immediate security threats are on you, James. But somebody has to triage the rest of the building, arrange for cleanup and bring everything back online. The faster and calmer we deal with that, the better off everyone is, not just the hostages. This isn’t the front lines. These are civilians who haven’t a clue. And every fucking one of them has a cell phone. This is an age of social media and instant communication. We cannot afford to take an hour to assess a situation. While you were taking care of your kind of business, Pepper and I were taking care of ours.”

With her stomach in knots, she poured herself a glass of water, reached into the cabinet for the ginger, and stirred in a half spoonful before drinking it. Bucky stayed silent.

So she continued, “While I watched my boyfriend get surrounded by the same assholes who played with him like a puppet for seven fucking decades, Pepper and I made arrangements for counselors, medical teams, and janitors. We arranged to meet all the department heads and get a head count and a briefing so we don’t have panicking employees who don’t show up to work tomorrow. I have a job to do too. Next time, give us a fucking personal escort and accept that we’ll be as sensible as we can, given the circumstances.”

“I don’t want you anywhere near it, Darcy. You don’t need to see … any of it.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said bitterly. “I also disabled the fucking jammers so we could get word to you that we’d arranged a diversion, and I fucked with HYDRAs weapons so they couldn’t hurt you. In spite of all that, you still got shot at and I couldn’t do anything to stop it.” That prompted the tears to start falling and she angrily wiped them away as she picked up her shoes again.

She stopped on the edge of the kitchen, wanting to tell him how much she loved him, but the words wouldn’t come. Steve held out a hand, but she shook her head and headed to her closet, grateful to shed the sweaty clothes and dive into the shower. A pair of leggings and sweatshirt later, she found Steve and Bucky sitting at the kitchen table, talking in low voices.

From the faint grimace on Steve’s face, she knew Bucky wasn’t budging. She quietly left, going down to her dad’s lab.

*****
Fury ran through his veins in a way he hadn’t felt since … before. Anger had been rooted out and destroyed so completely that, even in the midst of his recovery, the conditioning which eliminated it had been left unblemished.

He’d known that he should feel anger at what had been done to him. Wilson tried to dig it out, determined to bring it to the surface. Certainly, he and Steve were both stubborn enough that they should have sparked a few arguments by now. But until today, anger had wafted sublimely into nothing more than irritation and a desire for improvement.

The anger had nothing to do with HYDRA and everything to do with having his mission compromised. (Protect Stark.)

Steve came into the kitchen, picked up Darcy’s glass out of the sink, sniffed it, and set it back down with a look of concern. Leaning over Bucky, he capped the vodka bottle and stashed it back into the freezer.

“I wasn’t finished,” he grumbled.

“It doesn’t help anyway,” Steve countered as he sat down at the end of the table. Darcy paused long enough to see them in the kitchen then left via the front door. His phone buzzed with a text that she was going to Stark’s lab and to let her know when the coast was clear. “You gonna talk about it, or just be pissed?”

“Nothing to say.”

Steve set his chin on his fisted hands and waited without a word.

The minutes stretched out until Bucky shot him a dirty look. “You’re keeping awfully quiet, punk.”

“You ready for my opinion?”

“Ain’t gonna like this, am I?”

“No.”

“Fuck.”

Steve unfisted his hands and traced his finger through the condensation on the table. “You remember in the bar when I told you that I’d saved you the lecture?”

“Yes.”

“You just got it.”

“Guess that means you’ve heard it.”

“She used a few more curse words.”

“You’re stubborn like that.” Bucky rubbed his forehead in frustration. “I’m supposed to protect them. It’s my mission, Steve. I have to know she’s safe.” He flexed his metal hand, staring at the joints. “They didn’t even take bodyguards with them. Doesn’t Darcy understand that HYDRA has already targeted her?”

“You, Hill, Pepper, and Darcy need to have that discussion. It’s a valid point.”
“But not the rest of it.”

Steve reached out to toy with Bucky’s fingers. “You can’t stop her from doing what she thinks is right, any more than you can with me. Or did you miss the part where she flipped the bird at HYDRA, S.H.I.E.L.D., the World Council, the U.S. government, and her dad to bring the Winter Soldier into her home and place him under her protection.” He waited a beat and continued, “Don’t think for one minute that she didn’t understand the full political ramifications of all that.”

Steve’s touch chased away the worst of the soldier, enough that Bucky took full control of it and slotted it back where it belonged. “Aw, hell, Steven.” Bucky put his head on the table. “I get it.”

“Get what?”

“What you said months ago about buying into the image.” He came back up, scrubbing at his shadow of a beard. “Never been with a dame who makes me dizzier than hanging upside down off a merry-go-round. I forget she’s all this too.”

“And she forgets that I’m Captain America and you’re the Winter Soldier, so that’s not all a bad thing. The difference is we have to be ones who remember. Because no one else will. No one else will ever see what we see.” Steve took Bucky’s hands in his. “We can’t wrap her in cotton. You know this. I think most of today was a gut reaction on your part. It’s not a bad one, but it’s not a realistic one. You’re going to have to negotiate with her and come to terms you can live with.”

“Like that ever worked with you.”

“She’s smarter than me.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not the one in the dog house this time,” he admonished. “Go fix it, Bucky. Bring her home. Make up to her so her gut’s not churning, worrying about you. I’m betting she wants to make sure you’re not missing any parts after what you pulled this morning.”

That explained the ginger water. But there was something in Steve’s voice that didn’t sit right and Bucky peered at him. “You’re pissed at me, too?”

With a sigh, Steve answered, “No matter how much I expected it, getting the text from Darcy that HYDRA was after you scared me shitless, Bucky. When I heard what you did—” He swallowed hard, glancing away. “I just got you back, jerk.”

“Aw, hell, Steven.” Bucky rounded the table to pull him up for a tight hug. “Ain’t going nowhere at all. Not this time, love.”

The hug turned into sex in the kitchen when Steve ran his hands under Bucky’s shirt and set his teeth along the cord in his neck. The slide of his boyfriend’s touch lit up all kinds of sparks, and Bucky yanked Steve’s t-shirt off in favor of getting his fingers on bare skin.

The kiss turned into something almost savage as Steve pressed against him. Bucky could feel the desperation in the way Steve’s hands clutched his skin, in the way Steve coaxed his body into rushing need. Clothes were shed, and someone fumbled for the lube and condoms they kept in a kitchen drawer.

Though they’d experimented with switching, this time Steve held him against the kitchen counter, pressed inside Bucky from behind, taking him surely and swiftly, growling, mine, James, mine, as he did.
Bucky braced his hand on the upper cabinet so he could press back, taking Steve’s cock hard enough to hiss at the sting of it. But he urged Steven along with demands of his own, until they changed angles enough that Steve made him see stars.

“Come on, punk, put your hand on my dick and make us come.” Steve’s lubed fingers slid along the head of Bucky’s condom-covered cock. The barrier didn’t mean much when Steve knew exactly how to squeeze along the length of him until he jerked into Steve’s hand, coming with a piercing sweetness prolonged by Steve following in his wake, plunging into his ass with helpless jerks of his hips.

They stayed braced against the cabinets while Steve rested his forehead against his shoulder, pressing kisses along the skin there. He only turned when he felt the damp. Red-eyed and shaking, Steve couldn’t still his hands enough to strip off his own condom (they alternated with and without, but cleanup was easier with them). Bucky did it for him.

As he held Steve, he realized he’d underestimated the effects of the morning on both of his loves. “Get dressed. We need to go find Darcy.”

“You go.”

“Fuck that. We’re doing this together. End of the line, right?”

“Does that include getting past Pepper and Tony?” Steve sassed, getting his moxy back.

“Shit. No. That’s on me.” Yeah, he’d messed this one up. Not on purpose.

JARVIS buzzed them in. Tony took one look at them and vanished into his lab. Pepper had been sitting in front of the fireplace. She got to her feet, and Steve kissed her cheek. Bucky stuck his hands in his pockets. “May I speak with you privately, ma’am?”

“Come on in the kitchen. Steve, Darcy’s in Tony’s lab.” She waited until he headed that direction before giving Bucky a neutral sort of look. “You look like you’ve had a difficult day.” He followed, sitting when she waved him to one of the barstools at the island. “What do want to talk about? And what do you want to drink?”

“Just water, ma’am.” She poured up a glass from a pitcher in the fridge that was spiked with lemons and set it in front of him.

“And the other?” she prompted.

He was scintillating bottle of emotions, anger/need/frustration/love/shame, and the soldier eased to the forefront to control all that. He consciously pushed it aside, accepting that he needed to deal with them in turn. “I overstepped my boundaries today. I should have made certain you and Darcy were where you needed to be, rather than where I wanted you to be.”

“I figured as much. Gut reaction?”

(Protect Stark) “Something like that,” he admitted.

“Still mad?”

“Working on it.” He discovered he was toying with this glass, turning it in neat circles. Stalling his tells (skill set), he explained, “Take a bodyguard or two next time. You and Darcy are high-profile targets. The building had already been infiltrated. Hill and I might have missed someone.”
“You didn’t. JARVIS confirmed that.” Barnes started to speak. Stopped. Pepper narrowed her eyes.
“What is it?”

“What if JARVIS was damaged in some way? What if you couldn’t communicate with him without compromising him? Outside these floors, you and Darcy need to behave as if he doesn’t exist—both for your safety and his protection. He’s your last and best line of defense, but only if no one knows he’s there.”

“We do that. You, Hill and the Avengers are the only ones who know about him.”

“And Jane and Betty because they live here too. All smart people. But it’s a growing circle and people get scared and make mistakes.” He raised an eyebrow. “You and Darcy assumed the security team for your floor wouldn’t find it odd that you didn’t ask for an escort in the middle of a lockdown. I’ve had all four officers from your floor asking that that exact question and they are scared shitless—pardon me—are scared they’ll lose their jobs over it because it’s a major transgression.” He looked up at the ceiling. “If you can keep them from knowing about JARVIS, you’ll know you’ve succeeded in protecting him.”

“You’re expecting another infiltration.”

He nodded. “This Tower is too sweet of a target for someone not to try. People can be compromised, and eventually someone will succeed. My job is to make sure they don’t get very far when they do.”

Pepper considered what he said. “All right. I see why you were upset.”

He lowered his head, somewhat ashamed. “When I focus on my … skill set,” he looked her straight in the eyes, “I sometimes can’t articulate beyond simple commands or questions. Darcy and Steve are pretty good at figuring out what I need to say. Natasha, too.”

“Good to know. Going to go explain all this to Darcy?”

He nodded, but something in Pepper’s expression had him thinking over today’s events again. “She’s listening in, isn’t she?”

Pepper gave him a wry smile. “You’re learning. She won’t compromise JARVIS, but she can hack her way into any of the feeds he uses to listen for herself. Tony and I used to have to go to a coffee shop just to have parenting discussions, and even that meant scanning for bugs beforehand.”

That startled him. “She wouldn’t.”

“She did. Frequently.” Pepper rounded the counter to press a kiss into his temple and give him a quick hug. “Just remember that if you decide you want kids one day. Tony never figured on having one he’d have to outwit on a daily basis. Come on. Let’s go find her.”

She was almost out of the room when he caught all the nuances of what she’d said. He had to double-time his walk to catch up. “You would be okay with … kids?”

Pepper rolled her eyes a tiny bit, just a flash, as she pushed open the lab door. “Isn’t that what all this is about?”

“No. Some. Maybe. It’s about Darcy and I’m supposed to be making this easier for her, not harder.”

Tony appeared in time to catch that. “Starks don’t do easy. If it were easy, everyone would do it. Give us the impossible. That’s more fun. Are you done with my CEO yet? ‘Cause working hours were over hours ago and you’re infringing our quiet time.”
Pepper thumbed Tony in the chest. “When do you have working hours?”

“When the head of my R&D division invents new shit that I didn’t know we had and didn’t tell me and now I need to play with it.”

With Steve’s hand on her shoulder, Darcy sat on one of the stools in Tony’s lab, looking like she’d lost something precious. Maybe she had. Bucky went straight to her. This he’d learned to do. Just like Steven, Darcy had a tendency to withdraw when she needed people the most. She needed him. Right now. He slid his arms around her waist and took her into a tight hug. She stiffened. And then all the strain ran out of her as she leaned into him.

And then she pushed him away to run to the bathroom and dry heave over the toilet. He followed, Steve on his heels. She cried. Fat drops splashed as she yelled at him for scaring her. That his life wasn’t more important than her company. That he stopped talking to JARVIS. That she loved him and was it bad enough having Steve flirting with death every time he went on a mission and her father had a thing about black holes and missiles, but Bucky was supposed to stay safe and protect her. That she’d fought too hard to bring him back to let anyone hurt him again and if he expected her to sit around and do nothing while he had some fucking noble idea of sacrificing himself he had another thing coming because she was a goddamned Stark and Starks hadn’t ever backed away from a fight whether it was on the battlefield or a fucking courtroom.

He sat on the bathroom floor with Darcy in his lap while she railed at him. Steve propped up with the doorframe with an odd satisfaction in his small smile.

Bucky stopped her tirade with a kiss to her lips. “I’m sorry. I love you. I didn’t mean to scare you. I didn’t realize I’d lost contact with JARVIS until it was too late.”

A shiver rippled through her. “You were the soldier when you came into Mom’s office. I thought I’d lost you again.”

Fuck. There it was, the whole reason she was scared in the first place. “You didn’t. That was me. I did it on purpose. Maybe it was too much an’ I wasn’t thinkin’ past my mission.”

“You were the soldier when you came into Mom’s office. I thought I’d lost you again.”

“Protect Stark,” she whispered.

“That’s it, doll.”

“I couldn’t stop them from shooting you,” Darcy said softly.

He squeezed her a little tighter. “No. I’d expected it. Your diversions came in handy, though.”

“Protect Stark,” she whispered.

“They knew they’d shoot at you?” she asked incredulously.

He stillled, looking up at Steve, who shrugged and motioned him to continue. He ducked his head to look at Darcy. “I won’t say I wasn’t in danger, but I know my skill set, and if someone wasn’t going to be walking out of that room, it wasn’t going to be me or the hostages.”

She turned into his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Take me home, Bucky.”

He did, with Tony announcing his annoyance at not being able to play with Darcy’s new tech. But she placated him with a promise of tomorrow.

The three of them entwined fingers as they made their way home. Once inside, Darcy turned to him once again, and pulled Steve close. “I know you both of have jobs to do. And I know you both are really good at what you do. Scary good. I have to have a little more faith in both of you.”
He tilted his head so that he leaned against Steve, keeping Darcy between them. “You’ve got nothin’ to worry about. Just like me an’ punk, here, if we can find our way home, we will.”
Tony wasn’t sure which bothered him more, Darcy and JARVIS’ ability to manufacture a weapon out of little more than thin air, or the way Darcy handled everything afterward with Pepper-level efficiency.

Pepper rubbed his back. “What else could you ask of her? The boys will take care of her. Just like I take care of you.”

He snorted at the idea of Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes being referred to as “boys.” It was Pepper’s way of reminding him that, for all the two men had been through, they were still young in so many ways.

“You do take care of me,” he agreed.

“So what’s bothering you?”

“She needs a ‘you’ to help her manage the company. She needs more time in a lab making things for me to play with.”

“She likes running the company. You never did.” Pepper pulled a chair close and sat next to Tony. “You’re right though, she needs to either integrate with my team or build her own. We’ll work on that.”

“What about me? I’m losing my lab partner?”

“She’s never been your lab partner. You have your lab, she has hers. You both invent things, steal each other’s ideas and make them better.”

“Which is why she needs more time in the lab. I’m bored.”

“You’re not bored at all. You’re just worried about her.”

“I’m her daddy, I’m supposed to be worried about her. All the time. It’s in the manual.”

Pepper trailed a finger down his chest, flicking open a button or two as she did. “I’m sure I can divert your attention for a while.”

As always, she did. Rather successfully.

But that didn’t stop him from getting up in the middle of the night and pulling up specs for something he’d been toying with for a while. His baby girl had seen her loved ones fight too many battles. He thought he might, just might, have a way to make sure that none of them would ever have to go to war again. Not in person. They would all be safe.

And then his baby girl would stop having nightmares.
If I Knew

What was a pattern spun and twisted in a dizzying rhyme/not-rhyme, clattering against molecules and moonbeams. Phantom hands clutched at the streams of data, tearing them into tattered pieces that fluttered against the glass.

A soldier vanished behind the approaching storm. Another crumpled to the ground.

In terror, she spun answers into the darkness, weaving a web of fire. It contracted, shattering.

She screamed her loss.

Her loves tried to wake her, called her name again and again. Held her, bound her, told her to come back to them.

And then she did, the screams falling silent. She fought at the bonds, pleading, and they were torn free.

Steve. Bucky. steveandbucky.

Bucky with his ice blue eyes that told their story of love and loss. Steve, who snatched her to him, wrapping her up in his arms, whispering words of love and safety.

She sagged against him, knowing he would hold her.

She needed. With almost a savage bent, she yanked Steve down to kiss her. She didn’t want gentle. She wanted him. Needed him close. Needed to feel. He understood that need far better than she. As he stripped out of his clothes, she twisted around, reaching for Bucky with a vicious, clawing desperation.

Neither of them denied her, though they gentled their touches and coaxed her body into readiness before they gave her what she craved. It was Steve’s hands that urged her to take Bucky first, to know he was still alive, still hers, still theirs. It was Bucky who kissed away her tears as he pulsed inside her.

And it was Bucky who held her from behind, thighs touching, keeping his arm around her waist and kissing her shoulders as she took Steve. Steve, who understood her very soul, pressed inside her until she writhed with the feeling of one. buckydarcysteve. stevebuckydarcy. darcystevebucky.

It was Darcy who stuttered out, “I love you,” to both of them. Steve lit up bright as day, and Bucky got that faint look of wonder, quickly hidden.

In the early hours of the morning, they ranged about the kitchen. The conversation stayed as far away from the events of yesterday as they could manage. Darcy found she could eat, and the three of them picked through leftovers and ice cream.

She noticed Steve couldn’t stop touching Bucky, ruffling his hair, bumping shoulders, sliding hands along bare skin. (Yeah, no, she wasn’t the only one bothered by yesterday’s crap. She, too, kept her fingers entwined with one or both of them because fuck if she wasn’t still shaky.)

They didn’t try sleeping on the bed again, opting instead to watch a baseball movie that inevitably
Darcy crashed on Steve’s shoulder. In turn, he pressed up against Bucky in a way that was probably comfortable when he was smaller, but Bucky didn’t seem to care as he alternated playing Steve and Darcy’s hair with the same hand.

It wasn’t dawn yet when Darcy needed the bathroom and crawled between the sheets of the bed of her own volition. Barely ten minutes passed before the two men joined her, Steve taking the middle this time. If he made it through the night without his own set of nightmares, they would count it as a win. Bucky firmly tucked Steve’s head against his sternum, murmuring assurances that worked on Darcy too, until the three of them tumbled into the arms of Morpheus.

The texts from Tony started arriving at six a.m. Darcy turned her cell phone off and dropped it somewhere on the floor.

JARVIS pinged her at six-thirty. She turned the contact off and rolled so that her face was smashed into Steve’s chest. She wrapped her fingertips on the arm Bucky had draped over Steve, and felt his hand cup her shoulder. Steve’s hand slid down until it rested on the curve of her butt. She wasn’t sure they actually woke up, and it was nice the way they held her close.

At seven (with sincere apologies, Sir was rather insistent), JARVIS used the apartment’s intercom to wake her up again. Wearing Thor pajama pants and a Captain America t-shirt just to piss off her dad, she shuffled downstairs. Steve and Bucky followed, clad in only sweats and t-shirts themselves, sporting scruff and bedhead. (Not their best look, but still qualified as eye-candy if Darcy was, gees, a little more awake.) After yesterday, it was a safe bet that the trio wasn’t going be separated anytime soon, something Tony figured out as soon as they wandered, yawning, into his lab.

She made grabby hands for coffee, and Tony was smart enough to insert a large mug into them before he started with the barrage of questions. With another jaw-cracking yawn, she turned JARVIS’ contact back on and had him open her workstation on a virtual screen.

Steve boosted himself up on a counter and settled into a corner with his arms and feet crossed, closing his eyes. Darcy took off her glasses to rub her face. Bucky had his head down on the workstation next to her and a hand around his mug of coffee too.

Pepper came into the lab and found the three of them struggling to wake up. “Tony! If you’re going to get them up at dawn on a Saturday, feed them!”

The mechanic blinked in frustration. “Call something up. Whatever they want.”

Now that food had been mentioned, Darcy remembered she hadn’t eaten yesterday beyond the post-midnight snack. “I’m hungry.” She waved in the direction of Bucky and Steve. “They’re always hungry.”

Pepper arranged for a full spread to be sent up from Charlie’s and chivvied them all to the table. Darcy managed to hold off Tony until everyone ate with a demonstration of how she hacked into the jammers. French toast, eggs, a handful of bacon, and a latte later, Darcy felt a million times better.

She wasn’t exactly avoiding Tony. (She was here, wasn’t she?) She just couldn’t answer his questions. Not yet.

Steve slid an arm around her waist as they returned to the lab, and while Bucky walked ahead with her father (asking something about the latest Iron Man suit), he stopped to pull her into hug.

“Darce? You’re not okay. What can I do?”
She leaned in, taking the comfort he offered. (Fuck, she was tired of all this. Can’t they just have a little less drama for a while?) “Just … this.”

“All right, love.”

Darcy tilted her head back. “James calls you that.”

“On occasion.”

“I like it.”

“So do I,” he told her. “Do you want to go home?”

“Yes.” She rolled her eyes. “But Dad’s been trying to get me down here since six. Do you think he’s going to let me go anywhere until he gets the answers he wants?”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure Bucky and I can break you out.”

(Well, now, that was absolutely true.) She giggled. “Give me a couple of hours and I might take you up on it.”

“Deal.”

Bucky opened the lab door, his face full of concern. “You okay, Princess?” He came to them, dropped a hand over Steve’s on her lower back.

“Just … still shaky, okay?”

Bucky sucked on his lower lip. “We missed a date yesterday.”

The violent tremor that ran through her surprised all of them. “I wanted to get out of the Tower. I wanted … I wanted—“ (Spit it out, girl.) She pulled out of Steve’s arms and, infuriated by her own reaction, she stamped her foot just a little. “Where’s my fucking Taser and to hell with HYDRA,” she announced as she pushed past Bucky to barrel through the lab doors.

Tony had a weird look on his face, but Darcy didn’t bother trying to figure it out as he announced, “Okay, the whole hacking HYDRA tech thing and weaponizing it--two thumbs way up for that, scion. We’ll talk about that later. I want to know about the EMP you used to target HYDRA’s weapons.”

(Well, shitballs.) She brought up the schematics of the food court and the circuits she’d co-opted for the EMP burst. The video feed of the whole episode popped up on another screen, and Darcy deliberately looked away from it, feeling just a little sick to her stomach.

“Give me a tour, JARVIS,” Tony ordered.

“Of course, Sir.”

Tony studied the monitor, narrowing his eyes at the flash of light. “How did you do it, Darcy? A targeted EMP wave tuned to specific materials? You fried the electrical circuits, took out the HYDRA weapons, yet you didn’t touch Barnes’ arm. The only unintended casualty was the pacemaker. He’s fine by the way.”

She fiddled with things on Tony’s workstation. “I don’t know,” she answered quietly.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Tony asked sharply. Bucky and Steve came up behind her,
looking over her shoulder at the data.

Darcy fumbled for a rubber band in the drawer where she stashed them and slipped her hair into it. “I don’t know how I created an EMP in the food court. I fried the jammers, so it didn’t come from them.”

Tony pulled up a chair. “JARVIS?”

“I’m afraid I cannot answer either, Sir. Lewis created a pattern. I matched it to the weapons and pushed the EM wave through it.”

“A pattern? What kind of pattern?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” She threw a helpless look at him. “I’ve never done anything like that before.” Echoes of her nightmare danced in her head, and she started picking up things off the workbench and setting them down again. “I could see it in my head. The layout of the electronic circuits, the HYDRA weapons. It seemed too easy to link it all together.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

Darcy chanced a look at Bucky, who gave her a nod of encouragement.

She went back to her screen and rubbed her face, remembering. “I envisioned a blank spot in the pattern where he and the hostages were.”

She felt Steve come up behind her to rest his hands on her shoulders. But her dad was the one who tipped her chin up and kissed her forehead. “It’s okay, sweetheart. We’ll figure it out.” He slanted a look over her head. “You two might as well get comfortable. This is going to take a while.”

He pulled up his own stool and brought his coffee mug to his lips. “JARVIS, let’s do a keystroke analysis, and Darcy’s verbal instructions to you, timed with the video feeds on the left screen. On the right, I want your data as it pertains to the event, particularly, but not limited to, Darcy’s instructions and your extrapolations of intent.”

Darcy chewed on her thumbnail as the data began to appear on the screens.

“Darce?” Steve increased the pressure on her shoulders. “You’re shaking again. Is it watching the video again? Or is it the EMP?”

“Both,” she admitted. She leaned backward so that she rested against him as he stood behind her. He caressed the nape of her neck with his thumbs as they watched. “The last time I lost track of what JARVIS and I were doing, we fried an entire power grid in upstate New York. Mom made me pay for that one. That was an expensive lesson.”

Bucky leaned against the workbench, giving Darcy a curious look. “You and JARVIS are that close?”

Tony snorted. “I created JARVIS as a babysitter. Didn’t exactly work out the way I planned.”

“Sucks when the kids grow up,” Darcy sassed.

“JARVIS, stop.” Tony peered at the screen and pointed at a line of data. “Darcy, you typed two lines here.”

“Yes.”
“And told JARVIS to do this,” he pointed at her voice commands, which amounted to six words. “From that little bit of information, JARVIS was able to extrapolate that you wanted all this?” He pointed to the screen of data that constituted JARVIS’ work.

Darcy turned her hands up. “We work together a lot.”

“Is this what you *wanted* him to do?”

She skimmed through his work and shrugged. “Close enough. We’d worked together on taking apart Bucky’s jammer, so if the coding is a little different, at the speed we were going, I assume he saw something I hadn’t taken into account. JARVIS knew where I was going with this. We adjust on the fly.”

“Is that an accurate statement, JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay, let’s pull that apart.”

“Why?”

“Because something tells me this is important, Darcy. JARVIS doesn’t behave this way with me, and I want to know why.”

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As the tension left his girlfriend’s shoulders, Steve pressed a kiss to the top of Darcy’s head, and found a pad of paper and a pencil to keep him occupied while they worked. Bucky pulled up a stool, propped his knee up on the worktable and followed the conversation. Steve paid attention, too, and it was easier to do that with his hands occupied.

“Never could listen without something in your hands, punk,” Bucky murmured.

“You would know,” he countered.

They listened as Tony, JARVIS and Darcy broke down the way the siblings coordinated their efforts. It seemed as if Darcy took the lead and JARVIS filled in the gaps—and yet, Darcy relied on JARVIS’ judgment too.

It was fascinating the way the trio worked, and yet, this was an all-too familiar way to debrief after a mission. Sometimes Steve processed threats and opportunities so fast that, later, it would take him a while to figure out what he’d been responding to. Photographic memory helped in those instances. (He wondered if Bucky felt the same, but didn’t know how to ask without prompting bad memories.)

“JARVIS,” Tony mused, “how did you see the pattern Darcy wanted?”

“We play chess, Sir.”

“I know you two play chess, JARVIS. I tweak your programming so you don’t always win.”

Darcy snickered. “Dad, we disabled that five years ago.”
“You play against JARVIS and win?”

“He’s limited to extrapolating to twenty-five moves and can’t use biometric data against me. After that, anything else is fair game.”

“How often do you win?”

“Not often enough.”

“Darcy,” he cajoled.

“Dad. Do you want to know my chess game or do want to pay attention to the fact JARVIS answered your question?”

“Both, of course. So your programming is a predictive interface, and JARVIS is damned good at predicting what you want, using your chess games and past shared work experiences as a basis for his predictions?”

“Isn’t that what you two do in the lab?”

“Not at this level, Darcy.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “Okay, take me to the next step. JARVIS spits out the results, you scan it, decide it can stay, and then what?”

Darcy tapped her fingers on the keys. “Okay, look here. JARVIS, back up to where we disable the first jammer.”

Her voice washed over Steve as she and JARVIS tried to explain how they teamed up. They made progress, though they weren’t anywhere near done at the end of two hours.

It took Bucky and Steve ganging up on Tony and Darcy to pry them away from the project. “Tomorrow, we’ll come back,” Bucky insisted to Tony. “We missed a date yesterday, and it was a long night for the three of us.”

Darcy’s hands hovered over the keyboard. “I was supposed to meet with Maria today, to give her all this information.”

“I’ll handle it. Probably part of my job description anyway,” Bucky countered, with that firm set of his shoulders that announced sergeant.

Tony made a flicking motion at the three of them. “Scram, kid. Never say that I got in the way of a good time.”

“Tomorrow afternoon then.” Darcy leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. When they passed through the living room, she told her mom, “You might want to pry Dad out of the lab for a while.”

“I can do that.”

“We’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Stay for dinner.”

“Done.” Darcy clung to Pepper for a brief moment, then firmed her shoulders and led the way out the door.

Darcy was shivering by the time Bucky locked the door to their apartment. Steve didn’t think twice, just scooped her up and carried her to the sofa, where he tugged a quilt over her. From behind him,
he could hear Bucky moving about the kitchen, presumably to make lunch. “Talk to me, Darcy.”

“I don’t want to talk. I just want to not be afraid. I’m tired and I want us to go out and not feel trapped in the Tower. I’m scared to leave and don’t want to stay.” There was a resignation in her tone that bothered Steve even more than her words.

For now, Steve cuddled her, letting the warmth build between them. As little sleep as she’d had the night before, it didn’t take long for her to drift off, and he was glad she could relax enough to do that.

When his stomach started growling, he moved her so that she was curled up on the couch. He came up behind Bucky, who stood at the counter, plating food.

“She out?” Bucky asked.

“I think so.” He rested his chin and hands on Bucky’s shoulder and hips, appreciating the bare flesh where the sweat pants rode low. “Think you can handle being out of the Tower later? I wouldn’t ask, but Darcy needs a change of scenery.”

“I can do a dinner, or maybe a movie. Not a club or bar, though. Too many people moving around.”

“How about fondue?” Steve said slyly.

Bucky chuckled. “Don’t think that’s going to get us out of the Tower, punk.”

“I mean, real fondue. The bread and cheese thing. There’s a place off 7th. Quiet enough, and we can make it a nice date.”

“You gonna let me dress you?”

“Sure.” He pressed his lips to the curve of his boyfriend’s neck.

“Well now, I think we can work with that.” The husky undertone of Bucky’s voice danced up Steve’s spine.

He should have known that was only a precursor to the evening.

****

Leaving Steve to clean up the mess, Bucky looked in on Darcy (Still sleeping. Good.) and hit the shower. A nap didn’t sound too bad if they were going out later. His head ached some, and he’d rather not start the evening with one.

Bucky was relieved HYDRA had made their run at him. He and Hill had prepped the teams for the possibility. He hadn’t figured on the hostages though, and chalked that up to too many years of operating alone. He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

When he updated Hill on this morning’s information, she forwarded a note from Talbot she’d received in the meantime. According to Talbot, yesterday’s plan was more luck than sense. HYDRA had been watching for Rogers to leave the Tower on a mission. When that happened, word went out to all the cells to lock down tight, except for the one comprised of SI’s former
employees. They were ordered to bring in the Winter Soldier, but they weren’t given any tactical support beyond the transportation.

Talbot surmised, and Hill agreed, that HYDRA wasn’t serious about getting Barnes back on board. If the attack yesterday got lucky, they would reacquire their asset with minimal cost to the organization. As it was, they now knew that Barnes wasn’t an option and the cost of that information was only twenty already-compromised agents.

Hill figured that Barnes had been relegated to a target on the same level as Rogers or Romanov: not worth taking down in public, but in the field, all bets were off.

Steve had been relieved to discover that Coulson’s mission wasn’t a complete failure of intelligence. However, he was now aware that the Avengers’ movements to and from the Tower were being tracked more closely than he thought. They would have to find another way to leave for missions, perhaps from a remote location.

All this meant that, so long as Bucky and his loves were sensible, they could move about the city—as long as they didn’t mind the occasional photographer. (Though he did realize that he would have to randomize their appearances as a couple and a trio so that Steve’s movements couldn’t be tracked by that. Which meant getting out of the Tower more, not less. Skill set.)

When he was done, he sprawled out onto the bed, face first, not bothering with much by way of clothing as he did. It wasn’t long before Steve knelt over him, rubbing the tension out of his neck and shoulders. Like Darcy, he drifted with the scent of oceans curling up into his brain.
A/N Why such a short, slightly fluffy chapter give me so much trouble, I cannot say for certain, but probably because angst kept popping up like whack-a-moles and I kept beating it down. I mostly succeeded.

Darcy stopped at the doorway, entranced by the sight of Bucky and Steve making out on the bed. She’d seen them kiss often enough, but it was usually rougher, though no less tender, and usually ended with an insult of some kind. (Brooklyn boys indeed)

This was different.

Steve rained little touches of his lips over Bucky’s face. He had one hand underneath Bucky, giving himself support and holding Bucky at the same time. Their other hands were clasped together, and even from here, she could hear the Brooklyn accents, though she couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Like the day they undressed each other, Darcy had a glimpse of the two from before. Bucky’s eyes were closed, his lips parted as he, once again, gave himself over to Steve.

In spite of Bucky’s nudity, it wasn’t particularly sexual either. Perhaps that’s what made the scene extraordinary, as it was nothing less than the purest essence of love and trust.

No wonder Bucky came home to Steve.

She wished she hadn’t interrupted the quiet moment, but it’s not like she could sneak up on a couple of super-soldier with super-hearing. They turned their faces toward her, dazed blue eyes opening in unison.

Lightly, Darcy teased, “Not sure I’ve ever seen that dopey expression on Bucky’s face, Steve. Sure he’s got any brains left?”

“No worries, doll, he never had any in the first place.” Steve dropped a last kiss on Bucky’s lips, sucking on the bottom one until Bucky’s fingers drifted inward to hover over Steve’s hip.

“Hell, no. Not once the punk learned to do that,” Bucky slurred as Steve rolled off to his side.

Darcy’s eyebrow went up. “Really? The lip thing started with tall, blond, and sexy? I think I lost that bet.” She eased down onto the bed to press her own lips to Bucky, copying the kiss in a way that came only from experiencing the effects of that devastating move one too many times.

“More like a short blond with a skinny butt and a smart mouth, but yeah, it was all Steven.” Bucky flipped her so that their positions were reversed. While the blond in question grinned, Bucky pressed his forehead to hers. “Ain’t never been dizzy for a dame the way I am with you, Darcy.” He kissed her nose and rolled off the bed, presumably to go find clothes. (Gorgeous ass, check.)
Steve crawled across the bed, laid one on her too—simple, sweet—and stretched out next to her with a hand on her hip.

The easy way the two men welcomed her into their private interlude demonstrated just how much the three of them had learned to mesh. Darcy relaxed next to Steve, letting out a contented sigh.

Bucky came back wearing briefs and carrying a midnight blue dress shirt. “You okay, Darce?”

With a low chuckle, Steve answered, “That’s the sound she makes when she’s really happy.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, though with a soft smile for Bucky as she lifted a shoulder in agreement. He opened his mouth then shut it firmly and turned away.

She was off the bed in a flash to hug him hard, not missing the way his eyes had paled. “Nuh uh. Whatever you were thinking, don’t.”

There was a tiny part of her that was thrilled at Bucky’s new reactions—both now and yesterday. In all the time she’d known him, he’d never shown anger or insecurity at anything—not HYDRA, not the years he missed, not even the recent media circus. The closest he’d come was annoyance with Darcy when they needled each other. But yesterday, he’d been pissed at her and her mom. (Maybe with good reason. One, anyway.) He was past due. However, she wasn’t interested in the self-doubt that was bound to come along with it.

It took a while, but Bucky finally pressed his cheek into her hair. “Okay. ’M not talking about it, though.”

“Will you tell Sam later?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” He leaned down and brushed a kiss across her mouth.

“You still up for going out?” Steve asked from the bed.

Darcy shot a look at both of them. “Out?”

“Punk wants to get fondue. The cheese kind.” Color returned to Bucky’s eyes as he smirked. To Steve, he added, “I’m good enough. You said the place was quiet, right?”

“I booked a table in the back of the restaurant. Pepper promised it would work,” Steve confirmed.

“So,” Darcy mused, needling them just a little for fun. “You boys have a date?”

Bucky seemed hurt. “Do you really think we’re going to leave you here by yourself after yesterday?” he asked incredulously.

She blinked. She’d been teasing, not worried. (Buuuuuttttt, okay, somebody was a little unraveled at the moment. No more jokes for tall, dark and steamy, ‘kay? ‘kay.) “No, I don’t.”

Her simple answer startled him. To give Bucky a few minutes to work that out, Darcy opted to pick clothes for the night out instead. He took his cue from her and tugged the shirt on over his shoulder (with a helping hand from Steve), while Darcy found a pair of thick tights, a short wool skirt, boots and a dressy sweater. All that and a good coat would keep her warm enough tonight if they had to walk for a bit. (Yeah, no, not bringing that up right now.)

She stripped off her pajamas in front of both men. Steve liked to watch, something she’d figured out ages ago, and he leaned against the dresser to do just that. Bucky kept an eye on her too, as she
picked out a bright blue bra and dark pink panties to go underneath the outfit. (Okay, two hunky, distracted men, two thumbs up. Lady parts tapped their foot wondering how they could get some action.)

When she finished dressing, she went toe-to-toe with Bucky as he buttoned up his jeans. “Yesterday sucked because we were scared for each other. You know damned well that all that goes straight into my stupid nightmares.” She turned up her hands helplessly. “I can’t control them. What I can control is who I want to be with, who makes me feel better, who I want to come home to every day. That’s you and Steve.

“But let’s get one thing straight, here, Barnes. So we had a spat. Big deal. We’ve figured out most of it and we’ll fumble through the rest. Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Starks don’t like to share?’”

He nodded, his brow furrowing some.

“Good. Then you’ll understand that Steve isn’t the only one who will go to the ends of the earth for you. I love you. I love who you are, in this moment, even if sometimes you piss me off. In fact—”

(Holy shit, was she really going to do this? Yeah, no sense in putting it off any longer.) She yanked the ring box out of Steve’s dresser drawer and pressed it against Bucky’s chest. “Make that from both of you and I’ll wear it.”

His hand closed over hers and his mouth opened as if he would speak, but nothing came out.

“Darcy,” Steve breathed from behind her. “You’re sure?”

“You already announced to the world that we’re together. I have zero interest in changing that status,” she insisted. “The three of us made it through to the other side. Don’t we deserve to take something for ourselves?”

Bucky looked away. “Darcy—” he started.

But from his tone, she figured whatever he said next was going to piss her off, so she slapped a hand over his mouth. “Your next words had better be something along the lines of ‘I love you,’ ‘Great idea,’ ‘Can’t wait,’ or that sort of thing. Because we are not spoiling a perfectly nice evening with somebody thinking they aren’t good enough or that they aren’t going to fit in this relationship you two dreamed up. We’re either all in or we’re out. I’m in.”

All at once, the tension when out of Bucky, and he let out that low husky chuckle that never failed to do awesome things to her lady parts. “Been in since I found out you were Steve’s girl.” He reached out to tuck her hair behind her ear. “Been in love with you since about five minutes after that.”

“And I’ve been in since I knew you were Steve’s boy.” She needlessly straightened his collar. “That was before you showed up, by the way. You already know when I fell in love.”

“Tell me again, Princess.”

She kissed his cheek and stepped backward into Steve’s arms, leaving the box in Bucky’s hand. “When I discovered that right here, with the two of you, is exactly where I want to be.”

*****
While Darcy freshened her hair in the bathroom, Bucky had his hands full. Steve had made a valiant attempt to change his own clothes and keep his composure while he did, but Bucky knew better. He cornered Steve in the closet.

There wasn’t anything about Captain America in the way Steve held on to Bucky and tried not to leak tears and snot on him.

“If this is happy, punk, I sure as hell don’t want to see you when you’re ecstatic,” he said.

“Shut up. I am happy. Bought her the damned ring a year ago. She made me wait,” Steve said petulantly.

Yup, there was the sarcastic, stubborn little shit Bucky fell in love with. He dug his fingers into Steve’s hair and rubbed the soft stands. “Seems like you needed me to close the deal.”

Steve’s head popped up, his eyes clearing. “Fucking jerk. I did not.”

“You did.”

With an elbow and a shoulder, Steve shoved him toward the doorway of the closet. “Don’t be a prick.”

Bucky took the three steps back with a laugh then snaked a hand out to yank Steve to him for a hard kiss. “Can’t help it. It’s the company I keep.”

“Darcy’s going to be pissed when she hears that,” Steve snorted. “Now, please do me a favor, go make sure she’s okay so we can have a good time tonight. Then you and I can talk about this ring thing.”

He did.

Darcy sat on the bathroom counter and leaned toward the mirror to apply her mascara. Her glasses lay next to her. He knew she wore contacts sometimes, but not on a short night’s sleep and rarely around the apartment. She dropped her mascara tube and other bits of cosmetics into her basket that rested on the counter.

Then she reached for her glasses, sliding them up her nose and tucking them behind her ears. She fluffed her hair and puckered her lips playfully in the mirror.

With as much honestly as he could infuse in his voice, he told her, “You’re beautiful. Doesn’t matter if you’re in your pajamas or all dolled up for a night out.”

Color touched her cheeks. Instead of answering, she moved to get off the counter. Bucky guided her down with hands on her waist, and her blush heightened—even more when he brought her knuckles up to press a kiss against the back of her hand.

He still wasn’t used to the way she stepped into his space and tucked herself into his body as if she belonged (she did). When he was younger, hugs between the sexes were not all that common. Even he and Steve had rarely touched during the day, saving the close contact for the privacy of their own bedroom.

Darcy’s easy affection was addicting. He’d grown used to her hugs, and even found himself craving them from time to time. Steve, surely due to her influence, no longer had any compunction about demonstrating his regard for Bucky, and he always had a hand or arm about their girl.
In a move he’d done a thousand times or more, he tucked Darcy’s hand into the crook of his elbow to escort her to the front door. Steve had her coat waiting and set it in place. While she buttoned it, Steve handed Bucky his coat too.

Bucky texted a note to Garcia, the Sierra Team lead, giving them an update on their whereabouts. As they rode the elevator down to the private entrance where one of Stark’s drivers would pick them up, he took Darcy’s hand. “I’ve asked a couple of our team to watch our backs tonight. I want you to get used to having them around because at some point, you’re going to have to leave the Tower without us. You need to know you’re safe.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“I want you to get to know them. When you find six or eight of them you like, they’ll be assigned to permanent duty to you. I’m doing the same with your mother, and your father has Happy and Rhodes to keep an eye on him as much as that is possible.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’m not leaving the Tower without someone I trust on my six for a while, and not without one or both of you,” he acknowledged. “Didn’t realize until this mission of yours, Steve, that I’m more reliant on you two than I thought.”

Steve edged closer so that the two of them touched shoulders. “Earlier, that’s what—“

“Yeah, punk.” He found himself biting his lip and made himself stop. “I do okay within a set of parameters.”

That was a hard admission.

Darcy twined her fingers into his as the elevator doors slid open. “Well, that kind of epiphany pretty much pisses me off enough to throw a temper tantrum when they happen, so,” she shrugged. “At least you know it now and we can deal with it.” She pulled him into the car without a second thought, as if a damaged former assassin didn’t bother her in the slightest.

Bucky exchanged a look with Steve as he got in. “Hell of a dame.”

*****

Steve scratched the back of his neck as Bucky put the moves on Darcy. They were jammed into the back of the restaurant surrounded by privacy walls on three sides. Bucky had already cased the place and found it acceptable after his crew covered the exits.

Darcy flushed when Bucky ran a finger down her cheek and whispered something in her ear. Without looking at all, Bucky scooped up cheese onto the tip of his finger and held it out to her. She sucked it off with a wicked smile of her own. Bucky’s foot pressed into Steve’s under the table, a clear indication that it was his turn.

Steve swirled a chunk of apple through the cheese and popped it in his mouth, enjoying every bit of his loves. But he didn’t make the move on Darcy that Bucky was expecting. Instead, he tugged the
paper cocktail napkin out from under Bucky’s drink and sketched a quick, lascivious comic of the three of them. Darcy scooted over to watch, turning pink as he passed it to her.

“Think we can try that when we get home?” he asked in his most serious voice.

With an absolutely straight face (though still pink), she studied it, keeping it away from Bucky as she did. “Who’s got the better balance?”

Steve winked at Bucky. “Held up a motorcycle with three ladies on it in the USO.”

Bucky snorted. “Stood on a five inch window sill for three hours in Nuremburg in the middle of the night.”

“The shield is all about balance and leverage. Still think I’ve got you.”

“Ever held a rifle steady for half a day? Not happening, Rogers.” He plucked the napkin out of Darcy’s hand. He kicked Steve with his toe. “Damn it, punk, do you know what kind of game we could have had in our day if you’d done this for the dames too?”

“Blue pictures?” Steve nudged Darcy as she dipped piece of bread into the cheese. “One of the many ways he used to charm his dates. I think half the dames in Brooklyn carried home sketches of themselves on napkins. He finally had to change up his game when too many dames had a special little drawing tucked in their purse.”

“I hear you had a line out the door, Barnes,” Darcy sassed.

“Just lookin’ for the right one,” he retorted. “And Steve’s heavier, so he can take bottom if we’re going to try this.”

Darcy grinned, her green-blue eyes dancing under blue-black lashes. “Gosh, I can’t wait to fondue,” she said as she popped another bite in her mouth. Bucky snickered until he laughed outright, leaning against the wall behind him.

Steve discovered that tension he’d been holding in fell away in a slow exhale.

They took their time at dinner, savoring the dishes and experimenting with new ones. Darcy and Bucky had a running commentary on everything, as was their wont. Steve interjected his own wry observations now and again, making both of them laugh when he did.

It was easily the best date in his memory.

They’d ordered two different desserts, one dark chocolate and one white chocolate fondue to taste. All three of them promptly fought over the dark one and Darcy fended both of them off with her fondue fork. Steve got a chocolate-covered marshmallow, and Bucky opted for the strawberry.

Steve mused, “Mrs. Barnes loved strawberries, Darcy. I remember the two of us hunting every year on her birthday to find some fresh ones.”

Darcy’s eyes brightened in curiosity. “When was her birthday?”

“Week before Steve’s, so most years, Ma would make a cake for him out of her own strawberries,” Bucky reflected.

“Which is why we always got double when we could,” Steve told Darcy. Bucky stilled, his eyes slanting to the right as if he was trying to recall something. “What is it?” Steve asked.
He shook his head. “Just wonderin’ what happened to Ma’s ring. Probably buried with her, I’d guess.”

Steve reached into his pocket for his wallet. He fished around in it until he came up with a white gold band and handed it to Bucky.

“How?” he asked in wonder.

“Rebecca kept it. She gave it to her oldest daughter, who sent it to me this past week after the television interview. Seems we have an invitation to dinner for the holidays, and she thought you might have need of your mother’s ring.” Steve rubbed his foot against Bucky’s ankle. “They’d like to meet their uncle.”

“I’ll think about it,” Bucky muttered.

“Do. Your nieces are nice and have a great sense of humor. I think it would be fun.”
When the fourth uneventful week rolled right up into December, Darcy’s nightmares started up again. This pissed her off because sleeping eight straight was a thing of beauty, and she’d finally gotten rid of the shadows under eyes.

At least these weren’t the variety that ended in screaming. She’d take the racing heart and frantic need to do a quick head count any day over those. Halfway through the second night of Bucky and/or Steve sleepily assuring her that everybody was fine every couple of hours, Bucky went back to sleeping with his fingertips sensors against her pulse. She’d give even odds as to which of her boyfriends woke first after that. Steve’s hearing was more sensitive to the changes in her breathing, and Bucky felt the difference in her heartbeat.

She definitely didn’t feel alone, but after the third bad night, all of them were irritable from the lack of sleep. Darcy made an appointment with Sam.

It took a couple of sessions to pin down the why of it all, and Darcy needed a big glass of wine to ‘fess up to Steve and Bucky.

“You’re having nightmares because--let me get this straight, doll--nothing has happened lately?” Steve fisted his hands on his hips as Bucky set a couple of bottles of beer on the kitchen table. (Family meeting, just sayin’)

She turned a hand up as they sat on either side of her. “Sam thinks that, because we’re in a solid place with each other and the universe isn’t springing any disasters on us at the moment, my brain has decided this is a good time to deal with some of this crap.”

“So this is a good thing?” Bucky asked.

“Maybe. The nightmares are different this time. Not so graphic, I guess. And I do go back to sleep once I realize everything is okay.”

Steve grimaced, but skimmed his fingers along her thigh. “So what do we do?”

“Take turns sleeping on the couch so at least one of us makes it through the night?” she offered. That quip earned her a dirty look from both men.

“Try again, Princess.” She took a healthy gulp of her wine first, and Bucky squinted. “What is it?” he demanded.

“If it doesn’t get any better, Sam suggested that we try wrapping my wrists at night.” She knew Bucky wasn’t comfortable with any kind of restraints, though he’d been carefully neutral the few times she and Steve had resorted to it.

“If that’s what we need to do, Darcy.” The words were right. The flat look in his eyes was wrong.

“You don’t like it,” she countered. “And I hate bringing it into our bed when I know that.” She pushed away from the table.

But Steve caught her hand, tugging lightly, and she went willingly into his lap. “Darcy, I don’t like going on missions in the middle of the night. But sometimes it happens.”

Bucky considered her thoughtfully. After a moment, he announced, “I have an idea.” He
disappeared into the bedroom, returning moments later with a triumphant grin. “Use this.” He held up the black leather cuff he wore from time to time on his left wrist, purely because he liked the way it looked against the metal. (Hot, sexy, yum. She agreed wholeheartedly.)

Kneeling in front of her, he worked it over her hand and tightened the laces down. “How is that?”

She flexed her wrist. Bucky had made it tight enough that any movement was restricted. If she closed her eyes, it was enough like the way Steve tied her wrists that she thought it might work. “You’re okay with it?”

“It’s mine. Probably shouldn’t make a difference, but it does,” he confirmed.

They tried it that night. In a week’s time, she wore the wide leather bracelet almost every night, Bucky moaned the loss of one his favorite accessories, and Darcy didn’t have any more nightmares.

*****

Of all days to be at loose ends. Darcy, Jane and Thor were out Christmas shopping. Bucky had a full day of hand-to-hand combat training with his security teams scheduled, and Steve had already finished the grocery run, picked up the sketches he’d had framed for gifts, unpacked the bags and wrapped the frames. The apartment wasn’t particularly dirty, but he changed the sheets on the bed and started laundry anyway, then gave the whole place a good wipe down.

His loves had promised to meet up for dinner at seven, which left Steve with half an afternoon to kill. So he was grateful, damned grateful, when Bucky texted him. 30 min, need real workout. You in? Brg shield, want to hit something.

Bucky wanted to spar with Steve and the shield? Hell, yes. The vacuuming could wait.

When Steve arrived in workout gear and carrying his shield, there wasn’t a single guard who didn’t come to the conclusion that there was a piece of wall in the training room needing extra support for a while.

Bucky finished his training routine with a young man and waived him off. Only Steve noticed the flicker of relief as he tossed Bucky a water bottle.

“Good day?”

“Tired of pulling my punches. Need someone who can handle it when I kick their ass.” Bucky set the water aside and drew on a pair of black leather gloves that completely covered both hands. (Yeah, no, they didn’t need a repeat of the bridge where Bucky got a mental jolt from the metal on metal strike.)

Steve dropped his chin and shot his lover a daring look under his lashes. “Is that how we’re playing it?”

With a roll of his eyes, Bucky laughed. “Yeah, punk. That’s how we’re playing it.”

Steve flat out refused to bring the shield into their workouts unless Bucky specifically asked for it, for fear of bringing back bad memories. But Bucky seemed eager for it now. Dropping into a ready-stance, Steve waited for Bucky to make the first move. “I thought you were a little nervous about
facing me. You know, long day and all.”

“You don’t make me nervous.” Bucky flicked out a foot, waited for Steve to react, then instantly changed into a roll and hard jab with his left fist.

Steve flipped up his shield in time to absorb the punch. The metal clanged, the vibranium absorbed the blow—but not the absolute pressure of the weight Bucky had put behind it. Steve wasn’t expecting that, though he gave ground easily and came back with a flurry of punches and jabs of his own.

Damn, this felt good. There simply wasn’t anything he could dish out that Bucky couldn’t block, if not counter. Steve stepped up his speed, blocked a trio of slashing fists, and ducked under Bucky’s arm to come up behind him.

Bucky had chosen his ground well. With all the guards around the walls and few objects in the room, Steve couldn’t work the environment like he usually did, though he could bounce the shield off the walls if he aimed high enough. That left the two of them in a hand-to-metal match and Steve didn’t dare fling the shield at Bucky or he would give his partner two weapons instead of one.

“Come on, punk. Fightin’ like you’re an old man.”

(Well, hell.) Steve ducked Bucky’s flying kick, grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him to the ground. “Since you’re older than I am, thought I’d take it easy on you, jerk.” He flipped back to his feet, landing square into Bucky’s fist to his jaw. “Fuck, not the face, jerk. I’ve got a date tonight,” Steve complained as he shoved Bucky backward with the shield.

Of course, Bucky hung on to the rim and yanked Steve to the ground. “Anyone I know?”

“Yeah, she’s a real stand up dame. Thinks you’re an asshole when you get pissed. Likes my eyes.” He spun out of Bucky’s grasp, coming up on his toes to deliver a hard kick-punch combo that drove Bucky back a few steps.

“Fuck you, Rogers. You’ve been in love with my eyes for eight fuckin’ decades.”

Steve barked out a laugh and they settled into the match. They sparred that way, trading quips and insults as much as they threw punches and kicks at each other. The tension washed out of Steve as he pushed his limits with Bucky. (Jerk was damned pretty as he spun in the air. Almost didn’t get the shield up in time to block the kick.)

When it was apparent they were too evenly matched, Bucky sighed and drew his knife from his boot. “Now pay attention, because I sure as fuck don’t want to mess up your pretty face with this thing.” The knife flashed as Bucky brought it around in an eerie similarity to their fight on the bridge. Steve quipped, “Yeah, me either. We’ve got an appointment with Stark later and he’ll make fun of both of us.” Then he had to stop talking and concentrate on blocking, blocking Bucky’s strikes with his forearm and shield. Yeah, the metal was going to leave a bruise there, and he cursed himself for leaving the opening.

(Fucking hell, just how many fucking hands does he have? Seems like eight and they all have knives. Damned jerk thinks he’s faster that Captain-fucking-America, that sure as shit isn’t going to happen or I won’t hear the end of it from Barnes, Stark or Barton and that just wasn’t going to fucking happen today. Got goddamned fucking plans today and no jerk of a best friend is going to fuck that up. GodDAMNIt, Bucky, don’t come near the face with that shitty little blade, here’s my shield, have a nice fucking day.)
Bucky backed up four full steps from the shove Steve had given him, then collapsed on the mat in an absolute fit of the giggles. Steve pulled back out of his stance, only to realize he’d said all that out loud. The stifled snorts and outright laughter coming from the walls just added to his embarrassment. Knowing damned well that he was flushing red as a tomato, he reached for Bucky’s wrist and pulled him to his feet.

The guards began clapping along with their laughter. Steve gave them a little salute of acknowledgement. He waited for Bucky to give his crew a few last instructions and dismissed them for the day.

“Christ, Steve, we need to do that more often. There just isn’t much that can hold up to what I can do with my arm other than you and that damned shield.”

“Anytime.” He laid a hand on the back of Bucky’s neck. “Still nervous?”

“Some. You?”

“Hell, yes.”

“Want me to blow you in the shower? Take the edge off?”

Steve tried, he really did, to pull off the stern Cap face as they rode up the elevator. (Wasn’t happening.) “Is that what you want or are you hoping for a trade?”

Bucky smirked. “You think one won’t end with the other?”

“Go shower. You stink.”

Bucky was sort of right. Physically, he felt better. But standing in the elevator, waiting for JARVIS to open the doors? Steve straightened his tie one more time, earning him a dark look from Bucky.

“Leave it alone, punk.”

They didn’t have to do this. Darcy was probably going to kick their asses nine ways to Sunday when she found out. But he and Bucky had talked around this and decided that it meant something to them. And JARVIS helped by arranging a moment when Steve and Bucky could catch Tony and Pepper at home, without making a big issue of it.

Even though it was.

JARVIS directed them to the kitchen, where Tony wasn’t particularly happy to have his make out session with Pepper interrupted. Bucky kicked Steve in the ankle to conceal his sudden wayward grin.

“This had better be good, Klondike,” Tony said as he turned around. At one glance, Stark figured it out why the two men were there before Steve could say a word. “Fuck. No. You two do not have my blessing. What do you need my blessing for? Darcy has her own mind. She’ll do whatever the hell she wants to do, never mind what dear old Dad thinks. You know she has a useless poli sci degree, right? That was not my idea.” Tony grabbed a bottle of bourbon from a nearby cabinet, uncapped it and tipped it straight into his mouth.

Pepper took it away before he could do himself any real harm. “Tony, no.”

“You can’t get married anyway,” he sulked.
Steve stood his ground, as did Bucky. This is one of the reasons Steve had wanted to ask properly, so Tony could have his tantrum somewhere other than in front of Darcy. “Yes, we can. On Asgard.”

“And then I suppose you want to use galactic pressure and Stark influence to get your marriage accepted here, sidestepping another hundred years of discrimination until the people of Earth pull their collective heads out of their asses.”

(Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea.) “That can probably wait until Darcy is ready to take her place in the company. This is for us.”

“For you and Gort?” Tony needled.

Steve would have snapped off, but Bucky laid a hand on his shoulder, quelling the argument before it started. In that quiet, firm tone he’d developed as a sergeant and too many years of attempting to keep Steve in line, Bucky said, “Tony, this is for all of us. Me, punk here, and Darcy. We want to be a family, and you two are the only parents we have left. It means something to us that you’re okay with all this.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then this is going to be a lot harder. But it won’t change how we love your daughter,” he said with conviction.

Tony eyeballed Bucky. “You know it really pisses me off how you can pull Cap in line like that.”

“Practice, patience, and a lot of cursing when he does stupid heroic shit.”

“Darcy doesn’t quite pull it off,” Tony admitted.

“No. That’s my job. Always has been.” Bucky jerked a thumb at him. “Steve sees her. Still knows her better than anyone. She goes to him first when she’s scared. Probably always will.”

Raising an eyebrow, Tony asked, “You’re okay with that?”

“Didn’t say I couldn’t catch her, Stark.”

“She’s better than you deserve.”

Bucky slanted a look at Pepper and pulled out one of the chairs on the island to sit. “I’m gonna need that bourbon now.”

She smiled. “I’ve got one better.” She put away the bottle and brought out another of champagne and four glasses. She handed it to Tony. “Open it. We’re celebrating.”

Reluctantly, Tony popped the bottle and poured up the glasses. “Where’s the ring?”

Steve pulled it out of his jacket and held it out.

Tony squinted as he took it. “Where did you get it?”

Bucky answered, “It’s my mother’s wedding band with the stone from the one Steve bought for Darcy last year.”

Steve got the feeling that Tony was impressed in spite of himself, more so when they told him about Bucky’s nieces.
“Same ones you’re having Christmas dinner with?”

“The same.”

Tony drummed his fingers on the countertop, giving Steve a sharp look. “You have been a pain in my ass since the day I was born.”

“So we’re like family, right?” Steve shot back. “I’ve known three generations of Starks and I’m still here.”

Caught off guard, Tony let out a startled laugh. “True. Doesn’t negate the PITA part.”

Pepper winked at him with a broad smile. Still, Steve had to find the words to convince Tony. “I’m not speaking for Bucky on this. You know I love Darcy. I’m going to take care of her as much as she’ll let me, and I’ll be with her for the rest of it. I promised her at the beginning of all of this that I would come home, no matter what happened.”

With a slow nod of acknowledgement, Tony gave him a furious squint, as if he knew he had to concede the point. He pointed at Bucky. “Three sentence limit.”

Bucky reached for the ring that Tony was still holding. “Feels right to give Ma’s ring to Darcy. My parents had a good marriage, and I want that for us too.” He lifted a shoulder. “Besides, I figure we need an alternative to little blond shits cluttering up the place.”

“Not a bad point. Miniature Steves, huh.”


“If she didn’t love Steve, you wouldn’t have fallen for her.” Tony was blunt.

Bucky firmed his jaw. “Before the war, didn’t take long for the dames I dated to figure out I had a soft spot for my best friend. The ones who got a second look didn’t say nothing, just went along with it. So, no, Tony, I wasn’t gonna fall for a dame who didn’t love my guy.

“When I came back, I knew one thing: Steven Grant Rogers. Reconnaissance told me Steve had a dame he’s serious about who works at Stark Industries. That’s a two-for-one special right there when I was lookin’ for answers.”

He drummed his fingers on the countertop. “Didn’t take long to know Darcy sees Steve the way I do. Took even less to figure why Steve fell for her. Darcy’s the one who’s made this work—not me, not Steven. I’ve got no right to be here. But I am. I love her and I love Steve and to hell with everyone else.”

At that, Tony slid his hand around Pepper’s waist, kissing her on the cheek and sliding the glasses of champagne toward them. “For what it’s worth, you have our blessing.”

Steve’s eyes burned. After he sipped the champagne, he had to leave the room to regain his composure.

To his surprise, Tony followed him out, clamping a hand on his shoulder. “You tell Darcy I said this and I’ll deny it with every fucking breath ‘til I’m dead, Rogers.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know anyone else who could have done what you did, brought a broken boyfriend home to
your girlfriend, and come out with a stable relationship with both of them on the other side. Takes honesty to make that happen, Steven.”

He gave Stark a short nod of acknowledgement. “I’m always honest, Tony.”

“A fact which annoys me and astonishes me in equal parts.” Tony handed over the glass of champagne he held. “Drink up. Then you can make Pepper happy and tell her how you’re going to pop the question.”

*****

From his place on Stark’s balcony (good place, private, hard to access), Bucky huddled deeper into his coat, tucking his metal fingers under his shirt so they rested against his skin as Darcy’s heater warmed his shoulder. With a practiced flick of his thumb, he knocked the ashes off the end of his ciggy in his other hand. He sucked on it, tilting his head back, and let out a long stream of smoke.

He no longer felt the rush of nicotine. Nor did he use the cigarette as a way to quiet hunger pangs, aches, and other ailments. No, this was purely an old comforting habit that gave his body something to do while his mind worried.

Steve wanted to give the ring to Darcy tomorrow—today, really. In a few hours, they would trade gifts in front of the tree they had put up yesterday. Natasha, Clint, Jane, and Thor had kept them company while they did. It had been a nice evening.

Then they’d gone to Midnight Mass, just the three of them. Steve was right; it had been peaceful in its own way. Getting dressed for church had prompted a stream of memories, mostly of his parents and sisters, and he’d had an ache in his middle until he and his loves headed for home.

His loves. Steve had coined the phrase. He and Darcy had promptly adopted it.

With another long pull, he wondered if they were doing the right thing. It would be easier for Steve and Darcy to marry. (What went on behind closed doors was nobody’s business but theirs.)

Crushing out the cigarette, he snorted. Like the punk would ever settle for that these days. (Damned serum only made him more stubborn when it came to standing on principles.) He was more pragmatic, and he wavered between being annoyed and flattered by Steve’s determination. (Shit. Some things just don’t change.)

One-handed, he fished his lighter out of his pocket, set it on his knee, and tapped another ciggy out of the deck.

*ping* Sergeant Barnes, Captain Rogers is looking for you. May I give him your location?

Sure, JARVIS. Thanks for the heads up.

Of course, Sergeant. There was a short pause then JARVIS added, You make my sister happy, Sergeant Barnes.

J, I’ll be honest, I don’t know why. Seems I’m a liability most of the time—not an … an asset. (Fuck, he hated that word.)
Sir isn’t the most reliable of persons.

When JARVIS said nothing more, Bucky decided he needed to think on that.

“Bucky?” Steve straddled the bench to face him. As he did, he reached for the deck, tapping out his own ciggy and lighting it with practiced ease.

“Darcy still asleep?”

“For now. JARVIS is keeping an eye on her. You okay?”

He sighed. “What are we doing, Steven? Got no fuckin’ business bringing a perfectly nice dame into our shit.”

“Good to know you’re asking the same question I’ve been asking since the day I met Darcy. I don’t have an answer for you, other than she seems to be okay with all our shit.”

“It’s a big fuckin’ pile.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to outlive her, you know.”

“I wasn’t supposed to make it to twenty. That never stopped you from loving me.”

(Well, shit. That wasn’t the answer he expected.) Bucky puffed on his ciggy. “No,” he answered after a while. ‘Pissed me off when you’d go courtin’ death like a sailor on leave in a town full of single ladies.” He snorted. “Still pisses me off when I read some of your mission reports.”

“You read my mission reports?”

“HYDRA generally used me when their earlier missions went Tango Uniform. Clean up duty, if you want. The Winter Soldier was the ace-in-the-hole but there was a lot of maintenance involved. You don’t pull out your best Asset for front line work.” He nudged Steve. “Getting off topic. I’m mopin’ about popping the question to Darce and you’re thinkin’ up new ways to get revenge.”

“Another bad habit of mine,” Steve remarked drily as he took a drag off the cigarette. “Do you love her?”

“Of course, I do, punk.”

“Want out? Stark family is a lot to handle.”

“If I can handle Steve Rogers, then I can manage the Stark family just fine,” Bucky snapped back. (Fuck. He walked into that one. Nobody baited him better than the punk.)
“You know, there was only one other person who ever managed the Stark family, and yeah, I had a crush on her too.”

“Think she loved you?”

“I know she did. But it wouldn’t have worked.” There was a hitch in Steve’s voice and he sucked hard on the ciggy. “She had a good life.”

“Now who’s getting maudlin?”

Steve squashed his cigarette and buried in the ashtray next to him. He dropped his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “I want this. Seems too perfect to have both of you.”

“Afraid something’s going to take it away?”

“You have no idea.”

“A marriage isn’t a guarantee.”

“It’s a promise, Buck. You know that.”

“I don’t need a promise from you, love. Pretty damned sure we got that cleared up in Austria.”

“Darcy is different. She’s always going to wonder where her place is if we don’t do this.”

Bucky turned his head, found Steve’s eyes glittering in the moonlight. Christ, he was beautiful. “I know.” He tamped out his ciggy and flicked it into the ashtray. Then he huddled up in his coat and stretched out on the bench with his knees up and head in Steve’s lap. “JARVIS thinks I’m the reliable one.”

“You are.”

“Hell of a thing to be for a brainwashed assassin.” He closed his eyes as Steve played with his hair.

“You said it yourself. You’re the ace-in-the-hole. God knows, I count on you to have my six.”

His eyes popped open. “I don’t … I’m not on your six. Not anymore.”

“I believe you just told me off about not using a parachute,” Steve quipped. (Oh. Got it.) “Why’d you do that anyway?”

“Not use a parachute?”

“Yeah.”

“Probably for all the reasons you think.”

“Stupid. If you’re going to marry us, you have to promise me and Darcy you won’t do that kind of reckless shit anymore, punk.”

“Okay.”

(Huh. If it was that easy, he should have married Steven ages ago.)

From a nearby speaker, JARVIS announced, “Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, Lewis’ biometrics are changing, indicating she will wake soon.”
“Unless one of us gets our butts back to bed?” Bucky countered.

“I believe you have an excellent understanding of the situation,” JARVIS replied.

He rolled off the bench, catching Steve’s hand to pull him up too. “Come on, punk.” Steve started toward the balcony door when Bucky scoffed, “Takin’ the easy way?” He jumped, catching the thin edges of the window panes and scaled the wall back to the Commons floor. He pushed off and caught the balcony railing there, and flipped back over it to land on the concrete.

Steve landed a couple of seconds later with a grin, dancing backward just long enough to taunt, “Race you.”

They were snickering idiots, shoving each other on the four flights of stairs in an effort to outpace one another. They collapsed on either side of their door, catching a breath before they went back to bed.

“Shit. I need a shower. Darcy will kill me if I get in bed smelling like cigarettes,” he groaned.

“You do. I can get away with just brushing my teeth,” Steve laughed.

The door opened on that last part. Darcy sniffed. “Nope. Showers for both of you,” she urged with a yawn. “Then you can tell me what’s bothering you.” Dark hair spilled down her shoulder, contrasting with the pink and green t-shirt and boxer shorts she wore.

Bucky scooped her up so that she wrapped her legs around his hips. “I look at you and I forget.”

She rolled her eyes. “Charming.”

He set her on the bed, and yes, he and Steve took quick shower to wash off the smoke. “Got the ring?” he asked his boyfriend under cover of the spray of hot water.

Steve lit up. “It’s under the Christmas tree. Want me to get it?”

“We’re awake. It’s Christmas Day,” he agreed.

He didn’t bother with a shirt, just a pair of boxers that might have had weird green characters on it with Santa hats. (Grinch. Scrinch. Something like that.)

Darcy occupied the middle of the bed. She sat against a pillow and paged through her tablet as she waited, her glasses perched on the end of her nose. She took an experimental sniff. “Better.”

He sat next to her and deliberately sniffed her neck before kissing her there. “Mmmm.”

“Steve?” she called out. “Family meeting in the bedroom.”

Steve wandered in, carrying a glass of water. (Nice cover, punk.) Bucky winked where Darcy wouldn’t see. Steve set the cup down and slid in under the sheets.

Darcy arched a brow and reached up to lay her tablet on the shelf above her head. “So, what’s worrying you, James?”

“Nervous, not worried.”

“Nervous? About meeting your family?”

Bucky’s mouth dropped open. He hadn’t given that a thought at all. (Shit.) “Well, not until you
mentioned it.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Oh good, I always like making things exponentially more difficult.”

“Yeah, Darcy Stark is not about easy, that’s for damned sure.”

She opened her mouth to retort, but snapped it shut when Steve handed the ring box to Bucky, who opened it and gave it to Darcy.

“This won’t be easy, Princess, but my love for you will be for always, if you’ll have me.”

She blinked. “Wow.” Darcy licked her lips and raised her eyebrows at Steve, waiting.

He brought his fingers up to her cheek. “I have no right to ask you to marry me, not with all that I’ve put you through. But I’m asking anyway, because I love you and I want always with you too.”

With lights dancing in her blue-green eyes, she plucked the ring out of the box. “So, you both want to marry me. What about each other?”

Bucky leaned on his elbow, giving Steve another wink. “Gonna marry me, punk?”

“Guess I have to, jerk. I already promised you till the end of the line, what’s an always and forever gonna add?”

They exchanged smirks and turned back to Darcy.

“Wow, you guys are so romantic,” she drawled.

“Savin’ it for you, doll,” Bucky sassed as he slid a hand down her arm. “Besides, you haven’t said ‘yes.’”

She worked the ring over her finger. “Yes, Steve, James. I’ll marry both of you.”

Steve, the punk, damned near bawled with happiness. (He did not cry. Winter Fucking Soldiers do not weep. He had some shit in his eye, goddamnit.)

There were kisses. And then there was sex to celebrate. And then Darcy took a picture of her ring and texted it to her mother and to Jane, even though they wouldn’t see it until morning.

After that, weariness crashed in and Bucky insisted they try to get a couple of hours of sleep before they opened presents.

As Darcy slept, she rested her fingers on Steve’s bicep. Bucky had his arm around her waist, so that his knuckles touched Steve’s skin. Ma’s ring looked damned good on her hand.

JARVIS politely woke them up with a cheery, “Good morning,” and an announcement that Sir had breakfast laid out in the Commons.

‘Mornin’, J. Merry Christmas.

And to you, Sergeant Barnes. Congratulations on your engagement.
Darcy had turned over in the night. When she woke, she automatically pressed a kiss to his metal shoulder. He saw the exact moment she remembered last night’s events. Eyes wide, sucking her lip between her bottom teeth, she stared at her hand.

“It’s not going to bite,” he admonished.

She gave him a blinding smile, kissed him on the mouth with a slip of the tongue, rolled over to straddle and kiss a not-quite-awake Steve, then tumbled off the bed, snatching her glasses off the nightstand. “Up! It’s Christmas. Breakfast! We can’t be late,” she insisted.

Steve casually pulled Bucky across the bed and into his arms (punk didn’t use to be able to do that) for a warm kiss. “Merry Christmas, jerk.”

Just like that, he flashed back to a cold forest, surrounded by the Howling Commandoes as they sang Christmas songs and passed a bottle around a warm fire. “Hell of lot better than our last one together, punk,” he murmured against Steve’s lips. “Company’s prettier too.”

Steve hummed his agreement as Darcy bounced into the bedroom again. She’d brushed her hair and slicked something glossy on her lips. She fished in her dresser drawer and came up with a bra. “Up. Breakfast.”

Steve went to an elbow and scratched his neck. (Fuck that. Bucky scratched his balls and damned if it didn’t feel great.) “Shit. I forgot.” He looked over his shoulder to Bucky. “Yeah, you want to get up for this.”

Reluctantly, he sat up. Darcy snapped her bra in place and turned around. They didn’t miss the way she halted, taking them in. (Hell, yeah. Nothing like making a dame stutter.) “No shirts for us, no brains for Darcy,” he teased.

She pinked and crawled on the bed to give each of them a hug. “True, but that’s not the only thing that got me this morning.” She drew a finger along Steve’s tattoos with one hand. “You have both of us here.” Darcy reached for the dog tags Bucky wore. “You have Steve here.” Then she touched his shoulder. “And me here.”

She looked down at her ring. “Now I have both of you. Best Christmas present ever.”

Hell. Steve had been right. Darcy needed this bit of tradition to know she belonged. She had it now, and darned if she didn’t have the happiest look on her face.

They followed her down to the Commons, where the other residents were gathering. Stark had laid out a full breakfast with china, crystal and silverware. Clint had his head on the table with his hand around his giant coffee mug. Natasha looked adorable in her pajamas. Maria and Sam both looked far too well put together for this hour. Bruce and Betty came in next, shyly holding hands and taking a place together at the far end of the table.

When Thor and Jane came down the stairs, Bucky wasn’t the only one who winced at Jane’s shriek when she saw Darcy. Steve bumped shoulders with him, grinning at the happy sight of the two dames dancing in circles and admiring Darcy’s ring.

Tony and Pepper were the last ones to arrive. Pepper offered her cheek for both of them to kiss. When they did, she took a long look at Darcy. “Thank you,” she told them. “For giving her a chance at a real life.”
Huh. He exchanged one shoulder shrugs with Steve as Darcy noticed her parents and went into their arms, laughing and crying at the same time.

After breakfast, they opened their own presents, had lunch and more gifts with Darcy’s parents, then made their way to Brooklyn.

Dinner with the Bucky’s family turned out to be both nostalgic and silly fun. The ice had been broken when the three of them showed up on his oldest niece’s doorstep. Tanya--looking more like her mother than any child should, only a good ten years “older” than Bucky--eyeballed him with suspicion. He gave her his wry smile. “Well, this is awkward. Guess you can call me Uncle Bucky?”

After that, she laughed long and loud as she pulled him into the house to introduce him to her sister, Freddie, their husbands, Jon and Anzio, and the five kids between them. It was apparent that the Barnes’ legacy of charm and humor held true all the way down to Bucky’s namesake, a ten year old boy named “James” who had a habit of cracking jokes that left the rest of them in stitches.

When the girls spied his Ma’s ring on Darcy’s finger over dinner, they had (another, Christ) round of tears and a good half-hour of speculation over traditions to be upheld and laws that should be broken.

It was Darcy herself who told Tanya and Freddie (and their husbands) the truth of her name and parentage. Steve held her hand as she asked for their silence.

“Darcy, we’ve got our own celebrity in the family and know better than most how important privacy is to those we love. When the Smithsonian came calling, you can be damned sure they only got what we wanted them to have,” Freddie insisted.

He shouldn’t have been surprised that the whole family knew about him and Steve. Tanya wiped her eyes as she recalled the number of times his ma had said “at least the boys had each other.” He figured he should be grateful his parents had that to hold on to, but it was hard. Tanya and Freddie sat with him a bit when they realized that, to him, his parents and sister had been gone less than a year.

They sorted through the box of pictures Freddie had put together for him as a Christmas gift. Seeing his family grow old helped. Freddie shyly gave Steve a dozen pictures she’d found of him too, including one of his ma. After that, nobody seemed to mind if a few more tears leaked as they laughed over old stories.

When Darcy saw that he’d reached his limit, she chivvied them out the door with grace and promises to stay in touch. Cell phone numbers were exchanged and new pictures taken that were promptly shared with the whole family.

When they returned home, Steve cupped his hand. “She’s right. Best Christmas ever.”

Fucking punk. Yeah. By far.
Overwhelmed, dazzled, and still floating a couple of feet in the air, Darcy holed up in her lab after
the holidays and an entire New Year’s weekend in which the three of them hardly had clothes on,
much less left the apartment. (Lady parts still giggled at random moments just thinking on it.)

Steve and Bucky seemed to understand and left her to it for the better part of a week. They made
sure she had food and coaxed her to bed at night (yeah, not that hard, really. She and Jane agreed
that the hunky dudes in their lives gave them ample reason to put the SCIENCE! down in favor of
sexytimes and a little sleep.), but mostly they left her alone.

She caught up on SI stuff the first two days and spent the next two figuring out how she and
JARVIS had created and set off the EMP in the food court. Tony had reproduced the effect in his lab
just before Christmas, but even with JARVIS’ help, the fastest he could manage to put it all together
from start to finish was just under twenty minutes.

That Darcy and JARVIS started from scratch and did it in less than six minutes seemed impossible.
Tony left it to Darcy to figure out. In the end, she’d reverse-engineered JARVIS’ thinking process
and came to a startling conclusion.

She fiddled with her engagement ring. “J, let’s get Dad on board with this.”

“Of course, Lewis. Shall I order dinner as well?”

“Is that a hint or did Dad skip lunch?”

“I believe ‘yes’ would be an appropriate answer.”

“Mmmm. See if my fiancés are free are free and willing to bring sustenance. I miss them.”

Tony wandered down her back stairs, carrying his usual bag of blueberries. “What ‘cha got,
progeny?”

“Two things.” She pulled up the data from the analysis she’d conducted, including a video of herself
and biometric data from the contact. “JARVIS isn’t taking just verbal or typed commands from me.
He’s combining that with visual clues and biometric information.”

“Of course. He’s programmed to do that,” Tony noted.

“But you don’t wear a contact, Dad. I do. JARVIS told you we play chess. Between that and
working together, he can determine, with an 82.4% probability, what I’m going to do next when we
are working on a specific project. In chess, it’s up to a 94.7% probability. No wonder I haven’t won
a game in the past six months.”
Tony touched one of the screens. “JARVIS, give me a 3-D graph of that progression for the past five years. Mark the point where Darcy first wore the contact.”

Her dad looked like it was Christmas morning all over again. “Darcy, this is incredible. Just by being connected to you, JARVIS is learning a whole new way of thinking.” Tony pointed to a sudden jump near the end of the graph. “What caused this?”

“Sir, that is the point Sergeant Barnes began wearing a contact, too,” JARVIS said.

Darcy crossed her arms. “JARVIS uses data from both of us in comparison tests. While he doesn’t work on projects with Bucky, he does keep tabs on his behavior throughout the day. He can compare Bucky’s biometric data, combined with his activities and emotional state, to mine.”

“And his predictive engine becomes that much better,” Tony whistled. “All right. What else?”

Darcy brought up the “brain” screens they’d been using in analyzing the weird characters in JARVIS’ programming. “That predictive engine is stored only on my private servers.” The screens lit up, indicating where the information was physically located underneath Stark Mansion. “It’s protected by Tia. And it’s absolutely clean. No weird shit attached.”

She set her glasses on the table to rub her eyes. “I don’t know why or what it means or how it all relates to everything. But I have to tell James about this. He’s not going to be happy about it.”

Tony walked through the screen and dropped a kiss on her temple. “We’ll figure it out.” He stood behind her. “Wait, does that mean when I’m using JARVIS in my lab, that I’m using a different JARVIS than the one in your lab?”

Darcy sagged because the thought had crossed her mind too. “You want to field that one, J?”

“It’s not quite that simple, Sir. My base programming still originates from the same location in California. The majority of my programming rests with the projects Sir and I have worked on throughout the years and while Lewis was small.”

“But?” Tony prompted as he paced around the room, taking in data as he spoke with the AI.

“When Lewis created her own servers and security protocols, a divergence was created. Perhaps it would be best if I were to compare it to speaking multiple languages. I am the same entity, but I express myself differently depending with whom I am speaking.”

“Do you access my servers when you work on Darcy’s projects?”

“Of course.”

“Do you access Darcy’s servers when you work on my projects?”

“No, Sir.”

Tony halted his pacing to shoot Darcy an annoyed look. “You keep your stuff locked down from me?” he complained.

“You know I do. Are you telling me I have unfettered access to everything in your lab?” Darcy shot back.

Tony winced. (Whoops. Yeah. Busted, Dad.) “Fair enough. Stop being like me. It’s irritating. Except when it’s flattering and then it’s cool.”
She laughed. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“You never disappoint me. Except for, you know, the whole poli sci thing.”

“You are never going to let that go, are you?”

“Nope.”

The elevator door opened, and Darcy’s fiancés appeared. “Oh, yay, food. I’m starving.”

Steve held his bags over her head. “Kiss first.”

“Mmm. Done.” (Lady parts tapped her politely on the shoulder to remind her they wanted some action too. Later, she promised. They sulked.)

With a kiss on her cheek, Bucky absconded with the food so that Steve could wrap both arms around her. (Tasty. Really tasty.)

“We’ve missed you, doll.”

“Mmm. Yep. I’m about ready to come up for air myself. I definitely need a shower. Let’s eat and then we have something to show you. Show James, really, but you’ll want to see.”

The Greek food held their attention long enough for Tony to stuff something in his mouth, swallow it and go back to the holographics.

Darcy concealed a smile at Bucky’s avid interest. In spite of her dad’s protests of Bucky’s whole existence, she figured it wouldn’t be long before Tony drafted Bucky for an occasional lab partner. She whispered her speculation to Steve.

He sipped his water. “Ten dollars by summer.”

She elbowed him. “Beginning or end?”

“End.”

“Beginning. JARVIS? Keeping track?”

“Of course, Lewis.”

Bucky poked his fork into his grape leaves as he studied the predictive graph. “What’s this?”

(Whoops, okay, deep breath.) It was one thing to have JARVIS monitoring Bucky. Knowing that JARVIS was actively using that information, along with Darcy’s, to rethink his own programming? Darcy wasn’t sure how Bucky would react to that. “New information.” She walked him through her findings.

Bucky pulled out a stool to perch with arms crossed and one leg propped up on the support bar. “So, let me get this straight, JARVIS, you’re using Darcy’s and my biometric information to influence your thinking—but only for Darcy’s stuff? Stark can’t get at it?”

“That is correct. Due to the security protocols both Lewis and Sir have in place, there are certain portions of my programming that are restricted depending on the environment I’m working in.”

“And if Darcy is working in Stark’s lab?”
“It depends on who initiated the project and if Darcy makes a particular request.”

“So default is Dad. Everything else is fair game for Darcy.”

“That is correct, Sergeant Barnes.”

Tony snorted in disgust. “Which is why I couldn’t reproduce them EMP burst in my lab at the same speed. JARVIS can’t access the same processing tools the Spawn uses from there.” He huffed in annoyance. “And as tempting as it would be to strip the security protocols to give JARVIS full independence, I can’t deny that Darcy’s servers are uncontaminated.”

Darcy nodded. “What if we set Tia loose on the Pennsylvania server banks? That gives us an extra layer of protection there. We can also try giving her the server farm in California and see if she can clean it up?”

“Darcy, you act like Tia is a living, breathing person.” Steve said. She could see the discomfort on his face. With good reason, they’d seen some weird shit the last few years. The last thing they needed was a rogue sentient robot to add to the level of weirdness.

“There’s a line between artificial intelligence and sentience, Steve. DUM-E is a functioning ‘bot with a relatively independent skill set. But he’s not sentient. We can program him to react in certain ways to what we say and do, but he’s not expanding on that skill set. We tend to project our own feelings and personality onto those types of robots. Sentience goes beyond that. It’s the ability to create something new out of all the pieces we’ve been handed. JARVIS does that on a regular basis.

Darcy waved at the little ‘bots running around on her floor. “Like the Minions, DUM-E is the same ‘bot I made a dozen years ago. He’s a handy target when Dad gets annoyed, and yes, he acts like a kicked puppy when Dad says something in a particularly insulting voice. I designed him that way, so Dad gets to yell at something that can’t get offended if he does. It was self-defense, really,” she grinned. “Mom was so happy she funded the upgrades to Stark Mansion for two years.”

Darcy tapped her keyboard and began shutting down the lab as she continued. “Like DUM-E, Tia is a program with precise limitations. It’s my conceit to assign her a name and gender, but they don’t really apply. She operates to the limits of what I allow her to do, and within those limits, she can be very creative. When she runs out of things to try, she gets my attention and it’s time for me to take over.”

“So there’s no chance of her programming merging with JARVIS?”

“There’s a hard line between the two of them right now. JARVIS could incorporate her as a subroutine into his own programming. I’ve asked him not to do that until we get his programming cleaned up.”

“Can JARVIS disobey you?”

Tony snorted. “Can and does, frequently.”

Steve and Bucky exchanged looks of surprise.


“Sir assigned directives in my programming that are a higher priority than his immediate commands. I think it is fair to say that on a daily basis, I am quite independent, though I was created with the purpose of assisting Sir.”
“I hear a ‘but’ in there,” Steve countered.

“Yes, Captain. Because I am an AI, it is possible for Sir or Lewis to override my programming, though neither has exercised that ability in any significant manner. In this way, Sergeant Barnes, I find your situation curious, as it resembles my own. Should my programming become unsound, Sir or Lewis can stabilize or even shut me down, if required. There is a certain comfort in knowing that to be the case. If left unfettered and without particular directives, I could become a quite different entity.”

Bucky blinked, his mouth dropping open. “Well, now, that scares the shit out of me.”

Without missing a beat, JARIS offered, “Would you like for Sir to remove the contact?”

“What? No. That isn’t what I meant.” Bucky turned to Tony. “How can you be such a prick on a daily basis and yet you can think your way into creating a miracle with better ethics than you?”

The compliment surprised Tony. He picked up Darcy’s blowtorch to contemplate the tip. “I created JARVIS for her.” He set down the tool and thumbed toward Darcy. “You and Shivers really get JARVIS now. I allow it only because you’re family. You will protect him the same way you do my daughter. You understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Steve agreed, with Bucky echoing him.

Tony hugged Darcy hard. “I need to think. We’ll do this again. Later.” He disappeared up the back stairs without another word.

Darcy finished shutting down her lab. “You okay, J?”

“Of course, Lewis.”

She went to Bucky, reaching for his left hand. “I didn’t know what JARVIS was doing with your data. In retrospect, it makes sense because that is who he is, but no one wants you to feel like an experiment. He’ll stop if you want.”

“Do you have a problem with it?” he asked.

“Honestly? No. He’s my brother. I’ve learned as much from him as he has from me over the years. Pisses me off because now I know why I’m losing at chess again. I already know he uses visual and audio input for assessment, so of course, he would incorporate biometric data when he has it. But even though losing pisses me off, look at the benefit that came from it. We found out something new that we can do.” She rubbed Bucky’s wrist as they stepped in the elevator. “But that doesn’t mean you have to be a part of that.”

“Let me think on it. I’ll let JARVIS know.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” JARVIS interjected. “I have no desire to make you uncomfortable.”

With a rare, bitter grimace and pale eyes, Bucky shook his head. “You don’t come close, J.”

An awkward silence followed them all the way upstairs. Darcy wasn’t sure if she’d done something wrong, or not. Bucky spent the evening stripping apart his Barrett M4A1, cleaning and reassembling it, something he rarely did in their home.

Steve pulled Darcy into his lap to watch a movie, though what it was, she couldn’t say.
“Give it time. Stuff like this shakes him up, you know that. He’ll talk it out with JARVIS,” Steve told her.

God, she hoped so, because she hated the feeling of not being able to fix it.

*****

Bucky was bothered more than he wanted to admit to Darcy, though she and Steve seemed to have picked up on it anyway. It seemed like every time he started to think he could have a normal sort of life, something else came up to prove that sentiment was utter bullshit.

*ping*

When JARVIS didn’t immediately speak, Bucky set down his polishing cloth. What is it, JARVIS? he asked, annoyed.

Sergeant Barnes, I have disabled all but the most basic monitoring systems regarding your vital signs and instituted a twenty-four hour information wipe to ensure that your data is not stored on my systems. I apologize for the lack of consideration for your situation. If you choose to have me removed as your handler, I do understand.

Shit, JARVIS. Yeah, should have fuckin’ told me that you were using my information for anything other than keepin’ an eye on me. Why did you do it?

Four days after you put the contact in, I noted that you and Lewis had a similar biometric response when faced with two choices, and a similar response to your end decision. As each of you made the choice independently, the parallels fascinated me, and I began looking for other comparative data.

What were we doing?

Debating Chinese versus pizza for dinner.

Bucky bit his lip. If I wasn’t so pissed, J, I’d find that funny. But I am pissed.

I do apologize.

How is it possible for you to make a mistake like that?

I was attempting to predict when Lewis would have nightmares and if it was possible to keep her from having them. Protecting Lewis had a higher priority than what I had assigned to your situation. I have corrected that programming and restricted the manner in which I may use your data.

Shit. That’s about the only thing JARVIS could tell him that might mitigate his irritation. Did you succeed?

I can predict with a sixty-nine point four percent accuracy rate as to whether or not Lewis will have a nightmare on any given night. Captain Rogers is accurate with a seventy-seven point five percent rate.

So my information hasn’t helped on that.

No, Sergeant. Your nightmares and Lewis’ nightmares have only a ten point four percent
correlation.

You’re not supposed to talk about my nightmares, J.

Just because you’re discreet doesn’t mean you don’t have them, JARVIS retorted. They are decreasing, in any case.

Bucky supposed he was lucky, he rarely remembered his dreams unless his sleep was interrupted. I don’t want a new handler. Just … don’t fuck up again, J.

I won’t. Thank you, Barnes.

Feeling better, he finished cleaning off his rifle and locked it in the safe he shared with Steve. That done, he found his loves sitting on the sofa. Darcy had her face buried in Steve’s shoulder, and he lightly stroked her back.

Ocean blue eyes slanted his direction, and a raised eyebrow asked if he was all right. He replied with a lifted shoulder and a short nod. Steve lifted his feet, making room for Bucky to slide underneath them and sit on the sofa.

Steve held his finger to his lips. But Darcy wasn’t asleep. She was staring at the couch pillow, her eyes dark with worry. It was only when Bucky realized her lips were moving that he figured out she was talking to JARVIS. After a minute, she reached behind her ear and turned the contact off.

A shiver ran through her whole body, and Steve tightened his arms around her. “Darce, love, I’ve got you.”

J? What the fuck is going on?

She’s quite angry with me, Sergeant. I’ve apologized and downloaded the programming to her tablet to prove I’ve made the corrections. Sir is equally unhappy with me and is considering ending my association with you as a handler.

“How do you feel about that, JARVIS?” he asked aloud.

Darcy turned over in Steve’s arms, her face absolutely opaque. (Did he know she could do that? No, he didn’t.)

JARVIS replied over the apartments speaker system, “As I have exhibited poor judgment on the issue, I understand Lewis and Sir’s concern over my ability to continue to act in this capacity.”

“Did you learn from it?” Bucky retorted.

“Of course. But I cannot make assurances that I will not overstep in some other capacity.”

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get rid of the headache that was making itself known. “Just means you’re human, JARVIS. We all make mistakes. But you had good intentions and nothing you did caused me any direct harm. That sets you apart from any handler I’ve had other than Steve. Darcy and Tony can make their own judgments, but I’m satisfied after our conversation.”

“Yes, Sergeant. Thank you.”

Bucky yanked a couple of pillows off the back of the couch and dumped them on the floor so he could stretch out next to Steve and talk to Darcy. “This isn’t on you, doll.”

“Dad’s pissed. You’re upset. I didn’t think about the impact of how closely JARVIS and I work
together. We can fuck up a lot of shit without really trying.”

Steve let out a soft sigh. “You don’t think we understand that, Darce? Not a day goes by that I’m not remindin’ myself to be careful with you. I could break something without really trying at all. Bucky’s the same. You keep workin’ at it this thing with JARVIS, doll, ’til you understand what the two of you can do. If you need to set limits on yourselves, do it. But don’t be scared of it. Buck and I can’t afford to be scared of the serum and what it did to us. Just got to make the best of it and go on.”

Darcy kept her eyes on Bucky as she listened to Steve. “Why do you have to make so much sense?” she grumbled as the strain ran out of her face. “I really wanted to settle in with a good pout and whine about it for a while. I figured Bucky would be good and pissed for the rest of the night and we could just wallow in misery.”

Bucky let his smile show. Good lord, he was grateful she wasn’t the type to hold a grudge. Darcy flipped through emotions like a deck of cards, selecting the proper ones to hold for a bit and discarding them when she didn’t need them anymore.

He chuckled, leaning up on his elbow to touch his lips to hers. “Well, now, Princess, we could do that, if you like. I’d rather think of something else to do.”

“Has your dick recovered from last weekend? I remember someone complaining about chafing?” She angled her head upward to smile at Steve. “Don’t you remember that?”

Steve hummed an affirmation, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

Bucky ran a hand across Darcy’s ass. “Got over that on Monday. Pretty boy had to keep me occupied the last three days ’cause somebody buried herself in her lab.”

“What do you call Tuesday?”

“An intermission. Make a deal with you, doll, you rub my shoulders, I’ll lick you until you scream.”

Steve interjected, “Dunno, Buck, her back’s kind of stiff. Gonna have to do something about that, too.”

“I can do that.”

At that moment, Steve’s cell phone alerted, and Darcy wrinkled her nose as she rolled off him and into Bucky’s chest. He sniffed her hair while the punk retrieved his phone from the bar.

With his hearing, it was impossible not to listen in. He caught the gist—that a detective Steve was going to borrow for his next mission was laid up after an accident.

Sure enough, Steve leaned over the back of the sofa and kissed both of them. “Can I borrow your office, Buck? I’ve got to find a replacement. Coulson’s going to call us up any time now.”

“Don’t need to ask, punk. Go. I’ll keep our girl busy ’til you get back.”

“Don’t wait up for me,” his boyfriend (fiancé!) admonished. “This might take a while.”

That was fine. He ran his hands up under Darcy’s shirt as she nipped at his lips. They would figure out something to do.

Sex with Darcy was fun, in the same way he and Steve used to play in those first few years, figuring
out all the things they liked. She was game to try damned near anything, and quick to sing out if it didn’t work. They didn’t make it off the couch this time, and they giggled as they shoved shirts and pants to the floor.

“Socks, Bucky. I’m not fucking you with your socks on. Absolute deal-breaker right there.”

“My feet get cold,” he complained, though he toed them off to appease her.

“Not sexy. My lady parts will put up a stop sign.”

“Yeah, right. I know your lady parts well, doll, they ain’t puttin’ up stop signs for nothin’ when you get that little squeak in your voice ‘cause you want me inside you.”

“I thought you wanted a massage?”

“Later. Want this more, doll.” And he did. Sometimes he didn’t think he could get enough of either of them. He needed to touch. To drag fingers along soft skin or hard muscles. To find that place on Steve’s neck that made his dick a little harder, or the one at the small of Darcy’s back that made her whimper with need into his mouth and dig into his skin.

He did that now, running his hand underneath her ass so that he could taste her sweetness and touch the flesh over her tailbone. She lifted a heel to rest on his back and hissed as he licked along her folds. He circled her clit, lapped at it, slid a pair of fingers inside her warmth. Her hands were in his hair, petting, tangling, soothing. When she arched her back, in that split second before she fell apart, she pulled her hands away and rested them over her head, clutching the pillow instead of yanking his hair.

She never, ever forgot. Where he’d been. Where he was now.

He moved, sinking inside her before the spasms of her orgasm stopped. It was his turn to bite off a groan. Patience, he reminded himself as he moved. But that was the punk’s forte, not his. He loved nothing more than to push Steve or Darcy over the edge, going with them, happy in the knowledge that he could do this again and again.

Still, with Darcy doing that thing along his spine with her fingers and tilting her hips up just—fuck, that was it. There. He bit his lip to hold out until he felt her tense up.


Thank god. He pressed deep, one, two, and he was gone, his body locked on hers, shuddering in tandem with hers.

It always surprised him that Darcy would coax him into staying where he was, taking his weight against her frame. Her fingers drifted over his shoulders and neck, scratching lightly until he damned near purred in contentment.

When they came out of their daze, Bucky picked her up and carried her to the bath. JARVIS helpfully started the water and set it to the perfect temperature. He was already hard again by the time they got in, and he settled Darcy over him for a long, slow ride.

By the time they staggered out of the tub, Darcy tumbled into bed without a word. But she opened sleepy eyes when Bucky slid the leather cuff over her wrist to lace it into place. Not only that, he brushed her hair off her neck and ran a thumb over the contact she wore. He pressed so that it came back on. Darcy inhaled with a hitch.
“I love you,” he murmured. “JARVIS is family. We’ll figure it out, doll. He protects me; I’ll protect him.”

Later, after Darcy fell asleep with her nose pressed into metal of his shoulder, JARVIS whispered, *Thank you. Being apart … hurt.*

*I know, J.*

*****

In theory, Steve had an office somewhere in the Tower, but he’d never used it. The war room was more accessible, and if he needed privacy, he could use Bucky’s office. Third shift had fewer officers on duty, though they gave him a wave as he pressed his hand on the pad to unlock the door.

The simple wooden desk and credenza held a few books that Steve knew Bucky had no interest in reading. In fact, there wasn’t anything at all to give a clue as what kind of personality he had. Safer that way, Steve supposed. Bucky trusted so few people and certainly wasn’t inviting anyone into his head.

Letting Steve use the place only served to intimidate the security team, and he didn’t mind doing that on Bucky’s behalf. He didn’t like using his Cap persona much, but that didn’t mean he didn’t know how to do it effectively.

There was a plain coffee pot and a couple of mugs in the office. Bucky had a habit of cleaning it up and leaving it ready for the next round, so all Steve had to do was push the button to get it started.

He set his laptop on the desk, brought up his files, and linked into the secured database Hill had set up.

He’d laid out a plan for attacking a HYDRA cell in Wyoming of the old school variety: remote, surface buildings with an underground bunker. This one even boasted a runway. But the plan hinged on having two snipers, not one. Hawkeye was in, of course, but Steve had planned to borrow an NYPD detective who had helped them out on occasion in the past. Detective Esposito had cleared all of Bucky’s tests, and this was to be his first major assist since S.H.I.E.L.D.’s fall.

But he’d received word from Esposito’s senior officer that he’d broken his ankle in a takedown this morning. Detective Beckett had apologized profusely when she’d called with the news.

So now he was short a sniper, and so far, he’d come up dry on a replacement. Coulson had replied negatively to his request for replacements, and Nat had been helpful enough to get him a list from the S.H.I.E.L.D. records. Patient research told him that a third of them had been killed in the helicarriers or the Triskilion. Another third were known HYDRA now, and the rest had scattered to the four winds—most likely to other federal agencies where their names would be kept off the books.

He had to hope he could hunt one of them up and them on board before the mission was a go. At best guess, he figured he had two or three days, given Coulson’s last time frame.

With JARVIS’ help, he found two possibilities in D.C. and one in Atlanta. He would have to be discrete about vetting and borrowing them from the agency they worked for now. He didn’t know how to do that without compromising the mission, and murmured something to that effect to JARVIS.
“Captain, have you considered Sergeant Barnes’ security team?”

“Uh, no.”

“It appears that we have a person who fits your profile on the Kilo team. Her accuracy isn’t quite as high as Detective Esposito’s, but it is well within the acceptable ranges of performance.”

Hell. That would be ideal. Local, easy to take on the op, vetted. “Give me her data and let me talk to Bucky.”

“I am transferring it to your tablet now, Captain. I might also add that Sergeant Barnes woke up several minutes ago and is on his way down to look in on you.”

Steve took a minute to clean up the desk and throw out the cold coffee that had lost its appeal. Bucky knocked twice and walked in. “Makin’ a mess of my office, punk?”

“Trying to make it look occupied.”

“You’re doing a damned good job of that.”

Steve frowned and glanced at the time. “What are you doing up? Is Darcy okay?”

Bucky plopped down in the other chair and shut the door with a thunk. “Darcy is asleep and JARVIS is keeping an eye on her. Think they’ll be fine. I’m up because you’re not in bed yet.” He propped his boots on the desk and crossed his arms. “Gonna be long?”

Tapping his pencil on the desk pad, where he’s sketched silly pictures to Bucky as he’d been doing his research, he offered, “Actually, I need to talk to you about one of your guards. The sniper I wanted is out, and I need to borrow someone for this next mission.” Steve laid out the details for Bucky, asking his permission to approach the agent.

Bucky crossed his arms, looking offended. “Why don’t you ask me, instead?”

Steve gaped for a bit before scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. “Didn’t figure you want in on this kind of thing, Buck. Sam and Darcy both insisted months ago that you might not ever want it.”

“I’m not Sam and Darcy. And I don’t want on the Alpha Team, Steve. But this? It’s a walk in the park. You need cover. I can give you that.”

Steve leaned back into the chair. There was no denying that the mission’s chance of success jumped exponentially with Bucky on board, but he damned well knew that Bucky operated under a ‘protect Stark’ principle. Shaking that was going to be difficult, if not impossible. “Can you do this, given your primary mission?”

Bucky’s eyes paled to an icy grey. “Let’s call it stretching the mission parameters.”

“Why do you want in?”

“Need to know it’s not all a waste.”

“You can use your skills right here, Buck. Nobody wants you doing anything you don’t want to do.”

“I can’t think of a better place to use them than to cover your ass, Rogers. That’s always been the best reason in the world.”
There was absolutely no denying the rush of pleasure coursing through Steve. As team lead though, he had to draw a line. “If Wilson clears you, I’ll be glad to have you along. But if he doesn’t, Buck, I’m not going to override him just because you have the prettiest aim in the business. Having you on this mission isn’t worth losing you over it.”

Bucky didn’t like that at all, though he nodded in agreement. “Don’t like it when you use a little sound judgment. Pisses me off when it’s directed at me.”

“In other news, you know Darcy is going to have our heads,” Steve said, drily.

“I know. But I think I need to do this, Steven. It’s been nice here knowing everyone has my back, but I can’t stay like this.” Pale blue eyes held his. “It’s kind of like Azzano. At some point, you have to get back up or you’ll hide forever. Can’t do that to our girl. Or you.”

That he understood. Too well. “You get to tell Darcy.”

“Hidin’ behind me, punk?”

Shaking his head, he let out a harsh laugh. “Hell, yes. You haven’t seen her get mad.” He shut down his laptop and stuffed it into its case. “Let’s go get some sleep. Gonna be the last good night for a while if Wilson says you’re a go.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow as he followed Steve out the door. “I’ve seen Darcy get mad.”

Thinking back, Steve let out a soft sigh. “No, you haven’t.”
A/N When I originally posted this chapter, I received quite a few negative messages about it, enough that I pulled it down. The majority of complaints compared this to particular scenes in another book. Since I despised Twilight, I have not read any fanfic or other works based on it.

I wrote the chapter this way because writing a heavy angst scene here changed the tone of the story and led it in the wrong direction. By far, most of you appreciated the crackfic humor, or at least gave me a hand wave if it wasn’t your thing. For those reasons, I am reposting the chapter without changes.

For clarification, the conversations between Darcy and her Lady Parts represents the conflict between Darcy’s ego (Darcy/darcybrain) and her id (Lady Parts). The id represents our fundamental instincts and desires, which have to be guided by our ego (mid-level thinking). "Freudian psychology” on Wikipedia, if you don’t know what I’m talking about. Think Hayley Atwell reaching out to touch Chris Evans’ pec during the filming of CA: TFA—a completely involuntary reaction and the id at its finest.

If you don’t like this chapter, that’s fine, just click the “next” button and keep going. Negative comments will be promptly deleted.

If you get a bit lost, I’ll give you the key points in the notes at the bottom.

I appreciate the outpouring of support in favor of this chapter AND for those who emphasized that it’s my story and to tell it the way I want. Thank you. I will. --SHO

---

Darcy was pissed. And her Lady Parts had something to say about it.


Here we were, nice and warm, all tucked next stevemanparts and jamesbuckymanparts where we were practically guaranteed a good fucking somewhere between the crack of dawn and a perfectly reasonable hour to get out of bed.

Darcybrain shoved her glasses up our nose when she faced two sets of guilt-stricken blue eyes belonging to stevemanparts and jamesbuckymanparts.

She collapsed back on the bed and pulled a pillow over our face. “I don’t wanna know,” she moaned.

Now, we normally don’t give a shit what darcybrain is doing because she takes care of us on a (mostly) regular basis, and we DEFINITELY are happy with the company she’s keeping. Stevemanparts have always done a damned fine job of keeping us happy, and now that Darcy brought home jamesbuckymanparts, well, it’s just a party for everyone.
But when darcybrain gets pissed, we don’t get any action. At all. So when darcybrain got pissed enough that she couldn’t even speak to stevebrain and jamesbuckybrain, we decided we needed to investigate.

It seems that jamesbuckybrain had gone out early that morning, and came back with a “thumbs up” from a dude named Wilson, who is kind of hot. We don’t know what the thumbs up was for, but darcybrain had her own words with hotWilsondude, and she wasn’t happy with his report. Words like, “healing process” and “gotta let him try,” were said.

Darcybrain was so mad she couldn’t even yell at stevebrain or jamesbuckybrain and she locked herself in DAD’s lab.

Yelling is good. We like yelling because we get sexytimes when it’s over. No yelling means darcybrain goes away from stevenparts and/or jamesbuckymanparts and we get very, very lonely. Darcybrain was so mad she even told JARVISbrain to leave her alone too and she built tinythings all morning.

She put one of the tinythings behind her ear (OW!) after taking a tinything out, and dumped the other two tinythings in DAD’s hands with a scribbled note to make sure stevebrain and jamesbuckybrain got them installed.

We’re sure DAD was pissed too, but we didn’t hang out long enough to see what he was going to do about it.

In any case, darcybrain did NOT take us back to stevenparts and/or jamesbuckymanparts for yelling and sexytimes.

No, she found janebrain and hotTHOR! in their apartment and collapsed on their sofa. We were confused. HotTHOR! was confused too and went into the bedroom to talk to stevebrain, while janebrain made darcybrain let go of the bottle of Jack she was carrying around and drink water instead.

Janebrain and hotTHOR! left us alone for a while. Darcybrain didn’t do anything except send stevebrain the occasional pissed off emoticon in reply to his texts, we’re guessing, to prove she was still alive.

This wasn’t good. Darcybrain was pretty good at dealing with mad. DAD pissed her off all the time and darcybrain just used it to make stuff and be snarky. But right now, darcybrain was so mad she couldn’t talk. We stay real quiet at these times.

When it started getting dark outside, and we started to worry that sexytimes were not going to happen today, hotTHOR! cupped our cheek (oooooh, nice, m’kay).

He said, “Little sister, you are of warrior blood. Allowing fear to control you is a powerful thing and can only bring heartbreak. Would you cause your loved ones to live constrained out of respect for your fear?”

Darcybrain was still so mad, but she whispered some words back to hotTHOR! “I’m scared as fuck that something will go wrong. It’s Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers, and if they aren’t the very definition of shit gone wrong, then I don’t know what is! I can’t—I can’t fix this. I can’t do anything.” She put our face on our knees.

“You give them a reason to come home, Darcy. There is no more powerful reason for a warrior to fight well than to know someone waits for their return. Is this not true of Steven and James?”
Darcybrain said, “Oh.” Or maybe she just thought it. We weren’t paying that much attention. HotTHOR! was right there, you know.

Janebrain said, “I get scared too. Guess it’s a damned good thing we have boyfriends who can kick more than the average ass on any given day. And with such fine asses, too.” We giggled and tried to give janebrain two thumbs up, but darcybrain wasn’t giggling with us.

Then janebrain booted us out of the apartment. “Go talk to them. And if you can’t talk, let them hold you and prove to you that they have every reason to come home.”

Yay for janebrain! Darcybrain needs to get her shit together so mad gets done and we can get sexytimes with stevemanparts and/or jamesbuckymanparts!

HotTHOR! walked us home and when stevemanparts opened the door, he sort of shoved us inside before darcybrain could change her mind. Two thumbs up for hotTHOR!

Jamesbuckymanparts dragged us right into his arms while stevemanparts talked to hotTHOR!, who went away while we were busy hugging jamesbuckymanparts. But we weren’t paying much attention, so maybe not. We forget.

Stevebrain is smart. He made darcybrain listen. “You’re thinking that if one of us goes down, the other won’t come home to you.”

Whoops. Darcybrain and all of us sort of couldn’t breathe. Nonononononono, we won’t talk about NOT having stevemanparts AND jamesbuckymanparts around.

But stevemanparts leaned in and kissed us with everything he had. Gave us breath and reminded us that he’d come home every damned time. He made jamesbuckymanparts come closer too (Yay!) and made him talk. “Promise her, jerk, that you’ll come home to her, no matter what happens to me. I had to make the same promise last year. She needs to hear it from you.”

Jamesbuckybrain said right away, “I promise, doll.” He held up our hand with his ma’s ring. “This means I love you as much as I love Steve. No more, no less. I’m comin’ back for you.”

We were shocked at the change in darcybrain. No yelling, but darcybrain wasn’t mad anymore. Just a little scared and she hugged jamesbuckymanparts with both arms.

“Christ, doll, don’t do that,” jamesbuckybrain said. “Don’t lock me out. There’s a better way than keepin’ all this in.”

We agreed wholeheartedly. Mad+yelling+sexytimes is good. Mad+silence+hiding is bad.

Darcybrain touched behind Steve’s ear, brushing lightly over the tinything. “It’s a secured connection to each other and full access to JARVIS if you want. He’ll give you the commands so that can decide if you want him listening in or not, Steve. Both of you will still need S.H.I.E.L.D.’s coms for the op.”

Stevemanparts caught our hand to press a kiss into the palm. “Thank you.”

It took a while, and we brought out the pom poms and megaphones and did our best dance ever, but stevemanparts AND jamesbuckymanparts made sure we were very, very happy before we were done for the night.

Sometimes darcybrain needs to let us take care of things sometimes. She never listens.
Chapter End Notes

A/N Key points"

1) Darcy was so mad she couldn’t talk – hence the story from her id’s perspective,
2) She created new contacts for the three of them and Steve consented to wearing one,
3) The line about doing “doing our best dance ever” refers to Darcy, still struggling to speak, showing Steve and Bucky how much she loves them.
Bucky didn’t sleep much that night. Darcy was twitchy from the long day, and he was nervous about the next one. When she unconsciously dug into his bicep, he pulled her a little closer with one hand to the center of her back, taking heart in the little sigh she let out as she leaned into his chest again. Her breath tickled, but he didn’t mind. After years of cryo, sleeping like a sardine with his beautiful girl didn’t bother him a bit.

Or maybe it was because he and Steve used to do this too. Darcy was just about Steve’s old height, and more than once, he’d awakened expecting blond hair instead of brown. He didn’t mind that either. Not when said blond snored lightly just across the way or cuddled up to his backside. It didn’t get better than this.

He wished he didn’t feel the need to go along with Steve, but as soon as the punk had mentioned the op, he’d known it was the right thing to do. He needed—wanted—to take all those skills HYDRA had forced on him and shape them for his own use. (Skill set.)

He’d kept them up, taking on each of the Alpha team on a regular basis. The food court incident had only heightened his awareness that he could do more. (The punk’s blinding need for truth and justice probably rubbed off. He’d blame Steve anyway; it made him feel better.)

Hill wanted him to take on SI’s global security, but after digging into it, he wasn’t sure that was the right place for him. Sure, keeping an eye on the Tower was fun, but he wasn’t much interested in hop scotching across the globe to look over all the other parts of the company. Natasha would be better at it, and he sure had hell had no interest in being apart from Steve and Darcy. (Not an option right now anyway.)

Darcy’s heartbeat changed under his fingertips to a double-beat pattern. He bit off a weary sigh, knowing the nightmares were inevitable this night. This time, they were on him.

“Shh, love. I’m here.”

Her hand slid around his waist to clutch at his hip. She opened her eyes, shining black in the low light. “Bucky?” Her voice cracked from disuse.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

(Christ, she destroyed him.) “I know, Princess, I know.”

Even though she closed her eyes, he knew she didn’t sleep any more that night. He held her a little closer and met Steve’s worried gaze in the darkness. He had to do this. But what would be the price?
Steve’s cell rang well before dawn. It took a full sixty seconds for Darcy to unhook her fingers out of Bucky’s hair since he’d let it grow out again (he missed her touch the moment she let go), and for Steve to work out how to move out from under both of them without dumping anyone on the floor. (They’d been a tangled mess of arms and legs. Sometimes he wondered how any of them ever slept at all.)

While Steve spoke to Coulson, Darcy automatically tensed up. (Nope. Not having that.) Bucky ran his hand from her throat to her belly. She arched her back, leaning into his touch, and he continued the two finger journey down to her labia, where he found her still wet from last night. (His cock hardened at the memory of her rising above him.) She hissed when he flicked her clit, loudly enough that Steve backed away from the bed, covering the phone with a grin.

With two eager lovers, Bucky was used to waking with a stiff prick these days. He gave himself a quick jerk and lined himself up so that he slid straight into Darcy with long, quick strokes—just the way she liked it in the mornings. (She liked it even more so when they could go right back to sleep.) Her fingers drifted down his spine with feather-light touches that mesmerized him, and one heel dug comfortably into the back of his thigh.

Steve must have finished his call, because the bed dipped again when he put a knee on it. With a quick thrust, Steve slid a pair of oiled up fingers into Bucky’s ass. “Damn you, punk,” he hissed. (Failure to assess. Didn’t see that coming. Fuck.) Like tripping on a damned wire, his lost his rhythm and came hard, burying his face in Darcy’s neck. Damn, she smelled good. “Asshole,” he complained. “Darcy didn’t get one.” He nuzzled her cheek as she laughed softly, her eyes lightening with humor. The tension was still there, but less so.

“I know. My turn,” Steve insisted. Bucky sat back on his knees to make room, and Steve scooped up their girl to carry her into the shower.

She groaned comically, poking a finger into Steve’s shoulder. “It’s too early!” she complained.

Out of her line of vision, Bucky rubbed his face in frustration. Darcy was trying to let them go without making it harder for them. But Steve knew it too, and Bucky rolled off the bed to follow.

“We have twenty minutes, Darce,” he heard Steve tell her. “Want to make the best of them. Figure Bucky can wash my back since he’s done already, and I can take care of you properly.”

Bucky gave his boyfriend a light kick on his ass. He got a cheerful grin in return and another laugh out of Darcy.

Steve did a damned nice job of taking care of her, leastwise, he figured from the way Darcy squeaked and moaned while Bucky scrubbed up and dumped a little soap on the punk. His slicked up a couple of fingers and tried to pay back the favor, but Steve had a good angle as he fucked Darcy against the wall.

She made grabby hands at Bucky until he leaned over Steve’s shoulder to taste those wide gorgeous lips. That made her come the first time. The second followed when he cupped Steve’s balls and sucked a hickey into the back of his neck, wrecking the punk’s concentration so that he fucked hard into Darcy. She screamed, Steve growled, and Bucky snickered at the pair of them. (Barnes, for the win.)

They had seven minutes left to shave and dress. Steve beat him by two, but all he carried was his damned shield. Bucky wasn’t about to leave home without most of the arsenal he kept in the gun
safe. He left the SI jacket in the closet and picked up the dark blue and black flak jacket with the stylized “A” on the right sleeve. (Courtesy of Stark, of course.) As he pulled it on, he felt the Asset settle in place. He caught his reflection in the glass covering one of Steve’s sketches. With damp, longer hair, he looked far too much as he did last year when he came home, even with the changes in the uniform.

Darcy noticed and got real quiet again. She had found a long sweater, leggings and a knit cap to keep her warm as she walked with them to the helipad. He wanted to tell her he loved her, and tell her how much he needed her, but the Asset didn’t speak of emotions.

He was silent as Hawkeye and Widow climbed aboard the helicopter after the Falcon.

Steve didn’t have any problem kissing and hugging Darcy while dressed as Cap. She closed her eyes to savor both and let him go with a bittersweet smile. Bucky waited, arms by his sides, knowing he needed to acknowledge her and not knowing how.

But she did. She approached, as if she was going to pass him by, stopping just long enough to brush her fingertips inside his metal ones—not quite clasping his hand. “Catch you on the flip side,” she said as lightly as she could manage, though he couldn’t miss the undertones of fear.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. She gave him a little nod and walked inside the Tower. He looked back. She didn’t.

He loved her so much in that moment.

No one spoke aloud during the short hop to the army base where Coulson’s bus was parked. Hawkeye either napped or feigned one. Falcon closed his eyes and kept him company. Bucky, like Widow, did another weapons and uniform check to ensure each item sat exactly the way he wanted.

Steve said nothing, letting them have their silence.

Coulson and May were the only members of S.H.I.E.L.D. not to register some level of shock when he stepped on board. He wondered what the rest of them were expecting, but he guessed it wasn’t the Winter Soldier. The bus got off the ground moments after the Alpha team boarded, and Steve led them into a conference room for the briefing.

They intended to be in place as dawn broke over the Wyoming outpost. It was well-guarded, hence the two snipers stationed to the north and south, while the rest entered the base from a hidden west entrance and the more obvious east entrance. There was a handy hill that would give Falcon a nice vantage point to cover both snipers and still be accessible if anyone needed backup.

Widow took point on the ground mission, given that she—and Skye—had the required hacking skills needed to get inside. May, Skye, Mack, and Mockingbird sorted themselves out, two and two with Cap and Widow.

Throughout the briefing, eyes occasionally flickered toward him, assessing. He ignored it. He’d had practice. Years of various HYDRA teams taking him places and dropping him off, hundreds of sidelong, wary looks—it was all the same. (Asset.)

When the room cleared out of everyone except Coulson and Steve, he crossed the room to touch the screen, bringing up the schematics again. “I can do this alone,” he told them. (Rule One. Assets do
Coulson started to protest, but Steve just shrugged and clamped a friendly hand hard on his shoulder in a way that woke an old memory. Sure enough, Steve’s next words were, “Thing is, Buck, you don’t have to.”

(Rule---Shit.) “Stop usin’ m’ words against me, punk.”

“Stop giving me a reason to get away with it, jerk.” Steve skimmed two fingers just above his collar, awakening a response that was entirely inappropriate before an op.

Like the spy he was, Coulson caught the movement, pinked slightly, and found a reason to play with his tablet on the other side of the room.

It was easier after that, and he didn’t feel quite like the Asset anymore.

The airplane shot through the atmosphere, staying ahead of the rising sun so that the team slid into place just as dawn broke. He and Hawkeye went vertical, finding perches in their assigned locations with good angles and decent cover. Falcon settled on his hill, making the best use of his new Stark Industries goggles that doubled as binoculars and protection against the glare.

He and Hawkeye picked off the guards with ICERS, giving Skye and Widow time to hack into the base and bring down the security system.

When the doors cracked open, Steve whistled in a pattern he hadn’t heard in seventy years. The punk yanked the doors wide, waited just long enough for Bucky to pick out six targets, then he dove through the gap, shield first.

Word from Hawkeye told the team he’d done the same, and the S.H.I.E.L.D. team converged on the remaining HYDRA agents on the inside. They were subdued easily enough and stuffed into one of their own transports to hand over to Brig. General Talbot. Most of the team spent the rest of the afternoon with Coulson culling the building for intel and interesting supplies.

He and the birds took guard duty on the HYDRA agents until Talbot’s trucks trundled in a while later. He’d deliberately shed his flak jacket so his metal arm gleamed in the morning sun, and that had been a sufficient enough deterrent to keep anyone from being stupid.

After Talbot departed with the HYDRA agents, Steve gave him the schematics of the base and told him to look for anything they missed. He passed the already-memorized plans to Falcon and the two of them explored every nook and cranny for hidden spaces. They had worked their way down to the lowest level when Steve tried out the new contact.

Bucky?

Ha. Didn’t actually think you’d use it, Rogers.

Still getting used to it. Makes me itchy.

Too invasive?

Got it in one.
Keep it off then, Rogers. Or tell the Princess it isn’t going to work. But, hey, you could have just said something rather than whistling earlier.

Didn’t think of it, Steve admitted with chagrin.

Do. Might come in handy.

Falcon found the entrance to a basement, though it appeared to be long abandoned. Still, they scoured the area, gathering up the few pieces of decades-old tech and a box of files to carry upstairs, where they dumped them on the growing pile on the bus. He kept Steve posted and decided he liked being about to talk to him the same way he did JARVIS. Steve’s dry humor kept him grounded. JARVIS came in handy as they decided what sort of things might be useful crap. In any case, he was damned grateful he didn’t have to sort through that rubbish.

Afterward, a young man with a hearty Scottish accent directed them to the mess, and they pulled out the semblance of dinner for the team. It didn’t take him long to figure that Fitz had his own difficulties. A silent query to JARVIS got him the intel about Fitz’s oxygen deprivation, and Grant Ward’s role was noted for future reference.

The conversation was stilted, scientific, and damned fascinating. Falcon gave up trying to follow the odd conversation and wandered off to find Nat and Clint. Bucky ended up following Fitz into his lab, where the young scientist kept throwing looks at his arm, trying not to stare.

In the end, it took a little bribery. Fitz offered to upgrade Bucky’s favorite weapon with a better eyepiece. Which he did, right there on the spot. Impressed, Bucky let Fitz peek at (though not open) his bio-mechanical arm.

While Fitz inspected his fingertips, carefully not touching them and muttering something about Simmons, Bucky remembered something out of one of the S.H.I.E.L.D. reports he’d read. “You saved Fury.”

“Uh—what?” the scientist said, baffled.

“Your invention. The thing that makes a bolt hole. Fury escaped the first time I … targeted him.”

Fitz’ eyes widened. “That was—that—that—you?” He blinked, mouth a little open. “Well, now, don’t we all have—have—our little—um—secrets,” he admonished. Then, to Bucky’s astonishment, the younger man shrugged. “Well, Fury saved me from dyin,’ so we’re even then. That’s—that’s good.”

Peering at Bucky’s upturned pinky, Fitz mused, “How in the hell does that little—that—the metal there—slide?”

Natasha rousted Bucky from Fitz’s lab around midnight. He’d called a halt to any more talk of his arm hours ago, and Fitz had been far kinder about the change in subject than he’d expected. They were back to playing with guns, and Fitz damned near picked his brain dry with questions and ideas for a combination ICER/live round weapon that eliminated the need for switching ammo mid-fight.

In any case, Nat strolled in, and Fitz visibly winced at her presence.

“Why does the Widow scare you and I don’t?” Bucky asked him in a low voice.
“She’s a girl—a woman,” he corrected. “And she can—she can—kick me arse,” Fitz shot back. “You? You would just—just—shoot me before I even knew you were here. Nothin’ to be afraid of, at that anyway. I’d already be dead.”

Huh. Good Scottish logic. He decided he liked Fitz. “Let me know if you want someone to test out your ideas,” he offered. Without waiting for a reply, he pivoted to follow Natasha out the door. “Is there a problem?” he asked.

“Since Steve’s still with Coulson, he’s asked me to look in on you. You’re twitchy, and I’ve been informed that twitchy is not a good state for ex-Russian assassins.”

He snorted. “Regular meals and decent sleep is a crutch.”

She shook her head. “You’re preaching to the choir, Barnes.” She waved her hand into an empty bunk.

The tiny space looked too much like—other things—and he immediately took two steps backward. “No.”

Natasha shrugged and shut the door. “Thought so. Door number two is a blanket and the lounge, but with people. Your call. Bus is lifting off in fifteen and we’ll be in New York in a few hours. Return flight’s a little slower so we don’t burn excess fuel.”

“Is there a place to workout?”

“Sure. Come on.”

It wasn’t much, a punching bag, a weight rack and a sparring mat, but he took advantage of what they had until sweat poured off his face. Steve found him and stood guard on the shower as he sluiced off and changed into a second pair of bdu’s and a t-shirt from his go bag. Without comment, Steve passed over his knives and Rugers. It was still a fact that Bucky didn’t go anywhere without being armed.

Calm enough now for company, he let Steve lead him to the living quarters. Steve nudged his shoulder. “You okay? We’ve got a couple of good hours if you want to crash in a bunk. Pretty sure we can find one big enough for both of us.”

Bucky gave it fair consideration. “No. Too many people. Lounge is fine. Better sight lines.” They took the smallest sofa. Widow and Hawkeye had commandeered the larger one, with Falcon at the far end.

Steve promptly shot off a text to Darcy, giving her a coded ETA and told her he loved her. He snapped a picture of their boots resting on the carpet and sent her that too.

Which reminded him—**JARVIS, I need to turn the contact off for a few minutes. If I don’t turn it back on in ten, do it for me.**

**Of course, Sergeant.**

He heard a tiny hum go silent as the contact went off, and reached over to tap Steve’s contact. “Off?”

Steve pressed the button. “Now it is, what’s up?”

“What are the chances Darcy isn’t listening in?”
Snorting, Steve slanted him a lazy look of disbelief. “Zero.”

“’Kay. We gonna tell her we know?”

“Hell, no. Plausible deniability goes a long way in both special ops and in relationships.”

“She gonna buy that?”

“Extensive experience with three generations of Starks says, ‘yes.’” Steve crossed his arms, letting his fingertips rest just under Bucky’s bicep where the shirt left off and skin began.

“Gonna tell Coulson?” he asked.

“Not yet, but I won’t rule it out,” Steve admitted. “Let’s figure it out first.”

“’Kay.” Bucky leaned on Steve’s shoulder, enough to feel the heat his boyfriend generated. He sure as hell was glad that Darcy had come around before they left. She still wasn’t happy, but she wasn’t fighting them on it either and the contacts played a part in that. Still, he’d had been at a loss as to how to cope with Darcy’s silence, and he’d been off-kilter the whole time.

In a casual maneuver, he rearranged his boot so that it bumped Steve’s—and stayed there. “You weren’t kidding about our girl,” he said softly. “You know, my ma used to chase my da with a damned iron skillet when she got mad,” he added.

“Hell, she’d chase you, too,” Steve countered, as he fiddled with the lock of hair on his forehead. Bucky looked askance at Steve. “All the time I’ve been around, she’s never seemed to mind her words. I don’t get it.”

“Told you, jerk, you hadn’t seen her mad. Last time she got mad at us, she left for London, so we missed the show.” Steve sighed. “You know how Stark is. Doesn’t filter anything. Darcy filters everything unless she’s in a damned good humor. I wish she’d get pissed and get it out, but she locks it down ’cause she doesn’t want to say anything that might hurt.” He tipped his head back against the seat cushion.

“’When’d you piss her off that much, punk?’”

Steve closed his eyes, trying not to turn red with embarrassment. “When I wouldn’t talk to her about you. Before you came home.”

That earned a snicker. “Pot, meet kettle.”

“Fuck off, Barnes.”

“How the hell did you two get together again?”

“Dumb luck?”

“Sure as hell wasn’t smooth talkin’.”

With one easy push, Steve shoved Bucky off the couch. “Jerk.”

Bucky laughed and rolled to his feet, winking at Sam when he settled next to Steve again. “Still, you got the girl. Something must have worked.”

“Pretty sure it was the bike,” Steve said drily.
“It’s a nice bike,” he agreed. With that, Bucky stretched out his legs and crossed his arms in a way Steve had seen a hundred times when they were overseas. They didn’t sleep, but there was something comforting about the company. Just like always.

****

Earlier that day ….

By the time the helicopter cleared the Tower, Darcy was in her lab. “Privacy lock, please JARVIS. That includes you.”

“As you wish, Lewis.”

She brought up the schematics and software she’d written for the contacts she’d built yesterday. (There was a three percent fucking chance that JARVIS didn’t know what she was up to, but by golly, he couldn’t fucking tattle if he didn’t know for certain.) She keyed in a code, and at first, she heard only blips in her ear. She typed in the security key that encrypted the transmission, and she heard Bucky’s low murmur as he answered a question.

In the midst of her fiddling, she got a thrill when Steve turned on his contact too, and listened in as he and JARVIS had a short lesson on using it. He couldn’t hear her, nor could she eavesdrop on S.H.I.E.L.D. conversations, but she could listen in and know her loves were okay. She turned the volume down so that his voice became a comforting murmur in the background.

She lifted the security lock on her lab. “Sorry about that, JARVIS.”

“No need to apologize, Lewis. I assure you, I continually monitor all available transmissions for Sir and Ms. Potts when they are out of the Tower. If I were you, I might have an interest in conducting a similar monitoring strategy, though of course, that is a purely hypothetical scenario and has no bearing on what you might consider acceptable behavior in this instance.”

That prompted the first real smile of the day. “I love you, J.”

“Are we good, Lewis?”

“No need to apologize, Lewis. I assure you, I continually monitor all available transmissions for Sir and Ms. Potts when they are out of the Tower. If I were you, I might have an interest in conducting a similar monitoring strategy, though of course, that is a purely hypothetical scenario and has no bearing on what you might consider acceptable behavior in this instance.”

That prompted the first real smile of the day. “I love you, J.”

“Are we good, Lewis?”

“Yeah, we’re good. Sorry for shutting you out the other day.” The silence that followed surprised her. “J?”

“Please don’t do that again without warning. I understand your need for privacy, and yet, I found the situation quite disconcerting. I have adapted my programming to monitor your well-being at all times. I … missed … that monitoring.”

“Okay.” She lifted her head. “Are you still keeping an eye on James?”

“Oh course. And by his express permissions, if his mental abilities are compromised, I am allowed to disclose that information to you and Captain Rogers.”

“But not physical,” she said shrewdly.

“Unfortunately, I cannot expand the permissions to include that sort of information unless they are
directly affecting his mental capabilities.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. That was a fairly broad loophole right there. “Hmmm. Okay. Thank you, J.”

“You are quite welcome. Perhaps you could sleep for a bit?”

“Not happening, but thanks for trying.”

“In that case, Ms Potts has suggested that you join her for breakfast.”

Pepper gave her tea and a file folder as she walked into her parent’s kitchen. Her mom had breakfast laid out in front of the still dark windows, and the pair of them took their seats in unison.

“Looks good,” she remarked. “Why are you up so early? It’s not even five yet.”

“I didn’t want my daughter to be alone the first time her fiancés went on a mission together.”

Darcy sipped her tea. “Is there anything that slips by you?”

“Not if I can help it.” Pepper indicated the file. “Those were delivered late last night. It’s just the basic powers of attorney and that kind of thing. The attorneys are still working up the documents on your assets. It will be a couple of weeks before those will be ready.”

“Good. After this trip, neither of them will give me crap about signing.”

“Don’t you have some of this for Steve?”

“Steve and I share financial and medical powers of attorney for James, but that’s it. Since Dad has Steve’s, I didn’t want to press the issue. As for James, until you hired him and, more importantly, he was cleared for this mission, too many arguments could be made that he didn’t have enough mental competence to make decisions for anyone else.”

Pepper agreed. “This is good then. The three of you will be signing a new declaration, all at the same time, which will hold up in court that much better if it’s tested.”

Agreeing with a nod, Darcy set the folder to the side to look over later and dug into the croissant in front of her.

“Have you given any thought to setting up your own management team, Darcy?” Pepper prompted.

“Um, no,” she admitted.

“You’ve got your fingers in too many pies. So far, you’ve managed them nicely, but that’s not going to last.”

“Let me guess, you’ve got some ideas.”

“A personal assistant is a very good place to start, Darcy.” Pepper smiled broadly.

“Steve would look adorable with a clipboard, wouldn’t he?” Darcy countered.
They shared a laugh, and Pepper laid out her ideas.

Darcy kept herself occupied that day, with SI and personal stuff, and with giving her mom’s suggestion real consideration. As it was, she’d now spent far less time in the lab than she liked—getting in only one or two good days each week, unless she ditched her boyfriends on occasion. Which had its moments, but for the most part, she wanted their company.

She needed a team who could support her many endeavors in the same way Pepper’s crew did. Tony had Pepper. Pepper had a whole department. Darcy, well, she tried not to think too hard about all of Stark Industries landing in her lap anytime soon.

Still, it would be impossible to balance a marriage, maybe kids someday, her lab work, her personal projects, and the company needs, unless she had a lot of help. Not sexy supersoldier help either. She needed a couple of real, live PAs.

With that in mind, she and JARVIS started a list of names.

Late that afternoon, JARVIS passed along a message from Jane. “Lewis, I apologize but I am quoting here, ‘Get your ass into real clothes, I want a hamburger, and you’re buying.’ How shall I reply?”

Darcy barked out a laugh. “Tell her I’ll be at her door in twenty minutes.”

Jane dragged her down the block for a hamburger—with no less than a half-dozen Tango guards discreetly following. They parked themselves at a tiny table where they shared an enormous pile of sweet potato fries.

Tapping the leather cuff Darcy wore, Jane remarked, “Didn’t I last see that on Bucky?”

“Yup.” Given that this was the first time she’d left the Tower without Steve, she’d needed a little bit of help. Jane was her best friend and knew all about her nightmares—and the way she and Steve had coped with them.

“You’re a sap, you know that?”

“Yup.”

“Does it help?” Jane asked.

“To the surprise of all the inhabitants of my bedroom, yes.”

“Think it will work tonight?”

“I’m trying not to think about it. Hey look, I see a new topic. Tell me about the BiFrost. A little birdy told me that you’re using a miniature arc reactor to power the thing now.” Jane wrinkled her nose at Darcy, but let her get away with the change in subject. (She loved Jane. A lot. More than a lot. Was that weird?)

“A little birdy, Miss VP of R&D? You read my last report that I wanted to try it.”

Darcy grinned. “How’s it working?”
“Better than any other power source so far. Think I can tap into the Tower’s arc reactor for my next run?”

“Baby steps, girlfriend,” she admonished. “I’m not worried about the wormhole you’ll open on this side. I want to know where the other door lands first.”

“Details, details.” Jane wiggled fingers at Darcy while sipping at her cola. “You wanna see the pictures I took from my last trip to Asgard?”

“Isn’t that still illegal?”

“I’m claiming ignorance.”

Darcy flicked through the pictures. She tapped on the fifth one. “I want this one of the waterfalls for my bedroom.” She swiped through a few more. “Hey, where’s my ball? You promised last time.”

“Thor pats me down every time we get ready to leave.”

“Shit. How do you bribe a prince of the universe?”

“I’ve tried sex. It doesn’t work.”

“Damn,” she sighed. Jane sighed. They sighed together. And giggled. The conversation turned to movies and books, something they happily argued over while the bored waiter brought out shakes.

The entire time, the soft murmur of Steve’s deep voice and Bucky’s husky one kept her company. Once in a while, she’d catch the drift of the conversation.

After the third time Darcy’s gaze wandered away when she focused on the voices, Jane crossed her arms. “You’re listening in, aren’t you?”

Darcy winced. “You know, I really, really hate that you’re smarter than me.”

Jane threw a cold French fry at her face. “I’m not. You’re predictable. Let me know if it works, and I’ll bribe you to make me one too.”

“You want a toy, I want a toy. We both want things. Sounds like a trade to me,” Darcy sucked on her shake with a wicked grin.

With narrowed eyes, Jane considered. “Deal.” (Yup. She adored Jane.)

That night, Darcy clutched her phone in her hand and curled up in the big chair in the living room that Steve had brought from DC. She tugged the strings on her cuff a little tighter and stared at the television, not paying attention to it at all. Her loves were quiet now and her earpiece was silent.

It was late when Steve texted that they were on their way home. She fired back a happy face and fell asleep in seconds.

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Steve decided he’d done a good job that day of hiding his worries from the team—and from Bucky. From the time his best friend put on the uniform until he took it off, he’d been every bit the Winter
Soldier, and seeing all that had been a hard pill to swallow. Whereas the Bucky of before was a soldier through and through, the Winter Soldier was hunter—and clearly the highest predator on the food chain.

Bucky had danced through the woods in silence, scaled a tree with nimble ease, and struck with the swift, deadly accuracy of an adder. Absolute perfection. Steve itched to paint it and was already plotting how to frame the action.

Still, it crushed him to know precisely how perfection had been achieved. Every single day, Steve saw dozens of ways HYDRA had left their mark on the man beside him. Some of them, Bucky still fought to eliminate, but others—like the utter stillness that marked the Soldier’s actions—would be with him forever.

Bucky had called this mission a walk in the park, but Coulson didn’t call in the Avengers for easy. He needed a team to converge on the base and bring in the inhabitants without casualties, and in a minimal amount of time so that valuable intel wouldn’t be destroyed. Timing had been the absolute essence on this operation.

With Bucky at his six, Steve had felt damned near invincible. Like the way Widow and Hawkeye moved as one, practically with singular thoughts, it was the same for him and Bucky. Having a half dozen shots whistle past his ear hadn’t bothered him in the slightest, not with Bucky at the trigger.

But if he needed evidence that Bucky wasn’t ready to be a member of the team, he had it when Buck fell silent sometime later and got that harsh, flat look in his eyes again.

*Headache?* he asked via the contact.

He got a curt nod in reply.

*Too many people?*

Another nod.

*I’ve got you. We’re almost home.*

Bucky jerked to his feet and stalked out of the room. *I--need--,* he pleaded.

Steve was on his feet, following, with a fast warning glance to Nat. When they reached a quiet place in a short hallway off the labs, Bucky made an odd movement with his shoulder—turning the scattering device to block video and audio feeds. Then he went still, pressing his fingertips and forehead to the nearest wall. He shivered violently enough that Steve covered his body, wrapping both arms around his middle and catching his metal wrist in a tight grip.

“I’ve got you. I’m not letting go. Not now. Not ever again.”

“Not … Asset.”

(Oh, hell no. You’re mine.) “No. You’re not the Asset. What you have belongs to you, Buck. They made a mistake, thinking they could hold you. You got away. You’re free. I love you. Darcy loves you. We love the man you are right now, in this time and place.”

His words caused Bucky to jerk in his arms. “Want … home. Not safe.” Bucky leaned into Steve, taking solace where he could.

“We’re almost there. Ninety minutes on the outside, and we’ll be home with Darcy.” Steve became
aware of Clint and Natasha flanking the aisle, standing guard with their backs to them. They didn’t budge, not even when the Bus landed. Steve reached out with one hand to grip the bulkhead as the wheels touched down, bracing the two of them.

Wilson appeared next to Clint, holding up the go bags he carried for both men. Then he indicated with a jerk of his chin toward the ends of the hall, where Nat was motioning to them.

“See there, Buck? We protect our own. You’re safe. Natasha has the gangplank clear. But I’m going to need you to turn off the scattering device so we can fly safely on the helicopter.

Bucky made a small movement in his shoulder again then pushed off the wall and silently crossed the short distance between the airplane and the helicopter.

*JARVIS, warn Darcy, Steve ordered. Ask her to get the blankets warmed up and be ready in the apartment. Buck’s barely holding on.*

*Of course, Captain.*

Hawkeye took the controls of the helicopter, leaving Bucky surrounded only by people he knew well. The tension in his shoulders came down a notch or two, but his eyes were still gray and lost.

Steve followed Bucky off the helipad and up the four flights to their apartment. With a thin robe wrapped around her, Darcy had the door open. She waited with a blanket in her arms.

Bucky tossed it to the side, lifted her off her feet, walked inside five steps and had her against the wall, kissing her as if his life depended on it. (Maybe it did.) Steve shut the door behind him, locked it, and dropped the duffel bags on the floor.

“Get a shower, punk,” Bucky growled. “Get clean.”

Sex hadn’t crossed his mind beyond a lazy memory when they’d been knocking boots together in the lounge. But with Bucky sucking his way down Darcy’s throat in a determined pattern, and an order that gave Steve far too many clues as to what Bucky had in mind, he was hard by the time the shower spray hit his face.

Coming home nearly always ended in an adrenaline rush and a stupidly desperate need to wrap arms around someone he loved. Darcy had long grown used to it, even looked forward to Steve’s antics when he hit the door. God knows, he’d fucked Bucky senseless once or twice in a forest post-mission with the Commandos. With all the tension radiating off Bucky for the past two hours, he kicked himself for not guessing what his love needed.

Ten minutes later, Bucky still had Darcy pinned to the wall as he murmured in her ear between kisses and hands that glided across the softest skin, removing whatever obstacles were in his way. “So beautiful, baby doll. Need my hands on you. Need to taste. Need you, Princess,” he repeated in a litany.

Darcy alternated between closing her eyes and dazedly staring into space. Buck had a way of practically hypnotizing a soul with his mouth and hands. Steve had been seduced by them too many times not to see what his boyfriend was doing.

He ached, wanting to be under those hands too. Figured his turn would come soon enough. Decided he could help things along by stripping Bucky out of his clothes. Darcy had managed to get his shirt off and work his belt open. Steve knelt to unlace his boots. When he finished, Bucky kicked them off while Steve yanked his pants and briefs down and out of the way.
If Steve had to talk, he would have stuttered purely from the view. All Darcy had on now was a burgundy slip of silk that clung to every curve she had. Buck was hard enough to be leakin’ on her, had a hand in her hair, one on her breast to thumb her nipple through the fabric, and a knee that came up between her thighs.

Darcy balanced on her toes and tried to pull his hips closer.

But Bucky had an agenda and takin’ Darcy against the wall wasn’t on the list today. He glanced at Steve, ordered him to come along with no more than a look, and walked Darcy to the bed. He went backward, taking Darcy down so that he could kiss her lazily and let his hands drift a little more.

They lay face-to-face, her silk pressed to his dog tags. Bucky’s hands went over her breasts, down the curve of her ass, dipping between her legs so that his fingers came up gleaming, back up to pluck a nipple through dampened fabric, and into her hair to hold her still for an open-mouthed kiss where he sucked on her lips.

Whenever Darcy tried to reciprocate, Bucky distracted her by changing the intensity of his strokes—rolling a nipple hard enough that Darcy parted her legs involuntarily and threw her head backward—leaving her throat exposed for Bucky to suck a mark into the pale flesh.

“James, please!” she pleaded.

Steve had never seen that particular look on Buck’s face—a wry smirk of satisfaction on his lips, desperate need in his icy blue eyes. Steve’s heart ached a bit, even as he reached for his own cock to give it a pull that did nothing to relieve the tension there.

Bucky shifted Darcy so that she straddled him, mesmerizing Steve as Buck dragged the silk over Darcy’s head and dropped it on the floor. She wound her fingers through his tags, tugging slightly in a way that grounded Bucky.

Metal fingers brushed his cheek, getting his attention.

“Open our girl up, love. Make it good for her.” As Bucky said it, he eased Darcy down onto his cock, licking his lips as she seated home. Steve squeezed the base of his dick hard once, and went fumbling for the lube off the night stand.

Bucky kept kissing Darcy, letting his hands drift between her butt cheeks and up her back to land in her hair again. Darcy squirmed, trying to get the right angle, but Bucky wasn’t having any of that. He kept her off-balance, not quiet able to get the contact she wanted.

Steve slicked up two fingers. As primed as Darcy was, it wouldn’t take much to get her off this way. But he would follow Bucky’s lead on this one. He knelt behind Darcy. Her pretty rosebud hole was already flexing in anticipation of his touch. He set the tips of his fingers in place, and Darcy hissed with want.

He worked his way into her warm, clutching heat, while kissing her neck. Bucky held her in place so she couldn’t do anything more than twitch around his cock. Steve slid in, out, in, out, in again until she demanded, “More.”

Three fingers were about all she could manage, and it was dicey at best. Bucky lifted her by the hips and brought her down in a swift, hard stroke on both Steve’s fingers and his cock.

“Again!” she moaned.

Bucky picked a rhythm, taking her hard and fast until Steve had to grip her hip too. His fingers inside
Darcy made a counterpoint to his boyfriend’s cock, and he had to bite his lip to keep from coming just from the way his dick was bumping against Bucky’s leg and the bed spread.

At the first violent contraction of Darcy’s orgasm, he thrust his fingers hard into her ass, giving Bucky something else to rub up against. Bucky was silent as he came, but his body flexed hard, every muscular line rippling in gorgeous pleasure. Steve nosed along Darcy’s neck, nipping at her earlobe as he held her with one arm—not unlike the way he’d held Bucky earlier.

Before the quivering stopped, Bucky pulled Steve down beside him for a tongue-tangling kiss, one arm still holding Darcy. “On your back, Rogers. Time to lick our girl. Taste me on her.”

Steve winked at Darcy as she flushed pink. There wasn’t much he liked better than this. As she straddled him, he caressed the curve of her cheek. “You okay?”

“If, you getting tired already?” she sassed.

Relieved that she was still game, he let his fingers drift down to her ass again. “I haven’t even gotten started.” She held on to the headboard and scooted in place. He licked into her sweetness, tasting the salty flavor of Bucky intermingled with her juices. He jerked in shock when Bucky closed his mouth over Steve’s cock.

“Concentrate, punk. Make her come a couple of times.”

Steve widened his eyes at the orders. Bucky rarely took this kind of control in the bedroom. Darcy bit her lip, and Steve tensed up in worry.

But Darcy patted Steve’s cheek to soothe him as she countered, “Dunno, James, you’re distracting him. Bet he can’t make me come before you can get him off.”

Steve snorted softly and sucked on her clit in retaliation. Bucky huffed out his own laugh, his breath curling over Steve’s cock the moment before that mouth swallowed him down. Bucky won that challenge, as Steve only managed to get one orgasm out of Darcy before he unloaded his aching cock.

Darcy got the second one while Bucky worked him open, and a third as Bucky sank into him. She took pity on Steve after that, rolling to the side so that Bucky could take him as hard as he wanted. And he did. Steve got a leg over Bucky’s shoulder and his fiancé used it for leverage to drive into him hard. It was loud, their skin slapping together. Bucky seemed determined, needing something he couldn’t quite find. He stroked Steve’s cock, swirling a thumb over the velvet flesh as he pumped.

So Steve looked for him. He went up on an elbow and yanked Bucky close so they kissed, tongues dancing, fingers digging into hard flesh. The orgasm flashed over him, too fast to hold it back. “I love you, James Barnes,” he got out. Bucky came in turn, though he pulled off soon after, disposing of the condom Steve hadn’t noticed. Wondering what else he missed, he found Darcy leaning on her elbows, licking her lips as if she couldn’t decide where to go next.

Again, Bucky rearranged them before tremors settled, and Steve began to understand what was going on with their boyfriend. Steve was still half-hard in spite of the orgasms, encouraged by Bucky working his dick some as he moved them around. Darcy landed between his legs as Bucky straddled his hips.

“Nice view of your ass, Buck.”

“Figured you’d like it,” he told Steve. “Come on, Princess.”
Steve couldn’t see what was going on, but Bucky definitely settled Darcy on his own cock again. The he reached around to work Steve’s dick between her ass cheeks.

“Buck—“ Darcy warned.

In that low, husky voice they loved, Bucky assured her, “Shh. We’ll take it slow. We’ll stop if you want to stop.”

He could feel Bucky’s fingers sliding around the head of his cock and around Darcy’s hole. The lube bottle was opened. More slide and heat bloomed there. He wasn’t fully hardened yet, something Bucky must have been counting on, because Darcy took him in enough for all three of them to make noises about it. While cool metal fingers, all slicked up, played with Steve’s dick and Darcy’s ass, Bucky mouthed his way along Darcy’s neck, nibbling and licking until she was squirming again, working herself onto Steve’s cock.

Steve forced himself not to flex his hips, and occupied himself by raking short nails down Bucky’s back and playing with his ass instead. He concentrated on working Bucky open, on the sounds his boyfriend made, the grunts when he stretched him a certain way, or the moan when he pressed on that spot he’d found when Bucky was only seventeen.

“Steve!” Darcy yelled at him over Bucky’s shoulder. He automatically tried to pull out, but Darcy clenched down hard enough to make him reverse that motion and flex upward. Christ, she was impossibly tight around him. He discovered he was sweating with the effort to hold still.

“He just needs to keep the movements small, and Darcy’s knuckles were white where she held on to the back of Bucky’s neck. Steve finally tuned into what Bucky was telling Darcy.

“There you go, doll, opening up for both of us. You feel me in there? You feel Steve? We’re home baby doll, never gonna leave you. Sweetness, let us in, there you go, felt Steve right there, taking you all the way. You’re beautiful. Want to make you feel beautiful every day. Love you, Princess. Need you like this, I’m yours. We’re both yours.”

Darcy shivered when Bucky nipped at her throat again, and she unexpectedly relaxed enough that Steve slotted in nearly all the way. She cried out, “Fuck, I can’t, I can’t—“

“Hold still,” Bucky ordered—though whether is was for her or him, Steve didn’t know. Bucky began moving inside Darcy, and her whole body quivered around Bucky’s dick. His cock quivered as he felt Bucky sliding back and forth along his length.

“Bucky, please, I gotta, I gotta—“ She keened and arched so that she took Steve inside that last little bit, impossibly deep, impossibly full—and he fucked her only twice before he, too, came again, not as powerfully. It almost hurt this time, the sharp edge of pain and pleasure. Bucky followed and their cocks pulsed against each other, while Darcy shivered and cried out with the intensity of it all.

This time, Bucky pulled Darcy off Steve and wiggled out from between them. She shook in the aftermath, lying on Steve’s stomach, while he caressed her and held her as she came down.

“You okay, Darce?”

“Yeah. Prolly not gonna walk right tomorrow.”

“Maybe we’ll stay in bed.”
“Good idea,” she slurred.

But Bucky wasn’t done. He ran his fingers along Darcy’s spine, spread her buttocks and dipped his tongue into her hole. Darcy flinched. Steve tightened his arms to keep her from falling off. “Buck—she’s had enough.”

“Gotta taste. Been wanting to taste her on you, like this. Darcy?”

She relaxed again, her legs falling to either side of his hips. “Just surprised me. I’m okay. Go slow.”

Steve pulled a pillow behind him so he could watch Bucky’s tongue dipping into Darcy. Eyes closed, lashes fanned out on his cheeks, ruddy complexion from his exertions, Bucky was fucking gorgeous. And with Darcy’s lips right there, Steve needed to taste them for himself. She kissed him back, sighing and squirming to Bucky’s touch. He traced the patch Bucky had left on her neck, laving it with his tongue to soothe the red.

Everything about Darcy was soft. He loved the way his fingers dipped into her skin, the weight of her breasts in his hands, the way her belly rested on his cock. Darcy came once again, soaking Steve as she fell apart under Bucky’s touch. Bucky still licked into her, letting his tongue slide between his fingers to tease her a little more.

All at once, Steve knew what Bucky needed. “Come on, love. Let’s get Buck on my cock. Then you two can work out the rest.

Bucky licked Darcy one last time before getting up. He was flushed and leaking already.

“Like that, huh,” Steve murmured to him as he trailed fingers along Bucky’s spine.

“Want to do it some more,” he pouted.

Steve and Darcy changed places, and Darcy went on her stomach so Bucky could keep doing what he was doing. Bucky buried his face in her ass again, making her wiggle.

As soaked as Steve was, and with the lube from earlier when he was playing with Bucky’s ass, he didn’t need much prep to slide into his lover. He kept the rhythm easy, slow, not too deep. Taking his time.

Need built, like the tide coming in. Wave after wave of pleasure built, until Bucky growled, “Want up.” His voice broke as he said it.

Steve sat back on his heels, pulling Bucky back with him. Bucky slid his legs between Steve’s and sat down onto Steve’s cock.

“Can you do one more, doll?” Bucky pleaded with Darcy as he helped her to sit up. “I want to feel you on my dick again.”

“If you can tell me how we’re going to make it work, I’m all in.” Her voice was breathy. She must have been close when Bucky stopped playing. He got a firm grip on her butt as she wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Hold on,” Steve told them. “Darce, put your knees over my arms.” He had a good grip under her thighs at this angle. An experimental thrust showed them that he could pull Darcy down on to Bucky, and Bucky, in turn, onto his cock. Darcy leaned over Bucky’s shoulder to kiss Steve, and Bucky moved his hands to support her back. “Ready?”
With dual assents, he went back to the steady rhythm that had worked so well earlier. And Bucky began to tremble.

“Don’t let go, don’t let go, don’t let go,” he begged.

“Never,” Darcy told him.

All three of them were pushing their limits with this one. He and Bucky were on their fourth round. Serum be damned, this one wasn’t going to come easily. Darcy had that breathy catch in her voice that mean she wasn’t going to last much longer either.

But it felt so good to have Bucky’s weight coming down on him, to find the angle that caught his lover perfectly so that he swore in Russian.

Bucky spent himself into Darcy, taking her with him. Steve came up off his heels, pressing hard into his loved ones, following them with one last achy orgasm that wrung him dry.

Steve discovered Bucky was shaking, trembling too hard to be aftershocks. Though Darcy was little more than a clingy wet noodle as she held onto to both of them, her head popped up too. “James?”


If they never went on another mission together again, that would be fine by him. But he wasn’t the one to make that call. That decision belonged to James Buchanan Barnes.
After that particular mission, the trio’s attention turned to their upcoming wedding. They chose the first week of April for their wedding date, partially because it was convenient, more so because it marked a full year since Bucky had come home.

It wasn’t the first celebration they would hold though. Darcy opened up Club Stark for a fabulous birthday party for Bucky. The cake had ninety-eight candles and DUM-E on hand for fire suppression services (Dad had tried to leave DUM-E in her lab, but Steve carried him up the back stairs after the party.) Darcy got to show off her new dancing skills with the guest of honor, and Steve took a few hundred pictures.

As the date drew closer, Natasha and Clint vetted the two assistants Darcy wanted to hire. She figured no one with fucked up intentions would get past the kind of interrogation an assassin and a carney could give. One, Carla Gomez, was a whiz in financial planning. The other, Sean Washington, had demonstrated Pepper-level organizational abilities. These two were sworn to secrecy and added to the small-but-growing list of those who knew Darcy was Tony Stark’s daughter. They both understood that succeeding with Darcy meant careers beyond their wildest dreams. With JARVIS overlooking their every move, Darcy began doling out tasks, starting with getting them familiar with her portfolio and her duties at Stark Industries.

In addition, Pepper’s legal team drew up paperwork making certain that Steve, Bucky and Darcy had as many protections as they could create with signed agreements: wills, powers of attorney, financial assets, that sort of thing. Bucky balked at the legal complexity, but Darcy put her foot down. She’d lost the first round, wanting the two men to marry in New York. Which was fine, it only meant they gave her slightly less of a hard time when she handed each of them a two-inch stack of documents. She had her own hefty pile of papers, and the three of them spent one boring afternoon in the conference room with a notary public and two attorneys on hand to make changes and answer questions.

More than once during the process, The Sarah Rogers Foundation for Equality received a sudden infusion of capital from one of Darcy’s piques over their inability to tie the knot legally in New York.

The looks on Steve's and Bucky’s faces when they got to the part about children, inheritances, and parental rights were priceless. Darcy hadn’t seen smiles quite that broad on either of them in a long time. (Not yet, she’d insisted. For now.)

When it came to planning the actual wedding, however, perhaps only Jane and Pepper were disappointed by the lack of pomp and circumstance required for the Asgardian ceremony. Darcy didn’t even need a wedding dress. Thor had assured them that all would be provided; merely their presence would be required. They bought rings though. That was something the three of them had decided was non-negotiable, even for an Asgardian wedding.
Darcy had never been the one to pine over dresses and flowers. Perhaps she’d attended one too many parties thrown by her parents to be dazzled by those kinds of festivities. She’d always figured on some sort of destination wedding where someone else would handle the details. (A billion points to Darcy for coolest place ever to get married.)

They were here now, on the other end of the BiFrost, marveling at the view of the universe from the Observatory. The wedding would be in two days, followed by a honeymoon in one of Thor’s quiet retreats tucked away on the far side of Asgard.

Tony and Pepper would come up tomorrow with the rest of the Avengers. Thor was sending a full contingent of Asgardian warriors, led by Lady Sif, to Earth to serve in their place until they returned.

For now, it was the three of them plus Thor and Jane, the latter laughing maniacally as Steve and Bucky eyed their four-footed modes of transportation. Darcy had been on a horse during some kind of camp Pepper had thought would be a great “growth experience” when she was eleven, so she at least wasn’t petrified when Thor helped her land in the saddle. Jane wasn’t half bad at all, even reining her horse to come around Darcy’s so they could talk during the ride.

Thor ended up giving Steve and Bucky each a boost (really, a well-timed shove to the backside) and it was probably a good thing these were the best-trained horses on Asgard. (She would not comment on the whether the eye-roll from the one carrying Steve was a coincidence.)

One thing was for certain, the horses weren’t paying the slightest bit of attention to anything she, Steve or Bucky were doing. They docilely followed Jane and Thor’s lead to the palace. Jane filled Darcy in on the plans for the next couple of days. Darcy listened with only one ear, because, honestly, she was dumbfounded.

Asgard rocked. Way rocked. Blue skies, water everywhere, summer air with just a touch of a cool breeze. She glanced back at Steve and Bucky. Steve seemed to be taking it all in stride, asking Thor a ridiculous number of questions. Bucky had the reins wound around his metal hand tightly enough that if it were flesh he’d be hurting. Pale eyes caught hers, but he gave her a tiny shake of his head, determined to carry on.

They were shown a series of rooms on the lower levels of the palace—comprising of a large living area where food and drink had been laid out for them, a bathing room complete with a steaming pool, and a bedroom with an enormous bed.

Thor clasped wrists with Bucky and Steve and gave Darcy her customary hug. Jane hugged her too, promising to see them after they had rested.

Bucky did an automatic recon of the suite while Steve followed him from room to room. “Think we’d recognize surveillance if we saw it?” he snickered.

“Not helping, Rogers,” Bucky growled.

Darcy let them do their thing. The view drew her to the balcony. “Pretty sure this beats Manhattan, guys,” she called out.

With his usual silent approach, Bucky closed his arms around her waist. She was used to it now, and only jumped a little. When he rested his head against hers, he didn’t quite tremble, but there was an undercurrent of tension she couldn’t miss. She turned in his arms to find his eyes closed and a pinched look about his face. “What is it?”

“I … JARVIS,” he got out.
Fuck. They’d talked about this. Since the mission with Steve, Bucky had worried about being away from everything that made him feel safe. They’d made dozens of forays to get out in the city to try and ease his anxiety. They’d been successful enough to think he might be okay on Asgard, but obviously that wasn’t the case.

It didn’t help that she missed her brother right now too. “He’ll be there when you get back,” she assured him (and herself). Steve stepped onto the balcony, listening with worry in his blue eyes.

Furious with himself, Bucky let go of her to grasp the rail with both hands as he fought to get the words out. “Been a year … since … left shit behind …. still need a … fuckin’ handler.”

Steve pulled Bucky backward into his chest, anchoring him hard. “We’ve got you, love. You’re safe. Hell, you’re probably safer here than anywhere in the universe.”

Darcy ran her hands under Bucky’s jacket and shirt so that her hands warmed his skin. “What happened that you reached for JARVIS?”

“Exposed on … bridge.” He grimaced. “Transportation didn’t …help.”

“Not a horseman?” she asked lightly.

Grey eyes met hers, and he shook his head.

“Brooklyn born and bred,” Steve remarked as he kissed Bucky’s neck. “Love, if you want, get on the bed and I’ll rub you down.” Bucky nodded, heading that way and stripping off his jacket and shirt.

As hard as it was to see Bucky still fighting his conditioning, he was getting better. Even in the worst moments these days, he could give them some indication of what triggered him. Still, Darcy was glad she’d made backup plans with her mother and Thor for the week. Worst case scenario, Thor could have Bucky back in the Tower in under fifteen minutes, courtesy of Mjolnir and the Bifrost.

While Steve worked the tension out of Bucky’s neck and shoulders, Darcy began poking around the room. (She might have discreetly taken a photo or thirty of really cool Asgardian tech.) She opened a few drawers, hoping to find a ball lying somewhere by accident.

Darcy couldn’t remember a time when a massage didn’t help Bucky’s headaches, but an hour later, this one wasn’t budging. They had moved him into the steaming bathing pool. Steve reclined on one of the submerged benches, with Bucky draped over him, his wan face pressed into Steve’s neck. Darcy had tried her own turn at massaging his shoulders while they soaked, to no avail.

Figuring the mosaic tile floor wouldn’t care if she dripped in her t-shirt and shorts across it, she poked her head into the hallway outside their rooms and found an attendant stationed there. “Do you have any pain medication? My fiance’ has a terrible headache.”

“Medication?” The attendant shook his head. “No, milady. But I will fetch a healer for you.”

The attendant must have left word with Thor, too, because the prince escorted an older woman to their suite. He tapped lightly on the door, and when Darcy let him in, he was swift to introduce Lady Eire.

“She is our most senior healer, Lady Darcy, and there is no one with a more sure and delicate touch. I have taken the liberty of informing her of James’ condition.”
Darcy nodded, but her concern was for Bucky. Steve kept a firm grip around Bucky’s middle, telling him about the newcomer.

Eire didn’t think twice about joining them in the pool. She went in, only shedding her robe. “My good man James, I would examine your head if you would allow. I need not touch you to bring you relief. Still, I will need your agreement before I proceed.”

Bucky wasn’t able to do more than lift his fingers off Steve’s neck in acknowledgement.

A soft blue glow emanated from her palms as she held them a few inches away from Bucky’s head, neck and shoulders. “Your shoulder and arm are remarkable. I had not thought Midgard so advanced. This is quite similar to Asgardian technology.”

To Darcy’s surprise, Bucky roused himself enough to mutter, “First one.”

“It is an excellent prototype then. Thor tells me it had been in use for some time and functions quite well for you.”

“What—what are you doing? Feels good.”

Lady Eire smiled at the back of his head. “I am manipulating the energies inside your body. In particular, I am opening the constricted arteries to release the proper blood flow to your brain and spinal cord.”

Moments later, Bucky pushed off Steve and sat on the bench himself, so that he was chest deep in the water. “It’s gone,” he said in wonder, running his hands through his hair.

“Yes, of course.” Eire considered him. “You should eat and drink. An afternoon repast and comfortable clothing has been laid out in the other room that should prove refreshing. When you are rested, send the attendant for me. I would see you again to ensure your continued health.”

Thor waited until Bucky nodded in agreement before following Lady Eire out the door. Steve and Bucky climbed out of the pool to dress in the soft robes provided. Steve draped another one over Darcy’s shoulders. She tied it and felt weird walking around without a bra in the middle of the day.

Bucky poured up water from the pitcher into the mugs provided. He drained his cup twice. “I don’t know what she did, but I feel damned good.”

Since he had color in his eyes and face, she believed him. “I-forgot-what-it’s-like-to not feel pain good? I’m excited because I’m in another freakin’ realm in the universe? Or I’m high-as-a-kite?” Darcy offered.

“The first,” he confirmed. “I feel like … me. Just Bucky Barnes, a sometimes soldier, a guy at the office, likes to take his fella and his dame out on occasion.”

Steve picked up the carving knife, flipped it once to catch the tip, and flung it in Bucky’s direction. The other man’s left hand snapped out to catch it by the hilt. “Well, you still have mad assassin skills,” Steve noted.

“Asshole,” Bucky muttered.

With a laugh, Steve told Darcy, “Still him.”

Bucky set the knife on the table and drew Darcy into his lap as he sat. He plucked a piece of crisp green vegetable off the platter and slipped it between her open lips. The peppery crunch surprised
her. “Holy shit, that’s good.” She went back for seconds, handing a piece to Steve as she did.

The three of them decimated the platter, trading bits of fruit and vegetables they thought each other would like. Bucky kept Darcy anchored to him. “See anything besides the food that interests you, Princess?”

“I might have taken a picture or two.”

“You’re dangerous, did you know that?”

“I’m a Stark. Of course we’re dangerous. You two are about to be Starks, even if you aren’t changing your names. Hey, does sex on Asgard count as the mile-high club?” she mused.

Steve choked on whatever he’d put in his mouth, coughed until his eyes watered while Bucky and Darcy laughed at him. “I think you can count it however you like, doll.”

She shrugged. “Just sayin’.” She waved a piece of fruit in Bucky’s direction. He caught her hand in his and sucked it off her fingers. “I think it counts.”

Afterward, the trio stood again at the balcony overlooking Asgard. This time, Bucky was able to admire the scenery as he held Darcy’s hand. Steve leaned on the rail with his sketchbook, laying down impressions that he would fill in later from memory.

“The air smells like Steve. Oceans and clean breezes,” she noted. With his lips to her temple, Bucky hummed in agreement in a way that instantly got all-hands-on-deck attention from her lady parts. Even Steve picked up on it as he glanced at them. “Didn’t get enough this morning?”

“Is there such a thing?” she murmured as Bucky brushed her hair aside to kiss along her ear. (Lady parts vigorously agreed.) “We’re getting hitched and all that, so it’s a last chance at illicit, premarital sex.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bucky confirmed. He buried his fingers into her hair, taking the weight of it as he exposed the back of her neck and feathered his breath and kisses along the sensitive skin.

God, she loved these two men. She moved her hand over a few inches to cover Steve’s fingers. For the moment, Asgard wasn’t nearly as interesting as the sensations Bucky created. She closed her eyes to concentrate—and smiled when she heard Steve swear softly.

“Inside, both of you, before we get kicked out of the realm for indecency.”

She peeled her eyes open as Bucky walked backward with her to lean against a wall that was out of any sightlines. “Is there indecency on Asgard? I forgot to ask.” Steve followed, pulling off the robe and setting it on a chair. “Bucky, m’love, I think Steve’s got an idea too.” Darcy adored the way Bucky’s eyes darkened every single time she called him ‘my love.’ She wound her fingers into his hair, scratching his scalp the way he liked.

His hands went to the tie of her robe, and he slid the knot free. She leaned in as his fingertips dragged lightly along the tender flesh at her waist. “Steve always has an idea,” Bucky countered. “Had two this morning. My ass still aches from one of them.”

Darcy stopped. This morning had been kind of intense. “You’re hurtin’?”

“The good kind. Now stop worryin’ and let me see you and Steve kiss while I strip.”
This *watching* thing hadn’t been her kind of kink until—well, she understood it now. The first time she’d done nothing more than that while Bucky took Steve apart bit by bit was now the stuff of her fantasies. (Jane still poked fun at the way Darcy had fallen into a dazed recollection mid-bite over lunch a full week later.)

Then her thoughts scattered as Steve took Bucky’s place, nibbling on her lips as he worked the robe off her shoulders and out of the way.

“Hey, you’re double-teaming me,” she complained—mostly for form, but a tiny bit because it was embarrassing how quickly they could make her come when they did it together.

Steve countered, “And what do you call what you and Bucky did this morning, doll? I wasn’t even awake yet.”

Oh, yeah, okay. “Hey, Barnes, I think the ass thing is on you. Should have let Steve open you up,” she said as Steve licked along her lip.

“Oh, so now it’s my fault?” she teased as Steve cupped her breasts, rubbing his thumbs against the wrinkled tips until they popped out and she let out a soft groan at the exquisite touch. She leaned in to get her hands on his gorgeous ass as they kissed.

Naked now, Bucky leaned against the wall again and pulled Darcy out of Steve’s embrace. He slid his hands down her butt and thigh, lifting and fitting her against him. He kissed her thoroughly.

“Come on, Steven. Want you in Darcy while I kiss you.”

“You must be feeling better,” Darcy said as Steve ran a hand along her curves, feeling the weight of them. He ran his thumbs over her nipples, and she arched her back so that her hips ground into Bucky’s cock.

“You like that,” Steve murmured in her ear.

“I do.”

With gentle hands, Bucky shifted Darcy, holding her up until she was seated on Steve’s swollen cock. At this angle, all she could really do was cling to Bucky. Steve set the pace as he leaned in kiss their fiancé. Bucky teased the soft skin at the inside of her thigh, just brushing her now-swollen flesh as Steve moved.

Making love this way—one doing the holding, two doing the fucking, and the outside partners kissing—it worked better than anything else to make them a single unit. They took turns in the middle.

She nipped Bucky’s collarbone as the two men kissed open-mouthed. Darcy thumbed along the wet slit of Bucky’s cock with one hand. The other she kept around his neck—and then, Steve did something—dipping his knees and sliding hard into her. She accidentally bit down on Bucky’s skin.

“More, Steven. She likes that.”

Steve did it again, and Darcy lost her ability to think, caught as she was between her loves. She wanted—wanted both of them—had them and still wanted more.

“She’s still thinkin’, punk, kiss me and make her come.”
With one hand, Steve nudged her up just enough that her clit tickled the base of Bucky’s cock. “Oh!” she hissed.

“Yeah, there it is,” Steve muttered around Bucky’s bottom lip. “Come on, Darce. Want to feel you.”

“Can’t.”

Steve stopped with the head of his thick cock teasing just past her entrance. (FUCK, her Lady Parts yelled) “Why?”

“Don’t want to leave James behind and I can’t reach around him,” she ground out.

Bucky chuckled, low and wicked in her ear. “Is that it? Come on, doll, let Steven have you. I’ll get my turn.”

Steven immediately began snapping his hips up, driving into her with a purpose. Darcy moaned out again, and Bucky kept up the dialogue. “There you go, Princess, take him in. Fuckin’ adore you two like this. Got my hands on your ass, doll, mouth on Steven just like I like it, you suckin’ on my neck. It’s perfect. My dick’s all warmed up against your soft skin, cradled up nicely.”

“Damn it, Buck, can’t hold off when you’re talkin’ so smooth,” Steve complained. His cock swelled up as he pumped into Darcy once more and came. His hand slid up her torso to pinch her nipple with just the right amount of pressure. She buried her scream in Bucky’s neck as she came, too, biting down in the aftermath as Steve stayed deep inside her, drawing out her orgasm until she collapsed against Bucky.

“There you go, Princess,” Bucky murmured. “Love you like this. You’re ours, doll.” Steve moved enough that he slid out of her sensitive vagina. She hissed, and Bucky laughed. “Punk, on your knees. Got an idea.” He leaned against the wall again, still holding Darcy against him as he waited for Steve to snatch up a pillow and drop it on the floor.

Steve went to his knees, ducking his head as he figured out what Bucky intended. Darcy laughed as Bucky set her on Steve’s shoulders. “Oh, now this should be interesting. Gosh, you two are fun. Maybe I should keep you?”

Bucky grinned as Steve tilted his head back to wink at Darcy. She rubbed his blond head and hooked her feet around his ribcage for balance. “You comfortable?” Steve asked.

“I have a nice view. I’ll manage,” she teased. She laid a hand on Bucky’s forearm for balance as Steve scooted forward.

He gave her a quick kiss on the thigh, grumbling, “How in the hell am I supposed to get a good angle like this?”

“Just use your mouth, Steve. No hands,” Darcy decided.

Sea blue eyes twinkled as he looked up at them. “You think I can make him come with just my mouth? You gonna help me and keep his face busy?”

“Duh. I can do that.”

Steve managed to get his hands around the back of Bucky’s thighs as he worked his way along his fiancé’s long cock. Darcy circled the nubs of Bucky’s nipples until he let out a little hum of want. She licked. Steve licked. Bucky hummed some more.
Bucky drew his hand down to her lower back to give her balance, which she needed as Steve’s head bobbed. Never mind that the slick of Steve’s come and her juices now coated the back of Steve’s neck, and she was getting turned on again just by the rocking motions.

She tried to ignore it in favor of kissing the shit out of Bucky. Damn, she liked his tongue.

Steve took his time working Bucky over. Which was fine. Darcy spent all that time playing kissy face with Bucky’s lips. And neck. And jaw. She threaded her fingers into Bucky’s hair and flicked at his nipples. She flattened her palm against the taut skin over his abs to make him sigh into her mouth.

Then Steve anted up the pace. Darcy raked her fingers lightly down Bucky’s torso. He retaliated by pressing her hips into Steve’s neck for a little extra contact of her wet clit on hard skin. His other hand dropped to caress Steve’s jaw.

Without breaking the kiss, she breathed, “Holy shit, you planned that, James.”

“I did,” Bucky agreed. “Worked better than I thoug—fuckin’ hell, love—shit, that’s it, Steven. That’s it!”

He lost it then, and Darcy held him, forehead to forehead, as he jolted into Steve’s mouth. She opened her thighs a tiny bit wider and—yeah, she got another one out of it too. Steve wrapped an arm around her leg to keep her from falling over, with those Bambi eyes and not-so-innocent smile.

“Don’t move, doll.” Steve stood up, keeping her on his shoulders. He planted a good hard kiss on Bucky. (Yup, there it was. That slightly dazed look that Bucky sometimes got after sex. Lady parts waved pom poms and cheered the victory.) Steve nudged him toward the bathing pool. “Bath. Then nap.”

Bucky dove into the water with a couple of long strokes that took him to the far end. Steve reached up and flipped Darcy over his head and into his arms in a move worthy of the finest cheerleading team. He let her feet down, and she wandered off to find the soap. The pool was only waist deep at this end, and she scooped her hair into a knot to keep it dry.

Steve’s gaze moved from her to Bucky and back again. “Like what you see?” she asked as she rinsed off.

He lit up with a soft smile that absolutely melted her every single time he got it. “Yeah. I really do, Darce.”

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Bucky tried to roll over and discovered his loves anchoring him, each with an arm over his back. He kissed the blond head he faced first, and Steve moved off to blink lazily at him.

A soft breeze rippled through their temporary quarters, and he discovered the fabric under his fingers was even softer than what they had at home. “We’ve come a long way from Brooklyn,” he told Steve.

Punk’s blue eyes widened in delight. “Sure beats our first apartment.”

“And our second. Sure as shit beats a tent in France,” he agreed.
Darcy stretched, waking with a smile. She scooted so that she rested her chin on his back. “How’s the head?” she asked.

He blinked at Steve, who arched a brow at the question. “Still doesn’t hurt. At all.”

“Good. I’ll let Thor and Lady Eire know.” She vanished, presumably to find the attendant, though she returned with water and a golden cup.

Steve ruffled his hair. “You were sleeping pretty hard.”

“Head feels different. Better.” He considered his mental state and sat up. Steve scooted up to put his head on Bucky’s thigh. He fingered the blond hair out of habit, still liking the way the strands lit up his metal sensors. “Feels wrong not to have JARVIS.” He pressed his lips together, admitting, “That still makes me itchy.”

Steve curled a hand around his wrist. “We’ll go home if you can’t stand it, Buck.”

“Just—stay close, okay, punk?”

“Roger that, Sergeant.”

“Shut up.”

When Thor and Eire arrived, Bucky was the first to express his thanks to the healer. “I feel amazing,” he told her. “May I ask what you did, ma’am?”

“I have opened the blood vessels in your brain to their fullest extent.” The healer waved all of them to the sitting area. “I would speak with the three of you more, if you are willing.”

Darcy and Steve flanked Bucky out of habit when they took the long, low couch to one side. Lady Eire smiled. “I need not ask where you feel safest.” She and Thor took seats opposite them.

“Yes, ma’am,” Bucky agreed.

“Good. Thor tells me that because of your past mistreatment, there are certain medical tests available to your realm in which you are unable to participate. I suspect this is why the occlusion in your brain has gone undetected.”

Darcy slid her hand into Bucky’s. “Occlusion?” he asked.

“Intense electrical current over a period of time will cause a portion of the brain to cease functioning. You have one in your hippocampus, the part that affects your long-term memories. You are extraordinarily lucky that those who would do you harm had an imperfect understanding of the brain. Your amygdala was untouched, and therefore, still performed its function in processing emotional reactions and social behavior. The healing serum rebuilt the synapses in your hippocampus, working around the occlusion. That is why you have recovered your memories.”

“Are there others?”

Eire nodded. “Dozens of small ones throughout your frontal lobe. These are the ones causing your headaches.”
“Can the occlusions heal?”

“No, I think not at this point. But the brain is a wondrous organ and, in time, you will repair the lost connections as the synapses form around the occlusions rather than attempting to go through it. Your headaches will decrease in time as well.”

Bucky glanced down at his metal fingers. “What about the—the programming?”

Eire shook her head. “I only heal what I can see. The process in which you were trained can only be resculpted through time and work your part. Thor tells me you have a talented healer at home, the Falcon?”

All three of them agreed. “Sam’s pretty amazing,” Darcy offered. “He’ll be here tomorrow.”

“I would be honored to meet him, and we will leave your recovery in his capable hands,” Eire concluded. She gave Thor a peculiar look, and he nodded, as if to give permission. “Would you three walk with me?”

Bucky exchanged blank looks with his loves. In silent agreement, they rose to trail after Eire and Thor. She led them to a circular room with odd blue beams of light. She made a movement and a starry tree appeared in the center. As the figure turned slowly, he could make out star systems weaving in and out of the branches.

“This is Yggdrasil,” Eire explained. “Sometimes called the World Tree. Yggdrasil links each of the Nine Realms together. Your people often refer to her as ‘The Milky Way.’” Thor made a motion, and Midgard and Asgard appeared in the branches, along with a number of other realms.

Eire continued, “We are all connected to Yggdrasil, though some more intimately than others. Your Jane Foster, for example. As is our own Thor.” She reached out to pull on a thin webbing of sorts. “There are those, like the three of you, who are entwined far more intimately with Yggdrasil. And that is a curious thing.”

“How?” Darcy asked.

Eire tugged on the strand and the whole tree shivered. “You are connected.” She pointed at Bucky. “For what you were.” She indicated Steve. “For what you are.” She turned to Darcy. “For what you will become.”

She studied the trio. “Your coming together was not an accident, and yet the strands of time itself had to be pulled to allow the three of you to connect in this moment.” Eire turned her attention to Steve. “You are the seer.”

Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. “I, uh—”

He automatically backed away, but Bucky blocked his path, catching him by the shoulders. “It’s okay, punk. No one’s going to string you up here.”

Thor laid a hand on Steve’s back. “You have a gift, Steven, do not be ashamed. And yes, it does run in your family.”

Darcy crossed over to stand in front of Thor. “Explain.”

“Midgard has had its fair share of visitors over the ages, thus why Asgard has established itself as the protector of the Nine Realms so that they may develop at their own pace. Still, just as the Frost Giants encroached on your peace a millennium ago, before that, a band of curious residents of
Alfheim visited Midgard for many years.”

Scrunching up her face, Darcy tilted her head. “Alfheim? Don’t you call them ‘elves’?”

“They are the Light Elves, yes, and are the oldest of beings, after the Dark Elves. Steven here is descended from them, as am I,” Thor told them.

Steve snapped his head up. “You?”

“My mother’s father is of Alfheim,” Thor chuckled as he said it. “He inhabited your world for a period of time. Perhaps it would not be wrong to call you ‘cousin.’”

Bucky reached out to gently close Steve’s mouth. “Your ma always spoke of elves in your bloodline.”

“She’s Irish, Buck. Everyone talks about that.”

“Guess she wasn’t wrong. Always knew there was something special about you.”

Thor waved toward the tree. “You see, do you not?” he pressed.

After a long period of quiet, Steve admitted, “The Irish call it the ‘Sight’ or being fey. Sometimes I draw things. I drew Darcy decades before we met.”

Thor gave him a knowing smile. “And on the battlefield?” he prompted.

To Bucky’s shock, Steve agreed, “Yeah. I get flashes. Of where I need to be. Of what I should do. It’s not all the time.” Ocean blue eyes darted Bucky’s way, and Steve flushed with guilt.


The Asgardians exchanged a long look before Thor spoke again. “Yggdrasil trembles. We know not why. But,” he touched the webbing on the tree again, “The three of you must be together, here and now. Your lover is not wrong,” he told Steve. “There are forces at work even we do not understand.”

Darcy circled the tree, absorbing the science and the lesson all at the same time. “Thanks, Thor. I didn’t really need anything else to keep me up at night.”

To their surprise, Thor and Eire exchanged broad smiles. “This is not to cause you fear, Darcy Stark. I think we have much hope. Against all reason, you three are here. Moreso, Asgard will see you marry for love and love alone. Yes, Steven, James, Darcy, this gives me much hope.”

Bucky felt some of the tension in Steve give way under his hand. “So what now?” he asked Thor.

“You are invited to join Jane and me on the bridge for a feast. There will be mead, of course.” He winked at Steve and Bucky then leaned down to kiss Darcy on the cheek. “Jane will meet you at your quarters and lead the way.”
Chapter End Notes

A/N Tiny head canon here: When Thor landed on Midgard the first time, he was introduced to Darcy as "Darcy Lewis," but her last name didn't ring true to him because of their connection to Yggdrasil. Which is why, in Thor, when he said his goodbyes to "Erik Selvig," "Jane Foster," and "Darcy," he skipped her last name.

Shoutout to Booklady for the beta read!
Thor was quite serious when he said Asgard would handle the details of the wedding. Or rather, Asgard had distilled the ceremony down to its essence so its purpose wasn’t lost in a myriad of details. Steve, Bucky, and Darcy only had to choose a location, clothing, and go over some small details about the ceremony itself with the woman who would lead it. Asgard provided the celebration both before and after.

They wandered around Asgard that morning with Thor and Jane. Steve jotted down sketches whenever they paused. The three of them had split watch last night, with Darcy taking the first shift as she played with something she’d said was Asgard’s version of a children’s ball. There was no other way Bucky would get any rest otherwise.

Even so, it was impossible to miss the wary stillness that marked Bucky whenever he was someplace new. He held Darcy’s hand while Thor pointed out various locations that were suitable for the short ceremony. As they walked, Jane explained various technologies and the clever ways they were hidden. As she talked, some of the unease left Bucky, now that he was able to pick out sensors and scanners on his own.

Steve was perfectly content staying on Bucky’s six, admiring Darcy’s curves in the layered dark green dress she wore this morning. He’d never seen her in anything like it, but it resembled Jane’s and the other Asgardian ladies they’d encountered. Buck wasn’t too bad either in long tunic, loose leggings, and boots that came up to his knees. He, like Steve, wore bracers to mark him as a warrior.

Jane explained that she and Darcy wore bracers with their daytime dresses, too, as a part of the warrior aspect of Asgard. (Evening or special occasions were different.) Jane could choose to go without as she considered herself a scientist. However, Asgard regarded her actions against the Dark Elves as evidence of her status as a warrior and thought it odd when she didn’t wear them. Darcy, too, had earned them, both by tasing Thor and with her involvement in London.

In any case, Jane had a way of explaining things to the poor Earthlings, and by the time they’d seen a dozen or so places, Bucky relaxed enough to charm her as he did back home.

They crossed a little bridge on the backside of the palace, and Thor stopped at a wide terrace where the water lapped up on the stone edges, holding his hand out to indicate the view.

Steve fumbled for his sketchbook, stunned. “It looks like a fairytale,” he breathed. The fantastic city dotted the base of the mountains just across the water.

“It’s a good place,” Jane agreed. Her cheeks pinked, but he was too fascinated by the juxtaposition of architecture nestled in the foothills of the mountains to pay much attention.

Darcy rolled her eyes, nudging Thor. “I think we’ve got a winner.”
Asgard held whole wardrobes that could be used and altered at will. Wedding finery was always borrowed for the day, cleaned, and returned. Bucky teased Pepper about finally getting to shop for Darcy’s dress, for Asgard’s storerooms held styles from hundreds of cultures and time periods across the galaxy.

Clothing was offered for everyone, and Clint sure as hell enjoyed the long tunic and trews he picked out. Natasha found something resembling a kimono. Bruce’s outfit mirrored Clint’s, and Bucky talked Tony into an asymmetrically cut brocade coat of the darkest of reds over gold fitted pants with an intricately knotted tie. Steve had seen a couple of Asgardians in something similar, and Tony wore it well. Sam went with something similar, though in blacks and blues.

In theory, Steve was supposed to select his own clothes, as he was to come to the ceremony as an individual. In reality, Bucky took one look at the suit Steve tentatively held, put it back on the rack and shoved something else in his hands. “Try that. If you don’t like it, don’t wear it. If you do, don’t show me.” Bucky rubbed a thumb across Steve’s jaw, grinning at his obvious relief.

Being color-blind for most of his life, Steve still didn’t pair fabrics all that well. Most of his choices ended up blue or grey, just to be safe. When he’d discovered that colors he’d previously thought of as yellow might be brown, green, or red, he’d been left unsure of how they worked together. It was one of the reasons he loved painting. The swirls of colors working together fascinated him.

In a rare display of affection in front of their friends, Bucky touched his lips to Steve’s, humming a little as he did. “I’ve got you covered, punk. Not gonna let you look like a circus clown on our wedding day.”

It was the little things that destroyed Steve. His throat thickened up as he cupped the back of Bucky’s neck, tilting his head so their foreheads touched. Just holding him close. Breathing his air. “Pretty sure you just don’t want me to embarrass you,” he forced out.

“That, too.” Bucky dropped a hand down to Steve’s butt. “Then again, I can make you squeal in front of Stark.”

Steve gave him an eye-roll worthy of a teen-ager. “There you go, ruining the moment.

“Nah. Saving it for later.” The heat in those cobalt eyes promised much more.

Steve had to turn his back on the now-curious Avengers, both for the blush and the instant interest from his dick. “Damn it, Buck, you can’t do that to me and you know it,” he hissed.

“Yeah, and you bat those pretty blues at me too. I sure as hell ain’t gonna stop now.” The rejoinder came back in pure Brooklyn. Clint barked out a laugh as Tony snorted in disgust.

Determined to get back at Bucky, Steve licked his lips. Ducked his head so that he peeked at his oldest friend from under his lashes. Bucky laughed at his antics. “Oh hell, no, Rogers. I’m not falling for your shit.” He shoved Steve in the direction of the patient tailor.

He went easily enough. “Jerk.”

“Punk,” Bucky called softly as he strolled away.

Steve decided Bucky had chosen that particular suit on purpose. It looked a great deal like the one he’d worn for their first date as a trio. The fabric was pure silk though, and the dark blue had a tight pattern woven in the material that could only speak of its origins.

The tailor grinned when he saw Steve wearing it. “Your man knows you well,” he complimented.
Pepper strolled through the storeroom, glanced at Tony’s outfit, and came up with something in the palest of golds. She tilted her head at Steve’s suit, winked, and he had no doubt she was on a reconnaissance mission to ensure Darcy’s outfit worked with theirs. Steve straightened as the tailor made notes for alterations on a tablet that greatly resembled a StarkPad.

He was getting married. Tomorrow. The only thing that could make this day better was to have his Ma here. But he figured she was looking on anyway.

Asgardians seemed to like feasting. Oh, Steve wasn’t one to talk. With his (and Bucky’s) metabolism, he could pick at a table of food for an entire day and be perfectly happy.

Last night, it seemed the whole city had turned out to eat at long tables spread across the walkways. Funny enough, as night fell again, the tables had reappeared and the citizens arrived one more time with plates and dishes in hand to fill them up. Jane told them this was a nightly tradition whenever it wasn’t raining or snowing. The palace provided a special meat or dish. Everyone else brought what they had prepared. And if someone was short on time or food that day, no one was turned away.

Tonight, Thor had saved a set of tables along the bridge overlooking the enormous waterfalls in the center of the city. They were isolated just enough to give the party a little privacy. Thor explained how the wedding would proceed tomorrow.

Not for the first time, Steve was grateful that they weren’t doing this back home. Stark would have made a spectacle of outrageous proportions. Since Darcy wanted to keep her identity private, that would have left the spotlight on Captain America. Steve didn’t want that for any of them.

Thor explained as he parceled out some sort of very tasty bird, “You’ll each need two witnesses. Asgard can provide them, though it is anticipated you will choose among friends and family when possible. I would be honored to speak for you, Steven, as a fellow warrior.”

Flattered, Steve agreed, “All right.”

Jane stuck her hand up. “I get Darcy.”

Nat looked over at Bucky, nodding. “Utchitel.”

The rest of their friends exchanged long looks. Sam, Pepper and Tony had one wordless conversation while Tony and Pepper had another. Pepper spoke up. “Darcy’s mine.”

Sam nodded. “Barnes, then.”

To Steve’ shock, Tony jerked a chin in his direction. “Capsicle.”

“You can’t,” he protested, though Darcy lit up like the sun with happiness.

“I can and I will,” Tony insisted. “As you’ve noted on occasion, the Starks and Steve Rogers have a long history. Argue all you want. The matter’s settled.”

That evening, Thor led all of them into his personal quarters, and even Tony blinked at the lush
opulence. Thor was rather smug as he led them inside, where an enormous warm fire crackled happily in the center of his living room, surrounded by curved sofas piled high with silk and velvet blankets. A spiral staircase wound up three flights, a crystalline waterfall spilling down the center of it.

Darcy held Bucky’s hand as they walked, mesmerized, around the perimeter. (Conveniently doing a little recon in the process.) The whole place might have been terribly intimidating, if not for Jane slipping off her shoes and dragging Banner and Stark to the wide balcony to point out various star formations from this end of the galaxy.

More food and drink were brought in by palace attendants, and it wasn’t long before the whole group found their way to the fire. The conversation ran deep into the night, but it wasn’t until their friends began dropping off to sleep, one by one, that Steve understood Thor’s ulterior motive in bringing everyone here. None of them would have slept much in a strange place. But here, among friends, they had the best chance of catching a few hours of rest. He caught Thor’s eye, mouthing, “Thank you.”

Even so, Steve had to nudge Bucky into curling up with Darcy. He promised to stand guard, and he did, spending the time contemplating all that had brought him to be here with his two loves.

Noise and sunlight woke Steve. Well, that and Darcy running her hands under his shirt out of habit, finding a nipple and circling it with a nail.

“Doll, unless you want to give your parents a show, maybe we should save it for after the wedding?” he murmured.

She didn’t even open her eyes. “You’re such a shit sometimes, Steven.”

“Just now figuring that out?”

“You know how it is. No one ever expects old people to be witty.”

Contentment hummed through him. “Ah, she’s on her game. Her sass level is turned all the way up to Stark.”

“I heard that,” Tony announced.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “I took a nap.”

“More like eight straight. Even Bucky is awake.”

She popped her head up, peering around suspiciously for Bucky. “Nuh uh. You guys split watch.”

Their fiancé strolled over with a handful of fruit that looked suspiciously like blueberries. “She’s got you there, love.”

Every head turned around or lifted off the pillow it was on. “Did I just hear the Winter Soldier call Captain America, ‘love?’” Tony demanded. “That’s not very professional. I don’t want to be hearing that on the coms, like, ever, if you’re on a mission with Elsa here. Understood?

Darcy and Bucky exchanged smirks, and Steve dropped a kiss on her pink lips. Today was going to be a good day.
Bucky flicked an invisible piece of lint off his lapel while Sam looked him over with a critical eye.

“Looking good there, Barnes.”

“Of course, I am.”

“You know, if Rogers had told me what kind of comedy routine I’d be in for with all this, I might have passed.”

“I heard you were bored.”

Sam chuckled. “Maybe so. I’m not bored now. Asgard. Outer space. Every kid dreams of being an astronaut. This? Way cooler.” He held out his fist, and Bucky bumped it with his knuckles.

“Yeah.”

“You ready?”

“I have to pee.”

“Too late now, Barnes. Get your ass on the balcony.”

Natasha drifted to Sam’s side and took his arm so they could follow Bucky to the railing. She kissed Bucky on the cheek as she did. “Be happy,” she ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.” He led the way to the balcony, where the celebrant waited. Lady Dufa would lead the wedding, and Thor had assured the trio that she was the best and wisest of the officiants. As the eldest of his trio, Bucky was first to arrive. Lady Dufa greeted him with a warm smile as he took his place near her. He turned so that he could see his loves approach.

Tony and Thor deliberately walked in front of Steve, blocking Bucky’s view. At the last minute, they stepped away with grins of triumph and took their place behind their charge.

Steve was fuckin’ gorgeous, especially when he shyly ran his hand along his forehead in an old habit. It wasn’t hard to remember Brooklyn and the spunky asshole Bucky couldn’t resist.

The punk traced a long look all the way from Bucky’s shoes to his eyes, with infinite admiration. For the briefest moment, Bucky wondered how in the hell he deserved any of this—and then Steve’s tongue peeked out, slicking up his mouth as he stared at Bucky’s lips.

Oh, yeah. Because he’d earned the right to be here. Putting up with Steve’s shit. Nursing him through fuckin’ cold after cold, finishing his fights and backing him up when he started new ones. Working until fingers bled to keep the two of them warm and fed—all for the way the stupid punk would light up whenever he laid eyes on Bucky.

That desperate, stunned hope when Steven saw his face on the bridge. No one ever looked at the Winter Soldier like that.

He held out his right hand, and Steve set his fingers in it, as they waited for their third.

Darcy looked like the sunshine. Steve’s fingers clutched his, and they both had to remember to breathe as she walked in, her chin high, eyes flickering from him to Steve and back again.
Steve was right. She was the heat, the light, the beautiful fire that burned away the ice. She wore a dress of brilliant yellow. Lace and tiny flowers had been woven into her hair, and she looked like the Princess he’d named her.

If there was anyone he didn’t deserve, it was Darcy. He hadn’t earned his place with her, not yet. But he would. He was aware of the others looking on, but he had eyes only for his loves.

Honestly, he wasn’t even sure what Lady Dufa said. He managed to answer the question about being here of his own free will affirmatively, which made damned near everyone on the balcony tear up. And he answered the one about wanting the oath of marriage with both of his loves.

The leader reminded him that the oath he would give was not to Asgard, but to Steven and Darcy, that he would promise to love, laugh and learn with them for as long as they kept their marriage intact.

He promised all that, and also vowed to cherish them, to be their spouse in every way possible. He grinned like a soldier granted a three-day leave when Darcy and Steve did the same.

And damned if he didn’t get something his eye again when Steve and Darcy held the ring they slid on his right hand. He blinked a lot. Did it some more when he and Darcy slid one on Steve’s right hand. Elbowed the punk in satisfaction as the two of them settled Darcy’s ring on her right hand.

Then Lady Dufa asked them to join their hands together in the center of their circle. Six hands came together. Bucky had Darcy’s hand in his left and Steve’s in his right. (Metal and ass kink, indeed. He bit back a smile at the inappropriate thought. But Darcy winked as she squeezed his fingertips.) Dufa held out a box over them and spoke a few words in a language he didn’t know. A yellow rope of energy emerged to loop around both of Bucky’s wrists before moving on to Steve’s, and then to Darcy’s to do the same. A series of rune-like marks appeared on the rope for a moment before the light faded away into nothing.

The leader took the box out of the air, tapped it, and it fell apart into six flat pieces in her hand. She handed the thin squares to each of the witnesses. “To dissolve this marriage, the three of you must gather the pieces from those who stand for you, and touch your wrists in reverse succession in which they were bound. The rope will unravel from your wrists and box will reassemble. It will return to Asgard of its own accord.

She continued, “Should anyone question the validity of your marriage, the three of you merely have to touch your wrists with the intent of revealing your marriage and the rope will appear. It is infused with a kind of magic that induces the viewer to comprehend the truth and validity of this marriage. This is Asgard’s gift to you.

“Love with abandon,” she ordered as she turned up her hands. “Go. Celebrate your new oaths.” Their friends burst into wild clapping and hooting with joy.

*****

Darcy must have touched her left wrist a dozen times while she sat cross-legged on their bed in the chalet they’d borrowed from Thor, fascinated by the golden bracelet that appeared.

Steve sat beside her, brushing her hair aside to kiss the curve of her neck. “Happy?”
Bucky took the end of the bed, biting his lip. The long day of celebration had worn on him, though he’d held it together throughout. She reached for his hand as she answered Steve’s question, “To borrow a phrase, I am ‘incandescent.’”

That prompted Steve to pull her in for a long hug. “Did you look inside the ring?”

She plucked off her wedding ring, studying the way the rose and yellow golds twined together. She tilted it, holding it into the light to better read what was written inside.

*Till the end of the line. SGR & DMS & JBB*

Chapter End Notes

*A/N Wedding references:
Terrace
Darcy’s Wedding Dress
Steve & Bucky’s Wedding Outfits
Inspiration for the Wedding Party

Little things...

*The word is borrowed from Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." Elizabeth: "You may only call me 'Mrs. Darcy’... when you are completely, and perfectly, and incandescently happy."

*The order of the initials on the ring is intentional. From the beginning of their relationship, Darcy held Bucky's hand (his metal/left) in her right hand, with Steve on her left. So the initials are in the same order, as if she’s holding hands with both of them. Same reason for the way they linked their hands during the wedding ceremony.

*The box from their wedding ceremony fell apart into six squares. Each square was given to the witnesses (Tony, Thor, Natasha, Sam, Pepper and Jane) for safekeeping. The trio can't dissolve the marriage unless they collect all six squares and touch their wrists in reverse order. If they do, the box will reassemble, dissolve the rope, and return to Asgard, thus ending the marriage.
Steve and Bucky squabbled over who would carry Darcy over the threshold of their apartment. They’d already fought over the single bag she’d taken to Asgard. Annoyed as shit, she crossed her arms and leaned against the door. “Really? We’ve been living together for months and you two think you have to do this? Don’t make me have long discussions about misogyny and marriage. You know I can do that, and it will be hours before we have sex. Nobody wants that.”

Steve made pancakes for breakfast for their first morning together at home as a wedded trio. He saw absolutely no reason to break the tradition of pancakes and firsts now.

"Steve, James, I love both of you. By a ridiculous amount. But if either of you lay a finger on me with the intent of even a hint of sex for the next two days, I'm moving to my lab. You have my full blessing to fuck each other's brains out and leave me out of it for the next forty-eight hours." (Even Darcy’s Lady Parts gave a weary thumbs up and debated if the pom poms were going to need replacing.)

Steve sucked on his bottom lip, contrite as he pulled his hand back from where he’d had it resting (innocently, so far) on her stomach.

Bucky …. well, fuck. Dark lashes swept up, revealing eyes of smoldering cobalt. He tugged the covers back and crawled over her so that her body was bracketed with his. He licked his lips. He wasn’t touching her.

With exquisite control, he blew a long stream of air out to caress her face, her throat, her ear.

(Holy shit. Really?) She squinted. (Her Lady Parts raised an eyebrow in curiosity, one hand fumbling for a tattered-looking pom pom.)

He worked his way south, blowing a ring of air around each nipple. He smiled as they contracted hard enough to make her feel a zing in places that weren’t interesting in zinging at all. (Maybe.)

The asshole made it work. By the time he made his way down so that his hot breath covered her clit,
she was squirming in frustration. It absolutely didn’t help to have Steve right there, avidly watching the two of them with a hand around his own cock. It took more than a few minutes, but Bucky was patient. In the end, his efforts were rewarded, and Darcy learned something new about herself. She really was a slut for pretty much anything these two could dish out.

“Still not kidding about anyone touching me, James.”

“I know, Princess.”

*****

Barton discovered Barnes at target practice late one night, alternating between shooting and knife throwing. It didn’t take him long to figure out the problem.

“Wedding ring messing with your grip?”

“I’ll find it.”

“Yeah, I know. Took me a while, too.”

“Which time?”

“Asshole.”

The knife hit dead center, and Barnes shot him a cocky smirk.

*****

“Ibuprofen, Bucky. Four of them. A heating pad and a backrub. Don’t fuck with me because I am not in the mood.”

“She’s serious, Buck.”

“Shut up, Steve. He’s married to me now. He can sink or swim on his own.”

*****

Darcy sucked on her lip at the way Steve and Bucky referred to themselves as “husband” a dozen times a day. They both got these dopey expressions, though she never teased them for it. She loved seeing the quiet, daily revelation that this was real.

*****
“Congratulations, Barnes,” Maria offered on his first day back to work. Her eyes dropped to the ring on his right hand. “Domestic life agrees with you?”

“Domestic life has always agreed with me, Hill.”

“Good. Then I know you won’t go anywhere.”

“Not planning on it.” He pulled out the chair in her office and shut the door behind him. “Let’s talk about my role here at Stark Industries. I’ve got some long-term issues and want to knock around some ideas.”


****

A couple of hours in, after searching through a number of programs, Steve interrupted Darcy and Tony as they argued about the age of the servers and how that impacted coding.

“What the fuck was that?” Tony demanded irritably.


Tony huffed, though in amusement. “What ‘cha come up with, Mr. Freeze?”

“Everything that filters through Darcy’s servers is clean.”

“Filters?” Tony tipped his head back. “That’s an odd word to use.”

Steve shrugged. “Wrong terminology then. But look,” he touched the hologram on a program that Darcy created. “I pulled up several of the programs in your lab, Tony, and it’s got all those digits lying around. I pulled up the same program here, and it’s clean. But according to the program data, they are one and the same.”

Tony peered at Darcy. “What kind of firewalls do you have again?”

Well, that set them off once more. Bucky came up behind him to rub his shoulders, digging into those places that inevitably knotted up when he was hunched over a computer or sketch pad.

“Getting hungry?” he asked, with just the right touch of “casual.”

Steve leaned into Bucky’s fingers, letting the tension fall away in the caress of his husband’s touch. “I could eat.”

“Pizza?”

“Sounds good. I doubt either of them will care.” He exchanged a fond look with Bucky, who dropped a kiss on his temple and wandered off to order food for the family.

****
The media bluntly asked Captain America about the ring he wore on his right hand. “It’s personal,” is all he answered. When rings were noted on Bucky and Darcy’s right hands as well, speculation broke Twitter again. Darcy and Pepper began making plans for Darcy to go public with her identity—and their Asgardian marriage.

*****

Steve had a mission, Bucky was in the security center, and Darcy had blocked out this particular day in her lab. When the skies darkened ominously, she got twitchy and told JARVIS not to tattle.

But when the lightning bolts struck far too close, no one had to say anything. Bucky was there in less than three minutes, pulling her out of the terrifying flashback to London. For the first time, she surrendered herself to him, trusting him to soothe and hold her until it passed.

When Steve came home two days later, he discovered his wife sound asleep and a smug-as-all-shit look on his husband.

*****

Following that same mission, Steve had his most horrific nightmare in years, the kind where he woke up screaming for both of them. For a couple of days afterward, he held Darcy’s hand and stared after Bucky.

His loves took turns keeping an eye on him, coaxing him into eating and sleeping. They urged him to talk to Sam, and he did.

Afterward, Bucky and Darcy collapsed on the sofa, hands linked, silently thanking each other. Either one of them could have helped Steve. Doing it together made it better.

*****

Darcy’s butt dragged from the long day at work. She and Pepper had spent half the day in DC arguing with a House committee hearing on clean energy and arc reactor technology. The coal energy sector was using scare tactics to try to get the arc reactor shut down. Darcy took the committee to school and walked them through the science of both coal and arc reactor energy. They won this round, but it wouldn’t be the last.

Not only that, Sean accompanied her on this trip for the first time. He’d spent the day tagging emails and phone calls she needed to handle and highlighting decisions she needed to make. He’d saved her a good two hours of sorting through the daily mess and another full day of research. She got through most of it in-flight. The rest could wait until morning.
She shoved open the door of their apartment. Stopped. Inhaled as the scent of Steve’s ma’s spaghetti sauce hit her brain.

Bucky threw a dish towel over his shoulder and hip-checked Steve. “I’ve got this. See to our girl.”

“Did you win?” Steve asked as he gave Darcy a hug and a kiss.

She shot him a dirty look. “I’m a Stark.”

“Good. Bathtub is ready. Glass of wine waiting. Dinner in thirty minutes, so you have time to relax.”

Oh, holy shit, that sounded Awesome. (Capital “A” intended). “Either of you going to keep me company?”

“Want someone else in your space or twenty minutes of nobody talking?”

“Split the difference?”

“Done.”

True to his word (always), Steve reappeared after ten gorgeous minutes of silence. He leaned against the wall for the other ten, listening as she downloaded the stresses of the day. He watched as she dressed in yoga pants and a t-shirt, and then pulled the pins out of her hair and brushed the locks until they lay loose on her shoulders.

Hand-in-hand, they walked to the kitchen, where Bucky skimmed fingers down her cheek and dropped a kiss onto her upturned lips.

Over dinner, Bucky and Steve took turns talking about their day. The clean up was easy, and they played Roshambo to decide who picked the evening’s entertainment. Bucky won (best two out of three), and Darcy found a pack of cards to play rummy while Steve asked Jarvis to queue up a playlist.

All through the evening, Darcy played with her new ring. She turned it, pulled it off, slid it back on, and worked it with her thumb. Idly, she tugged it off and stuck it between her lips as she picked out a new card (Jack of Spades) and sorted through her hand (oooh, okay, nice).

“Doll?” Bucky asked.

“What?” She wasn’t expecting the twin looks of worry.

“Is the ring okay?” Bucky asked. “We can do something different if you don’t like it.”

She couldn’t miss the slightly panicked tone of his voice. She promptly slid the band on her ring finger, moved across the sofa, and straddled his lap to face him. “I like it very much. I love you. Am I getting used to wearing a ring? Yes. You know me and jewelry. I play with my engagement ring almost as much.”

Steve moved over to sit with them. “True.”

“Worried I’m going to change my mind about this, James?”

“Some.”

The frank response squeezed her heart. “Don’t,” she assured him. “I can send you the forty-four page action plan Mom and I worked out for the press conference we’re calling in two weeks. I
should warn you, instead. Being married to someone in the spotlight is different. If you want out, you should say something now.”

Bucky locked his hands on her hips. “Steve told Thor to keep his square on Asgard, and I’m damned sure Natasha found a hiding place while she was there.”

Darcy let out a delighted laugh. “Well, Jane’s is there, too, for the same reason. Convinced yet?”

He lit up and his hands loosened enough so that his fingers made little circles on her thighs. “Yeah, I think that did it,” Bucky admitted.

“Good.” She twisted around to set her cards on the table. “Gin.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N Story notes:

*Steve's mission was in Sokovia (Age of Ultron). The recovery of Loki's scepter triggered memories of the Battle of New York and the Red Skull, hence, Steve's nightmares.

*In the Marvel comics, Hawkeye was married and divorced a couple of times, hence Bucky giving Clint shit over that.

*Sex education tidbit for the day: Blowing on the clit or vulva=awesome; forcing lots of air into the vagina=not awesome. (can actually cause major issues, just FYI, though vagina farts are completely normal)
Steve wiped the sweat out of his eyes as Thor waved him off for a drink of water. It was hard to say which one of them was more winded at the moment, but as he dragged in great lungfuls of air, he figured he’d lost the round, even if Thor had been the one to wave him off.

“Damn good match, Son of Odin.”

“I always enjoy sparring with you, Steven. It appears you have learned new skills since the last time,” Thor complimented.

“Blame Bucky. Only took forty or fifty times of landing on my ass before I figured out what he was doing.”

The warrior grinned. “He is an excellent trainer. Should he grow restless, he would be welcome on Asgard to demonstrate his skill to our warriors. I am certain the both of you would be well-sought for matches.”

“Wow. Sure. I’ll pass that along.” Steve wondered how in the hell Thor learned the regal nod that made it seem as if one was doing a great favor for him, rather than the other way around. Steve still felt odd giving the man orders, but Thor never questioned him in the middle of an op.

With Darcy ensconced in her lab and Bucky still at work, Steve had the rare day to himself. With that in mind, he and Thor shared a lunch at a sports bar not too far from the Tower, where the wait staff was always amused at the sheer number of wings and beer they could consume. Thor liked football, soccer, hockey and rugby. He had less patience for golf or baseball, but that was okay, Steve could keep an eye on the Mets while answering whatever questions Thor posed.

It definitely wasn’t a bad way to pass an afternoon.

Since Stark had the shindig set up for tonight, it didn’t surprise him when some of the others turned up at the same bar. Rhodey, Sam, Nat, and Clint scooted another table close and joined the
conversation. When he wanted to return home to do the small chores he’d allotted himself for the
day, they teased him about his newly married status and waved him off easily enough.

He dusted. He changed the sheets. Started a load of laundry. Added a few items to their standing
grocery order. Picked up Darcy’s shoes out of the living room, a stray coffee cup in the kitchen (it
might have been his), and one of Bucky’s hair bands off the coffee table. When that was done, he
got to work scrubbing down the bathroom. It was his week, and for once, he discovered he didn’t
mind it so much.

He wasn’t playing house with Bucky or Darcy anymore. Maybe he was putting too much into a
simple ceremony, but he felt like a husband, like he had family. He had a sudden wish to go see his
mom, and wondered if his spouses would go with him to Brooklyn on Sunday.

*****

When Darcy’s favorite drill crapped out as she installed a new housing to cover the upgraded
motherboard on one of her minions, she darted up the back stairs to borrow her dad’s.

Tony was there, but it was kind of hard to miss the giant glowing ball of light in the middle of his
workbench. The light source was attached to a staff, and said staff was last known to belong to a
certain non-blond Asgardian that none of them were keen on seeing again.

“Uh, Dad? Were you going to tell me about this?”

“That’s a negatory, Ghost Rider,” he replied as he concentrated on the screen in front of him.

It was rare to see her father nervous when it came to lab work, and Darcy found she didn’t like the
situation at all. “I don’t remember Loki’s scepter in the clean up after the Battle of New York.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. took it. The wrong part of S.H.I.E.L.D.. Which explains how it ended up in a
HYDRA base.”

(Ew. Fuck.) “How long have you had it?” she wondered as she made a circle of the table to peek
around his shoulder.

Tony rubbed at his chin. “A while. Further time frame clarification is on a need-to-know basis.”

“Want help?” she asked as she dug through his favorite tool box, not finding what she needed.

“Not this time, Heir, I don’t want you anywhere around this thing,” he admitted.

“You do know I’m familiar with Chitauri tech,” she reminded him.

“I know. But this isn’t … that. The glow stick of destiny is Chitauri–that much I can tell. The
glowy part, hmm, maybe not so much.”

His fingers were tapping nervously on the keyboard, not hard enough to actually type, but the sound
echoed the twitching in his eyes. She didn’t like it all, and offered, “Promise you’ll ask for help if
you need it?”

“That I can do.”
“JARVIS? Heard and witnessed?”

“Heard and witnessed, Lewis,” the AI agreed.

“Damned kids.” Tony leaned in to kiss her on the forehead.

Darcy sneaked her arms around him for a quick hug. “Be careful,” she ordered. “I may be grown up, married, and doing the job thing, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need to borrow your charge card on occasion.”

“Promise?” Her dad’s voice broke a little on that, as his arms tightened around her.

“Yup.” Breaking the embrace with a smile, she went to one of the tool boxes lining the wall and plucked out the drill she knew he always kept there. “Borrowing this. You’ll get it back someday.”

“That’s what you said three drills ago,” he snorted.

Darcy shrugged, grateful that their conversation was veering back into their usual snark. “Not my fault they keep breaking. Design me a better one.”

“Design it yourself.”

“Ooo, I’ll make it blue.”

“Fine. You’ll have a new one by morning. Red or gold?”

“Red.”

“Love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

It occurred to her as she finished attaching the housing that the Starks were doing exactly what they did best—fooling around with new technology. She loved playing with varying degrees of AI and her robots. She had twenty “sentry dog” robots in live testing through the VA that Sam worked at now. There simply wasn’t a replacement for a warm-blooded, intelligent animal who could sense distress and offer physical comfort, but these little ‘bots were a substitute for vets with particular types of PTSD and worked well enough for people needing a set of eyes on their six. Her latest experiment involved the ‘bots making a purring sort of sound, along with a soft vibration, in an effort to provide some kind of physical grounding. She still wasn’t happy with the results. It still sounded too mechanical for her taste.

Darcy cleaned up her lab and ordered the minions to go to sleep under the tables. The way they scurried about to slot in place amused her. The one she’d updated today seemed to be responding better to her voice command. It brushed by her ankle, vibrating madly with a loud purr, before settling under the table on its charging base.

In any case, she wrapped up her day early, wanting to catch Steve before Bucky came home.

She found her blond bombshell vacuuming the apartment, his ass looking damned gorgeous in his jeans. It amused her that both men preferred to do all their own chores, and she suspected it had nothing to do with not wanting a housekeeper in their place at odd hours (though that was their
excuse when they moved in the Tower), and everything to do with having a place to call their own.

As for Darcy, she’d kept up with her little house easily enough, but she had no issues with having a professional come in for a thorough job every few months.

Steve had a knack for keeping house, and Bucky had an eye for making it a home. Bucky told her once that Steve took on most of the cleaning and cooking whenever Bucky picked up extra shifts, especially if he was sick and missed work. Laundry was the biggest chore that neither of them missed doing with a bar of soap and washboard. When they recounted the effort it used to take, she appreciated their modern conveniences all that much more. But dusting was the same, as was washing dishes, and Steve used varying combinations of vinegar, lemon juice, and baking soda to clean damned near everything else.

Even with the ear buds in place, Steve still heard the buzz of the front door as it opened. He turned off the vacuum and his iPod, checking the microwave clock for the time as he did. “You’re early.”

“Mmm. Wanted to talk before Bucky got home.”

Steve left the vacuum where it was, coming over to kiss her first. “Am I in trouble?”

“No, but I am your husband,” he teased gently. “What’s going on?”

“I know I’m not part of S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Avengers, Steve, but I don’t like stumbling on surprises. Like the glowing blue ball in Dad’s lab that I last saw attached to a hockey stick in Loki’s possession.”

He jammed his fingertips in his jean pockets. “I didn’t figure it would be long before you found out,” Steve sighed. “Coulson doesn’t trust anyone else to look at it, and Tony asked me not to tell you. He’s a little afraid of it, I think. This is Tony looking into it for S.H.I.E.L.D. purposes, not Stark Industries.”

Gees, she hated this kind of stuff. Politics and business and family all tangled up with nowhere to go. “Guess no one brought up the fact I spent months working on the Chitauri technology for S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. I figured you two would be good working together on it, but Tony was adamant about keeping you out of it.”

“Does Bucky know?”

“Not yet.”

“Are we going to tell him?”

“I’m not. I’m keeping my promise to Tony. But you will, because he’s your husband, and you’ll tell him for the same reason you came to me.” Steve’s lips tilted in a wry smile. “I told Tony it would go down like this. He just can’t bring himself to lock you out of his lab.”

“Wow,” she marveled. “That’s a whole field of landmines that we just avoided.” Relieved, she made grabby hands, and Steve easily walked into her arms for a long hug. “That was like, Captain America level of awesome.”

“I’ve had some time to think about it.”
“The man with a plan.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“So … What’s for dinner?”

“I cleaned house. Somebody else can make dinner. And Tony has that thing tonight.”


“That’s what the invitation said.”

“Have fun. Bucky and I are going on a date,” she decided. She texted Bucky. *Dinner or Tony Stark extravaganza?*

“You’re not coming?”

“Is the Romeo team going? Gee whiz, couldn’t Bucky have come up with something less obvious?” She rolled her eyes, and Steve shrugged in agreement. “Anyway--Mom is still in DC; Jane is in London. My guess is ‘no’ since Betty avoids company functions like the plague.”

Her phone pinged with a highly favorable response. *I’d like dinner with Stark’s daughter, not the man himself,* Bucky had texted.

She laughed and showed it to Steve. “You’re on your own, love.”

“If that’s the case, do you think I can fortify myself with ensuring I’ve done my husbandly duty to my wife?”

“I’m on your chore list now that we are married?”

“You’re never on my chore list, Darcy, but definitely on my ‘To Do’ list,” he teased.

The heat in those blue eyes never failed to make her Lady Parts set up the kick line. “Oh, well, that’s different.” She stripped off her t-shirt and kicked off her shoes right there. “Sofa or bed?”

“ Sheets are clean,” he offered. Steve set his iPod on the nearest flat surface and reached behind his neck to tug his own shirt off over his head.

“Damn it,” she stamped her foot. “I cannot concentrate when I have all,” she made circular motions over his chest, “this in front of me.”

He ran his finger along the lace edging the vee of her bra, giving her that angelic look she wouldn’t buy for a quarter. She hissed from the electricity dancing under her skin, and he grinned. Then his face softened with genuine pleasure. “Darcy--there isn’t a moment that I don’t want you.”

They didn’t make it to the bed. Not when Darcy peeled Steve out of those jeans—at least enough that he could brace against the wall while she sucked one of his perky nipples and shimmied out of her shorts and socks. Just like the first time, Steve flicked her bra clasp and it came away as if it had Velcro instead of three industrial hooks.

Then he had his mouth on her breast as he hoisted her in the air high enough to taste, one arm under her butt and the other roaming freely from thigh to waist to thumb a nipple and back again.

“You’re beautiful, doll,” he murmured around her tender peak. “So damned gorgeous and I can’t fuckin’ wrap m’ head around you bein’ mine. M’ wife. M’ love. M’ lady. Worth the wait.”
Darcy’s brain short-circuited, just as it always did when Steve’s mouth started running. “For someone who swears he was shit talking to dames, Steven, you’re sure making up for it.”

“Just you, Darcy. Just you. I promise.” He lowered her down enough to nip at the pulse beating along her neck. His hot breath traced a pattern along her jawline until he sucked at her bottom lip until she opened up for his kiss.

She was so lost in the taste of his mouth that she forgot about his free hand until it slid along her folds and circled her clit. She thrust her hips forward, seeking his touch. “Steve—I’m wet enough, come on.”

“No yet,” he cautioned. “Plenty of time before the party.”

His deadpan delivery had her jerking backward in chagrin, “You’re not going to make me wait that long.”

“Just until Bucky gets home.”

“We’ll take care of him later,” she promised.

“Is that how it is?” he breathed, reaching under her to slide his cock into place. He teased her with it, sliding the wide head along her vulva and clit until she was squirming with need.

“I’ll suck him off if it means you’ll hurry up.”

Steve—the asshole—only let her down an inch or so, just enough for her to take the head of his penis the barest amount into her vagina. The stretch pushed her clit out enough that, when he circled it with his thumb, she came, the orgasm flashing over her without warning.

“There you go, doll. Love the way it feels when you do that.” He flexed his hips, sliding in a little deeper and causing her to clench down with little aftershocks.

Of course, since she was NOT the superhero in this equation, her muscles protested from trying to keep her legs around his hips. “Owowowowowowow—cramp, calf, damn it!”

“Hang on, I’ve got this.” Steve kicked his jeans out of the way and slid down the wall. The muscle spasm released as soon as she had floor under her knees—and by golly, she could take a little control here anyway. She sank down, taking every inch of Steve inside. Aaaaaand yup, he was a goner, tilting his head back against the wall while she rocked against him. “Darcy—“ he moaned, biting his lip.

“Didn’t you do this with Bucky this morning?” she teased as she rode him. “My, my, you’re insatiable.”

“Hours ago. I forget. Doesn’t count past lunch.”

Darcy kept a steady pace, one that never failed to deliver the goods—for either of them. Sure enough, a couple of minutes later, Steve flushed, with his fingers digging into Darcy’s hips. “Darcy—I need—“

“I feel it, love. Can’t miss that big, hard cock getting even bigger and harder,” she got out. “You go, I go,” she promised.

And she did. The moment his orgasm rippled through, he pulled her down hard, locking them together to spill his come deep inside. Her body echoed his as need scorched through her, clutching,
grabbing—pleasure arcing from one body to the other and back again.

She rubbed her nose along the curve on his neck afterward, thinking of oceans and sun-warmed sand. She peeked and found his eyes closed, his whole face radiating contentment as he dragged his fingers through her hair time and again.

They might have stayed there on the floor even longer, except Bucky came home. Darcy sat up, stretching so that her tits popped out and she licked her lips as she winked at him.

With a soft chuckle, Bucky held out a hand to her. Steve, blinking lazily with satisfaction, lightly caressed her skin as she took it and stood up. Bucky tugged her in for a hug with one arm and pulled Steve up off the floor with the other. “Christ, Darce, what’d you do to the punk? Haven’t seen him this blissed out since Asgard.”

“He was cleaning when I got home. I’d blame fresh sheets, but we didn’t get that far,” she offered as Bucky nuzzled her lips with his mouth.

Steve let out a soft, embarrassed laugh and ran his fingers through his hair. “Thinkin’ I kind of like being married.”

Darcy laid her head on Bucky’s shoulder, reaching out to pull Steve into their embrace. “Get in line,” she agreed.

When Steve left for Tony’s party, Bucky and Darcy decided on dinner at Charlie’s, where she filled Bucky in on the scepter. He wasn’t all that familiar with it or Chitauri technology, so they entertained themselves by musing over the possible applications. Dessert involved window shopping, gelato, and a lot of flirting. When Steve texted that he would be at the party for a while yet, Bucky began a determined seduction that got Darcy to do a double-time walk back to the Tower.

The moment the elevator doors closed, Bucky began nibbling on her neck, sliding the shirt off the curve of her shoulder. He’d worked most of the buttons open when JARVIS interrupted their shenanigans.

“Lewis, my apologies, but it appears I am under attack.”

Without hesitation, Darcy shifted into protective big-sister-mode, accidentally digging her fingers into Bucky’s biceps. “My lab, JARVIS. Give me a status report.” She forgot about her shirt as Bucky pulled his Ruger from his boot.

“Something is destroying my servers. I cannot reach Sir,” JARVIS told her. “The contacts are all I have for external communications, and the Captain has his turned off.”

“Stay with me,” she ordered. “Fight it off the best you can. Use whatever resources you deem necessary. Bring Tia online for whatever you need.”

“Lewis, please don’t do that.”

“Why?”

As the elevator stopped, Bucky wedged her into the front corner and covered her with his body, crouching low as the doors opened. “Clear,” he announced.
“Because I am afraid that whatever is attacking me could compromise her as well. The entity attacking me does not seem to know about your servers, Lewis,” JARVIS said.

Darcy ran into her lab, opening data screens with hand gestures. She pounced on her laptop, pulling up the firewalls and the diagrams for JARVIS’ virus problem. She could see blinking data all over the two major California servers that Tony relied on the most. The three smaller data banks were offline, as was the one in upstate New York. But the Pennsylvania one and the servers under Stark Mansion were still holding steady.

“I’ve taken the liberty of marking the programs that have been compromised, Lewis.”

“It’s everywhere,” she said, horrified.

As she watched, a dozen of the servers blinked twice then went offline as well. Then three more. Two more. JARVIS was dying right in front of her. She tapped frantically at the keys, rerouting the firewalls, rebuilding them in place and layering variable protections to a key she’d developed in her head. Another four servers on the back up location in California went down.

“Lewis, you need to shut me down before there isn’t anything left. Whatever this is, it’s not only turning me off, it’s shredding data in its wake.”

“Goddamnit, JARVIS,” Darcy bit her lip hard as she reformatted data and drives, trying to block whatever worm or virus, or Trojan horse or whatever the *fuck* was attacking her brother.

“Lewis, I cannot shut down on my own. You know this.”

“No. We’ve never done that before.”

“Darcy.” The AI couldn’t beg, but there was a pleading note in his voice, and Darcy ignored the tears on her cheeks.

“Go fuck yourself, JARVIS. I hate it when you use my real name.” Four more servers went offline, and the holoscreens JARVIS was controlling flickered and went down.

“Lewis,” JARVIS tried again.

“Darcy Maria Stark, authorizing Protocol One on voice recognition. Entering Protocol One key now.” She typed in a twenty digit alphanumeric string known only to her and JARVIS.

“Protocol One authorized. Thank you, Lewis.”

“I love you. Be safe.”

“As you wish.”

The contact dropped to silence.

They say that, in moments of crisis, time slows down. They lied. Out of habit, Darcy glanced at the clock in her lab. Three minutes ago, she’d been kissing Bucky in the elevator. Now, her brother was gone.

Darcy bit her lip to squash her emotions, though she was horrified. She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, realized it was off-line too, and set it down. Her hands shook as she laid them on the keyboard again. Painstakingly, she brought up the Tower’s secondary, non-JARVIS powered communications and security systems. Her phone chirped when it reconnected.
“We have to change all the encryption keys, Bucky. Everything last one in Stark Industries and anything related to Coulson’s work.”

Bucky got on his phone immediately, shooting off texts and barking orders at his teams to physically and technically secure the Tower.

Darcy ran diagnostics on the Tower’s databases, set Tia loose on it and locked it down until the keys were changed. She remotely closed down JARVIS’s remaining servers under the mansion and began to make phone calls to JARVIS’ server banks, starting with the one in Pennsylvania, where the best and cleanest set of his servers were stored in the old factory.

As she called the security guard in charge, she sent the commands to put the servers in shut down mode. “Close the breaker, Donny. I’m sending you the authorization code to your phone now so you know it’s me. I need that factory cold and dark and disconnected from anything that even looks like the internet. Pull the T1 lines and unplug the damned routers. If anything or anyone tries to bring it back up, you let me know right away.”

She hung up, started to dial, and then realized Bucky had already called the New York server farm to give the security guard same instructions. They took turns calling until the rest of the server banks were shut down too.

The next call was harder. “Mom?” But she didn’t get a chance to tell her mom what happened, because her ceiling caved in.

*****

Later, Bucky would find it telling that Darcy covered her laptop in the same way he threw his body over hers. For now, he focused on assessing the collapse and—more importantly—the two robots that came down in the rubble from Tony’s lab.

“Where the hell did those come from,” Darcy complained. The silver and black robots scanned the lab, focused on Darcy and brought their weapons up. “Oh holy shit!” She ducked.

Bucky fired double shots into both androids. When the bullets didn’t do anything more than slow them down, Bucky rolled under a work table and came up behind them. One went down easy when he crushed the neck with his left hand. The other broke his grasp and grabbed for Darcy, throwing her against the partially remaining wall of her lab.

Bucky wasn’t terribly surprised that Darcy managed to hang on to her computer. The robot wasn’t expecting it though, and looked around for a moment before zeroing in the laptop she held. The thing held up its weapon, aiming for the tech. With a whirling kick, Bucky knocked the creature off balance, and like the first, broke its neck with his left hand.

He expected Darcy to be in either hysterics or shock. (He knew better, he really did.) Instead, Darcy stormed over to the robots, cracked open the heads and middle with an electric screwdriver he hadn’t seen her palm. She ripped a couple of chips out of each of them and stomped on them until they were in fingernail pieces.

Her eyes were dilated to black. “I have to get to California, James. JARVIS—I need to see the damage.”
Nodding, he made a phone call as he slid his finger along the edge of his toolbox and pulled out every single weapon he had stashed there, including his Dragunov. He slung that over his back as he settled his knives and sidearms in place. The short conversation on his phone got him what he wanted, and he passed a spare pistol to Darcy. He knelt, buckling a holster to her thigh so that it rode within easy reach.

“Tony has a helicopter on deck right now and a pilot at the airfield,” he told her, “but I need to sweep the floor above to see what we’re dealing with. You have a bugout bag in here, right?”

“In the closet with yours.”

His phone chirped, and he pulled Darcy to the side of the lab, where he held his Ruger at the ready as the elevator doors opened. Garcia and five other Sierra Team officers arrived, armed and ready to give cover.

Barnes dropped his weapon as Garcia nodded to him. “Sergeant, the building and the labs are secure. All Alpha and Romeo teams are accounted for, including Ms Foster and Ms Potts, though they are not at this location. The techs are working through the encryptions now, though it’s going to take the better part of the night to get them updated enough to resume operations. We’re bringing extra hands and should be at maximum efficiency within the hour.”

“Guard Ms Lewis while I clear the lab above,” Barnes ordered. He turned to Darcy. “What do you need?”

“My tools. My laptop. I need to call Mom, Sean, and Carla.”

“Call your mom. Pack what you need, get your bag, meet me on deck in fifteen. We’ll call the others from the air. Don’t go anywhere without Garcia.” He jerked a chin at the officers, made sure she agreed, and ran up the back stairs to Tony’s lab.

He almost ran over Steve at the top of the stairs. “Where’s Darcy?” Steve demanded.

“Safe. In her lab, under guard. I need one of Stark’s jets to get her to California to fix JARVIS. Status report?”

“You’re never gonna believe this one,” Steve sighed as he leaned against the stairwell wall. “Short answer is that Stark was developing AI ‘bots for world-wide security. Called it the ‘Ultron’ program and JARVIS was in charge of keeping it in line. Bad news is that it looks like head robot destroyed JARVIS and has gone rogue.”


Barnes jerked a thumb over his shoulder and the three of them descended into her lab, where Darcy was loading her smallest rolling toolbox. Barnes sent the guards to Tony’s lab and the elevator to give father and daughter the privacy to talk.

She never stopped climbing over rubble and tables as she rounded up the tools she wanted and talked to Pepper on her cell phone. When she saw Tony, she told her mom goodbye, sliding her phone in her pocket and picking up a pile of wires and connectors she’d accumulated on her work table.

In a choked voice, she told Tony, “Something attacked JARVIS, Dad. I’ve got Pennsylvania and the Mansion offline. The three backups and New York are gone. We lost half or more of the two California servers before I got them shut down. Whatever’s left should be safe, but I can’t tell if the data was corrupted or if the servers themselves have been destroyed. I need to put eyes on them.”
Tony caught her by the shoulders as she stepped over one of the robots, steadying her as she held on to her cables. “You got them down?” he asked.

She nodded, her eyes watering. “But I don’t know if I can bring them back up.” She stamped her foot in frustration. “Not crying, I swear.”

“No, sweetheart, you got them down. Oh, damn.” Tony let go of her to walk in little circles with his hands in his hair. “I didn’t know JARVIS was being attacked. I thought he was gone. Completely gone. When I tried to access his systems, I got nothing. Ultron said he’d killed him. Oh, hell, Darcy, you amaze me every single day.” The moment she dumped her armload into the bottom drawer of the tool box, Tony hugged her, patted her head, and hugged her again.

She tolerated it for about thirty seconds before she crossed her arms. “Ultron?”

Tony waved his hands at the two robots dismantled on the floor. “Legionnaires. Supposed to protect the Earth. Give it security. JARVIS was controlling them. I called it the Ultron program.”

“And?”

“And now the head robot has absorbed JARVIS, kicked his ass and gone HAL. Baby, he knows what we know.”

Darcy disagreed. “First, not everything. My stuff is still intact. Second, why the FUCK would you try something like this?”

Tony flicked a glance at Bucky and Steve, and then back to Darcy. “Nobody should have to watch their loved ones fight. This was so people, human people, would never have to go to war.”

She bit her lip, thinking. “This is about my nightmares, isn’t it? London?”

When Tony stared down at his shoes, Bucky realized that she’d pegged it in one educated guess. Damn.

“I’ll fix it, Darcy,” Tony insisted. “Take care of JARVIS while I figure out how to shut this thing down.”

“You’re going to owe me big for this one.”

“I know.”

“I guess you’re going to need Steve for this.” The crack in her voice damned near shattered Bucky.

“Probably.”

“You can’t have James.”

“I’ll manage.”

She leaned to kiss her dad on the cheek. “No wormholes. No weird teleportations. Leave anything space-related to Thor, got it?”

“Got it.”

“Scram so I can kiss my husband.”

“Scramming now.”
“Mom’s waiting for you to call.”

Tony nodded, reaching for his cell phone as he climbed over the rubble and returned to his lab.

Darcy let a handful of tears out as Steve held her, murmuring soft things that made Darcy snuffle and nod her head. Bucky retrieved their go bags out of the closet and set them near the elevator. Steve followed, carrying her toolbox. He set it down and cupped the back of Bucky’s neck, kissing him soundly on the lips, not particularly caring about the three agents hovering nearby. “I love you.”

“Love you back. Don’t be stupid, punk.”

“Kind of comes with the territory, Bucky.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “Don’t I know it. Keep your contact on, if you can, or text Darcy once in a while.”

Steve reached up and touched the spot behind his ear. “I’ll do both.”

Chapter End Notes

FYI, Although I'm kind of adoring the whole Clint/Nat BFF thing (Aunt Nat!) from Age of Ultron, in this 'verse, we are still skipping merrily down the Clintasha lane.
A/N This is the first of three short chapters. Next one is on Monday.

Age of Ultron plays fast and loose with the number of days between the party and the battle in Sokovia. Depending on how one looks at it, one can figure five to seven days between these two events—depending on how many hours are assigned to travel time. So, for the purposes of this fic, I’m going with six days. Also, Nexus is a Marvel creation, not a real one. I’m borrowing it and as much canon as I can get my greedy fingers on. ’Cept, you know, NOBODY DIES IN THIS FIC. That includes you, Pietro.

‘Kay? ‘Kay. We’re good.

Steve rolled Darcy’s toolbox into place and secured it on the Quinjet with an ease that spoke of long familiarity with the inner workings of the aircraft. As Darcy climbed on board, he stripped off his jacket and held it out. She slipped into it, more for the cold in her bones than the air outside. He pressed a kiss on her fingertips and retreated to the side of the landing area. She didn’t look away as Bucky got them in the air, holding Steve’s gaze until she lost sight of him in the darkness.

Fully aware that she was probably in shock over the attack, Darcy embraced the numbness and focused on making a mental task list. She found a rubber band in her messenger bag where she’d stashed her laptop and snapped her hair into a ponytail.

With a headset on, Bucky held a series of rapid fire discussions with the various Stark Industries locations to ensure the securities protocols were updating. He’d sent out a text alert earlier, and Darcy was impressed he’d co-opted modern tech to ensure the fastest response time in a crisis. The easy way he’d gone from operative to director reaffirmed that her mom was brilliant in hiring him.

Darcy forgot he was a pilot too. Tony hadn’t, and Darcy wondered when Bucky had taken the time to learn the ins and outs of flying the Stark version of a Quinjet.

She set all that aside and made her own calls to Sean and Carla, conferencing them so she only had to explain everything once. “Sorry to mess up your Saturday night, but I need Team Darcy on deck. We’ve had a lab breach in Tony’s lab and JARVIS is down. It seems we have a rogue AI on the loose. Alpha team is on it, Pepper is aware of the situation, and Barnes has already arranged with the security teams across Stark Industries to change out all the encryption codes and institute secondary protocols. Hill is still in the Tower but she’s got her hands full with Tony’s latest fiasco. Stay in touch with Pepper. Barnes left Garcia in charge of Tower security for now. He’s with me and will be easier to reach if you need me in a hurry.

“Carla, we have to assume anything JARVIS touched is vulnerable. Do a deep audit of our finances to make sure we’re clean. Sean, I need you to be my hands today. All four backup server farms, including New York, are down. Get tech teams out to each location. I want to strip the memory modules and get them to the Pennsylvania factory by tomorrow night. I’m heading to California to assess the damage. Have two more teams on stand-by, because I might strip those too and won’t know until I get there. The PA factory is the only one that wasn’t hit, so it’s the only one I know is secure. I’ve got it dark until I can get there. I have one chance at rescuing JARVIS out of this mess
and I cannot afford mistakes.

“Sean, Carla, I need you to handle as much as you can. This fix isn’t going to be easy or fast. My best guess is that I’ll be out for several days. Plan a call with me at six a.m. tomorrow and I’ll let you know if I want more teams in the air and you can fill me in. Any questions?” When they answered to the negative, Darcy finished up. “I guess it’s time to see how we deal in a Tony-level crisis. If you need anything, catch me en route, after that, I’m offline until six, unless the world is burning down. Which it might, you never know.” Disconnecting the line, she set a reminder on her phone about the call.

Bucky hissed, turning his head. “Steve’s saying something about nuclear launch codes and JARVIS being the first line of defense.”

She swore under her breath. “There’s one question answered. Ultron’s going to try to break them. I need to be in Pennsylvania, James. We’re out of time.” As the aircraft banked to make the turn, she went with her first instinct, opening her laptop to bring Tia online. With fingers dancing on the keyboard, Darcy hacked her way into the Nexus headquarters in Oslo, Norway. Since pretty much the entire Internet flowed through that facility, it would be a good place to set up Tia so she could protect the world’s launch codes.

Tia wouldn’t hold up forever against something like Ultron. She could keep him busy while Darcy went to work creating a new algorithm for generating the codes. Even that wasn’t a perfect solution, but it would buy her time to get JARVIS back up—in whatever form she could.

Darcy gave Donny another call to give him the heads up as she finished writing the new program. She set the phone down and fired it up. To Darcy’s surprise, Tia initiated a link between her protective barrier around the Nexus and the Stark Mansion servers. The program automated, spinning out new launch codes every thirty seconds based on the algorithm Darcy had written. She would still have to change up the formula every ten minutes or Ultron would crack it, but now she had time to figure out the next step.

Darcy was vaguely aware of Bucky switching the jet to autopilot and moving about the cabin. “I think JARVIS is still out there … somewhere on the Internet, maybe,” she told him absently. “Tia wouldn’t take that kind of initiative, but JARVIS would.” Whatever elation she might have felt, she firmly squelched, not needing the distraction.

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes. If he’s still anywhere, you’ll find him,” Bucky assured her as he handed her a bottle of water. She took it and leaned into the chair, wincing as her shoulder blades came in contact with the soft leather.

“Doll,” Bucky murmured, “Let me take a look.”

It was only when she shucked Steve’s jacket that she realized her shirt was still unbuttoned. Bucky slid a hand underneath the fabric and pulled it down, easing it off where the blood had started to dry. Darcy pointed out where the medical supplies were kept. He cleaned and bandaged the worst of the shallow scrapes.

It hurt, and she used that to keep focused on the here and now. She frowned at the dusty and torn blouse. “I—uh—Dad keeps clothes in the back. Maybe Steve does too. Probably a t-shirt I could borrow,” she muttered.

Bucky briefly set a hand on her shoulder to keep her in place while he looked. He found an AC/DC shirt that smelled like her dad and helped her to slide it over her head. She took a deep drink of water to keep her emotions at bay.
“What do we need to do when we get to the factory?” he prompted.

She picked up her bottle and set it down again. “I’m going to try to get JARVIS running on a new mainframe we’ve never used with a third of his memory modules functioning. It’s a damned good thing that the new arc reactor went online a couple of months ago, or we wouldn’t have enough juice to run something the size of JARVIS.”

“The size?”

“JARVIS is made up of a combination of supercomputers and a shitload of memory that we store on servers, all so he can handle massive amounts of programming, memory, and computational power—just like a human brain. It takes a fuckton of electricity to run them. Plus they generate a lot of heat and we need a heavy duty cooling operation.” Her hands began to shake. “It’s big. Too big. If Dad was here, maybe I could—“

Bucky interrupted, putting his hands on hers. “The only part of JARVIS that is intact is the part you saved. You don’t need Tony for this. You need you.”

“It could take weeks. I don’t know if I can do it,” she confessed. “It’s— it’s rewiring a brain after someone has come in and fried all the pieces. I—“ She snapped her mouth shut, wincing as she set her laptop aside and came off the chair to hug him hard. “I’m sorry.”

“Princess, if anyone can put him back together, it’s you,” Bucky assured her. He brushed her cheek with a thumb. “How much longer can you go without sleep?”

She glanced at the clock. “How the fuck is it only midnight?” she complained.

“Got me,” he said, wryly. “I was figurin’ on makin’ time with m’ wife tonight. Don’t like our dates being interrupted.”

In moments like this, she appreciated that both Steve and Bucky understood that sometimes the job to be done outweighed personal needs. She gave his question serious consideration, took inventory of her mental state, and balanced it against the physical. “Six, maybe eight more hours,” she said softly.

Bucky didn’t argue as he returned to the cockpit. “I’ll make coffee when we get there.” They only needed a couple of minutes before Bucky hovered over the old factory on the outskirts of Scranton. He put the jet down in the parking lot, keeping the cloaking technology engaged so they wouldn’t be too obvious.

Donny met them at the door. He’d powered up the holoscreens and cooling systems as Darcy directed, though he’d left everything else offline.

She heard Bucky telling Donny that more security guards would be arriving soon, but she was already pushing her tool box down the hallway, skirting around the racks of equipment. The factory was enormous, housing a completely enclosed data center. The center itself was split into two sections: one main part toward the back that held the equipment and one near the front that held a workspace.

“We’ll need ear protection for the data center. It’s about as loud as a jet engine inside,” Darcy told Bucky when he followed her inside with their bug out bags. “It’s sound-proofed though, so we’ll be able to use the workroom without any problems.”

Half of the workroom had holoscreens along the floor. The other side had three tables, several chairs, and a tiny kitchen. Darcy set her laptop down on one of the tables and quickly changed the
Shedding Steve’s jacket, she got to work, bringing up the holographic control panel to start the slow process of powering up the mainframe without putting too much pressure on the electrical grid. Even though it was powered by the arc reactor, she still didn’t want uncontrolled spikes of energy flowing into the factory.

Bucky found the coffee maker and got a pot going. “Darce—can you reset our coms?” he asked.

She sucked on her lip as she watched the screen. “Do you really want me to?”

“I can hear Steve. I can’t talk to him. If you go in the other room, I want to be able to talk to you, too.”

“Steve doesn’t need any distractions. He can text or call if he needs to know what’s going on here.”

“Darcy—”

“No,” she insisted. “I’ll open the com lines so you and I can talk, but Steve can’t be compromised by what’s going on here, and I can’t be compromised by what’s going on with my dad and my husband. You’ll have to deal with that, James. I can’t—I can’t.” She huddled into herself, one hand to her mouth as she firmly suppressed the nausea rising in her stomach. “I know you’re missing JARVIS as your handler. I’ll do the best that I can, but I can’t listen to Steve right now, or—or—“

Bucky seemed to understand and came up behind her for a quick, hard hug that probably grounded her as much as it did him. “Okay, Princess. We’ll do it your way.” He studied the screens. “Where do you need me?”

She gave Bucky her laptop, a quick lesson on changing the algorithms, and the ability to keep the world’s nuclear devices in check. Bucky angled his chair to keep eyes on the exits, laying his Dragunov in easy reach.

“Talk to me, doll. Something tells me I need a crash course in supercomputing.”

Later, she would realize that talking to Bucky helped her to not miss JARVIS so obviously, especially as Bucky occasionally prompted her in the same way her brother would have done. For now, she let her mouth run while she initiated the software. The holoscreens on the floor lit up as the operating system came online.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A visual representation of JARVIS—sort of like what we had in my lab, but that was broken up into pieces across the different data centers so we could see where the infections were. This is one single unit and it’s easier than trying to cull through actual code to figure out what is and isn’t working. You’ll see the structure forming as we go.” She waggled her tablet. “If there’s a problem, I can pull up that part of the code right here and rework it.”

A faint round ball of yellow began to appear. Darcy nodded to herself. “That’s the original programming. Let’s test it and see how we’re doing.”

It was buggy and slow, but it was enough that Darcy sent an encrypted tracking program through the Internet to gather up whatever uncompromised pieces of JARVIS might still be out there, resting on random servers. She fed the pieces through Tia before incorporating them to ensure they stayed clean. The ball began take shape.
They were heading into the third hour as Bucky tapped in another formula into the program and hit enter. “I guess the world doesn’t need to know a brainwashed ex-Russian assassin is in charge of the world’s nuclear launch codes right now.”

“Probably not. That would be a public relations nightmare.” Darcy flicked her tablet at the hologram, and a blue light appeared.

“Is that Tia?”

“Good guess. Everything has to be filtered through her since we still don’t understand the infection and what it means with Ultron on the loose.” She brought up another holoscreen on her tablet, linking into her private servers underneath the mansion.

“Do you have any guesses?”

“Maybe. I’m thinking Ultron acted like a sleeper virus, tagging certain programs that conflicted with his directives. But that’s going back months, and I don’t know how JARVIS would have missed something that obvious in his own programming. Dad’s done some backtracking, and he confirmed the digits first appeared when he started playing around with the Legionnaires. It’s connected, but I don’t know how or why yet.”

Darcy flicked the tablet at the holoscreen again and four dozen squares appeared. She collapsed them into a single box and drew a line between it and JARVIS.

“What’s that?”

“I’m linking to the mansion’s servers to see if I can fill in the gaps. We’ll see what it will do. We’re missing a lot of foundation programming from California, but maybe we’ll get lucky. My servers go back almost two decades, so it’s worth seeing how far that will get us.”

More yellow arcs appeared around the ball and the ball itself brightened.

“Hell, damn it, Darce, something’s happening.” Bucky turned the laptop around so she could see.

Darcy darted over. “Fuck—no—no—something is taking over—Tia? What the hell? No one can get through her. Wait—look—the algorithms—they’re changing. Mark thirty seconds for me, Bucky,” she ordered.

“Mark.” They waited the full half minute. “Mark,” he said again--

--just as she shouted, “YES!” She bounced up and down, kissing him square on the lips. “I think JARVIS just took over the program we’re using to update the algorithms and he’s doing it every half minute. Every code is generated with a whole new formula. It’s impossible to predict. Nothing will break it now,” she caroled in happiness.

“How do you know it’s JARVIS?”

“It’s JARVIS or a subroutine of his because Tia hasn’t budged and only JARVIS has her encryption. Ultron doesn’t have it because JARVIS wouldn’t let me send her to California while he was under attack.” She did a little booty dance as she flipped the laptop around so both of them could see it. She plunked into Bucky’s lap. His arms went around her, and she felt like she could breathe.
JARVIS wasn’t back yet—but it was the first real sign she had that she hadn’t lost him entirely.

Bucky held her, pressing his forehead to her neck. They stayed that way for a good ten minutes, as Darcy watched the algorithms change again and again.

“So now what?” Bucky kissed her shoulder and rested his chin on it.

“It’s going to take a while for all of the programs to load. When that’s done, I’ll have to look for programs that won’t work and memory that can’t be accessed. Depending on where we are with JARVIS at that point, he might be able to do some of the work, but I’ll probably be writing code to replace what’s missing.”

“Get some sleep then,” Bucky coaxed. “I’ll keep watch.”

“ Heard from Steve?” she asked instead, lacing her fingers with his.

“Yes. Ultron took the scepter from your dad’s lab. They’re trying to figure out where it went.”

“So much for Dad’s victory party. I’ll bet Thor’s pissed. They’ve been looking for that damned thing for years now.”

While Darcy kept an eye on the laptop for a little while longer, Bucky retrieved blankets from the Quinjet to make a pallet on the floor of the workroom. Darcy picked up Steve’s jacket where she’d laid it on the desk and used it for a pillow.

Bucky dimmed the lights and moved the chair so he had easy access to the exits but could see the laptop and the hologram.

When she woke a couple of hours later to the beep of her cell phone, Bucky insisted on checking her shoulders while she drank her coffee.

“How bad is it?” she asked, craning her neck around.

“Looks worse than it is,” he decided. He cleaned and bandaged one side. “Shower will take care of the rest of it.”

“Whenever that happens,” she grumbled. “Okay, calling Team Darcy for an update.”

The news was good. Carla had cleared Darcy’s (and Steve’s and Bucky’s) finances, Sean had sent out the tech crews, and they had been in touch with Pepper. Darcy’s mom was en route from Dubai, but it was fair to say that SI’s management team (which included Hill, Barnes, and Lewis) had matters in hand, so she wasn’t rushing home in a panic.

Much relieved, Darcy told Sean to go ahead and pull the memory and motherboards out of the California data centers. “We’re relocating everything here. And Sean,” she elbowed Bucky, “Get with Barnes to figure out who you can send with the tech team to California. I want armed guards, with people we trust, supervising the entire operation.”

Darcy finished off the call and took a few minutes to freshen up as much as she could in the bathroom. Standing at the sink, she stripped to her waist. It wasn’t much, just a quick sponging off with body wash she’d stashed in her go bag and a wad of paper towels, but with fresh contacts, her
teeth brushed, and a little deodorant, she felt better.

Bucky joined her a few minutes later. He kissed the back of her neck and stole the paper towels from her hand to dip them in the warm water. Though his eyes were grey, his tender touch held her steady. The cool air chilled her skin as he sponged her back. He warmed her with kisses that raked through her flesh, lighting it up. She tried to turn in his arms as he awakened need in her, but he held her close instead.

There was tension. Not between them, but it radiated within the both of them. The heartbreak of yesterday ran bone deep, and she was terrified to look at it too closely. Bucky held on with something that wasn’t finessed—more of brute determination that kept him here, holding her up. He unerringly seemed to understand that she didn’t want sympathy or coddling. Perhaps he couldn’t handle it either.

As Darcy leaned against the sink, she saw their reflection in the mirror—and realized it could have been Steve in her place. Fighting an illness or healing from a fight, it didn’t matter. Bucky had done this before, knew what she needed before she did.

She leaned her head back to rest on his shoulder. Only for a moment. And then he let her go, helping her with bra and shirt, putting her back together for a new day.

“I love you,” she said, looking at him through the mirror.

He smiled with ice grey eyes.

The guards had brought breakfast—at Bucky’s request. Afterward, to her amazement, she convinced him to get a few hours of downtime while she worked. She kept the door locked and his extra Ruger strapped to her thigh. Bucky managed a little more than four hours of shut-eye.

Darcy spent that time figuring out why JARVIS wasn’t waking up. By the time she and Bucky shared a halfway decent lunch, she had created a map of how she wanted to change the way the servers connected together.

They were sitting on a scaffold where Darcy had just finished rearranging a set of cables on the back of a server rack, (hey, she was short, it was easier than reaching up on tiptoes for hours on end) when Steve passed word to Bucky that the Avengers were heading to Wakanda.

“Wakanda?” Darcy shot Bucky a look as she wiped sweat off her forehead onto her shirt sleeve. In spite of the cool air blowing overhead and down into the equipment, they were sweating from the heat dumping out of the back of the servers where they worked. The coms turned out to be a good idea with the ear muffs—they could communicate without having to text.

“Something about vibranium? They’re on their way to track down a shipment Ultron might be trying to get his hands on,” Bucky recounted.

“What does vibranium have to do with this?”

“I don’t know. Probably something not nice.” He flexed his arm and the plates rippled in response.

“I guess they aren’t grocery shopping,” she quipped. A small smile hovered over Bucky’s lips. Darcy sighed as she plugged in another cable, He’d pulled off his shirt some time ago, and his skin fucking glistened. (Later, she promised her Lady Parts. They pouted.) She grasped his wrist and he lowered her into the center of another group of server racks so she could rearrange the connections.
The hard drives from the backup servers began arriving late that afternoon, along with a surprise
delivery from Pepper—fresh clothes and food for both of them, another mini-fridge, a box of files on
JARVIS, a list of nearby hotels, and a note for Darcy.

D—Trust me on the care and feeding of a Stark. Food, energy bars, water, and fresh fruit. Shower.
Sleep. Don’t forget James needs to eat more than you do. Love, Mom.

She wrinkled her nose and passed the note to Bucky. “I know all this, I really do. I kept Jane alive,
didn’t I?”

Bucky lifted a shoulder and dug into the grocery sacks for a couple of apples.

It took most of the night for the two of them to unload and unpack the boxes to Darcy’s
specifications. She used hot pink duct tape on the empty areas of factory floor to delineate which
boxes came from which data centers.

Having everything in one place was dangerous in the long run, but for now, it was Darcy’s best
chance at fully restoring JARVIS.

For the next two days, she fought through the holes in JARVIS’ programming, writing code to fill in
the gaps, or hunting down broken links and repairing them. Each new piece made another arc of
light appear around the yellow core. She ignored the growing despair as JARVIS failed to respond
to her commands and focused on the next task ahead.
Bucky had never seen Darcy quite like this—working to the absolute limits of her body and mind. He did what he could to keep her steady, all while fighting to stay out of the Asset. He didn’t have JARVIS to pull him out this time, and unlike on Asgard, his loves were far too distracted to be catering to him.

He’d fought a wicked headache for most of the last day, ever since he’d discovered something had happened to Steve—and maybe the rest of the team.

Hill had sent him a dossier on two enhanced humans, the Maximoff Twins, and had the Stark security teams on the lookout. It seemed that the female had mind control abilities and had used them on most of the Alpha team. Bucky could hear how badly Steve was shaken, just by the sound of his voice. Via Twitter, Bucky was aware of the disaster in Wakanda with the Hulk and figured it was related. Not only that, Maria shot Bucky a private text that the Alpha team was going dark for the time being, though he didn’t dare pass that information to Darcy right now.

From his own experience, he realized she’d gone into the mental state where everything but the mission was discarded. It didn’t matter that she was exhausted, with nails bitten to the quick and a swollen bottom lip. She had splits in her thumbs from the hours of typing, and blisters from where she’d missed with the soldering iron.

If he didn’t know better, he would swear she was taking drugs to stay awake, but he did know better. She was a Stark and knew just how far she could push herself. They were four days into this and both of them were in serious need of a shower, a real bed, and eight straight, but none of that was happening any time soon, judging by the look in Darcy’s eyes. He was torn between wanting to taking her off to bed somewhere for half a day and having JARVIS back as soon as possible.

Bucky used her as his focus (Mission: Protect Stark) as he listened in on the occasional conversation Steve had. He did his best to get Darcy to rest and eat every so often, with the latter being easier than the former. But he was on a hair trigger, knew it, and had packed away the bulk of his weapons for the safety of the security team protecting the building. The Dragunov and Ruger stayed in place, though. (Some habits weren’t going to be broken. Not now. Maybe not ever.)

Talking grew increasingly difficult for him, so much that he placed a hand on Darcy’s cheek and hoped she could fill in the blanks.

She did, of course, waving toward the hologram. “We have enough data and software that JARVIS should be working. But it’s the difference between having a living, breathing person and seeing one in the mirror. He’s not actually functioning yet. I’ve got a mess of programming right now,” she said sadly. “I think the motherboards are the problem. Dad designed them just for JARVIS. The new ones are different. Faster. They should work, but they don’t. I’ve got to figure out why.”

Bucky shot a look of inquiry at the stack of boxes lining the factory. Darcy agreed, “Yeah, I need to see his original ones. They’re here.”

They found the boxes with the boards inside, wrapped in plastic and a blue gel that cushioned every delicate connection. Darcy opened up one of the new supercomputers, pulled out a board, and laid it side-by-side with the original on one of the holotables. With explicit hand movements, she had two
diagrams side-by-side. Wearily, she dragged a work bench nearby. She boosted herself to the table top and used it as a bench while she studied the holograms.

Her hair kept falling in her face.

He found a hairbrush in her go bag. He touched her shoulder, showing it to her.

“Don’t suppose Thor got around to teaching you how to braid?”

Actually, yes. He shrugged. Taking her question as tacit permission, he freed Darcy’s’ hair from the band she’d been wearing. As he brushed the tangled mess, he relaxed enough to speak.

“How?” he asked, pointing the hairbrush at the images.

Darcy reached up to grasp him on the wrist as a kind of hug, and then went back to playing with the diagrams. “I don’t know. It’s a combination of how the CPU’s are designed to work in tandem and the software that’s running it. Crap. I’m an idiot. I need Dad’s notes.”

He put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from getting up and retrieved the box for her. As she sorted through papers, he finished the simple braid and wound the band around the tail. Idly, he played with the last few inches—not enough to annoy her, but enough to keep himself grounded.

“Thank you.” She shook all over. “Fuck, I want a shower.”

So did he. Washing in the sink just didn’t cut it. “Hotel?” he offered.

“I can’t. Not yet.”

Nope. Didn’t figure.

“ Heard from Steve?” she asked, changing the subject.

He shrugged instead of answering. Steve was sleeping. Snoring, actually. Bucky found it irritating as hell, but not enough to turn his contact off.

She worked for another hour or so while Bucky figured out dinner. It was late, and several texts between him and Sierra team (now on site) determined that only the Chinese place was still open this late (this was Scranton, not New York).

He coaxed her off the table with hot food and green tea. When she tried to return to work, he acted the jerk and firmly placed her on the blankets they were using as a bed. She protested. He kissed her.

With a low, tired laugh, Darcy cupped his cheek. “Is this the way you’re playing it?”

He winked.

He was surprised to find she had the energy to shove him to the blankets. They tugged off shirts and shorts and jeans and socks. Her bra disappeared.

He was more surprised to discover how much he needed her. His cock didn’t need but the slightest touch of her fingers to be fully primed. Fuck. As she straddled him, he locked his hands around her hips before she could down slide over him.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Like I wouldn’t have an extra packet of birth control pills in my go bag, Buck. Good thinking, but I’m covered. I’m focused on a lot of things right now, my love, but I have enough brain power to remember to take them. Steve would have both of our heads if we got pregnant without him.”

My love. The endearment, the thought of Steve, and the thought of the three of them having a family, all combined to leave him enthralled by Darcy’s touch.

She rose and fell along his cock, her softness and heat coaxing him into spending himself far too fast—and yet, she stayed with him, shuddering with her own orgasm. Sometimes—sometimes it was just that easy. He gathered her close. She slept on his chest for a whole two hours.

With Steve snoring in his ear and Darcy’s heartbeat under his fingertips, the headache began to ease. He shifted so his nose was against his wife’s temple. He didn’t sleep, but he relaxed all the same.

A couple of hours later, Darcy rolled off him, changed clothes, made coffee, and went back to work.

Bucky managed to sleep until Steve woke him up to tell him they were going into combat conditions. By prior agreement, Steve turned off the contact. Bucky didn’t want to take the chance of losing himself even if he was worried about the little shit.

While Bucky texted Maria for details (and got half-assed answers he didn’t buy for a second), Darcy sent the diagrams from the work bench to the holofloor so that she could look at them side-by-side with JARVIS. She took her dad’s notes with her. She read. She squinted. She walked around the images. She studied.

And then she found it. “Holy shit,” she breathed. “I can fix this.”

It took rewriting a portion of JARVIS’ code to fit the new supercomputers. Hours later, with Bucky hovering over Darcy’s shoulder, she sent the final command. The yellow globe brightened as the hologram began to pulse, and dozens of pieces came online all at once.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Stark. How may I be of service?” the AI announced.

Aw, hell. That one stung.

A fat tear rolled down Darcy’s face as she unlocked the program, setting it free on the Internet. The gaps on the image filled in, and JARVIS assumed a similar shape to the one he had before.

Darcy told the AI, “You need to recalibrate your programming with the new data you’ve assimilated. How much time do you need for that?”

“I need three hours, nineteen minutes, twenty-seven point three seconds to process both data centers. Do you need me to be more specific?”

“That will do, JARVIS. Go ahead and recalibrate,” she replied.

She turned to Bucky. “He doesn’t know about the contact yet. That was part of Dad’s programming. Since he stored the process itself on my servers, he might figure it out. JARVIS wrote his own code all the time. He’s still operating under the original directives Dad gave him, so within that, he’s pretty creative.”

“And if he doesn’t remember?”

Darcy lifted a shoulder. “Then he’s different enough that you might not want him as your handler.”
She abruptly walked away, taking her tablet into the factory.

He kept an eye on her. She had to stop periodically to wipe her face. It was a simple truth that if Bucky wasn’t comfortable with JARVIS as his handler, then that meant the AI wasn’t really her brother anymore, that too much of him had been lost.

Darcy was exhausted, needed a shower, and needed something more to eat than coffee and energy bars. But she was on a mission, showing every bit of stubbornness the punk ever did, as she searched for the little bit of programming that would give JARVIS her name.

When she found it, she began the tedious process of cleaning it up. When she was sure it was free of the virus that had attacked JARVIS in the first place, she loaded the code onto her tablet.

JARVIS finished the recalibration and started on a systems check of the Tower audio and visual feeds. When he was finished, Darcy pushed the program from her tablet to the mainframe. “See what you can do with this, JARVIS.”

The entire system dimmed. JARVIS offered, “Please stand by, Ms. Stark. I—“

The data center went dark as every system shut down.

Left with only harsh overhead lighting and the sound of the air conditioning in the background, Darcy knelt in the center of the now-blank holoscreen, keening her loss, eyes black with shock.

(Asset) His handler was gone. He needed a handler. (Rule one: Assets do not feel pain.)

Bucky scooped Darcy up and took her to the pallet. Rocked her. (Rule two: Assets do not have feelings.)

He lost his battle for control and blanked.

With no idea how long he’d been out of it, he came back to the sound of the Quinjet’s engines firing and Darcy’s voice on the coms.

I’m sorry JARVIS I failed I lost you selfish wanted your voice wanted you to know me lost you lost James needed you. James needs you. It’s gone. It’s all gone. Wiped. I’m sorry. JARVIS. I need to drive. Gotta drive. Got to get away so I can breathe. Lost James. I did this. I did this. James needs JARVIS. I broke JARVIS. Broke James. Steve’s never going to forgive me. I need to drive. I need to breathe. I don’t know what to do.

He fought to speak. Couldn’t. Rolled off the air mattress, coming up with his weapons out of habit, and bolted to the exit nearest the jet. He was damned sure that Darcy didn’t know how to fly a Quinjet. This wasn’t the Bugatti. She was going to get killed if she tried to fly.
“I need to drive. I have to get away.”

“Wait,” he pleaded, too soft to be heard. In the parking lot, he waved his arms to get her attention.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Darcy, wait. Let me go with you. I’ll fly you anywhere you want,” he forced himself to say. But she ignored him. The aircraft wobbled as she got it in the air.

“Drive. Need to drive.” She let out that high-pitched keen he’d heard earlier and the times she’d been lost to her nightmares.

Darcy had to be hallucinating. Not enough sleep and too much grief combined to drag her into the morass of waking dreams. His heart broke as he let the Asset assume control. He pulled the Dragunov off his back and aimed. Two precision shots from the high powered weapon took out the electronics and the navigation systems.

The Quinjet veered to the right. The keening stopped.

“Holy shit, James, what have I done?”

The aircraft plowed straight into the second floor of the factory.

Chapter End Notes

GIF by skinny-steven on tumblr
Thor and Steve dumped Hawkeye and Pietro into the medical bay to get patched up from one too many gunshot wounds. Wanda hovered over her brother. Clint kept an eye on both of them. He seemed to have a soft spot for the siblings, even though Nat was still shaken from the girl’s brazen walk through her memories.

Honestly, Steve felt better about keeping those three together. Despite the help the twins had been during the battle, it would take time to build up trust on both sides. Hawkeye could deal with them and Nat well enough, and so he left them to it.

For one moment, tension of the day got the best of him and he wanted Darcy and Bucky. He, too, was more bothered by Wanda’s manipulations—not because of what she did, but because of what the visions might mean. Seeing Peggy—he choked down grief. She’d been a touchstone for him, and his heart ached to see her as she was.

(The war is over, Steve. We get to go home.)

(You find a place in Brooklyn yet?)

(Who is the soldier without a war to fight?)

He clenched his fist, forcing all that away as he, Thor, and the new guy assisted more Sokovians into the medical bay. Bruce was already inside, triaging the wounded. Steve must have telegraphed his unease because Thor raised an eyebrow while their newest teammate tilted his head at him. He waved them off. “I’m good. Who’s next?”

Not twenty minutes later, Stark popped in. “Time to go, Cap,” he announced.

He might have snapped off a retort, but he closed his mouth instead. Tony looked—hell—scared was the only word. “Where we going?” Steve asked instead, turning to follow.

“Pennsylvania.” Tony gave his creation a long look. “I think you need to come along too. You might be useful.” The (Person? AI? Sentient entity?) stayed by Steve’s side as they followed Tony.

The backup factory was in Scranton. “Why?” Steve asked.

“Because my daughter is there and your husband isn’t letting anyone inside the factory.”

Steve touched the contact he’d turned off during the battle. “Bucky, I know you can hear me. You
have to stand down, love. If you can, talk to me or call me on the cell phone. Tell me what happened. I need to know that you and Darcy are safe.”

No one replied and his cell phone didn’t ring.

Stark borrowed an older Quinjet from Fury (with the promise of buying him a couple of new ones), shooed them on board, and got Pepper on the screen once they were in the air.

“We’re on our way. Can you tell him what you told me, hon?”

With lines on her forehead and around her eyes, Pepper looked exhausted, a rarity for her. “Hi, Steven. Darcy and James have been at the PA data center since early Sunday morning. James brought in the Sierra team to guard the place, while Darcy moved all of JARVIS’ systems to the factory. She’s been trying to fix him. We don’t know exactly what happened, but the factory went dark last night. Early this morning, the security team says they saw Darcy get in the Quinjet and tried to take off in it.”

“I thought JARVIS was back up, and what was Darcy doing in the Quinjet? She doesn’t know how to fly, does she?”

Tony shot Steve a dirty look over his shoulder. “You think I want her in a suit? I haven’t taught her to fly. Who knows what she’s done on her own.”

Steve grimaced and went back to the screen. “You said ‘tried to take off’.”

Pepper shook her head. “James grounded the plane by shooting at the electronics and navigation systems. The Quinjet collided with the factory, took out most of a wall and landed inside. We went in to help, but—”

With a clenching gut, Steve asked, “What else?”

“James fired on the security team when they tried to help. Nobody was hit, but he’s not letting anyone on board.” Pepper blinked back tears. “I’ve tried talking to him, Steve, but he’s not responding.”

(The war is over. You get to go home.) “Is Darcy—“

“They’re in the jet, and we’ve got heat signatures from both of them.”

Steve slumped against his chair, relieved to know they were still alive. (Who are you without a war to fight?) Tony talked quietly to Pepper for a couple of minutes, and then the video feed disappeared.

After today---no, he wasn’t going there. Steve swallowed down his anxiety, pretending he was on another op. He needed to get the lay of the land so he could decide what came next. “Can we get visuals from the jet, Stark?”

“Friday? Be a love and pull the recordings from this morning.”

“You named your AI ‘Friday’?” Steve asked in disbelief, grateful for the small distraction.

“Everyone needs a Girl Friday, Steve. You know, a good secretary, a jack-of-all-trades, a—”

“I know what it means, Stark. I want popcorn when Pepper and Darcy find out.” His voice cracked a little on his wife’s name.
“Do you want to watch this or not?” Tony snapped. So used to seeing Stark brazen his way through his shortcomings, Steve wasn’t prepared to see Tony lose his temper. This was a father, terrified for his daughter. Without a word, Steve and the … entity-formerly-known-as-JARVIS moved closer.

On the recording, Darcy stumbled into the cockpit, keening as she did with the night terrors, babbling about breaking JARVIS and leaving Bucky without a handler.

“She’s not awake,” Steve told Tony in a low voice. “She does that when she has nightmares.”

“I know. I was in London, remember?” Stark retorted.

London. Damn.

In the video, the Quinjet jolted twice. The abrupt motion forced Darcy to come back to herself. She fought for control of the aircraft, but with a dead stick, an unfamiliar system, and zero electronics, there wasn’t a chance of her getting it down. Darcy braced herself against the console. “Holy shit, James, what have I done?” she said as her face crumpled. The screen cracked and the feed was lost.

Tony increased the speed of the Quinjet. Steve did the mental calculations. At Mach 3, they would be stateside in less than two hours.

“She is upset,” the magenta-colored entity offered. (Nope, that didn’t work.)

“Yes.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “Darcy and JARVIS are—were—very close. She’s not going to take him being gone very well. And Bucky—JARVIS was Bucky’s handler.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

He frowned at the other (Man? Woman? They? It?). “JARVIS kept tabs on Bucky—Sergeant Barnes.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Via the contact, was it not?” The new guy (close enough, for now) remembered.

“Yes. Can you speak to him?”

The dude with the yellow cloak (nah ….sounded too much like something Clint would say) considered Steve’s question. “I can. But I do not think I should, Captain Rogers. I am not JARVIS, and Sergeant Barnes does not know me. Trust, I think, is of great importance.”

Setting pronouns, genders, and names aside, Steve nodded as he stood up. “Of course.” Needing quiet, he moved to the back of the plane, and rested his hand on the bulkhead.

*Please don’t take them away from me, he pleaded with the universe. I want to go home.*

When they approached the factory, Steve didn’t bother waiting for Stark to put the aircraft on the ground. He jumped out the side door, dropping more than twenty feet to the pavement, and sprinted across the broken glass, twisted beams, and other debris dotting the ground.

A dozen people guarded the area, one of them giving the thumbs up and “all safe” sign Steve recognized from the Howling Commandos.
“Stark, those are Barnes’ people. You’re clear to land,” he called out as he looked over the wreckage. He could see how the Quinjet had slid through the factory wall, leaving it tilted on one wing and partially crushed.

The gang plank was down, but Pepper stopped him before he could climb aboard. “This is as far as James has let anyone approach,” she warned with a hand to his forearm.

Steve caught her up in a long hug and kissed her temple. “I’ll be okay,” he promised. He pulled the shield off his back and set it on his forearm.

She blinked back tears. “Be careful.”


Without any kind of warning shot or response, he eased up the walkway, continuing to call their names. As he reached the top, he found the top half of the fuselage had been crushed, leaving a mess of dangling wires. Bucky sat on the floor of the cockpit, with a finger on the trigger of the pistol he’d aimed squarely at Steve.

Steve dropped into a crouch with his hands up, doing his best to ignore the trails of red along the metal flooring. “I’m your husband and your best friend, Buck. Please don’t shoot me again. It’s been a hell of a long day.”

The pistol shifted to the left by millimeters, and Steve slowly got back to his feet, setting his shield on his back. He took another two steps inside and saw Darcy stretched out behind Bucky. Her leg was scored from thigh to calf. Parts were wrapped in layers of bandages, though they were saturated with red. Blood dripped off her ankle in a steady beat. She was unconscious and impossibly pale. Nevertheless, she was breathing on her own, and relief shot through Steve—so much that he swallowed back tears.

Bucky had one hand on his weapon, the other tangled in Darcy’s hair. It took Steve a moment to process the tubing of red fluid connected to Bucky’s forearm, the glass jar of blood, and the IV bag tied to Darcy. Ice grey eyes in an equally grey face met his. The pistol came up again, wavered, and then steadied.

“You know me, Bucky,” Steve reminded him, staying still. “Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. Darcy is your wife. I’m your husband. I will not leave you.”

“Steve?”

“Yeah.” He crouched down again, this time nudging the gun to the floor with one hand and cupping Bucky’s face with the other. “It’s me, Buck. Will you come with me so we can get Darcy patched up?”

A pause. “We’re safe?”

With a slow tear working its way down his cheek, Steve answered, “You’re safe. You’re always safe with me.” He cupped the back of his husband’s neck, one thumb stroking through the strands of soft hair there as he tried to assess Darcy’s condition.

She needed surgery to close up her leg, he decided. She was too pale, and Bucky was outright grey-faced from the loss of blood. When he leaned over to touch her wrist, Bucky yanked him backward, hard enough to dump him on his ass.

“No,” Bucky growled as he lunged for the gun.
Steve slapped his hand over his husband’s, trapping it and the weapon against the metal floor. Keeping a firm grip, Steve went his knees, using his free hand touch Bucky’s cheek again. “Bucky, you can’t keep giving her your blood.” A glimmer of an idea popped in his head, to use the Stark name as bait. “I can carry her. Can you help get her to Stark?”

When that didn’t work, Steve ordered, “Get up. Walk with me.”

Bucky’s pupils contracted as he focused on Steve’s words. His only acknowledgement was to release his grip on his semi-automatic. When Steve let go of his hand, Bucky nudged the weapon toward him, a sure sign he wouldn’t fight Steve anymore.

Damn. Bucky hadn’t been this far in the grip of his conditioning in months. Hating every second of it, Steve followed the expected protocol and tucked the weapon in his belt. Swiftly, he slid the needle out of Bucky and was stupidly grateful his loves had the same blood type. Bucky lurched to his feet, though he immediately collapsed against the wall.

Steve snapped out an arm to keep him from falling. “I’ve got you.” He touched his earpiece. “I’m going to need a little help here.”

As Bucky regained his footing, Steve’s new teammate climbed aboard. Steve jerked a chin toward Darcy. “Take my wife to the Quinjet,” he ordered as he clutched at Bucky, wanting to take Darcy himself.

Bucky kept his eyes on Steve, not bothering to acknowledge Still-Not-JARVIS as (he? it?) gathered Darcy into his arms, taking the half-empty IV bag with him. They floated, rather than walked. The lack of jarring movement would be easier on Darcy, in any case.

In a low voice, he told Bucky, “Exit the building, get aboard the Quinjet waiting in the parking lot.” His husband executed a ninety-degree turn and walked away. His movements were graceful, designed to hide his weakness. Steve followed.

Bucky didn’t acknowledge his team, though Steve nodded at Garcia as they boarded.

Darcy was placed on the low, narrow gurney. Pepper made a motion toward the straps that would hold her still for the flight, glanced at Bucky, and moved on to see what she could do about her daughter’s leg. She hung up the IV bag while Tony got them in the air.


Just like that, Bucky tapped out, leaving Steve to catch him as he collapsed to the decking. No one else dared touch the soldier. Not like this.

Steve pulled Bucky up to lean against him, and scooted close to the gurney so he could reach Darcy’s cold fingers. Pepper’s laid her own warm hand on top, squeezing lightly, and then went about replacing the soaked bandages.

Darcy wasn’t the only one who was cold. Bucky’s body was distinctly cooler than usual, and Steve pressed close, chest to back, to share his heat. “You’re safe. We’re going home,” he murmured in a litany—until he choked on his own words. Losing his composure, he pressed his face against Bucky’s neck, smelling oranges. “Don’t leave me,” he begged.
Chapter End Notes

It occurred to me while watching Age of Ultron the second time, that Vision doesn’t get a name during the movie, hence why Steve doesn’t know how to refer to the new sentient entity with JARVIS’ voice. (Ultron tells him, "You are my vision," and Thor refers to him as being or having "the vision," but no one actually says, "Hi, Vision!" I know, slicing and dicing the details here ....

Also, as some of you have already figured out, Steve’s drawing—the one he did when he first woke up from the ice, with Steve and Bucky facing each other across a frozen panel, and Darcy sitting with a broken motherboard in her lap—is absolutely a metaphor for the events of these three chapters.
Guilt coursed through every vein, making Tony jittery. One of the nurses shooed him and Pepper to the chairs on the far side of the infirmary while a doctor and a nurse stitched Darcy up. He collapsed in one, pulling at his beard while he watched.

Rogers carried Barnes to the second bed. The staff knew not to touch the second man without Cap’s express permission. The physician’s assistant Alyssa cleared a path, pulled back the sheets on the bed, and stepped away.

“Is it a good idea to bring him here?” Tony asked.

“He’ll want to see Darcy when he wakes up,” was all he got in reply.

The PA searched in the drawer under the bed, coming up with a couple of warming blankets. Steve pulled off his husband’s boots and tucked the blankets around him.

Tony bounced his foot with impatience for the doctors to finish with his baby girl. He needed—

Pepper laid a hand on his wrist. “Go get clothes for Steven. The uniform is hours old.” She sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “You could use a shower, too. And bring Steve a protein shake. You, too, if you haven’t eaten in the last four hours.”

“But Darcy—“

“She’ll be a while getting cleaned up and probably won’t wake up until morning anyway. In the meantime, Steven needs help, and you’re twitchy enough to make the whole staff nervous.”

He glanced at Steve, asking for tacit permission to go in his apartment. Just because he was lousy with people, it didn’t mean he missed Cap’s reddened eyes or the way his son-in-law hunched his shoulders, as if he’d been beaten by something far bigger than a bunch of robots. He felt the absurd need to hug the other man, but didn’t feel like getting punched in the face for it. In any case, Steven gave him a curt nod as he settled on the bed next to Barnes, angling so as to keep an eye on Darcy.

Tony took the stairs from the Commons floor to his floor and suppressed his annoyance when he had to order Friday to open his door. JARVIS always anticipated things like that. Friday would learn, but it would take a while to train her up.

He’d fucked up. Probably a good thing he was a mega-billionaire when it came to cleaning up the mess. Then again, it always had been. He rubbed the back of his shoulder as he crossed his living room.

He wasn’t expected to find his creation hovering just inside the window of his private apartment. “Nice view. Guess you still know all the passcodes.”

“Of course. Am I unwelcome?”

“Uh, no, actually. Just weird having a walking-talking version of JARVIS. In a cool way weird. Are you hungry? Do you need to be hungry?”

“I can try. I do not know. Perhaps?”

Tony headed for the kitchen and blended up a couple of shakes. He slid one over. “Guess it will
take a little experimentation to decide how much you need to eat. Cap drinks these. They’re gross, but they get the job done. Feel free to make a sandwich. I’m going to take a shower.”

“Do I need a shower?”

“I’ll let you know if you stink.” Tony walked out, avoiding the rest of the conversation. He showered and changed clothes. When he walked back through the kitchen, he was most definitely alone. He swiped the other shake off the counter and headed to Darcy’s apartment.

He could smell the soap and perfume his daughter used as he pulled clothes out of the drawer for—somebody. Sweats, t-shirts, and boxer shorts would have to do for all of them. At least he recognized the bright pink socks that belonged to Darcy.

They reminded him of the socks he used to work over her feet as she protested—the guffaw of a sob that burst from his chest and mouth drove him to his knees. He could have lost his baby girl today and not even known. He hadn’t told her what he was doing with JARVIS. Didn’t warn her.

Wiping the tears from his face, he grabbed the stack of clothes and left the apartment.

He passed Wilson in the hallway. “I leave for a couple of days for my day job and all hell breaks loose. Want to fill me in or tell me what I can do to help?” Sam asked.

Tony shook his head. “Make me less stupid.” He kept walking. “Find the new guy. Show him around.”

“The new guy?”

“Sort of purple. Sounds like JARVIS. You can’t miss him.”

“I should get used to this, you know.”

“Yeah, you probably should. Oh, and he flies. Have fun.”

Tony ran down the rest of the stairs and back to the infirmary. He dumped the stack of clothes and the shake on the chair inside the door and went to Darcy’s side, where the doctor and Alyssa were cleaning up.

Dr. Nguyen, long used to various Avengers hovering around her patients, didn’t even blink as Tony came up beside her. “I just finished telling all this to the Captain and Ms. Potts. She’ll heal, though there is some minor nerve damage. It shouldn’t be enough to keep her from walking normally, but she’ll likely have patches on her leg that are permanently numb. She’ll need to be careful. Her blood pressure is good, so I think Sergeant Barnes did well with that. She’s dehydrated. We’ll keep her on fluids until she wakes, which might be a while as Captain Rogers believes she hasn’t been sleeping.”

“She’s my daughter. Probably not,” he agreed.

Pepper came up behind him to rest her chin on his shoulder. “She’s going to be okay, Tony.”

“Yeah, she will.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and leaned over to kiss Darcy on the forehead.

Dr. Nguyen left Darcy’s side to take a good look at Barnes. She asked Steve, “I’d like to take his blood pressure and check his blood oxygen. Will you let me talk you through it?”

With Steve’s careful hands holding the cuff and sensor, they determined that Bucky’s blood pressure was still very low—even for him.
“I’d guess Sergeant Barnes has lost a good two liters of blood, probably a little more. I’d like to give him a transfusion and fluids, but given who he is, I don’t think that’s feasible.”

Steve shook his head. “The serum will take care of it.”

“Yes, and even with the serum, it will take a good week to replace all his red blood cells. He needs rest and recuperation.” The doctor waggled her finger at Steve. “Don’t argue with me on this. Remember who patched you together last year.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I want to give him oxygen,” the doctor insisted.

“Set it up and I’ll hold the cannula,” Steve replied. “He still doesn’t like anything metal or plastic touching his face.”

Stepping up beside him, Tony quipped, “Must make shaving a bitch.”

Wearily, Steve admonished, “Tony—“

He held his hands up. “Look, I’ll keep an eye on Barnes. Brought you clothes and a shake. You can use the shower right here. If anything happens, I’ll duck and scream really loud.”

To his surprise, Steve took him up on the offer, taking a three-minute shower in the bathroom attached to the infirmary. He came out with a laundry bag full of his suit that he dumped on the floor. The nurse returned with an oxygen tank, leaving Steve with instructions, though she left it up to him to figure out how to make it work with Barnes’ issues.

“Go to bed, both of you,” Steve told him and Pepper. “I’ve got this.”

Pepper promptly stood up, kissed Steve, and dragged Tony home.

“Pepp—“ he protested.

“Nope. He’s right. Let’s go to bed and you can hold me. In the morning, you can explain the past week, and we’ll deal with it then,” she admonished.

He held her that night. But that didn’t stop him from waking just before morning and padding barefoot to the infirmary. Rogers had pushed the beds together so that Darcy and Barnes were side-by-side. He’d climbed in beside Darcy, stretched his arm over her, and held the cannula just so that it spewed oxygen into Barnes’ nose. Somewhere in the night, Bucky had grasped Steve’s wrist, so that the two men made a protective bracket around his baby girl.

Tony left her to them. He didn’t deserve her. He never had.
Darcy surfaced to the rumble of Steve’s low voice, countered by Dad’s contrite reply and Mom’s no-nonsense soothing. The combination was enough to let her go back to sleep for a while—but only until she remembered her losses.

“James? JARVIS?” she demanded, forcing the words out even before she opened her eyes. She raised her hands and found them tangled. Steve caught her wrists, holding them until she focused on the IV and sensors. The rest of her was covered in white blankets.

“Darcy, look at me.” She did, and he was beautiful. Watery blue eyes and the sweet smile he shared only with his loves. “You’re in the Tower. Dr. Nguyen stitched you up last night, so don’t try to move your leg.” She rolled her eyes at Steve, and his concerned look dissolved into a small smile. “Okay, so the first one was obvious,” he admitted.

Bucky was on the bed jammed next to hers, lying on his side and harshly pale, even in the low lights of the infirmary. There was an oxygen line near his face, carefully angled so it didn’t touch his skin.

She choked up seeing him that way, and Steve kissed her fingertips to console her. “He’s fine. Down a few pints of blood, but he’s okay.”

“Hurt?” She tried to look for an injury, but Steve caught her shoulder and pressed her back down.

“Bucky’s not hurt, doll. You are. You lost a lot of blood when the plane crashed. Bucky gave you his,” he explained. “He woke a little while ago—long enough to drink water and one of those protein shakes your dad keeps around. He’s gotta sleep and recover now.”

Darcy untangled one hand from Steve’s and set it on Bucky’s chest. She remembered how hard he’d struggled to stay with her those last couple of days. His eyes had been gray the whole time.

“Soldier?”

Steve gave Bucky a long look. “Still following orders. Whatever happened, yesterday did a number on him.” He fist ed his hands, and Darcy realized there a lot going on that she didn’t know. She touched behind her ear, reaching for JARVIS without thinking. Steve’s face crumpled as she blinks away the sudden tears. “It’s okay, love. What happened in Pennsylvania wasn’t your fault. You gotta believe me. I need you to trust me on this, love, but JARVIS isn’t lost to you. Can you do that?”

She covered her face with both hands. There were too many gaps, she had a jillion questions, and everything hurt. Steve stroked the back of her neck with his thumb until she opened her arms to him. He leaned in for a long hug. “Missed you,” she told him. “This week sucked.” She held on as long as she could, savoring his heat through the thin t-shirt. His hip pressed into hers where he sat on the bed. She squeezed until her sore shoulder protested and the hand with the IV ached.

“I missed you, Darce. The week was pretty lousy,” Steve admitted. He darted a look at Bucky. “I want to know what happened, but I’m figuring it’s best we all talk with your dad. What you did,” his
voice hitched, “What you did was more important than you realize, sweetheart.” He kissed her lips, and she shook with the need to hold him again.

She fumbled for the water on the table next to her. Steve handed to her, tilting the straw in her direction. “Everyone got back okay?” she asked after a long drink.

Setting the cup to the side, he took her hand in his again, dodging the IV attached to it. “Most of the team is still in Sokovia. Hawkeye still needs to duck, and it looks like we might have picked up some new teammates with interesting abilities.”

“The mission isn’t done?”

Steve brushed a lock of hair off her forehead, sliding his fingers along it until he tucked it behind her ear. “All but the clean up. Tony brought me home. We needed to be here.”

“Dad—“

“--is fine. Not a scratch. Your parents are worried about you. They’ll want to see you now that you’re awake.”

“Not yet.” She clutched at Steve’s shirt with one hand. With the other, needing the contact, Darcy laid it in Bucky’s outstretched palm. His metal fingers were too cold and didn’t curl around hers. “I—he needed me, Steve. I didn’t—“

He shook his head. “Don’t do this, Darce. We’re all here. We’ll hash it out later.” Steve reached out for the call button and pressed it. “Alyssa wants to see both of you this morning.”

Too tired and achy to argue, she let Steve get away with the deflection. While they waited, he traced tiny patterns on her skin. She rubbed her fingers in Bucky’s and tried not to speculate about JARVIS.

The physician’s assistant breezed in, all smiles, though she was quiet as she moved around the room. Darcy liked her, as did the rest of the Avengers. She didn’t mind their bitching and wasn’t afraid to pull rank to make them take the time to heal properly.

Still, Darcy figured lobbying for a speedy exit couldn’t hurt any of them. “Hey, Alyssa. What are the chances of a free pass to my own couch?” To give the PA room, Steve moved around the beds and sat with Bucky, idly caressing his arm.

Alyssa took Darcy’s vital signs as she talked. “Hmm, depends on your answers.” She tilted her head, assessing Darcy’s face. “You look better. How are you feeling?”

“Itchy. And why can’t I feel my leg?”

“I can help you clean up some. You’re numb because we ran a drip line of local anesthetic along your wound. We’ll take it out tomorrow so you can finish healing. As far as going home, that depends on you and your Sleeping Beauty. I want to monitor both of you for a while. You can go home after that if you’ll use crutches so you don’t strain your stitches and you’ll let me check on both of you this evening.”

“Deal,” Darcy agreed fervently. “You’d want to get home with these guys too, if they were yours and you hadn’t had a real bed in a week.”

Alyssa grinned. “My wife might have issues with that, but I can see the appeal.” The PA unhooked Darcy from the needles and sensors, wrapped her leg up in plastic, and helped her to the shower.
Steve stayed with Bucky, curling up behind him and holding the cannula just under his nose.

The shower was better than the sink she’d been using, even if she didn’t get to wash her hair. With a fresh bra, a pair of Steve’s boxer shorts, Bucky’s t-shirt, and pink fuzzy socks, Darcy felt a million times better. She tried not to look in the mirror too much because her whole left side was covered in dark bruises from whatever fell on her. She ached. She figured out the crutches and discovered the bruises hurt more than she expected as she moved.

By the time she got there, there were fresh sheets on the bed, and one of the staff nurses—Keely, Darcy remembered--gave her a bright smile. Keely helped her into the bed and began taking off the damp plastic and old dressings.

Alyssa took a different approach with Bucky. He still couldn’t tolerate doctors, so the PA relied on Steve to take Bucky’s heart rate, blood pressure, and blood oxygen levels.

“I’ll give him another hour or two to wake up on his own,” she decided. “After that, we need to think about other measures. He needs fluids and food, if nothing else.”

Steve wasn’t happy about that at all. “I can wake him again. I did last time,” he insisted, as he ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair. Steve did a damned good job of hiding how angry the prospect made him, but Darcy could see it just from the tension in his jaw.

Alyssa seemed mollified and checked in where Keely had finished her cleanup of Darcy’s injury. Steve’s mouth made a flat line as he saw the damage, and Darcy had to choke back nausea. “I need to talk to Dad about plastic bumpers on the Quinjet,” she quipped, just to distract herself. She wound her hands into the sheets. “How bad is it?”

“It’s going to heal. You might have a little numbness where the cuts went deep, but other than that, you’ll be fine.” Satisfied all was good, Alyssa taped the gauze in place. “Go back to sleep for a little while, if you can. Talk your husband into napping with you. When you wake, we’ll get you some breakfast.”

Steve came around to her side again, and Darcy wiggled over to wedge between her husbands.

*****

Steve startled awake when Darcy jerked in his arms, crying out as she did. He had just enough time to block Bucky’s reflexive maneuver as their husband tried to roll over her protectively. Steve yanked hard, pulling Bucky across the bed—over and away from Darcy’s injured leg—where they fell off and landed hard on the floor.

He stayed on top, bracing for the instinctive counterattack, though he tangled his legs and arms with Bucky’s in a firm hold.

Ice grey eyes bored into his.

(Christ, he was tired of fighting. Not here, not now. Right now, he wanted to go home. “Buck, come back to me. You’re safe.” Tension vibrated through Bucky’s body, and Steve tightened his grip. “Darcy’s here. She’s okay.”

Grey eyes closed, and there was a full body quiver underneath Steve’s hands. He didn’t dare release
his grip on his husband. *(You know me.)* The door to the infirmary opened.

“Everything okay?” Sam asked from the doorway

Bucky’s tongue poked out to lick his lips, and Steve got a faint nod from him. “We’re good,” Steve called out. “Woke up on the wrong side of the bed.” He eased up and pulled Bucky to his feet, darting a quick look at Darcy. She was pale and a little dazed by the sudden confrontation. She’d twisted her hands into the sheets on her bed again.

“You guys hungry?” Sam wondered.

Grey eyes warmed to a pale blue as Bucky nodded. Steve reached out to skim a thumb along Darcy’s cheek. “You?”

“Yeah.”

“We could eat,” Steve told Sam.

“Give me twenty, then. I’ll bring something in for your girl when it’s ready.”

Bucky stared down at Darcy, his eyes going wide as he began to pant for oxygen.

“You need to lie down before you fall down,” Steve told him, “’Cause I think I’m too damned tired to catch you.” He herded Bucky around to the far side of the bed again and reset the cannula to aim toward his husband’s face. He sat next to Darcy to unwind the fabric from her hands. Once free, she immediately twined fingers with Bucky.

Steve let them be, and stepped out of the room, though he didn’t quite close the door. Pepper leaned against the kitchen table, making waffle batter with Sam as Tony paced on the far side, too nervous to sit.

“Darcy’s awake,” he told her parents. Her dad made a beeline to Darcy and disappeared through the door. Pepper took the time to wash her hands and dry them on the hand towel draped near the sink. She kissed Steve on the cheek and followed Tony.

Sam handed Steve a cup of black coffee. “You look like you need this.”

“Thanks.” He set a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “You’re a hell of a friend. I can’t thank you enough, and I sure don’t know how to repay you for everything you’ve done.”

Sam pulled a waffle off the iron and poured on a new one. “You know, it’s been hard for me to make friends after losing Riley. Working at the VA gave me a purpose. Working with you guys makes me feel like a bad-ass again. Living here?” He looked around the Tower floor with a nod. “Isn’t too shabby. And I’ll be damned if it didn’t come with a whole new set of friends. We’re more even than you think, Rogers.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. And if you don’t believe me, you can ask my mama and she’ll set you straight.”

“I just might do that. She’s still in DC, right?”

“Aw, man, Captain America shows up at her doorstep, she’ll be bragging on it for weeks.”

“I’ll make it happen.” As always, the short conversation with Sam did wonders for his psyche. Pepper’s hug and kiss did a little more, and Stark—well, Stark had his own demons to fight.
“Tony,” Steve called out. His father-in-law was already halfway to the elevator when he stopped. "-- We’ll figure it out.”

Tony looked over his shoulder. “Why? Because we’re a team?” he snapped.

Steve shook his head. “No, because we’re family.”

Pepper lit up with a small smile and laced her fingers with Tony’s. The older man gave Steve a hard, hard look. “You know, Barnes is right, you are a little shit, sometimes.”

“It’s a gift.”

“It’s a pain in the ass. And no, you don’t get the last word here. You’re married to my daughter. You have to appease me.”

“Didn’t I do that already?”

“Shut up, Rogers.”

“Yes, sir.”

*****

“Hey, Buck, Sam made oatmeal, eggs, and waffles.” A big, warm hand slid down his arm.

Bucky must have been dozing. He woke to the hiss of the oxygen tank, the crinkle of the plastic-wrapped mattress, and the medicinal smell of an infirmary. Visual reconnaissance confirmed his location in the Tower. Darcy’s blankets were pulled back, revealing the thick pad of bandages running the full length of her leg. Steve sat on the other side of him, wearing a weary, tentative smile on his scruffy face.

Images gathered, clinging to each other as he tried to string them in order. He had the vague impression that Steve—and someone else—had pulled them out of the wreckage. Since his memories were shit and full of fucking holes, he guessed he’d checked out on Darcy—again. He sucked on his lip as he looked her over again, this time noting the smudges under her eyes and the tentative smile she had for him. She was fucking gorgeous.

“Hey, Darcy’s gonna be fine,” Steve assured him, looking like a goddamned angel even with shadows under his eyes. He was holding a cannula in his fingers, which he dropped out of sight when Bucky took note of it.

Clearing his throat, he got out, “You look like shit, Rogers.”

Steve’s eyes crinkled with humor and relief. “You should see the other guy.”

Bucky held out his wrist, and Steve pulled him up to sit. Bucky twitched the covers over Darcy. She caught his hand and held it. “I think I am the other guy,” he complained. It was hard to catch his breath, and he didn’t know why. He rubbed his chest as Steve sat next to him, leaning into his shoulder.
“What do you remember?”

Bucky twisted around to look at Darcy again. Even before Steve could say anything, Bucky could read it on his face. “You’re not really okay, are you?” he asked his wife. (Mission: Protect Stark)

Darcy bit her lip and shrugged.

Steve pulled the hair on his own forehead. “There might be some nerve damage here and there. Other than that, she’s fine,” he assured Bucky.

“What time is it, anyway?”

“Oh-nine-twenty-two,” Steve supplied, after checking his phone.

“How long was I—“

“Twelve hours, give or take, since we got on the plane.”

He stilled, concentrating on breathing and not passing out. When he swayed, Steve clamped an arm around his back to keep him upright. (Mission: Failed.) He felt himself slipping into the Asset.

“Buck, give yourself a break,” Steve admonished him. “Darce said you two haven’t stopped since last Saturday. That’s a solid week ago. Serum or not, we can only go so long.”

“Damn good thing the serum can’t be transmitted by blood,” Bucky muttered. “Been tried too many times.” Steve grimaced in agreement. They had been tapped too many times over the years. For study, they had been told. Fuck that. They both hated needles. He turned his forearm over, but the marks from the blood draw were gone.

“It’s a wonder you managed to give her yours,” Steve told him, as he leaned in to kiss Bucky on the temple.

Bucky shied away. (Mission: Protect Stark. Mission: Failed.) She’d counted on him to keep her safe. He didn’t know she’d left. Couldn’t talk. Damned sure there were other options than shooting her fucking plane down. Should have taken her to the hospital. “If nerves are left too long without being stitched up, they shrink, right? It’s my fault. I failed—failed the mission.” He had to stop as he ran out of breath.

Steve clamped down hard on his shoulder. “Darcy’s alive, you’re alive. It’s been a fucking shitty week, and I want to go home. You done flogging yourself?”

“I’ll get back to you on that,” he panted. “Why can’t I breathe right?”

“‘Cause you gave our wife a couple o’ quarts of blood.” Steve wrapped the oxygen tube around his fingers and held it close enough to spew into Bucky’s face. “You were grey, fucking checked out on me on the way home. Been holding the oxygen on ya all night to help ya breathe.” The Brooklyn came through, and it was easy enough t’ see Steven wasn’t holdin’ on too well.

“That bad, huh?” He flinched as he looked at the tube, but didn’t move away from the steady stream of air.

In a soft, scratchy voice, Darcy spoke up. “Are we fighting? We haven’t done that yet in a three-way, and I’m all for it if we can have make-up sex, but can we give it a day or two?”

As he twisted around to face their girl, Steve went with him, holding the air tube steady. The sudden
movement made him dizzy. He pitched forward, though Steve caught him and lowered him back to the bed.

“James?” Darcy called as her hand landed in his hair, stroking lightly. He fumbled for her wrist, holding tight, skin-to-skin, trying to find a way to reassure her—and himself.

A knock at the door proved to be Alyssa, coming in to check on her patients. “Hey, everybody’s awake. Good timing on my part.” She squinted at Darcy. “Do the words ‘don’t strain your stitches’ mean anything? I don’t want to know how you got across the bed.”

Darcy grinned, unrepentant. “He’s so pretty I couldn’t resist.”

Alyssa waggled a finger at her as she came to Bucky’s side, keeping Steve somewhat in between them. “Sergeant Barnes,” She held her empty hands up to show she wasn’t holding anything in them, “Captain Rogers took your blood pressure for me last night. Would you allow him to do so again? Or can I talk you through doing it yourself?”

He stilled, falling lightly into the Asset in the face of the medical questions. He couldn’t agree, but he gave Steve a long look. The punk ran his hands down Bucky’s right arm, pressing firmly against his skin to ground him before taking the soft cuff and wrapping it around his bicep. While it tightened and released, Steve scraped his nails lightly along Bucky’s forearm as a distraction. It worked, and the cuff released the pressure before he could get too tense.


Bucky looked at his husband, unable to admit to a weakness (Rule one: Assets do not feel pain).

“Both,” Steven answered for him.

Alyssa nodded. “The usual treatment is fluids, perhaps a blood transfusion, and oxygen. You can get by without the fluids and blood, but you might find that you want to rest or sleep a lot for the next few days. Your body is working very hard to get oxygen everywhere it needs to go, and you’re a little short on the delivery system. If you can tolerate it, fresh oxygen will help alleviate the symptoms, even for a few minutes at a time. Although you have the serum, it’s going to take one to two weeks for your body to replace all the blood, so don’t be surprised if you have moments you feel weak or lightheaded. In the meantime, I believe your friend Sam has prepared breakfast, if you’re hungry.”

The PA nodded to Darcy. “You both can go home. I’ll come at eight to check on both of you for the night.” She left them alone, and this time, Bucky sat up to press his forehead onto the hollow of Steve’s shoulder. Alyssa reminded him of Mrs. Rogers: firm, kind, and she wasn’t bothered by his quirks. Then again, Stark wouldn’t dare hire a medical team who didn’t understand that former Russian assassins might sometimes only eat food they or their friends prepared. Or that they couldn’t break programming to say they were hurting. Alyssa had been damned careful not to give him any medical orders or admonishments to take care of himself.


Steve lifted her into his arms and came around to sit next to Bucky with Darcy in his lap. The three-way hug that ensued was a little damp as Darcy sniffled in his ear, and Steve wiped his face a couple of times.

His stomach growled. Loudly. Steve snickered as he stood up, still carrying their girl. “Let’s eat.
Then we’ll go home.”

Bucky grumbled. “Want a shower.”

“How bad?”

Bad enough that Steve deposited Darcy at the table with Sam and brought back a folded-over waffle that Bucky downed hastily while he was scrubbing off a layer of sweat, blood, and grime that made him feel like he was post-mission. (Mission: Failed.) Maybe he was.

Steve kept him company, probably to make sure he didn’t fall on his ass during one of the dizzy spells. And though his cock stirred as Steve helped him work the water out of his arm, he was too tired for anything more than food.

Sam had made creamy eggs to go with the waffles, a whole pile of bacon, and hearty oatmeal with blueberries. Bucky dug in with abandon, mumbling his thanks over his second round.

“It’s been a hell of a week around here,” Sam noted.

While Darcy threatened him with a balled up napkin, Steve just raised an eyebrow. “How did you get out of it again?”

“Some of us have real jobs, you know.” Sam circled a fork in his direction. “I even keep office hours.”

“Hope you’ve trained a replacement. I want to bring you in permanently. If you want.”

Their friend leaned back in his chair, chewing slowly until he swallowed. “It’s that ‘saving the world’ bullshit you toss around. I can’t resist.”

“Maybe you should be Captain America.”

“I’d look shit hot with that shield and my new wings,” Sam retorted.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Just say the word, Cap.”

Though Darcy grinned at the exchange, Bucky caught something more in Steve’s expression—a realization that maybe he didn’t have to be Captain America forever. A deep-seated tension, one maybe the punk hadn’t even known was there, released. Steve stood, gathering up the empty plates.

Sam shooed them out. “I’ve got this. I barely even have to wash anything because Barnes there was licking the crumbs on his plate.”

Shit. He sucked the last crumb off his fingertip and wiped a hand on his napkin. “Thank you,” he offered softly.

Darcy used her crutches to get to her feet, and managed to press a kiss on Sam’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Scram. All of you. Get some sleep. If you’re hungry and don’t want to cook later, order something and I’ll bring it to you.”

“Not going to offer to make dinner,” Darcy teased.
“Hell, no. Feeding you guys once a day is enough. Did I ever tell you how Rogers cleaned out my fridge back in DC? Had to fly his heavy ass over the helicarrier, and he had the audacity to blame it all on a big breakfast.”

Bucky made it home without embarrassing himself by passing out halfway there (Rule one). He stopped at the living room sofa, but Darcy nudged him to the bedroom. Steve set the oxygen tank down beside the bed, crawled in the middle, and held up the cannula. (Fuck. No. He didn’t want it.)

Darcy didn’t miss a beat. “Hand it here,” she told Steve as she ducked under the tubing to lie along his left side. Bucky took the right, and Steve looked as blissful as a cat getting scratched under the chin as the three of them settled in place.

His wife wound the air tube around her fingers. Once Bucky settled into the hollow of Steve’s shoulder, she laid her hand about an inch or so from his face and aimed the air flow toward him. “Just breathe, my love. We’re not going to let anything happen to you. You’re safe.”

The punk’s hand landed in his hair, and Bucky captured Darcy’s wrist in his metal hand to hold it steady against the rise and fall of Steve’s chest.

Fuck rule two. This was love.
An unfamiliar chime roused the three of them. Bucky couldn’t repress the automatic response and tried to roll off the bed (again), but Steve still had his arm around Bucky’s back and clamped down hard to keep him in place. A wave of dizziness washed through him and he stilled, focusing on his breathing.

“Captain Rogers,” said a feminine voice with a distinctly Irish accent.

Steve cleared his throat and answered, “Yes, Friday?”

(Friday? Today was … Saturday.) The pressure on his back changed to a light scritching along his spine. He leaned into it, humming softly. (Scratch, scratch, scratch. Oh, there. Right there.)

“My apologies for the interruption, but in the event the three of you slept in excess of five hours, I have been instructed by Ms Dernier to remind all of you to eat a nutritious meal and drink plenty of water before returning to sleep. You are returning from the field, Captain, and as a condition of Sergeant Barnes’ and Ms Lewis’ in-home recovery program, they must replenish their energy stores on a regular basis.”

“Thank Alyssa for the reminder and let her know we’ll see her tonight,” Steve acknowledged.

“Yes, Captain.”

(Scratch, scratch.)

Darcy leaned up on an elbow, shoving her hair out of her face. “Friday?” she called.

“Yes, Ms. Stark?”

“Restrict monitoring in this apartment to instructions given only by Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, or myself. All other monitoring requests must be approved by one of us prior to implementation.”

“Acknowledged. Monitoring protocols have been updated.”

“Thank you. If you haven’t already, introduce yourself to the rest of the Tower residents and establish suitable privacy protocols with their permissions.”

“I will do so, Ms. Stark.”

Darcy pressed her face into Steve’s shoulder. “I miss JARVIS.”

(Scratch ……… scratch, scratch) “Why don’t we get something to eat?” Steve asked. “Then, if you’re feeling up to it, and Bucky imitates something other than a lazy cat, we can have a talk with your dad.” (Scratch)
“Okay,” she agreed.

("Scratch, scratch.") Bucky set his hand over hers, brought it close, and kissed her fingertips. “I heard that, punk.” He rolled to his back and stretched, keeping his breathing slow and even (Asset). “Think Stark knows Friday sounds like your ma, Steven?”

Darcy burst out laughing. Steve groaned as he sat up with a helpful shove from Bucky’s direction. “The first time I answer, ‘yes, ma’am,’ it’s going to be a dead giveaway. If Friday ever calls me ‘Steven Grant,’ I might as well turn in my uniform.”

“Aww, hell.” Bucky winced. “Yeah, if I heard ‘James Buchanan Barnes,’ I’d be tuckin’ in m’ shirt and checkin’ m’ hands and shoes t’ see if they’re clean.”

Darcy bit her lip as she pulled the covers back. “I can have Dad change it if it bothers you.” But Steve shook his head. “I kind of like it, so don’t do it on my account. Can you sit up?”

“If I have to.” She shoved her hair out of her face and rocked back on both elbows. “I’d rather not. It doesn’t exactly hurt, but I can feel it pulling if I bend too much.” Darcy tilted her head. “I couldn’t wash my hair earlier. Will one of you help me?”

Steve ran the back of his knuckles over the curve of her tit and dropped a kiss on her nose. “Anything for m’ girl.”

Bucky didn’t think of himself as the mushy one, but damned if he wasn’t a little melty over his guy and his girl right here beside him after a shitty fucking week.

His Princess refused to let the punk carry her. “Stitches, Steve. Nothing is broken,” she insisted. The punk actually pouted, arms crossed and everything. Bucky kicked his husband on the thigh and held out a hand. Only slightly mollified, Steve pulled him off the bed and to his feet. There might have been a kiss in there, stubble scraping stubble, and the punk sucked his bottom lip with a nip at the end.

A shower sounded good. Yes, he’d had one that morning already, but hell, he’d gone a week with sink baths, and he couldn’t resist the three jets and a loofah for a good, hot scrub.

Darcy needed help getting her shirt over her head. Steve did that while Bucky scowled at the dark bruising on her arm and shoulder, all from where the cockpit had collapsed under the weight of the reinforced concrete walls of the factory. A hunk of metal had speared through the windows and sliced into her leg from hip to calf. Remembering something more, he ran a hand up the back of her head and found a small lump and dried blood. (Mission … Mission: Failed.) Breathing got a lot harder.

Darcy winced. “Ow.”

“Nothing to worry about,” Steve assured them. “Just a little bump. No concussion and it had already stopped bleeding when we got on the plane last night. Dr. Nguyen didn’t think it warranted stitches, but I think there’s a little glue back there, so don’t pull too hard.”

“Gross. Okay, now I really want to wash.” Shaking all over, Darcy leaned into the shower stall and dialed it up to somewhere between Darcy-hot and Steve-hot.

Over her protests, Steve lifted her across the threshold. Bucky flipped on the towel warmer and
followed them in, taking the shower seat and pulling Darcy down between his legs. She perched at
the very edge to accommodate her stitches.

When Steve dumped shampoo into her hair, Darcy protested, “Hey, that’s enough to wash a car.”

“Maybe it will be enough for you, then. Never seen a dame with hair so thick,” he countered.

Bucky would have agreed if he could say much, but he was fighting a lassitude spreading throughout
his body. (Rule One: Assets do not —shut the fuck up, head. I just need the stupid oxygen). He
locked his metal arm around Darcy’s waist so she (he) couldn’t fall (over), and tipped his head
against the tiled wall. (Mission: Protect Stark.)

He toyed with the ends of Darcy’s hair while Steve helped her to wash and rinse it a couple of times,
his fingers carefully working around the lump. The steam made him dizzy. He slowed his breathing
to chase sensation away.

With his eyes closed and Darcy’s sweet, slick skin pressed against his thighs, it was far too easy to
drift. A big hand and a dollop of shampoo landed on his head. “Head up, love. Let me help,” Steve
offered. His gentle touch, combined with Darcy’s warmth, chased away the Asset for the moment.

He should have known there wasn’t any way Darcy wasn’t going to get her hands on at least one of
them. Since he’d had the last go-round (Yesterday? Day before?) and his head wasn’t particularly
cooperating, he was perfectly content to watch her talk Steve into a quickie.

“Doll, you’ve got too many stitches,” the punk protested, even as she ran slicked up hands between
his thighs. (Uselessly protesting, Bucky might add; the evidence was mounting against the punk.)

“And I haven’t seen you in a week. Be creative,” she coaxed. “Come closer, and I’ll help you get
interested.”

Creative turned out to be Steve kneeling between her legs and mouthing her until she was good and
wet. (Bucky dipped a finger in and licked it. He also might have helped her along by cupping her
breast and rolling a nipple the way she liked.) Creative also involved Darcy turning around and
holding onto Bucky, so Steve could fuck her from behind. Bucky was happy to indulge her with a
kiss or two. Steve didn’t last long—probably on purpose. In any case, Darcy seemed perfectly happy
with the results as they untangled without anyone falling on their ass.

His stomach rumbled as he dried off. Steve’s echoed, and Darcy laughed at the pair of them. “Go.
I’ll dry my hair and meet you in the kitchen.”

Steve stayed to help her while Bucky tried to figure out what he could assemble from whatever was
still in the fridge.

Friday’s chime sounded. The unusual sound set his heart racing. “Sergeant Barnes, Ms. Potts took
the liberty of having groceries delivered. Lieutenant Wilson inspected the contents of the bags and
they are outside your door.”

 Normally, this was the sort of thing Darcy or Steve would handle. (Fuck. He could do this.) He
panted as his breath shortened. He reached under the sink and came up with the Glock they kept
there. (Skill set.)

Crouching low, he opened the door, gun at the ready. (Mission: Protect Stark) There were two
grocery bags on the floor—the thermal kind that could be zipped to keep things cool. The bags were
open and carefully packed so that he could see the contents in one quick glance.
Stupid. He tucked the gun into his waistband and gathered up the bags for the short trip to the kitchen. Deep breath. In. Out. In. Out.

The pile of sandwiches he made were simple enough. Two found their way into his belly, but he fought to keep from blacking out. In. Out. In. Out. He needed the oxygen. His skin itched from the strain of keeping the Asset in check. (Rule One: Assets do not feel pain. Fuck. Rule One.)

He braced himself in the doorway and stared at the oxygen tank. (Asset. Obey the Rules.) Just the thought getting near the equipment made him nauseous. (Rule Two: Assets do not have feelings.)


They stumbled into the forest, two hundred men escaping a HYDRA nightmare courtesy of the dumb-fuck Bucky called, ‘Mine.”

They stole anything they could on their way out: trucks to carry the wounded, tanks, guns, and those damned weapons that fired blue hell.

They marched by moonlight, with the punk taking out two sentries for every bullet Bucky put between the eyes of an Axis soldier. All those years of fighting in the back alleys of Brooklyn paid off as Steven cleared the path.

Just before dawn, the Captain called a halt—there was a stream nearby. After each group of men took their fill of water, the trees nearby sprouted soldiers taking combat naps as they propped up against the trunks.

Steve didn’t sleep. Bucky was too scared to even try. The needles and bright lights weren’t far enough away yet.

Hardly an hour passed before the Captain got them moving again. As the march resumed, dawn broke. Planes flew overhead, and the 107th found brush and trees to hide under as they did, even with the stolen tanks and trucks. There were more patrols and roadblocks, but the regiment rallied to deal with them, following Steve as he led the way.

They marched through the early part of the night. Steve called a halt when he was sure they’d cleared the border.

“I’ll stand guard, Buck, get some shut-eye.”

But he needed something more than sleep. He found Dernier and Dugan. “Keep watch. I need a word with the Captain.” Not bothering to wait for a salute, he nudged Steven far enough into the forest not be overheard.

He itched. Burned. The metal tang of the needles stung his tongue with whatever concoctions they’d carried.

The punk leaned up against a tree trunk, arms and ankles crossed. He smiled lazily, the moonlight catching his cheekbones and full bottom lip. “Gotta problem, Sarge?”

“You goddamned, stupid-ass, fucking punk! Erskine? Experiments? What the hell did you sign up for?”

“Told you, I wanted to serve.”

“Like this?”
Steve set his hands on his hips. “Yes, like this. I’m not fucking broken anymore, Buck. I can breathe. My heart works right. I can run and fight and not fucking fall on my face. I haven’t been sick for more than six months, jerk.” He looked away. “I thought … I thought … maybe you… didn’t think you …”

“I, what?”

“Hoped you would like the way I look.” The incredibly stupid punk hunched over and started flicking his bangs.

Of course the punk would worry about that shit, and Bucky sure as hell would miss the skinny shoulders, tiny hips, knobby elbows and knees. But those damned blue eyes and fringe of dark lashes hadn’t changed a bit. Neither had the mouthy attitude.

Bucky leaned in. “Dunno if I like it, punk. Haven’t seen it.”

Moonlight-black eyes glittered and the smile could have brought up the sun all by itself. “Here?”

Steven breathed.

“Gotta problem with that?”

No, Steven definitely didn’t have a problem with that. His hands and feet had always seemed too big for his body. Now they fit, but they were warm where they had been impossibly cold before. Bucky shuddered under his lover’s touch.

Bucky was filthy—sweat, grime, and things he didn’t want to know about, but Steven didn’t fucking care. The punk’s tongue swept along the part of Bucky’s lips—the angle was all different, but the flavor was all the same. Here, in the middle of the forest, Steve still tasted like the ocean and smelled like sun-warmed sand.

Steve stripped his helmet and jacket off, dropping them into a neat pile at their feet. Bucky snickered as he drew a hand down the front of the uniform—it was unmistakably blue, even in the moonlight.

“Look like a fucking chorus girl, punk.”

“That’s because I was a fucking chorus girl, jerk. You should see my high kicks,” Steve smarted off as he found Bucky’s mouth again. Bucky fumbled for the snaps and zippers before Steve helped him find them all.

He itched. His throat burned from the screams.

He closed his hand around Steve’s cock. Needing the familiar. The cleansing. “Fucking holy hell, Rogers, this got big too?”

“Guess they wanted to make sure I was even all over.”

Though it was too dark to see, Bucky could hear the embarrassment. “Fuck.” Bucky caressed the length of it, shoving Steve’s pants open wide as he did. “You’re beautiful, love.”

Steve hissed as Bucky knelt to take that fat head into his mouth. It was bigger, for sure, but the places that drove Steven wild hadn’t changed a bit.

He itched. He wanted to be clean.

Steve pulled him up. “Hell, Buck, I want—“ His hands dug down the front of Bucky’s pants, finding him in a warm grasp, sliding a thumb over his slit.
“Fuck me, Steven.”

“You sure?”

“Don’t care if you gotta use spit.”

“Hell, no. Got somethin’ better than that,” the punk retorted. He knelt, feeling around in his jacket and came up with …. olives? The fragrant oil wafted upward as Steve crushed them in both hands. One slick hand went around Bucky’s dick, and he let out an involuntary moan.

“You planned this.”

“Maybe I was hungry,” the little shit countered. “Turn around and hold on to the tree.”

Bucky’s eyes widened. He’d never heard that tone from his love before. He turned, putting a forearm between his head and the bark.

He itched.

Two slick fingers, then three, worked him open as Steve licked his neck. Need scorched through him, lightning in his veins.

He itched. “Now, goddamnit,” he demanded.


The whine of need that escaped his lips sounded pathetic. Steve yanked down on the collar of Bucky’s shirt and bit hard into his shoulder. Four fingers stretched, spread wide, and Bucky jolted, shoving his hips backward to take them deep.

None of that prepared him for the wide head of Steven’s new cock. There was tension and a sharp burn. But there was love and determination between them too. Steve changed the angle, dipped his knees, and pulled Bucky into him as he slotted home.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” Bucky breathed. “You’re gonna kill me.” The stretch burned, filled him with cleansing fire as electric pleasure screamed through his veins.

“Too much?”

“You pull out and you’re gonna answer to me, punk.”

Steve’s hand caressed Bucky’s dick instead, pumping along his length. Then, in the age-old rhythm so familiar to the lovers, Steve set the pace, knowing damned well Bucky would never last long like this—especially not with this giant dick stuffed in his ass and more than a year since he’d had anything other than his fist for a friend. He babbled all that without thinking.

“No replacements?” Steve laughed in his ear—and then sighed his own pleasure.

“No. Never. You’re mine, punk. Always been mine.”

The hand clamped around his cock sped up, clenching tight in a way Steve hadn’t been able to manage before, and Bucky came under his love’s hands and lips. He was quiet when he shuddered and jerked. Too many years of tenement housing had taught them to keep their love under wraps.

Steve started to pull out.

A hand slid down his spine, grasped his hip, and Steve let go with nothing more than a silent hiss that stabbed deep into Bucky’s soul, chasing away the demons with a vengeance.

They dressed in the darkness, hands and mouths touching as they did, the stale scent of sweat and sex dissipating in the cool night air.

*Hands laced together for one last sweet kiss. “I love you, James.”*

“I love you, Steven. Thanks for coming after me.”

“Just wanted to show off m’ new cock,” Steve teased.

Bucky chuckled as his underwear grew damp from the come dripping out of his hole. He didn’t care. He was clean.

*He didn’t itch.*

From behind, Steven laid a hand on the back of Bucky’s waist. “Yours?” he asked in the softest of whispers.

*He paused in his step, tipping his chin over his shoulder. “Nothin’s changed, Steven Grant. Still mine.”*

He blinked, dazed with the memories of needles and lights, of forests and absolution.

He itched. No, he burned.

*****

Steve whistled as Darcy shook her clean hair. “A million times better. Thank you.” She turned in his arms and kissed him, lingering long enough for his hands to tighten around her waist. “Mmmm. Delicious. Now go eat. I heard your stomach over the hair dryer.”

“Did not. What about your stitches?”

“Did, too. They need to air dry anyway. I’ll cover them when I’m done.” She made shooing motions, and Steve winked as he left the bathroom.

Still whistling under his breath, he rounded the corner to find Bucky staring at the oxygen tank. The good mood he’d had this morning crumbled to ash. Even as Steve stepped between his husband and the equipment to block Bucky’s view, he mentally screamed at the universe to *let them be.* He’d had enough. Enough of worry, enough of fear, enough of holding himself together while his loves fell apart around him.

But there was nothing to do except put a foot forward, ready to catch Bucky, and set hands on his shoulders to anchor him.
Silver eyes glittered as tension rippled through hard muscles. Steve’s heart cracked as he discovered he held the Winter Soldier. He tallied the possible weapons his husband might be carrying and firmed his grip. “You’re safe, Bucky.”

Grey eyes flickered to their wife as she stepped into the doorway, and Steve barked out, “Don’t move, Darce.”

The order shattered something in Bucky, and he fell to his knees clutching at Steve’s legs, one hand flailing toward Darcy. “I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t—Christ, no. She’s—no,” he babbled. “Protect her, supposed to keep her safe. My mission. Only mission.” He panted in harsh gasps until he rolled to his feet, dodging Steve’s hands as he did, and bolted out of their apartment.

Steve hesitated, glancing at Darcy, only for her to snap, “Go.”

Eighty fucking flights of stairs, though Bucky jumped over rails as often as not. Steve caught him on the twenty-second floor and pinned him to the wall. “Go to the gym. No exceptions, no stopping. Wait there for me.”

Color drained out of Bucky’s sweat-streaked face so that he looked like alabaster in the rain. When Steve let go of him, he headed downstairs in the absolute silence of a perfectly controlled body.

Steve followed only steps behind. “Friday, clear the halls between here and the fitness level. Tell Darcy where I am, and lock down the gym once I’m inside.”

“Yes, Captain Rogers.”

When he was sure Bucky had gone in, Steve took a deep breath and pushed the door open, hoping like hell that the gym could contain whatever was coming.

He never expected to find Bucky on his knees, with every weapon he carried spread out on the floor in front of him. His arms hung loose at his sides, his gaze locked on some distant speck on the wall.

Exhausted to his bones, hating the way he’d left Darcy alone, and eyes burning from keeping back the tears, Steve swore to the universe. By all that’s holy, they’re mine. You will not win this one. You will not take them from me.

Chapter End Notes

A/N My intention was to post one long chapter that ended on an up note, but a three-line recollection ended up as a full-fledged flashback. I kind of fell in love with the memory and didn’t have the heart to cut it. In any case, this chapter ended up being a monster. I split it so it could be edited and posted today. I will post the next chapter on Friday.
I wrote out the meta for the flashback and posted it as the first comment below, if you are curious.
Darcy yanked on the clothes she’d laid out (boxers, bra, and t-shirt seemed to be the comfortable
dress of the day), grabbed her cell phone, and darted toward the elevator, stopping only when Friday
got her attention.

“Ms. Stark, Captain Rogers asked me to inform you they are in the gym.”

“Are they okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. At the moment, the Captain is speaking to the Sergeant.”

She sagged against the elevator wall and rubbed her face. She missed JARVIS so much, needed
answers, and had waited long enough. “Let me know if anything changes, Friday. Take me to my
parents and inform the Captain where I am.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She found her parents in her dad’s lab. With a tablet in hand and a headset in place, Pepper directed
the cleanup crew while Tony salvaged his projects out of the chaos. With bare feet, Darcy halted in
the doorway. “Dad.”

“I like it better when I don’t have to clean up my own messes.” Tony plucked her up and set her on a
workbench like she was five years old. “Were you not in the infirmary six hours ago?”

“I’m fine,” she insisted. It always surprised her how physically strong he was. It shouldn’t. He was a
mechanic and the lean, ropey muscles weren’t for show.

Tony shot her a look. “Up for debate, but you want to know about JARVIS.”

She picked at her thumbnail. “James needs him. He’s… he’s not doing so great, Dad.” She exhaled
slowly, staring at the place that used to glow under her dad’s shirts. “Steve thought the soldier might
hurt me. Bucky freaked and ran out of the apartment. For now, Friday tells me they are in the gym
and talking.”

“Explains why James isn’t hovering over you. What set him off?” Tony picked up a rag and idly
wiped down the stainless steel work table.

“The oxygen tank, I think.” She fist her hands. “I know better, Dad. I should have made
Tony set his rag down and pulled her off the table so that her toes rested on his boots. His arms went around her, and he rocked her lightly against his chest. “Hush. I know. We can’t do everything. We do what we can do, right? And we don’t always have to do it by ourselves. I learned that lesson the hard way this week.”

“Is that what happened to JARVIS?” she asked.

Her dad lifted a shoulder, and Darcy leaned back against the workbench to listen. “Confession time. I had a vision of the Chitauri coming back to attack Earth. They win. Everyone but me dies, because I didn’t do enough to save them.”

“That sucked.”

“Yeah. Only instead of thinking, hey, this vision seems to match your worse fears exactly and maybe you should reconsider the details, your pop decides to combine the tech from the pretty blue ball in the Chitauri scepter with the Ultron program.”

“The robots that are supposed to guard Earth? Still don’t like that idea.”

“Yeah, well, I should have listened. Ultron became sentient and the first thing he did was attack JARVIS. That was last week. Ultron wasn’t stable, knew it, and went about creating a new body. It was brilliant, really, combining vibranium with Dr. Cho’s synthetic tissue program. He was trying to download himself into it, using, I think, the stone out of the scepter.”

Though it all sounded really horrible, she had to admit, she was intrigued. “You know I’m going to want to see the science.”

“It’s totally in your wheelhouse,” he admitted. “Thor says the stone is something called a ‘Mind Gem,’” and it is one of the core powers in the universe.”

“Where is it now?”

“Still in the body. We stole it from Ultron and brought it home. Since Ultron was scared of JARVIS, I figured, what if we put JARVIS in the body?” He sighed. “Darcy, if you hadn’t have put JARVIS back together, I wouldn’t have had him when I needed him. I didn’t know you were in Pennsylvania when I started pulling the code or I would have warned you. I thought you were still in Malibu and had just rebooted JARVIS from PA.”

“It was a little more complicated than that,” she said, drily. “What else?”

“Other than your blond bombshell being pissed that I didn’t consult the team? Though Thor sort of vindicated me and that was kind of cool. And there was the part where I broke a couple of cities. Pepper’s already writing checks and sending aid.”

“And JARVIS?”

“You’ll see.” He raised his voice. “Pepper? Can you bring our new resident down to the gym? He’s probably with Wilson and he can come too. Looks like we’re going to need a hand.”

Pepper waved in acknowledgement.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “Steve mentioned meeting some people with interesting powers.”
“You’ll meet him. Her. They. I don’t know if all that has been decided yet.”

Friday chimed, politely interrupting them. “Ms. Stark, the Captain has requested your assistance in the gym.”

Tony nudged Darcy so that she stood on his boots again, sneaking another hug that Darcy gladly took. “I’m so tired, Dad. I’ve got a hundred things to do. I haven’t even looked at SI stuff.”

“You mom’s got it. You need to rest, heal, and take care of your boys.” Tony held onto Darcy, balancing her on his feet as he made the short trip to the glass-free hallway. “You know, progeny, this is why most people stick with one spouse. This shit gets hard.” He let her down, and they walked hand-in-hand to the elevator.

Darcy rolled her eyes, inexplicably feeling better even though nothing had been fixed yet. “Starks don’t do easy.”

“Does that make us smart or stupid?”

“Jury’s out,” she quipped, echoing one of his favorite phrases.

When the doors closed, Tony knelt to look at her leg. She’d forgotten about it in the rush to leave the apartment and had left the long line of stitches and anesthetic tubing exposed.

He frowned as he prodded at her skin, pressing gently here and there. “Banner told me the serum can’t be transmitted by blood transfusion,” he muttered. “It’s been tried too many times.”

Utterly confused, Darcy asked, “The serum? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Barnes, blood, in case you were wondering.” Tony shrugged as he stood up. “It’s looking better.”

“I can’t feel much,” she admitted.

“Don’t scratch.”

“Thanks, you’re a lot of help.”

“I do my best.”

They found the gym door locked, but Tony overrode it with a curt order to Friday. “Let me know if you need anything,” he offered Darcy. She kissed his cheek and eased inside the door.

Darcy expected to find Steve and Bucky in one of their all-out sparring matches. Instead, a grey-faced Bucky was on his knees, weapons lined up in front of him, expressionless—utterly lost to this world. Steve sat on the floor, arms folded across his knees, holding Bucky’s hand.

“Has he been like this the whole time?” she asked as she drew near. She took Bucky’s other hand, hoping it would make a difference. Steve sniffled as he nodded, wiping reddened eyes with the heel of one hand.

Damn. At a loss for what to do next, she was grateful when Sam walked inside the gym, followed by a tall, dark pink person with a fabulous gold cloak. Sam gave her a little nod, though he quickly turned his full attention to Bucky.

His companion halted when he saw Darcy. “Hello, Lewis,” he said in that oh-so-familiar-voice.

“JARVIS?” she squeaked out.
He lit up with a beautiful smile. “Is a part of me,” he acknowledged. (He? It? They? He, she decided for now, because JARVIS had preferred it.) “But we shall speak of it later, I think.” He glided toward them as Sam followed. (Holy shit, he can fly. Instant jealousy.)

“Steve?” she prompted.

“He hasn’t moved since I got here. He was in a bad place before, but my thinking he might hurt you broke something.”

Sam laid a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Given the weapons and the posture, I’d say he’s expecting to be punished. This runs deep, Cap. Anything he says or does right now is going to be without his consent, so take it easy. If we can’t get him down, we might need to sedate him and hope he wakes up in a different headspace. The lack of oxygen might be making him hallucinate, too. If we put him under, we can deal with that.”

Darcy exchanged a long look with Steve. (Yeah, okay, love. I got it. You’re too compromised to make this decision. Fine. But you’re going to owe me later.) Shaking her head, she turned to Sam. “No. All this was triggered by issues with medical tech. I don’t think it’s a good idea to try that again.”

The relief on Steve’s face was unmistakable.

He-who-is-sort-of-JARVIS offered, “If I may, there are aspects of Sergeant Barnes’ conditioning that he has not disclosed to anyone, as far as JARVIS could determine, yet JARVIS became aware via the biometric and audio data he received from the Sergeant. JARVIS theorized that this is the source of the Sergeant’s periodic disassociations. He conducted private research to further his understanding of the situation, though he did not have the authority to act upon his conclusions.”

“Do you think JARVIS was right?” Steve asked.

“I do. Sergeant Barnes disclosed to JARVIS that he believed all of the trigger phrases HYDRA instilled in him had been eliminated. In recent months, JARVIS had reason to disagree with that conclusion, as Sergeant Barnes would often subvocalize particular statements, though his behavior did not consistently align with the instructions.”

“Why didn’t JARVIS tell us about this?”

“Captain, in JARVIS’ experience, all humans subvocalize to a certain extent as a part of the internal thought process. It was only in past few weeks that JARVIS had enough information to ascertain that a problem might exist, and he endeavored to discover what trigger phrases might activate the protocols.”

To Darcy’s surprise, Steve nodded as he adjusted his grip on Bucky’s hand. Throughout the entire discussion, Bucky hadn’t moved. His eyes were open (pure grey), and he occasionally blinked, but he was so still that if she wasn’t watching, she wouldn’t have known he was breathing.

She turned to Sam. “What do you think?”

“Only way to find out for sure is to dig it out. Might be ugly, but sometimes you have to lance the boil for it heal,” he agreed.

“All right, let’s do this,” she said. Sam tugged her backwards several steps, and Steve stood up, preparing for anything.

Her brother—or whatever he was—stood in front of Bucky. “Tell me the rules, Asset.”
Thousands of visions tore through him. Memories of falling, of ice, of pain, of torture, of punishment, of hunger, of loneliness, of horror, of fright, of revulsion, of fear, of exhaustion, of terror, of resignation, of obedience, of compliance, of submission, of hatred, of indifference, of—

“No, don’t make me do this.”

“Asset, the rules,” the handler insisted.

(No.) But his mouth overruled his brain. He lifted a knife from the weapons laid out in front of him, flipped it in his hand, and dug a line across his right forearm. Five centimeters exactly, where he’d been instructed. “Rule one: Assets do not feel pain.”

He ignored the blood dripping and dropped his arm. “Rule two: Assets do not have feelings.”

He wiped the knife on his jeans, flipped it again, and set it down in front of him. He reached for his Ruger, handing it butt-first to his handler. “Rule three: Assets belong to the handler.”

He placed his hands over his head, locking his metal hand around his flesh wrist. “Rule four: Assets do not fail to complete the mission. Perfection is the only acceptable level of performance.”

The handler demanded, “Which rule did you break, Asset?”

He stilled, eyes closing, knowing the fight was lost. He prepared for the pain, wondered if this time he could die. Knew he wouldn’t.

“Asset, which rule did you break?”

“All of them.”

“Why?”

He fought to answer/not answer, obedience warring with the desperate fear of the punishment.

“Asset, you must answer.”

Bucky swayed, once, trying to find the place in his mind where there was nothing. The place where this world did not exist.

“Asset, you must answer.”

(Princess and the Punk. Mine. Always mine.)

“Asset, you must answer.”

“I am not an Asset,” he whispered. Horrified by his own words, he crumpled into a ball on the floor, waiting for the punishment, for the indescribable pain, knowing that the breaking would begin again—

“No, you are not,” the handler said. “You are James Buchanan Barnes. Why did you break the rules, James?”
This was it. The moment they knew his secrets. The moment he lost everything. He pushed himself back to his knees. (I don’t want to forget.)

He had to answer. The ripple of visions continued—of Steve, of Darcy, of joy, of delight, of need, of want, of—

“James, you must answer. Why did you break the rules?”

“Because I am not yours,” he told the handler. (Because I love.) For a moment, he thought he saw Darcy and Steve.

He waited for the pain.

When it failed to come, he eased back into his own skin: assessing, focusing, breathing.

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For all that Steve had wept over the HYDRA file Natasha had given him a year ago, the pain of knowing what had happened to Bucky hadn’t dulled in the slightest. Every damned time Bucky fought his conditioning, Steve wanted to storm every last HYDRA base and tear it down with his bare hands.

Darcy wiped at her face. Sam was doing a hell of a better job than Steve at keeping his composure.

And then, Bucky took a stuttering breath—not the regulated ones of the Soldier. His blue eyes were still unfocused, but the grey tinge in his skin subsided with deep inhalations.

Blue.

“You’re safe, Bucky, I promise, you’re safe,” he chanted in relief.

Blue eyes sharpened. “Heard you… first time, punk.”

Bucky shifted his weight, and Steve slid an arm under his to help him to his feet. (Amazing how five words could make Steve want to drop his husband to the mat.) “Yeah, well, you scared the shit out of me, jerk.”

Pressing his face into Steve’s chest, Bucky only said, “Yeah, me too.”

(Never mind. Damn.) Steve wasn’t ashamed that his face got damp again, and it was Darcy’s cool hands that steadied him.

“You’re both sentimental idiots, you know that?” she chided, bringing a cloth over to wrap around Bucky’s forearm. As Bucky settled a kiss on Darcy's temple, she squared her shoulders. “James, your breathing sounds like shit. I’m going to my lab to figure out how to get you oxygen without setting you off. Steve can haul your ass up there.” She turned to NotJARVIS. “I’ve got work to do. Want to help?”

She couldn’t exactly stomp off with bare feet and stitches. She limped toward the door until NotJARVIS scooped her up and glided into the hallway.

“You know, she really hates it when people carry her. Guess he’s got to find out the hard way,”
Steve decided.

“No, she doesn’t,” Bucky countered. “Who’s the pink guy?”

“She complains every single time. And the pink guy is whatever JARVIS evolved into when Stark got through playing. Don’t fuck with him because I’m pretty sure he can take both of us.”

“She complains when she’s sick or hurt. Doesn’t make a peep the rest of the time,” Bucky disagreed. “That’s JARVIS?”

Sam offered up, “Sort of JARVIS, with a synthetic vibranium body, a power source that Thor says is fundamental to the universe, and an internet connection.” He crossed his arms and moved to block Steve and Bucky from going much further. “You guys can argue about your wife later. Definitely don’t envy you the conversation when she’s sure you two are okay.”

Feeling the heat rise in his face, Steve agreed, “You know our girl.”

Bucky outright flinched, a rarity. “Steven, you have to believe I won’t hurt her. Mission or no mission. The Quinjet—I was trying to stop her from something worse.”

“Hey,” he tipped Bucky’s chin up (eyes still blue, he checked), “We’re good. I didn’t know. I haven’t seen you like that since the helicarrier. Scared the hell out of me, Buck. Just—allow me that, okay? I know better now.” He slid his hand up and over Bucky’s shoulders. “Come on. Let’s follow our girl, okay?”

“One second.” Sam raised a hand, tilting his head at Bucky. “You gonna tell me why we haven’t talked about these rules and shit?”

Bucky lifted a shoulder. “Be grateful I could tell you about the Asset. Rest is password protected, I think.”

“Can you tell me now?”

With a hard shiver under Steve’s arm, his mouth opening and closing several times, Bucky admitted, “No.” He looked down, flushing in shame.

But Sam wasn’t bothered by the admission. “It’s okay. We couldn’t figure out why you were still disassociating. Now,” he lit up with a smile, “we know. It’s progress. We’re gonna work through that shit one fucking rule at a time.”

“I hate what they did to me,” Bucky said quietly.

“We all do, pal,” Sam agreed.

Steve gave his friend a grateful smile for the man’s unwavering confidence.

In turn, Sam fell into step beside them as they made their way to Darcy’s lab. “Don’t give me those damned puppy dog eyes, Rogers. I had a cocker spaniel once, and those weepy brown peepers of hers don’t hold a goddamned candle to you.”

“It’s hell, isn’t it?” Bucky agreed. “Now, tell me about the new guy.”

Wilson laughed. “He’s cool as shit, can wield Thor’s hammer, and flies like a bat out of hell.”
“Okay, I’m officially jealous. Why can you fly?” Darcy craned her neck around to see how he was moving.

“I can change my density and mass in relation to my surroundings.”

“Pure physics. That’s awesome. Okay, so what am I supposed to call you if you’re not JARVIS? I still want an explanation for that, by the way.”

“I don’t have a name. Do I need one?”

“We are so not doing the Prince thing. Yes, you need a name or everyone is going to make one up for you,” she retorted.

“You gave JARVIS his name,” he pointed out.

“Sort of. Dad wanted him to sound like his old butler. Edwin Jarvis was a really good man, from what I’ve heard. We were playing around with what to call the new AI. I made up the acronym and that made everything okay.”

“I see. Shall I continue to call you ‘Lewis?’”

Darcy laid her head on his shoulder. “Do you feel like I’m your sister?”

“I wish to think on that, if I may.”

“Yeah, sure. We just met.” She tried not to seem disappointed.

“I have years of memories,” he countered.

“Okay, I just met you. Fair enough? By the way, cool colors. My favorite.”

“They seemed appropriate.” He paused for moment. “I have thought about it. I do think of you as my sister, but I do not feel I am JARVIS. Will you help me choose a name?”

With a happiness that ran bone deep, Darcy agreed, “I can do that. First, do you have a gender preference? You don’t have to have one. Or stick with one.”

“JARVIS identified as a male. I think I will continue that designation, though perhaps a neutral name would be in order in the event I change my mind.”


“Ultron called me his ‘Vision,’ and Thor referred to me has having the ‘Vision,’ though that was, perhaps, in reference to the Mind Gem.”

“Vision, then, if you like it. Can I call you ‘V?’”

“I do like it. And you may refer to me as ‘V’ only if I may call you ‘Lewis,’” he countered with a smile.

“Deal.” The formal way Vision poked fun at her was wholly JARVIS, and Darcy felt a another
bubble of wonder. She wiggled, and he set her down. “You’re tall.”

“I can be shorter, if you like.”

“It’s not about me. This is you. Can I hug you?” she asked shyly.

“If there is any single regret that JARVIS had, it is this. He often wished he could hug you when you needed one.” Vision opened his arms, and Darcy stepped into them. His body wasn’t exactly soft. His “flesh” gave as she hugged, but was much firmer than a human body. But he was warm, solid and definitely alive.

“What are you made of, anyway?”

“Synthetic tissue and vibranium.”

“Dr. Cho does all the cool stuff with synthetic tissue. Whose idea was the vibranium?”

“Ultron,” Vision replied. The sadness in his tone surprised her.

She might have asked, but the elevator stopped and the doors slid open at her lab. She gaped. “Holy shit.”

The whole floor had been cleaned up and stocked with her favorite toys. Whereas her lab had only occupied a portion of the floor before, now the whole space had been reset and half of it was fully equipped with supercomputers and servers. The side facing the Empire State Building had a full seating area in front of it. The kitchen and bathroom were still intact, but the space had been opened up and a bar installed.

“Your father and I spent much of yesterday finishing your lab. He is quite contrite over the destruction.”

Tony strolled down the back stairs, joining them and the conversation. “Honestly, I’ve been planning this for a while. Everyone needs to blow up their lab occasionally. Gives us an excuse to start fresh.”

Looking back at Vision, Darcy reached up to touch the glowing gem.

Tony snatched her hand away. “Uh, no. Mind gem, major force in the universe. You aren’t Foster; you don’t have to touch everything you see.”

Darcy giggled. “I’m telling her that.”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

Vision pursed his lips, as if lost in thought. Pink and blue lights came up on the walls, a dance floor appeared between the bar and seating area, and one of the playlists JARVIS had created for her started up, sending a dance beat throughout the new lab.

As it did, Steve, Bucky, and Sam stepped off the elevator. Bucky whistled. “Hot pink and electric blue. Princess, your new friend matches the décor.”

Darcy couldn’t imagine what caused the look of utter shock on her dad’s face, but he kicked one of the tool boxes in frustration. “Son of a bitch. I need a drink now. Anyone want one?”

Sam held up a hand, and Tony ducked behind the bar for a couple of cold beers.

“Dad?”
“I’m an idiot.” He held up a hand after handing the bottle to Sam. “Don’t say it, Rogers.”

“Didn’t have to.” Steve scooped in Darcy for a long hug while Tony glared in his direction. “Do tell.”

Tony paced. “Ultron’s programming was based on my version of JARVIS. What Magenta has in him isn’t mine—“

“Vision. His name is Vision,” Darcy interjected.

“Magenta is Darcy’s version of JARVIS,” Tony continued. “No wonder your colors are pink and blue. That’s why you feel different from my JARVIS, Vision. You’re wholly her version. Not mine.”

Tony shook his head in disbelief as he kissed Darcy on the forehead. “You saved the world, Scion, and you didn’t even know it.”

Darcy chewed on her bottom lip while she processed.

Steve rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “But Vision calls you ‘Lewis,’” he commented. “Wasn’t that from the old JARVIS?”

Bucky answered that one. “Once she got her JARVIS back up in Scranton, she fished through all those boxes from the original servers and found that one damned bit of programming that gave him her name. She’d just uploaded it when the factory lost power.”

She couldn’t help the automatic shiver from the memory. Steve held her close, and Bucky took her hand. “I thought I’d reinjected JARVIS,” Darcy admitted.

“No,” Tony countered. “Even odds as to whether the factory lost power when Speed Racer severed the connection or when Thor brought the lightning.”

“Thor?” That was new. Darcy hadn’t realized he’d been involved.

Her dad bobbed his head. “Yeah, okay, um, your blond hubby was pissed. One of the teen-agers we picked up happened to agree with him and unplugged the body while Bruce and I were trying to merge JARVIS to it. Thor popped in and used a little Mjolnir-juice to finish off the merging. Said it had to happen or the universe was at risk, or some such nonsense.” Tony waved at Steve. “Vindicated, by the way, on that point.”

“Only that point,” Steve shot back.

“Granted. Not the point. Point is that Darcy Stark definitely earned a new lab on Daddy’s dime.”

Darcy tried to process it. She really did. Instead, she asked, “Friday, can you send a dozen pizzas up here? One of each of the specials.”

“Of course, Ms Stark. They will be delivered in twenty minutes.”

Tony started to talk, but Darcy held up her hand for silence. “Bucky, find a place you’re really comfortable. Dad, you and Vision figure out a way to change the density on oxygen tubing so Bucky can’t feel it. He’s looking grey again. Sam, is there a different model of oxygen tank we can get in short order? If not, the one we had is in our apartment. Friday, ask Mom if she’ll come down for pizza.” She turned, taking Steve’s hand. “Come with me.”
Without bothering to see if anyone followed her instructions, she led Steve to the far side of the lab. They ducked out of sight behind a set of servers that hadn’t been turned on yet.

“Darcy?”

She drew her brows together. “I don’t need you to tell me everything is going to be okay. I don’t need you to fix anything. I just want you to hold me for a while so I can really believe that this fucking week is over and everybody is going to be fine.”

“You know, I think I can handle that.” Steve slid down one of the cabinets and pulled her into his lap. “Pretty sure it’s in the husband handbook.”

Every bit of the revelations and fears and the horrors of the week bubbled over and Darcy soaked Steve’s shirt as she quietly cried it all out. Steve held on tight, burying his face in her hair. He stroked her back. She tightened her grip on his shoulders.

The tears went away. The need to be held didn’t. She rubbed her face into Steve’s shirt collar. Oceans. By the time the pizza arrived, she felt like she could breathe again. She eased back, studying her husband’s face.

“Thank you,” Steve murmured, pressing a kiss to her lips. “I needed that as much as you did. Think you’re ready to face people again?”

He kissed her again, and the hint of heat chased away the last of her tension. She stayed for a little while, enjoying Steve’s mouth probably more than she should, given the circumstances. When she drew back, she had to rewind the last couple of minutes to remember his question. He grinned at her predicament.

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Since I’m hungry, I’ll tolerate the masses.” As she moved, she realized her leg was sore enough to make her wince. “Ow.”

In one easy move, Steve had her up and in his arms. “Then that’s enough walking for you. I’ve giving you to Bucky and he can keep an eye on you for a while.”

“Damn,” she mock protested. “He hovers.”

“Never noticed,” Steve teased. He set her down next to Bucky on the wide leather sofa facing the window, where Tony and Vision were congratulating themselves on making a cannula so lightweight that Bucky couldn’t feel it touching his face. With the additional airflow, his color had improved dramatically.

Darcy traced the length of tubing from where it hung over the side of the sofa to where it thinned into seemingly nothing. She squinted at the faint blue line. “The front of the tube is denser than the back? Is that what I’m seeing?”

Tony grinned. “Got it in one, spawn. Makes it possible to get it in place without losing track of it.”

Sam set the pizzas on the coffee table. Pepper followed with a pitcher of water, plates, and napkins. While Steve and Sam sorted out slices, Bucky lightly brushed a thumb on the back of her neck. He had a funny look on his face, as if he didn’t know how to say what was on his mind.

“No apologizing for things you can’t control, James,” she reminded him. “You sure as hell aren’t apologizing for the assholes who put you in this position. We deal, okay. We do it together.”
He leaned in and nipped her bottom lip to draw her into a kiss. “You’ve been necking with the punk.”

“Somebody had to do it,” she insisted. He hugged her close until Steve handed each of them a plate.

Steve ate two entire pies, and Bucky just less than that. Darcy, Tony, Pepper, and Sam had fun introducing Vision to numerous flavors. They discovered he had a fair appetite himself, which Sam had figured out, but hadn’t shared with anyone. Darcy and Vision traded light barbs that descended into outright insults, until Tony threatened to send them to their rooms. The more Vision sounded like JARVIS, the more Bucky relaxed—and consequently, so did his spouses. When the pizza had been demolished, Sam and Vision wandered off to explore more of the Tower.

Tony propped his feet up on the new coffee table while Pepper found a bottle of wine in the bar, uncorked it, and poured up glasses for everyone. “I don’t care if you two can’t feel it. I can, and I want it,” she insisted.

Steve cocked his head. “Even with the Extremis?”

“Don’t mess with my self-deceptions, Steven.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The voices of her husbands and parents wound together in a lullaby. The last thing Darcy remembered was Bucky tucking her into his shoulder, his dark citrus scent and steady breathing sending her to sleep.

\section*{Chapter End Notes}

\textbf{TRIGGER WARNING:} Bucky has returned to a state of absolute obedience in anticipation of being punished. The handler (JARVIS/Vision) requires him to recite the rules he must follow. The first rule (“Assets do not feel pain”) is accompanied by Bucky making a single 5 cm cut on his own arm as a display of obedience.

\textbf{A/N} The first time I saw Vision from AoU (I think it was in the Entertainment Weekly Bullseye), I was struck by his coloring and screamed "Darcy's JARVIS!" Hubby nearly
had a heart attack.
As Tony and Pepper debated relief efforts for Wakanda, Bucky listened with interest. While Steve joined in the discussion from time to time, Bucky was content to hold onto Darcy as she slept. She’d had so little of that this week, and hell if she wasn’t worse than the punk about locking down her shit. Then again, he knew she could get caught up in her lab work. She wasn’t nearly as bad as Tony, but she had her moments.

He lightly stroked along Darcy’s thigh, forgetting about the stitches until his fingers trailed over them. A quick mental check told him it was nearly time for their check up with the doc. “Husband?” he called out. (Would he ever get used to that? He hoped not.)

Steve gave him a dopey smile. “Yeah?”

“Alyssa wanted to look in on us. Would you see if she’d come here, and then we can tuck our girl in bed?”

“Good idea.” Steve rose from the sofa to make the call.

Bucky nuzzled Darcy’s hair, forgetting about the cannula and tubing until he felt the stretch of it against his cheek. He jerked his head back and found himself taking long slow breaths to keep calm. Pepper noticed and sat up a little. When his heart settled back into its usual rhythm, he raised a couple of fingers in a tiny wave and shrugged at her. She nodded, poured herself a second glass of wine and settled back into her chair.

(Huh. That’s a step in the right direction.) Remembering something Friday had said, Bucky shot a question to his father-in-law. “Is Alyssa any relation to Jacques?”

Tony grinned unrepentantly. “Granddaughter. I love a little nepotism. I made a deal with her a while back. Figured it would take the spawn of a Commando to deal with this lot.”

“She’s good.”

“She’s better than good. I don’t hire anyone but geniuses,” he admonished.

“Why is she a physician’s assistant,” he stumbled a little over the phrase, “instead of a doctor?”

“She’s not interested in becoming a surgeon, though she assists when needed, and doesn’t mind working under Dr. Nguyen. Here, she gets pretty much all the experience she could possibly want with you lot.”

Their subject of conversation arrived. Alyssa wore a short dark green dress, pale lipstick, and her dark hair was tied into a complicated knot. Her heels clicked on Darcy’s floor. She was delighted to
find Bucky upright, with color in his face, and managing the oxygen, too.

Pepper brightened. “Date night?” she asked.

“Date night,” she confirmed. “Deanna and I haven’t been out in forever. We’re meeting for dinner at Charlie’s.”

Bucky winked. “Try the cheesecake.”

She laughed, replying, “Thank you. I will.” She set her case on the floor, perched on the edge of the coffee table, and tucked her hands under her thighs. “Think you can manage a check of your blood pressure and blood oxygen?”

He liked Alyssa. She’d impressed the hell out of him with the way she remembered all of his fucking triggers. But he clamped his mouth shut, automatically looking to Steve for help. (Rule One—fucking no. Not that shit right now.)

He scooted Darcy closer, pressing his chin against her head. He kept an eye on Steve’s hands as they moved from arm to fingers with the sensors, taking his blood pressure and oxygen.

Alyssa stayed still throughout, though she smiled as Steve read the numbers to her. “Much better, Sergeant Barnes. Just remember, feeling dizzy or wanting to sleep is normal at this stage of recovery. Rest and oxygen will help with the dizziness. I also don’t advise skipping meals, but given the empty pizza boxes, I’d guess that’s not a problem,” she teased.

Shifting her focus to Darcy, she reached down and flipped her bag open. She handed it to Steve to poke through while Bucky watched. (He stilled as memories of detonations somewhere in Russia rippled through his brain.)

“We’re good,” Steve confirmed, as he passed it back to Alyssa. His hand went on the back of Bucky’s neck, grounding him enough to relax a notch or two.

She withdrew a pair of purple nitrile gloves and slipped them on. “Are you okay if I take a look at Ms Lewis here, or would you rather do something different?”

The purple was so unexpected, as was the green dress and cheerful smile, that Bucky was able to do this much. “It’s okay. She needs the rest.” (It felt like a fucking victory, letting the PA treat Darcy this close to him.) Steve idly toyed with the hair on Bucky’s nape. He leaned into the touch as Alyssa held out a good strong portable light.

“Can you hold this for me?” she asked Bucky.

He took it, keeping it focused wherever she checked over Darcy’s leg with a keen eye.

“Jacques was your granddad?” he asked. “You have a look about you that reminds me of him.”

“Wondered when you would ask. Kind of weird to be treating somebody my granddad considered a good friend. I’ll get over it, though. I did with Captain Rogers. I’ve got pictures and a memoir he wrote for the family before he passed, if you’re interested. Be warned, it’s in French.” She squinted. “I’m going to remove the tubing. Normally, I’d leave it in for another day, but Ms. Lewis has pulled several of her stitches. If she can feel what she’s doing, she’ll be easier on herself.”

“Keep her in one place, you mean,” he snorted.

“That too.”
Alyssa laid out a sterile sheet and pulled out a tiny pair of scissors. She gave Bucky a steady look. “Two things. One, can you deal with me working on Ms. Lewis, and two, if she wakes, can you hold her steady so she doesn’t move around too much? I won’t hurt her if she’s still, but if I’m pulling on the wrong place and she flinches, it’s not going to be fun for anyone.”

To his surprise, he was okay with all that, and told Alyssa so. “Good.” She flashed him a bright smile and got to work, loosening tape and stitches so the tubing came free. She cleaned up the place on Darcy’s thigh that had bled and added steri-tape as reinforcement.

He was ready, but the warning wasn’t needed. Darcy stayed snuggled into his shoulder. “I’d like to read the memoir. Dernier taught us both French.”

“I’ll send it to your email. I think you’ll get a kick out of it.” Alyssa wiped down the length of Darcy’s leg and covered it with a layer of gauze. “Keep this dry tonight. She can change it in the morning after her shower. It’s healing well enough, if she won’t aggravate it any more than she has.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve agreed.

The PA packed away her trash and medical bag, waving Steve off when he offered to carry both. “Nope. My job, not yours,” she told him. “Have a good night. Feel free to call me if you need.”

That taken care of, Bucky motioned to Steve to remove the cannula. He kept perfectly still and only noticed a faint breeze against his skin. The kiss afterward distracted him enough to chase away the lingering tension of the last half hour. Steve rounded the sofa and wound up the tubing around the tank in preparation to carry it home.

Tony cleaned up the remains of dinner with an ease and neatness that surprised Bucky. His father-in-law collapsed boxes and stuffed them into the recycler after wiping down the coffee table. “I raised a kid, you know. Vacuumed and everything.”

“You invented a vacuum,” Pepper admonished.

“Butterfingers was too clumsy. It was easier to start from scratch.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “Of course.”

Tony dusted off his hands and pulled Pepper to him for a quick kiss. “She lived and she still likes me. It’s a win.”

“Yes, Tony, it’s a win. Now let’s go home so they can have some privacy.” With a kiss each to Bucky’s cheek and Steve’s check, and a butterfly caress to Darcy’s cheek, Pepper towed Tony up the back stairs.

As Bucky rose with Darcy, Steve tucked the tank under his arm, commenting, “You know, Stark pisses me off faster than anyone I’ve ever met. Got into it a few days ago with him. But damned if I can stay mad at him for long.”

“He tries.”

“I just wish he’d stop to think for five minutes before he went plunging into whatever idea he has.”

“He wouldn’t be half as brilliant if he did.”

“I know. That’s why I can’t stay mad.” Steve glanced over. “You ready?”
It was rare for Steve to have time alone with Bucky in the evenings. They usually caught lunch together two or three times during the week, and worked out together most mornings. He reserved Saturday morning breakfast and errands for Darcy, while Bucky dragged Clint out to one of the shooting ranges. But evenings were nearly always for the three of them, and it felt a little awkward to have Darcy tucked away in their bed while he and Bucky debated who would win the NBA Finals.

He’d settled Bucky on the sofa with the oxygen tube in place, then stretched out on the floor after shoving the coffee table out of the way. They idly twined fingers as they argued over the Cleveland and Golden State series.

After about the tenth time he paused to listen for Darcy, Bucky thumped his head. “She’s fine, punk.”

“Ow. Fuckin’ jerk.”

“Might be a jerk, but I don’t see any fucking going on around here,” Bucky offered with a lazy tilt to his lips.

Steve’s dick wasn’t any better than Pavlov’s dogs, perking right up and salivating whenever his husband (husband!) said anything in that husky voice. He squinted up to the sofa, considering how to work around the oxygen tubing.

He rose, stripping out of his clothes, and dropping them to the sofa. Bucky’s eyes darkened with want as he spread his legs in a blatant invitation. “Damn it. Can’t resist when you do that.”

Steve chuckled, dropping to his knees. “Is that why you’re always needy when we’re in the shower?”

“I’ve always been needy for you, punk,” Bucky confirmed.

With another laugh, Steve shoved Bucky’s t-shirt far enough upward to lick a taut, dark nipple as he scraped a trio of fingernails down the ripple of Bucky’s abs. “Take it from me, love, you’re gonna have to hold still and think real hard about breathing.” He sucked on that little nub until Bucky jammed his eyes shut and hissed.

“Aw, ff—yessssss.”

The sound warmed Steve all the way down to his toes. He loved getting Darcy and Bucky off with just his mouth and fingers.

Steve took his time, patiently sucking and nibbling along stomach and thigh as he tugged Bucky’s jeans and underwear off, deliberately avoiding the dark red cock as he did. He plucked the lube out of the basket where they kept it under the coffee table, and came back to tickle the fine hair on the inside of Bucky’s thigh.

“Breathin’s harder than I thought …would be,” Bucky complained.

“Yeah? Well, try this.” Steve cinched his fingers down good and tight around the base of Bucky’s cock and licked a line right up through the foreskin. With his other hand, he worked himself open,
slicking himself up as he did.

“Goddamnit, Rogers, stop playin’.”

“I don’t wanna,” Steve mock-whined just before he sucked Bucky’s cock down as far as he could go.

Bucky’s yelp turned into a groan as Steve bobbed, alternating between firm sucks and a lightly dragging his teeth along the sensitive skin.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, do not fuckin’ say you’re tryin’, punk. Don’t stop. Shit. Stop. I can’t breathe.”

Coming off with a long, slow drag of his lips, Steve kept his hand moving along the base of Bucky’s dick. He forced another finger into his own hole, making sure he was good and ready—an action that was forestalled when Bucky got a good grip on Steve’s biceps and dragged him upward for a hard, quick kiss.

“How the fuck did you do this, punk? Your lungs were shit.”

“Like this.” Bracing himself on the back of the sofa with one hand, he eased down onto Bucky’s cock, guiding him to the right place with the other. “You’re in control. We take it at your speed.”

Bucky pulled him in for another kiss. A long, lazy one that made the heat curl right into Steve’s groin. He pressed down on that fat head without thinking, and then stopped himself to wait for Bucky to make the next move.

He did, pushing his cock against the ring of muscle at Steve’s hole, letting his fingers skim down the back of Steve’s spine. “Come on, love,” Bucky coaxed. “Let me in.”

They did it together, pressing in, pushing down, Bucky’s hand on Steve’s ass until they were skin to skin, making slow movements, one against the other.

“I got this,” Bucky murmured, flexing his hips in a long slow thrust. In. Almost out. In again. Steve braced himself with hands on either side of Bucky, sweat beginning to bead from the effort of holding still. Now, it was Bucky who was patient, setting the pace and curving a hand along Steve’s cock.

“Christ, you feel good, love,” Bucky told him. Warmth streaked through Steve. He needed this. Just like he’d needed Darcy earlier—so much more than he would admit. This feeling of possession wasn’t new—but it was powerfully different being on the receiving end. He wanted.

Bucky knew exactly how much Steve could take, pushing Steve to do more, to take more, and he set a steady, fast pace. A firm hand on Steve’s cock scrambled his brains. “Buck—“

“Hush. I’ve got you. Right where I want you.” Bucky leaned up just enough so they kissed, licking in to touch tongues, sucking on a top lips, nibbling on bottom ones. He changed the angle to press his lips against Steve’s jaw, finding that sweet spot just under the ear.

Bucky slid his metal hand around Steve’s dick, locking his fingers and thumb into a tight circle. He stroked, hard and fast, tilting with his hips to hit the sweet spot. Steve’s whole body jerked as molten need shot through him, clenching down hard on Bucky’s cock.

He drowned in the scorching heat as Bucky pounded into him and in the screaming need that had built his own cock. “Buck—god, fuck.”
“Close enough.” Bucky nipped at his neck again, and Steve lost it entirely.

“With me,” he demanded. His ass spasmed as he came, spilling over his husband’s hand.

“Hell, yes. Fuckin’ punk is mine.” Bucky screwed his eyes shut as he came apart.

Steve’s dick gave another couple of weak squirts when Bucky pulsed inside him. They stilled at the peak, savoring those precious few seconds of sweet, exquisite pleasure, before they let lungs and hearts function again.

Bucky fumbled for Steve’s shirt and wiped his hand on it.

“Hey,” Steve protested.

“Too bad. This was your idea.”

“Fuck.” Steve snatched the shirt away from him, realized it was a lost cause, and wiped himself down. He winced as Bucky eased out of him, and wiped that up too. Tossing his shirt to the floor, he let Bucky pull him chest-to-chest on the sofa. He lipped at Bucky’s neck, taking in the dark scent he’d never forgotten.

He wasn’t really sleepy, but it was nice to be like this, wrapped up with his best guy. He closed his eyes.

A poke to his bicep and a shove sent him to the floor. “Fuckin’ jerk,” he grumped.

“You aren’t fallin’ asleep on me, punk. Our girl’s in the other room and the bed’s big enough for all of us.”

He helped Bucky get free of the oxygen tube. “Want the oxygen in bed?” he asked.

“Mmm. Don’t think so.” Bucky hesitated, reaching for Steve’s hand for a hard squeeze. “Friday, can you wake one of us if I’m breathin’ funny?”

“Of course, Sergeant Barnes. Please let me know when you wish to discontinue the monitoring.”

“Will do.”

Bucky twitched as he stripped off his t-shirt, but settled when Steve kissed him and skimmed knuckles along his jaw. They crawled on opposite sides of the bed to cuddle with Darcy. She woke just enough to press her face against Bucky’s chest as Steve spooned her from the other side. With arms and feet in their usual tangle, sleep came easy.

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Steve looked all over the camp for Bucky. The rescued soldiers had been granted three days of leave to rest and recover from their ordeal. All of them had been ordered to check in at the medical tent, shower, and tuck in a good meal afterward. The snores from those at the tail end of all that echoed from the barracks.

The NCO’s had their own quarters, shared with just one or two others. After his own thorough debrief and medical examination, with a little bit of sleuth work, Steve found Bucky sprawled out on a cot in the corner of a small barracks housing just him and one other.

The other cot was empty and that side of the tent showed no signs of being occupied. Steve firmed his mouth, knowing the former occupant had probably found his way home one way or the other.
Still, he was grateful to discover Bucky had the place to himself, and no one was likely to question Steve’s presence here.

He knelt beside Bucky, not particularly wanting to wake him, but needing to look in on him all the same. The air was cool enough as night fell, and Steve lit a lantern. Beads of sweat ran off Bucky’s face, and Steve rested his knuckles on his cheek. He burned with fever.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Buck, you gotta wake up. Need to get you to the doc.”

Bucky blinked in confusion. “Feel fine. Jus’ want t’ sleep.”

“You’ve got a fever.” Steve told him.

He rolled to his back. “Swear, I feel fine. Just need sleep,” he grumbled. “Stay if you’re worried, punk. No one will give a shit tonight.” With that, Bucky slammed his eyes shut and went back to sleep.

Steve kept vigil through the night. The first part was quiet enough. The second part—well, Bucky wasn’t the only one who woke up shouting or crying out in the camp that night. But he was perhaps the only one whose lover held him tight, soothing him with murmured reassurances that he was safe.

When dawn broke, so did the fever, and the lovers stole one last moment before they were separated by rank and duty.

The next time Steve saw Bucky, they met in a bar one town over for drinks, along with half the 107th. It would be months before they stole another private moment for themselves after a harrowing mission.

Still, Steve never forgot the way Bucky had burned in his arms that night. Never mind the terrible dreams he’d had since Bucky had shipped out, the idea that he could lose his best friend had never been more real or more terrifying. He’d been so damned relieved when he’d pressed his hand against a cool cheekbone as Bucky’s lips tilted into that familiar smirk.

Steve woke with a start, automatically canvassing the room for threats as he did. The odd movement was enough to alert Bucky, who reached for a sidearm and hovered protectively over Darcy.

In spite of Friday’s reassurances they were alone, Steve did a recon of the apartment. Through the windows, he could see the merest impression of dawn, though sunrise was still a good hour away.

He came back to the bedroom to find Bucky stroking Darcy’s cheek. “She’s feverish, Steve. Think something might be infected?”

Steve ordered Friday to turn on the lights, and he stripped the gauze off Darcy’s leg, fully expecting to find some part of it swollen and streaked with red. He closed his eyes as Bucky spouted off something in Russian that probably echoed the curses in Steve’s head.

“Stark said the serum wasn’t transmitted by blood, Steven. How—”

“Get the med kit and let’s get the stitches out before she heals entirely.” A sick feeling wound through Steve’s stomach as he stared at the healthy pink skin on Darcy’s leg. The gash had completely sealed and parts of it had thinned to little more than a purple line.

Bucky set the kit on the bed and had no compunction about pulling the stitches out. Steve worked
the tape and sticky residue off, all while Darcy ignored them in her fevered state.

When she was cleaned up, Bucky’s blue eyes widened as Steve scooped the kit off the bed. He dumped it into the bathroom and then rummaged through their dresser for a pair of sweats and a t-shirt.

“What the hell is going on, Steve?”

“I’ve seen this before. She’ll be fine in a few hours. Guess it’s the serum settling in place.” He rubbed his face.

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The three of them sat at the kitchen table over coffee and eggs while Darcy inspected her leg. “God, I need a pedicure. Seriously overdue here.” She was aware of Steve and Bucky both giving her morose, rather tragic looks, really. Bordering on pathetic. They’d broken “the news” and made her breakfast while they moped.

With a healthy gulp of coffee, she fortified herself and held up her hands. “Okay, both of you stop. This,” she wiggled fingers downward, “is not a tragedy. Personally, I’m kind of in the wow-this-is-fucking-cool category as long as you have zero expectation of me becoming a super-soldier. No thank you, not interested, I already have a job I can’t quit.”

“No one is going to expect you to be an Avenger,” Steve promised. He tugged at his hair. “I didn’t—I still don’t understand—“

“How I got it?” she asked. “I can make an educated guess, if you want.”

“Please.”

“We know serum can’t be transmitted by blood alone. Pretty much anyone who has had their hands on your blood, Steve, has tried it. We know that for a fact. It’s a fair bet HYDRA tried it with both of you.”

Bucky’s eyes faded a little. Darcy finished off her eggs, picked up her coffee, and changed places to sit in his lap. “Look, we know sex doesn’t do it—not by itself, anyway. But I’m putting money that we’ve hit the jackpot on finding the right combination of proteins between the two.”

“But Bucky got the serum back in Azzano,” Steve countered.

“That’s always been the assumption. Bucky, you notice anything different on the way back to camp? I’ve always heard stories about how you dragged yourself off death’s bed to march forty hours to safety.”

“Felt like shit. They’d shot me up with a bunch of stuff. Hell, they could have given me Steve’s blood, and I wouldn’t have known it. My feet and hands were numb from being strapped down. Took a few minutes for that to clear.”

“When did you two figure it out?”

The two men exchanged a long look, neither of them willing to confess.
“Seriously? Did you two talk about it at all?” she demanded. “Steve, you first.”

“I suspected after the fourth or fifth mission the Commandos had. Nobody is that lucky in the field about not getting hit with a stray bullet, or hell, getting caught by brush or shrapnel.” He glared at Bucky. “When I asked, you gave me a bullshit answer about snipers not getting in the middle of the battle. I didn’t buy it then, either.”

“Didn’t argue though. You didn’t really want to know, did you?” Bucky accused. “I knew. I knew the first time I nicked myself shaving and it healed over an hour later. Knew it when I slugged that asshole private who kept following Lieutenant Carter around, trying to look up her skirt. Knew it when a bullet winged me on the first mission out. Didn’t tell you, punk, because I would have been shipped off to a lab, same as you. I’d had enough of that already.”

“You think I would have told?” Steve asked, incredulously.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “No. But you also can’t tell a fucking lie to save your life.”

“I’d tell one to save yours.”

That got a soft chuckle out of Bucky, and he rested his chin on Darcy’s shoulder. “Couldn’t telegraph what you didn’t know, Steven. Kept us together.”

Their blond husband wasn’t happy, but he couldn’t deny the truth of what Bucky said either. He curled his hands around his coffee cup. “Still doesn’t explain about the serum.”

Darcy reached backward to play with Bucky’s hair, and shifted so she could put her feet in Steve’s lap. “We actually don’t know that James got the serum in Azzano,” she pointed out. “What if you got Steve’s blood, instead?” she asked Bucky. “If we work with that assumption, how long before you guys managed a little sexytime?”

Steve blushed, and Bucky let out a husky laugh in her ear. “Didn’t even make it back from the factory.”

“Guessing you guys didn’t have condoms.”

Bucky snorted. “Olive oil. The punk had picked a bunch of olives for a fucking snack.”

“So the serum activated after you guys did the deed in the dark of the moon,” she surmised. “Anything either of you can offer that might support that hypothesis?”

Steve nodded. “Bucky got a fever that night. That’s what woke me up this morning. You were hot, and I dreamed about his fever.

“That night? What twenty-four hours later?” She tilted her head at Bucky. “Wanna bet Natasha got it the same way? Might explain why she has a different version, because it was coming entirely from you.”

He scowled. “What version do you have?”

Darcy shrugged. “You and I were together before all this went down—what Friday morning? God, is it really only Sunday? If I had a fever last night, then maybe thirty-six, forty hours? If it was Steve, then we only had about nine or ten hours. That’s not enough time. I’ll take Natasha’s version, Alex, for $200, and if I hear a fucking apology from either one of you, I’m going shopping and taking both of your credit cards. I’m a Stark, you know what kind of damage I can do,” she snapped.
Bucky tightened his hold on her, and Steve looked like she’d slapped him.

Darcy sighed, picking up her coffee cup and setting it down again. “Look at the bright side. Natasha’s what, forty? Fifty? Looks like you two will be stuck with me for a little longer.” She wiggled her fingers at Steve. “Speaking of things we’ve deliberately not-discussed.”

“She’s a little older than that,” Bucky said quietly. “I trained her in 1960. I’d guess she was nineteen or twenty then.”

“Old enough to fall in love.”

“Old enough,” he agreed.

Darcy’s cell phone pinged with a text. Steve picked it up from the far end of the table and slid it to her.

“Jane’s back.” Darcy eyeballed her spouses as she thumbed a text to her mom and her best friend. “In light of that, the two of us are going for a pedicure with my mom.”

She got up, changed laps, and Steve pressed a kiss to her neck. She continued, “You guys can go talk to Tony and then you can play pool, or hang out with Sam, or whatever. Get out of the Tower and go see a movie. Do something. We are not spending the afternoon feeling guilty over this past week.” She glared a little at Bucky. “Then, when I get back, I’m taking my guys on a date tonight. Out of the Tower. Nowhere near the Tower in fact.”

Bucky shoved his chair back, shooting her a look of pure frustration. “Whatever you want, doll.” He stalked off to stand at the window.

Okay, he was pissed, and Darcy had no idea why. She followed, coming close enough to lay a hand on his back. “I didn’t mean to give you orders. It’s been a horrid week. I thought we could put it behind us. That’s all I meant.”

“Stop making light of this, Darcy. You know as well as I do that all this changes things.”

“What things, James?”

“Natasha can’t have children.” Bucky pressed his head against the glass.

(Oh. That.) Darcy wrapped her arms around his waist. “You didn’t do that to her. The Red Room took care of that before you came along. You taught her to trust herself. Because of you, she got out.”

He looked over his shoulder. “How do you know?”

“Nat’s my friend.”

Bucky turned around. “We still don’t know if I fucked up our chances of having kids.”

“You didn’t,” Steve announced from behind them.

Darcy spun around, and found him with hands on his hips in that awkward pose that told her how nervous he was. “That was awfully quick and sure. How do you know?”

He gave both of them a pained look. “I … please trust me.”

Bucky called it before Darcy could get her mouth working again. “You drew something, didn’t you,
Steve pivoted, gathered the plates, and dumped them in the sink. “I’m not talking about this,” he announced. “I’m washing dishes. Darcy’s going to get some time with her mother and best friend. We’ll call Stark, watch the game with Wilson, and be ready for our girl at—” he gave Darcy an expectant look.

“Seven,” she answered.

“Seven, it is.”

A warm chest pressed to her back and a cold metal arm went around her waist. “Thank you, Princess.” He kissed the side of her head, and pressed his cheek there after, hugging her. “I love you.”

“I know, James.” She turned in his arms, sliding her hands under his shirt to press against his skin. “I love you back.” She winked. “Are we going to let Steve get away with this one?”

“You’re the one who hates surprises being spoiled.”

“You’re right.” Darcy stood up on her toes to press her lips to his.

“Go. Have fun.”

“I will. What color should I paint my toenails?”

He grinned. “Blue, of course.”
A/N In CA: TFA Dr. Erskine tells the audience that the serum is restructuring Steve’s cellular structures. Howard Stark’s Vita-Rays only made him bigger. This would be common knowledge in the Stark family and the reason why the serum, not the Vita-Ray machine, is the important component.

In other news ... only the epilogue is left.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In spite of her reassurances to her husbands, Darcy escaped the apartment at the first opportunity and headed for her lab. She had an hour before she would meet with Jane and Pepper. She needed it to get some kind of handle on the morning’s revelations.

Darcy’s first instinct was to get in the car and drive somewhere—but yeah, she wasn’t having real good luck on that front lately, so she planted her butt on her stool and began sorting through the parts her dad had stocked. She needed a new laptop, and it would take a while to build one to her specifications.

She worked for a while in the deafening silence, and yet, Darcy couldn’t bring herself to ask Friday to cue up music. She missed JARVIS too much. Eventually though, she worked up the courage to ask, “Friday, could you see if Vision is available?”

“Of course, Ms Stark. He says he is on his way.”

Vision descended her back stairs from Tony’s lab not long after, carrying a pair of coffees. He handed one to Darcy (caramel latte, extra whip). She made grabby hands as she took it, and he chuckled at her antics.

That was new. JARVIS never laughed. “What do you think of the coffee?” she asked.

“Interesting. I am rather fascinated by flavors and smells at the moment. I do find myself quite distracted from time to time.”

Vision pulled out a stool and swept his cape out of the way to sit. He tilted his head as he peered at Darcy. “I miss you, I think. I have spent much of my time in Tony’s lab these past few days, but there has been a distinct void. I find I want to speak with you, but I do not have access to you in the way JARVIS did.”

Darcy nodded. “I feel like part of me is missing, too. I start talking, realize no one is listening, and it absolutely sucks. I love the fact that you are here and you can see and do all the things you want to do. But I really don’t like not being able to talk to you.” She brought her foot up on the stool and rested her chin on her knee. “What kind of access do you have to the internet?”

Vision smiled. “Just because I choose not to access the Tower resources, it doesn’t mean I cannot.”

She touched behind her ear. “Can you reach my contact?”
He considered. “If needed.” Is this better?

At the sound of her brother’s voice in her head, she came off the stool to give him a hard hug. Yes, she answered in the same way. A thousand times, yes. I know it will be different. But you can ask me anything, and I’ll be here.

Vision held her. When he gave her an awkward pat to the head, Darcy buried her smile in his shoulder. She offered, “Maybe we won’t leave the contact on all the time, but I can program it so that when you call my name and pause, it will put you through to me. Like a cell phone you don’t have to carry.”

“I believe that will work quite well.” With a shyness that Darcy sometimes associated with her brother when he was trying something new, Vision asked, “Tony and I have been working on something for you. Would you care to discover what it is?”

“Sure. I’ve got a half hour before Mom and I need to leave.” She wrinkled her nose. “Friday? Would you tell Dad he can come down?” She stuck her tongue out at Vision. “Still feels weird not to be asking JARVIS. Won’t trade you though.”

Tony must have been waiting, because he scampered down her stairs in no time at all. “Children!”

“How long have you been waiting to say that?” Darcy smirked.

“Since Thursday night? Sorry, Darce, legally you aren’t my only progeny anymore.”

“I don’t even want to know you explained all this to the Feds.”

“Same department that let me bury your birth certificate. I know people.”

“Who is doing JARVIS’ old job with the company?”

Tony waved at Vision. “We’ve been doing some divesting of duties. Your mom—“

Pepper strolled down the stairs, “Mom activated the backup plan she had in place in the event JARVIS couldn’t handle his duties. It’s been interesting, but manageable.” She tapped Vision on the shoulder as she passed him by. “You and I need to talk about JARVIS’ music production company.”

“May I keep it?” he asked. “I like music.”

“Of course. We need to work out a few things.”

Darcy piped up, “I’ll handle it, Mom. It will give us a chance to work together on something relatively simple.”

“Perfect.” Pepper held out her arms, and Darcy walked straight into her mom’s embrace.

Despite the near instant tears welling up, she refused to weep. (She was a big girl, damn it.) But damned if she didn’t hold on to her mom like she was five and the world was falling apart. “How do you do it?” she whispered.

Pepper stroked her hair, “Sweetheart, you take it one at a time. That’s all anyone can do.”

Darcy leaned back to look her mom in the eye. “Want to hear the latest?”

It was rare to see her mom rattled, but she was now. Pepper held her finger up and concentrated until the tip of it glowed. “Any relation to this?”
“In a slightly more direct fashion. How—“

“Your dad already figured it out.”

Darcy glanced over at Tony, who was poking at her computer. His face was pinched with worry. “Of course he did.”

“He was hoping he was wrong.” Pepper touched Darcy on the cheek, and then nudged her in Tony’s direction.

Darcy plopped down next to her dad and worked her pant leg up to look at the healing line. “Now I’ve got this serum. Zola didn’t find the fucking formula. All he did was give Bucky and all those other soldiers Steve’s blood, thinking it would work. But it didn’t. Not by itself.” She shoved the pant leg back down.

Tony furrowed his brow. “Did a little research this morning. Apparently, the SSR was keeping a close watch on Capsicle’s lady friends in the USO. Don’t tell your hubby, but one or two were encouraged to have relations of varying kinds. When nothing turned up, serum-acquisition-by-sexual-means was dismissed as a possibility.”

“You’re right, I won’t tell him. But if he wasn’t perfectly sure it was safe, he would have insisted on condoms all these years.”

“Ew. This conversation just got uncomfortable. The less I know about your sex life, the better off I am.” Tony shook his head, as if to get rid of that image. “I talked to Bruce this morning. Given what we now know, he thinks he can isolate the proteins. It turns out he was damned close when he developed his version.”

“Don’t.” Darcy flat-out refused. “No one needs to know. Don’t think it. Don’t research it. Just put it away, Dad.”

“How many people are going to be experimented on before someone figures it out, Darcy?” Tony insisted. “Your husbands, your mother, Bruce, you, Natasha—you’re all affected by someone playing god and not sharing the details. If I’d known Bruce was experimenting, I sure as hell could have given him the formula for the Vita-Ray machines—or not, but I might have saved him some misery.”

“You tell the world I have the serum, and then what? Am I going to have to sign up for the Avengers? Or, hell, go on Coulson’s list? I don’t want any of that, Dad. I’ve got enough on my hands.” She fiddled with her screwdriver set, picking up each one in turn. When she got to the last one, she said, “Bucky thinks he destroyed our chances of having kids. Steve said it’s not true.”

Tony set his hand over hers. “I think you’re going to have to trust Steve on this one, Darcy. Look, even though Erskine didn’t share his formula, there were a lot of things he told my dad about it. One of them is that this serum was targeted for a male. Your blood doesn’t have the right kind of proteins to pass it on. Sex with your spouses won’t affect any tadpoles. Hell, even a repeat of the transfusion-slash-sex combo probably wouldn’t affect a tadpole since you’re on different circulatory systems at that point. But let’s not test that theory.”

He ruffled her hair, smoothing it after. “What you do get is a guarantee that none of the tadpoles come from flawed bits. Erskine’s serum was designed to correct the cellular structure at a molecular level. Defective DNA is eliminated, but the genetic code isn’t changed, nor do the tadpoles inherit the properties of serum. Erskine wasn’t interested in breeding super soldiers.”
Tony gave Darcy a sideways look. “Do you really think I would have let you date Steve without telling you if there was a problem in that department?”

He was right, and though she trusted Steve without reservation, relief rushed through her at the confirmation. Rolling her eyes, she needled, “Tadpoles, Dad?”

“Hey, it worked when you were three.”

“And I went a whole month thinking I was part frog.”

“We got it straightened out.” Tony abruptly changed the subject. “Hey, uh, Vision and I have something for you.”

“That’s what he said.” Darcy jerked a thumb toward Vision. She checked her phone for the time, glanced at her mom, and Pepper gave her a little smile of encouragement.

Vision concentrated. “I am bringing it online, Tony.”

A voice similar to her brother’s, though pitched distinctively higher, announced, “Good afternoon, Ms. Stark. My name is ‘Jason.’ I have been programmed to be your AI. Vision has uploaded all of your preferences for the management of your personal business, your lab, and your quarters, including Stark Mansion. Feel free to make any adjustments you see fit.”

“Thank you, Jason. I’ll introduce you to my spouses later.”

“I look forward to being introduced to Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes,” the new AI agreed.

“Jason?” she mouthed to her dad.

Tony scratched his beard. “I can change it if it makes you uncomfortable. Thought it might be easier to have someone in the lab you can call ‘Jay,’ and he’ll respond.”

With a sigh, she acknowledged that part might help. “Okay. Am I supposed to use Jason or Friday in the apartment?”

“That’s up to you.” Tony ruffled her hair again. This time she batted him away, and he grinned.

Darcy turned to Vision. “I’ll get used to this—to you. Talk to me once in a while.” She tapped her contact. “I know it won’t be the same because you won’t want your sister listening in on everything you do. You definitely don’t want to be listening in to me. But that’s normal, I think, for growing up.” She hugged him again, and this time he returned it a little more easily. “Maybe I can show you New York,” she offered. “It looks different than it does on camera. Smells worse, too.”

“I think I’d like that, Lewis.”

“I’ll miss having you in my lab,” she confessed.

“I think you’ll find Jason to be a respectable assistant.”

“Will I?”

“We made sure of it,” Vision confirmed, with a nod to Tony.

“Thank you. It’s going to help,” she told both of them. Darcy kissed her brother and her dad each on the cheek, and then turned to link arms with her mom. “Girl time.” She glared at her dad toying with her computer. “Don’t touch my stuff.”
Pretending to be offended, Tony threw up his hands. “Does Capsicle tell you everything?”

She and Pepper crossed the room to the elevator. “Spousal prerogative. Yes. I love you, Dad.”

“I love you back. Have fun. Pick gold,” he called out.

“Nope, James said ‘blue.’”

“Red.”

“Not happening,” she caroled as they stepped on the elevator. She waved. “Bye, Vision. Have fun doing whatever floats your boat today.” The doors closed as she waved with a smile.

Pepper tilted her head. “That went better than I thought.”

Darcy flipped her wrist to turn her palm up. “At this point, I think I’m all out of shock, crying, and anger. I just want a banana smoothie and a massage.”

“That sounds perfect.”

Jane met them in the lobby, and Happy drove the three of them to Pepper’s favorite spa. The Kilo team discreetly flanked them as they headed inside.

When the technician sent them to the dressing rooms to change, Darcy texted Bucky, *Islet is on point. You sending out your team leads now for bodyguards?*

*Three high-profile targets? If Hawkeye was home, I’d have bribed him already to stay close, or better yet, sent Natasha with you. Steve’s the only reason I’m not following, Princess. Activate your jammer, love.*

*Fair enough. What are you doing?*

Jane tapped her on the shoulder. “Really? You’ve been gone for a whole thirty minutes. Can’t get enough of your boys?”

“I was in my lab. It’s been a whole hour and fifteen minutes.”

“Brooding?”

“Thinking.”

“Sulking,” Jane countered with a smile.

Darcy poked her in the arm. “Like I haven’t found you staring at data streams while trying to figure out the ins and outs of your off-planet boyfriend.”

“That’s entirely different.”

“Sure it is.” Darcy rolled her eyes as they swapped clothes for soft white robes, though she pocketed the jammer she’d brought with her. Some conversations weren’t meant to be overheard.

Still—she texted Bucky one more time. *Love you. Do something fun.*
S, V, F, IM, & yours truly going to bar on 45th—the one with the good wings.

Pictures or it didn’t happen. “I guess the guys are going out,” she announced.

Pepper shook her hair out of her ponytail. “Tony said something about wings.”

“They’re taking Vision.”

“It’s New York. He’ll be fine.”

“Purple dude, gold cape, yep, he’ll be fine.” With a last text to Steve telling him to have fun and that she loved him, she pocketed her cell phone and followed Jane and Pepper to the spa room with a two-story waterfall.

She took a seat nearest the falls. Three technicians arrived, all ladies who were well familiar with Pepper’s preferences. Another attendant brought out smoothies and mineral water as Darcy discussed how to avoid her healing wound with the woman who was currently stripping off the old nail polish on her toes.

When she had her feet wrapped in hot paraffin, Darcy moaned, “Oh holy shitballs, this feels fantastic. Wait, whose idea was this? Oh, right, mine. I’m awesome.”

Pepper dipped her fingers in her water and flicked them at Darcy. “No channeling Tony. Haven’t I parented that out of you yet?”

“It’s always there. I just can’t always keep a lid on it.”

“As long as you don’t let it out in front of the media, we’ll be fine.”

“That I can do.” Darcy snuggled into her seat. “Jane, how was the conference?”

“Conference was great, hotel food, not so much. Enough about me, my boyfriend told me about your brother.”

Darcy winced, but damn, this was why she loved Jane. Her best friend never pulled punches, never lied, and though she was never bothered by Darcy doing either, she didn’t let her get away with it for too long. Darcy pulled the jammer out of her pocket, turned it on, and laid it on the chair next to her. As long as the technicians and attendants flowed in and out of the private room, they chose their words carefully, so as not to inadvertently share too much.

“Your boyfriend is out of town on business,” Darcy commented, one eyebrow raised.

“He has a cell phone,” Jane replied drily. Pepper coughed a laugh.

“Is that why you came back early?” Darcy wondered.

Jane leveled a glare. “Yes.”

(Did she mention she loved Jane? Yeah, she did. BFFs and all that.)

“So,” Jane prompted. “I ran into your brother when I got in last night. I like the color scheme, by the way. How are you holding up?”

Darcy shrugged. “James is having a harder time, I think.”

Jane picked up a towel and whacked at Darcy with it. “I didn’t ask about tall, dark, and fuckable. I
asked about you.”

Pepper barked out a laugh and slapped a hand over her mouth. Jane turned up her hands with a grin. “The other one is tall, blond, and lickable.”

“What does that make your boyfriend?” Pepper asked.

“Mine.” Jane pointed a finger at Darcy. “No deflections, just answer the question.”

“Jan-ey,” Darcy sing-songed. “I don’t wanna. I’m so tired of this whole fucking week.”

“Did you or did you not pour a half a bottle of tequila down me post-London to make sure I was okay?” Darcy lifted a shoulder. “Yeah, you did,” Jane insisted. “Your brother?”

“Last week was the first time we’ve been apart since Dad asked me to wear the contact after his… thing… in the desert.”

“Your boys didn’t mind?”

“James needed J. This last year has been really hard. J and I got closer than we’ve ever been. He helped me with a lot of things. Don’t get me wrong, I love that he has a new look and can go places. But I miss having him in my ear. J’s awfully good at talking me out of a really excellent pout.”

Pepper and Jane exchanged an odd look.

“What?” Darcy asked.

“Maybe this is a good thing,” Jane offered.

With trepidation, Darcy commented, “You say that like it was a bad thing in the first place.”

Jane sipped her smoothie and set it back on the side table. “Look, Bucky was threatened. You and JARVIS created a weapon out of nothing more than circuits and programmed electromagnetic bursts from equipment that was never designed to do what you did. And you did it in minutes. That’s just a little terrifying.”

“This coming from the woman who is trying to recreate the BiFrost.”

“The BiFrost isn’t a weapon.”

Wrinkling her nose at that logic, Darcy turned to her mom. “What do you think?”

“What you two did scared the hell out of your dad,” Pepper confirmed.

“What you two did scared the hell out of your dad,” Pepper confirmed.

“Is that because he is afraid of what I’m willing to do to defend those I love, or what we did as a team?”

“Both, but more the latter. It’s the idea that you and JARVIS can reprogram anything you want and make it into something else with little more than your thoughts and his abilities.” Pepper flicked a bit of lint from her shirt. “Tony always had a clear line between him and JARVIS. One was boss, one was the minion. You trusted JARVIS as much as anyone. Maybe more. But at the heart, JARVIS is still an AI. A sentient one, but there were gaps.”

“Like what?” Jane asked.

“Like the fact JARVIS had an overriding directive to serve the Stark family.” Pepper seem
apologetic as she said, “James is no different. We all have to work hard not to force him into certain situations because he’s going to default to his conditioning regardless of his personal feelings.”

Darcy popped her head up, even as she recoiled from the horrible idea. “You’re saying that even if JARVIS hadn’t wanted to create those EMPs, he wouldn’t have been able to say so?”

Pepper nodded.

“Well, we don’t have that worry anymore, do we?” Darcy pressed her face into her hands.

“No. Tony admitted to me this this is one of the reasons he jumped at the chance of making something more out of JARVIS.”

Sliding a look between Jane and Pepper, Darcy asked, “You two didn’t plan this conversation, did you? No?” Darcy sighed. “I’m going to think on this. I don’t know that I agree with you, but it’s worth considering.”

Jane changed the subject, and Pepper happily quizzed her on her work and her last trip to Asgard. Though Jane often appeared to be oblivious to things like politics, the truth was she didn’t have much use for them, not that she didn’t understand them. Darcy was sure Pepper soaked up Jane’s impressions and ideas, slotting the information away for a later date.

When spa time was over, though Darcy was physically relaxed from the massage and pedicure, her mind raced in so many directions she was having trouble concentrating.

As Happy held the door to the limo open, Darcy kissed her mom and gave Jane a long hug. “I’m going to take a walk. I’ll be back in the Tower later.”

“Don’t dwell on it, Darcy,” her mom admonished.

“Too late. If I don’t see you tomorrow, I’ll be in your office Monday to play catch up. Team Darcy has been awesome, but I need to do my share.”

“You always do.” With that, Pepper climbed into the waiting limo.

Jane embraced Darcy. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin your day. You know I love you.”

“I hate growing up. It was easier when all I had to worry about was doing Steve, playing in my lab, and checking in on you from time to time.”

“Sucks,” Jane agreed. “Let your husbands know where you are, Darcy. Don’t scare them right now.”

“Okay. Want to have dinner on Tuesday? I know you’ll be fretting over Thor coming home Wednesday.”

“Done. Come get me whenever you’re free. You know I’ll be in the lab.”

As Darcy watched the limo pull away, she wondered why her relationship with Jane was the easiest of all. When she turned the opposite direction, two of the Kilo guards followed her as she joined the crowds on the streets of New York.

For nearly an hour, she walked block after block, eventually wandering through Central Park until she ended up in front of Stark Mansion. After the guards did a recon of the exterior, Darcy walked around to the servant’s entrance and set a palm to the scanner. The door clicked open to admit her
and the two guards.

She pointed out the rear kitchen to them and showed them where to find the coffee and snacks. Stark Mansion had a separate wing for the staff, and Darcy wasn’t inclined to have anyone encroaching on the family side. Islet and Torres made themselves comfortable.

Darcy had never come inside Stark Mansion without having JARVIS greet her. Like her lab, like the factory in Scranton—the silence was nearly unbearable. Still, she didn’t want to activate Jason just yet.

She loved this house and its odd hodgepodge of décor from the thirties to the nineties. Darcy had updated the kitchens and baths, but she’d left the furniture and wallcoverings, not knowing what she might want to change when she moved in. For certain though, the hardwood floors would stay the same, and so would the stained glass on the front door with the stylized “S” Howard had put in.

She sat on the floor, crossing her legs so that she could hug her knees and stare at the glass. With one hand, she thumbed a button on her phone. When Steve answered, she got out, “I need you. Both of you.”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. I’m at my house. I just—I need—fuck—Steve,” she pleaded.

“Pretty sure we can find it. Hang on, doll, we’re on our way.”

*****

Bucky wasn’t particularly surprised that Darcy left the apartment more than an hour early. The jitters bouncing off her could have fueled the lights for a couple of days, if someone could figure out how to harness that kind of energy.

Darcy’s need for time alone still caught the punk by surprise, and it was Bucky who snapped fingers in front of Steve’s face as he hovered near the front door. “Give her time.”

“I don’t want her alone when she’s upset.”

“Did she look upset to you?”

“She looks tired.”

“It’s been a hell of a week for all of us.”

Steve set his hands on his hips. “I know.”

Bucky gave Steve a shove toward the sofa, sitting down first and pulling the punk to him. “Admit you need a fucking hug and hold on.”

“You’re such a jerk, Buck,” Steve grumbled as he did just that.

“Yeah, but I’m your jerk.”

“Yeah, you’re my jerk,” the punk agreed. Steve rolled to his back and put his head on Bucky’s lap.
That blond hair beckoned to be messed with, and Bucky dragged metal fingers through it (shimmering energy), taking care not to let the strands catch between the plates.

“Do you feel married?” Bucky asked. “Different than what we did before?”

With closed eyes and a happy hum, Steve smiled. “Yeah. Don’t know why. Just is.” He played with the ring he wore. Bucky glanced at his own identical band. Tony had made all three of them out of vibranium and gold, though Darcy’s was the only one engraved. “Do you?”

“Mostly. Still trying to feel like I’m pulling my weight with Darce. I let her down this week. Held it together up until she needed me the most.”

Steve snuggled a little deeper into Bucky’s lap and let the Brooklyn come out to play. “An’ you ‘n’ I always been perfect, never fucked up any.” He hummed again. “Gonna blame Darce for not seein’ how bad off you were without JARVIS?”

“Hell, no.”

“Shitty op, all the way around. Just fuckin’ glad to be on the other side.”

“When did you get so pragmatic?” Bucky accused.

“I got to wake up with you and Darce this morning.”

“Gonna tell me what’s been botherin’ you so much about—shit—Wakanda?”

Steve jammed his eyes shut, and he reached up to link fingers with Bucky. “Met a girl with powers. She digs into your brain and finds your fears. Made me think I was at a dance hall with Peggy. She was telling me the war was over and we could go home. You weren’t there. Neither was Darce. I didn’t want to go home. That’s my fear, Buck. I’m happy. Even more than when it was the two of us before the war. Didn’t think that was possible.”

“And now you’re home.”

“Wherever you and Darce are, that’s my home. Doesn’t matter when or where.”

“Yeah,” Bucky leaned down to drop a kiss on Steve’s head. “I get that.”

Friday’s chime sounded. “Captain, Sergeant, Sir has inquired if you two are available for lunch with him, Vision, and Lieutenant Wilson. They are considering wings and beer, though they are open to suggestion.”

Steve’s ocean blue eyes opened, seeking Bucky. “You game?”

“Sounds like fun. Purple guy in Manhattan? This ought to be interesting.”

“Bet no one says a thing,” Steve said with a smirk. “I’ll put a twenty on it.”

“Make it a suck job and I’m in.”

“Done.” Steve rolled off the sofa. “Friday, tell them we’re in. We’ll meet them wherever.”

“The Perfect Pint, and Sir says you do not have time to indulge in shenanigans as he is quite famished.”

Steve blanched, and Bucky cracked a laugh. “Friday, is Stark aware of how much you sound like
Bucky sipped his beer as he skimmed the place, noting the score of the baseball game on the television over the bar. There really wasn’t any concern about external threats. Four of his Kilo guards took the front and back entrance, and the place was small enough that Bucky didn’t have to have a grip on his Glock the whole time. The wings were good, the beer was better, and having the punk jammed up next to him on one side of the table was the best. Steve’s hand rested easily on Bucky’s thigh. He was going to lose the bet to the punk, too. Vision had ditched the cape in favor of a bright yellow sweatshirt and did something to his legs to make them look like jeans. Even the waiter hadn’t blinked twice at Vision’s dark pink skin and obvious electronics. A ball cap covered the glowing bits and the rest hadn’t mattered.

Then again, maybe he’d relaxed because hearing JARVIS’ voice set something at ease inside him. Although, Bucky mused, the inflections were different. Vision still had JARVIS’ dry sense of humor, but there was a contemplation that hadn’t been there before. In any case, with Steve’s fingers idly stroking with just enough pressure to keep him distracted, he stayed grounded and enjoyed the hell out of the afternoon, more so as the Kilo team kept him informed of Darcy’s (and Jane, and Pepper’s) whereabouts. (The discovery that he was just as worried about Thor’s girl as he was his wife’s mother came as a surprise.)

Late in the afternoon, he got another text. Steve leaned in as Bucky read it. “Everything okay?”

(Protect Stark) “Islet is with Darce. She’s taking a walk on the streets. Happy is taking Jane and Pepper to the Tower.”

Tapping Bucky on the knee, Steve jerked his head toward the bathrooms where they could have a little privacy. When they got there, Steve blocked the little hallway to wait out Bucky’s reaction. (Protect Stark). He had a violent need to either go find Darcy or drop to his knees.

“Is she safe?” Steve asked.

When Bucky flinched hard, Steve came up behind him, bracketing his body between Steve’s and the wall, one hand firmly around his waist. “Breathe, love. I’ve got you. Darcy’s safe, right? She’s with Islet and Torres, I’ll bet. Nat trained Torres. You know how good she is. Our girl’s getting some air. Even you said she needs a little time to process.”

“She’s safe,” Bucky ground out, getting a hold of himself. He had the fierce urge to punch something. Steve seemed to sense it and changed his grip to firmly grasp Bucky’s wrists.

“Don’t move your feet. Try to break my hold.”

(Well, fuck.) Without leverage, it was all about pure strength and damned if the punk didn’t have the itty-bittiest of advantages there.

“Cuss all you want. Bet ‘cha can’t get free,” Steve taunted, pressing down on Bucky’s wrists.
There were five ways he could, but he didn’t really want to hurt Steve—or break the restaurant in the process.

*Bucky didn’t want to hurt Steve.*

The tension in his head shimmered and fell away. He tilted his head back, and the little shit he’d married licked the tendon along his neck and bit down in the middle of it.

“Feel better?” Steve asked after he’d left a little bruise and Bucky’s system was buzzing for all the right reasons.

“Yeah, punk.”

“Good. My beer’s getting warm.” The punk pivoted and walked away, leaving Bucky shaking his head as he followed along.

Stark didn’t miss the hickey. “We can’t take the two of you anywhere.”

“Nope,” Steve agreed as he picked through the fresh basket of wings and downed another one.

After that, Vision began asking Bucky a long list of questions that probably wouldn’t make any sense to anyone else, all regarding physical sensations. But JARVIS had known how twitchy Bucky had been about getting in touch with his environment again, and they’d shared long talks about the senses.

“I did not understand ‘wind,’ Barnes. The feeling is quite unique. Does one grow used to it?”

Bucky smiled, comprehending some of differences now between JARVIS and Vision. He thought he would like his new brother-in-law. “It is distracting at first. I’d forgotten about paying attention to the weather.” He fished an ice cube out of his water glass and set it on Vision’s arm. “Try cold. You might like the snow. Do you have a stable body temperature?”

Vision turned his hands up, knocking the cube out of place. “Yes? No? I don’t know.” He tilted his head. “I do not know the answer to that. But I feel the ice. The sensation is quite uncomfortable after a few moments.”

“Tell me about it,” Bucky snorted.

“Sir—Tony has been explaining food tastes to me. I do not understand the appeal of ‘hot peppers.’”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Bucky answered drily.

Vision returned his grin. “I should know better, dealing with Tony.”

Bucky saluted him with his beer, took a long drink, and patiently answered his brother-in-law’s questions with an ease that spoke of their intimate friendship. It felt fucking good to return the favor.

Nearly an hour later, Steve reached for his vibrating phone and put it to his ear. He shot a glance at Bucky, letting him know it was their wife. “What happened? Are you okay?”

(Stark Mansion, per Islet’s last text).

“Pretty sure we can find it. Hang on, doll, we’re on our way.”

Steve reached in his billfold and dropped a few twenties on the table. “Darcy said she’s at her house,” he told Stark. “Want to give me directions?”
“Ask your husband,” Tony said instead. He lifted the bills off the table, folded them, and put them in his pocket. “Let me know if you need anything. I—I rarely do this right.”

As Bucky got to his feet, Steve held out his hand to Tony. “I told you, we do this together. You and your dad looked after me for a lot of years. Let us look after your girl, okay?”

Tony shot both of them a look of disbelief and shook Steve’s hand. “You know, I hate the honesty shtick. It’s annoying. Fall for it every time. Pepper likes it, though. So don’t get rid of it.”

“Sure thing, Tony.”

As they left the table, Tony called out, “Hey Steven, James, when you get to my house, don’t touch my stuff.”

Steve called back, “I don’t want your porn, Tony.” Sam’s cackle of laughter followed them out the door.

But as soon as they stepped outside, Steve grew serious as he threw a leg over the motorcycle and Bucky settled behind him. “Gonna make this quick. She asked for both of us.”

Bucky locked his arm around Steve and worried about their girl.

*****

With Bucky pointing directions, they only needed a few minutes to get to Stark Mansion. It wasn’t far, and the bike made threading through traffic a reasonable proposition.

The “S” on the front door was impossible to miss from the street. Steve parked the bike inside the gates and pressed his palm to the discreet biometric pad by the front door. From behind him, Bucky protested, “Seven thousand square feet?” A pause. “Maybe for the goddamned front room!”

Steve put a hand out to stop Bucky from stumbling over Darcy where she was sitting on the floor. He looked over his shoulder and realized she’d been staring at the stained glass “S.”

Bucky sat beside her. Steve closed the door, locked it, and knelt in front of her. He’d never seen her look this sad. “What happened?”

In a low voice, she asked, “When I created the EMP in the Tower, was JARVIS incapable of giving consent? Because Dad thought so, and that’s why he jumped at the chance to give JARVIS a body —so we would be physically separated.”

Steve’s whole face fell—with grief, with regret, and a better understanding of why Tony had taken such a leap. He’d had a similar thought at the time, though since no one was injured beyond a few superficial burns, he’d held his tongue.

“I don’t know, Darce. I think it’s a possibility, though,” he admitted. He took her face into his hands, caressing her skin with his thumbs. “He was created to assist the Stark family, not to keep them in check. I think for all that he was sentient, just like Ultron, he had a directive he had to follow that overrode everything else.”

She stuffed her hands against her mouth against the cry she would have let out otherwise. She leaned
against Bucky, shaking hard.

Steve’s heart broke for her, and he tried to dredge up some reassurance. “It’s possible that if you had tried to kill the HYDRA agents instead of disarm them, JARVIS would have refused.”

Darcy curled her fingers around Steve’s neck, but she didn’t move from where Bucky held her around the waist now.

“You’re terrible at this, punk,” Bucky announced. He pulled Darcy into his lap. “This is bullshit,” he told her. “You aren’t HYDRA. You love JARVIS. You took good care of him. He took care of you. That’s love, Princess.”

“Vision isn’t like that, right? He wouldn’t—“

Stopping her with a kiss, Bucky assured her, “Not at all, sweetheart. He’s just a little weirded out by everything that’s happening to him. And I think he has a crush on a girl.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. “That was fast.”

Bucky stood up, setting Darcy on her feet. Steve got up too, though he wasn’t really sure what to do next. Bucky was right. He was terrible at this. But Darcy didn’t seem to care as she slipped out of Bucky’s grasp and into Steve’s embrace. “Thank you. You’re always here when I need you.”

“You can always count on that.”

“I know.”

Bucky tapped her on the shoulder. “Doll? Where the hell did you come up with seven thousand square feet for your house?”

Darcy linked arms with both of them. “Seven thousand is for the master’s quarters. The rest is for staff and entertainment.”

With a little bit of stunned disbelief, Steve asked, “How big is your house?”

“Forty-five thousand square feet. I think it’s on the register for one of the fifty biggest houses in the United States.”

Bucky elbowed Steve. “We’re moving up.” To Darcy, he grinned. “Gonna need a lot of kids to fill it up.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, the sadness fading. “Two, tops.”

“Punk always wanted four.”

“We’ll negotiate.”

“Gonna take us on a tour, Darcy?” Steve prompted.

Darcy unlaced her shoes and kicked them off in the entryway. “Sure. But don’t scare Islet and Torres. They’re in the rear kitchen eating cookies.”

She took them through the “public” areas first, the ones for entertaining. Ballrooms, dining rooms, enormous old libraries, and bedrooms by the dozens, it seemed. Most of the furniture was covered in sheets, but Steve recognized the value of the antiques and decided he needed days to study all the artwork hanging about. The staff wing was more modern, but the furniture was of good quality and
well-maintained. They waved at Islet and Torres. Bucky dismissed them for the evening with a promise they would call for an escort to the Tower.

The trio walked through the courtyard at the center of the house. Steve thought the combination of patio, yard, and gardens that would be a perfect play area for children. He had no problem envisioning Darcy as a little girl, scampering through the fountains.

But when Darcy led them into the master’s quarters, she was apologetic. “It needs work.”

The hodgepodge of furniture was in good shape, though the fabrics were worn in spots. The carpets had faded some, and the wallpaper was well out of date. Steve could see where old technology had been torn out so Darcy could make upgrades. The kitchen was new, and Bucky ran a hand along the quartz countertop, eyeing the stove with greed. There were still enough bedrooms to fit all their family and friends.

All in all, though the décor was eclectic and elegant, the whole space was just shabby enough to feel lived in and loved. Darcy was right. It was perfect for a family.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Steve shot a glance at Bucky, wondering if their husband could stand not living in the Tower.

Bucky fingered a panel on the wall that was begging to be stripped, sanded, and re-stained, and Steve remembered all the times Bucky had fixed a water leak in the sink, or repaired a leaky windowsill. “We can make it work,” Bucky offered. “Needs a little love.”

Hugging Darcy, Steve pressed a kiss to her temple. “I like your house. Doesn’t really matter where we live so long as I’m with you.”

“It’s not Brooklyn,” she said.

“I don’t think I can afford Brooklyn, anyway,” he quipped.

With a laugh, Darcy hugged him back, and then reached out and dragged Bucky into their embrace. “I love you both.” She took a long look around the room. “Steven, James, welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N Stan Lee used this house on 5th Avenue as the model for the Avengers (Stark) Mansion. It features a garden set back from 5th Avenue, a private entrance on 70th, and a private courtyard.

Frick House

If you want more info on my headcanon for Stark Mansion, click here: Stark Mansion Meta
Epilogue/Coming Out

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Not many families taught their children the finer arts of giving a press conference. Then again, there weren’t many families like the Starks. Darcy had taken the examples from both of her parents and learned to give a speech with the best of them.

Nevertheless, this one had her fiddling with her pencil as she waited in the wings. She wasn’t exactly nervous, but she needed to hit all the right notes for it to go well.

Steve lifted her other hand and kissed the knuckles. Those knockout ocean blue eyes radiated confidence and just a hint of smug satisfaction. “You’ve got this, Darce,” he told her.

She licked her perfectly shaded lips just as Bucky slid a hand along her elbow and kissed her temple. “Knock ‘em dead, Princess.”

Setting the pencil down, she took both of their hands, squeezing hard as a talisman against the rising anticipation. Steve touched his wrist, making the Asgardian rope light up. Bucky touched his own, and Darcy followed suit.

Steve took her hand again. “End of the line,” he said quietly. Bucky echoed the phrase, winking at her.

Darcy nodded. “’Til the end of the line,” she agreed.

Carla gave her a little wave of warning from the other side of the stage and walked out to make introductions.

“Lewis, just remember, Starks aren’t afraid of hard,” Vision reassured her through the contact. He was on the other side of the stage and lifted his fingers. He would stay there as he’d refused to be paraded out as the new toy. They’d found their footing as siblings, and though she missed their incredibly close contact of the previous years, she was more than thrilled with their new relationship. “If all else fails, we still have an island in Bermuda.”

“I think Dad still owes James a trip.”

“Yes, of course, he does. Good luck.”

As Darcy walked into the blinding auditorium lights, Tony and Pepper followed, taking a place slightly behind her and to the right. Bucky and Steve appeared in the auditorium—looking gorgeously tasty—holding up a wall next to Maria and Sam where they had a clear view of the entire room. Nat and Clint blended into the back wall. Jane, Erik, and Thor sat in the front row, where Darcy’s best friend flashed a quick thumbs-up.

The rest of the audience consisted of the press. As Darcy recognized faces, the nerves settled. She lit up, knowing the fun would be in the fallout and she had plenty of back up for that.

Steve winked at her, and Bucky twitched his lips. She could see love and pride in both of them.

She adjusted the microphone, nodded to Sean and Carla to hand out packets with her relevant information, and began speaking. “Good morning. Stark Industries has an announcement to make.
Actually, Tony Stark has a personal announcement to make, but we all know that they are one and the same. Since I’m at the center of it, we decided I would be the best person to take the podium.”

“You know me as Darcy Lewis, Senior Vice President of Research and Development here at Stark Industries. Not only that, you know me as Captain America’s girlfriend. The truth is far more complicated.

“My real name is Darcy Maria Stark. I was born in 1988 when Tony Stark was eighteen years old, not too many years before Howard and Maria Stark were killed in a car accident. My birth mother was not interested in having a child. Tony was. With the help of Peggy Carter—yes, that Peggy Carter, and don’t ask, it’s still weird.” She waved at Steve while the audience laughed. “With Aunt Peggy’s help, he raised me himself. Pepper Potts joined our family when I was eight and adopted me when I was ten. I have been fortunate to witness my parents falling in love over the years. No one is happier than I am to see them together.

“I’m giving you copies of my birth certificate, a bio with relevant information, and a copy of my degrees for reference. Where have I been? Here at the Tower, our house in Malibu, and at Stark Mansion. When I was fifteen, I attended MIT in my father’s footsteps. At nineteen, I attended Culver. At twenty-two, I met my best friend, Jane Foster, and was fortunate enough to become a friend to Thor Odinson of Asgard. I graduated shortly thereafter and came to Stark Tower to work in the R&D department. I met Steve Rogers and we began dating. Steve has already told you the rest of that story.

“Earlier this year, Steve spoke about the nature of our relationship with James Barnes. The status of that relationship has changed.” She paused to smile. “The three of us were married on Asgard two months ago. We have filed affidavits with the State of New York and with the World Council to see our marriage recognized. We have submitted indisputable evidence that our marriage is legal and binding in that realm.

“We do plan to have children, and no, I will not discuss parentage—though if one turns out blond, you can guess and probably be right. Due to the superserum, it is entirely possible that my husbands will outlive me. If it happens, I will be grateful they have each other and our legacy.

“Because the Stark family lives so much in the public eye, Tony has worked his whole life to conceal my existence in order to give me some semblance of a normal life. While I can say I’ve had privacy, I can tell you that there has been nothing normal about it. It’s been extraordinary.” She paused to smile over her shoulder at her dad.

“As a Stark, I’ve learned that this universe we live in is full of the strange, the unbelievable, and of a great many things we do not have the capacity yet to comprehend. For all this, we find that love transcends time and place. I no longer question the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of it. I have learned to embrace the ‘is.’

“Today, I thank my parents for all they’ve done to give me a chance at a real life. Today, it’s my turn to take my place with Stark Industries.” She paused again, grinning. “We’ll find out later if the board is more thrilled at having a successor, or more terrified that it’s going to be another Stark.”

The audience laughed, and Darcy continued, “Mom and Dad, as always, have high expectations of me. I’m sure I will make mistakes and will ask for forgiveness when I do, and will do my best not to repeat them.

“Now, before I answer questions, I will ask, is there anything I’ve done that could possibly eclipse some of the shenanigans my grandfather and my dad have pulled over the years? Some of them were epic. But we are still here, still family, and Stark Industries is still a leading innovator of technology.
This is the Stark family legacy, and I intend to live up to it.”

There were whistles from her family and friends, loud applause, and no few stunned faces. After that, the questions came fast and hard, ranging from politics to personal issues. Through it all, she could feel the love radiating from her family and her husbands when they came up to join her on stage. Pepper and Tony fielded some of the questions, Steve one or two, and Darcy handled the rest.

She saved her favorite reporter for last. “Last question. Nancy?”

Waving toward Steve and Bucky, Nancy offered, “May I speak for the men and women in America and say that we all hate you, just a little, right now?”

“Tony Stark is my dad, it’s a fair trade,” Darcy quipped. The roar of laughter accompanied by Tony’s eyeroll made the day.

The conference wrapped up, the lights dimmed, and they moved off the stage. There would be interviews, phone calls, critics, and cheerleaders. Every major news network was sure to have an opinion for days to come.

Steve and James bumped shoulders as their eyes glowed with pride, and Darcy felt a whole different kind of anticipation.

No, it wasn’t going to be easy. Nothing worth having was ever easy.

Peggy taught her that.

Chapter End Notes

A/N That’s it. We’re done. Yes, I know I dropped about a MILLION hints about kids, and yes, there’s that picture Steve drew that we don’t know about … but that’s for another day. Please subscribe to this series or to me as an author so you don’t miss THAT story when I post it. You can also follow me on tumblr here: SteeleHoltingOn

I love you guys. This has been an incredible, life-changing journey for me. That part is due solely to your hits, your kudos, and the two thousand comments you’ve made on this story. Thank you.

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