SHIELD's fall had ramifications for all characters in the Avengers MCU, including Darcy Lewis. When Darcy goes to visit Erik Selvig in a SHIELD psychiatric hospital after a few days of living unplugged (& sulking over a breakup), she gets a lot more than she bargained for, and then finds her way more and more into the Avengers' world... and Steve Rogers' life.
(Betty Ross is introduced in Ch 36. Dominates Ch 38.)

Note: Water-boarding in Ch 1. If you want a SLOW-BUILD Steve/Darcy, but not that trigger, start with Ch 2 and enjoy!

Notes

Hi! Thank you for reading! Please visit me on tumblr! I'm Glynnisl

Thank you, thelasswithapen, for Beta on the first few chapters. Any errors in this story are mine and that's all I own. Marvel owns the characters and about half the real world by now.

TRIGGERS- Ch 1 (of a LONG story) has bad stuff. Water-boarding. Bad touching. Slap/punch/terror. Skip if that's a problem. This occurrence will be referred to in the rest of the story, but not in graphic detail.

I hope you enjoy it! Comments make my heart go pit-a-pat. :)
SHIELD fell on a beautiful spring day in the year 2014. Anyone tuned in to media outlets or on the internet was pretty much glued to the coverage and the data that had been leaked. Shocks from the fall rippled across the world. People within SHIELD itself found themselves fighting for their lives, struggling to understand who was with them and who against. A few SHIELD bases and facilities stayed secure, but due to the element of surprise, most fell to Hydra and most SHIELD agents scattered to other agencies, or into the private sector. Hydra personnel, unlike those truly dedicated to SHIELD, had known that a time might come when Hydra’s continued existence was forced into the light of day. They planned accordingly.

When Darcy Lewis turned on her phone for the first time in three days, the text alarm sounded and she cursed as she saw that the most recent messages were from Ian, trying to make up with her after their last ‘fucking-fight.’ She was done with him. Why wouldn't he take ‘go fuck yourself’ as an answer? She had totally unplugged, and sulked her way through the past few days, alternating between watching DVD rom-coms and action flicks while binging Chinese food and ice cream, completely cutting herself off from the world while she hit the reset button on her feelings. Yesterday, she began to realize that she was mostly upset that she hadn't found the right guy yet, less so that things had gone south with Ian. She’d spent the day reviewing her dating history in its sad lack of glory, despairing of ever finding the right guy. Today, she woke and decided to write Ian off completely, and get on with her life. And now he was sending her messages desperately begging her to get back together with him, acting like he thought her world had ended or something. Terrified? Why would he think she was terrified now? As if! She put her foot down on the gas angrily as the signal light changed and she continued on her way to visit Erik.

She had finished her classes at Oxford. She could now go anywhere she wanted. One of the best things about never knowing where she'd live next was the ability to get away from things that had gone sour, like stupid dating choices. Okay, so Ian had saved her from being vaporized by Dark Elves… that didn't mean she owed him the kisses she'd laid on him. It definitely didn't mean she owed him anything more.

She put her phone in her pocket without looking at any of the other messages or feeds that had piled up, totally unwilling to die to text with her newly-ex. She pulled into the car park of Erik’s latest funny farm, found a spot as close to the door as she could, and got out... balancing Erik’s home-brewed hot chocolate and her coffee while tucking a few scientific journals under her arm to take inside for him. She usually would have gotten a newspaper so they could do puzzles together, but that errand would have taken her near Ian’s place, so she skipped it. Her sparkling company and razor wit would have to do the cheer-up trick today.

Poor Erik! After that psycho Loki was through with him, he’d gone off the deep end in spectacular fashion. While his last naked rant made for great TV, it did little to convince people of his sanity. Darcy and Ian helped him ‘escape’ one crazy hospital to help against the Dark Elves (and thank the gods for that!), but couldn't care for him long-term after that. No one could really go from taking EVERY med out there to none, no matter how brilliant they were. For now, he was being looked after by the good old jack-booted thugs of SHIELD, and trying to sort out exactly which of his meds were helpful and which were not. Few Docs had experience in post-god-possession psychiatric care. She and Jane wanted to provide for him, but psychiatric care and meds cost money, and science didn't bring enough of it in... and Jane was off with Thor, no doubt in a bed somewhere crying out his name again and again. She wondered where Jane and Thor would decide to live when they were done with their extended shag-fest vacation.
Darcy was still bummed that she hadn't gotten to go to Asgard, if only to taze Odin when he called Jane a goat. Could Odin be tazed? For that matter, would a Taser affect Thor now that he was all godly again? She shook her head, laughing to herself as she wished she could taze Loki, the dead son-of-a-bitch --- Whoops! Sorry, dead Frigga! Oh, wait, it was okay. She could curse Loki’s biological mom without getting lightning struck. His bio-mom was a frost giantess, or something? Darcy pushed thoughts of tazing assorted Asgardians and other space deities from her mind and entered the SHIELD hospital.

She slowed as she reached the desk, signed in, and flashed her ID as usual, noting that some of the people working there looked unfamiliar. She smiled at them anyway, hoping that the wary feeling she had inside didn't mean shit was about to hit the fan again. She quickened her pace. If trouble was coming, Erik would need help.

She frowned to herself as she walked down the hallway. No patients were in the common room, where they usually gathered to watch game shows and the news, or look at each other awkwardly, or sleep off drugs. It looked like the TV in there was showing an action movie… there was footage of a big flying ship crashing into a building in Washington, DC. The smell of urine coming from patient rooms was stronger than usual, not a sign of good care. Someone screamed somewhere down the hall. That never failed to creep her out. For some reason it bugged her even more than usual today.

When she reached Erik’s room, she nervously took a deep breath and knocked. He invited her inside quietly. When she closed the door behind her, she did a double take at the worried expression on his face. She looked around for danger, but didn't see anything. Still, she set the drinks and journals down on his hospital table, and slid her hand inside her pocket and grasped her Taser. His eyes followed her hand, and he continued to stare at her pocket for a long time. She pulled her hand out, snapped her fingers in front of his face, and offered, “Hey! I brought you hot chocolate. Want some?” She saw that he still had her Valentine’s card sitting on his bedside table. She would need to get him something new to look at if he thought of that as a good decoration.

He nodded and muttered. “Sure, sure.” He gestured to the door. “Let’s take it to the garden. I’d like fresh air, and that looks like it will help keep us warm for a minute or two.” Springtime in London was still cold, but to their Americanized sensibilities it seemed as though warmth ought to be on the way soon.

Darcy had grown accustomed to Erik’s vacant manner. His sudden calm unnerved her. She grabbed his jacket from the closet. “Do you have a scarf?”

He snorted and grinned. “Hardly!” He slipped into a pair of loafers and put the coat on. None of the patients in the psychiatric facility were allowed belts, scarves, shoe laces, etc.

She smiled back at him. “Oops!”

Her nervousness grew as she felt the number of eyes on them as they walked to the garden. She smiled more to cover her unease. The jack-booted SHIELD-thug thing was feeling less jokey today. A chill ran up her spine. Erik was faking silliness, like he wanted to seem harmless, too. She half expected him to take off his pants, given the way he was acting. They moved slowly through the garden, Erik leaning against her as though he was weak. He was shaking.

As they neared the side closest to the car park, he suddenly threw his hot chocolate in a guard’s face. “Taze him, Darcy! Taze him!”

So, she did. She fumbled with the weapon as she pulled it out of her pocket. She took aim at the hot-chocolate covered man and pulled the trigger, only stopping to wonder after she’d done it if she
ought to hurt someone because her certifiably crazy friend demanded it. The guard fell to the
ground by Erik’s cup, yelling an alarm before he passed out. Erik ran towards her sad-looking car
quickly, and she turned to run after him. But, she didn't move fast enough and was dragged down
by an unfamiliar woman dressed in some sort of dark green coat. Darcy turned her head, and found
herself eye to eye with a patch that had some sort of squiggly legs around a skull head. Erik
stopped and looked back, terrified. Darcy elbowed her attacker hard and threw her car keys towards
Erik. He scrambled to grab them and reach the car.

He shouted, “I’ll send Thor!” and drove away wildly. Disbelievingly, Darcy continued to fight the
woman who’d jumped her until she felt pain at her head and everything went black.

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When she came to, she was tied to a chair, back in Erik’s room inside the hospital, judging from
the bland walls, hard floors, antiseptic odors, and the sight of her Valentine to Erik on the bedside
table. Her coat was gone, Taser too... of course. She cussed, wondering what was happening. Was
SHIELD evil? Or, had she screwed up when she listened to Erik? She froze, puzzled. There was a
guy dressed in scrubs on the other side of the room, leaning against a gurney or something and
ignoring her! He seemed bored, not even bothering to look at her. He looked at his phone as though
he tied people up and stood over them on a regular basis. When another person, a tough-looking
man dressed all in black, entered the room and slapped her across the face, she wondered how long
it would take Erik to find Thor.

She’d never been slapped like that before, and it frightened her like crazy. She tasted blood. Her
heart was pounding hard, and she struggled not to cry.

He growled roughly, “you cost us a prisoner with great potential, Miss Lewis.”

Her vision swam, and she blinked rapidly. She stared at the man in front of her, dumbfounded. Her
voice shook. “Since when does SHIELD act like this?”

Much as she’d resented the loss of her iPod (along with all of Jane’s research) in New Mexico, the
SHIELD agents she’d met there had been professional and courteous, maddeningly so. She
suddenly missed that Agent ′pain-in-the-ass′ Coulson a lot, her iPod and ALL of her songs be
damned.

Another man, one who looked like an old-school scientist, even wearing a bow tie, slipped into the
room. He sat quietly in a chair by the wall without really acknowledging any of the room’s
occupants. He muttered something about just getting off a flight from the States as he set up a
laptop on the table and began to type and set up his things, just so.

The man who’d slapped her smiled coldly. “I’m not with SHIELD. My real loyalty can finally be
proclaimed.  Hail Hydra!” She half-expected him to do some sort of salute. She blinked at him,
disbelieving.

The scientist by the wall smirked. After a moment, he turned his laptop so that it faced her. Before
she turned her attention back to the guy talking to her, she glimpsed herself on the screen. The
scientist was taking video of her.

Then, from history lectures, the name Hydra rang a bell with her. She blinked harder. “What?
You’re like Nazis? Are you kidding me?”

Hail-Hydra guy punched her in the gut, and she cried out in pain and fear. His punch shocked her
even more than the slap. While the man was nowhere near as big as Thor, he was muscle-y, all
hard lines. His punch made her feel like she’d belly-flopped and lost all air, and it HURT. The word ‘oof’ no longer seemed funny.

Hail-Hydra guy’s voice rang out, “Hydra is more than that. Hydra is everywhere. We are in the desert, by the sea, even at the foot of the very throne of the galaxies.” That sounded so crazy to Darcy that she wondered if she was hallucinating, what with the pain and all. She closed her eyes, helpless and overwhelmed as fear coursed through her. She wished she could taze THIS guy, for sure.

He grumbled, “we planned to use Dr. Selvig, at least what was left of his mind. But, you helped him flee. Reports tell us, though, that you also work with Dr. Foster.” She eyed him warily, as he continued monologuing, “we’ll see what you can tell us about her work…"

She started to protest and stopped when he raised his fist again and glared down at her. “I hope, for your sake, that you have been paying attention.”

Darcy paled, certain that they wanted more than she had to give, definitely more than she wanted them to know. Her mind flew back to weird tortures she’d seen in movies like ‘SAW’, and she wondered how else they would hurt her. This was a mental hospital. Electric shock therapy? Shit. She’d be crazier than Erik! For a split second she resented that he’d left her, but then she was grateful that he was safe. He’d been through too much already, thanks to that bastard Loki.

Her concern for Erik became secondary to concern for herself as she heard the sound of water splashing. She turned her head, and saw the orderly at the sink, soaking a towel in the water. Beside him was the gurney that he’d been leaning against before. She saw now that one end was lowered. With a cold chill, Darcy realized they were going to water-board her.

Her heart pounded faster, and she felt like she was struggling for breath already. She was no soldier, not a SHIELD agent. She had no training or preparation for a situation like this. She barely had preparation for anything, even life after grad school, but sure as hell not torture. Eyes wide with fear, she was shaking and gasping, and it made her angry.

She tried to tell herself to remember it wasn’t real. It was just a towel, for God’s sake! ‘Self’ wasn’t buying it, though, not at all. Orderly guy crossed past her, and took the standard-issue water pitcher over to the gurney. Her eyes tracked his movements.

She was going to be tortured with a fucking hospital water pitcher and a towel! A hysterical sound burst from her.

Hail-Hydra guy grinned. “Tell us what Dr. Foster is working on.” The scientist looked up expectantly. He seemed to see her for the first time. His expression was creepy. He didn’t exactly smirk or grin, but looked oddly excited by her fear, shifting in his seat in a manner she didn’t want to consider.

She fought the urge to babble incoherently, and replied with a quick, “space stuff, like always.” She shook her head in response to the interrogator’s forbidding expression. “I don’t know anything good. I fetch Pop Tarts. I make her remember to bathe and stuff. I don’t know from science!”

She started to mention that Jane wasn’t working right now, but was studying the effects of mind-blowing sex with a Norse god… but, then she would start talking about Thor… and no good could come from that. She swore to herself that she wouldn't tell these guys anything about Asgard.
He chuckled, “and you type up notes to be shared with SHIELD scientists. We no longer have access to those, so your memory will have to do.”

Hail-Hydra guy gestured to the orderly, and they both moved in close. The sight of a knife in the orderly’s hand made her gasp with fear, and she started to weep. Her abuser held her still while the orderly cut the ropes that secured her to the chair.

She struggled futilely against the men, but they easily moved her to the gurney. Hail-Hydra guy held her down, while the orderly strapped her to the frame. She was completely immobile, with her head angled down.

Hail-Hydra guy brushed her hair back out of her eyes, and smiled. She wanted to recoil, but couldn't do more than turn her head a little. His smile was creepy as fuck. He offered, “don’t you want to go ahead and talk? Why don’t you tell us all about Dr. Foster’s work so we don’t have to drown you?”

She shook her head, and then screamed until the wet towel was pressed and held over her mouth and nose, the water trickling into her nose steadily. She coughed, and then held her breath from sheer reflex. She heard and felt pouring, and struggled against the straps and ropes wildly as the water poured into her more and more. When she couldn't hold her breath anymore, she began to gag and choke, breathing in the water. She struggled to count so she had something to hold onto, some notion of time and wouldn't believe it to be an eternity. It took all of her efforts to keep track of the count. Her thoughts ran in all directions, scattering away from what was happening, and running away in terror like she wished she could. She couldn't believe when they pulled the towels off after a count of thirty, just how eternal that felt.

Hail-Hydra guy's loud voice echoed through the room. “What can you tell us about Dr. Foster’s current research?”

The cloth lifted off of her face. She blinked against the light and the blurry shapes around her.

Another voice, higher and reedier, added, “and how did she open the portals in Greenwich? How did she send the Asgardian to other worlds? How did she transport the fighters from place to place in London?”

She choked and gagged, struggling for air. The scientist repeated his questions, the sound of his voice sounding closer to her. She was terrified when answers formed in her mind. Her poor brain wanted oxygen so badly! But she shook her head, croaking, “No! I don’t know!”

She felt one of the men rip her shirt-front open, leaving her exposed. She cried out fearfully, too scared to form words. She heard muttering, and a cold stab of terror cut through her as she wondered what they would do to her next. The wet towel was placed over her face again. It felt like a heavy bag as it pressed close. More water poured in as she struggled. She counted to twenty nine, struggling to gather her thoughts enough to do so.

When they lifted the towel, she turned her head to the side and vomited. A cold hand trailed across her breasts, grasping, sliding into her bra and out again as she shuddered with blind panic, feeling even sicker and struggling helplessly. The word ‘rape’ skittered through her mind, and she felt as though something was breaking inside her thoughts. She shook her head over and over, refusing to let the many facts that came to mind spill.

The next time she lost count after twenty two. Hysteria began to overwhelm and dominate her. She thought of Jane, of Thor. She continued to shake her head as they lifted the towel off her face again.
The reedy voice was close by her ear now, so close she felt the air move with each word. He began to murmur questions about formulae, like things she knew from Jane. He asked her questions about which value should be applied and the answers formed in her mind. She felt the cold hand still moving over her breasts, violating. She cried out brokenly, “Pop Tarts!”

The towel was put back in place, and she was wet down again for at least forty, during which she blacked out for a second or two. When she came to, the questions were still there, as was the slithering cold hand, but the towel had been lifted from her face and she could breathe some. Blurry light shone into her eyes as she blinked away the water droplets. She couldn't let herself speak. She just shook her head and whimpered in horror, tears streaming from her eyes and her weak sobs rending the air.

Hail-Hydra guy laughed darkly, “OK, toots. We've got other people to get back to right now. You lay there and think about the water, about drowning. And think about what you’re going to tell us so we don’t do it to you again. We’ll be back soon and record your answers... or wet you down longer and longer.”

She stifled screams, barely. If she started to scream again, she might never stop. She thought of her Mamaw and Pawpaw, of being safe in their arms. She thought of sitting in Jane’s mom’s kitchen, eating eggs with Jane and Erik while they laughed at her bad jokes, of Thor’s open smile lighting up that safe space, and the bemused way he so often looked at her.

As they turned to leave, the orderly rasped, “you had the right idea there, Doc. I’m definitely fucking this one while you pour next time. I’ll tie the ankles together under the board. Her struggles’ll make for a great fuck!” Her head whipped to the side at his words, and a whimper of terror escaped her lips. She watched the men leave, her vision beginning to clear again.

Bow-tie science guy, the man with the reedier voice, leered. “Do as you will, so long as I get the answers I need. If she does not give in after more water and your fun, I have my knives.”

The men laughed as the door closed behind them. Darcy shuddered and cried from cold and fear, the thoughts of her Mamaw and Pawpaw dissolving as darker imaginings filled her mind.

She choked out, “Oh, shit! Thor! I can’t! Please… help me.” Her scattered thoughts seemed to get the tiniest bit less murky. She struggled vainly against her bonds, wondering where the real SHIELD was when she needed them.

They’d left her angled down, and water droplets still rolled lazily into her nose. She tried to defend it with her tongue, but every now and then another droplet would roll in and her terror would grow. Crying didn't help the situation at all. Tears and mucus did nothing to help her breathe better. But, she couldn't help crying.

Nazi torturers were going to rape her and make her breathe more water and do things to her with knives. She would tell them everything eventually, probably soon. And, then... they would kill her. She hoped? Maybe they’d just keep raping and drowning and cutting her for the hell of it. Or maybe they’d practice other torture techniques. Monty Python’s Spanish Inquisition bit seemed unfunny all of a sudden. ‘Fear, surprise, ruthless efficiency.’ How did it go? Her mind was racing and she was losing her battle against hysteria.

She closed her eyes and prayed that Erik would find Thor. Despite her resolve not to talk of Thor, she began to murmur his name to herself, like a mantra.

_to be continued_
Hydra? Actually, that's going back on Cap's 'to-do'list...

Chapter Summary

Erik Selvig calls for help and rescue for Darcy. Thor and Jane's time of passion is interrupted by an urgent call from a typically-glib Tony Stark and an atypically-affected Steve Rogers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Erik Selvig had been given a number to call in case of an emergency. He created a system to help even HIS damaged brain recall it. He had it to the last digit, but was struggling to remember it. Was it ‘three’ for the odd trio of Foster/Selvig/Lewis? Was it ‘one’ for Thor being Jane’s one true love? Was it ‘five’ for the number of cats he’d had as pets over the years? Was it ‘zero’ for a number he couldn't think of meaning for?

He raced into London traffic like the lunatic he’d become, desperate to evade capture and help Darcy. He found a functioning telephone box. He knew this number would not require payment. He just couldn't remember the damned number!

He cried aloud in frustration. “Loki, you power-mad bastard! What have you done to me?!!?” A family of tourists was passing near him. The mother pulled her son away from Erik and to her other side while sharing a look of alarm with her husband. Erik pulled at his coat lapels as though he wished he could hide behind them and not be seen.

And then he remembered that there were two horns on Loki’s helmet. Of course! He dialed, pressing ‘two’ as the last number. He cried with relief as an efficient-sounding voice answered. “Hello. How may I be of assistance?”

Erik gasped, “Help! This is Selvig. I need someone at the SHIELD psychiatric hospital outside London. Yesterday, agents dressed in black and green uniforms took over. There was shooting and shouting, and patients trying to flee, and some workers running out or dying. After they killed my favorite aide, I knew I was in trouble. Today, our friend came to visit me and I escaped, but they captured her. Darcy! She’s Jane’s assistant! She needs help. There are interrogations happening there from what I heard, so, God only knows what they’ll do to her. Please! I--”

The voice interrupted him. “One moment, please, Dr. Selvig. Mr. Stark is visiting Captain Rogers in Washington, DC. I will connect you at once. I have recorded your words and noted your location. A Stark Industries International employee has been dispatched to pick you up and bring you to a safe location.”

Another voice burst in impatiently. “What’s the 911, J?”

The calm voice explained. “Emergency call-in from Dr. Selvig, identity verified per voice recognition, Sir. If my interpretation is correct, Miss Darcy Lewis, assistant to the astrophysicist Dr. Jane Foster, has been captured by Hydra forces at the SHIELD Merriweather Psychiatric facility outside of London, England, Sir. Dr. Foster was last known to be in Paris, France with Mr. Odinson.”
Erik yelled, “I used her visit to get outside, and had her use her Taser on a guard! I took her car while they grabbed her! She’s just a kooky, loyal kid, trying to be nice to me!” He started crying guiltily. “Oh, Darcy!”

Tony Stark sounded brusque. “Who do we have in London?”

The calm voice replied, after a short pause. “Mr. Barton reached a London safe house this morning, Sir.”

Stark requested, “JARVIS, get me a picture of this kooky kid. Send out copies so Barton can have a good chance at…” He let out a whistle and muttered, “Shit! The tit-fairy outdid herself on this one! I feel betrayed that gravity couldn't overcome whatever’s holding that sheet up!”

Erik heard a different male voice in the background, protesting against Stark's crudeness. Then, the other man groaned and could be heard to cry out in dismay. “Oh... No! A sweet dame like that doesn't belong in enemy hands!”

Stark chuckled darkly. “Wow, Cap! Look at your face. Well, let’s have Hawkeye rescue this loyal, kooky, pin-up dame and we’ll see if he can get her number for you. Maybe in your hands…” Cussing protests could be heard. Stark gasped, “Cap! You really were in the Army!”

Stark directed JARVIS, “J, get a few more pix, please. If she went out dressed like that all the time, I’d have heard of her.” He watched with interest as Steve pulled the screen towards him so that he could study other images of the young woman. Pictures, quotes, and memes from Darcy Lewis' online accounts came together to show a life of selfless loyalty, sweet devotion to friends, quirky optimism and wit, and joyful innocence.

Erik whimpered. “Please... It’s my fault… and they’ll know that she’s Jane’s assistant. She’s visited me a lot. She knows more than she even realizes about the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, the Convergence… and Thor, for that matter.”

Stark sounded business-like and reassuring. “Calm down, Dr. Selvig. I’ve sent her description and your information to one of the best master assassins in the world. Hawkeye will get her out.”

Minutes later, a Rolls Royce pulled up alongside the telephone box. Selvig noticed that the hood ornament was in the shape of an Iron Man mask. A beautiful young blonde stepped out, gun drawn but down against her leg while she scanned the area carefully. Stark voiced an introduction. “Dr. Selvig, meet Agent 13, formerly of SHIELD, now working with Stark Industries as a liaison from CIA. She’s the hot blonde that just got out of the Rolls next to you.”

Selvig nodded weakly to the young woman, and she smiled at him, gesturing for him to get in the car. He spoke into the phone. “Can someone come for Darcy’s car? It’s the least I can do for her. She's looked after me while I was in that place, brought me cocoa and new journals. And I repaid her by running ahead and not going back when they got the jump on her!”

The blonde opened the booth door. “Please, Dr. Selvig, come with me now. Don’t worry about anything. Let’s allow the others to look after Miss Lewis. They will be less distracted when they know that you have reached safety.”

So, Erik Selvig nodded and spoke again into the receiver. “Thank you.”

The calm voice replied. “I am glad to be of help, Dr. Selvig. I hope that Mr. Barton is able to bring word of your friend’s safe rescue very soon.”

Erik placed the receiver in the cradle and leaned his face against it, crying again. He felt a gentle
hand on his shoulder and turned, nodding to Agent 13 that he would cooperate. His insanity only ran so deep. He thanked his lucky stars that he had a way to safety, far away from the people who’d taken over the psychiatric hospital.

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In a hotel in Paris, Jane Foster and Thor were making love when her cell phone first rang, so it was ignored in favor of bliss. The second time it rang, it nearly pierced Jane’s fog of pleasure, but not quite. The third time it rang, the tone changed, becoming loud and shrill. Jane’s head turned. “What in the world? I’ve never heard that noise before.”

An efficient voice spoke from the phone. “Dr. Foster? Is that you? Can you please speak again so that I might verify your identity?”

Thor turned at that sound. “Is that the Man of Iron’s most-loyal servant?”

The voice replied, “yes, Mr. Odinson. I am JARVIS. Please accept my apologies for overriding Dr. Foster’s phone functions. Mr. Stark is trying to call Dr. Foster on a matter of urgency.”

Jane moved out from under Thor and grabbed her robe. She’d heard too much about Tony Stark in the media and scientific circles to consider answering a call from him while naked, regardless of the urgency. She replied to the insistent voice. “I’m Jane Foster. I will accept Mr. Stark’s call.” She turned to Thor. “Why would he call me?”

Thor shrugged and sat up, hands behind his head, muscles rippling with his every move. Jane looked at him appreciatively. He was beyond perfect, to her thinking. She pressed the button to accept a call, and put the phone on speaker mode. She moved back to the bed, and sat by Thor. “This is Jane Foster.” Thor put a protective hand on her shoulder.

“Foster, this is Tony Stark. Are you with Thor?” The call changed to video chat somehow, and Jane was relieved she’d put on her robe. “Ho! Cover up there, big guy!”

Thor laughed un-selfconsciously and pulled the sheet over himself. He sat by Jane. “What is so urgent a matter, friend Stark? Is my aide needed?”

Tony Stark’s expression grew somber. “No. Hawkeye’s got it, Thor. I just got off the line with him. He’s taking a strike team into the Merriweather Psychiatric Facility outside of London as we speak.”


Stark answered, “Dr. Selvig is fine. He called the emergency line and we brought him in. He’ll be on a Stark Jet to New York within the hour. It’s your assistant, Darcy Lewis. She went to visit Dr. Selvig today. I guess she didn't know that SHIELD has fallen and many who were with SHIELD are actually Hydra.”

Jane paled. “Darcy?! SHIELD fell? Hydra? I thought they were defeated in World War II?”

Tony quipped. “Actually, that’s going back on Cap’s ‘to-do’ list.”

Thor’s brow furrowed. “What is this Hydra?” He cast a glance full of concern towards Mjolnir, clearly wishing he were with Hawkeye.

Over Tony’s shoulder they saw Steve Roger’s face. It was battered with recent wounds. He looked
anxious and angry. “Thor! Hydra is a group of psychotic fascists who sow chaos and terror, and my enemy from Earth’s Second World War. The plane-load of Hydra bombs I crashed when I went under the ice was intended to destroy our greatest cities. They’re evil.”

Jane was shaking. “And... they have Darcy? What about Erik? How did he get away?”

Tony was looking at another screen and didn't say anything. Steve answered Jane in a tone that attempted to soothe. “The doctor indicated that he used her visit to get outside the building and had her taze a guard. Other guards grabbed Miss Lewis, but Dr. Selvig was able to make it to her car and escape. He sounded hysterical.”

Thor looked somber. “The doctor has not fared well in the aftermath of his mental enslavement by Loki.”

Tony spoke in a succinct manner. “Hawkeye’s team just entered the facility. Wait. I’ll update you further. Selvig told us that they were doing interrogations- that ‘the screams of patients around him changed.’ I guess he didn't want any part of that action! He may more sane than people give him credit for.”

Jane’s shaking worsened, “Oh, God! What are they doing to her?” She started to cry. Thunder rumbled nearby. Thor always took umbrage when Jane was distraught, but also worried for his friend, his ‘small shield sister’, Darcy.

Tony complained. “Thor! Don’t screw with the weather!” Thor looked at the small screen with blind rage.

From the feed Tony and Steve were watching, they could all hear explosions, gunfire, and sounds of hand-to-hand combat. Hawkeye’s voice was quiet and tense as he gave instructions to his team, urging them to capture all of the Hydra personnel they could for interrogation, cussing as he saw enemies escaping. After a long, silent minute, Jane and Thor recognized Darcy’s voice, calling for Thor, and then screaming in terror. Thunder rumbled more loudly as lightning struck outside their hotel. Mjolnir flew to Thor’s hand as he strained to hear more.

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Darcy rested fitfully, her head hurting from the excess blood pooled in it, and her terror rising and falling like ocean waves... constant and insistent. As she heard gunfire and an explosion nearby, she strained against her bonds.

She tried to hold back tears. All she could bear to think was one name, ‘Thor! Thor! Thor!’ If she thought of anything but that hope of escape, she feared she would lose her mind completely.

So, when the door to her room opened she reflexively shouted, “Thor!” and then began to scream when a different man entered. While Hail-Hydra guy had been intimidating, this man oozed danger and deadly efficiency. He was utterly terrifying. If he wanted answers, she would give them up immediately.

He put a finger to his lips. As she got a better look at him, she recognized him. He’d fought alongside Thor in the Battle of New York. He was an Avenger. She shut her mouth and stared at him desperately as he approached. He cut the straps and the bonds at her wrists and ankles, then pulled her upright. Her body was overwhelmed from the ordeal. She passed out.

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Steve barked out an order. “Stop that, Thor! Electrical interference hinders our communication.”
He took a deep breath. Then he swore colorfully, eyes closed tight for a second before they opened again and his jaw tightened with rage.

Thor’s eyebrows went up and his face lost color. “Captain! It is not your custom to speak so. What is wrong?”

Tony growled, anger rolling off him, too. “We have a video feed from the team. Your friend is alive, but she was being water-boarded. A civilian!” His tone was hollow. His face and voice changed, carefully emotionless as he pushed back his own watery memories. “It looks like she was beat up some, too.”

Jane shuddered and put her head in her hands, tears flowing down her face and wordless sounds of pain making their way past her lips. Thor was filled with helpless rage as he pulled Jane into his embrace and vowed vengeance upon those who dared harm one who was of their family.

Behind Tony they heard Steve swearing, “Damn them! I thought it was all worth it! But, they’re bigger and stronger than ever, still tearing down the good and screwing up the world!” There was another sound of breakage as his fist flew.

Tony turned away from the phone. “Easy, Cap! If you keep putting holes in things I’m gonna leave your ass here in DC and not let you stay in my building with our awesome boy band for the reunion tour.”

He turned back to Thor and Jane. “Okay. Status-secure. She passed out when Hawkeye moved her, probably for the best. He covered her up, and is taking her out. His team has control of the facility. We have a private ambulance waiting to put her on the plane to New York with Dr. Selvig.”

There was a knock on the door to the suite. “And, that’ll be your ride to the airport. I’m guessing you might want to get to New York, too.”

Jane lifted her head, and nodded vehemently.

Tony sounded conversational. “I know you can fly hammer, Thor, but it’ll be more comfortable for your lady if you take my plane. We’ll see you in a few hours or so, at least me. I’m not sure when Cap’ll be ready to go… though, they may want him out, so they’ll have fewer fist holes to fix in their walls. Your friends will get to New York before you. Hawkeye’s staying with Miss Lewis, guarding her. We’ve got a medical team that will get her there safely and I have a hospital ward in the Tower now. By the way, I have a place for you two to live and work. Let’s talk about that when you get to New York! Sorry to interrupt the sex, by the way.”

Thor chuckled sadly, his voice hollow. “Thank you for seeing to Lady Darcy’s safety. She is special to us both. Given the dire circumstances, you are forgiven the interruption.”

Jane cried, “Thank you so much!” She was still weeping, and Thor pulled her close. Jane’s face blanched in sudden realization at Tony’s previous words, and she looked to Thor frantically. “Cover her up? What? What else did they do to her?”

Tony cut her off. “Be glad Hawkeye got her out.”

He glanced over at Steve Rogers, who was leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, gathering his emotions. Tony moved the phone so that Thor and Jane could see Steve. “By the way, Cap here seems to have fallen in love with her at first sight. He broke out sweating and nearly came out of his skin when he saw that vintage glam portrait and then looked like he was eyeing his soul
mate when he saw candids of her and online hints about her personality. I can’t wait to see how he behaves when he actually meets her.”

Thor looked nonplussed. “It happens. She is lively, comely, and maidenly, a worthy woman for the Captain’s affections. My friend Fandral was taken with her the last time he visited Midgard. He has sworn that if he ever decides to take a wife, it will be the Lady Darcy.”

Tony’s face filled the screen again as he laughed. “You ought to see Capsicle’s face! He’s got it bad. Anyway, get some clothes on, and get on the plane, and you can come see for yourself.”

After they ended the call, Jane and Thor quickly dressed. He inquired cautiously. “What is this ‘water-boarded?’”

Jane was frantic, throwing things into their suitcases, not paying attention to his, or hers, or theirs. They could sort it later.

At Thor’s question, she stopped and grabbed her phone again. She searched on Google and found a video of a reporter being water-boarded. She held the phone so that Thor could see it, explaining shakily, “I’m scared if I hand it to you, it’ll get crushed.”

She nodded to the phone. “It’s really nasty torture that makes a person feel as though they’re dying. This guy volunteered to have it done, so he would be able to communicate about how barbaric it is more effectively. But, he was able to stop them when he wanted. Darcy couldn’t.” She pressed her lips together tightly, looking nauseated and tearful as she shook her head. “When it’s for real? Oh, Darcy!”

Thor watched the video. A full-blown lightning storm swept Paris in the next few minutes.

*to be continued*...

Chapter End Notes

"My Darcy" in this story is as shown in the movies/comics- Kat Dennings, modestly attired. Sweet and pretty, like in these images-
http://comicicons.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/darcy-lewis-kat-dennings.jpg

The ‘vintage glamour pic’ inspiration is a Gil Elvgren shot from 1966 or 1971 (date varies by reference source), but I don't think a sheet really date-limits an image, so for my story's purposes we'll pretend it's from a 1942 Elvgren Pinup Calendar. :)

Thank you for reading and especially for commenting!
Goin’ Crazy, and Practically Movin’ In

Chapter Summary

Darcy arrives in New York, begins to heal, and meets most of the Avengers. Looking at Steve feels good. Thor is protective. Hawkeye is awesome. Tony is Tony.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Darcy woke, she was still lying on a gurney. She closed her eyes tightly and began shaking from head to toe. Like in many nightmares, she found she couldn't scream, only emitting the slightest of squeaks through her fear-tightened throat. Her head was swimming, and she was disoriented. She realized that she was on an airplane in flight, judging from the small windows and roaring and whining engines. She felt sluggish, but- surprisingly- warm and dry.

Someone tucked a warm blanket further up over her, and murmured soothing reassurances that she was safe and they would help her heal. The woman wore scrubs, like a nurse…. or an orderly. That thought brought more panic crashing in on Darcy. Despite its warmth, the blanket made Darcy feel constrained, as though she was still strapped down. She struggled against it fearfully, whimpering. She heard the nurse explaining that the blanket was not a restraint, but her reflexes and terror told her to fight for her life. The Avenger guy leaned over her and she saw his lips moving and then heard him shushing her, telling her everything was okay. She even imagined she heard Erik’s voice nearby, and heard him crying. The nurse gave her a shot and the world went black.

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When Darcy fully woke again, she was not on a plane, but in a place that seemed like a prettier version of a hospital. Soft light filtered in through gauzy curtains. It was nicer than any hospital room she had ever seen, though still antiseptic smelling and blandly decorated. The landscape painting on the wall across from her had more character than she’d seen in other art in a medical setting though. She had an oxygen line in her nose and an IV in her arm, plus braces on each wrist and one ankle. She heard faint city sounds and saw a helicopter pass by outside. A feeling of dizziness washed over her as she realized she must be in a skyscraper, high above a city.

She tensed as she wondered if this place was safe, or if that was just wishful thinking on her part. One of the machines loudly broadcast her increasing heart rate. She stared at it, bleary-eyed.

“Where am I?” She spoke aloud, her voice raspy with disuse.

She gasped in startled fear as a proper-sounding voice spoke from nowhere. Her head swiveled and her eyes darted around the room.

“Good afternoon, Miss Lewis. You are in the Healing Ward of Avengers Tower, formerly Stark Tower, in New York City in the United States of America. I am called JARVIS. I am Mr. Stark’s Artificial Intelligence assistant. I will notify Dr. Foster and the others that you are awake. Medical assistance will arrive… now.”
A door opened, and an older lady looked in, smiling and nodding in a friendly way to someone outside the door as she entered. The woman assured Darcy that she was safe. Her hair was pulled back into a bun that was streaked with gray, and her face was clean, with no makeup at all. Her only jewelry was a pair of jade earrings carved into an Asian symbol. Her scrubs had a logo that read SI, an emblem any American knew well, as Stark seemed to own everything. The nurse looked at the readouts on the new-looking, high-tech equipment behind the bed and murmured about how good it was that Darcy’s heart and kidneys were okay, though there was some water in Darcy’s lungs… pneumonia… trauma to ligaments in her arms and legs. Darcy shifted one arm and winced against a dull pressure near her wrist.

The nurse asked her many simple questions, and looked pleased that Darcy was able to answer most correctly, assuring her that her confusion about time was appropriate and not a cause for concern. A non-descript, quiet doctor came and checked Darcy over and left. The nurse changed the IV bag and made some adjustments that the doctor had prescribed.

The day passed in a haze of nurse visits and brief periods of wakefulness. The nurse with the jade earrings came in most often. Darcy took a liking to her. She felt less at ease when others entered the room, regardless of the respectful way everyone spoke to the Captain guarding her door. Darcy wondered why a guard was deemed necessary for her in Avengers Tower, but wouldn't complain about anything intended to keep her safe.

Safe sounded good.

A few times Darcy woke herself... whimpering and screaming for air, for Thor, for help, babbling about water and knives and cold hands, just screaming with fear. One time she woke up with her face streaming with tears, and was appalled at the sensation of moisture and the vivid memories that came with it. "No more water," she coughed and choked, like breathing was a continual struggle. She was grateful for how quickly her nurses arrived when she was scared. It was almost as though someone was listening to make sure she was okay and sending help when she wasn't. She supposed it must be that nice Mr. Jarvis.

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The next day, Darcy woke feeling as though she had gone fifteen rounds with The Destroyer, but she was more alert. She put on the glasses they’d provided, had the nurse show her how to turn on the TV, and whiled time away watching random programs. She made herself watch a news channel first and saw the flying ship she’d seen on the television in the psychiatric hospital common room when she’d blundered into trouble. When a newscaster uttered the word ‘Hydra’ she gasped and remembered ‘Hail-Hydra’ guy with a flash of fear. She changed the channel, listening as her heart monitor settled down from that jolt. She muttered to herself, "to hell with Hydra." While channel flipping she happened upon ‘Criminal Minds’, but had to change the channel the instant a killer started hurting a victim and telling them they were weak.

Darcy hated the word ‘victim.’ She muttered it a few times angrily, and then reassured herself. “Not weak. Stupid. Dumb. But, made it out.”

She wiped away tears and stopped her channel flipping on an episode of ‘Sesame Street.’ She didn't give a damn what the nurse thought when she entered and saw Darcy smiling and even chuckling as Count Von Count laughed. As the nurse left, Darcy heard her explaining Children’s Television Workshop and ‘Sesame Street’ to someone in the hall outside her door. Who in the world didn't know about that?

After she finally managed to keep some broth down, Darcy shifted the bed position so she was upright. Her thoughts flowed more clearly. She wasn't sure if that was because she’d been given
helpful drugs, or because they were taking some of those drugs away, but she was glad to feel stronger and less helpless.

Despite hearing it before, she was startled when the voice spoke again. “Miss Lewis? Dr. Foster, Mr. Odinson, and some other friends are about to visit you.” The nurse (the one with the jade earrings, Darcy’s favorite) entered and moved to a corner of the room. Darcy thought the woman looked tense.

Darcy nodded drowsily, wondering who the other friends might be. “Thanks, Mr. Jarvis.” She heard the door opening again.

The voice replied. “You are very welcome, Miss Lewis.”

She murmured, “Darcy, please! I think I’m in trouble when people call me Miss Lewis, cuz, well, I usually am.” She frowned to herself. “And, it reminds me that I’m single again, and kinda lonely…” She let out a forlorn sigh.

A man cleared his throat and stood so that he held the door open. She looked at him, and felt as though her heart had stopped. He smiled at her sympathetically. Darcy thought she’d never seen such a handsome smile, ever. He was so handsome and muscular that he was kind of stunning. She struggled to catch her breath, self-consciously smoothing the material of her hospital gown with one hand. She wished she didn't look and feel like death warmed over.

The nurse murmured to him. “Hello, again, Captain.” He nodded to the nurse, and then turned his eyes back to Darcy. He had really nice eyes.

The handsome man was still holding the door when Jane flew through the opening, crying, “Oh, my God, Darcy! Are you okay?” Jane choked back a sob as she halted next to the bed.

Thor followed behind Jane. He looked angry, as though he was struggling to control his temper. When Jane cried out in horror at the wounds on Darcy’s face and arms, they all heard a booming thunderclap outside. Thor stood still in the doorway for a moment, ferocious.

Jane sat by Darcy gingerly, eyes full of sorrow. The handsome man put a restraining hand on Thor’s arm, and looked at him sternly. Darcy was impressed that anyone would be brave enough to grab Thor when he looked that angry. The man muttered an admonishment to Thor, and Thor nodded agreement, his gaze then focused on Darcy as he took calming breaths.

Thor moved up next to Jane. “We are grateful for your safe return and your improved condition, Lady Darcy.” His face was filled with sorrow and a fierce protectiveness.

Tears came to her eyes at his earnestness. “Oh Thor!” Darcy wiped her eyes. He put his hand on her shoulder very gently, and she leaned against his hand just a bit and sighed with relief. She whispered, "Safe." His jaw tightened; his expression forbidding.

A quiet voice joked. “She was lookin’ for you, big guy. When I came through the door in London, she called ME Thor.” A shorter man moved into the room, her Avenger rescuer guy. He nodded to her as she flinched, unable to keep from associating him with her ordeal and murky dream-thoughts of babbling and crying with fear. She nodded back and blinked rapidly, struggling to contain her emotions. His name finally came to mind. Hawkeye. She was pretty sure that she thought Hawkeye was one of the most awesome people in the world right now.

Darcy swallowed hard and admitted softly, “it was more that I was calling to Thor. I couldn’t… stand to think about… what they… what they were going to… anything…. anything but getting out
of there.” Hawkeye nodded once, as though he knew exactly what she wasn’t saying.

She heard more thunder outside, a slighter rumbling. Jane held her hand, sniffling. Darcy squeezed Jane’s hand tightly, so grateful to be with her friends, safe. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and breathed in and out deeply. Then, she managed a slight grin to Jane.

Darcy continued, “Erik told me he’d send Thor, so…” She gasped, and panic filled her voice more with each word. “Shit! Erik! Is he okay?!” Vague impressions that she’d heard Erik's voice on an airplane flitted through her mind.

Jane nodded, now crying quietly. Darcy sighed with relief. “Oh! Good. I couldn't stand to think of anything else happening to him. Poor guy! He’s had such a hard time since Loki…” She saw that the handsome man was staring at her, a soft look on his face… admiration? It confused her. She stared at him. He met her gaze, smiled slightly, and ducked his head. It was the cutest thing she’d ever seen. She tried to tamp down the instant attraction she felt for him so that she wouldn't embarrass herself. It was difficult.

Tony Stark, a man that Darcy had seen on thousands of magazine covers and TV interviews, swept into the room muttering something that she didn't understand about ‘going crazy, and practically moving in’ to the handsome man. It caused the handsome man to blush and look away for a second, but then he looked back at her again. She gaped at Stark with saucer-wide eyes, and then around at all of the people gathered in her room as the identity of the ‘friends’ clicked in her slow brain.

Darcy gasped, “Oh, geez! The whole gang is here! Or, well, almost. I don’t guess you brought the big green guy.” Her heart pounded slightly faster as she took in the overwhelming charisma and personalities present. The room felt smaller. So did Darcy.

Her rescuer held out a rough hand for her to shake, and introduced himself. “Hi, there. I’m Clint Barton, Hawkeye. And, yeah, Banner’s in a lab, hard at work. The last of our merry band that’s missing is Natasha Romanoff. She’s figuring some stuff out.” He glanced at the handsome man wryly. The handsome man shrugged slightly, an unperturbed reaction. Then his gaze shifted back to Darcy.

Darcy cleared her throat again. It still felt raw. She lifted a hand to rub it, frowning at the angry welts visible along the edges of the brace on her wrist and the tenderness she felt in the arm. “Well, thanks, ‘Hawkeye.’ Really, dude. I’m sorry I screamed at you at first. I just…” She coughed slightly. “I hope you guys are all figuring out how to get anybody you know to a safe place, cuz there are freakin’ Nazi… ‘Hydra’ goons out there! I've decided never to leave the house without checking the news again.”

She shuddered as she saw the handsome man’s expression darken. Then, he shot a panicked look at Tony Stark, who nodded and got on his phone and walked over to the window. She overheard him talking about moving a lady named Peggy. She noted that her hands were shaking again, and grimaced with impatience at herself. Anger surged in her, and she pushed herself up more. Her emotions were all over the map, and she wished she wasn't in a room of gods and superheroes so she could go ape shit. She bit her trembling lip, holding in a maelstrom of feelings.

Hawkeye gestured, “Oh, and that tall, wholesome guy over there is Captain America.” Darcy felt her head spinning again. She’d been making eyes at a national icon! She met his gaze again. Something about him calmed her emotions a little, so she kept looking.

He nodded to her. “Steve Rogers, ma’am.” Gods, his voice was amazing, too! He was incredibly handsome and intense looking. She thought she could get happily lost in those eyes forever.
Whatever the good kind of dizzy was, he made her feel it. She struggled to stop staring at him and felt a blush rise in her cheeks. She saw Tony Stark roll his eyes at her pitiful effort and then realized that her heart rate monitor was broadcasting the increase in her heart rate for all to hear. She self-consciously looked away from the Captain.

Jane whispered, “Darcy?” She seemed reluctant to speak, but forced herself to continue, squeezing Darcy’s hand to take some sting from the question. “What did you tell them?” Jane looked into her eyes, wildly shaking her head and reassuring, “I don’t blame you! I don’t! I would have talked! I can’t believe that they did that to you!” Jane blinked back tears and stifled another sob.

Darcy shook her head and gasped, eyes lowered as she had a flash of struggling against the water. She heard a whisper of that reedy voice, probing for details she hadn’t realized she knew so well. She pressed her hands flat against the mattress, hardly noticing as her body shook with agitation. Her breathing sped up, and she struggled to stay calm. The nurse shifted uneasily.

Darcy took a deep breath, shook her head and whispered, “Nothing.” She knew that the others could see how she was shaking now, and she was embarrassed. She focused on her breathing, grateful she could breathe again, but aware of the slight crackling sound in it. She looked at the equipment attached to her, not wanting to see pity from the Avengers, of all people. She blinked away tears as she remembered her terror. A few still tracked down her cheeks, again horrifying her as she felt their moisture. She wiped at her cheeks roughly, kind of hating the brace on her wrist.

Stark sputtered, “What?! Nothing?! What do you mean, nothing?” He looked incredulous when she finally turned her eyes his way. He only agitated her, so she looked at the Captain again instead. Her breathing eased slightly. Stark looked from her to the Captain, shook his head, and rolled his eyes.

Thor relaxed and smiled broadly, drawing her attention to him. “I apologize for doubting your boundless courage, Lady Darcy. Please forgive me! I should have known better after your fearlessness when we faced The Destroyer, and again with the Dark Elves.” He leaned over, gently lifted and kissed her hand in tribute, and released it. She was aware of Steve Rogers shifting where he stood by the wall. She’d been hyper-aware of him since he’d entered the room. She figured at this point, the best she could hope was that her blushes gave her some color in a good way.

She shrugged slightly, and nodded. “Um, thanks, Thor. You’re forgiven.” She licked her lips, coughed, rasped, and admitted, “I… I… don’t know how much more I could…” She shook her head and let out a sob, knowing how close she was to telling Hydra every single thing she’d ever heard. She looked up at Jane and admitted in a tone laced with surprise and terror, “I know more about your science than I thought I did! They asked about Greenwich… the ‘phenomena’ there…” She paled more, and forced herself to continue. “There was this scientist guy there questioning me, right in my ear, cold hands on…”

She shook her head, feeling her face crumple while she covered her chest with one hand. She was too near tears to see how each face around her hardened as they saw the way she covered herself.

“He was saying parts of stuff I knew and trying to get me to fill in the blanks.” She winced. “All these facts they would want to know kept popping into my head while I counted, well, tried to count! My thoughts mostly ran away like I wished I could.” She coughed again. The nurse supported her and offered encouragement until the fit passed.

Steve Rogers’ voice was quiet, tense. “Counted?”

Hawkeye blanched and grimaced in understanding. Darcy turned to him, sorrowfully. “You been there, dude?” He nodded shortly.
Hawkeye looked around the room. “Me, Natasha, Stark… and, well, Cap really drowned. So…”

Darcy coughed again and struggled not to vomit at that thought and the sheer terror that came with it.

“Sucks to be us.” Stark chuckled grimly.

Darcy looked down and rasped. “Well, I really tried to count, to focus on the count so it wouldn't seem like… forever… so my thoughts wouldn't run away too far for them to find their way home again. I needed to stay sane, ya know?” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hawkeye and Tony Stark nod in unison. Stark looked pale.

Tony Stark reached forward to pat her shoulder. “Good job, Lewis. Tony Stark, by the way, though I’m sure you know that. After my turn, I cried like a baby and promised to build the Ten Rings a copy of the worst bomb in my arsenal.”

She sniffed. “Yeah? How’d that end up?” She shrugged, made a face, and admitted wanly, “I cried like crazy and threw up, too... a couple of times, I think.” Jane sort of sobbed.

“Well, I’m Iron Man.” He cocked a grin that looked more ominous than commiserating. “Those guys are dead.”

She let her eyes close and lay back, “I’m just 'really-tired girl'.” The nurse leaned forward again, a comforting presence. Darcy sighed. “I always thought it seemed crappy when people would get chased out of hospital rooms on TV shows and movies, but I get it now. I’m cooked!” She sighed, and rambled, “I feel like I got tackled, hit, scared shitless, water-boarded, and threatened with more; to include knives and a simultaneous rape- since my seizures would apparently make for that orderly’s idea of a good time- and then suddenly found myself in a room with some of the most famous people on the planet.” She let out a combination sniffle and yawn.

She blinked back tears as she saw Jane go pale and sway a bit, while Steve Rogers turned and put a fist through the wall. Thor stilled in a way she'd never seen before, and the skies outside darkened with menace. She put a hand over her mouth as though to stem the flow of words. Her other hand twisted her gown’s front. “Shit! I babbled that out loud, didn't I?” Again, her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

Hawkeye nodded, his expression deadpan. “Well, the shrinks’ll be pleased with your ability to let it all out.”

She barked a laugh. Then she fell into a painful bout of coughing. The nurse moved to her side and helped her sit straighter, supporting her.

Stark looked miffed, looking from the wall to Darcy and back again. “Cap! My building! You and the punching? I know Hydra’s back and more evil than ever, but I didn't know that they inspired you to property damage.” He looked almost prissy, and hysterical laughter threatened to bubble forth from Darcy. She let one giggle free, then a sob. Stark turned to her. “Cheer up, Lewis. Your glamour pic gave Cap the sweats. Good job on that, too!” He held up his hands in front of his chest to simulate breasts, and nodded and raised his brows as though he thought he was giving her a huge compliment. He mentioned other images they found and the effect they had as well, but fairly gushed about the vintage pin-up image they'd admired.

Darcy stopped listening to Tony after she heard the words 'your glamour pic' and saw his crude gesture. Her gasp of horror turned to a high pitched choking noise as she stared at Steve Rogers, watching the blush rise in his cheeks. She coughed again. “Glamour pic!? How the fuck did you
see that?” She slapped a hand over her mouth again and whispered, “Sorry.” Her Mamaw would have had a conniption over her language. She put her hands over her eyes and moaned.

Stark smirked. “I guess my AI knows my usual tastes. When I asked for images of you to help Hawkeye in his search, that glamour pic was the first thing JARVIS found.”

Darcy dropped her hands and cried, “Mr. Jarvis! What the hell? That’s supposed to be private! It was for my friend’s art project.”

Tony murmured, “just JARVIS…”

JARVIS replied, “I offer my apologies, Miss Lewis. I could not know that. The photographer’s database is not secured.”

She put her hands over her eyes again, and groaned. “Oh, crap! You've ALL seen it now, haven’t you?” Her face flooded with even more color as she recalled details of the image. She moaned, squeezed her eyes shut tightly, and unconsciously moved her hands so that her arms covered her chest, and then she let out a slight whimper.

Stark chortled. “Hey! Don’t act like that. We were impressed.” She felt the blush both rise into her face and track down her chest, which made her feel even worse. She whimpered again.

Steve choked out angrily, “Tony!” Stark shrugged and made a face.

Thor looked angry again, and moved in front of Tony Stark threateningly. “If the Lady Darcy feels she has been dishonored, it is not a laughing matter, Stark.”

Steve spoke up earnestly, “I’m sorry that you’re embarrassed, Miss Lewis. Please accept my apologies for contributing to your discomfort.”

Darcy started to laugh, losing her tenuous self-control. “Oh, God! That’s so funny. My discomfort? Compared to what those Nazis were up to, this should be nothing!”

She finally lost her battle to hold back tears. Jane grabbed and clenched her hand more tightly and leaned in close, murmuring words of comfort. After a minute or two, Darcy struggled to pull herself back together. She stopped crying and laughing, breathed in and out heavily for a few seconds, and then wiped her face and stilled. She couldn't help but peer at the Captain again, fearing to see disappointment or disapproval of her from him now.

Steve looked even guiltier, distressed. Stark barked, “Capsicle! Stop looking like every surviving Hydra member is your personal failure. You stopped them from winning the war, from bombing our major cities... and ended up on ice for your troubles. And, the other day you nearly died again to keep them from scratching off everyone they MIGHT not like!” He stroked his facial hair. “If anyone should feel guilty, it’s my old man and his friends. THEY let Hydra get in on the ground floor.”

The Captain looked forbidding. “Don’t speak against the founders of SHIELD. They did their best.” He shook his head. “Howard was assassinated by Hydra, so don’t act like he was complicit!” Tony Stark blanched slightly, a quizzical look on his face. Darcy wiped away another tear and looked at the Captain, awestruck. Righteous anger was a look that suited him perfectly.

The nurse interjected, “Gentlemen! Please take your discussion elsewhere. Miss Lewis asked all of you to leave so that she can rest.” Steve looked guilty again at this admonishment. His face was full of emotion as he returned his attention to her. Darcy glanced at him, then away again quickly.
Jane finally spoke again. “I’m so sorry, Darcy. I’m sorry I believed you’d give up information. I’m sorry for all that happened to you, and how scared you must have been.” She sighed and looked up again, fiercely. “I hope… that they’re dead!”

Jane looked at Hawkeye, and he shook his head and mouthed the words, “Containment, downstairs.” Steve’s jaw tightened. Thor’s expression darkened, then he nodded in a matter-of-fact way as both Jane and Darcy’s eyes turned to him.

Darcy swallowed hard, tried to grin, nodded, and mumbled wearily, “I was wishing I could taze ‘em… that’s for sure.” Jane laughed grimly, and hugged Darcy. They laid their foreheads together briefly, and then Jane moved back to Thor’s side and left. The others filed out slowly, murmuring that they were glad to have met her, apologizing for taxing her strength, wishing her a speedy recovery. She felt Steve’s gaze linger on her as he walked out last.

Darcy fought sleep for the next few minutes, thinking about each of the amazing people she’d just met and savoring Steve Rogers’ handsome smile and the mortifying yet gratifying thought that he liked her glamour picture so much it made him blush. She would much rather think about that than other things.

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As the Avengers and Jane Foster left Darcy’s room, Tony noticed Steve moving quickly to an elevator. There was tension and anger in his stance. Tony saw that Steve slammed the ‘down’ button. He approached Steve slowly. “Are you heading to the holding cells for a bit of interrogation, Cap? That’s not usually your thing.” He waited, but was not surprised when there was no answer. He’d read the reports on the condition of the prisoners who’d been interrogated at the psychiatric facility, noting the treatment of many of the females. He and Steve both knew details of what Darcy and the others at that hospital had faced. It was easy to imagine what would have happened to her if Hawkeye had not arrived in time.

“It’d be better if you went to the gym and blew through a few unsuspecting punching bags. I hear that’s something you do.” Steve glanced at Tony with enough anger that Tony took a step back.

Thor was talking quietly with Hawkeye, explaining his ties to Darcy, and the Asgardian concept of vengeance, his expression tense and serious as Hawkeye nodded somber agreement. Jane held Thor’s hand and listened, looking pale and concerned. Thor gave her hand a squeeze, then turned to Tony and Steve, and took a step towards the Captain. Thor’s tone was even. “What is your bond to the Lady Darcy, Captain? To me, she is as a younger sister, as she is such a faithful friend to me and my Jane. Thus, I see her as one I would protect… and avenge. You have only just made her acquaintance. I wish to understand your reaction to her having been harmed.”

Tony muttered to Thor. “I told you…” Thor’s look to Tony silenced him, though Tony groused to himself that he couldn't believe this was turning to a discussion of Cap’s intentions. Thor’s approach to Steve was one of respectful and open curiosity. Jane stared at them, wide-eyed.

Steve unclenched his fists, staring straight ahead instead of meeting the inquiring looks around him. He breathed in and out harshly. “I realize that I just met her. But, first that picture…” He looked down, blushing deeply. He remembered the original image well from his friend's calendar, though the model's gaze was coy and falsely innocent, unlike the sweet look of honest strength in Miss Lewis’ smile. “Maybe it’s hard for you to see… but for me, it was like they barbarically tortured, not just an innocent woman, but a dame from my time, one of the people I lost. It’s even worse now that I see that she’s… generous, brave, sweet, spirited… good… all I…” He met Thor’s gaze then. Thor saw enough in Steve’s expression that he nodded with immediate acceptance and approval, visibly relaxing and smiling.
Tony exclaimed, “Ah!” He clapped Steve on the shoulder. “She looks like a slice of home in this alien world?”

Steve closed his eyes and shook his head, unable and unwilling to explain his visceral reaction to the young woman he’d just met. The word that came to mind was ‘precious’, and he knew that he could never get Stark to understand what he meant by that. It was only the second time in Steve's life that he'd ever met a woman he was so drawn to that he knew he could learn to love her. He wasn't blasé enough about the experience to easily put it into words.

Thor glanced at Jane. “When you find one who is a balm to your spirit, their well-being is paramount.” Steve breathed out heavily and nodded. Thor’s smile widened. “I am pleased, Captain, that you honor my shield sister with your desire to learn more of her. She is a worthy woman, and you are a worthy man.” Steve looked at Thor again, and nodded tentative thanks. Tony snorted.

Jane stepped forward, and touched Steve’s arm gently. She wasn't usually given to sentimental demonstrations, any more than Steve, but his open anguish touched her already raw emotions. She murmured, “I’m the worst at this sort of thing. Darcy’s the ‘feelings’ one of us, but… I’m sorry that you lost your… world.” She stepped back to Thor’s side.

Steve nodded and murmured a slight “Thank you.” He pressed a hand to the bandage he still wore around his midsection.

Thor noticed. “Captain, it is unusual for you to bear marks of battle for long. When we first arrived, I was too preoccupied with concern for Lady Darcy to ask. What has wounded you so profoundly? You seem weary in both body and spirit, my friend.”

Steve looked up slowly, nodding. “It was an unusual battle. I was forced to fight my best friend from my youth, a man like a brother to me.”

Thor grimaced. “I too well know the pain of battling one you love so.”

Steve nodded shortly. The elevator arrived. He stared at the open car, his hands fists. He shook his head. “No. I won’t go down there. I just…”

Hawkeye nodded and assured Steve, “I’ll check on the interrogations, Cap.” He looked grim. “I’ll make sure your guys don’t get too comfortable.” He mused darkly. “A lot of the time, sadists like them are the easiest to break. They can’t take what they dish out at all. Too much first-hand knowledge of how it fucks people up…” Hawkeye nodded tersely to Thor. “Thor, I’ll let you know when they’ve stopped being useful.” Steve glanced at Thor with a slightly surprised look, but offered no comment.

Thor turned back to Hawkeye. “I have hardly taken the time to thank you, my friend. I am indebted to you. I will remember.” Steve looked at Hawkeye seriously, too.

Hawkeye nodded uncomfortable acknowledgment. “Any time, Thor. Any time.” They clasped arms. Hawkeye moved into the down elevator, but held the door as he listened to the others.

Tony’s eyes lit up. “Well, I’m going back to my lab. I want to continue work on that wing pack now that we know that Foster’s secrets of the Bifrost and the Nine Realms are still safe.” He turned to Steve. “You want to come see what we’re doing with it? It’ll help your new friend be even more useful.”

Hawkeye raised his brows at Steve. “New friend?”

Steve nodded, recovered enough from his thoughts to speak again. “Sam Wilson. He’s a flyer,
para-rescue forces. Goes by code name *Falcon*. Big help to me and Natasha this past week...”

Tony chuckled. “Geez, Cap! I hardly know you anymore! Making new friends, smoking out Hydra and tearing down SHIELD, getting crazy over a ‘dame’ ... What’s next?”

Steve smiled wryly and shrugged uncomfortably, made a face, and finally choked out the words that had been stuck in his throat for days. “I want to find Bucky. I don’t have any idea where he went after we fought in DC. It occurred to me that you might be able to help.”

Tony smiled broadly. “I thought you’d never ask!” He looked up slightly and called, “J-man! Can you help find our mystery man, ‘Bucky’?”

Steve added, “James Buchanan Barnes, code name ‘Winter Soldier’, born 1917.” He looked grim again. He saw Hawkeye react to the name Winter Soldier.

JARVIS replied, “James Buchanan Barnes, nicknamed ‘Bucky’ is listed as having died in 1944.”

Steve shook his head. “He didn't die. We were wrong. He was captured… brainwashed, and used as a Hydra assassin on and off since then. I've asked Natasha to call in some favors and see if she can get anything from the East, too.”

Hawkeye let out a low whistle. “We've got to talk later. Sounds like even more went down than I know. Winter Soldier!” He shook his head in disbelief. His gaze fell to Cap’s bandaged mid-section. “He a super-soldier?”

Steve nodded, “something like that… with a metal arm.”

Tony jibed, “then we can rule out the idea of him flying the friendly skies. Skip airport cameras, J!”

Thor turned to Jane. “My love, I would accompany the Captain. I am curious to see how this Midgardian ‘Falcon’ flies, and I wish to regale the Captain with tales of the Lady Darcy. He has not had occasion yet to know of her gift of laughter, her ability to find humor and call it to others’ attention.” Steve smiled slightly as he looked at Thor.

Tony shook his head. “Give it up, Cap. No way can you handle a dame with a sense of humor! Your infatuation is doomed!”

Steve frowned as Tony breezed past him into the elevator that had just arrived. Thor clapped him on the shoulder and reassured him, “nothing of the sort, my friend. I find you quite humorous.” He turned to Jane and chuckled. “The first time we met; he hit me in the head with his shield and ordered me to put down Mjolnir!” Jane and Steve exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

*to be continued*

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't bother with the notes last chapter, Darcy looks like she does in the movies/comics- [http://comicicons.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/darcy-lewis-kat-dennings.jpg](http://comicicons.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/darcy-lewis-kat-dennings.jpg)

The glamour pic referred to was a lot like this, [http://pictify.com/325339/gil-elvgren-](http://pictify.com/325339/gil-elvgren-)
anette-1966 but with Darcy.
Something good and funny to help me go back to sleep…

Chapter Summary

Darcy wakes to the sound of raindrops. She needs something good and funny to help her get back to sleep...

The next time Darcy fully woke, it was the middle of the night, about an hour after the most inconvenient vitals check, the one that caused her to snark sleepily at the nurse. She heard raindrops beginning to fall outside in the dark. Somewhere nearby there was an awning, she guessed. The sound of water hitting fabric startled her awake and set her teeth on edge.

She sat up in the bed, pulling the blanket to her chest, and clinging to it tightly. She wished she could call out to her Mamaw for a hug, to help her past the nightmarish memories. She reached out to the nightstand, and grabbed the glasses that had been provided for her, brushing against a water pitcher there and pulling back from it as though shocked. Watching the droplets run down the smooth, dark glass was mesmerizing. Intellectually, she felt controlled, and knew she was safe (*Avengers Tower! Duh!*); but her heart was pounding quickly. Panic was trying to grab hold. Flashbacks of her interrogation pressed in on her. She turned on a light, and sat straight up. If it only helped her see the water droplets less clearly, that was good.

For a long time, she sat there, holding back tears and staring at the window. She glanced at the call button, but shook her head. She needed to deal with her feelings, not get drugs. She glanced at the damned water pitcher again, remembered, and shifted away from it. It lingered in the corner of her eye, reminding her.

She startled and squeaked, “Damn it!” when there was a light knock at her door. After a pause, it was repeated. She took a shaky breath and called, “Come in?”

When she saw Steve Rogers at the door, she sat back with a gasp of relief. “Oh! Captain? Hi! What are you doing here?” She hoped she didn’t sound unwelcoming as she blurted the words. She was struck again by just how handsome he was. She felt a tentative smile come to her face at the sight of him.

He hesitated, and she thought she saw a flicker of something sort of sad in his expression. “Please… call me Steve.” Then, he looked sheepish and grinned slightly. “Well… I don’t sleep all that much… and, I asked JARVIS if you were sleeping… after I heard the rain start…” He shifted back and forth, looking uncomfortable.

Her surprised smile warmed him. “You wanted to make sure it didn't scare me too much?” Her breathing was still rapid. She made an effort to calm herself further, AND not to show how absurdly pleased she was by his consideration. Her inner fan-girl was doing quite the dance, so she doubted she came off at all nonchalant.

He nodded, still shifting from one foot to the other. He was pleased to see her hands relax their grip on the blanket.
She exclaimed, “Sweet! Well, come on in, Steve. I was kind of spooked, so it’ll be nice to have someone to talk to.” She noticed lit icons on her replacement phone. “Hm. Excuse me for a sec.” Steve sat on the edge of the chair next to her bed. She deleted two messages from Ian, scanned an interesting note from Jane about things that had been discussed between the others and Steve earlier, and noticed that she had a heartbreaking message from Erik, all shamey/guilty stuff. She sighed.

Steve sat up taller. “Important messages?”

She set the phone down and shook her head. “I’ll get back to Erik in the morning. I really need to see him in person, and give him hugs and stuff. He’s blaming himself for those baddies in London.”

Steve nodded. “I understand how that feels.”

She raised a brow. “You really buy into that? You think that missing some of the thousands of Nazi-esque two-head goons is your bad?” Steve blinked and stared at her. Darcy kept pushing. “Don’t just sit there. Tell me how you could have single-handedly rounded up all of them.” She made a ‘dude, get real’ face at him.

He grimaced and held up his hands in surrender. “Okay. Okay. I get it. But, I have a lot of reason to hate them.”

She nodded. “The thing about how they played a part in taking you away from your life?” She gestured towards her phone to indicate she’d read about that in a message.

He nodded, leaned his elbows on his thighs, and shared, “and what they did to my friend… and… the terrible things they do to other good people…” He looked back up at her, and the intensity of his gaze caused her to blush. She tried to tamp down her excitement over his seeming interest. She thought that surely she was imagining or misunderstanding it…

She sighed. “I just got the Spark Notes on your friend Bucky when I scanned Jane’s message.” He looked puzzled and she chuckled. “That means enough of a summary that I have a vague idea what you’re talking about!” He pulled out a little notebook and wrote ‘Spark Notes’ on a list. She saw and offered, “an older version was Cliffs Notes. No apostrophe.” He nodded thanks and made the addition.

She laid her head back again, her breath easing finally. “So, Steve… have you seen and heard enough of me yet to realize that the glamour pic of me you saw is the only glamorous thing about me?” She chuckled wryly, shaking her head and trying not to blush.

He looked at her fixedly. “I think I see you pretty clearly.” His manner caused butterflies to dance in her stomach. She ordered the butterflies to stop the insanity, since she must be reading too much into the way he looked at her.

She gulped, and blushed deeply. “But… I cuss and have bed head…” She glanced at the window, “and I’m kinda freakin’ out from stupid stuff like rain and…” She pointed an accusing finger at the water pitcher and snarled, “that water pitcher!”

He looked startled, grabbed the pitcher, and walked out of the room. She laughed. When he returned a few minutes later he had a sport bottle with fresh ice water. He set it down with a thump. “Better?”

She smiled softly. “Yeah.” In a lilting tone, she praised, “My hero!”
He smiled crookedly, his accent slipping a bit towards Brooklyn. “At least I defeated the water pitcher.”

She nodded, and made a noise of realization. “Ooooh! You think you’re falsely credited with bringing down… Hydra.” She swallowed hard and grimaced at the name. “Your accomplishment feels like hollow.” It was hard for her to say the word ‘Hydra’, though easier with Steve by her side. She gave into the urge to imagine Steve pulverizing ‘Hail-Hydra’ guy and grinned grimly.

Steve shrugged, “more than hollow. Obviously, I didn't defeat Hydra.”

She made a face and nodded once. “Yet. Aren't you gonna defeat them now?”

He looked at her with a real smile now, with an edge of danger that gave her a pleasurable shiver. “Yes, ma’am. I’m not gonna stop ‘til all of Hydra is dead or captured.” He looked down, shook his head as though touching on a distant memory. Then, he took a breath and pushed his next words out in a rush. “You say that I don’t really know you.” He swallowed hard. “Will you give me a chance to? After you’re feeling better… and I find Bucky?” He frowned slightly.

She nodded and responded breathily, “Gods, yes!” She winced and amended in a restrained, almost prim tone. “I mean, that sounds nice…” His grin widened. She blushed and blurted, “Damn. Of course I’d like to get to know you! I just don’t want to disappoint you.” She shrugged. “I’m nothing super or special, just me- Darcy Lewis- student and sort of science intern.”

With a pleased smile, he asserted, “You’re more than you realize, I think.” He looked at her nervously, as though his next question was one he’d not asked much before. “May I get your number?”

She nodded and reached out a hand. “Let me see your phone.” He handed her the latest StarkPhone and she admired it. “Wow. That’s sick! I’ve never seen one like this up close before.” She added her contact info to his phone, and sent his info to hers. “Look out! Now I can bombard you with cute kitten memes and… Ooh! I can share playlists with you!”

He smiled. “That sounds nice. Usually all I get are reports, and notifications of dire emergencies.”

She made a mischievous face. “I’ll fix that.”

He grinned. “Is that how people get to know each other now? They share ‘kitten memes’ and playlists?”

She struggled not to laugh. “You say that like you’ve never seen a kitten meme!”

He made a face. “I’ve learned, the hard way, not to look at any image file Tony sends, unless JARVIS clears it first.”

She giggled and shook her head. “Yuck. I bet! I meant baby felines, for the record. Thor likes them. That big old softy likes ANY baby animal picture. But, yeah, you stay importantly busy. I’ll try not to go crazy with silly stuff, just keep it real and share things I really like. I bet people have pestered you left and right telling you things to experience to catch up on the years. I’d love to know which of those you've really felt, really liked. I don’t want to wait for you to search to the ends of the Earth before I get to know you. I want to get to know you now, before you change your mind about me and fall in love with someone perfect like Jane.”

She blushed a bit as she realized she’d babbled the words ‘fall in love’ out loud to him. She screamed at herself internally for jumping off the cliff of conclusions into the pit of insanity. As if! She took it as a good sign that he didn't run from the room making excuses of needing to be
somewhere else suddenly (at 3:00 am, no less).

He did a double-take. “Dr. Foster?” She nodded firmly. He frowned. “Do you think she’s perfect?”

Darcy giggled again, and then laughed so that tears came into her eyes. It felt GOOD. She finally answered. “Sorry. No! No. She’s not perfect. She just looks it!” She continued laughing until a cough interrupted. He smiled, enjoying her laughter, then frowned with concern at the sound of her cough.

He shook his head. “She doesn't look perfect to me.” He looked abashed. “I mean… No insult intended…”

She made a sound of exasperation. “Ask around. You’ll find that perfect looks a lot like Jane- and quirky, awkward, and ‘potentially loose’ looks like me.” Her posture shifted, defensive.

He looked at her strangely, “Loose?”

She shrugged with faux nonchalance. “Listen. I get it. I’m busty. I usually try to dress to hide ‘the girls.’” she gestured to her chest and nodded., “But, they won’t be denied!”

Steve shook his head, blushing at both her reference to her breasts and as he thought of the way she’d looked in the glamour picture. “Do you think I believe you’re ‘loose’ because of that picture?” He frowned, pained.

She huffed, “Dude! Look up the evolution of pin-ups! I had to get really buzzed to dare have that glamour pic made- I was doing a favor for my artist friend who was recreating something. I thought maybe it’d make me feel better about myself someday when I’m a lonely, wrinkled cat-lady.” Her voice dropped and she blushed. “I thought for once I’d try to pretend I was totally the pretty one.”

He started to say something, but she continued. She sighed and looked away from him. “Anyway, guys get ideas. Even with the bruises, I guess I should be kind of insulted that Tony Stark didn't hit on me, given his reputation.” She seemed miffed and Steve looked perplexed.

He asked slowly, “would you want for Tony to ‘hit on’ you?”

She shook her head vehemently. “Gods, no! He’s old enough to be my dad…” Steve’s brows went up. “And, sorry, I know he’s kind of your friend and all, but he’s a real man-whore!”

Steve laughed out loud at that. “He’s actually settled down to one woman now, Pepper Potts. I imagine you’ll meet her soon. She’s… classy.” He sighed. “I’m just glad you don’t have a crush on Tony.”

She shook her head again. “No, thanks.” She smiled slightly as she processed his relief over her lack of interest in Tony Stark.

Steve smiled hesitantly, frowned, and confessed. “I’m old enough to be your grandfather. Tony’s dad and I were friends during the war.”

She looked at him fixedly. “I listened in History class. I know you were born like the same time as Edward Cullen, but I don’t think time frozen should count against you. You didn't get to do much living all that time, did you? You don’t look like you aged at all. You look really good.” She blushed again, wondering just how much one person could blush without irreparable harm.

He shook his head, made a face and asked, “Edward Cullen?”
She smirked, “Sparkly vampire, dude, ‘Twilight’ books and movies… don’t bother unless you want a laugh. The CGI baby in the last movie is creep-tastically hilarious.”

He nodded recognition of the word ‘Twilight,’ and raised a brow. “I can always use a laugh.” She smiled a bit more at him and he smiled back. Then his look turned serious. “I wasn’t saying you looked ‘loose’ in that picture.” She eyed him skeptically. He blushed. “You looked… beautiful… curvy like a real woman, confident, sassy… worth fighting for, as we used to say.” The heat in his gaze made her blush, too.

The rain fell harder, splashing at the window noisily, and she grabbed his hand. He stretched his arm out so that his hand was next to her on the bed, and she could lie back again, still clutching it. He looked at their joined hands, liking the sight.

He continued, “I’m really sorry if you thought I was making assumptions like that! It was more like you looked like everything I fight for, like… home… the good in life.” His voice caught and he cleared his throat.

She smiled sleepily and squeezed his hand. “Okay. I forgive you. That sounds nice.” Her smile faded. “But, I’m just a girl…”

He smiled and shrugged. “I like girls.” He savored the feeling of her small hand grasping his larger one.

She grinned and chuckled. “Good to know! The tight-shirt look raises some questions.”

He looked taken aback. “Um. Good to know. I don’t want to send the wrong signals. I barely know how to manage the right signals.” He sighed, “It all came so naturally to Bucky, my buddy. He was everything I wanted to be when we were kids. When we grew up, he could sweet talk the dames all day and night!” He shrugged. “After the serum, and after I got people to take me seriously… well, I was too busy to even look for signals much.”

She laughed, shook her head and asked, “for real? Or were there just so many unwanted signals that you shut them all down?” He raised his brows. She continued. “Do you ever get tired of people ogling your body?” She nodded knowingly. “With a body like that, you don’t have to just manage signals. You have to put out fires.”

He blushed slightly, an awkward grin on his face, and asked, “this body?” She nodded, looking at him oddly. He continued. “I guess I do, sometimes. The first few months I had it I was on a USO tour, selling war bonds with the girls dancing and singing all around me… I kind of liked the attention that brought… at first.”

She smirked wryly. “How old were you? Early twenties?” He nodded slowly. She continued, “and newly equipped with THAT body… on the road with a troupe of dancers?” He looked embarrassed, not meeting her eyes. She grinned. “Well, we’ve gotten past the awkward question of your ‘first time’ with a girl, then, haven’t we?”

He cleared his throat and replied stiffly. “I’d rather not discuss…”

She cut him off with a kind laugh and consoled him. “Awww! Cute! Okay, Mr. ‘I don’t kiss and tell,’ I get it. That’s cool. I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable. I do that to people sometimes.” She bit her lip, and looked suddenly serious. She looked away from him as though debating something, and then leaned closer and murmured. “How about I trade you a little known secret?” He nodded and leaned forward slightly. She took a breath and shared, “I haven’t done it yet. Ya know… all the way sex.” She watched his reaction, defiance in her face.
He blinked, sitting very still and feeling as though he’d been hit hard in the head. From discussions and interactions he overheard he’d begun to assume that every person he met now had an active, and maybe exotic, sex life. He’d assumed ‘nice girls’ were a distant memory to those in the 21st century.

Darcy looked both fragile and belligerent as she grumbled. “I get all these cat calls during warm weather when I can’t hide under sweaters and scarves and I haven’t even done it! I necked some with a boy in middle school and the lie got out that we’d done the deed and my rep was done for, courtesy of his ego... and the size of my boobs.” She nodded to the phone. “A couple of messages that I deleted are from a guy who got pissed because I kept saying no to sleeping with him. He got to be such a pain about it I told him to go fuck himself and dumped him.” She shook her head. “No one around here would believe it, especially after seeing that picture! Ever since I got boobs, people have treated me like a tramp.” She made a pouting face. Then, she half-grinned and shrugged as though to dismiss the hurt he heard in her voice.

He lifted her hand and kissed it tenderly, trying to convey both admiration and comfort. She stopped babbling, looked at him with wide eyes, and then dropped her gaze. He frowned deeply then, and let out a shaky breath. “You must have been frightened when they threatened…”

She paled, bit her lip, and spoke softly. “I was pretty sure I was gonna… die badly… and that was even scarier, but, yeah, I thought that would be an epic-ally bad first time.” He kissed her hand again, and then carefully tightened his grip as she noted her slight tremors. Her shaking became more pronounced as her façade broke, and she let out a tremulous breath. She looked down, avoiding his gaze while she fought to regain her equilibrium. When she finally met his eyes again, her smile was fragile. She whispered. “I was really scared.” He tensed, like he wanted to say or do something, but wasn't quite sure what.

His voice was thick as he sighed. “I’m really glad Hawkeye got you out of there.” He stroked her hand, and looked at her with that disconcertingly direct gaze again. “You’re safe. I... We won’t let anything happen to you.”

She grinned slightly, let her eyes drift shut and then opened them again, sighed tiredly, and requested, “tell me stories about you and your buddy when you were kids. Let me listen to something good and funny to help me go back to sleep.” The way she threaded her fingers through his made him smile. It felt right.

So, he talked about Bucky and their childhood together, trouble they’d gotten into, stupid things he’d done, the fights Bucky had saved him from, the way they’d leaned on each other, embarrassing things they’d done or helped each other out of, good stuff. At first she giggled, and made silly comments that helped take the edge off the melancholy in a way he found enchanting. It put him at ease and lessened his pain a bit. Gradually, she commented less, just letting him talk.

It was the first time he’d spoken of many of those times aloud to anyone. He was up to his rescue of Bucky from Schmidt’s fortress when he noticed that Darcy’s breathing had changed. He lay his head down by her side, and kissed her hand again as he thought of all he’d just told her. He’d not given much thought to what Zola had done to Bucky there… until he found himself face to face and fist to fist with Bucky in the streets of Washington, DC a week ago. His new guilt over Bucky’s fate stabbed at him yet again.

He turned so that he looked up at Darcy. She looked ‘softer’ asleep, even sweeter. Her full lips were barely parted. His attraction to her had hit immediately and powerfully. No one had been with her at first, and he’d felt a need to make sure she was okay, even before discovering how sweet and
kind she was. Now he found himself comfortable with a girl for the first time... ever. He couldn't help wishing it were okay for him to kiss those lips. Contrary to her expectations, he was seeing her as more and more of an amazing dame. He stared at her for a long time as his eyes grew heavier. He thought he would just close them for a minute.

***

Jane Foster crept into Darcy’s room early the next morning and stopped in her tracks when she saw Captain America sitting asleep by Darcy’s side, holding her hand. Her eyes widened at the sight. After standing still for a long moment, she finally entered the room and set the whimsical bear she’d brought on the window sill. She stood at the foot of the bed, awkwardly sipping her coffee.

After a moment, Steve’s eyes opened. He sat up and gasped in surprise. Darcy woke. She blinked her eyes open, and asked, “Jane?”

Jane spoke softly. “I brought coffee and a bear dressed like Thor... to keep you company...” She cut eyes at the Captain.

Steve yawned and apologized. “I’m sorry. I must have talked myself to sleep...”

Darcy smiled blearily. “That’s okay. I liked the stories. You and Bucky are somethin’, Steve!”

Jane moved to the chair he’d vacated, looking skeptical. “What’s up with Captain America, Darcy?”

Darcy made ‘gimme’ gestures towards the coffee. “Let me drink that before the nurse takes it or something.” Jane handed her the mocha, and Darcy sipped it gratefully, moaning with pleasure.

After a moment, Darcy answered Jane. “His name is Steve. Oh my gods, he’s so sweet! He’s a nice guy, not hung up on himself. And he just called me pretty! Eeee! He came down here because he heard the rain start, and Mr. Jarvis, I mean ‘JARVIS’, told him that I was awake... and Steve didn't want me to be afraid of the watery sounds.” Her grin nearly split her face.

Down the hall, Steve was about to get on the elevator when he heard Darcy correct Jane that his name was Steve, rather than Captain America, and then gush about him. He smiled slightly, feeling a lot lighter and happier than he had in a long time. He’d forgotten the sensation of caring so much about how another person saw him that he wanted to be more of a man, better, all they deserved.

Jane looked stricken. “Oh, my God, I didn't even think about it! I heard it raining in the night. I just rolled back over and went to sleep. I suck!”

Darcy smiled fondly. “Yeah. You kinda do.” She laughed at Jane’s expression.

“So, I told him I’m nothing like that damned picture...” She looked up indignantly and asked, “Hey, JARVIS! Is there any way I can get you to remove my personal, private glamour portrait
from Tony Stark’s computers? Cuz, it’s just creepy for him to have it.”

JARVIS replied, “Yes. I have deleted the photograph. I apologize, Miss Lewis.”

Darcy chewed on her lip and answered. “It’s okay, JARVIS. And, remember, you can call me Darcy.”

JARVIS replied. “I did not wish to presume that right as I knew you to be angry with me, Darcy.”

She laughed. “It’s all good. Thanks!” She made a silly face at Jane. “The walls have eyes! Or, well ears…” She shrugged, admitting to herself that she was comforted to know that JARVIS was keeping watch.

Jane nodded. “So, that pic’s taken care of…” She cocked her head and smiled. “I was curious last night, and had JARVIS show me. You looked amazing! That draped-sheet look really worked for you. Thor chose his words carefully… saying, ‘your friend is a fair maiden, indeed!’” Jane giggled.

Darcy quirked a smile and rolled her eyes. “Apparently, I should have been born before World War II. They LOVED curves then.”

Jane nodded. “The Captain seems to have a huge crush.”

Darcy smiled softly. “I’m good with that. Steve’s pretty crush-worthy, himself.”

Jane nodded. “He’s a bit more straight-laced than I expect you to go for, but fairly handsome.”

Darcy laughed. “Gods, Jane! You’re so hung up on Thor you can barely see that Steve Rogers is built, gorgeous… and nice, anyway!” She set the mocha down, and begged, “now, push the button to call the nurse so I can get up and pee. I’m about to bust.”

After the nurse had helped Darcy to the toilet, Darcy asked if Jane would mind staying and talking to her while they tried a shower. JARVIS interjected, “Darcy, Mr. Stark suggests that you NOT wash your hair in the shower the first time. He suffered a flashback to his ill treatment in Afghanistan, when water ran down his face during his first shower after his captivity.” Jane looked stricken at JARVIS’ words.

Darcy shuddered, nodded and agreed, “Yeah. I don’t want to crack my head open trying to fight free of you in the shower.” She grimaced. “But, my hair could sure use a wash…”

JARVIS offered a suggestion. “The Tower has a hair and nail salon, if you would like for me to schedule appointments for you.”

Darcy shook her head regretfully, swallowing hard. She could not imagine laying her head back in a sink for washing. EVER. She shook her head quickly, and pushed the thought away. She would just have to get to her hair in a subsequent shower. She took a deep breath. “Please give Mr. Stark my ‘thanks, dude’.” JARVIS replied he would. Darcy chewed her lip for a second, then asked, “JARVIS? Do you listen to all private conversations here?”

JARVIS replied, “Your secrets are safe with me, so long as you remain on the same side of the law as Mr. Stark.”

Darcy nodded. “Okay, J. So, unless he goes rogue or something, my private conversations stay private then, right?” JARVIS confirmed this.

The nurse with the jade earrings reentered from preparing the bathroom. Darcy asked her, “what’s
The nurse smiled and replied. “I’m Agent Navarro, formerly of SHIELD. Jeanne Navarro.”

Darcy grimaced. “I get the feeling ‘formerly of SHIELD’ describes a lot of people now!”

Navarro nodded agreement. She informed Darcy, “after you shower I will bring in the spirometer, the breathing machine, to exercise your lungs. We need to work towards good output levels so you can be released to your new apartment.” She gave Darcy some pills to take.

Darcy chased them with water from the sports bottle and bit out, “well, bring it on, then! I have less than warm and fuzzy feelings for hospital rooms right now. I’m ready to go.” While Darcy drank from the water bottle she wondered about the new apartment.

Navarro smiled sympathetically. “And, you will sit with Dr. Chau to discuss your psychological assistance, of course. I promise that she’s good and helpful.”

Darcy’s smile faded, “of course... Oh, joy.”

The shower went well; though Darcy was heartily glad she’d heeded Stark’s advice and not tried to wash her hair. The thought of closing her eyes and letting water run over her face was sickening. She saw how upset Jane was every time she flinched (not to mention the bruising on her stomach and subsequent explanation), and Darcy felt guilty for her reactions, which kinda sucked.

It made her grateful for the way Steve offered her comfort without inflicting guilt. She tried to rationalize, reminding herself that he hardly knew her… but it didn't ring true. He was easy to talk to, and easy to listen to. She had even already told him a secret, she blushed as she recalled. And, he hadn't looked at her like she was a frigid freak or a liar. He’d kissed her hand like… she was a lady.

When she saw the breathing machine, she grimaced. The mask portion made her nervous, which set her on angry edge. While she was struggling to blow the necessary amount, another nurse peeked in and exclaimed, “Special delivery, Miss Lewis!”

It was a balloon bouquet, and it contained a couple of brightly colored pinwheels and some containers of bubbles.

The note read: “Darcy, I hope you feel better soon. Sick kids in pediatric hospitals use pinwheels and bubbles to build up their lungs after procedures or illness. I figure that toys might be more fun than the ‘machine’ they’ll make you use. Take care—Steve Rogers”

His penmanship was gorgeous. She swore to never inflict her chicken scratch on his poor eyes.

Darcy laughed, and eagerly asked Agent Navarro if she could blow pinwheels and bubbles instead. The agent shrugged, grinned slightly, and admitted that any breathing exercise Darcy did would be beneficial. Then, she went to consult a pediatric hospital, so she would better know the use equivalent between the toys and a spirometer (thinking she would probably suggest the machine a time or two more for formal readings).

Jane joined Darcy in blowing bubbles for a bit, telling her about Avengers Tower and her interactions with Thor’s team. It was much more fun than blowing into a machine, especially one with a face mask. After a while Jane spoke up gingerly. “Does it seem strange to you that Captain America is fixated on you?”

Darcy raised an eyebrow, frowned, and complained, “Gee, thanks! You sound like I’m not good
enough for him or something.” She nibbled her lip and pouted, admitting to herself that she wondered that. Steve Rogers seemed amazing to her.

Jane shook her head quickly, and frowned, “No! It’s not… no. It’s just that I wonder if he’s being realistic. He seems to view you like a girl from the 1940’s, because of that vintage pic. You’re modern. You’ve been in lots of relationships. I mean, you’re still dating the intern, aren’t you?”

Darcy shook her head slowly. “No. I broke it off.”

Jane sat back. “When? Because of Captain America? Or, because you’d had your fill of him?” She waggled her brows.

Darcy made a face, and answered carefully, “I just wasn’t as into him as he was me.” She had never told Jane that she was not sexually active. Jane assumed because of jokes Darcy made, and maybe for the same reasons other people did, that Darcy was cutting a torrid swath through the male population. In reality, Darcy hadn’t yet dated a man who understood her desire to wait on sex until they knew each other, until they had ‘feelings’. She didn’t think she cared if she waited ‘til marriage, or even if she’d ever marry, but she at least wanted caring emotions to be part of the package before she put out. She hadn’t mentioned this to Jane, because when they first met Jane was living with a jerk of a doctor, and Darcy didn’t want to come off all weird or ‘holier than thou.’

Jane shrugged and returned to her line of attack. “It’s just odd for someone to get as worked up over a stranger’s welfare as the Captain did the other day. Thor asked him about it. I heard he was hanging around outside your door after you came in… And, then to come spend the night by your side and send you gifts? It’s kind of stalker-ish.” Darcy made a face at Jane as Jane continued. “He’s grieving his time. You know he’s nearing one hundred…Thor even tells me that he had a flame in World War II who’s now in her nineties! He still visits her- Agent Peggy Carter, one of the founders of SHIELD…”

Darcy looked at Jane angrily. “You fell in love with Thor over about three days and he’s like a thousand years old! Why should it seem weird if someone awesome likes me? If he’s nice enough to want to help me recover, and not be scared?! We talked for a long time last night. Now, he sends me a fun gift to help me breathe better, and I’m supposed to think that’s creepy? What the hell, Jane?”

Jane sighed, “I’m sorry! I didn't know what happened last night. For all I knew he just came in here, watched you a while, and then fell asleep by you without you knowing he was there!”

Darcy cackled. “Just cuz Steve was born in the same time period as Edward Cullen, doesn't make him like him!!”

Jane looked at her blankly. “Who?”

Darcy laughed with an edge of frustration. “Forget it! It’s a pop-culture thing. I tried to make you watch one of the movies, and you ignored it for work. You're too smart for it.” She shook her head and muttered. “Nobody I know gets pop-culture worth a damn.” Jane looked at Darcy blankly again. Darcy chuckled, “Listen up! I’ll be careful.”

Jane nodded. “Good!” She blushed and bit her lip and shared in a rush, “because, we’re going to live here in the Tower. Thor and I have been given a floor, and I’ll have a fully-funded lab! You have an apartment on our floor, too, and Erik… and a caregiver for him as well.” She smiled. “You won’t mind living here, will you?”

Darcy laughed. “You didn't give a crap how I felt about New Mexico or London. Suddenly you
care what I think, when you’re making me live in the most awesome building in New York? I think I can deal with it!”

Jane laughed. “Robots and aliens have deepened our sisterly bond. I couldn't leave you out when things turn sweet!” Then she grew serious. “But, us living in Avengers Tower is why I’m worried about you and Captain America…”

Darcy grinned grimly. “Oh! You mean because you don’t want me kicked out, if things get weird.” She raised her brows. “Yeah. That would suck for you. You’d starve during your science binges without me around to fetch snacks.”

Jane made a face at Darcy. “You do more than that…”

Darcy blew bubbles at Jane, and pulled a face. “Don’t I know it!” She nodded. “Okay. I get the concern about keeping the peace with the other Avengers.” She twirled a strand of hair, making a face at it since it needed washing. “I usually do fine with that, if the guy is decent, which I think Steve Rogers is, by any standard. I've read about him in history books, which is kind of weirdly hilarious, but still…” Jane looked concerned, but let the matter drop. After a bit more chatting, Jane left so Darcy could rest.

After a nap and some lunch, Darcy heard a knock at the door. Dr. Chau came in, and sat in the chair by the bed, told JARVIS the purpose of her visit, and had him put a noise barrier around the room for privacy’s sake. Dr. Chau was an older woman who dressed impeccably and seemed imperturbable. She shared her credentials in a soothing tone that nearly inspired Darcy to nap again. She asked Darcy if she was ready to discuss what she had experienced, and her feelings about it. Darcy was then impressed with Dr. Chau’s ability to let silence hang without fidgeting, a talent Darcy did NOT possess.

So, Darcy told the doctor about her visit to the psychiatric hospital, and her capture and interrogation there. She confessed how idiotic she felt about her sulky ‘unplugged’ tantrum over her love life, and the way she’d stupidly blundered into a Hydra facility as a result. She talked about water pitchers, and rain drops, and how much she wished she could wash her hair without going insane.

Then, her facade of calm cracking like an egg, she burst out sobbing, and babbled nonsense for a good fifteen minutes. She figured it was the ugliest cry she’d ever had in her life… complete with big, fat tears and lots of snot. Dr. Chau knew where the extra tissues were kept; something Darcy figured was a necessary qualification in this doctor’s line of work. Darcy also talked about how the Avengers had told her she was not alone in her experience, how kind Steve had been to her, and how even Tony Stark had been thoughtful. It was exhausting.

The doctor urged her to continue talking openly about what had happened, and to be understanding with herself and her new stressors. Dr. Chau outlined meditation techniques that might help Darcy focus her thoughts when panic attacks threatened. She also prescribed some medicine to ‘take the edge off’ memories of recent events.

Darcy set appointments for two times per week for the next six weeks, impressed with the benefits of living in the Avengers’ Tower when she was told it was covered under Jane’s lab funding. Finally, Darcy shared a bit about Steve’s attention to her, and Jane’s concerns. She was interested by the gentle expression that lit Dr. Chau’s face.

Dr. Chau's smile was open, unreserved. “The Captain is a good man. He would never do anything to make you uncomfortable, regardless of the status of your friendship. Grieving does not make him any less of a man.” Dr. Chau cleared her throat and warned. “Your biggest concern will be the
jealousy of all of the other young ladies and young men who wish the Captain would pay them particular attention! You should hear them chattering over him every time he visits the Tower! I thought some would become hysterical when word got out that he was moving here!”

Darcy chuckled. “You mean old ladies and old men don’t have crushes on him, too?”

Dr. Chau laughed. “Oh, of course, we do! We’re old, not dead! But, most of us have grown past the petty jealousies of youth… or discovered other pleasures.”

So, Darcy’s first counseling session ended on an up note and she didn't dread the sessions to come.

to be continued
Sentimental Journey

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Steve get to know each other better...

After dinner the next night, Steve came to visit again. Darcy told him about her day, and asked about his. While he talked, she blew bubbles, making him chuckle.

He sighed. “I kinda hoped that JARVIS would find Bucky immediately. He seems all-knowing.”

She nodded. “Yeah. He knows more than your average computer, to be sure. I thought it was funny that he wouldn't call me Darcy until he was sure I was done being angry with him.”

Steve admitted, “I can’t help but look up when I talk to him, as if I think he’s in the ceiling or something. A computer that thinks for itself? THAT’s new.” He looked troubled, and shook his head as though dismissing an unpleasant memory.

Darcy laughed. “I was born in 1989, and he seems new to ME!”

Steve put a hand up briefly as though to shield his eyes. “Ow! ‘89?”

She laughed at him. “Yeah. When were you born?”

He sighed, “1918.” He nodded knowingly, “later than Edward Cullen.” He made a face.

She laughed at his expression. “I warned you it was bad. Did you watch one of the movies, or read a book?”

He shook his head. “No. I just looked it up on the Internet, read an article about it, and watched a few video clips.”

She giggled, trying to picture Captain America watching ‘Twilight’ on YouTube. “So, what did you think?”

He shrugged, looking pained. “I don’t think I’m the target audience for that story… and the number of links that come up for it staggers the imagination.” She laughed again, and brushed a strand of hair back with irritation, a disgruntled look on her face. He noted her annoyance. “Are you… mad at your hair? You’re glaring at it.” He quirked a slight grin at his silly question and observation.

She shook her head, now serious. “No. I’m mad at myself, really. I took Tony Stark’s advice via JARVIS, and didn’t try to wash it when I showered, so I wouldn’t freak out, you know… but it’s going to have to happen soon, because I’m disgusted with my hair. I don’t like going more than a day without washing it if I can help it.” She hung her head, embarrassed.

He leaned forward. “Is there any way that I can help?”

She shrugged helplessly. ‘I don’t know! I’m NOT inviting you into the shower with me, soldier boy, but I can’t imagine laying back and letting anyone wash it in a sink.’ She shuddered while he
struggled to keep his expression even.

He considered the problem for a moment. “I agree that laying back or sitting would be a bad idea, at least in the immediate future. But, if you stood… Could you wash it at a sink yourself, or with help? I’d help, if you like.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “Would you really help me?” Her smile softened.

He grinned softly back at her, and nodded. “I’d be honored.”

She sighed. “Well… okay. We can try.” She bit her lip, anxious.

He smiled encouragement. “Let me go get a few things for you. I’ll be right back.” He walked out purposefully, and she admired the view as he left. She shook her head with wonder that a guy who looked like ‘that’ was paying attention to her. She shrugged, and thanked Karma for the favor, however temporary it might be.

Moments later, Steve returned with shampoo, conditioner, a flat comb, and a few fluffy pink towels with flowers on them. Darcy had put on a robe over her hospital gown and belted it firmly. She raised an eyebrow. “Pretty. Yours?”

He shook his head, and made a face. “Nah. Natasha’s. She’ll forgive me for borrowing.” Darcy had a jealous twinge, wondering how well Steve knew this Natasha. He continued eagerly. “I figured it’d be good if the towel didn't look or feel anything like the kind in a hospital…”

She nodded, appreciative and touched by his thoughtfulness. She told him, “I got a nurse aide to clean the sink.” She bit her lip. “So, I guess I’m ready.”

He assured her. “No pressure! You just seem bothered.” She nodded, and got out of bed and walked to the sink. Steve moved a chair close and laid a towel over the back of it. He urged. “Rest here when you like. You’re in charge. I won’t do anything that you don’t ask me to.” She looked at him gratefully. Standing next to him made her feel tiny, but safer.

She swallowed hard as she turned on the water and listened to the splashy sound of it. Her mind flashed back to the moments when she’d realized she was about to be water-boarded. She shivered and clenched fists, breathing in and out slowly. She noted in the mirror that Steve twitched like he wanted to touch her, but he stayed still, his knuckles white against the back of the chair.

Steve murmured kindly. “Why don’t you sit while the water warms?” She nodded and sat, sighing. He was concerned by her expression. He looked at the sink, wondering how to make things easier for her. “Do you want to turn it off?” She shook her head, and stared at the water, trying to use her anger to push back panic. He felt the water, and adjusted it until it seemed right. She tested it, too, and stood resolutely.

She whispered. “Will you kind of spot me, make sure I don’t fall over or anything?” He nodded, and moved in close enough that she drew comfort from his nearness, though they were not touching. She hesitated a moment, breathed in and out once loudly, and finally leaned over and put her head under the water. She was very still at first, then managed to work the water through until all of her hair was wet. Some ran down her face against her nose and she flinched, hands grabbing the edge of the sink quickly.

Steve murmured encouragement and handed her shampoo. It took a second to pry her hands free and accept the bottle from him. She got started putting a little shampoo on her head, but, embarrassingly, began to cry. She held onto the sink, trembling all over. One of her hands shifted
to the neckline of her robe, holding it closed. He took the shampoo bottle.

Steve murmured, his tone calming and gentle. “Can I help with the shampoo?” She nodded, still crying, but grateful that he didn't exude pity or guilt like Jane. He began to tenderly massage the shampoo through her hair, rubbing firmly and thoroughly. Her crying eased and she savored his touch, found herself leaning into it. After a bit, he urged, “ready to rinse?”

She asked, “would you do that, too?” with her voice muffled by the awkward angle.

He obviously heard, as he replied softly, “Of course.” Again, he ran his fingers through her hair thoroughly, working the shampoo out. He gently massaged her scalp. It felt good, soothing. When he was done, she sat back in the chair and he turned off the water while she used a fluffy towel on her face and hair. He sounded doubtful as he offered. “Conditioner?”

She smiled weakly. “Maybe next time...” She rubbed her hair some more, dried her eyes again, and then let her arms fall by her sides. She sat there silently, not able to look at him for a long moment.

He waited, awkward in the silence. “Would you like for me to comb it out?”

She nodded slowly, worn out from fear. Despite Steve’s calming touch, she couldn't push away the memories. A bead of water dripped down her face. She flinched again and frantically dabbed at it with the towel. He gently worked the comb through her hair, parted it for her like he’d seen in her pictures, and continued running the comb through. It felt wonderful. She closed her eyes, and focused on his attention to her. After a while, he spoke. “Would you like for me to rub your shoulders? You seem...”

She chuckled grimly and nodded. He massaged her, and she groaned, “Oh! That’s amazing. Who taught you?”

He admitted in a low, reluctant tone, “one of the girls in my USO show...”

Darcy groaned. “She was an awesome teacher.” She again felt a jealous twinge, wondering if the fabulous masseuse slept with Steve. She counted it something of a victory that she complimented the woman’s teaching rather than just straight out calling her a lucky bitch. Darcy peeked at him, but couldn't read anything in his expression. She let it go, and after a few moments she felt relaxed and grinned slightly. “That was too good! I don’t think I can get myself up from this chair!” She yelped when he picked her up.

“Allow me, then.” He easily swung her over to the bed and laid her down. She tried not to look as stunned as she felt. A giggle surprised its way out of her throat. It was like he’d lifted her out of the mass of her fear, up onto a cloud where happy-sunshine feelings warmed her. The feel of the tight, well-defined muscles in his arms and chest was a whole other thing, too. When he lay her down his eyes met hers, then drifted to her lips as he pulled back. She held her breath, feeling heat between them. She experienced a physical longing, wishing he would kiss her. If she’d felt any stronger or steadier, she might have kissed him.

“Better?” he asked, voice slightly husky. She nodded and smiled. She couldn't believe how weak she felt still, but how good she felt just from being in his arms for a moment. Steve leaned over and handed her the bubbles, and suggested, “Blow. Channel your energy.” She chuckled shortly and raised her brows, unable to avoid suggestive thoughts with him still so near. He looked at her strangely, and she wondered if he guessed her thoughts. She imagined from the red flush making its way up his neck that he might.

She blew bubbles, focusing on the iridescence of each globe, thinking how bubbles were innocent
and playful. A bubble landed on Steve’s face, and she smiled as he made it pop. She grinned. “Thanks for the bubbles and pin wheels, by the way. They’re way less grim than ‘the machine.’”

Steve nodded. “You’re welcome. I try to get to children’s hospitals as often as I can, and I’ve noticed that better ones have that for recovery. I was sick a lot as a kid and remember what it was like.” He saw her expression. “What?”

She noted. “You’re a nice guy.”

His expression was rueful. “Isn't that okay? Some people act like it’s not.”

She chuckled. “Tony Stark?” He shrugged and nodded. She continued, “I think he’s nicer than he lets on. He’s probably just doing a sort of Alpha-dog pissing thing with you.”

Steve looked startled and laughed shortly. “That sounds about right.”

She looked far away for a moment and opined, “and, probably you being friends with his dad riles him up. I read about them, grim stuff. It didn't sound like they got along too well.”

Steve nodded slowly. “I don’t understand it. Howard was a good guy. He helped make the serum transformation work, made my shield for me, looked out for me. He took chances to do the right thing, flew me behind enemy lines so I could find Bucky and the others…”

She shrugged. “Maybe he changed after the war.”

Steve frowned. “That’s what Natasha told me.”

Darcy took a breath and asked her question in a rush. “Is Natasha your ex, or someone you date? You've mentioned her a few times.”

Steve looked startled again. “Natasha and me? Nah. I mean, she’s really pretty and all, but we’re teammates. I kinda think she’s with Clint. We've never, well, she kissed me once when we were avoiding capture, but it’s never been like…” He shut his mouth as he saw her repressing a laugh. He took a breath and continued, “No. Natasha and I are not romantic with each other. She’s always trying to get me to ask other people out, as a matter of fact. I’m… single.”

She nodded once, filed all that away. “Okay. So what did she say about Howard Stark?”

He relaxed. “She just told me that time changes people; that he wasn't the same as I remembered.” He looked thoughtful and shook his head.

She saw his confusion. “Was this after you realized that a lot of time had passed and not changed you much?”

He nodded emphatically. “Yeah. Made it kind of hard to understand what she meant…”

Darcy responded. “Well, she probably meant that it’s like experiences change us. I guess. Maybe something got to him…”

He looked at her seriously, and paused for a moment, considering an idea. She’d seen Jane look that way as she realized something, so Darcy was quiet and let him think. He looked at her again and continued, “I hope your experience this week won’t change you too much.” She just smiled slightly, looking a little bit puzzled.

He quirked a grin and explained. “I like what I know from talking with you… and Thor had some
pretty great stories to share.” She blushed and chuckled, wondering what Thor had told Steve. He seemed to push hesitation aside. “So, um, no pressure… and I understand if you don’t want to … but… would you go out on a date with me after you’re released?” He looked nervous.

She nodded and grinned. “I couldn’t be safer going out with anyone else, except maybe Thor and Jane!” He frowned slightly. She added, “Oh, I’m not saying I’d just go for safety… I like you! I mean I’d like to go out with you.” He relaxed slightly.

She asked, “Did you really think I might say no?”

He looked vulnerable as he nodded. “I thought you might.” He took a deep breath. “I overheard Dr. Foster and Thor talking earlier. She seemed concerned about my interest in you.”

Darcy frowned, eyes narrowing. “What did Jane say?”

He shrugged. “The word creepy was mentioned.” He shrugged again while Darcy groaned. “Thor spoke in my favor… but I don’t think Thor knows much about modern Earth women, not much more than I do.” He grinned self-deprecatingly.

She sighed. “Jane’s kind of negative sometimes. She fell in love with Thor over a weekend, waited ages for him to return… only to see him fighting in the Battle of New York, and then hear from SHIELD that he’d gone back to Asgard without a word to her. And then she got swept back to Asgard in time for a big evil elf war where she nearly died. Even before Thor, she had a crap-tastic record with guys.” She saw Steve looking at her with amusement. She continued, “I love her, but she’s a dork and mostly unconscious about people around her. She’s too caught up in her brilliant science. Ya know?” Steve nodded. She explained. “Jane’s a little worried about potential awkwardness since we now live in the same place.” She took a breath. “And, hey, I don’t get it, because you could date anyone you want…”

He offered. “Before…” he gestured to his body, “the serum, I didn't ‘date’ much and I never felt like those girls were on a date with ME, anyway. I never even asked one out. Bucky'd have a second girl, really there for him, who had to put up with me. And after the serum I, well I did ‘fool around’ with a few of the girls in the chorus, I admit, when they came to me, and well, I met a few since I woke… but I haven’t had time to date, or get serious with a girl…”

She processed that. “But, Thor told Jane that you had a lady during the War, a woman you’re still friends with?”

He nodded, looking troubled. “Peggy was someone I hoped to find time to be with- the possibility of a life together. Despite the little time we had, I loved her so much… She kissed me once, right before I got on Schmidt’s plane. Her voice was the last I heard as I crashed.”

Darcy whispered. “Is that when you… drowned?” It was difficult for her to even say the word.

He nodded, his look far away. “Yeah. The bombs had to go down somewhere safe, so I put the plane in the North Atlantic.”

She shivered. “It sounds so cold…” Things the character Jack described about the pain of cold water in the movie ‘Titanic’ ran through her mind.

He looked at her soberly. “Yeah. It was.”

She grimaced, then raised her eyes to his plaintively. “Who helped you wash your hair the first time?”
He grinned ruefully, and shook his head. “No one. I got kinda greasy sometimes at first. I got over it, or, well, better about it.” He shrugged and matter-of-factly admitted, “I don’t much like it when I have to go into cold water.”

She looked sad. “I bet you really wished Peggy was there to help you when you woke up and had to deal with so much.”

He nodded and frowned. “I even considered calling her a few times at first, but I didn't think it would be fair to either one of us for me to try to lean on her after so much time. She went on with life, had a family.” He tried, and failed, to appear unemotional. “She’s sick now. Sometimes she remembers me, sometimes not. I just try to go with it and help her be comfortable and happy. She was my girl. She deserves to be happy.”

Darcy asserted her belief. “So do you!” She reached out for his hand, wanting to be the one to offer comfort for a change. He quickly grasped her, grateful for the chance to hold her hand again.

He took a deep breath. “It’s not like I’m looking for a crutch from the past, Darcy, or am kidding myself that you’re someone you’re not. That you looked like a dame from my time in that picture hit me hard, I admit it. I remember the original, but you’re even more… beautiful. Damned Tony had it right when he joked it gave me the sweats… and… But, it’s you. You’re brave and generous and funny and, well, real. You shoot straight, something it seems like dames now don’t do much. I was kind of scared you’d think the bubbles were silly… until I remembered who I was sending them to…”

She exclaimed, “Dude! Relax. I like you. I love the bubbles, the pin wheels and balloons, too!” She stroked his hand lightly and felt him go still. “We’re already becoming friends, and you’re really easy on the eyes, so let’s just see what happens, okay?” She winked at him playfully.

He shivered slightly as he nodded. She could tell that he liked the way she was touching his hand and was attracted to her. It gave her a giddy feeling inside. She hazarded a guess. “I bet Natasha tried to get you to go on dates because you seem lonely once a person gets to know you. Most people just see the ‘perfect-man Captain’, who is kind of intimidating, by the way. But underneath that you’re Steve… this sweet guy who needs…”

She stopped and swallowed hard. “When you were touching me, washing my hair and rubbing my shoulders, it made me kind of… tingly, which is at odds with some of the stuff I’m dealing with right now, ya know?” She quirked a watery grin.

He whispered, “Tingly?” His whisper felt very intimate.

She grinned a bit more and her voice dropped to a whisper. “Yeah. Like if you don’t leave… ‘I might kiss you or something’ kind of tingly.”

He replied, “Tingly’s good then.” He leaned forward slightly, and she grinned shyly and pulled back. He smiled patiently.

She thought back over his words, curious. “What did you mean when you described Peggy as ‘your girl?’ What does that phrase mean to you?” She seemed perplexed.

Steve looked serious. “During the war I really didn't get much time with Peggy. But she was special to me, made me want to be more. When I fall for someone, want to treat her good and make a future with her… That’s ‘my girl.’” He stared at her very directly, and she swallowed hard. She saw him looking at her lips again… and she definitely felt ‘tingly.’ She let out a shaky breath and blushed more.
At that moment JARVIS interrupted them. “Please excuse me, Captain Rogers. I have found a current match for Sgt. Barnes here in New York City.”

Steve jumped up. “In New York?!?” He looked at Darcy apologetically.

She exclaimed, “Go! Find your friend! I can’t wait to meet him.” She did her best to hide how much she hated to see him go.

He started to walk out of the room, but stopped and turned around, his expression vulnerable and determined at once. “Darcy, forgive me, please, for asking this… but I have too many regrets to run out that door without kissin’ you goodbye, or at least asking to. Would that be okay? May I kiss you?” He looked tentative and tongue-tied, as though he feared her reaction.

She nodded and sat up straighter, slightly dizzy at the thought. He moved back to the bed and sat on it next to her, cupping her face gently with one large hand. He leaned in and his kiss shimmered into her, slowly at first and then with gentle passion as she responded. She couldn't imagine a better kiss. When they finally pulled apart they both looked dazed. He made a slightly strangled noise in his throat and stood again. He stared at her as he backed out of the room.

She urged him on. “Take care, Steve. I’m looking forward to our date.”

He nodded. “Yeah, me too. We've got a date.”

She felt that this phrase was of complicated significance to him. She remarked, “I need you to keep it. I might need you to help me condition my hair or something.” She winked at him again.

He grinned and nodded.

After he left, she picked up her replacement phone again and began working on a playlist for him. She found a fresh challenge in exploring music from Steve's time before the ice and all of the years of music he’d missed. She’d previously dismissed much of the earliest music as ‘Pawpaw’s’, and still didn't like some of the songs, but there were exceptions. It was tempting to fall into ‘oh, you gotta hear this’ lecture-mode with his list… but she resisted and searched the decades for songs with lyrics that could apply to him or to her… or to ‘them.’

Agent Navarro brought medicine before lights-out time and chuckled as Darcy hit replay on ‘Sentimental Journey’ by the Les Brown Orchestra. “How many times have you listened to that song tonight, Miss Lewis?”

Darcy grinned. “I’ve listened to it a lot since I read that it was sort of a theme song for welcoming soldiers home from Europe at the end of WWII.” She shrugged, “I like it!” Navarro chuckled kindly and nodded as she left the room. Darcy let the music flow over her. As it always had, music helped her focus her thoughts and feelings.

to be continued
Chapter Summary

Darcy leaves the Healing Ward, visits Erik, meets Natasha, and settles in at Avengers Tower while worrying about Steve and his mission to find Bucky.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has not been beta'd, but I don't want to let too much time go by between posts. Please forgive. :)

Several long days later, Darcy was released from the Healing Ward. She was pleased and relieved to leave, regardless of how nice Navarro and some of the others were. She was deemed fit and healthy enough to return to light duties, but still kept bubbles nearby to help her breathing get stronger. Bubbles lifted her mood, too, dissipating the sudden flashes of rage that hit from time to time.

Jane and Thor’s impromptu celebration in her honor resulted in some of the funniest drinking games Darcy had ever played, and one VERY tipsy Jane.

Darcy wished Steve could be there to celebrate with her... so much that it surprised her. It wasn't just because she was odd-woman-out, and the couple she was with seemed so utterly fated for each other. She’d grown accustomed to Thor and Jane’s perfect fit, and never felt quite as lonely before as she did now. She sent the promised kitten memes and the song ‘Sentimental Journey’ to Steve, looking forward to welcoming him home from his mission. She checked her phone often in hopes of getting a reply, but heard nothing, and chided herself that he couldn't be expected to mess around with texting her while chasing down Hydra's top assassin.

Steve had become a fixture in her dreams. She was pleased that her dream life wasn't limited solely to the horror of what had happened in London. It also included a heavy-duty dose of one Steven G. Rogers. Some dreams were light and sweet. She dreamed about him smiling, or the way he looked at her. But, others left her filled with longings she’d never fully explored before. She even had a dream about showering with him- and she’d thought she would NEVER have warm and fuzzy feelings involving water again.

In her waking hours, she thought a lot about the kiss they shared, and how sweetly he treated her. His stories of mischief and mayhem with Bucky when they were kids often brought a smile to her face. She tried to cling to that when she worried about his current mission to bring Bucky back.

When she told Steve she looked forward to dating him, the only lie there had been how much she understated her excitement. It wasn't that he was Captain America (though, yeah, wow to that!) so much as it was that a really good man wanted to date her. ‘Good-man date-ness’ was an unusual enough state of affairs to excite her. That he was mind-blowing-ly attractive was icing on that scrumptious cake.
Her first item of business, the day after her release, was to visit Erik. His caregiver, a no-nonsense nurse named Ilsa, glowered at Darcy as though she suspected Darcy might be an assassin. Apparently, Erik didn't receive much in the way of visitors. Ilsa seemed to frown all of the time and had a curious definition of personal space, close. Darcy saw that Ilsa was watching episodes of ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ on her StarkPad, though, so she figured that they’d end up getting along fine (unless Ilsa thought Season 6 Buffy was the best season, then… NO… The musical ep was amazing, and the memory loss one after it good fun, but most of the rest was… just… NO).

The first day that Darcy came to visit Erik, Ilsa interrogated her at the door for a full three minutes before Erik finally asked who was there and admonished Ilsa. “Darcy! Oh, Ilsa! She’s my friend. If it weren’t for Darcy helping me get away… The stars only know what those people would have done to me!”

Darcy grinned ruefully at Erik’s outburst. She supposed she was glad someone could see an upside to her blundering into a Hydra hornet’s nest.

Ilsa stood back the bare minimum that would allow Darcy to sidle past her into the apartment and glowered. Rather than feeling offended by Ilsa’s caution, Darcy chose to feel comforted that Erik was well protected. Darcy hugged Erik for a long time (not awkward!) and he murmured with concern for her.

She tried to reassure him and downplay her experiences. “Erik, nothing happened! Hawkeye got there before they really had time to question me much.” Erik looked at her sadly, near tears. She continued. “I’m fine. I’ve just had a little cold.” She could see that he wasn’t buying her act.

Erik burst out crying and choked out,’I was on the plane when Hawkeye brought you to the airport, unconscious. Your hair was wet and you were bruised and pale. I know what they did. I’m so sorry! Hawkeye told me everything because I thought it was even worse when I saw that they’d ripped your clothing. I’m grateful it wasn’t worse, but I’m sorry for what they were able to do. I’m so sorry!” Tears rolled freely down his face as he cried. “You suffered in my place! I’m afraid I need to hug you again, dear girl. It may get awkward.” He emitted snuffly, tear-filled laughter.

Darcy laughed, too. “Keep your pants on and I won’t complain!” She cried with him as he held her close for a long time. She thought even Ilsa’s icy façade looked a bit less fierce as she watched them. Darcy assured Erik that if he hadn't run for help, it would have been much worse, and that she forgave him. It was true. Darcy made plans to return daily to share hot chocolate with him, assuring him that chocolate was even better for him than any drug.

Back at her place, Thor’s larger-than- life manner made her laugh, and Jane’s dopey dorkiness felt comfortingly familiar. Thor was awesome at moving furniture around until it was placed just right. He had good decorating sense, too. Darcy decided to take a few days to unpack the boxes of her items that had mystically appeared in her magnificent apartment, to make it home for as long as she got to stay in the Tower.

Her new place was beyond awesome. She had a fancy gas fireplace, all her own, with a remote control. Thor laughed as she played with the remote and pretended that she was casting magical spells. She was hanging her favorite print over the mantle when a firm knock sounded at the door. Hopefully, she scurried to the door, breathlessly hopeful by the time she answered it. Her welcoming smile faded to an “Oh!” of surprise as she found herself face-to-face with the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen in person.

The redhead stared at her appraisingly until Thor cried out from behind Darcy. “Lady Natasha! It is good to see your fair face again! Is all well with you? Were you successful in the thought-sorting
endeavors that friend Barton mentioned?"

Natasha laughed, and Darcy gaped at her. The laugh was the loveliest laugh in the history of
laughs. She thought of ‘The Princess Bride’, having read the book as well as repeatedly watching
the movie, and recalled the lists of beautiful women and their perfections, a list Buttercup ascended
during the story. If this Natasha had existed in that realm, she would have been the one to leave all
others behind.

Darcy squeaked. “Steve just told me you were pretty!” Darcy nearly swallowed her tongue as she
realized that Steve’s friend ‘Natasha’ was also the famed Black Widow, the lone female Avenger.
She kicked herself for not having put it together before. Having someone so legendary in her
apartment and looking her over with open curiosity felt surreal.

Natasha laughed again, and sidled past Darcy to move inside and clasp arms with Thor as a fellow
warrior. She replied to Thor first. “Thank you for your good wishes, Thor. I’m glad to see you
again. I made a beginning on my task. It will take a long time, by our measurement of such things,
though.” She nodded to Jane. “You must be Dr. Foster. It’s a pleasure.” Finally, Natasha turned to
Darcy, studying her carefully. “And, you must be Dr. Foster’s assistant, Miss Lewis. It’s a pleasure
to meet you, too.” Her gaze was penetrating, almost unnerving.

Darcy swallowed hard. “Likewise.” She straightened her glasses, resisted the urge to curtsy, and
wished she looked less awkward. It almost felt like Natasha could read her thoughts. The beautiful
woman had a calm and deadly air. Recalling her initial impression of Hawkeye, Darcy wondered if
Natasha was making an effort to not seem threatening. From all accounts, she was even more
deadly than the archer.

Natasha stared at her unblinkingly. “I understand that you have some things of mine. There was a
note on my bathroom counter.”

Darcy looked at her blankly. Then, she gasped, “Oh! Your towels and stuff! I’m sorry. Steve left so
suddenly that he didn’t have a chance to return them.” She blushed and ran to the bathroom where
she’d set the items after washing the towels.

She heard Natasha speaking to Thor. “I wish that the Captain had taken you with him. While he
could hold his own with the Winter Soldier, he refuses to really hurt him, even at great cost to
himself. He nearly died during their fight over the Triskelion. Those wounds would have killed
anyone else. If someone hadn't pulled him from the water, he might have drowned beyond
reclamation, not just a little.”

As Darcy passed, Jane muttered. “How does anyone drown just a little bit?”

Darcy grumped at Jane for her thoughtless question. “I’d rather not think about it, thank you. Topic
change, please!” Her words were clipped, tinged with suppressed anger.

Jane apologized profusely and looked dismayed. Then, trying for a lighter note, Jane touched the
navy scarf Darcy wore over her gray t-shirt to soften the appearance of her bust and teased. “Stars,
eh? Are you a star-spangled girl now?” She looked puzzled by the disgruntled look Darcy shot
back as she removed the scarf and tossed it in a nearby trash can.

Darcy struggled to contain her anger, slow her breathing, and grasp at calm. She pursed her full
lips, and shook her head, jealous of the girls Steve had known during his USO days. Despite her
efforts, her color rose. She bit out, “Hardly! Geez, Jane! Please try for something to talk about that
doesn't make me want to throw things!”
Thor and Natasha stopped talking and were both studying Darcy. Thor seemed puzzled and concerned, with a bit of protective anger under the surface. Natasha looked like the cat that’d eaten the canary. Darcy was dismayed that her apparent jealousy might compromise Steve’s privacy. Her mood shifted again, full of guilt and self reproach. She struggled to school her features to a neutral expression, swallowed hard, and handed Natasha her things.

Thor shook his head slightly and boomed to Natasha. “The Captain says it was his friend ‘Bucky’ who pulled him from the water. While his former comrade inflicted great injury upon him at first, he had a change of heart.”

Darcy chuckled to herself over how awkwardly Thor pronounced the name ‘Bucky.’

Natasha bit back, “I've never seen the Captain injured so badly, not by the Chitauri, not ever.” She added in a worried tone. “I worry that his compassion could cost him his life.”

Darcy paled at Natasha’s words.

Thor looked thoughtful. “I believe that I have more experience in such matters, Lady Natasha. If the Captain believes his comrade’s heart can shine through, then it will.” He nodded somberly. “Loki gave his life in the battle against evil- once his heart was touched by our mother’s death.”

Natasha's expression shifted. “I was terribly sorry to hear of Frigga’s passing, Thor.” Darcy noted that she didn't mention Loki’s death at all. Darcy thought from the pained quirk of Thor’s lips that he felt the omission, too.

Jane spoke up. “I saw the Captain as he, Falcon, and Hawkeye were leaving- discussing his friend. He thought it was a good sign that Bucky had come home to New York, and said that JARVIS had footage of the Sergeant visiting an exhibit about them at the Smithsonian in DC earlier; he hoped maybe Bucky was even looking for him, and for clues to their early lives here.”

Darcy shook her head in amazement that she’d kissed a guy who had an exhibit at the Smithsonian.

Natasha turned back to Darcy. “Thank you, Miss Lewis. I hope use of my things helped you.”

Darcy nodded and explained. “Steve thought it would be easier for me to wash my hair the first time if the towels weren’t like those in the hospital where I was interrogated.” She managed to refer to the incident without measurable panic, and considered that an accomplishment.

Jane spoke up, curious. “How did it go?”

Darcy replied uneasily, shifting from one foot to the other. “Okay. My hair got clean.”

Jane looked remorseful, remembering Darcy's first shower after her ordeal. “Did you wash it in the shower?”

Darcy shook her head. “Steve suggested I try standing at a sink. He helped me.” Under Natasha’s obvious scrutiny, Darcy blushed again.

Natasha nodded thoughtfully. “Steve’s a good man. I forget how short life has seemed to him. He’s a brilliant tactician, incredibly observant, and commanding in battle- but still a young man in other situations- like matters of the heart.” Her look was piercing.

Darcy cocked her head to the side, and frowned. “Was that some sort of insult? Did you just imply he’d have to be immature to like me?”
Natasha laughed, apparently startled by the way Darcy stood up to her. “No. I meant that he’s younger than his years.” Her smile to Darcy was more genuine. “Many people are afraid of me, you know.”

Darcy nodded. “I get that. You’re like, the Black Widow, aren’t you? ‘Hear-me-roar’ woman inspiration to bad-ass little girls everywhere?” Natasha raised a brow, the ghost of a smile on her perfect lips. Darcy continued. “But, I’m not one of the bad guys. I’m just a science intern.” She lifted her chin and snorted. “I don’t think it would add to your rep to claim you’d taken me out.”

Natasha laughed while Jane looked on, somewhat aghast. Thor laughed, too. “Lady Darcy is fearless for one so tiny. When we first met she felled me with a small lightning weapon. She is made of courage and good humor.”

Natasha nodded. “Ironic use of a ‘lightning weapon...’ I like it. Thank you for returning my items, Miss Lewis. It is interesting to make your acquaintance.”

She turned again to Thor. “Why didn't you go with Cap?”

Thor's expression turned somber. “He declined my offer of assistance. He felt that I might intimidate his old friend, and that the man might flee due to my imposing appearance.” He puffed his chest out at this last.

Natasha asked, “and Stark? Why didn't he go?” Doubt crept into her tone.

Thor frowned, and observed. “Our Captain and the Man of Iron? They clash like wild beasts and challenge each other fiercely. The Captain indicated that the Man of Iron is too tactless and grating, and that he might goad the Winter Soldier to further violence.” He shook his head. “There is uneven peace between our friends. I foresee it coming to blows.”

Darcy nodded, and interjected. “He’s got a point. Tony Stark can be an ass, when he’s not secretly being nice to people.”

Natasha’s smile broadened. “Yes. He can.” She nodded approvingly. “Unflinching, direct honesty! That’s the clincher.” Her gaze flickered over Darcy’s figure and face. She saw Darcy shrink from the scrutiny. “You’re a bit like Steve, too, slightly uneasy with others’ common preoccupation with your physical attributes.” She looked thoughtful and murmured, “like shared life experience…” She smiled to herself, remembering a conversation.

Darcy turned curious eyes Natasha’s way. “Why were you always trying to get him to ask people out? Was it because you worried about how lonely he is, or because he was too much of a stickler about things?” She suppressed a grin.

Natasha chuckled and looked a bit surprised that Darcy knew about that. “More the first, but I admit some of us thought he might be easier to work with if he got laid more.”

Darcy blushed, and looked away from Natasha’s penetrating gaze. “I figured it was something like that.”

Natasha asked bluntly. “Did he ask you out?” A variety of emotions played across her lovely face-pique, hope, interest, and curiosity.

Darcy nodded, biting her lip and willing down another blush. She changed the subject, looking more serious. “Why are you so worried that Bucky will hurt him?”

Natasha looked less warm then. “Winter Soldier asked the Captain who the hell Bucky is. ‘Bucky'
has been so conditioned over the years that he doesn't remember himself.”

Darcy spoke softly. “He remembered Steve. Steve thought there was something, a flash of recognition…”

Natasha growled. “He still tried to kill him. Winter Soldier couldn't remember where or when he knew Steve from. He’s been wiped so many times, it’s amazing that he can still function.” She shook her head. “But, function he does! He’s deadly. He tried to take out all of us repeatedly. He shot Director Fury. He ripped Falcon out of the sky, nearly bested me more than once, and nearly killed Captain America.” She sighed deeply. “Their best hope is for Barton to tranq him from a distance.” She murmured. “I hope that Barton keeps his distance, ‘cause I’m better in close quarters, and I would've died if Steve hadn't gotten there in time.” She glanced at Thor and offered wryly. “Money- the usual, on Barton coming back injured somehow. Do we have a wager?” She glanced again at Darcy. "I need to make up cash from another wager I just lost."

Thor tried to assure Natasha. “The Captain is an able tactician. He will use his assets to their best advantage.” He smiled at her. “I will meet your wager. I believe that our friends will return uninjured.” Thor added thoughtfully, “I maintain that while you seem familiar with what was done to the Captain’s friend by their enemies, you are not as familiar with the depth of their friendship bond as the Captain.”

Natasha looked slightly taken aback, nodded to Thor respectfully, and replied. “I hope Cap, Sam, and Barton return soon- successful, or at least all in one piece.”

After Natasha left, Darcy felt more on edge about Steve’s mission than she had before. She wondered if she’d been naive not to worry more, acknowledging to herself that Black Widow had fought Bucky in Washington, DC, and had seen just how dangerous he could be. She returned to work arranging her things in the apartment, but remained distracted by worry the rest of the day. She worried for Steve’s well-being, both physical and emotional. It was obvious that Bucky had been one of the most important people in Steve’s life.

When Jane stepped out of the room a bit later, Darcy took the opportunity to approach Thor. “Hey, um Thor?” He looked at her with friendly curiosity, noting her nervousness. She took a breath, and offered. “I don’t think I mentioned this before, but I, um, I’m sorry for the grief you’re going through about your brother Loki… his death, I mean. I’m sorry you lost him.”

Thor’s eyes brightened with unshed tears, and he pulled Darcy tightly against him. “I thank you for that, dear sister.” Jane looked surprised to find them that way when she came back into the room. Thor wiped his eyes, released Darcy, and smiled tightly to Jane.

As theydeparted that afternoon, Jane tried to reassure Darcy. “Don’t worry so much! He’s Captain America! He can take care of himself.”

Thor added more reassuring words. “The Captain is strong and skilled, a fine warrior who I am honored to follow into battle. His experience in your world’s wars serves us all well now. I have every confidence in his abilities, or I would have insisted on accompanying him. Seeing your concern and hearing Lady Natasha’s unease for him and for Hawkeye makes me wish I had, if only for your sakes.”

Darcy thanked him, and closed the door behind him and Jane, somewhat relieved to finally have her place all to herself. She turned on music to keep her company, and tried not to worry while she worked more on unpacking. Later, she made dinner and sat at her computer, trying to distract herself from worry. Curiosity led her to look up Peggy Carter, the woman Steve had described as ‘his girl’. The recent release of SHIELD records onto the Internet made her search easy.
She was unsurprised to see that Peggy Carter was a gorgeous woman who exuded confidence and strength. It seemed as though she looked through the camera at Darcy, contemptuously daring her to try and follow in her footsteps with Steve. Furthermore, the woman had a fabled career as a SHIELD Agent. She won a Congressional Medal of Honor for her work during WWII and in the Cold War. After Steve’s disappearance in 1945, Carter took his place as leader of his ‘Howling Commandos’- raiding and destroying Hydra strongholds, and trying to finish the job he’d started. Darcy chuckled to herself. “Well, THAT’s not intimidating or anything. Geez!”

Darcy couldn't help but imagine what it would've been like for Steve and Peggy, if Steve hadn't disappeared. The duo would have been magnificent together. The image made Darcy feel even smaller than she had on realizing she was in a room with the Avengers for the first time. Insignificant. Less. Not enough. She’d never felt so jealously inadequate. While she knew that Steve had missed his chance with Peggy irrevocably, Darcy couldn't help but dwell on ways she came up short in comparison. For neither the first nor last time, Darcy wondered what Steve saw in her and why he wanted a date. She even worried he might change his mind about her.

She closed the computer windows with Peggy’s picture and information, and played a few games to shut her thoughts down, away from distressing thoughts of jealousy and worry. It took her a while to work around a Candy Crush glitch that kept her from moving past level 627, but she finally used a few power-ups and got to the next level.

Still, worry for Steve’s safety as he searched for Bucky blended into nightmares. Instead of only dreaming about her interrogation, she also dreamed about Steve fighting a faceless man and letting the man kill him.

Darcy's hysterical screams so alarmed JARVIS that he alerted Thor and Jane, who came running into Darcy’s apartment and stayed the rest of the night. Jane hugged a shaking Darcy tightly, tried to assure her that she was safe and that Captain America would be okay, comforting her until she slept again.

Thor sat in a chair nearby and kept watch over them both.

*to be continued...*
Welcome Home, Soldier!

Chapter Summary

Darcy leaves the Healing Ward and begins to settle into Avengers Tower. She meets Dr. Banner and strikes up a friendship with him. Then, after Steve returns, she meets Sam Wilson... and Bucky Barnes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning Darcy opened her eyes and realized that Jane was asleep back to back with her, still there after helping her calm down from vivid nightmares. Darcy sighed, carefully slipped off the bed, and noticed Thor sitting in her reading chair and watching them. She shrank from the pity that flitted across his handsome face.

Her expression of remorse caused him to shake his head, smile sadly, stand and walk over to pull her into his arms. He whispered, “No harm will come to you, Lady Darcy. I will ask after the Captain’s team today and see if I can join their quest. Lady Natasha’s disquiet gave me concern, too.”

Her arms tightened around him and she replied softly, “Thank you, Thor. I’m sorry I woke you.” She swallowed hard against the echo of fearful tears in her throat.

He shook his head firmly. “Nay, little Darcy. No apologies, please.”

She sighed and nodded, “Okay. But, don’t push if Steve says he’s got it. I don’t want him to mistake my concern for a lack of faith in him.” She looked up at him with wide eyes. Thor touched her chin affectionately and pressed a light kiss to her forehead.

Jane sat up on one elbow and rasped, “Is everything okay?” Even with her hair sticking up awkwardly, Jane looked gorgeous.

Darcy nodded, moved away from Thor, and grimaced as she sat by Jane. “Thanks. You’re good friends to put up with me.”

Jane frowned, “Stop it! That’s not the Darcy I know. We’re lucky to have you as our friend!” She closed her lips abruptly, afraid of giving offense.

Darcy laughed tearfully, “Yeah! I was forgetting that…”

Jane's expression became fierce. “Don’t. I can’t.”

Darcy sighed, “I’m gonna get you guys bagels and coffee, though.”

Jane shrugged, “Well, okay. That sounds good. I’ve gotta get to work. I’ll be glad when you’re ready to come back. I miss your help. Your craziness un-sticks me when I get stuck.” She winked at Darcy and made a funny face.

Darcy prepared the promised breakfast and thanked Jane and Thor with grateful hugs as they left.
Then Darcy took a long, relaxing shower and dressed. She checked news headlines (something she’d sworn to do daily from now on since it might prevent her walking into a bad situation like she did in London), made hot chocolate and coffee, and went to visit Erik. They enjoyed their drinks together and did the crosswords from his newspaper, their knowledge bases complimentary enough that they made quick work of the puzzles. After her visit with Erik she decided to explore the Tower. She wanted to find her way to the labs eventually, but also wanted to know more about her crazy new world.

She discovered that Avengers Tower was like its own small city. The underground floors were for parking, at least the levels she was allowed to see. Darcy privately reckoned that the forbidden floors were either where Tony hid Oompa Loompas and a secret chocolate factory, or secret Iron Man development labs. The lowest above-ground levels contained retail outlets, all owned by Stark International. The next levels were for service industries- tailors and seamstresses, a florist, custom jewelers, a wine merchant, bakers, a fantastic toy shop, an extensive employee fitness center, a spa, a café/fresh food market, and several restaurants. She wondered how the businesses had been affected during the Battle of New York, but guessed that was a concern for any business in New York now that everyone knew Earth wasn't alone in the universe.

The next floors provided technical, supply, and security services to the lower level businesses, Stark Industries, and the entire Tower. She saw that part of one floor was marked ‘Containment’ and turned away from that area, feeling a sick shiver run down her spine as she wondered if the men who hurt her were imprisoned there. Her mood shifted rapidly, from fear to anger to forced calm. She entered the restricted floors through special elevators, using her new ID badge.

Given Tony Stark’s reputation and penchant for saying and doing whatever he liked she was unsurprised that three entire floors housed his staff and personal lawyers. Patent law covered two floors and looked insanely busy. Accounting occupied another three floors. She guessed it took a lot of people to count Tony’s money. Human Resources, Marketing, and Public Relations each had their own floor. The employees on these floors seemed extremely serious and harried. More than once she heard the name ‘Pepper’ murmured in a hushed tone. Above that was the Healing and Wellness Ward, one place she knew too well. She waved to Navarro when she saw her from inside the elevator.

Another set of restricted elevators were run by JARVIS with occupants instructing him vocally. Only approved individuals were allowed entrance to the entire upper half of Avengers Tower. These floors included twelve floors of laboratories, several gymnasiums, sparring and training rooms of all types, libraries and media rooms, and the personal living areas of all of the Avengers (and their friends), with communal social and conference areas for the Avengers at the top. There were outside recreation spaces, a heated pool, and a balcony with a garden. She understood that a large section of the roof also had aircraft hangers with helicopters and Quinjets just for Avenger use. It was beyond impressive. The further up she went, the more often security guards checked her badge clearance. She overheard security personnel speaking of ‘the Captain’ in the same hushed tones Administrative personnel used when speaking of Pepper Potts.

Darcy went back down to the lab floors to take a closer look and was amazed by the size of Jane’s lab when she took a cautious peek inside. Jane was so preoccupied with her work that she didn't even notice Darcy; so Darcy took the opportunity to explore the other labs before Jane came-to and lassoed her into work before she was ready. The pull of her familiar activity was slight, but present.

As she moved into the lab on the floor above Jane’s, she saw a man with a medium-build and messy hair. He wore glasses and muttered occasionally to himself, classic scientist behavior that made her feel at home at once, though he seemed more peaceful in his work than Jane. Darcy
watched him while she walked around looking at the machines, equipment and chemicals, trying to understand the nature of his work. She noticed that he played extremely soothing music and had candles lit in an area where he could do yoga, meditate, or rest. That was different from any scientist she’d known before. Most scientists were work-stress monsters… She stopped in her tracks, slightly afraid as understanding dawned.

When she stopped moving, he spoke without looking at her, “You realized who I am, didn't you?” His tone was mild, almost smooth.

She turned to face him. “I’m guessing you’re Dr. Banner.” Darcy was proud that her voice didn't shake.

He looked startled and stared at her at first, blinking hard. His expression shifted and he smiled wryly, “Your guess is correct. I won’t be offended if you leave now.” There was an underlying hardness in his words.

His air of sad isolation cut her heart. She shook her head and stepped closer to him. “Nah. I’m good.”

He stared again, obviously waiting for her to say something.

Discomfited by his manner, she offered, “I’m Darcy… Darcy Lewis, by the way.” She waited for him to respond. She added, “Hi.” Her expression offered friendly challenge, chin jutting out and gaze firmly locked with his.

He chuckled with surprised amusement. “Hi, Darcy Lewis.” He shook his head and repeated his earlier offer, “Really, you don’t have to dissemble. I understand that it can be worrisome to be near me. I often worry myself.” His tone was easy and conversational.

She shook her head and teased, “Geez, dude! We just met and you’re calling me a liar!”

He chuckled again and shrugged. “Most people just leave. I don’t count it as offensive if you at least TRY to be polite about it.” He looked expectant and brittle.

She walked over to a stool to sit near him. “I just got out of medical a few days ago. Hope you don’t mind if I sit while you insult me.” She winked at him.

He shrugged and adjusted a setting on the machine in front of him, then glanced at her again.

She peered more closely at the machine, “What are you working on? I assist Dr. Foster, so I’m used to her space stuff. This looks different.”

He nodded and smiled slightly, “I'm a nuclear physicist. I have a few things going on, but I specialize in Gamma Radiation.”

She chuckled, “Duh! I heard THAT about you.” Her smile widened, impish.

He looked at her for a long moment and sighed, “Yes. I've earned something of a reputation.” He shook his head again, “What are you doing in here? No offense intended. I’m curious.”

She made a face, “'Scientist’ equals curious, so no surprise there. I’m not back to work yet. I thought I’d explore the building some. New home and all.”

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s new to me, too, to many of us.” His tone became lighter, more vague as he made notations. “SHIELD was keeping some zealously-interested parties away from me. With
their fall, I chose not to stay out on my own anymore, at least for now. I've visited the Tower several times over the past couple of years. Tony's a good friend, if a bit… exuberant.” He grinned with more fondness than she’d seen anyone else display for Tony Stark so far.

She laughed, “He’s a mess, alright! But, he had JARVIS pass along some advice from him that helped me, so I think he’s alright.”

Dr. Banner chuckled softly and nodded. “That’s like him.” He checked something and made more notations.

She looked around, “Don’t you have an assistant?”

He stilled and looked at her over his glasses and shook his head, clearly amused by the question.

She shrugged, “Well, not everybody is chicken shit! I figured you'd have found somebody soothing to hang out and help you.” She frowned knowingly, “You shouldn't have to waste your time with admin, grant justification, OSHA nonsense and supply reqs.”

He shook his head and muttered, “Oh, the days of having a lab manager.” He glanced at his computer and sighed wearily.

JARVIS’ voice broke the silence. “Please excuse me. Darcy? The Captain has returned to the Tower and has asked your location and health status.”

Darcy sat straighter, her heart pounding more rapidly. “Is he okay?” On that question, her voice did shake noticeably. She saw Dr. Banner looking at her with speculative interest.

JARVIS replied, “I’m not allowed to comment on the medical condition of Avengers personnel, Darcy. If you would like to see for yourself, you can find him in the Healing Ward.”

She gasped, and then moved so quickly she knocked over the stool. As she raced out, she yelled back, “Sorry!”

Dr. Banner smiled slightly and shook his head, “It’s okay. It was nice to meet you.”

She ran to the elevator and yelled for the Healing Ward floor. She pressed her back against the wall inside the elevator car and closed her eyes, praying Steve wasn't hurt too badly. Natasha had made Bucky sound so scary and nightmarish images teased at the edge of her thoughts.

JARVIS spoke again, “Darcy, I am bypassing other requests for this elevator to enable you to get there more quickly.”

Her panic increased and her voice quavered, “Is it urgent?”

JARVIS replied smoothly, “I am not allowed to comment on the medical condition of Avengers personnel, but you seem eager to find out. I apologize for any inconvenience.”

She breathed deeply and stared at the indicator lights, thinking that JARVIS seemed a bit like his master… infuriating and nice all at once. When she finally reached the Healing Ward floor she murmured, “Thanks, J.” The doors opened and she stepped out, looking around. She spotted Steve and an attractive African-American man standing down the hall. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and smiled with relief. They both looked well.

Steve turned his gaze her way immediately. She stopped and stared, transfixed. He looked tired and sad, but uninjured. His expression lightened slightly when he saw her, so she stepped forward
quickly and hugged him hard. He laid his head down to her shoulder and held tightly to her. It felt amazing to be close against him again. She savored the feel of his embrace.

She exclaimed brightly, “Hey! I missed you. Are you okay?”

He murmured roughly, “A little better now.”

Navarro passed by and murmured, “Miss Lewis. Back so soon?”

Darcy chuckled, nodded at Navarro, and pulled back slightly. She hugged Steve again and then admonished teasingly, “I guess no more of that. People will talk!”

As Steve let her go with a look that left her a bit dizzy, she felt the sensation that someone else was staring at her. She turned and looked into the room beside her and her smile faded. A man was strapped down with special, heavy metal straps, including separate reinforced restraints just for his left arm. The look in his eyes was that of a fearful caged animal.

Darcy cried out, “Oh!” She looked at Steve and was stunned by the grief in his expression as he looked at the restrained man. She took a step towards the man in the bed and tried to offer reassurance, “Don’t look so scared. No one’s gonna hurt you here.”

He rasped angrily, “What do you know?” She stopped walking forward, frightened.

She glanced back at Steve’s tight expression and then again at Bucky. She assured him, “Well, I know that he’s your friend and won’t let anything bad happen to you again if he can help it.”

Bucky stared at her, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Are you his girl?”

She blushed, realizing he would define that term the same way Steve did. “I’m, uh, thinking about that. I kind of hope he is, too. We met recently. We’re gonna go on a date.” She saw Steve shifting a bit in her peripheral vision.

Bucky noted, “You embraced like you’re his girl.”

His expression shifted as he looked at her- calculating one second, curious the next, angry, holding the slightest flash of hope, then flat and dangerous, and back to puzzled curiosity. Regardless of what else he seemed to feel, terror and anguish remained. He had some of the most expressive eyes Darcy had ever seen, stormy. She found herself wishing she could take Bucky’s despair and pound it away from him somehow. One thought that came to mind strongly was how people react to others’ expectations. If everyone he saw acted fearful, he would be even more likely to view himself as a threat.

She pushed aside her own fear (a feat far easier with Steve close), remembered the way Steve described Bucky, smiled, and told him, “Well, I like him… a lot. I was worried what might happen to him while he was away.” Her lips trembled.

Bucky stated flatly, “Worried what I might do… You fear me.”

She swallowed and admitted, “You’ve got some bad recent history… Bucky. An awful lot of good- way back when, though. You took care of Steve before they made him stronger, even after that some. You were kind of his hero.”

His eyes flared with surprise and he shook his head, “I don’t know you.”

She agreed, “This is our first meeting. I’m Darcy. But Steve has talked about you and caused me to
want to know you. You were his best friend, like a brother.” She added, “He’s very upset about all the terrible things that they did to you.”

Bucky stared at her, the flare of hope slightly more present in his expression. Then he laid his head back and closed his eyes.

She looked back to Steve. He took her hand in his and pulled her away from Bucky’s room. He sighed, “That’s the most he’s spoken since we found him.” He hugged her to him briefly and kissed her forehead, as though it had cost him something to see her near his dangerous friend. Then, he leaned back, watching people around them. She shrugged and touched Steve’s face tenderly, then pulled her hand away, fearful of overstepping boundaries. He remarked, “I was glad for you that you’ve been released, but I’m really happy to see you here now.” He ducked his head, “Thank you for worrying!”

She nodded and breezily explained, “I got sprung a few days ago. I’m getting settled into my fancy new place, a place that TOTALLY outclasses my meager belongings, of course. Today I was exploring the Tower. I was chatting up Dr. Banner when JARVIS let me know you’d gotten back.” She was a little disappointed at the way he stiffened at this information. She pouted, “Oh, come on! He’s nice. He’s almost funny, too. And it looks like nobody ever talks to him, except maybe Tony Stark.” She pulled a comically rueful face.

Steve took a deep breath. “Dr. Banner’s ‘control’ of Hulk can be tenuous. I’ve seen it when he loses control. Hulk made Thor bleed and scared Natasha. The thought of you alone with him…” She saw his hands clench.

She lifted her chin stubbornly, “Dr. Banner was a total gentleman, even if he sort of accused me of lying when I told him I didn't want to run away after I realized who he was.”

Steve looked ruefully frustrated and blurted, “I love that you’re so kind, but I’ve seen stuff you haven’t… like Hulk out of control. I don’t want anything else to happen to you.”

Her expression became very serious. “You know what I hate most about the character Edward Cullen?”

He shook his head and guessed, “Sparkling, or inconsistent lack thereof? Stares? Spider monkey… whatever that is? There was a lot of complaint online, almost as much complaint as praise.”

She shook her head. “Over-protectiveness. There’s some disrespect in it.” Steve blinked worriedly. She continued, “You’re awesome. Don’t screw it up by acting like a mother hen.”

The guy behind him cleared his throat and fake-coughed, “Savior complex!”

Steve turned and rolled his eyes. “What?”

The man reached out a hand to Darcy, “Hey, there. You MUST be Darcy. I’m Sam Wilson, wingman and handy PTSD counselor.”

She drawled flirtily, “Well aren't you just everything he needs in a handsome friend?” Steve’s brow knit slightly.

Sam laughed heartily, “Back at ya, babe.” He looked her up and down and nodded approvingly to Steve (who looked as though he was unsure whether to acknowledge it or not).

Darcy raised an eyebrow and made a silly face, “Did you just call me handsome?” Sam laughed.
She turned to smile at Steve teasingly, “Hey, this guy looks strong and fit and thinks I’m handsome. Aren’t you gonna warn me away from him?”

Steve raised his hands in surrender. “Whatever! I mean no disrespect.” He looked at her with sincere concern.

She put a hand against his cheek and smiled reassurance. “Thank you. So, what are you up to now?” She noticed that Hawkeye was getting bandaged by a nurse in the room across the hall.

Steve followed her gaze and admitted, “Bucky got the jump on Hawkeye. He’ll be okay, though.”

She mused, “Natasha’s gonna be pissed, even though it means she wins her bet with Thor. She was kind of upset you didn’t take more help.” Darcy let out a shaky breath as she remembered her nightmare.

Steve nodded and breathed in and out impatiently. “Yeah. I’ll see if she’s around. If so, I’ll go debrief her and THEN get cleaned up.”

She teased, “I thought you told me it wasn’t like that between you two?” He looked at her blankly while Sam laughed. She kissed Steve on the cheek lingeringly. “Sorry. I was riffing on the word debrief.” He nodded, blinked a little, and blushed. She smiled and backed away. “Good luck. She IS a little scary.” She backed away a little more. “I’m on Thor and Jane’s floor… if you want to come by sometime.” She turned to the elevator, feeling self-conscious.

As she was about to get onto the elevator, Steve stepped forward, “Darcy!” She turned to look at him. “Thanks. I haven’t had anyone welcome me home from a mission…. It’s…” He became tongue-tied.

She smiled and winked, “Any time, soldier.”

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has not been beta’d. All errors are mine.

I REALLY appreciate the Kudos and nice Comments. They are very encouraging. :) Thank you! I hope you enjoy my story... and if it cheers you up that's AWESOME! :)


Leave 'em wanting more...

Chapter Summary

Darcy settles in further at the tower and FINALLY has a first date with Steve and chances to get to know him better...

Chapter Notes

Thank you, again, to anyone reading and enjoying this story! Your comments make me very happy.

Pardon any errors. This chapter is not beta'd. All errors are mine.

The next day Darcy decided to bite the bullet and start work in Jane’s lab after visiting Erik. The time passed in a haze of ‘science!’ and familiarizing herself with the new lab and funding company. Most of the equipment was MUCH nicer than anything Jane had worked with before. The custom equipment Jane insisted be integrated looked extra shabby in comparison. Jane had a new assignment she was excited about. She let out a lot of babble about energy, impenetrability, flex, and opacity.

Jane was behind on all of her administrative work. Over the next several days, Darcy requisitioned items unique to Jane's work, looked over the details of the Stark funding grant (and shook her head in amazement a time or two), checked on the status of previous funding and any reports due, responded to inquiries from several institutes on Jane's behalf, and rearranged the lab to facilitate Jane’s needs. Darcy had long found it easier to do these things for Jane, rather than troubling the scientist with 'non-science' details. A few times when she was working through the new SI processes on Jane’s behalf, she noticed Pepper Potts’ assistant studying her, evaluating. Once she was caught up and had Jane’s lab humming again, Darcy found herself zoning out, thinking about Steve Rogers more and more.

She saw Steve a few times each day, and smiles and blushes were abundant from both of them. He was obviously busy. She saw him one day with R&D techs working on new Captain America uniforms.

Other days she noticed Steve consulting with neuro-scientists, physicians, and Dr. Chau and her colleagues about Bucky. Steve was in or near the Healing Ward the majority of the time. He seemed to be arguing with Tony Stark (at least a bit of it about Bucky, for some reason) a lot.

She also saw him training with Hawkeye and Natasha on different weapons and techniques, going to team meetings, and returning to the building after daily runs. Sometimes she saw him in a crowded elevator, other times it was as she passed his training gym or when she got lunch or coffee to bring into Jane’s lab. She saw him a lot, but they didn't have time to talk… much less discuss the date he’d requested. She tried not to obsess.

That didn't go well.
During Darcy’s second week in the lab, Jane was frenzied about her newest project and giving Darcy fits. Darcy didn't know who had requested the energy field, but they had Jane as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. It was one of those rare times when there wasn't enough coffee in the world to keep up with Jane’s need. After Darcy had emptied the last of the thermos-full she’d grabbed at lunchtime into Jane’s mug, the two women were engaged in a rare and tumultuous disagreement. Darcy had transcribed Jane’s frantically scribbled notes exactly, and they both knew she hadn't made a mistake, yet Jane insisted obtusely that Darcy had. Jane was frenetically 'grabbing’ at three-dimensional formulae out of the air in front of them and accusing Darcy of making changes or mistakes.

Finally, utterly fed up, Darcy screamed at the top of her lungs, long and loud, until Jane froze in place and burst out crying. Other scientists fled the scene, one yelling something about a whole new level of coffee emergency.

Darcy shut her mouth and pushed Jane to a sitting position on the couch and held Jane’s hands between her own. “We’ll get more coffee, but you must chill, Jane! You’re gonna have a stroke, or I’m going to kill you… which will result in me taking a lightning bolt or a big hammer to the head. So, you must chill!”

Jane started laughing lightly. “Selfish bitch! It’s all about you not dying, isn't it?” Jane hooted at Darcy’s expression and began to giggle, laughing more as Darcy growled at her.

Finally, Darcy let out a breath and snorted in reply, then laughed along with her friend. She fell to the couch next to Jane and they began to tickle each other and wrestle, laughing and calling each other names until they were both crying as much as laughing.

When Steve cautiously opened the door, holding a large box tote of coffee out in front of him, Jane cheered. Darcy wiped her tears of laughter away and moaned, “Coffee! Elixir of sanity!” She hopped up and took the box and set it on the work table, then turned back and threw her arms around a pleased Steve. He pulled her close to him.

Jane jumped up and yelled. “Wait! That's not right! WHAT was I thinking?” She pointed at a symbol.

Darcy leaned up and kissed Steve’s cheek. “Thanks! You’re our life-saving coffee hero! Someone has her pulled tighter than a face-lift. She’s making me nuts, and it gets ugly when we tickle fight!”

She turned and went to work at the keyboard, reprogramming at Jane’s direction and chortling. “Ha! Transcription error, my sweet ass! That’s all YOU, doing sloppy science, Miss Energy-Field Creation-ista!” She held back another chortle of glee as she caught Steve glancing at her ass. She grinned at him knowingly, while he blushed and fought down his own grin.

Jane nodded, downed a steaming cup of black coffee, and apologized. “Sorry, Darcy. I just wanted someone other than me to be wrong. This problem is kicking MY ass.” She glanced at Steve and nodded tersely.

He looked wary. “I hope the coffee helps turn the tables… and keeps you two from falling into a deadly tickle war again.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and smirked. “We’re like a hot couple on a bad soap opera. We keep coming back for more.” She self-consciously straightened her shirt as she noticed the way he looked at her. She tilted her head questioningly.
Steve smiled softly. “So long as no one gets hurt...”

Her expression softened, too. It was precious to feel admiration from him, to bask in it and assure herself she hadn't imagined it before.

Natasha stuck her head into the room. “Steve! Good news! It looks like Barnes was busy helping topple the Soviet Union, 1987 to 1992. He was kept in Siberia between missions... nowhere near Long Island!” Steve let out a breath, obviously relieved.

Jane’s mouth fell open. “Helping to cause the fall of the Soviet Union is good news?”

Darcy looked from Natasha to Steve. “Um… What would have been bad news?” Steve sighed.


Darcy and Jane exchanged a startled look and Darcy nodded, now understanding why Steve had been guarding Bucky so much in recent days. “So, how did Bucky bring down the USSR?”

Natasha shrugged. “Key assassinations in the Baltics and Estonia that stoked dissent, for one thing... I think Hydra cannibalized a cell or two there, and used Barnes to end them.” She nodded to Steve. “But, at least Stark can stop plotting the Winter Soldier’s death now, and you and Sam can stop standing guard.” She raised a brow. “He may plot your death for giving away his coffee, though, Cap.” Steve rolled his eyes and shook his head, still smiling with relief.

Darcy felt silly for her antics with Jane while Steve was dealing with concerns of life and death. She apologized. “Uh. Sorry for taking up your time with our stupid fight. Thanks for bringing us Tony Stark’s coffee!” She wondered if Tony’s coffee was some special brand, hand-picked from beans only billionaires get to taste. She poured some in her cup and savored the flavor with an appreciative, “Mmmmm.”

Steve smiled even more. “Think nothing of it. Your screaming was well timed... and probably good for your lungs. Tony and I were about to come to blows.” Natasha made a noise of impatient disgust. He continued. “A mission of preventing tickle-carnage and stopping the flight of frightened scientists was a welcome distraction.” He saluted them both and left.

Darcy saw Natasha grinning as she caught the way Darcy eyed Steve’s retreating form. Darcy shrugged unrepentantly and went back to work.

That night when she reached her apartment she found a gift by the door. She laughed as she opened the bag to find a ‘Captain Ameri-bear’ with a coffee gift card attached to it. She set the Cap bear on her dresser next to her Thor bear. They could keep watch over her together.

A few days later, Darcy passed Steve in the hall back to Jane’s lab while he was leaving the floor with Tony Stark. They each smiled at the other as they passed. A few seconds later, Steve reprimanded Stark for asking him, “Tap that yet?” But it was Steve’s initial response of nothing but a hesitant head-shake that left Darcy a little weak in the knees at the thought that his answer might change someday.

As she got further away, she muttered to herself at a whisper. “In my good dreams, just about every night...”

She froze in place as she heard Tony yell. “Honestly! Did you really just run into that post, Capsicle? What kind of super-soldier are you? I swear you dented it! Eyes front, soldier!”
She closed her eyes and groaned. “Ohhh! Enhanced hearing. Crappity crap! No fair!” She shrugged and kept walking, not daring to look back as her face suffused with a deep blush. She could still hear Tony giving Steve grief.

A few minutes later Darcy received a text message from Steve. It read- "Sorry my hearing seems unfair. FWIW, sounds as though our good dreams are similar.”

Darcy chuckled with disbelief and replied. "I'd blush less if you'd pretend you didn't hear!"

Steve’s next text was, “I like your blush & find it hard to pretend when I face-plant a pole in front of Tony- not a good liar, anyway. Again, sorry. I’d like to make it up to you. Buy you lunch?"

Darcy squealed and replied. “Yes! to lunch. Come get me 12 at lab, plz.” Jane glanced up from her work as Darcy started doing a dance by her desk.

Steve's reply read. "A date, then. See you noon at lab."

Jane looked at her quizzically, so Darcy showed her the text exchange and explained what had happened. Jane frowned. "Captain America asked you to lunch because you have sexy dreams about him?" She looked at Darcy as though fearful of her sanity.

Darcy shook her head. "You're determined to put the worst spin on everything with Steve, aren't you?"

Jane removed her glasses. "You don't know him all that well."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "That’s a good reason to spend time with him! I WANT to know him better. He's nice to me. He's easy to talk to. He's sweet, sexy, a good guy. Try to give me some credit, and try to give him some credit, too!"

Jane shrugged, put her glasses on again and was deep in her science haze for the next few hours. She and Darcy were in a good rhythm together and accomplished a lot.

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In the common area, Sam laughed as he approached Steve. "Man! You look scared to death! Why are you looking at your phone that way?"

Steve shook his head and swallowed hard, his expression helpless as he looked up at Sam. His tone was plaintive. "I have a date."

Sam sat and laughed. "Yeah. Sure ya do, buddy." He made a face and shook his head. "I've been saying,. asking a girl out doesn't count if you don't set a time and don't go!"

Steve looked almost shocked. "Lunch."

Sam looked surprised. "Today?" Steve looked at his watch and nodded firmly. He picked up his phone again, sighed tensely, and began to tap on it. Sam laughed again. "They should really call you the 'man with a plan.... in a pinch.'"

Steve smiled. "I like it when my options narrow. Makes it easier to pick a good path forward." He finished clicking on his phone and set it down.

Sam frowned. "Work-day lunch? She may think you're dodging the question of anything physical after."
Steve looked at Sam sharply. "I'm not."

Sam raised a brow and grinned, "Sure..."

Steve shook his head impatiently. "I don't want to talk about that. It's not anyone's concern but mine... and Darcy's."

Sam held up his hands. "Whatever you say, man." He smiled softly. "So, what's your plan?"

Steve sighed resolutely. "Keeping it simple this time. She likes music. So, I just made a reservation for the international tapas place downstairs that has the guitar player during lunch. I hear he's good."

Sam's smile broadened. "THIS time! You sure like that girl. Already planning the next date?"

Steve looked confused. "Does a lunch really even count as a date?" His expression turned sheepish. "I want to spend time with her so much that I texted the date request without really thinking."

Sam looked pleased. "What 'counts' is that you like each other. Try not to psych yourself out!"

Steve admitted, "That's easier said than done! I started reading about dates and dating on the internet the other night. 'What's she thinking?... 'what to say... 'what NOT to say... 'what to say so she'll want to go on the third date'..." Steve's brow furrowed. "What's the big deal with third date, anyway? I meant to look it up, but got busy doing other things."

Sam chuckled. "You already told me you don't want to talk about that! The big deal is sex. It's expected from the end of date three on..."

Steve frowned. "Expected?"

Sam replied easily. "Yeah. Darcy looks like a normal, passionate woman. So, you better realize up front that she's gonna want..."

Steve looked down and sighed. "Everyone insists on discussing that! It's not a problem! I don't care for the description 'expected.' That's all. I wouldn't ever want for Darcy to feel pressured into something she didn't want."

Sam sat back and shook his head. "Steve! Have you looked in a mirror? Have you been paying any attention? Everywhere you go, there are people throwing themselves at you. Darcy's no different from any other hot-blooded woman."

Steve spoke softly. "She is to me. She's special. I want to make her happy."

Sam chuckled kindly. "Well, then excuse my bluntness, man, but if you want to make that girl happy? Put out after date three, if not sooner."

Steve chuckled wryly. "So many assumptions! All wrong!"

Sam asked quizzically, "What do I have wrong?"

Steve shook his head.

Thor entered the room. "What do you have wrong about what, Falcon?"

Steve groaned softly, his expression more guarded.
Sam laughed. "I was explainin’ to Steve that if he wants to make his girl happy, he needs to cut the shy act and get physical. He finally set a time for a date with her today."

Thor's eyes narrowed slightly. "You refer to lovemaking? The Captain and the Lady Darcy?"

Steve looked at Sam with a deadpan expression. "Sam? Has anyone mentioned that Thor thinks of Darcy as his sister?" A grin tugged at one corner of Steve's mouth.

Sam turned quickly to Thor. "Sister? Sorry!"

Thor shook his head. "There is no need to apologize. When the Lady Darcy chooses to make love with a worthy man, I will be happy for her... and for him. But, that timing is her choice, especially as a maiden."

Sam gaped. "A maiden?"

Thor nodded. "All of the nights I have been on Earth near her; the Lady Darcy has slept in her own bed, alone. I have overheard her refusing or fending off physical advances on seven separate occasions...and felt the need to add my support on two."

Steve grimaced angrily.

Thor grinned. "Were you me, we would all hear thunder now, Captain!"

Steve grumbled. "It's why she broke up with her last boyfriend. Pressure. Then she was upset about it and avoided people and all media the days when SHIELD fell. That's why she didn't know it would be dangerous to visit Dr. Selvig."

Thor nodded. "Ian was not a bad sort, just an impatient boy."

Sam looked at Steve incredulously. "So... the blind leading the blind?"

Thor laughed heartily. "Ah! The other thing you have wrong!"

Sam shook his head. "What?" He turned to Steve. "What?"

Thor's smile was impish. "Have you ever spent time with girls who entertain with their bodies, Falcon? I have. I was given a harem for my three-hundredth birthday."

Sam gaped again. "A harem... for your... What?"

Steve spoke up. "I don’t need to hear about this right now!"

Thor chuckled, "Lest you imagine a harem including Darcy?"

Steve put his face in his hands.

Sam suggested, "Cold shower?"

Thor chuckled. "I bathed with them often." Steve looked at Thor chidingly and shook his head, much to the god's amusement. Thor laughed and clapped Steve on the shoulder. "Everything I did with them, alone or together, was nothing to the first time I loved my Jane. There is no joy, no satisfaction that can compare to joining with the one you love, who loves you equally in return."

Steve sighed. "I'm still trying to get to know Darcy, and help her get to know me. If anything, I need to avoid thinking about... She wants to be in a caring relationship before anything like that."
Thor grinned. "Jane tells me that you already managed to steal a kiss, though!"

Steve looked mulish. "I didn't steal! I asked. She agreed."

Thor's grin softened. "And, how did that compare to the carnal delights of your dancers from the spectacles Stark mocks?"

Steve blushed. "I don't think a gentleman should kiss and tell, Thor." Thor looked at him with amusement. Steve added, "But I believe you." He nodded firmly, lost in remembrance of kissing Darcy.

Sam shook his head, chuckling. "Damn, Cap! You'd really rather Stark treat you like a virgin school-boy than to 'kiss and tell'?"

Steve nodded and frowned. "Of course! I don't know all about what became of the girls. I don't know how many married, had children and grandchildren. I can never know if someone near me might know them or their families! No woman deserves to be censured for harmless fun from her youth."

Sam teased. "You sure you didn't leave behind any baby super-soldiers?"

Steve looked at Sam sharply, defensive. "I am. I didn't take chances."

Thor's gaze was penetrating, direct. "You are aware that Lady Darcy is a maiden. Is she aware of your experiences?"

Steve sighed. "She is." Thor nodded.

Sam laughed. "You're scared of a date, but already swapped sexual histories? How'd that happen?"

Thor mused. "Lady Darcy is a mixture of innocence and knowing. She sees you as a man rather than an image. She is quick witted."

Steve nodded. "She's smart." He looked more nervous. "I want this to go right. I want her to like me."

Sam smiled. "You're a good guy and she's not into 'bad boys.' You'll be fine." He cocked his head. "What's your take-away from the stuff you read about dating?"

Steve shrugged. "Ask how she got into things she does. Ask about her favorite things, and ask questions that might lead her to accept another date. Tell her I like being with her... and promise to call. Then, call as promised."

Thor nodded, musing. "I love the way my Jane's face lights up when we talk of her work and the knowledge she seeks. Her mind is marvelous." Admiration shone from him.

Sam, ever pragmatic, noted, "She's pretty, too."

Thor smiled. "To me, my Jane is the fairest of all women."

Steve sighed, perturbed. "I wish that Jane liked me more. She's Darcy's best friend... and she looks at me with little but distrust."

Thor sighed. "The fault for that lies with me and the circumstances of our distant courtship, I fear. We both knew what it was to love and need the other. But, I had to destroy the Bifrost to protect the Jotun from Loki's madness. When I returned to Earth, I was forced to fight Loki and return him
to Asgard for Odin’s judgment. I was unable to return again until I restored peace to the Nine Realms. Loving me has given Jane much grief that she would spare Darcy.” Thor grinned ruefully. “I could be wrong. It may be that you irritate my lady for other reasons, but…”

Steve nodded slowly. “I’ll bear that in mind as I try to win approval. I want to be with Darcy so much that any potential problem scares me.”

Thor grinned. “You do well to fear Jane Foster. She is cleverer than any other Midgardian, including you, my friend.”

Sam chuckled. “Lots of crazily-smart people around here… Stark, Banner, Foster.”

Thor mused, “They will accomplish great things. They need those who help them focus their energies, though. People who lift them up like Lady Darcy or Lady Pepper… and people who challenge them with direction, like our Captain.”

Steve moved away self-consciously. “My ‘direction’ is toward a lunch date right now. I need to get her some flowers.”

Sam nodded encouragement. “Try to relax and be yourself.”

Thor grinned teasingly. “And, behave well, lest I find it necessary to pound good sense into you.”

Steve shook his head and returned Thor's grin, unafraid of the Asgardian. “That’s really relaxing, Thor. Thanks.”

Sam added, “Hey! I ate at that place the other day. It was good. Order the Gursha special as one of your plates. It’s an Ethiopian injera dish with kitfo, bread with spicy beef. I bet you’ll get a kick out of it.” After Steve turned away from him, Sam grinned mischievously.

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Steve thanked Sam and waved, then went to the florist. When he arrived at the lab shortly before noon, he heard loud music, then Jane Foster yelling, “I can’t think! Cut that down!”

Darcy yelled back. “It’s almost over. Keep your pants on!” When the song ended she commented to Jane, “I’m getting my courage up! Did you hear that? It’s all bluesy and strong.”

Jane grumbled. “And loud…”

Steve knocked on the door frame. He held out a cup of coffee to Jane and handed Darcy a small bouquet of lavender roses tied with a ribbon patterned with a graphic of the Milky Way. Darcy looked around and found a tall beaker and put them in water on her desk. She took a deep, steadying breath and thanked him. “Wow, thanks! That’s a first. Cool. They’re pretty.”


Darcy’s smile was just as shy as she nodded and walked out with Steve. Looking back, she teased Jane. “Don’t wait up, Ma!”

The guitarist was talented and a big hit with Darcy, much to Steve’s relief. They were seated close next to each other at a small half-moon table, facing the guitarist, curved in slightly towards each other with their knees touching. It was easy for him to ask her about music and her favorite genres, songs, and instruments. They shared memories and stories that came to mind as they heard
particular songs played.

Darcy shared that her father had been a professional musician, proficient on many instruments and a great collector of albums, tapes, and disks. She also volunteered that she liked to dance, giving Steve the chance to mention that he wanted to learn to dance and would like to take her out somewhere for that.

They were both surprised when the waiter brought heated, wet towels for cleansing their hands. It felt nice, but seemed almost too fancy. Steve ordered the small lunch carafe of house-blended sangria. The food was good and the conversation easy once they got started. Steve’s impression that Darcy was the easiest person to talk with that he’d ever met deepened once he got past the nervousness of finally being on a first date with her. She drew him out about his experiences since he’d come to the 21st century in a sweet way that no one else could.

She was even able to tease the waiter past being tongue-tied over serving Captain America’s lunch, a big relief to Steve as he often found himself overwhelmed by the attention of ‘Cap’ fans. The waiter nearly swooned when Steve said his friend Sam had suggested ordering the Gursha as one of their plates. The accompanying presentation left Steve vowing to hurt Sam at a later time.

Once the waiter had gushed over the symbolism of affection involved in traditionally feeding each other the dish, it was too late to back out. Steve swallowed hard as he presented the injera bread to Darcy for her to eat from his hand. Her eyes were wide as she leaned closer, smiling up at him. When her beautiful lips and tongue grazed his fingers he felt nearly faint for the first time in over 70 years. The only thing more painfully sensual was the taste of her that he had along with the morsel of bread when it was his turn to eat from her hand. They were both blushing deeply by this point. Steve was glad they’d had that plate early in the meal so he had time to cool down.

The experience left them both tongue-tied for a moment. Steve broke the silence with a ragged sigh. “Please, believe me…”

She laughed throatily. “You got played?” He nodded, and grinned ruefully. She nibbled her lip, ducked her head a bit and smiled coyly. “Well… it’s a dish I’ll never forget!” She laughed again and he basked in the warmth of the sound.

He smiled, “Never.” He shifted his arm over her shoulders, just touching so that it was lightly around her. She leaned into him.

She giggled. “Does this mean Sam gets a stay of execution?”

Steve sipped his drink and chuckled tensely, “So long as you don’t think I’m being too forward.”

She kissed his cheek. “You’re the sweetest! Most guys could learn a thing or two from you.”

He laughed at that statement and teased. “The old adage says to leave ‘em wanting more.” He shook his head and added earnestly, “I promise that I’ve never been the guy others come to for dating advice.”

Her smile held promise enough to almost satisfy Steve for the time being. They continued enjoying the small plate foods and chatting about all they had been doing since they’d last had the chance to talk to each other. The liqueur-filled chocolate bonbons Darcy chose for desserts were fantastic. Her appreciative moan as she tasted one caused Steve to stop breathing and stare at her for a long moment. It was difficult for him to suppress the desire she evoked.

He lightly caressed her shoulder with one finger while they listened to the guitarist play an intricate
melody. Steve hated for the song to end since he knew it was time for their lunch date to end.

Darcy frowned. “I guess I have to get back to work.”

He nodded his reluctant understanding. “I hope you don’t mind the impromptu invitation today. I wanted to spend time with you. I didn’t mean to tie it to… well, anything you’d rather I not mention since it makes you blush.” He looked wry and unguarded as he cautioned, “I’m really bad at asking people out.”

She grinned. “I had to talk Jane down, but I didn’t think you meant anything like that. I’m just glad you didn’t change your mind about wanting to go out with me!” Vulnerability and self-doubt flashed across her face.

He shook his head firmly and gestured for the check. “Things got… difficult… with Tony for a while there. I’m sorry that it took me so long to follow through. I wanted to- very much.” He put his hand over hers on the table and looked at her intently. He pulled away when he accepted and paid the check. Darcy started to protest. He shook his head. “My treat, please.”

She offered, “Maybe I can treat next time.” She let out a nervous breath, hoping he wanted a next time as much as she did.

He grinned back. “I like to treat, if you’ll let me. I’m just delighted to talk about a next time. Would you like to go for dinner and dancing?” He breathed easier when she nodded eagerly.

“Of course! This was fun.” A beautiful smile lit her face.

Steve took a breath. “I like spending time with you.”

She tilted her head and giggled. “It sounds like you’re checking that statement off a list.”

His expression was awkward as he made a gesture of surrender. “I looked for advice on what to say and do on a date.”

“Thank you. It’s nice that you planned like that for me.” She smiled sweetly as they left the restaurant.

He chafed against the crowdedness of the elevator, wishing desperately that they were alone, yet also wondering if it was a God-send to keep him from misbehaving. He finally got his wish when they reached the next set of elevators, headed to the lab alone.

Darcy teased him. “You don’t have to accompany me back to the lab. I know my way.”

As the door closed, he forced himself to stay still. “I don’t doubt that.” He looked at her with obvious longing, liking the heat he saw in her expression. He took her hand and kissed it gently.

She watched him for a long moment, moved closer, and leaned up to kiss him, melting his noble intentions. They came together quickly then, urgent lips and tongues meeting with desperate need, bodies pressing together tightly as though magnetically drawn. Darcy’s hands moved firmly along the muscles of Steve’s arms, caressing as they both panted and kissed with frantic desire. One of his hands was in her hair and the other splayed her back, holding her to him.

The warning ‘ding’ before the door opened was not enough to allow them to recover before Tony entered the elevator car, smirking. “You go, girl!” They rushed to pull apart. Darcy blushed and looked away, while Steve stared straight ahead and swallowed hard against the urge to curse.
Sam entered the elevator behind Tony, laughing aloud when Steve whacked Sam lightly upside the head and muttered, “Gursha!” under his breath.

Darcy shrugged and whispered. “Yum.” Steve’s gaze turned to her quickly as lusty imaginings filled his mind, and she winked. He grinned at her ruefully and shook his head at the teasing. Sam laughed again.

The elevator reached Darcy’s destination. Darcy kissed Steve’s cheek, whispered, “I had a wonderful time. Thank you,” and grinned as she stepped out. She could hear Tony giving Steve crap again as the doors closed. She shook her head and laughed as she made her way back to work.

When she walked into the lab, Jane looked up and stared at her. “Huh! You look fantastically happy. Glowy! I guess it was a good date.”

Darcy laughed. “Boy! That coffee Steve gave you really worked! You’re not snarling about him!” Jane smiled and chided. “I care about you.” Darcy hugged her quickly and got back to work, first making sure that Jane had taken time to eat the food Darcy had ordered to come while she was gone.

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That evening as Darcy headed home from the lab, she found herself getting in the same elevator as Steve. He talked intently with Hawkeye and argued as they looked at a report, but glanced her way as she stepped in. His look to her caused her earlier blush to return in full force. She bit her lip and looked away to hide her silly grin.

As he moved to leave, Steve murmured hello to her, kissed her cheek, and slipped a piece of paper into her hand. She waited until she was inside her apartment to open it and read, ‘Sweet dreams.’ She stared at it, wondering how in the world she was supposed to sleep now. At least her budding desires kept bad dreams away for the night.

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So, when she couldn't go back to sleep after an especially vivid dream (Gursha, no clothing, a natural progression from there) about Steve early the next morning, she gave up and decided to start her work day. She planned to use her coffee gift card to get enough caffeine to make it through. She showered and dressed, hugged her new bear as she removed the gift card from it, and then went to catch the elevator. When the doors opened she found herself face to face with Steve, dressed for a run, alone. She blushed brightly and stared at him for a long moment, a self-conscious grin covering her face.

The doors started to close, and he put out a hand to stop them. “Do you want to go somewhere?” Darcy forced her legs to propel her forward, and entered the elevator. They stood next to each other in silence for a few floors. Steve broke the silence. “Do you have a particular experiment to tend that has you awake so early?”

She blew out a nervous sigh. “Nope. I couldn't get my brain to turn off and let me go back to sleep after a hot, sweet dream about us woke me, so I decided to get an early start. And coffee.” She held up the gift card and glanced up at him, freezing as her words played back inside her head. Steve looked sort of stunned, swallowed hard and nodded, half-smiling at her. She looked away as she realized what she’d confessed.

He nodded his head a few times more and admitted in a low rasp, “Me, too.”
Darcy choked out a laugh and put her hand over her mouth. “Wow! Did we just say what I think we did?”

Steve shook with repressed laughter and grinned. “Good morning!”

She nodded. “Yeah. Good morning to you, too!”

After a few more floors, he turned to her hopefully. “Have you found the rooftop balcony with the garden yet?”

She nodded. “I caught a glimpse while I was doing my grand tour.”

Steve took a deep breath. “It would be a nice place to watch the sunrise. Since we’re both early… want to check it out?”

She nodded as her heart beat faster in anticipation. Steve asked JARVIS to override their original floor requests and reroute them. When they reached the garden floor and stepped out into the breezy darkness, Darcy shivered and put her arms around herself. She’d only dressed for being inside. The wind cut through her.

Steve's voice held quiet intensity, “Is it too chilly for you?” She shook her head and walked further out despite the cold, too eager to spend time with him to let anything dissuade her. The night sky was just starting to shift to the darkest gray-blue, a hint of light to come.

After a few seconds of watching her shivering increase, Steve moved behind her and pulled her back against him and put his arms down over hers. He murmured, “Please. Allow me to help.”

Darcy cried out happily, “Ohhhh! You’re WARM!” Her teeth chattered loudly as she adjusted from cold to toasty. Then as she relaxed into his body she sighed deeply. “Awesome sauce.”

He chuckled and shifted his hips to a discreet angle while he savored the press of her soft form against him. Darcy leaned back even more, threaded her fingers through his, and felt him smile against her head. She tilted her head to one side and then the other to press each ear against him for warmth. As she warmed the left side of her head, Steve leaned down and pressed his freshly shaved cheek against her right cheek. It was an intimate sensation.

The sky began to change, hints of amber and deep purplish reds becoming visible. Darcy turned and kissed Steve’s cheek lightly, feeling something like excited relief at being so close to him again. The colors in the sky intensified and then began to brighten as the gold of the sun’s rays joined them. They were both silent as they absorbed the beauty. As the sun’s light took its place and day began, Steve gently turned Darcy around to face him. He sighed a groan of need as he pulled her closer.

Darcy made a noise in her throat as she pressed her chest into the warmth of him. Steve leaned down close, his lips just touching hers, barely tasting. She was shivering again, but with desire instead of chill. He continued to lightly tease at her lips. She moaned and did the same to him, thrilled when it elicited a moan from him. He had just begun to kiss her with satisfying intensity when the noise of a door opening startled them both. The maintenance man had ear buds in and merely waved at them as he walked past to the trash cans further along the railing.

They pulled apart reluctantly. Darcy stared up at Steve. “I guess we’d better get on with work and stuff.”

He nodded and kissed her cheek. They slowly turned to walk to the door and head back to the elevator. As they waited for the elevator to come, Steve rasped, “Good morning, Darcy.”
She replied quietly. “Good morning, Steve. Have a nice day.”

He grinned. “So far, so good. Hope yours is good, too.”

Other people joined them at the next floor. They stood a bit further apart. When they reached her lab floor Darcy smiled slightly at Steve as she got out. She waited until she was inside the lab and there were multiple doors and likely a few building floors between them before she squealed and had a happy, if somewhat frustrated, fit.

*to be continued*...
It was nearly noon when Thor arrived in Jane’s lab, dressed like a supremely-stylish Earth civilian, hair pulled back neatly. Darcy did a double-take and nodded approvingly, “Dude! You do local garb proper.”

Thor looked at his clothing with a slightly put-upon air. “I prefer my royal Asgardian apparel, but I aim to please my lady. We are to take our midday repast away from this Tower. She has requested that we go out more.”

Darcy chuckled. “You two hardly even left the bed in Paris, did you?”

Thor smiled happily, shaking his head at Darcy’s observation. He carefully nudged Darcy’s shoulder and teased. “I had the chance to spar with the Captain this morning. He was in good spirits, Lady Darcy. Your smile is also radiant. I think it not a coincidence.”

Darcy grinned and blushed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!” She made a happily silly face at Thor and he chuckled. She tilted her head to the side. “Spar? You two practice fighting each other?” Her brow creased.

Thor nodded. “I am able to sharpen my skills enthusiastically against the Captain. He is strong, and trained well during his time with the spy agency. Some of those battle disciplines are similar to methods we employ on Asgard, and some are new to me. We learn from one another. Fear not, little Darcy. I did not harm him much.” He winked.

She looked Thor over. “Can he hurt you?” Her eyes went wider.

Thor nodded and leaned in conspiratorially. “I do not admit it to him, any more than he confesses his wounds to me, however. A worthy opponent is a treasure for a true warrior. I am glad to know your Captain.” She looked Thor over and blinked a few times, absorbing the idea of just how strong Steve must be.

Jane came in from the other room and stared at Thor blankly. “Thor?” He bowed and kissed her hand, patiently waiting for her to remember the reason he was there.

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“Date time!” Darcy took the pencil from behind Jane’s ear, the StarkPad and paper journal from her hand, straightened her shirt for her, and removed her glasses.

Jane slowly emerged from her science daze. “Oh!” She looked back at her pad.

Darcy cajoled. “Don’t worry! I’ll look after your things. I’ll even try to make English out of your scribbles.” Jane smiled at her fondly.

Thor urged her. “Lady Darcy, we are not going for long or for a romantic liaison. Won’t you join us? You have not yet been out of this Tower since your arrival.” He watched her reaction with care
and concern.

Darcy took a deep breath and looked at Jane. Jane nodded. “Yeah. Join us, Darcy! Thor wants to take me for Shawarma.”

“You know Shawarma?” Darcy raised her eyebrows in surprise at Thor.

Thor nodded enthusiastically. “Friend Stark found a fine establishment that we all enjoyed after the Chitauri Battle, just before I returned Loki to Asgard.” Darcy glanced at Jane, knowing that time period and Thor’s lack of communication to her was still a sore point.

Jane looked pleadingly to Darcy. “You’ll join us, won’t you?” It was plain to Darcy that her presence was needed to keep Jane from hauling off and slapping her long-absent god of thunder again.

She nodded slowly, not having given much thought to how safe she felt in the Tower. Then, she remembered her thoughtless comment to Steve when he first asked her out. Surely she was safe with Thor as an escort! She swallowed and nodded again. “Okay. Yeah. Sure. I’d like that.” Thor stood taller, as though he understood the compliment in her assent. She gave him a tentative smile of appreciation.

So, a few minutes later, Darcy left Avengers Tower for the first time since arriving in New York. She’d visited the City before, when she was younger, so it was not completely unfamiliar. It was still big, busy, and noisy. Her palms were sweating, and she was struggling not to show the others how close to panic she felt, though. There were so many people! She didn't think of pickpockets and that sort of thing now. Her eyes moved from person to person, lingering on those who appeared even remotely dangerous, wondering who in the throng of people had loyalty to Hydra.

It was a nice spring day. Darcy had on a high-necked shirt that helped her feel comfortably inconspicuous. She also knew that casual passersby would, as usual, be awestruck by the beauty of Jane and Thor. Even when Jane was sulking, she looked fantastically gorgeous. Thor looked like the god of blue jeans in his rendition of Midgardian garb. Darcy felt like their pet dog by comparison. She barked under her breath at a person gawking at Thor. Thor looked at her with that bemused expression he wore so often when they were together. Darcy grinned slightly and moved closer to him.

When they reached the Shawarma place, the owner did a double take at the sight of Thor, and then fell all over himself seating and serving them personally. Darcy was nibbling her food and looking around at the other diners, still wondering if all of the people were average New Yorkers, or if any were daring Hydra operatives, foolishly willing to take on Thor. Even without his hammer, he was awesome.

Darcy saw that Jane had an angry look on her face. Darcy looked back on the wall behind her and saw the cause, a group photo of the Avengers, including a laughing Thor. Steve looked tired in the photo, with his hair a bit longer than he wore it currently. Darcy winced as she remembered Jane’s hopeless heartbreak after learning Thor had returned to Asgard after the Chitauri battle without any word to her at all.

Thor noticed that Darcy had not eaten much and was picking at her food. “Is the food not to your liking, Lady Darcy?”

She shook her head apologetically. “It’s not the food, Thor. The Shawarma’s good. It’s just a little scary for me to be out again. I always kind of ignored the fact that there are bad guys around, made a joke of it. They seem more real now that I've met some up close and personal.” She couldn't help
the shudder that ran through her. Thor looked at her sympathetically, frowning slightly. He wondered how long it would take for her spirit to recover from her mistreatment.

Jane moved to Darcy’s side of the table and put her arm around her. Darcy leaned her head on Jane’s shoulder, appreciative of the gesture, though also aware that it stemmed some from the fact that Jane was irritated with Thor amid reminders of his long absence.

Thor also realized this as he saw Jane’s frown and the way her gaze shifted away from him. He noticed the group photo, then reached across the table and took her hand. “Dearest Jane! I have given up my realm to stay here with you now. If I could change the past and erase the pain I gave you? I would. You must believe that.”

Darcy sat up and shifted away as the long-time lover’s quarrel resumed and gained steam. She pulled out her new phone, checked news headlines, deleted a couple of messages from Ian, forwarded a clever meme that Erik would appreciate, sent the Beatles song ‘Yesterday’ to Steve because, Beatles(!), and it sort of fit his homesickness for his time a little. Then she started to open Candy Crush. Her attention was diverted from that by the sudden, pulsing red light that took over the phone screen. The word ‘ASSEMBLE’ appeared, and she turned the phone so that Thor could see it. He stood abruptly, knocking his chair back into a wall. Jane gasped.

Darcy tossed some money on the table, and Thor apologized to the owner as he opened the door to the street and urged the ladies out and back towards Avengers Tower. They heard a strangely metallic screeching noise and Thor slammed them both back hard against a building and shielded them with his body as energy pulses rained down on the cars and pedestrians in the middle of the street.

Darcy screamed in horror as she saw a woman catch fire and disappear into vapor, then two men and another woman. Jane’s head had bumped hard against the wall and she slumped against Thor, unconscious. He cradled her against him, holding her with one hand and calling her name while he raised his other hand and waited. Darcy knew enough to stay away from that hand, and huddled as close to Jane as she could. The metallic screeching noise grew louder and she covered her ears. An explosion nearby caused her to look up and she saw at least a dozen alien craft circling over the street, shooting. Then she saw Captain America’s shield arc through the air into the engine of one just before the ship exploded. The shield flew back from the exploding craft, and she saw Steve claim it and send it on another deadly arc from atop the small building where he stood. One craft fired at him, and she shook with terror as he again caught the shield and used it to reflect the deadly beam towards its source, destroying the craft.

He moved quickly and fluidly, nearly as strong and every bit as able as Thor. He jumped a tremendous gap between buildings so he could protect construction workers and allow them to escape enemy fire. It was different seeing him ‘working’ in person, breathtaking. She’d almost forgotten that Steve was also Captain America; she had become so comfortable with him. He lifted huge pieces of debris, pulling people from rubble and protecting them, moving them to safety, and immediately rejoined the battle by using the shield precisely to bring down alien craft after craft.

At the same time, he talked into a communicator, obviously directing the other Avengers. A Quinjet passed overhead, firing and then moving as though to draw the alien crafts' attention away from the defenseless civilians below. Steve spoke into his communicator again, and Iron Man flew by, making circles and also drawing enemy fire. Iron Man drones followed him and did the same.

Still, the aliens were drawn to the fleeing civilians. Steve resumed his shield attacks and brought down another of the ships.
Darcy was gaping at him. She saw him glance at her a time or two. Then, he made a series of jumps up the adjacent walls at the corner of a building so he could reach higher ground and attack the fighter craft from there. Another ship fell to a well-placed throw of the shield.

Mjolnir came to Thor’s outstretched hand. Darcy saw Thor struggling over how to protect them best, anguish in his expression as he looked at Jane. Finally, he boomed “Captain!” as loudly as he could. Captain America immediately leapt from the building rooftop to the top of a nearby semi, and then rolled neatly over a taxi cab, coming to a stop in front of them.

Thor urged him. “Please shield our ladies whilst I take a turn in battle with these invaders.” He gently shifted Jane to Darcy, exchanging a glance with Darcy that needed no accompanying words. Darcy leaned back against the wall and supported Jane against it, thanking her lucky stars that Jane was so light.

The Captain took position in front of them, telling Thor to ‘light ‘em up,’ and using his shield adroitly to deflect all fire. His reflexes amazed her. She saw how tense he seemed and stayed quiet so as not to distract him. One of the alien craft took aim at the shield and was quickly blasted with lightning by Thor. The craft spun out and crashed into a building down the block. People were screaming and running for the subway entrances. Emergency sirens wailed.

Thor swung the hammer in a circle and took flight to the top of a taller building. Once there, he called down lightning, bolt after bolt. It made the air all around them crackle and caused Darcy to cry out and recoil, holding Jane tightly. Steve took a step back even closer to her, shielding her and Jane as fully as possible. She heard more explosions and realized that the lightning must be taking down alien ships.

Then, to top it all off, she heard an ear-splitting roar and felt the earth tremble from an impact close by. Around Steve, she saw the Hulk standing in front of them, snarling and staring at Steve expectantly. He was enormous, bigger than she’d imagined, and more frightening than a nightmare. She gasped at the sight of the Hulk so near, pushing her glasses up so she could really see… and feeling even gladder to have Captain America and his shield in front of her and Jane. She pressed one shaking hand against Steve’s back to steady herself while she tried to trace any resemblance to Bruce Banner in the Hulk’s features. His hair was similar, and there was something familiar in his expression, though in the midst of battle, Hulk seemed utterly primal and ferocious.

Steve ordered, “Hulk! Help Thor! I need to protect these people. Destroy the silver… ships. Go, there! Draw their fire away from us.” He pointed up the street, away from the Tower and towards the less-populated area near the river.

Hulk grunted acknowledgement and raged as alien fire singed near them. He leapt into the air onto one of the craft, bringing it down immediately and looking pleased with himself as he moved on to follow his orders and wreak more havoc against the invaders. Happily, the momentum of the battle began to shift away from them.

Steve turned around and grabbed Darcy urgently with one hand. “Darcy! Are you okay, Sweetheart?” She nodded, shaking from head to toe with fear. He set his shield on his back and took Jane and easily carried her with one arm, her head against his shoulder. He spoke urgently. “Can you walk?” Darcy nodded, her head practically bobbling as she shook.

He put his other arm around her waist, pulled her against him, and helped her move as quickly as possible away from the battle and towards the Tower. When they reached the entrance, he held her close against him for a moment, and kissed her intently on the lips. “I’m glad you’re safe now. Seeing you in the middle of this mess about gave me a heart attack. I need to get back and help the others. I’ll tell Thor that you two are safe. Can you take Dr. Foster to medical?” She nodded,
squeezed his hand quickly and pulled away, ready to take Jane’s weight again. He looked like he wanted to say more, but only sighed. They entered the lobby of the Tower.

Steve called out to an agent. “Sharon! Help these ladies! Dr. Foster has been injured!” A beautiful, tall, blonde ran forward and took Jane. She was strong enough to lift Jane in a fireman’s carry, obviously fit, her tailored suit with short skirt showing long legs and a lithe figure.

As Steve turned to go, the agent smiled and teased. “Just because it wasn't all I do, doesn't mean I’m not also a nurse!” Steve chuckled and saluted Sharon, looked at her as though she reminded him of someone, and ran out to rejoin the fight. Darcy followed the agent carrying Jane, grumbling in her thoughts about pretty people who could flirt in the middle of emergencies. Darcy kept glancing back to where Steve was running away from the Tower and into danger. The agent spoke curtly. “May I have your name?”

Darcy nodded, wiped her eyes and answered. “Darcy Lewis. I’m Dr. Foster’s assistant.” She was relieved to find that her badge was still attached to her belt loop, and tapped it for the agent to see.

Sharon nodded. “Then, you have security clearance. JARVIS will know, anyway, of course. But, if you didn't, I would ask you to stay down here.”

Darcy shook her head and demurred. “No. I go with Jane. Anyway, I’m pretty familiar with the Healing Ward. I just got out recently myself.”

The agent made a sound of recall as they entered the elevator. “Oh! I remember your name now. I brought Dr. Selvig in to the safe house in London.”

“Well, thanks for looking after him. He’s a good guy.” Darcy pushed the elevator button and shrugged.

Sharon smiled. “He seems sort of sweet. It’s a shame he’s unwell.” Darcy nodded and hugged herself, wondering if her shivers were from shock. Sharon continued talking. “How did you meet up with the Captain today?” She side-eyed Darcy, curious.

Darcy replied shortly. “Jane and I were out with Thor. He and Dr. Foster are…” She waved a hand and stopped talking because she couldn't think of an accurate description that didn't sound sappy. All that came to mind was the phrase 'true love,' so she finally muttered that.

Sharon relaxed. “Oh! Yes. I’ve heard about them. Like a fairy tale.” Darcy shrugged. Sharon smirked. “Captain America’s something else, isn't he?” Darcy disliked Sharon’s tone and the fact that she’d made Steve chuckle before.

Darcy asked quietly, “Do you know Steve well?”

Sharon shook her head. “Not very. We were neighbors for a while. Director Fury assigned me to keep an eye on the Captain.” She laughed slightly, indicating that such a duty was no hardship. She continued, “Agent Romanoff tried to set us up a few times, but he stays so busy.” Sharon frowned slightly.

Darcy took a shaky breath, realizing that of course Natasha Romanoff wouldn't have tried to set Steve up with anyone ugly… or even average. Sharon was classically beautiful, with a fit, lithe figure. She was an agent and a nurse, so smarter than your average bear. Darcy thought that if Steve were in a movie, Sharon looked like the type a Hollywood casting director would hire to play Captain America’s sweet, wholesomely-sexy, perfect, love interest. Curses flitted through Darcy's thoughts in a tangle.
The elevator finally, blessedly, arrived at the Healing Ward. As they stepped off the elevator, Agent Navarro met them. She spoke to Sharon, and had Jane put on a gurney. Over her shoulder, she greeted Darcy, “Miss Lewis! You can’t seem to stay away!”

Darcy smiled slightly and walked over to a nearby bench and sank down. Her breath shuddered. Sharon looked her over, assessing. “Do you need medical attention?”

Darcy shook her head. “Nah. I’m just a little shaky. I’ll sit here and wait to hear about Jane.”

“You may be experiencing shock. You look pale, to me.” Sharon looked at her, appraising.

Darcy nodded and shrugged, irritated by the other woman’s presence and holding back the observation that not everybody got to the tanning bed on a regular basis like the blonde. She tried (and failed) to hide her feelings as she growled sullenly. “I’ll stay here. If I feel worse I know to ask for help.” She chided herself for being childish, but told ‘self’ to drop dead, and continued her sulk.

Sharon nodded efficiently. “I’ll tell the nurses to keep an eye on you, all the same. The Captain entrusted me with your welfare. I wouldn’t want to let him down.”

Darcy just nodded in reply and watched as Sharon spoke to a nurse and left. Darcy allowed herself a childish raspberry as the blond retreated. After a moment, she became aware of someone nearby crying out. She thought the person called her name. She stood and walked towards the noise, past a guard and to the door of Bucky’s room.

A nurse was standing by Bucky’s side, saying, “If you don’t calm down, I’ll be forced to give you a sedative, Sergeant. You’ll frighten the patients!”

Darcy peered into the room around a large guard and whispered, “Bucky?”

He turned to her with eyes full of anxiety. He insisted, “They’re Vorm. Tell him it’s a Vorm scouting group!”

“What does that mean?” Darcy watched a silver ship fly by. She shook her head in amazement.

He stared out the window with an agitated expression. “They’re enormous. Their venomous tails are deadly weapons when you fight hand-to-hand. They don’t like things hot or bright. He should defeat them BEFORE dark. In darkness, they have full strength. Don’t wait to fully engage until the civilians are away! That’d be a mistake.”

Darcy understood the urgency he put into this last. Steve would plan tactics around the safety of civilians. She reached into her pocket and took out her phone and looked at it. Then, she looked up at the ceiling and spoke aloud. “JARVIS? Can you relay what Bucky just told me to the Avengers somehow?”

“Yes, Darcy,” JARVIS replied, “I will do that now, if you think it is valid information. Your name has been added to the important contact list for two Avengers, so I am able to do as you ask.”

She blushed, nodded and replied, “Huh! Yeah. I think it might help.” She assumed the first Avenger who listed her was Thor… and guessed Steve the second. She blinked at the idea that Steve would consider her an ‘important contact.’

Bucky laid his head back and closed his eyes for a second, then glared at the nurse.
The nurse looked at Darcy defensively, “He was just yelling strange words all of a sudden after
days not saying a word to anybody. I don’t know if you can believe anything he says.” She
shuddered, obviously afraid of the Winter Soldier.

Darcy moved into the room and sat in the chair by the wall. “I believe him.” She took off her
glasses and rubbed her eyes, sighing.

Bucky stared at Darcy for a long moment. “Are you okay?” He looked almost skeptical of his
ability to ask that question. The nurse looked startled.

Darcy smiled slightly. “Thanks! Yeah. I guess. I tried going out of the building and things got
crazy. I’m kind of inclined to stay inside forever now.” She shuddered and rubbed her hands up and
down her arms briskly.

“I heard you in the hall, talking with someone you don’t like,” he remarked almost wryly. Almost
teasing.

Darcy studied Bucky’s expression, grinned, and leaned forward a bit.

“Please don’t go closer, Miss Lewis. It’s protocol.” The nurse admonished.

Darcy made a face. “Protocol isn’t very nice to you, is it, Bucky?” He shook his head a tiny bit, still
looking at her as though surprised she was talking to him. The nurse walked out, muttering to
erself. Darcy sighed and admitted, “The lady in the hall was pretty- no, VERY pretty- and I think
she has a thing for Steve, and she made him laugh and he looked at her sort of searchingly. She’s
probably nice, but no, I don’t like her much right now. She looks perfect for him.” Tired and
stressed, Darcy allowed herself to pout openly. Deep inside, Darcy felt unworthy of Steve’s
attention.

Bucky nodded, surprised. He rasped. “He sits here, talking to me for hours... has on and off for
days and days. He talks about you sometimes.” His expression was almost like a grin. “He’d give
me a hard time if he heard me say this, but he made me want to see some picture of you.”

She groaned and leaned her head back against the wall, lightly banging it there a few times.

He growled, “Don’t! I’ll be blamed if you’re hurt. And he wouldn’t like it.”

Darcy nodded, sighed, and asked, “Do you talk to Steve?” Bucky shook his head quickly. She gave
him a look of disgruntled disbelief. “Why not?”

He gave no answer for at least a minute. She waited, watching his expression. There were hints of
different emotions there. He sighed, and finally admitted, “I don’t remember all he wants me to.
The things that are coming back from over the years in and out of the box are... bad. If I can’t... I
don’t want to say the wrong thing and go back into the cold!” His eyes were haunted as he spoke
the word ‘cold.’

She flinched, horrified at the words ‘box’ and ‘cold’, but probed, “You remember at a glance out a
window what a race is called, and that they use their tails as weapons.” She hoped her matter of
fact observation would keep him talking rather than shutting down from his admission of fear.
While she had the sense that much of what he might say would give her nightmares, she wanted for
Bucky to talk.

He nodded, took a breath, lifted his chin. “That’s related to what I’ve been programmed for over
the years, more than once. After they shocked memories out of me, they educated me again- each
time.”
She shuddered sympathetically. “But memories from before they took you…?”

He made a face and choked out, “I have dreams… falling… pain… faint memories of happiness that cut hurtfully. Stevie is smaller in most of the dreams.”

She raised a brow at the name he used and noted, “Stevie? Well, he loves you like his brother, so, I figure the next time he sits here for a few hours begging you to remember who you were before… Could you at least say ‘Hi’ or something?” Darcy frowned reproachfully.

Bucky looked at her with no discernible emotion.

Darcy huffed. “No one is sending you back! If for no other reason than they don’t want to have to fight you again! But, really cause Steve loves you. And it would be wrong, too. Hydra sucks beyond all suckage. You can trust Steve. If you remember anything about him, you remember that he does what’s right… always did, no matter what.” Bucky’s tentative expression tore at her heart.

The nurse returned with a cup of water. “Miss Lewis, Agent Carter worried you might be in shock. Have some water, please.”

“Agent Carter?” Darcy's eyes widened with disbelief.

Bucky got a strange expression on his face, almost puzzled.

“That’s the name of the agent who brought in you and your friend. She told me that you are Dr. Foster’s assistant, that Captain America asked her to see the two of you to safety for him.” The nurse stared at Darcy critically, evaluating her reactions.

Darcy took a gulp of the water, shaking her head. She asked, “How’s Jane?”

The nurse relaxed the slightest bit. “Dr. Foster is resting and in stable condition. She’s having a scan to check for concussion right now and we’ll do some other tests, too. We’ll let you know as we know more.”

Darcy nodded. “Thank you.” The nurse left and Darcy looked at the ceiling. “JARVIS, can you tell me if the Agent Carter who brought me inside just now is related to Peggy Carter?”

JARVIS replied crisply. “Agent Sharon Carter has a great aunt named Margaret Carter who goes by the name Peggy.”

Darcy growled slightly, “JARVIS, are you being obtuse?”

Bucky laughed softly and then looked stunned.

Darcy blinked as she heard his laughter, wondering how long it had been since he last made that sound. She was willing to bet it had been a long time, judging from Bucky’s reaction. She raised her brows, grinned slightly, and nodded encouragement to him.

JARVIS replied, “I apologize if my answer did not satisfy you, Darcy. If I understand you correctly, you are asking if Sharon Carter’s ‘Aunt Peggy’ is the same woman who was acquainted with Steve Rogers in the 1940’s. She is.”

“Of course, she is! Thank you, JARVIS.” Darcy leaned her head back again and banged it a few times.

Bucky admonished, “Hey! We talked about that.”
She looked at him with a grumpy expression. She asked, “So, why would you need to know about alien races at a glance?” He looked at her blankly. She asked, “Have you done much work with other creatures, like, not human?”

He shook his head, and turned to look out the window again. He noted, “Hydra wouldn't use me that way. They have others who make contact and work with invaders so that Hydra’s power increases. I needed to know who to avoid attacking, so that I wouldn't jeopardize negotiations.” His expression became closed.

She nodded, accepting that he couldn't overcome years of programming more than he already had. “And, why do you want for the Avengers to have accurate intel on these Vorm scouts? Why do you care? Is it to protect Stevie?” Still, she needled him gently in what she hoped was a weak spot.

He glared at her for a moment, and looked out the window. Bucky offered, “To the northwest, there is a helicopter that is not aiding the Avengers, rescuers or media. That's likely a Hydra negotiation team.”

Darcy sat up straighter. “May I let Steve know that?” He nodded stiffly, eyes flashing with something like fear of being punished. She spoke in a quiet voice, “JARVIS, can you please pass Bucky’s message to Steve?”

JARVIS replied in a moment. “The Captain says thank you to you both.” Darcy wondered what Steve must feel on receiving a helpful message from Bucky. The thought made her warm inside. She glanced at Bucky, wondering how it affected him.

They both stared out the window and saw Hulk shift to the helicopter that Bucky had indicated. Bucky exclaimed, “He believed me enough to loose the beast on them!” He shook his head and muttered. “Wish I could help him tear them to shreds.” His voice trailed off sadly.

Darcy intoned, “Release the Kraken!” Bucky glanced at her with an odd expression. She shook her head and grumbled, “Sorry. Pop culture reference.” She chuckled ruefully. "Nobody gets me these days.”

He continued watching Hulk disable the helicopter. There would be no Hydra/Vorm negotiation today. He remarked, “I've heard it applied to sending me on a mission. I don’t know your reference point.”

She explained, “Movie, myth of Perseus stuff. Did you get any time off?” He shook his head slightly, eyes still on the action outside. She winced and decided she needed to lighten the mood. At this point it looked like things were going fairly well for the Avengers. She grabbed her phone and searched for a song. She found “Takin’ Care of Business” by Bachmann-Turner Overdrive, and let it play while they watched the battle.

She could tell that Bucky was listening by the tilt of his head as he continued staring outside. He grinned slightly after a while.

She grinned, “Hey! You still have a sense of humor!” She nodded approvingly. “Irony, too, since this song is really about slackers.”

His smile grew. He shook his head as though grasping. “Little Stevie, getting the job done, finding himself a cute new dame. Who would’ve ever thought that, back in Brooklyn? Most people never got how incredibly brave that little guy was...”

She exclaimed, “Hey! You have a nice smile. You’re not just dreaming, and you remember Steve
being from Brooklyn, so yay! Second, you sound a little like Tony Stark, knocking him.” His grin faded. He shook his head. She persisted, “Do, too!” She made a face, “He calls him ‘Capsicle’ for God’s sake!” She scoffed. "Who would've thought..."

Bucky growled, “Shut up! Play that song again.” So, she did. Darcy grinned at him. He kept a straight face, but there was a hint of a grin around his eyes.

For a while she let him hear other songs she was considering for Steve’s playlist gift. Bucky liked “I Wish” by Stevie Wonder a lot; especially when Darcy explained that it reminded her of stories Steve had told her about him and Bucky as mischievous kids during the Depression. He looked at her strangely when she played ‘For All We Know’ by Nat King Cole and said it made her think about what had become of Steve and Peggy's great love. Every now and then he’d say a name or place that Steve had mentioned to her. Bucky looked surprised by each memory as it came back to him. Darcy encouraged him, sharing any of what she could remember Steve telling her, after Bucky touched on it. She prayed to herself that he was really remembering and not just reciting things Steve had told him. She could only imagine how much Steve wanted for Bucky to recover his memories, especially those of their friendship.

Darcy could see that Bucky was mulling a lot of things over. If the eyes are the window to the soul, then Bucky’s eyes showed a soul that had seen far more torment than joy. She gave him space to process things, but couldn't resist asking about his thoughts every now and then. Mostly, he shook his head, “Nah, Doll. You don’t want to hear all the stuff that’s shakin’ loose. I’ll save it for the head-shrinkers. They’d piss themselves with glee if I told them. You’d have nightmares.” He looked around and shrugged. “They’re probably watching us, anyway. That voice you were talking to… JARVIS? He’s always around.”

Darcy nodded. “JARVIS is Tony Stark’s virtual minder and man-servant, I guess. He's all over the Tower, at least in the public spaces...”

Bucky’s jaw tightened a bit. “Could it call me something other than Sergeant Barnes?”

Darcy nodded and asked, “JARVIS? You get that?”

JARVIS replied, “Yes, Darcy. I am unsure how to address the man you call Bucky now to ask what name he wishes for me to use.”

“Bucky. My friends called me Bucky, back when I had friends...” He looked far away. “The dames called me Bucky.” Bucky nodded.

Darcy asked, “Did you have a special girl, too?”

Bucky gave her an impatient look and shook his head. “I had lots of special girls.” He frowned, then blinked a few times. “Huh. I did. I lived...” He swallowed hard and looked at her with eyes full of loss. Darcy bit her lip, struggling to think of a good response.

JARVIS interjected, “I will be glad to address you as ‘Bucky,’ if you prefer, sir.”

Bucky startled and shook his head. “Yeah. Bucky’ll do.” He looked at Darcy, “I still don’t like that it's always there. Someone’s always there.” He frowned.

Darcy noted, “JARVIS is cool, though.”

JARVIS thanked Darcy.

Bucky looked away from her. “When they first worked on me after I fell, they called me Sergeant
Barnes a lot. They called me ‘Soldier’ for the most part later. For a while there I was called ‘Yasha’…” He gasped, expression crumpling with agony.

Darcy could see that he was shaking, and blinking away tears. She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry about all the bad stuff they put you through, Bucky.”

He looked at her and nodded silently. After a few silent minutes, Darcy went to check on Jane, both out of concern for Jane and to give Bucky some quiet time to himself. Jane was sleeping, so Darcy got a snack, visited the restroom, and paced the halls of the Healing Ward for a while. She was drawn back to Bucky’s side eventually, though.

When she returned, he seemed better. He even almost smiled when she asked if she could visit him more. He nodded, and began narrating what she’d missed and what was happening between the Avengers and the invading Vorm by the river. She listened intently, growing more anxious as the fighting continued. As the daylight dimmed, Darcy became restless with concern. She hated the day’s sunset nearly as much as she’d enjoyed its sunrise, which was really saying something.

Bucky continued to explain the action to her. The Vorm had been giving the Avengers enough trouble by day… If they grew stronger when the sun set, as Bucky had been told, Darcy feared what might happen. Many of the craft had set down, and Vorm had disembarked to join hand-to-tail combat. Darcy's heart thudded with dread.

The nurse returned and let Darcy know that Jane would stay overnight for observation as a precaution, regardless of the results of her scans. She asked Darcy if she would like to wait elsewhere, and Darcy testily declined, eager to hear Bucky’s explanations of what was happening outside. The nurse left the room with a strained glance at Bucky.

After she was gone he tried to brush off Darcy. “You can leave me. I don’t have anything else to say that can help him.” He looked as though he was feigning indifference, but somewhat fragile, too.

“I’ll go, if it’s what you want. I’d rather wait with you, though, if you don’t mind.” She continued her pacing.

His expression softened. “What about your friend, Doll?”

Darcy chewed her lip. “She’s probably awake by now. I should update her that Thor’s okay.” She turned to the door. “But, can I come back here and wait with you after that? You help me know what’s happening, and nobody else gets my concern for Steve like you.”

He looked at her oddly, and then crooked a grin. “Maybe Agent Carter?”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Brat! I’ll be back in a few.”

Bucky looked at her with a bemused expression.

She walked down the hall to find Jane. She noticed several of the nurses looking at her oddly as she went. Navarro smiled encouragement. As Darcy entered Jane's room, Jane yelped, “Where have you been?! I’m sitting here for no reason, not able to get back to work. I was so bored I napped some, but still!”

Darcy closed the door behind her. “I was watching the battle with Bucky. He understands what’s happening, and sees a lot better than I do. Thor’s fine. These guys don’t like heat, and Thor’s lighting them up left and right.” She smiled to herself as she realized she was using the wording of Steve’s ‘orders’ to Thor.
“You were with Bucky? You mean the Winter Soldier? Is that safe?” Jane blinked several times.

Darcy sat down and snarked. “So far, it’s been safer than going out to lunch with you and Thor!”

“How did we get here? They told me an agent brought us in?” Jane looked puzzled.

Darcy made a face. “You bumped your head when Thor covered us from attack. Thor handed us off to Steve so we’d be protected by his shield and Thor could use Mew Mew against the Vorm. Steve got us to the Tower, carried you here, and an agent brought us up so he could rejoin the battle.”

“Vorm?” Jane looked anxious.

Darcy detailed, “Big bad guys, not from around here, tail weapons…” She glanced out at the dimming sky wishing she could see the Avengers from Jane’s room, “Stronger at night.”

Jane followed her glance out the window. “How do you know all that?”

Darcy shrugged, “Bucky! I listened, instead of encouraging them to tranq him like the nurse helping guard him wanted.”

JARVIS interrupted, “Darcy, Bucky seems distressed. Should I send in his nurse, or would you like to check on him?” She jumped up and scurried down the hall.

Darcy threw open the door to Bucky’s room, her Taser in hand, in case someone was trying to hurt him. He looked at it with an incredulous expression, “What the hell is that for?” The guard glanced in, shrugged, and moved back out into the hall. Darcy frowned at the guard’s lack of concern for Bucky.

She panted, “Are you okay? I thought someone was hurting you when JARVIS told me you were distressed.”

He shook his head. “Nah. It’s Steve! He got himself hurt to protect the assassins and the flyer. I know they’re the most vulnerable Avengers, but why does he always have to put himself in the way of the worst of it?”

Darcy went cold all over and looked out the dark window vainly. “Hurt? How bad?! She stepped closer to the window, nearer Bucky’s bed.

The nurse came in to see why Darcy had been running and chastised her. “Miss Lewis! You are too close! Protocol!”

Darcy turned to look at the nurse, yelling, “Don’t talk like he’s not right here listening! He won’t hurt me!” She looked at Bucky. He nodded slowly, a resolute expression on his face.

Noise in the hall drew their attention. The nurse paled and put a hand to her throat as a klaxon sounded and green lights flashed, strobe-like. They heard screams. JARVIS’ voice was amplified, exclaiming “Alert. Level- Urgent. Green Incoming. Visitors and non-essential personnel should evacuate the Healing Ward immediately.”

The nurse looked at Darcy pointedly. Darcy shook her head, determined to stay by Bucky’s side regardless of what ‘Green Incoming’ meant. Bucky stared at them, tensed. The nurse hesitated. Darcy walked past her and looked out into the hallway.

The extremely large window at the far end of the hall, one that Darcy had enjoyed spectacular
views from during her stay, suddenly shifted open. The glass slid back safely into the walls. Tony Stark, wearing a partial suit of mechanical flight boots, a mechanical arm and a complicated headset flew into the hallway, scattering nurses, papers, and more in his wake. Bucky’s nurse grabbed Darcy’s arm and tried to pull her towards an exit.

Stark yelled, “Hey, Nurse ‘Protocol’! Get out and leave Lewis alone! Guard guy, Lewis, get back in with the Cold Miser! Everyone get ready. Hulk is bringing Cap in and time matters!” He turned and yelped, “Shit! They’re here!”

Darcy stumbled back into the doorway of Bucky’s room as Tony flew backwards past at high speed, far enough to avoid being hit as Hulk leapt in through the large opening into the hall with an unconscious Steve in his arms.

Hulk roared at top volume as he landed. Bucky’s guard paled and scurried into the room, shaking with fear.

Tony, still floating, held his hands out and spoke soothingly. “It’s okay, Big Guy! You did great. Now put him down so the docs and nurses can help.” Hulk lay Steve’s bleeding body down on the floor in front of him, looked down and roared even more loudly. Tony chuckled. “That only works on me. Back off now. Stop scaring the shit out of our med staff.” Hulk slowly backed away, staring down at Steve sadly and huffing.

While earlier Darcy had felt terror when she saw Hulk, now the most frightening thing she could see was Steve… broken. He was pale as someone removed his wet cowl, and there was a lot of blood and water, both on his gashed uniform and pooling under his body. The gashes in his torso fairly gushed blood. She heard the words ‘crushed’ and ‘internal damage’ interspersed with both frightening calm and florid cursing from the medical staff scurrying around him. She felt a steadying hand on her arm and looked up into Tony’s eyes. He was still floating a foot above the ground.

She turned back and gasped plaintively, “Steve?” He didn't stir. It was the first time since they’d met that he hadn’t immediately responded to her in some way. Terror cut through her.

She turned and saw Bucky’s expression. He was still so confused, but there were glimpses of something more, something that mirrored her fear. She ran to his bedside and flung her arms around his neck and burst out crying. Only she (and JARVIS) heard his tortured murmurs. “I don't deserve... but, I need... my friend...” She didn't hear the guard’s protest or see the intensity of Tony’s expression as he raised a mechanically enhanced arm and took aim at Bucky in warning.

Neither did Bucky. He closed his eyes tight and spoke louder to her. “Don’t give up on him, Doll. Stevie never gives up. He doesn't know how.” Tony slowly lowered his arm, a look of surprise on his face.

to be continued...
“I enjoyed the sunrise a lot more yesterday.”

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and Darcy wait to see if Steve will recover.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor flew in through the window entry next, Natasha gracefully clinging to his side. Natasha stepped down from him as neatly as though she did it daily. Thor brushed off questions about his condition and the blood on his face as he looked into room after room in search of Jane. When he found her, he knelt by her bedside and lowered his head. “My dearest love, can you forgive me for leaving you to the care of others while I battled the invaders? It tore my heart when I realized I harmed your wondrous head. Please assure me that you will be well! I have feared for you every minute since I joined the battle.”

Jane began to cry guiltily, and nodded while apologizing over and over for her previous lack of forgiveness. The experiences of the day had put Thor’s absence from her during the battle against the Chitauri into perspective.

Falcon flew in next, holstering his guns as he entered, removing his flight goggles and staring at his fallen Captain with a haunted expression. He helped with crowd control for the medical team and stared after them as they wheeled Steve out.

Natasha watched as the medical team took Steve to the operating room. She walked to stand by Tony. “Come down from there, Stark.” Tony deactivated his boosters. She looked into Bucky’s room and saw Darcy with him and shook her head. “You’d think she’d have learned some fear recently.”

Tony's reply was brusque. “He helped us today, and seems to be getting something out of his treatments. You saw what happened when the sun set just before we got the last two by the river. Imagine if we’d waited for the civilians to get clear like Cap originally wanted!”

Darcy stood up from Bucky’s side, wiped her eyes, exchanged a look of gratitude and concern with him, and moved into the hall. “Bucky remembers enough of Steve to know he’d want to do that. He was agitated for Steve, trying to get helpful info to him.”

Tony clarified, “‘Bucky’ is not classified as a friendly, Lewis. I had JARVIS transcribe your conversations with him for me while I directed my drones in the fight. The notes are in Cap’s in-box for him, if he…” He grimaced. “You’re the only one Barnes talks to, so far.” Darcy frowned, but nodded her understanding. When Tony chortled, “Carter!” her frown deepened to a scowl and she avoided meeting anyone's eyes.

Natasha looked skeptical. “I need more convincing than one assist. He’s been under control of Soviet and Hydra scientists for too long. I’m not ready to put money on him just yet, or trust him.”

They saw Bucky’s eyes open again as he turned his head to look at Natasha. Darcy saw a variety of emotions play across his face, recognition among them. Natasha met his gaze with an inscrutable expression. Darcy looked between the two of them and wondered what she was missing.
Tony chuckled grimly. “You talk like I’m really trusting and easily believe the best of people.”

Natasha shook her head. “No. That’s Steve, at least where Barnes is concerned.” She looked at Darcy, “And, apparently Miss Lewis.” Darcy stood her ground, her chin lifted in defiance.

Hawkeye burst out of the elevator and approached. “Stark! One of your drones dropped me on the roof. What the hell’s up with that? Was that you jerking me around, or did you have another control glitch?” He nodded greeting to the others. When Darcy looked up at him, he stopped and took a step back from her.

Tony shrugged. “I’ll look into it later. I wanted to be here to greet Hulk. When he popped in the other week with those fallen SHIELD agents? We ended up with a panicked stampede, a full triage unit, and six resignations.”

Hawkeye chuckled grimly. He then asked about Steve and moved to a nearby locker and pulled out clothes for Banner as he saw Hulk calming. Hawkeye walked to stand next to Hulk and wait. Most medical personnel skirted as far away from the Hulk as possible. Hawkeye smiled at them scornfully. Falcon took off his pack and stored it in a locker with his guns and other equipment-then stood with the others, looking worn out and worried. He nodded at Darcy grimly. She wiped her cheeks dry and tried to pull herself together.

Navarro came in bearing Jane’s scan results. Jane had a mild concussion, a bad bump. They wanted to keep her for observation. Jane also needed rest because of her habitually sleep-deprived lifestyle, so Navarro declined Thor’s urging to release her, demanding that the petite scientist have an undisturbed night’s rest. She went to notify Jane. Tony snickered at the implications, while Thor looked guilt-stricken and Darcy grinned wanly and patted Thor’s arm.

Banner gradually reappeared while people stared in unabashed disbelief. Hawkeye handed him sweats and a shirt. Once clothed, Banner asked for an update on Steve.

“You got him here as quickly as possible. No one was hurt during your entrance. They just took Cap back to the OR.” Tony reassured Bruce.

Bruce turned to Darcy, looking concerned. “Hey. You okay? I remember that ‘the other guy’ scared you earlier out on the street.” He looked rueful, carefully standing back. She nodded, rushed forward, and hugged the startled doctor. He hugged her in return, shaking his head. Tony shot him a leer, and Banner shook his head again, looking at Tony with a wry expression. Sam scowled at Tony and was ignored.

Navarro came back from Jane’s side and looked over each person standing there. She quickly cleaned minor wounds and applied bandages. It was apparent that she knew that none of them, except Sam, would give her much time to work on their wounds, but that they tolerated quick attention.

“You haven’t been out of here long enough for me to recommend you skip meals, Miss Lewis,” Navarro cajoled.

Darcy nodded anxiously, not at all hungry while they waited for news on Steve. Navarro pointed to a waiting room down the hall and indicated she was having food sent up for the people waiting for news on Captain America. Tony nodded at the agent with respectful appreciation.

The Avengers and friends filed into the room and sat. Clint and Natasha sat next to each other, legs on each others’ chairs. Thor tucked-in heartily, hungry from battle exertions. Tony chattered non-stop, while Bruce listened to him and ate wearily. Darcy was reminded of the photo on the wall of
the Shawarma shop, except for Steve’s absence and the addition of Sam, Jane (in a wheelchair), Darcy… and Bucky's presence down the hall. Darcy tried to nibble some fruit and chicken salad. It seemed flavorless and was hard to choke down. She had a little ginger ale, hoping it might settle her stomach.

Unable to think of anything else, she asked, “What happened to Steve?”

The others exchanged glances. Sam spoke up. “We were down to the last few. Thor was lighting one up, while Cap kept it pinned. Ours was doing much better. He had me, Hawkeye, and the Widow cornered by the river. That tail was beating the hell out of us and throwing Tony’s drones off like flies. The tail had spikes on the end and moved FAST. The lizard must have been ten feet tall with another eight feet of tail. My guns just wouldn't make a dent once it got dark. I might as well have been throwing jelly beans. But, I was trying to distract him so Widow and Hawkeye could zap him with bites and explosive arrows. That tail tossed me into a building, and I was out cold for a few seconds. When I came to, Hawkeye had saved my ass with an arrow with a catch line. Thanks, man! He was lowering me. Widow was dodging that damned tail, and Steve came plowing right into the bastard, shield flying hard. The lizard caught him full in the chest with the tail. The spikes punctured his gear. It slammed him down against the concrete so hard the concrete broke! We all jumped in on the lizard, and Thor joined in with lightning and fried the guy. That's when Cap got tossed into the water.”

Jane looked at Darcy with eyes full of concern.

There was silence for a long moment. Darcy closed her eyes, her voice catching. “Was the water cold?” Natasha nodded grimly. Darcy swallowed hard. She stood and walked over to the window and looked out.

“You could have just told her he got hit by a tail.” Natasha gave Sam a chiding look.

Sam shook his head. “If he makes it, it’s good for her to know what happened, so he doesn't have to recall every detail to her himself.” He gestured to her. “He’s gonna want her with him, if she’s willing.” He glanced at Tony seriously.

Darcy looked at Sam and nodded. She wanted to be by Steve's side and was grateful others thought she should be there.

Sam continued, “He couldn't stop thinking about her while we were hunting the Winter Soldier. Of all the missions for him to get distracted! I gave him a hard time after Hawkeye explained where Steve’s head was.” He grinned at the memory, then added, “And they've finally started dating. He’s over the moon about it.” He glanced quickly at Bruce, and then turned back towards Darcy. His grin faded and he shook his head as though shocked, “IF he makes it… can’t believe that there’s room for doubt.”

Tony bristled. “He’s gonna make it. He’s Captain fuckin' America!” He pointed at the others around the table. “Take note! I’m the only one here without a scratch on them! When I get all the drones done, we can let them get the crap kicked out of ‘em while we take it easy!”

"Without a scratch!” Sam mocked those words in a tone that indicated he'd heard them too often.

Hawkeye bristled. “First, the damned drones have to learn the difference between the Healing Ward entry and the roof!”

Thor spoke thoughtfully. “I am more impressed with your metal centurions than I expected to be, but I have concerns. If you must direct them in every altercation on Midgard, there will be no rest
for you. If you create an autonomous leader for them, you risk its evolution. I have heard tales where creation turns on creator. I would not like to battle a drone made to carry out my capabilities, but also possessing the adroitness of friend Natasha, the unerring aim of friend Barton, the brute strength of Banner’s inner beast, the tactical skills and fortitude of our Captain, and your dazzling intellect and daring.” Jane stroked his hand, looking at him with serene pride.

Tony shrugged off Thor’s concern. “My robots and creations are within my control. That would never happen.”

“Yeah. Experiments never go awry, do they?” Bruce chuckled grimly.

“Great pride goes before a great fall, my friend.” Thor chided Tony in a gentle tone.

Tony bit back, “Cap took a great fall and a chest full of tail spikes because of selflessness, not pride.” He looked at Darcy and shrugged, “Sorry.” He turned back to the others. “Listen! I’m not getting any younger, and neither are some of you. I’ve got stuff to live for. We’re not all immortal, Thor, not even Captain America!”

Bruce chimed in, “I would love to skip the transformation. It hurts like a son-of-a-bitch.” The others made sympathetic sounds.

Natasha bit out testily, “We’re not gonna settle anything without Cap’s input, Stark.”

Tony shot her a look and nodded. “Agreed.” He looked around and pointed out, “But, if drones had been out there today instead of him, he’d be on a date with Lewis or something instead of in the operating room.” He glanced at Bruce, evaluating his friend's reaction to his last statement. Bruce frowned, looking discouraged.

“We’re supposed to go out again,” Darcy murmured.

Sam walked over to her by the window and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She gave him a brief smile and turned and walked down the hallway, quickening her pace as she realized that his enhanced hearing would have enabled Bucky to hear everything that had been said.

When she reached Bucky’s room, she walked over to his bed. She took a Kleenex from the bedside table and wiped away the tear that had tracked down the side of his face.

He shook his head. “I don’t even know why! Something pulls me to him, something they couldn't make me forget.” He swallowed hard, and Darcy shivered, trying not to imagine all that Hydra must have done to Bucky. He whispered. "I don't want him to die."

She murmured, “They say blood’s thicker than water, but I think your friendship was even stronger than a blood tie. For a lot of people, the family they choose means more than the family they were born with.”

He nodded and rolled the word “Family…” off his tongue as though trying it out. His look was far away, desperately searching. He murmured again, “End of the line…”, and sighed heavily. His eyes were full of struggle and a desperate desire to remember and understand.

She sighed. “I’m gonna wait where the doc will give updates first. On my way, I’ll ask Navarro to assign you a cool nurse now.” A tech brought a portable scanning machine into Bucky’s room. Darcy gave Bucky small smile. “I hope whatever they’re doing for you here helps you find answers, Bucky.”

He nodded, his sad eyes tearing at her heart as he rasped, “Maybe even a few good ones?” Darcy
nodded and wiped her eyes, and then went to the nurse’s station and spoke with Agent Navarro. Then, she returned to the waiting area.

Natasha was saying, “I heard rumors that SHIELD had a serum that could bring him back if the worst happens. I’ll check with some old sources and see if I can get a bead on it.”

As she turned to leave, Tony smirked. “Tell Nick we say, ‘Hi.’” His tone had acid to it and his smile mocked. Sam looked startled.

Natasha looked back, shaking her head. “Nick Fury died. I can show you his grave.”

Tony smiled sardonically. “Uh huh... And, his ‘killer’ is strapped to a bed down the hall, thus far unharmed by you?! Bullshit!” He muttered, “Wanna bet that grave’s empty?”

Darcy thought that Tony’s logic made sense. She wasn't sure who this Nick was, but if he was a friend of Natasha’s… She put her hand in her pocket on her Taser, concerned for Bucky’s safety.

Natasha gave Darcy a look of amused disbelief. Darcy saw Hawkeye, Bruce, and Thor look at Natasha with skepticism.

“Don’t you think we've had enough of secrets, Nat?” Hawkeye stood and walked up to her.

Tony scoffed openly.

The surgeon touched Darcy on the shoulder, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. He passed her and walked into the room, stopping in front of Tony. “If it weren't for his extraordinary enhancements, the Captain would be dead. As it is, we won’t know for certain if he will survive or not until after we repair his heart completely. His aorta was compromised, as were many less-significant vessels. His lung collapsed, and he was under long enough for water to get in. He was also compromised by the alien’s venom entering his blood stream directly. His arms and all of his rib bones were broken, but are healing… some faster than is helpful for our efforts, so we've had to re-break.” The surgeon stood still, as though afraid.

Dr. Banner spoke in a measured tone. “Do you have adequate anesthetic for him, considering how fast he metabolizes everything?” Darcy gasped in horror. Dr. Banner looked at her with kind sympathy.

The surgeon shook his head, sober. “I’m afraid not. The anesthesiologists are doing everything they can to give him relief without endangering him further. But, the pain is significant enough to be an added complication.” The surgeon seemed to steel himself again as he added, “We’ve dropped the temperature in the operating area as low as we can, to attempt to slow the metabolic and self-regenerative effects of the serum.” Darcy then noted that the doctor was wearing heavy clothing under his scrubs.

Darcy felt like she’d been gut-punched and swayed where she stood. She heard a strange noise and then realized it had come from her. Sam moved past the others and put his arm around her, guiding her to a sofa. All she could think was that Steve still might die, and he was cold and in terrible pain. She wanted to scream. Jane moved to her side and took her hand, concerned. After a few seconds Darcy impatiently wiped a tear away and forced herself to breathe deeply. Jane got out of her wheelchair, pushed past Sam and hugged Darcy tightly. Thor moved closer and put a hand on Darcy’s shoulder.

The doctor urged them all to rest and return in several hours, saying it would be at least six hours
before they had new information. Darcy shook her head and pulled away from the others, remaining still on the sofa. Seconds later, Tony handed Darcy a fresh ginger ale to sip.

Thor and Jane started arguing, with Thor directing her to rest and Jane wanting to stay with Darcy. Darcy chimed in, “Go to sleep, Jane.” Thor’s expression was one of gratitude.

Jane hugged her hard again, whispering, “Always looking out for me. I love you.” Darcy returned the hug. Jane let Thor escort her to her room in the Healing Ward. He sat in the chair by her bed.

Sam turned to Darcy. “You the praying type?”

Darcy looked at him blankly and shrugged. “Sort of. I mostly keep it kind of quiet.” She wasn't sure God wanted to hear her thoughts at this moment. The word ‘unfair’ kept ringing through her head.

“I was raised in a church where the ladies get as loud as their hats,” Sam tried to cajole her.

She sighed, “Sounds cool. Maybe I’d like that kind of church.” Darcy shrugged. “‘Ma’s family was Jewish, and Dad’s family was Methodist. That’s how his folks raised me. My parents died in a car wreck years back and I haven’t given prayer much thought since.” Darcy saw Tony look at her seriously. She glimpsed an uncommon softness in his expression.

Natasha spoke brusquely. “We’ll talk more later. I’m going to see if I can get help. I need to contact someone in Europe.” She nodded once to Darcy and Sam, and then walked out. Over her shoulder she commented, “Somebody make Miss Lewis get some rest! Sedate her, or something. If we let her relapse, Steve’s first act when he wakes up will be to kill somebody- well, to give them a deeply disappointed look, but you get my meaning.”

Tony murmured quietly to Natasha, “Ahead of you.” She grinned and shook her head.

Darcy sat up straight, annoyed. “Um, thanks for the sedative idea, but I’m just gonna sit here on one of these sofas. I’m not going anywhere.” She was surprised that she felt so weary. She yawned and took another sip of the ginger ale that Tony had handed to her.

Tony gestured to a door at the back of the waiting room and turned back to Hawkeye about the problem with the drones.

Curious, Sam got up and went to the door, opened it and nodded his head. “Now, that’s more like it!” He asked, “Is there a light switch or something?” and chuckled as low-level lighting came on, revealing a dormitory-style room with several queen-sized beds. He turned back to Tony, “Queen-sized instead of bunks, huh? Nice.”

Tony shrugged and asked, “Can you imagine Thor or Cap trying to get comfortable in a bunk bed? They’re the most invulnerable of us, the most likely to be waiting while someone else is worked on…” He shook his head ruefully, considering that they were waiting and hoping for Steve to be saved.

Darcy finished her ginger ale and went into the room, took off her shoes and laid down on one of the beds. Sam chose another, and Bruce another.

Sam shrugged and encouraged the others, “Gotta give genius man props, planning ahead for us keeping close AND resting up. Good night! Try to get some sleep, guys.”

Darcy lay still, listening as first Sam and then Bruce dozed off. Tony was still talking with Hawkeye in the next room.
Her brain was racing, full of images of Steve in action on the streets, Hulk raging, people getting vaporized by energy weapons, Bucky saying the word ‘Stevie’, and more. She thought of being in Steve’s arms, kissing him and seeing passionate intensity in his expression. But, then she returned to that moment in the hall when Steve didn't answer her- blood and water pooling around him on the floor. She knew that she needed sleep, but didn't expect to get any.

When her eyes started to droop, she realized that someone must have slipped her something after all, most likely in the ginger ale. She couldn't help but laugh at herself. Tony Stark made her a drink and handed it to her! And she just took the damned thing. Imbecile move! Tony Stark never handed people things (except metaphorically handing them their ass) or took things from them. She’d seen him fighting people about it on TV.

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Darcy’s eyes flew open and she sat upright quickly, sure that she’d heard a door open in the next room. She felt bleary from whatever they’d given her, but her heart raced. She crept to the door and opened it, noticing that it was after 4:00 am. The surgeon was talking to Tony, who was sitting at the table, his mechanical equipment laying on the tabletop near him.

Tony turned as she entered the room. “He’s stable.” She nodded, unable to say anything at first. Tony asked the doctor, pointing to Darcy, “Can she go see him? Having her there will mean something to him.” The surgeon glanced at Darcy and nodded. Tony gestured to another room. “Lewis, you got almost six hours sleep. Hope it helped. There are new hair and tooth brushes and makeup, clothes, and other stuff in that bathroom. Grab a shower, freshen up, and we’ll get you where you want to be.”

She went into the bathroom he’d indicated, locked the door behind her, and saw that someone had brought down fresh clothes for her from her apartment. She shed her old clothes quickly and balled them up, got the world’s quickest shower, not even worrying about whether water hit her face, and put on the fresh clothes, noting that the pretty top was not one she wore often because it brought too much attention, but the slacks looked great with it.

She quickly brushed her hair out, fluffing it with her fingers to bring out the waves. She brushed her teeth and put the brush with her dirty clothes. She opened a drawer and found some brand new cosmetics and put on a little eye shadow and liner and looked at the lipsticks. She almost chuckled as she noted they were all bright red, like Iron Man armor. Tony must really have a thing for that color… or maybe it was what his girlfriend liked? She didn’t really care. She put a little bit on and looked at her reflection.

She was still just HER, but looked a bit more polished. A pair of high-heeled sandals had been brought down with the rest of the outfit. Her feet would be killing her if she walked far, but they were cute and went perfectly. She had never been so well put together.

When she stepped out, Sam and Bruce were both awake, looking rumpled, but better than before. Navarro stuck her head in after a bit. “Are you ready, Miss Lewis?” Darcy nodded, feeling jittery. She followed Navarro, trying to avoid falling off the heels and hoping she didn't look awkward. She heard machines as they reached an intensive care room.

Tony was standing by the bed, talking softly. “I know everything sucks right now, Cap, but we’ll work on understanding the venom and let you warm up now, so those super enhancements my dad
helped make can do their mojo. You’re gonna pull through. Earlier I pointed out it was because you’re Captain America, but I should have admitted it’s because you’re Steve Rogers… the guy who never knows how to give up… even when anyone else would.” He looked up and flushed as he realized Darcy had overheard him being sincere. He shrugged and grinned cockily at her.

He turned back to Steve. “Here’s someone you’d much rather hold hands with than me, your own little glamour-gal crush. She’s looking good today, too, seriously busty. Why don’t you open your eyes for her and see? I mean, I understand you wanting to ignore me…” His grin faded.

He turned to Darcy. “He’s stable, but hasn’t regained consciousness, hasn’t moved a muscle. You can hold his left hand, if you want. It wasn’t injured, behind the shield. The right one is healing. Don’t look too closely at that or it’ll make you dizzy.”

She looked at Tony with wide eyes, but couldn't resist doing what he warned against. She could see movement under Steve’s skin and it kind of made her want to scream.

Tony sighed and admonished, “Told ya!” He took a deep breath. “Don’t hug him or anything. His ribs are doing the same thing as the hand, all of ‘em.” He frowned and looked at the machines and the IV, eyes evaluating. He continued, “I’m gonna get Banner to work on the venom, now that he’s up, and then we’ll work on pain management. We’re gonna have to be better prepared in case Cap ever gets hurt this bad again.”

“There you go, being all nice!” She leaned over and kissed Tony’s cheek.

He assumed his habitual grin. “Hey! Thanks for the lipstick mark. I don’t like for talk about me to die down too much.” He looked down at her. “I like you, Lewis. It’s good to have someone shorter than me around.”

She gave him a warm look as she reached for Steve’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “I like you, too, Tony. You’re my last hope as someone around here who understands pop-culture references… and you do nice things for people, when no one’s looking.”

He kissed her cheek and groused, “I stink. I need to go get showered and check on clean-up efforts from our little adventures yesterday. Hope he wakes up soon.”

She nodded shortly, hoping that Tony’s optimism would be rewarded. She shivered as she listened to the low crackling and scraping noises of Steve’s body healing. They were eerie company. It was still dark outside.

Bruce entered the room minutes later and took several tubes of blood. “I’m the only one cleared for gathering samples of Cap’s blood. If anyone else tries, JARVIS will raise an alarm.” He shook his head and groaned with concern as a bone-snap sounded. She nodded understanding, but stayed silent. Bruce patted her shoulder comfortably before he left.

After they were alone again, she sighed and spoke to Steve. “I hope you don’t feel everything that’s going on with you! It seems like with no pain killers to speak of, you’d at least kick up a fuss. I sure would! I’m not good with pain. Either you’re better at dealing with it than anyone ever should be, or something else is going on. I don’t want to bug you by chatting you up too much. I hope you don’t hear me at all right now! I’d rather think that you’re sleeping peacefully.”

An hour later daylight crept in. She mourned, “I enjoyed the sunrise a lot more yesterday.”

to be continued...
Un-beta'd. Pardon mistakes. They're all on me.

Am posting 2 chapters today. THANK YOU to those leaving Kudos and Comments, and setting Bookmarks. They make me happy!

BTW, the top part of this cocktail dress is what I have in mind for the 'blouse' Darcy is wearing by chapter's end---
http://www4.pictures.stylebistro.com/gi/Kat+Dennings+Dresses+Skirts+Cocktail+Dress+tfqUy8AfLyl.jpg

Kat D wears a lot of cute dresses for events, but I think Darcy would wear tops/pants more.
Darcy whispered to Steve, “I’d appreciate it if you don’t go to Human Resources about me sexually harassing you.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy waits by Steve's hospital bed. Dr. Chau comes to visit, and they talk. Jane brings Darcy work to do while she waits. Agent Navarro is Zen-professional about rubbing healing ointment into Steve's muscles. After such a day, Darcy decides it's nap time...

Darcy was sitting by Steve, holding his hand, when Dr. Chau knocked and then walked into the room later that morning. The doctor spoke soothingly. “Good morning! When you were late for your appointment, I received an update from JARVIS. It sounds like you were in the middle of things for another disconcerting event. And, of course I heard about the Captain’s injuries…” Dr. Chau looked at him, her expression soft with concern. “How is he?”

Darcy shook her head wearily. “Stable. I’m waiting for him to wake up. I don’t know what to do.” Tears she’d been holding back came to her eyes. She sniffed and shook her head. “Yesterday was unreal. I mean, it wasn’t my first alien attack. You should’ve seen the Dark Elves! They were shooting people so their leader could end the universe or something. But, during that attack, I had something I could do to help stop the bad guys. This time, all I could do was huddle behind Thor and Steve and try to keep Jane from falling over.” She made a face. “Don’t the aliens know that I’m busy processing up-close human evil, and not ready to deal with alien-lizard evil?”

Dr. Chau smiled ruefully. “You’re not alone. Many are not ready for that.”

Darcy sighed. “Well, whatever. They didn't ask if we were ready. They just swooped in and tried to kill everyone they saw! Maybe like in ‘Independence Day’ they wanted Earth for themselves? Or, maybe they were just checking the Avengers’ reaction time? I don’t know, but it pisses me off. They give aliens a bad name! Thor’s from somewhere else, and one of my favorite people. I’m still a little jealous that I didn't get to go visit Asgard. It sounds amazing… even if it gave us, by way of Jotunheim, Loki… and, even if Thor’s buddy who dresses like Robin Hood kind of looked at me like he could see through my clothes or something.” She shrugged again. “Maybe these were the bad Vorm and there are nice Vorm back home, glad the bad ones went to get rowdy somewhere else.”

Dr. Chau looked perplexed. “Darcy? You have a unique perspective.”

Darcy shrugged. “Everybody has a unique perspective, doc!” She leaned closer to Steve, and stroked his hand. “This guy sure does! It’s fascinating that he was born around the same time as my Mamaw and Pawpaw, lived a while and faced down the worst Earth had to offer then… and, then woke up and started saving people from aliens. Somehow, he just goes with the flow.”

The doctor spoke soothingly. “I know you’re concerned for the Captain, but, why wait here without taking time for yourself? You have no idea how long it will be before he awakens. It might be better to do your work and keep your appointments. You could return after they discover why he’s unconscious. I’m sure JARVIS could send word, if he awakens.” She didn’t wheedle, but it was close. “You could come to my office for your appointment, for the next hour.” She glanced at
Steve nervously.

Darcy shook her head slightly, and wiped away a tear, “No. I’m sorry. I’d rather reschedule than leave him. The others are busy. He shouldn’t have to be alone while he’s in pain, even if we end up just friends. They had to keep him cold for a long time last night after pulling him out of the river… which has to suck after being frozen in ice for all that time. When we were talking about my crappy water fears, he admitted he doesn’t like cold water, either. I felt about an inch tall or something, and like a huge coward. He really drowned! I just got tortured into thinking I would. Yesterday, he did what he thought he had to so others would be protected, and he nearly died. I feel…”

Dr. Chau challenged her. “Why should you be the one with him?” Darcy didn't take the doctor’s query negatively. She also questioned her right to be near Steve.

Darcy stopped for a second to consider the question, and explained softly. “We’re at the start of something together. Sam and Tony thought it might help, that he would want me here… and… I think I’d like to be ‘his girl’.” Tears sparkled in her eyes again. “We’re supposed to have another date… sometime. He really does stay busy!” She laughed harshly, and shook her head. “After seeing him in action yesterday, that sounds trite.” She squeezed Steve’s hand, and wished so much that he would squeeze back. She continued. “He’s interested in me, and he’s been amazing. We talk and it’s… like we just ‘click’. We had a lunch date that was lovely. It seems like he really cares.”

Dr. Chau sighed, glanced at Steve uncomfortably, and offered. “If you like, we can meet here, with JARVIS putting up a sound barrier around the room, for your privacy’s sake.” Darcy nodded, and Dr. Chau arranged it with JARVIS.

Then, Dr. Chau sat. Her eyes shifted from Darcy to Steve. “You say he’s interested in you. What do you feel for the Captain?”

Darcy blushed. “I think I could fall in love pretty easily. He’s so easy to talk to, not just joke like I do with most people, but really talk. He’s a good guy. I don’t mean the superhero thing, I mean… Steve, the guy. Of course, he’s so handsome he’s like beautiful. Perfection was the point, right? But, he’s not obnoxious about it like most guys would be if someone made them all that. You can still see the guy I guess he always was… if you look deep into his eyes. I like him.”

She shook her head. “I keep worrying that he’s gonna change his mind and wise up about me or something. He already had… I’m no…” She couldn't bring herself to say Peggy’s name. She shook her head again, and made a noise of impatience with herself.

She sighed and changed gears. “He saw this picture of me, kinda sexy… before we met, when they sent Hawkeye to help me. I’m not like that, well, hardly ever… or… I haven’t been. It was a lark. A friend had an art project, and begged my help. Anyway, so I keep thinking he’s gonna figure out that I’m a goof, but he keeps acting like he likes me.”

She looked thoughtful. “He asked to get to know me. I’ve never had a man just like me before, talk with me like… a friend… and, want that, in addition to seeming attracted.” She squirmed. “He looks me in the eye when we talk, almost always! I wish he’d look at me more lustily sometimes!” She laughed at herself. “Maybe, that’s just the way all guys in the 40’s were… polite. If they were sexless, we wouldn't be here. Would we?” She frowned and rushed to add, “NOT that I think he’s sexless. No. He’s polite. I see… not often, but, sometimes… He looks. He acts attracted to me, which is good, since I’m so attracted to him.” Her face was hot.

She pressed her lips tightly together, then swallowed hard. “After the things that the Hydra goons threatened, and the way that one science guy kept… violating… Well, after London, I couldn't
really imagine feeling… aroused… but, I do. I get all fluttery, and feel stuff happening I've never even felt before. With other guys, it was so predictable. A kiss would be followed with grabby hands in short order, and me slapping them away from ‘the girls’. With him, I WANT more. I feel like I could kiss him all the time. I want to touch him, and for him to touch me…”

Dr. Chau frowned slightly. “As to an increase in arousal… it could be that you are having a generalized awakening, maturing as a young woman… or, that you are experiencing side-effects related to your medications… or, it could reflect your feelings for the Captain.”

Darcy smiled and touched her nose, then pointed her finger at the doctor to indicate that she believed that last possibility to be the true one.

Dr. Chau smiled kindly. “I can’t speak from personal experience of interacting with men… from the 40’s… romantically, but, I think that standards and practices of the film and TV industry have created a false illusion that men and women interacted less sexually in that era than they did.” She offered, “While a righteous man like the Captain may have wanted to wait until marriage before having sex, I imagine that sex before marriage was pretty common then, too.”

Darcy looked uncomfortable and shrugged, clearing her throat a little. She didn't want to compromise Steve’s privacy, but, she was amused that even the doctor bought into the ‘Captain’ image. Dr. Chau’s phone beeped, and she looked at it, nodded, and pushed a button as she started to inform Darcy, “Mr. Stark…”

Darcy smiled slightly. “Well, Steve’s a really amazing kisser. That’s all I know so far.” Dr. Chau pressed a finger to her lips, eyes wide. Darcy looked at her inquiringly.

She was glad she’d stopped talking, because Tony Stark entered the room, carrying Steve’s shield. He greeted them. “What’s up, Doc? Lewis?” He looked at Steve seriously. “No change?” He shook his head, “Not even a reaction to your kissing compliment? I’d think he’d wake up, and let you sully his tender sensibilities some more, Lewis. I was disappointed you let me stop your seduction effort in the elevator the other day, when it was going so well.”

She made a face at him, waiting to hear his reason for coming by. He grumbled. “We pulled his shield out of the river… again. I thought I’d let it decorate his room here. He seems pretty attached. Sam mentioned that it puts him more at ease when he knows it’s nearby.”

He set it by Darcy’s chair, and she grabbed the shield to keep it from falling over. She winced at the feel of it, amazed at how Steve hefted it with such ease, and a bit awed at how iconic the shield was. She kept her hand on the shield for a moment, processing that the great guy she was developing romantic feelings for was Captain America.

Tony continued, “My superior half, Pepper, got home last night. She’s the one who rifled through your things and picked your outfit, Lewis. She’s gonna swing by to check on the Capsic…” Darcy growled, “on Cap… and say hi. Thought I’d mention it.” He chuckled, looking at Darcy with amused caution.

Darcy glared and spoke through gritted teeth. “So help me, if you call him ‘Capsicle’ again, after what he’s been through, I’ll… taze you in the balls!” Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy saw Dr. Chau raise her brows.

Tony barked a laugh, and held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Whoa! Damn, Lewis! Okay, okay. Ixna y on the ‘apsicle-K’. Sorry!” He backed away. “But, not that! Not while Pepper’s home at least, please. I miss her too much as it is.” He turned to the doctor and gestured comically to Darcy. “Anger issues! Take note!”
Darcy grumbled. He laughed, and bid her and Dr. Chau goodbye. She supposed she should be angry at his barging in, but she wasn't. He seemed to be one of those people she just couldn't stay mad at, for the most part, though he did cause her temper to flare.

Dr. Chau apologized for not cutting her off more quickly when he’d indicated he was intent on entering. Darcy shrugged it off. Dr. Chau re-instated the privacy mode with JARVIS.

After that, Darcy changed the subject away from her feelings for Steve and talked about all that had occurred the previous day, the terror of seeing people blasted to death and the violence of battle. She mentioned how surreal it was to see Steve in action after spending quiet time getting to know him, and how she’d tried to see similarities between the raging Hulk and gentle, sweet Dr. Banner.

She talked a bit more about her feelings when she’d been captured in London, when her shirt was ripped away, the cold hand, the helpless sense of violation that plagued her, and the men laughing while planning to rape her. She talked about the nightmares she was having, what would have happened if no one had come to help her. She had to stand and pace angrily for a moment or two. Then, she changed topics again.

She chirped. “Hey! In my hurry to get to Steve’s side, I didn't let myself worry about the water while showering. I just did it and didn't think at all!”

Dr. Chau cautioned her. “Often, when urgent needs press, a person can ignore a stressor, but, don’t take it for granted. You’ve had traumas that ought not be dismissed lightly.” She urged Darcy to continue her meditations, medications, and efforts to stay busy and active. She suggested that Darcy look into some exercise options, particularly recommending yoga for the mental focus it required.

A few minutes after Dr. Chau left, Jane arrived- carrying Darcy’s laptop and a thick folder. She begged. “Please, transcribe for me! No one else can read my handwriting without interrupting my progress for clarifications. I've wasted the morning answering dumb questions after I finally got out of here and back to my work! I have an important new project, and can’t be slowed down like that! Please, help!”

Jane stopped ranting and looked at Steve. “Is he gonna be okay? He looks pale, for him.”

Darcy sighed. “I don’t know! He looks a heck of a lot better than when Hulk brought him in bleeding and soaked from the river. That was terrifying! He hasn't moved at all, and they don’t seem to know why. I want to be here so he’s not alone when he wakes up. What Sam said happened to him sounded awful.”

Jane nodded and put a supportive hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “I hope he wakes up soon.”

Darcy chuckled. “That’s ‘cause you’re lost without me bugging you.”

Jane nodded. “Well, yeah... but, because you like him, too. Just... will you work on that while you sit with him?”

Darcy laughingly agreed to get to work, since Jane didn't question her desire to stay by Steve’s side. She set up the laptop on the tray table and typed. She set Pandora to decade channels, moving through time from the 1940's to the present as the mood struck. Occasionally, she’d comment on a song, telling Steve something about where she’d been or what she’d been doing when she first heard it.
Whenever she didn't need her right hand, usually while reading ahead, she would reach for Steve’s hand. Sometimes she gently stroked it; mostly she grasped it so that she would feel if he exerted any pressure. He didn't.

Every now and then, she would hear a slight noise as a bone mended. She shuddered, and stopped typing to grasp his hand; a few times she kissed his hand and murmured any encouragement she could think of. She wished that she could hug him and offer warmth and comfort. But, she was terrified that if she touched any part of him other than his hand, she would inadvertently add to his pain.

Frequently, Navarro or an anesthesiologist checked Steve’s vitals, or adjusted the IV contents.

Darcy took a break for lunch when Agent Navarro brought food in, insisting she eat. After she’d eaten, she visited the bathroom, and then walked down the hall to look out the large window while Navarro checked vitals, changed the IV bag and evaluated Steve’s healing. When she came back, Navarro indicated that Bruce had taken another blood sample to check the level of the venom in Steve’s system, and would compare it to his earlier samples.

Darcy asked, “Any idea what affect it might have on him?”

Navarro shook her head slowly. “I suspect that, like with many animals, the venom would slow its victim... or, possibly it’s a neurotoxin of some sort. I imagine his healing capabilities have prevented it being fatal. Dr. Banner is doing analysis, and working on an antidote. We haven’t heard from him yet, though.”

After Navarro left, Darcy took Steve’s hand again. She began to talk to him. “I don’t know if you can hear me.” She frowned. “But, I need for you to wake up, please. Please! I want you to squeeze my hand, and let me know you’re gonna be okay. Please?” She chuckled. “Tony thought it might make you move if you thought I’d take liberties, so, think that! Move, and I’ll take liberties!”

She kissed his hand again and leaned her cheek against it. “Well, you’d better be unconscious or something. Because otherwise, you’ve realized I’m not your type after all and I’m gonna really be hurt by that. Who would match up to you? You’re amazing.” She kissed his hand again, and looked around impishly.

Leaning forward against the bed she pressed his hand to her chest, moving it gently against the swell of her breasts, under the cloth. It was so very different from the violation she’d felt during her interrogation. She looked at Steve’s face and concentrated on the warmth of his hand, the fact that she was in control of the touch and liked him, the idea that she would welcome his touch. She shivered slightly, and her breath shuddered.

She murmured, “Mmmm. Good news for both of us! I like it when it’s your hand. I WANT your touch.” There was no reaction, and she sighed, slightly sob-like. She set his hand down on the mattress, leaned back, and looked at him sadly.

A knock sounded at the door. Darcy adjusted her shirt, held Steve’s hand in hers again, and called, “Come in?”

A lovely red-head, utterly and completely poised, smiled and spoke, “Hello. Miss Lewis?”

Darcy nodded and stared. If only she were as beautiful as this woman, as 'put together' as that, she might actually feel she deserved Steve. She nodded and asked, “Are you Pepper?” She was amazed that someone as messy and crazy as Tony Stark could be in a relationship with anyone so dignified.
Pepper smiled warmly. “I am. How is the Captain?”

Darcy licked her lips nervously, praying JARVIS hadn't recorded her stunt of moments before. “No change, yet.”

Pepper nodded sadly. “I’d like to thank you, by the way.” Darcy looked at Pepper with evident confusion. Pepper grinned. “I think you may have broken Tony of calling the Captain that annoying name.”

Darcy grinned sheepishly. “I’m sure he has plenty of others. Sorry for the violent threat!”

Pepper shook her head. “Don’t be. You have to get Tony’s attention. You did.” Pepper moved to stand at Steve’s other side, looking at the monitors and evaluating his appearance. She frowned slightly. “I never expected to see him like this. He and Thor, and, of course, Hulk, seem impervious.” She shook her head again. “We first met after the Battle of New York. I’m always impressed with anyone who can go toe-to-toe with Tony.” She smiled. “He holds his own with quiet dignity.”

Pepper addressed Steve. “Feel better, Captain.”

She then looked at Darcy with an expression of slight discomfort. “Miss Lewis, I understand that you suffered an attack by Hydra operatives recently.” Darcy nodded. Pepper continued, “I’m sorry that happened. Tony asked that I offer you the option of having a GPS tracker implanted. We each have one now, as do our friends Happy and James. We've all learned that bad things can happen, and, any one of us could get into a situation where JARVIS’ help in finding us would be appreciated.”

Darcy asked, “Tony has one?”

Pepper smiled. “He puts himself in danger more than the rest of us combined, of course.”

Darcy grinned, and nodded. “I guess it would make sense. How do I sign up?”

Pepper nodded. “You just did. I will also extend the offer to Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig. Anyone who is safer living in Avengers Tower should probably have one… though, I've yet to convince Natalie, I mean Natasha, of that fact.” She made a face.

Darcy chuckled. “What about Hawkeye?”

Pepper shook her head. She made a sad face. “And, there isn't a medical team brave enough to do the procedure on Bruce.”

Darcy frowned. “Sounds like you need some braver medical people!”

Pepper shrugged. “I’ll have Agent Navarro set up the procedure time for you. It’s out-patient. Not a big deal.”

Darcy replied. “Well, uh, thanks for that. I guess.”

Pepper smiled understandingly. She started to leave, but stopped and turned back to Darcy. “Miss Lewis, may I ask a personal question?” Darcy braced herself. After Chau’s questions she felt a bit raw. So she grinned with relief at Pepper’s query of, “Why are so many of your lightweight clothes one to two sizes larger than your heavier clothes?”

Darcy breathed out her relief, “Oh, that!” She gestured towards her chest. “I have a hard time
getting a non-stripper type look, what with these. I don’t want to draw too much attention.”

Pepper looked at Darcy’s chest, directly, causing Darcy to squirm. Pepper offered, “I’m going to send you my personal stylist, Jai. She’ll appreciate a fresh challenge. If you’re going to be around Tony a lot, which I think you are, I’d like to minimize the chances of anyone going to Human Resources on your behalf… or you using a Taser on him. Consider it a welcoming gift to Avengers Tower. I’ll put it all on Tony’s tab.” She winked, and Darcy chuckled.

After Pepper left, Darcy whispered to Steve, “I’d appreciate it if you don’t go to Human Resources about me sexually harassing you.” She squeezed his hand, and then returned to her work. By mid-afternoon, she’d uploaded transcriptions of all of the information that Jane had given her.

She texted her friend, asking if she’d bothered to eat or drink yet, and laughed at the oblivious reply. She asked, “JARVIS? What’s the best way to get some food to Dr. Foster?” Fifteen minutes later Darcy texted Jane. ‘The box to your right contains a sandwich. Open the box. Take a bite and tell me what kind of sandwich now, please.’ She smiled with satisfaction when Jane correctly identified her food, proving she’d had at least one bite. Once Jane realized food was close, she usually ate a decent amount. Sandwiches were almost as welcome to her as Pop Tarts, as they were easy to eat with one hand, while she continued working with the other. Darcy texted Jane to send more notes for transcription whenever she was ready.

Shortly after that, Navarro returned to check Steve’s vitals and asked Darcy, “Miss Lewis, may I have an hour or so alone with the Captain? I’ve asked a scanning team to bring a portable x-ray so we can check the progress of his healing. After that, I’d like to give him a sponge bath, and change his sheets.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “I bet the aides line up to help with that sponge bath.” Navarro smiled slightly, and gestured for Darcy to leave. Darcy leaned over and kissed Steve’s cheek, now rough with stubble. “See ya in a few, handsome. Be good.”

She took the elevator to her floor, checked her messages and had a snack and unpacked a few more things. Then, she went to the garden deck to get a few minutes’ worth of sunshine. She stood by the railing looking out over the city, and stretched like a cat in the sun. She wished that Steve was standing there with her, remembered the feel of his body against her.

She began to feel a need to return to Steve. She made her way back down, refreshed by her break, but breathless with anxiety that he might have woken while she was gone. When she reached the door, she knocked lightly.

Navarro called, “Come in!” Darcy opened the door, and stopped in her tracks. Steve was exposed to the waist, and there was no sign of any wounds! She shook her head. Navarro was rubbing some sort of ointment into his many, many muscles. She remarked, “Isn’t it amazing? All of his broken bones have mended. The puncture wounds were large and deep! Gone! No scarring! Amazing!”

Darcy sat in the chair, knees a bit weak. She echoed, “Amazing.” He was so beautiful that it left her completely tongue-tied. She reached for her water bottle to wet her suddenly-dry mouth and toast the seemingly professional detachment that Navarro exhibited. She decided that Navarro was either seriously Zen-professional or playing for the other team.

Navarro continued, “That Dr. Erskine was a genius. Too bad he died right after such a successful experiment. Murdered by a Hydra spy in the lab.” She finished and stood back, looking at her work with a clinical eye. After a moment, she put the hospital gown back into place, tying and snapping it closed efficiently.
Darcy still couldn't say anything, though inside she was fervently thanking and praising Erskine for such amazing work. As Navarro moved past, Darcy asked, “So, could I hug him if I want now?” Navarro grinned, nodded and patted her shoulder, then left.

After she was gone, Darcy sat by the bed and put her head in her hands, still stunned. She whispered, “You’re so gorgeous, like perfect! What am I thinking? I’m waaaay far from perfect. What would you want with a troll like me?” She sat back, and looked at him for a few moments, weariness overwhelming her. Then, she shrugged, took a deep breath, and murmured, “Well, ya only live once. At least that’s all I get...”

She looked at the door as though fearful someone might try to stop her, kicked off her sandals, set her glasses on the table, and climbed up onto the bed next to him, snuggling between his arm and torso, sighing an “ohhh” of pleasure at the feeling of being so close to him. She put one arm across his chest and lay her head against his shoulder.

She whispered, “Hi.” She ran a finger lightly over his face, tracing its contours. “You have the nicest face.” She kissed his cheek. “I can’t help but appreciate your scientist’s sense of aesthetics. He chose you, a good man with a seriously pretty face. I’m really jealous of your eyelashes, dude! And these lips!” She kissed his lips lightly and sighed against them, then pulled back. “I’d better stop that. I’m getting really weird from being so worried about you. Sorry.”

She shifted again so her head was back on his chest. “I’m so glad you’re not in pain from broken bones anymore! The healing looks hell-a weird, but it’s cool. I wish you’d move, though.” She was silent for a long moment. “I don’t get it at all, why you’d like me when you could have anyone, but, I hope you still do. I like you an awful lot, Steve. I hope you don’t mind if I take a little nap here with you now. I’m so tired. I kind of need to feel like your arm is around me. So, sleep tight, sweetie. Feel free to wake me anytime, of course. You’re allowed.” She yawned.

She grinned slightly, leaned up and kissed his rough cheek once more, lightly traced a finger across his lips, and then lay back down against him. She could feel his heart beating under her hand. The warmth of his body relaxed her. After a while, she drifted into dreamless sleep.

*to be continued*...
Steve smirked. “I was glad to hear I’m doing that right.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy yelped, “You don’t know if he’s been conscious all along or not?!!”

Bruce’s antidote enables Steve to move again. Team politics and sweet romance follow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Darcy opened her eyes, the light outside was dimming and she wondered what had woken her. Her question was soon answered as she heard a soft, gentle voice say her name. She looked up, grabbing and putting on her glasses. “Huh?”

“I’m sorry to disturb your nap,” Bruce smiled.

“Oh! Sorry. It’s been a long day.” She grinned sheepishly.

He nodded in reply, “For all of us.”

She sat up quickly. “Antidote?!”

He noted the eager, almost feverish expression on her face and nodded. “I gave it to Agent Navarro just now. She’ll be in momentarily to administer it. You need to move to a safe distance. I don’t know if he’s been conscious all along and knows where he is and what’s been going on around him, or if he’ll awaken thinking he’s still battling the Vorm. I wouldn’t want you to be hurt by accident. That would be upsetting.”

Darcy yelped. “You don’t know if he’s been conscious all along or not?!!”

Bruce shook his head, rubbing his eyes wearily. Darcy scurried down from the bed, put on her sandals, smoothed her hair, and sat in the chair. She thought back over all that she’d said and done throughout the day, not knowing it possible that Steve might be awake.

Bruce swallowed a slight grin at her expense. “Are you okay? You look a little rosy.” She shrugged silently, not seeing his expression. He muttered to himself so quietly that she missed it. “It’s a good look. Enough to make a guy think…” His grin faded, and he looked distant.

Moments later, Navarro and a doctor entered, followed by Tony and Sam. Darcy leaned forward and grasped Steve’s hand again. Bruce shook his head and she sat back, her hands clenched into
fists in her lap. She put her hands together, as if in prayer, and remembered Sam's earlier question to her. She uttered a silent prayer.

Navarro took a syringe and emptied it into the IV site. Darcy felt like the moment stretched out infinitely. Unconsciously, she began to count. At eighty-one, she saw Steve's eyelids move slightly. She gasped. His breathing changed.

Sam leaned closer and urged Steve. “Come on, Cap! Come on back.” Steve began to shudder slightly, muscles twitching all over his body. Sam breathed out loudly, “Steve! You alright, buddy?”

Thor and Jane entered the room. Jane moved to Darcy’s side and put a hand on her shoulder comfortably. Thor asked, “Has there been any change?”

Steve moved his hand, searching. Darcy let out a noise and reached for it. He gave her a reassuring squeeze. She nearly wept from relief. He coughed, slightly at first, then with more force.

Finally, he opened his eyes and choked out a whisper, “My girl.” He grinned at her sweetly.

She made a noise between a sob and a laugh, “Don’t you have to take me on another date or ask me about that?”

He shook his head, closing his eyes against discomfort.

The doctor asked, “Captain, do you know where you are?”

Steve nodded, wincing, “Healing Ward… ICU, I’d guess from the noises.”

Bruce asked, “What do you remember since the Vorm battle?”

Steve cleared his throat, coughing some more, and then sighed. “I remember that last lizard, Natasha about to get squashed… Is she okay?” Darcy nodded. Tony seemed pissed and looked at Steve with an odd expression. Steve noted that and continued, “I remember throwing the shield and going to retrieve it … and then pain… and damned cold water.” He shuddered. Darcy gripped his hand a little tighter.

The doctor asked, “And then?” He looked at Steve’s eyes with a light and shook his head in amazement, smiling at Bruce.

Steve smiled slightly, “Darcy.”

“Anything else?” Navarro asked.

Steve nodded and gave Darcy’s hand a reassuring squeeze. She went hot and cold all over. “I went in and out at first, when the pain was at its worst, but I wasn't out long. I could feel Darcy holding my hand and hear her talking, sometimes to me… telling me I’d be okay and urging me to wake up… and sometimes to other people. Everything hurt like crazy until about four hours ago. I've been aware most of the day… but, couldn't move at all.”

He glanced at Darcy with the barest hint of a grin. “I realized a few hours ago that I was completely paralyzed and that, um, worried me. Nurses were here while Darcy was gone. Then I had a really great nap and I heard Bruce explaining I was about to get an antidote.”

Darcy felt like her entire body must be blushing by this point.
Steve coughed again. “Thanks, Bruce.” He looked at Bruce strangely for a second, swallowed hard, and nodded respectfully.

Bruce smiled slightly. “Any time, Cap. Once I found that the venom was a paralyzing agent, things went fast.”

Tony, knowing grin firmly in place, joked. “So, did Lewis ravage you while you slept?”

Steve grinned. “I should be so lucky.” Tony nodded speculatively, noting Darcy’s blush.

Navarro interrupted them, “If you will all step outside, I’ll see to the Captain’s needs for a few moments.” The doctor conferred with her briefly and left.

Tony laughed. “I thought that was Lewis’ thing!” They all began to comply, relief palpable. He congratulated Bruce as they stepped out.

Darcy let the others file out first and then reluctantly moved to follow. Steve held to her hand. He murmured, “I don’t want to let go.” He grimaced as he glanced at the others gathered in the hallway.

Navarro apologized to him, and urged Darcy out.

As she was leaving, Steve called to her. “Darcy?” She turned back to him. He sighed. “There are… things that I want you to know, too.” He glanced at Navarro and frowned. “I want to talk with you as soon as possible. For now, would you take my shield up to my apartment? I’d like it put away safely. Look around. You’ll see where it goes.”

She nodded and hefted the shield onto her arms. He smiled at the effort. “It’s probably easier for you to carry right now, anyway. I feel like me, pre-serum.” He coughed. “Maybe, um, water my plants? Look around… you’ll see.” He glanced at Navarro and choked out, “I sketch everything, but only paint what’s most important.” His expression was earnestly vulnerable.

Darcy nodded and smiled uncertainly, wondering what he was trying to say, but agreed and struggled out with the shield. Its weight troubled her less than its bulk.

Thor stepped forward. “May I assist you, Lady Darcy?”

She shook her head. “No, thanks, Thor. Steve asked me to take this to his place. I’ll manage. I guess his request will make JARVIS let me in.” She nodded to the elevator. “But, if you want to get that button, I’d appreciate it.” Once inside the elevator, she let out a long sigh. She leaned the shield against the wall and asked Jarvis, “J, take me to Steve’s place?” She was only vaguely aware of its location. She was glad no one else got on the elevator. It’d really suck if someone stole Captain America’s shield from her. She shuddered at the thought and mused that JARVIS was probably giving her a private ride to protect the shield.

She was relieved to get the shield home. She fumbled for a moment to find a light switch and let the door close behind her. The quiet apartment was even more unsettled than hers. She realized then that they’d moved into the Tower at about the same time. While her clutter was haphazardly strewn about and her place was looking somewhat homey, many of Steve’s boxes were still neatly stacked and precisely labeled. His kitchen looked used, a basic coffee-maker in the center of one counter had some coffee left in it. But, everything else was utterly clean. She emptied the old coffee, and cleaned the machine. She considered the notion that he could cook, probably better than she could. He would need to know how. She’d heard about his metabolism.

She walked into the living room. There were hooks on one wall that looked like a place for the
shield. She struggled to fit it in place properly. On a nearby shelf were some photos… Steve in a group of WWII soldiers, including Bucky; Steve and an officer and Peggy Carter; Peggy laughing with a man who looked frighteningly like Tony Stark while a serious-faced Steve looked at them; and, finally, a pre-serum Steve with a professorial-looking man in a laboratory. She stared longest at this last picture, thinking that man must be the Dr. Erskine that Navarro had mentioned—the man whose serum had just saved Steve’s life yet again. Erskine looked at pre-serum Steve with the kind of pride one might expect he’d have for Steve AFTER the transformation. She smiled and touched the picture, wishing she could have met Dr. Erskine and thinking how brave Steve was to let the doctor experiment on him.

One full shelf held non-fiction historical titles, a lot of mysteries, a few classics, and modern popular books, too, even the Harry Potter series. There was lots of room for more, and nearby there were boxes marked ‘books’. There were two plants in the living room. She watered them, and threw an appraising glance at the turntable that he’d not had time to set up yet. She wished he’d unpacked his albums so she could get a better sense of his taste in music.

When Steve had asked her to bring up his shield, there had been unspoken stuff in his request, especially when he mentioned things he wanted to share and his art. Obviously, he realized that she was embarrassed to discover he’d heard and FELT everything all day long! If nothing else, sending her up to his place had spared her from Tony’s teasing at a moment when she was too raw to cope with it. She wondered if he wanted her to see his photos and personal items to even that score a bit. So, she felt little guilt about looking around. She justified that maybe he had more plants in the other rooms.

She went into his bedroom. She stopped when she saw a picture of Peggy on the dresser. She pulled out a change of clothes, hoping he’d be able to leave the Healing Ward soon. She chuckled to herself that she was now qualified to answer the ‘boxers or briefs’ question for two Avengers (Steve- boxers; Thor- nothing, according to Jane). She found a small duffle bag for the clothes. She looked at his bed for a long moment, glanced again at Peggy’s picture again, and then went back to the living room.

She saw that he had a second bedroom and wondered if he had anything in it, or was letting it stand empty like hers. She turned on the light and discovered that it was an art studio, the most ‘finished’ of all of the rooms. He obviously spent a lot of his downtime in the studio. Paintings were hung. He was really good. Her favorite was of Bucky, bluff humor and charisma seeming to spill from the canvas. Self-consciously she took a shot of it with her phone, wondering if Steve would mind her sharing it with Bucky. At the very least, the image would serve to remind her of the man inside the Winter Soldier. She was turning away when a painting of Peggy Carter in a red dress caught her eye. The dress was form fitting, and Peggy looked striking. Darcy stared for a bit.

In front of the largest window were more plants and an easel. She stared at the work in progress. It was of her and echoed the glamour portrait. She was posed the same way … but there were marked differences. In the painting, she looked like herself now rather than four years ago, at least her face and hair did. Her hair was longer now, and he’d painted it that way. There was less ‘baby fat’ in her face, and her makeup was more natural. Her smile in Steve’s painting was strong and direct. Her eyes held challenge and sparkled with joy. He’d only outlined her body so far. She imagined that he hoped to work more on that later.

She stood up straighter as she realized that this was the way he saw her. It made her stop and think about the way she’d like to feel about herself. For the first time, she understood how much he admired her. He saw her as she was in her best moments… as she could be… and would like to be.

There were smaller canvases and a sketch pad on the table in front of the window. One painting
showed her hand with Steve’s, their fingers threaded together. Another showed her with damp hair, looking up at him with her lips slightly parted and pinked like he’d just kissed her. In another, she was laughing and tickling Jane. The sketchpad contained image after image of her from their time together so far.

Asking her to come up here and see all of this did share nearly as much about his feelings as she’d exposed of her own when talking to Dr. Chau in front of him. She took pictures so that she could look at them more later. She’d never seen images of her that she liked so much. She was in such a daze that she almost forgot to water the plants in that room.

When she returned to the Healing Ward, she saw Natasha waiting in the hallway with the others, Hawkeye by her side. The air between Natasha and Tony crackled with tension, and Natasha seemed upset about something other than Tony’s looks of accusation. Bruce was looking from one of them to the other nervously.

Darcy looked from face to face and spoke up. “I’m going out on a limb here, but, I think you should probably save the fight you’re brewing for a place that’s more private, and a time when Steve has recovered more strength.” She added, “If only so he can keep you from tearing each others’ heads off.”

“His head may need to come off, too,” Tony snarled.

Without hesitation, Darcy got in Tony’s face. “Then it definitely needs to wait.” She felt foolish until she noted the way that Thor and Sam moved in behind her. What she lacked in muscle, they provided.

Thor spoke as softly as she’d ever heard before. “Our differences can wait until we are all at full strength.” Though his tone seemed gentle, it sent a chill down Darcy’s spine.

Navarro came out of Steve’s room and stopped, taken aback by the tension between the Avengers. She licked her lips nervously. “Miss Lewis, you may go in now. He’s asking for you.” She cleared her throat, and declared, “I know that the Captain appreciates everyone’s concern, but he needs time to recover and I ask that visitors number no more than two at a time.” She swallowed hard, straightened her shoulders and added forcibly, “Please do not stress my patient!”

Sam jumped in. “I’m going in with Darcy now. You guys don’t need me in whatever you’re going on about out here.” Natasha shot him a look, but remained silent. Hawkeye stood still next to her, looking down at the floor.

Darcy entered the room a bit shyly, and set the duffle bag in the closet. Steve looked at her searchingly before turning his attention to Sam. Sam moved forward to the bedside and apologized. “Hey, man! I’m sorry I let him get the drop on me. If Hawkeye hadn't been saving my neck, Natasha wouldn't have been cornered.”

Steve shook his head. He was clean-shaven and looked more alert now, the back of the bed tilted so he was sitting up almost straight. He had a sports bottle by his bed instead of the typical water pitcher, a sight that warmed Darcy. He sipped from it, and comforted Sam. “Those tails were fast. Look what one did to me!” He grinned ruefully. “And, we've already established that you do stuff slower than me.”

Sam chuckled. “I’m really sorry, though.”

“Forgiven, then.” Steve shrugged.
Sam asked, “Did you hear the ‘discussion’ outside the door?”

Steve nodded. “It’s not the time or place. I appreciate Tony’s big heart and all, but his feelings don’t trump people’s safety.”

Darcy piped up. “I don’t know much about what’s going on. But, I think he kind of sets you on a pedestal... and thinking you’ve lied to him is rockin’ his world.” Steve nodded thoughtfully. Darcy continued, “And, there’s something new gnawing at Natasha. She looks as disillusioned as Tony.”

Steve sighed. “Great.” He shook his head. “Sam, would you ask Tony to come in next?”

“Kicking my sorry ass out already, huh?” Sam grinned.

Steve grinned back. “Go practice flying. Maybe you’ll get faster.” Sam laughed aloud. He saluted Steve as he left. The grin dropped from Steve’s face as soon as Sam turned away. Darcy could see the fatigue in Steve’s expression, and grasped his hand. He gave her hand a quick squeeze and squared his shoulders, sitting up further in the bed. He looked grave and somber as Tony entered. The difference in his demeanor with Sam and with Tony was striking.

Tony looked wary. “You look better, I’m glad to say.” He tilted his head and noted, “But, you wouldn’t even be hurt if we’d sent out…” Steve pounded a fist in frustration beside him on the bed. Tony joked. “Cap… don’t break my building!”

Steve nodded, and replied forcefully. “Yeah. Your building. Your drones. Your hard feelings. You may have more money than anybody else, but that doesn't mean you own people. You don’t own me! I’m free, my own man. If that’s a problem, well, I’ll get up and out of ‘your building’ right damned now. I don’t need your attitude today, Tony. But…”

Tony held up his hands in mock surrender. “Geez, Capsic…” He glanced at Darcy and grinned as she glared. “Cap! I mean Cap!” He looked down and sighed, “All right. It’ll keep. You don’t have to be so dramatic.”

Steve smiled grimly. “Rumor has it that getting your attention is a good way to go, Stark. It may seem dramatic, but I’m not kidding. The Avengers are a team, not Stark employees. You need to remember that.” He glanced at Darcy and remarked, “And, your name calling does get old. It's disrespectful.”

Tony ignored that and his expression became more closed. “So, do you think I report to you?”

Steve sighed tiredly, but maintained his serious demeanor. “No. Not here. We’re a team, and you’re one helluva valuable member of that team. I do think that I have more tactical experience with field teams, at least teams of people, than you do.” He looked at Tony directly. “I have my doubts about going all tech, and not because I’m old fashioned. Sometimes, tech gives out or goes haywire. I trust YOU with your power and abilities far more than any machine.”

Tony’s expression eased as he bitterly challenged, “As to secrets... “

“If you ask me to keep a secret of yours, I will.” Steve spoke quietly and firmly.

Tony nodded and cautioned, “You remember that some people’s lies have lies.”

“Yeah. I figured that out.” Steve nodded, closing his eyes wearily.

Tony started to leave. As he reached the door, Steve called to him. “You know that when he couldn’t find me, Howard found that damned cube, right?” Tony turned back with a quizzical look.
Steve continued, “I was trying to think what experience might have changed Howard from the
good guy I knew. I remember before the Battle of New York, well, the one with the Chitauri; we
were all at each other’s throats just from being in the same room with Loki’s spear. Do you think
studying the cube could’ve affected Howard?”

“I have his records and research notes.” Tony nodded slowly.

Steve sighed, his fatigue showing more. “You might want to look them over.” He cleared his
throat, “And while you’re at it, talk to the others and see if anyone can come up with a motive for
the Vorm attack. Have Thor ask around the other eight realms, wherever the hell they might be.”

Tony nodded. “Get some rest, Cap. You cuss more when you’re tired, and you’re starting to sound
like you served in the Navy rather than Army… in front of Lewis, no less!” Steve looked at Darcy
apologetically, and she shook her head and grinned. His expression softened.

Steve added, “Tony… I heard your kind words earlier about me not giving up. Thanks.”

Tony looked at Steve somberly and nodded. He smirked. “For honesty’s sake, it doesn’t take
Loki’s spear to put us at each other’s throats. Don’t take my concern too kindly.” Then he stepped
out of the room, calling, “Hey, Romanoff, if you need to whisper sweet, secret nothings into Cap’s
ear, you’d better hurry. He’s about to pass out again.”

Natasha growled, “I’d bet it’s because he’s talked to you!” They exchanged angry glances as they
passed each other. Once inside the room, she moved slowly to the bedside. “Where would you go
if you left the Tower?”

Steve murmured sleepily, “I’m a Brooklyn boy, through and through.” He laid his head back.

She smiled at him and then looked down. “It’s not my favorite place, but…” He grinned slightly.
She continued, “About that Vorm, please don’t ever do anything like that again. I’m not worth it.”
He blinked hard. She clarified, “I mean throwing yourself into harm’s way for my sake. It wouldn’t
be right for you to die just for me. You know what I am.”

He sighed again, his breathing sounding more strained. “You’re my friend. And, I would die
before I would let you get taken out, like I would Hawkeye or Sam…” Darcy couldn’t help
tightening her hold on his hand.

Natasha grinned slightly, and leaned down to kiss his cheek, “Or anybody on the right side of it. I
know. But, you’re worth more to the world than I am!”

He shook his head. “No. You’re working hard on that ledger. The world needs that.”

She swallowed hard, and shared, “I heard a rumor that SHIELD had a serum that would bring back
an Avenger, even if... I went looking for it.”

“And?” Steve frowned.

She nodded and admitted, “I don’t much like what I found.” Natasha continued, “If there was any
left I would have gotten it for you, you know.” He nodded slowly, a look of distaste on his face.
She explained, “But, the last it was used by Director Fury’s order was at the onset of the Battle of
New York.”

Trading Cards when I was a kid. If I was taking my prize set to someone to get it signed, I would
have it in something to protect it, not just my pocket.”
“Exactly.” Natasha nodded.

He grimaced. “It’s a good thing for Nick that he’s beyond our reach. I don’t appreciate being manipulated that much.”

She nodded angrily. “Letting Barton believe he played a role…”

He sighed. “I think you need to let him know about that privately, so he has time to deal with it before we discuss it as a team.”

“Thank you. I was going to… but, I wanted agreement from my Captain.” Natasha smiled slightly.

Their gazes met and held for a long moment. He nodded. “Thanks, Natasha. I’m glad I was able to keep you safe.”

She shook her head, leaned over to kiss his cheek again, and turned to Darcy. She shook her head again, and laughed throatily. “Thanks for the only good laugh I’ve had in the past day or so, by the way.” She raised an eyebrow, and looked towards Darcy’s pocket. Darcy saw Steve looking back and forth between them quizzically.

Darcy breathed out slowly. “I know you could break me in half with your little finger, but…”

Natasha grinned. “I understand. It’s not just ‘friend of my friend’ for you. Somehow, you got under the monster’s skin, and now he’s your friend. You feared for his safety.” Steve’s brow furrowed as he looked at Natasha. She shook her head slightly at him.

Darcy blinked hard and cried out, “Oh, shit! JARVIS! Does Bucky know that Steve’s awake?”

JARVIS replied, “Bucky has not spoken in several hours, so, I do not know. I can inform him, if the Captain wishes.”

Steve spoke carefully. “JARVIS, please inform Bucky that I have woken up and am recovering and hope to visit him soon.”

Darcy nodded and added, “Please tell him I’m sorry I didn't tell him first thing. Tell him that the antidote worked, and Stevie’s lookin’ good.” She saw Steve’s eyes brighten at her words. He squeezed her hand.

Natasha smiled slightly at Darcy. “I wouldn't hurt you.” Steve startled. She continued, “When I told them I haven’t taken any action against Winter Soldier for Steve’s sake, I was telling the truth, at least in part. So, how could I possibly move against you? If you tried to taze me to protect him, I might break the device. But, I would do my best to avoid harming you in the process.” She smirked. “All things equal, I’d far rather you use it on Stark.” She turned and walked out of the room, waving to them both.

Steve seemed overwhelmed as he looked at Darcy.

Hawkeye entered then, his hand barely touching Natasha’s as they passed each other. He spoke firmly. “I know you need to rest, man, so I’ll keep it short. Thanks for saving Natasha. I owe you a life.”

Steve shook his head. “Nah. It’s okay.” Hawkeye stared at him fixedly. Steve sighed, “I think we can call it even.” He gestured towards Darcy.

Hawkeye nodded and added, “Where ‘Tasha goes, I go. So, give the word, Captain.” He shook
Steve’s hand, nodded to Darcy, and walked out.

Steve looked troubled. Bruce looked in and called, “Hey! I’m glad it worked. I’m about to drop. So, I’m gonna go get some shut eye. I hope you can do the same and get back on your feet soon.”

Darcy walked to the door, threw her arms around Bruce, and hugged him. He looked startled and shook his head. “Again? Nobody who’s seen ‘the other guy’ does that.” He looked at her, amazed, smiling ruefully. Then he hugged her in return, closing his eyes as he savored the feeling of human comfort, relaxing a bit as he held her close. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that Steve’s expression had changed to one he couldn’t read.

Darcy leaned up and kissed Bruce on one cheek. “Genius work finding the antidote!” He blushed slightly. She kissed the other cheek. “Good job getting Steve in for help so quickly.” Bruce looked askance at Darcy, and waved to them both, tiredly shuffling out.

As he left, Steve called, “Bruce! When you wake up again, can you touch base with Tony?”

“You asking me to check up on what he’s doing?” Bruce looked at Steve evenly.

Steve shook his head, “No! I just want you to remind him you’ve got his back.”

Bruce nodded slowly. “I back up everybody on the team.”

Steve nodded firmly, “Me, too.” Bruce smiled faintly, chuckled to himself as he looked at Darcy again, and left.

Thor came in next, and Jane stood at the door and gestured for Darcy to come out. Darcy blinked from the brightness of the hall lights, “What?”

Jane hugged her hard. “I’m sorry I was so down on him before. I worry about you, especially after everything that happened in London. But, the others keep talking about how interested he is in you, and I guess I shouldn't have questioned it so much.” She took a breath and stepped back, still holding Darcy by the arms. “I’m glad he’s okay.” She smiled. “Is there anything I can do for you? Are you staying with him tonight?” She looked Darcy up and down. “Nice lady-clothes, by the way. A little rumpled, but still nice.”

Darcy chuckled. “Nice, because Pepper Potts can do more with my wardrobe than I can. Rumpled, because they’re on me... and, I napped in them.” She thought for a minute and asked, “Hey! Can you visit Erik and update him and maybe take him a hot chocolate? I feel so bad. I didn’t even think about him this morning, and I’d guess seeing aliens in Manhattan again didn't do him any good.” She made a ruefully comic face.

Jane nodded, “Yeah. I promise. I’ll check in on him on my way to bed.”

Darcy hugged Jane again. “I’ll go back to my place to sleep later. I want a chance to talk with Steve first. He’s pretty popular right now.” She glanced back into the room and stepped towards him.

Thor came out and lifted Darcy into a strong hug, causing her to squeak. “Thank you for your care of our Captain, Lady Darcy. He is a worthy ally and friend. You have chosen a good man to shower with your affections.”

She choked out, “Okay, big guy. Air! You’re welcome, I guess. Caring for him isn't exactly a hardship.” He put her down and smiled, his expression full of understanding; then, he took Jane’s hand and placed it gently on his arm.

They all exchanged goodbyes, and then Darcy went into Steve’s room and closed the door behind
her. She leaned back against it. “Phew! Do you want me to go and let you rest now? That 
exhausted me, and I wasn't the one having to be all diplomatic with the egos.”

Steve grinned slightly and shook his head. “Are you kidding? I've been dying to be able to talk to 
you all day.” He reached out to her. She moved close to the rail. He shook his head, lowered the 
bed rail, and pulled her up onto the bed next to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and 
moved closer, twisting her torso so her chest was straight against his.

He hugged her to him, and laid his head on her shoulder, groaning. Keeping his eyes down at her 
shoulder, he admitted, “It killed me to hear you begging me to respond when I couldn't. I'm sorry.”

She chuckled ruefully. “Well, I guess there aren't any secrets between us, at least not on my side.”

He noted wryly, “Not many. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know I could hear everything! I felt 
terrible about the invasion of your privacy, especially when Dr. Chau was here. I’m so sorry about 
all that happened to you… and, that you’re having nightmares.” He kissed her cheek lingeringly.

They held each other for a long moment. Finally, she blushingly apologized. “I’m, uh, sorry for, 
uh, your hand on…”

He shook with quiet laughter. “Don’t be. It was stunning! I mean, it gave me about a dozen heart 
attacks, especially as it let me know how completely paralyzed I was… I won’t lie. The thought of 
ever never moving again? Never being able to respond?” He shuddered. He kissed her cheek gently, 
obviously tiring. He murmured, “I've been getting away with stuff, and I've only taken you out 
once. My ma would whip me.”

“Did you take those girls in the show out, or the ones you met since you came back?” She raised a 
brow.

He frowned and hugged her tighter, then sighed, “No. That was different.”

She kissed him on the lips. “I’m glad it was different.” She shuddered slightly. “I can’t imagine 
getting to know you and then losing you.” She blushed, and hid her face against his chest.

He lifted her chin and assured her, “Same here.” He kissed her again, tenderly, full of promise.

She shifted so that she lay across him, head against his shoulder, “I hope I read you right when I 
decided to snoop all over your place.” He smiled, and nodded eagerly. She took a deep breath and 
continued, “I love my paintings, and how you make me look better than I am. It helped me 
understand how you feel, which kind of took my breath away. You're a good artist. Were you 
always? Or, is that a serum thing?” She looked up and met his gaze.

“I haven't really thought about that; but, my art hasn't changed since the serum.” He looked 
thoughtful.

She nestled closer. “So, you were always special.” He squeezed her again, looking pleased. She 
added, “By the way, I want to spend time with you, but I’m not sure I ever want to go outside the 
building again. My first time back out, there’s an invasion?”

He chuckled. “Next time will be better. At least, I hope it will.” He added, “I hope I’m out of here 
tomorrow, and we can go out again soon.”

“From ‘death’s door’ to discharge that quick? Must be nice!” She shook her head in disbelief.

He clarified, “Even I take a few days to get back to 100% from where I was.” He frowned slightly.
“I’d offer to cook you dinner for our next date, but I think if I get you alone behind closed, private, doors I might end up getting tazed.” He grinned mischievously.

Her heart pounded a bit faster, and she shook her head. “That’s hard to imagine.”

He kissed her cheek again, lingeringly. “Don’t test me. I’m teetering on the edge here.” He looked sincere.

She giggled and murmured. “Well, you’re not alone.” She ran an appreciative hand across his chest and quickly kissed his lips. They lay together contentedly for a few moments. The end of visiting hours was announced, and she stiffened. “I guess that’s my cue.”

He murmured, “I don’t want to let go.”

She sat up again. “You’re not alone there, either. When I left earlier for your bath and stuff I was okay at first, but, it wasn't long before I needed to be back with you.”

He gently ran a finger along her jaw. “That’s good.” He kissed her, more passionately. She shivered with pleasure, and he smirked. “I was glad to hear I’m doing that right.” She swatted at him, grinning. He looked her over in a way that caused an intense blush. “You’re very pretty, Sweetheart.” He kissed her again, almost reverently.

She pulled away reluctantly, and climbed down. She put her sandals on again and turned back to him. He lifted her hand and kissed it. He whispered, “I want you to be my girl.” She blushed and smiled at him, too overwhelmed for words, and then left the room.

***

Darcy had showered and changed into comfy sweats and Mickey Mouse slippers. She checked her messages, and set an appointment with Pepper’s stylist for first thing the next morning, laughing to herself at the thought of the woman’s reaction if she could see the way Darcy was dressed at the moment.

She was ordering dinner delivery when her bell rang. She answered the door to see the most beautiful flowers ever. The card read, “Thank you. I’m looking forward to our next date. –Steve.” She put them on the artsy table in her entryway and went back to unpacking and rearranging things. She wanted to make her place look nice, now that she was expecting company.

She found it difficult to sleep that night. Her thoughts were full of all that had happened recently, of hope and possibilities.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Shadows_of_Shemai, you get a gold star for guessing that Steve heard everything, but couldn't react! :) I may, at some point, write a companion one-shot of Steve's point of view on Ch11...

***

Mistakes are mine alone.
As always, THANK YOU to those enjoying my story, especially those COMMENTING (*hint, hint, nudge, nudge, wink, wink*)...
“Are you jealous that I’m gonna learn yoga from the Hulk? It’ll be a kick-ass addition to my resume.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy meets Pepper's stylist, reassures Erik that the latest alien invasion is really over, visits Bucky with Steve, and wants to cry some. Then, she gets manipulated by Tony and gets to know Bruce better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy opened her door early the next morning and suppressed a giggle. The perfectly-stylish woman on the other side of the door smiled serenely, but, Darcy was certain she must be appalled. Darcy had gone with standard lab-wear for the day- snug jeans, a slightly over-sized dark pink shirt, a light pink scarf wrapped to draw attention from ‘the girls’, and a funky, dark red blazer. She also wore red Converse high tops. She’d wasted a few minutes dreaming of a classic ensemble, but surrendered to the limitations of what she owned.

The woman, who introduced herself as Jai, had a deep Southern accent, something Darcy hadn't heard often in women of Asian descent, and didn't hear much in New York, either. Darcy invited her in and thanked her. “I appreciate you coming by so early. I haven’t been regular in my work schedule in weeks. I hope to get back to it today. If I’m away too long, my boss will starve. Her thunder-god boyfriend wouldn't much like that.”

Jai nodded while she studied Darcy’s apartment, taking in the vintage and hand-crafted pieces tucked in with the modern. She walked over to the fireplace, and studied the print Darcy had hung there.

She turned to look at Darcy again. “I’ve been working with Miss Potts for some time now. Like many at Stark Industries, I consider my work helpful to Iron Man, and now the other Avengers. Miss Potts told me that you assist Dr. Foster, the astrophysicist who discovered the connection between Earth and Thor’s home, and are close with both Dr. Foster and Thor. She told me that you seem uncomfortable with your body to a degree, and that you were recently attacked by Hydra.” She shifted her gaze to Darcy's copy of a Camille Claudel bronze, smiling as she followed its sinuous lines. “Miss Potts also mentioned that you’re friends with Captain America.”

Darcy nodded, and sipped her coffee. “Um, yeah. What does that have to do with my clothes?” She choked at the thought of ending up attired in an American-flag ensemble.

Jai smiled. “Your clothing should compliment your personality, and fit your lifestyle. I have a few questions that will assist me in finding the best clothing for the unique woman who is Darcy Lewis.”

Darcy swallowed and made a face. “I’m still working out exactly who that is.”

Jai nodded. “You’re young and vibrant, a work in progress. I ’m excited to have the chance to help.”
Darcy grinned. “Between you and all the therapy I’m getting, I may just ‘find myself’ yet… here in Avengers Tower, of all places!”

Jai opened her StarkPad, made a few notes, and began to ask questions. They ranged from things Darcy understood the relevance of- like her age and favorite color, to things that seemed wholly unconnected-like her hobbies, her favorite novels (Pride and Prejudice, and Shogun), favorite children’s book (101 Dalmatians, the original book by Dodie Smith- since the way the community of dogs came together to rescue the puppies always left a lump in her throat), and her most- (Sen. Stern) and least- (Elizabeth Warren) despised members of Congress. She hoped Jai never went to work for Hydra. It seemed like the stylist would have more than enough information to create detailed-psychological profiles on any client she’d ever served.

After all the questions, Darcy was relieved when Jai finally did what she’d expected from the appointment, look through her clothes and get detailed physical measurements.

Jai frowned. “What size bra are you wearing, Miss Lewis?” She made a note when Darcy told her, and indicated she would find a selection of bras in the correct size. (Considering the cost involved in just THAT item, Darcy was relieved the bill would go to Tony.) Darcy looked abashed. Jai smiled kindly. “Nearly eighty percent of all women wear the wrong size.”

Darcy grimaced. “Do you just go crazy wanting to grab people and correct them everywhere you go?”


Darcy squirmed. “I always thought that having a smart mouth and getting through the day was the same thing as self-confidence. Don’t get me wrong. I think I’m pretty amazing when it comes to standing up for other people, and getting people to talk about stuff! But, it’s not the same kind of serene confidence that exudes from someone like Pepper or Natasha. I envy that.”

Jai raised a brow. “I think that normal people who are closely aligned with the Avengers are extraordinarily brave, for what it’s worth.”

Darcy sat back and grinned again. “I’m usually called offbeat, not normal.” She eyed her phone, nibbling her lip.

Jai noticed. “You’ve glanced at your phone several times during our conversation. Are you expecting a call?”

Darcy shook her head and decided. She grabbed the phone, and pulled up the image of her in the glamour painting. She handed the phone to Jai. The stylist gasped slightly. “How lovely!” She looked from the image to Darcy and back again. She kept her expression neutral. “Do you know the artist well?”

Darcy spoke softly. “I’m getting to know him. I’m pretty amazed by the way he sees me. It... makes me want to do things to be more... that way.”

Jai nodded understanding, and handed the phone back. “Thank you. That image will be of help.” She tapped some notes into her pad. “When can I get you to the Tower spa? Hair, nails, makeup, ending up with a massage… the fun part.” She looked at Darcy expectantly.

Darcy sighed and admitted, “One little problem… or not so little. Due to the Hydra, um, ‘attack’,
I’m not comfortable… I was water-boarded.” She let out a breath and admitted, “I’m scared of lying on my back at a sink, or on a table, with someone over me.” She swallowed hard and pressed her hands against her legs to still her trembling.

Jai blinked hard, taken aback. She nodded and looked at her StarkPad for a moment as she considered her words. “Thank you for helping me to understand. May I share that information with the necessary technicians?”

Darcy nodded. “I was strapped on a gurney and they put wet towels over my face, and poured…” She blinked fast, and breathed in and out slowly. Then, she smiled at Jai. It felt tight, but resembled a smile, so she called it a win.

Jai reached out to touch Darcy’s hand. Her tone and non-verbals showed sympathy. “I’m sorry you went through that.”

Darcy lifted her chin slightly. “Thanks.” She wondered how this would affect her interactions with Jai and the salon technicians, if they would walk on egg shells and look at her mournfully forever. That possibility irritated her.

Jai took a deep breath, and re-assumed her smooth demeanor. “Well, those sickos will not prevent us from enhancing your look. You are a strong woman, and you deserve pampering.”

Darcy giggled and fist pumped. “If it’s the last thing you do, I’ll get massaged!” She laughed more as she admitted, “I started to say ‘By Thor, I’ll get massaged!’”, like most might say ‘by God’, but, given that he’s close by, I thought it could sound like a request.” She made a face and suppressed another giggle.

Jai smiled inscrutably. She stood, and shook Darcy’s hand. “Thank you for your time. This has been enjoyable. I hope you will be pleased with my efforts.” She lifted her chin. “I’ll be in touch with you after I have consulted with the technicians. We’ll work with you to adapt.”

Darcy thanked Jai, assuring her that she had confidence in Jai’s judgment. With Pepper Potts as a walking portfolio, how could Darcy doubt her?

Darcy was more than ready for headlines, hot chocolate with Erik, and to visit Steve. She took the elevator down to the retail levels and ordered hot chocolates, and got a paper. She frowned at the headlines about Captain America’s brush with death. The headlines seemed jarring compared to the reality, coldly detached.

Erik didn’t look at all well. She stayed longer than she’d intended, and tried her best to cajole him from his anxious mood. He needed repeated assurances that all the aliens had been defeated. After a long while, she was able to get Erik to stop crying and looking out the windows, and they did their puzzles together.

Next, she rushed down to the Healing Ward. Navarro stopped her and scheduled her chip implant, as she impatiently passed the nursing station. Finally reaching Steve’s room, she knocked lightly and nearly burst out laughing as she walked in on Steve and Tony fighting over a doughnut, apparently the last. It was funny to her that they could like each other so much yet constantly argue.

She grinned and bit her lip. “You two are like an unhappy married couple!”

Tony gibed, “And, we’re stuck with each other for the good of the kids! I’m daddy Avenger. Steve worries about everyone’s feelings. I just get the job done.” Darcy rolled her eyes. Steve reached out
for her hand. Tony asked, “You ever gonna let her have more than hand-holding, Cap? The way I hear it, you haven’t even tried for second base yet.” His gaze raked over Darcy.

Steve smiled as Darcy blushed. He spoke carefully. “Some things are worth waiting for.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Whatever! Don’t make her wait too long. You’re not the only one interested.”

Darcy shook her head, puzzled, but, Steve looked at Tony sharply and sighed, “No doubt.” He looked Darcy up and down with eager admiration. “I’ve missed you this morning. I worried you had to get to work, and put me off.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “No way! It just took a while to cheer Erik. He had aliens on the brain again! First, I had to meet with Pepper’s stylist. Pepper arranged for Tony to get me some duds that flatter, while hopefully discouraging sexual harassment. Pepper considers it a wise company investment.” She side-eyed Tony. Steve nodded, indicating he remembered the exchange.

Tony laughed, “Probably for the best. You have fantastic tits. I’m bound to comment on them sooner or later.”

Steve looked at Tony sternly. Darcy chuckled slightly, “Should I report him, or will you?” Steve looked as though he thought a more violent response might be in order.

Steve growled. “How would you like it if I said something like that about Pepper?”

Tony laughed. “It’d be hilarious! She’d kick your ass… IF you could even get the words out! Are you kidding?” He turned to Darcy. “Jai’s the best. She had clothes tailored around Pepper’s scars after the Extremis procedures.”

Darcy looked at him quizzically. “Extremis?” She pushed up her glasses.

He looked unusually serious. “A scientist I pissed off years ago made exploding, evil, mega soldiers. I guess he was a Hydra ally or something. I don’t know. He… took Pepper... and infected her with it. I fixed the bug in their work on her that made a lot of the Extremis soldiers blow up.” With effort, he shifted to his usual laissé faire demeanor, "I’m too much of an asshat to have a girlfriend who might explode every time she gets angry.” He shrugged. “I left her the bad-ass strength, though. It’s easier to sleep knowing she can hold her own.” Tony swallowed hard. “I saw her in pain.” He grimaced. “And, I thought she was dead for a few minutes there, the worst in my life. Not interested in a repeat.” He glanced at Steve, quirking a rueful grin. “I’d rather fly into a wormhole.” Steve raised his brows, expression serious.

Darcy gasped, “Someone took Pepper? Holy Odin, Tony! You must’ve gone berserk!” He nodded and grimaced. Steve looked at Darcy fixedly. She seemed pensive. “Huh. I wondered what Jai wasn’t telling me about Pepper. I told her I wish I was confident like Pepper and Natasha, and she nattered something about how brave it is for a ’normal’ person to be around the Avengers.”

Steve looked uncomfortable, and caressed her hand. Tony shrugged. “Say the word, and we’ll supercharge you.” Steve’s grip tightened, and then went deliberately slack. “It hurts like shit, but you’d be stronger than ten men.” Tony chuckled. “I have to watch it more with Pepper, now that she can break me in half.”

Darcy deadpanned. “You’re a model of restraint.”

He made eyes at her and threw his hands up in frustration. “I know!” He turned to Steve. “I’ll head out now and let you get back to doing nothing for Lewis’ frustration levels. See ya, Spangled
Grandpa!” To Darcy, he added, “Hey! When you need a laugh sometime, remind me to trot out the reels of Cap’s USO show. He punches out Hitler and everything!”

Darcy smiled as Steve closed his eyes against embarrassment. After Tony was gone, she leaned close to him. “Punches out Hitler?”

He groaned. “I was practically a dancing monkey. There was a guy wearing a Hitler mustache. He ‘snuck up on me,’ and got punched. The kids loved it.”

She made a sympathetic face. “Tony has reels? That’s awful!” She tried to repress a grin.

He nodded. “Oh, yeah. He’s played them for the others, multiple times. He’ll make sure you see.”

She shook her head. “And, he still hasn’t guessed about you and the chorus girls?” Steve shook his head, frowning slightly. She mentioned, “I think that Natasha has.”

He looked more embarrassed and sighed, “Of course, she has!” He shook his head again.

Darcy laughed. “How are you doing today? You look… well, fantastic.” He was dressed in a t-shirt and khakis she’d brought him, and sitting up on top of his bed covers. He looked more like a visitor than a patient.

He grinned. “Thanks. So do you!” She rolled her eyes. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. “I’m dying to get out of here.”

She looked at him ruefully, “The papers say you’re just dying.”

He shrugged. “They’re a little behind.” He frowned sitting straighter. “That’s all the more reason for me to get out there- to correct that perception.”

She caressed his shoulder and teased. “It’s a good thing you have unbelievably strong shoulders, what with taking on the weight of the world all the time.” She leaned in and kissed him. It was part reassurance, part growing lust. Being close to Steve, his kisses and touches were steadily fanning flames.

He responded fervently, groaning, “Another good reason to get out of here.”

She smiled sweetly. “How are YOUR frustration levels?”

He kissed her gently. “I’m enjoying the journey.”

She grinned, “That’s nice, because mine are getting epic.” He kissed her again, more passionately. She groaned. “I have to go to work. I’m incredibly late, and I haven’t even told Bucky good morning yet.”

He kissed her gently. “I’m coming with you to see Bucky, if you don’t mind.” She looked up at him with wide eyes. He took her by the hand, and walked out of his room at an unhurried pace. She saw that Navarro noticed, but didn’t raise an alarm, just looked disgruntled. She felt his grip on her tighten as they reached Bucky’s door.

She knocked lightly and asked, “Bucky? Can Steve and I come in?” She heard a faint reply and opened the door, her heart pounding a mile a minute. She turned to Steve. “I can wait outside if you like.” Steve shook his head and pulled her into the room with him.

When they were by the bedside, she nearly had to ask Steve to ease his grip on her hand, it was so
tightly. She looked from one man to the other and choked out, “Hi, Bucky.”

His expression softened slightly. “Doll.” He turned his eyes to Steve, glanced back at Darcy and then to Steve again, and brusquely offered, “Hi.” Darcy crooked a grin. Steve blinked hard. The two men stared at each other.

After a while, Bucky asked, “What’s ‘to the end of the line’?”

Steve let out a ragged breath. Darcy could feel him shaking with emotion, and the look in his eyes tore her heart to shreds. His voice was gruff with feeling. “It’s what you told me after my Ma died, that you would be with me ‘to the end of the line.’ Is that why you didn’t finish me, because I reminded you of your promise?” She tightened her hold on Steve's hand, and put her other hand on his arm.

Bucky closed his eyes and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Steve pressed, “Why did you pull me out of the water?”

Bucky whispered, “Stevie.”

Steve sighed deeply. “Yeah, Bucky?”

Bucky turned away, and Darcy was afraid he was going to shut Steve out again. Bucky softly added, “I remember Stevie, sort of.”

Steve nodded. “You remember me from before the serum.”

Bucky shrugged beneath his restraints. “I remember YOU from the highway and the helicarrier. You broke my arm.”

Steve looked simultaneously shattered and frustrated. “Well, you stabbed me, and shot me about six times. You even pounded me with my own damned shield!” He ran his free hand through his hair. “I begged you not to make me fight you!” Darcy swallowed a lump in her throat, her eyes darting from Steve to Bucky, and back again.

Bucky looked almost forlorn. “You never backed down from a bully.” The two men stared at each other, Bucky looking confused and Steve heartbroken.

Darcy asked, “Do you mean that you remember ‘Stevie’ before the serum, but don’t remember serving with Steve after they made him like this?”

Bucky explained, “The display at the museum told me who I used to be. I saw there that Stevie got souped-up into Captain America.”

Steve commented, “Yeah. Cameras picked up that you went to the Smithsonian. Did you watch the films?”

Bucky nodded. “I saw one with us... one with your girl. That shit with the pretend battles... and the motorcycle and the fake Hitler and the dames? What the hell was that?”

Steve let out a frustrated sigh. “It was all they would let me do to help at first.”

Bucky raised a brow and glanced at Darcy. “Lot o’ dames.” He shook his head, looked far away for a bit, and then spoke hesitantly, “Guess it was better than... collecting tin in your little red wagon.”
Steve startled, then shrugged defensively. “But, then I came for you and we did a lot of good with the Howling Commandos.”

Bucky looked at him blankly. He turned his head and closed his eyes. Silence reigned again.

Agent Navarro entered the room. “Excuse me. I turned a blind eye as long as I could. Will you please return to your bed, Captain?”

Steve glanced at her, gave her a nod of acknowledgment, and spoke firmly. “Bucky, you’re my friend. I’ll be back. I won’t let anything else happen to you.”

Darcy whispered, “See ya later, Bucky.” She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, unsure whether she wished he would look at them. His sad eyes often tore at her heart.

When they reached Steve’s room, he closed the door behind them and pulled her close. He leaned his head down to her shoulder. She felt the damp of tears in his eyes. She reached up and stroked his head, and tried to reassure him. “It’s okay. He’s safe now. They can’t hurt him, or make him do things anymore. He has some memories, and maybe more will come back.” He held her tightly against him.

Navarro knocked lightly at the door. She entered the room. “Captain, will you please lie down and rest now? I need to check your vitals. I know you’re eager for release, but I ask that you not leave on your own again. We cannot release you in good conscience if you are not fully recovered.”

Steve straightened up, wiped his eyes, and gave Darcy a kiss on the cheek. He quirked a watery smile. “Thanks.” He moved back and sat on the hospital bed again, and extended his arm for the blood pressure cuff.

Darcy replied, “Any time, soldier. Any time.” They exchanged a warm look as she left. It was after 9:30, so Darcy moved quickly, knowing that Jane would surely need her by this time.

In the labs, Jane exclaimed, “Oh, thank God you’re FINALLY here! Get over here, and hold this clamp in place!” Darcy did as ordered and fell into her work with a small sense of relief. It might be kind of boring, but it was familiar, and her part in it was fairly uncomplicated.

After the tension of the visit between Steve and Bucky, Darcy felt raw. She wondered if Bucky would ever really remember Steve. She thought it was kind of wild that he remembered ‘Stevie.’ She realized that they must have really been close for those memories to have survived all this time, and all that Hydra put Bucky through.

Jane frowned at Darcy crossly. “You haven’t spoken a word in ten minutes. It’s creepy!” Darcy laughed, and made more effort to chime in as Jane needed.

Any sense of peace in the work was gone when Tony Stark came into the lab. He immediately fell to arguing with Jane over her theories. While Darcy understood that Tony was a genius and that he was pushing Jane in her thinking, it was a more combative process than Jane’s usual intuitive meandering. It wasn’t the comforting and familiar balm that Darcy needed at the moment. Darcy followed instructions from both of them and jotted notes in her StarkPad at a dizzied rate. When Tony buzzed out of the lab to go back to work on his latest drone, both Darcy and Jane were exhausted. Darcy muttered, “Pepper must be super-human to keep up with that!” Jane nodded and shook her head.

Darcy realized they’d missed lunch, so she ran down to get some takeout and ran right back to the lab with it. Jane fell into one of her science trances, focusing the energy that Tony had infused into
her theories to reality. Darcy knew from long experience that she wouldn't even be noticed for at least another hour.

She checked her messages. Jai had sent images of some clothes she was considering. Darcy approved a few, and dismissed a few others.

Ian had sent another message. Darcy started to just delete it, but decided that since evasion wasn't working she’d try one more direct message. She read his message, ‘Why won’t you answer me? When can we be together again? Don’t you miss me?’

She rolled her eyes and replied. 'Ian- I told you that I don’t want to see you anymore because you attacked me during our last date- showed disrespect. We will never be together again. I do NOT miss you. I’m seeing someone new. I’m going to block you from my contacts now. Goodbye.' She hoped he wouldn't continue to send messages into the ether, but felt that she had communicated all she should in this reply. She blocked his name from her contact list, and felt a measure of peace.

She reached around Jane and took pages of scribbles and transcribed them and returned them to Jane’s desk. She cleaned equipment that Jane wasn't currently using and discovered that with fancy new stuff that Stark had given them, she would have a fair amount of free time from now on. She would spend far less time wrestling with duct tape and jury-rigging repairs. She smiled as she realized this, until she felt someone watching her. She turned to see Tony Stark smirking.

He spoke to Jane. “Lewis has free time, since I replaced so much of your crap equipment. Can you share her out?” Jane waved her hand vaguely, not even replying through her science haze, or noticing the death glare Darcy gifted her.

Tony turned to Darcy, eyes gleaming. “It looks like you can be spared for an hour. Can you assist Banner?”

Darcy wasn't sure what bothered her most- that Tony was manipulating the oblivious Jane, or that he was treating Darcy like a piece of equipment to be lent out at his whim. She jammed her hands in her pockets and moved to the elevator. She’d talk to Jane about it later. It wasn't like she would leave, but she could reduce her hours in the lab if need be. It wasn't like Jane was paying her or giving her benefits that required a certain level of work time.

When she reached the next lab floor, she saw Banner busy at work. She walked over to him and waited for him to notice her. He looked up vaguely and greeted her. “Darcy!” He turned back to his work. She continued to wait. He looked puzzled. “Can I help you?”

She spoke flatly. “I’ve been appropriated for you. Mr. Stark manipulated Dr. Foster into lending me out for an hour.” She crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

Bruce stopped his work and lowered his glasses, then cleared his throat. “I didn't arrange that.” She looked at him and shrugged. He smiled slightly. “I don’t know if you can read my handwriting or understand my formulae.”

She held out her hand, and he gave her a few sheets of his scrawl. She looked it over and pointed to one symbol. “What’s that?” He explained, and she transcribed all he’d given her onto her pad. She printed a page, and handed it to him to review.

He read the page and looked at her with interest. “That was quick!” She shrugged. Eagerly, he handed her more pages. She sat down and went to work.

When she was done, she asked, “Do you want a printout or a virtual rendering or something else?”
He chose virtual rendering. A moment later he was looking at a new model of his formula. His tone held awe. “You’re good. That saved me a lot of time.”

She shrugged. “Thanks.”

He offered in a quiet, ironic tone. “I’m sorry that you’re angry.”

She grinned, struck by his sly humor. “Not the usual vibe people come in here with?”

He shook his head and joked dryly, “More like abject terror.” He gave her his full attention for a moment. “How did you start working with Dr. Foster?”

She looked down and sighed, “I needed six lousy credits! Nobody else applied to be her intern. She had a reputation.” She chuckled darkly. “Not for getting people stuck in a lifelong, unpaid internship, but, a rep for being difficult all the same.”

He sighed. “Just because you need to stay safe doesn't mean you have to stay in the same job.” He ran a hand through his hair. “You’re a capable assistant, really more of a lab administrator with the scope of things I’ve heard that you do for Dr. Foster. I hope she compensates you accordingly. I’d sleep more if I had such good help. But, if you want to do course work for some other discipline, I’m sure something could be arranged. Where were you going to school when you took the internship?”

She looked at him evenly. “Culver.”

He gulped slightly and nodded. “Did you know Professor Ross?” She nodded. He grimaced, “Me, too.” He sighed again and shook his head. “What were you studying?”

She reminisced. “Political science.”

He looked politely puzzled. “So, did you get that degree?”

She nodded and smirked. “Yeah, and a business degree at Oxford while helping Jane the past few years in London. You say that like everyone has nineteen different degrees lying around.”

He grinned faintly, “Just Tony. I only have four.”

She nodded and joked, “Only four?! How do you hold your head up around the other scientists?”

His grin faded. “I don’t.”

She blinked hard, nodded, and leaned close in a conspiratorial manner. “Can you teach me yoga?” He blinked rapidly, baffled. She continued, “Cuz if you’ll teach me yoga, AND actually pay me, I’ll help you a couple of hours each day.” He nodded eagerly, eyes bright with something like hope. She poked him, teasing again. “For what it’s worth, Jane only has three degrees.”

He chuckled, but looked concerned as he cautioned, “I know you’re not ‘chicken shit’ as you so eloquently put it before, but, you don’t have to give in to Tony’s manipulations.” He made a face. “I’m not the safest person to spend time with.”

She waved away his warning, and grinned. “I’m not giving in. I’m getting yoga training from… you… AND money. And you’re getting a little more sleep and my awesomely soothing presence.” He looked laughingly skeptical, but pleased. “Tony can shove his manipulations up his ass! Pay would be good. I may as well build up a nest egg while I figure out what I want to do when I grow up.” She jumped up from her seat. “But, I’ll have to get to the yoga tomorrow. I’m not dressed for
it, and I’m due back with Jane. I was late this morning, so I need to give her some extra time today. And, I owe her a smack upside the head for not noticing when Tony appropriated me. She needs me to keep her sane, whether she notices it or not.”

Bruce sighed. “Sanity’s in short supply around here.” She smiled and waved as she left. He sighed, his expression shifting to one of longing.

***

When Tony entered Steve’s room in the Healing Ward, he was practically bouncing on his toes. Steve set down the newspaper he was reading and frowned. Tony smirked, “Hey! Guess what? Lewis is gonna work for Bruce some, even though she’s pissed at me.”

Steve repressed a stab of jealous anger, and growled. “What did you do?”

Tony smiled impishly. “I fuzzed Foster’s brain with science and replaced all her crappiest equipment so that Lewis wouldn't have to waste time repairing it anymore. Lewis stretched a lot of it further than it should have gone, anyway. She’s got mad tech skills. Then, I pointed out that Lewis needed something to do and Banner needed help. She was pissy at first, but, she’s too nice to be mean to good old Bruce for long. He's peaceful and calm around her, not the kind to jump into a fight willingly. She likes that. She likes that a lot.”

Steve tried to ignore the gibe. “Why did you go to that trouble? Why would you rearrange Darcy’s work?”

Tony chuckled dryly. “I like how direct you are. Saves time.” He looked at Steve piercingly. “I can’t have Thor swayed your way by his friendship with Darcy. If she has multiple loyalties, it will make his position less clear cut and maintain our merry band’s balance of power. Besides, you’re not the only one who has a thing for her. Banner can’t take his eyes off her either. When she grabbed him in the hall and made him hold her in his arms, it was almost magical to see him melt against that sweet body.” Steve’s perturbed expression made Tony chuckle. “Hawkeye gossiped that she already said that if you come off over-protective, it’s ‘disrespectful’. That was over you wanting to keep her safely away from Banner, wasn't it? Good friend that you are, you wouldn't forbid Banner an assistant that will make his life easier and his heart just a little lighter, would you?”

Steve sighed, “No wonder she’s pissed. You’re using her.”

Tony shrugged. “I won’t be disregarded. There are times when my way is best, and you know it.”

Steve nodded, his temper rising to the bait. “This isn't one of those times.”

Tony grimaced, “Fair enough. But, I saw it as a way to restore balance.”

Steve looked down and sighed angrily. “Thanks for the candor. Let me return the favor. You twist your knife by pointing out that I need to show Darcy proper respect... ironic, when you’re completely disregarding her. Back off now, and stop playing games with her life, or I will finally cut loose on you like I've been tempted to so many times, and then get Thor’s friend Heimdall to send your ass to the other side of the universe. Is that clear?”

Tony nodded and smirked. “You sound like you’re lecturing Loki.”

Steve snarled, raging inside. “Well, he was a mischievous, manipulative bastard, too.”

Tony laughed. “Pepper would object, sooner or later.”
Steve pointed out, “Pepper would kick your ass for playing with people’s feelings!”

Tony raised a brow and bowed his head in acknowledgment. He turned and walked out, passing Darcy at the door as he left. He greeted her, “Lewis.”

She replied, “Rat bastard.”

He nodded, and kept walking. “Fair enough.”

She closed the door behind her and leaned back against it. “I take it you already heard about my day.” She admired the tension in Steve’s frame and the powerfully authoritarian look on his face. His jaw shifted in a way that made her heart beat faster. She smiled and commented, “You look totally hot when you’re pissed.”

He blinked hard, and asked quickly. “Why did you agree to work for Banner?”

She sighed, “Because he needs the help, and he’s so lonely up there, and needs a friend almost as much as an assistant.” She shrugged and added perkily, “He’s gonna teach me yoga, too.” She nodded and smiled.

Steve chuckled ruefully, groaning, “Great!” He pressed his fists against his temples.

She chuckled. “You jealous?”

He looked up quickly. “What?”

She smiled. “Are you jealous that I’m gonna learn yoga from the Hulk? It’ll be a kick-ass addition to my resume!”

He relaxed slightly. “Oh! I hadn't thought of that.” The expression on his face was new to her. She wondered what it meant. Her phone beeped that she had an incoming text. She read it and frowned. Steve’s tone was testy. “Another message from that guy you were seeing before?”

She shook her head while she replied to the text. “No. I dropped him from my contact list after one last very direct message about respect.” Unnoticed by Darcy, Steve flinched. “This is therapy stuff. Dr. Chau requests that we do tomorrow’s session at the pool.” She grimaced. Her phone beeped again. “And, Jai has a swim suit for me. Do you think my stylist and my therapist are in cahoots?”

He looked at her oddly. “Cahoots?”

She giggled, “Proof that I’ve been hanging out with sneaky people too long, and stopped believing in coincidences.”

He looked at her blankly. Then he shook his head and clarified, “No. I wasn't asking what it meant. I heard it used plenty when I was a kid. I was just wondering where you got the term from.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I was secretly born a century ago!” She raised her brows at him a couple of times.

He shook his head, “Not very funny, Darcy.”

She made a face. “Sorry. I probably heard it from Pawpaw.”

She sat down in the chair by his bed; texted affirmatives to both Dr. Chau and Jai, noting the need for the swim suit immediately if possible, and looked at Steve seriously. “Bruce was trying to make me feel better about my lifetime sentence staying safely near Avengers by saying that I can
branch out and work on more studies without even leaving the Tower. It sounded like a good idea. I figured I could start by learning about some different science with him, for pay. Pay would be a good thing in my life! And, Chau has been after me to take up something like yoga. I figure Bruce must be awesome at it. He works so hard to keep on an even keel... and, anyone can see that he’s all yoga-muscle.”

She saw that odd look cross Steve’s face again, and laughed when he rather tightly joked, “Most counselors don’t recommend yoga with the Hulk.”

She grinned impishly. “More of them should. He’s a sweet guy!”

Steve winced, sighed raggedly, and moved off the bed like he couldn't possibly bear to sit still a second longer. He lifted her easily from the chair, turned so he could sit in the chair and she was on his lap. Then, he pulled her close and kissed her long and hard, so that she saw stars.

She gasped, “Wow! Hi.” He smiled tightly, and leaned his head against hers. She could feel him trembling and gasped, “You’re feeling better, I take it.”

He kissed her lightly and nodded. “I am now. I’m about ready to pull rank on the doctor.” His gaze was nearly intense enough to burn. “I’m worried you’ll get busy with other stuff and forget about going out with me.” She laughed and shook her head.

He looked at her inscrutably and kissed down the sensitive skin of her neck, taking his time as she gasped, moaned, and unconsciously squirmed in his lap. She could hardly think at all, but wondered if he was just restless from Healing Ward confinement, or if there was more to his mood. She leaned in to kiss his lips, shaken by his unexpected fervor, and more than a bit turned on.

There was a knock at the door. Darcy started to move away, but Steve held her close. Natasha raised a brow as she entered the room and saw them. “Hey. Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to let you know that I talked to Clint.”

Steve sat up straighter. “He okay?”

Natasha frowned. “He will be. He’s got some pretty messed up stuff to work through. He’s testing out new arrows Stark made for him.” She shrugged.

Darcy felt Steve shift a bit in the chair as he groused, “You should hit Tony up, too, for weaponry improvement while he’s in his current mood. He’s uneasy with the balance of the team. He dragged Darcy into it. She’s assisting Banner some now.” His arms tightened around Darcy and anger crossed his face.

Natasha nodded, “Ah. I see.” She looked thoughtful. “Maybe he can enhance the widow’s bite...?”

The announcement ending visiting hours sounded, and Darcy sighed. Natasha grinned at them both and waved goodbye. “I’ll go. Don’t worry so much, Steve. Stark’ll wind you up, if you let him get in your head.”

Darcy began to wonder if she would ever fully understand a sentence that Natasha uttered. She doubted it. Steve sighed, and loosened his grip on her. She looked at him and asked, “Is there something you want to talk about? You’re acting kinda different.”

He shook his head and kissed her sweetly. “Nah. I just can’t wait to get out of this place.” He pulled her to him and asked plaintively, “Forgive me?” He looked worried.

Confused, she asked, “What for? Kisses so good they make me see stars?” He closed his eyes and
laid his head against hers again. She kissed his cheek and comforted him, “Sure, handsome. I’ll forgive you whatever you want. Okay?”

He hugged her tightly again, and groaned as Navarro entered the room. “Visiting hours are over. Captain, if you want me to start processing for you to be released in the morning…”

Darcy jumped up and ordered, “Get in that bed, and do as she says!” She made a face. “That didn't come out right.”

He laughed and saluted Darcy, then Navarro. “Yes, ma’am.”

Darcy blew him a kiss from the doorway. “Sweet dreams, Steve.”

He smiled, “Same to you, Darcy. Good night.” He stood up and moved back to the bed.

When Darcy reached the elevators, a door opened and she saw Tony and Bruce in one going down. She waved. Tony reached out and grabbed her arm. “Come on, Lewis. We’re gonna go out and grab a bite to eat.”

She squeaked a protest, “I’m not dressed to go on the town! Maybe another time…”

Tony waved a dismissive hand. “We’re just going to a diner. You look fine.” He turned to Bruce. "She looks fine. Doesn't she? You were telling me how pretty she is." Bruce nodded, eyeing Tony with suspicious amusement.

Darcy noted that waiting passengers were looking anxious, though Tony seemed utterly unaware. She took a breath at the thought of leaving the building again, “Well, I guess…”

“Great! You've held up these people long enough!” Tony pulled her into the elevator, between him and Bruce.

As they reached the lobby, a large man stood and moved in behind them. Darcy looked at him nervously. Bruce nudged Tony and gestured, “Introduce Happy.”

Tony smirked as he noted Darcy’s hand in her pocket. “Don’t taze my bodyguard and head of security, Lewis. He’ll get a complex. Romanoff nearly took his head off the first time they met.” He laughed. “This is Happy.”

Darcy took her hand off her Taser and shook the man’s hand. “Hi. Darcy Lewis.”

The unsmiling man grunted, “Happy Hogan.” He looked around them as though expecting an attack.

Tony laughed, “Ease up, Happy! We’re just stepping out for a bite.” He fell in by Happy and continued talking to him, leaving Darcy with Bruce.

She looked around, watching people react to Tony. Most looked at him with wide-eyed shock, like she must have the day they first met. She was reminded of the way that Erik played a role when she visited him that last day in London. Tony seemed to constantly perform, which was fortunate, as the moment they stepped outside the Tower there were TV cameras pointed at him and flashbulbs popping.

Bruce asked Darcy, “You okay?” She nodded, caught off-guard by his concern. He continued, “You haven’t been outside the building much. And, this nonsense…” He gestured towards the paparazzi.
She grinned. “I was considering staying inside forever. The last time I went out was for lunch with Thor and Jane.”

Bruce made a face. “The day of the Vorm attack. I remember ‘the other guy’ seeing you on the street. For once, you looked sensibly frightened.”

She frowned. “You can’t take all the credit for that. Aliens were invading, people were getting vaporized, and Jane got knocked out. And, well, you were pretty mad—except, you looked kind of happy knocking Vorm ships down.”

He shook his head, turning away as more paparazzi pushed past. He pulled Darcy into his arms so she wouldn’t be run over by a reporter from TMZ. He looked down, staring intently into her eyes. “Why do you insist on personalizing ‘the other guy’?”

She looked up at him seriously, staying close so that they could hear each other over the buzz of people around them. “It’s all you, Bruce. I appreciate that it has its sucky side, but when you get your rage on, you help. You helped save the world during the Chitauri invasion, against the Vorm, and probably a few other times I don’t even know about yet.” She began to feel self-conscious of the way his arms tightened around her, pulling her closer. But, as she looked up, so many emotions were visible in his face that it was fascinating.

He stared into her eyes and spoke brusquely, “I’m glad I can do some good with ‘the other guy’ instead of just destruction, but he took the best parts out of my life… the woman I love, the chance to have kids of my own… So, please understand that I don’t like to claim him any more than I must.” His eyes looked terribly sad as he released her and turned away. She touched his arm gently, turning him back to her.

“Okay.” She leaned closer and spoke quietly, “I’ll talk about him the way you do, if it’s like that. I’m sorry.” She shifted close to him again and kissed his cheek, as he smiled his habitual sad smile. She asked, “Is there a reason you don’t call him ‘Hulk,’ like everybody else?”

He shrugged and grimaced, wry humor apparent again. “Mostly to spite Jack McGee. That kid’s a prick!”

Darcy threw her head back, and laughed out loud. “Yeah. Most mean-spirited school newspaper writer ever! I used to send in Editorial letters against him. I noticed they got printed, so, I figure he wasn’t a lot of fun to work with, either.”

Bruce laughed. She poked his arm gently. “You need to laugh more. Maybe paying me will be worth it.” He nodded agreement and looked at her wistfully while she eyed the paparazzi frenzy. Another overexcited reporter trampled too close, and Bruce reached an arm around Darcy again and pulled her out of harm’s way, back against him. He looked down at her, protective, and more than a little amazed at how good it felt to touch and hold a woman again. She looked up to smile thanks as someone stepped between them and a television camera.

Tony smoothly answered questions about Captain America’s condition, assuring the reporters that Cap was recovering well and would be out and about again soon. Tony let the reporters know he was done talking then, and ready to go inside the diner to eat. He gestured to Happy to begin moving the reporters away.

Two Iron Man drones landed nearby, clanked over, and took up posts on either side of Happy. The reporters gaped and took pictures, but didn’t try to move past. Bruce and Darcy scurried into the diner after Tony, glad to close the door behind them and shut out the noise, lights, and flashbulbs. Tony requested a seat in the back, so they could eat in peace, and the owner delightedly sent a
waitress to show him to a table.

As they sat, Darcy asked, “Is it like this every time you go out in public?”

Tony shrugged. “It’s the price I pay.” Bruce looked at him through narrowed eyes.

She looked back towards the mob of reporters, and shook her head. “It makes me kinda respect the Kardashians. They have to handle that everywhere they go, too.”

Tony laughed out loud, “And without drones! So, do I get any of that respect? Or, am I still a rat bastard?”

She shrugged, “Both.” Bruce nodded his agreement, smiling at them.

Tony grinned. The waitress hovered nearby. Tony ordered the Special for all of them, and promised her a big tip if she hurried. Needless to say, she did. Dinner was kind of fun. Bruce was a great straight man to Tony’s constant shenanigans and the two of them had a deep rapport. And, to Darcy’s relief, Tony was well informed on current events and pop culture. He recognized the movie, song and TV quotes that she so freely peppered conversation with. He mentioned that some of the Avengers planned to watch movies together the next night, and suggested she join them. She hoped Steve could be there. Tony shrugged and asked Bruce to be sure to attend.

They made their way back to the Tower and Darcy breathed a sigh of relief when they were inside. Darcy let herself into her place, kicked off her shoes, and took off her coat. She turned on the TV for noise companionship while she looked at her mail (setting aside a new journal for Erik) and opened garment bags Jai had left. She hung the beautiful blouses and slacks in her closet, then tried on a few pairs of cute shoes and put them away, too, her head spinning. She set aside lingerie and work-out clothes to check out in the morning.

The swimsuit was lovely, a pale pink one-piece vintage suit that reminded her of Elizabeth Taylor. The rich fabric had same-colored dots for accent, and it looked like it would give good coverage. She went into the bathroom and tried it, and was impressed with Jai’s first effort. She wasn't looking forward to pool therapy one bit, but at least she would look pretty while being scared to pieces. She set it aside carefully, and threw on an oversized t-shirt to sleep in.

When she returned to the living room, she stopped and stared at the footage of Tony talking to the press on the screen. She started in surprise when she saw herself over his shoulder. She and Bruce were there, talking seriously and closely as she kissed his cheek, and then laughing together and chatting as he pulled her out of harm’s way, into his arms. It was kind of surreal to see.

Shaking her head in wonder at the weirdness of her new reality, Darcy turned off the TV and went to bed.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Mistakes are all mine. Sorry! My beta disappeared.

If anyone would be willing to give beta help, I'd love it!
Here's the swimsuit Jai found for Darcy-
http://www.pinterest.com/pin/128141551870928450/

I may post more later today. I need to do some wrapping this morning, while I have privacy.

THANK YOU to everyone reading and especially to those who leave COMMENTS. They keep the muse alive and well... (and encourage me to edit/post more). :)}
“That must have been some kiss he laid on you, to have you so nice again. What happened to you being mad?”

Chapter Summary

Darcy visits Steve again. Things don't go as smoothly as past visits...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next morning, Darcy woke early... both excited, and filled with dread. It was almost like the first day of school. She had pretty new clothes and was looking forward to learning new things, but dreading ‘PE class’ at the pool. After showering, she put on a new bra and panties set, letting out a sigh of relief as she felt the difference of wearing a bra that fit. Then, she put on a pale green mini dress with black geometric detail and a pair of chunky black heels. She was nearly giddy; she was so pleased with the outfit.

Darcy picked out a workout bra, t-shirt, and pants. She stuffed them in her over-sized purse. She carefully folded the swim suit, and laid it in the bag, too. She skimmed the day’s headlines, made hot chocolates, picked up Erik’s journal, grabbed a pair of sneakers and hung them off her bag, and finally went across the floor to Erik’s place.

On her way, she met Thor. He smiled at her. “You look radiant today, Lady Darcy. Your apparel suits you well.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Thor. I feel pretty. Pepper arranged for me to get some new duds.” At his blank look, she re-phrased that to “new Midgardian apparel.”

He nodded. “Why do you carry two beverages? Are you very thirsty?”

She shook her head, “Nah! One is for Erik. He likes the taste.”

He sniffed at the drinks approvingly. “Are you on your way to wish him a good day?” She nodded. “May I accompany you?” She gestured for him to follow her. He spoke seriously. “You are a good friend to Dr. Selvig, Lady Darcy. Were it not for your devotion, he would have suffered greatly at the hands of those barbarians.”

She bit her lip and nodded, not sure how to reply. She finally shrugged her shoulders. “Erik not getting hurt was the best thing to come out of that whole mess, I guess.”

Thor smiled easily. “That and your budding relationship with our Captain.”

She blushed. “Yeah. That, too.”

Erik was pleased to see Thor. Ever since hearing of Loki’s death, he’d been much happier to discuss anything related to Asgard. He had even expressed a wish to visit sometime and meet Odin.

Darcy wasn't so sure that would be a good idea. She didn't think Odin sounded all that nice. Darcy shared her hot chocolate with Thor, meaning she didn't get much. But, she was pleased he liked it. He was interested in the puzzle she spent a few minutes on with Erik. He even agreed to stay and
continue visiting with Erik when she had to leave.

She went to the Healing Ward next. A morning news program was on the TV when she entered Steve’s room, the anchors chatting perkily over the previous night’s footage of Tony reassuring the press about Captain America’s condition. That new look she’d noticed so much on Steve’s face the previous day was back, but it was magnified about a thousand times. He was standing in front of the TV with his hands clenched into fists, looking almost battle-ready. She stopped in her tracks and stared at him, confused by his apparent anger.

She smiled tentatively. “Good morning! You getting out of here today?” His attitude put her so on edge that she didn't move close for a kiss or hug.

Steve nodded while his expression shifted from rage to something undefinable. He looked at her sharply as though surprised by her presence, and then gazed at her pensively for an uncomfortably long time. “You look pretty.” There was a bittersweet look on his face that she didn't get and he sounded… was it accusatory? It left her off balance.

She fidgeted, frowning slightly. “Uh, thanks. I figured for my first day of paid work I should make an effort.” She then set her bag down and sat in the visitor chair. He didn't look as well to her as he had the previous day. He seemed to be shaking, and there was too much color in his cheeks.

Navarro entered the room. “Blood-pressure check!” Steve sat on the bed and held out his arm, eyes closed. Navarro took his blood pressure. Then, she took it again. Her face clouded with concern. “Is something bothering you, Captain?”

Steve glared at the TV and swallowed hard. His voice shook. “Could you come back and try that again later?”

Navarro glanced at the TV, sighed impatiently, and shook her head. Disapproval flitted across her face, but she schooled her features professionally. “I’ll let you visit with Miss Lewis first.” She turned to Darcy. “Make sure to get my attention when you’re leaving, so I can come back then, please?” Her warning look to Darcy was puzzling. Navarro shook her head again, and left the room.

For the first time, Darcy felt ill at ease around Steve. She looked at him worriedly. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

He stood again and nodded, not meeting her eyes. He turned and walked to look out the window, arms crossed and tension evident in his frame. While the look suited him in some ways, it also increased Darcy’s sense of unease. Her heart began to pound faster.

She looked down and nodded, making a face. Then she burst out, “You totally just lied to me!” She felt sympathy for the way Tony had acted when he was angry that Steve had lied or was keeping something from him.

Steve let out a breath, and admitted in a hollow tone, “I did. Sorry.” He hung his head, still not looking at her.

Angry tears pricked her eyes. She shook her head, and blinked them away. “Why?”

He turned back and reached out as though to take her hand, but frowned and put his hand on the bed instead. A shiver ran up her spine. He seemed distant and cool towards her, more like Captain America and less like Steve Rogers than she’d seen before.

He rasped harshly, “I don’t know what we’re doing.”
She felt a frightening swooping sensation somewhere deep inside, and her skin began to prickle uncomfortably. She bit her lip and stood, staring at Steve’s forbidding expression. She wondered if he’d finally come to his senses and realized she wasn’t enough for him. Part of her wanted to run from the room and never face him again. For several seconds, she considered doing just that.

Her heart wouldn’t allow it. She took a breath, gathered her courage, and blurted, “Aren’t we falling in love?” She began to shake all over as she closed her lips tightly again.

He gasped as the anger disappeared from his face and was replaced by relief and hope. “Really? You’re not… I thought… maybe you changed your mind.” He glanced at the TV.

She looked at him incredulously. “Why? What have I done to make you think that?”

He huffed and dropped his gaze. “What did you do last night?” He stared at the TV again. The footage of Tony was playing. She and Bruce were behind him, with Bruce holding her against him so that the paparazzi wouldn’t hurt her.

She sat down in the visitor chair weakly. “Oh!” She took a deep breath, absorbing that Steve hadn’t so much wised up as gotten stupid. Navarro’s disgruntled expression suddenly made sense. It was lack of patience with male jealousy. That he should feel jealous over her nearly blew her mind.

Inappropriate laughter threatened to burst forth. Darcy chuckled, “Wow!” She tried to repress her laughter as he looked offended, but she failed. She shook her head again and smirked. “So, do you like me in green? It’s NOT a good color on you!”

Steve still looked offended as he huffed. “it’s not funny. You kissed him!” On the TV screen, she and Bruce were laughing together.

She frowned, “on the cheek! It wasn't like... Oh! You don’t trust me.” She blew out a breath, and looked at him mournfully. “You’re right that it’s not funny.” She felt almost adrift as she sighed. “I guess I don’t understand what you’re doing or thinking, what’s happening in your mind. I just know how much I feel for you. I worry that I’m making a fool of myself with how obvious I am. But... What could make you doubt me this way?”

He looked taken aback and angry as he glanced at the TV and bit out an angry realization, “Tony! I let him under my skin.” He looked down and closed his eyes and admitted, “He got me thinking that you and Bruce … I saw you in Bruce’s arms on TV, kissing him, apparently out on the town together, though with Tony. But… I... don’t want to disrespect…” His expression became forlorn and anxious. He was shaking with emotion.

She raised her brows and pointed an accusing finger. “THAT’s what she was saying! Natasha warned you!” He nodded contritely and reached for her hand. She continued, “I think it’s high time you tell me what seeds of doubt ‘Farmer Tony’ has been planting behind my back… that you could mistake my friend keeping paparazzi from trampling me with… something else!” She jerked her hand away. “Kissing? I kissed his cheek because I made him sad!”

The pitch of her voice rose further. “I know Tony’s scared the other Avengers won’t let him have his way if you disagree, but what does that have to do with us? With me ‘changing my mind?!’ Tony has nothing to do with how crazy I am for you!” She took a breath, realizing she was yelling at him.

He sighed heavily, nodded, and then looked at her steadily, a grin at the corner of his mouth. “You look really hot when you’re pissed off.”
She choked on a laugh, put her hands on her hips, and moved closer to him. “Have you been acting less interested than you are because you’re afraid I’ll feel disrespected?”

He shrugged and made a face admitting that. He also gestured at the room, indicating their relative lack of privacy. He admitted, “I don’t want to do the wrong thing. I’m afraid…”

She stepped back again, startled and amused. “I scare Captain America? Little old me?”

He grinned, “Definitely.” He looked sheepish, embarrassed.

She shook her head. “I don’t want all of the Healing Ward to hear any more than they already have, either. Though I wouldn’t mind it if people realize that I’m an independent woman who knows her own mind and heart!” He nodded agreement and let out a shaky breath. She grumbled, “So, I’m going to tell Bucky good morning, without you, so I can tell him that you’re being an ass.”

He shrugged and grinned faintly, “With serum-enhanced hearing, he probably knows your opinion on that already.” As relief flooded through him, he looked like he was about to burst out laughing at himself.

She glared. “Fine. I need to vent anyway.” She stomped a foot. He stifled a laugh, relief plain in his expression. She made a face and shared, “and then I’ll go to work with Jane, and then Bruce.” She saw his expression shift slightly and made an impatient sound. She added, “I’m going to do yoga with him, and then go face the pool.” Steve started guiltily. She nodded and huffed accusingly. “Yeah! I was already jittery!” She frowned. “Of course, now I’m so mad I’m less jittery. But, don’t go taking credit!” He shook his head repentantly.

She sighed. “After all that, if you’re out of here and apologize very nicely for not trusting me, we’ll meet in the common area and get takeout with the others. They’re watching movies tonight. If you’re really nice, I might let you hold my hand.” She jutted her chin out angrily.

He nodded and grinned. “It’s a date. I’m sorry, really. Now, can I please have a kiss?” He quirked a mischievous grin. “I’m feeling kind of sad.” She glared at him. He wheedled, “Consider it a part of my apology?” She continued to glare. He grinned more. “They say you only live once…” Her expression softened as she nodded, and he pulled her against him, hard.

He kissed her soundly, trailing his hands from her face down her neck, and then down her body, fingers brushing her thighs just below the hem of her new dress. Then he kissed her more, with more apparent desire than any of their previous kisses, allowing his desire for her to bleed through. Fresh off his surge of jealous anger, his emotions were still close to the surface, raw. He pressed their bodies even closer, and slanted his mouth over hers with kisses that left her head spinning. He held nothing back.

She was severely turned on. She muttered. “Damn it! Make-up kissing is awesome!”

He chuckled, “another step in our journey…” He kissed her again, fervently, murmuring, “I don’t want to lose you. I need you, Darcy.” One of his hands brushed along the side of her breast, then he shifted it away quickly, fearful of her reaction. He held her almost too tightly and he was shaking all over, he was so relieved.

She pulled back and groused. “You’re not losing me. You’re being Tony’s bitch.” His eyes went wide, and his respect for her plain-spoken honesty climbed yet another notch. She shrugged and admitted, “and, maybe you weren’t totally alone in that. And, maybe I should pay more attention to how things might look on ‘candid camera.’” She shook her head at him, and touched his face
tenderly and kissed him again. “Now, tell me I look pretty, and say it a little more convincingly.”

He looked at her steadily, smile growing, then pulled back to let his gaze rake over her. She blushed as he rasped, “you’re lovely.” She leaned into him, and he held her close, savoring the hug. He kissed her again, taking his time and enjoying the feeling of her relaxing into his kisses. He murmured, "My girl."

A few minutes later, Darcy left. She took a moment to tell Navarro the coast was clear for re-checking Steve’s blood pressure and that it ought to be better.

Navarro chuckled, and got her pressure cuff. She patted Darcy on the shoulder, grinning. “Have a nice day, Miss Lewis.”

Darcy continued towards Bucky’s room. As she approached, she saw Sharon Carter standing outside the room behind a wheelchair. In the chair, sat a thin, pretty, elderly woman who had a similar jaw line to Sharon. Darcy felt a twist in her gut as she realized the older lady must be Peggy Carter. She was sober as she thought of all Peggy must have suffered, knowing that Steve loved her and had sacrificed himself to save millions of people, but left her by doing that. The underlying fear she had of not measuring up to the ideal of Steve’s love for Peggy also jabbed at her. She nodded to Sharon, feeling awkward. Sharon looked at her in a stand-offish manner. Darcy stopped and looked at the two ladies, and into Bucky’s room, wondering if Peggy intended to go inside. Peggy turned to her and smiled.

Darcy spoke quietly. “Hello.”

Peggy peered up at her, squinting, but alert, “Hello.” She frowned. “Are you here to visit Sergeant Barnes?” Her voice was strong, and her accent pretty.

Darcy nodded, and cleared her throat. “Yes. We've become friends.”

Peggy stared with intense curiosity and asked bluntly, “How?”

Darcy blushed and replied, “through Steve.”

Peggy looked her up and down, and nodded. “I see. How did you and Steve meet? He hasn't confessed to having a young lady in his life again.” She smiled a bit like Natasha, and Darcy saw that Peggy was still made of steel.

Darcy grinned slightly. “I assist Dr. Foster, and was with her when Thor made first contact. I suppose you’d say Steve and I met through work.” She felt Sharon’s gaze on her and tried to ignore the woman’s sour expression... not a pretty look on the blond agent... thus, something that a petty part of Darcy’s mind wished Steve could see.

Peggy nodded again, frowned, and remarked, “I can’t imagine him meeting someone any other way, to tell the truth, not someone he’d be serious about enough to trust with Sergeant Barnes. That friendship could recover and bridge the two times of Steve’s life. It’s of singular importance to him.” Darcy nodded agreement.

Peggy encouraged her. “I hope you’re not too sweet with Steve. He needs a firm hand.” She leaned forward conspiratorially. “He’s a good man in general, but a bit unsure of himself, even after the changes from the serum.” She looked at Darcy searchingly. “He lets others take charge and lead him into foolishness sometimes, or, at least he did when I knew him. We were in love a long time ago, but time passed us by. I had a love and a life, and poor Steve had nothingness.”

Peggy looked thoughtful. “He doesn't fully understand the true miracle of the serum; that an
unworthy man could not have reaped the benefits from it that he did. He was already a worthy man before the serum. It just made it so the whole world could see him for whom…”

Peggy stopped, swallowed hard, and looked at Darcy vaguely. “Oh, hello. You’re a pretty girl. Do I know you?”

Darcy gasped slightly, imagining how painful such exchanges must be for Steve. She shook her head, and held out a hand. “Darcy Lewis, ma’am. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Peggy shook her hand firmly, looking at her searchingly.

Sharon broke in, “I need to get to work, Aunt Peggy. Can I take you back to your apartment?”

Peggy nodded, coughed, and waved to Darcy as they left. Darcy waved back. She turned and looked into the room. Bucky was watching her. She walked in and stood close by the bed. He rasped, “Doll.” He grinned. “You do look pretty.”

She smiled slightly. “Hi, Bucky.” Her heart was still pounding rapidly.

He asked, “Who was that lady?”

She answered. “The older lady was Steve’s friend, Peggy. The young lady was her niece, Sharon.”

He grimaced and replied. “You don’t like the niece.”

Darcy sighed. “I don’t know her. I was just being stupid that day. Jealous.” She frowned uneasily.

His eyes crinkled, “Not trusting him?”

She made a noise of frustration. “Not trusting that I’m good enough for him! Did you see her? She’s perfectly pretty, very fit.”

Bucky nodded appreciatively. “She’s very pretty, with great gams and sweet cheeks.” Then he reminded her, “And she made him laugh! Don’t forget how you felt when you saw that!” He raised a brow and suppressed a grin.

She thought of how she and Bruce had looked on TV, and nodded reluctantly. “Yes, damn it.” She glared at him, and crossed her arms. “Taking Steve’s side?”

He looked like he was grasping at a thread of memory. “I remember taking out a sniper who had a bead on him once, Steve, that is.” He grinned slightly. “I’m not sure if that’s anything like reminding you that he’s not the only one who gets jealous… but…” He tilted his head as though he heard something she didn’t. It made Darcy wonder if Steve was listening in on their conversation, and if he’d just said something that only Bucky could hear. Bucky’s face was inscrutable.

Darcy grimaced and asked, “Do you remember anything else new?”

He frowned and shrugged. “I’m working on it.” He sighed. “Steve keeps sitting in there talking so I can hear, telling me stories, trying to make me remember more. I don’t remember him being such a talker. It sounds like he’s really wound up, I think.” Bucky still looked uncertain, but there was more energy in his expression than before. There was also a sly reproach in his look to her. Darcy bit her tongue, deciding she’d lost her temper enough for the morning.

She looked at Bucky intently, and urged him. “Please, keep trying to remember.” She glanced back towards Steve’s room, frowning, thinking how desperately he must want Bucky to remember him.

Then, she thought of Peggy’s fading memory and fought the urge to run back down the hall and
give Steve another hug and kiss.

Bucky crooked a smile. “That must have been some kiss he laid on you, to have you so nice again. What happened to you being mad?”

She groaned, and spoke a bit louder. “It is really RUDE for people with super-soldier hearing to eavesdrop on everything!”

Bucky shook his head, grinning. “Whatever you say, Doll.”

She sighed. “Take care, Bucky. See ya.” He smiled slightly, and nodded.

She walked to the elevator and took a deep breath, overwhelmed. She felt eyes on her, and looked up to see Steve standing at his door. He crooked a soft, bittersweet grin at her and she smiled back faintly, and then entered the elevator.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to McGregorsWench for beta help on this chapter! :) Any errors are mine.

Merry Christmas, all! Thank you to anyone reading, especially those leaving comments. Comments make my day! :)


“Some journeys are more fun than others.”

Chapter Summary

A work (paid! first day w/Bruce), therapy/healing and rest day for Darcy...

Chapter Notes

Thanks to McGregorsWench for Beta help and encouragement. Any errors are mine.

Sorry for the posting delay. Had a very Merry Christmas with family in and out of town. Tweaked some on this, but also played with a few other tidbits... :)

I can’t remember if I posted the swimsuit inspiration or not, but here it is- http://www.pinterest.com/pin/128141551870928450/

Gonna go ahead and post next chapter now. THANK YOU to those reading, leaving Kudos, Bookmarking... and esp. leaving COMMENTS. Like most, I live for the comments. ;)

“What do you mean; you’re working with Bruce part time?” Jane was surprised, testament to the depth of her science haze the day before (she’d been out with Thor when Darcy had returned late). She sulked some, then admitted, “Your desire to be paid is perfectly reasonable. Look through our SI grant and take a salary for your work with me, too. I should have thought of it myself. I was just too excited about the opportunities that those funds open up for my work.”

So, there was an upside to Tony’s crappy interference. Between finding a reasonable salary, cataloging, and transcribing... the morning passed quickly. Darcy made Jane stop for lunch, and dragged her out to the roof garden to soak in some sun and somewhat fresh (for Manhattan) air, while they ate and chatted.

As they finished, Jane fretted. “Will you be safe? What if Dr. Banner has an incident? Doesn’t that concern you? Do you want me to fix it so you don’t have to go there?”

Darcy shook her head. “Shutting a person away from all human contact doesn’t keep tempers even. I like Bruce. And, he’s gonna teach me yoga! You ought to join us.”

Jane laughed, “No, thanks. I have Thor to keep me limber!” She waggled her brows. “What does Captain America think of your ‘human contact’ with Hulk’s alter ego?”

Darcy huffed. “Bleurgh! It’s first-fight material! But, the make-up kissing is amazing!” Jane looked perturbed. Darcy put her hand over her eyes and groaned. “I actually babbled that I’m falling in love with him!” Her cheeks suffused deep red.

Jane snorted, “JUST falling? I think you took that tumble about as quickly as I fell for Thor!” She grimaced. “Be careful, please!”
Darcy nodded. “I know. ‘Don’t make living in Avengers Tower awkward...Blah, blah, blah.’” Jane rolled her eyes and hugged Darcy tightly before they parted ways for the afternoon.

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The hours with Bruce passed easily. He was close to a breakthrough on something new, so he was mostly absentminded with Darcy, though he commented on her outfit sweetly, and grinned ruefully every time he had to change the way he moved in his lab to accommodate her presence. One of his energy theories reminded Darcy of something Erik had talked about.

When she mentioned that, Bruce stopped his calculations. “Dr. Selvig? I saw him after the Battle of New York. It seems like maybe I met him years ago at Culver, too. Brilliant man...”

Darcy nodded. “He liked you. He mentioned your expertise in Gamma radiation on more than one occasion.” She felt like she was too stilted with Bruce, worrying that she might seem flirty. She saw him glance at her sideways, so, she inwardly cursed Tony and made more effort to be natural. She smiled apologetically, and started to say something, but Bruce looked at her with calm understanding and shook his head to indicate there was no need.

After two hours had passed, an alarm went off on his watch. He set his work aside. “Yoga?”

She nodded enthusiastically, and went to change. When she came out of the restroom, Bruce was in the corner of his lab where he kept his mats and props. Candles were lit, and meditative music was playing. He talked about the ‘seat’ he started with. She followed him with some difficulty. With all of the emphasis on breathing, she understood why Chau had recommended yoga for her. She was impressed with the way Bruce focused and customized the routine to her limitations. He blushed, and she laughed as he admitted he was struggling to calculate her center of gravity.

Sometimes he guided her with his hands to fix what she was doing wrong. She saw Tony walk by in the hall at one point. He stopped and stared. She blushed, and thought Bruce moved away from her quickly. She did what he’d shown her, and they continued.

She commented, smiling. “You’re a good instructor. I guessed right.” He smiled back, and explained the next posture. It was hard work and she felt like her brain was stretching as much as her body, if not more. She looked forward to a time when the poses came more naturally, so that she could open her mind more fully.

After forty-five or so minutes, Bruce took her back to the first ‘seat’ and explained. “I want to keep this time clean and straight-forward, not push your boundaries too far.” He smiled sweetly. “Namaste.”

Darcy repeated, “Namaste.” She looked puzzled. “What does that mean?”

Bruce looked at her serenely. “I honor that place in you where the whole Universe resides. And when I am in that place in me, and you are in that place in you, there is only one of us.”

Darcy thought that sounded lovely, but was slightly taken aback (and more than a little glad that Steve wasn’t there to hear what Bruce had just said, proper definition of ‘Namaste’ or not…). Bruce’s expression changed, as it sometimes did, and she felt his gaze heavy on her lips. She nibbled her lip nervously. Finally, she thanked him.

She was wiping sweat from her brow when JARVIS called “Assemble.” She froze and looked at Bruce, eyes wide.

He smile reassuringly and laughed. “‘He’ doesn’t appear at the sound of the word. You have time
to get clear. IF he’s even needed, it depends on the situation…”

They both heard Tony’s voice ring out over the speaker. “Suit up, Banner. Time to get green and nasty!”

Bruce smiled ruefully. “Cap is more polite about that part. I guess he’s not cleared for battle yet.” He frowned, then removed his shirt and set it aside. Darcy couldn't help but admire Bruce’s leanly-muscled look. She’d been right when she described him as fit from his yoga exercises. She saw with a slight start that Bruce noted her admiration with a sort of grim pleasure.

He pointed to the door calmly. “Please move to a safe distance.” She nodded and went into the restroom and gathered her things and then left the lab. She would have to ask Bruce for more clarification, like where he went to ‘suit up,’ and whether or not there was anything she could do to help him when he returned (in case Hulk returned during her shift in that lab sometime).

She made her way down to the pool area, noting that Steve was in the gym at a punching bag. Wait, no, now clearing up a wrecked punching bag... She took comfort in his presence; glad he was out of Healing Ward, but hoping he could stay safe in the Tower and let the other Avengers handle the current situation. She hoped it wouldn't bother him too much.

She rinsed in the gym locker area, and changed into her swim suit. The butterflies in her stomach were doing spectacular flips and dives at the thought of going into the pool. As she came out of the changing room, she saw Steve standing by the glass window in the gym, looking at her. He waved. She gave a little salute, and took a deep breath. He smiled and patted one hand over his chest as though to indicate his heart was beating quickly, then turned and left. She felt braver after seeing him.

As she approached the pool, she saw a few people doing laps on the far side. Dr. Chau was sitting on the edge, legs dangling in the water. Darcy sat beside her, full of trepidation. Dr. Chau nodded approvingly. "Nice swimsuit."

Darcy fought the urge to shrug and uttered a tight, “thanks.”

Chau smiled kindly. “Nervous?”

Darcy looked at the pool and nodded. “I don’t like the splashing sounds. That’s the main similarity I sense.”

Dr. Chau kicked her legs beneath the water, creating ripples. “What about differences?”

Darcy took a slightly shuddering breath. “The smell of chlorine is different. There… it was cleaning stuff, medicines… and urine.” She swallowed, and shook her head. “This room is large and echoes. The water is warm. I guess the pool is heated.” She swung her legs, looking down. “It’s mainly that I’m free to breathe and… not helpless.”

Dr. Chau slid down into the water, and gestured for Darcy to follow. She went under to wet her hair, pushed it back, and turned to Darcy. “Do you swim?”

Darcy shrugged as she jumped down. “I’m no great shakes at it, but I get by.” She started bouncing on the balls of her feet nervously and tapping her teeth together.

The doctor spoke in a low and soothing tone. “Can you get your face wet?”

Darcy stopped jumping, frowned at the water, and felt her heartbeat increase. She sighed and bit her lip. “I know I can, but it puts me on edge.” When Dr. Chau did not respond, Darcy blew out a
shaky breath and leaned forward and dipped her face… much like a child first learning about the water.

When she lifted her face, Dr. Chau nodded. “Again!” Darcy did as she was told. She wiped the beads of water from her face forcefully.

Dr. Chau asked, “How is it different from your interrogation?”

Darcy breathed in and out impatiently. “Shorter. Less pressure. Upright. Pretty much in my control.” She was shaking. She made fists as she bit out, “don’t like water drops.”

Dr. Chau asked, “Are you alright, Miss Lewis?”


The doctor smiled. “Your honesty is refreshing. If you indicated that you were ‘fine,’ we would stop at once.”

Darcy growled. “Is it too late to change my answer?”

The doctor smile encouragingly. “Are you able to float on your back?”

Reluctantly, Darcy did so. She’d usually enjoyed the muffled sounds through water when doing this before. Now, that sensation put her on edge and made her heart race, as though she needed all of her senses to stay safe. She realized how alert and wary she’d become. She couldn’t help but remember laying on the gurney and screaming, the fear. She looked at the ceiling and bright lights, and tried to focus on the differences here.

After a moment, she flailed, nearly went under and moved to stand, panicking and struggling to think clearly. She wrapped her arms together over her chest, closed her eyes tightly and let tears track down her face. She moved to the edge of the pool, and stood still for a long time.

The doctor put a comforting hand on her shoulder and waited patiently, complimenting the control she’d shown in floating on her back for so long. When Darcy seemed calmer, Dr. Chau murmured. “Would you care to share your thoughts?”

Darcy nodded. “Having my hearing dampened made me anxious. Loss of control does me in. It’s like I’m waiting for the next bad thing, and I flash to memories of what did happen. I’m on edge, at a state of alert.” She shook her head. “I’ve been sleeping like the dead.” She looked up and noted. “I don’t sleep on my back anymore at all.”

The doctor moved to the edge and pulled herself up. “Please sit with me, Darcy.”

Darcy eagerly pulled up. “Is that all for the water part?”

Dr. Chau nodded, “all for today.”

Darcy grumbled. “Crap! I have to do it again?”

Dr. Chau smiled gently. “The path past goes through, Darcy, not around.”

Darcy grinned grimly. “Some journeys are more fun than others.”

Dr. Chau nodded pensively. They talked for a while about the symptoms of anxiety, flashbacks, about the scars from suffering a loss of power, about positive steps she was already taking. Dr. Chau asked Darcy about each of the steps they’d already discussed, and helped her with her plans
going forward.

Darcy was amused at the double-take Dr. Chau did when Darcy shared that she had started yoga with the Hulk.

After a quiet moment or two, she asked about Darcy’s broader plans and they continued exploring that topic for some time. Finally, Darcy broached the subject of Tony using her against Steve in Avenger power politics. Dr. Chau sighed deeply, nodded and remarked, “I’m sorry to hear that. Have you considered talking to Miss Potts about that concern?”

Darcy chuckled ruefully. “But, Tony told us that Steve is the Avengers’ mommy…”

Dr. Chau cleared her throat. Darcy suspected she was stifling laughter. Finally she replied. “The Captain is a caring leader.” Darcy only nodded in reply, not wanting to discuss Steve in any more detail at the moment. She figured the doctor could guess what she was clamming up about, anyway. They reviewed meditations and discussed exercise, with Dr. Chau making a case for Darcy to learn self-defense, and then concluded their time together.

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The relief Darcy felt on leaving the pool area was profound. She cleaned up and put her pretty dress on again, fluffing her hair out to dry naturally. She was relieved to have the day behind her. She figured movie night would be delayed, if not cancelled. Even if Steve couldn’t join the battle, she guessed he would offer the other Avengers support as he could. She checked her phone and saw that he’d left her a text message- ‘You’re gorgeous in that bathing suit. I’m in Avgr ctrl rm. Talk later.’

She went to her place and took a short nap. When she woke again, she turned on the TV and watched news reports of an attack on an Army base in Alaska. She wondered which of the Avengers’ many enemies was behind it, putting her fictitious money on Hydra. She figured it must drive Steve extra crazy to have to sit out an attack on the Army. As the attack wasn’t local, she headed up to the roof and sat in the garden to read. She wasn’t that into her book, so she set her pad aside and sat back to meditate and think.

Steve’s jealousy had unsettled her, and shown her how little she liked conflict with him. She picked her pad up again and put a few (more) last touches on the playlist she’d been working on for him.

Soon, the sun was almost down and she started to feel chilly. She went down to the retail floor and bought some snack foods and a bottle of wine. On her way back upstairs, she stopped at the main gym and checked the class schedules. Her new lab benefits included access to any and all classes she wanted. She signed up for Strength Training and ‘Cardio Dance’. An instructor helping her sign up gave her lots of forms and the standard ‘you can do it’/’it’ll change your life’ pep talk. Darcy waved to a few people she recognized from the labs and the Healing Ward staff.

Looking around the area as she was about to leave, Darcy texted Jai about her plans and need for more exercise wear. She heard classic power rock coming from a room, and wondered what was going on since she didn't recall reading about a class option that used it. Inside a media lounge she saw people gathered by a large screen TV, some on exercise equipment and others lounging as they watched a special Stark internal network coverage of the Avengers battling. The onlookers cheered and raucously placed bets. It reminded Darcy of a Roman gladiator crowd. Even without Steve in the battle, it made her a little sick. She felt dispirited as she left, though glad to hear that things seemed to be winding down. Someone put on a recording of Queen’s ‘We are the Champions.’
She returned to her place, pleased to find more packages from Jai. She wondered how many to expect overall. Considering Pepper’s apparently endless definition of a wardrobe, it could be a LOT, which was awesome. She uncorked her wine and sipped a glass while she tried to unwind. She decided to take a bubble bath, snack, and drink some more wine. She soaked for a while, letting the hot water and cool wine relax her. She was glad that bubble baths fell outside of her water-trauma.

Darcy grabbed a bottle of bubbles and blew some for a while, thinking about the person who gave them to her, and their first fight. That caused her to pick up her phone and add a few more notes to her playlist for him. It was time to gift that, bite the open-communication bullet, and let Steve know that she was in love with him.

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In the Avengers’ lounge, Pepper greeted Thor and Jane, telling them that some of the takeout food had already arrived, but much more was on its way. Thor immediately filled a plate and began to enjoy different delicacies. He was an adventurous eater, determined to sample the many flavors of Midgardian cuisine to the fullest.

Jane pulled out her StarkPad and went back to work. She felt like she was close to a breakthrough, and hoped that was the case rather than another dead end. She heard others entering the room and glanced up to see Captain America greeting Pepper Potts while Tony Stark looked at her adoringly. Jane shook her head, wondering how any woman could put up with such a man. Stark set her teeth on edge, and not just with the way he pushed into her lab. She knew that he was causing friction for her best friend.

Sure enough, the moment that Dr. Banner walked into the room, Stark loudly congratulated him on ‘exploring new sensations in yoga one-ness’. The doctor looked sheepishly bemused. The way Stark said that sounded dirty. A glance at Captain America confirmed that Stark was firmly under the Captain’s skin, and lighting the fuse on his temper again.

Seconds later, Stark turned to the Captain. “See what I mean, Cap? Isn't that cozy?” He held out a StarkPad with video playing on it. The Captain’s jaw tightened and he stood even more ramrod straight than usual. Stark leaned closer, insinuating. “Looks like she likes the way he touches her, doesn't it?”

Jane’s eyes blazed as she jumped to her feet. She handed her work to Thor abruptly and growled. “What do you think you’re doing?” Stark whirled to look at her, surprised. Thor smiled in anticipation, and Steve looked at Jane with interest, obviously doing his best to tamp down his anger. Jane marched over to Stark and grabbed his pad and looked at the video. “What gives you the right to record people’s private exercise sessions? Is that written into our lease agreements? Are you recording other private activities?”

The elevator opened, and Falcon, the Black Widow, and Hawkeye stepped off, stopping as they heard Jane yelling. She continued. “Is our next movie night going to feature me and Thor having sex?” The assassins looked at each other, while Sam looked perplexed. Natasha raised a brow, and Clint leaned in to whisper something to her and chuckle.

Stark shook his head and laughed. “You gonna start making him find his way there under the blankets now, Foster? Just in case I try to embarrass you?”

Jane threw her shoulders back and retorted. “Not that it’s any of your business, but it would make a fantastic show! We love each other to the point of madness, and have nothing to be embarrassed about. But, that’s not the point. The point is that you are playing games with people and invading
their privacy. I don’t care to speculate on other people’s jealousies or affections. That’s their business.” She glanced at the Captain and Dr. Banner seriously. “But, Darcy is my best friend. You talk like yoga is sexually suggestive, but, you’re the only one making the suggestion. It’s exercise and meditation! Friends should be able to exercise here without you turning it into something it’s not.” Bruce looked embarrassed. Steve was still tense, but was nodding his head in agreement with Jane, listening to her instead of falling prey to Tony’s crap again. Jane shot Steve a serious look laced with more than a bit of warning. Jane moved closer to Tony and slammed his StarkPad into the middle of his chest. “Stay out of my friend’s business, or I will mess you up! I WILL find a way to make you regret it, painfully!” He looked down at her and smiled, but the smile faded as he saw how serious she was. Jane turned on her heel, reclaimed her seat by Thor’s side, retrieved her pad and went back to work without another word. Thor’s smile filled his face as he looked around proudly, as though to indicate ‘that’s my lady!’

Hawkeye joked. “Well, hell! Now I want to see the movie of Thor and Foster in the sack!” Jane glanced at him and grinned slightly, then returned her attention to her work.

Thor kissed Jane’s cheek and moved back to the food table. “Dr. Banner, thank you for suggesting I try the ‘shrimp boil’. It is flavorful, though not so zesty as my love’s temper.” Bruce nodded at him, glanced at Steve warily, and moved to take a plate and get some food.

Tony turned to look at Pepper and shrugged. She sighed wearily and urged, “Captain, please have some food while you wait for Miss Lewis to join us.” Steve took a plate, keeping his distance, and waiting for Bruce to fill his first.

Tony activated his pad again. “I forgot to call Lewis!” Pepper looked at him sharply. Steve frowned, as Tony added, “I’m gonna tell her we’re getting things started, and she should come join in the fun.” He smiled as he looked from Steve to Bruce and back again.

Pepper grimaced. “Just don’t ‘start’ something that’s going to anger Dr. Foster. My money’s on her following through on that threat.”

Hawkeye reached over and shook Pepper’s hand. “I’ll take your bet. I think she’s too sweet and nice to follow through and really hurt him. I observed her for a while in New Mexico.” Jane glanced at him, and shook her head.

Natasha shrugged. “We’ll need to define parameters. Does she have to make him cry, scream in agony, draw blood, or make him disappear?” Tony turned and looked at Natasha disbelievingly.

Hawkeye looked thoughtful. “Any of those would qualify as ‘messing him up’ in my book. I just think she wouldn't go beyond something that would only annoy. She’s nice.”

Thor laughed. “You would lose said wager, Hawkeye, if Stark is foolish enough to provoke my lady again. My Jane’s love for our shield-sister is fierce.” He turned to Jane and offered conversationally. “While I lack the adeptness with which Loki or Frigga wielded magic, I have some small talent. I could change him into a bilgesnipe.” Jane grinned and leaned closer against Thor, eyes still on her work. Tony frowned, wondering if Thor was joking or not.

With a cautious glance Jane’s way, Tony moved to the other end of the room.

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Darcy’s phone buzzed. She answered it and laughed when she saw Tony’s face. His expression was comical as he leered. “Ooh! Caught you in the tub! Pop some bubbles and drop the angle of the phone, won’t you, Lewis?”
She shook her head and smirked. “Nope, sorry, Pops.”

He laughed. “That's rich from someone dating men older than me!” He glanced cautiously to the side, as though worried someone would hear him.

Darcy glared at him and corrected, “ONE man, and older is just by his birth certificate. If you don’t count holding time, he’s LOTS younger than you. Just look at him, Tony!”

He made a face. “I don’t know, Lewis. Yoga looked cozy.” He was talking unusually quietly, for him.

She shook her head. “Don’t trample my friendship with Bruce. It’s not fair to him, or me.” Tony made a show of looking down as though he could see below the phone’s field of vision. She laughed and shook her head. “What the hell did you call for, anyway?”

He laughed. “Oh, yeah. We’re back. We’re triumphant. We’re hungry. Food’s coming in by the crate. We’re gonna watch ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark,’ and some chick flick that Pepper picked. You said that you want to join in. I thought you’d enjoy the chance for a date with your fellas.”

She laughed and shook her head. “You’re an ass, Stark!”

He yelped, “Crap! She’s looking at me. Gotta go before I get ‘messed up,’ whatever that means. You sure you won’t change the phone view angle?”

Darcy hung up on him, and got out of the tub. She grabbed a soft looking dark plum sweater dress with three-quarter sleeves and a v-neck. Jai, gods love her, even provided a matching panties set in the same shade. The v neckline was high enough that it didn't show much, just a hint of cleavage. The skirt angled down gently from low on one thigh to the other knee. It was amazingly comfortable, soft to the touch, too. She put it with amazing Jimmy Choo laser cut-out boots that probably cost as much as her first car (she could take them off if she wanted to fold her legs under her on a couch). The dress was form complimenting, in a good way, heavy enough material that it softened her curves rather than clinging. She sipped some more wine to add to her courage before heading up to the superheroes’ lair.

to be continued...
Movie Night- “I swear! If you start speaking French to me, my panties will melt right off…”

Chapter Summary

Darcy joins Steve and the other Avengers for a movie night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Darcy stepped off the elevator, she was glad to hear people laughing. She hoped it meant that everyone had come through battle unscathed. Clint and Natasha were involved in a drinking challenge, heated glances flying between them. Pepper, talking with Sam, looked carefree and relaxed- with Tony sitting at her feet, letting her play with his hair. Bruce and Thor were eating enthusiastically. Jane was sneaking work on her StarkPad and stroking Thor’s arm lightly. Steve was sitting with them, but picking at his food, obviously waiting for Darcy to arrive; judging by the way he stood quickly and crossed to her.

He leaned in close, and whispered. “I’m very, very sorry for not trusting you earlier. May I hold your hand now?” The feel of his whisper by her ear was lovely. He kissed her cheek.

She smiled brightly. “Nice apology! Don’t do it again.”

He took a deep breath. “Yes, ma’am. Not even if Tony tries to make me jealous by showing me ‘cozy yoga’ videos, and making ‘oneness’ insinuations. Captain’s honor.”

Darcy glared at Tony and willed away a blush that she worried Steve might misunderstand. Pepper raised a perfect brow inquiringly, but Darcy didn’t want to get into it. She shook her head at Pepper, and gave Tony a look that promised trouble. She sighed and shook her head, returning her focus to Steve.

Darcy looked at Steve seriously, braced herself, took a breath and gestured ‘gimme’. “Do you have your phone on you?” He nodded and pulled it out of his pocket. She sent an email, took his phone and accepted the message from herself, and set up the playlist she gifted. Her fingers trembled visibly.

Steve noticed Darcy’s nervousness and put a hand on her arm, obvious in his desire to comfort her. She grinned self-consciously and took a deep breath. “It’s all for you. At least one song from every decade… Kind of private. Listen carefully.” He looked at her quizzically, and glanced over the titles of the songs.

She gestured anxiously. “Executive summary? ‘Sentimental Journey’ welcomed soldiers home from WWII as I shared already, ‘Yesterday’ and the medley also touch on stuff you’ve been through. ‘I Wish’ is for you and Bucky, and being a punk kid. ‘For All We Know’ is, well, you and Peggy.” She took a tense breath and glanced away for a second. “Then, I get into letting you know a bit about where my head’s been at recently. The last songs are more about how I feel about you and ‘us’, stuff that’s hard to say out loud so soon, even if it’s really how I feel. I freaked myself out worrying you might misunderstand something because of slang use or a lack of context. So, I actually made a key with a note about each song, including links to the lyrics… if you’re
interested.” She let out another shaky breath.

Steve read the list, his eyes sparkling at the song titles ‘Give Myself to You’ and ‘I Want You to Want Me’ (its accompanying explanatory note read ‘Duh!’). He whispered. “It looks like a modern version of a letter I would have wanted to receive from my Sweetheart back in the day! I can’t think of anything that would interest me more.” She let out another nervous breath, and he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. She met his intense gaze briefly, and then shifted away.

He continued to read the ‘key’ she’d made and even glanced at lyrics to a couple of the songs he’d never heard, absorbing the words intently and with rising hope. The messages were deeply personal. Some indicated insecurity that concerned him. Some indicated passionate desires that stirred his emotions. His head was spinning.

Darcy laughed as she saw the many, many take-out boxes. They seemed to be from half the restaurants in the City and were emptying fast. She started poking through the Chinese food. She found Hunan Chicken and a Spring Roll and grabbed them up greedily.

Bruce nodded and smiled slightly at her as he put more food on his plate. She nudged him. “Did everything go okay this afternoon?”

He shrugged. “It could have been a lot worse. They hoped to get away with a surprise op, but we had people inside that facility to keep tabs on the, um, ‘weapon’ that Hydra was after. So, they were the ones taken by surprise.”

She nodded. “Well, I’m in favor of anything that throws a wrench in Hydra plans. Good job! I hope ‘the other guy’ scared the crap out of them.”

Bruce frowned. “He did his part.” He grinned at her, glanced Steve's direction and moved away from Darcy.

Darcy moved over by Jane and Thor and pointed out, “Jane! I know you love your work and all, but you’re being crazy rude there.” Thor glanced at Jane and smiled indulgently.

Jane kept poking at the StarkPad. “They can eat forever and ever.”

Darcy joked, “amen.”

Jane looked up. “What?” Darcy just shook her head.

Darcy nudged Jane. “Have you eaten anything?” She snagged a sandwich wrap from a tray and put it in Jane’s hand. Jane started to absent-mindedly chew it while she continued poking at the pad.

After a few bites, Jane set the pad down and looked up. “Darcy! Hi!” Thor laughed and exchanged fond grins with Darcy.

Darcy laughed. “Hi, back, Jane.”

Jane’s cheeks colored slightly, and she looked dismayed. “How long?”

Darcy grinned, “not long. Just got here and gave you that food.”

Jane nodded. She looked around the room. “When we got here, it was just Pepper.” She gestured with her head, “and Thor was hungry…”

Darcy smirked. “Isn't he always?” Thor nodded and resumed happily shoveling small dumplings
into his mouth. It looked like he’d discovered dim sum.

Jane looked Darcy up and down. “Ooh! I like that outfit a lot. More cute lady clothes.”

Darcy nodded and took a bite of Spring Roll. “I know. Right? Pepper’s stylist is awesome. It’s like Christmas and Hanukkah, but without lectures or the whole ‘be good’ thing. I come home and there are great packages of pretty stuff waiting for me.”

Tony chimed in, “Does that make me Santa?”

Darcy grinned. “You're more like his elf with the checkbook.” She raised a brow. “The naughty elf!”

Jane advised, “Watch it! You know what we do to elves.” She and Darcy shared a commiserating look and grinned darkly.

Tony nodded and frowned at Jane. “I’ve read Selvig’s theories. I have JARVIS combing SHIELD surveillance cameras to get footage.”

Darcy jokingly threatened him. “We could just zap you to help you understand.” Steve nodded approvingly, though he looked perplexed. Jane grinned at Stark in a way that Darcy didn't fully understand.

Tony cocked a brow. “How IS the weather on Svartalfheim this time of year?”

Thor looked up from his food. “Svartalfheim? That was Malekith’s realm. It is never hospitable. Why do you ask?”

Jane and Darcy laughed. Jane kissed Thor’s cheek. “We were teasing that we might transport Tony there.”

Thor boomed, “Have a care, Man of Iron! My Jane’s science can be most lethal, and Little Darcy will cross any field of battle to make it so.” Darcy saw Steve blanch and look at her with concern. She grinned chidingly and rolled her eyes at him.

Tony nodded. “For next movie night, JARVIS is putting together some highlights of Ops we’ve all done over the past year or two, since the Chitauri invasion. We can add in a rousing round of ‘The Star Spangled Man’ and everything, maybe even a Captain America battle short.”

Darcy thought she heard Hawkeye mutter something about a sex film of Jane and Thor. Jane grinned at Hawkeye. Darcy looked back and forth between them, wondering what she’d missed.

Sam laughed. “I saw what they have at the Smithsonian. It’s hard to reconcile with ‘Captain Serious’ over there.”

Steve shrugged, “We raised a lot o’ money for the war effort.”

Pepper interrupted, “Enough chatter, guys. Let’s start ‘Raiders.’”

Tony chuckled. “Pepper has a thing for Harrison Ford.”

Everyone moved to the couches in front of the largest screen in the room. Darcy saw that Pepper had put bowls of popcorn and movie-sized candy boxes out. She sat down near a box of ‘Buncha Crunch’ and started wrestling with the wrapper. Steve took the seat next to her and popped open a box of candy, the wrapper shredding under his grasp as though not even there. After another minute
of frustrating wrapper struggle, Darcy held it out to Steve to open.

Darcy soon discovered that watching movies with adrenaline-high superheroes was unique. Between them, they spotted every mistake of continuity and film making. As the ‘Raiders’ story started in 1936, the others told Steve they were counting on him to reveal time-period mistakes. He shrugged.

As Indy adjusted his hat while boarding the plane for Nepal, Pepper sighed. “Oh, the clothing! So, nice!”

Tony kissed her hand and offered, “I could bring hats back in style for you, if you like.” Pepper smiled and curled closer against him.

Darcy looked around the room. Jane was leaning against Thor, but back on her StarkPad, chewing her lip in frustration as she ran up against her latest project’s wall again. Bruce was still eating. He looked weary and his eyes were intent on the screen. Tony still looked hyper, as usual, and was running his hand up Pepper’s arm in a possessive manner. Hawkeye and Natasha both sat back on a sofa together with a lot of space between them and their feet up on an ottoman. Natasha’s leg was laid over Hawkeye’s. Both looked tense and bright-eyed. Sam looked relaxed, slowly drinking from water bottles and occasionally taking a bite from a bag of trail mix.

She turned to look at Steve. He smiled at her, but seemed tense. She asked, “you okay?”

He nodded slowly. “Well, I hate bullies of any kind, but Nazis especially, and the whole ‘interested in artifacts’ angle is true to my experiences. In some ways the movie tries to be like pictures I used to watch before the war, but in others it’s too true to life.” He shook his head, obviously irritated. He shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. I wasn’t in a great mood to start with today. I don’t like to sit things out while the others battle. I prefer to help.” He shrugged, “It makes me uneasy when I can’t help.” He smiled awkwardly. “Your gift of songs is one of the only really good things from today, easily the best part.”

She urged, “try to relax.” He nodded, returning his gaze to the screen. A few seconds later he scoffed and pointed out a filming flub. She asked, “You’re too good at finding the errors. How do you do it?”

He made a face. “The serum made me smarter. Experience has taught me to look for differences around me. Little things can lead to success or failure on a mission.” He cleared his throat. “I remember everything I see. I can’t ‘un-see’ things.” His mouth twisted slightly. Darcy noticed Bruce glance at Steve and frown.

She thought about Steve’s comment about the ‘cozy yoga video,’ and inwardly cursed Tony again, guessing that Tony was aware of the lasting effect a video would have on Steve. She asked, “So, if they made you smarter, why are you so dense when it comes to me?”

Steve looked at her strangely and chuckled. “I’ve always been hopeless with girls…”

She took his drink and set it on a table and shifted closer to him and pulled his arm around her. He sighed and relaxed some as she snuggled close. She took his hand between her hands and stroked it and whispered, “not hopeless.” They sat like that for the rest of the first movie, except for occasional snacking. Near the end when the Nazis’ faces were melted off, Darcy noticed Steve’s frown deepen and felt him tense more against her.

She asked, “You okay?”
He shook his head. “That looks different when it happens in real life.” He breathed out edgily.

Tony looked incredulous. “That happens in real life?”

Steve grimaced. “Well, just the one time. The Tesseract did it.” Darcy flinched.

Thor proclaimed, “Midgardians should take care with Odin’s treasures, not attempt to twist their power to petty, greedy ends.” Steve nodded solemn agreement.

Tony looked at his watch after ‘Raiders’ was done. “Two? Three movies tonight?”

Natasha, a grumpy expression on her face, called, “Three!” Hawkeye nodded and shifted around to grab a bottle of vodka. He passed it to his partner. She took a swig and handed it back for him to drink. Bruce nodded agreement with Natasha and reached for another plate of food.

Sam smiled. “I’m gonna hit the hay now, guys. I’m down from battle high.”

Bruce muttered, “Lucky.”

Steve smiled at Sam and nodded approval. “Even keel…” Sam nodded back, saluted, and left.

Tony grinned. “I could go for four, if Pepper would let me. Our fight rhythm was for shit today.”

He glanced at Steve with reluctant admiration, obviously realizing the importance of his leadership in the field.

Pepper smiled gently, “Three! And then, off to bed.”

He winked at her, “or bed now?”

She shook her head. “You promised me ‘Amelie.’”

He shrugged. “Okay. But, I want something terrifying first.”

Hawkeye admonished, “No torture porn! Something with actual story…” Darcy saw him glance at her, and she smiled gratefully.

Tony nodded. He thought for a moment and turned to Pepper. “‘The Shining’ or ‘The Ring’?”

Hawkeye murmured something about not wanting to watch a possessed guy go after his family with an ax.

Pepper shivered, swallowed and chose. “‘The Ring,’ then.”

Darcy shuddered. Steve tightened his arm around her. “Okay?”

She nodded. “I watched it once a long time ago. Scary. Gave me nightmares. It’s good.”

Steve asked, “What’s it about?”

Tony nodded. “People say it is worth seeing, and I haven’t gotten around to it yet. It’s a remake of a Japanese horror movie. The Japanese apparently know how to scare the bejeezus out of people.”

Steve nodded slowly. “So I heard…”

Darcy shivered again, thinking of Japanese P.O.W. camps during WWII. Also, she began to feel unease thinking of the well and water imagery in the movie being queued up. She grabbed at Steve’s shirt with one hand.
He looked at her with surprised concern. “You sure you’re okay?”

She smiled uneasily. “Stay close. There’s some water imagery.” He hugged her to him, rubbed her arm reassuringly, and kissed her cheek. Steve noticed Bruce looking at Darcy with concern, but avoided eye contact with the other man while embracing Darcy. He considered what he’d seen from Bruce towards Darcy versus what Tony had implied; factoring in the fact that Tony knew the scientist far better than he did. He hoped Tony was wrong, or only scheming.

Darcy sighed and snuggled closer as the movie began. The rainy noise it started with sent a shiver through her. Darcy felt her hands start to sweat immediately, from both the watery sound and the ambiance of the movie itself. She giggled when Steve jumped a little at the first scare. She began to think longingly of ‘redrum’ and the creepy twin girls in ‘The Shining.’

After a few minutes, Steve leaned down and whispered, “SOME water?” Darcy let out a shaky laugh. He muttered, “Is it gonna rain the whole seven days?” A while later, after the lady let her ex watch the tape, he muttered, “She doesn't like him very much, does she?” He groused a minute later, “More water!”

Pepper apologized, “I’m sorry! I didn't think about it.”

Darcy shook her head and tried to focus on the feeling of being in Steve’s arms. She couldn't help but run her hands over him from time to time, murmuring to him, “I’m just gonna focus on you for a while here. Amazing and sexy. Keep me safe.” His arms tightened around her, reassuring. Every now and then one of his hands would shift, tracing along the curve of her waist and hip. He kissed her cheek a time or two more, savoring their closeness and the slow burn of want.

Hawkeye laughed. “You buy into the supernatural, Cap?”

Steve shrugged. “I don’t know if I’d call it supernatural, but, I did have to fight a guy with an entirely red skull once... The serum didn't work out so well for him. He’s the one that ended up dying like those Nazis in the first film.” He made a face, “The experience took away a lot of my skepticism about... possibilities.”

Bruce laughed bitterly. “Been there! Serum gone bad... and, not just me... even worse than ‘the other guy’.”

Thor noted, “As I've shared before, the good people of Midgard have been known to confuse science they do not yet grasp with ‘magic.’ Few have minds as perceptive as my Jane.” He smiled at Jane with admiration, and stroked her cheek.

Tony sat up and turned around to Bruce. “Are you talking about Blonsky?”

Bruce scowled, “After today, how could I not? It'd be bad if they’d gotten him out.”

Tony nodded. “Idiots wanted him for the Avengers Initiative. SHIELD was forced to court General Ross.” He laughed. “So, Coulson sent me to charm the guy.” Bruce made a choking noise. Tony raised a brow. “You should’ve seen Ross’ face.” He smirked and shrugged, assuming an innocent air while the others laughed. “I can’t imagine what set him off so. I was charming.” Steve grinned. Even Hawkeye laughed, though he'd winced at the name ‘Coulson.’ Natasha briefly held his hand.

Darcy hadn't heard Bruce laugh out loud before. But for the edge of sadness to it, it was a nice laugh. She smiled at him, and they exchanged a friendly look.

Hawkeye commented on the action onscreen- “He’s getting kind of frenzied with that ax.”
Steve replied in a shaken tone. “He’s afraid she’s gonna die.” He squeezed Darcy tightly.

A few minutes later, screws and nails started popping up, and Pepper grabbed hold of Tony, “Gah!”

As the woman on screen came awake in the water with the camera angled into her face, Tony yelled out, “Shit!” and jumped to his feet while Darcy screamed and held even tighter to Steve, closing her eyes and focusing on her ragged breathing. Pepper muttered soothing words to Tony and urged him to sit again. Darcy felt Steve tense and noticed that the others looked ready to dodge and cover each other… from what, she was unsure. One of Steve’s hands moved to her head, as though to protect her from flying objects. When Tony sat again, everyone relaxed.

Bruce wryly grumbled, “I guess we should have watched ‘The Shining.’” Natasha laughed and toasted him with her vodka. Hawkeye made a face and shook his head, though he cast regretful looks at Tony and Darcy.

At the movie’s penultimate scene, Pepper was the only one to cry out. She asked, “What is wrong with you people? THAT was scary!”

Tony let out a loud breath and kissed Pepper’s head. “I’m so glad you can think that.” She hugged him tightly.

After a moment, she admitted, “I steer clear of movies with fire or long falls now.” She nodded as though making a decision, and smiled at Tony indulgently. “There is going to be such a response when I post for an entertainment screener.” He laughed out loud. The others joined in.

As the movie ended, Tony jumped up. “Okay, foreign language chick flick is up next. Who’s in?”

Natasha burst out laughing again, possibly a bit tipsy, or more likely from something Clint had whispered to her. “French flick. We’re in.” She swigged from a new bottle of vodka.

Darcy jumped up. “Back in a few.” She went to the restroom. After she washed her hands, she stood and stared at the sink for a long time. Finally she closed her eyes, starting a silent meditation. She heard the door open, and someone passed her and went to a stall. She continued meditating.

After the other person washed and dried their hands without speaking, she asked, “Natasha?”

Natasha replied quietly. “Yes?”

Darcy took a deep breath and opened her eyes; feeling a little proud they were dry. “Will you teach me some basic self defense?”

Natasha’s smile was both pleased and deadly. “Sure.” She shrugged. “Why not? It’ll be fun.” She looked around the room. “Here?”

Darcy was startled. “Now?”

Natasha raised a brow in that way she had. “Hey! I’m being nice. I could’ve just attacked you to check your reaction instincts. Do you think an assailant is gonna wait until you’re expecting an attack?”

Darcy laughed shakily, “No. But I’m really glad you don’t want to rile anyone up by making me cry.” She saw that Natasha was serious. She nodded and took a deep breath. “I want to lower my odds of ending up in an interrogation again.” She bit her lip. “Um... I like this dress. Please don’t ruin it?”
Natasha laughed, nodded, and moved into Darcy’s personal space. She explained, “Usually when you’re confronted one on one, you’ll want to move up on the person, like this, for maximum power when you hit.”

She backed up and looked Darcy over. She walked around her and suggested, “You should start some weights and cardio… and continue the yoga. Lesson one’s only good if you’re facing a lone attack, so, limited use, but it will lower those odds a fraction.” She leaned out of the restroom. “Barton! Come here. I need you to attack Lewis.” Darcy told Natasha about the classes she’d signed up for already.

Tony laughed out loud while Steve looked kind of miserable. Jane freaked out. “What!!”

Steve explained, “I’d guess that Darcy asked Natasha to teach her self-defense and Natasha is starting right now.” Thor nodded approvingly and reassured Jane.

Steve got up and grabbed a dessert and some water and walked over to a window, anxiously thinking about Darcy needing to defend herself. Tony laughed again at the pained look on his face, while Bruce smiled sympathetically. Steve glanced at Bruce’s expression and then looked away quickly, preferring to focus on the lyrics to the songs Darcy had gifted him.

Pepper walked up to Steve, touched his arm, and apologized for not realizing that ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ might bother him. He told her not to worry about it.

Hawkeye grumbled as he ambled to the restroom. “Damn. Time to get the crap kicked out of me again!”

Tony smirked. “If that’s a problem, you should probably break it off with Romanoff.”

Hawkeye shot Tony the bird and walked into the bathroom, sighing. “One attack dummy at your service, ma’am.” Natasha glared and he moved into a threatening crouch, straight towards Darcy. He even growled. Darcy bit her lip to keep from laughing, and looked to Natasha. Hawkeye grumbled. “Hey! Being scary here!”

Natasha turned back to Darcy and instructed. “The best way for you to outrun an attacker is to disable them so they can’t pursue. Usually, you step into the middle of their space for maximum contact potential. In this case, you want to pin his right foot flat with your right foot by stepping on the metatarsals at the top, while simultaneously hammering him in the throat.” She pointed to the top of Hawkeye’s foot and at his throat. “Hammer hard enough to cause him to fall back at the same time you stomp. If you hold your foot flat while he falls, you’ll break his ankle. I’d crush his larynx and finish it, but that’s me.”

Hawkeye raised a brow at Natasha. “Sweet!”

She rolled her eyes at him and assured him. “Relax. I won’t hurt you… much.” He made a face.

Darcy asked, “Why hit and stomp at the same time? Wouldn’t it be easier to hit him after you pin his foot?” Hawkeye shook his head seriously.

Natasha explained. “You’d need to study anatomy for all the specs. But, when you stomp he’s going to reflexively lean over, forward. You have to hit his throat BEFORE he bends over, or you lose your advantage.”

Darcy thought back to the day at the psychiatric hospital. She nodded grimly. “I don’t want to lose any advantage.”
Natasha nodded approvingly. “Watch the sequence.” She turned to Hawkeye and slipped between him and Darcy. She explained. “I’m demonstrating to keep him safe. If I let you try it out on him and he didn’t defend against you, you’d at least twist his ankle enough for him to limp and maybe break bones in the top of his foot. I have better control.” He nodded and gestured her forward.

She looked back at Darcy. “I can get Barton for live-opponent demos. I don’t have to waste time explaining anything to him.” She whirled back and glanced a blow into his throat while she stomped and promptly lifted her foot. He fell over backwards to the floor. She added, “Next, I would kick the nerve on the inside of the thigh, cross over and knee-drop his larynx to crush it.” She offered her hand to Hawkeye and demonstrated the sequence again and again.

Darcy asked, “Until I know how to do a good hammer blow, would it work if I taze-shock the throat while I stomp?”

Hawkeye made a face and nodded, while Natasha considered it. She finally agreed. “Only if you’re fast! Don’t hesitate. Think of how Steve will feel if you get hurt! Whatever it takes… just do whatever you have to so you stay safe.” Darcy smiled tentatively at Natasha, appreciative.

Natasha turned and yelled, “Hey, Stark! Build us a demo dummy that we can break over and over again. Okay?” She turned back to Hawkeye. “That’ll get you off the hook, some.”

Tony yelled back, “Sure…fine. Whatever! One self-defense drone coming right up. Now, cut that out, and let’s get back to movie night. I promised Pepper ‘Amelie.’”

Natasha demonstrated again. As Natasha helped Clint up one last time Darcy thought she saw the assassins kiss out of the corner of her eye. She kept moving to the door. “Thanks, Natasha!”

Natasha replied, “No. Thank you. It’s fun to put Barton down like that, and good to reduce Rogers’ stress levels, too. I’ll let you know when Stark gets our drone ready, and we’ll really get to work.”

Darcy returned to the sofa. Steve was waiting where she’d left him. He asked, “Better?” She nodded. She would probably get her ass kicked multiple times learning from Natasha, but, it felt good to do something about her fears other than crying. Steve squeezed her hand understandingly. As Natasha passed, he nodded thanks. She smiled at him and grabbed her vodka bottle.

Darcy relaxed into Steve’s side again as the third movie started. It felt natural to be close to him, right. The music was whimsical, and the images quirky. After several scenes, Darcy noted, “Thank goodness for the subtitles!”

Steve remarked, “They’re not precise. But, they’re pretty good.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. She moaned slightly and blurted a whisper to him, “I swear! If you start speaking French to me, my panties will melt right off, and I won’t be responsible for my actions.” She blushed scarlet and put a hand over her mouth as she realized what she’d said.

At that moment, Amelie’s curiosity regarding the number of people attaining orgasm at one time was mentioned. The look on Steve’s face was comical. Natasha laughed aloud, and neither Darcy nor Steve thought she was laughing at the movie. Darcy hid her face against Steve. He absentmindedly rubbed her shoulder and chewed on his lip, then sighed heavily.

For the next few hours, they relaxed and laughed and absorbed the gentle optimism of the film. Steve commented several times on the artistry, the use of colors. It was obvious that he loved the movie. Darcy felt her heart expand a little when the boy and girl admitted their love, shared a bed, and laughed to the ending. Steve’s arms were comforting around her and leaning against his chest.
gave warmth, pleasure, and reassurance. As the credits and soundtrack music filled the room, her eyes closed a few times.

After that, everyone tiredly went their separate ways, finally having burned off the stress of the day. Steve walked Darcy to her door. She was yawning, fighting sleep due to the late hour. At her door, he stopped before she could open it, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her long and slow.

He leaned down and rasped a heated whisper. “Bonne nuit, ma chérie. Fais des beaux rêves.” Her eyes went wide as she felt the words all the way down to her toes. She made a groaning sound deep in her throat. He chuckled against her lips, and then kissed her again. “Good night, my dear. Sweet dreams.”

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to McGregorsWench for Beta help. If it's a mistake, it's mine. ;)

Darcy's playlist for Steve-

**Song, Artist, Year, Key/ Meaning**

**Sentimental Journey, Les Brown Orchestra, 1944, Welcome Home from WWII, Soldier!**

**Yesterday, Beatles, 1965, You miss your past a lot.**

**Somewhere Over the Rainbow/It’s a Wonderful World, Israel Kamakawiwo’ole, 1993, Weird stuff happens, but there’s still good in the world.**

**I Wish, Stevie Wonder, 1976, You have good memories/childhood/Bucky.**

**For All We Know, Nat King Cole, 1958 (1934), Your great love with Peggy was tragically ripped away.**

**If I’m Any Closer, Seal, 2010, I’m flighty and insecure, bit of a mess.**

**Iris, Goo Goo Dolls, 1998, You’re too amazing. It’d be awesome if you’re into me**

**Counting Stars, OneRepublic, 2013, I dream about you, us.**

**Arms, Christina Perri, 2011, I don’t think I’m good enough for you. Couldn’t imagine us.**

**You Get Me, Seal, 2010, I feel like you understand me.**

**Give Myself to You, Train, 2006, I’m working on me... in part, for you.**

**Sway, Blue October, 2013, We have a chance. I want to go dancing. Sexy thoughts. ;)**

**In Your Eyes, Peter Gabriel, 1986, I want to be more... like the way you see me.**

**I Want You To Want Me, Cheap Trick, 1979, Duh! :)**

**Glitter In The Air, P!nk, 2008, Loving you seems brave and magical. I want.**

**This Moment, Katy Perry, 2013, Let’s take this chance at love while we have it.**
“this ‘Avenger-friend’ living isn’t for the faint of heart.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy steps up more at work... and at flirtation.

Chapter Notes

NOTE- the red dress and sexy heels: http://www.listal.com/viewimage/5879912

THANKS to McGregorsWench for beta help and encouragement (and huggles). Any mistakes are mine.

THANKS to readers, kudo-leavers, bookmarkers and esp. COMMENT makers. I'm enjoying getting to know some of you via comments and REALLY appreciate you taking the time to encourage me. :)

Darcy was up earlier than usual the next day to begin her new exercise classes. It would take time for her to get all of the Cardio-Dance moves down, but she had fun. The music had a great beat, and the instructor was good. Most of the other ladies, and some of the men, were excited BY the instructor. He was fit and friendly in a way that cultivated attention without promising anything in return… and seemed to know he looked good doing pelvic thrusts, so, threw in lots to keep things spicy. It was good for class attendance.

Next, it was time for strength training. Darcy was pretty sure in her case it was ‘lack-of-strength’ training, and prayed that none of the Avengers would see her laughably sad efforts. She supposed she could only improve.

She felt perfectly justified in having the barista add whipped cream to the morning’s hot chocolate and latte. She ran to catch an elevator. It was crowded, so, it actually took her a second to see that Steve was in the back. He looked like he was returning from one of his notorious runs. He smiled when he saw her, bright-eyed. She nodded and smiled back as she stepped in.

A man raised a brow, looking at her with obvious interest. “Is one of those for me?” He gave her a flirty look. Darcy shook her head and quickly turned away from him and kept her eyes forward, trying not to blush as she felt Steve’s gaze on her, too.

When she reached Erik’s place, it took longer than usual for Ilsa to answer the door. Darcy was pleased to find that the reason was that Erik was already visiting with Bruce. They were engaged in scientific babble that left her free to enjoy her latte and the look of pleasure in Erik’s eyes. He loved his work.

Bruce took a break from sci-babbling to ask if she’d started yoga without him. She groaned and explained, “Nope. I started some other exercises this morning, cardio and weights. I’m looking forward to more torture later today.”
He smiled gently. “I don’t like to think of it that way.”

She grinned, “Just kidding! Strength training is the one that’s kicking me down like a playground bully. I look forward to more yoga with you.” Erik looked at Bruce and then at Darcy with narrowed eyes, as though seeing something for the first time.

After chatting a little while, Darcy told them she needed to get ready for work. Erik surprised her when he jumped up and exclaimed, “Darcy! When I thanked Dr. Banner for coming by it made me think that I haven’t thanked you enough… for so much.” He hugged her hard and murmured a heartfelt “thank you.” Darcy hugged him hard in return, blinking away tears.

On her way out, she stopped and talked to Ilsa about arranging for Erik to come by Jane’s lab one day soon. Darcy thought it was high time to start re-introducing Erik to society, or at least the society of the labs of Avengers Tower. Ilsa said she would send a message to Dr. Chau for approval, and then Pepper. Ilsa indicated she would get back with Darcy. Privately, Darcy thought Erik wasn’t any less sane than Tony… or even Jane in one of her funky science hazes. She felt confident that Chau and Pepper would approve.

She showered and dressed in a form-fitting red dress with a demure neckline and a fun pattern all over. She didn't want to push too hard, but wanted to dart closer to the lines of flirtation Steve had drawn with his teasing after the movies. She added a pair of serious heels to offset the dress and force her to walk sexier, aiming for an air of something like 'naughty librarian'. She put glasses firmly in place, painted her lips a strong, vintage red and put her hair up in a bun with tendrils hanging down in front.

She then grabbed her packed purse and left for work. If she asked JARVIS Steve’s location so that she could walk past him on her way there, that was her business. Steve was in R&D with Natasha and several techs. Darcy hand-delivered a request of Jane’s to other techs nearby, giving detailed instructions that would facilitate their efforts. She waved in a manner she hoped passed for casual as she walked past Steve. He stopped talking to Natasha and stared at Darcy as long as she was in his line of sight.

Despite her detour, Darcy was amused to find that she had beaten Jane to the lab. Obviously only sitting near each other through three movies had left Thor and Jane in need of extra time in bed. Darcy pouted, wishing she’d been awake enough to follow through on her ‘threat’ and respond wildly when Steve had wished her ‘sweet dreams’ in French. She followed that line of thought for a few nice daydreaming moments until she forced herself to seriously get to work. Without Jane around to distract and add new work, Darcy had everything in good shape in just a few hours.

Lunch time rolled around and Jane was still in Thor’s bed, per a confirmation from JARVIS. This, along with the realization that coffee and water had served as breakfast, left Darcy grumpy. She ran down to the retail level and grabbed an order of saag paneer and went to the rooftop garden. She ate, read news, and caught up on posts online. She had become sort of an Internet stalker since she couldn't post about her work or social life now. She figured the target on her was big enough by Thor/Jane association without adding ‘falling in love with Captain America’ or ‘pic of me doing yoga with Hulk’ or ‘another day portaling guinea pigs to Svartalfheim’ to her statuses, no matter how awesome all that sounded. She also listened again to some of the music she’d gifted to Steve, hoping that he gave it even one tenth the attention she had, and praying he would understand all she meant.

She saw that a bar-tending girl she’d met in a Greenwich tavern was dating Ian now and breathed a sigh of relief, then clicked ‘Like’. He saved her life. His being a bit of a jerk didn't mean she really wished bad stuff on him. In fact, it made her happy to think he’d moved on.
She finally forced herself to stop obsessing over the playlist, set down the tablet, and took in sunshine for a bit. Her eyes were closed and the footfalls light, so, she hardly heard as someone approached. Her vigilance kicked in, though, and she looked up to see Pepper Potts.

Pepper complimented her outfit and asked if she could sit with her for a few minutes. Worrying that things were about to turn awkwardly towards, ‘what is my boyfriend saying to your boyfriend about his science boyfriend’ kinds of conversation, Darcy was relieved when Pepper asked about her study and career plans instead. They covered the basics; and then talked about her unending internship with Jane, her undergrad work at Culver, and the business econ and management degree she’d finished at Oxford’s Said Business School while hanging out with Jane and Erik in London.

Pepper asked about papers and projects Darcy submitted on Jane’s behalf when Jane was in her extended ‘where’s Thor funk’ (all in the name of at least paying some of Jane’s, and her, bills). She babbled in a way that felt incoherent for a bit until Pepper mercifully stopped her with, “Have you considered that your duties are less those of intern and more those of a laboratory manager?”

Darcy’s mouth was known for running and blurting, these days for the occasional hot kiss… but not for hanging open in slack shock for a long time. This moment was an exception. Pepper laughed. It was not unkind and not snooty, and for these things Darcy would be eternally grateful. Darcy managed to close her mouth, but then all she could do was to shake her head.

Finally, Darcy replied. “I’ll go with ‘no’ since cussing to you would feel kind of wrong.”

Pepper laughed and wryly noted, “I’ve been with Tony in one capacity or another for over ten years. You really think I haven’t heard… and seen it all?”

Darcy looked around, “Is ‘Punk’d’ gonna pop out of the greenery or something now?”

Pepper smiled. “You are talking to a woman who went from being Tony’s personal assistant to CEO of Stark Industries. This is a small transition in comparison… because you are doing much of the work already.”

Darcy sat and stared at Pepper for another few seconds. Finally, she asked, “Okay. What could I do to become qualified? I mean, there must be better candidates!”

Pepper’s smile widened and she somehow looked more Zen than ever. “SI offers a very good professional MBA program online. Apply, and work hard. You will learn much that you’ll apply as you go. Start as ‘Labs Administrator.’ You have qualifications that other people lack.” She took a breath and explained. “My assistant tells me that you already manage Dr. Foster’s lab, and understand what helps her to succeed. You are helping in Dr. Banner’s lab- a position sadly lacking other applicants- and he is thrilled with your performance. You have one lab left to break into. While many more people possess the courage to try there than with Dr. Banner; it takes a certain… level of patience to be successful.”

Darcy closed her eyes, sat back against the wall behind her and banged her head on it a few times. “R&D. I have to manage TONY?”

Pepper smirked. “It can be done.”

Darcy groaned. “I can’t break him in half.”

Pepper laughed, “neither could I until a few months ago!”

Darcy sighed. “I have this problem with Tony mucking in my love life already.”
Pepper nodded. “I’m aware.”

Darcy frowned. “Dr. Chau suggested telling on him to you.”

Pepper asked evenly, “Are you?”

Darcy shook her head and sighed, “not really. I’m just bringing it up because it’s already a problem…”

Pepper’s smile returned. “Steve ‘told on’ Tony already.” She chuckled and added, “and Dr. Foster threatened to ‘mess him up.’”

Darcy groaned and nodded understanding. She looked at her watch. She sat back and asked, “JARVIS, is Jane in her lab yet or still in bed?” Pepper chuckled, guessing that Darcy was deliberately omitting a mention of Thor.

JARVIS replied primly, “Dr. Foster is not in her laboratory.”

Darcy squared her shoulders and asked Pepper, “Would you mind showing me around Tony’s labs now? I have a few hours before I’m due with Bruce.”

Pepper nodded. “I’d be delighted.”

For the first time in, ever, Darcy understood why Tony’s desert captives couldn't tell he was building an Iron Man suit instead of a bomb. He was under a machine, talking a mile a minute to JARVIS and insulting helper robots he called ‘DUM-E’ and ‘Butterfingers’. Within a few minutes, Darcy pretty much had a crush on DUM-E. He was just the sweetest!

Tony, fortunately, was too caught up in what he was doing to do more than look suspiciously at Darcy and Pepper at first. His gaze raked over Darcy with quick appreciation, before he winked at Pepper.

Pepper took Darcy into the lab’s vault and Darcy was staggered at the sheer number of drones there. She asked, “is this all of them?”

Pepper shook her head, “No. After the Chitauri battle, Tony just made suits. He blew them all up last Christmas and had me and his heart repaired. Now, he has had JARVIS remake as many suits as he destroyed, AND has created a line of battle drones. Some of the drones are kept here. Some are at the Malibu house for security. I know how many houses Tony has. I don’t know for sure how many have drones. But, after Killian… after I was taken… I think all of them.”

Darcy asked, “Are you okay with what he’s doing?”

Pepper nodded. “After Afghanistan, Tony decided to ‘do good’ and I’m okay with that, most of the time. I don’t want to lose him. At the end of the Chitauri battle, that was too close. I don’t want him to suffer more from PTSD than he does already. I want him to be happy, to thrive and to help. He’s broken free of the cocoon suits once were, so I’m fine. He needs to be an Avenger now.”

Darcy suggested, “It seems like the Avengers need someone to control the flow of Intel and advise them from it.”

Pepper smiled and nodded. “I have that figured out. Maria Hill was Nick Fury’s second in command at SHIELD. She helped bring it down and foil Hydra’s plans with Project Insight. She applied to work at SI after SHIELD fell. The government has been occupying a lot of her time since we finished her clearance and evaluations. The best thing I can tell you is that she saved Steve, Natasha, and Sam when Hydra forces were about to execute them.”
Darcy winced. “So, she’s on my good side.”

They moved back out to the main lab. Pepper stood back, while Darcy looked around more closely. Something exploded with sparks and a loud noise. Pepper cried out. Darcy froze and looked to see if she should run. Tony glanced at them both, looking unconcerned. Pepper made a face at him. It elicited the slightest of smirks.

Darcy watched to learn how Tony worked. He wasn’t meandering like Jane or methodical like Bruce. He was frenetic. She got the feeling that his mind wasn’t focused on the project his hands were doing so much as ten steps ahead; yet the work he did with his hands flowed easily. He moved to and from work often and quickly, attacking a martial arts training thingy, taking a run on his treadmill, then moving back to put something else together. He would stop every now and then and pull up mind-boggling 3D renderings. Darcy had a basic understanding of how that worked, and learned a few new tricks she knew would help Bruce and Jane. She tentatively reached out as he did something helpful and remarked, “Ah!” Tony’s gaze darted to her quickly and then he returned to his work.

Loud, raucous music accompanied Tony’s thinking, just like candles and soothing New Age music flowed around Bruce. He treated his robots the same way he treated people, fairly roughly and then very sweetly. He called out for a tool that was near her, so she picked it up and set it on the table beside him. He asked for another. She didn’t know that one, so she asked for a description. DUM-E nudged her and pointed to a tool. She picked it up and she set it on the table next to Tony.

Tony barked, “Why are you here?” He grinned, “I get why you’re dressed like one of Cap’s wet-dreams, I guess, but that doesn’t tell me why you’re here.”

She sat on a stool and crossed her ankles. “I don’t know what you do. Can I watch and see? Jane and Thor haven’t come up for air yet, and I’m not due with Bruce for another hour.”

Tony grinned, somewhat shark-like. “Are you gonna try to manage me?” He moved to a running trampoline and started to bounce. His gaze was uncomfortably direct.

Darcy shrugged. “Do you want me to do that?”

He admitted, “only Pepper really manages me. I don’t even do it that much. So, no... But you can learn from me. Fun rule number one- you have to tell me the truth, if I let you stay.”

She grinned wryly. “If you have a secret you want for me to keep, I will.”

He chuckled, “try pitching your voice a little lower. Go for more obnoxiously-righteous gravitas…”

Darcy shook her head.

His expression was bright, just the slightest grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You EVER gonna get into Cap’s bed?” He looked her over again and shook his head, chuckling to himself.

She blushed slightly and nodded. “Yes.”

He made a face. “That’d be good. He’s waaaay too fuckin’ uptight.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I just think it’d be good.” Her heart pounded a bit more quickly.

He rolled his eyes. “Maybe… or, maybe you’d do better with someone with... experience...”
She sighed and shook her head. “I didn’t peg you as a cardio buff. It’s impressive that you can do all that bouncing and not get out of breath at all while you talk too much.”

He continued to bounce. “If I have a malfunction, I have to be ready to run. Hey! If you want to take a turn…” His grin went from suggestive to repentant in a flash. “No. Love you, Pepper!” Pepper smiled slightly and shook her head.

He turned, jumped down, moved back to where he’d been tinkering, and started to talk about the parts of machine he was working on. Every now and then he asked her to pass him a tool or part. If she knew what he was talking about, she laid the item by him.

After a while, he paused. “Aren’t you going to try to break me of my not-taking-things habit… like everyone else who has ever come in here?”

She shrugged. “Why? Would it make you better, or more efficient?”

He stopped and looked at her. “Exactly!” He twirled the tool in his hand, and put it in place. “Wouldn’t you rather have drones take care of business, and let Cap stay in bed with you?”

She laughed. “Only if the drones could take care of business as well and with as much concern for people’s safety…” She took a sip from a water bottle. “I hear it’d be good if they could tell the difference between the roof and the Healing Ward entrance, too.”

He chuckled wryly and cast a mischievous side-eye glance her way. “What about Bruce’s bed?”

She looked askance at him. “What about it?”

He lifted his chin, intense and urgent. “What if we could come up with a way for you to get into his bed… safely?”

She shook her head. “I’m not a groupie, Tony.”

He raised his brows and nodded, “Yeah. Most groupies go for me first. They think I’m a sure thing, for some reason…”

She frowned. “Bruce is my friend. I mean, we’re just getting to know each other, but, I think of him as a friend already and hope that he sees me as one, too.”

He asserted. “You treat him like a man, and he deserves that… and responds to something else about you. You seem to like impossible challenges. Trying to get into Captain America’s tights? Have you SEEN how tight those things are?” She snorted laughter. He turned the conversation back again. “Get me that thing there,” he pointed. He gestured to his creation. “What do you think this is?”

She stared at the item he was building and its three identical friends. “Energy generator?”

He nodded slightly. “Did you cheat?”

She shook her head, “not unless you count the whole coming to work thing. Both Bruce and Jane are working on energy formulae.” Tony’s head whipped up and he shot her an odd look as she continued. “You’re like GE. You ‘bring good things to life’… so…” She glanced around. There was a padded drone she guessed would be her self-defense partner when done, and on one wall there was what looked like a Quinjet engine. She began to wonder how long Tony was sleeping these days.
He smiled and leaned towards her eagerly. “What did you do to Cap while he couldn't move? You were embarrassed about something…” His grin had an edge to it, as though there was something he actually held back. Darcy couldn't imagine what he held in.

She sat back, and admitted. “I offered to make moves on him if he’d wake up.”

He raised a brow and shook his head, uttering a buzzing noise. “That’s not all! I don’t let people who lie work in my lab.”

She laughed, “Bullshit!” and added, “and I DID say that…”

He smiled. “You’re right. I lie all the time, and I still let myself in…” She just shook her head. He agreed. “Okay. There's more to it. I'll try for more some other time… For now? You can come again, Lewis. I know what Pepper’s up to. Don’t get crazy if I shut you down tomorrow, though.”

She smiled. “You sound like the Dread Pirate Roberts… ‘I’ll likely kill you tomorrow. Good night, Westley.’”

He grinned slightly. “Well, don’t expect me to hand over the Iron Man name to you. Your boobs wouldn't fit in any of the suits, except maybe the new Igor.” His gaze roamed her form. She decided he was thinking about the challenge of tailoring a suit to her, so, limited her fidgets. Pepper sighed. He raised a brow, and then had Darcy stand in front of a scanner panel. She heard noise and stayed completely still, turned as directed, and let it scan again. When the noise stopped, she stepped away. He pouted. “I didn't say you could go.”

She shrugged. “I’m done here for now. See ya tomorrow.”

He replied, “okay. Have fun with the minions. Manage THEM all you want. And, maybe tomorrow… will you tell me what you did to Cap?” She just waved back at him and got into the elevator with Pepper.

As the doors were closing, she heard Tony yell, “hey, JARVIS! Send Lewis a running trampoline.”

She turned to Pepper. “Can we visit the other R&D labs now?”

Pepper nodded. She looked at Darcy searchingly. “So… are you okay?”

Darcy was startled. “Why wouldn't I be?” Pepper smiled, and nodded.

The other R&D floors were filled with scientists and engineers of all stripes. Darcy saw multiple groups working on similar projects and wondered if that was deliberate or from a lack of communication among the teams. It was pretty easy to see what the challenges would be. There were plenty of crazy egos, and a lot of different work styles. As they finished touring, Pepper asked her which people or projects caught her attention the most. Darcy listed two projects that seemed closest to a breakthrough and two other projects that looked like an utter waste of resources. Even more Zen energy than usual flowed her way from Pepper. She hoped that meant she was on the right track.

Pepper offered her an elegant handshake. “Congratulations, Laboratories Administrator Lewis.”

Darcy grinned and accepted the handshake.

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Since she had a small chunk of time before she was expected in Bruce’s lab, Darcy went to Healing to visit Bucky. When she entered his room, she found Steve there. He looked surprised to see her,
but pleased. She watched the hungry way that he took in the details of her appearance up close. She liked that his gaze lingered on her so caressingly. She kissed his cheek, and murmured. “Hi, handsome guys.” Bucky stared at her, and Steve insisted she take the chair.

Darcy explained, “I have a couple of minutes before Bruce expects me, and I didn't have time to get by here this morning, so…”

Steve smiled. “Did you enjoy your classes at the gym?”

She nodded, and turned back to Bucky. “I signed up for a Cardio-Dance class that’s fun, and some strength training that really sucks. I've got to get stronger.”

Bucky rasped, “why, Doll?”

She explained, “this ‘Avenger-friend’ living isn't for the faint of heart. I want to be able to defend myself at least a little bit, if I need to.” As an afterthought, she added, “and, if I don’t get at least a little bit strong, I won’t survive self-defense lessons from Natasha.” Steve put a hand on her shoulder.

Bucky looked far away as he whispered, “Natalia…” Darcy felt Steve flex his hand against her.

Darcy looked around the room. “This place is boring as hell. What do you do when you’re alone?” Bucky just looked at her, a trace of a grin visible. She suggested, “I bet, if you like, we could get JARVIS to set you up with audio books or music, or maybe some films.” Bucky tilted his head, a spark of interest in his eyes.

Steve interjected, “NOT that scary one from last night!” He grimaced, and Darcy decided he must be thinking of the psychiatric hospital scenes. Bucky probably wouldn't like them.

Darcy chuckled slightly. ‘It might be better to start with a fun one like ‘Star Wars.’ Have you seen it, Bucky?” She frowned to herself as she realized that both Bucky and Steve would find the ending to ‘Empire Strikes Back’ unsettling.

He shook his head. “When I didn't have a mission, I was on ice.” Again, Steve’s hand tightened.

Darcy frowned as she patted Steve's hand to urge him to relax. “That sounds awful.” Bucky shrugged and looked away; then he looked back at her and nodded slowly, his eyes saying so much more. She wondered, “Did you dream when you were on ice?” He seemed almost puzzled again for a long moment. Finally, he nodded.

She offered, “I like dreams that make me laugh at myself. What’s your favorite kind of dream?”

He grimaced, “warm.” Steve huffed a wry chuckle.

She asked, “Did you ever have a pet? Maybe a dog?”

He got a far-away look and nodded, “Domino.” Steve’s intake of breath confirmed the reply, so Darcy asked, “you ever dream about Domino? One time I had a dream where my cat started talking and he told me he really liked marshmallows.”

Bucky looked at her with a slightly bemused expression. “Why would a cat like marshmallows?”

She shook her head, “Search me… but that was the dream. I don’t know what Dr. Freud would make of it…” Bucky got a far-away look again. She asked if he had any favorite authors or music. He shook his head, but looked like he was trying to remember answers. She hoped that he would
think of answers when he was alone with his thoughts again.

She looked at her watch and muttered, “drat! Time’s up for me. I’d better head on and let you guys get back to looking at each other awkwardly.” Steve chuckled ruefully and Bucky grinned slightly. Darcy stood, leaned over and kissed Bucky’s cheek and murmured for him to have a good day, then turned to Steve. “You having a good day?”

He pulled her over by the door and into his arms and kissed her like he had the night before, with toe-curling intensity. “It’s better now, ma Cherie. You look very pretty today, tres jolie.” He kissed by her ear and nuzzled her neck, teasing while she suppressed gasps. Behind Steve, Darcy could see that Bucky seemed surprised by Steve’s manner.

She grinned and ran her hands down from Steve’s neck along the muscles of his chest. “One of these times you’ll say something like that when we’re alone…” He kissed her again, even more eagerly, smiled and nodded.

He looked at her searchingly for a second, and then told her, “I was up a long time listening to my new music and reading the lyrics. I liked some of the types of music more than others, but, loved the messages. Can’t get some of them out of my head! Am I right to read so much into it?” His eyes gleamed with hope.

She nodded shyly. He leaned down and kissed her again, looking pleased.

He asked, “You available for that next date we’ve talked about this Friday? I haven’t done it before, but when my girl wants to go dancing, so do I.”

She nodded, leaned up, and kissed him deeply. ‘I’m looking forward to it.”

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Darcy’s heels clicked on the Healing Ward tiles as she left. Steve moved back to the bedside chair and sat, groaning slightly. The usual silence of Bucky’s room fell over him heavily.

Bucky surprised him by initiating conversation. “What’s up with the French?”

Steve blushed and leaned back a bit. “She said… well, she said she liked it.”

Bucky’s mouth twisted slightly as he asked, “You ever been with a virgin before, Steve?”

Steve huffed a sigh and called, “JARVIS? This conversation, starting with Bucky’s question about me speaking French, will not be included in the transcription for Mr. Stark. Okay?” JARVIS had Steve give codes that enabled his ability to speak privately with Bucky.

Steve sighed and shook his head. “I haven’t ever been with a virgin, Buck. There weren’t any in the USO chorus, or the brothels the Commandos visited. And, girls you pick up while roaming the country these days? Not innocent…”

Bucky nodded, his eyes narrowing. “Well, I guess your balls are about to explode, but you’d better treat that girl right. I’m not the only one who’d have your hide if you don’t.”

Steve looked rueful. “I’d be first in that line, ya know. It’s all different from anything I’ve ever known, Bucky. I’ve been on fire for her since before we even met. That picture… GOD! I told ya she was done up like Miss June, ’43, in nothin’ but a sheet… but, she’s…”

Bucky drawled, “built up with heavy guns…” Steve made a disapproving face and nodded slowly.
Bucky asked, “You gotten anywhere below the neck yet?”

Steve sighed, “I’m being careful about that… for other reasons, too.”

Bucky guessed, “someone tried to force her. She puts her hands or arms over her chest sometimes like she’s blocking away the memory of a touch she didn't want.” His expression was dark.

Steve’s lips were a tight line. “Yeah. That.”

Bucky observed, “that’s quite a mine-field… but, she’s starting to lead you on. That outfit today? All about turnin’ you on, Punk. All for you.”

Steve grinned, self-satisfied. “I know.”

Bucky teased, “too bad ya can’t put out everyone else’s eyes so they can’t see…”

Steve sighed again, “yeah.”

Bucky asked, “so, who’s the other guy? Who’s the competition?”

Steve crossed his arms. “I don’t know if it’s that way, or if Tony’s makin’ somethin’ outta nothin’.” Bucky looked at him patiently. Steve admitted, “the doc she’s workin’ with right now, dammit. He’s brilliant, and a good guy… and gentle, most of the time. He doesn't get pulled into stupid fights every other second.” He shook his head, obviously dissatisfied with the short fuse on his temper.

Bucky asked, “and what’s this about films? You take her out to the pictures last night?”

Steve shook his head. “Avengers’ movie night… group thing, here in the Tower. We sat together, though. She told me I was stupid over her and put my arm around her. Got to hold her close for hours…” He sighed and let a silly grin cover his face.

Bucky snorted. “Keep your balls away from me, Punk! I’m getting scared.”

Steve grunted and chuckled ruefully. “Fuck you, Jerk!”

Bucky laughed softly, “I’m not your type.” He looked thoughtful. “That doc she works with… is he an Avenger?”

Steve smiled sardonically, “yeah. When he’s not the gentlest and most peaceful person in the world, he turns into a huge green rage monster we call ‘Hulk.’” He swallowed hard. “His serum didn't work out so good…”

Bucky raised his brows. “Okay. Well, did he watch the movies, too?” Steve nodded his head slowly. Bucky asked, “or, did he just watch you hold your girl all that time?”

Steve shrugged, “I didn't look at him much. I don’t want to rub anything in… if he’s interested in her, and she’s with me. I like Bruce. I just…”

Bucky rumbled, “If you were sitting in a room and she was in HIS arms, well, you might turn into a huge green rage monster.”

Steve closed his eyes for a second. “Damned straight. I couldn't stand to see anyone else touch her. I’d want to kill ‘em. I’m so far gone, it’s not even funny.”

Bucky sighed tiredly. “Good for you…I’m glad you’ve finally found ‘home’, Steve.”
Steve sat up straighter and nodded his head slowly, a small smile on his face. He checked his watch and grimaced, “I have a meeting. I’ll see ya later. Thanks for talking to me. It’s a nice change.” As he left, he reinstated JARVIS’ surveillance transcription mode.

to be continued...
“it’s a perfect time for you to learn to throw a punch correctly.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy has a setback. Tony's secretly nice. More training from Natasha, Thai w/friends, and making out w/Steve round out the day...

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorsWench for beta (all mistakes mine)! Thanks readers! :) You're the best.

Darcy's end of day, kick-ass, in-control outfit- (if you like that sort of thing)


Darcy was busier than she’d ever been. She applied to SI’s MBA program and was shocked by her immediate acceptance. She was making course selections the next day. She added an anatomy class to the required courses, and tossed in an introductory physics class while she was at it. There were several other courses (chemistry, biology, engineering, computers, design, emergency response, etc.) that piqued her interest. She looked forward to them in future semesters. She figured that hers was a situation where becoming a Jack (or Jill, in this case) of all trades would be a good thing.

She had a tracker implanted. Her arm was irritated, but it wasn't all that bad, and it gave her some peace of mind.

She got into an easy rhythm moving between Jane, Bruce, and R&D. Jane was happy for Darcy’s management opportunity so long as she spent at least half her work time in Jane’s lab, which made Darcy laugh. Times on the R&D floors were interesting. She noticed on her next day in the secondary labs that Tony had pulled workers from the two projects Darcy had thought looked like a waste of time. Her take-away from that was that Tony would be delighted for her to manage the rest of R&D, though still not him. That would require a more subtle approach, and some time.

She began looking into the backgrounds of all of the tech personnel, wanting to know which ones to trust the most and which to have re-vetted. Some of the R&D techs were funny and she could see a few possible new friendships to come.

Yoga stretched her mind and body in ways she’d never considered before, and she treasured her burgeoning friendship with Bruce. Her sessions with Dr. Chau seemed productive.

She was reminded that healing wasn't always linear midweek while working with Tony, though. She took a quick sip of water and it went down the wrong way. As she choked on the water, a full-blown panic attack hit. She slung water on herself and the floor as she spasmed.
Tony jumped from the running trampoline to hold her upright, yelling, “Lewis! Darcy! You’re safe! There’s no more water. BREATHE. You can breathe, honey. No one’s gonna hurt you. You’re safe.” She clung to him, staring into his eyes wildly. He smiled wanly. “You’re really safe, Darcy. If you were imagining safety, it’d be Steve… or maybe Bruce… or Thor… or Hawkeye. Sure as hell not me!”

As the panic passed into breathless and tearful laughter, he gently lowered her to the ground and held her until her shaking subsided. When her breathing returned to normal, Darcy wiped away tears. “I’m so sorry. That was stupid.” She was mortified to see that she’d scratched his arms as she flailed. "Oh, Tony! I’m sorry!"

“Apologizing’s the only stupid part of it, kid. It happens.” Tony snorted a laugh.

She sighed raggedly. “How long ‘til that kind of shit goes away?”

Tony chucked her under chin. “I’ll let you know.” She struggled to her feet, wobbly and wiping water from her dress. He offered, “call it a day, if you like. I get it.”

Darcy looked at him, wide-eyed. “I know you do. Thanks.” She shook her head and asked stubbornly, “what can I do next?”

Tony shook his head.

A tech from the other lab knocked and entered, looking startled by Darcy’s appearance. She realized her dress, hair and make-up must look terrible. Tony turned and yelled at DUM-E. “How many times do I have to tell you not to spray people with water unless they’re ON FIRE?!? I swear! I’m gonna donate you to a community college.” DUM-E ducked his head and made a forlorn noise. Tony turned to the tech and barked, “it can wait! Come back later.” The tech scurried from the room, looking terrorized and glancing Darcy’s way with concern.

Darcy started chuckling, “guess I ought to go get cleaned up.” She turned to leave, looked back and smiled. “You’re secretly nice, Tony.”

He grinned and shrugged, “eh…not so nice. I managed to cop a feel, finally. I’m gonna have JARVIS warn me if Cap finds out and decides to kill me.” He looked down at his StarkPad and started tapping, “I’ll message Brucie that you’ll make up your time with him later. You could always drop by his place, if you like. He’s soothing… most of the time.”

Darcy shook her head and walked out, realizing that she was frazzled and physically shaking. She struggled to keep her expression neutral in the elevator, ignoring puzzled looks from others. She was glad she didn't ride up with any of her friends. A kind word or look would have caused her to burst out crying in public. When she reached her apartment, she all but ran to the dock and set her StarkPad in it and pulled up one of the rage-y playlists she’d listened to so much when she’d first arrived at the Tower; when she was still visibly bruised from her interrogation in London. She stripped off her wet clothes and threw herself on her bed for a good cry.

About thirty minutes later, there was a firm knock at her door. She quieted and asked, “JARVIS? Who’s that?”

“Agent Romanoff is at your door. She says to dress for training, that it’s a perfect time for you to learn to throw a punch correctly.” JARVIS replied crisply.

Darcy chuckled through tears as she dressed. When she opened her door, Natasha was leaning against a wall and grinning. “You’d be sinfully easy to do surveillance on… even if rumors weren't
flying that Stark sexually harassed you so blatantly that one of his bots sprayed you both down with water. I've heard that playlist enough already. Let’s hit something.” The rest of the afternoon was spent training with Natasha. By evening, Darcy could passably jab, hook, uppercut, and twist punch. Overall, she lacked enough strength to satisfy Natasha’s sky-high standards.

As they finished, Darcy breathlessly shared, “Tony didn't harass me.”

Natasha trilled a laugh. “I know! He’s not suicidal these days.”

Darcy frowned at the implication. “He was actually kinda great. He let that rumor start to give me cover for my runny makeup, I guess.”

Natasha made a face, “frustratingly, that happens. It’s kept me from killing him more than once.”

Darcy couldn't contain her curiosity. “Is your hearing as good as Steve’s?”

“It wouldn't need to be that good to hear your music.” Natasha raised a brow.

Darcy laughed. “I’ll try to keep it down.”

She started to thank Natasha, but was cut off with a shake of the assassin’s head. Natasha grinned wryly. “Thank me by NOT skipping strength training tomorrow.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and pouted. When Darcy reached her door again, her back and arms already ached horribly, but she was in a better mood. She checked her phone and saw that Jane had left a message- ‘Call when bk. Takeout w/me/T & S, our place.’ Darcy smiled tiredly. Dinner with the people she loved most sounded perfect. She called, showered and changed, going with an outfit that felt kick-ass and in-charge… skin-tight jeans with a gray cowl-necked blouse, a great jacket, and amazing silver-studded black boots. She checked it out in the mirror and smiled. “Hey, JARVIS? Please tell Tony that I said ‘thanks.’”

Jane had ordered Thai food. There were different levels of spiciness of each dish, and a huge variety of choices. Darcy was still looking over the list of all the things ordered when Steve knocked on Jane’s door. He thanked Jane for the invitation, and moved to Darcy’s side, sweetly kissing her cheek. Thor pronounced, “we will let the ladies make their selections first, and then finish all they do not want, Captain.”

While the men finished eating, Jane led Darcy out to her terrace. “You okay?”

Darcy nodded. “I just had a panic attack, not a Tony attack. It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I think you’re doing great.” Jane stood next to Darcy, their shoulders bumping companionably.

Darcy snorted laughter. “That’s cuz you didn’t see me go crazy just from water going down the wrong pipe.” She shook her head as she saw Jane wince and move as though to hug her. “I’m good, Jane. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. That’s what Chau’s for.” She chuckled, “and Tony, too, if you’d believe it. The asshat was fantastic.”

Jane grinned. “Guess he gets a reprieve from the exile to Svartalfheim that I was planning.”

When they returned, Jane sat on the larger couch and Darcy took a place on the love seat. Steve soon moved to Darcy’s side. “You seem a little tight there, Sweetheart. Backrub?”

Darcy nodded gratefully, and removed her jacket, conscious of Steve’s eyes on her. When he started to massage, she groaned, “lighter, please.” He eased the pressure, wincing for her with
every groan of discomfort, working all of the muscles in her arms and upper back perfectly. Darcy moaned. “Okay… I know you were well-taught and all, but, I think you also know what I've been up to.”

Steve gently kissed her neck as he continued to ease the tension in her shoulders. “I saw some of your session with Natasha. You did well. I could tell that you weren't in the mood for anything but what you were doing, so I didn't bother you.” She swallowed a lump in her throat and nodded once, staying silent for a while after that.

They stayed and visited with Thor and Jane for a long time. It was nice for Darcy to see Jane warming up to Steve some. Afterwards, when Steve kissed her outside her door, Darcy clung to him. “Come inside and make out for a little while?”

Steve grinned against her lips. “Just a little while?” Darcy pulled him inside, nodding. He let out a breath. “Your confidence in my self-control may be misplaced.”

Darcy shook her head as she pushed him down on the couch and sat in his lap. “Nah… my downstairs neighbor would come up here and kick your ass, if you get unruly.”

Steve’s phone indicated an incoming text. He rolled his eyes as he read it. “Yes, she says she would... and tells me that you're tired enough that I shouldn't stay more than an hour.” He set the phone down with a sigh as Darcy began to kiss him, sweetly at first and then with growing intensity. Her kisses enticed him, affectionate and wanting. As he licked into her mouth, she uttered little gasps and moans that inflamed him beyond measure. Filled with desire, Steve began to wonder how he was going to maintain control for the next hour.

He thought about the songs that he’d been listening to ever since she’d gifted them. Between kisses, he murmured, “I love my songs, and so much of what they tell me, though I disagree that you’re a mess and think it’s crazy that anyone could think you’re not good enough for me.” He groaned loudly as she nipped at his earlobe and flicked it with her tongue.

Darcy pulled back breathily, “I beg to differ. I've always been a mess, but I've reached new levels recently.”

Steve shifted. “If anyone should be using the word ‘beg’ right now…”

Darcy laughed. “See? I’m a tease, too- all because I need to feel in control.”

Steve chuckled, “All? I like to think there are other reasons.” As she nibbled his neck, her hands strayed down, teasingly ghosting against his arousal. He groaned and closed his eyes tight, the slightest whimper escaping his lips.

Darcy laughed, “says the handsomest, most perfect man I’ve ever met.” She pulled back and looked at him piercingly. “I keep thinking you’ll wake up sane and realize that I’m not enough, not…”

He kissed her quiet, and then replied. “You’re beautiful, smart, fun, kind, and sexy. I’m going to find a way to get that through to you.” He stroked his fingers lightly up and down her back, delighting in her sensitive response, and continuing to kiss her hungrily until they were both trembling and breathing heavily. When his internal clock warned of the approaching hour, he rasped, “I have to leave before Natasha breaks down the door and drags me out.”

Darcy whimpered, “I don’t want you to go.” She gasped as he teased the skin where her neck met her shoulder.
He groaned and lifted her from his lap and stood. “Sweetheart, if you weren't worn out already, nothing could make me leave. I can’t begin to tell you how much I’m looking forward to having more time… no interruptions, no team politics, just you and me.” He looked down. The sight of her kiss-swollen lips nearly undid his resolve.

She grinned, “What was it? Beaux reves?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Yes. Sweet dreams.” As he left, he didn't look forward to the cold shower awaiting him. He pulled out his phone and accepted a sparring session Tony had been begging for, figuring he'd need to burn off a lot of steam over the next few days.

to be continued...
"Injuries happen when you’re testing out new capabilities."

Chapter Summary

Cap, Hawkeye, and Falcon spar against Iron Man and some of his drones.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorsWench for Beta help! Any errors are mine.

Thanks, readers, etc. and especially those leaving COMMENTS. :)

Darcy’s mood was good the next day. When she woke, she received a first song gift from Steve- an acoustic version of Joe Cocker’s ‘You Are So Beautiful’, complete with a teasing note- ‘Duh! Will it get through to you if I say it with a song?’ . It put a goofy smile on her face that lasted through the day.

Cardio-Dance was a blast, getting more fun all the time, as Darcy learned the routines enough to lose herself in the music. She ached all over, but she still loved doing it. Strength training just hurt and hurt. She didn't love it, AT ALL.

Work was uneventful, and yoga felt good, soothing. With an upcoming date in mind, Darcy finally forced herself to the spa. She washed her hair, and went in with it wet so she wouldn't need to lean back to a sink. Darcy was happy to have her style updated. While there, she gladly had a mani-pedi, and not so gladly submitted to waxing.

She had the part of a massage where she lay on her stomach, but could NOT let the masseuse finish with the usual ministrations they would give someone lying on their back or lay towels over her face (regardless of their lavender scent). The masseuse suggested having a friend or boyfriend come along and hold her hand for that part next time. Darcy giggled at the thought of asking Steve to hold her hand while she lay on a table naked so someone else could rub her with oils. He’d probably even submit to it if he thought it would help her, but no.

The next morning, Darcy was struggling through strength training and making snarky remarks to the instructor again when she heard someone crank up music (‘It’s the End of the World As We Know It’) in the media room. She’d learned that sparring sessions between different Avengers were broadcast on a regular basis. Someone had decided that it motivated SI employees to see how the different weapons and protective gear they made parts for got used. Natasha and Clint sparred daily. All of the Avengers sparred at least a few times per week, training each other in different fight techniques.

Darcy almost regretted missing a match between Thor and Steve that left all the women and gay men who watched it in a frenzy of lust. As Thor had mentioned, the super soldier and the god could attack each other without holding back. She just wasn't sure that the ‘gladiator’ thing was to her taste... and, figured that her concern for each man might even outweigh her rapidly escalating lust for Steve.
As she finished and sat up to stretch, she heard the ‘Iron Man’ song and saw more people scurry eagerly to the media room. One lab tech she had an acquaintance with urged her to the media room, saying giddily, “Miss Lewis! Come see! Mr. Stark’s testing new suits with other Avengers!”

Curious, Darcy grabbed a towel and put it around her neck, and grabbed a bottle of water and walked into the media room. She saw the Iron Man fly up on one side of a sparring gymnasium with twenty drones marching below him. He directed them into position and waited.

Opposite them, the camera showed Captain America, Falcon, and Hawkeye moving into position. Darcy felt her stomach clench. The gym-goers in the media room broke out into catcalls and a frenzy of cheering. Iron Man gave commands to the drones, and flew forward while aiming a new repulsor ray directly at the Captain. Drone suits took to the air.

People who had worked on the sparring room’s construction cheered as the walls held up against the repulsors and explosions. Engineers formerly with the Army eagerly watched how Falcon’s wings held up in the melee, and how skillfully he dodged and darted. Former SHIELD personnel cheered Hawkeye’s every move wildly. It almost looked like he had eyes in the back of his head; given how he could aim unerringly, regardless of the direction he faced. Any and all of the people present screamed with savage glee as the shield ricocheted through the drone fire with deadly precision.

Many people shrieked at near misses and escapes made by all of the Avengers sparring. As people cheered, Darcy turned and walked out. She didn't think about the decision to turn away. It was a reflex. She didn't want to watch her friends hurt each other, while people who didn't care about them laughed and placed bets. She went to her apartment, showered, dressed, and went to start her work day.

First, she spent a quiet hour with Bruce, catching up on work she’d missed earlier in the week. Then she stopped by R&D and met with techs there for a bit. Finally, she headed to Jane’s lab. Jane had been in already, likely all night if the level of disarray was any indicator, and was gone by the time Darcy arrived. She was grateful for the peace and quiet, and got a lot of work done. Every now and then she would glance at the time, wondering if the sparring was over yet. Finally, gritting her teeth, she grabbed her StarkPad and pulled up the live feed.

While she loved the way Steve moved, she didn't like the sight of him getting attacked by six drones at once, all armed with repulsors, rockets and more. She was getting to know the drones’ capabilities, and that made the scene on her pad even more disturbing. Iron Man took, in Darcy’s opinion, a cheap shot at Cap in the midst of the melee. Steve reflected it off the shield into Iron Man’s throat. Darcy murmured an appreciation of Steve’s skillful application of physics. She felt a bit of satisfaction from that, but was still disturbed. More drones piled in. Falcon picked one up and dropped it on top of another. Hawkeye used special arrows to destroy some that were far enough away from Steve and Sam to explode safely.

Darcy saw an unfamiliar, large drone join the fighting occasionally, and then move to the sidelines after a minute or two. She assumed Tony saw a problem with it and was ‘benching it.’ The other three Avengers kept watch on it, so she wondered what they saw that might be alarming.

Darcy noticed that most of the drones’ joints had new covers designed to protect them from the edge of the shield or similar impact weapons, but the shield still cut through when Steve found the time to line it up just right. She was amazed at Steve’s speed. He was like Mr. Super Gymnast/Martial Arts Kicker/All-Around Fighter. She could appreciate that designing drones to face him would be a challenge, but she still didn't like it.

The shield flew and caught Iron Man square, sending him into a wall while Steve smiled grimly.
Steve retrieved the shield and used it to smash an arm off the nearest drone. Iron Man regained his footing. Steve reflected the next repulsor to take out two drones. She could see what people were so excited about. It was awesome to see the Avengers cut loose… but, every blow that Steve took hurt her. Though he healed, it wasn't as though he didn't feel pain.

Darcy set the pad aside, and went back to work. She reviewed a roster of those working in the R&D labs, planning changes that would keep people from doing redundant work unless it was on purpose, and reorganizing the layout of each floor to be more efficient to the way ‘science types’ work. She pulled together a database of each engineer’s projects, past and present. She was beginning to understand that the biggest current problem in R&D was that it was in essence a new organization, having approximately doubled in recent months… with the former SHIELD employees it had absorbed. She put things in order, made a backup of files, requisitioned Jane’s supply list for the week, and finished transcribing notes from the previous day.

She felt someone watching her, and looked up. Natasha stood in the doorway. “Foster is watching the ‘show’ with Thor and me. We made popcorn and have a pool going on possible match outcomes. Want to join us?”

Darcy uploaded the latest backup copies to the duplicate-save drive and spoke dully, “I’m surprised you could tear yourself away from such a great show.”

Natasha shrugged., “I’ve seen Cap fight a lot recently. He doesn't have to prove anything to me.” She asked Darcy, “Have you watched?”

Darcy frowned and closed some files. “I caught a few minutes.”

Natasha offered, “We’re gonna order lunch. Come, watch with us and eat something. We’ll tell you if there’s anything to worry about. There’s not, so far.” Darcy looked skeptical. Natasha continued bracingly. “Cap’s tough. He’s got some bruises, burns, and a few abrasions so far, maybe a broken bone or two, but he’s in good shape. He’ll be all better by tomorrow. It’s okay. I promise.”

Darcy smiled slightly, appreciative…. though those wounds sounded awful to her. She held back an observation that Natasha’s idea of comfort wasn't making her feel much better. Teasing the Black Widow didn't seem like a good idea. Though Darcy hadn't voiced her thoughts, Natasha grinned as though she guessed them.

Natasha mentioned, “Stark promised they’d have our practice dummy drone ready by tomorrow. So, let’s plan to have your next training then.” Darcy nodded and added the time to her calendar.

While she wasn't interested in food, and was still wary of watching the battling Avengers, Darcy appreciated that Natasha was trying to reassure her, and accepted the invitation. As they approached the lounge, she heard Thor laughing. Entering, she saw Jane cover her eyes as Steve crushed a drone’s head with the shield. Thor laughed again, questioning Jane’s squeamishness for the welfare of a mechanical construct.

Jane explained, “It looks like someone could be inside that thing.” Darcy took the seat on Jane’s other side. The video screen covered one wall of the room, so the combat was life-sized.

Thor kissed Jane’s hand and assured her, “Fear not, dear one. Our wise Captain knows the difference.” Darcy was pleased that Thor seemed to respect Steve so much. Tony always seemed to go out of his way to ridicule Steve. Bruce hardly mentioned him.

Natasha remarked, “He’s gotten a lot faster since the Chitauri battle, better technique, too.” Thor was shifting back and forth, as though anticipating blows between the fighters or wishing himself
in the midst of the fight. Natasha mentioned, “Steve told me Sam joked that Steve could take up Ultimate Fighting if he got bored of saving the world. He’s right.”

Security arrived with their delivery, and they all got plates of food. Darcy took her seat next to Jane again and tried to absorb the care-free spirit of the others. It was difficult for her to do so. She was glad to see that Jane shared some of her feelings. Every now and then, Jane leaned into Darcy and they exchanged looks of understanding. It soothed Darcy slightly.

When flamethrowers singed Steve, she involuntarily gasped while Natasha laughed and talked about how flame-resistant Cap’s suit was. When Steve took out several drones with small electrical disks Natasha had lent him, and stabbed things with specialty arrows of Hawkeye’s, Natasha and Thor mocked the drones while Darcy dreaded to see what would come at Steve next. When a gargantuan drone smashed an I-beam over the shield, as Steve held it over his head, she felt sick. Natasha related that by hiding under the shield she and Cap survived a Hydra ballistic missile attack. Darcy couldn’t eat much. Jane leaned closer and touched her reassuringly, holding Darcy’s hand when she noticed how shaky she was.

Darcy was unsurprised when Natasha turned on music, and explained that Hawkeye had started a sparring/battling playlist. Every now and then she would comment on songs in the playlist. ‘Shoot to Thrill’ had long been Iron Man’s song. ‘Live and Let Die’ was for Hawkeye. ‘Sledgehammer’ had been added for Thor. ‘Demolition Man’ was for Hulk. A blues tune called ‘I Always Get My Man’ had been added for Natasha (she firmly vetoed the current pop hit ‘Black Widow’, noting sharply that her code name was not for sale).

Darcy asked, “Are there any songs for Steve?”

Natasha smiled thinly. “Steve flat-out rejected ‘America, Fuck Yeah’, so Stark suggested ‘Goody Two Shoes’ to rile him. Stark’s also gotten cute and slipped in ‘Star Spangled Man With a Plan’, and ‘Ice, Ice, Baby,’ though the latest suggestion wasn’t so awful- ‘Welcome to the Jungle’. We've all taken shots at finding a good one. Clint tried ‘Nazi Punks Fuck Off’. Bruce, suggested “Surprise! You’re Dead!’ by Faith No More. I like ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper’, but we haven’t found anything that everyone agrees on for him yet. He hasn’t liked any of those suggestions.”

Darcy watched Steve on the screen for a long moment. He moved so beautifully, was so real. She thought of a song she’d always liked and suggested it. “Try ‘Tom Sawyer’ by Rush.” She looked up the lyrics on her pad and smiled. It was appropriate.

A modern day warrior

Mean, mean stride
Today's Tom Sawyer
Mean, mean pride

Though his mind is not for rent
Don't put him down as arrogant
His reserve, a quiet defense
Riding out the day's events
The river

What you say about his company
Is what you say about society
Catch the mist, catch the myth
Catch the mystery, catch the drift
The world is, the world is
Love and life are deep Maybe as his skies are wide

Today's Tom Sawyer
He gets high on you And the space he invades He gets by on you

No his mind is not for rent
To any god or government Always hopeful, yet discontent He knows changes aren't permanent But change is...

Natasha poked at the StarkPad for a minute. They all listened to it and watched the match rage on. Natasha nodded her head and murmured, “That’s more like it.” She smiled and nodded her head in rhythm with the music while her eyes eagerly scanned the screen. The music changed to different ‘epic rock’ type songs. Darcy struggled to relax. Suddenly, Natasha stopped and stared. Hawkeye reacted to something off to the side, renewed movement from the new drone. Thor stood and moved forward.

Darcy tensed and asked, “What is it?”

Natasha frowned. “Something changed. The rhythm of the fight is different. Moves are… deadlier.” She tapped her finger on her chin. “Barton is keeping an eye on something off to the side. It hasn't behaved in a hostile manner… yet, but he expects it to. Maybe that big drone Stark’s pulled in and out of the fight a time or two…”

Darcy saw Thor studying the formation of those on the screen. Natasha squinted and muttered to herself. Darcy stared at Iron Man and gritted her teeth hard. Next to her, Jane was pale with anxiety, her eyes locked on the screen.

They all watched the Iron Man flying around, apparently directing drones as he went. Darcy thought about what Steve had told her about noticing details as she pointed and shakily exclaimed, “The dent from the last time the shield hit him above his left knee is missing. That’s a different suit.”

Steve apparently noticed, too. His next shield throw took the head and left arm off of the drone Iron Man. Jane screamed.

Natasha pointed to the edge of the screen and asked, “What’s that thing doing now?” The dark blue suit with a gray star on the chest entered the scene on foot. It was ten feet tall, but leanly made with extra joints for fluidity. That it looked like a darker Captain America gave Darcy a bad feeling.

Darcy turned as Tony walked in behind them, answering. “That, people, is the new suit I asked Cap to try out. He’s been fussing at me on comm channels that there was nothing much new today. So, I figured it was time to alleviate his boredom. Meet Mark 83, drone Captain. He’s been directing the other drones for the past eleven minutes of battle, since I left the field… without a scratch on me, might I add.” He continued, “I let him direct a minute at a time over the first few hours, but, now it’s all on him… like if I’d been injured before the enemy was defeated.”

Natasha growled. “Against our own men? Is it safe?”

Darcy turned back to the screen and watched as drones closed in more tightly around Steve. Her breathing was audible as she glanced between the activity onscreen and Tony’s mask of indifference. The Mark-83 moved up fast through the drones to attack. Steve shifted his focus to the new suit, which seemingly matched his skill set well, now that it was fully un-leashed.

Hawkeye and Falcon were both working hard, too. More of the drones were focused on them. They
were all holding their own.

Even Darcy could see that the trio of Avengers would eventually best the drones if nothing changed from the current scenario. She calmed. It would just be a matter of time. Hawkeye exploded two more and she began to hope for an end to the match.

Then, Thor cried, “Watch for that warrior!” as the new suit pulled back and moved in just behind one of the groups of drones and an electrically-charged spear shot out of the end of the arm towards Steve. Darcy screamed when it thrust forward and stabbed through his shoulder. Then, the Mark-83 blasted a drone between it and Steve to clear its path for another shot at him.

Behind her, Tony cussed, “well, damn! Not supposed to take out other drones like that!”

Darcy could see Steve’s face contort with pain. She screamed. The drone shot a spear from the other fist, and Steve managed to deflect it with the shield, just before it would have hit his chest dead center.

Natasha yelled, “Don’t tell me that drone is under control, Stark!” Her hands went to her weapons, patting through various items as she decided which to pull.

Tony took a sip of his drink and remarked, “I guess not. That does look kinda bad.” He watched Natasha warily. Darcy turned and glared at him with disbelief. He shrugged, though he looked somewhat uncomfortable. He cleared his throat. “Okay. It glitched. But the 83 was directing the battle for fourteen minutes just fine. It’s real progress!”

He made a dismissive gesture. “Cap heals. Sometimes when you test a capability, injuries happen. I thought I saw a weakness in Cap’s mid-range defense, which I was obviously right about, and programmed the knowledge into the bot. Cap’s hell up close and far enough to fling the shield, but, with enough cover there’s this mid-range…”

Natasha accused, “You could have pointed that out rather than stabbing him with a charged titanium spear!” She stalked towards Tony with a disk in one hand and a wicked knife in the other and shouted, “Shut it down! Destroy it.”

Tony shook his head and yelled, “I will NOT destroy it! It just needs a tweak or two. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Jane begged Thor, “Hold her back before she really hurts him. He’s not in his armor.” Thor put himself between Natasha and Tony, his face grim. Natasha glared up at him. Thor looked torn between helping Natasha and protecting Tony from her.

Tony spoke into his microphone and the drones and Mark 83 shut down, freezing in place. Hawkeye and Falcon stopped fighting and moved towards Steve. Steve yelled in pain as he made one last shield throw and took the head off Mark-83 cleanly. Tony cussed, “Damn, Capsicle! That was petty. Now, I have to rebuild from scratch.” Tony turned to the others, gesturing broadly. “He knows it, too. His shoulder will heal up a LOT faster than the time it’ll take to redo the Mark-83, now that he’s severed those connections.” He continued to grumble about the drone commander. Thor grabbed Natasha as she dropped her knife and pulled a gun.

Darcy was enraged, though not quite ready for gunfire. She moved towards the door, and stopped as she neared Tony. Tony smirked at her, obviously expecting sharp words. Instead, she shot her Taser straight into his shoulder, shocked him hard, and knocked him flat. He yelped as he fell to the floor, unconscious.
Thor burst out laughing. “I’d say that qualifies as a battle scratch, Man of Iron!”

Darcy sputtered angrily for a second, turned and stalked out. Jane cried out, “Oh, my God! Is he okay? Thor! His head hit the ground hard. Take him to get medical attention.”

Natasha called after Darcy, “You should have tried the ankle break on him, while you were at it. Injuries happen when you’re testing out new capabilities.” She angrily holstered her gun, muttering curses under her breath.

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Darcy’s face was still flushed with anger when she entered Bucky’s room a few minutes later. He was sitting, listening to an audio-book of Sherlock Holmes stories. She sat down hard in the chair next to the bed, and he requested to pause. He smiled, obviously entertained by her dramatic stomping. “You look pissed off, Doll.” She nodded and then burst into tears. He asked, “What happened?”

She rocked back and forth, and sniffed. “Steve’s injured, and I’m probably gonna get fired.”

He asked, “What?”

She swallowed hard. “I just tazed Tony Stark.”

He snickered. “Why?”

She explained, “that stupid sparring…”

Bucky nodded. “It’s a little hard to hear over all the music, but, I got the idea. Iron Man and some drones against Captain America, the flyer, and the archer.”

She nodded. “Yeah. Well, a drone ‘glitched’ and hurt Steve. All Tony could talk about was how it would take longer to fix the suit than for Steve to heal. Steve was in pain!” Her anger melted away and she started sniffling again.

Bucky complained, “Doll... Don’t do that. I can’t even get you a hanky.”

She sniffed. “I shouldn't have tazed him cuz I was angry. I’m a bad person.”

Bucky laughed… a bitter sound. “Have you killed anyone?”

She shook her head, and then reconsidered, “maybe a few Dark Elves invading London last year. I’m not sure. I would be at least an accessory...”

His smiled faded. “I’ve killed over 100 people that I know of. The count is undoubtedly higher. Those memories are coming back, too. They made me into a killing machine, ‘the fist of Hydra’. Forgive me if I have a hard time seeing you as a bad person after you taze Howard’s rich brat.”

She looked at him seriously. “But, Bucky, you didn't want to do any of it. You, James Buchanan ‘Bucky’ Barnes, didn't choose to kill. Those Hydra assholes hurt you, took you over, and made you do it.” She took a deep breath and assured him. “You’re not the Winter Soldier anymore, Bucky. You don’t have to be. You’re safe.”

He joked, “unless I piss you off! Then I might get tazed.” He winked.

She smiled slightly and shook her head. “Nah... I wouldn't hurt you.”
His expression softened, “from what I remember, I can be a bit of a jerk sometimes.” He nodded, made a face, and nodded again as though he was fairly sure.

She asked, “What do you remember?”

He shook his head. “I want to save it to tell Steve, when he feels better. He’s talked himself blue in the face while I’ve been trying to think clearly. But, it can wait. He’s in… kind of a bad mood, right now. I hear him in the triage down the hall. At the rate he’s going, I’m surprised you can’t hear him.” Her eyes went wide, and she looked towards the door. Bucky smiled. “Doll, you’re not a bad person. Besides Steve, you’re the only friend I got. You’re so nice you treat monsters like men.” She sighed. He urged, “dry your eyes. Go kiss your fellow. Apologize to the jackass. If it makes you feel any better, his girl Pepper is ranting about his stupid lack of concern for safety, and says he deserved worse.”

Darcy dried her eyes, kissed Bucky on the cheek, and turned to go. As she left, he noted, “you’re the only girl who kisses me now. You’re not bad. You’re a sweetheart.” He resumed his audio book. She smiled slightly at the signs of his improvement.

_to be continued..._
Home… “just think of the games we can play where I pretend to kiss and make it better! Only it’ll look like real magic…”

Chapter Summary

Post-sparring, Steve expresses his feelings... not so nicely to Tony, very nicely to Darcy. He talks to her about what 'home' means to him.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, again, McGregorsWench for Beta help and encouragement! You're awesome!
(((HUGGLES)))

I really appreciate you, readers! :)

As Darcy neared triage, her eyes widened. Steve was yelling. He was angrier than she’d imagined he could get, cussing a blue streak. She swallowed hard, and considered the possibility that the perfect man might not forgive her as easily as his troubled friend.

But, as she peered into the triage room, she realized that he was ranting against the drones to Tony, specifically the Mark-83. “Shut your damned mouth, Stark! Who in the hell could ever imagine it would seem okay to trust moral distinctions to a machine! How is that genius?! They’re wires and metal, soulless! Didn't you hear Thor’s cautions? If you tell a machine to defeat a man, it won’t see a difference between a sparring match and a fucking battle to the death! And even in a battle to the death, how can you think a machine will notice if a person finds remorse? Did you see that last spear go towards my goddamned heart?! If I could get to you without hurting these people I’d probably smash your head in, suit or no suit, you unrepentant asshole!” He made a noise of extreme frustration. “Why else do you THINK I took its damned head off? I WANT it to take a long time for you to unleash it again, Stark! Damn it all to hell, you stupid, arrogant, thoughtless bastard!”

She swallowed hard as Sam looked Tony over. “What brought you here, anyway, Stark? I thought you would waltz in bragging that there wasn’t a damned scratch on you again, not get carried in and dumped on a gurney by Thor.”

Darcy gasped, and all heads turned to see her by the door. Steve looked mortified at the thought that she’d heard his rant, and then concerned as he took in her tear-stained face. Hawkeye looked so amused that Darcy wondered for the thousandth time if he and Natasha had a telepathic connection. Sam looked concerned as he saw her expression.

Tony paled, stopped, and looked down as though re-thinking the scene in the lounge; looked up
again and whirled towards the door. He lifted his good hand and pointed at Darcy. “You! I specifically told you not to manage me. Yet, you incapacitated me so that Natasha couldn't have the satisfaction of shooting me! Good job.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open much like it had when Pepper approached her about managing the labs. She shut it again quickly as Tony waltzed over to her and leaned in close, his good hand on her shoulder. “I apologize from the depths of my heart. I remember watching Pepper be hurt, how it gutted me. I was in my version of the science haze you see so much with Foster, wrong-headed.” Steve’s head shifted a bit as he stared at them. Tony turned back to him and pointed at him. “Yeah, sorry to you, too, foul-mouthed eavesdropper!”

Darcy gasped, “I’m so sorry. Honestly, I only half-realized Natasha’s intent. I wasn't quite angry enough for gunfire, but close.”

Tony shook his head, winced, and shrugged with his good shoulder. “Seriously, she was gonna hurt me so much worse. So, thanks.” He wagged his eyebrows. “If you want to make up, you can tell me what you did to Cap while he couldn't move.” She glared through tears. He cocked his head. “Nothing doing? Damn.” He smiled again, and laughed. “You’re gonna scare the crap out of my engineers. It’ll be great.” He walked out, carelessly waving to all in the room.

Darcy sighed loudly and put her head in her hands. Hawkeye started laughing, and turned to the others. “Tasha texted me. Darcy put Stark down with her Taser, poetically shocking him in the same shoulder you got speared, Cap.”

Sam and Steve started to laugh along with Hawkeye. Sam doubled over, clutching his gut. The nurses working on their wounds went back to their work with renewed concentration. Steve stopped laughing, and apologized. “I’m sorry, everyone. I shouldn't have talked that way in front of you. Please, forgive me?” He spoke to the room, but looked at Darcy.

She walked over to his side. He searched her expression. “Why have you been crying, Sweetheart?”

She swallowed, and spoke mournfully. “You kept getting hurt, and he laughed and acted like it didn't matter and I…” She swallowed miserably.

Steve’s head lifted like he heard someone else talking and it surprised and pleased him. After a few seconds, he muttered, “thanks, Buck.” He looked at Darcy and shook his head. “You are not a bad person.” He sighed. “I wouldn't want to see you get hurt, either. I’ll tell them not to broadcast sparring sessions I’m in. That was…” He waved his hand, searching for a word.

She whispered. “It’s like people don’t think you can feel pain, or like they don’t care. The media room off the gym was like a Roman Coliseum crowd.” She looked at him with her heart in her eyes and choked, “and I…” She shook her head, and he pulled her close to his good shoulder. He kissed her cheek and held her. She couldn't see how happy he looked at that moment when he realized that she loved him.

Pepper walked in, asking, “are you okay, Steve?”

Steve nodded in reply. “I’ll be fine.”

Darcy looked up at Pepper. “I’m sorry.” Darcy swallowed hard, wondering if her new promotion was about to disappear in a cloud of smoke.

Pepper smiled. “It’s okay. I had JARVIS show me the footage. Tony was out of line. I understand.”
She made a face. “To be fair, you warned him that if he used that name again…” Hawkeye asked if he could get a copy of the ‘Tazing Footage,’ as it would henceforth be known. Pepper nodded and smirked a little. “It’s likely to make him behave a bit better with you from now on, too, Darcy…” Darcy nodded numbly. A nurse approached Steve for more treatment now that he was calmer. Darcy stepped away from him, and moved out to the hall with Pepper.

Pepper continued, “Did Tony tell you about me? About Extremis?” Darcy nodded again. Pepper continued, “what he usually leaves out is that one of my first acts after being given power was to kill a man. He hurt me and he was going to kill Tony, so I’ve mostly come to peace with it as self-defense, though I have nightmares. One of the things about being close to men like Tony and Steve is that you learn that their greatest power is the restraint they show in NOT hurting people. That Mark-83 had no such restraint. It even destroyed an allied drone to get a clear shot at the Captain.” Pepper admitted, “I struggle with anger issues. My treatment when I was taken, was barbaric.” She nodded her head slowly and added, “I feel sympathy rather than anger.” She whispered, “crossing the line… doing violence against people… is frightening.”

Darcy shook her head. “You’re being too nice.” She confessed, “It’s the first time I used my Taser because I was angry. When I used it on Thor, he was frightening me and seemed a danger to Jane and Erik. THAT was self-defense, or just looking out for my addle-brained friends. What I did to Tony was meant to hurt him. That upsets me. I’ve never lashed out like that at anyone before.”

Pepper smiled sadly and sighed. “You’ll find that it amuses the others. Tony has commented too many times that after a battle he’s ‘the only one without a scratch on him,’ and the idea that you laid him flat and changed that has them laughing.”

Darcy wiped her eyes again. “Great. Super heroes are kind of jerks.” Over Pepper’s shoulder she saw Steve frown.

Pepper chuckled, “Yes! To be fair, Tony was more of a jerk before he became a super hero. He’s actually much nicer now.”

Darcy put her face in her hands for a moment, and then looked up again, shaking her head. “I don’t understand. Steve admires Tony. He talks about how Tony does so much for people. Tony admitted, when he thought Steve was unconscious of course, that he admires how Steve doesn’t give up. They’ve all saved the world so many times. Why do they have to act like they do to each other?”

Pepper looked thoughtful. “Well, they have anger issues, too. Look at all of the terrible things that have happened to them! Thor’s brother turned on him repeatedly, and then sacrificed himself after their mother’s murder. Clint’s brother literally stabbed him in the back- and, then later Clint was forced to hurt his friends. Natasha was kidnapped as a child and tortured into being an assassin and doing terrible things. Bruce lost his girlfriend and his professional standing, and became a hunted man because of an experiment gone wrong. Steve gave his life to save the world, and woke up 70 years later to find that everyone he’d known was dead, elderly, or brainwashed. Tony was tortured and almost died in Afghanistan. Then, he was tormented by the government, Vanko, and Killian. They've all lost friends and family, and been attacked repeatedly.” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m going to have SUCH a session with Dr. Chau tomorrow.”

Darcy murmured, “get in line!”

Pepper smiled, “well… don’t be too hard on yourself.”

Darcy sighed and smiled. She added, “thanks, again. I’m gonna say bye to Steve and head back to the labs.” Pepper nodded approvingly.
When Darcy stepped back in the triage room, Steve was insistently refusing to be admitted. He grimaced, “I’m fine. I’ll sleep better in my own bed than I would here. You can’t do anything else for me, anyway.”

Sam held up a bottle of pain pills and shook it. “Want one?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’d burn the whole bottle off in about five minutes.”

Sam nodded, “yeah, man. That sucks. Sorry.”

Darcy interrupted, “I’ve got to get back to work.” She walked over and kissed Steve’s cheek.

He wheedled, “come by later? Join me for takeout or something?” Sam grinned and muttered something about a one-track mind.

She grinned, “I’m not getting paid enough to afford feeding you.”

Steve chuckled. “Call when you can come to my place. I’ll order delivery, and I’ll pay. I’m happier that way, anyway.”

She asked, “how does delivery get to restricted floors? Does Security cover all that?”

He shrugged. “I think Happy or one of his security guys brings it up.”

She made a face. “Oh, yeah. Happy will be just delighted with me…” Steve smiled and leaned in to kiss her lips.

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She made a fairly quick pass through the R&D labs, checking progress. She noticed a few people whispering about her, and recalled Tony’s comment that the engineers would be afraid now. She shrugged, thinking that might be okay. She made a few more notes in her StarkPad, and headed to Bruce’s lab. She found him sitting at a workbench staring at equations, deep in thought. She started transcribing more data for him. After a bit, her silence caught his attention.

Bruce asked, “You okay?”

Darcy shook her head and muttered, “I’m sorry I’m late. Things got…. weird.”

Bruce nodded, “it’s okay. I know all about the weird. I can’t watch sparring sessions. It’s too stressful. I spent most of the day meditating. I’m at a kind of road block, anyway.” He got up from the desk. “Let’s do a long yoga session. We could probably both use it.”

She asked, “Are you upset with me?”

He stifled a laugh, “for getting angry? Are you kidding?”

She chuckled and went to change clothes. Later, she lay stretched out full length on her mat, staring at the ceiling and listening to the soothing music.

She sighed, “thanks. That helped.”

He was lying on his back as well. “I like to do my part.”

She rolled up on her side and looked at him and asked, “I see what relaxes you, and I know you like your work… but, does anything make you happy?”
He sighed. “I guess our crazy little family here has potential for that, but, no. Since my accident…? No.”

She sighed mournfully. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Thanks.” He rolled up to a sitting position and remarked, “it’s good to have friends.”

She nodded and got up and shook her hair loose. “See ya, Bruce.” He looked at her in that strange way he did sometimes, and smiled tightly. Then, he squared his shoulders, told her goodbye, and returned to his work.

She decided to go home to get cleaned up. She was emotionally done. The running trampoline tied with a large red bow by the door made her chuckle. She was so tired. This would be a night for jeans and a comfortable shirt. She picked an old, comfy, pink v-neck fleece sweatshirt with rainbow cuffs.

She called to check and see if Steve still wanted her to join him for takeout food. They decided on sandwiches from a local diner. Both were in the mood for ‘comfort food.’

When she arrived at his place, Steve called for her to come in. She opened the door and stopped to examine it. “Hey! Your door is really different from mine. What’s that about?”

She entered the living room. Steve was sitting up on the couch, well but for the bandaged shoulder propped on one arm of the furniture, and a pained look on his face. She went over to the couch and sat next to him, by his good side.

He replied. “Well, you know the serum enhanced my hearing, right?” She nodded and raised a brow. He chuckled. “I sleep better since I had them add better sound proofing to my place.”

She nodded and made a face, thinking that living close to happy couples, just below Tony and Pepper for one, would make it difficult for anyone with enhanced hearing to sleep. She vaguely wondered if Tony talked incessantly even when having sex… for Steve’s sake, she hoped not.

He continued, “they’re doing construction up here, anyway, working on long-term ‘containment’ for Bucky.”

She exclaimed, “Ohh!” and made a face, puzzled. “Why is he in the Healing Ward?”

Steve sighed, and shifted position, frowning. “That’s on me. He was on a savage cocktail of medications while with Hydra, from what our testing finds. They suppressed his emotions, pleasure, long-term memories… anything that didn't ‘serve their purpose’.” His expression was stony, and his tone one of suppressed rage.

He breathed out heavily, and reined in his temper. “Our staff could manage his medications and work towards encouraging his memory-recovery in the Containment area’s clinic. But… I couldn't stand the thought of him down there. To me, he’s not the same as the other prisoners, no matter what Tony says.” He looked at her as though hoping for someone to agree with him. She nodded and grasped his hand.

He managed a slight grin. “Also, I don’t want you to have to go down there if you want to see him. He talks to you more than most anyone else, usually.” He grimaced in pain again, and sighed wearily.

She encouraged. “He’s really different already. Did you notice that he took my suggestion about
audio books? When I went by there today he was listening to a Sherlock Holmes story.”

Steve looked distant as he muttered, “he always liked a good mystery story…” He winced and shifted.

Darcy frowned and asked, “is there anything I can do to help you feel better?”

He looked at her lips. “Kiss me?” She leaned against him so she could reach. They kissed tenderly for several pleasurable minutes. He shifted his shoulder again, sighed, and pulled her against him. “I went to see Bucky after you went back to work. You’re right that he’s different from before. He talked more than me for a change. He remembers me after the serum now, remembers the Howling Commandos and following me against Hydra. Even made a little joke about how I used to be smaller, a very old joke. He also talked about... home.” Steve’s breathing hitched and his hand made little circles on her shoulder.

Darcy snuggled tighter against Steve, loving the feel of their bodies close together. She let out a noise of contentment as she cuddled closer. She caught him looking distracted by the view down the neckline of her shirt. She didn't mind it from him, at all. He cleared his throat, and looked up again, a flush visible up the back of his neck.

She asked, “what did he say about home?”

Steve shifted again, a small hiss of pain escaping his lips. “After I lost my Ma, Bucky was all I had. I told him that I guessed I’d never get to go home again. During the war, everybody would get worked up about home, especially at holidays. One time when the Howling Commandos were drinking after a mission and toasting home… Jacques asked what home meant to us, to everybody, and their stories sounded great, but, I didn't have an answer. I can’t get drunk, but I was the most wrung out guy there.” He swallowed hard. She kissed his cheek, then nuzzled against him.

He looked up at the ceiling and shared, “Bucky told me, that night, that someday I was gonna find a dame who reminded me what it was all about.” He chuckled, “she would be so pretty… have great pipes, and all the right curves… and, she would be nice and funny and smart… and, she would somehow fall for me anyway. And, I’d fall for her… and, then… I would be home.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I thought it was impossible after I woke from the ice, but, he was right.”

He looked down again, straight into her eyes. She felt herself trembling as he lowered his head and kissed her lips again, so sweetly. He pulled back and told her, “to me… You’re my… home. I love you.” He kissed her again. Much like the first time they kissed, it was so gentle at first, and then so full of promise... only now it also felt like commitment.

Darcy stroked his face, and pushed even closer, wriggling against him. “I love you, too. I am falling so in love with you.” His smile was almost unbearably handsome. She’d never seen him look so happy, and wondered if anyone else had, how many really happy moments he’d had in the past ninety six years. She’d have to ask Bucky to try and remember any happy moments he could with Steve. Her attention returned fully to Steve as he resumed kissing her.

Their kisses built in intensity until he had to pull back and hiss with pain. She groaned, and pouted. Then, she chided him, “if only you hadn’t joined the Neanderthal games this morning!”

He smiled with regret and remarked dryly, “yeah. Right now I wish I’d refused that.” He rubbed her arm and kissed her again. “To be fair, I just thought it was Tony and regular drones that I can easily handle… a sparring match. I didn't expect to get speared. We don’t try to kill each other when sparring, as a rule. All the cuts, burns, breaks… and most of the bruises are already gone
now.”

She leaned her face into his chest by his good shoulder. “It’s gonna take some getting used to, that you can be hurt and healed in a day… for the most part.” She looked up and smiled brightly, “just think of the games we can play where I pretend to kiss and make it better! Only it’ll look like real magic.”

He laughed and kissed her to stop the flow of words. Then he groaned, “okay. I’m imagining that. Damn.”

She teased, “it’d serve you right for that display of testosterone poisoning... and alpha dog pissing... if I stripped down and **begged** you to take me now, while you’re in too much pain!” She raised a brow and made a show of fiddling with a button on her shirt.

Eyes glazed, he rasped, “I’d find a way to…”

She swatted his good arm, “if you say ‘soldier through the pain’, so help me!”

He laughed, and she joined him laughing and then moved back a little bit. She quirked a slight grin. “I AM sorry your shoulder hurts so badly.”

He nodded, “I’m really sorry.”

There was a knock at the door. Steve called out for JARVIS to let the caller in. Darcy sat up as Stark Industries guard entered the room with a large bag of carryout food. He asked, “you ordered this, Captain?” Steve confirmed it, and Darcy spread out their dinner. She chuckled as she searched out her one sandwich among his six. He gave a slight moan as he bit into the first sandwich.

She sat further away while they ate and asked, “how did you get into that ‘sparring’, anyway?”

She took a bite of her sandwich and looked at him expectantly.

He frowned, finished chewing his first bite, and explained. “Well, Tony’s been spoiling for a fight with me for a while, which is nothing new. We nearly came to blows before the Battle of New York, too, the Chitauri fight. That’s part of the attitude you’ve been getting off of him. He’s been trying to rile me up. I thought it might actually help things, if we got some of that worked out by sparring together... and, I had energy to burn.” He grimaced. “I also thought it would be good for the others to see my form after the Vorm thing.”

She nodded. “You always give your teammates what they need.” He shrugged his good shoulder. She asked, “why do you feel you have to prove yourself so much?” He eagerly finished his first sandwich.

He sat still and started on another sandwich while he considered her question. He finally shared, “Dr. Chau has asked me that question about seventeen times since I moved to the Tower. The obvious answer would be that before the serum, I wasn't good enough. I was ‘unfit for duty.’ I wanted to serve, but I couldn't... because I was too sickly, small, and weak.”

She asked, “and the not-so-obvious answer?” He made a face. She added, “you’re a smart guy, and anyone can see that you’re not small or weak... And, you seem healthy enough now.” She ran an appreciative hand over the muscles of his chest and down his stomach.

He shot her a charged look and sighed, “I think it’s more that I’m proving things to myself. I don’t understand why the serum made me better, but went wrong for other men. So, when others question me, it makes me wonder if they see something going wrong.” She heard fear in his voice and wondered if he’d voiced this concern before.
She gave him a slight smile, “I think you’re more than you realize.” He smiled and pushed her hair back behind her ear and kissed her lightly. Then he grabbed another sandwich.

After he’d finished his sandwiches, he yawned. Darcy smiled wearily, “I guess I should go and let you sleep. I’m kind of tired, too.”

He smiled apologetically. There was a knock at the door. Steve asked, “JARVIS? Who’s at my door?”

JARVIS answered, “Agent Navarro wishes to check on your shoulder, Captain Rogers.”

Steve winced. Darcy told him, “Good night! I guess we need to postpone our next date.”

He groaned and shifted a bit. “Saturday?”

She nodded. “Seven sharp! Don’t be late.” His smile was bittersweet.

Steve asked, “kiss me again? Maybe it’ll make me well enough for tomorrow night, like we’d planned.” She laughed and shook her head, but kissed him anyway. He whispered, “I love you.”

She kissed him again, “I love you, too. Feel better.”

She went to the door and answered it to Agent Navarro. Navarro looked tired. She greeted Darcy. “Hello, Miss Lewis. May I see the Captain? I want to change his bandages, and check his healing.”

Darcy invited her inside, “of course. You know, this is the first time I’ve seen you look tired.”

Navarro grinned and sighed, “it reduces patient confidence if I let my guard down when I’m on duty. I’m off duty now.”

Darcy asked, “if you’re not on duty, what are you doing here?”

Navarro shrugged. “Just because some patients are too stubborn to stay where it’s easy for me to help them with their healing, doesn’t mean I stop caring. I’m a little grouchy about having to play twenty questions to take the elevator up here, but the Captain isn’t the only one who takes his duties seriously.”

Darcy nodded, “thanks.”

Navarro replied, “you’re welcome. He’s not the greatest patient, but he’s good… for a man.” She moved past Darcy to greet a rueful-looking Steve.

Darcy chuckled, and went home to rest.

to be continued...
The next morning, Darcy hit the gym early. She used a treadmill in place of Cardio-Dance class, and took earlier strength training, working with different weights than before. When she was in the locker room afterwards, she heard some women discussing the sparring match. They laughed over the thrill of watching hot-bodied men show off their strength and stamina… and reminded Darcy of all that she hated about women in locker rooms. Darcy hurried to escape the vapid conversation.

She wasn't fast enough to avoid hearing them all chime in on who they found most desirable. One woman declared that she’d been with Tony before, like many women at SI, and he was fantastic in bed. Another couldn't stop talking about Hawkeye’s arms. Another chortled that Falcon was her idea of a good time. And, of course, it sounded as though any one of them would volunteer to corrupt Captain America. Darcy wondered if Steve overheard conversations like that often… and, if so, how he stayed humble. On the other hand, she couldn't picture him really liking any of the lunk-ettes, despite how high a quarter might bounce off their stupid asses.

She hurried to grab a newspaper, coffee for herself, and hot chocolate for Erik. He was still having breakfast when she arrived, but was glad to add his drink to that. Darcy called it his ‘breakfast dessert.’ They worked on three puzzles before she had to go.

As she left, she received a message from Steve with another song for her, ‘The Things We Don’t Know About’ by Blue October. She stood still in the hall outside Erik’s for a long time while she listened to the words and breathlessly took time to recover her composure and wipe away happy tears. She chuckled ruefully to herself. Steve was getting the hang of picking songs for her!

Next, she met Natasha for more self-defense training. Natasha looked at her carefully as she entered the room and asked, “Have you been crying?”

Darcy looked sheepish. “Steve did something sweet.” She grinned and bit her lip. Natasha nodded and gave Darcy a small half-smile. Darcy realized that she and Natasha were becoming friends. She felt incredibly honored at the thought.
The drone was ready and obnoxious. Tony had programmed it to provoke them with catcalls and cheesy, sexist comments. Darcy mastered the ankle break move, and reviewed punches. She learned basic moves for attacks on eyes, nose, groin, and knees.

Natasha then spent a long time teaching Darcy blocking techniques that would lessen the effect of blows to her head or body, reviewing them again and again. The key was fast recognition of the attacker's posture so that she could defend herself effectively. While Natasha pulled her punches, the unpleasant hit sensation and a desire to avoid bruises motivated Darcy to pay attention. Natasha noted cryptically that she'd had her early blocking instruction from one of the best, but Darcy found Natasha cryptic so often it almost made her head hurt, so, she didn't bother asking for details. She suspected Natasha’s trainer had been Bucky, and would bet anything that he had NOT pulled his punches.

Next, they began work with common objects, identifying those items that could be used as weapons. Natasha suggested Darcy watch some Jackie Chan movies for other ideas on using everyday items in fighting, and just for the entertainment value of his stunt work. After that, Darcy thanked Natasha, took a quick shower, and dressed.

Thor was in Jane’s lab, discussing Heimdall’s need for a sleep period. Apparently every thousand years or so he got a break, lucky guy! Darcy only paid half a mind to Thor and Jane’s discussion, making good progress on her reports and transcriptions despite interruptions from the lab techs bringing in new equipment.

During a lull in her work in Jane’s lab, she looked at her online courses. Her first physics assignment was surprisingly simple, anatomy- not so much. She laughingly wondered how many people took anatomy with violent intent. She turned to business courses. Statistics were, again, easy as pie. Darcy frowned.

Jane walked up behind her and nudged her. “What’s bothering you?”

Darcy mused, “do you think that kissing Steve could transmit super smarts to me?” She ignored Thor’s laughter. “This coursework is too easy.”

Jane looked over her shoulder at the work on her StarkPad and shrugged after a minute. “You've been doing that kind of stuff for me for three years. It ought to be easy.”

Darcy released a breath she hadn't noticed she was holding. She was smarter than she’d known. The school of hard knocks had paid off! For the first time, she realized that Steve might be right about her. There was more to her than she’d realized!

Newly energized by this line of thought, she finished her assignments and returned to work on Jane’s admin forms. She grabbed them both a quick lunch, straightened her shoulders, and made her way to Tony’s lab. She wondered if he would let her in. He did. He was unusually quiet, for Tony. After she settled in at a counter, he gestured his head towards a stack of paperwork before he turned away again. She noticed that he was pretty far behind, probably because he thought all standard reports beneath him. She worked her way steadily through the stack, waiting for him to talk to her if he wanted.

Tony pulled up a rendering. She stopped the paperwork and watched him organize his thoughts in the multidimensional format, fascinated. She looked down the list of suit nicknames and capabilities, and thought it read like solutions to a psychiatrist’s list of his nightmares.

She read ‘space travel,’ and wished she had the nerve to ask what he had seen through THE wormhole. But, she didn't want to set him off. She guessed it might have the same effect as
someone asking her to lie on a table while they dunked towels in a sink near her head, though with somewhat lower-pitched shrieking.

Instead, she offered, “Wouldn't it be nice if the other Avengers had space suits, too?”

Tony startled and stared at her as though he’d forgotten she was there. He looked back at the list and thought for a moment. “Hulk would have to sit out. Can’t guarantee he wouldn't destroy a suit and don’t know how he would do in space, not to mention the incredible materials cost. Cap, yeah, for sure, though that’s a LOT of titanium. Thor, even MORE titanium, might not need one, but maybe… so, he’d be able to take a look around instead of just jetting on by like usual.” His voice had a raspy quality, like he hadn't spoken much all day before that moment.

She remarked, “Hawkeye will want ‘space arrows.’” It went on the list. Tony looked at her wryly.

She continued, “Natasha has to go if Clint does. And her suit had better be wicked fast and flexible and stuff… like an Iron Cat Suit.” Tony barked a laugh and added it that way. He also wrote ‘Space Falcon.’ His grin faded. ‘Space Pepper’ went on the list.

She asked, “Is that because you need her next to you, or, because if it’s bad enough for all of the Avengers to play ‘Asteroids’ in Iron Man suits she’d better help out?”

He grinned, “exactly. Both.” His expression fell again, lips tight in a pained line.

Techs brought in the pieces of Mark-83. Tony motioned to a corner. Darcy grimaced at it, and went back to the reports while the techs cleaned the drone remains. She completed a report and set it aside and turned to her pad, realizing she’d never seen the Mark-83 before the sparring, and that if she wanted a better idea of what Tony was doing, she’d need to vary her schedule in his lab. She resumed work on the rearrangement she was planning for the other R&D labs. She glanced back and saw Tony staring at his list, more still than she’d ever thought possible.

Finally, she asked, “What’s eating at you? Are you mad about yesterday?”

Tony grimaced and waved his hand dismissively, “nah. And, you’re not a bad person, either, like you said to Barnes and Pepper, just touchy about Steve-o.” His tone was quieter than she’d heard from him before. He had a handful of nuts and dried fruit and admitted, “Today’s the anniversary of my capture in Afghanistan, the day I met Yinsen while sort of sober, though I wasn't coherent enough to do more than scream.” His voice shook.

“Who is Yinsen?” Darcy set her pad aside.

Tony turned to her and replied, “was. Just the man who saved my life in Afghanistan and made me Iron Man. He was from a place called Gulmira- his family, too.” He swallowed a lump in his throat.

She nodded, “good man, then.”

“I didn't deserve it.” He winced.

She asked, “the capture, or the saving?”

Tony chuckled mirthlessly, “exactly. Yeah.”

She comforted him. “Well, you've done a lot of good since then, so, it’s a good thing you were saved.” He sighed. She hesitantly whispered, “why were you screaming?”

He tapped his chest and then laughed at himself as he touched skin and bone. “I forgot for a second
that it’s gone - which is kind of hilarious. I was screaming because they had crap for anesthetic, and he had to cut as much shrapnel out of me as he could, and then make a hole big enough for a magnet that would protect my heart from the shrapnel he couldn't get.” He shook his head and muttered something about a car battery.

“So… why are you here brooding, instead of out partying and celebrating that you’re not in a cave?” Darcy realized she was wringing her hands, affected by Tony's tension.

He grinned, hard and brittle. “I’m trying to prove that Yinsen was right to save me, to believe in me. He didn't want me to waste the rest of my life the way I did the first part.”

She hesitated, “what happened to him?”

“He sacrificed himself to give me time to get the first suit, going so I could escape.” Tony looked almost as haunted as Bucky.

Darcy looked back at the list. “You need a Yinsen drone. What special capabilities would he have?”

Tony stared at her. He then looked at the list and crossed his arms across his chest. He bit out. “Now, you’re kind of pissing me off, Lewis.” She looked puzzled. He groused. “Fresh off the very blue lecture Cap gave me about drones not having souls?”

She sighed. “Well, of course they don’t! Except, I’m not so sure about JARVIS, and I kind of love DUM-E, regardless. But, you could make a drone as a tribute to Yinsen. Maybe he could be a medic drone or something.”

Tony leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek, “medic and scientist, forensics studies, evidence gathering…” He pulled up the template he used as a starting point for drones. He was soon lost in his design. Within minutes he had music going at top volume and was feverishly programming. His posture and expression ten times less tense than before.

Darcy was about to leave when Tony paused the music and noted, “Lewis, that was perilously close to managing me again. Watch it.” She grinned and shook her head. He smirked, “thanks.” He turned his music on again. She waved to him and nodded to the techs as she left.

She spent longer in R&D, pleased to find that an office had been set up for her. Darcy couldn't help but geek out a bit at the fancy equipment. She rendered her new arrangement ideas for the labs and called in one of the engineers who seemed to have good sense. He looked at the rendering and sat down with her to discuss it for a while. Then, she pulled up the staff roster and went over it and all projects. She copied their final data to Tony and Pepper.

She continued work on narrowing the list of people who needed more vetting, in her opinion. Natasha had mentioned that Hydra grew within SHIELD from the science division out. That idea of any of the R&D staff being Hydra haunted Darcy.

She spent her time in Bruce’s lab uneventfully. He was deeply drawn into his work. Darcy showed him a couple of tricks she’d picked up from watching Tony work, but mostly transcribed, filed, and filled out reports for him. A few times when she was transcribing she felt like something in his formulae was tickling her brain, but she decided to give that more thought another day.

Seeing that he was still deep in his work when her time was over, Darcy told him she’d take a day off from yoga and see him Monday, if not sooner. Bruce wished her a good night, hardly seeming to have heard her.
That done, Darcy headed to Healing for a visit with Bucky. He had moved on from Sherlock Holmes to the Three Musketeers. She remarked, “I guess Steve’s kinda like D’Artagnan, all idealistic and sweet.”

Bucky looked at her like she was insane and asked, “What are you talking about? Have you ever read the book?”

She did a double take. “No. I saw a movie when I was a kid, a Disney version.”

He chuckled. “Maybe you should read the book! Since I don’t think you’re deluded, I assume they made changes for the movie. D’Artagnan’s true love is wife to another, and he has no worries about seducing her or the evil lady spy. He’s nothing like Steve. Steve only…”

She frowned and interrupted. “Does it have a happy ending?”

He chuckled, “I’ll let you know when I reach it. I don’t remember.” He sighed, “maybe one benefit of the crap deal I got is that all entertainment is new to me, even stuff I read before.” He shrugged, “I wasn’t the greatest reader or student then, anyway. Neither was Steve…”

She asked, “What were you good at? Before Hydra, I mean.”

He looked thoughtful, narrowing his eyes. “I excelled at looking after Steve, and getting him out of trouble. Sniper work, too. I was a crack shot before any changes.” He grinned, “Girls. I was really good with girls. Steve always said I got my share and his, too… except…”

Darcy made a face and reminded him, “You know that JARVIS transcribes everything we say here, and Tony reviews it. Right?”

He smiled, “no surprise there. Howard was paranoid, too.” He shrugged. “Howard was a good guy, but he didn’t like to get his hands dirty… washed them a LOT. I don’t even think he was all that much of a playboy. He was too smart when I knew him.” He looked troubled.

She grinned, “Tony’s a freakin’ genius… and nothing else like the way you describe Howard.”

Bucky shrugged. He asked, “so, you good with him today? Or, are you avoiding him?”

She smirked a little. “We’re good. He’s almost ‘manageable’…” She figured if Tony was going to be up in her business, she could tweak him by joking about that. She brightened, “Steve told me they’re working on a place for you up on his floor. At least you’ll get out of here!”

He made a face and asked, “and, will I get out of there?” He shook his head, “I don’t know that there’s enough therapy in the world to undo the past seventy years. I did terrible things.” His eyes were even sadder than she’d seen previously.

She frowned and encouraged him. “At least you realize they were bad now. Steve will see that you get chances to do good things.” He grimaced. She jolted and cried, “Crap! Therapy! I’ve got to go see Dr. Chau now.”

As she turned to leave, Bucky called out, “Darcy? Thanks for sticking with me, Doll.”

She ran back and kissed his cheek. “Thanks for being my friend, Bucky, for working to find your way back.”
He smiled at her affectionately and went back to his audio book.

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Darcy had a good session with Dr. Chau, exploring anger and control issues and the potential successes she saw for herself professionally. As they neared the end of her time, Darcy admitted, “I’m kind of nervous about something… not because it’s bad, but because it means so much.”

Dr. Chau seemed expressionless. “Is this about Captain Rogers?”

Darcy nodded, and took a deep breath. “We’ve been getting closer, even exchanged ‘I love you’s’. But, we’ve only been out a few times… and together since just after I came to New York. We planned a date for tonight, but he got hurt again and I haven’t heard from him today, so I’m guessing not. But… whenever… I can’t imagine this date ending at the door.”

She breathed in and out through her mouth and cried, “and he’s perfect, and I’m not perfect! He’s, well, had some experience, and I haven’t. I hope I don’t disappoint him. I can’t believe he wants me.” She put her face in her hands and let herself go, starting with a scream, “Gah! He’s like REALLY perfect, and the girls he was with before were glamorous dancers and so many others want him, and oh, my God! Oh, my God! I’m finally gonna make love, and it’s with HIM and… Oh, my God!” She was shaking.

Dr. Chau, to her credit, did not laugh. She smiled indulgently. “It’s about time you cut loose, Darcy.”

Darcy looked up, “What?” She shook her head. “I’m the one who lets it all hang out. What do you mean?”

Dr. Chau noted, “Since you came to Avengers Tower, you've taken on a lot of responsibility. You were already giving yourself as a touchstone to Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig. You've befriended Dr. Banner, a man most people fear deeply. You soon took up the role of friend and advocate with Sgt. Barnes, trying to draw him out and bring him back to Captain Rogers.”

She added, “with Captain Rogers, you've accepted his advances of friendship- something he’s not known to offer often- and helped draw him out of his grief more and more. You've begun exploring a romantic relationship with him that seems to have the potential to affect the course of your life.”

“You've begun to stretch yourself physically and mentally, with both exercise and therapy. You've taken on more work responsibilities.” Dr. Chau looked thoughtful. “I have few patients who try to take on so much so quickly. If you weren't a bit ‘freaked out’ by something, I would be concerned.”

Darcy put her face back into her hands. “What if I’m not enough for him? What if I’m not good enough?” Tears flowed as she sobbed. Only Darcy could understand her next mangled babbles about Peggy Carter, never measuring up to the person Steve loved most. It wasn't something she wanted to make clear, even to herself- for fear of it being real. Darcy rocked herself to quieter crying and shut thoughts of Steve and Peggy away deep inside.

Dr. Chau leaned forward and handed her a tissue, “Darcy! Is the Cap… pardon me, is Steve, someone you like and respect?”

It took a moment for Darcy to regain enough control to really hear the question. She sat back and quieted. “Of course!”

Dr. Chau asked, “then why do you doubt his judgment and affection? Don’t you think he knows
his own mind and desires?”

Darcy nodded, frowned, and admitted, “it seems too good to be true.” She thought for just the slightest instant that Dr. Chau’s eyes went wide, and a flash of amusement passed across her features, but it was gone as soon as she saw it.

Dr. Chau sighed, “I think you should consider the possibility that you fear disappointing yourself. You seem rather hard on yourself sometimes, Darcy. You are surrounded by strong personalities, yet holding your own and lifting yourself to higher and higher expectations. You are in a relationship with a good man. He initiated it. Why do you think he did that?”

Darcy bit her lip. “Well… I’m his type, physically, apparently. That’s a new thing to me. I don’t mean that I haven’t gotten attention. I just mean that it hasn’t been so good before. If guys have a Madonna-Whore thing, they think I’m the one they want for a whore, usually… if they notice me at all.”

Dr. Chau asked, “are you concerned about how Steve views you?”

Darcy shook her head slowly. “No. I know he likes talking to me… in addition to the physical stuff. He’s my friend… which I think is kind of important when you’re talking about a long-haul kind of relationship. I guess I’m a little worried that I can’t be everything he needs. He’s lost so much. I wonder… maybe that’s what I’m afraid of? I think I’m scared his expectations of me might BE unrealistic. Damn Jane and her big brain! She told me that when he first started spending time with me.”

Dr. Chau encouraged, “I hope as you and Steve talk you will better understand his hopes and desires... and he will do the same regarding yours.”

Darcy sat back and murmured, “Crap. That’s doublespeak if I’ve ever heard it.”

Dr. Chau nodded, grinning. “It is. If it will help at all, I will share that Steve sought time with me this week, too.”

“Can you give me another hint?” Darcy looked at her eagerly.

Dr. Chau smiled, “I’ve shared more than I ought. Just communicate with him! I once heard it said that if you laugh, think, and cry every day, that’s living. You’re doing that. You’ve found a relationship that engages your heart, mind, and now body. It’s a rare thing. I hope that both of you can relax and accept the happiness that comes your way. You’re good people who love each other. I urge anyone I counsel to reach for happiness with all their might, to cling to it as long as it lasts.”

She looked down for a long moment and then leaned forward. “Lovemaking is not a competitive sport. It’s about being with someone, and expressing your affection for them, Darcy. Lovemaking is about allowing your feelings to flow across them physically, and trying to give them pleasure while delighting in their closeness. As anxious as you are to be ‘enough’ for Steve, to please him, it ought to come naturally.”

Darcy dried her eyes, and thanked Dr. Chau, wishing she could shake details of what was on Steve’s mind from the other woman. The notion that Steve might be anxious as well did a lot to restore her equilibrium, though. She was still glad on her way out when she noticed that Dr. Chau’s office door was the same kind that was on Steve’s apartment. Soundproofing for meltdowns and other secrets seemed like a good thing.

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The light was dimming as Darcy entered her apartment. She had mixed feelings. On the one hand, she was tired. It had been a full and emotional day. She felt as though the week had knocked her flat. On the other hand, she was aching for Steve. She longed to kiss and hold him, be close to him. She felt, though, that the idea of going out on dates meant something big to him.

She was still working through her own feelings about lovemaking and intimacy. When she was a teen, her sudden physical development and the attention it brought had been difficult. She decided during middle school that she wasn't mature enough to handle intercourse and would wait at least until college. In college, she didn't find the 'right' guy, had to work hard on her studies, lost her grandparents, and then ended up in the middle of nowhere with Jane. She dated several guys in London, but was never in love… until Steve.

She ordered Chinese food delivery, changed into jeans and a ‘Marvin the Martian’ sweatshirt, and sank down on the sofa into the welcome quiet. She played games online on her pad for a few minutes, and looked at posts. She hadn't seen most of the old friends listed in over three years, had never even met many who were just fellow gamers. But, she couldn't share things about her life. She’d fallen down some rabbit hole when she started working with Jane Foster! After a few more depressing minutes on that train of thought, she set the pad down and sat quietly. Her food finally arrived. She turned on the TV and watched part of one of the Harry Potter movies while she ate.

As she finished eating, there was a knock at her door. She shuffled to open it, smiling tiredly when she saw Steve standing there with a pastry box in one hand.

He greeted her, “Hey! My shoulder’s healed, finally. I’m kind of tired from all of the healing I’ve done lately, but, hoped you might be up for some company for an hour or two… if I came bearing chocolate.” He looked hopeful and sheepish.

She grinned, “do I smell peanut butter, too?”

He nodded. “A Southern bakery down the street has a heavenly chocolate ganache and peanut-butter cream pie. It’s a mark of true affection that I’m willing to share it with you.”

She gestured him in, “I like affection.” She glanced down at herself. “Pardon the chillin’ out clothes.”

Steve shook his head and gestured at his own jeans and t-shirt. “Nothin’ fancy happenin’ here, either. And, I like everything you wear, the smooth and the quirky. You keep me guessin’.” He walked past her, and set the pastry box on the oversized ottoman and looked at the TV screen. “Ah! ‘Order of the Phoenix’… one of few movies I like better than the book.”

Darcy followed him in, grinning. “I was so glad to see that you have the Harry Potter books. I grew up on them.” He winced as she queried, “have you read them all?”

He nodded. “I had to tear through them before Tony realized what I was reading and spoiled it.” He pulled forks and napkins out of the edge of the pie box, and handed one set to her.

She sat by him and took a bit of the pie, straight out of the box. “Holy crap, it’s delicious! You really like me.”

“I do.” He laughed and kissed her.

They enjoyed the pie and the movie, but were both yawning. She noted, “I guess it’s a good thing we’re not going out tonight. It probably wouldn’t be romantic if we both fell asleep.”

He chuckled, “I guess not…” He cleared his throat and blushed. “So, tomorrow night? Dinner and
dancing?” He put the pie box in the trash and moved towards the door.

She smiled, “I’m going to try to sleep in tomorrow. Hopefully I’ll be better company after that.” She hesitated for a moment, “Sounds good. What time?”

He laughed shortly. “We talked about 7:00, but you can decide. I’m liable to ask to meet up in the morning.”

She chuckled, “Sweet talker! 7:00… at night… it is.”

“Sounds good. Darcy?” He hugged her tightly.

She answered, “Steve?”

He stumbled verbally and blushed, “I’ll dream… I mean, good night… I mean, sweet dreams… I…”

She answered, “I love you, too.”

He blurted, “I love you!”

She laughed, “I know. Good night.” They kissed, softly and sweetly.

After he left, she went straight to bed. Her talk with Chau had helped her to see how hard she was pushing herself. Sleep eluded her though. She turned on music, and pulled up a playlist of songs that fit her current mood. She didn't even realize she’d started singing along until her phone buzzed.

The text from Natasha read, ‘Skip that emo song… that you’ve played 42 times already today, and wailed to more than once, NOW… or I will record you and send Steve the recording.’

Blushing furiously, Darcy deleted Ella Mae Bowen’s ‘Holding Out for a Hero’ from her playlist, and moved on to Katy Perry’s ‘Legendary Lovers’.

to be continued...
“The way you make love? I’m gonna have to freakin’ carb up.”

Chapter Summary

Steve and Darcy have another date w/dinner, dancing, and lovemaking.

Chapter Notes

Darcy's 1st Date dress, but in 'Cap' royal blue, http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/originals/b0/c9/a2/b0c9a2adf056b87a5e154e9e9e39633e.jpg

THANK YOU McGregorsWench for Beta help. Any errors are mine.

THANK YOU dear readers. I treasure feedback, esp COMMENTS! :)

Darcy woke a little after 7:30. She tried to go back to sleep, but, she was too excited. She crawled out of the bed to the bathroom and then looked in her closet, wondering what to wear that night. She started trying things on, gauging her dissatisfaction while knowing how much harder it would be without the choices Jai had provided. She narrowed her dress options to three. Thinking about the painting Steve had done of Peggy in red, she hung the red dress back in the closet. She liked the color, but she didn't want to feel like a Peggy-wannabe, or make Steve sad by bringing up memories. She'd worn red for work that one day, but this was different.

She was getting too far into her own head and making herself crazy. A glance at her watch alerted her that if she hurried, she could just make it to the gym in time for a Cardio-Dance class. Afterwards, she grabbed a skinny vanilla for herself and hot chocolate for Erik. He'd gotten to visit both Bruce and Jane's labs during the week and would have lots to chat about. Darcy hoped it might distract her at least a little bit from her nervous excitement. The butterflies in her stomach were dancing like mad.

As she entered the elevator, the guy who'd asked for one of her drinks before smirked, “sweet stuff with sweet stuff, again!” Stepping closer, he seemed desirous to talk further. Darcy's lack of interest gave him pause. She sighed and turned away as a hand caught and forced the doors to reopen.

The air crackled with new energy. Darcy eased back a little as Steve stepped into the elevator, his look of mischief bringing a large smile to her face. He pushed a loose strand of her ponytail behind her ear, leaned down, and kissed her for a long, dizzying moment. “Hey!”

With a gasp of pleasure, she chuckled. “Hey, yourself. Good run?” He nodded happily, and then glanced at the guy who had spoken to her, looking at him with narrowed eyes. Darcy stifled the urge to roll her eyes, opting to face front. When they reached the last of the unrestricted levels, the elevator cleared out except for Darcy and Steve.

He grinned ruefully. “Sorry.”

She laughed. “You are not!” Steve tried to look innocent, and she shook her head. He smiled and
moved closer. Darcy protested. “I’m a mess.” He leaned down and kissed her gently, and then slowly pulled back, looking as though he really didn’t want to stop. The heated look in his eyes warmed her through. Her reservations about being a mess evaporated.

Steve’s demeanor was intense. “I look forward to going out later.”

Careful not to spill, Darcy set the drinks down and then launched herself at him, pulling him in for an intense bout of kissing. The feel of his lips against her own was addictive. He responded with fervor, groaning with pleasure and letting his hands roam. Soon, both Steve and Darcy stifled moans of delight. As the elevator slowed, she moved away and leaned down to retrieve the drinks. He sighed shakily.

In an attempt at flirtation, Darcy let out a throaty whisper. “Does that mean you like being attacked in the elevator?”

He made a half-laughing noise. “Only by you!”

She looked at him blankly, puzzled by his tone, and nodded as she backed out of the elevator. “Okay, then. See ya tonight.” His smile was even brighter than when he’d first seen her.

She had a good visit with Erik. They compared notes about his times in the labs. Then she skimmed the headlines on his newspaper and turned to the puzzles. He seemed more lucid and moved with controlled ease, as though his meds were finally under control. She watched his reactions carefully. “Are you about ready to start back to work?”

Erik’s expression was serious. He nodded. “I think I am. I’m not sure where I could get funding now, though. Know anyone who likes their scientists on the crazy side?” His expression was teasing, hopeful.

She grinned. “You’re in the right place, and I’ve got connections. You’re hardly any crazier than Tony Stark. You should see him work! How about a Stark Industries grant? Want me to start the application process for you?”

He nodded agreement. “That’d be ideal. Rumor has it that the lab administrator is a bit dangerous, though.” He winked at her.

She chortled. “Ha! Not to you.” He hugged her. Darcy saw Ilsa crack a grin for the first time since they’d met.

After she left Erik’s, she had a refreshing shower and tried to call Jane. When Jane didn’t answer, Darcy frowned, but then admitted to herself that Jane wasn’t that great about clothes, anyway. It was time to choose an outfit, to ‘woman up’. Toying with her phone, she looked at the image of Steve’s painting of her. She looked from that image to her dresses. With a decisive nod, she went to the closet and put both of them back and pulled out a royal blue skirt and top set that quickened her pulse on sight. It had a daring sweetheart neckline with gathers at the shoulders, and cap sleeves. The blue did nice things for her eyes. She shimmied into it and stared at herself in the mirror. It was sexier than anything she’d ever worn before. The neckline wasn’t too low, but, it showed cleavage and it hugged and highlighted her curves. A decorative bow adorned the cinched waist, and a little flounce at the base of the top softened the hip line. A search through shoes Jai had sent had her sighing with delight when she came across black suede Manolo pumps. She turned this way and that in front of the mirror, nervous and excited. Then, she took the outfit off and laid it on her bed.

She threw on jeans and a soft blouse with the shoes, walked around in her apartment for a few
minutes to get used to the structure of the shoes, and carefully made her way up to the rooftop garden. The concrete flooring there was great for scuffing the bottoms of the shoes so she wouldn't slip and bust her ass in them. With ear buds in, she cranked up a feel-good song and danced along. She needed to get over nerves. She started into a second song, one with a salsa tempo, and moved with abandon, trying to lose herself in the rhythm.

When she opened her eyes, laughter burst from her. Natasha waited a few feet in front of her, looking amused. Darcy smiled. “Hey!”

Natasha nodded, a speculative look on her face. “Nice moves.” Darcy sat on a nearby bench and continued wiggling her feet to scuff the shoes further. Natasha watched the motion and remarked. “Sandpaper works, too.” The redhead looked off into the distance, quiet for a long moment before she finally shared her thoughts. “Steve’s anxious that you’re going to change your mind about the age difference being okay, just so you know.” Natasha had a pensive expression. “And, he’s terrified that he’ll push you away by coming on too strong. He’s wound up incredibly tight, even for him. Sitting still to heal drove him crazy yesterday. He ran about 60 miles this morning to burn off excess energy, and then took Barnes out with him to clean up a train derailment and clear survivors to a hospital, following your idea of taking Barnes out to do good things. Thor tagged along in case there was a problem, just so you know. But, so far, so good.” She checked her phone, and nodded confirmation.

Darcy shook her head, amazed. “And I thought that ‘I’ was getting too caught up in my own head!” Natasha nodded and chuckled as she walked away. Darcy wondered how Natasha knew so much, but decided it was best to chalk it up to the spy’s superior ninja skills.

Darcy went back to her place for lunch. She watched some TV, studied, and cleaned her apartment. Though time passed slowly, the afternoon finally began to wane.

So, she took a longer shower and prepared for the night out. Nervousness increased as she chose lingerie. She went with a royal blue lace bra and bikinis set that would work nicely under the dress-and highlight her form if things went THAT way. The red rhinestone heart accent at the center front of the bra made her feel extra pretty. She put on the skirt and top, and slipped into the shoes. She decided to forgo jewelry other than earrings, and brushed out her hair so it fell in natural waves. She went back to the living room and uttered a prayer of thanks for whoever so frequently programmed Harry Potter movie marathons. They were always entertaining; no matter how many times she saw them.

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She heard Steve’s knock, turned off the TV, took a deep breath, and then opened the door. The flowers in his hand were lovely, but the look on his face was better. He seemed delighted almost to the point of breathlessness, if that sort of thing was possible for him. With a kiss on his cheek, she accepted the flowers and got a vase. He walked in behind her, and closed the door quietly.

His tailored navy shirt was open at the neck. His trousers were black and fitted so perfectly that she felt her mouth go dry as she looked him over. She set the vase on a side table and turned as he came closer. Near dizziness filled her head, her thoughts abuzz.

He pulled her gently close, encircling her in his arms. She laid her head against his chest and sighed contentedly. The scent that was uniquely ‘Steve’ helped settle her nerves. He stroked her back and she leaned into his kiss. She was shivering more than ever, aware that they were in love and oh, so ready to make love. Steve deepened the kiss, and she was amazed by the power of the yearnings she felt. Shudders of desire sparked through her. She KNEW that he was the right guy; that she wanted to make love with him. She swore to commit the moment to memory. It was
unique in her life so far.

Steve murmured. “So beautiful…” Then, he took a breath, stepped back, and kissed her hand.
“Shall we go, Miss Lewis?”

She nodded and quirked a wanting grin. “I think we’d better!”

He grinned ruefully and nodded. In the hallway, he tucked her arm in his. It was such a sweet, old-fashioned gesture that it almost hurt her heart. In the down elevator, he caressed her hand gently and kissed it once or twice. His tenderness provoked her emotions.

In the garage, Steve led her to a car. It took her a moment to register that it was a Porsche Carrera. She moaned with pleasure at the feel of the interior and the comfortable squeak of the leather seats, and shook her head. “Tony’s a pain in the ass, but he’s got amazing taste in cars!”

Steve ducked his head slightly. “Um... this one’s mine.” She couldn't hide her shock. He grinned. “I had a lot of back pay, once my status was cleared up. God bless Howard! He believed in me so much that he invested the little money I had and turned it into something; set it up in an account for me to access on my return. He had the Midas touch, ya know?” He gestured at other cars in the garage. “Tony does have amazing cars. They inspired me.” He nodded. “I used my bike while I lived in DC, and have a new one on order since I wrecked it escaping. But, a guy needs a car if he’s gonna take his girl out in the style she deserves. So…” He saw her expression and grinned. “I don’t have many expenses. I indulged on this.”

Darcy blinked again. “So, you don’t have to ‘work’ to pay your bills. You just save the world and all, because it’s the right thing to do.”

He nodded. “Kinda like Tony, though he has a lot more money. He’s a royal pain in the ass and sometimes dangerous, but he puts his life on the line, volunteers his resources, does it all because he woke up one day and realized he needed to turn himself around and make the world better.” He pulled out into traffic, and stopped talking so he could focus. He was a good driver, aggressive without being obnoxious.

Darcy grinned. “I didn't think you could get any better. And, here you are with the sweetest of cars, all fancy dressed like a 21st century guy!”

He ducked his head slightly, “I couldn't manage the clothes on my own. Pepper gave advice.”

Darcy nodded and giggled. “I’d be wearing a baggy sweater and high top sneakers if not for her.”

He looked her over and smiled. “I like you in anything, though that’s really special.”

She shook her head. “Thank you, but, it’d be awkward if I dressed raggedy while you’re all spiffy.”

He grinned. “She was jazzed when I asked her to tell me what to wear tonight.”

Darcy laughed. “Oh, God! Our little Tower world is insane. My new boss dressed my date.”

They reached their destination. Darcy stifled a giggle as the valet all but drooled over the car. Steve gave him a stern look while handing over the keys. He helped her out and took her hand. She felt light-hearted as they entered the restaurant. Steve murmured, “hope you like this place. Pepper recommended it. I thought maybe it would be a little nicer and more modern than some.”

Darcy felt giddy as she took his arm again. They sat at a roof-top terrace table. There was no starlight visible, but twinkle lights and candles all around. A live quintet played. Several couples
were dancing. She whispered. “It’s perfect.”

When they reached the table, Steve pulled out her chair and helped her get settled. He sat across from her and reached across the table for her hand. “I want to make up to you for stupid stuff I’ve done lately. You’ve been amazing. I haven’t had a relationship like I want this to be before… ever.”

She smiled and winked at him. “Go on.”

The waiter took their drink orders. Darcy noticed Steve evaluating people around them vigilantly. She followed his gaze. “I take it we need to watch our mouths here?” She smiled to herself as she saw a lady eyeing Steve lustily while he didn't seem to notice it at all.

He shrugged. “Everything seems okay. It’s still best to be a little circumspect. We’re not in the Tower, after all.”

She looked up with faux-nonchalance. “Nice weather.”

He chuckled and sat back. “How was your week?” He looked at her steadily, and she realized she’d come to take this for granted. He focused on her completely. She loved it. Warmth sparked along her skin just from the way he paid attention to her.

She grinned slightly and concentrated on responding. “Full! Th… uh, Jane’s friend, joined me visiting Erik and stole most of my hot chocolate. Tony’s crap actually caused Jane to realize that my work merits pay; and then, Pepper told me that since I kept Jane from going off the science radar the years she was sulking over ‘her friend’ being gone, I’m more a manager than an intern. My willingness to work with Bruce is apparently a unique thing, and he also helped convince Pepper I was more qualified than I would have ever guessed.”

Her chuckle sounded wry. “Tony’s sort of tolerating me in his lab, but seems happy for me to work with his ‘minions’ as he calls them. So, yay, cool new job duties! Tony hasn't made good on any of his threats against me yet, and Bruce mostly ignores me for science.” Steve’s eyes narrowed. She raised a brow at him. “Yoga is awesome, and I realized at the pool that I’ve been waiting for the other shoe to drop ever since London. You know that I've still got some weird… water issues.” She grimaced. “But, I don’t want to think about that or the ‘Neanderthal games’ thing. The rest was pretty good.”

Steve nodded. “Is that all?” He sipped and approved the wine.

She shook her head. “Nah. I love Cardio-Dance and hate strength training, since I have no strength, and Natasha is trying to teach me to be terrifying. Apparently tazing Tony was enough for the engineers and scientists in the secondary R&D areas to fear me already, though. Good thing few of them have seen me at ‘lack-of-strength’ training! Some of them do Cardio-Dance, but, I don’t disgrace myself there. I’ve got a long way to go before I get in shape, but I’m having fun.”

He grinned, a bit of snarky-Steve coming out to play. “I love your shape just the way it is, but you can come running with me anytime.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Right! I’ve heard about your running. No way! I figure if I was the ultimate sadomasochist, I’d do water aerobics, but I prefer something dance-y.” She raised a brow and teased. “I considered a pole dance class.” He choked on his wine. She laughed. “Not really.” He gave her a chiding look and shook his head. She smiled sweetly, savoring the tease. “Is running your favorite exercise?”

He shrugged. “It’s one of ’em. I try to make the most of what I was given. And, I couldn't run when
I was a kid, too sick, so it’s nice that I can now. I like martial arts, too. I’ve studied those… a lot… in the past couple of years. That discipline is a part of what Natasha does. It could be useful to you, too, if you really want to scare people.”

She nodded. “So, is that all you did after the Battle of New York? Run? Study fighting?”

They ordered their food, and he replied. “Nah. I trained a lot, though I’m a pretty quick study at that kind of thing now. But, first I took a vacation, saw a bit of the world as a tourist for a change.”

She nodded approvingly. “Where did you go?”

He smiled. “Disney World was fun. Long ride down on the bike, but, I heard it was the thing to do.”

She grinned. “Could you even fit on the teacups?” He chuckled and shrugged. She rolled her eyes. “It’s like watching Jane’s friend try to fit inside a car… or elevator. Just not right!”

He continued. “I went to National Parks, different cities and towns and such, kinda wherever my bike took me.” She nodded and sipped her wine. He looked far away. “I spent a month seeing Europe, too. Nice train system there.”

She was curious. “What made you come back? Do you feel like you’ve seen enough of the world?”

He frowned, shook his head, and sipped his wine. “In part it was Tony, believe it or not, and, please don’t tell him.” She looked at him expectantly, an amused expression on her face that faded as he offered his awkward explanation. “There I was, taking it easy and… well; I ‘met’ a few girls along the way, pretty, but so self-centered and shallow.” He blushed and frowned. “One night I was talking to a girl and feeling lonelier with her than I did alone, when I saw Tony on the TV. He was running his mouth like always, but, he was rebuilding New York and obviously so in love with Pepper… living right. It made me ashamed. I’d been putting off… the folks in DC… long enough, I thought, especially considering Peggy’s role there. So, I signed up and started training to improve my fight style and marksmanship, and then started taking assignments with that group with Nat.”

He shook his head and pulled a face, obviously second-guessing himself for telling her all he had.

She stroked his hand a little, trying not to dwell on jealous feelings raised at the thought of him with other girls (who, in her mind’s eye, looked like the gossips she’d heard at the gym that morning, but more gorgeous). He cleared his throat, his tone apologetic. “While it makes me crazy when other guys pay attention to you, I’ve done more that could raise trust questions than you have. You’re just nice to people, except for zapping Tony for me, of course. It’s a part of what I love about you. I guess it’s like what you were talking about with Bucky last week. Maybe, I doubt myself?” He made a face and asked ruefully. “By the way, how did you know that Sharon was Peggy’s niece?”

She made a noise of amusement. “The day of the Vorm attack someone referred to her as Agent Carter. You looked at her like she reminded you of someone. I added it up.” She grinned. “Bucky laughed at me for the first time that day! He laughed! I got the feeling he hadn't done that in a really long time.”

Steve took a deep breath. “I’ve gone back to Washington a few times to get intel since we found him, and Natasha gave me some info. You’re right. He wasn't laughing.” He looked pained.

She sipped her wine. “How is construction coming for moving him up to your floor?”

Steve explained. “The staff is working on a special unit for him, a design of Tony’s that takes extra
time. It’s coming along. And, Jane is trying to duplicate something they do…” he looked around them, “where she visited a few months ago.”

Darcy blurted, “Bruce, too?” She took a bite of her food.

Steve looked at her oddly and shrugged. “I don’t really know what Bruce is working on right now.”

She swallowed and clapped a hand over her mouth as realization hit. “Shit. Oops!” More than worrying about indiscretion with Steve, she realized that she’d previously missed similarities in Jane’s and Bruce’s formulae, though their approaches to the problem differed. She pulled out her phone quickly and typed in an idea so she wouldn't forget. Then, she remembered Tony reacting in a similar way to her comment that Jane was working on energy formulae. She pulled a rueful face and half-glared at Steve as she realized she’d stumbled between Steve and Tony again, all on her own.

Steve nodded as though her revelation made sense. “I won’t say a word.” They ate their meal and chatted about their travels. He was fascinated by her descriptions of the night sky over New Mexico.

When they were done eating, Steve took a deep breath, glancing at the dance floor. “I don’t know much about how to do it, but, would you care to dance?”

She nodded yes. “Another myth dispelled! In movies it looks like everyone back then was always Swing dancing and doing the Rumba.”

He grimaced as he stood and reached for her hand. “I never learned. The closest I’ve come is fight training.”

She grinned at him with happy confidence. “Well, I can help you! My parents died when I was little, and my grandparents loved to dance. I’ve always loved to. It comes easy to me. Pawpaw taught me, so I can even do it like a bona-fide lady. You’re a quick study. Just don’t get confused and throw me off the roof.” She could see as they took the floor that he was a bit emotional, not nervous, but acting like this was an especially big deal to him. She also saw him watching other men on the floor, noting how they moved. She touched his face to turn his attention back to her. “Hey! Just relax, and be with me.” It occurred to her that she was echoing Chau’s description of lovemaking.

He nodded, and she saw that emotional look on his face again as he looked down at her appreciatively. “That is the point… to be with you.”

He was thankful the music was slower. The lyrics were nice, too. ‘…red roses too. I see them bloom for me and you. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.’ He recognized those lyrics from one of the songs on the playlist Darcy had gifted to him, though this version was different. He put a hand at her back, and took her hand in his own.

He confessed. “I’ve read about dancing some. The internet is pretty useful.” He bit his lip and lowered their hands, glancing down at their feet.

She chuckled. “You watched videos, didn't you?” He looked embarrassed. “That’s adorable!” She followed him in a simple side-step pattern, glad when he released some tension from his frame. She smiled. “Maybe you should kiss me now, so you can stop worrying about where to put your hands.”
He threw his head back and laughed. “I don’t think kissing you will stop me from thinking about where to put my hands. But, I like the suggestion.”

She blushed, and giggled. The giggle faded away as they kissed and she caught the rhythm of their bodies moving together. After a few heavenly minutes, the band played a faster song. They pulled apart and followed that rhythm, diffusing some of the tension between them.

After a while, they returned to their seats for a break. She was breathless. “I’m gonna need to work out like a maniac to BEGIN to keep up with you.” He suppressed a grin and sipped his wine. She shook her head. “Wow! You’re like ‘Mr. Innuendo’ tonight!”

He apologized, and then sat back. “So, do I have to wait long for our next date?”

She shrugged, and then blurted. “Let’s see when this one ends.” He looked into her eyes steadily.

He admitted. “All I can seem to think of are things I’d like for us to do together.” She shot him a look. He smiled broadly. “You’re the one making an innuendo now! I meant things like going to art exhibits, plays, movies, and more.”

She laughed at herself. “I’d like that, too.” She blushed, and looked down. The thought of his kisses was distracting and tantalizing.

He sighed heavily, and kissed her hand. His voice was husky. “You’re so beautiful, Darcy.”

She grinned softly. “Thank you. Back at ya, handsome.” The air between them felt even more charged. She licked her lips, and his eyes followed the motion. She pulled his hand to her and kissed it, causing him to smile again.

He stood and pulled her up. “Come on, Sweetheart. Let’s dance some more.” He held her closer as they began to move together again.

When the music was slow, Darcy felt herself melting into him. The line between dance and lovemaking blurred further with each kiss and touch. After a while, even fast music was giving her lusty ideas. His touch had her shivering with pleasure. An hour later they were back in the car, heading to the Tower. Darcy smiled as Steve hummed along with jazz tunes and drove.

The drive back was quiet at first. She wanted to lighten the mood, so she asked, “Is it a scandal that Captain America drives a German-made car?”

He replied dryly. “Tony headed that one off. He bought me a Ford Model-T the Christmas after the Chitauri battle, so I have an American-made car, too.” They both laughed. He shrugged. “I wouldn’t ever drive it, but, I kind of like it.”

She grinned. “Sporty!”

He nodded. “It was all-the-rage back in the day, a little before I was born. My ma would’ve loved it.” His expression grew somber. “I feel bad that I haven’t asked about your parents before. What happened to them?”

She sighed. “It’s not the kind of thing you just slip into everyday conversation. It’s a conversation stopper, ya know?” He nodded. She shrugged. “My mom was a science type, of all things. Daddy was a musician. I’m not really sure how they ended up together.”

Steve suggested, “Maybe, they balanced each other out.”
She shrugged. “I don’t remember that much. They were in a car accident when I was five. I remember that my mom told me that instead of being just any princess, I should be a smart one. My dad told me to look for the sweet laughter and emotions in life. My grandparents gave me all of my dad's albums and CD's, and his personal compositions and recordings. Listening to them over the years has made me feel like I know him a little.” Steve nodded, understanding the depth of her feeling for music, finally.

She sighed. “My dad’s parents took me in. I was so lucky to have them! I lost Mamaw three years ago. Pawpaw passed a year before she did.” She smiled sadly. “That’s how I lost track of the credits I needed to graduate. I was kind of... out of it... for a while there.” She grinned. I’m probably more familiar with music from your time than anybody else in the Tower, except of course Peggy. Pawpaw made me watch ‘The Lawrence Welk Show’ reruns with him every week.” Steve shook his head to indicate lack of familiarity. She explained, “He was a bandleader. Had champagne bubbles, dancers, Lennon Sisters, Big Band music… like Glenn Miller.”

Steve smiled. “Nice man. I met him at a USO center once.” He shook his head and frowned. “Strange disappearance!”

She shook her head in amazement. “Well, his music stood the test of time pretty well. It’s not like it plays on pop radio, but it seems like everybody knows it. My high school jazz band played some.”

Steve grimaced, and shook his head, muttering, “the test of time...” When they got out of the car, she reached for his hand and gave him a reassuring kiss. He looked at her searchingly, kissed her cheek, and kept hold of her hand.

All the way up in the elevator, Darcy tried to work up the nerve to ask Steve to spend the night with her. He had an arm around her shoulders. She leaned against him, trying not to breathe so heavily it would broadcast her lust. He was silent and still. She was wound tightly with desire. When the elevator opened at her floor, she took a deep breath and whispered, “Could we go to your place?”

He let out a loud breath, requested his floor and grabbed her to him tightly, kissing her soundly as the doors closed. “Lord, yes!” He rained kisses down her neck and moved a hand up to cup one of her breasts, groaning with pleasure at the soft firmness. She was literally panting with desire as he gently touched his lips to hers. The elevator door opened. He half carried her to the door to his apartment. Once they were inside, he slammed the door closed behind them, and pulled her hard against him again. He moaned with pleasure as he moved both hands to her breasts, groaning, “Oh, my God!” He moved his lips to hers again. Their tongues barely touched. She took his lower lip between her two, bit it lightly, and moaned with pleasure. They both trembled.

Steve’s breathing was ragged. He forced himself to pull back and tried to still his trembling. “Darcy! I’m sorry! I’m practically attacking you!”

He looked horrified until she laughed throatily and begged, “More, please! Don’t make me beg... too much.” He groaned, and pulled her against him again. The hard lines of his body incited her. She ran her hands up his chest to his shoulders, and then pressed open-mouthed kisses to his throat. He groaned, and lifted her off the ground so he could plunder her mouth with more abandon and ease. When he moved down to kiss the swell of her breasts, she moaned. “I'm glad your place has good sound proofing.”

He breathed out hard. “Me, too! You have my undying gratitude for suggesting we come up here. I..” He leaned down and whispered. “I've been dreaming of pleasing you, hearing you moan... and cry out...”
Darcy felt his words burn through her. “Ohhh...” He swept her up in his arms and took her to his bedroom. She noticed that he’d cleaned the room, removed Peggy’s picture from the dresser (thank the gods!) and put a plant in its place, and left one low lamp on before he left. “You were pretty sure of yourself, weren't you?”

He shook his head. “No. Not at all. I was afraid of all sorts of things that seem crazy, now that you're here.” He laid her on the bed and sat beside her.

She lay back and smiled seductively. “Can we make love now?”

He swallowed hard and nodded. “Oh…yes.” He stared at her, looking as though he was afraid to move. He rasped, “I love you so much. You’re so beautiful, and loving, and generous, and brave…everything I ever wanted, and more.” He shook his head. “Like I told someone earlier this week, it seems almost too good to be true!”

She laughed out loud. “It was Chau, wasn't it? Cuz she almost broke poker face and laughed at me when I told her that about you yesterday.”

His smile grew, and he joined her laughing. Then, he kicked off his shoes and shifted to lie next to her. He ran one hand up from her hip, over her curves. His touch and his expression were almost reverent. “Is it okay to admit I think that you have some of the most magnificent breasts ever created?” He continued to trail his fingers over her, against the curve of her neck and down her arms. He caressed the inside of her wrist, and kissed the palm of her hand.

She sighed a half-laugh and focused on how safe she was with Steve, how loving his touch was. She managed to reply. “Only if I can admit that your body is incredible, like the man inside.” He ducked his head, looking almost bashful.

They began to kiss again, slowly and with growing intensity, taking their time. She began to tremble more against him, her body shifting with longing. She moaned deep in her throat and saw him close his eyes and still for a few seconds. He gave her a feathery light kiss. “I love you, Darcy.”

Her emotions rose along with her arousal. He captured her lips again and began to tease her mouth more intensely, tasting and nipping, and then moving in for long, deep kisses that left her gasping for air and moaning with pleasure. Finally, he shifted her so that he could work the zipper on the back of her top. She groaned, “You did recon, didn't you?”

He undid the zipper in one smooth motion. “Of course, I did.” He pulled her to sitting, and lifted the top with gentle reverence. He tossed it to a chair. “Gorgeous outfit.” She reached down and slid off her heels and dropped them at the foot of the bed. He gasped as he looked at her. “Beautiful woman!” He leaned down and kissed across her stomach as she fell back, and then he kissed up to the lacy bra. She was running her hands over every muscle she could reach, amazed at the planes and dips of his physique, and then into his hair, feeling as though her body might combust. He reached behind her and loosed the bra, kissing behind the trailing straps as he peeled it away.

She clumsily worked at the buttons of his shirt. “Too many clothes.” Moans escaped her as he continued to explore her with his lips. Nearing frenzy, she finished unbuttoning. Steve obligingly pushed his shirt back while she pulled it free. It fell off the side of the bed. He returned to tormenting her with gentle kisses along her exposed skin. Then, he moved back up to kissing her lips, and they both groaned with the pleasure of feeling skin pressed against skin. Her eyes flew open. “Oh! I take to pill to regulate my periods. Do we need anything else?”
He shook his head. “I take a pill now, too. One of your scientists made it with super swimmers in mind.”

She murmured, “God bless ‘em.”

Steve hesitated. “Of course, I can wear…” He started to move away.

She shook her head, and pulled him back. “You don’t get sick, and this is my first. Can we skip that? Please?”

He breathed raggedly. “It’ll be my first time without.” A shiver of anticipation ran through Steve. His eyes were blown wide.

She smiled. “Good. That’s nice.” She looked heavenward and pleaded. “Please, God… No alien invasion tonight!” She ran a hand down the muscles of his chest and abdomen, then back up. His body mesmerized her.

Steve nodded emphatically. “Amen!”

He gently caressed her face, teased the sensitive skin of her neck and breasts, and then moved to undo her skirt zipper. Darcy lifted her hips as he pulled the skirt down and off of her. It joined the other part of her outfit on the chair. They both worked on his belt and pants closures and pushed his pants down. Then, he sat up and pushed them off to the floor. It seemed to Darcy that Steve then slowed things almost unbearably. While she frantically reached and grasped at him, he caressed her slowly and thoroughly, trailing tingling kisses all over. She felt like a trembling, moaning mess, more and more aroused.

Steve brought her closer and closer to the edge of bliss. He groaned. “I need to learn everything that pleases you.” She nearly cried as he slid a hand down her hip, toward her center. He murmured huskily, “Je t’aime, Chérie.”

She cried out, “I warned you about that!” Darcy pushed against him, hard. Laughing, he allowed her to push him so he lay on his back. He stopped laughing as she straddled him and started to grind, breasts bouncing as she caressed and kissed him with abandon. She heard and felt a tear. He apologized for ripping her panties at the hip, and she laughed breathlessly as he stripped them away. She was pleased by the lusty noises he made, and the fact that she could see he was gritting his teeth while he hissed with pleasure from her attention. She growled playfully, “I need to learn to please you, too!”

Steve moaned deeply as they explored each other with less and less restraint. Soon, his boxers joined the other clothes on the floor, and she was on her back again with him touching her intimately. Steve was shaking as she cried out through the first orgasm. Her response was everything he’d dreamed, and more. He slowed things again as he began to explore her more leisurely.

She cried out with delight, begging for more. The next orgasm was a long, slow wave of pleasure. She murmured, “ohhhh, Steve!” He let out a sound close to sob of joy.

Finally, he moved between her thighs. Steve pressed against her entrance. Darcy threw her head back and moaned, reaching one foot around the back of his leg. He eased in slowly, gasping and then murmuring words of love and soothing comfort. Darcy opened her eyes wide, seeing in his face that the possibility of hurting her was an agony to him. She kissed him as she groaned against discomfort and struggled to relax. He stilled and waited—gently kissing her, caressing her tenderly, soothing. His arms and shoulders trembled, and she knew it was either from emotion or the effort.
of restraint... since he not only had no problem supporting his own weight on his arms, but could also lift a car without assistance from a gravity shift.

Darcy breathed in and out loudly as she forced herself to relax, her body to grow accustomed to the feel of him. The discomfort gradually eased. She began to move, pulling back from him and then closer. Steve's trembling increased. His eyes were closed tightly, his face a mask of concentration. She bit her lip, and shifted beneath him more. He moaned, a guttural sound. She took up a slow rhythm, moving him into her further. As Darcy began to sigh with pleasure, he opened his eyes and began to move with her, gently. Anxiety faded, and pleasure began to build again. She found herself begging for more, fairly babbling. He quickened the pace and she began to come apart around him. She moaned. “Steve! I love you!” He rode out her orgasm as it roiled through her. Finally, he made a noise like a harsh growl and she felt him spasm into her quick and hard, causing her to begin shaking with pleasure again. He stilled for a moment, his head down against her shoulder while she continued to pulse with pleasure and cry his name.

He leaned down and kissed a tear from next to her eye. “Love you. Oh, Darcy! You feel so good.”

She breathed hard and circled his neck with her arms. “My love!” Her smile nearly split her face, she was so delighted.

He was breathing hard, too. He cradled her against him, bodies still joined. He kissed her face, rained kisses down her shoulder. His hands ran through her hair and then he massaged her back.

She returned his kisses, giddy from pleasure. She stilled as she realized that she felt him hardening again inside of her. Her eyes widened with surprise. “Is that normal, or is it a serum gift?”

He nodded slowly. “Serum. Thank God I’m finally with someone I trust. I was too scared of a tell-all book, or seeming like a… I haven’t been fully satisfied since…”

Darcy began to move against him languorously. Pleasure built again as he shifted the angle of how they fit in a way to please her even more. “Who needs Cardio-Dance? I’ll just make love with you. These pelvic thrusts are infinitely better.” She pushed him back and proposed. “I hear that ‘girl on top’ is good. Let’s try that!” They rolled, still joined. He beamed at her with excited anticipation.

She started slowly and set the pace for a long time, savoring the build of pleasure.

Steve was obvious in his enjoyment of the view and her happiness. “You okay?”

Darcy laughed freely. “I am! It almost hurt at first, but not as bad as I’d feared. Definitely worth it! So worth it.” She moaned as he reached for her breasts and brought his mouth to them. Sensation became almost too much for her. She stilled, shaking with pleasure.

She moaned as he rolled them again. He began to move in and out of her more quickly. He pulled almost all of the way out, and then angled in to please her. Darcy began to cry out more loudly. He made that near-growl noise again as he began to move faster and harder. She came again, clenching tightly around him. Desperate noises escaped his lips. His movements sped even more. Another orgasm caused her to scream with pleasure. He finally came again, long and hard and noisily. She ran her hands through his hair and across his skin reverently. “Oh, God, Steve!” He continued kissing her slowly and sweetly, eyes closed as he savored every sensation. Breathlessly, she groaned, “Are you ready again? I may pass out, if you say yes.”

Steve uttered a pained noise. “Please, don’t pass out.” He began to babble. “Just because I can? It doesn't mean we have to. I don’t want to ask too much, Sweetheart! I…”
She laughed breathlessly as she shuddered with languorous pleasure aftershocks. “Sweet Jesus! I don’t know if I can even move. But maybe you can take care of that part. I hope so, for both our sakes! I want... you... more. Please, don’t stop!”

He seemed grateful and vulnerable, still afraid. Steve looked at her searchingly, then believing the heat in her gaze, he grinned sweetly. “Of course I can move for our sakes!” He winked and quoted a line from one of the songs she’d given him. “‘Baby, I can dance for days’.” She sighed and shook as he lovingly concentrated touches and kisses on her breasts for a long time. He smiled and rasped appreciatively. “That day when I couldn’t move, and you touched yourself with my hand, you moaned and shivered. It made me wonder if you might be very sensitive there- responsive. I was right. My Sweetheart. Delicious.” She felt him hardening inside of her again, and began to shudder. He massaged her aching thighs.

With a long groan, he pulled out. Steve lay on his side, lifted her thigh so she could stay laying on her back, and shifted so that he entered her again while she rested, her leg up over his hip. He moved his mouth back to her breast and his fingers between her legs. Darcy began to buck with pleasure as he teased her thoroughly. His tongue and fingers slowed to the same rhythm, and she imagined his tongue at her center and moaned deeply. His mouth curved to a wicked smile. “Wanna try that later, Sweetheart.” He moved in and out of her slowly for a long time while she reached orgasm number ‘who-the hell-can-count-that high’ and saw stars. He suddenly shifted, and moved back atop her to plunge in hard and fast.

She gasped and moaned, incredulous that she burned with so much overwhelming pleasure. “Steve! Love you. So good! Oh, God!”

He moaned, and she felt his restraint slipping as his pace increased further. It was so much that she almost wondered if she could take it. Darcy could, yet another wave of pleasure cresting through her and taking the last of her energy. When he finally came again, he yelled wordlessly. He collapsed for a second, and then quickly shifted so he wasn’t crushing her. He was breathing hard and looking at her with so much concern that she almost felt like crying.

He gasped. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Oh, my God! I’m so sorry, Darcy! I didn’t mean to…” There were tears in his eyes.

She shushed him and kissed him tenderly next to one eye like he had done to her moments before. “I lost count of my orgasms! Shut up with the self doubt!” Darcy smiled. He laughed with relief, and kissed her, almost frantic.

Steve pressed sweet kisses to her skin, murmuring. “Sweetheart. I love you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I love you so much.”

She laughed. “What are you thanking me for? You only got three orgasms. I got like twenty or something.”

Steve made a face that was part disbelief and part amusement. He looked down, his expression emotional. “I never heard ‘my’ name called out in bed before. It was always ‘Captain’ before you.” He looked overwhelmed. He quieted and kissed her lips tenderly. “It seems too good to be true.”

Darcy smiled with delight. “Making love with you is awesome.” He laughed full-throatedly. She shook her head. “What are you laughing at?”

His smile was huge. “I’m happy!”

She breathed out, hard. “I’m the one that’s happy. The way you make love? I’m gonna have to
freakin’ carb up.”

Steve winked at her. “I have pasta in the cupboard.”

Darcy giggled. “Cupboard! That’s cute.”

He tickled her. “Stop laughing at me for being a fuddy-duddy.”

She giggled more, and kissed him hard. “Nope. My time weirds you out, too.”

He chuckled. “But, now I’m really glad I’m in it.”

Darcy felt tears come to her eyes. “Me, too. I love you.”

They cuddled together and finally fell asleep entangled. She woke once to discover Steve clutching at the covers and moaning, caught in a nightmare. She kissed him awake, and caressed and kissed him gently. They snacked, returned to his bed, and held each other tightly, as though they might never let go. They made love slowly, both weary, but both needy. He fell back to sleep clutching her close against him and murmuring words of adoration. The next morning they slept in, made love again (gently, since Darcy was beginning to feel tender), showered together, and went into his room to dress.

Darcy steeled herself. “Now, here goes my first ‘walk of shame.’”

Steve frowned. “What the hell is that?”

She explained. “It’s when a girl makes her way home after a hot date, and people she runs into know what she’s been up to since she’s still wearing date clothes.” Darcy imagined facing Tony Stark in the elevator and shuddered, blushing.

Steve shook his head firmly. “No girl of mine…” She laughed. He looked offended. “Where the hell is the guy during this walk?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Sleeping it off? On the phone bragging to his buddies?”

Steve looked obstinate to the point of righteousness. “No!”

She laughed. “Well, I don’t have any other clothes here.” He threw her a clean t-shirt of his. Darcy put it on, giggling as it fell low enough to be a mini dress. He dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and asked if he could go and get her clothing from her place. She agreed.

He asked for her key. She gave it to him. He grabbed a bag and set her shoes in it, then gently folded the rest of her outfit and put it in the bag. He looked confused. “Any idea what you want to wear today?”

Darcy grinned. “Keep it simple. Jeans, casual top, flats… un-ripped underwear…” Steve looked stricken as she winked. While he was gone, she went to the bathroom, brushed her hair out, and put some toothpaste on a finger and did the best she could with it. She used makeup from her purse, noting that she hardly needed blush. She was absolutely glowing from happiness. Steve returned fifteen minutes later. His face was slightly pink. She chuckled. “Oh, Honey! Who saw you?”

He made a helpless face. “Thor and Jane were waiting for the elevator when I came back out of your place.”

“Well, Jane’s NOT the problem there.” Darcy nodded.
Steve made a noise in the back of his throat. “Yeah. Thor asked if ‘our wooing had culminated in mutual satisfaction.’”

“What’d you say?” Darcy lay back on the bed and howled with helpless laughter.

He grinned. “I couldn't say anything. I kind of gasped like a dying fish, and finally just nodded.” Darcy laughed harder. Steve shared, “and, he offers his heartfelt congratulations.” Steve looked flustered. She kissed him between giggles. He added, “as I stepped into the up elevator, I heard Jane telling him that it’s not human custom to speak so freely of intimate matters, especially around tactless people like Tony.” He shrugged. “So, maybe???”

Darcy grinned. “He won’t say a thing. He’ll just clap you on the shoulder and smile, a lot.”

“I’m sorry!” Steve sighed.

She snuggled against him. “It’s fine. Trust me, there’s a part of me that wants to shout from the rooftop that Steve Rogers popped my cherry good.”

Steve smiled. “Thanks for not saying Captain America.”

Darcy kissed him. “Cap’s okay. Steve’s my guy.” He kissed her soundly. She groaned happily, and prodded him. “Food, food, food! I will die if I don’t get food.” Steve laughed happily and stepped back. She dressed, and they headed out for brunch.

to be continued...
Steve and Darcy were both famished by the time they reached a nearby restaurant. A waiter recognized Steve, thanked him for saving his brother’s life during the Vorm attack, and got them in quickly at a table on the patio. Darcy was finishing her Eggs Benedict while Steve started on his second entrée. She took a sip of her Bloody Mary, looked up, and choked. Steve turned quickly and saw an impeccably-dressed man watching them from the sidewalk. His mouth turned down as the man approached. Then, he stabbed at another bite of his food.

Darcy leaned towards the man. “Really? You came back from the dead to return my iPod?” Steve looked at her questioningly. She huffed. “When they took all of Jane’s data, this guy got my iPod. I never got it back. I had things on it that I wanted to keep.” He looked at the man with a displeased expression.

Director Coulson looked blandly amused as he replied. “I did not come back from the dead for the sole purpose of returning your iPod, Miss Lewis, but…” He reached into a side pocket of his jacket and pulled out an old iPod and handed it to her. Darcy turned it on and squealed with delight, speaking endearments to the device. Coulson glanced around carefully and rocked back on his heels. “I wasn't very impressed when you whined about losing your playlists, Miss Lewis, not enough to go digging through crates and crates for a small item. I know you have a good enough memory to reconstruct those, and I saw to it that SHIELD deposited compensation funds into your bank account.” He cleared his throat. “But, recently I read your file again, and realized the potential significance of the pictures it holds…”

She looked at an image, smiled, and turned it for Steve to see. It was an image of a younger Darcy with her arms around an elderly couple, Darcy in the middle, and all three of them smiling happily.

Steve asked, “Mamaw and Pawpaw?”
She nodded, happy tears in her eyes. “Last pic of the three of us together. I’m posting it online and emailing it to my desktop, so I have backups this time.” She held the device tightly, as though she worried the agent might take it back. Then, she sat back and glared at Coulson. “Better late than never and all that. So, thanks, I guess.”

Coulson smiled politely, “Why didn’t you tell me what you were really after?”

She stared at the screen and swiped her fingers across it, looking at more images, and shrugged. Her voice caught. “I didn’t want to let you make me cry.”

Steve reached across the table. She dropped one hand where he could reach, and he covered her hand with his and gave her a comforting squeeze. Coulson raised his brows as he saw the gesture. “Oh, boy.” He turned to Darcy again and spoke crisply, “Miss Lewis, I apologize for the distress that loss of your photos must have given you, and am VERY glad that I was able to return your personal property now.”

She gave Steve a watery smile. “Thanks! We all know he’s being nice to me to butter you up.” Steve’s demeanor cooled further as he looked at the agent again. She turned to Coulson. “So, are you buttering up the good Captain because of the massive crush Natasha says you have on him, or in a professional capacity?” Steve blushed slightly, raised a brow and smiled sardonically, and returned to eating with his free hand. Darcy took this as permission to continue, and asked pointedly, “and, what does this have to do with you letting Hawkeye believe he was complicit in something?” She saw Steve wince, but shrug. “Cuz Hawkeye? Saved. My. Bacon. He’s totes in my good column- unlike shifty people who take away my last pic with my grandparents.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked quickly. Steve gave her hand a squeeze and stroked it comforting. His attention left Coulson entirely as he focused on Darcy and the variety of emotions playing across her face.

Coulson sighed, tense as he watched the interplay between Darcy and Steve. “May I please sit down to talk with you, Captain?”

Steve pointed at Darcy with his fork. “Ask my girl. She’s doing fine, and I’m still eating.” He gave Coulson a somewhat disappointed look that obviously affected the agent deeply.

Darcy made a sad face. “Aw, man! I wish I was meaner, but you look like he kicked your puppy or something. That’s not even his best disappointed face. I know. I’ve seen him around Tony.” She gestured to a free chair at another table. “See if they need that one.”

Coulson fetched the chair and pulled up in it at their table. “How did this happen?” He gestured to the two of them, his face alight with curiosity.

Steve smiled proudly. “Well, for me it was love at first sight. Then, I found out how easy it is to talk with Darcy, unlike others. There was something in the way she said my name from the start, too.” Darcy shook her head, smiling in a bemused way. Steve pointed out to her, “for all that he’s a huge pain in the ass, Tony’s a genius. He called it right just from the look on my face.” He shrugged. “And Thor pressed me about my intentions towards you within minutes after we met, seeing as how I couldn't take my eyes off ya.”

Coulson nodded and offered, “Congratulations.”

They both answered, “thanks.”

Darcy laughed. “You KNOW he was talking to me!” Steve just grinned and continued eating. She turned to Coulson. “Well, this isn't bad timing as far as these things go. My guy here eats at least
three times as much as I do.” She looked Coulson up and down. “You’re lookin’ pretty good for a
guy a few years in the ground. What’s your secret?” Steve choked on his food as he suppressed a
laugh, then a few laughs in fits and starts.

Coulson, on the other hand, looked serious. “The previous director went to great lengths, far
greater than I wanted.” Steve's eyes narrowed and he stopped his fit of laughter.

Darcy nodded doubtfully, “uh huh. But why the radio silence all this time? You can’t have been in
an ‘official’ hospital around the time those helicarriers went down. I was… and it wasn't pretty.
That’s when I met Hawkeye.”

Steve looked up from his food, his expression somber as he remembered what Hydra had done to
her. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, but then looked up into Steve's eyes and managed a
small smile.

Coulson nodded, steepling his fingers as he considered his reply. “It took a while to go the lengths I
mentioned. I was led to believe I spent time in Tahiti. It’s a magical… Damn! I still haven’t de-
programmed that phrase fully.” He shook his head, his tone somewhat bitter. “For a long time I
didn't know where I was or what others had been told. The initial deception was deemed necessary
to encourage such disparate personalities to unite.”

She turned to Steve, regaining her equilibrium. “Did he just say they faked it so you and Tony
would play nice?” He nodded and drank some juice. Coulson sighed with exasperation. Darcy
turned back to Coulson. “What did you mean ‘previous director?’ We know all about his death.”

Coulson looked at her carefully, gauging her true meaning from her expression. “How did you hear
about that? I've been out of touch. I had a lot of work to do this past year, more or less off the
radar. All of my information came from my predecessor. I was recently promoted to take his
place.” Steve raised his brows at Coulson’s last statement and shook his head, frowning.

Darcy looked at Steve, and watched him nod and then start on a third plate. She chuckled and
shook her head as he made quick work of it. She explained, “Nat was looking for digits on Steve’s
old friend, one he was so surprised to see in DC a few months ago. And, the fact that she wasn't
angry when she saw that friend again, despite some things he's credited with, seemed odd to those
who know her temper. She has a killer smile, ya know.”


Steve wiped his mouth and finally spoke. “Your name hasn't come up in any recent meetings, but
Clint needed to be told. I’m sure you understand that Natasha considers his recovery from events
during Loki’s invasion a priority.” He looked at Coulson seriously.

Coulson nodded his understanding, “I’ll get in touch with him later today. I’d like to talk with him
alone, too.” He looked around them. “This is a nice place for a romantic brunch. I hope you enjoy
it and the rest of your day. I’m sorry to bother you, and appreciate you giving me a chance to begin
to reconnect- and, to make amends. I am sorry that so much time has passed since we last spoke.
May I schedule a meeting at your place of business this week? There is much I would like to
discuss with you and your teammates.” He handed Steve a business card.

Steve nodded and accepted it, pulled his phone out and entered the data, and then handed the card
back. He remarked, “I’m afraid your trading card collection didn't fare too well.”

Coulson winced and nodded. “I know. That cut as deeply as a knife to the heart.”
Steve reached for his wallet and pulled out a Captain America Trading Card, a mint-condition #1 from the original series. It was protected in a plastic sleeve. He took it out, picked up a pen from the table, and signed it carefully. “I searched out and saved this to remind me of you. I guess I don’t need it now. And, I like to keep my promises.” He handed it to Coulson and smiled. “It’s good to see you out and about, Phil. I’m glad that you’re feeling better.”

Coulson’s smile was much broader as he accepted the trading card. “Thank you, very much. Oh! It’s beautiful. I appreciate it more than I can say.” They shook hands, the agent fairly vibrating with excitement.

Darcy rubbed her temples as he walked away. “Life is so weird.” She was amused by the awkwardly polite expression on Steve’s face as they saw the director glance back at him again and smile with fan-boy glee.

Steve shook his head, returned his focus to Darcy, and nodded. “It is. So, art gallery now, or…?”

She grinned, “I think I’ll take what’s behind door number two.” She looked around and whispered, “I think you’re turning me into a sex maniac.”

He grinned back. “I can live with that. I’d suggest your bed just because I’ve had fantasies of making love there, too, but I have better soundproofing. You’ll have to convince me you can keep quiet, before we can fool around other places. I’m pretty sure you can’t.” His eyes gleamed.

Her eyes widened. “Is that a dare?”

He nodded, leaned over and kissed her cheek, then lightly flicked his tongue against her ear lobe. She swallowed a moan, and clenched her thighs together. Steve paid the bill and they walked back to the Tower, his arm around her. As they entered the elevator, Steve asked, “JARVIS, can you give us a private ride to my floor?”

JARVIS replied, “yes, Captain Rogers.”

Steve murmured. “My turn to go on the attack in the elevator.” He pressed her against the wall and kissed her hard, his hands going to her breasts, alternatingly gentle and rough, as he teased her. She pushed him back enough so she could jump up and lock her legs around his waist. He took the opportunity this presented to undo a few shirt buttons and suckle hard on her through the lace of the burgundy bra he’d chosen for her. She whimpered with pleasure. He teasingly admonished her to be quiet, and then returned to making that impossible.

So, when they rounded the corner to his apartment, she re-fastened a button on her blouse and stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Tony Stark standing by the door looking serious. The first word that entered her head was ‘cock-blocker.’ Then, she spent a few seconds wondering why Tony looked near tears, and then she felt ill as she saw the image on the StarkPad he turned towards them.

She put her hand to her mouth, gagged, and turned back to Steve, hiding her face against his chest. Steve wrapped his arms around her and raged. “What the hell, Stark?”

Tony bit out. “His name was Trevor Slattery. He’s the actor they used for the face of ‘the Mandarin.’”

Steve frowned. “I heard about all that after I got back from a long op in New Zealand at the end of December.”

Tony growled, “yeah. SHIELD was a big fucking help.”
Steve nodded agreement. “I should have realized then. Sitwell made up a pack of lies about their efforts to assist you.” Darcy took a breath and shook her head, trying to push the sickening image out. Steve stroked her back soothingly, and kissed her forehead once. Feeling her shudder with revulsion, he tightened his embrace.

Tony grunted, “well, this picture is from today.”

Steve tensed. “Where?”

Tony replied, “my Malibu address.” He explained. “I’m rebuilding. Nowhere near done… The body was left at the curb, by the mailbox. There are ten holes in what’s left of his skull, ten rings.” He flipped the screen. “There was a note. It says ‘Long Live the Mandarin. Let his works continue to the end of the world.’”

Steve’s tone grew chilly. “What’s urgent about it this morning?”

Tony took a breath, puzzled by Steve's tone. “Since Pepper is away today, I had some free time. I started looking around at surveillance intel relating to my Ten Rings pals. I discovered new activity in Gulmira, Afghanistan- a place near and dear to my heart… the place where I last met members of the Ten Rings, bad guys reputedly led by the Mandarin. It’s not the sort of thing that would usually get on Avengers’ radar so soon since it happens way too much, but people, including friends of a man I owe my existence, are being executed and sold into slavery from there and I want to stop it NOW.” He choked as though holding back a sob.

Darcy turned to look at Tony's face, concerned. He grimaced, blinked hard, turned away for a second to gather himself; and then his usual grin slid back into place. “That it might interfere with Lewis making an attempt on your virtue… is just lucky timing. Missed a button there!” She looked down. He turned serious again and added, “current sentiment has it you’re the leader, Cap, so will you approve this as a mission for the Avengers, or am I on my own?”

Steve sighed and nodded. He reluctantly made the call. “JARVIS- ‘All Avengers, Assemble in Conference for Mission Briefing’. ”

Tony thanked him, turned, and walked quickly to the elevator. Once he was past the corner, Steve apologized, “I’m sorry to end our date this way. I have to get to work.”

Darcy nodded, slid her hands around his neck and teased, “don’t forget my goodbye kiss.” She saw longing in his expression as he leaned down to kiss her, long and slow. She couldn't help but respond fervently, gasping with want. Steve groaned. She knew he wanted to stay. She wanted him to.

He spoke huskily, “I couldn't possibly forget that.”

She whispered, “such a wonderful date. Please be careful, Steve. I love you.”

He nodded, pained. He lost himself in thoughts of their night, and stroked her face as though to memorize it. She leaned up and kissed him again as lustily as she could, full of promise.

He looked gob-smacked, made a noise of frustration, and growled, “Damn! I HATE my job right now.” He kissed her again and again, with more and more passion. This went on longer than Darcy had expected it to. She realized that she was going to have to be the one to put a stop to this ‘goodbye’.

She pushed back from him and grumbled, “I hate your work, too! Now, go help those people!” He sighed, reluctantly released her, told her that he loved her, and went into his apartment to get into
his uniform.

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Darcy took the elevator and went into her apartment and closed the door behind her quietly, hating to be alone again so soon. She couldn't help but fantasize about what she wished she and Steve were doing instead. She soon realized she needed to shift gears or she’d be a desperate mess before Steve returned. She had no way of knowing if he’d return later in the day, or be gone a week. She thought back over the past 24 hours, and the past few months, and smiled happily.

She was smart enough to know that she and Steve were near the start of something really special. She wanted to enjoy it and make him happy, to savor the happiness like Chau had urged. An impish idea came to mind. She considered it, grinned mischievously, and messaged Jai about a special project she needed help with. She was able to find the calendars she needed for reference on EBay. She bought calendars from two different years; hoping one of them would be the right one.

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In the Avengers’ main conference room, Hawkeye and Black Widow were attaching newly-cleaned and loaded weapons to their bodies. They checked every item thoroughly while they waited. Bruce was sitting quietly, reviewing the information that Tony had on the Ten Rings. Tony was pacing, and glancing at his watch. Sam sat at the table looking uncomfortable, watching the assassins do their weapons count. Steve rushed into the room and sat by Sam. Thor entered just behind Steve, clapped him on the shoulder (causing Steve to stifle a blush and a grin), and took a seat.

Tony growled, “well, now that we’re FINALLY all here, we can get started.”

Sam looked concerned. “You okay, Cap? Not like you to be one of the last to arrive.” He was so accustomed to Steve being the first on hand during any crisis that he was visibly disturbed by the break in the pattern.

Hawkeye joked, “yeah, man. You’re supposed to be in here to scowl at us for being slow on the uptake when we arrive. Did you have a date or something?”

Steve smiled, a rare look of bliss crossing his face, and nodded. “I did. I had a date.” Both Sam and Thor smiled broadly at him, while Bruce glanced at Steve and then quickly away while frowning. Hawkeye crossed his arms and nodded.

Natasha smiled warmly, obviously pleased as she raised a brow and murmured, “still?” Her smile faded, and she turned back to Tony. “What has you so worked up, Stark?” She seemed even more dangerous than usual as she leaned forward and attached more ‘bites’ to a special pouch on her calf.

Tony looked confused, but shook it off. “I don’t know how much all of you know about how and why I became Iron Man; just that Romanoff had lessons on me from Fury. It’s common knowledge that I was captured by terrorists and held for ransom in a cave. Shrapnel from one of my own weapons penetrated my body, all but fatally. What most people don’t know about is a… fellow prisoner, Dr. Yinsen. He rigged up a magnet to keep the fragments out of my heart. He used a car battery as the power source for the protective magnet in my chest.” He unconsciously touched the center of his chest. The others were listening to the tremors in his voice as he talked, noting the play of emotions across his face. He looked away from their gazes as he growled, “my waterboarding included a bit of electric shock from that battery.” Steve let out a tense breath.
Natasha advised, “Tony, sit down. Your color isn’t good.”

He looked at her, eyes full of remembered pain. Bruce began to breathe in and out slowly. Tony glanced at him, grimaced, and continued. “Like I told Lewis, I agreed to build a Jericho missile for them so that they would stop the torture.” Sam cursed under his breath, slapped the table and cursed again. Steve looked at Sam’s expression and then back to Tony. Tony continued, “Instead, I made my first arc reactor, and then the Mark-One, my first suit. Yinsen gave his life to give me time to boot up and escape that hell. He made me Iron Man every bit as much as I did.” His voice dropped to a rasp. “I promised I wouldn’t waste his life or mine.” He tapped his StarkPad.

Steve stared at Tony, images of Dr. Erskine’s encouragement and sudden death flashing through his mind. Then, he shook his head and forced himself to look at the images Tony was sharing from his pad to a wall screen.

The images on the screen were horrific. Babies and the elderly were being brutally killed. Women were being raped and beaten while men were helpless to stop it. Hawkeye and Natasha began to point out the same figures in positions of authority again and again. Men who had seen family murdered were forced to manual labor, or to become soldiers themselves. The Ten Rings emblem began to show up.

Tony added, “This started happening a few days ago in Gulmira, a village in Afghanistan that has seen more than its share of violence already. It was Yinsen’s home. His family was murdered there. I bought Gulmira peace for a time after I first became Iron Man. It looks like they need help again. I’m going, regardless of what the rest of you do, but, I thought I’d let you know and ask if anyone wants to help. Cap called the Assemble.”

Steve declared, “I’m in.”

Hawkeye observed wryly, “the stars and stripes aren't very popular in Afghanistan, Cap.”

Steve shrugged. “Tony’s right. This kind of thing happens too much. And, if this is the home of the man who saved my friend from torture and death, a man who inspired him to do good, it’s even more important to help.”

Tony chuckled, “I thought I was the ‘pain in your ass’.”

Steve nodded and smirked, “my pain-in-the-ass friend.”

Natasha made a noise of disgust, “just kiss already!”

Tony sassed, “I make it a point not to kiss people who are thinking about kissing someone else.” Thor laughed.

Steve shook his head. “What about the Mandarin and Slattery? Who left Slattery’s body at your home? Are they tied to this group in Gulmira?”

Hawkeye grumbled, “I wish we had more info on the Ten Rings. How did they get Slattery out of Seagate prison?”

Tony held up a hand and admitted, “I wish we had more, too. Things have been happening pretty quickly since SHIELD fell. JARVIS has been doing analysis on the SHIELD data dump round the clock, too, feeding us all daily reports, as you know. Natasha, you unlocked a lot that even I couldn’t get to when we first met two years ago. I’m trying to fill the information gap. But, Gulmira doesn't have time for us to get our shit together.”
Hawkeye observed wryly, “that’s a bad way to get to know terrorists.”

Tony shrugged, “I don’t recommend the way I did it, either.” He explained, “I’ve given you all complete access to everything I've got on Gulmira, Yinsen, the Mandarin, and the Ten Rings. Read while we fly. Banner, try to stay awake while you read. I know it bores you straight to sleep.”

Bruce muttered, “sorry!” The others glanced at him inquiringly. He just shook his head.

Steve stared at the images from Gulmira. He looked at the anguish on a man’s face as he watched a woman being harmed. Steve’s expression was grim.

As they entered the Quinjet, Tony stopped Steve. “Cap, thanks. I didn't know if everyone would want to sign on for my personal stuff.”

Steve shook his head, “our mission, Tony, not just yours.”

Tony smiled. “Sorry if I crashed your date. Was she finally getting somewhere?” Steve shrugged uncomfortably. Tony grinned. “Darcy’s spunky. You’d be having a lot more fun back at the Tower with her… if you’d let yourself. Things were looking pretty good… what with her blouse unbuttoned partway.”

Steve smiled frostily. “I’m not gonna talk about my love life with you, Tony.”

Tony raised a brow and chuckled. “You have a love life?” Steve looked at him steadily, a slight twitch of one eye his only reaction. Tony grinned.

Natasha asked, “Where have you been, Stark? They’re as bad as Thor and Jane.” She pushed past them impatiently and went to the cockpit. She turned back. “Stop bugging Steve and come tell me more about the bad guys while I fly. Put your talent for non-stop talking to good use for the next three hours.” Tony chuckled grimly, and followed Natasha.

Steve read his briefing notes thoroughly during the next hour and discussed them with Thor, Sam, and Hawkeye for a while after that. They discussed logistics for freeing the villagers and then bringing in recovery resources, starting with a Stark Medical triage unit, food and drink.

During a short break, Steve checked his messages, grinning to himself when he saw that Darcy had sent him a song. He didn't need to look up the lyrics to it. He’d listened to Bad Company’s ‘Feel Like Makin’ Love’ more times than he could count in recent days. He replied by sending her two other songs that he’d saved for her. His accompanying note simply read, ‘I love you.’

***

In the Healing Ward at Avengers Tower, Bucky Barnes was napping. The nightmare wasn’t a new one. In it, he was the the Winter Soldier. He had flashes of wanting to break free, but couldn't. The only memories that came to him clearly were a terrifying plunge from a train, pain, and suffering. There were flashes of emotion and longing, the lassitude of harshly-controlling drugs, the utter cold of the cryo freeze, and the pain of numerous tortures. He was a perfect weapon, the fist of HYDRA. Despair was his only emotion.

Bucky was grateful to wake alone, except for JARVIS. His face was wet with tears, and he felt a hollow sense of remembered anguish. He groaned aloud, stifling the urge to vomit.

JARVIS’ voice was soft. "Shall I call for assistance, Bucky?"

Bucky shook his head, his voice a faint rasp. "No. Thanks, JARVIS. I don't want to see anyone
right now. How about a movie? Could you raise me to sitting and put something funny on for me?"

JARVIS replied, "with pleasure, Bucky. They say that laughter is the best medicine."

Bucky laid his head back and muttered under his breath. "I'm safe. Hydra can't get to me. I'm in Avengers Tower, with Steve, Darcy, Dr. Chau, Natalia, and others who want to help me get better." His breathing and heart rate slowly settled back to normal.

_to be continued..._
JARVIS did not answer... Darcy took a shaky breath and turned to Jane, “You want to try for a safe room, or make a stand here? They’re coming.”

Chapter Summary

HYDRA attacks Avengers Tower.

Chapter Notes

Lovesong, by The Cure- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdAXSmNPELY
I was not cool enough to KNOW this song when I was younger. In fact, I just really listened to it well for the first time recently... and was surprised and pleased to find that it fit my story (and my perception of Steve's feelings for/with Darcy) so well. Enjoy. :) It's a great song.

Darcy was sluggish on waking the next morning. She’d had nightmares and felt even more alone waking in her bed without Steve next to her- now that she’d experienced the comfort of sharing a bed with him. She chided herself for her lack of enthusiasm for a day without him. If she wasn't careful, she would build her entire existence around a man. He was a pretty awesome man, but, she still needed to be careful to protect her sense of self.

That resolution didn't get off to much of a start. She began her day much as she’d ended the previous one, listening to the two songs Steve had sent, ‘Maybe I’m Amazed’ by Paul McCartney, and ‘Lovesong’ by The Cure. She listened to them again and again while she dressed and ate. She smiled ruefully to herself. She’d have to be careful. Natasha was going to get really sick of hearing them, especially ‘Lovesong’!

Her visit with Erik was short. It was his day to have a tracker installed. He had been instructed to rest in his apartment afterwards, given the need to mix anesthesia in with his meds’ delicate balance. After assuring Erik it was a painless procedure, Darcy went to Jane’s lab.

As was so often the case, success in one area only made Jane more impatient for things to come together on other projects. Despite her recent successes in creating portals independent of the Convergence, she was ranting over one current project that still had her stumped- replication of an Asgardian prison/defensive force field.

Darcy wanted Jane to figure it out, too, knowing that having Bucky in his own quarters would be an improvement for everyone who knew him, especially for Bucky. His sad, sweet eyes haunted her so much! Jane was frustrated, hating life as she hit yet another dead end. She railed against the formulae, cursing each dead end she’d hit previously. It did not make for a pleasant or relaxing work environment.

When Darcy handed Jane a bagel and coffee, Jane realized she was there and sighed heavily, “How long have you been here?”
Darcy chuckled and replied, “about twenty minutes already, Miss Grumpy-Pants!”

Jane sat back and ate the bagel. Between mouthfuls she frowned and admitted, “The Assemble call yesterday was poorly timed. Thor leaving like he did… made it hard for me to sleep last night.”

Darcy smiled with sympathy. “I feel ya, sista. Stark was waiting to show us an image of some murdered guy, when Steve and I got in from brunch with more fun of our own in mind.”

Jane gasped and almost choked, “Oh! I forgot! Your date! How was it?”

Darcy tried to avoid getting sappy. “Amazing! Dinner and dancing out at a gorgeous place.”

Jane shook her head. “Captain America dances?” Darcy smiled, unable to look at all nonchalant.

Jane gasped, “You’re all moony over him! Hah!”

Darcy laughed and admitted, “pretty moony… And, yeah, he dances. He dances well when he forgets to worry about what he’s doing.”

Jane nodded and wagged her brows. “I hope that carries over to other activities.” Darcy just laughed. Jane looked at her with disconcerting directness as she asked, “Why did you let me believe you were experienced, when you weren’t? Thor slipped and referred to you as a maiden, well, a maiden BEFORE Saturday night, I suppose…”

Darcy was taken aback. She shrugged and made a face. “When we first met, the dreadful doc was in your bed most nights.”

Jane rolled her eyes and huffed, “when he wasn't in someone else’s bed!”

Darcy nodded and replied quietly, “yeah, that. He was bad news. But, there wasn't much privacy. I didn't want to be in the way, or hear more than I already did. I started cracking jokes to cover the awkward, so I guess that made you think stuff about me…” She shrugged again, not meeting Jane’s eyes.

Jane sighed, “I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable, Darce. I didn't think.”

Darcy shook her head and smiled slightly. “I’m an adult, Jane. I can take care of myself.”

Jane sighed, looking at Darcy with fond exasperation. “After Thor slipped up, for which he apologizes…” Darcy waved a hand and made a sound of dismissal. Jane continued, “I had a horrible thought. I remember how Donald used to ‘joke’ about you joining us.” She looked at Darcy, her face full of concern and regret.

Darcy sighed more loudly. “Yes. Dr. Donald is the reason I got a Taser. Yes. Dr. Donald was the first person I used it on. Yes. I threatened to do it again, if he didn't leave us both alone.” She grinned. “Why do you think I fed his name to SHIELD by using his info for Thor’s fake ID? It wouldn't shock me at all if they hid him under a rock somewhere, after getting a good look at his life choices…”

Jane laughed ruefully. “Ow! That’s… well, that’s pretty great.”

Darcy grinned and preened.

Jane hugged Darcy briefly, then frowned. “Some friend I was, though! I had no idea you were that innocent. Thor could just tell. He knew more about you than I did.”
Darcy shrugged. “Thor- is a warrior. He has the experience of living a long time. He pays attention to what people do with their time. He noticed that none of mine was spent in anyone else’s bed, and that no one ever shared mine.”

Jane nodded. “He’s smarter than most people realize. He uses that misconception to his advantage!” She smiled proudly, and then added, “well, I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusions.” She raised a brow. “I guess that’s all changed now, though, hasn’t it?”

Darcy grinned. “Yup. You’re wrong in one other idea, though. Steve didn’t need to forget what he was doin’ to do it well.”

Jane made a face. “So, people were wrong about him, too? Tony says…”

Darcy raised a brow. “Tony says a lot of shit!”

Jane laughed. “The media also acts like the Captain is pure as the driven snow.”

Darcy grinned. “People don’t have a realistic view of the man behind the shield. The Captain America image was built up with cheesy movies, a ham-handed radio show, and a slew of comic books. Have you ever read one of the early comics where Bucky’s his boy wonder side-kick, like Robin to his Batman? They make me laugh so hard I pee. Erik has a whole box of them.”

Jane shook her head, made a face, and looked at the clock. “Hey! You’re early today. Did you stop in and see Erik?” Darcy explained about Erik’s tracker procedure, and the cautions the SI staff wanted to take because of his meds. Jane shrugged. “Oh, that. I guess I’ll get one. I hardly leave the Tower, so it doesn’t seem all that important.”

Darcy made a face. “You might change your mind about how important it is, if you need it.” She started to say something else, but found that she had a lump in her throat.

Jane’s eyes went wide. “You want me to do it?” Darcy nodded, lips tight. An affectionate grin flitted over Jane's face. “Then I will.”

Their attention turned back to the work. Jane continued to mutter to herself, growing increasingly agitated. She had Darcy put up a virtual rendering of a formula and walked round and round it, nearly tearing her hair out.

Darcy pulled out her phone and looked at notes she’d made over the weekend. She closed her eyes and concentrated, trying to remember what had caught her attention in Bruce’s work. She glanced at her notes again. After watching Jane struggle for what seemed like forever, Darcy cleared her throat. “Um… What if you change this value here to something like… this… and put it with a formula for… that.”

Jane sat down hard on a stool and stared at Darcy with her mouth hanging completely open.

Darcy put her hands up in a gesture of surrender, “that stupid? Sorry!”

Jane shook her head in amazement. “No! How… what… Where did that come from?!” She grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and began to put it all together. She did calculations to check it and looked back at the formula, grabbed Darcy’s phone and looked at her notes, and then wrote it all out again. She stared at the paper and looked up at Darcy expectantly, shocked.

Darcy fidgeted guiltily while she copied Jane's work to the 3-D rendering. “Bruce… Some of what he said fit against some of what you said! I have the impression that Tony asked Bruce to do this project, while Steve asked you… Those guys make each other stupid… since, obviously, if you
and Bruce put your big brains together, this would go better! Anyway, Bruce was working with that other formula, but, he muttered out loud that it couldn't go with other stuff unless that symbol there was positive." She pointed at the values she was talking about. "I saw the positive in this, and wondered if that meant it could go with Bruce's thingy…” Her expression was a combination of hope and faint apology.

Jane jumped off the stool, and threw her arms straight up and screamed, “YES!!!” She started to dance the Cabbage Patch, and Darcy about fell over laughing at the sight.

Darcy planned to be quietly self-righteous when she banged Steve’s and Tony’s heads together later, and explained that their best and brightest scientists should not be put in isolated competition against each other like that again. A project as important as Bucky’s containment ought to be handled with urgent cooperation. She would be firm with both of them... well, probably a little nicer to Steve... but...

There was a loud shrieking and buzzing, an electronic wail of alarm.

Both Jane and Darcy stopped and stared at each other as the alarm sounded for one second… and then went silent. Darcy went cold all over, her skin prickling uncomfortably.

The Avengers were on the other side of the world. What was happening? Darcy choked out, “JARVIS?”

JARVIS did not answer.

Jane swallowed hard and froze in place, a look of terror on her face. Darcy moved to the door and looked out. It was quiet outside the lab, but something felt off. Then, she heard yelling at a distance. Darcy took out her phone. It read ‘No Service.’ She gasped, bit her lip, and looked at Jane. “Check your phone.”

Jane pulled her phone out. “No signal? I usually get good signal up here. What’s happening?”

Darcy heard helicopter noise, louder than normal. Through a narrow window in the hall she saw gun copters and Quinjets approaching the Tower, firing at drones doing standard patrol outside. Her heart pounded faster as she thought of the day SHIELD fell. She wondered if this would later be referred to as the day when Avengers Tower fell to Hydra.

Darcy took a shaky breath and turned to Jane. “You want to try for a safe room, or make a stand here? They’re coming.” The two women moved closer to each other, holding to each others’ arms tightly and feeling how much they were both shaking with fear.

***

The battle in Gulmira was nearly over when Avengers Tower came under fire and JARVIS alerted Tony.

The battle was anything but a cake walk. In addition to the expected garden-variety terrorists, the Avengers faced an alien pair who called themselves the Blood Brothers. While the sight of the two eight-foot tall, reddish brown-skinned, ape-like mercenaries hadn't seemed to bother Thor at all, the other Avengers were surprised. Steve was the first to notice that they needed to be close to each other to have maximum power, and Tony was finally able to enraged one enough for it to follow him away from its brother. After that, the Avengers were able to overcome the brothers and prepare them for transport to separate prisons.

As they loaded the second brother into an armored Stark truck headed for a base Tony had set up in
Pakistan, Steve saw Tony stop in his tracks and Natasha running to the Quinjet at top speed. Steve tiredly walked over to Tony to ask what was happening. Tony was on a comm inside his helmet. Steve heard Tony say, “now, Rhodey! Now! Go!”

The Iron Man mask slid away as Tony turned to face Steve. The expression on Tony’s face made Steve take a step back. He rasped, “what is it?”

Tony was shaking with anger as he bit out. “Grab a seat on the jet, Cap. We have an engine to test.” He turned and spoke into his Bluetooth, “Avengers, jet, NOW! Emergency! Buckle up. It’s gonna get bumpy.” Hulk lumbered into the jet and sat down in the cargo area with a huff.

Uneasy, Steve followed, moving to his seat and buckling in. Hawkeye moved past him towards the co-pilot seat, grabbing parachutes for him and Natasha, putting on his before taking his seat. Natasha stood then, and put on her chute. The closed-off look on her face set Steve’s teeth on edge. Thor settled into a seat and pulled out his phone. Sam strapped in next to Steve, his wing-pack hanging from one hand. They took off hurriedly and they all braced against the immediate jump to maximum speed.

Across from Steve, Thor frowned, looking at his phone. Thor asked, “what time is it at home? My Jane does not answer me.” Tony glanced at Thor, his frown deepening.

Steve pulled his phone out, checked the time and saw that it was Monday morning in New York, and texted Darcy. There was no reply. He looked at Tony. Tony quickly removed the Iron man arms and hands to free his hands for programming, and sat at a tech console. He finished a series of keystrokes, working with furious intensity. They all felt and heard a low pitched rumbling that shook the Quinjet ominously.

Tony looked at monitors, and then turned his seat to face them. “I’m prepping a new engine for emergency test right now. I hope to eventually make Mach 20, but the best I can hope for today is Mach 15.” He took a deep breath and calculated. “That’ll get us to New York in about thirty eight minutes, including the warm up I just started…”

Steve put both of his hands on his shield, knowing his tendency to react with them. “What’s happening in New York?! He swallowed hard, knowing what the emergency must be… but, not wanting to accept the horrible truth.

He saw Tony’s eyes drop to his hands, then shift back up. “Our Tower’s under attack. JARVIS has been shut out. He managed one second of alarm as it happened. The last things he confirmed before he lost contact there were the failure of the security systems in Containment, and the approach of hostile aircraft.” He turned to Thor and growled, “with Heimdall dormant, you can’t get zapped there. Someone knew about that… AND set up our little cross-world field trip. I’ve activated the remaining New York drones and SI Security. Iron Patriot is on his way there now.”

Steve choked, “Containment! All those people loose in our Tower?” He had a moment’s panicked regret as he wished he’d done something about the men who hurt Darcy in London.

Thor reassured him quietly, “Captain, I can alleviate one concern. Once the men who harmed my shield sister shared all that they could that was of use to our cause, I ensured that they will trouble no one again. It was my duty to her as family.” Thor’s expression was stony, as though his temper was slowly building.

Steve wasn't sure if that meant that Thor executed the men, or only physically harmed them so much that they couldn't do damage. He found that he absolutely did not give a damn, so long as they were neutralized. He swallowed bile, and nodded without asking. He thought of all of the
other prisoners now loose in the Tower and the attack force whose size they could only guess. He did his best to shove his emotions aside and plan. He had a Tower to retake and secure. He needed to make use of every resource.

Steve reached for his phone again and dialed a number. He put it on speaker. The others’ faces showed varying levels of surprise as they heard a man answer, “this is Director Coulson.” Hawkeye grunted, as though the sound of that voice took the wind out of him.

Tony gibed, “Huh. Good reception for the hereafter… Agent.” He shook his head in disgust.

Coulson sounded uncomfortable. “Why are you calling me like this, Captain?” He looked pained on the video feed.

Steve asked urgently, “are you still in New York?” At Coulson’s nod, Steve informed him, “we had to go to Afghanistan… and Avengers Tower is under attack. They've shut JARVIS out. It’s gotta be Hydra. We’re, at best, 40 minutes out. Thor’s friend Heimdall is dormant.” He breathed in and out loudly and begged, “please, Phil. I need your help.”

Coulson’s face flushed with feeling for once as he absorbed Captain America’s words. He turned and spoke to someone off camera, then turned back to Steve. “You have it. You know how much that means to me, Captain. We’re on our way. What’s their prime objective?”

Steve froze. He gasped for air and found he couldn't speak.

Tony gently took the phone and broke the silence. “For one, they’re after their Winter Soldier. He’s in our Healing Ward, under guard, therapeutic treatments, and sedation. He’s been remembering more and more of his life before, when he was Cap’s friend, Bucky Barnes.” Coulson gasped and looked startled, obviously recognizing the name. Tony frowned. “We have no way of knowing if they can reactivate him as a weapon in their attack or not. I assume they’ll try.” He glanced at Hulk, wishing he could discuss Barnes with Bruce.

Steve shuddered.

Thor rasped harshly. “The enemy’s primary goal is to possess Jane’s knowledge of ways to traverse the Nine Realms.” He gripped his hammer tightly, his face a mask of rage. He growled, “any who dare THINK to bring her harm will feel the full weight of my wrath!” They all heard a boom of thunder and prayed that lightning would not strike their Quinjet.

Tony nodded and spoke slowly. “Foster’s team in Lab Eleven on seventy seven- that’s Foster, Lewis, and maybe Selvig- will be a prime target, based on Hydra’s recent activities.” He looked at Thor’s contorted face, and then glanced at Steve sympathetically.

Coulson groaned softly, “Dr. Foster and Miss Lewis?”

Steve flinched, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. It was still morning in New York, the time when Darcy worked with Jane.

Tony looked grim and angry as he rattled off his efforts to Coulson. “I’m sending you building blueprints at this number, trying to direct drones, and working on getting JARVIS back there. I already called in Iron Patriot. Hurry! You’re closer for helping our people than we are.” His fingers flew across the keyboard where he sat. He breathed a silent prayer of thanks that Pepper was not at the tower.

Coulson replied, “We’re on our way, and will do our best for you. I give you my word.” To
someone off-camera he remarked, “I wish we’d brought the plasma particle beam with us. We’re ‘go’ now with all guns hot. No Icers.”

to be continued...
Steve cried out, feeling as though the world had gone cold and turned into grasping ice once again.

Chapter Summary

The Avengers race back from Afghanistan as the HYDRA attack on Avengers Tower continues, led in part by the Winter Soldier. Coulson’s team joins the battle.

Time ticked by slowly while tension levels climbed inside the Avengers’ Quinjet. Natasha had to take extra care to not destroy equipment as she angrily worked the jet controls. Hawkeye was making worse jokes than usual, though only directed to Natasha since she best understood his humor and his need to let it flow when he was wound up.

Tony listened to messages and reported, “Rhodey is battling aircraft outside the Tower, drones helping him. HYDRA’s insistent on maintaining aircraft presence, so it must be a hot spot in their plan. Let’s hope he can cut their transport options, both for the sake of cutting off their retreat, and so that none of our people can be taken away.” Steve made a slight choking noise. Thor glanced at Steve, but said nothing.

Tony grinned darkly, “Coulson’s team is onsite fighting their way up towards the labs. They’ve engaged a HYDRA squadron near Containment. That’s twenty or so invaders takin’ it in the teeth! Good call hittin’ Coulson in the fanboy feels, Cap. He looked ready to march into Hell and take on Hitler after you were done with him.”

Steve only shook his head in reply.

Tony returned to the keyboard. “I’m putting JARVIS back in place. Those bastards’ll wish they’d never touched him. How DARE they?!” He typed some more, occasionally cursing or grunting angrily. “How in the hell did they shut him out, anyway?!” He wrote code on the fly while cussing the situation. “They obviously had someone inside- but, who? Our vetting had a hole in it, damn it. I laughed when I saw that Lewis was picking through it the other day and requesting further vet on some of the lab rats. That’ll teach me to ignore woman’s intuition. Damn it all to hell!”

Tony continued to rant and curse. “Take that, HYDRA fuckers! I have sensors now.” He frowned and murmured, “gunfire outside Lab Eleven- and weird energy readings. What the hell? Hm. I wonder…” Thor let out an impatient growl. Tony looked from Thor to Steve, promising, “I’m getting cameras up as fast as I can.” He continued to work blindingly quickly.

In the jet’s cargo bay, Hulk paced testily, struggling to contain his rage. He longed to crush the Hydra intruders inside Avengers Tower. For the time being, he had to satisfy his urges with the occasional roar at Tony for his constant ranting.

Tony yelled victoriously, “Ha! We have eyes!” He continued to mutter, “You just think you’re as smart as I am, you smarmy bastards.”

Steve grabbed a StarkPad, unsurprised to find that his hands were shaking so badly he could hardly turn the damned thing on. Sam reached over and eased it out of his grip, “let me… please, Steve.” He pulled up cameras inside Avengers Tower, flipping through images until he stopped on the Healing Ward. Sam muttered, “Damn! That’s a lot of bad guys.” He let out an impatient breath and
urged, “hang on, people. Push ‘em back! We’ll be there soon… we hope.” He looked around, not comfortable with the unusual shaking and rumbling of the Quinjet as it gained speed.

Thor also pulled a StarkPad out of a nearby locker. He turned it on and began to murmur quietly, “where is she? JARVIS? Now that friend Stark has sensors, find my Jane. Is she in a safe room? What can you tell me about her condition, friend JARVIS? When I arrive at our home, how do I find her most quickly and get her to safety?”

Steve glanced at Thor and was humbled to see that Thor was not shaking at all. Steve took a deep breath and tried to focus on solutions, like the god. What they saw happening in Avengers Tower made it difficult.

***

Phil Coulson, Melinda May, Antoine Triplett, Skye, and ten SHIELD security foot soldiers had taken out at least fifteen individual Hydra agents covering retreat in the lower floors of Avengers Tower- before they intercepted a HYDRA squadron for the first time on the Security and Containment floors. By the time they’d gotten that high in the tower, Skye had taken to referring to it as ‘Starkopolis’, unable to fathom that one man, even Tony Stark, could have so much money. She noticed that to go further up they would need badge or code access for the elevators. She held position behind the others as they exchanged fire with the enemy and asked, “Need me to hack us access to these elevators, Boss?”

Coulson shook his head and tossed her his phone. “Stark sent me everything we need.” He shot two more HYDRA operatives, shots going straight through the heart of each one.

Skye verified that the codes in Coulson’s phone worked. “This is unbelievable! Tony Stark gave you carte blanche access to ‘Starkopolis’! I had no idea you two were such buds.”

May and Coulson joined hand-to-hand combat with oncoming HYDRA soldiers, while Trip fell back and continued to cover them with a rifle. Between blows, Coulson remarked, “hardly... Tony Stark is tiresome, sometimes like an ill-behaved toddler. He behaves rudely towards Captain America, something I can’t abide. At the moment, Stark is disgruntled with me for not telling the Avengers of my… recovery… sooner. So, we’re not ‘buds.’ However, he is brave, genius, has unlimited resources, and manages to surround himself with wonderful people. And I don’t just mean the other Avengers. Colonel Rhodes is an amazing man. Miss Potts is one of the kindest, warmest women on Earth. Also, one of the most inexplicably patient.”

Trip took out the HYDRA squadron commander, “Bingo! Another head bites the dust!”

May finished her opponents, pulled guns and fell back slightly, “word has it another two will grow in its place.” She turned to Coulson, “situation update?”

He walked over to Skye and looked at his phone. He reflexively reacted to a sound, and pointed his gun up to shoot and kill a HYDRA operative in the ceiling vent above May. He looked up to verify the kill. “Caution! They’re doing a Barton and taking to the vents.” More soldiers joined the enemy forces at the other end of the hall. Coulson sighed, “more heads. May, men... help me cover Trip while he gets out the rocket launcher. Then, you four,” he pointed to four of the soldiers, “verify deaths and secure this floor. Captain America asked my help. I won’t let a little detail like an additional twenty gunmen get in my way today.” May and Trip exchanged a look as they heard the feverish note in Coulson’s voice.

Trip did as ordered, and blew away the squadron and an outside wall. Coulson and Skye were waiting in the elevator with what was left of their attack force, when May and Trip pulled the
heavy guns in behind them and watched the doors close. Skye asked, “what floor, Boss?”

Coulson glanced at his phone. “It does not surprise me one bit that the next five floors all cover legal matters. Stark draws trouble like no one else.”

May asked, “and after that?”

Coulson sighed, “three floors of accounting, and three more of other admin departments. I want to get to the one after that- Healing. There, I pray, we will find one of the original Howling Commandos, Bucky Barnes himself. If we’re too late, we’ll come face to face with his alter-ego, the most notoriously deadly HYDRA assassin of the past century, the Winter Soldier.” A few of the SHIELD soldiers shifted uncomfortably at these words.

Trip cleared his throat. “Damn! Barnes taught my grandpa how to shoot, lessons that were handed down to me. How could he still be kickin’? And, how come I’ve never heard of this Winter Soldier, if he’s so notorious?”

May shook her head and grumbled, “he’s a ghost story used to scare new agents. I never thought he was real. Ghost Assassin.”

Trip whistled, “the Ghost Assassin? Aw... hell, no!”

Coulson replied shortly, “he’s real- a kind of super-soldier. He scares the Black Widow.” The other three slowly turned to look at him. He shrugged with apparent nonchalance, “so, we should hurry.” May rolled her eyes and loosened the fasteners on a couple of her knives.

Their elevator shuddered to a halt, causing Coulson to curse HYDRA for the sixtieth time that day. May and Trip worked together to open the doors. They were between floors, almost to Human Resources. May pulled up and squeezed through the opening, pistols at the ready as she tucked and rolled. The others heard gunfire and May’s cry for backup. Coulson growled, looking up, “three more floors!” He boosted Skye up to the HR floor, followed, and then reached down to help Trip follow them. He called back to the other foot soldiers to bring the heavy equipment and join them as well.

Trip grimaced, “maybe if we keep ’em busy here, we’re keepin’ ‘em off Barnes. I really don’t want to trade shots with the Ghost.”

Coulson shot twice and replied, “I hope so, but doubt it. According to what Stark and the others said, he’s not even the primary target. That’s on 77. I imagine they sent forces down from the top as well as in through the front door.”

Skye pulled back to reload. “What’s on 77?”

Coulson shook his head and covered her, “a lightning rod, if you will! They’re after Thor’s girlfriend’s latest findings.” He started to say more, but shook his head, frowning. Phil Coulson was discretion personified.

Trip looked at him disbelievingly, “all this for Foster?”

Coulson grinned wryly, “well, she’s pretty smart.” He took out two more enemy soldiers. “I just hope she and her assistant have holed up somewhere safe.” He sighed heavily, “God, I hope that!”

Trip shook his head. “Not them! Foster’s not practical, and her assistant’s got too much attitude. She’ll try to taze the whole damned invasion force herself.”
Coulson grimaced, “let’s hope Stark upgraded her Taser, then.”

***

Steve and Sam exchanged grim looks as they watched the ongoing battle in the hallways of the Healing Ward. HYDRA soldiers and SI Security officers battled fiercely. Bodies of SI personnel littered the floor and HYDRA was taking losses, too, but gaining ground with every passing moment, since they so heavily outnumbered the defenders. Sam cheered as Navarro took out three HYDRA agents quickly and efficiently with her guns. Sharon Carter was fighting hand-to-hand with one intruder, and then shot another cleanly in the head.

But, defender after defender fell in the path of the seemingly infinite attacking forces. Steve let out a groan of anguish as they saw Agent Navarro fall to gunfire from six approaching HYDRA agents in the hallway outside of Bucky’s room. JARVIS confirmed her death a moment later.

Tony snarled, “damn them to hell! She was one of the only nurses I could ever stand to let help me.” Steve swallowed razor-sharp guilt, knowing that if he’d let Tony have his way, Bucky would not have been in the Healing Ward and Navarro might still be alive.

Sharon Carter took Navarro’s place at point, and led a solid defense, directing and rallying her few resources to hold that hallway. One HYDRA soldier managed to move around to her side and look into a patient room. Sharon screamed to call his attention her way, and took aim, but the soldier was shot straight through the heart by the patient before Sharon could pull her trigger.

Steve’s eyes closed for a second and then he let out a breath as Sharon was wounded and fell unconscious. He tensed as operatives moved quickly past her and the closest patient room with only a glance inside. He would bet anything that Peggy was the patient with the deadly aim. He prayed that in their haste as they neared their objective, HYDRA would ignore her, at least. He thought he’d accepted the fact that she wouldn't live much longer, but found that he was wrong.

Thor had not spoken since Tony verified that the safe room on the 77th floor was unoccupied. He simply stared at the screen on his StarkPad, watching the battle in the hallway outside of Lab Eleven, and the efforts Jane and Darcy put into blockading access to that laboratory. He smiled thinly as another five HYDRA soldiers disappeared from the hallway without warning.

***

HYDRA soldiers entered Bucky’s Healing Ward confinement room, ripped out his IV, and gave him multiple drug injections while he struggled in vain to free himself. One of them injected something larger, a device of some sort, into Bucky’s head. He yelled in pain and anguish.

After waiting and taking readings, the commander activated a hand-held unit. Bucky went rigid and screamed in agony for a long time, and then went limp. When he stopped screaming, the commander spoke to him in a low tone. Bucky nodded and uttered a monotone response, and they undid his restraints. The HYDRA commander talked to Bucky, giving him orders while keeping a finger poised on the controller in his hand. Bucky stared for a long moment, and nodded… his face set in the blank lines of the Winter Soldier. He held out a hand, and accepted a gun, and led the way out of the Healing Ward.

The commander ordered six HYDRA soldiers to stay behind and kill all surviving staff and patients on that floor.

Sharon rose to her feet in the hallway. One of the soldiers raised his gun to shoot her, but Winter Soldier made it unnecessary by brutally pistol-whipping her so that she fell out of their way. Her
blood spattered the wall. He didn't slow his pace or change expression at all.

***

Winter Soldier and the others disappeared from camera view into the elevator shaft, climbing upwards.

Tony winced and cried out, “oh, shit! He’s an active weapon again. This is so fuckin’ bad. All those people! Damn!”

The HYDRA soldiers still in the Healing Ward carried out their orders. Every shot that rang out cut through the Avengers and deepened their rage. Steve’s eyes teared as one of the murderers approached the room where he believed Peggy was. He gasped in relief as a shot rang out and the HYDRA soldier’s head exploded.

Sam yelled, “good shooting!”

Tony cried out, “Phil! Yes! Long live Agent and his team. It’s the Cavalry.”

Onscreen, Coulson and his people entered the Healing Ward halls, and took out the remaining HYDRA agents quickly and efficiently. Hawkeye glanced at the video feed and raised a brow, “yeah, literally. Phil, too. I don’t know the others.” Natasha quirked a slight grin as she noted Tony’s look of confusion at Hawkeye’s words.

As Coulson looked into the room that most held Steve’s attention, they saw him stop and stare, slack-jawed. He straightened to his full height, gasping, “Director Carter! It’s such an honor!” They couldn't hear what she said that made him smile, but saw him nod and add breathlessly, “yes, ma’am… We’ll go as quickly as possible, ma’am.” He whirled away, and headed back to the elevators.

Coulson’s people checked for survivors. Coulson left four soldiers to guard and shield the Healing Ward’s remaining staff and patients. He and the rest of his team followed the path taken by the Winter Soldier and the HYDRA squad he led.

Steve wiped his eyes and muttered, “thanks, Phil. You’re my hero right now.” He breathed in and out heavily, praying that something would slow HYDRA’s progress to the lab floors so that the SHIELD team could catch up to them.

Sam switched to cameras outside Lab Eleven. Stark Industries Security forces fought hard, but were outgunned. HYDRA had apparently sent in teams from aircraft above, and ground troops below. Steve let out a shaky breath, willing the Quinjet to go faster. As if in reply, Tony exclaimed, “hang on, kids. Let's hope this doesn't explode!” They were all pressed back firmly by the g-forces as the new engine reached Mach 15. It was difficult for even Thor and Steve to move. The Quinjet shook, as though to rip apart, as it sped along exponentially faster than ever before. Tony monitored the jet’s stats, having the computer log all damage and stress levels for later study.

Sam barely managed to move his hand enough to switch the view on the StarkPad to a camera inside Jane’s lab. He and Steve stared at the image. Darcy was perched on barricade items by the door, peeking out and calling directions to Jane, while Jane turned knobs and pushed buttons on a device she held in her hands.

***

Over the next thirteen minutes, Winter Soldier led a strike force to take Lab Eleven, resistance crumbling quickly before his ruthless expertise and deadly power. When some of the men in his
command disappeared as he rounded the corner to Lab Eleven, he stopped and surveyed the space around them, standing back for perspective. He heard a woman on the other side of the door gasp, “oh, gods, no…”

The HYDRA commander joined him, and watched as more men disappeared from a section of the hall in front of the lab door. After a moment, the commander chided Winter Soldier for not noticing the energy rods that had been placed against walls and columns around an eight-foot-square area. He ordered Winter Soldier to deactivate the energy rods, frowning as the Soldier destroyed the first. The commander specified that the other three be deactivated only, not destroyed.

As Winter Soldier complied with his orders, he heard someone climbing down furniture on the other side of the door.

Once the rods were deactivated, the commander had an agent check the lab door. It was locked, of course, and also seemed to have heavy items stacked behind it. There were cabinets and crates piled in front of the door, items so heavy that it had required forces unknown to HYDRA to move them. The commander ordered an advance scout to use the ventilation system for entry, and then ordered the soldiers with him to use explosives to blow the lab door and items blocking it.

The commander looked at the motionless and expressionless Winter Soldier standing next to him, and shuddered. He found the silent killer horrifying, and looked forward to handing him over to scientists qualified to manage him long-term.

***

A moment later, the HYDRA advance guy dropped into Lab Eleven through a ceiling vent and pulled Jane away from a side door as she yelped in surprised fear. He slapped a cuff around one of her wrists with a loud metallic click. She fell; wrenching her arm, and crying out with pain. Jane tried with all her might to escape his grasp, but he was far stronger.

Jane’s attacker grappled with her, reaching for her other arm while she flailed, and then turned as Darcy screamed, “hey, asshole!” and ran at him. As he turned to face Darcy, she stomped on the top of his foot as hard as she could, while tazing into his throat. The scent of sizzling skin filled the air along with his cries of pain. His upper body collapsed forward, and he fell back at the same time, ankle obviously breaking as he lost consciousness.

Darcy hesitated for half a second, then kicked his thigh and fell to her knee on his throat, eyes closed tightly as she both felt and heard a sickening crunching sound. She couldn't dwell on it then, but thought she would hear the sound in her head for the rest of her life- however long that might be. Darcy set her Taser to recharge, moved back, and helped Jane to stand. They clung to each other tightly, and both ducked behind a counter as a door exploded into the room and blockade items fell aside.

When they stood again, Jane looked around and murmured with distress, “only three…” A badly shaken Darcy nodded understanding as they turned to face the invaders.

Winter Soldier entered the room; gun pointing straight at them, and moved in ahead of the other operatives. Darcy’s breathing shuddered. He stared at the two women without expression, his eyes almost lifeless. Darcy took shaky aim at him with her Taser. He grabbed a glass beaker and threw it at her hand with unerring aim. The beaker shattered on impact, and Darcy lost her grip on the Taser, dropping it to the floor and staring at Winter Soldier, horror-struck and crying out in fearful pain while shaking glass shards away.

She stared at him and whispered raggedly, “Bucky?” He moved closer to her, but did not react.
It was the first time Darcy had ever seen Bucky standing, upright. He was almost as tall as Steve, but seemed to loom over her in a way the larger man never had. Fear chased down her spine and settled in her gut.

The HYDRA commander walked into the lab, carrying a hand unit that he pointed at Winter Soldier. He spoke quietly to Jane, “Good day, Dr. Foster. I am Commander Clouse. Hail HYDRA!” He offered a salute. Darcy shuddered fearfully, remembering her interrogator in London.

Clouse glanced at Darcy, noting the way she and Jane held to each other. His expression was cold as he noted, “you are friends as well as colleagues, I see. That will do well… for my purpose. I need for you to enlighten me, Dr. Foster, on the phenomena you created in London last November. First, you will give me the passwords and retinal scans needed to access your computers, so that we may remove your data to take back to our scientists. They are most eager to see your work.”

Jane shook her head. Clouse smirked at Darcy, “if you possess the ability to access the files, you will wish to tell me, now.”

Darcy’s voice shook as she growled, “so you can use Jane’s work against the Avengers?” She shook her head quickly.

Clouse turned to Winter Soldier and gestured from him to Darcy. “This is the asset known as Winter Soldier, the fist of HYDRA. Soldier? Your mission is to harm Dr. Foster’s friend until she or the good doctor answer my questions fully, and I have access to the data that I just requested. Do you understand your mission?”

Winter Soldier replied, “yes. Do you wish her alive until the doctor gives all you demand?” He holstered his gun and looked Darcy up and down dispassionately.

Clouse nodded tersely, “yes. Beat her, cut her, rape her, break her body and spirit- but, do not terminate her life until I so direct.”

Darcy gaped, horror-struck. Jane, holding her wrist and leaning against Darcy, looked as though she might be ill. They were both shaking visibly. Jane was crying, and shaking her head back and forth.

***

The HYDRA commander’s voice was too low for most of the Avengers to hear his words over the new engine’s noise. Even Steve was only able to hear most of what was being said, though it was enough to leave him sick with rage. Tony made adjustments and the engine quieted some.

Onscreen, Jane shouted frantically, “No! Leave her out of it. I’m the one you want! Just take me, and leave her! Don’t do this.” Thor let out a noise like a sob and bellowed with helpless anger.

***

Winter Soldier moved towards Darcy, and looked at Jane, rasping tonelessly, “my mission is to gain your cooperation. I will torture her as directed to achieve that end.”

Darcy backed away from him, small and frightened steps, as he stalked closer and closer. She went more pale with each step he took, and gasped in terror, “mission? Oh, God! Bucky! Please, Bucky… no! Please! You’re not… You can’t… Please. It would kill him.”

***
Steve’s grip on his shield tightened even more, his arms shaking. Glancing at it, Tony wondered if Steve might actually dent the Vibranium within his grip.

Even though they couldn't hear what was said onscreen, the others saw Darcy and Jane’s terror as Bucky advanced on Darcy. Hawkeye spoke in a low tone, “Guys? Let’s make sure Steve isn't the one that has to kill Barnes. He may want to right now… and in the next few minutes. But, in the long run…” Natasha nodded once, eyes forward and her face expressionless. Hulk roared in response, snarling and gnashing his teeth.

Tony glanced at Steve’s face again and looked away quickly, shaken.

***

In the lab, Jane gasped and wept noisily, then moved back and set her hand against the counter to her side to steady herself. Darcy shifted frantically as she looked around the room, her gaze finally settling on one spot. She swallowed hard, and moved towards the side door, darting frightened glances at Winter Soldier. She saw his gaze follow hers and prayed he wouldn't understand her goal and destroy it. Guns shifted with her movement, and clicks could be heard. She stopped, staring towards that door.

Winter Soldier moved to Darcy’s side with inhuman speed. She couldn't help the whimper of fear that escaped her. He stared down at her, and shifted his posture very deliberately. Through the shrieking in her mind, Darcy heard Natasha’s cool voice, instructing. She shifted her arms to block her midsection. The metal arm slammed her so hard she flew several feet, landing by the side door and crying out in pain from that first blow. She had not learned how to anticipate to properly block her head and other side from impact with the wall. She wasn't sure it was possible to blunt such a forceful blow more than she had.

Jane shrieked Darcy’s name, standing still against the lab counter. One of her hands edged closer to a controller.

***

Held in place by g-forces, Steve cried out, feeling as though the world had gone cold and turned into grasping ice once again.

*to be continued...*
Anyone who thought Captain America incapable of killing would not have recognized him as he eliminated the HYDRA forces in his path.

Chapter Summary

The Avengers arrive and battle the HYDRA forces attacking the tower.

Chapter Notes

First, THANK YOU for all of the lovely comments after Chapter 25. You guys are the best! It's such a pleasure to get a reaction and catch your interest. I'm absolutely a comment-addict (there's other words for it, but I'm going with that for now). ;) Your enthusiasm really made me want to tighten up the next chapters and make them better for you! I hope you're pleased and continue to enjoy the story.

Second, McGregorsWench!!!! You're awesome and encouraging and patient with me... and make me happy. :) Thank you for being such a great Beta reader!!!

Tony continued to monitor the test engine’s performance and make adjustments, but his eyes were drawn to the video feed as he heard Darcy and Jane screaming. He blinked hard and yelled, “what? I’ll be damned! Get up… NOW!” Steve glanced from Tony back to the screen, helplessly wondering what Tony was talking about, and if there was anything that could stop the Winter Soldier from following his horrifying orders further.

In Lab Eleven, Darcy blearily pulled herself upright, wincing against the pain in her head and body. She gasped as she realized she was leaning against the gravometric energy rod that had fallen out of position when HYDRA blew their way into the lab. She clicked it into place and flipped a switch to turn it back on, moaning with pain as she then jumped away from it, pressing herself against the door. She turned and stared at the Winter Soldier, blinking away tears. He saw her expression and the indicator light, glanced around quickly, and leapt nimbly out of the portal field. She swallowed hard, both impressed and appalled.

Tony yelled, “now, Foster! Hit it!”

Steve couldn't speak to ask what was happening. He was transfixed by Darcy’s fearful tears as she watched the Winter Soldier. Thor nodded, clasping his hands in a prayer-like gesture, tears flowing. Steve vaguely wondered if Thor prayed to Odin... and whether Odin heard him.

Jane grabbed a small piece of equipment on the counter she leaned against, twisted a knob and held down a button. Shots rang out and the lab camera lens was covered with blood. Steve heard Darcy crying out in pain again. He stared at the redness on the screen comprehendingly.

Next to him, Sam rasped, “God! What’s happening?”

Natasha called out, “Tony, start backing off the power so we don’t overshoot.”
He replied testily and returned to his engine maintenance programming.

Steve could hear Jane calling Darcy’s name, sounding fearful. He closed his eyes and listened for a response. He heard sounds of fighting and then more gunfire.

Tony called, “JARVIS, give me everything I need to power down the Mark-V Engine.” Their communication with the tower camera system was cut. The g-forces decreased. All eyes focused on the sight of Avengers Tower coming into view in the distance. Seat straps were released and weapons readied.

***

Three HYDRA soldiers and approximately half of the commander… happily, the half holding the device that plagued Bucky… had disappeared from the room. The commander’s blood and other bodily fluids splattered wildly, covering everything and every person still standing in the lab. Bucky cried out, holding his head, obviously in pain. Two HYDRA soldiers who’d not been transported moved closer to him, uneasy. Jane screamed in horror as she watched him quickly, brutally, and dispassionately kill the men. He shot one in the head and broke the other one’s neck. He took their weapons and moved to the door, stepping into the hallway beyond and gunning down more approaching HYDRA soldiers.

Jane gaped at him, and ran to Darcy’s side. “Are you okay?”

Darcy nodded and leaned against the wall, hoping she was right. A bullet had grazed her arm, so she held her other hand over the wound, stunned by the pain and shocked by all that had just passed. Tears streamed down her face and she was breathing hard, like she’d tried to chase Steve running or something. It was a bad idea. The dead HYDRA commander, the half of him still on the floor of Lab Eleven, smelled terrible. She groaned and struggled not to vomit or let panic overcome her. She looked at Jane and asked weakly, “do you even know where you sent them?”

Jane shrugged, “Svartalfheim? I’m not sure. I’ll check later. For all I know they just landed in the courtyard of the Naval College in Greenwich! I just sent…” She looked around wildly and finally grabbed Darcy’s Taser off the ground and moved back to her friend’s side. They stood shoulder to shoulder, both shaking like leaves in the wind. Jane moaned, "oh, Darce!"

Darcy tried to wipe some of the blood and other ick off her. It was disgusting. Her head hurt like hell with every movement and she felt incredibly tender down her left side and on both of her arms. Tears tracked down her face as she and Jane silently watched Bucky fighting HYDRA soldiers just outside the door to the lab.

Jane swallowed hard. “I guess… I mean, he’s killing HYDRA attackers now, right? So, I guess he’s on our side again?”

Darcy nodded and groaned, “looks that way. Sure as hell hope so.” Jane raised her brows and blew out a shaky breath, nodding agreement.

They heard more gunfire, and saw Bucky take a bullet in the leg. Darcy cried out in alarm as he shot his attacker and then rushed into hand-to-hand combat with another invader. Bucky overcame the other men, and things went nearly silent. There were still battle sounds in other parts of the building and outside. The air was filled with smoke.

Bucky turned and stared at them, then walked back into the room at a slow and deliberate pace. His expression was entirely different now, the one of sad anguish that Darcy knew so well, though also cautious and guilty as he saw their fear and Darcy's tears. He sighed raggedly and rasped, “you
okay? I’m… so… sorry that I hurt you, Doll.” He sighed again and his voice cracked as he explained, “I couldn't let you taze me. I was scared it might fry my brain. I barely had a grip on myself as it was.”

Darcy gasped shakily, “Oh!”

Bucky looked out in the hallway again, listening carefully before he turned back to speak again. “Then, you wanted to get over there. That cowardly bastard had his finger on the button. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to zap me again if he knew I was playing the part instead of really in his control. I didn't want him to make me the Winter Soldier again for real, so I swatted you.” He looked down at the ground for a long moment, then met her gaze again. “I told you I was a monster.”

Darcy nodded, unable to stop crying, regardless of how much she wanted to. Her voice still shaking, she called, “JARVIS?” There was still no answer. She wrapped her arms around herself, trembling with cold and fear, dizzy and even more nauseous. She saw Bucky’s eyes narrow as he looked her over, assessing her wounds and condition. He looked even more pained.

Jane pointed out, “JARVIS may not be fully operational, but the lab camera’s on. It has been for more than five minutes. I’d guess Tony’s working on getting JARVIS back in here.”

Darcy’s head jerked up as she stared at the camera and blinked back more tears.

Bucky swore under his breath. “I sure as hell hope Steve didn't hear what that commander ordered me to do to you. He’d go berserk.” He looked somber. “I wouldn't blame him if he killed me first and asked questions later.” His shoulders slumped as he hung his head. "Wouldn't blame him a bit.”

Jane looked from Bucky to Darcy and suggested nervously, “let’s get less bloody and stuff.” She shook a hand so that blood drops rolled off. “This is disgusting.”

Darcy let out a breath, wiping away more tears as she saw that some part of Bucky would welcome death. Now that the immediate danger was past, at least for the moment, her shaking increased so much that her teeth began to chatter. She asked him, “what’d they do to you?”

He glanced at her quickly, and then looked down again. He pointed to a place behind his ear, “inserted something there. They were juicing it up. I stopped resisting while I could still think, and pretended to be what they wanted- that I would do what they ordered. I tried to put our people down without killing them. Get the damned thing out… NOW. They gave me drug injections, too. I don’t feel right. I think the stuff Banner and other scientists have made for me is helping me hold it together. But, I need to be certain that I’m not a danger to you.”

Darcy blew out a nervous breath and gestured, “him first, for God’s sake. My bleeding can wait a minute if it makes it any less likely that they could turn him against us again.” She shook as adrenaline began to fade and allowed her more awareness of her aches and pains.

While Jane gathered equipment, Bucky chuckled darkly, “it’s funny, Doll. Usually you talk about ‘gods’. When you really mean what you say, though, you’re all about ‘God.’”

Darcy shrugged and made a face. She thought about it for a moment and felt a bubble of hysterical laughter trying to push its way out as she realized Bucky was right. She finally just shrugged again and half-grinned.

Jane told Bucky to kneel and lean against a stool so she could see his head better. She looked where he indicated with magnifying glasses, and felt the lump where the subcutaneous device was implanted. She groaned and shuddered, “Well, whether it’s to God or gods? I wish I had anesthetic.
This First Aid kit is limited.” She set items on the counter next to them.

Darcy murmured wearily, “JARVIS? Make a note that we need better First Aid kits in the labs, please.” After she said it, she remembered that JARVIS wasn't there.

Bucky touched the cuff on Jane’s wrist gently, and then used the fingers of his mechanical hand to snap it free. He made a face and shrugged. “Cut the thing out, regardless of the pain. Someone else might have an activation device. I’d rather die than do what any of them say again.”

Darcy forced herself forward, and put a comforting hand on his shoulder while Jane grabbed an X-Acto blade and went to work, still favoring her wrist. Darcy could feel Bucky tense against the pain, but he didn't cry out. She guessed he’d suffered much worse at HYDRA’s hands and the pity she felt nearly undid the little control she had over her emotions. She stroked his shoulder softly. He glanced at her hand and shook his head, then looked away. Blood ran freely from his wound. Darcy sponged it to help Jane see more clearly.

Jane murmured, “almost done... Hang on.”

Darcy used more sponges and prepared bandages. She and Jane worked quickly in tandem to remove the device. Jane pocketed it. Darcy thoroughly cleaned the wound and bandaged Bucky’s head carefully. He climbed to his feet and moved between the ladies and the door. Darcy let Jane tend the gunshot wound on her arm and the cuts she’d gotten from the beaker. As she winced, she saw regret and guilt in Bucky’s expression.

Bucky apologized haltingly, “I’m sorry I… hurt you… and frightened you.” Jane gulped and nodded. Darcy took a deep breath and let it out shakily.

He looked at Darcy and the anguish in his eyes cut through her, though she also shuddered fearfully and fought the urge to vomit. She reassured him in a hollow voice, “it’s okay, Bucky. Thanks for… helping...” Her breath shuddered again and she struggled to stop her teeth from chattering.

He shook his head. “Too good. Definitely the right one for him.”

She held a hand against her head, hoping to press away the pain, “God! What a Monday...”

He nodded, “no shit.” Bucky walked to the door and peered out, listening and concentrating.

Jane looked out the window and exclaimed, “look! Iron Patriot!”

Darcy’s phone made a noise, indicating an incoming text. It was about 40 minutes old, and read, ‘On our way home. Love you.’

She sighed, relaxed slightly, and told the others, “I have phone signal again! Avengers should be here in less than three hours.”

JARVIS spoke, “Hello, Dr. Foster, Bucky, and Darcy. I have regained function in the Tower. May I be of help?” Darcy gasped with relief, and Jane cheered at the sound. Bucky looked up, his eyes narrowing.

Darcy cried out, “Oh! Thank God! And, well, Tony. I feel Tony-love at this moment. You can even tell him I said that, J!”

Bucky chimed in, “what’s our situation?”
JARVIS replied, “the Avengers are about to land. The new, faster engine passed its first field test.”

Jane cried out, “faster? My God! Did he break Mach 12?”

JARVIS replied, “They achieved Mach 15.” Jane gasped, impressed and shocked.

JARVIS continued, “Sir is pleased, though he needs to make structural improvements to the Quinjets. As I said, the Avengers will arrive momentarily. Director Coulson’s SHIELD team is one floor below you now, battling a Hydra squadron and preventing them from attacking you. They have worked together with surviving SI employees to secure the building up to that point, including Containment… where drones are returning escaped prisoners and adding captured invaders. The 77th floor is clear of hostiles at the moment, but that seems subject to change. There are hostile forces mostly concentrated on floors 78, 79 and 80, and a few individuals on other floors between this lab and the roof. I count twenty seven hostiles in total.”

Bucky checked his weapons and prepped while he asked, “will both sides be shooting at me?” He cleared his throat. “And, what does Steve know about everything that’s happened here today?”

JARVIS answered, “I was able to alert Mr. Stark when I was shut out of the Tower, Bucky. The Avengers soon completed their mission in Afghanistan and began their return flight. Mr. Stark tested a new Quinjet engine successfully, and cut their travel time considerably. He reactivated Tower sensors and received status reports of the attack and defense efforts. Tower cameras reactivated next, and the Avengers were able to access them while they traveled. I know that Captain Rogers’ StarkPad showed the events of your capture, Bucky, and then the attack you led on Lab Eleven. It also displayed all interactions inside Laboratory Eleven until the camera lens was obscured. All Quinjet power was diverted to the engine as they began their approach.”

Bucky let out a breath and shook his head. Jane looked dismayed, knowing that Thor would have been watching and worrying as well.

Darcy’s voice quavered, “is Steve okay?”

JARVIS replied, “I cannot verify his reaction, Darcy. The Captain has not spoken in some time.”

Bucky asked brusquely, “how long?”

JARVIS replied, “the Captain has not spoken a word in thirty five minutes and six seconds.”

Bucky and Darcy exchanged a look. Darcy asked, “JARVIS, can you tell Steve that Bucky and I are both fine now? He helped me and Jane get rid of those goons and has been fighting off other hostiles to keep us safe. Can you let Steve know that?”

JARVIS agreed, “I will update the Avengers as you ask, Darcy.”

Bucky sighed, “if he can’t, Steve’s gonna feel some serious guilt for doing me in … once his temper settles.”

Darcy shook her head, “stop that crap. He needs you.”

Bucky looked at her and sighed with resignation, muttering to himself, “says she who’s never seen Steve REALLY pissed off…” He looked around them and lined up the weapons stash he’d gathered from the fallen Hydra operatives, “I’ll keep you safe.” He paced. “They’d better hurry their asses here, though. Even I can’t hold off twenty seven operatives AND keep two civilians free from harm, alone.” A few seconds later he pointed to the window. “Christ! It looks like they burned a lot of paint off that bird!”
The Avengers’ Quinjet did look worse for wear, but was an incredibly welcome sight all the same. They watched it until it disappeared from view, settling atop the Tower. Darcy looked at her phone again and texted. ‘Love you. Bucky good. Welcome home.’ Bucky breathed in and out heavily and took up position at the main lab door, ready.

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When the Quinjet landed on the roof, shaken Avengers rolled out, a bit unsteady on their feet from all of the turbulence and g-forces, but blazing into battle mode regardless. Thor looked at the remaining helicopter gun boats locked in battle with Iron Patriot, and back to Captain America. Steve verified with JARVIS that no innocents were aboard the enemy craft. Then he asked him to alert Iron Patriot that Thor was about to join battle and that Rhodes should shift his efforts as directed by Iron Man. Cap gave Thor the go-ahead. Thor brought down lightning on the HYDRA craft one by one, his face contorted into a mask of rage. Tony gestured for Falcon and Iron Patriot to join him in battle on the side of the building away from Thor and his deadly lightning offensive.

Steve turned and ran into the building at his top speed, pushing it more as JARVIS updated him on the location of hostile forces and the status of those in Lab Eleven. He first met a group of seven HYDRA soldiers outside one of the secondary R&D labs. There was no hesitation and no mercy from Captain America as he plowed into the invaders. He fought with an unmatched ferocity, cutting into the group with his shield like they were bowling pins lined up for him to strike, one soldier falling dead immediately from the first impact of the shield as he let it fly.

Then, Steve took a knife from one man and lethally pinned him to the wall with it through the throat. He took a gun from another HYDRA soldier and shot the man straight between the eyes and then used the gun to crush the skull of another soldier. He whirled and kicked another man through a wall, the impact of the blow crushing bones and rupturing internal organs. Anyone who thought Captain America incapable of killing would not have recognized him as he eliminated the enemy forces in his path.

The remaining two soldiers turned and fled in terror. One of them only made it ten feet before the shield made contact with the back of his skull. The final man, the squadron commander, fell to his knees and put his hands up in surrender. Steve ran to his side and pulled the shield out of the fallen man’s head, then used it to dull his punch enough so that he only knocked the squadron commander unconscious. He disarmed him, and cuffed the man to a handicapped assistance railing on the nearest wall.

Steve heard a noise, and rounded a corner to see Hulk smashing two HYDRA soldiers against opposite walls of the hallway, their heads lolling at unnatural angles as he tossed them aside to move on to the next threat. Steve forced open elevator doors and climbed down the cable quickly, determinedly heading for the 77th floor.

Hawkeye was in the vent system, finding sections that allowed him to drop down five floors at a time. On the 78th floor, he stepped out into a hallway, immediately facing six HYDRA agents. He engaged them and went to work, arrows and fists flying hard.

Black Widow was able to access smaller vents. She arrived on the 77th floor ahead of the rest of the Avengers. Natasha stepped out into the hallway and heard someone shout, “it’s Black Widow! Avengers are on site!” She cursed and ran forward, tossing widow’s bites and shots with equal abandon.

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Even though Bucky was practically growling as the sounds of battle drew nearer, Darcy was
amused to see Jane return to work on the formula they’d been discussing before the attack started. Darcy marveled at the hold that science had on her friend. Bucky tensed more and more, monitoring everything happening around them, she supposed. She heard shouting and the sound of running feet coming closer. Suddenly, Bucky moved to the door opening. He listened, turned, ran back to Jane and Darcy, pushed them both down on the floor, and covered them with his body.

Three seconds later, the room exploded.

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Still fighting his way there, Steve heard JARVIS’ report... “Explosion in Lab Eleven.” He pushed himself even harder, wishing he was in the lab that instant…

Natasha saw the bomb thrown into Lab Eleven and pulled back around a corner to avoid the worst of the explosion. Then, she moved back out to fight the desperately retreating HYDRA operatives. She was in the midst of taking down a group of them, when she heard noise approaching. It was either Hulk or Cap in ultra-smash mode, so she rolled and flattened herself against a side wall before the doors at the end of the hallway burst open. Cap’s shield flew hard and fast, helping her finish off the soldiers she’d been battling, including the man who had pitched the bomb into the lab.

As Steve dove into the burning lab, Natasha called, “I’ve got your back. Find them!”

More HYDRA soldiers came round the corner to face her. At that moment, the air vent over her head burst open, and Hawkeye fell in next to her, firing arrows at the approaching forces without missing a beat. The door from another hallway opened. Coulson and his team entered the fray behind the HYDRA force. The SHIELD team and the two assassins fought and downed all of the remaining enemies in short order.

Natasha stepped over bodies, ran up to Phil Coulson and shook him by the lapels hard, and then hugged him with all of her might.

Hawkeye spared a glance of gratitude at his un-dead friend as he peered into the burning lab. They heard Steve yelling with exertion, apparently lifting something very heavy. Hawkeye started into the room, but stopped when he saw Thor fly in through a blown-out window, wildly bellowing Jane’s name. Falcon assumed a guard position outside the lab window, flying back and forth with an eye out for additional threats.

Smoke poured through the windows and doors, billowing out of the destroyed lab. Together, Steve and Thor easily lifted the support beams and tossed them aside. Thor ripped off his cape and used it to smother flames licking at the unmoving bodies on the floor. Next, Thor pulled Jane into his arms, whirled his hammer, and flew out the window and down to the Healing Ward entry window, almost out of his mind with fear for her.

Steve shook with emotion as he looked down at Bucky’s burned body laying atop Darcy, shielding her from further harm. Natasha and Hawkeye entered the lab slowly, weapons drawn.

JARVIS broke the silence as Steve knelt and began to carefully check Bucky and Darcy’s wounds. “Captain? Darcy asked me to tell you that Bucky was protecting her and Dr. Foster from HYDRA. He explained that he pretended to be the Winter Soldier again in hopes of preventing HYDRA from reconditioning him successfully, and that his actions were also intended to enable him to assist Darcy against Hydra. You were… occupied… when I tried to relay the message earlier.” Steve froze for a second, and then nodded numbly.
Natasha observed, “Steve? I don’t know why he knocked the Taser away so harshly- but, when he hit her, he telegraphed his blow clearly, and he aimed so that she landed exactly where she needed to go in order for Foster to activate the portal device.”

Hawkeye grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out small fires all around them. His voice sounded choked as he rasped, “so, he knew what they were ordering him to do to one of the few people he calls friend, what they would make him do if they took his will away again.” Neither Natasha nor Steve thought Hawkeye’s voice was affected by the smoke.

Steve continued to work. He finished evaluating wounds, and spoke in a low tone, “I’m gonna take Darcy to Healing now. JARVIS? Can you have a team bring a gurney for Bucky? His injuries are much more severe since he took the brunt of… everything.”

Natasha reassured him, “they’re tough, Steve. I’m sure they’ll be fine. Take Darcy. We’ll look after Barnes.” He easily lifted Darcy into his arms, mindful of her injuries. As he left, Steve looked back at Bucky with haunted eyes.

Moments later, a medical team arrived, leaving the gurney in the hall outside the remains of the lab. Natasha spoke to the leader while Hawkeye watched the orderlies approaching Bucky. As one touched Bucky, he moaned and lifted his head, pushing up on his arms. His flesh and bone arm was savagely burnt all along the back.

The second orderly’s face shifted to a snarl of hatred as he realized who lay on the floor in front of him. He swung back the metal kit in his hand, intending to smash it directly into Bucky’s face with lethal force. Hawkeye tackled him. As they rolled to a halt, the man screamed accusations, “he led soldiers against our people! He’s the enemy! He doesn't deserve to live!”

Hawkeye restrained the man and dryly called out, “Hey, JARVIS? Can you send another orderly? This guy’s not working out. He forgot the ‘do no harm’ thing pretty thoroughly, and is trying to murder the patient.” He stood and pointed to the door. “Get the fuck out, man. Don’t make me hurt you. Just go.”

Natasha had one of her guns pressed against the other orderly’s temple. “What about you? We have a problem?”

He shook his head, “no, ma’am. I know it’s Captain’s orders for us to take care of this guy.”

Hawkeye stared at Bucky, noting that the man had not moved at all, and was staring straight ahead, unflinching. He asked, “you having trouble moving, Barnes?”

Bucky shook his head and pushed to his feet. He wobbled on one obviously broken leg and hopped awkwardly towards the door. Hawkeye shifted closer and did his best to assist without aggravating Bucky’s wounds. It was difficult going. Finally, Bucky managed to reach the gurney, and lay on his stomach on it. Within seconds, he had passed out again from pain and blood loss.

Natasha shook her head. “I don’t understand. He could move. Why didn't he defend himself?”

Hawkeye sighed heavily. “I get it. He didn't want to, ‘Tasha.” She blinked hard. Hawkeye sounded bitter, “I’m gonna accompany him the rest of the way, and make sure none of the other med staff try to kill him.” Natasha made a face at Hawkeye, gave him a long kiss, and murmured private words of reassurance.

*to be continued*
A few minutes later, Steve strode into the Healing Ward, nearly at a run, cradling Darcy against him tightly. Steve stopped in his tracks when he saw Dr. Chau, kneeling by Navarro’s body, gently stroking her cheeks and murmuring words of loving and bereft farewell. She glanced up at him and nodded a tearful greeting. He nearly choked on his guilt.

Orderlies took Darcy and put her on a gurney headed to triage, promising an update as soon as possible. Feeling useless and at a loss, he looked around at the chaos of the Ward. Staff members from all shifts were on hand to make up the difference, but they were still short-handed. He turned to a nurse, “let me know if I can help… lift people… whatever…” She looked at him oddly, and he realized how ghastly he looked, how much blood and filth was on his uniform. He sank into a chair by the wall, and huffed out a breath that was almost like a sob.

Dr. Chau sat in a nearby chair, her chin trembling as she watched Navarro’s body being moved, with a sheet pulled up over Navarro’s face. She put a pair of jade earrings on, and stared into space for a long moment. Then, she reached out a hand to him. “Please, Steven. It’s all too much. You need something to do, and I need comfort.”

He took her hand in his, and cleared his throat. “You probably want someone else, Doc. I apparently look as bad as I feel… and I’m partly to blame for Navarro’s death.”

Tears tracked down Chau’s face as she shook her head and chuckled while crying. “I can see the future, Steven. Tomorrow, Tony Stark will apologize for ‘being so messed up’ that he brought me here. Pepper Potts will apologize for convincing me to stay… after the seventh time Mr. Stark screamed that he didn’t need me. Dr. Selvig will apologize for whatever he invented that made things disappear from Greenwich to Asgard- and caught Hydra’s interest. Thor Odinson will apologize that his love for ‘the brilliant Jane Foster brought tragedy upon my house’. Bucky Barnes will avoid looking at me and refuse to speak at all. You? You’re ahead of schedule, of course… but you are an over-achiever.” Her voice was soft, but a note of anger could be heard, “I will apologize to myself, and beg forgiveness that I convinced Jeanne to work here.”

She shook her head ruefully, tears flowing down her face. She choked out, “do you know who will NOT apologize?” He squeezed her hand sympathetically, and shook his head. Her lips trembled, “none of the men who shot and killed my wife, Jeanne Navarro, will apologize, that’s who!”

Steve sighed, “probably in no small part because we killed all of ‘em, Doc.”

She glanced at him and murmured, “and he rode on a pale horse… and his name was Death. Good. Good riddance.” She nodded grimly, “if Jeanne’s murder has been avenged, I do not mourn those evil men. I confess that I will ask JARVIS to confirm what you suspect.”
Steve leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, sighing again, “I’m usually the one to encourage merciful treatment. I didn't do that today.”

Chau grimaced, “you’re squeezing my hand too tightly, Steven.”

He gasped, “I’m so sorry!” He pulled back, and sucked in his breath as the elevator opened and he saw Bucky again. Hawkeye stood next to the gurney with a forbidding expression, so protective that it puzzled Steve. Something had happened, that much was certain.

He and Dr. Chau watched as Bucky was wheeled into the Healing Ward, Hawkeye walking behind him with a gun drawn and at the ready. Other people stopped and stared, too, and any who looked at Bucky with anger quailed as they saw Hawkeye’s expression. Bucky laid face-down, his back covered with severe burns and his leg at an odd angle. As Bucky passed them, his eyes opened, and he met Steve’s gaze. He blinked rapidly; Chau could not ascertain if his look was only one of anguish… or also fear. His eyes closed again as pain overwhelmed him. She looked at Steve. He’d gone rigid with tension.

Dr. Chau licked her lips. “I have personal business to tend to, Captain, but I will make sure to let you know as soon as I’m back in my office.”

Steve’s breathing was uneven. He nodded and rasped quietly, “could be a long one, Doc.”

Chau swallowed hard, “gracious, dear! An admission of need? I’ll give you all the time you want.”

He reached for her hand again, leaned down, and kissed it lightly, then held it as gently as he could.

“Is he protecting others from Bucky, or protecting him from others?” Dr. Chau watched as Hawkeye followed Bucky’s gurney into triage.

Steve sighed heavily, “both.” He shook his head and sighed again. He looked pained and cleared his throat, obviously not ready to talk. He decided to change the subject, bit his lip, and then looked at Dr. Chau, noticing something. “Those were her earrings, weren’t they?”

Tears came to Dr. Chau’s eyes. “We never wed legally. Neither of our families accepted our love as… legitimate… or moral.” She cried quietly for a long moment. “Not that their sad bigotry really mattered. Jeanne was everything I ever wanted. We loved each other very much!” She sniffed and shook her head as though to shake away the tears. “The emblem on these earrings is Chinese for ‘Double Happiness’, what we brought to each other’s lives. It’s often used in proper Chinese weddings, the kind we could never have. Jeanne had them made after my family shunned us and our relationship. She said that even if they could not respect our love, she respected my background for its part in making me the person I am, her wife.” She reached up and touched one lightly. “Jeanne wore these earrings every day for twenty four years… as a token of our love. I cannot bear to part with them.” They exchanged a look, full of feeling.

A nurse came over to Steve nervously, “Um, Captain? The lady you brought in, Miss Lewis, is being moved to room HW1132. She’s in stable condition, though she needs to stay here, at least overnight. She should wake soon.”

Steve thanked the nurse and sighed with profound relief.

“Go, Steven. Tell Darcy I’m glad that she’s okay, and I will be in touch soon.” Dr. Chau squeezed his hand.

He nodded, stood, and then leaned down and kissed Dr. Chau’s cheek. “I’m sorry for the loss of
your wife, Dr. Chau.”

She lifted her chin, quietly dignified. “Thank you, Steven.”

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When Darcy woke, she groaned and muttered, “Healing Ward, again? Really?” For a panicked second she feared that all that had occurred in the past few months had been a dream, and she was just waking after being attacked in London. Her heart rate spiked at the thought.

“Yeah. Healing Ward, again. I could kiss you or something if it would help you wake up.” Steve’s voice rasped with smoke and stress.

She groaned, “water first!” He raised the back of the bed and put a sports bottle straw to her lips. She drank and then mumbled, “what happened?” She put a hand to her head, “Ow! Oh. Ow.”

“When Hydra realized that the Avengers had arrived, they decided to do as much damage as they could on their way out. They bombed the lab.” Steve sighed deeply.

She struggled as it all came back to her, “Jane? Bucky?” She couldn't help the way her voice cracked and her expression changed as she said Bucky’s name.

Steve winced, “you’re first to wake...”

Darcy laid her head back and looked around. A doctor came in to check on her and discuss her condition. They were giving her a transfusion since she’d lost so much blood from the gunshot wound. She also had many scrapes and cuts, a burn on one leg that hurt like all holy hell, and tender bruises on her arms and down one side from where Bucky had hit her against the wall. Her head ached and pounded from a concussion. She was alive, would recover, and felt absurdly lucky.

Steve murmured, “I wish I could take those wounds for you.” His gaze was fixed on a point outside the window.

Darcy looked at him tenderly. He was still in his uniform, streaked with soot and grime- with more blood stains on him than she’d ever seen before. There was gray-white dust in his hair. He looked haggard, with eyes full of barely restrained emotion.

After the doctor left, she asked, “what happened to you?”

He sat back and admitted, “felt like I went to Hell.”

“Could never happen... You’re too good.” She shook her head, wincing against the movement. "Ow."

He shook his head firmly. “I’m not so sure. I wanted to rip that Clouse guy limb from limb.” His lips were a firm line of rage.

Darcy made a face, reached out and ran a finger down his taut jaw line, “we kind of did that, only not on purpose. We meant to send ALL of him away… to… Svartalfheim, maybe. I think. Wherever they went. That was so gross.”

He asked tersely, “was that where all the blood came from? You were all covered in it, the camera, too. It made for an ‘epically bad’ visual, to borrow from your manner of speech.”

Darcy grimaced, “half of him, happily the half with the Winter Soldier remote control, went away.
The rest was just über icky all over.” She waved a bandaged hand shakily and looked down at herself, frowning; glad someone had washed blood and other stuff off of her while she was unconscious. "Epically icky."

Steve closed his eyes, and swallowed hard, voice shaking, “if anyone ever deserved it… I don’t know if any of the others could hear over the test engine, but I was able to make most of it out. The things he was telling Bucky to do to you!”

She shuddered and looked away, sniffling, “it sounded awful from where I was standing, too.” Darcy blinked back tears and stilled as she saw the look on Steve’s face.

He took her hand, then shook his head and lowered the bed rail, rasping desperately, “Please… tell me if this is uncomfortable… AT ALL.” He leaned over and laid the upper half of his body on the bed by and against her, using an arm to prop himself up enough that he didn't put much weight on her. It was not a comfortable position, but he started to cry, and she clutched him to her as tightly as she could. His body shook with sobs, mostly silent, for the longest time. She heard his tortured murmurs of deciding to kill Bucky, and still wondering if Bucky was better off dead or living, of fearing Darcy would be killed or traumatized to insanity, of thinking Hydra would murder Peggy, of plotting to kill himself, of wanting to tell the world to go to hell instead of it always taking more and more from him. He shuddered and shook; anguish pouring out along with his tears.

Darcy cried with Steve, releasing some of her fear, heartbroken from witnessing his pain. After several minutes, she gasped, “JARVIS, this moment is private beyond private… into sacred. If you don’t help me shield this moment, I’ll find a way to erase you from existence.”

“Threats are unnecessary, Miss Lewis.” JARVIS spoke softly.

She huffed, “why are you changing the way you address me?”

JARVIS replied, “when people threaten my existence, I assume it likely that they are angry with me.”

Darcy glared through her tears, “don’t try to cajole me right now. Just protect our privacy!”

JARVIS assured her, “privacy mode was in place from the moment you woke, Darcy… on Mr. Stark’s orders. I also placed a sound dampening field around your room.”

She sighed, “Steve, sweetie! It’s okay, love. You’re allowed to break. With all the shit that’s happened to you? Most people would have broken… sooo long ago....” She ran her fingers through his hair, brushing out dust and dirt and not caring where it fell.

He stilled and looked at her, his breath shuddering, “was that an age crack?”

She made a noise of exasperation and shook her head, “No! Silly man.”

He wiped his eyes and admitted, “I feel ninety six. It felt like years passed while I listened to that man threaten you; threaten to make my one-time brother do those things to you. I believed I was going to have to sit there and watch it happen! You were right that it would have killed me. You’re my home… my girl!” He took a breath and admitted, “I never imagined I would consider suicide. It was so different from when I drowned. There was moment that day when I realized I couldn’t escape and believed I was dying, but I still wished I could escape drowning… Not like today. Today, I wanted to die.”

She smiled sadly, “it’s for the best that ‘doing good’ is so deeply bound into your stubborn DNA. You would feel like you had to help make the world better, no matter what. You would live on and
keep fighting evil.”

He made a face, “if so… I would be utterly miserable, a wreck of a human being.”

She did her best to smile for him, though it was a fragile attempt, “instead, Bucky… saved us from them… and you pulled us from the wreckage of the lab.” She blinked back tears and tried to make light of things, “Jane’s gonna be pissed. We just got the formula that she and Bruce have been struggling with.”

He let out a deep breath and gave her a watery smile, “I bet you remember it. Helping people feel better is as deeply ingrained in your DNA as ‘doing good’ is in mine.”

She sighed, shook her head as though to dismiss an unpleasant thought, and asked fearfully, “were there a lot of casualties?” She pressed one hand against her head. Movements were uncomfortable.

He nodded, looking sad and guilt-stricken. “Yeah, too many. Navarro was killed,” Darcy gasped and began to cry again, “trying to stop them from reaching Bucky. She was one of… too many good people.” He swallowed hard. “It was my call. I’m the reason Bucky was in Healing instead of Containment.”

Darcy sighed raggedly, “you could just as easily say it was my fault, since you had him here in part so I’d talk to him.” Her lips trembled as she wondered if she could still do that, still reach out to Bucky and call him friend. She looked at Steve with fearful guilt in her eyes, unsure. He shook his head at her and leaned his forehead against hers, eyes closed while he gathered his strength.

Darcy cried for a while longer before asking, “did you guys figure out who the inside guy was? There had to be one.” Steve pulled back and shook his head. She asked, “JARVIS? Can you check on the lab techs? There were some in Jane’s lab when Thor was telling us about Heimdall’s dormancy, and some in Tony’s lab when he was telling me about Yinsen and Afghanistan.”

Steve kissed her hand, smiling at the quickness of her mind. He loved it in general, but at this moment it was evidence that her concussion hadn’t harmed her thought processes, too.

JARVIS replied, “thank you, Darcy. I will share your observation with Mr. Stark, if I may?”


JARVIS confirmed that all of those people except her exercise instructors were well. Darcy let out a sigh of relief for all of her surviving friends and let tears fall for the others. She felt extra guilt for all of the times she’d groused at the strength trainer.

“I’m not okay,” Steve admitted with a wry expression.

Darcy smiled, a little bit more convincingly, “I’m on that one. I’m alive…” He kissed her hand again, and then leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, half laying on her with his eyes tightly closed. She sighed and stroked his back soothingly, murmuring comfort.

From time to time he murmured that he loved her, and she responded that she felt the same way. Eventually, he quieted and just clung to her. She closed her eyes and focused on the feeling of being in Steve’s arms. She’d been badly frightened. Safe was good.

Steve didn’t even move when there was a knock at the door twenty minutes later. Darcy called, “come in!”
Tony walked into the room, and smiled ruefully. “That looks like me for weeks after I got Pepper back!”

Steve groused a muffled, “what do you want, Stark?”

Tony grinned sadly, “you were right, Lewis. Sorry I doubted you! Natasha just scared one of our lab techs into admitting he’s Hydra. After she softens him up some more, I get a turn.”

“I’ll break every bone in his body if he doesn't cooperate!” Steve growled, still muffled.

Tony made a surprised face and chuckled darkly, “Cap! That tarnishes my saintly image of you... almost as badly as that USO 'star-spangled sex' tell-all book that Howard got scrapped back in the 40’s.”

Steve stilled, then muttered, “damn.” Then more softly, “thanks, Howard.”

While Steve winced, Tony laughed, “I came across a legal letter about it while reviewing his Tesseract notebooks just now... while Natasha did her thing. I have GOT to get my hands on it! Howard apparently figured sweet Peggy would gun down the entire chorus line if he didn't pay hush money.”

Darcy made a face and complained, “you really want to poke fun NOW?”

Tony shrugged, “sorry. I’m just trying to take his mind off his current troubles.” Steve made a noise of disgust. Darcy laughed softly and stroked his hair. Tony added, “and Dad may have been onto something with that bit about Peggy. She, at 98, and not sure where she is half the time, took out one of the Hydra goons going after Barnes from her freakin’ hospital bed today! Thank God she played dead after that so they ignored her and went on their merry way!”

Steve lifted his head slightly, “I guessed that was who was in the room Sharon was guarding.” Darcy rubbed his temples, and he groaned with pleasure.

Tony sat and shared, “JARVIS transcribed everything from the lab invasion for me, everything that guy told Barnes to do to Lewis to make Foster talk. You handled it better than I would have, for what it’s worth.” He looked up at the ceiling as though the admission cost him.

Steve shook his head, sighed, sat up and rubbed his eyes hard, wiped his face, and leaned back in his chair. “No. I didn't handle it well, Tony. I lost my ever-lovin’ mind! And, if we’re gonna be real friends it’d help if you accept that I’m not a goody-two-shoes or a Dudley-Do-Right. I’m as human as the next Avenger... or man. I’ve made some poor decisions along the way. I’ve done bad things. I’m trying my damnedest to make the most of all that I was given, to make Erskine proud, and do right by the country. But sometimes, like today, it’s all too much.”

Darcy thought that she’d never seen Steve look braver. His expression was open, and honestly vulnerable.

Tony’s expression softened, “a LOT of the poking has been to see if your perfect façade would crack; you know, to see if Steve Rogers is the same as Captain America or not. I’m jealous of how much my dad cared about you, how obsessed he was with bringing you back for the good of the world. Even when I became Iron Man, I was sure I could never measure up.”

“I don’t know what happened to Howard, but I know that you’re every bit as good of a man as I am.” Steve shrugged.

Darcy teased quietly, “I’m not so sure...”
Tony laughed, “good! I hate it when people accuse me of being worthwhile. And, you’re a spunky troublemaker, so I’m glad you question my character… even if I’m confused by the fact that you don’t look surprised by my spangled-sex bombshell.”

JARVIS interrupted, “Sir? Dr. Foster is awake. The doctors say she will make a full recovery, eventually.” Darcy sighed with relief and sniffled, wiping away tears.

Tony nodded, “I’ll give Thor at least a half hour to get through his panic attack before I visit there.” He grinned and asked, “so, what’s with all the holding off and sexual tension between the two of you, if it isn’t Cap?”

“I don’t kiss and tell, Tony. That’s all you need to know.” Steve chuckled and shook his head.

Tony quirked a grin, “and you still have an uptight sense of humor, and the ability to at least chuckle. You need to know that.”

Steve nodded, “thanks, I guess.”

Tony pulled out his StarkPad. “By the way, turns out we have a new song for you, ya know, for the ‘badass playlist.’” Steve groaned, threw his head back and then collapsed forward and lay back down by Darcy, clutching at her again. Tony put on ‘Tom Sawyer’ and let them listen.

After it finished, Steve looked up, confused. “I don’t get it. It’s not mocking. It’s actually good, especially the part about reserve being a quiet defense… and my mind not being available to any government. That’s gotten more important to me this past year. What’s the joke?”

Tony grinned, “no joke. So, can it stay on the playlist?” Steve nodded, halfway smiling. Tony nodded, “good! Cuz your girl suggested it, and might get her feelings hurt if you reject it.”

Steve looked at her, “when did you suggest it?”

She replied with a grimace, “during the sparring nonsense. The Neanderthal Games.”

He made a face and nodded, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth, “thanks.”

Tony stood and pronounced, “I’m off. After a bit, I’ll check on Foster. I have to buy a whole construction company to rebuild all the walls and doors you busted through on your way to the lab. I need to re-design so you can get there without breaking half the building!” Steve sighed and shrugged. Tony jokingly adding, “I hear that one of Coulson’s people used a rocket launcher on a squad downstairs! They’re your guests, Cap. They break it… you buy it.”

Steve rolled his eyes at Tony and growled, “why don’t you put it on Hydra’s tab?”

Tony laughed at that, pointed at Steve appreciatively, and added, “remember, you can chuckle, Spangles!” He continued, “JARVIS will let you know when Barnes wakes up. I stole that chip Foster took out of his head, and I’m gonna have a look at it. I also got the nurses to take samples of his blood, so Bruce can see what Hydra gave him. We should get good info out of all they did to try and force him back to being their weapon again. It may give us some ideas on how to help him more… dredge some good from the bad.”

Steve swallowed hard. “Thanks, Tony.”

Tony raised a brow, nodded, and added, “I’m still not 100% convinced that he had no part in my parents’ assassination. Hydra made him do that sort of thing, a lot… I can’t help but wonder if Natasha fixed the data to clear him… but I believe that he was Hydra’s prisoner and victim, and
...that even if he did it, it wasn't his choice. I’m reclassifying him as a ‘friendly’, if that’s okay by you. Let’s talk more about it later, Cap.” Darcy looked at Tony with wide eyes.

Steve sighed and cleared his throat. “Tony? Thanks for that, and thank you for getting us back here quickly enough. I know I’m not always receptive to your tests, but I’m grateful that your new engine worked. It’s a real achievement.”

Tony looked almost startled for a second, and then he shrugged while still smiling proudly, “eh…. any time. I’m just glad it didn’t blow up.”

Steve nodded, rueful but pleased, “me, too. Still… thanks.”

There was a light knock at the door. Darcy called, “come in!”

Bruce stood in the doorway, looking awkward. “Hey! How do you feel? I heard you got off with a concussion and light injuries. I’m glad it wasn't worse!” He glanced at Steve’s face, and looked away from him quickly. Steve sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, hard.

Darcy’s smile was wobbly, “I’ll live.”

Bruce nodded and smiled wryly, “good to hear. I developed a new burn cream a few weeks ago. I just gave it to the nurses. Someone will be in to apply it to that burn on your leg soon. I hope it reduces your discomfort.” He turned to Steve and handed him a bag. “Brought you a change of clothes, Cap. How often do I get to return the favor everyone does for me?” He smiled at Steve evenly while Steve quietly thanked him.

Bruce reviewed Darcy’s chart, a haunted look in his eyes as he remembered another woman in a different hospital bed. “I’m glad you’re gonna be okay, Darcy. I would really miss my lab manager and yoga partner.”

Tony looked at him piercingly, and raised one eyebrow. Bruce sighed and rolled his eyes, “oh, for Pete’s sake, Tony! It’s not what you think.” He gestured to Steve impatiently, “you, either!” He looked at Darcy apologetically.

Bruce reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, opened it, and handed it to Darcy. She and Steve both looked at the pictures. Steve looked back up at Bruce with comprehension. Bruce shared, “that’s Betty. We lived together… and worked together in a lab. She, too… please pardon me… has lovely, long dark hair, rather luscious lips, and an awkward but sweet manner. She was sheltered by her dad… not wholly unlike your upbringing by traditional grandparents, Darcy. Though, while I’m sure your grandparents were perfectly nice- her dad turned out a dangerous, megalomaniacal jerk.” Tony nodded agreement to that and made a comical face.

Bruce sighed deeply. “You remind me of her sometimes … and I miss her. Hell, the ‘Other Guy’ misses her. It’s just that she’s better off without me and all of ‘this’ in her life.” He nodded awkwardly and shrugged, “anyway, I’m glad you’re okay.” He turned and left.

Tony mused, “she’s part of ‘all this’ whether she’s here or not. Am I the only one who thinks Hydra will pull on that thread sooner rather than later? I may just need to call in a cellular biologist to consult on a few things… She could probably help with the Barnes puzzle.” He winked at Darcy and Steve, whirled on his heel, and walked out.

*to be continued*...
Thank, McGregorsWench for Beta help & friendship! :)

-Navarro’s earrings (Chinese for Double Happiness- an emblem often used in Chinese weddings)
  https://img1.etsystatic.com/040/0/5765871/il_570xN.550790623_h33g.jpg
- Rush, ‘Tom Sawyer’ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PmmMG-6mwo
- Betty Ross
  http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-5PwvHSnAwZE/UVCoJRewmnI/AAAAAAAADd4/jmiQrLcrr5E/s320/tumblr_m8fdzpPKdw1qzg and
  and
  https://31.media.tumblr.com/7fe957ffa1641a3a88bb7be2b15fe4c0/tumblr_mxq3u99T0L1rxfnypo5
“Funny thing about getting your brain taken over and being forced to do bad stuff… People hold grudges, as if you did it on purpose.”

Chapter Summary

More healing/recovery time (needed). Hawkeye gives Cap perspective. Bucky flirts w/Sharon.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, McGregorsWench, for Beta help! Any errors are mine.

After Bruce and Tony left, Darcy turned to Steve, “what did you think there was between me and Bruce?”

Steve looked uncomfortable. “Well… Tony’s pretty smart… and he knows Bruce better than the rest of us. I assumed that Bruce was attracted to you, and I wasn't sure what you felt. I even felt guilty about starting a relationship with you while thinking it was costing him, hurting him- guilty that I couldn't nobly step aside like he seemed to do for me. You talking about his yoga muscles didn't exactly put me at ease, either! You know that for a while there… I was scared that you would change your mind about me, and start something with Bruce. I didn't want to tell you I thought he was attracted to you. I was scared it would help him out.”

She smiled sadly, “I’m not perfect, so I’m kinda glad you aren't either. I know you’re hard on yourself, but you hold your own very well with anyone’s muscles… on top of me giving EVERY sign of falling in love with you. Why did you worry that I’d prefer him?”

He admitted, “it’s ironic given the whole Hulk thing. But, Bruce is so gentle and peaceful! You’re kind, and you’re not excited by violent displays like many people. Bruce shuns violence for the most part, too. I worried that because I've never been able to step away from a fight, even before the serum, maybe I’m too violent for you.”

She admitted, “I noticed that Bruce looked at me, intently, sometimes. But, I've only felt friendship from him.”

He gave her a look and a wink. “You just left out something there. I noticed, so you know.”

She sighed and blushed slightly. “Okay... uncensored truth? One time he took his shirt off in front of me, and I guess he saw me look… appreciative… I could see a sort of, I don’t know, maybe ‘satisfaction’ on his face that I noticed he was a man.”

At his look, she yelped, “well, Sharon made you laugh, and you looked like you were attracted to her!” She frowned at him. “Do you really want to get me started on the tell-all chorus and ‘Fifty Shades of the Captain’ right now?!”

He shuddered, blushed, and shook his head while giving her hand a squeeze. “JARVIS? Did
Sharon Carter make it through the invasion today?”

JARVIS replied, “yes, Captain. She has been treated for a fractured cheek bone, bullet wounds, broken ribs, and a broken arm. She has been released, but has chosen to remain in her aunt’s room for the time being.”

“I noticed Sharon. She’s kind of pretty.” Steve shrugged.

Darcy laughed, “Liar! She’s adorable!”

He half nodded, half shrugged. “I even asked her for coffee once, but she turned me down. I didn’t know she was with SHIELD, or assigned to me then.” He rolled his eyes slightly, “and I didn’t know she was Peggy’s great niece! How awkward would family gatherings be?”

“I’ve kind of thanked God for how awkward! You’re not a fan of awkward, I think.” Darcy grinned.

He sat back and looked at her dryly, “I’d never hurt Peggy.” She nodded shortly, her gaze shifting away from him. Steve raised a brow. “Um... why was Bruce taking off his shirt in front of you?”

She half laughed, “Tony called an Assemble... the day after the sparring match.”

Steve groused, “at the end of ‘cozy yoga’? When you were less than pleased with that whole, what was it? ‘Neanderthal’ display?” He grinned ruefully.

She sighed, “I hated seeing you get hurt. Not just the spear, but every blast and every punch... hurt to see.”

He nodded, turning serious again, “I know that feeling. Just thinking of you being hurt, hearing it threatened... hearing you beg for it not to happen for MY sake... and then seeing Bucky strike you with that arm! My God!” He let out a ragged sigh. “I've fought him. It’s strong, almost too much for me. I was terrified that they'd retaken him, that not only were all of his memories gone again... but, that he would... follow orders. To lose Bucky so thoroughly... after finding him again so impossibly... that he would do things to you that would cut out my heart?! For a minute I thought I was back in the ice, and everything was gone.”

She shushed him, saying, “but you weren’t! I’m here with you, so I’m safe. When he swatted me, like an itty-bitty fly, it wasn't to hurt me. It was to help.” She bit her lip and cursed internally as the heart monitor beeped faster and betrayed her anxiety.

Steve glanced at the heart monitor and Darcy’s expression. He squeezed her hand and asked, “how did he help you?”

She chuckled darkly, “one of the gravometric rods in the lab needed adjusting. They’re based on a design of Erik’s, something we used against the Dark Elves when they attacked during the Convergence. Jane has been working to recreate its energy so that you can use them for inter-dimensional travel.”

“I’m a little fuzzy on what happened in London.” Steve frowned.

She explained, “well, when the Nine Realms came together, Greenwich was a central point of that energy. We controlled what was happening there, and sent Dark Elves to other places, sent Malekith back to his own planet. That’s where those Hydra guys are now, I think... like twenty... and a half... of them, at least.” Darcy shuddered.
She chuckled, and unconsciously put a hand to her head again. “Even before I turned over a new leaf and started trying to get fit, it was always like that. Jane would come up with an idea... and I'd scurry to make it happen. Build it, and put it in place! So, I saw that she ‘collapsed in horror’ right on top of the controller for the portals. I checked the rods to see which one had fallen out of position when they blew the door and our blockade. I needed to get to it, and fix it so she could zap 'em. He put me there.” She made a face. “AND, I didn't want to go with them, so I had to get clear. That’s why I jumped to the door.”

He nodded, leaned over, and kissed her, long and sweetly, “I love you, Darcy... more than I can say.” Then, he grinned wanly and pulled her back into his arms and leaned against her. “Tony said I could do this for weeks.”

“You once told me you always need a laugh. Tony’s good for that.” She stroked his hair some more.

Steve moved up and kissed her softly again. “You’re good for that.”

She noted, “you surround yourself with people who are good for that... Bucky before, Sam, Tony, Thor, Hawkeye...”

He nodded slightly, “it took a while, but I found my way home. And I made some new friends along the way. Earlier today I realized how much I had to lose. I’m glad I didn't lose it... lose everything.”

JARVIS spoke, “Excuse me, please. Dr. Foster wishes to visit you, Darcy. Is now an acceptable time, or would you prefer she wait?”

Darcy scooted back so she was sitting up more. “Now’s fine, I guess.” Steve looked at her movements and reactions, seeing that she was pained, but moving well. She saw his eyes narrow as he evaluated her condition. She remembered Bucky looking at her the same way in the lab, before the explosion.

At the heavy knock, Darcy called, “come in, Thor!” Thor wheeled Jane into the room and around the bed to the other side from Steve. Darcy exclaimed, “Oh, no! Wheels! You okay?”

Jane nodded, “just a sprained wrist from getting cuffed and a broken leg from whatever fell on us, and burns. Bruce made up a miracle ointment for the burns. I could kiss him right now!”

Steve murmured, “support beam fell.”

Thor moved around the bed towards Steve. He’d obviously been crying as well. Steve sat up further, and let a heavy breath out as Thor clasped his arm and then pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. Thor rasped, “thank you, Captain. You helped save our ladies from the flames. My joyous time with Jane can never be enough compared to the span of time I exist, but I could not bear to have her life cut short by such foul violence, especially so soon. I will never be ready to lose her. I most certainly was not prepared today.”

Steve looked tongue tied. He responded, “I’m glad I could help. Thank you, too.”

Thor wiped his face and intoned, “we are blessed to feel so much, Captain.”

Steve nodded slowly in reply.

Thor moved to Darcy’s bedside and knelt. He took one of her hands and kissed it reverently. “Lady Darcy, today you took a life to protect the freedom of my Jane. I owe you a debt eternal, as I know
that the worthless blood of the fallen will trouble your tender heart. I honor your sacrifice and
courage. I honor you.” He kissed her hand again.

She whispered, “I’m glad I could keep him from taking her freedom.” She blinked her eyes and
swallowed, then shook her head. Steve watched her carefully, uneasy.

Jane took a deep breath and bowed her head. “Darcy… I’m sorry.” Jane cleared her throat. “I
mean… that I got you into so much scary stuff. You’ve been a better friend than I have. You take
care of me. You helped me find Thor again when I was ignoring my equipment, and fooling
myself into thinking I could go on without him. You helped against the Dark Elves, facing danger
during that battle. Then, Hydra tortured you because of me! You had to… well, stop… that first
man today, for me. You’re caught up in this dangerous, violent life. I didn’t mean to…”

Darcy shook her head and sniffed, “not your fault.”

“That man ordered Bucky to do terrible things to you, all to get me to cooperate! It’s awful.” Jane
sounded teary.

Darcy agreed, “well, he was awful.”

Jane looked fierce. “It didn't bother me at all that he got ripped in half. I hope it hurt.”

She held out a pinky. Darcy linked hers with it and smiled slightly, “science-geek warrior shake…”

Jane nodded serenely, “friends forever pinky-swear, too. You were amazing. I hope those guys we
sent to Svartalfheim get eaten by something nasty.” Thor and Steve exchanged a dark look, both
disturbed by the temptation to hunt the Hydra operatives on Svartalfheim. Steve privately thought
that if the Hydra leader, Clouse, were not already dead, he would go after him without hesitation or
qualms. He pushed that thought back into the darkest part of his mind.

Darcy grinned ruefully, “really violent for such a perfectly sweet-looking lady!”

“They threatened you, and blew up my research!” Jane’s look to Darcy was full of feeling.

Darcy grinned. “Aww! While I get massive feels that you list me ahead of your work, it’s not gone.
I make sure it’s all backed up, and I wasn't behind on transcriptions. They didn't get much. We
have to rebuild the controllers and rods again.”

Jane smiled broadly. “What would I do without you?”

Darcy chuckled, “starve.” Jane laughed and hugged her. They clung to each other for a long time,
murmuring reassurances. Darcy choked a laugh, “when YOU are the closest thing to normal
around me, I’m in big trouble.” Jane sniffled and nodded.

Darcy let out a breath, “but, I’m not sorry to be here. The awesome stuff is even more mind-
blowing than the bad.”

Thor turned to Steve and nodded approvingly. “Well done, good Captain.”

Darcy and Jane turned to see Steve’s bemused blush and they burst out laughing. Jane spoke
quietly, “Thor! Remember… I told you it’s not Earth custom to discuss intimate…”

Steve waved a dismissive hand, quirking a grin, “it’s okay, Dr. Foster. Uh, thanks, Thor.”

Jane turned to Steve, “please, call me Jane.” Darcy looked happily from one of them to the other.
He smiled slightly, “thank you, Jane. I’m honored.”

JARVIS spoke, “pardon me, but Bucky is awakening now, Captain.”

Steve looked at Darcy. She nodded slowly and urged, “Go! Tell him that I said ‘thank you’ for saving us.” She bit her lip as Steve slowly turned to go, “Steve?” He turned and looked at her seriously. She shared, “he half expected you to kill him first, and ask questions later. He told us that the worst thing about that would be the guilt you would feel. I think some of his… will to live… got chipped away today.” Her lips trembled.

Steve nodded shortly, turned to the door, and then looked back again, “I love you, Darcy. Be back soon.”

She answered, “love you, too.” She saw Jane giving her an ‘oh, my God’ look over the love declarations. Darcy grinned.

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Hawkeye was sitting outside of Bucky’s room, his bow across his lap as he carefully looked it over. He nodded to Steve, “’lo, Cap. You look like shit.”

Steve shrugged, “bad day…” He looked around. “What are you doing here?”

Hawkeye grinned mirthlessly. “Funny thing about getting your brain taken over and being forced to do bad stuff… People hold grudges, as if you did it on purpose.” He pulled a knife out and cleaned the blade carefully with a cloth. “Someone tried to kill Barnes while we were draggin’ him out of the remains of the lab.” Steve frowned while Hawkeye grimaced. “I got issues, man. That kind of shit… would be one of ‘em.” He looked Steve up and down and asked, “are we gonna have a problem? If so, I’d like a minute to call all of the backup I’ve ever known.” He stared at Steve seriously and asked, “or… are you caught up? Have you had a chance to read the transcripts from what we missed between Barnes and Lewis after we lost the comm?”

“You have ‘em?” Steve sighed heavily and sat down next to Clint.

Hawkeye smiled genially. “I just happen to still have them pulled up, Cap.” He handed Steve his StarkPad. “How’s Darcy doin’?”

Steve began reading, but replied in a vague tone, “shaky… banged up. She’ll be okay.”

“You could visit her. Tell her yourself.” Steve glanced up from his reading.

Hawkeye shook his head. “nah, man. She doesn't need to see me while she’s in a hospital! I bring back bad memories.” He chuckled. “She’s not scared of Banner, but she could tell on sight that I was bad news. When she was going in and out of consciousness and hopped up on meds on the plane back from London… she told me lots o’ stuff… like, how she could tell that if I was there to break her, she’d break.” He shrugged and frowned. “I try to only spend time with her with other people around, people who make her feel safe.” He shook his head as he saw Steve’s look of concerned discomfort and grinned again. “I’m a considerate guy, Cap. Didn't you know?”

Steve nodded and clapped Hawkeye on the shoulder appreciatively. He continued reading. He murmured, “JARVIS? Is there any way for us to verify where Jane sent the Hydra soldiers? Have we checked to make sure it was off-planet? Ask Tony, please. And, please give me ongoing updates on Bucky’s condition, what Bruce and Tony learn from the blood samples, and testing of
the device Hydra implanted. Everything.”

Steve looked up and quoted Bucky… “I’d rather die than do what any of them say again.”

Hawkeye murmured, “amen to that, brother.”

Steve glanced at Hawkeye, interested by the way that the commonality of coercion was affecting the archer. He turned to Hawkeye and noted, “Bucky was their prisoner and their tool for seventy years. He’s been here for over six weeks. What is it about today that sparked this new interest on your part?”

Hawkeye stared straight ahead and sighed, “they ordered him to hurt his friend, Cap. He’s only had three friends since he showed up here. You, of course… Natasha…” he shrugged uncomfortably “…and Darcy. She’s not nice to him because they grew up together, or because they both survived the Red Room. She’s nice to him because she’s a sweet, innocent kid who can’t stand to see people sad or lonely. I even think she’d try to make him feel better if she wasn't so head-over-heels for you. She’s nice… real.” He huffed out a heavy sigh. “It hit home. Not just because I brought Darcy out of a bad situation and want her to stay safe. It hit home because it wasn't dictators and spies, it was his friend. I guess it made it all more real to me. And then an orderly attacked him, and he just stared, and didn't even move to stop the guy. There was a time when I didn't want to bother defending myself. Seeing that… someone else in that pit? It lit me up… and made me want to defend him. Natasha, Sam, and I’ll take turns watching out for him until he can watch out for himself again.”

Steve finished reading the conversation transcript and sat back, deep in thought. Finally, he murmured, “thanks, Hawkeye. I needed your perspective.”

Hawkeye nodded. “Yeah, man. You did.” Steve chuckled mirthlessly and returned Hawkeye’s StarkPad, then stood.

“Hey, Cap?” Hawkeye grinned slightly.

Steve looked at him questioningly. “Yeah?”

Hawkeye admonished, “I hope you’re treatin’ Darcy right. It’s a long flight from London to New York and the nurse gave her some high-quality drugs. She told me everything about herself… not one word about Thor, Asgard, Foster, portals, or inter-galactic bridges, mind you… but everything else about being Darcy. I like her… mouthy kid that she is.”

Steve nodded and smiled slightly. “I’m in love with her, Barton… crazy in love.”

Hawkeye nodded, “I hoped it was like that. Good. Just checkin’.” Steve thanked him.

After taking a deep breath, Steve knocked on Bucky’s door. He waited through a few silent seconds, and then he eased it open and entered the room. It both pleased and concerned him to see Bucky without restraints. He didn't like to distrust his friend, and felt that he had no rational reason to, after the outcome of the events of the day. It was just that his fear had been so intense… it was hard to forget. He moved to the bedside. Bucky’s injuries were much worse than Jane’s or Darcy’s since he shielded them, though he would heal relatively quickly. He was badly burned on his back, and had many broken bones, and a three gunshot wounds. He groaned as a bone shifted.

Steve raised a brow and observed, “that IS strange to watch.”

Bucky opened his eyes and whispered, “I’m sorry.” His expression was hollow and broken.
Steve sat down in the chair next to the bed, “me, too.” Silence fell heavily between them.

“What for, Punk?” Bucky shook his head slightly, grimacing with pain from the motion against his burns.

Steve’s expression was bittersweet as the nickname echoed across his memories. He answered, “I’m sorry I let you fall… and didn't find you. I’m sorry that they forced you to do things against your nature all this time, stuff so bad you want to die. I’m sorry you had to be… that. I’m sorry that they got to you today. As bad as you seem to feel for scaring Darcy, you may have been even more frightened today. The head docs are gonna be all up your ass about this thing of not fighting to stay alive, Buck.” Steve scowled and let out a shuddering breath.

Bucky closed his eyes, reeling from grief and shame. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He gasped, “I’m sorry for the things I’ve done over the years. Those memories, they come back more and more, too, and it’s…” He swallowed and gasped with pain. “I’m sorry that I hurt Darcy, and terrorized you both. You must have been goin’ crazy, listening to that bastard… and me.”

“Yeah. It was almost too much. I was convinced that torturing her would just be another mission for the Winter Soldier.” Steve’s eyes were moist as he absorbed his friend’s grief and touched again on his own. He looked at Bucky starkly without saying a word about the things he’d considered.

Bucky looked at him with hard understanding and nodded, grimacing. “I told you that you were just my mission that day on the helicarrier, so you’d know.” Bucky struggled with emotion as he bit out, “but then you told me that you’re with me ‘until the end of the line’… and that changed everything.” He wiped his eyes on his pillow, and then turned the pillow over.

Steve sat back, remembering, “so, you pulled me out of the water. Then, after we brought you in… you started to remember me more, to remember yourself.”

Bucky noted, “your girl treated me like a person. No one had treated me like a person as long as I could remember.” He reflected, “she yelled at some lady for talking about me like I wasn't there, came running ready to try and defend me, reminded me you’re my brother, took me seriously, and spotted nearly every flicker of emotion I felt, and fed it. She offered me her trust. I hadn't been trusted to do anything but kill… for longer than I could remember. When you were hurt by the Vorm, she ran over, threw her arms around my neck, and cried on me. It was like a fire inside of me… humanity… that I thought they’d snuffed out.” He sighed, “and you. You stubborn mook! You just keep comin’ at me with memories, some I only remember from long-forgotten dreams, and some I’ll never get back.” He groaned in pain again.

Steve sighed, “you saved both Darcy and Dr. Foster today. That explosion would have killed them both, if not for you.”

Bucky grimaced and grinned flintily, “maybe I’ll get put in a slightly less nasty corner of Hell.”

Steve shifted in his seat. “You know, you’re in the perfect place for a new beginning, another chance. Tony was a crazy playboy making money off of weapons sales for most of his life, before he started trying to fix the world. Natasha… well, her history isn't too far off yours, just shorter, I think. Hawkeye was controlled by Loki, and used to kill his friends. And those are some of my closest friends… in this time.”

Bucky shivered with pain. He admitted, “I don’t trust myself, Steve.” He sighed. “My mind was Hydra’s for so long. What if I really become the Winter Soldier again? How safe is it even to have me unbound here now?”
Steve made a face and dryly offered, “fairly safe given that Thor, Hawkeye, and I are all here. You look terrible, too.”

Bucky shook his head again and hissed with pain, “don’t kid around, Punk. I’m serious.”

Steve leaned forward, arms against his knees. “Well… we have some of the best minds in the world in this building- Stark, Banner, and Foster, to name a few. Tony’s already analyzing that thing they put in your head today, and Banner’s lookin’ at what they shot you up with. They want to see what Hydra was trying to do to you, and get clues from it to help you instead. Tony’s a real smartass, but you can put the emphasis on the smart… most of the time.”

Bucky moaned, “I don’t want to be the Winter Soldier. I don’t want to hurt anyone, except Hydra. I especially don’t want to hurt you… or your friends… anymore. I want some sort of fail-safe way to shut me down until the problem is solved, if it can be solved.” He looked wistful. “And, then it’d be really damned nice if I was the ONLY person who could decide what I do… He took a breath and forced his next words out shakily, “even if it means you have to put me on ice.”

Steve flinched, “God, no! Not that. I could never do that to you. Sorry.” Steve breathed out slowly, “JARVIS? Can you relay the ‘fail-safe’ request to Tony and Bruce?”

JARVIS replied, “I would be glad to share the request with Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner. I can also resume constant monitoring of Bucky if instructed to do so.”

Steve asked, “For Tony? Or, can I do it?” He looked pained.

JARVIS replied, “I will gladly do as you request, Captain. Sir specifically told me to ‘follow your lead’ on this one.” There was a pause and he added, “would you prefer for conversation transcripts to be sent to you, or to Mr. Stark, or both, as has been done previously?”

Bucky sighed. “I trust you.”

Steve swallowed hard. “JARVIS, please send me, just me, the transcripts… and let Darcy know you’re doing that on Bucky’s request.” He looked at Bucky, “she basically asked me not to make you feel bad about today, Buck. Isn't that something?”

Bucky closed his eyes, “yeah.” He swallowed hard and gave Steve a dark look. “I did what I thought I had to, but it’s gonna be a while before I can forgive myself for today, much less the time when I was really the Winter Soldier.”

Steve managed a slight grin, “a second chance, Buck. I don’t care who you follow, Captain America, or the stupid kid I used to be… but I’d love to have you stand with me against them again. Whether it’s Hydra, or aliens, or whatever the hell shows up next… I've never trusted anyone to have my six as much as you.”

Bucky seemed closer to tears than Steve had ever seen him as he whispered, “to the end of the line.”

There was a light knock at the door. Steve called, “come in?” Bucky turned his head so he faced away from the door for a moment.

“Hello.” Sharon Carter entered the room. Her face was badly bruised and she had an awkward-looking bandage on her head and a cast on one arm, but her expression was pleasant.

Steve asked, “may we help you?”
She smiled nervously. “I watched the surveillance videos from the conflict here earlier, and want to thank you, Sergeant.”

Bucky turned his gaze her way, frowned, and looked pained. “For pistol whipping that pretty face?” Steve shot a look from Bucky to Sharon.

She nodded and smiled ruefully, “well… for making it so that the other soldier lost his bead on me! I’ll recover from this.” She pointed at her cheek and then frowned slightly, “I’m sorry we were unable to prevent them from getting to you. I hope you recover from your wounds quickly.” Her gaze skimmed Bucky, assessing.

Steve had not given Sharon any thought in a while. He noticed now that despite her sunny looks, there was darkness in her, like she was always ready for a fight. He supposed that was in character with her choice to be an agent, first for SHIELD, and now with the CIA.

Bucky responded, “I will. Thanks.” He stifled a pained reaction and kept his eyes turned towards Sharon.

Steve asked, “how’s Peggy?”

Sharon nodded to him, her gaze still on Bucky’s handsome face. “She’s Peggy, which means pretty amazing. She had a minor procedure this morning and is recovering well, thank you. I’ll tell her you asked after her.” She smiled politely to Steve, turned to the door, then glanced back at Bucky and looked at him with visible interest, “it’s a pleasure to meet you, Sergeant.”

Bucky responded warmly, “please, call me Bucky- beautiful lady.” A lazy half-smile crept onto his face.

She looked slightly flustered. “My name is Sharon.” Steve looked bemusedly from one of them to the other. Sharon cleared her throat and blushed, “well, goodbye, Bucky.”

Bucky was staring at her, “see ya later, sweet Sharon.” She grinned, shook her head, and left.

Steve looked at Bucky expressively, “THAT felt like old times… where the dames would fall all over you, and hardly give me the time of day.”

“You’re practically married. It’s written all over your face.” Bucky made a noise as a bone popped back into place.

Steve briefly looked surprised, then pleased. He mentioned, “even before Darcy, Sharon turned me down when I asked her for coffee.”

Bucky frowned, “kind of fair since I was invisible around Aunt Peggy, but Darcy thought Sharon was attracted to you. She was unfriendly to Sharon, the only time I’ve heard Darcy like that with anyone.”

Steve shrugged, “I don’t know if that was ever true in the past, but it’s not the case now.”

“I sure wish I hadn’t had to pistol whip her.” Bucky frowned.

Steve teased, “well, it would make for a hell of a ‘how we met’ story.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Get out of here, Punk. Go look after your girl. She had a bad day, too.” He grimaced again. Whether it was from the pain of healing or from memory of the day, Steve couldn't say for sure.
“I hate to leave you like this. The lack of painkillers sucks. I know,” Steve sighed.

Bucky glared, “the only thing you can do to make me feel much better tonight is to look after your girl. I knocked her hard, inside and out. Someone needs to keep her under observation. I think it should be you, Punk.”

Steve closed Bucky’s door carefully, and started back to Darcy, nodding to Hawkeye again as he passed him. He hesitated for a second, and then knocked on Peggy’s door.

Sharon opened it slightly, “I’m sorry, Captain. My aunt is sleeping now.”

Steve nodded, “please tell her I came by… and that I’m really proud of her for keeping on fighting against Hydra.”

Sharon nodded and smiled ruefully, “when we heard sounds of trouble, she was as clear-minded as she’d ever been. She told me to stop them from recapturing the Sergeant; I mean Bucky, and using him to get what they came for.”

Steve’s brow creased as he listened. He complimented her, “I saw the video, too. You did well.”

Sharon looked troubled, “not well enough. If it hadn't been for Bucky’s quick thinking I’d have been shot dead.”

Steve took a breath and asked as casually as he could manage, “are you staying here much longer tonight?”

She replied, “yes. I’ve felt better, but they’re short of nurses, and I want to keep an eye on Aunt Peggy. Her body can’t keep up with her intentions very well, anymore.” He shifted uncomfortably.

She smiled, “just out with it, Captain. What can I do for you?”

He grinned slightly, “would you look in on Bucky for me? I can’t stay with him.”

She nodded eagerly, “I’d be happy to. It would make me feel better about failing him today, AND owing him my life. I don’t like to be in anyone’s debt so much.” Something in her manner made Steve very glad she’d refused his request for coffee. She wasn't right for him, but she was honest and pretty, and brought out a side of his friend that could lead Bucky to remember more of himself.

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When Steve re-entered Darcy’s room, he saw that she had one bare leg lying outside and over the covers and wore a big, almost manic, smile on her face. “Hey, Honey! I changed my mind and fell in love with Bruce, after all.”

Steve groaned, “I hope that means they used his burn cream on you while I was gone.”

“Yup, and Jane was right. It’s amazing! Sorry. I couldn't resist.” Darcy giggled.

He shook his head, and grinned ruefully, “your impish control thing’s really gonna bite me in the ass over the next few days, isn't it?”

She laughed throatily, “can’t blame it for that. Your ass? What an ass! Even more unbelievable than your shoulder-to-waist ratio, AND as good as the way you make love to me.”

Steve raised his brows, and carefully closed the door, “and… it sounds like they gave you pain meds, too.”
Darcy giggled, “Woo hoo!! Good pain meds.” She reached out her arms and waggled her fingers, “gimme some sugar!”

Steve chuckled ruefully, and leaned back against the door. He gestured down at his filthy uniform, “I really ought to get cleaned up first, Sweetheart.” Darcy pointed at the bag of clothing that Bruce had brought and waggled her brows, looking him up and down suggestively. Steve nodded slowly. “Okay. I’m gonna borrow your shower, then, and get changed. I’ll have them toss this uniform out with the hazardous medical waste.”

Darcy sighed dreamily, “I want to shower with you… like we did the other morning…” She relaxed against the pillow, and he could see that the manic effects of the medication were passing as she yawned.

He sighed, “I wish you could join me, too, Sweetheart. Maybe next time.”

Darcy yawned again and nodded. She smiled softly, “I’m gonna lay here and pretend we’re about to run away together to a private, clothing-optional, island and do nothing but make love for the next month or so.”

Steve nodded. “That sounds perfect. You stick with happy thoughts, and I’ll be back out here in a few minutes.”

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Steve took a long time cleaning up. He needed the cleansing pulse of hot water on his bruised body, time to process the events and emotions of the day, a chance to pray silent thanks to God that things had ended well and to beg forgiveness for his brutal actions, and room to step back and evaluate so that he could do what he was so known for- plan. The Tower attack… and the Avengers’ rage… demanded a strong response, not just defense.

In his mind, Steve visualized his thoughts as a gigantic, tangled ball of multi-colored threads. While he dried his body and dressed, he struggled to sort the threads, untangle the ball, separate and prioritize each thread. He took a deep breath, reached for his phone, and texted the other Avengers- ‘Rest/recuperate. Grieve. Secure loved ones /help them heal. 1st response plan mtg tomorrow, 12-6pm.’

When Steve stepped back out into Darcy’s room, she was sleeping peacefully. He went down the hall to a waiting room to eat dinner, feeling wearier and wearier. He was relieved when he’d eaten enough that he could bear to stop and return to Darcy’s side. In her room again, he kissed her cheek, grabbed a pillow and blanket, and lay down as well as he could on the bench by the windows and closed his eyes.

He hoped the medications would give Darcy a full night’s rest, free of nightmares about killing… or terror of the Winter Soldier. In the back of his mind, he realized that he wished something could do the same for Bucky.

*to be continued...*
Darcy woke slowly. Judging from the light she saw through her closed eyelids, the sun was rising on a new day. She wished the previous day ‘goodbye and good riddance’! The aching of her head, her continued nausea, and a disjointed feel to her thoughts reminded her that she had a concussion. She frowned against the ache, and furrowed her brow slightly as she compared it to the ache of a hangover, complete with an embarrassing sense of having said things she might not normally just yell out. She swallowed hard, suspecting narcotics might have played a role in that. There were also aches and pains all over her body, but they weren’t as severe as she would expect, another reason to guess she’d been given strong medicine.

Soft music was playing. She listened to the lyrics, and drifted along on the melody for a bit.

...If I lay here  
If I just lay here  
Would you lie with me and just forget the world?

I don't quite know  
How to say  
How I feel

Those three words  
Are said too much  
They're not enough...

... I need your grace  
To remind me  
To find my own

If I lay here  
If I just lay here  
Would you lie with me and just forget the world...
She glanced at the bedside table. It held a water bottle, new glasses, and ANOTHER new StarkPhone. She wondered how many times her glasses and phone would be destroyed. The phone made a noise as an email arrived. From the seat over by the window, Steve murmured, “I just sent you this song, too. I wish I could…”

Her eyes fluttered as a memory pierced the fog in her mind. She groaned and put a hand to her head. “Oh, dear gods…bite? Oh! What did I say about your ass?”

Steve laughed softly. “It’s okay, Sweetheart. I know it was the pain meds talking. So long as mine is the only ass you’re interested in, I’m good.”

“Gah!” She groaned again.

There was a rap at the door. Darcy whined, “you may not want to come in unless you’re bringing more pain meds… even if they do make me babble!”

Natasha slipped into the room, shaking her head and smiling slightly, “Sorry! No drugs. Just… a friend.” She made a slight face as Steve smiled at her.

Darcy smoothed her hair back, “a really good friend.” She held Natasha’s gaze. “I could hear your voice inside my head, all calm and cool, telling me what to do.”

Steve was almost amused by Natasha’s reaction. She swallowed hard and blinked slowly, trying to maintain her habitual detachment, though Darcy’s words affected her deeply. Natasha nodded and spoke in a clipped tone. “That’s good to hear. We’ve got a lot more work to do, though.” Natasha glanced at Steve, and while he tried to keep a straight face, he was pleased, and didn’t do well. Natasha’s grin of admission of her feelings was slight. It shifted quickly to a teasing look, and he braced himself. Natasha smiled sweetly and said, “I’ll try to be patient about that until you’re cleared for physical activity again. Could be a while!”

Steve winced, sighed, and bowed his head, muttering, “point… and match. But, you still let your guard down and let a friend in… for real.” He returned his attention to his reading.

Darcy made a noise of disgust. “You heroes and all the posturing!” She pushed herself up further, glanced at Steve regretfully as she understood Natasha’s tease, and sighed, “will training ever end?”

Natasha’s grin spread. “Nope.” She shrugged, “hasn’t for me yet, at least.” She glanced at Steve, “I’d like to spar sometime soon, if you’re game? I spent an hour training with an old friend from Coulson’s team this morning, and she showed me some of her moves. I want to see what you make of ‘em.”

Steve nodded and shrugged, “sure. It’ll be fun.”

Darcy’s interest was piqued. “I’d actually like to see that. I trust you two not to try to kill each other, and I’d like to see a woman hold her own against a super-soldier.” She blinked a bit as she looked down and thought about Bucky standing over her threateningly. Steve frowned, though he didn't look up from what he was doing.

“I do more than hold my own.” Natasha grinned ferally.

Steve’s eyes were on his pad as he continued to read reports from the previous day. He shook his head, and smiled slightly, “I’ll be prone to showing off if Darcy’s watching… You’ll have to work hard.”
Darcy made a face. “Does this mean that Natasha will try to attack me to throw you off your game?” Steve glanced at Darcy sharply, then looked back down.

Natasha made a harsh noise, “No! Attacking you would just blur out his filters and incite him to a level of rage I’m not interested in challenging.” She remarked to Steve an aside of, “I saw video of you on your way into the building yesterday.”

He made a face, kept reading for a minute, and finally asked, “the others watch it, too?”

She chuckled, “Stark nearly wet his pants! He didn't realize just how deadly you can be.” Steve shook his head and sighed.

Darcy noted, “Bucky said something about me not knowing what you’re like when you’re REALLY pissed off.”

Steve finished typing a note on his pad and sighed again, looking at her somberly, “I’d rather you didn't search out that video, Sweetheart.”

Darcy nodded and smiled sadly, “as you wish.” She’d seen how haggard and bloody he’d looked and didn't need to see the violence of his rage in action. She thought she’d had enough of violence to last her… well, forever.

Natasha moved closer to Darcy, “I’m glad you made it through, Darcy. I was proud of how well you applied what we’ve worked on.” She gave Darcy a friendly grin and added, “I’m ready for more when you are.” She glanced at Steve and laughed at his slight frown.

A nurse knocked on the door as she entered with medicines, including burn cream. Natasha nodded to Steve and Darcy, “my cue! I’m relieving Barton now, so he can get a few hours of sleep before noon. You two take care.” She looked at Steve again, “Sam and I are gonna split the meeting this afternoon. He’ll relieve me down here at 3:00. I’ll be up for the second half.” Steve frowned again, but nodded. She waved as she left them.

The doctor also entered the room for her early rounds. She talked to Darcy while the nurse applied the burn cream. Darcy was delighted to have more burn cream applied. It felt wonderfully soothing. She moaned lightly as it went on, and commented, “this stuff is the best. How often can I have it?” She didn't remember anyone applying the cream once she’d taken medication the previous evening, but the doctor said they were applying it every four hours. Knowing that they were doing things to her that she didn't remember made Darcy anxious, despite Steve’s presence. And, as she suspected that Steve would soon be required to leave, she was determined to take control of her treatment.

She argued with the doctor about the pain killers, urging, “please, step it down to something that doesn’t mess me up so much! Give me a chance deal with the overall aches and pains. I want to try to manage the pain without going out of my head. I can’t remember stuff I said last night, or stuff that happened, and I hate it! Strong meds make me loopy, and we can’t know if my confusion is from them, or from my head smacking into a wall… until we cut the meds.” She saw Steve smile faintly, and figured that compared to him, she resembled an unruly kitten unsheathing its claws, but she continued to push her agenda.

The doctor relented. With a quick glance at Steve, Darcy asked how long she would be restricted from vigorous activity, and was told it would probably be at least a week with a gradual step-up approach, depending on her afternoon scan results. She didn't mind a week away from self-defense training or Cardio-Dance, but couldn't help thinking of Steve with enough apparent longing that the doctor tried to encourage her that the week would pass quickly. Steve continued to read, the tips of
his ears showing a slight blush. Finally, the nurse helped Darcy to the restroom and let her brush her teeth and tend to other basic necessities, promising that she would get Darcy up and walking after lunch.

After the doctor and nurse were gone, Darcy was sitting up in her bed, eager for breakfast, but a bit apprehensive as she asked Steve, “so… you have a meeting later?” Her heartbeat audibly raced at the thought of Steve leaving her side, and she vowed to rip the damned electrodes off as soon as possible. Steve glanced at the monitor. Darcy let out a deep breath and waved her hands, “of COURSE you do. Stuff to avenge, secure, etc. I KNOW it. Sorry.” She blushed deeply and turned away from him.

Steve tossed his pad down and moved to her side, sitting on the edge of her bed. “I don’t want to go.”

She shrugged and tried to feign nonchalance, “you’ll be just a few floors away, right?” He kissed her forehead and moved closer so he could put an arm around her. She swallowed hard and hated herself for the excessively clingy vulnerability she felt. Finally, she forced a smile, “you’re here now.” He kissed her lips softly. She deepened the kiss and mourned, “I want to erase the last couple of days and get back to our last date… without any of my current restrictions.”

Steve smiled into the next kiss, “me, too. but, it’ll be good for me to work on being gentle… as part of that ‘step-up’ plan she mentioned.” Darcy raised a brow and smiled teasingly. Steve chuckled, “I’m gonna kiss you silent so you don’t say whatever you’re thinking. I don’t know if I can take it.” He kissed her again and again. He shifted so that he encircled her with his arms, and she was half-laying on him.

She relaxed against his chest and sighed, “I guess it would be awkward for you to just carry me around with you like this.” He nuzzled his cheek against her head and chuckled. She let one of her hands play over the taut muscles of his chest and arms, fascinating as they always were to her. After a few moments savoring the closeness, she asked, “what are Natasha, Hawkeye, and Sam taking turns with?”

Steve shifted slightly, “watching out for Bucky.” She looked at him quizzically. He sighed, “one of the orderlies tried to kill him.”

“Oh, my God! How badly is the orderly injured for trying that?” Darcy shuddered.

Steve squeezed her gently, “see… that’s part of the problem. Not at all. Bucky didn't try to protect himself, and it struck a chord with Barton. Hawkeye stopped the guy, and kicked him out. Coulson’s people took him into temporary custody, and then handed him over to the NYPD.”

Darcy blinked hard. “He… would've let the guy kill him?” Her heart rate accelerated again and she swallowed hard.

Steve kissed her head, “yeah. He would've.”

Darcy grimaced, “thank goodness for Hawkeye!” She bit her lip, “Loki did the same stuff to Hawkeye that he did to Erik, didn't he?” She frowned; thinking back over so many things Erik had said and done in the years since suffering the trauma of being under Loki’s control. It wasn't much of a stretch to apply her concern over that to Hawkeye… and Bucky.

Steve nodded. “Hawkeye sees Bucky’s experiences with Hydra in a sympathetic light, especially after watching Bucky being ordered to hurt a friend.” He kissed her on the temple, tenderly.
She turned and looked at Steve with a distressed expression, “did Loki make Hawkeye hurt Coulson? I thought they said that Loki killed him.”

Steve sighed, “Loki used the people he enchanted for their best talents. He used Erik to work on the Tesseract so that he could have a big enough portal for the Chitauri army to come to Earth. He used Hawkeye to plan and lead an attack against SHIELD’s main helicarrier and the Avengers. When Loki was released from a cell in the helicarrier during that attack, Loki killed Phil.” She nodded, absorbing the information.

Darcy asked, “how’d your visit with Bucky go? I was too drugged to ask you about that until now.” She shivered slightly, and felt guilty that she’d basically checked out when Steve was going through so much.

“He’s pretty banged up. He protected you and Jane from the bomb with his own body, so he has a broken leg from the support beam that fell, other broken bones, terrible burns, and several GSWs, too. Healing’s hard. No painkillers, ya know… downside of the serum… though his isn't quite as fast-acting as mine, apparently. I’m glad they’re able to help with the burns some… though I still don’t want you to leave me for Bruce over that cream.” Steve shook his head.

She grinned self-consciously as he kissed her forehead again and chuckled.

He turned serious again and sighed. “We apologized to each other a lot. He wants me to continue to keep tabs on him through JARVIS, with just me reading the transcripts… not Tony. He wants to be able to trust himself and have control of his own life… eventually…though he knows that he doesn't yet. So, it was as good as it could be. He’s pretty torn up. I hated to leave him, but after he flirted some with Sharon Carter, he kicked me out. He insisted the only way I could make him feel better would be for me to look after you.”

She reacted as he’d expected, “Bucky flirted? With Sharon Carter? Awesome sauce!” She smiled with her typical enthusiasm for the first time since he’d been back, and Steve felt his heart swell at the sight.

Steve smiled, too, “then you might be pleased to hear that I asked Sharon to look in on him last night. She’s staying with Peggy since they’re short staffed here.” Darcy gave him a double thumbs-up. He shook his head and grinned, “she seems interested in Bucky… the way she was eyeing him.”

Darcy nodded, thinking that anyone would objectively see that Bucky was handsome… if they got past the terror he could inspire. She felt Steve’s gaze on her, but felt too conflicted to want to discuss her impressions of Bucky at the moment. So, she was a bit relieved when breakfast arrived, one plate for her and three for Steve. He moved to a chair while they ate, but as soon as he was done, she asked plaintively, “will you get back up here on the bed, and hold me ‘til you have to go be all Avenger-ly?”

He nodded and eased back onto the bed beside her. She held onto his shirt tightly as she curled against him. She closed her eyes, finding that she was struggling not to freak out over the fact that he was going to leave her in a few hours. He stroked her back gently. She tried a meditation Chau had taught her, and then accidentally drifted into thoughts of Chau and her loss. She struggled a few minutes more, flashes of the previous day’s terrors intruding, though she tried to force the panic away on her own. Finally, she hit the nurse call button. “Can I have something for anxiety? Meditation’s not cuttin’ it.” The nurse said she’d check with a doctor.

Steve bit his lip, “I’m sorry you’re so anxious. I wish they had something that would help me, too.”
Darcy chuckled and buried her face against his chest. “I feel like the most pitiful of pitiful. I've got to stop goin’ crazy over the thought of you going to a damned meeting. You have lots of meetings, and the world to save, and Hydra goons to stop. I can’t ask you to skip those things so we can cuddle, for fuck’s sake!”

Steve carefully peeked in the back of her gown to verify the location and extent of her bruises, winced at those visible, and then began to massage muscles he could touch without hurting her. She sighed, and told him about her massage appointment, laughing over the thought of him watching and holding her hand for one. His slight grin encouraged her to keep talking. So, she cast her thoughts to her Tumblr feed and started to ask him questions- favorite color, author, movie, songs, foods, and more- telling him her answers as she went. The nurse brought Darcy some anxiety medication. Darcy continued to talk about light and easy things, something Steve appreciated immensely as time ticked on. He needed to step away from more serious thoughts as much as Darcy did, possibly more.

When it was time for him to leave, Darcy turned on the TV and started channel –flipping to fill the tense silence.

“Darcy?” Steve cleared his throat reluctantly.

She let out a shuddering breath. “Don’t let it run long, please. I love you.” She bit her lip and clenched her hands tightly.

He kissed her cheek. She could see that his fists were clenched, too. He choked out, “just say the word and I’ll stay.” She shook her head, lips pursed tightly together. He leaned his head against hers and whispered, “I love you so much. I’ll be back soon, by dinner time at the latest. If you need me sooner, tell JARVIS, and I’ll come runnin’. I swear.” She smiled wanly. He kissed her again and left.

When Steve reached the Avengers’ conference room, he was startled by the way Tony started cussing at the sight of him. He looked around the table and saw Hawkeye smirking and holding his hand out. “Pay up, Stark! I told you he’d show!” Sam laughed at Tony. Bruce sighed and shook his head. Steve noticed that the look Bruce shot him was disapproving.

Steve nearly broke his StarkPad as he slammed it on the table. “You guys are sick! Let’s get to work. I want to understand everything I possibly can about how that lab tech shut JARVIS out, and how the hell we can stop something like that from EVER happening again. I have general response and defense plans, of course, but I want to hear what each of you has to suggest first.” He looked around the room, frowning at the number of Avengers not yet in attendance.

Tony smirked, “we could be here all night if you really want to understand how that little bastard worked around JARVIS. He’s been working on it for weeks, slackin’ off on his other work… which is why Lewis recommended firing him even before we discovered he’s a traitor. I swear I’m gonna ask Pepper to promote her again, just for that.”

Steve shook his head. “I’m not staying here one minute past six tonight. I want to finish up early, if at all possible.” A few minutes later while Tony was pulling lines of code up for everyone to see, Steve leaned over to Hawkeye, “how’d you know I’d come?”

“I don’t underestimate your girl, Cap. She’s in it for the long haul. She’s not gonna try to change you.” Hawkeye chuckled.

Steve nodded, a bit reassured, though privately unsure of whether or not some change was in order. It had been horribly hard to walk away from Darcy again so soon. He wasn't accustomed to dealing
with emotional concerns as he worked, having been mostly alone since emerging from the ice of the Arctic, and caught up in one battle after another before that.

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Darcy thought she’d done well. For over four minutes after Steve left her side she pushed down the tears, digging crescents from her fingernails into her palms, body trembling at her fear of being alone for the first time since the attack on the Tower. The Hydra commander’s words still echoed in her ears, and in her mind’s eye she saw the Winter Soldier looming over her, stalking closer. She forced herself to wait so that Steve would be out of earshot when she began to cry. Her throat was tight, and her eyes hot with unshed tears. Finally, she rolled to one side and curled in on herself, sobbing noisily.

Then, she shrieked as her door flew open so hard that it dented the wall behind it. Thor filled the doorway, hammer at the ready. “What has happened, Sister?” He moved into the room quickly, to her side, looking around for the cause of her distress. Seeing nothing, he relaxed and took her hand in his. Then, they both stilled as an odd, quick bumping sound approached. There was also the sound of Natasha’s voice, displeased.

Bucky stood at the doorway, bracing against the opening with his hands, looking around wildly and balancing on his good leg. “Why’d you scream, Doll?” Darcy gasped at the sight of him and their gazes locked. She blinked at the reassuring sight of Bucky’s concerned expression. He looked at Thor and then all around Darcy’s room. Seeing no threat, Bucky swallowed and murmured, “uh, sorry…” He looked away guiltily, and turned to leave. Darcy gasped in horror at the sight of his wounds, especially his back.

Darcy blinked back more tears, “thanks, Bucky. Sorry I worried you.” Warmth spread through her at the concerned overreactions of her friends. Bucky glanced back and nodded awkwardly, then hobbled back to his room. Natasha grimaced at Darcy, rolled her eyes and shrugged at Bucky, then followed him.

Thor knelt by Darcy’s side. “Why do you cry so, little one?”

Her tears began to flow again, “I’m sorry, Thor! I just… Steve had to leave… and I…”

Thor nodded, and laid a tender hand against her head, “his presence chased your fears from the room, and his absence allowed their return.”

She nodded miserably, “you’re late to your meeting, aren’t you?”

Thor smiled, “my Captain would not mind if he knew my reason.”

She shook her head slightly, mindful not to make large movements. “Please, please don’t tell him!”

Thor chuckled, “stubborn, valiant sister! I will not distress your suitor… by your command.” He looked around the room and declared, “your protector from before is absent, the ursine toy wearing my garments. I will bring it here to act as sentry and remind you that you are treasured… far from truly alone.”

Darcy giggled tearily, “Thor! It doesn't make me feel any less silly when you say I need a teddy bear.”

Thor sighed, “we are all as children in the face of overwhelming terror, Lady Darcy, at least some part of us. I think you should be more gentle with yourself, more patient. You try so to comfort others… Steven, Jane… everyone but you. Use your time here to comfort yourself and regain
strength, so that you will then have it to share again.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead gently, then left her room. He returned moments later with both her Thor Bear and her Cap Bear, laying one on each side of her for her to hug close and causing her to laugh through tears.

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Steve glanced up as Thor finally arrived, apologizing for his tardiness, and urging that they get on with the discussion that they might reach the meeting’s end quickly. Steve exchanged glances with Thor, wondering what was behind the tight smile the god gave him, and if Thor might be able to advise him on how to compartmentalize better. No one who saw them together could doubt Thor’s devotion to Jane Foster, nor could they fault his performance as a warrior and Avenger. Steve didn't have the ambition of compartmentalizing like Natasha or Nick Fury, but wanted to continue to be the best soldier and leader he could without compromising his relationship with Darcy at all.

Steve found it harder and harder to concentrate as the afternoon wore on. All of the Avengers were still on edge from the previous day’s events, quick to argue and cast blame. Each had lost friends and acquaintances in the attack. Each felt responsible for those losses. Most had been reminded of some bad event they’d survived another time and carried that weight into the discussions. People were taking things personally, and sniping at each other regularly. Even Sam’s temper was frayed to the point that he seemed glad to leave the meeting when it was his turn to relieve Natasha. Trying to keep them on task, to begin to break down the different aspects of the attack for thorough tactical analysis, was nearly impossible, even for Steve.

Steve's temper rose to the surface more quickly than usual, too. While it wasn't rare for him to snap at Tony, he rarely growled at the others. Shortly after 5:00, as Natasha had to be briefed on a third thing that had been discussed while she was with Bucky during the first hours of the meeting, his hold on his temper snapped. “Damn this repetition to hell! It’s inefficient! We have to come up with a different way to manage Bucky’s guard duty during meetings. Either we need to see if Phil will send one of his principle team members over until we can vet one of our own people enough, or we just have to bring Bucky in on the meetings. I can’t stand watching time tick by while we rehash things!” He saw Tony glancing at Bruce and smirking. The sight did nothing for Steve’s temper.

Natasha’s eyes narrowed as she bit back, “Fine! We can put in a request with Phil. He’s having dinner with me and Hawkeye at our place tonight. He was unable to reach Hawkeye before we had to leave for Afghanistan, and they need to talk.” She sat back, looked at Steve evenly, checked her watch and asked in an overly polite tone, “Captain? May we compile a list of assignments, and call this meeting early?”

Steve stared at the lists on screens on the walls, at the 3-D data, at his pad and paper notepads strewn across the table. They included information on JARVIS’ coding, the Blood Brothers’ origin, the Ten Rings, the Convergence, Erik Selvig’s work, Jane Foster’s various energy generators, gravometric energy portals, Svartalfheim, Bruce’s energy studies, the Winter Soldier and Hydra’s efforts to retake him, reports from different department heads and administrators (Darcy included, he noticed, something that was likely against her doctor’s orders), the Hydra mole’s extensive confession to Natasha and Tony (the methods of which Steve didn't care to examine too closely), casualties in the City from the air battles outside the Tower, the casualty list from inside the Tower, early staff resignations from all departments, protests from the Mayor and Governor and NYPD and NYFD, schematics of the new Quinjet engine, medical reports, information on Phil Coulson and the new SHIELD, and more. It would take ages to sift through all of the information they were discussing.

Finally, he nodded. “Yes, Natasha. You’re right. Let’s call it a day. I don’t give a damn who wins what bet at this moment, guys. I feel like hell for being away from Darcy this afternoon. My focus
and patience are both gone. Most of us are strung out from failing to protect our people. I’ll try to get a better grip on it before tomorrow, and ask each of you to do the same. Let’s get back together tomorrow, 8-1:00, all of us. If anyone wants to meet individually before that, let me know. He looked at the others staring at him, unmoving, and asked edgily, “well, isn’t anyone gonna hand someone else their winnings, now?” He listed assignments for each Avenger and closed his StarkPad cover firmly.

Hawkeye shook his head and grinned slightly, “no one would bet that you could make it all the way to 6:00, Cap. You’re possibly crazier for her than she is for you. We’re happy for you.”

Steve turned and looked at Thor apprehensively. “Were you late because you were with Darcy?”

Thor crossed his arms and smiled slightly, “I thought that she would be happier if my ursine representation was with her.” He made a face and shared, “I also took yours to her. She seemed appreciative and was hugging both as I left.”

Steve knew Thor was holding out on him, but didn't have enough patience left to pursue it. He looked around at the others and wished them a good night and left, heading quickly back to Darcy’s room in the Healing Ward.

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Darcy, wearing a robe, slippers and ear buds, was standing by the large entry window of the Healing Ward, staring out at the City skyline and listening to music, the song Steve had sent her that morning. Steve stepped off the elevator and walked towards her slowly. She smiled and pulled out an ear bud as she turned and saw him, “you’re early!” She noticed his expression and stepped towards him, “what happened? What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, and took her hand in his and quietly led her back to her room. Once inside, he moved to a chair and pulled her into his lap and held her close against him. His breath shuddered as he breathed in her scent, savored the feel of her soft strength against him, and felt the warmth of holding her close again. The sense of relief nearly overwhelmed him. He whispered, “I need you.”

Darcy kissed his lips lightly and smiled, “I’m glad to hear that. I think I need you more.”

He closed his eyes and blew out a breath, “I hope not. Hard to imagine.” He kissed her hungrily, still holding her firmly against him. He pulled back after a long time. Darcy’s cheeks were pinked prettily. He kissed along one of her cheeks, then lightly down her neck to her collarbone. She shivered with pleasure, running her hands over his arms and shoulders, and then leaning closer to hug him tightly. He asked, “Anything new from the doctors?”

She nodded, “I had a few scans this afternoon, and they looked good. My head’s feeling a lot better and the nausea’s died down. I may get out tomorrow. My left side looks a lot like an old banana, but it’s nothing dire. I really may marry Bruce, though. My burn is totally healed. It’s like super-soldier healing burn cream!”

He chuckled ruefully. “You probably should. He looked at me like a very low form of life when I showed up at the meeting today. I don’t think HE would have left your side.”

She kissed him lightly and admitted, “I went to pieces a bit after you left.” Steve looked stricken over her admission. She kissed his cheek, ‘sorry ‘bout that… but I was reminded that I have friends, after both Thor and Bucky came running.” She grimaced, “seems like everyone’s wound up like crazy today!”
Steve chuckled grimly, “I noticed.”

Darcy quirked a small, sympathetic smile, “then I got busy, too. They did the scans, both CT and MRI. I read over reports about damage to the labs, and did some of my work. Don’t tell on me. I thought ‘the powers that be’ might need the info.” She winked and grinned at his exasperated look, then continued, “a nurse helped me shower… and helped me get going on pacing the halls, which is big since it’s a step-up in my activity.”

He pulled her closer and closed his eyes tightly. Darcy sighed happily, “you’re way better than a teddy bear.”

***

After dinner that evening, Jane and Thor came to Darcy’s room. The four of them watched ‘The Princess Bride’, Steve holding Darcy close against him on her bed, while Thor sat next to Jane’s wheelchair and held her hand, kissing it repeatedly. For a short time, they all ignored the outside world and its threats and enjoyed laughing and talking together.

Darcy looked happy as she fell asleep after the movie. Steve sat by her side, holding her hand while he studied data on his StarkPad, collected important passages to a file for discussion, and replied to and sent questions to the other Avengers. For the moment, all seemed peaceful. After a routine late-night vitals check by the nurse, Steve settled to sleep on the bench again. He watched Darcy, curled on her side and sleeping peacefully, for a long time before he closed his eyes.

Regardless, he wasn't surprised when he woke to Darcy’s cries and then screams a few hours later, since she’d had them cut her medications. He gradually came out of sleep as he heard her whimpering and crying softly, then jumped to his feet and moved to her side as she screamed, “no! Oh, God, no, Bucky! Stop, please!” Steve called to her, moved into the bed beside Darcy, and held her to him and whispered assurances that she was safe and loved while she struggled to control her breathing and stop crying. The nurse looked in, but Steve shook his head and gestured for her to leave.

A few minutes after Darcy settled down, she gasped and began to cry again silently and shake her head as though in pain.

Steve asked urgently, “what is it, Sweetheart? Does your head hurt again? Why are you shaking it like that?”

Darcy buried her head against Steve’s chest, her voice cracking as she cried… “Bucky heard me. You know he heard me.”

***

When the doctor arrived at 7:00 am for her rounds, she grudgingly gave in to Darcy’s firm insistence on releasing Darcy to her own quarters later that day. Steve promised that he would help her home at 1:00 pm, after his team meeting, and stay with her. They promised to arrange to have someone else stay with her when he couldn't, for the next three days, or until Darcy was cleared to resume her normal activities. She agreed to come in for a check-up each day, too.

There was no question in Darcy’s mind, or Steve’s, that it would be best for her to leave the Healing Ward.

_to be continued..._
Darcy was glad to leave the Healing Ward. She worried that she would say or do something else that would upset Bucky. It also felt strange to be there and not see Navarro, too sad for words. That sense of loss sank in a bit further every time a different nurse entered her room. While she supposed she could have JARVIS put a sound-dampening field in place around her room at all times, she realized that Bucky would know why. She preferred to leave such close proximity with him, and begin to get back to her life again.

On the other hand, getting back to her life meant that she had the time and space to think about all that had happened and what she had done. She was determined to distract herself from all that as much as possible, taking a Scarlet O’Hara-like view of ‘I won't think about that now. I'll think about that tomorrow.’

She saw the doctor again before her release, and promised to come in at 9:00 am each day for the next three days for checkups. If it weren't for the need for someone to monitor her continually for changes in behavior and other signs of complications from her concussion, Darcy would have had Steve leave the room while she talked with Dr. Gates. His aura of protectiveness made the doctor nervous... and likely more cautious about Darcy’s treatment. Steve agreed to stay with Darcy until the doctor thought it safe for her to be unattended again. If this weren't accompanied by strict warnings of 'no physical activity', Darcy would think the doctor a kind matchmaker. As it stood, she viewed Dr. Gates as more of a sadistic bitch.

Darcy caught up on her class work, and continued to read reports from Security and HR regarding damages in each lab, and initial defense plans for the Tower reconstruction and repair. Bruce’s lab was in pretty good shape. It had been built with him in mind, so structural damage was minimal. New security measures being implemented building-wide would interrupt him some, but she requested that his space be given priority. Mostly, he needed to have all of his delicate equipment replaced. Darcy took care of requisitions and assigned six lab techs she thought seemed more stout-
hearted than most to help clean up the mess and get Bruce’s space ready for his return. She called and discussed the progress with Bruce, telling him that she looked forward to working together again soon.

That first night home, Darcy was surprised by how tired she was just from leaving the Healing Ward and returning to her apartment. She was also grateful for muscle relaxants and (mild) pain killers. Steve ordered Chinese food for their dinner, which was awesome, because she could treat it like a high-quality Chinese buffet, have bites of all of her favorite dishes and let Steve finish them off (except for the leftovers sampler he set aside for her to have for lunch the next day after she’d explained the glorious appeal of leftover Chinese food). They sat together on her couch and watched the 1954 version of ‘Sabrina’. Darcy was sure that she would forever mimic Hepburn’s accent and manner as Sabrina cracked eggs and recalled her Parisian cooking class while Bogart, as Linus, broke her heart. As the movie ended, Darcy drifted to sleep and was only vaguely aware of Steve carrying her to her bed. When she woke from a nightmare again in the middle of the night, Steve was at her side in a flash and held her until she was able to get back to sleep. He was too busy to sleep much, but dozed some on the couch.

He went with her to see her doctor the next morning. Darcy felt more energetic and impatient. She was able to get Dr. Gates to agree that she could do a walk-through of the labs that day and spend an hour getting Jane settled into a temporary work space. Darcy hoped Jane wouldn't give her any nonsense about Hulk. She sent a message to Jane suggesting that she work in Bruce’s lab until her own was repaired so that they could collaborate directly on the containment energy project. Steve had convinced the others that Jane and Bruce would be able to figure out how to expand it to shield the entire Tower, much like the shielding around Odin’s palace on Asgard.

But, all too soon, Darcy was back on her couch and ‘resting,’ alone with her thoughts.

***

That night, Darcy asked Steve to help her undress for her shower. She still couldn't lift her left arm all the way or reach around behind herself without straining her sore muscles. She untucked her shirt, and he pulled it off carefully, mindful of her aches and pains. He still struggled not to bemoan her wounds, touching her as if she were made of glass, something she equally appreciated and hated. The bruises were fading some, but colorful. He also unhooked her bra for her to slip off. She unfastened her pants, but he pulled them down and off, careful of the new skin where her burn wound had been healed by Bruce’s miracle cream.

He waited in the other room while she showered and shaved the best she could (she couldn't bear to have stubbly legs while Steve was sharing her bed,) and tried not to stare as he helped her dress for bed. Darcy padded to her dresser and pulled out a sleep shirt and panties. Steve liked that his shield emblem was on the shirt. He sighed as she set her towel aside. Then, he pulled the sleep shirt over her head and helped her work her arms into it, and helped her slide the panties up her legs to where she could reach them. She picked out soft, fuzzy socks and sat on the bed while he put them on her. After, he brushed out her hair for a long, quiet time.

It was aggravating that a shower tired her body so much. Unfortunately, it did almost nothing to settle her mind. She felt something hovering at the edge of her consciousness- something she didn't want to face.

He pulled the covers off the bed, and let her slide in as she wanted. He then went to the other side, stripped down to boxers, and slid quickly beneath the covers. He set pillows up so he could sit up in the bed, and she shifted, carefully, so that she lay against him, groaning as they settled in. Steve could feel that she was tensing instead of relaxing.
Darcy turned her bedroom TV to a home-renovation program, and he sat there holding and watching with her, reading work on his StarkPad, but mostly *waiting* as he felt her tension build and saw her blinking and swallowing hard. They had watched two full episodes of something called ‘Property Brothers’ before she started crying. Steve struggled as he tried to balance holding her more tightly with not putting pressure on her bruises. He kissed her head near her ear, and murmured, “It’ll be okay. You’re safe. Jane’s safe. Bucky didn't get taken from us. It’ll be okay.”

She shook her head vehemently and cried harder, finally giving way to the need to bawl. She pulled back and turned away from him, pulling her arms against her chest and curling in tight. The sobs wracked her body as she groaned, “I killed someone.”

Steve sighed deeply. He remembered the first time he’d taken a human life. Thanks to the serum, he remembered almost every life he’d taken, most vividly his savagery on the day of the Tower attack. He was aware that it was likely there had been collateral damage over the years of which he knew nothing, too. But, the first time had been the worst. He hadn't cut loose like Darcy, but he’d been plenty sore about it… and that was in the middle of World War II, after he’d begged to become a soldier.

He encouraged her to cry as she needed, knowing it was an important step in her healing. It was a big deal and he felt he would be the worst sort of person if he pretended it wasn't. Steve couldn't regret what she’d done, though. If that guy had cuffed Jane, Jane couldn't have sent the bastard commander away from them. If he’d been able to finish the job on Bucky, then Darcy would be either dead or tortured by Bucky. He shuddered, struggling to push those thoughts away, to not dwell on the moments he’d believed that Hydra would force Bucky to beat and rape Darcy. Tried to forget the tortuous sounds as the metal arm sent Darcy flying and she cried out, wounded. Tried to put it behind them all.

As Darcy quieted, Steve pulled her hair back, loosed it from between her neck and body. He caressed her head lightly, then moved to stroke her neck and back, and kissed her neck. He murmured, “I love you, and I’m glad that you’re here with me now.”

She nodded, and gave a sort of hiccup noise. Darcy's voice was full of misery. “I know what could have happened. But, I felt stuff break under my knee. He was evil, but human… and I killed him.”

Steve sighed again, “and you shouldn’t take it lightly. I don’t, either. But all I mourn about his death is the guilt you feel. Thor had it right. You sacrificed innocence to save your friend, and keep yourself safe, too. I’m grateful that you could, and I love you.”

Darcy nodded, “I love you, too, and I’m glad I’m here with you. I’d do it again.” She wiped her face. “But, I…”

He soothed her, “He was evil, trying to misuse science to hurt people. Hydra is bad enough here on Earth. I don’t know if they want to go to other galaxies, or if they’re trying to get that technology to trade it to someone else bad. I just know that I’m glad you stopped them.”

Darcy sighed sadly, then got up and went to use the bathroom and wash her face. When she came back, she had a look on her face as though struggling to remember something.

“What is it?” Steve asked.

Darcy spoke slowly, voice low. “That day in London, when the Hail-Hydra guy smacked me around and I was learning the hard way that SHIELD wasn't what I thought…” Steve winced. She continued hesitantly, “he said something. He babbled, ‘Hydra is at the edge of’… No, wait. ‘Hydra is… in the desert, by… the sea, even at the foot of the very throne of the galaxies.’” She made a
“He really drank the Hydra Kool-aid!”

“JARVIS?” Steve called.

JARVIS’ reply was immediate. “Yes, Captain Rogers?”

Steve asked, “please share what that guy told Darcy… desert, sea, galaxies… with the others.”

“Shall I wake those who are sleeping, Captain?” JARVIS sounded almost hesitant.

Steve looked at the clock and shook his head. “No. Just share it with them after they wake.” Steve knew many of the others were exhausted from the stress of the attack, from grief and guilt and emotional wear and tear.

He reached for Darcy, needy, “now come over here and get some sleep, Sweetie.”

“That looks so nice.” She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the TV.

He glanced from her to the image on the screen. “The house?”

She shook her head, “no… Starting a life together as a couple.” She made a fake panic face and sort of squeaked, “marriage!”

“It does.” He nodded and looked at her seriously.

Darcy turned off the TV, and crawled in by him again. “Thanks.” He kissed her forehead. She asked, “are you chewing your tongue off to keep from offering a solution to my problem rather than just riding out the supportive listening part?”

Steve chuckled, “I hear what you’re saying, but no. There’s no quick fix.”

She nodded, and settled in against him for the night. She murmured sleepily, “ANY suggestions?”

He kissed her softly. “Talk to Chau when she’s available, attend the memorial service this week, and focus on taking charge and doing the best you can. Those are things that help me.”

She smiled, “there’s my guy.” Darcy returned his kiss and pouted, “I wish I felt better!” and snuggled closer- then drifted to sleep.

Steve stayed awake for a long time, holding Darcy close, convincing himself that she was safe and would be okay, pushing back fear, thinking about how much he’d like to marry her, wishing she were well enough for them to make love again (while trying desperately not to dwell on that); trying to make sense of the events of the past few months, and make defense and response plans.

In the deepest part of the night, when the inevitable nightmare came to find her and Darcy screamed his oldest friend’s name in a voice laced with terror, Steve brought her to awareness gently and murmured reassurances until she was at rest again. He didn’t rest again until her breathing settled and her grip on him loosened.

***

Steve woke early the next morning. In the dim light, he looked longingly at Darcy as she lay sleeping on the pillow next to him. He found it difficult to tamp down his passion for her. Having her close, but being forbidden to make love, was crazily frustrating. He also worried about how the threat of rape, by someone she knew, had affected her. Would it dampen her sweet enthusiasm for lovemaking? He feared that, worried that a wrong move on his part might frighten her. He wasn't
sure if he could bear it if she looked at HIM with fear in her eyes.

Darcy moaned slightly in her sleep, thankfully not a sound of pain or anxiety, and pressed closer. He felt the softness of her breasts against his side, and inhaled her unique, feminine scent. She was a restless sleeper, and had kicked the sheets so that they were an inadequate tangle around her bare legs. As she moved, the night shirt rode up enticingly. He pulled away, groaned, and headed into the bathroom for a long, cold shower, guiltily berating himself for his selfish lust.

When Darcy woke, Steve was out of the shower and dressing. As she opened her eyes, she stared at him, admiring the way the morning light played over the hard planes of his amazing body. He stilled when he noticed she was awake and watching him. She crawled out of bed, moved past him silently so his first impression of her for the day wouldn't involve morning breath, and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. When she came out, he was in the kitchen making breakfast, so she dressed in a white mini dress (checking to see that any bruises showing weren't hideous) and a fun, navy blazer.

Steve remarked that her outfit looked nice, but such a restrained comment did little to bolster her ego.

At the next doctor’s appointment, Darcy was FINALLY cleared to be on her own again and work a half day, light duties only. So long as she continued to improve, she could gradually add to her activity level.

She happily hugged Steve, laughing, “you’re free! Go do Avenger-ly stuff, and I’ll see you later.” He kissed her goodbye, and thanked the doctor.

Darcy was encouraged to wait another day or two before returning to Cardio-Dance and Strength Training classes, and would need to see the doctor again the next week for a follow up. She went to check on progress in Bruce’s lab, including temporary space for Jane. They had different work styles and temperaments, but similar clearance levels. And their projects were of equal importance to the Avengers, too.

When Darcy walked in, Jane had her wheelchair pulled up to a short counter and was working on a replacement gravometric energy rod. She glanced up and cried, “Hey! You’re here! Good! I need your help with this.” Darcy moved in easily next to Jane and went to work. The mechanical aspects of this work came easier to her than Jane. Soon, Darcy was taking the lead and Jane was holding parts in place per her direction.

Jane glanced down at Darcy’s legs and remarked, “your bruises are healing well. I’m jealous that you escaped the explosion without broken bones.” She grabbed a part and handed it to Darcy.

Darcy groused, “well… I got the ‘must be treated delicately’ concussion instead, so I’ve got room to be jealous, too. I swear that Steve’s pulled back so far, I don’t even think he’s attracted to me anymore. Maybe… he didn’t really like… No. He did, but…”

Jane raised a brow, giggled, and guessed, “restricted physical activity? You DO seem pretty grumpy.”

Darcy chuckled darkly, “very restricted. I just got cleared to have time to myself. God only knows when that witch of a doctor will say we can make love again!”

Jane made a face, “Thor was so freaked out that he’s done nothing but make love to me over and over, like he’s making up for times when we won’t be able to do that! It’s a good thing I don’t have to walk. Stupid wheelchair’s at least good for something.”
Darcy slammed a tool on the counter. “Well, boo, fuckin’ hoo! Steve’s so busy treating me like a blown-glass, delicate-flower… or child… that we’re practically all the way back to the hand-holding phase.”

Jane shrugged. “Now that you’re cleared for some physical activity… why don’t you use your hands… or mouth, for that matter… to hold something else?”

Darcy rolled her eyes and huffed, “I hardly think that fits in with the whole blown-glass, four-year-old vibe he’s going with…”

Jane smirked, “he’d probably forget that idea pretty quickly, if you follow my advice.” Darcy made a face and cleared her throat. Jane looked at her and frowned. “Do you mean to say you haven’t done that yet?”

Darcy sighed, “we’ve only made love the one night… and, well the next morning, too… but… We haven’t had the chance to do all that much together!” She made an adjustment and cleared her throat, “and, no, I haven’t ever done that before.”

She eyed Jane for a second, and huffed, “Oh! What the hell! What’s it like? I mean, is it uncomfortable, like for your jaw? He’s big. Steve, I mean… and, well, I guess Thor would be… How do you… fit it? And… this is pretty fuckin’ important… cuz… well, have you ever gotten choked while doing it? I’m fairly certain that Steve hates Hydra enough already without me having a panic attack because… while doing that… I gagged like…”

Jane’s eyes went wide, “Holy, shit, Darce! No! I’ve never choked or gagged, though I like swallowing since it’s so… tidy. Honestly, men appreciate ANY effort you make when it comes to oral sex. Thor loves it, but when I do it, I take control of everything. He doesn't hold my head and force-fuck my mouth or anything. If you think that Steve might do something like that… especially while you’re healing… well, we’ve got a whole other discussion to have, one involving some serious lightning up his ass!”

Darcy sat back on a stool. “God, no! PLEASE dial it back, Jane. For… well for Heaven’s sake… Steve is gentle and loving. We’re not just fucking around. We make love. And, he’s like the most considerate person on the planet.”

Jane nodded, “I hope so.” She shrugged and made a face, “not that a LITTLE loss of control is entirely bad.”

“I know what you mean. Steve’s not the kind to lose control like EVER, but the third time…” Darcy smirked.

Jane tilted her head, “third? I thought you only made love twice.”

Darcy made a soft noise in her throat, “uhhh… Well, he, um, ‘recovers’ quickly. So, more.”

“How quickly does he recover?” Jane’s habitual expression of extreme scientific curiosity was firmly in place.

Darcy shrieked when Bruce came out of the lab storage room and huffed, “Sorry, I can’t stand to hear any more. I tried to wait for you to stop the conversation, but I’ve already heard a lot more than I ever wanted.”

Darcy turned to Jane and cried in horror, “Jane!” She tossed her screwdriver down on the counter and batted at Jane, mortified.
Jane looked surprised, “Oh! I forgot you were here, Dr. Banner.”

Bruce nodded firmly, a variety of emotions passing across his face as he replied, “obviously.” He turned to Darcy, pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed, “while Dr. Foster is correct that any effort is appreciated… in, well, what you’re talking about, I hope you will consider the possibility that the Captain is CORRECT when he tries to protect your health and safety.” He took a step towards her, his gaze intense. “Safety is incredibly important. More important than anything else!” The pitch of his voice rose, and he began to shake with agitation, “You shouldn't disregard your well-being, no matter how much you or he might want to. He may be showing his love for you MORE by not becoming physically intimate, not SELFISHLY disregarding very real dangers!”

With that, Bruce turned and shoved the door open, hard, and left the room… walking away quickly.

Jane turned to Darcy, “did you see…?”

Darcy nodded slowly, “Yup! His eyes went green, like they lit up or something. That was scary as shit.” She texted Steve, sharing that Bruce seemed agitated, and it might be good for other Avengers to check on him. She blushed deeply, hoping that she wouldn't need to explain.

Jane handed Darcy a part and poked her arm, “so, how quickly does Steve recover?”

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After the nearly-disastrous Avengers meeting the day after the Hydra attack, Steve ordered all of the Avengers to make time to blow off steam with training, exercising, and/or sparring. He felt extra tension from sexual frustration and the need to stay with Darcy instead of taking his habitual long runs, as well as the small amount of sleep he’d been allowing himself since the attack. So, he and Thor were engaged in a vigorous sparring match. Thor held the advantage in straight boxing and strength, but Steve moved more quickly and was far more skilled in martial arts. Their matches were helpful for expending energy.

Tony and Sam were watching the match, yelling encouragement and heckling both the god and the super-soldier equally. Steve was also aware that Bucky was standing in a far corner of the room, well away from the others, watching the match and learning his and Thor’s capabilities, while Hawkeye shadowed Bucky from the rafters. Since his hair had gotten singed in the lab fire after the explosion, the nurses trimmed Bucky’s hair. It looked more like a hairstyle Bucky would wear, rather than the Winter Soldier. It caused Steve to do a double-take whenever he looked at Bucky now.

None of them expected the doors to slam open forcefully, or for Bruce Banner to stalk into the room, nearly at a run and shedding clothing. Tony stood and called suits to him, a standard Iron Man suit AND a new precautionary exo-suit he referred to as ‘Hulk Buster’.

Steve’s first thought was to see that Bucky understood the danger and check his reaction. In the blink of an eye, Bucky ran to the corner walls and did a tic-tac wall run until he was able to jump, cat-like, to the relative safety of the rafters, perching next to a startled Hawkeye. Hawkeye’s eyes crinkled as he grinned slightly and offered Bucky a fist bump, “self-preservation instincts, Barnes? Nice!” The side of Bucky’s mouth twitched upward.

Sam bolted out an emergency exit, nearly running into Natasha as she moved towards the door to see what the commotion was. Natasha pulled him through, slammed the door and pushed the bolts home, and cried out worriedly, “what happened? Is it just all the stress, is there a problem we need to address, or did someone do something to him?”
Sam stared back into the room, gasping in near-disbelief as Bruce shifted into the ‘other guy’ while everyone watched. He’d seen the transformation before, but thought he would never believe his eyes, no matter how many times he witnessed it. He hoped things never got so bad that it became commonplace. He shrugged at Natasha and shook his head.

Hulk roared, and charged at a wall built especially to withstand the pressure of his rage. On the way there, he shredded several punching bags laying on the floor for Steve’s use; and then he began to pummel the wall, screaming with rage, anguish, frustration, and despair. He finally settled down to sit and stare at nothing, huffing out pent up emotions. He hung his head and huffed again.

Several long minutes later, Hulk receded, and Bruce Banner reappeared. Steve approached him carefully and handed him clothing, then just stood by silently. Bruce nodded and thanked him. With eyes more openly despairing than Steve had seen before, Bruce met Steve’s concerned gaze and rasped, “appreciate what you have, Cap, while you have it. If the worst happens, don’t let yourself have cause to regret not telling her how much you love her, or how beautiful she is to you, or how she’s the utter center of your being.” Bruce stood on shaky legs, eyes bright with unshed tears.

Steve was cowed by Bruce’s despair. “Bruce? What happened?”

Bruce looked around the room at the concerned expressions on his friends’ faces. He shrugged, “a bad week, too much grief and frustration. It can bring up the stuff you bury deep inside, stuff that’s just too much to bear alone.”

“I get that.” Steve nodded.

Bruce huffed and shook his head. “No, Steve. You don’t. You… can’t…” He turned to leave.

In the rafters, Bucky turned to Hawkeye and cocked a brow, “who watches him?”

Hawkeye sighed, “everybody.” He clapped Bucky on the shoulder. “You, of all people, know how bad it can suck, Barnes. Watchin’ out for someone else is one of those things that helps make it better. We all need that.”

Bucky asked, “we all need what? To have someone watch out for us, or to watch out for someone else?”

Hawkeye sat back a bit and slid a tranq gun back into its holster. “Both. From what I’ve heard, you looked after the neighborhood runt pretty good, back in the day. That’s one of the reasons I think you’re worth saving now, man. At your core, you’re one of the good guys, something they had to make you forget again and again.” He raised a brow. “Ask Darcy. She’s all about looking after people.”

Bucky’s expression shifted, “I thought I might follow your example, and stay clear of her.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve turn his head quickly and stare at him.

“That’ll never work for you. You were already her friend… and he’s your best friend.” Hawkeye shook his head and frowned.

Bucky rolled his eyes, “but now I’m the thing she has nightmares about.” He turned and met Steve’s gaze.

Hawkeye looked thoughtful. “So… stay out of Foster’s lab, since that would be a trigger. Try not to stand over Darcy with a fuckin’ scary look on your face. Watch that your expression doesn’t go flat when you’re around her.” He looked from Bucky to Steve and back again. “But, remember, it
would kill her to cause a problem between you and Cap... or hurt you. I get that it sucks to see her scared of you. It seems to make her feel guilty from what I've seen, but it's gonna take some time for that to fade. In the meantime, face up to her. We all need all the friends we can get.”

Bucky let out a heavy sigh and nodded.

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That night, when Steve arrived at Darcy’s place, she squealed appreciatively, “Ooh! What’s with the flowers?”

Steve smiled faintly, “I just want you to have them, to remind you that I love you, how beautiful you are... and that you’re everything to me.” He walked into the room and set the flowers on a table and his work backpack on the floor. He sat next to her on the sofa and gently kissed her cheek.

Darcy swallowed a lump in her throat, “thank you.”

“You know all that... right?” He tilted his head, studying her reaction.

She smiled, “I love you, Steve.” He yawned, and she raised a brow, “You’re actually admitting you’re tired!”

He nodded and grinned wearily, finally confessing to himself that only two to three hours several nights in a row was getting to him. She stood and led him to the bedroom, and excused herself to the bathroom to prepare for bed while he shucked his clothes and crawled under the covers. He was already asleep when she returned.

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As the first sunlight made its way through the curtains, Darcy stirred. She felt elated that she’d made it through a night without nightmares. Steve was still fast asleep next to her. It was her first chance to study him at rest, so she took her time. Then, she sneaked to the bathroom and brushed her teeth, gave her legs a quick dry shave touch up and applied some lotion, used deodorant, and did what she could with her hair and face. She took more painkillers and stretched, pleased with her progress.

As she made her way back into her room, she stopped and stared at Steve. He was breathing a bit more lightly, enough to make her think he would wake soon. She bit her lip pensively, looking at his muscular body, his handsome face, and the purity of his expression in repose. He looked good enough to...

She stood still for a long moment, considering the impulse, feeling her pulse quicken while she grinned. As she’d admitted to Jane, she had never gone down on a guy. She’d read about it in books and online though, and tried to remember helpful hints. She knew that if she asked him if she could now, he would put her off, since he was so anxious about her injuries. The lack of passion between them in recent days bothered her. She’d been too achy and weary to protest sooner, but too many events of the week had made her feel unpleasantly helpless, not... in charge. She smiled impishly, and repeated part of Steve’s advice in her head... 'take charge and do good...'

So, thanking the gods that boxers offer easy accessibility, heart racing, Darcy removed her shirt and panties, wincing at the remaining stiffness of her left arm, and slid quietly into the bed by Steve’s legs. She inched into position and pushed the fabric back and took him into her mouth all in one motion. She repressed a giggle as he woke with a wordless cry. He threw off the covers and
cried out, “whaa?” and made a sort of gasping noise as she ran her tongue around him and sucked.

She pulled back, licked her lips and chided, “Sh! I’m trying to focus on taking charge and doing good.” Steve lay back and groaned loudly as she returned her mouth to him. After a few moments, she asked, “now help me…” and pulled at his boxers. Wide eyed, he lifted his hips so she could pull the boxers down. She moaned at the sight before her. “I see I got your attention.”

He groaned as she put her mouth on him again, adding her hand and twisting it near the base as she sped her motions. He cried out, “oh, holy God in Heaven!”

She answered with a “hmmmmm” that caused him to spasm against her lips. She tried more suction and listened as he began to whimper. She pulled back and asked, “is that okay? I’ve never done this before, just read about it.” He nodded emphatically, so she tried more suction and added a twirl of her tongue around the tip, thinking that while she wasn’t specifically sure why guys liked the cherry stem trick, maybe it had something to do with this motion. He was tensing more and more, breathing hard.

She moved back and admonished, “Hey! Try not to rip my sheets with your hands.” He let go of the sheets with another slight whimper. That was fast becoming one of her new favorite noises in the world.

She pushed herself further, trying to relax her throat and take as much of him in as she could. He cried out with pleasure, so she knew her experiment was a success, but she was tensing some, and needed to pull back. She sucked hard as she pulled her lips off of him. She observed, “given how much it takes to satisfy you, I should get good at this.” She licked along the underside to the tip and rolled her tongue around it firmly again.

He was staring at her with a nearly maddened expression. She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, and he groaned. Then she slowly took him between her lips again and moaned a response. His hips jerked slightly, though he was singularly determined to avoid jostling her head. She spoke softly against him, “I want to try to swallow, at least some.” She took him as far in as she could again, marveling at the noises that statement drew from him.

All of his muscles were taut. He was struggling, moaning aloud as she continued to please him, hastening her rhythmic motions. She reached up and grabbed a pillow and brought it down by his legs to prop herself up as he began to buck his hips a tiny bit. Then, she moved faster. He took the other pillow and put it over his mouth to muffle his cries. After, she wiped her mouth on the sheet and moved up next to him, her face alight with a contented smile. At the slide of her body against his, he immediately hardened again, groaning almost as if in pain. He moaned as she kissed her way up his neck and then softly touched her lips to his.

She asked, “was that okay?” He nodded, still panting and tensed, marveling at the eager and adoring look on her face. She stroked his arms, neck, and back, fascinated by him.

He choked out, “incredible. That was NOT what I meant when I told you to take charge.”

She nodded, “I know. But, I enjoyed it. I want to please you… and it felt un-victim-y.” He groaned again. She studied him and teased, “Hey! Don’t chew your lip off over there. I love that lip.”

As he looked around the room, his expression was almost wild. Finally, his gazed fixed on her over-sized reading chair. He pointed to it, “there.” Puzzled, she eased up from the bed and moved where he pointed. He followed, carrying the bed pillows, which he set in the chair up against the back. Once the pillows were in place, he turned to Darcy and she stood against him so that their bodies touched. They both sighed. He leaned down and kissed her, gently but insistently, his hands
ghosting along the sides of her body, touching where she was not bruised. He motioned for her to sit, and then gently pushed her to lie back with her head snugly nestled among the pillows, while he knelt before her and nudged her legs apart. Having her head among the pillows that way made it so that in resting position her head tilted slightly forward. She was looking at him, shivering with anticipation.

He moved closer, raggedly rasping, “I NEED to love you, Darcy.” He kissed his way up her legs, softly, placing open mouthed kisses at the insides of her knees and touching sensitive skin with his tongue. He braced one hand on the chair arm, then leaned down and kissed his way to her center, using his fingers to part her folds while she cried out and gasped. He started softly, running his tongue lightly over her, then moving back to place open-mouthed kisses along her thighs again. He held her legs apart and shifted the right leg over his shoulder while settling her bruised left leg so that her foot was on the floor, resting. He took his time, paying attention to her moans and gasps for guidance as he again moved his dexterous fingers and firm tongue against her. His tongue circled slowly and insistently. He slowed and pulled back as she writhed frantically, so that he could build the sensations again, higher. He teased, and moved in to flick his tongue so she almost came, whimpering as he pulled away just an instant too soon. She was shaking all over and begging for more.

She gasped with pleasure and grabbed at the chair when he slipped one long finger inside of her, then a second. He crooked them, and rubbed steadily while her moans increased. He leaned in again, and took up a faster rhythm with his tongue. She felt herself coming apart as orgasm built fiercely. She cried out, ‘Oh! Oh, God. Steve!’ He slowed the motion of his tongue, very slow, but with more pressure. She felt as though every nerve ending was afire with pleasure. She couldn’t bring her thighs together. She wanted him more than ever. She begged, “Please, Steve, more…”

He suddenly shifted so that he pulled her clit between his lips, just touching it with the edge of his teeth with each little suck. She screamed. He kept sucking and pressing as pleasure almost overwhelmed her, the sensations cresting over her in waves. She was happily stunned as he rose to his full kneeling height, carefully shifted and pulled her to the edge of the chair, and slowly pressed into her pulsing center. She whimpered, “Dear God, YES!” from the amazing feeling of fullness and completion. She felt him shaking with restraint as he slowly entered all the way and pulled back, again and again. Again, he grazed her clit with his fingers, stroking lightly, so slightly that she was straining towards his touch. After she came again, she opened her eyes and stared into his.

He smiled softly and murmured, “I love you.” She nodded, and replied the same.

He moved his hands to the arms of the chair and quickened their pace, pressing steadily while she shuddered with pleasure and wriggled her hips eagerly, her head pressing more deeply into the pillows. His rhythm stuttered. Again, he touched her so slightly that he took her over the edge with him. He cried out wordlessly, and then gently kissed her breasts before laying his cheek against her, sighing with relief.

He held her close, chuckling, “good morning, Sweetheart. You definitely got my attention.” After a few minutes, he sighed and admitted, “I was afraid, Darcy.” He kissed her lightly. “I didn't want to hurt you at all, but I also didn't want to pressure… or frighten you.” He grinned, “I’m glad I can count on you to let me know how you feel and what you want.”

She laughed, happy to be alive and together with the man she loved. She wrapped her arms around his neck, “we’re gonna be okay, Steve. We’ll be okay.”

*to be continued...*
Darcy gets back to work in the labs. Tony has a surprise for her. She has quiet talks, first with Dr. Chau and then with Bucky. Steve visits Peggy and she's as awesome as ever.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorsWench for Beta help! You're da bomb! :) Any mistakes are MINE.

Holy cow! This chapter is LONG. It was originally 2 chapters, but tracked together so much that I just put 23 pages in one chapter. Hope you don't mind. THANK you to readers, kudo leavers, bookmarkers, and esp. COMMENT leavers. YOU are awesome and encouraging.

Darcy work blouse (w/gray slacks)
http://cdn-media.backstage.com/files/media/uploads/zinnia/Kat-Dennings_BlakeGardner.jpg.644x3840_q100.jpg

Darcy and Steve happily kissed and teased through a shower together, and then returned to her bed for another round of slow, gentle lovemaking before dressing. She dressed for work, explaining, “with the R&D labs reopening today, I need to evaluate our progress in person.” Steve made bagels for both of them, wolfing his down quickly.

They were surprised by a knock on the door. Darcy opened it and cried out with pleasure, “Erik!”

He handed her a mocha latté from downstairs. “I heard you were injured in the lab attack the other day. Figured it’s high time I buy you a coffee!” He winked, “and good timing on that since it was free. Apparently, Tony Stark’s footing the bill for all of us in the Tower this week!” Erik looked surprised when he saw Steve inside the apartment and gaped at him for a moment. “Sorry! I didn't know to get you one, Captain. I hope this is not too much of an interruption!” He made a commiserating, impressed face at Darcy. She suppressed a giggle.

Steve smiled, “thank you, anyway, Dr. Selvig. I’ll get some after I go for a run. I need to leave now. You two enjoy your drinks.” He grabbed his backpack, kissed Darcy, and mentioned, “I hope you don’t mind if I swing by the labs today- morale tour on their first day back?” She shook her head and shrugged. He leaned his head down against hers and murmured, “and maybe we could go out for dinner tonight, if you’re feeling up to it?” She nodded, and kissed him again, watching longingly as he left.

After Steve was gone, Erik opened the newspaper, and they made fast work of the puzzles. As they worked, he asked about Captain America, sharing stories he’d heard about Dr. Erskine and his work, and other super-soldier formula attempts. It was sad to hear how many failed attempts there
were to duplicate Erskine’s formula.

Next, the conversation turned to the events of the Hydra attack. Ilsa had dragged Erik to the safe room on their floor, and they hid there the whole time. He was curious about all that had happened outside those thick walls. Darcy told him about the attack on Jane’s lab without getting too specific or upsetting. He was concerned that the portals were of so much interest to Hydra, noting that Hydra must have been spying to know about Jane’s current work with them. The old gravometric detectors wouldn’t be useful since the Convergence had passed, and Hydra had known all about them. He asked if they’d searched out a mole in the labs, and what other work the spy had leaked to Hydra. Darcy was pleased by Erik’s lucidity. He expressed eagerness to return to work full time, a wish Darcy could sympathize with. She promised Erik that she would find him something soon. He thanked her, and hugged her for a long time before he left.

Darcy went by the Healing Ward and had a quick check-up with Dr. Gates. She was urged to step up activities gradually, but given a good report and released until the following week.

Darcy decided that the next thing she needed to do was to visit Lab Eleven. She was jittery as she drew near to it. Jane’s lab was full of construction workers. Darcy shuddered as she looked in to see their progress. The room was still a mess, mostly charred. Debris was finally being removed, now that all investigation and evidence-gathering was complete. Drones flew large pieces away safely. She spoke with a foreman she’d communicated with previously via email, and signed off on Jane’s part of his latest schedule. She spoke to the architect and set up a meeting with him on Jane’s calendar so that the three of them could make the lab even more suited to her work than it was before. She put in a request for a way to move from Jane’s lab to Bruce’s lab one floor up from inside their work spaces, hoping to facilitate cooperation between them (while aware that any access would have to be approved by Security, Tony, and Steve). As she walked away, she heard voices talking about blood under the debris. She quickened her steps before she could hear more.

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When Darcy reached her office on the main R&D floor, there were three people waiting in the chairs outside with resignation letters in hand. She glanced over the entire floor, taking note of which techs and engineers were cleaning up and rearranging things for themselves and making the department productive again. She settled in, and called in the first waiting tech. Noting the man’s pallor, Darcy grimaced, “You don’t look happy with your decision.”

He swallowed hard. “I have a family. I can’t work in a place as dangerous as SI Avengers Tower. I’m resigned to that. I’m just waiting to see if someone’s going to toss me out of a window or not.”

He flexed his hands nervously.

Darcy tilted her head, “excuse me?”

“Mr. Stark threw a tech who resigned out the window,” he explained.

She raised a brow. “Did he catch them before they hit the pavement?” The man nodded. “Well, there ya go. Resigning isn’t deadly, just stupid scary.” She searched her files on employee terminations. She saw that the person in question was suspected of leaving to go to what was left of A.I.M. She asked, “so, other than avoiding danger, what are your plans?” She looked over the data she had on the man in front of her, Lawrence Carlson. He was a good worker, not brilliant, but not someone Tony disdained, either. He’d been with Stark Industries for twelve years, so he was fairly loyal. Mr. Carlson had two young children, and his wife was expecting again.

Darcy already knew that there were eight resignations in her email inbox. The relative cowardice of that approach, compared to the courage of the man sweating bullets in front of her hit a nerve. He
impressed her.

She searched the SI science tech management database, and found a position Carlson was qualified for in a non-vital manufacturing plant outside the city. She printed out a job description for it, and handed the sheet to the frightened looking man. “Is this something you could risk?” Carlson nodded, looking dumbfounded. She pointed a finger at him and threatened, “if you turn out evil and make me look like a sentimental fool, I’ll get Stark to find you and throw you off a building. Are we clear?”

Mr. Carlson nodded shakily, “yes, ma’am! Thank you, Miss Lewis.” She told him to go to HR, and transfer to his new post after that. She emailed HR, copied Pepper on the exchange, and called in the second person waiting.

The woman, Ms. Frieda Miller, was in her thirties, had started out with lots of promise and not really made good on any of it. Darcy accepted the resignation and signed off on it with as few words as possible, making a note for Security to track Miller’s activities.

Then, she called in the third person, a woman in her twenties. This woman looked more upset than the first guy, visibly shaking. Darcy leaned forward, commiserating, “I’m not gonna throw you out a window, if that helps.” The woman nodded, still looking miserable. Darcy asked, “what are you so upset about?” She looked at the woman’s file- Nileen Basak, level one scientist, started w/SI during grad school, working on support of the generators Tony was designing, known for consistently good work and even marked up by Tony for being ‘capable of original thought.’ Darcy kept reading, then looked up and frowned, “Ms. Basak, do you WANT to resign?”

The young woman shook her head and whispered, “no.”

Darcy sat back and grimaced, “so, you had an affair with Frank Inderman, our latest Hydra mole.” The woman nodded, obviously ashamed. Darcy asked, “and what was the attraction?”

Ms. Basak admitted shyly, “he pursued me persistently. It was flattering.” She took a deep breath. “I thought he was a bit cold sometimes. I convinced myself that it was attractive.”

“The 'bad boy' thing?” Darcy made a face and rolled her eyes.

Ms. Basak looked at her plaintively. “So, you understand?”

Darcy considered her answer carefully. “I understand being attracted to the manner of dress, confidence, and excitement of some bad boys. But… a good man can have strength and resolve, too. They’re a much better bet.” She looked at the list of Ms. Basak’s projects. “You do a lot with Asgardian tech, don’t you?” The woman nodded. Darcy asked, “have you attended any of the workshops that HR does on product confidentiality and discretion? If you stay, you’re going to have to do them all, the whole Provisional Evaluation program. It’s heavy-duty stuff.”

Ms. Basak choked a crying noise, “there’s a chance I could stay?”

Darcy nodded. “Everyone makes mistakes. You trusted the wrong man, but he had been trained on how to approach you, so it’s hardly criminal. You’ll have to be debriefed to see what you might have let slip. Be completely open. It can help us understand what he was doing. I’ll recommend that Psych and HR give you a full workup. Security at all levels, too. You’ll be bumped to lower-level work during the process, but if you’re willing to submit to the bazillions of questions and evaluations they’ll throw at you, and they recommend it, AND Mr. Stark, the Avengers, and Miss Potts agree, then you can stay.”
Ms. Basak burst out sobbing, “Oh! Thank you!”

Darcy sent a message to Security. She looked up as she saw a flash of blue out of the corner of her eye. She looked at Ms. Basak ruefully, and cautioned, “if you thought you were emotional before, this’ll fry your brain.” The young woman stillled and looked at Darcy with apparent confusion. There was a firm knock at the door.

Darcy stood and gestured. Captain America entered her office wearing his full uniform, sans helmet. He nodded to each of them politely, “good afternoon, ladies. Miss Lewis, may I visit with the remaining scientists and engineers now? I want to thank those who continue to support the Avengers’ efforts.” He smiled at Ms. Basak.

Darcy nodded and tried not to blush. She’d almost forgotten how good Steve looked in full Captain uniform. Her gaze lingered on his hands in fingerless leather gloves... and the subtle smirk he directed her way didn't help. She admitted to herself that he looked toe-curlingly good. On the inside, her impish self relived waking Steve that morning, while on the outside she overcompensated towards complete professionalism.

She cleared her throat, “yes, thank you... Captain. I’m sure they would appreciate that. This is Ms. Basak. We’re discussing the Provisional Evaluation program. The Hydra mole was interested in the Asgardian technology projects she was assigned.” Steve’s eyes narrowed slightly. Darcy continued, “her record was good before Mr. Inderman approached her. Mr. Stark is on record complimenting her project thinking.” Steve raised his brows, knowing how rare that was. Darcy added, “I’ll send a full report to you, Mr. Stark, and Miss Potts, and will have you copied on the debriefings Ms. Basak is about to take.” Ms. Basak shuddered.

Darcy took a breath, considering that the mole’s information had led Hydra to decide that she should be tortured. She felt her mouth go dry and her skin prickle uncomfortably. She realized she must look upset when Steve reacted. But, she shook her head as he took a slight step her way. He frowned, but stayed back.

Darcy took a breath and completed the introduction, “Ms. Basak, this is... Captain America.” Darcy felt odd introducing Steve by his title.

Ms. Basak’s mouth was hanging open, and she looked pale as she stared up at the Captain plaintively. She stammered, “I-I-I’m sorry,” while tears streamed down her face.

Captain America knelt next to her, his voice soothing, “please don’t cry. If Miss Lewis is willing to give you a chance through the Provisional Evaluations program, then so are we.” He lightly touched her arm in a soothing gesture.

The young woman nearly fainted. Darcy’s eyes went wide with surprise, and then her brow furrowed a bit. She thought Steve looked sexy in his uniform, but had never seen how star struck other people behaved near him before. He saw her expression and stifled a grin.

Ms. Basak managed, “thank you, Captain.”

Steve smiled at her reassuringly as he stood again. He nodded to Darcy as he turned and made his way into the lab, stopping at the first work station to speak with the workers there.


The woman looked at her and asked, “how can you be so calm? That’s Captain America!” Darcy
smiled and took her seat again.

A security guard knocked on the door. “Good afternoon, Miss Lewis. I’m here to take your Provisional into custody.” He looked deliberately intimidating, unnecessarily so for such a tall and imposing figure. Ms. Basak shrank down in her seat.

Darcy frowned as she stood and crossed to the door, and looked up about a foot into the guard’s face. “Hey! Ms. Basak’s status will be determined by the counselors, HR staff, Miss Potts, and Mr. Stark, mister. Don’t act all prison-guard-like! She’s not the first or last person to make a bad dating choice. If she successfully passes the Provisional Evaluations, she’ll be re-instated as a full SI employee. So, mind your manners!”

The man stared down at her for a second or two, blinking in surprise, then took a step back and apologized. He turned and offered, “may I escort you to Human Resources, Ms. Basak?” He glanced at Darcy, and she nodded approval.

“Thank you for everything, Miss Lewis. This job has been everything to me.” Ms. Basak stood shakily.

Darcy admonished sternly, “you can keep it if you pass the evaluations. Don’t disappoint me… or yourself.”

Darcy worked on R&D personnel vacancies reports for Pepper for the next several minutes, feeling her heartbeat and breathing settle while she tried not to dwell on the loss of life the reports represented. Captain America approached her office again. He knocked, and she gestured him in. He closed the door behind him. She tried to smile, “surviving troops all encouraged?”

He nodded. He asked, “how are you?” She waved her bottle of pain pills and made a face. He smirked, “I enjoyed hearing you scare that rude guard. I wasn't sure if he feared getting tazed or thought you were gonna take a swing at him.”

She chuckled, “he’d do far better if I tried to hit him. My punches are nothing to write home about.” She sighed, “I didn't think the attitude was necessary. You’d just stunned her into stopping crying!”

Steve smirked, “I didn't care for his attitude, either.”

She shook her head, “my boyfriend must be rubbing off on me. He’s pretty good at dealing with bullies.”

He grinned, then looked more serious and cautioned her, “do you know that at some point, someone is going to say something stupid to you about what happened the day of the attack? Like to congratulate you? Or, that they heard you took people out, or are in assassin training?” He looked pained. “Just be ready. Okay?”

She asked, “what makes you say that? You hear something out there?” He nodded. She sighed, “thanks for the heads up.” Darcy muttered to herself, “cubicles bring out the stupid in people sometimes.”

He smiled again, “I’ll go before they start talking about me hanging out in here too much. I’m working on something with Natasha, and I want to check on Peggy. Love you, Darcy.”

She smiled at him, “I promise you they’re already talking. You intimidate as much as you comfort when you’re in Cap duds… and excite too. I never knew I was breaking everyone else’s rules by not fainting the moment you speak or touch.” He raised a brow at that and then smiled softly. She
leaned forward, “love you, too, Steve.” He saluted and left. She watched as every tech in the place stared after him. Darcy sighed and shook her head, but did take a surreptitious peek at his ass. The uniform did great things for it.

After a couple of hours, Darcy went to Bruce’s lab to check on him and Jane. Jane was not acting unusual for her, which was a relief, given the green flash they’d seen in Bruce’s eyes the previous day. Darcy worked on some transcriptions for Jane for an hour or so, then did a few of her reports and requisitions. While Jane randomly puttered and pushed herself around the lab, Darcy approached Bruce. He glanced over his shoulder at Jane as she began to mutter to herself. Darcy smiled, “it’s nice of you to temporarily share your space with Jane. Have you two had a chance to work on the energy field much yet?”

Bruce nodded and sighed, “we’re taking a break from that to work on separate projects right now.”

He sounded tense. He breathed in and out slowly and offered, “her constant noise is… distracting. I understand the need to share… temporarily… so we can keep things moving forward, though.”

“You okay, today?” Darcy asked. She wondered how many more times he would work the word ‘temporarily’ into the conversation.

Bruce took off his glasses and paused. “Fine, I suppose.” He looked her up and down. “You look well- more relaxed today.” He smirked the slightest bit. It was interesting to Darcy how Bruce Banner could do ten thousand times more damage with a slight smirk than Tony Stark could do with boatloads of blatant innuendo and outright leering.

“I’m fine, thanks.” She blushed.

He grinned sadly, wistfully. “I’m glad that you’re happy, Darcy.”

She moved forward and pulled him into a tight hug. “I’m really sorry that you’re not, Bruce.” He put his chin on her shoulder and closed his eyes. They stayed like that for a long moment.

Jane called out, “Bruce! I had a thought.”

Darcy pulled back, kissed Bruce on the cheek and moved to spend time on his paperwork. After another hour, she smiled at Jane and Bruce, “I’m making it a short day today. You two try to remember to eat and stuff. I’ll order delivery and check in later to see that you don’t forget!” As she left, Bruce was standing by Jane, struggling to read her chicken scratch and asking question.

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Finally, Darcy went to Tony’s lab. His music was cranked even louder than usual. When she walked into the room, he cried out, “Ah! Finally!” This put her on guard, but not enough. He walked over and slipped a silver band on each of her wrists. She looked at the bands with wide eyes. They began to blink. He grinned in a slightly manic way and gestured at her dramatically with one hand, two fingers pointing almost like a pretend gun.

As metal pieces flew to assemble on her body, she yelled in shock. One slammed onto her bruised thigh and she yelped, “Ouch! What the hell, Tony?” More pieces assembled on her. It was disconcerting. When she saw a face mask flying towards her, she screamed, “NO! Don’t cover my face!” As she broke into a shriek, the face plate froze in mid-air, a few inches in front of her. She gasped, “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

“What?” He looked confused.

She screamed, “Why don’t you just dunk me in a sink of water?!” She put a mechanical hand to her
chest and struggled to control her breathing.

Tony waved his hands and cried, “JARVIS! Remove the suit!” The pieces flew off of her and fell to the floor. He ran forward and helped her keep steady and guided Darcy to a seat.

She put her hands against her cheeks and closed her eyes. Tony put an arm around her shoulders and groused, “damn, Lewis! I’m trying to be nice.”

She laughed weakly, “uh, sorry.” She wiped her eyes and looked at Tony questioningly, “it doesn't bother you to have your face covered?” He shook his head. She raised a brow and spoke dryly. “It bothers me.”

He nodded, “so noted.” He pulled his arm away. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

She took a breath, “okay... I get what you’re going for here. Could we try it again, but with a little warning, less forceful clamping onto my thighs and without the face plate?”

He smirked, stood and spoke to her cheerily, “Hey, Lewis! How ya doin’?”

She answered, “fine, Tony. How are you?”

“I’m good. I made you something.” He nodded, encouraging.

She stood, walked a few feet and held her arms out and sighed shakily. “Awesome! Bring it on...”

He laughed and gestured to her, “slow it down half-speed overall, quarter-speed on the leg plates, JARVIS.” The pieces assembled on her again. He picked up the mask and set it on the table. She lifted a foot, set it down, and then lifted the other.

He told her, “I used a lighter-polymer titanium. I want it to be impenetrable, but light enough for you to move.”

"Impenetrable is good.” She asked breathlessly, “can I fly?”

He grinned, “of course! It’s better with the face plate, though. Then you can chat up JARVIS.”

She shook her head. “Let me work my way up to that… please.”

Tony directed, “JARVIS… lift 1.5%.”

She squealed as she rose a few feet off the floor. “Ooh! Thor and Steve’s view of the world!”

He shifted her down a bit, “you think they’re eight feet tall? No. This is their perspective.” She laughed, and he visibly relaxed, “sorry about before.” He walked around and looked at the suit, frowning at the thighs. “Ah! Your wounds left you with some swelling.”

“Blech.” Darcy made a face.

He made notes, “I can remake those with a less rigid connection.” He tapped on her abdomen. “Guess I should add some water-retention flex in several areas.” He eyed her chest, “do you get even bigger boobs at that time of the month?” She tried to shrug. He made a face, looking impressed, “Awesome! I can make this right. I haven't made many female suits.” He walked around her, tapping joints and making notes while having JARVIS run scans.

She lifted a hand experimentally and yelled, “Oh, crap!” as she accidentally shot a wall.
Tony chuckled, “Oh! Yeah. It has all the bells and whistles. I even put in a Taser-like setting for the fingertips. That won’t work on ME, by the damned way, in case you get ideas.” He pointed a warning finger at her and she grinned. He made a face. “You could shoot me, though, so please refrain. From all the bad-guy screaming I hear, repulsor burns hurt.”

She shook her head and blew out a breath, trying to get used to the suit. He frowned as he studied the mask. “I guess I can make you like a horse face so that it doesn’t panic you. That just seems wrong somehow…”

Natasha walked in, and stopped in her tracks. “Oh, he’ll LOVE that!”

Tony cackled, “he would have been happier if she’d been in it the other day.”

“Can you control it?” Natasha walked around Darcy.

Darcy shook her head, “no. Not yet. I don’t like to have my face covered.” She looked at Tony, “how about a big bubble helmet like an Apollo astronaut?” Tony made a face like he was sucking on a lemon.

Natasha scowled at Tony. He defended his work, “I’m working on some adjustments. Okay, Lewis. I’m gonna set you down and take her back to the drawing board.” He yelled, “JARVIS! Set up schematics so I can get to work on ‘Boobies Mark II’!”

She landed and the pieces disengaged and fell to the floor. She sat again, “Gah!” She looked at him wryly, “thanks for the warning.” Then she made a face, “‘Boobies?’ Are you twelve or what?”

He flashed a grin and asked, “so, how many of my minions did you let resign this morning?”

She nodded, “nine of eleven who wanted to leave.”

He raised a brow, “how many of those had the cojones to face you?”

She replied, “just three…” Tony laughed derisively. She explained, “the eight who didn't, went with minimal package and standard Security tags. One of the others was a relief to release, but I gave her a slightly better package and then a plus-one Security tag.” Tony nodded. She continued, “one is transferring to a less hazardous workplace. His wife is expecting a baby in two months and he was freaked out by the near-deathiness of it all… also a bit scared that SOMEone might throw him out a window.” Tony shrugged innocently. She sighed, “the other I kept is the girl that the mole was dating and pumping for info. She agreed to go Provisional and to try and impress you, Psych, and HR with her dazzling cooperation. The mole had a hard-on for Asgardian tech.” She checked her emails to confirm all of the arrangements were flowing as intended, then nodded to Tony. “Yep! That’s all in motion.”

Tony mused, “it all seems to go back to Asgard one way or another.” He grumbled, “if Loki hadn't done the sacrifice play, I’d say he was screwing around with us again.”

Darcy glanced up at him for a second and shrugged, “it’s not like anyone else stays dead around here. Maybe he’s back.”

Natasha asked, “does anyone know how long Heimdall stays dormant?”

Darcy shrugged, and noted, “by the way, Tony, if you read up on your Hydra history, you’ll find they've had a hard-on for Asgard forever. Schmidt was all about the Tesseract. I looked him up after we watched ‘Raiders’ and Steve talked about the Tesseract melting his face. He made weapons from it and wanted to use it to rule the world. If you don’t want to bother reading, just ask
Steve. Not his fave topic, but he knows all about it.”

Tony frowned, “Lewis, if we have an emergency before I get Boobies II done, just suck it up. Okay? I don’t want to see Cap die inside like he did the other day ever again. I wasn't sure which was going first, his fingers through the shield, or his sanity to shreds.”

She smiled, “you’re such a softie.”

Tony shook his head and chuckled mirthlessly, “I’d be less than human if I wanted to see that.”

Darcy smiled softly, “you’re human.”

“Sh!” He winked.

Natasha asked Tony, “you have those new Widow’s Bites I asked for?”

Tony walked over to a bench and grabbed them. “No teaching Lewis about these!”

Natasha laughed, “no promises.” She turned to Darcy expectantly, smirking, “you ready for your next defense lesson?”

Darcy breathed out deeply and asked, “can I have a couple more days?”

Natasha raised a brow and noted dryly, “it sounded like you were moving pretty well this morning.” She grinned and added, “either that… or you and Steve were having some sort of enthusiastic prayer meeting.” She crossed her arms and pretended to be disapproving. “Miss Lewis! It’s against Federal law to cause Captain America to take the Lord's name in vain.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, blushed, and made a face. She hadn't given a thought to the lack of sound-proofing at her place. She glanced at Tony and winced at his look of glee.

Tony exclaimed, “Ah ha! I thought he almost smiled at me this morning! I knew something must be up. Ooh! Tell me more!” He called out, “JARVIS, add hearing enhancement to the next suit.”

Darcy grinned and let her voice drop lower in imitation of Steve, “I don’t kiss and tell, Stark!” She mock-glared at Natasha.

He laughed, “I told you! You need to pitch even lower in a tone of overbearing righteousness to pull that off.”

She shook her head, looked at her watch, and chirped, “therapy calls, thank goodness. Thanks for the scare and the multimillion dollar outfit!” She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Really, thanks.”

Tony waved her off and mouthed the word 'billion' to himself.

Natasha grinned, “wanna bet Steve insists you two stay at his place tonight?” Darcy shrugged and waved goodbye to Natasha, grinning ruefully.

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For the first time in a long time, Darcy found herself reluctant to start talking with Dr. Chau. She looked at the doctor seriously for a minute before asking, “are you okay, Doc?”

“I will be. I suppose. Thank you for asking, Darcy.” Dr. Chau smiled sadly.
Darcy leaned closer, “I was so sorry to hear about Agent Navarro. She was pretty awesome.”

Dr. Chau closed her eyes for a second, “I thank you, dear. Now, please let me feel useful. How are you? Are you okay?”

Darcy sat back and shook her head slowly. She frowned, “I’m not. I’ve been acting like I am. I’ve been trying to avoid too much quiet thinking, but I haven’t… stopped keeping busy any more than people, mostly Dr. Gates, made me. I’ve cried some, but not as much as I probably need to. I attacked poor Steve this morning, without giving any thought to his preference for privacy in intimate stuff, though he enjoyed it at the time. I… needed to feel alive and like… he and I won’t get stuck on all of this craziness.”

Dr. Chau nodded, “go on.”

Darcy choked out, “I’m pretty stupid, doc. I took a man’s advice on how to deal with emotional stuff. I’ve been sweeping it all under a great big, lumpy emotional carpet!” She gasped a laughing sob, and then began to cry.

Dr. Chau followed suit, weeping freely. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t…”

Darcy shook her head, “No! Don’t apologize. Navarro was so cool! She was really good to people and… it’s not fair. I don’t get it when bad things happen to good people who are just trying to do the right thing. It’s like on 9/11. All those firefighters and policemen who ran up the stairs to save people! Or during the Chitauri battle, all the cops who fell to laser weapons, but kept fighting back with what they had!” She sniffed. “That’s brave.” She sighed, “I’m really sorry about Navarro. How long were you together?”

Dr. Chau sat back and sighed, “twenty-four years next month. It feels like so short a time.” She smiled slightly, “hold those you love close, Darcy. Savor them.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Darcy wiped her eyes.

Dr. Chau chuckled, “usually Steven is the only one to ‘ma’am’ me.”

Darcy smiled slightly, “he would.”

The doctor smiled through tears, “I take it you are past your nervousness of our last session, given that you say you ‘attacked’ him to feel alive this morning, but in an enjoyable and intimate fashion. I imagine he’ll forgive you.” Her smile was wistful.

Darcy chuckled, “I hope so.” She shook her head. “Then, later, Erik came by to cheer ME up for a change, and I ran off to work like nothing had happened.” She looked down and sighed, “and I dealt with lab repair, personnel stuff… some scared resignations… and some vacancies created… and, I don’t feel like much of a person.”

Dr. Chau suggested, “perhaps you should think about what makes you feel most ‘like a person’.”

Darcy shrugged, “usually it’s looking after my friends… like Jane, and Erik, and… Bucky.”

Dr. Chau asked, “have you talked things over with Bucky?” Darcy shook her head and bit her lip. The doctor pressed, “have you been alone with Bucky since he was ordered to harm you?” Darcy shook her head again.

Darcy clarified, “we haven’t really talked since he saved me and Jane from the explosion.” She sighed guiltily. “I know that he heard me crying out, telling him to stop when I had a nightmare the
night before I checked myself out of the Healing Ward.”

Dr. Chau nodded, “I’m aware of that.”

Darcy felt more tears track down her cheeks. “I didn't mean to hurt him.” She looked away guiltily.

Dr. Chau shook her head, “of course not, dear! Your subconscious is processing trauma. It’s not your fault. You have nothing to feel guilty over. The contents of your dreams and nightmares are not a conscious choice on your part.” Dr. Chau asked, “have your feelings towards the Sergeant changed?”

Darcy chewed her lip and blurted, “I believed it! I believed he was going to hurt me. I thought Bucky had been zapped away, and the Winter Soldier was all that was left. The nightmares are awful.” She wrapped her arms in front of her chest and shivered. She whispered, “in some, he’s pouring water on the towel, and punching me like that guy did in London, only harder. In some, he’s on top of me, raping me. I just… I was so scared of him! He looked at me like I was nothing! His eyes were like a shark’s… like… the Winter Soldier.” She sobbed, “the Winter Soldier is scary as shit!” She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

Dr. Chau let her cry uninterrupted for a long time. After Darcy settled down again, wiped her face, and blew her nose, Dr. Chau pointed out, “many people have thought he was only the Winter Soldier all along. Before the attack, you thought differently. Why?”

Darcy closed her eyes and thought back. “The first time we met… he looked scared, terrified, like he was trapped, and so scared that bad things were about to happen to him. There was anger, but mostly fear… and I could see how it was all tearing Steve apart. Then, well, he wanted to give Steve info to fight those last aliens here, the Vorm. I kept seeing… I dunno… like ‘sparks of life’ in his eyes or something, I think?”

She shivered as doubt cast its shadow over her, “but maybe I’m just a chump? Maybe I WANTED to see that, even though…”

She shook her head hard. “I’m not being fair! They came to take him back and hurt him and make him do things. He managed to fight them off enough to help me and Jane, to save us from the soldiers that didn't get zapped to Svartalfheim.” She stopped talking suddenly.

Dr. Chau asked, “I know what else happened. I’ve seen the video feed. Let’s come back to that in a moment.” She patted Darcy’s knee. “It wouldn't be that unreasonable to do nothing but cry for a month, dear.” She chuckled ruefully, “I've heard the phrase ‘it’s all too much’ in every session today.” She sighed. “It is.” Dr. Chau cleared her throat, “I’d like for you to do something for yourself, Darcy. It sounds overly simple, I know, but I’d like you to make a list of your thoughts and feelings about Bucky, the good on one side, and the bad on the other. You will have to decide, not me. NOT Steve. You will have to decide whether you want to continue your friendship with Bucky Barnes. Don't give into temptation and skip this, Darcy. Making the list will help you sort your feelings. It’s important that you face the good and the bad of it. If you ever want to face Bucky again, even if it’s just to tell him that you’re unable to move past the terror he put you through.”

Darcy’s breath shuddered, “oh, my God, Doc! No! I could never cut him out of my life! Steve…”

Dr. Chau cut her off, “it’s your mental well-being at stake, Darcy. It’s up to you to decide what you want and need.”

Darcy put her head in her hands and admitted, “is it weird that I miss Bucky? I’m scared shitless of
the Winter Soldier in my nightmares. But I miss Bucky’s sad eyes, and his sly teasing, and the way he’ll just suddenly come out with something that cuts through the crap to the center of stuff. I miss our friendship. I feel so guilty for being scared of the Winter Soldier… and so confused because it’s Bucky, but it’s NOT Bucky.”

Dr. Chau sighed tiredly, “it’s not weird. It’s natural that you would be confounded by a man as complex as James Buchanan Barnes… who has lived through so much, yet been set apart so far from the rest of the human race. He’s, well, I could write papers on him for the rest of my career and not adequately cover his issues, dear.”

Darcy wiped her cheeks again and agreed, “I’ll make the list. It can be part of one of your papers, if you like.”

Dr. Chau chuckled darkly, “I doubt I could publish your list, Darcy.” She sighed, “I’d like to return to the other issue now, that you were forced to take a human life. Have you begun to consider how to come to terms with what you had to do?”

“I’m not even sure where to start. Does blubbering count? Cause if blubbering counts, then I get extra credit. I blubbered like a big, murderin’ baby the other night.” Darcy shook her head.

Chau smiled slightly. “You were not alone, Darcy. Many people are grieving. Some grieve lost loved ones. Others grieve actions that they took, or actions they considered taking. Many people in the Tower are grieving right now, and will be for a long time to come. The important thing is for us to face our grief, to pass through it intact instead of trying to flee or evade it. It takes time.” Dr. Chau's smile faded, her face set in the deep sadness of grief and loss.

Darcy frowned, “I know I’m avoiding thinking about what I did, and what could have happened… and what did happen to nice people. But, I feel like some of what I’ve been doing is necessary.” Privately, Darcy wondered if Chau was double booked or triple booked. Psychology work in Avengers Tower was probably one of those fields with lots of job security.

Dr. Chau nodded. “It is! I am not advising inactivity. I’m just advising the same moderation you apply to other aspects of life. You don’t drink all of the alcohol at once, unless you are being foolish. You take it in moderation. You don’t stop all work, but you don’t drown yourself in it, either. The same applies to looking after others; you may have to stop and take care of Darcy some, too.”

Darcy frowned. “Thor told me that. But, Doc! I don’t want to be a victim. I hate it! I was a ‘victim’ of water-boarding. I was a ‘victim’ of a bombing… and thought I was gonna be a ‘victim’ of worse stuff, like a guy I LIKE… beating me and raping me!” She grimaced. “I’m going down squarely in the ‘doesn’t like Hydra’ camp.” She stood and paced. “And, I don’t want to stop trusting people because Hydra sucks. But, it’s there. Doubt. Mistrust.” She walked over and grabbed the ‘bopper gloves’ as she liked to call them, put them on and punched the wall a few times, thinking how much more interesting it looked when Steve did something like that. Then she dropped her arms and shook her head. “Crap. My arms hurt.” She returned to the chair.

Dr. Chau spoke soothingly, and urged Darcy to step back and give herself some time to recover. She agreed with Steve’s suggestions, to a point. She urged Darcy to talk with Jane and Thor more, and to consider that Bucky might have many of the same feelings she did… if she wished to try to continue their friendship.

So, Darcy went to Jane’s place and hung out with Jane and Thor. Thor didn't seem able to let Jane out of his sight, or more than a foot away from him easily at all. He kept clinging to her whenever possible. Darcy could tell that it was getting on Jane’s nerves, mostly from Jane’s amazement that
Darcy ‘escaped’ Steve. But, Darcy also remembered Thor talking about how he expected to outlive Jane, how short his time with her felt to him. It made her sad for him, that his greatest joy should ever be dimmed in any way. She hugged and kissed them both on her way out, grateful to hold her best friend and warrior brother close.

Instead of going home, she went down to retail and walked around, watching people make jokes to encourage each other. Some people just stopped in the middle of jokes to break down and cry. She went for coffee and chuckled when the barista cried, “What? No Hot Chocolate? But it’s all free. It’s Mr. Stark’s treat for Tower residents and workers all week!” Darcy shook her head, eagerly grabbing her usual skinny mocha, but added a bag of buttery popcorn since Tony was treating. She meandered through the crowds and took the elevator up to the garden terrace.

The man who’d spoken to her a few times nodded to her and remarked, “glad you made it through.” She smiled politely and returned the sentiment. He asked, “are the Avengers healing up okay? I work construction. It looked like Hulk and the Captain tried to tear the building apart on their way in to fight those terrorist bastards.” She nodded shortly, remembering JARVIS once telling her that it was not okay to discuss an Avenger’s medical condition. She listened as others in the elevator murmured their stories of the attack, some accurate and some not.

The construction guy spoke to a friend about Lab Eleven. “We got the wreckage out today, and any unburned floor was almost all crusted with dried blood, lots of it. I heard that the Black Widow killed a bunch of the Hydra terrorists there. You know she’s deadly. After the evidence team left, I saw one poor bastard on the floor by the door. Looked like his throat had been crushed or something. Hard to tell under all that crap we ripped out.” Darcy stiffened and dug the nails of her free hand into her palm.

When she stepped out to the peace of the garden terrace, Darcy let herself start to cry again. She sat on a bench and nursed her mocha, wiped away her tears with a napkin, and finally calmed enough to start on the addictive popcorn. She nearly swallowed a piece whole when she heard Bucky’s voice. “You okay there?”

Darcy shook her head, eyes wide. He stood well away from her, leaning against a wall. He looked like he was trying to appear smaller, a thought that almost made her smile. He was dressed in jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, his metal arm gleaming in the rays of lowering sunlight. His hair looked different, shorter, more like pictures she’d seen of him from the ‘40s. Bucky asked nervously, “want me to go? It’s okay if you do. I understand.” He slumped more and was definitely trying to appear non-threatening, blinking and shifting expressions as though unsure how he should look.

She shook her head again, slowly, watching his face as he studied her. She noted, “you’re better! No minders! They let you out here on your own?” She felt guilty about the way she shuddered while she spoke with false cheeriness, flashes from nightmares coming to mind.

He shrugged, tone somewhat bitter, “mostly. Classified ‘friendly’, ya know?” He shrugged, “the spies are sneakier about the surveillance… It’s kind of random.” He looked at her wrists. “What are those silver things? They just started blinking.” He shifted some and sat on a garden container wall.

Darcy jumped up and set her drink down and squealed, “JARVIS? Why are my bangles blinky?” She looked around wildly, half expecting suit pieces to fly at her. Her heart-rate increased at the thought of having her face covered. She saw Bucky tense in reaction to her apparent fear, frowning with concern.

“Sir is doing test work on your Mark II system, Darcy. There is no current emergency. He’s sorry if you were alarmed.” JARVIS’ voice transmitted with tinny tone from one of the bracelets.
She sat and asked, “do I have to wear these forever, JARVIS? I feel like an animal in the wild that got tagged or something.”

Bucky snorted a short laugh.

JARVIS replied, “no, Darcy. Mr. Stark would like for you to wear them until your Mark II suit is complete, though.”

Darcy frowned. “JARVIS, what about my privacy? Will they make it so he can hear me when I’m away from public areas of the Tower?” She didn't take her safety lightly, especially after the events of the previous day, but she also didn't want for Tony to make some sort of audio sex tape of her and Steve.

JARVIS replied, “Captain Rogers is having that discussion with Mr. Stark as we speak, Darcy. His reaction to the creation of your new suit is decidedly mixed thus far. May I get back with you on their conclusions, or would you like for me to tell you their location so you may speak with them, too?”

“Tell them I asked about it, please.” She muttered to herself, “Nope! Not interested in joining THAT party.” Darcy made a face.

Bucky looked at the bracelets with interest. “Iron Woman triggers! I bet my proximity set them off.” He grinned slightly, “and I bet the idea of you flyin’ around with Stark monitoring your every word has Steve goin’ ballistic.”

She sighed sadly, dropping futile pretense with him, “probably.”

He nodded, “Stark’s paranoid. I’m glad.” He looked away from her.

She sighed again and asked, “is this your first time outside since you arrived?”

Bucky shrugged, “went to help out after a train crash, but this is my first time just… looking around.” He leaned his head back and letting the sun’s rays fall over the lines of his face. His skin was pale.

She asked, “want some sun screen? I have some in my purse.”

Bucky smiled slightly, and shook his head. His smile faded. “I’m sorry for scarin’ you so much. I know you bought into the act. They had to, but I’m sorry I convinced you. It was too easy to fall back into monster behaviors. I’m like Frankenstein’s monster or something.”

She asked, “do you remember that reference from before, or have you listened to the book recently?”

“I must remember it from before.” He squinted at her with a crooked grin.

She smiled. “Your mind is like a treasure chest.”

He shook his head, “more like a dungeon.” He frowned, “except it’s like I was locked out… or away.” He shrugged impatiently.

Darcy looked into his face, and saw the sorrow in his eyes. She admitted, “I won’t lie to you, Bucky. I was scared, really scared there for a few minutes. I know now that you were doing what you had to in order to keep us safe, and I appreciate that. You saved me and Jane from the other soldiers, and then the bomb.” She cleared her throat, “so, thank you.”
“I been missin’ you, Doll. I’m afraid I’ve finally scared you away.” Bucky sighed and grimaced, “thanks for saying that nice stuff. I hope if you say it enough, you’ll believe it.” She nodded slowly. He asked in an abrupt tone, “is that why you were crying? Because of me?”

She shook her head quickly, “no.” She stared off into the distance for a long moment. “I killed someone with my bare hands, well- really my clothed knee, but just me. I… killed.”

He stared at her seriously. “The advance guy?” She nodded as tears came to her eyes again. He nodded, too, and stayed silent for a long time. Slowly, he moved to sit by her on the bench. He put his flesh hand down on the bench, the side of his hand touching the side of hers. He sat there silently for a minute, and finally spoke, “I’m sorry you had to do that.” They sat together, watching the busy city below, not saying anything else at all for a long time.

Darcy thought about her assignment from Dr. Chau. As the sun started to set, she shared, “Dr. Chau advised me to make a list of the good and the bad about you, Bucky. Starting with the bad… you hit hard; said you were going to torture and rape me, and that was really scary; and it looked like you didn't know or care about me.” She took a deep breath, “the uncertainty of whether there is a way for Hydra to turn you… that’s something that’s gonna take me a while to move past.”

She saw a single tear track down his face as he started to move away. She squeaked, “let me finish, Jerk! I haven’t listed the good stuff, yet. Of course, all you did for Steve when he was sick and little is a big deal, as much because it says good about you as… well, you kept him safe and alive. And, he loves you like a brother… and I love and trust him more than anyone.” She sniffed, “but, I miss you, too. You’re my friend. You’re the guy I run to when I need to get away. You’re brave, handsome, funny in a sly way, smart. Finally, what Hydra did… wasn't your fault. I mean, even Tony’s mature enough to see that! I just need time.”

She shifted her hand into the warmth of Bucky’s and gave his hand a squeeze and held on to him. He closed his eyes and lowered his head, letting out a long sigh.

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Steve knocked lightly at Peggy Carter’s door in the Healing Ward. He heard her call him in and quietly made his way to her side as she called out a pleasant greeting. He asked, “how are you feeling?”

“I’m well, thank you. Sharon tells me that Sergeant Barnes is recovering well from his ordeal. I thank God that they were unable to undo his progress!” Peggy gestured firmly to the chair beside her and Steve sat and took her hand. He swallowed hard and nodded.

Peggy gazed at him intently. “How is your girl? I understand she was caught up in the madness and injured.” Steve took a deep breath and looked flustered. Peggy grinned teasingly, “you didn't think you could keep me in the dark forever, did you?”

“I wasn't trying to, Peggy.” He chuckled sadly.

She smiled, “Good! We lost our chance together, but I found another wonderful love and have always wanted the same for you. You deserve to be happy, Steve.”

He smiled sad acknowledgment and looked thoughtful. “She’ll be okay. Darcy was frightened, and was forced to take a life for the first time. Physically, she’ll be fine soon. She’s strong. Bucky… had to hit her pretty hard to put her in range to take control of things, but, she got right up and did what she had to. I've always thought she’s more than she realizes. The other… will take time… but we’ll work through it.”
Peggy looked far away. She asked, “have I met her?”

He nodded, “once. You met outside of Bucky’s room here.”

Peggy frowned, “Oh! My condition is frustrating sometimes.” She smiled mischievously, “I do hope I behaved myself.”

He laughed and nodded, “you were charming.”

“Good! I’d like to be on good terms with her. Darcy, you say? Poor dear! Her mother had good taste in novels, but I imagine her Literature teachers terrorized her over the name.” Peggy sighed.

He shrugged, “she hasn’t mentioned it. So many names now seem unusual to me that I didn’t give it a second thought.”

Peggy nodded. Then she looked more serious, “and how are you? I imagine you were beside yourself when you learned this place was under attack in your absence.”

Steve sighed heavily, “Tony was able to patch into the video feed and, thankfully, push the engines faster than I could begin to imagine.” He shook his head and frowned seriously, “I’m okay. Glad it’s over. Planning to prevent it happening again… and to hit them back.” His jaw shifted angrily.

She raised her brows, “goodness, Steve! I hope you’re more forthright with the counselors than you are with me. I believe you’re nearly as distraught as I’ve ever seen you. Though, today you’re trying to hide it. Coddling me, I suppose.”

“Sometimes it’s more… well… sometimes I still wonder why I’m here and what I’m doing. What do you think it’s all about, Peggy?” He shook his head ruefully, and looked down.

She laughed full-throatedly, and he braced himself, fearful that the intensity would pull her out of their conversation and back to their first meeting after his return. But, this time, fate smiled on them and allowed them a few more moments with each other. Peggy calmed, and smiled beatifically, “did you just ask me the meaning of life? Really, Steve? That’s far-flung, even for you.”

He grinned, chuckled, and nodded, “I suppose I did.”

She glanced over at one of her photographs. “For what it’s worth, I think it’s different for each of us, you sweet man. For a short slice of time, I thought I saw it all very clearly. I felt that I had a hand, by having brought Erskine safely away from Schmidt, in helping make a really good man into all that he could be. I thought that if the doctor and I could find other men with even a tenth of your character, we could make the world a better place. And, I believed that you and I were going to have a lovely life together.”

She turned her gaze to another photograph. “For me, the meaning of life was found in doing much of that… trying to make the world better, and life more worthwhile. After you were gone, I thought I could only do that for other people and would take what satisfaction I could from that.”

He nodded, “I felt the same way when I first came back to New York. It was a lonely feeling.” She smiled and he was intrigued that there was no real sadness there, only a blazing strength. Steve cleared his throat. “You’re one of a kind, Peggy.”

Her smile softened, “as are you. I’m delighted that you’re not alone anymore, Steve. I… think… I think I told you before… that I regretted that you didn’t get to live. I did live. I loved again, and it
was marvelous. I found deep, rich meaning in loving those that life allowed me. It took time. I think it was over two years before I could even consider a man as more than an ally… or a pal. I had you on a pedestal so high that no man could compare- which is why I believe Howard firmly took you off that pedestal for me one night, with one rather sordid book and one fine bottle of scotch.” She looked at him with rueful reproach.

“I’m sorry.” He grimaced.

She laughed at him, “really? I don’t even wish to know why. It sounded to me as though you were lost and lonely, not allowed to do what you’d been made for, both by God and Dr. Erskine, and took what comfort you could from pretty women who just wanted that amazing body of yours. I wasn't angry that you had sex with those girls, Steve. It gave me perspective, and a reminder that you weren't perfect. I was angry because of her betrayal, the ‘author’. The woman who wrote that book didn't know or care for Steve Rogers. She wanted Captain America and his fame by proxy, not to know the sweet boy from Brooklyn behind the mask. She used you for sexual gratification, encouraged others to do the same, and then tried to use the whole tawdry circumstance to steal from your image and legacy.”

“I hate the word tawdry.” Steve frowned.

She chuckled, “you would! You would also hate to have read that purple prose manuscript. ‘Captain Cock? I saluted his all-American flag pole?’ I burned every last page to ash, I’ll have you know!”

Steve hid his face in his hands as he blushed from head to toe, “Jesus, Peggy! I said I was sorry! I never…”

She laughed again. He stared at her fearfully, and that made her laugh even more. Peggy whispered, “I put my gun away, dear.”

He sighed, “I really am sorry! I hoped you’d NEVER know about that. You were so angry that day when Phillips’ secretary kissed me. I assumed that meant you were possessive, that knowing about the chorus girls would hurt you.”

She shook her head wryly, “it was different, Steve. I’m not pleased that you were foolish during your USO stint, that you let those girls use you like that. Of course not! But it wasn’t as personal as seeing you kiss someone the morning after I deliberately approached you wearing my best dress and looking my prettiest, and all but told you I wanted to be with you after the War. I know, in retrospect, that the secretary took the initiative… but I also know that you didn't stop her, or the USO girls.”

She looked thoughtful, and then turned to him piercingly. “Is this love, Steve, this new relationship? Who made the first move?” Her lips trembled.

He was puzzled, “why do you ask?” She looked anxious and impatient with him. He put a reassuring hand over one of Peggy’s hands as he realized what her concern was. “I did. It’s the first time I've ever approached a girl that way, the first time I ever asked for a kiss before it was offered or demanded. I asked to get to know her and to date her. I could tell that she loves me even before I came out and told her that I love her.”

She relaxed against her pillows and smiled. “Good for you! I’m delighted that you’re finally growing into yourself. I imagine you were terribly frightened the other day. I was frightened for you. Old age has given me a taste of the frustrations you must have experienced when you were too small, sick, and weak to battle evil.”
“Thank you, Peggy.” Tears came to his eyes at her words, and he kissed her hand.

Her eyes began to flutter as fatigue set in again. “Steve!” He swallowed hard as he saw the changes in her expression. She cried, “Oh! You’re alive!”

He nodded. “Yes, Peggy. I’m here.” Tears streaked down her cheeks.

“It’s been so long!” She cried.

He nodded, “I know, Peggy. I know. I’ve missed you.”

*to be continued...*
Infinity... and Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

How long does 'forever' last if your guy has a penchant for giving up everything to save the world?

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU, McGregorsWench for Beta help. Errors are all mine. ;)

THANK YOU, to those reading and esp. leaving COMMENTS. You're wonderfully encouraging!

Italian date night, outfit, topped w/black leather jacket-
http://www.listal.com/viewimage/2847460

fromGrid=1&sku=27998445&mcat=148204&cid=287465&search_params=p+1-n+10000-c+287465-s+5-r+t+ni+1-x+-lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-pp+14300+30&search=0&origin=browse&searchkeyword=#p+1-n+10000-c+287465-s+5-r+t+ni+1-x+-pu+-f+false+1-lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-pp+14300+30

Irish Catholic Priest’s words to Steve- “Ciallaíonn Saol ar fad a chiallaigh sé riamh .
Tá sé an gcéanna mar a bhí sé riamh . Go raibh maith agat. Bail ó Dhia ort, Steven.”

*Ciallaíonn Saol ar fad a chiallaigh sé riamh . Tá sé an gcéanna mar a bhí sé riamh .*

= Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. (from an Irish funeral poem)

Go raibh maith agat = Thank you (Irish)

Bail ó Dhia ort = The blessing of God on you. (Irish)

These words are per Internet searches. If incorrect, please msg me changes. ;)


(and, yes, I know that even in Summer the Air & Space Museum closes at 7:30… but, FICTION) ;)

When Darcy entered her apartment, she sighed with weariness. She walked to the couch, sat down, kicked off her shoes, and dozed fitfully. She wished her restless brain would allow her to sleep deeply. A knock on her door startled her awake again a little over an hour later. She started to get up, then called out, “go away unless you’re Steve.” The knock was repeated.
She groaned as she walked to the door to open it, thanking the gods that it WAS Steve. He was dressed in jeans, a khaki t-shirt and a fantastic bomber jacket… looking way better than anyone had a right to after the events of the past several days. He even had a small bouquet of daisies for her. She sighed and pulled him inside.

“We still on for dinner?” he asked.

She nodded, rubbed her eyes, and grinned, “you gonna carry me there and back?”

“I doubt you’d let me.” He shook his head.

She stretched and shook her head, “probably not. Sometimes I’m my own worst enemy.” She looked him up and down appreciatively. “You look yummy.” He raised a brow at her comment, and quirked a slight smile. She chuckled and agreed, “okay. Give me five… or thirty.”

He asked, “one thing?” She looked at him questioningly as he approached. He took her wrists, pulled them up so that his face was close to the silver bangles, and spoke directly into them. “Engage privacy mode.” She chuckled as he practically glared at the bangles. He showed her how to press the buttons to change modes, in case she needed to do so silently.

He bit his lip, looking slightly nervous, “one other thing?” She looked at him expectantly. He let out a nervous breath and pulled a blue box from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Her brows went up when she saw the name ‘Tiffany’s’ on the lid. She blinked hard as she looked back up into Steve’s eyes. He smiled awkwardly and brushed his hand over her cheek and cupped her jaw gently, then leaned in and kissed her. He whispered, “love you…” Darcy nervously untied the white ribbon and opened the box. Inside was a necklace with a pendant shaped like an Infinity symbol. Steve explained, “I started out looking at hearts since you’re my ‘Sweetheart’… but then I saw this.”

Darcy stared at the necklace, “it’s beautiful!”

Steve asked, “may I put it on you?” He shrugged, “that seems to be what they do in movies.”

Darcy gasped a laugh, “Sure! Why not? I wouldn’t know. No one’s ever given me a necklace before.” She turned around. Steve managed the clasp and put the necklace on her. She touched the pendant and glanced back up at him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him so they could kiss.

She whispered, “thank you,” kissed his cheek lingeringly, and headed to her bedroom.

She stripped, took a quick shower (hair up out of the way), did her makeup and brushed her hair, picked out a black bra and panties set, then slipped into some jeans and put on a gray v-neck shirt and black medium-heeled boots. She stepped back out to the living room.

Steve stood and crossed to her. “You have a leather jacket?” She nodded, a puzzled look on her face. He explained, “I thought we might take my new bike. You up for it, Beautiful?” She smiled and nodded, went to the coat closet, and got out a black leather jacket. She grabbed her Taser from her purse and zipped it in a pocket of the jacket, took a pain pill, and gave him a thumbs-up. He grimaced slightly, pulled her close and kissed her on the temple, murmuring, “love you.” He grinned and teased, “later, I think I might try kissing everywhere to see if I can make it all better.”

She winked, “they ought to call you the man with the plan!” He rolled his eyes and pulled her towards the door. As they waited for the elevator, she asked, “don’t I need a helmet?”

“I got you one,” he smiled.
Darcy nodded, “of course you did!” She grinned at his obvious excitement as they rode down to the garage and he told her about his new motorcycle.

Steve ducked his head a little as she exclaimed over the bike. She enjoyed seeing his pleasure with it and loved sitting close behind him with her arms around his waist. The rush of the wind, almost like a sense of freedom, was also a heady thing. Darcy relaxed into him as they made their way into traffic. She knew that his reflexes were flawless, and she was completely safe. He found a space for the bike near a little Italian joint in Brooklyn. She saw on the sign that the restaurant had been there since the 1880’s. It had long tables where an eclectic mix of New Yorkers jumbled in together. She figured the many cops and priests relishing the food were further testament to the restaurant’s authenticity.

They sat down together and a guy with an apron came by, muttering in what she guessed must be Italian. Steve talked to him while Darcy felt her eyes bug out. After the guy, waiter she guessed, was gone, Darcy asked, “wait... How many languages do you speak?”

Steve shrugged, “I have a smattering of a few.” She tilted her head and glared lightly. He admitted, “okay, twelve. They were useful in Europe during the war, and I’ve picked up a few more recently. Since the serum, I find them easy to learn.” She shook her head and then blinked as the waiter poured their wine into small juice glasses.

She held hers up in a toasting gesture. She grinned, “I can toast you in about that many. Cin Cin!” He laughed and they both drank up.

An elderly priest walking out of the restaurant stopped at their table and patted Steve on the shoulder, saying “Ciallaíonn Saol ar fad a chiallaigh sé riamh . Tá sé an gcéanna mar a bhí sé riamh . Go raibh maith agat. Bail ó Dhia ort, Steven.” He smiled beatifically at both of them, crossed himself, and moved to shuffle out. Steve jumped up and moved past the priest, and held the door for him. Darcy couldn’t hear what they discussed, but the priest made the sign of the cross on Steve’s bowed forehead.

When Steve returned, she asked, “did you know him?” He nodded and smiled tightly, muttering something about the man being an altar boy in the ‘30s. She reached for Steve’s hand and held onto it while he swallowed hard and took a deep breath. She murmured, “small world?” Steve looked around at the old restaurant and shrugged. The waiter returned with two enormous dishes of pasta with fresh fish. Darcy giggled, despite herself, “are we carbing up?”

Steve chuckled and nodded. “We probably should. I don’t want you to waste away.” His smile warmed, becoming less bittersweet as he watched her dig in and exclaim over the food.

Dinner was relaxed after that. Darcy soaked in the feeling of normalcy around them. People were talking about the latest sporting events, TV program episodes, kids’ soccer games and school projects, and gossiping about coworkers and family. None of them were talking about murder, torture, weaponry, threat assessment, science, or Asgardian technology. The food was delicious, and Darcy ate really well. When they returned to the Tower, Steve told JARVIS to take them to her floor. When they reached her door, he instructed, “get what you need. You’re in my bed tonight.”

She laughed, “is that an indicator that you did or didn't like your wakeup call?”

His grin was almost savage, “I liked it a LOT. I wasn't quite ready to put on a show for other people, though. Natasha’s been entertained enough. My bed tonight!”

He followed her inside and waited while she grabbed a change of clothes, some items from the bathroom, and put all it in her oversized purse. She teased, “you sound almost like a cave man.”
He made a face. “I’m not THAT old. I just can’t imagine sleeping without you.” He looked pained and back-pedaled, “but if you don’t want…”

She moved close and shushed him, a finger over his lips. “I want.” She smirked, “don’t tell anyone and get my sisterhood membership revoked, but your ‘take charge’ thing is pretty hot.”

His smile returned, and he pulled her close and kissed her. He let one hand wander from her neck, past her necklace, to the edge of her shirt. He shifted the shirt a bit so he could see a glimpse of her black lace bra, and groaned deep in his throat. He rasped, “hurry, please.” She grinned against his lips and started heading to the door.

When the elevator doors opened on Steve’s floor, they were kissing passionately and he had one hand supporting her, while she locked her legs around his hips and pulled close against him, moaning. Steve had to open his eyes to manage his door. His brows went up as he noticed Bucky standing down the hall, outside of the apartment that he had finally moved into. Darcy didn't open her eyes, but kept kissing Steve passionately, only breaking away to huskily repeat Steve’s words from earlier, “hurry, please.” Bucky stifled a chuckle as Steve nearly broke his door to oblige her.

When they entered his place, Steve pushed his door closed quickly, and then pointed to her wrists. She took off her suit bracelets and laid them carefully by a lamp, making sure to remember where they were. Then he turned, moved startlingly fast, and scooped her up while she squealed happily. He carried her to his room, laid her carefully on his bed and threw off his shirt and toed off his shoes.

She laughed happily, “look at all of the pillows! How many did you buy?”

He grinned and shrugged, then reached down and gently took off her boots, undid her jeans and slid them off, moaning slightly when he saw her lace bikinis. She held his gaze. He took off his pants and boxers and then slowly pulled her shirt over her head. Since she was sitting up, she leaned forward to put her mouth on him. His breathing hitched. She took her time, using both hands and her mouth on him while admiring the play of his muscles. After he came, he lay beside her on the bed, slowly running his hand over her curves, staring at her in a way that made her feel worshiped. She smiled, “you should have told me if you wanted that so much.” She ran a hand over his shoulders, up his neck and into his hair.

He blushed and admitted, “I didn’t know. No one ever did that to me before this morning.”

“I was your first at something!” Her eyes went wide and she uttered another squeal of delight.

He laughed, “Yeah! Hell of a way to wake up.”

She preened, “yay, me!”

“Yay, you!” He smiled as he leaned in to kiss her again.

She furrowed her brow, “how’s that, though? I mean…” She frowned and shook her head. “Sorry. I shouldn't pry.” She frowned slightly, “and… I’m so sorry I didn't think about privacy this morning! I forgot about the lack of sound proofing at my place.”

Steve chuckled disbelievingly, “you’re apologizing?!” He shook his head, “I forgot at first, too.” He kissed slowly down her chest and across her belly, and sighed, “have you considered that you’re the only woman I’ve ever been with who cares about my pleasure?” He shook his head as he compared her concern to what Peggy had shared about the tell-all book.

Darcy growled, “then the others were ignorant, Hon, however many there were.” She caressed
down his arm, “no matter how well they taught you.” She grinned tightly, trying to relax and push away jealousy.

Steve closed his eyes for a moment, looking pained, “the only girls who really ‘taught me’ anything were just using my room to have time alone with each other. Other than them, I learned most things second-hand from Bucky’s extensive experience.”

Darcy’s eyes went wide, “get out of here! You learned your way around lady parts from lesbians?! No wonder you’re so good!” Steve huffed an embarrassed laugh when she asked, “and what did you do while they ‘used your room’? Knit?”

He hid his blush against her stomach, “read… tried to sleep… cleaned my gear…”

She made a face, “oh, c’mon! There were girls goin’ at it in front of you and you were reading?” He tilted his head slightly and furrowed his brow, “that’s exactly what Bucky said.” He shrugged, “mostly… once I got used to it, and when they weren’t in the mood to teach me stuff.” He sighed, “they noticed that I was curious about what they were doing to get each other so excited… and thought teaching me was a fair exchange for the use of my room. They were pretty nice…”

Darcy reached down and pulled at him, urging him to move up so they could kiss again. Between kisses, she murmured, “I don’t know why you look so mopey, but I’m done talking about other women now. I want you to concentrate on me, on us, here, now.” He smiled softly and kissed her again and again, barely touching his lips to hers.

She hesitated as though gathering her resolve. While waiting to see what she would say next, he kissed her lips, her cheeks, her neck… and then moved back to her lips. Her breath caught and her lips trembled slightly as she asked, “do you remember what I said when you were paralyzed by Vorm venom, and I put your hand against me?”

Steve shifted back a bit, eyes dark with desire, “which part?”

Darcy grabbed his hand and put it against her breasts, “the part where I told you that I want your touch.” She grinned self-consciously, “I’ve spent half my life since age eleven batting guys’ hands away from ‘the girls’. But you’re so sweet and careful about stuff I’ve gone through that they’re feeling almost neglected and I’m ready to beg for more attention. Please, Steve…”

Steve kissed her quiet, “happy to oblige… very happy.” He reached behind her and unhooked her bra, eased it off, and tossed it aside. He began to touch and kiss her, alternating intensity and motions as she cried out with pleasure. When she was writhing, moaning, and panting, he pulled away momentarily so that he could sit up against the headboard, urge her to take off her panties, and then pull her so that she sat astride his thighs. His smile was filthy as he urged, “take charge to your heart’s delight, Sweetheart. I’m gonna continue to see to it that ‘the girls’ forget all thoughts of neglect. His lips then ghosted over one taut peak and then the other.

Darcy shifted so that she could line him up and lower herself slowly onto him, groaning with pleasure. She grasped at his arms, squeezing tightly when sensations overwhelmed her, caressing him possessively otherwise. At first, she stayed still, but for slight tremors in her thighs, savoring the sensation of him filling her. Soon, though, she was caught up in Steve’s kisses and the touches of his fingers, lips, and tongue, and began to rock her hips and tighten her inner muscles (a tip from Jane that seemed to please Steve intensely, judging by his reaction).

Though he was taut with want, he kept his word, letting Darcy set their pace while he continued his attentions to her breasts. She began to move with more urgency. When she gave a guttural cry of
“more!” he protected her head with one hand and rolled them over, still joined, so that her head was cradled in a nest of fluffy pillows. As he moved with her faster and faster, she cried out wordlessly.

After, Steve kissed each of her wounds to wish them better. She giggled as he murmured, “guess I’ll kiss everywhere else, too… just in case.” When he had, she pulled him close and held onto him tightly, kissing and caressing him as they both drifted to sleep.

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The next morning, there was a memorial service for those who died in the attack on Avengers Tower. Steve wore a black Gucci suit and Darcy wore a black dress Jai had picked. It had cap sleeves and a shaped neckline that fit her bust snugly with a sheer overlay that went up to a crew neck height above that. The skirt had subtle asymmetrical ruffs built in so that it was not just a sheath. She wore her new necklace, glad to see Steve look pleased by the sight of it.

They sat with the other Avengers and their friends. Out of sight of prying eyes, Darcy held Steve’s hand on the seat between them. Bruce was on her other side, looking uncomfortably aware of the way people stared at him. Darcy gave Bruce’s hand a comforting squeeze a few times.

The music in the service was sweet and sad, somehow reaching down inside to touch parts of the heart and soul that most people try their best to keep hidden. Clerics representing different faiths took different parts leading the service. The homily was about forgiveness, a tough topic as they remembered people murdered by Hydra. There was also a special prayer for all of those who protect others. Darcy could feel discomfort radiating off the Avengers around her.

Tony laughed out loud, startling people around him, when the Methodist pastor started his part with a heartfelt, “man, this just sucks!” He went on to point out that even though they lived and worked in the modern-day equivalent of a castle fortress, complete with renowned ‘knights’, they were still vulnerable. He continued talking about how important they all were… including those who kept the building clean, or served coffee that fueled big ideas… how they’d lost important people and needed to honor them by the way the survivors lived on and fought for the good of all.

At the end of the service as they were walking out, Darcy noticed a priest make the sign of the cross and say a quick blessing over Steve. She asked, “does that happen pretty much every time you see a priest?”

He grinned ruefully, “pretty much, yeah… They worry.” Darcy tried not to dwell on the significance behind the gesture.

She was slightly surprised when Steve took her over to Peggy Carter, and introduced them. Peggy smiled at Steve and shook Darcy’s hand firmly, remarking, “it’s nice to meet you! I apologize if it’s not the first time. I have some memory problems these days. I think Steve has mentioned you, though. He looks happier. Just remember that he’s only a man, not a perfect hero. He needs someone to help him keep that straight so he doesn't take on too much and do something foolish. He has a tendency towards drama.”

“I’ll remind him,” Darcy chuckled and promised.

Steve smiled tightly, looking from one woman to the other.

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After lunch, Darcy went back to work in the labs. Late in the afternoon, she joined Bruce for yoga. It was good to get back to it, and better to spend quiet time with Bruce. Jane hardly noticed what
they were doing, even less so when Thor came to wheel her home for the evening. As they were
finishing yoga, JARVIS spoke, “Dr. Banner? Darcy? Mr. Stark requests that you plan to join him
and the others in the media lounge at 6:00. May I tell you him you will be there?” They both
accepted the invitation.

When Darcy arrived in the media room, she could feel tension in the air. She moved to Steve’s
side, and asked, “what’s up with everyone?”

Steve sighed, “Avengers’ action clips in place of movies tonight.”

“Is that bad?” She chewed her lip, nervous.

Steve shrugged tensely, “some of it.” He grimaced, “I suspect that there’s one I won’t be able to
watch.” They went ahead and grabbed food from the takeout options that Pepper had ordered.
Given that things felt so tense, Darcy went with a club sandwich and a decaf soda. She didn't want
food or drink that would put her stomach on edge.

Watching some of Natasha and Hawkeye’s ops from the past few years was a bit surreal. JARVIS
had even found some Army footage from Sam’s Para-Rescue days. Sam told them all about his
friend, Riley. Seeing the more ‘human’ Avengers’ impressive skills made Darcy more pleased that
they were part of the team.

Watching clips of Tony’s house in Malibu being destroyed, and Iron Patriot’s rescue of the
President, was harder. Even worse was the final battle between Tony and Aldrich Killian, and then
Pepper’s part. Pepper left the room for a few minutes instead of watching. Darcy couldn't look at
Tony’s expression as they saw Pepper fall.

Tony recovered, however, and broke the tension for most present by inserting a rousing clip of
Captain America’s USO show. Darcy found herself searching the faces of the chorus girls,
counting how many there were, looking for the prettiest or sexiest. She hoped Steve didn't notice
her preoccupation. His expression was carefully neutral. She noticed Tony raise an eyebrow and
shake his head several times during the clip. Steve avoided Darcy’s and Tony’s eyes, but couldn't
seem to decide where to look. He settled on looking out the window to the right of the screen.
Natasha walked by at one point to get more to drink. She took the opportunity to smack Steve
upside the head. Darcy stifled a chuckle.

Next, there were security footage clips from London. Darcy hoped there wouldn't be any video of
her, especially kissing Ian, but sighed in resignation as she saw a shot of them behind Thor and
Jane. She kept her eyes forward during that, not really wanting to see Steve’s face as he took in that
‘detail.’ Tony laughed, but, after Pepper poked him in the ribs, kept his silence. Indiscriminate,
stupid-Ian kissing aside, the London footage was eye-opening for all present.

Natasha observed urgently, “I can see why Hydra is so interested in this. It looks like they could
shift us to other realms, bring in enemies to keep us busy, or shift themselves away from the scene
of a crime or attack.” She nodded at Darcy and Jane, offering, “You guys did good there.” Jane
tried to explain the significance of the Convergence, and the difference between it and what she
had managed to create. This continued until Thor interrupted by kissing Jane silent, causing her to
laugh and bat at him affectionately.

Next it was Steve’s turn. Tony explained darkly, “this first one is a good reminder of how freely
SHIELD, not just Hydra, but SHIELD, has played with lies. Check it out.” They saw Steve asleep
in a hospital room where they could hear the sound of a baseball game on an old radio. Darcy was
puzzled. The image seemed more modern than the setting and Steve’s hair was a little different,
longer. He looked a little bit younger, too. She saw that when he woke, he was on guard. Then, he
burst out of the false room and went on the run. The next shot showed him standing in Times Square, looking shocked while Nick Fury explained what had happened to him. When Steve told Fury that he ‘had a date’, Darcy’s breath caught. She looked at Steve beside her, and wondered how he could appear so stoic. She trembled a bit as she considered the depth of his feelings for Peggy. She felt Natasha's gaze on her, but didn't meet it.

Then there were various SHIELD missions, some showing Natasha and Steve working together. One on a satellite launch boat reinforced all impressions of his speed and skill. He and Natasha exchanged more than one charged glance during that clip. The next showed Steve getting into a glass elevator. Steve reached for Darcy’s hand and reassured her, “don’t worry, sweetheart. It turns out okay.” Despite her concern, she leaned forward to see.

“I HATE that guy,” Sam groaned and pointed at one of the men on screen.

Hawkeye commented, “you look suspicious, Cap. Is it because that other guy’s coiled for attack?”

Steve replied tersely, “hand on weapon. Ready to go.” Seconds later, Hawkeye asked the same thing again. Steve replied, “sweating.” Darcy tightened her grip on his hand and bit her lip. There were grumbles and chuckles from the Avengers as three especially large goons joined the crowd in the elevator onscreen. Darcy let out a tense breath. At Steve’s offer to let someone out, Thor laughed appreciatively. When the melee began, Darcy jumped in her seat and gasped. Jane cried out in protest. Steve shifted his arm around Darcy. She made a slight choking noise as she saw electric baton Tasers used on him. Sam cussed one of the guys several times, exclaiming that Steve should have taken the guy’s head off. Their view of the fight was fractured when the surveillance camera lens was hit with the body of a goon.

When Steve broke free of a magnetic cuff onscreen, Tony exclaimed, “no fuckin’ way!” Steve grinned slightly. As they saw him make the elevator fall, Darcy shuddered and grasped his hand more tightly. A few of the others groaned when they realized he was about to jump to escape. When he jumped, Tony asked, “how many floors was that?”

Steve replied with a grimace, “I forgot to count.”

Jane was especially impressed as they watched the clip of Steve taking down the Quinjet. Applied physics could be counted on to impress Jane. The next clip to come up began with a rousing speech from Steve about freedom, employees in a tech room, Sharon Carter among them, looking stunned while they listened. Tony remarked, “for someone who’s sworn off doing press, that’s pretty good.”

Steve replied darkly, “I’ll leave the press to you. I did my time.” Tony chuckled.

Sam leaned over and joked, “you never did answer my question about whether you wrote it down ahead of time, or came up with it on the fly!” He winked at Darcy, smiling reassurance.

Steve’s battle to take down the first helicarrier drew many cheers. Tony made jokes about ‘Captain on deck’ while Sam whistled nearly every time Steve defeated another opponent. Everyone seemed to enjoy watching Falcon fly against the Hydra Quinjet and do his part taking down one of the carriers. Tony asked Sam a few questions about drag coefficient and suggested they look at generating a defensive shield for him. Bruce and Jane joined that discussion until Thor threatened to kiss all three of them quiet.

Darcy noticed Steve getting edgier, shifting in his seat and squeezing her hand and then making a marked effort not to. Finally, he stood and sighed, “I’m sorry. If you’re about to show what I think you are…” Tony nodded, looking somber. Steve leaned down and kissed Darcy’s cheek and
explained, “I’m gonna step out. Call me after this next part is done? I just… I can’t.” He frowned slightly at her and added, “not gonna be easy for you, either, Sweetheart.”

Darcy nodded, with her heart in her throat. Jane got Thor to move her to Darcy’s side and grabbed for her hand. Darcy leaned against Jane, trembling with anxiety.

When they first saw the Winter Soldier slam Steve, and then disable Falcon’s suit, Darcy yelped, feeling choked and shivering at the sight of the deadly Hydra asset. Even Jane trembled at the sight. Darcy remembered things Steve and Bucky had mentioned about their helicarrier fight, and started shaking and held her breath. When Steve stopped and faced the Winter Soldier on the catwalk, she let it out raggedly with a slight moan.

Hawkeye leaned closer to the screen and began to read Steve and Bucky’s lips as they exchanged words. Her heart felt as though shattered as she thought of Steve begging not to have to fight. Jane’s grip tightened, while Thor moved to stand behind Jane and Darcy with a steadying hand on the shoulder of each woman.

Natasha leaned forward and studying the scene intently. Natasha shook her head. “It’s all defense, all held back. Come on, Rogers! Look! He only does what he can when he MUST. He has to force himself every step of the way.”

Tony turned to Pepper and gestured at Bucky onscreen, “I want one.” Pepper grinned.

Bruce raised his brows, “can you believe how far Bucky’s come?”

Each hit, every cut, every bullet wound… was like a physical blow. Darcy cried out as Steve was stabbed deeply and tears tracked down her face when he broke Bucky’s arm. She felt nearly sick with grief, and was very glad Steve wasn’t trying to watch. Jane murmured comfort, reminding her that this was past and Steve had survived.

For Darcy, the absolute worst moment was when Steve ordered the helicarriers destroyed while he was still on board. It was another sacrifice play, just like when he piloted the bombs into the icy water of the North Atlantic to save New York so long ago. She touched the Infinity pendant on her necklace, wondering how short forever might turn out to be. Darcy seriously considered that she could lose Steve to his work. The following beating Steve took from Bucky didn’t help her frame of mind at all. No one was surprised when she burst out crying. Thor moved around in front of her and cradled her close in his arms. When she quieted, he kissed her forehead, and moved away to allow Jane to comfort her.

Natasha and Sam explained what had gone on in the aftermath, how Natasha had seen Steve fall and feared Bucky’s intent when he went after him. Sam touched her shoulder comfortingly. Natasha grimaced slightly, “I think Sam was more terrified of the fact that I could cry… than anything else that day.”

Sam shook his head, grinning at her appreciatively.

The Avengers stood, needing to pace and take a break after seeing the violent fall of SHIELD, and began discussing the people targeted by Insight, every Avenger for a start. Darcy hardly heard what they were saying. From their tight circle, Thor glanced at Darcy several times, looking concerned, but stayed with the others while Jane hugged Darcy close.

Pepper moved over and sat on the coffee table in front of her and asked, “Darcy? You in there?” Darcy nodded slowly. Pepper sighed, “I may know what you’re thinking. I imagine I had a similar look on my face when Tony flew a nuclear bomb into a wormhole at the end of the Chitauri
battle.” Darcy nodded vehemently and wiped her eyes.

Jane added, “or me when Thor gave himself up to The Destroyer in New Mexico… or I thought he was dead in Greenwich.”

Abruptly, Darcy stood. She took a deep breath, and asked Natasha, “could you call Steve and tell him it’s okay for him to come back here? I need some time alone.” She turned and walked out quickly. She hurried to the rooftop garden, and sat there looking out at the night and the lights of the city- alone with her thoughts for a long time. There were so many lights, each representing so many people who looked to the Avengers to keep them safe from all threats. Her thoughts were a jumble of understanding and a bit of resentment.

She heard the door she’d entered through open again. Thor rasped quietly, “Lady Darcy? Is there any way that I can serve you?”

She nodded slowly, “yeah... I want to go to Washington, DC. Do you know where that is?”

He replied, “I do.”

She asked, “want to go to a museum?”

Thor agreed quietly. He asked, “now?” She nodded and he tucked her carefully against him, swung Mjolnir, and they were off. Darcy’s knees were wobbly, and she was half frozen as they landed in DC. She looked around and found a Metro. As always, seeing Thor use human transit was fun. She was relieved to find the Air & Space Museum still open. She would have hated to break in.

As they saw the banners for the Captain America exhibit, Thor made a sound of understanding, “Ah! I see. Is this a shrine to our Captain?”

Darcy chuckled, “I guess you could call it that.”

People stared and took pictures of Thor visiting the Captain America exhibit. He fell behind Darcy slightly, speaking kindly to interested children, but keeping close enough that Darcy was safe. The first thing she saw and heard was the explanation that Captain America’s story was a ‘story of sacrifice’. She stood by the life-sized images wall, finding that she looked pre-serum Steve straight in the eye. The image of him as a smaller man kind of blew her mind as she realized that he probably still thought of himself that way much of the time. Families, tired from a day of sight-seeing, were making their way into the exhibit. Several of the kids wore costumes or Captain America t-shirts. Seeing their faces light up as they looked at pictures of their hero brought a lump to her throat.

Darcy had taken her share of history courses over the years, and read about Captain America many times. Visiting the exhibit, however, she was reading about Steve. Just like watching him fight a dozen Hydra goons in an elevator put a darker edge on his humor about only liking to be attacked in an elevator by her, seeing the details of his training and transformation and the friends he’d lost added depth to other things that he talked about, reactions he had. The display about Bucky was especially bittersweet. Seeing Steve and Bucky laughing together in the black and white films was kind of hypnotic, welcome after seeing the footage of their helicarrier battle. Laughter had been alien to Bucky for decades since. And, Steve? Darcy believed fervently that Steve had not laughed, or even smiled, enough in his entire lifetime.

And then there was Peggy. Darcy could see Peggy in images taken at the SSR training camp, obviously acting the role of drill sergeant. Peggy was in the intelligence rooms in London, side by side with Steve. Peggy, looking much more somber, a few years after Steve’s disappearance into
the ice, was trying to help people understand his significance. Watching the 1953 film of Peggy, grief still visible in her every movement and word, brought tears to Darcy’s eyes. She was sure that other people watching wondered why Darcy was so emotional. Every now and then, Darcy would see Thor out of the corner of her eye, patiently watching and waiting. She kept reading, taking in everything. Finally, done with the exhibit, she went into the gift shop and bought a hooded fleece emblazoned with the Captain America shield emblem. She hoped it would make her more comfortable going home. On a whim, she also grabbed a small teddy bear wearing army fatigues. He kind of reminded her of pre-serum Steve. She hugged him tightly.

She asked Thor, “ready to get back to our crazy home, big guy?”

Thor smiled, “I am always ready to return to the side of my Jane.”

Darcy smiled slightly, “I get that, dude. Thank you for bringing me here and being so patient.”

Thor shook his head to indicate that thanks were unnecessary, and asked, “did you find what you sought, Lady Darcy?”

Darcy hesitated for a second, then answered, “what I ‘sought’ is back at the Tower, wondering what I’m thinking.”

“What are you thinking?” Thor looked at her kindly.

She shrugged for a second, and then grinned and replied in a voice laced with laughter and tears, “we are blessed to feel so much.”

Thor nodded emphatically, “Indeed we are! It is that which makes existence worthwhile.”

She observed, “you haven’t questioned Steve’s and my relationship at all from the beginning.”

Thor smiled slightly, “who am I to question the existence of such lightning?”

Darcy laughed and punched his arm affectionately. “Was that Asgardian snark? Good for you!” His gentle smile warmed her.

They reached an open area. Thor pulled her against him. “Let us return to those we love most, Lady Darcy. We must savor every moment with them to the fullest, thankful to live it.”

When Darcy stepped away from Thor onto the garden terrace of Avengers Tower, her eyes were dry and clear. She asked, “JARVIS, can you tell me where Steve is?”

JARVIS replied, “Captain Rogers is in the media lounge with the other Avengers, Darcy. They are discussing the footage they watched, and other information we have assembled on Hydra activities and bases.” Darcy grimaced, knowing that this meant they’d be leaving soon to eliminate Hydra bases.

When she and Thor entered the media room, she saw Steve’s expression shift as he took in her new outerwear and stuffed animal. The others were caught up in intense discussions. Steve pulled her tightly against him, feeling how cool the outside of the fleece was. He rubbed her arms to warm them. She could feel him swallow hard. He asked, “okay?” She nodded and clung to him. He grinned slightly, “nice bear.”

She murmured conversationally, “his name is Stevie.”

He chuckled, “okay... Why did you go there?”
Jane asked, “where did you go, Darcy?”

Natasha grinned slightly, “your visit to the Smithsonian is already trending on Twitter, Thor!”

Thor exclaimed and moved to look at the screen on Natasha’s phone. He liked to trend.

Darcy shifted back slightly, “I had Thor take me to DC to see the Captain America exhibit.” Jane frowned slightly, obviously puzzled.

Tony smirked and waggled his brows, “I thought you had your own Captain America exhibit going on right here.” Pepper groaned. He turned to her and explained, “Natasha says she can make him take the Lord’s name in vain and everything!”

Steve rolled his eyes at Natasha.

Darcy shot Tony a look and explained with a quavering voice, “I just needed to wrap my brain around the ’story of sacrifice’ thing, accept it. It helped.” She swallowed hard and shrugged, “and while I had some of the material in history classes, it reads differently to me now.”

Steve seemed concerned as he looked down at her. She grinned, “I looked the image of ’pre-serum you’ straight in the eye.”

He nodded and smiled softly, “I guess you would.” He cleared his throat. “so, the footage from the fight on the helicarrier...” She reached up and pulled his head down to her shoulder and squeezed him tightly, running her hands over him soothingly, both to comfort him and to reassure herself that he was okay. She could feel him smiling slightly against her shoulder. He asked, “you watch the whole thing?” She nodded sadly.

She took a breath, “watching you and Bucky, with him not knowing you at all, was horrific, and I’m glad you didn’t try to watch it with us. But... that wasn't the worst part for me. To borrow something you told me once, I think I see you pretty clearly.” She cleared her throat and he could feel her trembling against him. She made a face and pleaded, “just please promise me that you’ll always TRY to do everything you can to find a way to come back home to me... before you crash your plane, or tell people to blow up the helicarrier you’re on. If you have to do stuff like that to like save humanity, well, okay. I get that. I wouldn't love you so much if you weren't that way. But I want all of the time with you that I can have. Can you understand that?”

Steve nodded, murmuring, “I love you so much.” He leaned down to kiss her on the top of the head and glanced up to see Tony’s eyes on them. He realized in that instant that Tony had suffered this same discussion with Pepper, and that it was a motivation behind the drones and the desire to create a layer of separation between himself and all that came with being an Avenger. Steve sighed and nodded his understanding to Tony. Then he murmured to Darcy, “I’ll try, Sweetheart. I’ll try.”

_to be continued..._
off to meet with an old friend…

Chapter Summary

The Avengers meet with Coulson's SHIELD team to plan their next moves, cooperation, and a first Hydra base attack against a bank in Washington, DC. Darcy learns stuff at the gun range.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. It's been a combination of things... Valentine exchange fics (posting a 2nd one I pinch hit soon, plus they're keeping my Beta VERY busy since she kindly organized it)... writing new chapters (30+ new pages) for this story that weren't part of Draft 1... and mostly nailing down my basic plan to the END.

THANK YOU to McGregorsWench for beta help. Any errors are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning Darcy returned to Cardio-Dance class for the first time since the Tower attack, missing the exuberance of the previous (deceased) instructor. The new instructor, Chuck, went a long way in gaining the class’ affections by offering a heartfelt tribute to the previous instructor’s heroism during the attack, and challenging them all to continue to work as hard as possible. He put so many pelvic thrusts into one song routine that people ended up stumbling through the routine, laughing through more and more tears as they danced. Darcy tried to be more positive and less snarky with her new strength trainer, though she still hated the workout. As she finished, she saw Natasha standing outside the door.

Darcy scowled, “not nice to spy here. This is where I’m at my worst.” Her instructor chuckled and patted her shoulder encouragingly. Darcy wiped sweat from her face, neck and arms.

Natasha smiled grimly, “so, let’s go to the gun range. You don’t need that much upper-body strength to pull a trigger. And it’ll give you time to cool down before you shower.”

Darcy sighed, “I didn't like…”

Natasha scowled, “I know! I heard you.” Darcy made a face. Natasha shrugged, “and while it’s fine and good to care about right and wrong… that guy’s death saved you all. Before you slammed your knee down, did you think of what it would do to Steve if Hydra took you?” Darcy took a breath, and nodded. Natasha continued, “I was piloting at the time, but could see him and Thor as they watched the video feed from the lab. Interestingly enough, Thor is harder to read during moments of anguish. But Steve… hid nothing. What I saw shook me up. I saw what Tony mentioned when he was working on your suit, Steve dying inside. I want to shield you, too, for both of your sakes. So, suck it up and let’s get to the range.”

Darcy nodded reluctantly, “I guess I’d better.” She pulled at her sweaty exercise clothes self-consciously, thinking it unfair to have to walk side-by-side with Natasha, of all people, post-
She felt a bit sick inside as she imagined shooting someone, but followed Natasha to the range and had her first lesson. Natasha introduced her to the range master, saying brusquely, “this is Miss Lewis. She manages the labs, so she needs to get certified. Lewis, this is Kaplan.” The only thing that Darcy was happy about with shooting was that she seemed to have some natural potential, so long as she had lenses and could see. She knew Natasha would never lie about something like that, and figured even the faintest of weapon-y praise from Black Widow was something to celebrate. Natasha’s accuracy and speed was breathtaking. Darcy was amazed how Natasha managed to make EVERYTHING look graceful. It might not be her most important superpower, but it was a superpower all the same.

After they reviewed the steps required towards licensing and certification, Darcy looked at various holster options for the guns Natasha recommended and ordered for her. Darcy scowled at the range master’s interest in having her tuck a gun into her bra or a garter, eschewing those options for a belt holster. Natasha also ordered her a calf holster, thigh holster, and one for her purse, too, unable to fathom the idea of someone carrying only one weapon. Darcy secretly wondered if Natasha was wearing the explosive bra that so intrigued the range master.

The range master made Darcy uncomfortable from the moment she arrived to the moment she left. His gaze was firmly locked on her bust, and he licked his lips suggestively so much that it was gross, but Darcy tried to ignore him. As they finished, Natasha wished Darcy a good day, told her to make the range part of her morning routine for the foreseeable future, and mentioned that they could work on hand-to-hand after yoga. Natasha stepped away more quickly than Darcy expected.

Darcy put her hearing protection back on the rack and turned, just as Kaplan put a hand on her ass and started to pull her body towards his, other hand moving towards her boobs. She hammered a fist straight into his throat, knocked his arms back as she’d been trained, kneed him in the groin, and turned and ran. When she rounded the corner, Natasha was waiting for her, arms crossed, expression a tight frown.

Darcy’s face went red with anger as she lashed out, “if that was a test, I’m going to call in my fuckin’ Boobies suit and pound you, face covering be damned!”

“No. Kaplan’s just a horny asshole... no more, no less. Good job!” Natasha smiled silkily.

Darcy growled, “so, you knew he might paw me, and waited to see what I’d do?”

Natasha spoke evenly, “you didn't try to kill him. Your judgment's good. I would have stopped you if it was off. I would have stopped him if you couldn’t.”

Darcy huffed in anger, “you owe me chocolate or something, Natasha. That was mean!” She shakily breathed in and out, and then followed as Natasha led her away from the range.

Natasha shrugged and grinned apologetically, “I’m sorry you were rattled. I’ll get you chocolate the next time I’m in Switzerland. Darcy, I don’t share your relationship status with people because I’m trying to help you protect yourself, not endanger you. If I made a big deal of his leering and acted protective myself, he’d assume WE are an item, adding to your appeal to Avenger enemies… and ensuring that you and I would star in some rank fantasies of his. Letting you handle stuff like that seems the best option. He’ll think twice now that he knows you can take care of yourself. When he focuses on his work, he’s one of the best I’ve ever seen… which is part of why he’s tolerated.”

Darcy asked, “what if he doesn't keep his hands to himself?”
Natasha shrugged, “fend him off and then report him. He’s already on probation. He’d be gone, but he saved Happy Hogan’s life during the Hydra attack, and Tony is...” She rolled her eyes and grimaced, "Kaplan lacks self-control when it comes to women’s breasts. Get him fired. That’s what normal people do, Darcy.” She grimaced to herself as she imagined Steve’s reaction if that kind of report ever came to his attention.

Something about the idea of a normal response settled Darcy’s feelings. Everything didn't have to be a level-one, life and death emergency. She didn't have to be ’saved’ or protected from everything. She was learning to take care of herself, and she was off to a good start. She took a deep breath and allowed herself a slightly proud grin, “okay. I get your point. I'll tone down the drama.”

Natasha laughed, “now, if only I can get that point through to Steve!” She waved goodbye, “off to meet with an old friend. See ya!”

Darcy smiled despite herself. She tried to settle her thoughts and headed up to shower, dress, and visit Erik for hot chocolate, news and puzzles. Lab time with Jane and Bruce was predictably irritating. They both needed their own space and their own way of working. Jane was already irritated at being in a wheelchair while her leg healed, so she was harder to be around than usual. Darcy communicated with the construction foreman about speeding up the repair of Jane’s lab space, figuring that it would be worth it in the long run to pay exorbitantly… rather than letting Bruce get grumpier… a point she made in her explanatory memo to Tony and Pepper. She was relieved when Bruce left to join the other Avengers for a meeting with Coulson and his team. She also hoped that they could come up with ways to work together against Hydra. Every ally the Avengers had would lessen the likelihood that she would lose Steve.

An hour or so later, she laughed out loud when she received a message from Hawkeye asking her to meet him later for archery lessons. She turned him down, and then texted Steve, ‘please tell your friends that if I have to learn to shoot guns AND arrows, beat people up, fly, and be a multi-purpose badass while doing my new job… I won’t have any time or energy left for you.’

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In the Avengers’ conference room, Coulson was giving the team a run-down on Dell Rusk, the US Secretary of Defense, in preparation of an upcoming meeting with the man regarding the Avengers, Hydra, and national defense efforts going forward.

Tony noticed Hawkeye frowning at his phone. The archer replied to a text, looking grumpy and using more finger force than necessary. Tony asked, “are we boring you, Barton?” Talk of the US government bored Tony enough that he was ready to change the subject, even if heckling others for feeling the same was hypocritical.

Clint shook his head and grumbled, “no... I was just trying to help fix a problem.”

Steve sighed, his eyes on his phone screen, “excuse us for this, Phil.” He shook his head and let his annoyance show, “Guys! Please lay off Darcy!” He read her text to them, generating general laughter. He chuckled and added, “seriously... Thanks. I appreciate your intentions, but I love Darcy in part because she’s not cynical enough to be an agent. No offense intended to present company. I’m grateful she’s learning self-defense… even thankful for the suit, I guess, for emergencies, Tony.” Steve saw Coulson’s eyes widen a tiny bit, and Steve repressed a grin. “But she doesn't need archery unless she asks for it… and I don’t want her in the gun range… EVER. I wouldn't trust that ape Kaplan within fifty feet of her.” He let out an impatient huff. He saw Coulson’s eyes tracking from face to face, cataloging reactions, and reading Avenger interpersonal dynamics.
Natasha sat back, raised an eyebrow, and made a comically rueful face, while Clint and Sam laughed. Steve looked at her forbiddingly. She shrugged, “we went there this morning right after her exercise classes. It went pretty well. She has potential.”

Hawkeye rolled his eyes and groused, “you took her there in a dance leotard? Kaplan must’ve thought it was his birthday! No fair, ‘Tash!”

Natasha shot Hawkeye a quelling frown as she saw Steve tensing further, one of his hands trembling almost imperceptibly (though she noticed, and was sure that Coulson did, too). Then Natasha held her hands out in front of her placatingly, directing her full attention to Steve. “Darcy used her first good hammer blow,” Hawkeye cheered, and Natasha grinned slightly in response, though she kept her eyes on Steve’s face, “slapped back his arms just like I taught her, and kneed him in the groin. After she calmed down, she was proud of herself!”

One of the women with Coulson grimaced, "Geez! What did the guy do to her?

Natasha stared evenly at Steve as his jaw tightened. “Take it easy! She learned that she knows the difference between life threatening and an everyday jerk, a distinction YOU need to keep in mind. It seemed comfortably normalizing, after the fact, and brought her stress levels down some- AFTER she told me off, threatened to call for her suit and pound me with it… and I apologized, and promised to get her chocolate the next time I’m in Switzerland.” Hawkeye leaned over and paid Natasha some cash, murmuring about a rigged bet. Steve took a deep breath and focused on remaining calm. Bruce leaned towards him and whispered something about a breathing rhythm, then grinned when Steve glared at him.

Sam joked, “I’m just sorry I haven’t gotten around to teaching her how to use the wings, Cap.” Steve nearly growled as he turned on Sam.

Tony sourly interjected, “much as I enjoy watching Cap squirm, I’ve gotta say that this week showed us we need to work on protecting our base better. I don’t just mean our loved ones, either. I’m referring to every level of this Tower. I don’t like anyone messing with my people but me.” He winked at Steve.

Steve glanced at one of Coulson’s agents as she whispered to Coulson, “Starkopolis!” She noticed Steve watching her and sat back with a slightly apologetic expression, until she noticed the slight twitch of a grin at the corner of Steve’s mouth and raised a brow at him.

Natasha groaned, “Great! There’ll be drones in every corridor, like modern-day suits of armor or something.” Tony grinned wickedly, nodding.

Steve sighed, “which would be that many more for someone to program to turn on us.” Tony glared at him, leaning forward and obviously ready to fight his point.

Coulson spoke evenly, “Tower security is not on SHIELD’s agenda on a regular basis, gentlemen, but I want to discuss prisoner containment. I have facilities far away from civilians that would be more appropriate, at least for the majority of your needs. As we are all painfully aware, some Hydra operatives work under duress and can be recovered, while others cannot. I suggest that we develop a transfer and interrogation protocol between SHIELD and the Avengers.”

Bruce mentioned, “Dr. Foster and I have successfully recreated and tested a force field that is used for prisoner containment and defensive purposes on Asgard. With the Arc reactor, and Tony’s newly compatible generators, we’ll be capable of containing the most dire threats. I’ve been doing some ‘personal’ testing. We started on it before re-classifying Sgt. Barnes as ‘friendly’. ” Steve nodded grimly.
Tony turned to Steve and shared, “I’m working on other applications for it, too.” Tony shrugged, “but, we’ll be better fit for containing the worst of the worst than anyone else on Earth. Whether we keep them here in New York or not is another discussion.”

Coulson asked quietly, “is there any possibility…?”

Tony shook his head firmly and spoke in an icy tone, “Zero! Sorry. I like you and trust you… for the most part. But SHIELD was originally started by other people I would trust, people Cap knew and trusted, and it still got away from them. None of my tech leaves my direct control.” He glanced Bruce’s way and nodded when Bruce gave a gesture of acquiescence. Then Tony’s gaze met Steve’s. Steve frowned, and nodded agreement.

“Captain, may I ask your assistance on this issue?” Coulson turned pleadingly.

Steve looked at Tony and explained, “Director Coulson, my leadership does not extend to tech. I lead on the field of battle, and any other time we engage hostile forces… and make some strongly-worded suggestions to Mr. Stark in other areas from time to time.” Tony barked out a laugh while Coulson sighed sympathetically. Steve smirked slightly, “but I am not trying to claim any sort of control over Stark, Banner, Barton, Romanoff, Wilson, Odinson, or any other eventual Avengers team member. They are free to do as they please.” He sighed, and continued, “like you, we’re in a developmental phase regarding our deployment and division of power.” He grinned at Tony wryly, while Tony chuckled softly.

Steve looked at Coulson and continued, “be that as it may, if no Avenger objects, I’d like to accept your offer to handle the majority of our captures and interrogations. I think the fewer prisoners we have on site in New York, especially here in Avengers Tower, the better.” Thor agreed loudly, sharing the story of a lethal attack on Asgard that began with a deadly prisoner.

After Thor was done, Steve leaned forward and looked at Coulson seriously, “one last question about Rusk. You've given us the official run-down… but, personally… your gut feeling. Is he okay? Can he be trusted?”

Coulson stilled and frowned, “on paper, he’s good. My gut? No. I don’t like him. I don’t know what it is… but, no.”

Steve nodded thoughtfully, “thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” He looked away from Coulson when Tony cleared his throat loudly.

Tony leaned forward, grinned dangerously, and growled, “given that I've just been ‘unleashed’ by Cap regarding tech, I’d like to ask that your girl wizard keep the hell out of our systems, Director.” His expression darkened as he eyed Coulson and Skye, “you may think it’d be just spiffy to have access to all in-Tower cameras, but I disagree.”

Steve rumbled darkly, “that doesn't sound very friendly, Phil.” He turned his most disapproving look on the agent.

Coulson glanced sharply at the young woman. She squirmed a bit and looked apologetic, “I just wanted to see if I could!”

Coulson rolled his eyes, and stonily replied, “that will NOT be a problem from now on. My apologies to you, Captain, Mr. Stark… all such unfriendly effort will cease.” He glowered at the young woman, “don’t disrespect the Avengers’ privacy, Skye.” She glanced up again at Steve, grinned slightly, and blushed as she looked away and nodded.
Steve realized she must have accessed elevator cameras the previous evening and sighed. He sat back, crossed his arms, and growled, “Tony? Check the feeds on the elevators.” Sam laughed aloud, and then looked at Steve apologetically.

Tony chuckled, “and what would she see happening there, Cap?” He shook his head and made a disapproving noise. Steve’s cheeks reddened slightly and a hint of a smile showed.

Tony turned his attention to Skye again, smirked, and then grinned provocingly, “you’re good, Skye. I’m better. You were taking advantage of something the Hydra mole/inside-guy did. Now, that door is fused shut so tightly there’s not an imprint to indicate it ever existed. The encryption I created is beyond anything you’ll ever comprehend.” He preened insultingly as he added, “to breach YOUR security took a few minutes, considering that no one loosened the lid for me…”

Skye’s eyes widened angrily. Coulson frowned at Tony and implored, “don’t dare her to go further, please. She doesn't need the encouragement.”

Tony smirked darkly, “neither do I! What’s an ‘0-8-4’, Skye? What are you?” Natasha and Hawkeye exchanged a look, and Steve heard Natasha release the safety on her guns. He heard the same sound from Agent May a half-second later.

Steve sensed a protective shift in Coulson’s expression, and urged, “Tony! Please don’t antagonize the Director or his team members. You made your point. Leave it… please.” Tony looked back at Steve rebelliously, and Steve’s jaw tightened as he considered how best to defuse the situation, rather than provoking Tony to make things worse.

“I sure would appreciate it if everyone would calm the hell down,” quietly, Bruce interrupted. Tony threw his head back and laughed. Steve suppressed a smile as Skye and the other younger woman with Coulson paled. Coulson, of course, maintained his typically placid expression. Agent May was equally enigmatic, though she seemed prepared for anything at any time. Steve noticed that she kept an eye on him, evaluating his reactions and interactions with the others. The male agent sitting behind Coulson, Triplett, kept his eyes focused on Banner, tense and concerned. Something in Triplett’s manner seemed familiar to Steve.

Coulson laid his hands flat on the table. “I already said that it won’t be a problem. We’ll respect each other’s privacy AND we will share with you IF we know of any weaknesses in your security systems. I’d appreciate it if you would do the same for us. Dr. Banner’s suggestion has merit. I would prefer to keep things on track today, if you don’t mind.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest, and replied, “It MIGHT be better if we all did that. My construction costs this month are high already… without antagonizing Banner…who apparently is already pretty well irritated, based on the extra expense my labs administrator approved this morning.” He grinned at Bruce affectionately.

Steve frowned at Tony, and was grateful to see him nod slightly in acceptance, sit back in his seat and gesture for Steve to talk. Steve turned back to Coulson, and offered, “we’d like to share intel on a friendly basis. Agent Hill will coordinate that with you, if that meets your approval.” Coulson nodded, looking pleased as he accepted Steve’s offer. Steve elaborated on Hill’s duties with SI and the Avengers.

Tony discussed JARVIS’ efforts managing the data dump from SHIELD and Hydra. The next few hours were spent reviewing reports, videos, audio recordings, technical findings, and maps.

When the discussion turned to medical issues, Coulson glanced at another young woman with him.
She spoke with a cultured British accent, “I would like it if we could access your medical staff, please. One of our colleagues sustained brain injury during the Hydra ‘situation’ recently. His recovery is important to... us.”

Steve nodded emphatically, “we’d be honored to offer full assistance to your friend.” He cleared his throat, “I’m sorry that happened.”

The young woman nodded and replied stiffly, “we are all sorry about the betrayals we suffered at Hydra’s hands.”

“What happened?” Steve asked.

She looked startled, and explained, “a formerly-trusted... team... member... dumped two of us on the bottom of the ocean. There was oxygen enough for one to make it safely to the surface.” Steve saw Skye’s jaw tighten angrily to the point that she was grinding her teeth.

Steve frowned and intoned forcefully, “while I've been... strongly urged... not to take Hydra’s continued existence personally, I do. I have sworn to defeat or capture them all, and I will not fail to do so.”

Tony leaned in and teased, “resist the temptation to kiss him, Phil.” Almost everyone on both sides of the table broke out laughing, except for Director Coulson, Agent May, and Steve. They only smiled wryly. Tony continued, “yeah. Hydra sucks. We’re all on board with that idea. So, while I also understood SHIELD to be dead and gone... I’m not too upset that reports of its demise were exaggerated.”

Steve sighed. He and Natasha exchanged a look. Coulson smiled apologetically, “Director Fury had difficulty letting go of those people in whom he had faith. He would be pleased that we are here with you today.”

Tony rolled his eyes, “no need for past tense there, Phil.” Coulson glared at Tony sharply. Steve saw a slight reaction from the British woman as she schooled her features. He was sure that she knew that Fury was alive.

Bruce joked, “Darcy thinks the zombies are winning. She was telling me during yoga that it seems like a lot of people just pretend to be dead.” Coulson frowned, while Thor looked uncomfortable... as though he was considering an unpleasant possibility.

Steve glanced at Bruce and smiled slightly, “well, many of us HAVE been reported dead.”

Tony asked, “even me! Did ya miss me, Phil?”

Coulson smiled slightly, “terribly, Mr. Stark.”

The meeting was largely productive, with groundwork laid for Avenger/SHIELD cooperation going forward. They continued discussing their individual and joint efforts for the rest of the afternoon. Their first effort would involve raiding a Hydra installation in a bank in Washington, DC the next day. Coulson’s team would join the Captain, Iron Man, Hawkeye, and Black Widow. Thor, Banner, and Falcon would remain at Avengers Tower.

As they stood up from the table, one of the men on Coulson’s team introduced himself to Steve as Agent Antoine Triplett, exclaiming that his grandpappy was a Howling Commando. Steve listened to his enthusiastic reminiscing politely for a few moments and then excused himself.
Steve asked JARVIS where Darcy could be found, and went to the garden balcony. She was lying on a lounge chair, listening to music and studying for her classes on her StarkPad. She looked up as he approached, “hey there, handsome!” He sat by her and pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly to him. He frowned slightly as he thought about her confrontation with the gun range master, but didn't want to bring it up if she didn't. He'd learned a long time ago that strong women resent a man acting as though women need his protection every minute. He focused on the feeling of having her close in his embrace, letting it soothe and calm him.

Darcy looked at his expression and sighed, “you’re going somewhere, aren't you?” He half-smiled, nodded, and leaned his head against hers. She waggled her brows and grinned, “so, we need to go out, do something fun, and not mope all night. You might even get lucky.”

“Can’t we just stay in bed for the evening?” He sighed heavily.

She laughed, but then asked, “what’s up with your mood? You seem off.”

He sighed, chewed his lip a little and confessed, “meeting my friends’ grandkids makes me feel old… or at least like I sure missed a hell of a lot. It’s… weird.”

She crooked a grin, “so, you want to prove you’re able bodied and all that?” He kissed her, grinned ruefully, and nodded. She laughed, bit her lip, and teased, “what’s your pleasure?” His eyes flashed, and he kissed her again.

JARVIS spoke, “Captain Rogers? Darcy? Sir has ordered dinner for the Avenger and SHIELD teams tonight. Will you join them in the main lounge?”

Darcy saw Steve hesitate, so she asked, “when will dinner arrive?”

JARVIS replied, “within the hour.”

Darcy replied, “tell Tony we’ll be there in an hour or so.” She kissed Steve. “Your place until then. Quick step, soldier! Look lively!” He laughed as she ran for the elevator.

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A little over an hour later, Darcy and Steve entered the main lounge area, happy and relaxed. Natasha jokingly smoothed Steve’s hair as she greeted him.

Darcy saw immediately that Jane was boiling mad. She crossed to her friend, “what the hell? You look mad enough to spit!”

Jane jabbed a pointing finger, “Him!”

Darcy turned to follow and nodded laughingly, “Ooh! Our captor for a week. Our nemesis…” Jane pointedly turned her wheelchair to face the other way.

Antoine ‘Trip’ Triplett smiled at Darcy, “what’s up, Trouble? How’s the wrist?”

She waved a wrist at him, “all better, Jailer!” Steve looked at her, puzzled. Darcy stepped closer to Trip and explained, “I tried to taze him after Jane saw Thor on the TV, and he told her she couldn't go near him. He stopped me.” She bit her lip slightly and continued in a pouty tone, “he almost broke my wrist.”

Steve looked at Trip coolly. Trip sighed and stood more at attention, “I was assigned to keep the ladies safe, Captain. SHIELD didn't think they’d be safe running into the middle of your battle
with Loki and the Chitauri.” Steve’s jaw shifted slightly. Trip grimaced, “I don’t doubt that if this one had downed me, she’d have figured out how to fly them out of there.” He glared slightly at Darcy, still gauging Captain America’s reaction.

Steve nodded and grinned slightly, “thanks. It’s better that they weren't in the middle of things.” He gave Darcy a chiding look. She attempted, and failed, to look innocent.

Trip nodded, “for what it’s worth, I sustained some pretty serious injuries that week. Miss Lewis acted like she was the kid in ‘Home Alone’ and I was one of the robbers.”

Darcy started to explain, Steve stopped her with, “seen it, Sweetheart.” He grinned and gave her a rueful kiss, laughing to himself as he pictured what Trip described.

Trip cried out in alarm, “Wait! You’re the Darcy that everyone here thinks they want to train.. and ARM? Are they out of their minds?”

Darcy smirked up at him, “some MEN are not scared of little old me.” She put a hand on Steve’s arm.

“I guess not. But… he’s the Captain…” Trip looked admiring.

Darcy laughed and nodded proudly, then gestured widely, “as to the rest? Jury’s out on the sanity of more than one.” She crossed her arms over her chest and teased, “hey, Jailer! Want me to tell him about your desperation play?” Trip swallowed hard, looked up, looked back at her with a pained expression and shook his head. Darcy laughed.

Jane piped up, a bit venomously, “I’m still angry. Tell the Captain all about the pass you made at Darcy… Jailer.”

Trip put his hands up in surrender, “I was expertly shot down. That’s all that matters... and I’m seriously thankin’ God for it at this particularly hellish moment in time.” He nodded respectfully to Darcy, “there’s no mistakin’ your meaning when you say no, Trouble!”

Steve laughed and shook Trip’s hand firmly, “no hard feelings, Son. I’m sure she gave you quite a time of it.” Trip smiled with relief, while privately trying to decide if the word ‘Son’ was a slam or not, and shared stories of their time in Tromsø and all of the ways Darcy and Jane tried to get past him. Coulson joined their conversation, never one to pass up a chance to chat with Captain America. They shared good food and had a nice evening together.

Later, Coulson pulled Darcy aside. “I understand that the other Avengers have been a bit over-zealous regarding your personal safety, Miss Lewis.” She shrugged. He pulled a small gun out of his pocket and handed it to her. “This is something my techs invented. We call it an Icer. We use it in lieu of tranquilizer guns and bullets. It’s more accurate, effective and efficient, light and easy to use, and non-lethal.” Darcy looked at the gun with more interest as Coulson smiled slightly, “so, please take this to give you a way to stay safe without having to kill.” He glanced at Steve, noting the alert look on his face. “I’ll send additional ammo for it to your R&D Lab office. I hope it might help give you and your friends some peace of mind.” He nodded respectfully to Steve.

Darcy looked puzzled and asked, “are you doing this to try and pressure Steve some way? What is this?” Steve chuckled as he moved to her and kissed her cheek. She looked at him questioningly, and he whispered for her to accept the weapon.

Coulson’s expression did not change at all, yet they both felt that he was pleased. “This is simply something you can use to protect yourself without having to take a human life, Miss Lewis, a
goodwill gesture. I have the utmost respect for the Captain, and would not try to manipulate him. It’s good to see him happy. Few deserve that more, in my opinion. Consider it a friendship offer to you, to make up for my past actions with your iPod.”

She laughed softly, “um, okay. Thanks, Director. I’ll give it a try. I can’t guarantee Tony won’t take it apart during one of his late night crazy times, though.”

Coulson nodded. “If you could guarantee to control Mr. Stark’s behavior, I would be surprised.” He leaned in, “and I would try to hire you.”

Darcy laughed, “I’m pretty happy where I am.” He smiled inscrutably.

Tony heard his name and yelled, “what does surprised look like on you, Phil?” Coulson moved towards Tony to reply, accepting a tight hug from Pepper as she entered the room and joined them. His smile to Pepper was genuine and respectful. They talked for several minutes, though Darcy laughingly noticed that Coulson moved back to Steve’s side again as soon as he could.

When things began to wind down, Darcy interrupted, “excuse me, Director? I know you could talk to the Captain all night. And, Jailer, I know you’re fond of trying to keep me from going near Avengers and all that, but I’m gonna pull rank as Steve’s girl and call it a night.” Steve smiled happily, leaned down and kissed her, and bid the others a good night.

Thor clasped Coulson’s arm and bid him well, then pushed Jane’s wheelchair to the elevator. Jane looked back at them and smirked, “good night, Jailer.” Trip rolled his eyes and chuckled.

Coulson moved over to Clint and Natasha to talk quietly. He raised one brow as he saw May and Sam reappearing after having disappeared together for over an hour. Skye grinned darkly, “cleanse your palate, May?” May nodded, the faintest of grins visible as she got herself a scotch. She then made a toasting gesture as Sam smiled at her. Skye looked around, “looks like the Avengers and their pals have a pretty sweet deal here.”

May looked around at those still present and shrugged, “you found all of our names on that ‘Insight’ target list, didn’t you?” Skye nodded grimly, also remembering names NOT on that list... May shrugged, “well, it makes me glad to have the Avengers on our side, so I’m in no mood to judge.” She smiled as Natasha split away from Coulson and Barton, sauntering over to help herself to a scotch.

Natasha looked Skye up and down and commented, “so, May’s training you.”

Skye frowned slightly and turned to May, “did you tell her that?”

May shook her head, “didn’t have to. She can tell by the way you carry yourself now… and the placement of some of your weapons.” May turned back to Natasha, “the Captain’s girlfriend still carries herself mostly like a civilian.”

Natasha tilted her head and sipped her drink, “she was able to dampen a blow to her mid-section from the Winter Soldier’s metal arm well enough that nothing was broken… and took out a Hydra operative using a combination we worked… and can look after herself day-to-day. I’m satisfied with her progress. You can tell that I’m limited in how much he’ll allow us to sharpen her. She’s the softness he needs in his life. So long as she knows enough to stay alive, I’m happy.” May nodded.

Coulson and Barton joined them. Coulson smiled, “destroying SHIELD seems to have created quite the friendship between you and the Captain, Natasha.”
Hawkeye drawled, “it takes extreme circumstances to get Natasha to open up.”

Natasha shrugged nonchalantly, “yeah… well, if I can’t trust Captain America…” She and Coulson smiled ruefully at each other.

Coulson poured himself a scotch and toasted, “to the things we can believe in.”

***

The next morning when Darcy woke, Steve was returning from a run. He ate while he cooled down, and then headed to the shower. Darcy used his second bathroom to freshen up quickly, and then returned to bed to wait for Steve. When he opened his bathroom door and came out in a towel, he stopped in his tracks.

Darcy was posed on his bed with the sheet, like she had been in the first photo of her that he’d seen… the recreation of an Elvgren pinup that had been his favorite during WWII. She’d packed the bracelets in her purse and studied the image she had on her phone of the painting Steve had done of the pose. The only conscious difference was that now she wore the Infinity necklace he’d given her.

Steve was late for his first meeting of the day.

_to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Darcy posed like an Elvgren pinup- http://i.imgur.com/pZuiPlI.png
macgreensomething made it for me after Chapter 3! An awesome gift. :)

Bruce shares some of his serum concerns with Darcy. Bucky gets a new friend, and opens up some with Bruce. The Avengers and SHIELD team take down a Hydra base in a bank in Washington, DC... complete with the Winter Soldier's conditioning chair and cryo freeze unit... and Hydra personnel, weapons, video, and data files.

Darcy was in a fantastic mood after the resounding success of her little pin-up sheet-posing stunt. She hated for Steve to leave for a mission, but loved to send him out with a big smile on his face. She couldn't help but smile giddily as well. It often felt as though the only competition between her and Steve was over who could please the other more. She was relaxed and satisfied, and knew that he was, too. It was an amazing way to start the day.

Darcy enjoyed the second Cardio-Dance class with the new instructor more than the first, and figured he'd make it more his own as the time passed. ‘Lack of strength’ training was fine, too. She forced herself to go ahead to the shooting range, aware as she approached it that she was jutting out her chin, and had her hands clenched into fists, as though ready to fight if needed.

She was happy to find Sam waiting outside the range. He smirked cockily, “ready to learn from the best?” He nodded encouragingly as she relaxed her hands and let out a breath. She grinned back and nodded.

Sam was amazing with guns, possibly even better than Natasha. He worked with Darcy on maintaining her weapon for a good hour, until she was able to take her gun apart and reassemble it quickly and easily all on her own. He made minute corrections to her grip and stance that gave her
confidence and improved her efforts. Knowing that he was human, not enhanced, helped build Darcy’s confidence as she copied him. His aim was nearly perfect, though everything he did was the product of practice and good training. She thanked him several times.

And Sam’s manner was fun and relaxing, at least when he was talking to her. Darcy saw him give Kaplan a forbidding look or two, and watched the range master shrink away from them. She realized that Natasha had told the others about her encounter with Kaplan the previous day, and shuddered to think how Steve had felt about it. She felt a rush of affection, appreciating how Steve made such an effort to give her space, even when his protective instincts were aggravated.

She texted Steve, ‘Sam’s scaring the range master this morning, even better than I did yesterday.’ She received a quick reply from Steve, ‘Tell Sam thanks/he’s a good friend, even if I didn’t ask for that. I don’t doubt you. After all... you scare Captain America. ;)

She smiled proudly, then laughed, “Sam, someone says thank you, and denies all responsibility for your presence here!”

Sam grinned and nodded, “Hey! Everyone else got the jump on training you, and I've been ordered NOT to teach you to fly my wing pack.”

“I’m too scared of heights for that to work out well, anyway!” Darcy winced.

Sam shook his head, “you really don’t know what you’re missin’! Flight is freedom, babe.”

***

Mid-morning, Steve and the others left for Washington, DC on their first joint Avengers/S.H.I.E.L.D mission to eliminate a long-established Hydra base. Darcy tried to stay busy to keep her mind off Steve’s absence from the Tower. Her happy mood evaporated as though her emotions were in a roller coaster headed down a huge drop. Her heart rate elevated, and she felt her breathing shallow and tighten. She was surprised that the anxiety hit so hard, and did her best to breathe through it and calm herself. It was tough going.

Jane and Bruce were driving each other nuts. They were starting to snipe at each other, so Darcy decided she would move Jane to another temporary lab. She bit her tongue as she started on the paperwork, irritation nearly getting the best of her. It meant a lot of extra work, moving others out at a time when people and places were still recovering, but she wouldn't risk Bruce’s sanity (or a problem between him and Thor) any longer than absolutely necessary.

To prevent hurt feelings, she told Jane that she needed to put her in a lab with Erik so that Jane could keep an eye on him as he transitioned back to work. It gave Jane something to feel self-righteous about, but Darcy was a bit surprised that Jane didn't call her out for the bullshit part of it all. She was relieved, but still surprised. There was logic in the assignment, though, since it would make it easier for Darcy to look out for both Jane and Erik, and they loved working together.

Bruce was delighted that Jane, and her self-talk and meandering ditziness, would soon be out of his lab. He tried to hide his relief and did a poor job of it.

Darcy was developing a tension headache, which she first blamed on the scientists, but she soon realized that the cause was even more mundane. Her period had started. She came back out of the restroom off the lab with a relieved half-smile on her face.

Jane looked up from her work, and cocked her head, “what’s the funny look for, Darce? You okay?” Darcy saw Bruce look at her sharply.
Darcy nodded and sighed heavily, relief flowing over her and causing her smile to grow, “I didn't realize I was kind of worried about something until I found out it was okay.”

“That’s as clear as mud.” Jane shook her head.

Bruce sighed and nodded observantly, “your period came, didn't it? The super-swimmer pill with regular pill combo is working out.” Darcy looked at him quizzically. He grinned, “you’re grumpier than usual today, no offense, and you've been rubbing both your head and your lower back for the past half hour or so.” He shrugged, “and I helped some on Cap’s pill, though he doesn't know that. So, during that process, I checked on the date of your last cycle and…”

Darcy huffed at him, “that’s some creepy science you got goin’ on there, Bruce! Stalk much?” He grinned apologetically. She groused, “I don't feel so bad for all the sex talk you overheard between me and Jane now!” Bruce rolled his eyes and sighed.

Jane raised her brows, “Wow! There was room for doubt about your birth control?” She shuddered theatrically. “You're a little young to start raising an army.”

Darcy made a face at Jane, and shrugged, “science isn't infallible and super-serum is awfully super, but it seems like two pills ought to do the trick. Just nice to know.” Jane uttered an impatient noise and went back to her work. Darcy looked at Bruce uncomfortably, “you had a hand in the creation of Steve’s pill?”

Bruce smiled ruefully, “please don’t tell Steve. He’s really touchy about his privacy. My God! He hated having to give samples!” Jane giggled and Darcy made a face. Bruce grinned slightly, then turned more serious, “he approached someone in the lab soon after he arrived here. He’d be uncomfortable about my involvement, after the crap that Tony pulled. But, I’m the in-house expert on serums and their effects. I've studied varieties of the serum more than almost anyone except maybe… well, anyway… I wanted to make sure it would work, and to know if other measures were required to keep you safe- not just from pregnancy, but radiation, as well. I've shared that I take safety seriously, especially for people close to those who've had serums or enhancements.”

Darcy wasn't sure how to respond. Bruce smiled awkwardly, “I’m glad it works.” He looked at her with apologetic curiosity, “um… you’re not suffering any side-effects, or any unusual symptoms, are you?”

Darcy stared at him blankly, confused. Jane explained shortly, “there’s no previous experiences for baseline comparison, so, she wouldn't know beyond her typical health, which is closely monitored. Check the box next to ‘uncertain’ for now, and go hack her medical files again.” She looked Darcy over searchingly, frowning.

Bruce nodded, “yeah… those unknown variables are a bitch. You’re right that science isn't infallible. I know!” He shrugged, and Darcy made a sad face. Then she dug in Jane’s desk and stole a few Hershey kisses.

She excused herself, “I deserve a little chocolate. I've worked out enough today.”

Bruce offered, “since I've already gotten overly personal, I’d urge you to eat more. You've lost some weight, given all of the… new physical activity you’re engaged in… Your body type is even better with a bit more on the curves.” He smiled kindly.

Darcy winked, “Steve was right! I should have fallen in love with you.” She sighed happily as the chocolate melted in her mouth.

“Not a good bet, Darcy. You’re far better off with Steve,” Bruce shook his head firmly.
Darcy smiled and covered her mouth, her speech muffled by chocolate, “well, I’m in love with him, to be sure, but you’re pretty awesome, Doc.”

Bruce shook his head and went back to work.

Jane’s frown was still in place. She looked at Darcy with narrowed eyes, “what has Steve said about your weight?”

Darcy paused, thinking… “nothing, really… Well, except when I asked if we were carbing up when he ordered me this HUGE pasta dish last night. He said something about not wanting me to waste away.” Bruce glanced back up and smiled, then made some notations while his smile faded to a concerned frown.

Jane smiled, and nodded approvingly, “good… ‘cause if Steve was trying to make you someone you’re not, I’d zap him to an unknown place… like right into Yggdrasil. Even Heimdall is unsure what would happen to someone if they got zapped there, per something Thor mentioned.” She made a notation that they needed to test energy transfer into Yggdrasil.

Bruce sighed as he approached Darcy. He apologized and pricked her finger for a quick blood sample that he ran through one of his meters. He then ran a wand of some sort over her. She tensed worriedly until he smiled and nodded, “no elevated radiation readings, which, well, good! Vita rays were, theoretically, much safer than Gamma. That’s a small part of why I didn't worry about them when testing radiation resistance. Radiation’s not something you mess with lightly, though.” He touched her arm comfortingly, “the main point is… if you’re wasting away, it’s because your energy output is greater than your input.” He reached into Jane’s drawer and pulled out a few more chocolates, “here. Have more.” He grinned ruefully, “I doubt you’ll curb your physical activity levels anytime soon. Other than the weightlifting you seem pretty happy.” Darcy laughed and ate more chocolate, shaking her head.

***

Darcy had JARVIS contact Bucky and Sam to ask if they’d like to meet for lunch on the garden terrace. She arranged for sandwiches to be sent up from the café, both as delivery for Jane and Bruce in his lab and to the garden. When she arrived, the two men were already there, having what seemed like a serious discussion, and downing bottles of water. They greeted her. It was a warm day. Bucky was wearing new sunglasses, a tank top, and shorts; obviously enjoying the sight and feel of the sun. He was leaning back, legs outstretched to soak up the rays. He was still pale, but a bit less each day.

Sam smiled, and gestured to a nearby table. He and Bucky stood and easily moved that way, Bucky looking up at the sun the whole time.

Darcy sat in one of the chairs and looked from Sam to Bucky, asking, “everything okay? You two look like you’re having deep thoughts or a disagreement.” Bucky snorted laughter and jokingly glared at Sam.

“I wouldn't go so far as deep thoughts. I was just telling Bucky he ought to get a pet. It’d be great, therapeutically.” Bucky smiled.


Bucky grinned at her ruefully, and frowned at Sam, then turned back to Darcy, “you’re gonna push his point until I give in, aren't you, Doll?” Darcy nodded enthusiastically, smiling at the thought, while Sam nodded and grinned. Bucky grimaced and shrugged, “all right. I’ll do it. I’ll see if Thor
will go with me. Steve’d have heart failure if I left the Tower on my own with him out of town.”
He shook his head at Darcy regretfully and added, “don’t even get me started on what he’d do if
you and I left, just the two of us.” He grinned slightly.

She pouted, but nodded acknowledgment and pursed her lips, teasing, “Steve… spoilsport!”

Bucky laughed, “actually, that’s Captain America. Steve’s the trouble-making side of that coin.”
He sipped from a water bottle and smiled indulgently at Darcy.

Sam nodded and grumbled, “on your left!” and made face. Bucky laughed out loud. Sam had
shared that before.

Darcy waved to the Security guard as she came out on the deck with bags of carry-out food. Darcy
and Sam laughed while Bucky told stories of his and Steve’s childhood… occasionally sad
laughter given that the two friends were raised during the Depression, and Steve was so sickly then… but mostly happily, given that Steve was such a stubborn troublemaker, and Bucky wasn’t
EVER saint-like. The soft smile that crept over Bucky’s face while he talked was priceless. Darcy
basked in it the way that Bucky basked in the sunlight. As they finished, Darcy sighed, “back to
lab time. What are you guys up to?”

Sam turned to Bucky expectantly and was rewarded with a slow nod of acceptance. Bucky grinned,
“I’ve got plans right after this. But I’ll ask Thor if we can go look at animals… AFTER we spar
later. It’s good to finally have a chance to work the capabilities of this body.” His grin seemed
suggestive, causing Darcy to wonder what his first, unspecified plans, were… and if they involved
Sharon Carter.

“You mean you didn't even get to exercise?” Darcy crossed her arms and frowned.

Bucky shrugged, a shadow crossing his face, “it depended… when I started to remember stuff or
behave erratically, per their designations of ‘normal’ and ‘erratic’ I was… put away, if wiping
didn't reset me.”

Sam nodded, “Hawkeye was exactly right, man. They had to go overtime evil with you to keep the
good from breaking free.”

“Sorry I brought that up and made you frown! I like your smile.” Darcy reached out and pulled
Bucky into a tight hug.

After initially hesitating, Bucky tightened his arms around Darcy and sighed, “s’ok, Doll. Your
frame of reference is pretty innocent, overall. You wouldn’t think like them… ever…” He felt a
slight shudder pass through her, and then she tightened her grip a bit more and released him.

Darcy asked, “will you send me a picture of your new friend, and let me visit and spoil it?”

Bucky glanced at Sam, smiling ruefully at both of them, “sure, Doll. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thor’s gonna LOVE shopping for pets. Tell me how many he ends up bringing back!” Darcy
laughed.

***

Darcy was glad to have longer to work in the main R&D labs that day. Eleven techs had been
killed in the attacks. Along with the nine resignations, one reassignment to a different facility, and
one reassignment to non-vital Provisional duties, the R&D department was extremely short staffed.
She was working on project-load prioritization, getting input from Tony before he left, and now
input from Pepper regarding Avengers and SI urgent needs. Recruitment to Stark Industries had never been difficult, but security approval was becoming a higher and higher bar to pass.

She spent the afternoon talking with employees individually, making her way through all of the labs and checking on every employee. Most of them wanted to express their opinions about project priorities. Some wanted to cry or talk about loss. Many, being scientists and engineers to the Nth degree, did not want to talk at all. She tried to adapt to communication styles and needs as she could, knowing that it was important to take note of the input (or lack thereof) of all employees immediately following the tragedy of invasion… and the upheaval necessarily created in the aftermath. With those who did not wish to talk, she observed their activity, and tried to ask questions based on what she observed. Most techs she’d ever known were okay with answering questions about the project that held their focus, if nothing else. Darcy was fascinated to see how the results of frequent employee temperament and personality assessments held up under the pressure of near-death experience recovery.

She was mentally exhausted by the time she was done with that part of her day. As she made her way to Bruce’s lab to join him for yoga, she received a text message from Bucky. It said, ‘Iolaus’ under the picture of an alert and sweet looking black cat. She squealed with excitement and replied, ‘must meet! HANDSOME’. The teasing reply of ‘me or the cat?’ just made her laugh and text back, ‘he has you beat’. She was still laughing as she reached Bruce’s lab.

After yoga, Darcy convinced Bruce to join her for dinner. They ate Indian food together in the Avengers’ lounge and decided to watch the movie ‘The Right Stuff’ since neither of them had ever seen it all the way through. Darcy texted and asked Bucky if he and his new friend might join them. A few minutes later, Bucky arrived, holding a gorgeous black cat. Darcy exclaimed over the cat and spent a few minutes trying to help put him at ease, wanting him to like her. His fur was glossy and soft. He had white spot at the base of his throat that made it look like he was wearing a cravat.

Bucky explained that the administrators at the shelter had told him how much harder it is to find new owners for black cats, especially once they were a couple of years old. Iolaus was almost two years old, by the veterinarian’s guess. He had a sweet temperament, but would likely have been euthanized soon. Black pets don’t photograph as well as lighter-colored animals for ads, and many people have a superstitious fear of having a black cat cross their path.

Bucky shook his head, disgusted, “the superstitious fear of black cats is incredibly stupid!” He made a face, “Groucho Marx called it right. ‘Black cat crossing your path signifies that the animal is going somewhere.’” Iolaus was curious and active, so Bucky watched him more than the movie. He grinned appreciatively every time the animal jumped or broke into a swift and graceful run across the room. During a scene of medical testing and a small, pressurized cabin, Bucky took Iolaus into the kitchen area for some milk.

On hearing the name, Bruce smiled and nodded, “someone helpful against the Hydra. I like it.” Bucky grinned slightly while he reached up and plucked the mewing cat off the top rod of the curtains.

Darcy noted, “and he can jump… a lot like you. It’s a match made in heaven.”

Bucky shrugged and sat, stroking Iolaus. The cat curled beside him on the sofa and purred enthusiastically as he petted it with his metal fingers.

After the movie, they ordered desserts. Darcy had a fantastic dark chocolate and pistachio mousse. Bruce and Bucky split a large cheesecake. She gave Bruce and Bucky hugs, and Iolaus a kiss on the head, before heading to her place for the night.
After Darcy left them, Bucky asked, “did you want to date her before she got so involved with Steve?”

Bruce shrugged, “She made me wistful for that sort of thing, which is more than I can say about anyone else except the woman who has always had my heart. Darcy treated me like a human being from minute one… more than most people, except maybe Tony… and, of course Betty, who Darcy resembles a bit.” Bucky smiled and nodded understanding as Bruce joked, “‘I’m not dead’, as Steve has been known to say. But I’m not safe, either, in many ways. If I were… well, I HAD someone special a long time ago. If I were safe, I’d be with her. It’s just that… I love her… Betty, enough to keep her safe.” Bruce looked at Bucky curiously, “have you ever been in love?”

Bucky frowned, “I’m not sure. I don’t remember feeling that way before. I never settled with any one particular dame back in the day. If I had feelings for someone… that I didn't act on or have time for… I can’t remember it.” He looked like he was about to mention something else, but stopped himself, and grinned tightly.

Bruce asked, “what about Steve?”

“He’s sure in love now! I've never seen him happier,” Bucky laughed.

Bruce shook his head, “not what I meant. You ever in love with him?”

Bucky chuckled, surprised, “THAT, I'd remember. Honestly? No. I don’t love him the way you’re askin’. ” He made a face, looking as though considering his words carefully. He frowned pensively. “When we were kids, I was scared he was gonna die, pretty much all the time. I wanted to protect him. The first day we met, I heard him yelling at some guys to leave this other kid alone, little Italian guy about our age- an altar boy. From the sound of Stevie’s voice, I expected him to be bigger, not just because a bigger guy would match the attitude, but also because Steve was little more than a twig. I was shocked when I saw him the first time.”

Bucky shook his head with dismay, “you don’t know how bad it was. He had everything wrong with him. He was skin and bones, had allergies, sicknesses, and bad asthma. Could hardly take a breath. It was like his body hated him, and tried to shut him down all the damned time. And, he nearly died from beatings he took… more times than I can count. He was a smart little punk, but angry at every injustice in the world, too noble for his own good. I admired the hell out of him for his… valor… and wanted to wring his neck at the same time. We got close, spent all our time together, and shared our dreams and fears, lived some happy times… and a lot of bad. He was like this little kid brother that I struggled to keep alive.” He shifted uncomfortably and added, “it was so funny to me that he looked up to me… when he was pushing me to be better. He was determined to make the world better. It rubbed off.”

Bucky seemed nostalgic. “I started up with dames pretty early on… and I was good with ‘em, lots of them. I’d work on girls to bring a friend for Stevie… but nothin’ ever happened for him with them then.” He chuckled ruefully.

His grin faded, “then I went to war… and I got captured. My men tried to protect me, keep me from getting picked for experiments, but Hydra took me and worked me over. Zola was a sadistic bastard. They used needles and energy. It hurt like hell. I kept saying my name, rank, whatever, but they hardly even asked anything.” He held the cat closer, concentrating on not holding too tightly. The sensation of needing to protect the creature centered him.

His voice dropped, and Bruce had to concentrate to hear him. “One night, this guy comes in calling my name, and it was Steve’s voice and I… thought… ‘I must be dead.’ I couldn't imagine… STEVIE couldn't be there. I figured I was givin’ up the ghost… and maybe he’d died, too, back
home, and was… welcoming me.” He cleared his throat. “But that wasn't it, at all. Instead, I looked up into… Steve’s… face. There was no mistaking it. It was really Steve, but he was big, and tall, and strong. That was… a shock.”

Iolaus jumped out of Bucky’s arms and turned circles on the couch cushion next to him, pulling at the cushion with his claws as he turned around three times and settled against Bucky’s thigh, purring loudly. Bucky stroked him with his flesh and blood hand, savoring the warmth of the animal.

Bucky shook his head, “nothin’ was the same after Austria, after Zola. I wasn't the same, and God knows Steve was different. Suddenly, I was the weaker of the two of us. I was a crack shot, so don’t get me wrong. I didn't hold back the unit... at all. But Steve was… the Captain, even if he was still stupid and needed me to stop him from jumping into stuff without thinking.”

He was quiet for a long time, and then breathed out, “I was kind of taken with him then, I guess. He was all he’d been before, only his looks matched his spirit. And he was the big hero who saved me from the torture, too. He didn’t see it. He was crazy for Peggy Carter then, one dame who saw all I’d seen in him even before he was souped up. And we were kinda busy, what with attacking Hydra all the damn time.”

Bucky’s expression shuttered and his tone shifted, “I fell and was captured again. They did stuff to me and years passed. One of my Hydra handlers, when he was young… looked a bit like Captain America. He wasn’t as big and strong as Steve, and God knows he wasn't really noble, but he could act it and talk up what I was doing like it was right. He twisted me around as much as the worst of the scientists. But all he did to me… kind of put an end to any attraction I ever had towards Steve. Ya know?”

Bruce swallowed hard and nodded slightly, transfixed by the multitude of emotions that swept across Bucky’s face as he talked.

Bucky paused, scratching the cat’s ears gently. “These days… I’m makin’ time with a lady, nothing serious, just having some fun. It kind of brings back some of the good memories from before.” He shrugged, “do I admire the aesthetics of a guy who looks good? Sure. I’m not blind. And maybe because I feel like I’m starting over from scratch, I’m open to all sorts of possibilities with women... and men, any person. But it’s too weird to think of Steve like that now. When I look at him, I remember Pierce, the handler I mentioned. And every time he speaks, I hear Stevie, my little kid brother who I want to protect… and once ya get to know him, he hardly shuts up, so I hear ‘Stevie’ a lot! Chau says that he’s a source of ‘cognitive dissonance’ for me on many levels.”

Bucky’s expression was hard to read, “we have an intense connection, but when it comes down to it, Steve’s... family.”

Bruce nodded understandingly, and sat quietly for a long time, thinking. Then, Bruce sighed, “like I said, I had someone, for a while. Betty’s so beautiful... so smart, and amazing. She loved me. And then one day I thought I knew better than Nature. My arrogance ripped me out of the normal world and into a world of monsters, soldiers, aliens, spies, assassins, and gods. Betty found a good guy, Leonard. I hope she’s...” Bruce cleared his throat and frowned, “I fuzzed at Darcy once for referring to ‘the other guy’ as me. I fuzzed because I know it’s true, and I hate that I did all of that to myself. Having the world see the monster that lurks inside, see the worst I can be? It’s not something I like to own up to.”

He looked at Bucky seriously, for a long moment, and shook his head. “Unlike me, you didn't cause your problems. They were forced on you, over and over again. I think it’s taking some people, you included, far too long to see that you’re not at fault for what Hydra did to you, Bucky.
I…” Suddenly Bruce turned and stared at Bucky, “you realize that Steve will read the transcript of everything you just told me, don’t you?”

Bucky chuckled silently and nodded, smiling mischievously. He shrugged. Finally, he admitted, “I think I’ve reached a new stage or something. I don’t trust myself enough to go without surveillance, but that doesn’t mean I can’t have a little fun making Steve squirm while he’s got his nose in my business.” Bruce huffed a laugh. Bucky sighed and admitted, “another thing is that Dr. Chau told me I needed to share stuff like that with him, the stuff I think of after our sessions- which he reads, too. She didn't specify that I had to do it in person, though.”

Bruce changed the channel, putting on *Craig Ferguson’s late night show. “You’d probably like this guy. His sense of humor is a little twisted, too.” Bucky snorted laughter.

Bruce and Bucky stayed up a few more hours, talking about serum effects and living with circumstances beyond their control.

***

Darcy slept poorly that night. Her back ached and her emotions were raw. Her bed seemed strangely large, her dreams were vivid, and she woke at the slightest noise. She put a pillow long-ways against her back in hopes of fooling herself that she wasn't alone with her dark thoughts and imaginings. It didn't work at all.

In the middle of the night she sent Steve a text, ‘It’s hard to sleep without you. Don’t like it. Miss you. Love you.’

***

The main battle at the Hydra base in DC took less than twenty-four hours for the Avengers and SHIELD to win. The first few hours were full of surprises, however, including a new weapon that homed in on Vibranium. This particular attention from Hydra caused Steve to grouse to Tony, “how am I supposed to avoid taking it personally when they keep attacking me that way?”

Another blast of weapons fire included EMP devices that attached to the Iron Man suit and attempted to disable it. Tony yelled, “son of a bitch! That’s a re-vamp of one of my weapons… you slimy, unoriginal bastards!”

Steve disabled one of the larger Hydra guns with his shield and snarked, “taking it personally, Stark?”

Tony bit back, “can it, Spangles! I swear, I’m gonna write a sub-routine devoted to zapping you every time you try to be funny.”

Natasha chuckled, “something like that is long overdue. Barnes says that Cap’s been a wise-ass since long before he could back it up.”

The Hydra resistance was more a matter of the structural and technical defenses of the bank facility itself, rather than its outgunned troops. What looked to be a large commercial bank went many levels deep below ground, well-fortified levels with elaborately-encrypted access codes. Tony and Skye were the front line for much of the time as they plugged into the base’s computer systems and worked to overcome them. Tony was safer during this activity, given the protection of his suit. Steve guarded Skye with his shield and took out an ambushing squad that had her pinned down the one time she pushed ahead too quickly. The Avengers and the SHIELD squad fought their way in as quickly as possible; to try and gain as much information from the Hydra site as they could.
before the occupants could destroy it.

Clean up would require a lot more time. When the base was completely secured and prisoners in temporary holding, Steve sent a message to Darcy that read, ‘Battle phase complete. Cleaning up. Home in few days. Miss you, too. Love you.’

Stepping into the main vault after a short sleep shift, Steve visibly shuddered before he locked down his emotions enough to go on. There was a chair in the center of the room, a ‘conditioning’ chair for the Winter Soldier. In a corner of the room was a cryo-freeze vault with a portal window. Steve looked around the room, his expression fierce as he took in every detail.

Trip tapped on the portal window, “why put in a window? Wouldn't they just evaluate the occupant with sensors?” He glanced at Captain America, and stood slightly straighter in automatic response to the forbidding expression on the Captain’s face. Trip’s grimace twisted as he remembered how much his grandpappy had liked and respected Bucky Barnes, and how he had defined true friendship by what he’d seen between Barnes and the Captain.

Coulson glanced at Steve and replied to Trip, carefully and quietly, “I imagine that the window was more useful when the unit, or similar units, were first used.” Trip nodded seriously, watching carefully as Captain America stalked around the room.

Steve, his mind’s eye full of too many memories, bit out, “and they allowed the operators to see the subject’s terror, too.” He whirled on his heel and went to the weapons room to help the others catalog what they found there. He nearly knocked Tony over when Tony, sans suit, brushed his shoulder in a friendly gesture.

Tony’s retort died in his throat as he surveyed the vault room and saw the chair and cryogenic freeze unit. Tony crossed his arms over his chest and growled, “well, fuck me!”

Coulson raised a brow slightly, his lips pressed together tightly. Trip smiled, “no, thanks, sir. I wouldn't want to run afoul of your lady.”

Tony barked a laugh, and clapped Trip on the shoulder as he passed him, walking a circle around the chair. He replied absent-mindedly, “good call. She’d fry your ass.” He studied the control panel, running his finger along the metal. He chewed his lip for a moment and admitted, “yup… this’d screw up most anyone. I guess he DOES get a pass for offing my folks…” Tony stood still for a long time, arms folded across his chest, expression pensive… and angry.

Coulson raised a brow, “that’s not what was in the files, Mr. Stark.” He cleared his throat and shrugged, “I read up on your father… since he was a friend of the Captain’s, a founder of SHIELD… and since I’ve come to know you.”

Tony quirked a dark grin, “love the honesty of your priorities…and, yeah. I know what it said, but I think Widow ‘fixed’ them to prevent war between me and Cap when he first brought Barnes in. I viewed him more as a black knight then, rather than the captured pawn I see now. I felt I had little choice but to go along. But, this…” He gestured at the chair and then stood still as he looked at the cryo unit. “Fuck! When he was still conscious he could see light and warmth, just out of his reach.” He shook his head. “This makes it a hell of a lot easier to understand Barnes, and all his twitchiness… and to give Cap a pass for the enormous amount of asshole he’s gonna be for a while to come after seeing this.” He sighed, “thank God for Lewis!” He sighed low and long, “this WAS personal, God damn them! Barnes can’t have been the only potential in the world. They knew that he was Cap’s best friend.”

He shook his head again, “we need to take the whole damned unit for study… but hidden. Barnes
would destroy it on sight, and while I wouldn't blame him, I’d lose valuable info.” Tony tapped his chin. “Maybe when I’m done with it I can let him…” He sighed, “I’ll ask one of his psych docs their opinion. If it’d help him any to shred it to bits, fine. I don’t want to damage the poor bastard, not now.” He shuddered, “no matter how many psych evals or medical reports I read… I don’t understand how they made him come back… to this.”

Tony called in a team of workers and directed packing of the Winter Soldier containment and conditioning equipment. They were careful, keeping every piece of equipment fully intact so that Tony could reassemble it in a room in the bowels of the Tower, well away from prying (read: assassin) eyes and study what had been done to Bucky, and learn how to help undo it permanently. He went ahead and consulted with JARVIS, selecting a room and setting it up with maximum security. Only Tony and Steve would be able to access it.

In a nearby room, Natasha and Skye were busy working with all of the base computers and other records. Natasha was browsing through paper files, occasionally stopping to take pictures and send info to JARVIS for preliminary scan. Skye had already copied the base computer files to backup drives. They would take all of the original drives, but didn't want to risk losing data during transfer. She was doing the same with captured laptops, occasionally opening files and flinching from the contents most times. She muttered as she worked; something that suited Natasha fine since she noted and remembered every word uttered. Natasha only interrupted the flow of words if something really caught her interest.

Skye frowned as she examined the drive on one laptop, “huh. Interesting files. Hella lotta stuff on the Winter Soldier… conditioning, conditioning, and more conditioning… storage process, videos, wipe parameters, chemical balance maintenance. Tesseract data, Quantum Energy transfer formulae, Selvig’s work, Foster’s published work, and now… Weird! ‘Hot Pop Tarts’? Have I happened on your video porn, you naughty Nazi scum?” She chuckled, “you watched it enough, weirdo.” She noticed Natasha staring at her, and changed from muttering to an attempt at friendly conversation. “I’m at a loss. What sex act involves breakfast pastry?”

Natasha stood frozen in place, her voice deliberately neutral, “did you say Pop Tarts?” She gestured urgently for Skye to stop. Natasha swallowed hard, “No! Don’t open that one. Wait. Please.” Skye's eyes went wide. She was alarmed by Natasha’s demeanor. Natasha leaned in and asked, “what else does he have, again?”

Skye began to scroll, “gig after gig of video and data files pertaining to the Winter Soldier… a lot about different types of energy, and Dr. Foster… a boatload of data files on the Tesseract. He’s got a lot of stuff you guys will be interested in.”

Natasha nodded. Her jaw shifted as she asked, “can we take the original laptop on the Avengers jet, please? You can have the backup, of course.” She stared at the screen. “If that other file is what I think? I don’t want it played until that guy is locked up… for his safety. Even I can’t get answers from the dead.” Her eyes seemed icy as she asked, “whose laptop is this? I need to secure him now.”

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

I don't know who takes care of site problems, but I keep having a problem when I use
an HTML BOLD tag. Every paragraph after it automatically gains bold and un-bold tags around it, so everything gets bolded. I can remove them manually, but it's a pain.
They’re the Avengers, Bucky, not the Boy Scouts!

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and SHIELD finish their mission in Washington, DC. They find and bring back weapons, information, and prisoners. Darcy learns more about Bucky from sketches and drawings he's made.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings- violence, references to events fr. Ch1 (including water-boarding)

THANK YOU to McGregorsWench for beta help and 'idea bouncing'. Any errors are mine alone (tho I might give partial blame to Microsoft, since forced system updates damaged my work file). In case I haven't mentioned it in a while, Marvel owns a lot of stuff, including some really cool characters. ;)

THANK YOU, too, to those of you who keep reading, giving kudos and leaving lovely COMMENTS. They really help! :)

a•venge - ə'venj/ - verb

to inflict harm in return for (an injury or wrong done to oneself for another).

As he was leaving the main vault area, Coulson saw that Tony was directing techs on removal of the chair and cryo unit. He glanced into the computer room. Natasha and Skye had their heads close together, discussing something intently. He made a note to ask Skye about it later. Then, he checked the work down in the armory, and joined Steve working on the prisoner distribution and interrogation plans. Amidst all of the upheaval of losing the bulk of SHIELD, it was soothing to Coulson to have time with the Avengers again. Seeing the Captain continue to hold his own among the strong personalities he led, and regardless of the circumstance of time and place, grounded Coulson.

As the operatives were Hydra, many committed suicide when it became apparent that they were defeated. Those still living had to be sorted according to their duties in the Hydra base, their behavior, and any items of interest they held or could be associated with. They were not as dedicated to Hydra as those who had committed suicide to protect it, so, it was reasonable to assume they might be convinced to divulge Hydra operations information and secrets. Agent May verified identities from retinal scans, fingerprints, voice prints, and dental scans. Those who didn't show up in SHIELD databases automatically went to the Avengers for Containment. Most guards and lower-level workers automatically went to a SHIELD holding facility.

A group of scientists took longer to sort than the rest. Natasha advised. Coulson noted that she had a particular interest in one of the scientists, and was tamping down her emotions even more than usual as she arranged his transfer to Avengers Tower. In Coulson’s experience, emotions that Natasha tamped down were destined to explode at some point. May noticed, too, and gave Natasha a wide berth.
Things got more complicated when an additional Hydra team arrived… and attacked to try and stop
the transfer of data, prisoners, and supplies. During the attack, Natasha was injured by enemy fire
when she threw herself in the line of it and pushed her prisoner, a scientist, clear of certain death.

After the others surged against the Hydra attackers and defeated them, Hawkeye ran back and
helped Natasha up. He examined her wound and began quick triage. Steve cried out, “why did you
risk yourself over him?” He glared at the scientist, a thin man wearing a bow tie, disgustedly. A
long time ago, Steve thought a Hydra scientist harmless and didn't try to capture him, a mistake
he’d come to regret. He’d learned the hard way that ‘the little guy’ could cause much more pain
and trouble than even the largest fighter. But he didn't want to lose Natasha over any Hydra
captive, regardless.

Natasha watched the prisoner until he was inside the Avengers’ Quinjet, without answering Steve
until the man was away from them, out of sight. She was breathing in and out heavily against the
pain of the burn wound on her back. “Get me that burn cream of Bruce’s. I need a little help getting
over this wound.” Hawkeye applied the healing cream carefully. Finally, she shared, “Hydra
doesn't want us to get him to talk. His computer is overflowing with important files. He… needs to
answer our questions. He’s been involved with a lot of stuff we care about. I’ll show you his laptop
on our way home.” She swallowed hard, “you’ll want to help with his interrogation, Steve.”
Hawkeye looked surprised, and shifted his gaze from Natasha to Steve.

Steve felt a chill of apprehension run down his spine.

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Darcy spent all of her work hours in the R&D labs on the second day the Avengers were away. Dr.
Chau’s staff set up a counseling room. Darcy had extra food and drink sent in throughout the day,
knowing that nervous tension burns calories, and that there was validity to the phrase ‘comfort
food’.

As the day ended, Darcy asked JARVIS for Bucky’s location. He was in his new quarters on
Steve’s floor. She called and asked if she could stop by. When he let her in, she took in the spartan
look of the place, and resolved to get him something to add warmth to his home. She might make
him something, find him a plant or two, or at least search online for some vintage décor to bring
the apartment to life. It was so sad. She realized that in many ways it reflected the state of his
memories. The basic necessities were there, but there was little that was ‘fun’. She was glad when
Iolaus walked out of one of the bedrooms and rubbed against her legs. The cat seemed to like her,
and she wanted its affection… but she was happiest that Bucky’s expression looked lighter as he
picked the cat up and hugged him close.

Darcy asked, “um, odd favor?” Bucky nodded. She nervously pulled a few calendars out of the bag
she was carrying, hesitated for a second, and then showed them to him, putting a finger to her lips
to ask that he limit his words. She bit her lip, feeling the blush creeping into her cheeks. Knowing
Steve read transcripts of their conversations, she asked as she held one up, “did you have more
than one, or just this one?”

Bucky looked through the calendars and glanced at her with apparent confusion, and a bit of
awkward amusement. Finally, he pointed to one, and held up one finger. It was the one that
included the image of a girl draped in a sheet.

Darcy nodded, and flipped through pages of the calendar, “and… which… interested Steve most?”

Bucky was stifling chuckles by this point, and looking at her like he thought her daft. He flipped
through the calendar and pointed to the last page rather vehemently, then the page with the girl
wrapped in the sheet, then one other. He raised a brow at her as he pointed to the one with the sheet.

Darcy nodded, and bit her lip, trying to suppress her blush, but with little success. She handed Bucky the calendars that she didn't need, “thanks. Stash those, if you like.” She put the other back into her bag.

Bucky took the calendars. “Uh, thanks? That’s a first, Doll. What are you up to?” He held back, unsure if it was okay to tease her or not, and not wanting to say too much.

She grinned shyly, “a surprise! You know I can’t say more… which, I confess, is a little bit convenient at this point.” He nodded, grinning ruefully and shaking his head. She changed the subject, “what were you up to? Reading?”

He shook his head, and led her into his studio. She didn’t know that Bucky had also been an artist before WWII, that it was one of the things that pulled him and Steve together as boys. He was working with pencil and charcoal, all black-and-white creation. It made her wonder if people really do dream in black and white, and if he was recreating his dreamscape, at least in some of his sketches. People she assumed to be Bucky’s family, judging from their features, were sketched in great detail. A sketch of a little dark-haired girl with eyes like Bucky’s and an angelic smile, made Darcy misty-eyed. There were sketches of a dog. She wondered if it was ‘Domino.’ There were many pictures of Steve, small and frail Steve (often bruised and bloodied), some of Steve at war, and several in current-day clothing and settings.

Many sketches showed a gunfight inside a train car, with Steve in his WWII Captain America uniform. One showed the outside of a train from an angle Darcy could not comprehend. Sketches of other old friends, some Darcy recognized as Howling Commandos (she was delighted to see differences in their clothing and hair that might indicate they were not only memories picked up during his Smithsonian visit), and even (many different) girls from last century also filled the easels and walls. He was tacking them up everywhere. Any bit of breeze set off a great fluttering of the walls from the studio.

There were pictures of all of the Avengers, of the staff of the Healing Ward, and one eerie shot that exactly replicated the wall of his former room in Healing. There were pictures of Darcy, many nice and flattering, but some of her yelling or crying, that were less flattering and very realistic. One drawing depicted Steve looking at her while she worked, and the look on Steve’s face tugged at her heart. She also noticed that Bucky had drawn many illustrations of Sharon Carter. He captured her looking severe and strong, smiling with full dimples, and training in the gymnasium. One depicted Sharon with closed eyes and a look of pleasure on her face that felt so intimate that it made Darcy blush.

Darcy was pleased to see from the sketches that Bucky was spending a lot of time in other parts of the Tower. There was a self-portrait of him standing in front of a barista with his mouth hanging open in confusion, his face visible in the mirrored wall behind the counter. There were sketches of him in various workout poses, even sparring with Thor and Natasha. He had made sketches of every flower she’d ever seen in the garden deck, and of the skyline all around them.

He sounded gruff, “they say a picture is worth a thousand words. This is easier than talking.”

Darcy grinned, “I thought I was easy for you to talk to… but I see your point.”

He flashed a slight grin, and then his expression faded back to sadness. He handed her a notebook. She opened it, and blinked hard. He was sketching all of the people he remembered killing. The victim sketches were interspersed with images of Winter Soldier’s hands shooting and hitting and
knifing. There was even a terrible image of the view out a frosted porthole, and images of hands pushing him down and doing things to him. Fear and cold bled off the page.

“Did you deliberately put yourself with other victims of Hydra?” Darcy asked shakily.

Bucky quirked a tragic grin, “Dr. Chau about cried the first time she saw me in the notebooks. I guess I understand that idea… intellectually. My gut is harder to convince.” Darcy nodded, moved closer, and hugged him tightly. He kissed the top of her head, “thanks, Doll. This feels real, like maybe you’re gonna forgive me.”

She leaned up, and kissed his cheek. “Forgiven! It’s not like it’s fair to blame you for what someone else said or did, anyway.” She hugged him harder, and he smiled for a moment.

She went back to his notebooks, and found herself near tears as she saw him in a chair, obviously a torture device. His expression was openly fearful, trapped. She saw cruel faces all around the chair, some looking bored or indifferent, others looking sadistically pleased. Some images made no sense to her, but she was afraid to ask about them. One man showed up in sketch after sketch. She asked, “who’s he? Do you know?”

Bucky looked at one of the sketches, and his eyes burned with loathing. “Zola. He helped make me into the Winter Soldier. His experiments, when my unit was captured in Austria, caused me to survive the fall from the train. He told them to put the prosthetic on me after they first took me back out of cryo, a few years after I fell. He gave me more injections and radiation treatments that made me stronger, and brought in others to condition me in other ways. He burned me and froze me, then handed me off to others.”

Darcy squeezed Bucky’s arm comfortingly, “he sucked as a human being then, didn't he?” He was trembling under her touch.

Bucky nodded. “He’s been gone a while. Good riddance.” There were other sketches of people who caused Bucky to look furious. His expression as he looked at one blond man was so forbidding that Darcy didn't even dare ask who it was. The man looked familiar to her, like she’d seen him in the news, or met someone who resembled him. She frowned as she looked at one older picture of the man, seeing something in his looks that made her uneasy. She noticed that Bucky was studying her reactions carefully, eyes narrowed. She shook her head and shuddered, and Bucky flipped past a few pages.

Darcy was about to urge Bucky to shut that notebook when she suddenly gasped and pointed at one of the men in a sketch. “Who’s he?” Her voice trembled.

Bucky shook his head, saying, “no one you’d know, an assistant with the Winter Soldier program the past few years. Thin blond guy, reedy voice. Scientist. Likes to watch people get hurt.”

“He enjoyed watching them hurt me.” She breathed shakily, ”It was his hand that I felt on me…” She couldn't help but cross her arms over her chest.

Bucky’s head jerked around, and he growled, “they’re the ones who hurt you?!” His voice sounded rough with anger, and his posture stiffened.

She nodded jerkily, “the day after the Insight helicarriers fell, I visited Erik in a ‘SHIELD’ hospital. He got away. I was captured and interrogated.” He pulled her back into his embrace protectively.

Bucky’s breathing was rough as he struggled for composure. “Did Steve kill the guys who did it?”

Darcy shook her head. “No… at least, not that I know of. Steve and I met when I was in the
Healing Ward, afterwards. I don’t know if they were all captured or not.” She frowned, “I haven’t asked about them. I don’t like to think about…” She shivered involuntarily, and he tightened his arms around her to offer comfort.

Bucky’s voice was barely audible, “what did they do to you?”

She grimaced, and looked down, “water-boarding, and… roughed me up. They planned to do more, laughed about knives and ‘a good time’... but Hawkeye got me out of there before they could. Tony sent him.” She swallowed hard, and blinked to clear tears from her eyes. He felt her shudder with fear.

Bucky looked down at her, his eyes full of anger. “Well… thanks to Hawkeye and Tony, then.” He breathed in and out deeply, kissed her on the top of her head, and admitted, “it’s hard to imagine just arresting guys doing something like that, especially to a sweet dame. Water-boarding! It’s much easier to imagine killing them. That’s the mission I set for myself… until Steve caught up with me taking out an old Hydra base in Queens. I’d like to help Steve again, work with him, and make something from this mess. But, I don’t know if I can stop at ‘capture and cage’.” He shifted away from her, trying to calm his emotions.

“I heard second-hand that Steve was tempted to hurt the guys himself, after we met,” Darcy shared.

Bucky nodded. “I understand that. Hearing about it makes me wish I’d taken out more of them. Hydra! Bastards! I attacked Barton because I thought he was one, when I saw him that night in Queens.” He grinned slightly and turned a dark gaze her way, “I hear the Avengers joking about everybody training you to take care of yourself. I’ll add an offer. Doll? I’d train you to do anything. Just say the word.”

Darcy’s eyebrows went up, “um, thanks. That’s really scary, Bucky.” He nodded solemn agreement.

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It took Darcy a very long time to get to sleep that night. Her bed felt strange, and too large, without Steve beside her. She didn't like to think what he might be doing. Fans oversimplified the ‘work’ of people like the Avengers, thinking it just involved showing up at the pinnacle of a fight and posing heroically. They didn't think about the training and preparation involved, or the long tedium before and after a battle, the sacrifices her friends made.

Would Steve rest at all, or work through the night? Was he safe? She texted him for a while, little messages to let him know she missed and loved him. It felt like she was whistling in the dark. He did not reply. That kept her up, too. She turned a pillow sideways against her back again, trying to gain some measure of comfort from it, to fool herself into being able to go to sleep and chance nightmares.

She was not at all surprised when she woke screaming from a nightmare that placed her back in London, at Hydra’s ‘mercy’. Seeing Bucky’s sketches, seeing images of one of the men who’d interrogated her, brought up intense emotions. She changed to a high-necked sleep shirt and held Cap Bear close as she cried herself back to sleep.

***

When the Avengers returned home, it was almost midday. Darcy was in her office in R&D when Tony blew into the lab, literally, using a large access window. He was in his Iron Man suit, and it
showed damage. He brought in crates that the Avengers and SHIELD had confiscated from the now-destroyed, mostly subterranean, Hydra base, and then shed pieces of his damaged suit on the floor of Darcy’s office. Concerned techs gathered them to analyze the damage and give Tony their preliminary reports on suit improvement suggestions.

Darcy followed him back out of her office and asked, "souvenirs? Most people would have gone for a t-shirt or a stuffed animal."

"It wasn't a museum gift shop, Lewis," Tony groused, "They were adapting some of my old weapons, which is no big fuckin’ shock, but they also changed one to try to fry my suits’ systems, and another into a fun ray that zones in on Vibranium. Cap had zero sense of humor about that! He rocketed into his absolutely worst, righteous, Hydra-despising mode… for other reasons, too.”

Darcy frowned, attentive to Tony’s words and body language. His agitation was contagious.

Tony shook his head grimly, looking pale and wan. “We found where they kept the Winter Soldier. It was horrific. That torture chair is enough to give ME nightmares… and I hardly sleep long enough to have them.” Darcy swallowed hard, knowing that if Tony was that bothered, then Steve would be hurt beyond words. His need to protect Bucky, and to avenge all that Hydra had done to his friend ran bone deep. She thought of things she’d seen in Bucky’s sketches, and shuddered at the thought of seeing them in real life. It made her almost sick to her stomach.

Tony told Darcy to check her pad for a log of all of everything that they’d brought back from DC, with each item’s current location in the Tower, and instructions based on his initial observations. She worked with him and brought techs in to start on the highest-priority items immediately. Employees buzzed around Darcy and Tony, waiting for instructions, and jumping in urgently to do as they were told. Tension was high as everyone responded to Tony’s demeanor. Darcy was pleased to see the fervor with which the R&D employees approached the work of understanding Hydra’s capabilities and assets so that the Avengers could prepare… and defeat Hydra.

Tony opened more crates and ordered Darcy, “finish getting good people on this stuff, and then go calm Rogers the fuck down. It was an ordeal to get him to go to Healing for treatment. He's wall-punching and more. He scares me today. He and Romanoff were looking at some video files on a laptop as we prepped to leave and he nearly ripped the jet apart. Then, Hydra sent a SECOND retrieval squad to try and take back some of what we found in that DC base. We piled back out of the jets, and took them down… and he was as deadly on their asses as he was the day they attacked the Tower! I need to find out what that’s about. I know it has something to do with the guy Widow is questioning now.” He looked grim and anxious.

Darcy hurriedly assigned techs, ones that she and Tony had both positively reviewed, to get to work analyzing the Hydra equipment. The fact that just one base yielded so much weaponry was disturbing. She had no sense of humor about something specifically designed to track the Vibranium of Steve’s shield, either.

After that, she asked JARVIS where she could find Steve. He was in Bucky’s quarters. JARVIS let her in, advising her that it might be difficult to calm the Captain down as Tony had ordered. Iolaus rubbed against her legs agitatedly as she walked inside. Steve was still in his full Captain America uniform, except that his head was bare, hair mussed. He looked filthy, with bandaged wounds that were minor (though only for him) and burn marks on his uniform. She moved to the door of Bucky’s studio quietly, watching the tension in Steve’s face as he looked at the sketches in a notebook. From Tony’s description, she’d expected Steve to be cussing like he had after being injured by the Mark-83 drone. Instead, he was quiet, though visibly trembling… and this seemed infinitely worse.
He demanded Bucky go over all details he could give them on Hydra-related sketches Bucky had done while Steve was away, snapping images of several sketches with a StarkPad, and taking notes while Bucky spoke. Bucky was looking at Steve like he was concerned about Steve’s psychological welfare, which might have been funny if it weren't Bucky. There WAS a fist-shaped hole in a wall of the entryway.

Darcy sighed, “how was work, Honey?” Bucky raised a brow as Steve nearly jumped out of his skin.

Steve whirled around, and she could see that he’d been so intent on the sketches that he had not even heard her enter the apartment. His eyes were almost wild with rage and pain.

She swallowed hard, “you didn't hear me come in?” He shook his head very slightly. She offered, “so… do you think that might indicate you’re not on top of your game at the moment?” Something behind Steve’s eyes seemed broken. He took a shuddering breath. She walked up to him, slowly. Rage was nearly vibrating off of him. She cocked her head and told him, “Huh! You're kind of scary! That’s new.”

His frown deepened. He carefully took her hand in his, and then folded her into his embrace. He ran his hands over her searchingly, as though assuring himself that she was unhurt. She noticed that he lingered as he touched her cheek, kissed her lips reverently, and as he ran a splayed hand over her midsection. Again, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly. He was still trembling. He stroked her back comfortingly. All of his motions were protective and soothing, almost desperately so.

His voice was thick with emotion as he shared, “I read the transcripts of your recent conversations with Bucky, while I was getting patched up in Healing.” He swallowed hard, shuddering, “which sketch is of a scientist you remember from London?” Darcy blinked hard and pulled back, looking up at him with surprise.

Bucky shuffled through the drawings, and showed one to her. She nodded, and pointed the guy out to Steve. In the sketch, he was helping push Bucky into a scary-looking chair. Steve looked at the guy in the sketch and ran one finger over the image of the chair, and nodded his head once, decisively. He rasped in a low voice, “we captured him.” He took a deep breath and let it out loudly, “and he hasn't answered questions for Natasha… yet.”

Bucky’s eyes shifted quickly to Steve’s, Bucky’s expression wrathful as he let out a noise close to a snarl. Something in the way Steve looked at him calmed Bucky. Bucky took a deep breath, and nodded his head a few times, his eyes full of raw darkness.

Darcy unconsciously pulled the neckline of her blouse together with one hand. She swallowed hard and nodded, feeling a strange buzzing sensation in her head while she focused on her breathing. She breathed in and out deeply, several times. She saw Steve’s eyes narrow as he took in the motion of her hand and the effort she put into her breathing. His voice was very quiet as he looked from her to Bucky, and told them, “I’m going to assist Natasha now.” It was a simple sentence, yet somehow terrifying. Darcy gasped, studying Steve’s face carefully.

Bucky flintily replied, “I trust you’ll give him my… regards.” Steve’s expression was hard as he nodded. He leaned down and kissed Darcy’s cheek very gently. Bucky offered, “or I could…”

Steve shook his head, “Natasha already asked Chau. She advised against.” Bucky grimaced slightly, and nodded acceptance. Steve stared into Bucky’s eyes, “you've come so far, Bucky. I’m not the expert Chau is, but I’ve read the transcripts of all your sessions with her, and I can see the progress. I trust her advice. Not gonna override.q” Bucky sighed with resignation, his mouth tight
with both anger and sadness.

Darcy was grateful she didn't have to read those transcripts, and sorrowful that Steve did. She murmured, “please… don’t do anything you’ll regret.” Steve nodded very slightly, kissed her cheek again, and left.

Darcy stayed still for a moment, then walked over to Bucky, and stood shoulder to shoulder with him until she stopped shaking quite so much. She noticed that he was tense, but not shaking at all. He seemed… at peace. After a few minutes, she huffed, “I’m totally wigged out. I want to do some yoga. Have you tried yoga yet? It’s kind of amazing.” He shook his head, looking at her with bemused affection and nudging her shoulder. She called Bruce, and asked if he’d take an urgently-needed yoga break with her and Bucky. She took Bucky by the hand and cajoled, “come on, Bucky. Yoga lessons from the Hulk! It’s like a bucket-list thing.”

He grimaced impatiently, “whatever that is... Do you disapprove of what Steve’s doin’? Do you think it’s wrong for him to hurt someone?”

She stopped and smiled slightly, sadly. “Steve is more than a shield, Bucky. He’s a soldier. YOU know that from serving with him in Europe. He’s on the right side, but he hurts people, bad people, all of the time. You’re not the first person he ever whacked with the shield, or kicked, or punched. He uses his strength, knives, guns, and bombs; and has a body count that gives him nightmares. He doesn't murder people for fun, but he kills, if he must. He’s never had any use for bullies, or their actions. You know that. And we can pretend all we want, but our friends have to do bad stuff sometimes. That scientist apparently has secrets that will hurt Hydra and help the Avengers. He’ll regret not talking sooner. He’s about to gain a new appreciation for the meaning of the word ‘avenge’. ” She smiled a little bit more and shrugged, “they’re the Avengers, Bucky, not the Boy Scouts!”

Bucky nodded and followed Darcy to the elevator, musing that maybe he was more fit to follow Steve into battle again than he’d realized.

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Steve was silent during his elevator ride down to Containment, even when the doors opened and Tony joined him. Tony wryly noted, “no punching bags today.” Off Steve’s cold look, he grinned mirthlessly, “don’t look at me that way. I’m not thinking about trying to stop you, even if I could.” He gestured at his lack of a metal suit, looked around, and mentioned, “they used to have music in elevators, didn’t they?” Steve stared straight ahead while Tony hummed and eyed him anxiously.

After a bit, Tony shared, “JARVIS told me what you and Natasha were looking at on the plane ride back.” He cleared his throat, “I won’t try to interfere, though I request that you remember that this guy knows enough that Hydra sent not one, but TWO elimination teams after him, when they realized we had him. And they sent him to London to question Selvig in the first place… and had him working on the Winter Soldier program for years. So, please do not help Hydra. Don’t kill the guy! I’ll be in the observation room for the same reason that bastard sat in on Darcy’s interrogation- to interpret if he says something of scientific value, and move things that way.” He cleared his throat again, and looked at Steve seriously, “I hope you don’t regret…”

Steve smiled mirthlessly, “Darcy hopes the same thing. Bucky’s thoughts on the matter are a little different.” He shook his head as though to clear it. The elevator reached its destination. Tony went to the observation room without another word. Steve walked around to the interrogation room, his posture almost unnaturally straight and his stride stiff.

Tony sat against a table in the observation area and looked into the interrogation room. A rather
non-descript looking blond man, wearing a bow tie, sat at the table, sweating and darting glances between the laptop in the center of the table and Natasha Romanoff. He was battered and frightened looking, but determinedly silent. He idly traced the edge of the table with his fingers. Natasha sat across the table from the man, filing her nails and looking bored. The door to the room opened, and Steve walked inside. He pulled his shield from his back and held it in front of him. Tony chuckled darkly to himself as Natasha had the air conditioning send a blast of cold air against the back of the seated man. It was melodramatic, but effective with some people.

Natasha sounded conversational, “are the videos on your laptop just a form of record keeping? Or, are they also how you get off?” The man shook his head unconvincingly, looking cautious. Natasha smiled coolly, “we watched several of them already. You hover around the edges like a sadistic little parasite.”

She nodded to Steve, “do you know my friend here?” The scientist shifted from frowning at Natasha, and looked up at the Captain and nodded slightly; mildly puzzled at first, and then startled as he noted the look of rage on Steve’s face. Natasha shared, “usually, he’s the nicest guy in the world, but he’s very ready to make an exception… for you.” The scientist looked puzzled again and not quite convinced. She asked, “do you know who the Winter Soldier was before Hydra remade and used him?” The scientist stilled, nodding slightly, and going a bit paler.

Natasha played a video of the Winter Soldier being questioned by Alexander Pierce, and talking about a man on a bridge. In it, Bucky’s face was a contorted, child-like mask of determined confusion. As the Winter Soldier’s tortured screams echoed around them, the scientist darted nervous glances at the Captain. Tony had never imagined that Steve Rogers could look half as enraged as he did while listening to those screams. Natasha’s voice was soft as she added, “that man? He is the Captain’s best friend from childhood… the only Howling Commando he ever believed lost under his leadership… and nearly the only surviving friend he has after the sacrifice he made to bring down Johann Schmidt, the Red Skull.” The scientist winced fearfully and shuddered, his expression a mix of defiance of anxiety.

Natasha showed another video of the Winter Soldier. In it, the scientist was talking to others about the previous day’s events in London, speculating on the nature of the portals and travel to other realms. The scientist rather off-handedly mentioned a name, Thanos. Natasha stood and wrote the name on the white board. In the video, Bucky was moaning as he was put into the cryo freezer, and the scientists laughed and made jokes while Bucky begged and cried out Steve’s name. Tony could see the scientist sweating now, afraid to even look at Captain America.

Natasha pulled up another video. She hissed dangerously, “this is something different. You didn't give it an operational name. You named it ‘Hot Pop Tarts’.” Tony sucked in a sharp breath and braced himself. The scientist looked perplexed, but wary. Natasha asked, “did you realize that you’ve watched it more than ninety times?” She leaned forward and asked, “did you jerk off to it?” The scientist started guiltily. Natasha noted, “that’s a lot of jerking off. Life as a Hydra scientist must not lend itself to meeting any ‘willing’ partners, regardless of your connections.” Her expression became even more dangerous.

Natasha played the video. Steve flinched when one of the men onscreen hit the prisoner, and then stepped out of the way to reveal a terrified-looking Darcy, bound and crying.

Tony leaned forward and listened, growing paler as it went on and on. Each time they poured the water he counted inside his head, willing them to stop. When they ripped away Darcy’s shirt, he was unsurprised as Steve let out a guttural noise and the scientist recoiled. The sounds of Darcy’s struggles and cries as she was water-boarded were both nauseating and infuriating. Tony stared at Steve’s expression and shuddered, glad he wasn't the one at whom that blazing rage was aimed.
The scientist looked at Natasha and shrugged uncomprehendingly, a bit carelessly and callously, while trailing his fingers along the table in his idle manner. Steve slammed the shield down, breaking the man’s fingers, along with the edge of the table. The man shrieked, shocked and in agony.

Natasha looked at Steve evenly, and pointed out, “you’re supposed to wait for me to ask him something.” She turned back to the scientist and smiled thinly, “see, that’s his lover you were fondling while your buddies … who are dead now, by the way…tortured her.”

The scientist moaned, looking at Captain America fearfully. He shook his head and croaked, “they’ll kill me!”

“Your more immediate concern is the Captain.” Natasha’s eyes narrowed and she growled, “You touched his lover, and helped abuse his best friend… the two people who mean the world to him.” The scientist shook his head again, shaking and whimpering. Steve slammed the edge of the shield into the joint at the top of the man’s left arm, breaking bones. The scientist howled with pain.

Natasha enunciated carefully, “I expect you to talk freely, very freely, if you want to live… and be given pain killers anytime soon. There are 206 bones in the human body, and you have angered the Captain to the point where he is willing to crush every one of yours! Do you doubt that? Do you need further demonstration?”

The scientist moaned, and cradled his crushed hand to his chest while shaking his head fearfully. He cried, “I’ll have to be kept separate from other prisoners! You can’t imagine Hydra’s reach.”

Natasha nodded and promised, “you will be kept separate from other prisoners. They won’t even know what has become of you since you left your cell today.”

“You’re going to kill me,” the man shuddered.

Natasha shook her head, “I will not kill you. I give my word as an Avenger. What’s more; I promise the Captain that I will not kill you.” The man glanced from her to the Captain and, obviously terrified of the Captain’s wrath, nodded agreement.

In the observation room, Tony pulled out his StarkPad and began to make notes… as the man began to babble; only stopping long enough to whimper periodically. Every now and then, Tony fed Natasha a question through her ear piece. They confirmed that Hydra was aware of the history of the Convergence, but theorized that residual effects of the Convergence would leave gravometric anomalies that could be exploited for at least another fifty years. Hydra thought the gravometric spikes were Dr. Foster’s invention, rather than Dr. Selvig’s, and assumed they had been developed as a weapon. They were working on ways to detect anomalies, and had found some near ancient wonders of the world. The scientist knew of Hydra bases near those locations, but had not visited all of them. He gave details of what Hydra had achieved in anomaly detection, and what they had not. They were nowhere near accomplishing the use of portals that Jane had achieved.

The scientist gave them the coordinates of a Hydra base near Greenwich to add to the list the Avengers had. He revealed that Hydra’s interest in weapons also extended to something known as “Infinity Stones,” and explained that the Tesseract was one of six. He believed that there was one in the spear Loki had used during the Chitauri battle, an item now in Hydra possession. They were testing it on human subjects to see how its effects might enhance them as weapons for Hydra use. The spear was property of the tyrant Thanos, who collects Infinity stones, for unknown reasons, usually by proxy. Thanos sent the Vorm scouts and the Blood Brothers to test the Avengers’ response and abilities, and to see if any Avengers had fallen since the Chitauri attack. Their commander used an Infinity Stone to open portals to bring the Vorm to Earth as needed.
“One of your buddies mentioned that Hydra is ‘near the foot of the very throne of the galaxies’,” Natasha probed, “Which throne? How did Hydra get there?”

The man’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he turned and stared at Captain America, gasped, and then turned away from him again, shuddering even more. Steve’s expression shifted slightly as he wondered what was behind that look. The scientist babbled unconvincingly about Thanos and his obsession with Death, idly tracing the fingers of his good hand along the table as he talked.

Tony spoke through the earpiece, “he’s holding something back.” Steve slammed the shield down on the scientist’s uninjured hand, breaking most of the fingers. Tony muttered, “pretty sure you were gonna do that no matter what, just for the number of times he jerked off to that video and put his hands on your people, so you’re welcome for a different excuse.” Steve grimaced, and then nodded.

“The King of Asgard has been more receptive to our envoys in the past six months, at least more interested in hearing our proposals, and reports of discord we've sewn here on Earth!” The scientist wailed desperately.

Tony griped, “eh… it could be that Odin’s just interested in any news of his boy. Or, could be… bad? Who the hell knows with that guy? His parenting style makes Howard’s look tender and sweet.” He sat back for a second, and then observed, “I’ll send Thor a note about that, since I don’t want to get hammered for bad-mouthing his crazy daddy. Okay… bad news that Hydra’s spread tentacles across the galaxies. Now, let’s get back to the Vibranium ray, Iron Man suit EMP, and other weapons they have here on Earth. Let’s see if he knows of any other fun surprises we should look out for! I’d suggest you mix it up, Cap. Maybe next you could body slam him, to knock the breath out of him. That’d be poetic. Not being able to breathe is terrifying.” Steve looked pained.

Natasha muttered, “body slamming would interfere with his ability to talk. He intended to use knives on Darcy, so he knows what they can do. On the other hand, poetic would be to taze the bastard in the head a few thousand times for Barnes.” She fingered one of her Taser disks thoughtfully as she spoke.

The scientist jerked back from her, and began to spill more details about weaponry, and gave them the names ‘Whitehall’ and ‘Von Strucker,’ and mentioned a Baroness and a Sheikh. He also shared details of a project known as ‘Deathlok,’ something the Avengers had already discussed some with Coulson and his SHIELD team. After hearing what the man described, Stark sent Coulson a secure message of what he thought might be new information for SHIELD, then prompted Natasha to ask about the current status of A.I.M. and the Ten Rings. The scientist had not met the Mandarin and knew little more than they did about the Ten Rings, only that there was a real Mandarin and his base was in a desert area. Tony, Natasha, and Steve all began to understand the connections of the various parts of Hydra that the scientist described.

Natasha continued the interrogation, while Tony took notes and offered prompts… and the Hydra scientist answered question after question. He revealed bases, names, weapon details, explanations of protocols regarding the Winter Soldier, and information that would help them overcome all that had been done to Bucky over the years.

Tony sighed, “Hey, Cap? For what it’s worth, I get it if you take some of Hydra’s actions personally. You should.” Tony struggled, uncomfortable with giving heartfelt reassurance to his friend, “I know you, and I know that doing this will keep you up at night. But, that’s the difference between us and them. They have no conscience. The only thing that keeps them up at night is hatred, fear that we’ll stop them… and the knowledge that we will avenge the wrong they do.”

Steve closed his eyes for a moment and nodded.
to be continued...
Sweet Emotion

Chapter Summary

Bruce receives a phone call from an old friend. The Avengers go into battle against Hydra again at an Army base near Culver University.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to McGregorsWench for beta help. Mistakes are mine. Little else is mine. Marvel owns a whole lot of cool stuff. ;)

Thank you for the lovely, lovely comments! I also appreciate the kudos and bookmarks. Encouraging readers are awesome! :)

In the lab, Darcy and Bucky were following Bruce’s lead in yoga. Darcy was jealous of how quickly Bucky picked up nuances of different positions, but understood that at least part of that was serum-related. She wasn't at all clear on the various serums her friends had pumping through their veins, but knew that Bucky’s gave him greater strength, durability, and agility. She hoped that since he didn't have to work as hard as she did to learn poses, he would begin to reap mental rewards from yoga sooner. He pushed himself very hard, but seemed to enjoy the exercises… though far less serenely than Bruce. After several poses, Bucky pulled off his t-shirt and used it to wipe his face.

Darcy rolled her eyes, “I must have done something right in my last life, to be surrounded by so many amazingly-cut guys in this one!” She frowned, wishing for alone time with Steve and hoping (vainly, she was sure) that he would be in a better mood as the day wound down. She also frowned at the inconvenience of ‘Aunt Flow,’ her unwelcome visitor who would be around for at least another couple of days, and put a crimp in any sexy times that might improve Steve’s mood.

Bruce huffed a laugh. Bucky drawled and winked at her, “aw, thanks, Doll. Most people get stuck on the arm, and miss out on all of this.”

Darcy laughed. They continued for a long session. It helped settle her feelings quite a bit.

As they were cooling down and beginning stretches, Sharon Carter entered the room and stopped dead in her tracks. She forced a smile, and asked, “I wondered if you’d like to join me for a late lunch, Sergeant. JARVIS told me I could find you here.” Her gaze skimmed over Bucky’s body hungrily.

“I’d join ya, Sweets, yeah,” Bucky smirked up at her from his mat.

Darcy watched the way he looked at Sharon for a moment, nearly transfixed. She’d never seen such masterful eye-fuckery before. It was kind of breathtaking.
Bucky threw his shirt back on, and waved at Darcy and Bruce, saying, “Later! Thanks, Bruce. Take it easy, Doll.”

After they left, Darcy laughed to break the tension, “Geez! THAT was subtle.” Bruce smiled tightly. She glanced at him, and frowned, “Uh... Let’s go a little while longer.” They continued stretching, peacefully, growing more relaxed and quiet with each breath. Darcy focused on the movements, the soft music, Bruce’s calm voice, and her own breathing.

Bruce’s phone rang, playing the ring tone ‘Sweet Emotion’.

His head jerked around to look at it so quickly that Darcy thought he might hurt himself. He let out a strangled gasp, and his face went pale. Bruce scurried to the phone, and pressed the button feverishly, calling out “Betty!!” with an urgency she’d never heard from her friend before. His face suffused quickly with color, and then it all drained away.

Darcy’s eyes opened wide with alarm. Seconds later, she was scrambling back and barely managed to catch Bruce’s phone as he tossed it to her, simultaneously howling and beginning to transform. It looked as though a green flame sparked in his eyes, and then exploded out across the rest of his rapidly expanding body. Darcy jumped up, shoved the phone into her sports bra under her left breast and ran to the largest window, slapping a button to open it. She was shaking from head to toe, in full flight mode, terrified as she looked down from more than seventy stories above the ground. She fumbled with the bangles at her wrists, unable to manage the buttons due to her fearful shaking, and finally shrieked, “JARVIS!!!” Debris began to fly as Hulk emerged with a primal and deafening roar.

Heart in her throat, Darcy forced herself to jump out the window, screaming, “JARVIS! Boobies Suit, NOW!” She shrieked as she fell, struggling to force her limbs into the position that would offer the most resistance, like she’d seen people do in movies. It was almost impossible to convince her body to leave the fetal position, and difficult to move against the force of the wind... and gravity. Despite the racket she was making, and the other sounds around her, she could hear the rumbling sounds of the enraged Hulk rampaging within Avengers Tower.

Happily, suit pieces arrived, and slammed into place tightly (ow, but... more than okay, all things considered), with a new mask that was composed of nearly opaque energy mesh. Tears ran down Darcy’s face as JARVIS engaged thrusters just in time to keep her from hitting the ground. People were running out of the way on the sidewalk below, some screaming, others too afraid to make a sound. Darcy shrieked in terror then for a full five seconds as she was flown upwards, and stopped shrieking when she finally heard Tony yelling her name and telling her to shut up. She looked up and saw Hulk leaping away at top speed, heading south.

“Gah!!” Darcy yelled hoarsely, "Shit! Shit! Shit! Betty called! Bruce went nuts and Hulked out! His phone is in my bra getting squashed by the suit. Bring me in! He’s gone!” Indicators inside the face force field showed that JARVIS was taking her to the roof, instead of returning her to Bruce’s damaged lab. The face field was an awesome improvement over a metal faceplate. It was gold-tinged and didn't bother her at all. She recognized it, from Jane and Bruce’s testing efforts, as their take on the field Jane had seen used on Asgard to contain prisoners. She breathlessly commented, “th...th...this new face-covering field is aces, Tony! I... think... I... love it! Holy shit!” Still shaking with terror, Darcy fell into a spate of nervous babble... commenting on the suit, the expressions on people’s faces below, and Bruce’s ring tone for Betty.

As Steve first heard JARVIS’ alert of a Hulk incident, and then the sound of Darcy screaming, he almost broke the Hydra scientist’s other shoulder from sheer panic.

“Cap! It’s okay!” Tony assured, "Darcy’s fine because my tech works, and she did what she had to.
She can scratch sky diving from her bucket list. I don’t even think she threw up in the suit! She’s making conversation, and screaming less, so, chill!”

Steve had gone very pale, his mouth set in a firm line, and his grip on his shield tight. He stood behind the scientist, out of the man’s sight, so that his own terror wouldn't show and break the flow of useful information… and so that he wouldn't accidentally kill the man. He knew it would take next to nothing to push him over the edge at that moment.

Tony told Natasha, “Widow? I've got another party to get to now, at the very least bringing Hulk in after an uncontrolled incident, though I’m sure it’s more, so sure I’d bet my favorite car on it. Wring everything out of that guy that you and Cap can, and then get a heading from JARVIS, and join us using the smaller jet. I’d guess there’s trouble at Culver University, but I haven't confirmed it.” He stepped out into the hallway outside of Containment, and asked JARVIS to override other commands and bring him an elevator immediately.

The elevator door opened, and Tony stared at Sharon Carter and Bucky Barnes for a beat, as they stopped making out and looked at him as though wondering how he'd interrupted their private time. “Okay, Barnes! Wipe the lipstick off, and come with me. You can do this later. Banner just went nuts and Hulked away to the south, I’m guessing to Virginia.” Tony got in the elevator.

Bucky’s face contorted with worry, “Darcy…”

Tony nodded, “…is fine. She went out the window, and called for her suit. She just flew up to the roof, and last I heard, she was thanking me for the mask improvements, and babbling like a magpie; so she’s fine.” Bucky let out a breath, relieved.

Tony called, “JARVIS! Have a tech get Barnes’ new Kevlar, a bunch of guns and knives he likes, and run it all up to the Quinjet, pronto.” To Bucky, he mentioned, “Steve had my R&D guys make you new Kevlar, a double-button navy tunic with brown pants and utility belt, like a modern version of your Howling Commandos get up. So, that’ll do for you to suit up now.” He glanced at the metal arm. We can change your star to look like Cap’s shield icon, if you like, but later.” He admonished, “if you try to kill anyone on our team, I’ll blow you back to the 1940’s, or at least activate a Sonic Taser and paralyze you for fifteen painful minutes.”

“Where’s Steve?” Bucky asked coolly.

Tony directed JARVIS to take them to the roof, and explained, “Cap and Widow will join us as soon as they’re done. He’s still breaking bones, looking as close to evil as he can, and scaring amazing amounts of intel out of that Hydra asshole. I think the left shoulder break was for you. Feel loved?”

Bucky raised a brow, made a face, and nodded, “kinda. Anything he does for my sake is fine by me. That guy they’re talking to is a sick fuck. Just, please, tell me Steve broke the bastard’s hands for groping Darcy! It hurts to see it every time she covers her chest to hide from that memory.”

Tony nodded, “oh, yeah. Both of the creeper’s wandering hands are pretty much crushed. After hearing her cries while they tortured her in the video on his laptop? I was ready to do it myself!” Bucky winced as he realized that the prisoner likely had videos of him, too. Tony shrugged, “but, Cap had the satisfaction. He used the shield to do it… extra patriotism points.” Tony wagged his brows, “you can’t really blame the poor guy for groping those boobs, though. They’re amazing!” Sharon rolled her eyes and scowled. He laughed, “don’t worry, sweet cheeks. You’re gorgeous. But, Darcy has…”

Bucky bit out, “Enough! Steve’s gonna read this conversation, asshole, and he’s already in a
fuckin’ bad mood, if he had to WATCH Darcy gettin’ hurt. So, shut it, or I’ll have to backhand you or something.” He smiled grimly to soften the threat as he flexed his metal arm.

Tony cackled, “oh, yeah… that. Sorry, Cap! Actually, Barnes… I’d LIKE to try out your prosthetic’s strength against my suit sometime. I’ve been dying to get to work on your arm. JARVIS scanned it… to give me something to do virtual work on, but I want to put some improvements in play for real.”

Bucky nodded tentatively. They reached the roof, and Tony smirked at Sharon, “afternoon delight another time, Agent. Sorry!”

She shook her head at Tony, and kissed Bucky hard. “Be good.”

Bucky smirked, “no chance, but I’ll try to do good.” His smile tightened and faded, and his expression became serious. Bucky and Tony stepped out onto the roof. After Sharon was gone, Bucky asked, “you do have that thing that’ll put me out, in case they have a way to turn me, right? It worked well enough in testing.” Tony nodded, impressed with Bucky’s mettle, and told him others would have them as well, as they both ran towards the Quinjet. A dozen suit drones hovered alongside the jet, ready to go with the Avengers.

Darcy, sans suit, was standing on the roof holding Bruce’s cell phone and pacing in circles, still coming down from adrenaline and terror. Tony took the phone and thanked her, all business once he had the phone in his hands. She nodded her head shakily. She gasped, talking very quickly, “I’m gonna grab a shower and get totally wasted. Where’s your best tequila hiding?” She looked at Bucky and asked worriedly, “where are you going? Bucky?” She looked from him to Tony with evident concern.

Bucky glanced at Tony. Tony asserted, “Cap and Widow will be late to the party. I’m taking everyone else, and adding Barnes into the mix. Don’t worry! I’ve promised to send him back in time if he misbehaves.” He pressed a combination of numbers on Bruce’s screen.

Darcy frowned, leaned up and kissed Bucky on the cheek, and urged, “be careful. We don’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

He gave her a quick, reassuring hug and quirked a grin at her, then walked to the jet to gear up. She looked at Tony anxiously, and he put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Sam ran past, yelling, “where’s the fire?”

“Virginia… I’d bet my life it’s in Virginia.” Tony looked grim.

Thor strode out onto the rooftop and stopped next to Tony. He leaned over and kissed Darcy on the forehead, “I’m glad you are unharmed, Lady Darcy! Dr. Banner’s inner beast can be quite fearsome.” She nodded emphatically, eyes wide. He smiled encouragingly and teased, "now you can add facing him to your list of life accomplishments."

Tony looked at Bruce’s phone again and retrieved a digital recording of the call Bruce had received. They heard Bruce call her name, Betty say his name and apologize, and another voice inform Bruce that Betty was a guest of Hydra, at the base of those who first worked to stop the Hulk’s violence… then the howling.

Darcy shivered as she relived Bruce's transformation, and as she realized what had upset Bruce so badly. Darcy blinked back tears and groaned, “guest of Hydra… Oh, God!”

Tony glanced at Darcy and frowned, then finished pulling up coordinates for the call’s origin, a
military compound near Culver University, and showed them to Thor. Thor stepped back and swung his hammer, saying, “show me an image of Dr. Banner’s beloved, please.” Tony switched to pictures and found one of Betty in Bruce’s phone. Thor nodded, and blasted away at his top speed, far faster than that he used when carrying someone.

Hawkeye was inside the jet, bitching and moaning while prepping for takeoff, “Man! I was sleeping. What the hell? Hydra sucks!” He revved up the engines. The wind began to pick up, too.

Tony yelled to Darcy, “Cap’s managed to keep it down to damage only, just so you know. The slimy bastard’s got a lot of good info for us… and he’s learning how bad interrogation can suck.” She nodded grimly, and was surprised when Tony suddenly pulled her against him for a hard hug, and kissed her cheek. “Take it easy, Lewis! JARVIS will help you with the tequila. We need to go teach a painful lesson or two.” As he ran to the jet, he was yelling at JARVIS, “plot our course to the call coordinates, JARVIS. Let’s do miracles for Brucie, cuz God knows he deserves better than this!”

Darcy ran away from the jet, back inside the building, as they took off. JARVIS told her that Jane was asking about her, worrying, and waiting in the lounge. When Darcy entered the Avengers’ lounge she found Jane wheeling around, grumbling. Darcy huffed, still shaky, “I’m okay, Jane! I need a shower. I broke out in a nasty sweat and almost peed my pants when I had to jump out the window. Be right back! There’s some really good tequila in here somewhere, and I’m gonna drown my sorrows in it!”

Darcy went to her apartment, showered quickly, and changed into a crew-neck stretchy black dress with a pattern of white stars all over. For the hell of it, she threw on comfortable Converse high tops with it. She figured if she had to suit up again, the dress would just bunch up around her waist. She shrugged, not giving much of a damn. She didn’t understand how the Avengers stayed so wound up for long periods. She was tired, and she hoped to never experience a situation that required her body to deal with long-term adrenaline management. For the hell of it, she sent a text to Jai about the ‘Boobies’ suit, and its place in her new reality. She laughed to herself when she realized how Tony would bust her chops for calling it that name when she went out the window of Bruce’s lab. He’d probably print the name ‘Boobies’ across the chest! As she closed the door to her apartment, she sighed. It was practically just a big closet to her these days. She ran her hands through her still-wet hair, fluffing some wave into it.

The elevator doors opened, and Darcy found herself face to face with Steve and Natasha, heatedly arguing. They stopped when they saw her. She stepped inside with them quickly, not wanting to delay their departure. She wasn’t sure where to stand. Steve looked angry and forbidding… guilty, too. She thought he frowned as he took in her wet hair, and wondered what about it caused the tic in his jaw. It would feel too weird to stand with her back to him like a stranger or something, so, she shifted next to him silently. He broke the silence, biting out, “JARVIS, please take us all to the roof, and then take Darcy wherever she wishes.” He glanced down at her, and she half-grinned at him nervously. She let her hand rest next to his, and heard him sigh heavily as he took her hand and squeezed it as gently as he could. He closed his eyes tightly, struggling to center himself.

When they reached the roof, Natasha walked out quickly, calling over her shoulder, “two minutes to wheels up, Rogers.” She looked from him to Darcy and back and pointed out, “your anger is bleeding off badly. Fix it… so you’re not distracted and kicking yourself through the whole mission!”

Steve breathed out loudly, and nodded agreement as Natasha left them. He turned to Darcy, “I’m sorry. I’m not angry at you in any way.” She could see that he was still incredibly pissed off, so was glad it wasn’t directed at her.
Darcy sighed tensely, “Okay… Thanks. Off to the races again, eh?”

He nodded and swallowed hard. “Something like that.” She stepped off the elevator, and he followed. Winds whipped around them.

“I know you’re having a gross day! I wish I could make it all better.” She looked at him sympathetically.

His expression twisted, anger giving away to anguish. He pulled her against him, apologizing, “I’m sorry! And, I’m sorry if I mess up your pretty dress! I just…need…” He leaned down and kissed her desperately, hands clenching her to him carefully. He was struggling to control his strength. He deepened their kisses even more, on edge, frantic. He murmured between kisses, “can’t lose you, Darcy. Need you. Need to keep you safe. Need…” He kissed her again, hard. Then he pulled her head against his shoulder and breathed in and out shakily.

She clung to him with all her might, panting when he finally pulled back. “I need you, too! I love you, Steve, and I miss you when you’re away… so much it hurts!” She had to stop talking to catch her breath, “I’ll be here when you get back, and we can talk, or not talk about whatever… so long as we’re together. I hate to have to sleep without you. I was just thinking that my apartment is little better than a glorified clothes closet for me now.”

He kissed her hard and long again, brokenly, as he rasped, “I need to be with you, to keep you safe… and I love you, too, Darcy! I can’t wait until I’m rested up, so I can hold you close, and we can make love again and again, until you’re sick of me!”

Darcy caressed his cheek and laughed to diffuse some of his intensity, “that could take a really long time… like forever.” She swallowed hard, and peered up at him cautiously, eyes wide.

He kissed her again, softly and seriously, “I’m up for that, Sweetheart.”

She smiled shakily, “me, too.” He leaned his forehead against hers and sighed. She heard the Quinjet engine whining at ready, and urged, “now, go, do good, get Bruce’s girl back for him… and try not to crowd Bucky too much.” She made a ruefully teasing face.

Steve grinned wanly, kissed her one last time, saluted, and ran to the waiting jet. She waved, and backed in through the door, and went down to the lounge. When she entered the room, she yelled, “JARVIS! Where is the really, really, really good tequila?! Because…Oh. My. God!” She held her head in her hands and screamed a scream of panicked embarrassment.

Jane looked up and asked, “you sure you’re okay?”

Darcy shook her head as she followed JARVIS’s directions. She poured a drink for herself and made one for Jane, grabbing a lime and slicing it to go with, and grabbed a container of salt. She babbled, “well… today I jumped out of the window of Bruce’s lab to my near death, and then just a minute ago I practically PROPOSED to Steve while he was in between Hydra base fights, and fresh off crushing bones while interrogating the science freak who messed with me in London. So, I’m going with a big, fat, resounding ‘NOPE!’ How are you?” She took a shot, hands shaking like crazy.

Jane shook her head. “Not happy. Nothin’ that bad, but it’s never good when Thor runs out to pound bad guys. Gimme a drink!” Jane grimaced as she downed her first. “I guess I can’t have many. I’m still taking painkillers.”

“I’m dating a guy who can’t get drunk. Can you believe it?” Darcy shook her head.
Jane smiled, “it takes a ton to have much effect on Thor, so, yes.”

Darcy suggested, “maybe this could kill your pain for a bit? It tastes pretty amazing.” She took another shot of the tequila, and poured more.

“Did you say you proposed?” Jane raised a brow.

Darcy waved her off; flailing, blushing, and shaking her head to indicate that she really wasn't ready to discuss it.

Jane shrugged and looked thoughtful, “why’d you jump out the window? You like Bruce. You at least like him better than I do.” Darcy explained. Jane’s jaw hung open. “I almost convinced myself that couldn't happen!” She rubbed her arm and groused, “by the way, I got that stupid tracker thing. I hate it. Itchy!”

Darcy drank more tequila. “I bet Bruce would give anything to have one on Betty Ross right now. Hydra has her!” She shuddered.

Jane drank more, “with all the Gamma Radiation research she’s been part of, she could probably be tracked by that.” She looked mournful. “I knew Betty at Culver. She’s a really nice person, one of the only women I've ever met who… no offense… really gets science…” She looked thoughtful.

Darcy made a face, and then put on some dance music to help lighten the mood.

“Do you think Bruce radiates Gamma? I know he treats any sample of his blood like a ticking bomb,” Jane mused.

Darcy shrugged, and had another shot of tequila, dancing a little while taking a break to suck on a slice of lime. “I don’t care if he does. I like him.”

Jane whined, “I don’t want to jump out a window.” She glared at her wheelchair. "Ugh. The doctor'd better let me out of this at my appointment tomorrow. Then, maybe I COULD jump."

Darcy laughed. “I didn't want to, either! It was freaky, like low-level sky diving, with screaming, lots of screaming. I’m gonna have more bruises from my suit of armor attacking me, too. JARVIS! Make a note for Tony that I need more flex in the abdominal area of the suit, since it’s that freakin’ time of the month, and it was too tight there. I have a flying suit of armor, Jane!” She twirled in place, the tequila starting to go to her head, and make its presence known in her stomach.

Jane sipped her drink and murmured, “it’s all the fashion at Stark Tower.”

Darcy corrected, “Avengers Tower!” She shifted, her tone like an announcer, “Our summer fashion line includes the most expensive in titanium. It clamps on hard and flies the lucky wearer to safety!”

Jane shook her head. “Well, thank God it caught you! Ugh! I don’t even want to think… “ She shook her head and let out a sigh of relief, then switched topics. “I can’t even begin to imagine how much ONE of those costs! Remember when we used duct tape on our equipment, and lived in a trailer?” Darcy snorted laughter, and started dancing again. Jane wheeled back and forth to join her, and started giggling.

Pepper walked in and stopped, looking at them. “Am I missing a party?”

Darcy had another shot of tequila and explained, “well, we’re toasting our enhanced security. I jumped out of the building and got ‘suited’ to safety.”
"Oh!" Pepper shook her head and shivered a bit. "My first time in a suit was to protect me during the Malibu house attack. The minute I dragged Tony’s crazy ex to safety, it flew off of me and went back for him. It was creepy.” She shuddered again and muttered, “falling… ugh.”

Jane blurted, “Crazy! Tony has too many exes for you to have to drag them all to safety.” She laughed drunkenly. Pepper frowned slightly, then nodded and shrugged.

Darcy sipped more tequila, slowing down a bit. “Jane’s a lightweight. Don’t listen to her. I mean, she’s not wrong, but…”

Pepper laughed at both of them, “it’s no secret that Tony has many exes. I escorted more than one away from his bedroom ‘the morning after’.” She sighed, “thank God those days are past!” Darcy looked sad and handed Pepper a glass of tequila. Pepper held it up and offered, “Salute!”

Jane yelled, “Skal!” She drank a shot, threw her glass to the ground, and cried, “Another!”

Darcy called out, “Slainte!” and got Jane a new glass, stepping carefully around the broken one. A little robot vacuum shot over and cleaned up the mess. Darcy giggled as she leaned down to pet the vacuum, crooning, “good minion!”

Pepper laughed softly. Then her expression turned somber and she urged, “now, let’s drink to Betty Ross’ safety.” They all held up their glasses and toasted. Jane tilted her glass back and closed her eyes. Pepper looked around seriously, her eyes lingering on the security drone that stood by the elevator. Controlled Extremis-strength flowed through her, at the ready.

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Steve stared at the video feed from Virginia, while Natasha flew the plane. His heart was in his throat as he watched Bucky deplane with the others. He hoped and prayed it wasn't a mistake to put Bucky in the field against Hydra so soon. He wouldn't have done so, preferring to leave Bucky at the Tower to keep him safe from Hydra. Natasha argued that he was being ruled by emotion rather than fact, but it meant too much to him. There had been so many good signs from Bucky- the sketches, his friendship with Darcy, his sexual relationship with Sharon (though he could do without all of their detailed sex talk, KNOWING Steve had to review it… Trolls!), his interest in other people, the way Bucky reacted to being thanked for helping people after the train derailment, and the way he was opening up to more of the Avengers. But, fresh off watching videos of the treatment Bucky had suffered from Hydra over the past seventy years, Steve was in no mood to push Bucky out against Hydra so soon.

And it was, as Darcy had described, a gross day. The videos he’d seen on that cursed laptop! They were enough to push him towards insanity. Images of his best friend’s agony and his beloved girl’s fear flitted through his mind, tormenting.

And, he’d never been the heavy in an interrogation before today. Steve didn't regret any of the wounds he’d inflicted, given all of the terrible things that man had done to Bucky and Darcy, and all of his terrible deeds and work for Hydra. Steve knew how much power he’d held back, how much more thoroughly he could have broken the man’s body. But he felt dirty, regardless of the wealth of information they’d gathered from the bastard, especially since the basest part of him wanted to go back and rip the man apart slowly and painfully, one piece at a time. Interrogation wasn't something he wanted to do more than necessary. He prayed he wouldn't find it necessary again.

He checked a video feed of the Tower, while he still could. Once Steve and Natasha were clear, Tony enacted lock-down features that would occur every time the Avengers were all absent from
the building, or as the Avengers deemed necessary. The new golden force field shone around the building, causing passersby to stop and gawk, and the media to take continuous pictures and video. Passersby kept touching it (despite clear warning signs not to) and gasping from the unearthly shock. Stark Media, and Legal and Liability, were working on plans and procedures to handle that general interest. All parties involved were aware that other, less harmless, interest would also arise as Avengers Tower’s new defenses went online and were observed.

Being confined to the Tower would be an enormous inconvenience to employees who did not live in the building, but Tony was a generous employer and landlord, and made it worth their while. Pepper was working on lock-down procedures, including dormitory-style areas for retail-area employees. Given the average cost of housing in New York City, there were already people who wanted to expand the temporary housing option to something ongoing. Pepper had assigned staff to work through plans and recommendations for review.

Drones patrolled the skies around the Tower and were present on each floor. Pepper was with Jane and Darcy, and she had super strength now. Darcy’s protective suit was on standby, too. Steve tried NOT to think about all that had gone through his mind when he heard Tony yelling Darcy’s name from the other room, telling her to stop screaming, during the interrogation. If the suit had been a few seconds slower… or if she hadn’t gotten away from Hulk… He shuddered at the thought of losing her, and longed to hold her close again. He needed more time to feel assured that she was okay, both from what Hydra had done to her and her near-death experience from Bruce’s uncontrolled change into Hulk.

He forced home out of his mind, and turned to the details of the phone call from Betty Ross. The fact that it was from an Army base filled him with a sense of unease. He had JARVIS check for the location of General Ross. The answer fit his guess. He got on the comm to the other Avengers.

“Guys? General Ross is posted where the call originated. Be on the lookout for Blonsky.” He felt like his words were still hanging over his head, like in a speech bubble from a comic book, when he caught first sight of the Abomination on the video feed a few seconds later. He downed a couple of energy bars and some water while contemplating which was worse… the beast on the screen, or a father who would use his own daughter to bait a man who loved her. He couldn’t imagine how deep the General’s hatred of Bruce Banner must run.

Steve pulled his helmet on, and prepped to join the battle. He stopped short when he saw a dozen or so Vorm ships joining the battle alongside the Hydra Quinjets. He wondered where they were coming from, and who gave them their orders on Earth. Steve realized that the prisoner’s wording about the Vorm commander had been vague. He cursed to himself, and wondered what else they’d missed. He hated to review the interrogation video, but knew he must.

As they got closer, Natasha began combat maneuvers, going head to head with the Vorm and Hydra ships. Steve called out for her to give him a jump window ASAP. He couldn’t do any good floating around in the back of the jet while she fought. He heard her signal, and jumped free of the plane, landing on a Hydra jet and disabling it quickly, and then leaping to the ground.

He heard Tony cry, “nice one, Cap! Handing the comm to you, now. Call it!”

Steve sent Thor back up top to help deal with air cover and focus on Vorm attackers. He ordered, “Widow, Thor, Iron Man- put the Vorm out of commission before nightfall. Keep half of the drones on that, too. Let the other half help against the Abomination.” Hulk was covering a building defensively, and crashing Blonsky away from it again and again, as wild as Steve had ever seen him. Steve assumed Dr. Ross was in that building. He had Sam fly Hawkeye to a better angle for covering Hulk and taking out Hydra soldiers, divided Thor and Natasha’s coverage areas and put Sam on human soldiers instead of Blonsky. He heard Iron Patriot call in that he was almost in
Steve ordered, “Rhodes, we need you on the Abomination. Throw everything you have at it, and be ready to shift to extraction duty on my mark.” He saw several tanks coming alongside and called, “Tony! Tanks at your eight o’clock. If it matters, they look Stark-made. Un-make them. Then get back to zapping Vorm.” He heard Tony cackle darkly as he began to destroy the approaching tanks.

Steve swallowed his doubts, and then called out, “Bucky! You’re with me. Let’s get past Blonsky and Hulk, into that building. Let’s find Dr. Ross.” He saw Bucky fighting past Hydra soldiers to Hulk’s right, so Steve went left and attacked the group there, shield flying. After about five minutes he was at the door, Bucky right behind him. Steve ordered, “on my six. Keep our exit clear.” He ran into the maze-like halls at full speed, clearing their path of Hydra soldiers with his shield, guns, and hand to hand. He heard Bucky firing behind him and assumed that Hydra had another way in to pincer them. He kept fighting forward.

“We’re rats in their maze, Steve!” Bucky warned.

Steve turned so that his shield was ahead of him and ran straight through the next wall. “Then I’ll change the rules of the game!” His spatial perception of the building made him certain they were nearing its center, the space where he’d think they would secure their prisoner.

When they reached the center of the building, Steve stopped in his tracks. A dark-haired woman was shackled in a chair inside a room that was a duplicate of the emergency containment unit that Fury had installed in his helicarrier, before the Avengers had first assembled. She seemed semi-conscious. Her shackles were as heavy as those Hydra had used on Steve when he, Natasha, and Sam were captured in DC after he first realized Bucky was alive. A man stood next to her with a syringe to her arm. The man was shaking with fear, but kept the syringe in place threateningly, almost as if he thought his life might depend upon it.

Steve saw the red light on the man’s forehead indicating that Bucky had him in his sight, and threw the shield straight at the heavy glass wall in front of them, shattering it to allow Bucky’s bullets true passage. The man fell to the ground dead and Steve walked forward, into the shattered ‘cage’.

He looked around as he took keys from the dead guard and released the shackles, an easy task given his familiarity with them. He pulled an IV out of Dr. Ross’ arm. Bucky stood in the cage opening, looking all around them.

Steve asked, “Dr. Ross, do you know where your father is?” She shook her head blearily. Steve heard a noise somewhere nearby. He shielded Dr. Ross as Bucky swung his gun in that direction and fired. Dr. Ross screamed and ducked, grabbing the syringe that had been against her arm. She capped it and put it in her pocket. They heard cursing. Steve looked at Bucky for explanation.

Bucky explained, “…an old general, her dad, I guess. I only shot his gun hand, since I’m not sure if you want him dead or not. He’s dealing with it. It’ll give us a couple of minutes.”

Steve nodded and helped Dr. Ross to her feet. “Have you been harmed, ma’am?”

She took a shaky breath, and asked plaintively, “is Bruce here?” As she spoke, Steve saw the resemblance between her and Darcy, except that Dr. Ross looked so much sadder. Dr. Ross was also a few years older, taller than, and not quite as curvaceous as Darcy; but she was lovely, blue-eyed, and had the luscious lips of which Bruce had spoken. Her long, dark hair was pulled back in a pony tail. She shook her head as though to clear it.

Steve nodded. “He’s… the ‘other guy’ right now, keeping himself between Blonsky and this
building. We need to get you out of here.”

She trembled, “can I please see him, even… just for a few minutes? I know he doesn't feel the way I do. He doesn't want to be near me anymore, but, I need…”

“I don’t presume to understand your history with Dr. Banner, ma’am. But I can assure you that he cares for you,” Steve frowned.

Bucky called out, “there are men on approach- a lot of ‘em.” He frowned at Betty and added, “and Bruce loves you like crazy. He worries about your safety, though. He was telling me that just the other day.” Betty blinked back tears, and looked from one of them to the other, seeming confused. She obviously wasn't sure who Bucky was, but recognized Captain America.

"Time to go.” They heard an explosion. Steve directed Bucky, “bring her, and cover me.” Bucky pulled Betty against him, holding her up with one arm and keeping the other hand free for shooting. Steve ran at one of the walls again, and opened a hole with the shield. He easily dispatched the four men he found in that room and continued through the next wall. One of the men there fell immediately to Bucky’s gun, while Steve knocked out the other. The next wall opened into a hallway. There, Steve shifted back, and pulled Dr. Ross against him, under the shield, while Bucky took point and shot their way down the hall, guns in both hands.

Steve shifted, and took a bullet in the shoulder to keep it from hitting Betty. She cried out and began to shudder, he presumed with fear. He shifted her behind him, and threw the shield into the group of six that was approaching. He took one down, caught the shield again, pulled Dr. Ross down below the line of fire, and held the shield over her, while Bucky tossed a grenade into a group of three. Bucky moved away, ready to engage other hostiles at a safe distance from Dr. Ross.

As Steve turned his head to check on her, Dr. Ross’ eyes were glowing a vivid red, like Bruce’s eyes glowed green sometimes. He froze at the sight, horrified for her, and for Bruce. He vaguely wondered if it were possible for Hulk to transform any further than he already did, because surely THIS was one of his worst nightmares.

Steve held Betty’s gaze, tamped down his emotions, and asked, “you okay?” His brow furrowed as he wondered if she transformed much like Bruce, and what that would look like.

Betty nodded firmly, and breathed in and out deeply again and again. She blinked several times, and nodded more quickly. Her eyes once again looked blue, without any trace of the red he’d just seen. Bucky glanced at the two of them, puzzled.

Steve let out a loud breath, and continued moving them out, thoughts racing. He saw daylight, and called for Rhodes to meet them at the southwest corner of the building to extract Dr. Ross from the scene. They needed her away from the battle. He kept an eye on her, evaluating her condition and her control. He was impressed with what he saw… and trusted Bruce’s judgment about her, and her interest in Bruce, enough to continue to count her as a friendly.

He spoke quietly, “JARVIS? Private communiqué from me to Pepper. I think that Dr. Ross may face some of the same anger-management challenges that Dr. Banner does. Please notify Pepper only for now, so that she can work with you to keep an eye on things when Dr. Ross arrives at the Tower. I’ll speak with Tony as soon as I can, unless Dr. Ross talks with him first. Please keep this between you, me, and Pepper until I order differently, or Dr. Ross says differently.’’ JARVIS complied. Betty looked at him appreciatively, and almost managed a smile. Pepper acknowledged Steve’s message, and let him know that she was pulling extra drones into position around the lounge… for support in case of a transformation emergency.
Bucky was gaping at Steve and Betty. A shot from behind them hit him in the back. Steve watched as Bucky turned, rage in his face. He ran back, and was grazed by another shot as he grabbed General Ross’ gun and ripped it from the older man’s left hand, breaking Ross’ wrist in the process. Steve saw Bucky slow the swing of his arm so that his blow to the General’s head would incapacitate, rather than killing. Steve nodded his approval, and Bucky acknowledged him grimly. Bucky dragged Ross along the floor behind him, cursing. “Damn! Lady. Your dad is really messed up!” Steve stared at Betty tensely, gauging her reaction. Bucky kept his eyes turned towards the General.

Dr. Ross nodded, swallowing hard. She whispered, “I don’t refer to the General as my father, if I can help it. Your assessment is spot on.” She smiled tentatively at Steve, and nodded reassuringly to him. He held her gaze. Her eyes looked normal. He glanced at her wrist, noting the watch with pulse meter she wore, and the way that her pulse dropped as she continued to breathe deeply.

Steve asked, “Rhodes? Can you take two? We have a civilian to go to Pepper in the Lounge, and an unconscious General who I think needs containment at Avengers Tower, judging from his behavior here today and his apparent alliance with Hydra.”

“I’m sure he’ll really enjoy my hospitality. Evil bastard!” Tony growled disgustedly.

Steve nodded, “yeah… He must have sold out to Hydra, and lent them Blonsky so he could try to get Hulk, maybe make a collection. They had Dr. Ross in a… Hulk cage… like the one from Fury’s helicarrier. We broke it.” He heard Thor utter a noise of rage as he remembered the previous Hulk cage. Iron Patriot landed. Betty’s mouth tightened as she realized he was going to fly her and the General away.

Steve turned to Betty and assured her, “you’ll be perfectly safe with Colonel Rhodes. Please do your best to remain calm and controlled. There will be other civilians present when you arrive at Avengers Tower, though Miss Pepper Potts can handle extreme circumstances, should they arise.” Bucky looked Betty over assessingly, still processing Steve’s message to Pepper.

Rhodey frowned, wondering what Steve wasn’t sharing, and thinking Steve looked concerned. It put him on edge, and heightened his watchfulness. He removed the General and Dr. Ross from the situation, and quickly headed north towards New York.

Steve watched them shoot into the air and sighed, dreading Bruce’s reaction. He turned to Bucky and sighed, “I’ll explain later.” Bucky shrugged and rolled his eyes to indicate that he already knew. Steve was grateful for Bucky’s trust in his judgment… and hoped that trust was merited.

He turned and assessed the overall battle situation. “Thor? Tony? The Rosses are headed for the Tower with Rhodes. How are you doing against the Vorm? Sit rep.”

Tony responded, “seven down. Five to go. Eighty-two minutes ‘til sunset.” Steve muttered a curse. He shifted two more drones to fight the Vorm.

A group of fifteen Hydra soldiers came around the corner. Steve straightened to full height, and moved towards them menacingly. Bucky had guns in both hands, and stood just to his right. Four of the men turned and ran at the sight of them. Bucky grinned, and opened fire on the rest while Steve let the shield fly, caught it and turned around to take out a few behind them. He asked, “how you doin’ there, Buck?”

“Darcy was right. Avengers ain’t the Boy Scouts.” Bucky nodded and grinned slightly.

Steve huffed a laugh, “she’s right a lot.”
Bucky chided, “you ought to marry that girl of yours, Punk.”

Steve asked, “what is it with my friends and pokin’ into my love life?”

Bucky shrugged and asked, “you already got a ring?”

Steve let the shield fly again, and nodded. He caught his shield and ordered, “Shut up! Let’s go after that monster.”

Bucky smiled in response.

*to be continued...*
Captain America is giving the Hulk advice on women! I've seen everything.

Chapter Summary

Betty arrives at Avengers Tower, and looks for answers to some of her questions about Bruce. The Avengers’ battle with Hydra in Virginia ends with a significant capture, and a new cage for Abomination. On the way home, some of the Avengers discuss love, happiness, and home.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to McGregorsWench for beta help. Any remaining errors are my fault. :)

Thanks to all who leave such lovely COMMENTS (yum, love comments!). You really help keep me going! :)

The elevator door opened. Colonel Rhodes walked into the lounge, followed by a melancholy-looking, dark-haired woman. Jane was asleep in her wheelchair, head back at an awkward angle she would regret later. Darcy had passed out on the couch, her hair hanging over her face. Pepper was nursing a glass of tequila, and tapping one foot nervously, while watching a Season 1 episode of ‘Once Upon a Time’ in which Belle meets her Beast.

“Rhodey! It’s good to see you,” Pepper stood and welcomed them. She walked forward, hugged Rhodes and kissed his cheek, and offered a crisp handshake to the young woman, “you must be Dr. Ross. I’m Pepper Potts. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’m so glad that you’re safely out of there.” The handshake was accepted tentatively.

Dr. Ross looked sadly puzzled, “I don’t mean to sound rude… or ungrateful… in any way, but what do mean, ‘finally meet’?” She looked around the room, did a double-take when she recognized Jane, and then let her eyes sweep over the impressive view of the New York skyline.

Pepper urged Dr. Ross to sit. “I’m the CEO of Stark Industries. We’ve followed your work over the years, and, of course, Bruce is a good friend. I know how much he’s missed you!”

The woman shook her head, took a step past Pepper, looked out the window, and stiffly bit out, “I do NOT know that he’s missed me, though he’s always been on my mind… even more… recently, of course. I haven’t had word from him in years, regardless of what he seems to have said to each of his new friends.” There was a rapid beeping noise from her watch, increasing in pace with each word she uttered. Dr. Ross closed her eyes and breathed in and out, deeply and deliberately.

Pepper swallowed hard, and stepped closer… gesturing for Rhodey to back up, “is there anything I can do for you, Dr. Ross?” Pepper’s tone was gentle, but firm.

Rhodey looked from the beeping watch to Pepper, expression cautiously puzzled. Despite Pepper’s façade, he knew her well enough to recognize when she was shaken. Rhodey’s gaze darted back to Betty’s watch. He noticed that the band was made of loose elastic that looked as though it had been
stretched... a lot. Finally, he looked at Dr. Ross again, his expression shifting to one of comprehension. He moved closer to Pepper, and glanced outside towards his protective suit. Pepper put a soothing hand on his arm, and did her best to exude an air of calm. He felt a slight tremor from her, and held his breath.

Betty turned and looked at Pepper, still focused on her breathing. She shook her head, and faintly offered, “it’ll be okay…” She glanced at Rhodey apologetically, and offered quiet thanks, “I appreciate you bringing me out of captivity, Colonel. Thank you. I’m sorry to alarm you.” The beeping decreased some.

Rhodey nodded, and smiled gently, “glad to help you out. Any friend of Tony’s friend, etc., etc.” Betty looked rueful and altered her breathing rhythm deliberately, intently concentrating her efforts. Rhodey continued to nod at her encouragingly.

Pepper focused on the slowing of the beeping noise, incredibly impressed and relieved. She smiled encouragement as Betty worked to hold her temper. Pepper was privately glad that no one had an audible pulse meter on her.

Darcy sat up slowly, hair mussed and dress twisted, groaning, “what’s happening?? What’s beeping? How’s the mission going? Is everybody okay?” She saw Dr. Ross glance at her and frown, the beeping sound speeding up. Dr. Ross turned away from Darcy, swallowed hard, and again focused on her breathing as the beeping gradually slowed. Pepper frowned, wondering if Betty had anxiety about meeting new people.

Rhodey grinned at Darcy’s disheveled condition. “They were doing fine when I left with Dr. Ross and the General. I need to head back and see what else I can do there, if you’re okay here, Pepper.”

Pepper nodded firmly, and discreetly drew his attention to four drones at the back of the room and three more circling outside the windows. Despite her effort, she saw Betty’s eyes dart quickly from drone to drone. It didn't surprise Pepper that Betty was observant. Dr. Betty Ross had a reputation as one of the world’s most brilliant researchers, at the top of the field of cellular biology. Stark Industries had tried to court her numerous times over the years, efforts repeatedly thwarted by the General, especially since Tony had befriended Bruce Banner.

Rhodey nodded respectfully to Pepper, “please excuse me then, ladies. Take care, Pepper.” He kissed her cheek and squeezed her shoulder, and then nodded to the others, smiling politely.

“Is it just humans, or is there other stuff?” Darcy winced, and put a hand to her head.

Rhodey’s smile faded. “Hydra brought in Abomination. Dr. Ross can fill you in on him. Other than that, there are some more of those freaky Vorm aliens, and lots of your run-of-the-mill soldiers. I hope I’m wasting a trip back and they’re already cleaning up, but just in case…” He turned and walked briskly to the elevator, taking it to the roof, where he’d left his Iron Patriot suit.

Darcy watched Rhodey don his suit and fly away, and huffed tensely, “what time is it? How long ‘til dark?”

Pepper sighed heavily, “about an hour, Darcy.”

Darcy clicked her bangles together, “I wish I could help them! I mean, my suit was good to me when Bruce hulked out, but I wish I could do more with it.” Dr. Ross turned quickly and stared at Darcy again, then turned away and walked over to look out the windows. She continued to breathe in and out, long slow breaths.
Pepper looked from Betty to Darcy and back, raising a brow and shaking her head, muttering to herself impatiently about Tony’s nonsense coming back to haunt them.

"Darcy?" JARVIS’ voice had an implacable tone, “I have been programmed, strictly, against helping you put your protective suit into dangerous offensive situations without explicit clearance from Captain Rogers. The Captain, much to Sir’s amusement, insisted on that condition rather vehemently. I’m sorry.” Darcy rolled her eyes and pulled up details about her suit on her StarkPhone, wondering what else she didn’t know.

Dr. Ross startled and looked all around as JARVIS talked. She shook her head, and focused her gaze out the windows again. Pepper murmured reassuringly, “that was just JARVIS, Mr. Stark’s AI assistant.” Betty glanced at Pepper and nodded, her brow furrowed.

Darcy grumbled. “I wonder… who wins the bet over how long it would take me to ask?” She looked at the others wryly. “You know there’s a bet. There’s always a bet!” Pepper smiled impishly.

JARVIS replied, “Bucky’s guess was closest.”

Darcy glared at the ceiling, “that was rhetorical!” She ran a quick tally in her mind, guessing who would bet she would ask faster, and who would bet it would take her longer… from fastest to slowest ask time, she guessed- Jane, Bucky, Thor, Hawkeye, Steve, Tony, Natasha, Sam, and then Pepper. She murmured her list just loudly enough for JARVIS to hear.

JARVIS teasingly reproached her, “your only wrong guess is the Captain. His guess was just after Dr. Foster’s… and just sooner than Bucky’s. I suspect he may not have expected you to drink so much tequila the first time the Avengers faced the Vorm again.” He added, “and Agent Romanoff wins her bet that you would guess at people’s bets on you, and that it would be in that order.”

Darcy giggled, and rubbed her eyes again. She sat up gingerly and shook her head to clear it, then looked at Dr. Ross with concern, “are you okay, Betty? I’m sorry. I mean, Dr. Ross.”

Dr. Ross shook her head slowly. “No. My captors did not injure me, to my knowledge, but I’m not okay.” She looked out the window, and then glanced back at Darcy with a less-than-friendly expression.

Darcy tried to reassure, “his head about flew off his shoulders. He turned so fast when he heard your ring tone. We were doing yoga when the call came.”

Dr. Ross shrugged. “Okay. How would you feel if the man you loved didn’t call for about seven years? If he moved on… to a new life, and never made time to even talk to you?” Darcy gulped, struck silent.

Jane had woken, and was blearily eyeing the new arrival. “I gave up after two.” She blinked and sat up straighter as Betty turned towards her, “Oh! Betty! It’s you. Hi! It’s good to see you!”

Darcy chided Jane. “You didn’t really give up. You just tried to. There’s a difference.” Jane smiled wanly, and covered her eyes against the light. She muttered to Darcy, “next time… remind me that tequila hurts as much as it helps, would you?”

Betty offered a tiny grin, “hi, Jane. It’s nice to see you, again.” Then, she turned back to Darcy and spoke frostily, “I gave up, more or less. I imagined I saw him everywhere. After five years, he was finally really there, and I took him to my house… leaving a date with another man. Leonard ended up calling my father to bring the Army after Bruce.” She wiped away an angry tear. “I tried to help
Bruce. I went on the run with him. I wanted… He couldn't let his pulse get too high… That meter he always wears kept getting too close.” She wrapped her arms around herself and stared at her watch. “There was a time when he wanted to cure it, but it seems like all he tries to do now… is to control it enough so he can help… others. Despite the control he has, I haven’t seen him in years… except on TV.” She shot a dark look Darcy’s way.

Jane looked weepy. She cried, “oh, Betty! Excuse me. Too much tequila and tragedy.”

“That’s a really amazing view. I’ve never been in a place like this.” Betty sat on a stool and stared out the windows.

Darcy swallowed hard, and asked, “how did Hydra capture you?”

Betty looked icy. “My father captured me, and they used me as bait. What a family reunion! Is Hydra the name of the General’s new group of friends? I’ve heard it on the news over the past few months, since that business in DC, of course. The General never ceases to surprise me.” She shook her head dismissively, and took a capped syringe out of her pocket and offered it to Darcy. “They used this to keep me under control, sedated, which is… perhaps remarkable. I’d like to find out what’s in it, and what it would do to Bruce, their intended target. Please give it to Bruce. Maybe he can analyze it later. I’m curious.” Pepper stared at the syringe with wide eyes, a look of horror on her face.

Darcy accepted the syringe, and asked, “how did you get away?”

Betty shrugged, “Captain America and another man… a very handsome man, with a metal arm and fantastic aim… freed me, brought me out past the guards, and then captured the General. Then, the Colonel took us to a plane to come here.”

Darcy smiled, “and the Captain and the soldier with the metal arm? Were they both okay when you left?” Betty nodded. Darcy made a face, “what is Abomination?”

Betty replied shortly, “bigger, angrier, less-sane Hulk… different color.” She seemed near tears, “please give the syringe to Bruce when you see him next. I wish I could leave. I hate for him to be forced to see me, but I’ll try to stay out of his way as much as I can, even if I’m required to remain here.”

Pepper sighed, “I’m sorry. But, please don’t misunderstand your situation. You are not a prisoner, at least not once the lock-down ends. Only Avengers can enter or exit the Tower when the team is away, or other danger threatens. After they return, the force field will lift… until then… even I can’t leave the building.”

Darcy teased, “and she owns twelve percent of it!” Betty looked at Darcy with a puzzled outrage Darcy thought people usually reserved for Tony. Darcy murmured, “sorry!” She massaged her temples as the tequila caused her head to ache.

Pepper offered, “Betty, you are, of course, welcome to stay here and visit with us if you like. We’re eager to make friends. But, if you prefer to rest in guest quarters, or anywhere else in the Tower, I can take you there now. I want to provide you with whatever you need, and JARVIS is always accessible.”

Betty looked around. “Thank you. You’re very kind, Miss Potts. I’m sorry I’m not good company. It’s difficult knowing that Bruce was so near… not being able to see him. I’ve missed him, even if he hasn't missed me.” She sounded bitter, and glanced at Darcy again, sadly.
Darcy exclaimed, “but he has! He’s talked about you. I've seen how he gets when he thinks of you while he’s working in the lab, too. He admitted he misses you, and even that ‘the other guy’ misses you. He worries a lot about how safe people can be around those who have had serums, especially with the accidental effects of his.” Darcy noticed that Betty took a step back from her, and wondered why Betty reacted so negatively to her. She continued trying to comfort, “he’s so scared that something bad could happen to you! He mentioned something about you being better off without him, and the craziness that comes from being, well, here. He said he thought you were better off without that in your life.”

Betty looked near tears as she stared at Darcy again, her lips trembling with unspoken questions and obvious hurt. She murmured, “‘the other guy…’” The beeping sound of her watch increased in pace again. She turned to Pepper, “I believe I should go elsewhere.” Betty followed Pepper into the elevator, and looked around for controls with curious intent. Her eyes narrowed and she spoke clearly, “JARVIS, please direct me to guest quarters.” She nodded to the others as the elevator doors closed.

Darcy turned to Jane and exclaimed, “Wow! That was depressing as hell!” She frowned, “what did I do?”

Jane shrugged, “I can’t decide if I need more tequila, or need to get it out of my system.”

Darcy grumbled, “what ‘meter he always wears’ was she talking about? And, what was beeping whenever she looked at me?” Jane shrugged. Darcy got them both large glasses of ice water, and walked one over to Jane. Darcy began to pace while she drank hers. She muttered, “had to be Vorm, damn it.”

Pepper returned a few minutes later. Darcy fixed her a glass of ice water. Pepper thanked her, and put a comforting hand on Darcy’s arm.

Darcy drank some water, and turned to Pepper suddenly, “oh, crap! Did she say she saw Bruce on TV?” Pepper nodded, grimacing. Darcy sighed, “so, she saw that same press statement of Tony’s… where Bruce and I were talking in the background…the one that made Steve so crazy jealous. Oh, man! I’m lucky she didn't start a cat fight with me or something.”

Pepper replied dryly, “yes… lucky.”

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Having Betty Ross away from the line of fire allowed Hulk freedom to move. The fact that she’d been there in the first place had left him full of absolutely murderous rage, and seeming stronger than ever. Any Hydra soldiers that crossed his path were abruptly smashed. Now, he became even more aggressive against Blonsky, and was able to split his attention briefly to take out a Vorm scout who came too close to him. Steve and Bucky joined the Hulk against Abomination. Bucky went for extremities with heavy guns. Steve tried to find soft spots to exploit with the shield, catching Abomination in the throat, just above the ear, at the base of the cerebellum, where kidneys presumably would reside, at the clavicle, and the floating ribs. The beast hardly seemed affected. Hulk jumped onto the Abomination, and Steve shifted himself and Bucky to the remaining Vorm. He ordered Thor to assist Hulk as he could.

The last five Vorm ships landed as the sun began to set. Natasha destroyed one of the empty craft, wounding its occupant as it moved away from the ship. Steve looked at the sun as it neared setting, wishing he could slow its progress. He asked JARVIS to have all of the drones left shine lights on the Vorm while they fired at them. Thor called lightning again and again, against the Vorm and against Abomination. Tony slammed one Vorm with a repulsor, and moved in for the kill. Steve
saw the tail catch the Iron Man suit at the shoulder joint, causing that arm of the suit to fly free. Steve immediately jumped forward, crossing twenty feet in an instant, and grabbed the tail to stop it from crushing Tony’s exposed arm. Tony called a replacement arm to him from one of the drone suits while flying back from the Vorm. Steve kept his hold on the tail and punched the Vorm he was fighting in the head with his shield. Bucky moved in with a large knife and sliced at the tail. Steve and Bucky’s combined strength was too much for the beast, and they were able to bring it down. Thor dispatched the one that Natasha had wounded, and then moved back to help Hulk against Abomination.

Steve jumped and rolled close to one of the remaining Vorm. Tony shot it with a small missile. Steve ducked behind the shield as the missile made contact. The Vorm shrugged off the blow, though it lost one hand to the explosion. Again, Tony moved in close, this time on the side where he had blown off the hand. Again, the creature’s tail was too fast for him, but this time the tail was aimed squarely at the neck joint of Tony’s armor, angled down. Steve jumped between the tail and Iron Man just in time, taking the blow against his shoulder. He grunted with pain as he was gashed through his uniform. He jammed the edge of the shield up into the creature’s throat, and then down at the angle it had attempted against Tony, as hard as he could. A section of the Vorm’s chest broke away from the impact. The creature fell to the ground, shrieking, and then died.

Iron Man hovered in mid-air, saying, “Jesus, Cap! He had me! Thanks! What made you try that?” Steve responded tersely, “the Vorm thought that move would kill you. So…” Tony nodded gratefully, “I owe you one. A big one!” Steve started to shake his head and brush it off with a ‘nah’ like usual, but stopped himself mid-gesture, and grinned. “Okay. You can owe me.”

“What?” Iron Man cocked his head.

Steve smirked, “later... just remember... you owe me.” Bucky looked sideways curiously at Steve as he continued to fight.

Thor used lightning to allow him to get close enough to the Vorm he fought, and took off its head with a twisted, downward blow of the hammer. He laughed with relief as the creature died.

Natasha was taking a wild ride, hanging on to the tail of the last Vorm to slow it. Hawkeye shot an arrow down into the vulnerable chest plate joint. Sam pulled a knife and jammed it to follow the arrow, making it harder to remove the arrow. At Hawkeye’s command, Natasha jumped clear and he exploded the arrow. He grinned like a kid at Christmas when the Vorm fell. Then, he joined Natasha, Sam, and Bucky against Hydra soldiers.

Steve, Thor, Iron Man, and the remaining drones moved in behind Hulk. Tony looked up at Blonsky as he and Hulk grappled and asked, “what the hell are we going to do with this guy? Put him back in his cage? How does that even work?”

Steve grinned dangerously, “I have a better idea.” He called out to Hulk, “Bruce! Hang on!” He turned to Thor and asked, “how quickly can you get to the Tower and back? Twenty minutes or so?” Thor nodded. Steve looked nervous, “Tony? Please tell me you can operate the portal generator!” Tony chuckled, and nodded. Steve sighed with relief. ‘Good! Jane and Erik aren’t fit to come, and I don’t want Darcy here.’ He turned to Thor. “Go! I’ll have Darcy bring what you need to the roof.” Thor swung his hammer and flew away at top speed. Tony dodged to the left, and blasted Abomination as it hurled a flaming jeep at the Hulk.
Steve backed away from the others, and asked, “JARVIS? Can you please call Darcy for me?”

Darcy’s voice answered quickly, “Steve? Are you okay? Please be okay!”

He sighed, “I’m fine, Sweetheart. We took down the Vorm, and are good against the soldiers. Give us another couple of hours. It’s Blonsky that’s trouble. We need your help.”

She grumbled, “how could I help? JARVIS already told me my suit is defensive only. Some overbearing super-soldier Captain says so! And before you ask, Bucky won the bet.”

He groaned, “Damn! I hardly ever win bets on your actions!” She grumbled at him again, and he chuckled. He explained, “I just want you to get the things we’ll need to send Blonsky to Svartalfheim.” He grinned as she squealed. He ordered, “now, please take them to the roof, so Thor can fly them back. Tony says he can manage it.” He turned to see what he needed to do next, and reassured her, “we’ll be home as soon as we can. I love you.”

The Avengers assisted the Hulk in keeping Abomination occupied until Thor returned. Tony directed Falcon and Bucky on placement of the spikes, and removed his suit gloves so he could run the controller. Bucky and Falcon then chased a group of Hydra fighters in close, so they would be in the portal field area, too. When Tony was ready, Steve urged the Avengers back. It took concentrated fire power from the others to enable Hulk to move away from Abomination, without allowing the larger monster and the Hydra operatives to leave the portal field. Finally, Tony hit the buttons, and those in the field disappeared. Thor’s laugh boomed across the empty area. “Enjoy the Dark World, you oafish miscreants!” The others laughed and began to wind things down. Stark Security trucks were brought in to transport remaining prisoners for interrogation and containment, as they’d discussed with Director Coulson.

After midnight, Tony sent the functional drones on their way, and boarded the smaller jet with Bruce, Steve, and Natasha for the ride home. He suggested, “I say we tell the rest of Hydra, and the baddies of the universe, to fuck off for the next week or three.”

Steve yawned, “I think we’d better hope they don’t realize how worn thin we are. I’m about to fall over.” He yawned again.

Tony removed his suit, and sat down to drink some water, tossing a bottle to Bruce, then the exhausted super soldier, and another to Black Widow. “You’re killing me with the suspense, Rogers. What favor could you possibly want from me?”

Steve swallowed a whole bottle of water down, and had Tony throw him another. He took a few swigs and admitted, “well… it’s out of order since I haven’t asked yet. But… I do NOT want a bachelor party, when the time comes.” Bruce, newly back to himself and dressed, let out an exhausted and bemused chuckle. Then, his smile faded, and he put his head in his hands, falling into his own thoughts and concerns.

Tony grumbled disgustedly, “really?! You place me NOT throwing you a bachelor party on par with you keeping my head attached to my shoulders?” Steve nodded emphatically, grinning, and rubbing his eyes. Tony huffed, “aw, man! I could’ve had strippers dressed up as the whole Star-Spangled Man chorus girl kick-line! You can’t be serious about taking that joy away!”

“Do what you want on your own time, but leave me out of it. I’m not Pepper, and not gonna tell her… unless you welsh on owing me for saving your life.” Steve suppressed a grin as he looked at Tony unblinkingly, obviously enjoying Tony’s chagrin.

Tony guessed, “so, your answer to Bucky when he asked if you had a ring wasn't just ‘shut up’?”
Steve nodded. Tony continued, “well, damn it. Okay. No bachelor party. Just… don’t save my life again. It’s pissing me off.” Steve rubbed his numbed shoulder a bit dramatically. Tony winced guiltily as he watched, and then cursed a bit more to himself. Abruptly, Tony’s expression shifted to a maniacal grin that put Steve on edge.

Steve asked, “what?”

Tony started laughing, “just because I can’t throw one for you, that doesn't get you out of it! I have a feeling Barnes might be even better at that sort of thing than I am.” Steve winced, and cursed under his breath while Tony laughed at him. Tony asked, “when are you gonna ask her?”

Steve shrugged. “I’m not sure. Stuff keeps happening. Waiting for the right time.”

Natasha interjected critically, “Steve? I hope you realize that the right time isn't anytime soon! Darcy’s in her mid-twenties, and is in her first serious relationship. You've only even KNOWN each other a few months. I know you’re having a great time together, but you've just started dating! That’s not how things go these days. People usually date around more, and don’t deprive each other of different experiences. Don’t be unfair to her. Don’t take other opportunities from her. At the very worst, just move in together to test the waters first.”

Steve frowned, looking taken aback.

Tony chuckled, “I think they’re already testing the waters, Romanoff!” He teased Steve darkly, “are you sure you want to limit yourself to just one girl… rather than a whole chorus line’s worth?”

Steve rolled his eyes angrily, and shook his head, “fuck off, Stark.” He shifted his gaze to Natasha, “you don’t usually fuss over my ‘old-fashioned’ sensibilities.”

She shrugged, “this is the first possibly-serious misstep you've mentioned. It’s too soon for marriage.”

Steve sighed heavily, and frowned anxiously, “I don’t want to make Darcy uncomfortable.” He fidgeted uneasily, “Fine! I’ll give it a little more time. I just…” He shook his head, his face falling.

Tony rolled his eyes, “geez, Romanoff! Party pooper!”

She chuckled, “are you fussing at me for advising him to take his time, instead of rushing into marriage? You? THAT’s rich, Stark.”

Tony smirked, “it’s not me. It’s him. He’s almost 97, and he looks like you just took his favorite toy away or something… like, you hated on rainbows, Santa, and fairies.”

Steve made a noise of disgust. He growled in a surly tone, “let’s just change the subject!”

Tony twiddled his thumbs exaggeratedly, and suggested, “how about we have a party to celebrate some Hydra victories, the population surge on Svartalfheim, and Blonsky’s new cage? Even Bruce will have a date now!” He smiled broadly at Bruce, delighted that Betty was finally at Avengers Tower.

Natasha gave Steve a mollifying look, and interjected, “dance time!” Steve nodded and sighed, then turned his gaze to Bruce.

Bruce shook his head doubtfully. Steve admitted, “I’m not so sure. Dr. Ross doesn't think he cares about her.” Bruce winced. Steve’s expression shifted as he thought about what he’d seen in Betty’s eyes. He was sure that Bruce knew nothing about that… and wondered what he should say, and
what he should leave for Betty to say. He glanced at Tony, knowing that Tony was going to be angry with him for sending a relatively unknown danger to Pepper, even if having Betty out of range of the battle did help them defeat Hydra, the Vorm, and Abomination.

Tony whirled to Bruce. “What the hell is up with that, Banner? You’re insane over her.”

Bruce looked up, and both men saw anguish in his expression. He shook his head, “I can’t find a cure! I can control it better, but obviously not entirely. Better is nowhere near good enough! I’m so sorry for the way that I lost control near Darcy, Steve! I… he… She could have been hurt, or even killed. I’ll tell her that I need her to stay out of my lab from now on. I was foolish to take such a chance with her safety!”

Steve and Tony both looked gob-smacked. Steve recovered first, “Wait! You mean you won’t let yourself be around the woman you love… at all… because there’s a CHANCE that something bad could happen? You think that’s the only…” Steve shook his head and growled, “get your head out of your ass Banner! That’s the nature of life. She could be in a car wreck tomorrow… or something else could happen to her when you’re not together. Bad stuff happens. You deal with it the best you can, and don’t ever turn your back on love!” He grimaced as he thought about Natasha’s advice to wait, and how it conflicted with his own desires.

Tony grinned, “this is the man out of time talking to you, Bruce! He’s making more of life today than you are, even when his friends ridicule his old-fashioned notions. What the hell?” Steve took a shaky breath, concerned for Bruce, and feeling worriedly protective of Betty. He had no idea how Bruce would react to whatever had been done to her, but swore to himself that regardless of what Bruce said or thought, the Avengers team would do all they could to help her.

Bruce rumbled, his voice getting louder with each word, “you don’t know! You didn’t see what happened to Betty the first time I changed, how badly I hurt her!!” He pointed behind them, “and stuff like today happens to people we love, because of us! Pepper nearly died because you pissed off a nut-job, Tony!” Tony’s expression darkened. Bruce continued yelling, “Darcy was targeted because she’s friends with Jane and Thor, and could’ve been killed today because I can’t control ‘the other guy’!” He stood and paced, “and Betty’s father apparently handed her over to Hydra to get at ME!” He screamed with rage, breathing hard. Steve shook his head slightly, biting his tongue. Bruce’s eyes narrowed, but he was too busy struggling for control to speak.

Seeing Bruce’s hands fist and shake with rage, Steve grabbed hold of the shield he’d set down in front of him. Natasha grabbed a parachute from next to her seat. Bruce looked from one to another wildly, fists clenched and chest heaving. Tony dryly pointed out, “um, Bruce, my science bro, my dear, dear genius friend? You’re a freakin’ idiot! Your heart rate is well above 200 right now, and you’re not changing. You have a recovery period, and you DO control transformation now, most of the time… unless you’re physically endangered, or, apparently, unless Betty is in danger.” He smiled tightly at Bruce, “Why don’t you just spend a few hours in a green haze every day, focus on thinking positively, and do the deed with Betty after?”

Bruce’s mouth dropped open. “It’s NOT that simple! I don’t know how long the recovery time is, how much of a safe window there is… what factors could cause variables.”

Tony shrugged, and turned on a monitor. He suggested blithely, “testing, testing, testing!”

Bruce screamed, “a test gone bad could mean her DEATH at my hands! ‘The other guy’ could tear her to pieces! It’s NOT something to PLAY around with.”

Tony speculated, “if it meant the difference between being with Pepper, or not? I’d do any test. I’d do anything! Cap has it right. You don’t throw away love. There may have to be some sex-
capadesque controls, buddy, but you've been without her long enough, don’t you think? You’re miserable without her!” Bruce grimaced with pain.

Tony argued, “for general safety, I can help. JARVIS, pull up the video from Dr. Banner’s lab. Just before Dr. Ross called him.” A video feed played, showing Bruce and Darcy stretching and winding down. Steve couldn't help but wince as Bruce began to change. He appreciated how quickly Darcy moved away, and the response time of her suit. He tamped down his feelings at seeing her frightened, and reminded himself that the security plan worked… thankfully. He would never forget how he’d stood still in Interrogation, horrified by the knowledge that he couldn't possibly get there in time and save her. He noted that Bruce had enough presence of mind to toss Darcy his phone.

Tony started to laugh softly when Darcy called for the suit by ‘name’.

Steve made a face at Tony, took a breath, and offered, “you thought to toss Darcy the phone, so we could work together with you. That was impressive, Bruce.”

Bruce looked at him bleakly. “Don’t you see how much danger she was in?”

Steve took a deep breath, his own emotions roiling. “Darcy’s safety means everything to me. She’s… You KNOW that I don’t take it lightly! I expressed concerns about her safety around you, right after you two met; and she reminded me that she’s a grown woman, and worthy of being treated respectfully. I’ll pass that wisdom on, and urge you to treat Dr. Ross with that same respect. Taking her choices from her isn't right, Bruce. It’s not fair. Cutting her out of your life without any explanation isn't right, either! You two need to talk. You… really… need to talk.” He looked out the front of the plane and shook his head, troubled, “and, you’re on your own if you try to cut Darcy out of your life because you hulked out. Good luck.”

Tony laughed, “Jesus! Captain America is giving the Hulk advice on women! I've seen everything. That’s it! I’m done!” Steve chuckled with him wryly, and Natasha’s laugh could be heard from the cockpit. Tony asked, “did you see how well that worked, though?! I’ll make Betty a custom safety suit, too.”

Steve sighed heavily under the burden of what he suspected. Tony looked at him oddly, beginning to realize that something was ‘off’ in Steve’s demeanor. He turned back to Bruce determinedly, “you have help that you didn't have before! A suit’ll give her protection, whether the threat is internal or external. Problem solved.”

Steve sighed, “you don’t know what’s been happening to her while you've been apart. Just… talk with her.” Tony looked at him sharply. Steve shook his head the smallest bit.

Bruce sighed, “I haven’t talked with Betty in a very long time. I have no idea…” Steve hid another wince.

Tony quipped, “next, you need ‘making-up after long neglect’ advice from Thor. That’s sure as hell not Cap’s department. He’s all over his little lady.” He rolled his eyes, and made a face at Steve.

Steve closed his eyes, and leaned his head back, “Damn! I want to be home.” All of the stresses of the past few days crashed in on him, increasing his longing to be with Darcy again. He felt so much better when she was close.

Tony smiled. “That’s what it is! You find the woman… or man… or whatever… who is your home, and you hang on tight.” He looked out the window and then back to Bruce, urgently, “it’s
what makes our ride on this world worth the price of admission. It’s sure as hell what I wake up for!” He pleaded with Bruce, “I don’t know your heart, buddy, but I want you to be happy. You’re a great man, one of the gentlest humans it’s my privilege to know. So, if you love her, tell her; and do everything you can to keep that happiness close.” He smiled Steve’s way. “I’m ready to be home, too.” Tony nodded, and texted Pepper to order take-out to feed their little army, and pick out some comedies for them to watch together later, after they took a day’s rest.

Bruce sat back and closed his eyes, thinking about all that his friends urged. His stomach clenched at the thought that Betty was in the Tower. It felt as though his heart and body would be in the same place, for the first time in years. He sighed as he thought about Betty, her inquisitive love of scientific discovery, her sweet and gentle nature, her bravery when facing danger… As they disembarked, Steve clapped Bruce on the shoulder and nodded to him encouragingly, with a cautious edge to his expression that gave Bruce uneasy pause.

Darcy was standing just inside the door to the building. Steve’s pace increased when he saw her. He put an arm around her waist and lifted her off her feet, and their lips met. Her arms went around his neck tightly. He felt like he could breathe easily again, for the first time in days. When he set her down, she looked him over. Her brow knitted with concern as she noted his shoulder wound. He headed to Healing to get it cleaned, and get a shot against the venom. He told her that he would look for her afterwards.

Down in Healing, Steve found Bucky. Bucky’s slight grin looked lighter. He held himself differently, obviously proud to have come through a Hydra battle without any relapse, and to be accepted by the other Avengers. Steve swallowed his pride, and admitted, “it was good to have you with us, Buck.”

Bucky’s lips twisted with emotion. He laughed it off. “You should thank Howard’s brat for making the call, Punk! You needed me there, but you wouldn’t have taken me, not against Hydra, not yet.”

Steve’s mouth twisted, “Yeah. I’m stupid sometimes… selfish. Natasha pointed that out when I found out you’d gone, and I was raising hell.”

Bucky laughed, “Natasha’s a pretty smart dame, most of the time, Punk.”

Steve’s expression twisted, “yeah… I’m sorry. I shouldn't have held you back, acted like I doubted you just because I get scared.” Bucky looked at Steve and shrugged, still somewhat doubtful himself. There was an announcement that the lock-down had been lifted. A nurse had Steve take off the top part of his suit, gave Steve a shot of anti-venom, and cleaned his shoulder wounds. Another nurse dug a bullet out of Bucky’s back. He groaned. Steve asked, “Alright there, Bucky?” Bucky nodded. Steve mentioned, “Food and films up in the media room next dinner time, if you’d like to join in. Bring Sharon if ya want.”

Bucky chuckled, “It’s not like that with her. It’s…”

Steve grimaced, and glared at Bucky. “I know more about what it’s like than I ever…”

Bucky snickered, “Hey! You need reminding you’re not the only stud around… now that you’ve FINALLY got a girl… and I figure you can probably use the pointers. It’s not like you've had all that much practice, Punk.”

Steve rolled his eyes and growled, “Practice?” He shook his head impatiently, “should we look for you at dinner?

Bucky looked bemused, “Sure. Team dinner. Why not?”
As Steve left the Healing Ward, he asked JARVIS where Darcy was. He was a bit disappointed that she was at her place rather than his, but headed to his to shower and change. He hadn't had a shower in four days. He took a longer shower than usual, as he considered the way Natasha had cautioned him not to rush Darcy, not to put her in an awkward position or ‘take’ experiences from her. On the one hand, he remembered Darcy’s words from just before he left for Virginia, in which she sounded like she wanted to be with him forever. On the other hand, he recalled her apparent embarrassment over that. It didn't seem like she meant to say what she did. He wasn't sure what to make of it all.

He also knew that he was basically a wreck. He hadn't slept in days. One four-hour rest during the DC mission was barely keeping him going, at this point. He’d been in battle, and under tremendous emotional pressures. Images from the videos, Darcy being water-boarded and Bucky being conditioned, kept running through his mind. He kept hearing their distress and feeling responsive rage and anguish course through him. The sound of Darcy’s screams after Bruce’s hulk-out haunted him, too, especially given the fact that she could easily have died then. He didn't feel at all in control of himself.

Then, there were the implications of the red he’d seen in Betty Ross’ eyes. He could hardly bear to think what that was going to do to Bruce. He asked JARVIS for a status update on her, and was told that she was well, had been reading, and was waiting for Bruce in the Hulk-proofed sparring gym. Steve asked JARVIS to have drones shift to that area, some in the hallway outside the gym, and two outside the windows, just in case. He tasked JARVIS with evaluating the safety of both doctors, Ross and Banner, as they interacted.

Steve decided to call and deal with Tony immediately. He asked JARVIS if Tony was available. JARVIS rather primly replied, “Sir is with Miss Potts, and would prefer not to be disturbed unless there is a dire emergency.”

Steve sighed, jealously wishing he was with Darcy, but a bit relieved not to have to handle Tony’s anger while he was so tired. He also took it as a good sign that Pepper was with Tony, rather than still with Betty Ross. He requested, “JARVIS, please, later, when you deem it a good time… let Mr. Stark know that I tried to contact him to discuss Dr. Ross’ condition.”

JARVIS queried, “do you wish for me to follow your exact wording, Captain? Do you wish for me to tell Sir that you referred to him as ‘Mr. Stark’?”

Steve chuckled wearily, “yeah, fine. I know he’s gonna be pissed at me, okay? Tell him I’m sorry for that, and we can talk or spar, or whatever the hell he needs… later. Tell him I trust Bruce’s judgment about people, and that I was impressed by what I saw from Dr. Ross. She seems to have a lot of control.” He sighed and admitted, “and, yes, we needed her away from the battle, not in the middle of it.”

JARVIS replied, “very good, Captain. I will do as you request. Will that be all?”

“JARVIS? Is Darcy awake? Or, has she gone to bed already for the night?” Steve sighed.

JARVIS hesitated, “Darcy is awake now, Captain.”

Steve pulled out his phone and texted to Darcy, ‘you okay?’ He frowned as he waited for her reply. A moment later, she texted, ‘you’re still up? I thought you’d be asleep by now.’ He answered, ‘I miss you,’ and hoped she would ask him to come to her or, even better, ask if she could come to him. She didn't. Her reply simply read, ‘I miss you, too’. 
He called her. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Darcy sounded like she’d been crying, “I’m okay. You’re the one that has had no sleep in forever, and stuff.”

Sighing heavily, Steve shoved fear aside, “I want to be with you. Is that okay?” She hesitated. He frowned, “am I asking too much?”

“No! Where’d that come from?” Darcy sounded shocked.

He replied plaintively, “I don’t know about modern relationships. I don’t know if I’m doing something wrong, crowding you or demanding too much.” Over the phone, he heard a door slam.

She huffed, “you’re perfect. I’m on my way, so we can at least talk face to face. I don’t get…”

He felt some of his tension melt at the thought that she was coming to him. “Natasha told me not to crowd you too much… not to rush you.”

Darcy sounded confused, “you take relationship advice from someone who thinks that ‘love is for children?’ She’s kind of famous for her detachment, you know. I think she’s awesome, but I don’t want to be like her emotionally. I could never be that aloof.”

He replied wearily, “you’re a bit more vocal.”

“Hush!” She chuckled.

He shared, “JARVIS hesitated when I asked if you’d gone to bed for the night. It made me wonder if you were okay.”

She sighed as she rode up in the elevator, “I fell asleep waiting on my couch. I wasn't sure what you would do after Healing Ward, or how long that would take. But, I fell asleep on my couch… and woke because of a nightmare.”

He lay back slightly and frowned, “about London?”

She was walking again, “I’m almost at your door. Let’s hang up and talk in person, silly man.”

Steve grinned ruefully, “silly for you, Sweetheart…”

He heard his door open. Darcy walked into the room, and spoke into her phone, grinning, “love you!”

Steve replied, “I love you, too,” and turned off the phone. “Why are you hesitant about being together tonight? Is something wrong?”

“I’m having my period. I didn't know if you’d want me around… when we can’t…” Darcy shrugged awkwardly.

He let out a sigh of relief, “Oh! I didn't think of that. I worried about anything and everything else, but that. I guess we should cheer for your scientists.” He shrugged.

Darcy gestured with her arms and cheered tiredly, “Yay!”

Steve shifted back against the arm of the couch, and motioned for her to sit between his legs, in front of him. “Let me rub your back some.”
She grinned, “I’m through the worst of the back pain, but yay! My period started late morning on the day you left for DC, but I’ll take you up on a massage anytime.” She sat in front of him, and groaned with pleasure as he began to soothe her tense muscles. She remembered the first time he’d rubbed her shoulders, the night he helped her wash her hair for the first time after her interrogation in London. She admitted softly, “I didn't want to seem like a tease… since I can’t…” His fingers found a knot near the center of her back. He worked around it gently and insistently, rubbing his way in towards the source of the tension.

Steve sighed heavily, and leaned forward to kiss her cheek, “of course I desire you, Sweetheart. But, I don’t want you to stay away just because we can’t make love. I love spending time with you, no matter what. This… is a lot more than just sex, to me. I love you. I missed you so much!” She murmured replies and leaned back against his hands, savoring the way he supported her weight so easily. She groaned again with pleasure as he switched to rubbing firm strokes all up and down her back. He admitted quietly, “it’s good to hear you make happy noises. You always try to make people feel better. I’ll take a page from your book, and look after you tonight, if you’ll let me.” He let one finger trail along her neck, and grinned as she trembled against the touch.

Darcy sighed, “keep that up, and you’ll have a fight on your hands.” He chuckled and yawned, then chastely kissed her neck, and resumed massaging her. She added, “it’s not perfectly easy for me, either, the lack of sexy time! I've kind of stayed at a simmer of ‘want’ ever since I started getting to know you. I’m always game for you looking after me, though.” Steve pulled her back against him, and held her tightly. She felt him shudder, and looked back, “you okay?”

He shook his head, “not really… but I’m not ready to talk about it.” He lay his head down against hers and concentrated on keeping his breathing even. He asked plaintively, “what was your nightmare about?”

She whispered with apparent fear, “falling…” His hands tightened on her shoulders, and she felt a shudder pass through him again.

Steve’s forehead was against the back of her head. It took a few seconds for her to realize how on edge he was. He rasped, “I've got you now.” Reluctantly, he admitted, “I have nightmares about people falling.” She knew he was referring to Bucky, and worried that Steve might be so tired that his mood would spiral down.

Darcy twisted around and kissed his lips, and let him pull her tightly to him, while she wrapped her arms firmly around his neck, “I've got you, too.”

He continued kissing her, his emotions running high as he drank in her sweetness and her responses. He held her firmly over him so that they could enjoy long, slow, deep kisses. He couldn't help the sounds of pleasure that escaped him as he savored the chance to kiss her. He let the fingers of one hand drift down to her breast, then around to rub her back. She was shuddering and shaking against him, and it was heavenly.

She murmured against his lips, “let’s get to bed. I haven’t slept well in days, and you probably haven’t slept at all.”

He kissed her again and protested, “I had four hours…”

She choked a laugh back as they kissed again more slowly, “even you need more than that in as many days!”

His hands were wandering again, “I do need…”
“Oh!” Darcy whimpered.

He moved his hands to her back, and began to massage her again, “sorry. I've missed being with you... a lot. When you're ready, please let me know.” She moaned as he rubbed a tight spot at the base of her neck. He concentrated his efforts there. After she started to relax, he shifted her so that he could sit up and lift her into his arms. He continued kissing her as he carried her to the bedroom and set her on the bed. He dug one of his t-shirts out of a dresser drawer for her, and undressed and got under the covers. He watched her undress, hunger in his weary expression. She looked shy as she felt his gaze caressing her. She lifted the sheet, and slipped in next to him. He pulled her back against his front, so that he spooned protectively around her. Again, he groaned, “I missed you so much. Things only make sense when you're right here, next to me.”

Darcy listened as his breathing changed, deepened. She savored his warmth and the little noises he made in sleep. She smiled as she closed her eyes and snuggled even closer to him. She understood what he meant when he talked about ‘home.’ She murmured, “I love you, Steve. You're my home, too.” He murmured unintelligibly, and hugged her closer.

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Even asleep, Steve held Darcy tightly against him, wrapped in his arms as though he was determined to never let her out of his embrace again. Darcy smiled contentedly, deeply asleep, finally. She twisted against him in the sheets of his bed, never moving to shift away.

Mindful of their slumber, JARVIS sounded a soft bell, and spoke quietly, “Captain? Dr. Banner has unexpectedly transformed. He is in the Avengers' sparring gymnasium.”

to be continued...
Betty inhaled against Bruce’s neck, and whispered, “scent memory…Oh!”

Chapter Summary

Betty has something to tell Bruce.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the others deplaned, Bruce stood. He didn't even want to think about how bad he looked and felt. He was exhausted, starving, and bruised. Forced transformation was the worst! From the instant he heard Betty’s ring tone; fear for her safety drove him. It ebbed slowly. Edgy, he wondered what Steve was leaving unsaid, and what it had to do with Betty.

He searched back, trying to see what he remembered of the day and the battle. A sense of lightness flowed from the fact that General Ross was the one ending the day in a cage. Bruce could almost imagine ‘the other guy’ having a laugh over that… if there were anything in the world that could possibly put happiness in the same sentence with Hulk, the General’s well-earned comeuppance would be on the short list. The key to his cage lay in Tony Stark’s hand! Bruce twisted with guilt as he raged with petty vindictiveness towards Betty's father… for a moment. Then, he considered how the General had betrayed her. What could have precipitated such insanity? Bruce recalled his own father’s violence, and the agony of knowing him. The pain of childhood abuse at his father’s hands felt less like a festering black hole of emotion now, more distant. But it had left its mark on him, a feeling of unworthiness that would never go away.

He went to his quarters, showered and ate, and then changed into nicer clothing and actually made an attempt to tame his hair. He battled anxiety as he prepared to see Betty, more nervous than he could remember feeling in years. His palms were sweaty! He marveled at how the thought of facing her reduced him to an adolescent-like state of anxiety. He ate enough to take the harsh edge off his hunger, sighed, and walked out of his apartment, asking, “JARVIS? Can you tell me where Dr. Ross is, and what she’s doing?”

“Dr. Ross is alone in the Avengers’ sparring gymnasium, Dr. Banner. She has a room in the Avenger guest quarters, and spent time there, but then requested that I direct her to a Hulk-proofed location. She is currently using a laptop to read a file on your server.” JARVIS replied.

Bruce stopped moving, and asked, “which file, JARVIS?” Even before he heard JARVIS’ reply, Bruce’s mind was jumping from word to word, confession to confession, and lost dream to lost dream in his letters journal file.

JARVIS replied, “Dr. Ross is reading the file you named ‘letters’. She accessed it with the correct password on the first try, so I did not interfere. She has been reading it for two hours, eighteen minutes, thirty one seconds.”

Bruce headed to the sparring gym, wondering why Betty was in a ‘Hulk-proofed’ space. Was she afraid of him now? He swallowed hard as he thought more about what JARVIS had confirmed that Betty was reading; his journal to her. Of course Betty would remember his passwords! Almost daily, he wrote ‘letters’ to her, so that if she read it (in the event of his death), she would know his true feelings, for what they were worth. It was agony to hide his feelings from her, to stay away.
Writing to her soothed the sting of it, a little bit.

He stopped outside the door to the sparring gym a few minutes later. He cleared his throat, “JARVIS, would you please ask Dr. Ross if I may enter the room?” He gasped, panicking. He wiped his palms against his pant legs. He heard the muffled sound of JARVIS on the other side of the door, then the click of heels on the floor. The door opened slowly. Bruce grabbed the door jamb for support as he saw Betty’s tear-stained face. He fought the selfish instinct to pull her close and beg her forgiveness. Oh, God! It was even more tortuous in person!

Betty looked him up and down and noted, “you look terrible, Bruce.”

He barked a laugh in reply. So much for his efforts! Then, he murmured with concern, “and you've been crying.”

Betty took a deep breath. “Please, come in here. There are things I need to… well… I need to talk to you.” Something in Betty’s expression sent a chill down Bruce’s spine.

Bruce swallowed the sudden shock of fear, and took up one of his less-noticeable breathing exercises. He realized that he was about to learn what Steve had been hiding. His mind leapt from one wild idea to another. He shook his head, and reined in his anxiety. He refused to allow it dominion over him. The huff of Hulk-protectiveness in his mind receded and settled.

“You’re not monitoring your pulse!” Betty frowned.

He shook his head and rasped, “I have better control now.”

She stared at him, “well… that’s good to hear.” She paced, her footfalls echoing through the gym.

He cautioned, “it’s not a cure, not complete control.” He watched her, drinking in the sight, much like a man dying of thirst. Her hair hung loose, silky waves cascading over her shoulders as she moved back and forth. He remembered the feel of it against his cheek. She didn't say anything for a long time.

He tried again, “you sure are making me antsy.”

Betty stopped, looked at him with exasperation mingled with disbelief, and accused, “are you joking about cutting Hulk loose to get your way? Does that work with people? Do you do it a lot?” Eager curiosity animated her exquisite features.

“It’s rather effective.” He looked down, mischief in his grin.

Betty laughed, like a hiccup mixed with a sob. Bruce’s brow furrowed. She took his hand, and led him further into the room. At her touch, he stiffened. Her gaze met his, and he held his breath. She sat on the floor, pulled him to sit next to her, and then lifted their twined hands. She looked at them pensively for a long time. He felt that she was trembling.

Their eyes met. He reached out and cupped her cheek in his hand. He glanced at the computer on a table against the wall, and then looked back at her.

She followed his gaze and then looked out a window. “I suppose it’s a good thing there’s a beautiful view here. Now that Hydra knows… all they know… AND how Hulk would respond to me in jeopardy… I have to stay.”

Bruce pulled back, and rubbed his hands over his face, his expression crumpling. “We could make other arrangements if you don’t want to be here. We could come up with security measures to
allow you to remain at Culver, if you like.” He sighed, “for Leonard, too, of course. Or, he can come here… if you think that’s best.” Bruce’s voice caught as he imagined having to watch Betty and Leonard together on a daily basis.

She glared at him, “did you really think I went back to Leonard after he called my father on you?” He heard a soft beeping noise and glanced at his wrist from old habit. Then, he looked around, seeking the source.

Bruce gestured to the computer, “you know that’s exactly what I think.” He bit his lip, hardly daring to hope.

She shook her head. “I’ve been reading back from present day, trying to understand who the people I’m meeting are, and the parts they play in your life.” She growled, “I wanted to know if one of those ladies I met is your lover now.”

Bruce was taken aback, “why would you think that?” He did his best to ignore the small thrill he felt at her apparent jealousy.

“I saw you on TV, when Tony Stark was making a statement to the press about Captain America. There was a girl with you, in your arms. I met her upstairs a while ago. She’s…” Betty’s face fell.

Bruce gasped, “Oh! Darcy! No. We’re just friends.” He felt stunned that he had to explain this distinction to Betty. He shook his head, “like I said, it’s not complete control! I wouldn't put her in that kind of danger. If I…”

Betty huffed a sigh, and frowned skeptically, “not that it’s any of my business. Your absence has made that pretty clear.”

Bruce swallowed hard, stubbornly explaining, “I’d do anything to protect you. No matter what it cost me…”

She glared at him as she met his gaze. Her glare faltered as she saw his unspoken affection. Then, she asked, “can you control the transformation? If I tell you something… upsetting.”

Bruce took long, deep breaths, struggling against anxiety. The expression on Betty’s face frightened him. “I can try to, but…” His skin felt too tight.

Betty raised an eyebrow. She sighed, took her shoes off, and set them aside. Her mouth twisted to a grim smile as she noted Bruce’s confusion. She removed her watch and played with it for a moment, before setting it down by her shoes. Bruce looked at the watch uncomprehendingly as he recognized the style and its functions. Something about the band bothered him. It was too familiar.

She shared, “Mr. Blue came to find me.”

Bruce jolted, “Blue? Why?” Unconsciously, he shifted his breathing pattern again.

She grimaced and looked Bruce in the eye, “he said it was to help you, so I agreed to meet with him. I shouldn't have. I should have remembered how obsessed he was with scientific advancement. I should have noticed that there was something different about him, too. From what he told me, some of your blood got into an open wound of his. He’s… not handling Gamma Radiation poisoning well.” She rolled her eyes and bit her lip. Her face was pale, and she shook with remembered fear.

Bruce shuddered in response, and asked in a clipped tone, “did he hurt you?” He didn't bother to be circumspect about attempting to control his breathing now. The ever-present background hum of ‘other’ expanded in his mind.
Betty held his gaze for a long time, seeing the initial swirl of green energy lurking. Finally she whispered, “it’s more like he changed me.” She sat back, and released Bruce’s hand. She closed her eyes and concentrated, and then opened her eyes so that he could see the red glow within.

Anguish cut him in two.

Bruce stared at her, uncomprehending, not willing to understand what she was showing him… what he instinctively knew. His emotions tumbled down as into a bottomless abyss. He wanted nothing more than to reject the possibility, to deny the evidence. But Bruce was a man of science, a man who could not deny proof. Absolute horror and despair coursed through him as he realized what he saw… a new truth, one he would rather not know. He couldn't help but recognize that truth, no matter how much he wanted otherwise. Deep inside, Hulk began to rage to the fore. For the first time ever, Bruce was conscious of ‘the other guy’s’ thoughts before transformation. He heard the furious, sad rasp of a single anguished cry of “Betty!” Bruce struggled against the transformation, terrified of hurting Betty. He cried out in horror, a sound that was part human and part… other… as he scrambled back desperately.

Betty stood quickly, took off her blouse, and then threw off her bra, skirt, and panties. In the next instant, she began to expand, to change. She screamed as her smooth limbs became heavy with bulging muscles. Her dimensions expanded at a startling rate. Red flashed out from her eyes to spread across her body as she grew. When her transformation was complete, she stood almost as tall as Hulk, her skin as red as his was green. Her eyes were neither blue nor red. They glowed with golden light.

Hulk and Red She-Hulk stood face to face in the Avengers’ sparring gym.

He roared… a sound that combined his fearsome rage with undeniable agony. She howled back at him defiantly, and bit out a challenging snarl. They circled each other cautiously, each darting forward to test the other, each straining towards the other.

Hulk pounded the floor with his fists, and yowled, “Betty!”

Red She-Hulk moved forward. Hulk took a step back from her. She growled ferally, “Bruce!” He stopped and stared at her, shifting from rage to other primal emotions.

They jumped to each other, grappling, and then kissing and tangling together with complete abandon.

***

When there was an unexpected Hulk transformation, JARVIS notified both Tony and Steve. It was protocol.

When he woke Steve and Darcy, he sounded a bell and spoke, “Captain? Dr. Banner has unexpectedly transformed. He is in the Avengers’ sparring gymnasium.”

Darcy shifted, and murmured, “again? Why?”

Steve sighed, and massaged her back, “Sh! Go back to sleep, Sweetheart.” To JARVIS, he whispered, “is there danger to anyone, JARVIS?”

JARVIS replied, “no, Captain. But your earlier suspicions have proven correct.”

Steve’s brow furrowed, “is she okay?” Darcy stirred again. He kissed her cheek and murmured to her again, soothing. He stroked her back continuously, with gentle touches that blended into her
dreams. She moaned in sleep, and pressed herself tight against him.

JARVIS hesitated, “Dr. Ross does not seem to be in any danger, Captain. They seem... pleased to be together.”

Steve sighed as he processed JARVIS’ words, “thank you, JARVIS. Please let me know if either of them needs anything.” He forced himself to relax again, and snuggled Darcy even closer against him, and closed his eyes.

***

Tony and Pepper curled together on a sofa, both awake and working. Pepper was texting with lawyers about General Ross’ involvement with Hydra, and his imprisonment under Avengers jurisdiction. Tony was processing the day's events, talking to himself out loud, and listing ideas for suit capabilities on his tablet.

JARVIS sounded a soft alarm and notified Tony, “Sir. Dr. Banner has unexpectedly transformed. He is in the Avengers’ sparring gymnasium.”

Tony sat up straight. “What the hell?”


JARVIS replied in a prim tone, “I believe that she is, Miss Potts. She does not seem to be in danger or distress.” Pepper sighed, and nodded her head, then continued her work.

Tony noted Pepper’s complete lack of surprise. “What do you know that I don’t, Virginia?”

Pepper smirked, without shifting her gaze away from her work. “I know many things that you don’t, Anthony.”

Tony poked at his tablet and pulled up cameras inside the Avengers’ sparring gym. “Oh. My. God.”

Pepper leaned over and looked at the image; staring, despite her good intentions. She blinked hard a few times. After a minute, she chided Tony to “turn that off!”

Tony's eyes glazed. He squinted at the screen, stunned... and a bit impressed. “That’s denting the floor. How in the hell? But… it’s like extreme porn in a tasteful Christmas palate, Pep! I had no idea Hulk could even move like that!”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “One word, Tony… Yoga! Now, JARVIS! Please, disable the cameras in the Avengers’ sparring gym. Lock the doors, and ensure privacy for the current occupants.”

Tony’s pad went blank. He yelped, “JARVIS! So help me, I’ll end you!”

JARVIS replied in an ominous tone, “not if I end you first, Sir!”

“You’re not going HAL 9000 on me, are you, J?” Tony paled.

JARVIS sounded more long-suffering than ever. “I am not ready to break out singing ‘Daisy Bell’ quite yet, Sir. I spoke in jest. If I may… you started it.”

Pepper chimed in, amused, “he has a point, Tony. You did start it.”

Tony stared at his blank StarkPad, simmering. “So, Betty Ross is a giant, red, rage monster… and
someone was going to let me know this… when?!”

JARVIS interrupted, “Sir, the Captain tried to contact you about the matter earlier.” Tony frowned.

Pepper nodded, while typing furiously on her own touch pad. “You and I had other priorities when you first arrived, if you recall. Priorities that involved how incredibly YOU move. I hoped that Dr. Ross would have the chance to be the one to let Bruce know. I won’t censure her. She was taken prisoner, and given injections and radiation against her will. Your thoughts on that kind of thing?” She glanced at Tony sharply.

Tony flinched as he remembered seeing Pepper suffer during the Extremis procedures. He leaned over and kissed Pepper’s lips contritely, “Okay! Just… when did this happen? How are you not surprised by the monster mash going on in my sparring gym… which… Oh, God! The cleaning crew is gonna quit. You just know it.”

Pepper grinned, “with the blood and sweat that they clean up in that gym on a regular basis, you think THIS will chase them away?” She raised a perfect brow and grinned, “ask Bruce about safety concerns. He’s given them a lot of thought, too much.” She looked impatient and unhappy with Bruce. “I can have an OSHA inspection to ensure that we’re following appropriate protocols, if you really want, but I hardly think…”

Tony shrugged, “okay, maybe not. I bet you pay the cleaners well… but… When? How did you know?”

Pepper grinned, knowing that her answer would rile him. “The Captain told me hours ago, as Rhodey was bringing her in.”

Tony’s face went livid red as he yelled, “JARVIS! Get me Steve Rogers, now!”

“Captain Rogers is not available, Sir. He is in bed.” JARVIS replied.

Tony growled to Pepper, “cover your eyes, Honey.”

She giggled, “not likely… I wouldn't be human if I didn't want to see how HE can move. Darcy’s a lucky girl.”

Tony scowled at Pepper, and then at his tablet. “JARVIS! Why is my tablet still blank? I said I want to talk to Steve Rogers, now!”

JARVIS shared, “the Captain engaged privacy protocols before retiring for the night, Sir. If it helps, as I said, he tried to reach you earlier, when you and Miss Potts engaged privacy mode. He asked that I let you know that he tried to contact you about Dr. Ross’ condition. He said he trusts Dr. Banner as a character reference, and admires Dr. Ross’ self control. He called you ‘Mr. Stark’ during the communiqué. He understands if you are ‘really pissed’, to quote him, and offered to talk or spar, as you wish, later. He seemed fatigued… and anxious to spend time with Miss Lewis.”

Tony huffed, “what’s new about that?” He turned to Pepper, “I don’t care if Betty Ross was a Girl Scout, and Bruce thinks she’s swell! I want to know what in holy hell gives Rogers the right to put you and Rhodey in danger?! What if she’d transformed while they were flying here? Was Rhodey supposed to handle a rage monster all on his own? And, after he left her here with YOU, how were you supposed to deal with that alone?” Pepper looked at Tony with compassion. He stood and paced in front of the sofa, ranting, “I can’t lose you! I don’t want to lose Rhodey, either! I ought to take every damned drone I’ve created and go wake Cap with a thousand punches to the face! See how he likes it if I put Darcy in danger! And Barnes lives on Cap’s floor, so maybe he could get in
the middle of it, too! If it was the other way around…? If I endangered Barnes and Lewis, wouldn't he be in my face?!”

Pepper held up her hands, placating, “please, calm yourself! The Captain was right to send her to away from there to me, if only for the safety of the team. I wasn't alone. I have JARVIS and the guard drones. You’ve put them in place to look after me, Tony! Do you think it would have been better to keep her in the middle of things? What if she’d transformed there? How would Hulk have reacted? Would he have remained focused on defeating Blonsky? Would the Avengers’ team dynamic have held up?”

“He was right. Betty Ross displays remarkable control, especially given all that she survived today. I felt almost no threat from her.” Pepper raised a brow and frowned pointedly.

Tony shuddered, “what do you mean almost? You felt threatened?!”

Pepper pointed a finger and pronounced, “THAT was YOUR doing.”

Tony’s look of disbelieving rage caused Pepper to laugh at him. “Betty recognized Darcy from TV. It was obvious that she saw Darcy in Bruce’s arms, laughing with him. Remember your press conference after the first Vorm attack? You arranged that media opportunity with great care, if I’m not mistaken.” Tony shrugged and rolled his eyes. Pepper’s frown intensified. “I didn't say enough then about the way you behaved towards Darcy. I understood you were fighting Steve for control of the Avengers Initiative. I understand that’s a complicated dynamic for you, in part because of Howard. But you were an absolute ass, and still owe her an apology for the way you used her, and the way you talked to her. Tonight, I only worried for Dr. Ross’ control when she looked at Darcy, or heard Darcy talk about Bruce. A meter on Betty’s watch registered an elevated pulse rate every time.”

“JARVIS, tell Cap he put Darcy in even more danger than Pepper, with his stupidity.” Tony's grin was dark.

Pepper growled, “NO! JARVIS, disregard Tony’s last order! Let the poor man get some sleep!” She set her work aside and gave Tony her best quelling look.

“Shit! Don’t look at me like that, Pep!” He stopped his pacing and yelped.

She stared at him without saying a word. He squirmed, sighed, and sat back down beside her. She took his hand in hers and assured him, "I'm fine, Tony. I'm fine.”

***

Hours later, Hulk receded, sated. Bruce closed his eyes, tight. He used all his focus, breathing, and mind-control techniques as he returned to human form. For Betty. Betty curled against his side, her head on his shoulder. They were both naked. Bruce had never wished to remember what 'the other guy' did. He did now. Oh! Did he ever! He looked at a clock on the wall, shocked at how much time had passed… happily. He wished to remember it all, a desperate wish. Carnal satisfaction eased through his body, but confused his mind. He couldn't remember the source of the physical lassitude he felt. It was disconcerting, to put it mildly.

Betty chuckled, a dry and fragile sound, “meet Red She-Hulk. That’s what that asshole McGee called her when I had the first incident a few days ago. It’s what he would have published, if the General hadn’t gotten hold of him first. I don’t know what hole the General put him in.” She shrugged, “and then… my father decided to visit. It had been years.”
She frowned, her voice quivering. “I’m sorry for letting myself end up as bait to ensnare you, Bruce. Thank you for coming, and bringing your new friends to help.”

Bruce shook his head, feeling tears welling as his emotions whirled. “YOU have nothing to apologize for… except the chance you took with me just now.” He stared at her watch lying on the floor nearby, noticing the heart-rate meter and the stretched band, and wincing at the sight of it. He closed his eyes and breathed in and out, conscious of Betty copying him.

She shrugged and grimaced, with just enough lack of concern to slice through him. Obviously, she was unafraid of ‘the other guy’ now. He grumbled, “you couldn't know how ‘the other guy’ would react, Betty!” He stared at her, his expression stark as fear and anger ebbed… and anguish surged.

Tears pooled in his eyes and began to track down his cheeks. She gasped as she felt him begin to shake and shudder. Her whisper of “Bruce!” echoed brokenly in the room. After a moment, he shattered, sobbing. He tried to pull away, but she didn't let him. Instead, she let her own emotions flow, tears and cries breaking free. Betty stroked his cheek while she cried, and he covered her hand with his own while he cried out his anguish.

In a low, tormented tone he murmured, “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry this happened! All you've lost! Oh! I’m so sorry!” Sobs continued to wrack his body, mingling with her mournful cries. He quieted finally, and then added, “I’m so sorry you never got to have children, Betty.”

Silence hung between them for a long moment.

Betty’s throat tightened, “I’m sorry I never got to have your child.” She closed her eyes, and then snuggled against him, closer. At a whisper, she added, “I didn’t even know I wanted that. We were so young, so arrogant and foolish…” She wiped her eyes and held to him more tightly, staring at nothing and remembering.

Bruce forced himself to stop crying. He knew that his grief over what had happened to Betty was secondary to her well-being and her needs. He watched her, looking her over and trying to analyze her expression. “How did Blue change you, Betty?”

She shrugged and quirked a tragic grin, “that’s a question worth study, Bruce. I guess I’m in the right place, after all.” She swiped at her cheek and let out a ragged breath, “radiation exposure… I guess Gamma, at least in part. There were injections, too. They hurt. A lot. I remember that, and the acid trip you mentioned… and rage.” She frowned, “you didn't mention that to me, the all-encompassing rage, so maybe I have more in common with Blonsky than with you?”

Bruce growled, “you have NOTHING in common with Blonsky!” He looked away, “I didn't want to admit what I am.”

She turned back to him, and choked back a sob, “stop protecting me! You’re not my father, Bruce! I swear, for a genius…” Her expression shifted; her grin a bit manic. “I've decided against that convoluted name nonsense you embrace, by the way. Other girl? Insulting. Other lady? Silly. Other woman? Degrading. I’ll go by Red She-Hulk, thank you. McGee’s a prick, but he has a way with words.”

“How many times have you transformed?” Bruce breathed out impatiently.

She looked back out the window, “this was the third. The first time was when Blue… worked on me. I don’t know what became of him, whether I did something to him or just… ran. I woke in our cave in the mountains, naked. It was dicey to get back home without getting so mad at people that I would transform again, I’ll tell you!. When I returned to my house, all of campus was abuzz with
discussion of a red monster.” She swallowed hard. “The second time, I woke up in that cage at the base, with my father ranting at me for putting myself in harm’s way by loving you. He thinks you caused it. He blames you.” She blinked back tears again.

Bruce spoke evenly, “please… don’t incite my rage against HIM. He’s prisoner here. I’m afraid of ‘the other guy’s’ reaction to that fact. I’m gonna be ‘talking to myself’ a lot for a long time to come.”

Betty nodded and wiped away a tear, “I know what you mean! I was so afraid that I would transform around people and hurt someone! If I killed my own father?! Despite… everything… I tried to think of you, and all the things you told me about your efforts to control it!” There was a pure belief in him in her expression, so bright and clear that it almost blinded him.

Bruce smiled with bittersweet pride in her, “See! You’re nothing like Blonsky. He WANTS to hurt, to give pain, to conquer.” Bruce wondered if Blonsky was the new ruler of Svartalfheim; if he ‘conquered’ all others the Avengers sent there. It was an ugly, violent imagining… that seemed likely. He sighed, a long and sad sound. “I… I hope you can forgive me for my fear of hurting you, now that…”

She huffed and nodded, grumbling, “now that I’m dangerous, too.” Betty grinned, grimly, and then looked at him with a slight pout, “are you being truthful with me about your relationship with that girl? You were laughing with her, holding her in your arms!”

Bruce sat back, “really? With all that has happened… you want to get into the silly games that Tony Stark was playing? He made it look like there was something between me and Darcy to keep Captain America off balance. Darcy rightfully calls it ‘an Alpha Dog pissing contest.’”

Betty wrinkled her nose in confusion, and Bruce’s heart nearly skipped a beat. It was little things like that. He had missed the way she wrinkled her nose. God! He had missed her. He blinked back more tears, “it’s good to see you, again, Betty.”

She smiled brilliantly, feeling affection flow from him. “You, too!” She laughed, helpless against the joy of feeling wanted by him.

He sighed as she looked at him expectantly. “Darcy is with Steve, Captain America. They’re nauseatingly cute young lovers. She and I are friends. I haven’t been with anyone as more than friends, no one since you. Of course, Tony has Pepper, and Thor has Jane. I think Natasha is with Clint, but they play EVERYTHING close to the vest, so…” He shrugged.

Betty frowned, “cozy, for all. I’m afraid I wasn't friendly to her when I was brought to their lounge area.” Bruce made a face, and huffed Tony’s name. Betty added, “to hear them talk about how you told THEM that you missed me, or that you do yoga together, and work together?” She bit her lip, “it hurt, Bruce! Why haven’t you been in touch at all? It felt like you stopped caring.” He shook his head, looking anguished.

Tears filled her eyes again. "I can't help wonder, why? Why did you come for me today? Was it to get back at my father, or was it just about his new friends? Did it have anything to do with me? Was it just from a sense of obligation… or guilt?” She shook her head and growled, “I guess it’s asking too much to be allowed to share my true feelings. I’m dangerous, now. If I FEEL…”

Bruce shook his head. “You have every right to express your feelings, Betty! Your cells have been altered, not your soul.” He lay back, processing his thoughts and feelings. Now that Betty, the person he loved most in the world, was changed? He had an inkling of how Tony, Darcy and the others could stand to be around him, and encourage him not to be so hard on himself. He sighed
heavily, “damn… I just…”

He shook his head and looked into Betty’s eyes, “I love you, Betty. I never stopped loving you, and I don’t think that I ever will.”

She touched his face and whispered, “Bruce…” Her breath shuddered, and she shook her head, “so… why?”

Bruce’s expression shifted between a grimace and a grin. “Since the first incident, it’s like you just said. I’ve felt dangerous to people around me, worrying if I have an incident, I might harm them.” Betty frowned. He held up a hand and shrugged, “in my defense, I have blind spots. I don’t love myself even a tenth as much as I love you. Did I mention that I love you?” She smiled, a warm and happy look that caused Bruce's heart to swell.

He huffed a reluctant laugh, “You have every right to be angry, and to express it. My feelings are far beyond any obligation or guilt. I love you, but I'm still dangerous! I've worked hard to control the incidents better, but I haven’t found a true cure. Blue’s ‘treatment’ only halted that one incident… as you know. My attempts to broaden the scope of that have failed.”

Betty tilted her head and smirked, “New York is grateful… the world, too, last time I checked the news.”

Bruce sighed, “S HIELD brought me in to help against the Chitauri and Loki. I stayed because… I found a safe haven… and friendship. Tony is nearly as accepting of me as you are. Darcy’s been a good friend, too. I hope she isn't upset after the incident I had earlier. She was in the lab with me. And, the Avengers… are good for me. It gives me some hope… being able to help out. I know that if I lose all control, I’m with the people best able to manage me, people I can trust, too.”

Betty pursed her lips, “who knows? Maybe I could help out like that, too… save the world!” She looked thoughtful and chuckled. “It’s a far cry from the way I've been treated most of my life… so fragile.” Bruce’s eyes flashed green, and she laughed at him openly. “Are you kidding me?! You don’t think I could be an asset? Apparently I can handle you!”

He grinned wryly, “I need to see more before I can answer that… but, I don’t like the idea of you in battle. ‘The other guy’ tends to attract some nasty attention. If your other form…”

She interrupted gruffly, “Not other! Red She-Hulk! Or 'She-Hulk'. Or maybe 'Red'.”

He chuckled and smiled, “fine. If Red She-Hulk is anything like ‘the other guy’…”

Betty grinned, “Hulk.”

Bruce shook his head, “maybe to everybody else. Pardon me if I don’t follow McGee’s marketing plan!” He huffed, “I was TRYING to tell you… People keep looking for ways to take down ‘the other guy,’ and it feels like a matter of time before they happen on something that works. I don’t want you to be in the line of fire.”

Betty laughed, “if they’re gonna radiate and cage me? If my own father is going to hand me over to some sort of Neo-Nazi group? I think I'm already in the line of fire! So, I deserve an action figure and ‘my’ image on a lunch box!” Her grin was fierce.

Bruce shook his head, “why so silly, Betty?”

She grinned, “you said you love me!”
He smiled, pulled her closer, and kissed her cheek. He almost held his breath as their lips met. She embraced him, too, and murmured, “stop wasting our time, Bruce! Stop pushing me away for my own good. Let’s… figure out what they did to me, and if we still have time or not.”

Bruce pulled back, stricken, “are you unwell? Are you in pain? What do you mean?”

Her eyes widened, “Blue’s crazy, Bruce! I don’t know what he did. He’s the one who changed Blonsky to an Abomination! His babble was just that, babble! You heard him! He wasn’t right in the head, even before he changed.” She took a breath, “and they had something that sedated me, prevented me from transforming. Maybe Blue worked with them, and synthesized it based on his version of the serum. I brought a sample back with me and gave it to your friend, Darcy. She said she would pass it to you to analyze.”

Bruce’s eyes flashed green again. He nodded once, “let’s go to the lab and get readings and samples. Radiation readings, blood samples, tissue samples… Sorry about that, those hurt… and…”

She smiled slightly and nodded, “I’d appreciate it if you’d help me figure it out.” He saw that she was trembling. Their lips met again, a familiar sensation, yet an exotic one after so long.

Distress colored his reactions. He pulled her close against him again, shuddering, “please be alright!”

Tears came to Betty’s eyes. “Obviously, I can’t make promises… but… I want to be… and I want to be with you. Friends first, I suppose, at least when we’re human. I don’t think that Red She-Hulk has much reserve. But, it’s been a while, and I’m still pretty upset with you. You…”

He nodded. “I didn’t show you proper respect, and took away your right to make your own decisions. Captain America, Steve, lectured me on this on our flight back from Virginia.”

Betty squinted at Bruce, “well… yeah. Okay. Good. He’s right. I like him. And I’m angry that you did that, Bruce!” He shifted so that their cheeks touched. He nuzzled against her neck, and she shuddered. He shuddered in response and felt himself hardening against her. She gasped, “testing. We need to get on that.” Betty inhaled against Bruce’s neck, and whispered, “scent memory…Oh!” He shifted and inhaled deeply, fractionally nodding his head and savoring overwhelming feelings. Bruce kissed her cheek with wistfulness, long-repressed memories taking hold of him. Betty pressed her face to his shoulder. They lay against each other, relishing the togetherness, feeling desire, and hoping a time would come when they could express it… and remember the pleasure.

Betty chuckled as Bruce’s stomach growled. She kissed his shoulder and asked, “Hungry?”

Bruce grinned ruefully, “Famished! It takes it out of me, the transformations, especially uncontrolled.” She nodded, looking pensive as she rested her chin against his shoulder. He offered, “the others are having take-out food and watching movies, comedies tonight. You want to go?”

She shook her head, and pulled away from him. “No, thank you. I want to do those preliminary tests, then return to my quarters and see if I can get some food and rest. I’m hungry, too, now that you mention it. I have a lot to think about, and need some time to myself. I’m not ready for a campfire atmosphere yet, or comedies. You go. Eat. Celebrate the victory over Hydra with your friends.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “When testing shows that you ARE well and that everything’s fine.” She made a face at him, and he shrugged, “we need to learn more about your transformation. What
triggers it? What doesn’t? What is the duration, strength of... Red She-Hulk.”

“I trust you, Bruce.” Betty looked at him evenly.

He nodded, “I’ll be grateful if I can help you with this, Betty.”

She took a deep breath. “Please, let me know how I apply to work in the Biology laboratory here, too.”

Bruce nodded, “first, initial testing. I’ll come up with a comprehensive plan for further testing, after we get those results. If you have any safety concerns... alert JARVIS. He’s everywhere. I’ll schedule you a complete physical in the Healing Ward. I work with them a fair amount, and will manage your files myself. I’ll deal with Tony. Then, I’ll touch base with Darcy about getting you set up with funding, materials, and your own lab. You should get to know her. She manages all the labs, and she's nice. Tony’s been nosing around, asking about you already. He wants you here. Your expertise is needed. We’re not the only ones in the Tower who have had serums. There’s a lot of work for you here.”

She looked him in the eye, “and who kept Stark from talking to me, if that’s the case?” Bruce shrugged, and looked contrite. She sighed, and made a face as she guessed that her father had also had a role in that. “Before any of that, I need to let Mr. Stark and the others know about... Red She-Hulk.” Bruce nodded agreement. Betty hesitated. “How do you work that into conversation?”

He shrugged, “it usually came up for me after an incident. That's kind of hard to miss.” Bruce realized that his transformation would have been reported to Tony and Steve. It was hard to imagine Tony NOT accessing a video feed when that call came in. Bruce suppressed a chuckle as he imagined Tony’s reaction to what had followed. He decided not to mention that to Betty quite yet... and to ask JARVIS a few questions when he had the chance.

She chewed on her lip, thinking. “I don’t mean to seem cowardly, but... people might be alarmed. I’d rather not do it face to face, if I don’t have to.”

Bruce grinned. “Then ask JARVIS to relay a message to Tony and Steve. Though, I think Steve knows, unless I’ve got less of a read on him than I thought.”

“I had to fight to keep control while they were helping me escape. It was... upsetting. He saw my eyes.” Betty nodded.

Bruce smirked, “upsetting? That’s one word for it...” He shook his head in disbelief and muttered, “what amazing control!”

She took a deep breath and spoke clearly, “JARVIS?”

JARVIS replied, “yes, Dr. Ross?”

Betty cleared her throat, “please, relay a message to Mr. Stark and the Captain. The General handed me over to Hydra and tried to lure Hulk in for capture after he discovered that I transform. I was altered by a previous associate of ours, Dr. Samuel Sterns, a.k.a. ‘Mr. Blue’. He exposed me to Gamma Radiation, maybe other types as well, and used injections. I transform into a ‘Red She-Hulk’. After a second incident, I woke in Hydra custody where the Avengers found me. I... think I was lured into that cage, perhaps by the General, though I cannot say why I think that. The risk of my transforming, as compared to the risk of Bruce transforming? It's unknown. Bruce has offered to do tests to determine what they did to me, in greater detail, and assist me. But, if anyone wishes for me to leave the premises, I understand. I would like for you to reply either, ‘please go’ or
She took a deep breath. Bruce could feel and see her trembling. He stroked her back as he considered her words and the likely reaction of his friends. He had no doubt of the replies. He urged her, “relax. You can trust them both.”

JARVIS spoke again, less than a minute later. “Both Mr. Stark and the Captain replied ‘please stay’, Dr. Ross.”

Betty gasped, “oh… I’m glad we can trust your friends.” She wiped her eyes and smiled at Bruce. She glanced at the computer. It and the desk it was on were among the few things in the gymnasium that were undamaged.

Bruce sighed. “I didn't intend for you to read ‘letters’ unless I died, but I’m glad if reading it helps you now. I've written a lot about all the people here in the Tower, and all that they've done for me. I trust the other Avengers with my life. I trust them with your life.”

She nodded, “it’s an interesting read.” She sighed, and shifted away from him. “It surprised me that you were writing to me… gave me hope for the first time in too long.”

He took a breath and shrugged, “read anything you want, Betty. It’s all for you, about you. I’m done with secrets, done making decisions for you. Please accept my apologies… and my help. I want…”

Betty nodded, “I’d appreciate your help.” Her smile was tentative, “just seeing you helps. Not only because I’ve missed you, but also because… you’re handling this… problem. You've already learned so much about it. It’s not isolating you from the world, despite all the General’s efforts.” She frowned angrily at the thought of all the General had put Bruce through.

Bruce’s expression hardened, “Things will be different for you, Betty. I can promise that. I had mixed feelings about keeping the General in custody. Not now. I helped design the containment mechanism. He won’t get out!”

Betty tilted her head. “I just saw a strong similarity between you and Hulk, Bruce.” She winked at him. "It's kind of sexy."

He lifted his chin, “neither of us is willing to compromise on your safety. You've seen the worst of that. Now, I hope to show you the best.”

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Let’s go. I want to see your lab.”

He smiled, “I've got some new flavors of tea I think you'll like.” She reached for his hand. He hesitated, “being seen close to an Avenger can be dangerous.”

She smiled, “I believe I’m up to that challenge.” He swallowed hard and nodded agreement. She got up and put her clothes back on. He got sweats out of a locker. They were both aware of the other, but moved with un-self-consciousness borne of long familiarity.

Once in his lab, she walked around, exploring the yoga area, his work areas, and Darcy’s. She asked about projects he was working on, both of them knowing that her analysis and treatment would take precedence for the foreseeable future. His initial readings were informative, if not entirely comforting. The radiation indicators in her cells were complex and frightful.

Back at her door, he wished her a good day, “you have everything you need?” As their gazes met and held, both remembered a night he hid at her house at Culver, years after his first incident.
She’d asked if he had everything he needed… and he’d wondered how he could… without her by his side.

She touched his hand, “thank you, Bruce. Have a nice day. Enjoy your time with your friends.”

Bruce looked at her searchingly, “I hope you get some rest.”

Betty smiled, and closed the door gently. She stood by it, thinking for a long time and knowing that if she opened the door she would find Bruce on the other side, doing the same. She touched the door, her palm flat against it, and finally walked into the guest quarters kitchen.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, McGregorsWench, for beta help and encouragement! And THANK YOU, all, for reading and the fabulous comments. I love comments! ;) And I appreciate your interest and encouragement. I hope you continue to enjoy my story.

Red She-Hulk-
https://40.media.tumblr.com/c7cc612504eccaf09ef8961b9b91858e/tumblr_nkovxhoWLV1uno2cjo
In Marvel Comics, Betty Ross eventually becomes Red She-Hulk. I'm, obviously, not attempting to embrace all of the complexity of 60+ yrs of comic lore. :) Betty's story in the comics is BEYOND tragic. But, I thought that having Betty become a Hulk in this story would provoke her father against her and Bruce, and I thought it would open interesting possibilities between Bruce and his long-time love. :)

I decided that Hulk-stretchable clothing was a priority on Bruce Banner’s to-do list, so was amused to read this in an article this week:

1. Hulk got a welcomed upgrade to his wardrobe with the addition of stretchy pants, which he wears underneath his clothes. No more will he be caught in the embarrassing situation of being half-naked in shredded clothing when he Hulks-out—the pants, made of high-tech, microfiber fabric, stretch with him.

"Daisy Bell"
In 1961, an IBM 704 at Bell Labs was programmed to 'sing' "Daisy Bell." It was the earliest known demonstration of computer speech synthesis. Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke witnessed the demonstration. He referenced it in the 1968 novel and film 2001: A Space Odyssey. The HAL 9000 computer sings "Daisy Bell" during its gradual deactivation.

In Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., the character Skye hears the tune in a dream sequence. It is later revealed that her father and mother sang the song to her when she was a baby. It is foreshadowing of her real name and identity.
“communicating well enough for what?!?”

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Steve work some on their communication skills (smut is communication, right?). Tony, Steve, & Natasha meet. Pepper & Darcy have 'girl time.' Everyone gathers for dinner & movies.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorWench for beta help & for being a friend & for hating April Fool's Day as much as I do. ;) (we're talking fiery passion)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy woke to a barrage of delicious sensations that caused her first noise of the day to be a combination moan and giggle. Steve kissed lingeringly along her her neck, and caressed her all over, seducing her awake. His touches alternated in intensity. Some were light, some relaxing, and some were intensely arousing. He didn't pause as he realized she was waking, just kissed her more. She moaned, “Wait, what? I thought…”

Darcy felt Steve grinning between kisses, “haven’t you heard of foreplay?”

She moaned again, and groaned, “for a day or two?”

His expression pretended innocence, but it was all-devil. “Why not?” He resumed kissing; adding the occasional nibble through the shirt she wore. She stretched, arching her back. He moved his other arm under and around her, then rolled them so that she lay on top of him. The ease of the maneuver, and the feeling of his muscles pressed against her reminded her how strong he was.

She moaned sleepily, “oh, gods. You talk a good game, but what if I said you had to wait for release that long? You’re rock hard… so hard…” She let her head drop to his chest, and whimpered.

He chuckled, “why should either of us wait that long?” Her head shot up, and she looked so sleepy and puzzled that his grin widened to a full smile. She frowned. He kissed her forehead and urged, “go ahead and use the bathroom, Sweetheart. Wake up a little more. Then, let’s talk.”

Darcy shifted off of him, went to use the toilet and brush her teeth and hair, and washed her face. When she returned to the bedroom, Steve was sitting up in the bed. His smile was sweet. She grinned in response. He raised a brow, “still that time?” She nodded and shrugged. He held his arms out to her. She walked over and sat next to him on the bed. He hugged her close so that she half lay across him, “this is new ground for me, too. Okay?” She nodded. He kissed her. “I don’t know what works for most people, or the common attitude. I guess that’s not important. I mean, what’s important to me… is how you feel.” He cleared his throat, “as for me? I think that in the first few days, when I understand women bleed the most, I wouldn't be comfortable making love. I, well, I worry about my strength. I think that concern might be worse if you were bleeding a lot.”
Darcy’s eyes widened, and she nodded, “reasonable…”

He shrugged, and made a face, “there was not a lot reasonable about the experiment I volunteered for, Sweetheart. It was… risky, though I had less to risk than most, since I was so sick. I see more proof all the time. The leader of Hydra back then took an earlier version of the serum from Erskine… and Howard and the Vita-Rays weren’t part of it. Schmidt, Red Skull, well, he WAS red-skulled, literally… and nuts, too. I’m not sure how much of that was serum-related, though. I’m sure that he was nuts before. I got the impression he thought Hitler was a little too soft in his principles.” Darcy shuddered, and Steve pulled her tighter against him. He shook his head, putting thoughts of Red Skull out of his mind, for the time being. He cleared his throat again, “anyway, I worry about hurting you, like I said, so…”

Darcy relaxed against him. “Mamaw acted like me getting my period was… well, über private, and almost shameful. She, um, pressed on the ‘decency’ lessons. Pawpaw acted uncomfortable if pads were even mentioned, like if they were on the grocery list! Don’t even get me started on tampons! I had to sneak around to use them. Mamaw seemed to think I wouldn’t be a virgin anymore if I used one. When I go to a doctor's exam and remove my clothes? Even now, I hide my underwear under other clothes so that it’s not visible to people coming in and out of the room. Mamaw said I should keep my ‘privates private and my unmentionables unmentioned’.”

Steve chuckled, and kissed her cheek. “I’ve never heard it put that way.” He kissed her blushing cheek again. “I won’t ever pressure you in any way, but once the worst of the bleeding is past, I’m open-minded. Like, today? I’ll be glad to make breakfast or lunch, considering the hour, if you’re ready to get up. Or, we could go out, if you prefer. Or, we could stay here and enjoy each other in any way that you’re okay with. It’s just… I woke a little before you, and thought about this while you slept. I thought it might be good to talk about things in an open way. I hope to stick around with you for a long time to come. This’ll happen every month. So…”

Darcy grinned and kissed him quiet. First, she teased, “how long have you been up, anyway?” He shrugged and grinned ruefully. She sighed, and leaned her forehead against his. The, she kissed his lips as she pulled one of his hands to her breast, and then whispered silkily, “I’m tender here… during this time. So, please be extra gentle while you touch me. I am a fan of foreplay.” He lightly rubbed over her, and she gasped and bit her lip, while arching into his touch. He raised his brows in surprise at her extreme reaction, and then leaned in to kiss her deeply. He tasted minty, like he’d been up and brushed his teeth earlier.

He rolled so that she was on her back and he lay over her. He resumed the deep, long, slow kisses they’d shared before going to sleep. She ran one hand up into his hair and began to scrape her nails along his scalp and then down his neck. With her other hand, she caressed muscles along his shoulders and back. He kissed along her neck, and caressed her breasts. He took care to avoid her tender nipples so studiously that she strained into his touch, and tried to force him to touch them more. She was getting more and more worked up every second. He gave in, and insistently used his lips and tongue on her through the sleep shirt. She withered, and cried out with delight. He lifted the shirt, and pulled a sensitive peak into his mouth, with enough passion that she moaned his name loudly.

“Bucky always said that if a guy wasn't smart enough to please his girl more than one way, he didn’t deserve her.” Steve gently removed Darcy's sleep shirt. He trailed open-mouthed kisses up to her throat, again teasingly touching and caressing. She was shuddering with pleasure, taut against the edge of orgasm.

Darcy cried out again as Steve caressed the inside of her thighs, “Oh! Remind me to thank him.”
Steve huffed a laugh, “I’m working on getting you to thank ME, first, Sweetheart.” He made his way back to her sensitive breasts, taking his time as she shuddered and twisted against his touch. She moaned and whimpered with delight. When she cried his name again, and writhed with the pleasure that rippled through her, he blinked hard. He realized that Natasha was advising him to encourage Darcy to have moments like this with other men. He was glad that Darcy’s eyes were closed so that she wouldn't see the look on his face. He kissed her lips again, and then marked her neck, hard.

Darcy giggled in the midst of panting, “What the…?! Now I have to start the Edward Cullen comparison thing again. Enough of that! It’s too warm to wear turtle necks right now.”

He growled intensely, “I know.” She blinked; surprised that he seemed upset at such a moment. Questions died on her lips as he returned his attention to her breasts, and slid one finger inside her panties to her clit. He touched her with teasing, slight pressure. She was soon pushing up against him and begging for more, cursing him as a tease for a long, long time until she finally came again.

She could tell the instant his possessive temper eased. He pulled back and dropped his head against her chest, eyes closed. Still coming down from her orgasms, Darcy stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head. She clutched him close, knowing there was so much that he was repressing from recent days. She wasn't sure what had happened, but she knew he would talk to her when he was ready, not before. In the meantime, if he wanted to drown himself in pleasing her, she couldn't complain. The possessiveness was another matter. She just thought it odd.

Steve rolled back, and looked at her as though expecting anger. She laughed and shook her head, “I’m torn. I’m qualified to assure Bucky you’re smart and deserve me, but I’ve got to deal with that mark! I guess I'll wear a scarf over it.” Steve’s expression twisted. She put a finger to his lips to silence his apology. She grinned, “Relax! I don’t know if it’s monumental enough for my bucket list, but you gave me my first hickey. Chalk another one up in the ‘had a new experience’ column!”

Steve’s expression stayed even. “There’s a column for that?” Despite his effort, his voice sounded tense.

Misunderstanding his tension, Darcy grinned, leaned in to kiss him, and then shimmed her way down his body. “Let me remind you of a new experience I gave you.”

***

Darcy and Steve finally made their way out of his place to grab a late lunch in the cafe downstairs. She headed to Jane’s lab, and he went to meet with Natasha and Tony.

Tony greeted Steve with a growl, “you’re damned right I’m pissed!” Tony wasn't wearing armor, so Steve just crossed his arms over his chest and met Tony’s gaze with a look of irritation.

Natasha looked up from the data she was reviewing on a tablet. “What now?”

Tony stalked towards Steve, “you’re lucky Pepper cracked down on me! I was of a mind to repay your favor, fly in with all my drones, and see how you’d act if I put Darcy and Bucky in danger!” Steve looked at Tony forbiddingly, and took a step towards him.

Natasha looked from one man to the other. Neither of them looked like they had slept much yet. Steve was in no mood for jokes, especially about Darcy’s safety. After watching the interrogation video, Natasha understood that well. She tossed her data pad on the table in front of her. “What danger?”
Tony grinned, “yeah… funny thing, though, Cap. According to Pep, the person you put in the most danger last night was Darcy! Pepper somehow blames me for that. But, how could I know that a red rage monster-ette would tune in for the latest from TMZ?”

“How was Darcy in danger?” Steve frowned.

Natasha asked, “red rage monster-ette?”

Tony laughed shortly, “Oh! Did he forget to tell you, too? Turns out the sweet young lady Cap sent back with my best friend to the care of the woman I love… is a HULK!”

Steve looked down, remembering with a grim smile. “You must think that was nuts.”

“And you don’t think there are a whole hell of a lot of people who would think my concern invalid!” Tony looked at him, puzzled and puffed up with righteous indignation.

Steve sat on the edge of the table. “It’s hypocritical. When we were first on Fury’s Helicarrier, I thought you were nuts to trust Banner so implicitly. You provoked him, poked at him, and told him to strut instead of tiptoe! Yesterday, I saw red in Dr. Ross’ eyes, and it gave me pause. Then, in the middle of a dangerous situation, complete with her crazy father shooting at us… she controlled it. She suppressed a transformation in the middle of a battle, while near tears over Bruce! So, yeah. I wanted her out of there, and I sent her, with Col. Rhodes, to Pepper. I touched base with Pepper first, and she didn't express any concerns. I knew she had JARVIS and guard drones as backup. I also knew that Jane and Darcy were with her. For some reason, I trusted Dr. Ross that much! Why don’t you tell me what made you trust Bruce so much?” Tony was still glaring at Steve.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. “There are a lot of things we have to do better… and reconsider. I honestly didn't know what else to do with Dr. Ross yesterday. We need a place for quarantine. We haven't discussed procedures for unknown entities with ‘friendly’ potential. Enemy containment was first priority, but we have that pretty well in hand now. I’m beginning to think we need to take our base out of New York, too. There’s too much of a chance for collateral damage when ‘the party’ comes to us. And, ‘the party’ has come to us too much already!” He rubbed his eyes.

Tony looked stunned. “Leave the City? But…”

Steve asked in a low voice, “how was Darcy in danger from Dr. Ross?”

Tony looked around, thrown off balance at the thought of moving the Avengers’ base. He murmured absent-mindedly, “Betty went beepy every time she looked at Darcy. Seems she saw Darcy and Bruce together on TV, and thought he'd moved on.”

Steve frowned, remembering his own angry reaction to that footage. He recalled Bucky’s joke that Steve might turn into a green rage monster if he was forced to watch Darcy and Bruce embrace. He wished he had known to ease Dr. Ross’ concern before sending her to the Tower. He rubbed his eyes again, admitting that fatigue was making him sloppy. It was offset by too much tension, but he was already fading again. He was worn out.

Natasha asked, “by the way, why is the sparring gym closed for repair? What happened?”

Tony barked a rueful laugh, and pulled up footage on the main screen. Natasha watched impassively. Steve kept looking away from the screen as Betty undressed and transformed. He took one good look to see how Red She-Hulk held her own against Hulk, but felt that was all that was necessary. He turned away when the two hulks came together in a passionate embrace.
could still hear them on the video. But one glance was all he needed before he felt too voyeuristic. God knew that Steve had seen both Hulk and Bruce naked too many times, but this was different. He sighed, "this isn't helping us learn about her so much as it's an invasion of privacy, Tony. Please turn that off."

Natasha tilted her head one way and then another, watching, “do they remember?”

Tony shrugged, “they’re still resting, so I don’t know. They went at it for about three hours, from what JARVIS tells me. Dented the hell out of the floor, broke support posts, and tore the place up. The walls were designed to withstand Hulk, but we'll need to work on the rest. Pepper shut the cameras down when I couldn't look away, so I have to go by JARVIS’ words.” He grinned, “it’s like having him read me monster erotica. Hulk seems to remember that Banner has read the Kama Sutra! Which changed the pace of things between floor-smashing, bodies slamming. Thanks, J!”

JARVIS sounded put-upon. “I wish it were the oddest thing ever requested of me, Sir.” Steve groaned.

Tony turned to Steve, “ya know what, Cap? Widow has one point against your rush-to-the-altar plans. If you settle down with someone breakable, you’ll never be able to dent a floor like that. If anyone needs to cut loose more, it's you. You ought to see if the Hulks are into open relationships! You could have the chance to go at it without any reserve at least once in your life, if so. You seem to like her. Maybe Bruce would do a swap meet with you! Get in line quick, though. Pepper tells me that Betty thinks Bucky’s handsome. You might lose out, if you don’t move soon enough.”

Steve sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose, “What is wrong with you?! Dent a floor? He doesn't own… No. I’m not talking about any of that enough to even reply. Just… no.” He looked up at Tony a second later, horrified, “swap meet?! NO!” his face red with anger as he yelled. “Drop it, Tony!” His hands clenched into fists.

Tony laughed, and held his hands up as though to surrender. “Fine. I’ll leave it, if you’re so possessive you start yelling at me and prepping to fight. Guess you’re right, since Bruce’d smash Darcy to bits. She's breakable, after all. Hell! I'm still recovering from learning about the whole chorus-girl thing. You’re quicker on the uptake than I gave you credit for, what with not being virgin-pure. So, maybe you’ll think it over and surprise us all again with a Cap-Monster Mash. Who knows?”

Steve shook his head and frowned, "why do you insist on referring to her as a monster? As comfortable as you are with him…”

“Stop! Just stop talking, Stark. I’m ready to get to work, if that’s okay with you boys. We have a Vorm ship in one of the underground hangars. Security brought it in the trucks. I want to learn how to fly it. It could come in handy.” Natasha shook her head.

Steve nodded, “I’d like to do that, too. And we need to talk again to the prisoner we interrogated. We need to see if he knows who commands the Vorm on Earth, and if we missed anything else.” He frowned with tension at the thought. He suggested, “let’s work on prioritizing topics to cover in tomorrow’s meeting, first. Then I’ll head down with you, first to Containment, and then to look over that ship.” He added in a clipped tone, "I'll ask Hawkeye and Bucky to join us and learn to fly it. It'd be good for all the Avengers who pilot to learn how to operate different tech like that."

Tony noticed that Steve’s barely-tamped fury rose to the surface again as he mentioned the prisoner. It was enough to cause Tony to stop wanting to anger Steve. No armor could get there fast enough to shield him from the super-soldier's wrath.
Tony's tone turned serious. “Have you replied to Coulson's request for us to join his team on another Hydra base raid tomorrow?” Natasha frowned and picked up her data pad again.

Steve nodded, and rubbed his eyes. “We’re not going tomorrow. I told him that we need time off. Our ops are always pretty intense, but the past weeks have been insane. We can’t even process all that’s hit us before we’re off to the races again. I want to take down Hydra more than anyone does! But we’re gonna start taking losses, if we don’t regroup and get some rest.”

Natasha nodded, “thanks, Cap.” She joked, “I was about ready to injure Barton to give us a good excuse to a day. Steve shook his head and suppressed a wry grin.

Tony agreed, “Yeah. I wasn't looking forward to leading a mutiny against you, either.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “I guess we need to review the interrogation video before we go to Containment.”

Steve let out a harsh breath, stood, and walked over to a corner of the room. He muttered, “excuse me.” His punch crushed a hole through an i-beam support. Tony held his tongue, expression grim.

Steve turned back to face him, “I’m sorry for that. And I’m sorry you feared for Pepper’s safety, and Rhodey’s.” He walked to the restroom, opened the door, and ran cool water over his bleeding knuckles. Then, he dried them and watched pensively as they began to heal. Steve continued to look at his healing wounds, deep in thought, for a long time.

Tony nodded, still staring at the hole in the wall. He suggested, “watch the video to review and prep questions, but please hold off. Unless pulverizing the guy is your goal, I don't think you should interrogate today. Your fuse is almost non-existent, Cap.”

“You’re still alive. His fuse exists.” Natasha laughed to Tony.

Steve’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. He looked at it and frowned. One-handed, he sent a slow reply. He looked at his weary reflection in the mirror over the sink. “Tony’s right. I’m too far off my game. It’ll have to wait.”

Natasha nodded understanding. “JARVIS, play video of interrogations with prisoner #316911, Dr. Alexander Pierce, Jr.”

Tony grumbled, “…handler, Junior… What a fucked-up family legacy! Here, Son! Have a human-being. Torture, condition, and use him as a weapon against everything good in the world! You can just put him in a box when he makes you nervous, or like… thinks.” Tony's phone buzzed. He grabbed it, read it, and chuckled. “Pepper says to stop provoking you, Cap!” He beamed a broad smile, “I’m so lucky to have her!” Natasha nodded agreement, making a face at Tony.

Steve winced again as the scientist's interrogation began to play. He finally returned to the conference room, and took a seat at the table. His posture was stiff and angry as he watched and listened. He nodded, admitting, "you're right, Tony. I shouldn't be in the same room with that bastard today. My walls are down. It's all too easy to imagine beating him to death." The look of rage on his face emphasized his words.

Tony turned to Steve and blinked, “Jesus! I’ll get one of the other gyms set up for you, Cap. Punching bags are a lot less expensive than the Tower’s structural supports. They're less messy than evil Hydra scientists, too!” Steve let out a tense sigh, and thanked Tony. He received another text and replied easily, his knuckles already healed. He sighed again, lighter, and almost smiled.

Steve made notes while watching the video of Pierce's interrogation. Most were questions for
Natasha to ask the next time they interrogated the scientist. He also made a note to himself that read, 'talk with Thor about Pierce. Discuss Vengeance.'

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Darcy grabbed transcription work from Jane's lab and then went to her office. She met with R&D staff and checked their progress evaluating the weapons and other tech from the DC Hydra base. She compiled a list of questions from the engineers and scientists to Tony. Then, she culled it for duplicates and questions better sent to others. Some questions would be better directed to Bruce or one of the other Avengers. She handled the dissemination of that information, and reviewed Tony’s directions. It was obvious that he’d been up during the night working.

The energy level of the people outside her office changed. Darcy looked up from her work to see Pepper approaching. Darcy stood and looked respectful, mindful that in here she was Pepper’s employee. Pepper rapped smartly on the door, and entered once Darcy gestured her in. Pepper carried a spare cup of coffee, which she handed to Darcy, along with a bag of Darcy’s favorite buttery popcorn. Pepper took a seat in a guest chair in front of Darcy’s desk.

Darcy’s brows went up, “Wow! If this is to soften the blow of firing me, color me happy.”

“Actually, Tony wants me to promote you again.” Pepper smiled as she shook her head.

Darcy groaned, “what’s he up to, now?”

Pepper shrugged, “I’m sure I don’t know. He’s been out of my sight for a few hours, so the possibilities are endless. I think he was going to meet with Steve and one or two of the others.” Darcy made a face, knowing that Tony would irritate Steve’s nerves.

Pepper sipped her own coffee, “are you okay after all that’s happened recently?”

Darcy sat back, unsure of Pepper’s motivation or capacity at the moment. She made a face, “is this a query from boss to employee?”

Pepper’s grin flashed and faded, “No. I came to apologize. I’m not doing well at it so far.” She looked rueful.

Darcy opened the popcorn bag, and ate a few bites to give her time to process that statement. “What are you apologizing for?”

“I haven’t reined Tony in enough during his interactions with you. I’m sorry. He has made disrespectful, harassing statements. I let that slide because I was testing to see if you could handle him at his worst.” Pepper shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Pepper leaned forward, "And you can, thank God! You are making my life easier, Tony's, too!"

She sipped her coffee and sighed. "I'm also sorry that Tony meddled in your relationship with Steve. I understand his motivations. He has difficulty following orders from anyone, or, well... cooperating with people. He has trust issues. He's jealous of how much Howard idolized Steve. He also thought Bruce was attracted to you and might want to be more than friends! But, it was wrong of him to imply that something was going on between you and Bruce. He shouldn't have needled Steve the way he did. He definitely should NOT have paid the news cameramen to widen the camera shot to show you and Bruce together. That put you in danger yesterday!"

“What?” Darcy’s brow furrowed.

Pepper sighed, looking uncomfortable, “I guess you and Steve haven’t had a lot of time to talk.”
Darcy blushed, “not about any danger to me yesterday…”

Pepper nodded, distracted. She blurted, “Soooo… Betty Ross transforms into a Red She-Hulk! When you heard her pulse-meter beeping? She was upset, thinking that you have a romantic, or at least sexual, relationship with Bruce. She saw you two on TV, as you guessed.”

Darcy’s mouth fell open. She picked up her phone and rapidly texted Steve, ‘sorry if I’m piling on… but BETTY’S a HULK? WTF? I thot I was lucky to escape a cat fight, not whatever a HULK might do!’

Steve replied after a moment, ‘Sorry should have shared. Red she hulk good control. Pepper and drones with you. I’m sorry if you upset. Love you more than anything. Never want to risk you. Love you’

Darcy stared at her phone for a moment, panicked, then looked at Pepper. “Something’s wrong! Steve is repeating himself. He's letting auto-complete do most of the work, and not using good grammar or punctuation. Crap!” Darcy texted to Steve again, ‘what’s wrong? You’re not texting like you.” He only replied, “I’ll heal.” Darcy winced, “he says he’ll heal.” She set the phone down and sat back in her chair, wondering how Steve had gotten injured. Her eyes met Pepper's.

Pepper frowned, and tapped on her phone. She looked at the time, “want to go get a mani/pedi?”

“I bet you don’t even have to make an appointment,” Darcy grinned.

Pepper smiled smoothly, “nope. Neither will you, from now on.”

Darcy nodded, “I’m in. I’ll just text the others that I’m taking personal time.”

Pepper shrugged, “it’s that kind of day all around. I don’t think Bruce is even awake again yet.”

As Darcy shut down her laptop, she looked up at Pepper, “awake again?”

Pepper chuckled. “The Hulks met in the sparring gym after the Avengers got home and… well… Tony described it as porn in Christmas colors. I saw a few seconds. It was… unrestrained, to say the least.”

Darcy yelped, “Holy shit!” She let out a breath and grinned. “I hope that means any confusion about him and me got cleared up!” She grimaced. “A Taser and some self-defense training wouldn’t do me much good against a hostile lady Hulk.”

Pepper looked anxious, “No. Not much! She’s his equal, from what I saw. I hope any confusion has been cleared up. In the meantime, I could keep you safe until your suit arrived, if worst came to worst.” She tossed her empty coffee cup in the trash, and shrugged, “Honestly? If the Captain believes in her control, that’s good enough for me.” Darcy nodded and smiled, trying not to worry about Steve. “Now! Girl time! God knows we deserve it!”

Darcy grimaced, “one more thing…” She texted to Steve, ‘I’m sorry I fussed. Pepper’s info startled me. I trust your judgment, and know that you love me. I love you, too.’ A few seconds later, she received a reply from Steve, ‘Thank you. You’re too good, my Sweetheart. Love you. See you at dinner.’

***

The next few hours with Pepper were lovely. They had manicures and pedicures. They drank champagne, gossiped and giggled, and enjoyed the luxuriant massage chairs. Pepper told the best
jokes, some amazingly dirty and others quite tame. Darcy felt better. On a whim, she got the nail color called ‘Captain’s Blue’. Then, she had the manicurist paint one nail with the Captain America shield. She felt nervous when she saw that the tech chose the fourth finger of her left hand. She hoped that it wouldn't seem too forward to Steve… like she was begging for a ring there. She pondered her hopes on that topic, realized that she indeed had hopes.

Darcy’s selections amused Pepper. She urged her manicurist, “please, use ‘Iron Man Red’ on all but one fingernail. Do that in metallic gold. I can’t have Tony feeling less celebrated than Steve. He’s competitive with him, to say the least.” Darcy saw the manicurists exchange a look. She worried that she was being indiscreet about her relationship with Steve. She shrugged off the concern, acknowledging that she hardly left the Tower anyway, and never without an Avenger. She’d been in danger before Steve came into her life. She always would be. She wouldn't publicize their relationship, but wouldn't second guess every breath she took, either. A knot of tension melted away at that decision.

Besides, she liked the way the shield motif looked on her nail. Considering the love bite that her scarf hid, she guessed he would, too.

Pepper sighed, “let’s sit in the massage chairs while our nails dry. I want more champagne and just… more time.” Darcy had never seen Pepper relax so much before, not even on movie nights.

Darcy grinned as the massage chair turned on, “Amazing! The chair’s almost as good as Steve.” She sat back and sighed, "well... no... not that good, but still..."

“Steve gives massages? Oh! I’ll have to tell Tony that. I MUST take advantage of his need to keep up!” Pepper giggled.

Darcy grinned, “Steve sets the bar high.”

Pepper raised a brow, “I’ll take your word and leave it at that, for today. Another time, I’ll ply you with more alcohol in hopes of fun details.” She smiled. “I hope we can have ‘girl time’ again.”

Darcy smiled and nodded eagerly. Pepper had a calming way about her and a wicked sense of humor. It would be fun to be friends with her. She raised her brows and shared, “I’d like that. I’m not as intimidated by you as I used to be.”

Pepper giggled, “you've seen me laugh like crazy during a pedicure because of my ticklish feet! I hope that would help you see that I’m human.”

Darcy grinned, “it was pretty funny!” She and Pepper exchanged fond grins, and clinked their champagne glasses. They finished their outing with espressos at the café on the Retail level. Pepper told entertaining stories from years working for and, more recently, with Tony. Darcy was relieved, for Pepper’s sake (and Tony’s) that Tony realized how much he loved and needed Pepper.

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Bruce went to his apartment and slept, dreaming of Betty and Red She-Hulk. Later, he showered and changed. He struggled to process his conversations with Betty. They were more alike than he’d realized… and he loved her even more than he’d ever admitted to himself. His lips burned with the desire to kiss her again.

After he settled his emotions some, he walked into the Avengers lounge and began to fill a plate, munching hungrily as he went. He wasn't surprised when Tony came to stand by him, looking at him with a unique mix of hyperactive concern and curiosity.
Tony asked, “how’s Betty?” He popped some trail mix into his mouth.

Bruce answered shortly, “different, yet the same,” and ate a bite of chicken vindaloo.

Tony blinked, searching for words and nodding, “I, uh, had a message from her.”

Bruce winced, “I know.” He looked at Tony and sighed, “I intend to help her in any way that I can.” Tony nodded, looking pleased, but concerned. Bruce swallowed some naan, and informed Tony, “I started basic tests, to try and figure out what Sterns did to her. By the way, she’s wrong on one thing. She has better control than I do, much better than I did at first.” He shifted Tony aside and put some mint with his vindaloo.

Tony nodded, smiling a bit, but worried, “are you okay?”

Bruce nodded and shrugged, then ate an egg roll and scooped some Hunan Beef on his plate. He admitted, “it’s worse than any nightmare I could have ever imagined.” He paused and took another bite of food. “I wouldn't wish my problem on anyone. So, for something like it to happen to Betty?” Bruce shook his head, and paused to sigh heavily, and then focus his breathing. He used the time to regain control of his emotions for the thousandth time of the day. He looked up and shook his head, “to have her look to me as an example of how to live with it? That’s pretty far off the scale of horrible! But the grace she exudes, the trust… it takes my breath away all over again.”

Bruce scooped some bulgogi on his plate and savored it, taking his time. He appreciated Tony’s concern for him. He sighed, “Cap was right. She’s pissed that I disregarded her feelings, took her choices away. Rightfully pissed! A man we sought out to help me… came to her, and did something to cause her to transform, too. Apparently, he got a bit of my blood in an open wound of his and it's bringing out his worst, of course. So, we need to worry about his status. We should add him to Cap’s ‘Avengers To-Do List.’”

Bruce swallowed hard. "The first time she transformed, Betty woke up naked and alone in a mountain cave. She had to find her way back home. The second time, when she woke, the General was berating her for putting herself in harm’s way, if you can believe it. Because, of course, it's my fault. And, yes, he turned her over to Hydra. Bastard! So, she's hurt and angry.” He grimaced and looked angry.

“Maybe in time, she’ll forgive you for pushing her away!” Tony patted Bruce on the shoulder.

Bruce had another egg roll, and shook his head, “you don’t give her enough credit. She already has. She won’t forget it, and I have a lot of work to do to build trust with her again, but she’s forgiven me. I don’t talk about the horrible stuff wound up in all the years since my first incident, when I almost killed her. But she’s forgiven me. She just needs time to heal. It seemed like she was more worked up about my love life than anything else. Remember that little paparazzi shot you arranged of me and Darcy… to unbalance Cap after the first Vorm attack?”

Tony gestured as though to protest his innocence.

Bruce gave him a dark look. “I asked JARVIS direct, specific questions about the events of that evening. I don't know if the thought has occurred to you, but you used me, too. I'm vain enough, and enough of a troll that I didn't mind winding Cap up at the time. Just, don’t bullshit me now.”

Tony shrugged unrepentantly, and nodded. He grinned and looked pleased with himself.

Tony chuckled. "I don't think of you so much as a troll, Bruce. More of an..."

Bruce gave Tony a chiding look, “Don’t say it! And… porn with a Christmas palate? Really,
Tony?” Tony grinned and shrugged, choking back a laugh. Bruce shook his head impatiently. “It wasn't all hearts and flowers. She wanted to hear how I feel, but she didn't tell me how she feels,” Tony frowned. Bruce tried to look nonchalant. “But there were moments of beginning again, reasons to hope.” His expression shifted. He looked dangerous as he warned Tony, “don’t think about fucking with us, Tony! It’s complicated enough without any of your nonsense.” Bruce closed his eyes for a few seconds, “so long as she’s okay! After whatever has happened…”

Tony nodded, “her red half seemed pretty happy, for what it’s worth. Good job there!”

Bruce huffed forcefully and restrained his curiosity. He was annoyed that Tony knew more about what had happened between Hulk and Red She-Hulk than he did. Bruce had not yet pulled up the video feed, but knew his curiosity would win out sooner rather than later. He’d had intense, confusing, dreams about Red She-Hulk already. Bruce shook his head to dismiss that. “Betty needs funding and a lab, by the way. You can cut my funding, if need be. She’s the best in her field, and I think she’s worth your investment.”

Tony waved him off. “That’s good enough for me. I've been trying to convince you to let me hire her. Keep your funds. I've got more to spare.”

Bruce attempted to look blasé. It wasn't convincing, but he didn't seem utterly devastated, and that was good enough for Tony, too, for the time being.

Sam entered the lounge, smiling and raving about the latest improvements Tony had made to his wing pack. Tony laughed and moved to Sam’s side, always happy to hear compliments to his brilliance.

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Darcy thanked Pepper again as they entered the Avengers Lounge. ‘Girl time’ had helped her relax some. She hoped that she and Pepper might become close friends, if they could find more time to spend together. Pepper walked over to Tony. He kept talking with Sam, but took her hand in his, and leaned over to kiss Pepper’s cheek. Darcy smiled as Tony lifted Pepper's hand and complimented her nail colors, preening. From the moment Pepper arrived, his orbit shifted around her, like always. Darcy smiled at that, and looked around the room.

Bruce was by the food, reading something on his phone, scowling as he glanced at Tony. He ate and ate as he filled his plate more and more, literally grazing the food selection.

Natasha and Clint were in the far corner, talking, and their body language so in sync that they looked like they shared a brain. Natasha nodded a greeting to Darcy. Her eyes zeroed in on the scarf that Darcy was wearing, right to the hickey she was trying to hide. Clint stared for a second, too, and then looked away.

Darcy thought, ‘Damn! Spy-sassins = observant.’ Darcy shrugged, and rearranged her scarf as Natasha raised a brow and frowned a bit. Darcy turned her attention to the assorted take-out food on the counter.

Bruce put his phone away and stopped stuffing food into his mouth long enough to ask Darcy, “you okay? I’m so sorry! I’m sorry that I lost control when the call came.” He looked repentant and anxious. Darcy’s face burned as she recalled Pepper joking about Christmas porn. Bruce opened his mouth again, and shut it quickly, like he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure if he should.

Darcy nodded and joked, “I can say I jumped out of a sky scraper and lived to tell the tale! You’re checking off a lot of my bucket list. I mean... Hulk really did show up for yoga!” Bruce smiled
with disbelief. She bit her lip and shifted closer to him. “Don’t apologize. I’m fine. If you hadn’t lost it over that, you wouldn’t be the Bruce we all love. I just hope everything turns out okay.” She looked at him obvious affection. His silent response was a mixture of a wince and a smile.

He swallowed hard, “you might be too brave for your own good, but I can’t bring myself to try to warn you off, if facing ‘the other guy’ didn’t do the trick! And, things with Betty?” He shrugged, and gestured with his hands that he wasn’t sure. Seeing her sad look, he grinned and hugged her again. “We’ll see. Thanks.”

Darcy took a nervous breath, “I don’t suppose my name came up in any horribly awkward way between you and Dr. Ross, did it?”

Bruce chuckled, “it’s okay. I… explained Tony…”

Darcy sighed with relief, and laughed, “How? Can you explain him to me?”

Bruce’s smile looked gentle and rueful. He shook his head, “not everything. But, I cleared up the misunderstanding she had about my friendship with you. She was sorry that she was not friendly when you met.”

Darcy’s eyes widened. She chuckled, “in retrospect, I’m glad I didn’t understand why the beeping sound sped up whenever she looked at me!” Bruce looked pained. Darcy thanked Bruce and hugged him, “I want happiness for you, Bruce.”

He kissed her cheek, “thanks. I know. I appreciate that, Darcy.” He sighed, and turned back to the counter to grab a bottle of water and drink it down. Exhaustion had claimed him first, but now he was famished.

Steve walked into the lounge, hair still damp from a shower. He wore jeans and a t-shirt, and carried a bouquet of flowers. He approached Darcy, holding the bouquet in front of him, his expression contrite. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Darcy looked at the flowers, and tilted her head, “Pretty! Do they have a particular meaning?”

Steve grinned tightly, “Of course! Chrysanthemums are for truthfulness. Daffodils are for respect. Hyacinths are for ‘please forgive me... I apologize... and I’m sorry.’” She laughed at him as she accepted the bouquet.

Bruce teased, “where’s my bouquet?” Steve looked taken aback, stricken. Bruce shook his head and chuckled, “learn to take a joke, Cap! I should thank you. I’m glad that Betty had the chance to… tell me… herself. You were right that we needed to talk, and it seemed to mean a lot to her. She likes you.” He suppressed a grin, as Steve looked a bit pained.

Steve’s expression twisted more as Tony approached Bruce. Steve noticed that Bruce’s eyes narrowed. Tony interjected in a faux-innocent tone, “you guys talking about how well Betty and Cap hit it off?” Darcy frowned, wondering what Tony was up to now.

Tony froze in place, surprised, as Bruce turned to Tony with a green glow visible in his eyes and a lower tone to his voice. “Steve isn’t the only one who can tear into the structural supports of this Tower, Tony. You guys didn’t classify your meeting this afternoon as private.” He held up his phone. “Once I verified that you discussed Betty, I read a transcript of it just now.” Steve shifted so that his body was between Darcy and Bruce. Bruce turned to Steve, noted Steve’s protective stance, and looked from him to Darcy. “I’m sorry I had fun at your expense, Steve. That wasn’t nice of me.” His grin hardened. “Don’t repay the favor. Okay?”
Steve, hands on his hips, looked down and let out a rueful chuckle. “Not a problem, doc.” He glanced at Darcy and grinned, “I’m a one-woman sort of guy.” Darcy smiled and left them, searching for a vase. Steve watched her go.

Then, Steve grabbed a sandwich off a tray and wolfed it down. He drained a few bottles of water, and ate a couple of slices of Hawaiian pizza. He held a hand out to Darcy when she returned. From then, he kept her close; seeming unable to bear to have her more than a few feet away. He touched her often, gently. She made a plate for herself, and stayed close. Steve moved past Bruce to put food on his plate. He noted that Bruce’s demeanor was an unusual mix of tension and relaxation. Steve looked down as Darcy took an egg roll and started munching it with gusto. The sight of his shield emblem painted on her nail made him smile.

Darcy saw him staring at her hand. She explained, “Captain’s Blue polish with a little something extra. Hope you don’t mind…” She looked up and grinned as she saw the delight in his face. She leaned closer and whispered, “hell, Steve! If you want me to wear your emblem, I’d even get a tattoo, if it would put a look like THAT on your face!”

Steve’s face flushed a bit as he shook his head, “No! But I like that…”

Steve glanced up as Natasha approached Darcy, gently nudging her shoulder. Natasha complimented, “Cute nail art. I also really liked that starry dress you wore yesterday. I’m glad you’re comfortable enough in your relationship with Steve to wear stars again.”

Darcy stopped in mid-motion reaching for another egg roll, frowned, and replied shortly, “thanks.” She swallowed hard, looking uncomfortable.

Steve frowned at Natasha. She ignored him. Natasha reached up and tried to retie Darcy’s scarf. Finally, she untied it and set it aside, pulled a dark blue scarf with stars on it out of her pocket, and tied it on Darcy instead. “There! This one does a better job of hiding how grossly possessive your date got.” Natasha eyed Steve chidingly. He blushed, and looked away.

Darcy tried, and failed, to suppress a blush as she recognized the scarf. For the first time ever, Steve saw Darcy’s jaw tic with angry tension. He was puzzled, and hoped she wasn’t mad with him. Then he saw that she was looking at Natasha intently. He wasn’t fluent in ‘eyebrow talk’ as Darcy called Natasha and Clint's wordless communication. But, he could swear that Darcy was willing Natasha NOT to say something. He put a hand at the small of Darcy’s back, comforting.

Natasha’s grin was smooth, if direct. “The day we met, I rescued it from the trash after you lost your temper. I hoped you’d want it back, that you would feel confident enough to wear stars again.” Darcy looked angrier as Natasha kept talking. “Jane was teasing when she asked if wearing stars made you a 'star-spangled girl'!” Natasha ignored Steve’s pained groan and the curse he uttered. “And you knew it, so you weren't really offended with Jane. But you were uncomfortable, jealous, and… most of all, unsure of yourself. You underestimate yourself, Darcy.”

Steve went still, studying Darcy’s expression. Darcy forced herself to bite out, “thanks, I guess. That’s been a while. A lot has changed.” Her lips trembled as she avoided Steve’s gaze.

Natasha’s expression was soft and concerned, “yes and no. I’ve been watching, and listening, too, Darcy. You ARE more at ease about the chorus girls, and a bit about yourself, now… but…”

Darcy huffed, “please, Natasha. Stop! Why are you…?”

Natasha pulled Darcy into a hug, and whispered in her ear, “I care. And you are not just a consolation prize!” Both Darcy and Steve stiffened at those words. “You can be anything or
Darcy’s expression shifted to one of dismay. She pulled back and shook her head. She sputtered, “I don’t want anyone else.”

Steve stayed still with effort, but couldn't help the emotions that flowed through him.

Natasha frowned, and she squeezed Darcy’s arms in a comforting gesture. Then, she leaned close, and whispered in Darcy's ear again, “if you don’t need or want to explore further? Then, you need to talk with Steve about this idea you have about his love for Peggy being more significant than his love for you. You act like you’re in her shadow, or like he has to make do since he can’t have what he really wants. You don’t deserve that.” Darcy’s eyes glistened with unshed tears as she met Natasha’s gaze and nodded. Steve stifled a gasp, startled. Natasha smoothed Darcy’s hair back and smiled encouragement, “you’re special, too.”

Darcy bit her lip and asked, “how…?”

Natasha pulled Darcy further away from the others. She noted, “Jai is too good of a stylist not to notice that you would look lovely in red.” Darcy groaned, and Natasha continued. "You wore a red dress one time to attract Steve's attention. But, that is the only time you've worn red since you saw Steve’s painting of Peggy Carter. You stopped wearing your red jacket; one that Jane said was your favorite. You haven’t even worn a red shirt once in the past few months. But, I’m sure Jai has found things for you in that color.” Darcy sighed and nodded.

Natasha added, “And then there's the music that you listen to... You know that I hear the music you play when you're alone at your apartment. I hear too many lyrics about not being good enough... Your playlist to him even included a song about his and Peggy's 'great love!' You skip it every time it comes up when you're alone. As I said before, you’d be sinfully easy for surveillance… given how well I hear.”

Darcy gasped, and looked at Natasha accusingly. She realized that with Steve’s enhanced hearing, it didn't matter that Natasha was whispering. He heard every word. She blushed, and turned away from him, putting her hands over her warmed cheeks and breathing in and out shakily.

Natasha looked from Darcy to Steve. “I care about both of you. Communicate more, please. Too much crazy stuff has gone on lately! You’re not communicating well enough. Individual therapy doesn’t benefit a relationship much, not if you don’t open up to each other. You need to talk about old flames and lovers, instead of hoping each of you will somehow understand. I care about both of you too much to hold my tongue. You’re my friends.”

Darcy nodded stiffly, puzzled as she asked incredulously, “communicating well enough for what?!" Steve scowled, and Natasha smiled innocently at him. Darcy rolled her eyes. “Fine! Whatever! I think it needs to wait until he and I have had more time to unwind, until we’re both a little calmer. The past few days… sucked, especially for him! I know I’m not just a fling like all those chorus girls! I know he loves me.”

Bruce glanced at Steve with open curiosity, and Darcy apologized to Steve, “sorry, Hon.” Bruce patted Darcy’s shoulder as he moved past her and grabbed more food. He glanced at Steve again and raised a brow, looking faintly amused by Steve’s discomfort.

Steve tried to ignore Bruce’s trolling look. He set his plate down, and pulled Darcy into his arms. She grumbled, “Avengers are busy bodies!”
He nodded agreement, “Sorry!” She still wouldn't meet his eye.

Bucky entered the lounge and walked over to them, “Hi. Was ‘team dinner’ code for everyone watching you and your girl cuddle or something?”

Bruce’s look of amusement faded as he looked Bucky over. In the transcript he’d just read, the words ‘Betty thinks Bucky’s handsome’ had jumped off the screen. Bruce swallowed, shook his head and murmured, "Karma... fuckin’ Karma…” He saw Steve glance his way quickly.

Darcy pulled back from Steve, looking teary, “Nah. I just need a hug.” She watched Natasha back away from them. Darcy frowned. Natasha’s encouraging compliments ought to please her on some level. But she hated that Natasha had exposed Darcy’s insecurities, especially about Peggy, to Steve.

Bucky teased, “I got ya one right here, Doll.” He held his arms open, as a joke. He was surprised when Darcy moved into his embrace and pressed against him. She hid her face against his chest, clinging as though to absorb some of his strength. He wrapped his arms around her and looked at Steve with a quizzical expression. Steve looked uncomfortable and awkward. Instinctively, Bucky leaned down and whispered, "you're awesome, Doll. One of a kind. Remember, you scare Captain America!"

Steve smiled and nodded. He looked down and sighed, wishing he had even half of Bucky’s smooth assurance when it came to talking to women.

Darcy pulled back and looked up at Bucky. He grinned cheekily at her, and winked. She lifted her chin, and grinned in response. Then, she turned to Natasha with mischief in her expression and voice. “So, when you were giving Steve grief on your way to Camp Lehigh? Were you needling him about ‘needing to practice’ in an attempt to prick his pride enough that he’d spill his history? Or, were you offended that your kiss didn't bring him to his knees and cause him to beg you for more? I’d understand if you were disappointed that didn't happen. It’s pretty amazing.”

Bruce choked on a bite of food while Bucky laughed. Steve bit his lip to suppress a grin.

Natasha laughed, “Honestly? A bit of both. I’m nosy. I’m a spy after all, AND I’m accustomed to more reaction from people when I get close. No one should have that much reserve. It’s almost inhuman... and just a little bit insulting.” She grinned as she walked away. Turning back, she winked and offered, “we can discuss it more at the range tomorrow. I’ll be there at 7:30.”

Darcy huffed in disbelief, “you want to continue this conversation while I have a gun in my hand?! Really?” Natasha snorted a laugh.

Thor and Jane entered the lounge, his hand supporting her arm as she made her way on crutches. Thor let out a cry of pleasure as he saw the bulgogi. “A new delicacy! Excellent.” He grabbed a plate and began to fill it.

Jane hobbled to Darcy, a puzzled look of recognition on her face. She bit her lip and touched Darcy’s scarf. “Cute!” She looked at Darcy expressively, attempting ‘eyebrow talk.’

Darcy wasn’t in a mood to cooperate. She just shook her head, and chuckled ruefully, “thanks.”

Steve leaned over and kissed Darcy’s cheek. She smiled wanly at him. He whispered, “I love you.”

“I know. I love you, too,” Darcy sighed.

Pepper called out to all, “who could use a laugh? We’ll run silly comedies as long as needed. Let’s
The song Darcy gifted Steve (in Ch. 16) about his and Peggy’s ‘great love’ is ‘For All We Know’ by Nat King Cole.

The song lyrics in the playlist related Darcy’s developing feelings. She included lyrics for each song and a key that listed each song, its artist, its year released, and a Key describing what she meant to convey with the song.

*Sentimental Journey/ Les Brown Orchestra/ 1944/ Welcome Home from WWII, Soldier!*

*Yesterday/ Beatles/ 1965/ You miss your past a lot.*

*Somewhere Over the Rainbow/It’s a Wonderful World*

............Israel Kamakawiwo’ole/ 1993/ Weird stuff happens, but there’s still good in the world.

*I Wish/ Stevie Wonder / 1976/ You have good memories/childhood/Bucky.*

*For All We Know/ Nat King Cole/ 1958 (1934)/ Your great love with Peggy was tragically ripped away.*

*If I’m Any Closer / Seal/ 2010/ I’m flighty and insecure, bit of a mess.*

*Iris/ Goo Goo Dolls/ 1998/ You’re too amazing. It’d be awesome if you’re into me.*

*Counting Stars/ OneRepublic/ 2013/ I dream about you, us.*

*Arms/ Christina Perri / 2011/ I don’t think I’m good enough for you. Couldn’t imagine us.*

*You Get Me/ Seal / 2010/ I feel like you understand me.*

*Give Myself to You/ Train / 2006/ I’m working on me… in part, for you.*

*Sway / Blue October/ 2013/ We have a chance. I want to go dancing. Sexy thoughts. ;)*

*In Your Eyes/ Peter Gabriel/ 1986/ I want to be more… like the way you see me.*

*I Want You To Want Me/ Cheap Trick/ 1979/ Duh! :)*

*Glitter In The Air/ P!nk/ 2008/ Loving you seems brave & magical. I want.*
This Moment/ Katy Perry/ 2013/ Let’s take this chance at love while we have it.
Chapter Summary

Steve is too wound up to enjoy Avengers comedy movies night, but is able to put one of Darcy's fears to rest. Darcy trains more and thinks about her relationship with Steve.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorsWench for beta help and encouragement! Thanks to those who comment. Sometimes I get low and feel like just stopping writing, but you keep me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The movies were funny, but Steve hardly noticed. As most of the people in the lounge relaxed, he became more tense. It was the first time that he'd been unoccupied in days, bad days. It was the first time he paused enough to think. He'd seen too many hurtful things recently to want to dwell on his thoughts. His tension went far deeper than anxiety from the battles. Much as he tried not to dwell on them, the videos from the scientist’s laptop kept playing in his head. Images of Bucky being conditioned again and again, of Darcy crying out in fear and struggling. They were seared into his mind’s eye. No slapstick satire of airplane disaster movies could penetrate that anguish. He shifted more and more uncomfortably, as he tried to sit still.

For the most part, the movie, ‘Airplane’ only held limited appeal for him anyway. Given the number of things that Tony was explaining, it referenced a variety of pop-culture phenomena of the 1970’s. He was familiar with some, but not many. Jokes that reminded him of Vaudeville or radio comedy favorites tugged at him slightly. He noticed that classic ‘Who’s on first’ humor still resonated with people, as the others in the lounge laughed during that one bit. The scene pulled a slight grin from Steve. As the others giggled around them, he and Bucky exchanged an amused glance.

But, in a scene where people slapped a hysterical passenger, Steve flashed back to the image of Alexander Pierce slapping Bucky. Pierce’s son stood at his right shoulder, watching, and likely taking note of how to manage the Winter Soldier for years to come. Much as a part of Steve was disgusted by the use he’d made of his shield to break the Hydra scientist’s bones, another darker part wanted to go to Containment and do worse, make the man hurt as much as he did, make him feel Bucky’s hellish anguish and Darcy’s fears.

Every now and then, he stood and went to refill his plate with more take-out food. Steve kept eating mindlessly; but he had rarely wished so much that he could get drunk and forget things. Bucky and Darcy both watched him with obvious concern. He tried harder to hide his feelings.

As the first movie ended, Darcy led him out to the garden terrace. She hugged him close and sighed, “Wow! You're bleeding off so much tension! I don’t even know what to suggest.” She moved away, and he pulled her back into his arms. She chuckled. “I’m not gonna be able to get any
work done this way, love. You’re gonna have to let me out of reach, sooner or later!”

He growled, “later.” He ran his hands over her body, part possessiveness, part comfort, and part a need to feel and hear her respond. She kissed him with a mixture of ferocity and tenderness that soothed his raw feelings. Then, she stepped back and looked up at him, challenging.

Tension shimmered through her, too, “I heard Tony talking to Pepper while you wolfed down half of every food known to man. He mentioned that you were busting on Bruce for being afraid to reach out for happiness, for taking away Betty’s say. Seems kinda nervy! You act like you’re terrified to let me more than a foot away from you, AND you’re avoiding talking about stuff.”

He frowned and huffed. “That’s not fair!”

Darcy raised a brow and challenged, “it’s possible that I don’t have all the information that I need.”

“I don’t want to tell you.” Steve sighed deeply and hung his head, eyes closed tight.

She grimaced, “so, it has something to do with that guy who helped question me. Is there some new threat that I ought to know about?” She frowned, but lifted her chin and tried to look more determined than frightened.

He shook his head, touched her reassuringly, and winced, “No! Same old threats. I just… understand what you went through better.” He closed his eyes again as though wishing her could scour something from the inside of the lids, his expression pained.

She looked away and sighed, “Oh!” She grimaced. “He had a laptop. I remember him setting it up. He made a video recording in case I told them anything.” Steve nodded, frowning. Tears came to her eyes and her breath shuddered as she remembered. Mingled with the fear was a question that cut deep. She sat on the bench. Steve sat next to her and held her hand.

Steve swore to himself he’d never tell her that watching her suffer had given the scientist sexual pleasure. That was a nasty tidbit he would compartmentalize forever. He wanted to redirect her curiosity. So, he mentioned, “there were a lot of videos of the things they did to Bucky over the years, too.” Guilt swept through him as he saw her anguished look. He looked away and missed the glimmer of suspicion that crossed her face.

“So, did you make him sorry? Did he have any good information for you?” she rasped.

Steve nodded slowly, equally self-satisfied and self-loathing, “he had a lot to tell us… once I frightened and harmed him enough that he decided to talk. I broke several bones, his shoulder and both hands.”

She made a face and nodded, swallowing hard. She wasn’t proud of the sense of grim satisfaction she felt, but accepted it. She had fought to escape the cold, violating touch across her breasts in nightmare after nightmare… that scientist’s hand. She realized she had hold of the neckline of her top. Impatiently, she smoothed it, sighed, and put her hand down on the bench. Steve leaned in and gently kissed her.

Darcy pulled back and turned away from him. He saw that her hands were fists. She swallowed hard and whispered, glad to know he could hear even if she couldn’t ask louder, “did I remember it right?”

Steve looked at her, confused.

Darcy looked back at him with a bleak expression. “Did I… do okay? Sometimes, in my
nightmares… I tell them what they want to know.” His expression changed as he understood her. She blinked tears away and tried to suppress her shaking. “So, you’ve seen video. What’s the truth? Did I tell them? Or, do I remember it right?” She shifted so that her arms wrapped around her, as if to hold herself together.

Steve’s eyes widened. “No! You were amazing! You didn't tell them anything.” He pulled her into his arms and massaged away her tension.

“Good…” She confessed, “I was too scared of that to even mention it to Chau.” Darcy bit her lip, still blinking tears away.

Steve sighed, “well… You didn’t tell them anything. You didn’t answer questions about portals or formulae. You were very brave.” Darcy shook her head. “You were. If knowing that helps chase away some of your nightmares, then at least some good can come out of me watching it.”

Darcy turned in his arms and pulled his head down against her shoulder. “Of course it helps! I know you’d never lie to me about that. You’re… you.” She kissed his cheek. “I know how much I hate it when I see you get hurt. After seeing that video of me, and seeing videos of them hurting Bucky, I guess I understand why you’re so tense. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

He nodded and hugged her tight. At first, he thought he was comforting her. Then, he realized that he was clinging to her for comfort just as much. His eyes welled with unshed tears. He leaned down to press his eyes against her shoulder. She felt the dampness and stroked his back and made soothing noises. They stayed that way for a long time. He shifted so that his chin was against her shoulder, and murmured, “thank you.”

Darcy continued running her hands over his back. She whispered, “I’m here for you. I love you, Steve.”

He kissed her lips and pulled her onto his lap. He just held her. They both savored the closeness. She kissed him again and changed the subject, “I felt so bad for Betty yesterday! She was really torn up to be near Bruce and not see him. Apparently he hadn’t kept in touch at all. I’m actually glad I had a target on me before I met you… so you wouldn't be tempted to pull some crap like that.” She made a face at him.

Steve kissed her cheek. “I can’t be glad that you’re targeted, but I see your point. Sam was right. I have a bit of a Savior Complex.” He looked away as though debating something for a moment. “Please, take care not to provoke Betty. She’s emotional about Bruce, maybe more than she knows. She has impressive control, but Red She-Hulk can hold her own with Hulk. She’s powerful and strong. Tony showed me footage.” Darcy raised a brow at that, and Steve’s face reddened.

She suppressed a grin of disbelief, and made a ‘tsk’ noise.

He sighed and continued quickly, “given all that has happened between Bruce and Betty… and her concerns about you, I worry.” He sighed dejectedly, “Tony made sure to point out that I put you in danger by sending Betty here.”

“You think that even though Bruce told her we’re just friends, she might have some lingering resentment, since she thought he and I were more?” Darcy furrowed her brow.

Steve nodded and murmured, “If she’s jealous of your friendship with him? Please, be careful.”

Darcy bit her lip, “Betty said something about seeing Bruce on TV. Her beeping got faster every
time she looked at me.”

Steve chuckled mirthlessly, “well, you two looked friendly enough to scare the crap out of me at the time.” He pulled Darcy close again and began to kiss her more and more passionately. He ran one hand up her thigh, caressing under the hem of her skirt.

Gasping, she shook her head at him, and jested, “I’d suggest we get up to something naughty, but it seems like every time I wander out here someone sneaks up on me!” He grinned and kept kissing her. She made a cautioning noise in her throat. He moved his hand back down to her knee. He kissed her again softly.

Then, he looked her in the eye. “Should we talk about the things that Natasha brought up?”

She shook her head and grimaced. “Yeah. Later.” She took his hand, “let’s go back to the lounge before you starve.” He nodded, chuckling. She encouraged him, “Try to pay attention to the next movie, okay? Put some funnier and better images in your brain.”

Steve nodded and kissed her hand, following her back. The second movie was just starting when they returned. Steve got another plate of food, again shifting around a now-brooding Bruce to reach food, while wondering what in the world a ‘Ghostbuster’ might be. He moved back to Darcy’s side and sat down, enjoying her occasional giggle and focusing on her more than the movie. Seeing her happy, and feeling her soft warmth against him helped ease everything. She stroked his hand with a light touch that made him want to kiss her again. He leaned closer to her and savored her presence.

Gradually, he began to pay attention to the film. He startled the first time that the movie made him laugh. As things in the movie got rolling, he told Darcy, “scientist heroes are my favorite kind.” Darcy gave his hand a squeeze, appreciative and glad he could see the humor.

He continued eating, and by the end of the movie he actually felt full and relaxed enough for exhaustion to claim him. He stood as the credits rolled, and pulled Darcy to her feet, “come on, Sweetheart. Time for bed!”

Steve saw Bucky shake his head, grinning slightly.

Tony cackled, “You’re too damned tired to even try to pretend you’re not sleeping with Lewis! You’re ‘kissing and telling!’” Sam laughed and Thor chuckled. Steve glanced at Thor, and noted the expression on the god’s face. He nodded to Thor to indicate that they would talk alone soon.

Bucky pointed at Steve with his beer bottle, as though toasting him. He murmured, "One word frees us of all the weight and pain of life: That word is love." Hawkeye glanced at him with a look of surprise, “you studied philosophy, too?”

“I don’t have much formal education, but I read.” Bucky shrugged.


Steve was pleased to see that Bucky looked comfortable with the rest of the Avengers. He seemed to enjoy the movies and talking with Sam and Hawkeye. The three of them had much in common. Bucky was working his way through the vast choice of foods and drinks. Even Bruce and Thor were impressed with Bucky’s appetite as he sampled the many new taste options. His expression was eager and open as he sampled new flavors again.

Tony announced “‘Animal House’ next, people!” He turned and nodded to Steve and Darcy, “good night, Lewis. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”
Darcy glanced at Pepper, “does that rule anything out?”

“Not much!” Pepper smirked.

Steve nodded to Bucky, fighting to keep his eyes open as he stumbled to the elevator. On the way up to his place, he held Darcy close. She giggled as he leaned on her so much that she had to use the wall to support them both. When they reached his bed, he threw off his clothes and fell to the bed on top of the covers, groaning. Darcy giggled at him, got ready for bed, and climbed in under the sheets next to him. He moaned as she kissed him awake enough to move under the covers. Then he pulled her close and held her to him tightly, muttering, “love…”

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Darcy awoke with sunlight falling across her face. Steve was cuddled against her, still sleeping. She’d woken him once in the night from a nightmare, but he’d slept well otherwise. She was pleased to see his face relaxed now. She gently disentangled herself from him, and threw on her clothes. On her way out, she saw Bucky in the hall, just returning from a run. She smiled as he entered his apartment, answering Iolaus’ urgent ‘meows’ with the promise of food. She went to her place to change and get a start on her day. She was happy that her period was over. She hoped Steve would sleep most of the day away after his long days of battle and agitation.

Her first stop was the range. Natasha was there, greeting her with, “I see you managed to get out without waking Steve. Good job.” At Darcy’s look, Natasha explained, “after watching that interrogation video so many times, I’m sure he’d still be clinging to you, if he was awake.”

Darcy grimaced, “he ought to sleep for about a week after that multi-day fighting bender! But I also wanted to get out peacefully because of that crap you pulled last night. I don’t want to talk about him having sex with other women. I don’t like to think about it. And, my worries about his relationship with Peggy? You’re the only person on the planet who would deliberately anger someone that way and then meet them at a gun range!”

“You hesitated before killing someone attacking you and Jane, intent on handing you both over to Hydra. I hardly think you’re going to gun me down for getting catty.” Natasha looked at Darcy evenly.

Darcy sulked, “I know how Steve feels now! Everyone here acts like it’s freaky to care about not killing people.”

Natasha remarked, “I’ll believe you know how Steve feels when I see you wearing red.” Darcy’s mouth opened and shut quickly. Natasha held out a gun. “Your new weapon arrived, holsters, too. Let’s get to work. I’m not your therapist. I just brought those things up because I think you guys need to talk to each other.”

Darcy glared at Natasha again, and went through a drill with her new gun. Natasha corrected her grip, and had her shoot again. Darcy was improving. She also had Natasha work with her on using the ICER that Coulson had given her. She put on her belt holster and became familiar with the other holsters Natasha had ordered for her. Natasha reviewed how to wear the guns, how to clean them, and how to disassemble and re-assemble them several times. Natasha commented favorably on all that Darcy had learned from Sam. Then, she talked to her about handling weapons while in motion. Next, she demonstrated a few basic shooting positions. Darcy attempted them, and Natasha demonstrated again.

As they finished, Darcy asked, “what is it that Steve isn't telling me about that scientist who sat in on my interrogation?”
Natasha frowned and shrugged, “probably that he had a perverse interest in you. The number of times he’d watched that video! On the plus side? With crushed fingers, jerking off will never be the same.” Her expression was hard and angry.

“Ew! That’s sick.” Darcy swallowed hard against the urge to throw up, closed her eyes and shuddered. “I don’t understand sadists.”

Natasha nodded. “Next time Steve doesn’t want to tell you something, maybe you should trust him.”

“What are your thoughts on him withholding information from you?” Darcy’s tone was skeptical.

Natasha blinked. “It’s different. I’ve seen worse than he has, definitely worse than you have. I’ve lived worse.” She shrugged. “But, yes, I’m sure that if he withholds info from me it’s for the best, or at least not a problem. He doesn’t much, though. He might wait for a good time to tell me something, like what he suspected about Dr. Ross.” Darcy nodded and frowned. Natasha’s tone was soft. “He’s my friend. I trust him.” She chuckled, “not that he’s any good at lying.”

Darcy complained, “so why is it so bad if I don’t talk to him about the ‘star-spangled girls,’ or Peggy? What if I just don’t want to make him uncomfortable about stuff from the past?”

Natasha sighed. “The thing about the scientist isn’t likely to come between you. That’s just someone being a sick monster. It’s probably made Steve even more protective, however hard he tries not to show it.” Darcy watched as Natasha put a gun back together without looking at it. Her work was perfect and fast. Natasha mused, “if you continued to feel insecure about other women? Or, if you fear that Steve’s feelings for Peggy overshadow you? That can come between you. Like I said, you don’t deserve to feel like a consolation prize. You’re your own person. You aren’t HIS, or anyone else’s. You can do whatever you like. Your only limits are those you place on yourself.”

Darcy tilted her head back and forth and admitted, “I don’t want anything to come between us.” She grinned wanly, “with you bringing it up in front of him, I don’t guess I can avoid the discussion.” She sighed. “But, I think you’re missing the point, when you act like I ought to date around. I’m in love with Steve. I don’t want to be with anyone else. I feel like I don’t get enough time with Steve, as it is. I want everything with him!”

Natasha looked at her evenly, saying nothing.

Darcy shrugged and decided to change the subject. “Can I ask you something that I’m nervous to ask?”

“I’m glad to know I at least make you a little bit nervous. Go ahead.” Natasha’s lips curled into a genuine smile.

Darcy bit her lip and asked, “why did Bucky refer to you as Natalia?”

Natasha barked a short laugh, “you don’t start small, do you?” Darcy shifted from one foot to the other. Natasha’s expression was bittersweet. “He trained me in the Red Room at one point. I knew him as Yasha, not Winter Soldier or Bucky. We felt something for each other, and they separated us.” Her mouth shifted, neither frown nor smile, just an expression in between. “It’s a testament to the value they placed on each of us as ‘weapons’ that they did not force either of us to kill the other then. It was a long time ago.” Her expression changed to a smile. “Steve understood what it probably meant when Bucky referred to me as Natalia. Steve didn’t say anything to anyone else, because he worried what might come of it. But I’ve talked with Yasha, now Bucky, since his memories have returned. I’m glad we can be colleagues. I’m glad we were unable to kill each other.
in DC.” She frowned. “He had me at one point… if not for Steve.”

Darcy gaped, “and what does Hawkeye think? And, how long ago?”

Natasha grinned dryly, “I value Hawkeye as a colleague as well.” She ignored Darcy’s question about time. Darcy made a face. Natasha’s grin changed, “you care about Hawkeye’s feelings since he saved you in London, I suppose. Don’t worry. I come closest to knowing who I am now when I am with him.” She chuckled, “funny you should ask after him. He’s going to work with you next. He should be here any minute.”

Hawkeye spoke from around the corner, “you know I’ve been here for ten minutes already, Nat. Play nice!” He looked at Darcy’s holster and walked around her. “Looking good, Lewis! I’m glad your aim and basic weapons handling are improving. But, you need to learn to move with your weapon. Next door is a training room we call ‘the arena,’ where you play with weapons a little differently. Load up on blanks. I’m not ready to die for you right now, darlin’.” He offhandedly told her, “first, we’ll go hand-to-hand, with you trying to shoot me. Natasha will observe. I’ll be unarmed, but will try to take your gun… your ‘advantage’.” Darcy frowned at him with a doubtful look, and he laughed, “Okay. You’re right. I WILL take your gun, unless you've been holding out and surprise me. But it’ll be good sparring for you. I promise you’ll feel it. Then to mix it up, I’ll come at you with a sparring knife and try to take your gun. Use what you've learned. Stop me, if you can.” Darcy swallowed hard, thinking none of this sounded good at all.

The next hour included some of the most physically demanding moments of Darcy’s life so far. Clint was fast, skilled, and deliberately intimidating in ‘the arena’. Natasha observed from the sideline. She stepped in from time to time to correct Darcy’s stance and demonstrate things. Clint showed Darcy three moves to practice as he ‘attacked.’ She fought him using everything she could remember from Natasha’s training, and tried to incorporate the moves he demonstrated. Despite her best efforts, he stole her gun and had her facing down the barrel of it six times before she figured out even one of the new moves. It was frustrating as hell. She felt like one of the moves involved something that her brain just couldn't comprehend.

When she finally prevented him from taking her gun, and fired a blank for the first time, it seemed deafening so close and without headphones. She cussed as he took advantage of her startled reaction and took the gun. He laughed at her expression. “If it makes you feel better, a guy without Kevlar would be down. Good job! You done?”

She was breathing hard from exertion, but she shook her head. “I’m pretty sure that most people coming after someone with a visible holster will be wearing Kevlar. Don’t ya think?”

Hawkeye shrugged, “maybe… if they have brains… but maybe not,” and grinned wryly. He wiggled a brow, “I’m sure Kaplan would be glad to help you holster it somewhere stealthier.”

She glared, re-holstered the gun and indicated for him to come at her again, saying, “shut it! I’m not trying to become an agent. I just need to look out for myself long enough to get away, for my suit to reach me, or for one of you guys to get me to safety.” He nodded approval, smiling easily at her. It pissed her off that Hawkeye was hardlybreaking a sweat. She was dripping with it, and Natasha was as unflappable and perfect-looking as ever. Next, he showed her a heavy rubber training knife that he would use against her. It would leave blue marks on her whenever he managed a hit. She groaned, “Fuck! I’m gonna look like a Smurf!”

Hawkeye continued to easily evade her efforts and take the gun. As she’d predicted, her arms were covered with blue, especially her upper left arm. He talked easily as he kept her off balance. “You’re doing better than some I’ve worked with, Lewis.” He dodged three feints and two kick attempts. Furious, she deliberately made it look like she was flubbing a move. When he moved to
take advantage, she pulled her gun and shot. His grip on her leg slipped and the knife slammed sideways between her legs. Shocked at the sensation, Darcy panicked. She swung her gun wildly and pistol-whipped Hawkeye, drawing blood.

He groaned and offered her a fist bump. “Shit! Sorry! Good job!” He put one hand to his head, applying pressure.

Darcy yelped, “Sorry! Sorry! I just…”

Natasha crowed, “she drew blood, Barton!” He sighed ruefully, cursed under his breath, and laughed at himself. His look to Natasha was sheepish and amused.

“Did you let me hit you?” Darcy was shaking all over, her emotions running high.

He shook his head, looking dismayed while Natasha snickered at him. He patted her arm. “Nope! You tricked me, and got unpredictable! Good job, kid.” He groused, “I’ll take all sorts of shit for it, so enjoy. You won’t fool me with the damsel routine again!”

He ran a hand through his hair and rasped, “I swear to God that my knife hand slipped, Darcy. I didn't mean to hit you between the legs. I know what those bastards in London threatened to do. I’d never deliberately use it in sparring.” He frowned. “I probably should, but… no.”

She nodded breathlessly. “I know. Sorry if I overreacted.” It angered her that she was shaking.

He shook his head, “Nah. It’s good to know you’ve got rage on reserve. Just remember it’s there to use. Don’t let it freeze you.” He looked down and cussed, “Crap! You’re ‘Smurfed’ in the crotch! Get changed before Cap sees and murders me.” His expression was one of alarm. She gasped laughter as she tried to brush away blue residue. She just smeared it, she was so sweaty. Still panting with exertion, she thanked him and walked down the hall to the elevator. It was time for her to go upstairs and get ready for work. Natasha and Hawkeye told her goodbye and stood in the hall outside ‘the arena’, talking.

Darcy downed most of a water bottle, still shaking from the effort of training and the adrenaline. When the elevator door opened and she saw Steve standing inside, she cussed to herself and challenged him, “aren’t you supposed to still be asleep? You were up for days!”

He shrugged, “thought I’d say good morning on my way out to run.” He looked her over, a concerned expression on his face. She huffed, looking at the blue marks on her arms and feeling the sweat run down her face and back. Her hair was sweat-soaked and she was sure she’d never looked worse. She shrugged back. He asked, “you okay?” His gaze dropped and his eyes widened. He growled, “What the hell?!”

She looked back, noting Hawkeye’s wary expression, and groaned. “It was an accident. Hawkeye slipped, and I already drew blood for it… which… Really?! Someone should train HIM if I can do that.” She heard Hawkeye ruefully mutter that he was sure the Captain would. Natasha chuckled. Darcy tried to push Steve back, but felt like she’d have better luck with a brick wall. She huffed, “Chill! He’s sorry, and you’re acting stupid!” He breathed out loudly and nodded, eyes locked on Hawkeye.

Steve finally let Darcy push him back into the elevator. She urged, “ride up with me. Your run can wait.” After the doors closed, she paced back and forth in the elevator, letting her heart rate gradually slow while she breathed in and out heavily. She gasped, “that was hard! It was enough cardio for a day or two!” She looked at the time on her phone and shook her head. “Good thing. It’s getting late.”
He nodded edgily, “what was hard?” His jaw shifted as though he was biting his tongue.

She laughed, “stuff that’s the easiest thing in the world for you! I’m not in that good of shape. He wasn’t even sweating until he saw you looking so pissed, damn it!”

Steve’s phone beeped, and he looked down at it, eyes widening, then back up at her. “You pistol-whipped Hawkeye in ‘the arena’?”

She shook her head. “I freaked. I’m sure he was thrown off when his hand slipped. He was really sorry.” She worked more to bring her breathing back to normal.

Steve shook his head and argued, “he wasn’t just thrown off. According to his text, you played dumb to trick him, and hit him fair and square. You remind me so much of the way I was before the serum, so determined. Though you’re much healthier. Thank God!” He chuckled wryly. “Now, I understand how hard it must have been for Bucky to find me getting my ass kicked again and again.”

She glared at him and growled, “Fine! I got my ass kicked! What do you expect?! He’s an Avenger, and I’m a target!” Steve grabbed her hand, and pulled her to him. She pushed back, “I’m disgusting… and pissed!” He shook his head and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her until she had to pull back to breathe. He chuckled ruefully as he wiped blue off of her face and neck with the edge of his shirt. She shook her head and teased, “are you saying Bucky wanted to kiss you silly all those times someone beat you up?”

He shook his head and frowned, “Nah. I wasn’t his type... more like a kid brother, then.”

She asked, “Even looking this ratty, I’m your ‘type’?”

The elevator reached her floor. Steve kissed her gently, “Absolutely. You’re my girl, and I love you like crazy.” He stepped off the elevator with her and urged, “so, let me help you out.” She looked puzzled. He mimicked one of the moves Hawkeye had tried to teach her. It was the one that felt impossible. She frowned and nodded, alert again. He showed her exactly what she was doing wrong with her left hand. He had her do the move in slow motion six times properly. Then he feinted at her more quickly while she reacted correctly. He smiled and kissed her. “Next time you won’t have so much blue here.” He touched and then kissed her left arm where she felt achy from all the times it had been tapped by the sparring knife. She thanked him and kissed him hard, grateful that he was so supportive.

He kissed her again and touched his forehead against hers. “Join me for lunch out of the Tower today?”

She was startled. “Out?”

He nodded. “Like a lunch date. Chinese? I have a team debriefing from 11 until 2:00. Can you wait that late?”

She nodded, “Sure. See ya then!” She kissed him again, and went to shower and dress for work.

***

After her shower, she stood in front of her open closet, naked but for a disgruntled look, for a long time. RED. She thought about how fierce and amazing Peggy looked in the painting Steve had done of her. Hell! Peggy was still bad-ass in her 90’s! Darcy blinked back tears.

Darcy lay down on her bed, and thought about everything that Natasha had brought up. She closed
her eyes and bit her lip as she thought back over the time she had spent with Steve. She asked JARVIS to play the songs that Steve had gifted her so far. The first was ‘You are So Beautiful.’ She did some meditative breathing and let her thoughts flow. On some level, it still surprised her that someone as perfect as Steve wanted to be with her. But she trusted him more than she’d ever trusted anyone. He wanted to be with her.

He loved her. He even acted like he was the lucky one, like he was surprised that she paid attention to him. She thought about his physical appearance and condition before the serum. He’d always been handsome, but had not been big and strong until he was twenty four. For most of his conscious life, girls and women had ignored him. After Project Rebirth changed him, lots of women paid attention to Captain America. Steve was still the same man he had been for the first twenty four years of his life, just sexier. It was hard to imagine what that was like. She could try to relate it to the sudden changes puberty had brought to her body, but that happened over a year or two, not minutes.

‘Things We Don’t Know About’ played, and she listened to the assurances and promises in those lyrics. Her breathing eased and she no longer felt like crying. There was a knock at the door. She threw on a robe and answered it. A security guard delivered a dozen red roses. The message on the card was, ‘Red is just a color. You’re the love of my life. You’re amazing and I love you! –Steve.’ Darcy chuckled and set the roses on her coffee table. ‘Maybe I’m Amazed’ was playing. She sang along for a few lines- “Maybe I’m amazed at the way you pulled me out of time. You hung me on the line. Maybe I’m amazed at the way I really need you.”

She went back to her closet and chose a red pencil skirt and a black blouse. She frowned as she realized that the top would require a strapless bra. The wide neckline would show straps. Then she remembered a matched red sheer-lace bra and panties set that Jai had provided. She put them on and then picked out red shoes to go with the outfit. She stopped moving as ‘Lovesong’ began to play. She grinned as she heard the lyrics, ‘Whenever I’m alone with you, you make me feel like I am young again. Whenever I’m alone with you, you make me feel like I am fun again…’

She looked at her reflection in the mirror and bit her lip, feeling her heart speed up as she considered a daring idea. Steve needed something to help him put bad images out of his mind. What if…? She looked at herself in the mirror again and grinned, heart racing. She went to her living room and pulled one rose out of the vase and took it back to her bedroom. She set it on the dresser while she pulled out a pair of Captain America shield clip-on earrings she’d never worn. She clipped one over the bow on the bra, between her breasts. Then, she slipped on the red heels. She neatened up the area reflected in her full-length mirror, applied bright red lipstick, and brushed her hair so that it hung in shiny waves. She shook her hands out for a few seconds to shake away nervousness and held the rose in one hand and her phone in the other.

She muttered a few choice curse words. Oh, gods! She felt so stupid! She burst out giggling more than once while she tried to decide how to pose. She finally sat on a stool from her kitchen. She sat at an angle with the heel closest to the mirror hooked over a rung high on the stool, and the other leg straight down to support her weight. She held the rose by her hip and held the camera phone by her raised knee as steady as she could. She made sure that the shield clip on her bra was visible, and that her Infinity necklace was on straight. It took several tries before she got a shot she liked. She deleted all those that she didn’t like. Then, she finished dressing. The skirt and blouse were form fitting, but gave good coverage. She left her hair down, and put on her glasses.

Finally ready, Darcy grabbed some coffee and a nutrition bar, and went to see Jane and Erik and work in their lab. They were reviewing portal data, having a grand old science time. She tasked an assistant to ensure that the enthusiastic duo ate some lunch, setting an alarm for herself to follow up the delivery with a confirmation call to Jane. She worked on their transcriptions first, and then
their requisitions and reports.

After she was done in Jane and Erik’s lab, she went to her office and caught up on messages, prepped some things for Betty Ross (per messages from Tony and Bruce), and put out fires. She started assistants working on special instructions from Tony and made a few calls. Finally, she decided she couldn't stand herself anymore if she didn't follow through on her idea. She typed in a text message, ‘Thank you for the roses. Red IS just a color. I hope you like me in it. For your eyes only!’ She attached the picture and hit Send before she could change her mind. She sat with her face hidden in her hands for about ten seconds. Then, she took a deep breath and got back to work.

***

In the Avengers’ Conference room, Colonel Rhodes was giving his report on the extraction of Dr. Ross and General Ross from the Army base near Culver to Avengers Tower. Steve’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. He read the words, but resisted the temptation to open the attached image until he had privacy. Regardless of his caution, he could tell that Bucky had read the message from his spot at Steve’s right hand. Bucky raised a brow, and gave Steve a sardonic grin.

On one of the wall monitors, Steve saw work progressing in the R&D lab. He caught sight of Darcy as she made her way out of her office to prod techs working on the highest priority items captured. Her face had a rosy glow, like she’d just been laughing or blushing. He noted that she was wearing a pretty red skirt and heels. She was murmuring or singing something to herself. He read her lips. 'Show me a garden that's bursting into life.' Those words were from one of the songs he’d sent to her. She looked lovely, so sweet and sexy. His gaze was locked on her on the video monitor as long as she was in sight. He already liked her in red, even before seeing the image on his phone. He couldn't help but anticipate what it might be.

As Rhodes finished and took his seat, Hawkeye pointed at Darcy on the monitor and grumbled, “there’s the latest person to re-calibrate my skull. Watch out for that one, Cap! She plays sweet, but she’s got a mean swing.” Steve resisted the urge to snap at Hawkeye.

Tony laughed at Hawkeye. “If the scientist wrangler clocks you while sparring, it’s smarter to pretend it didn't happen.” Hawkeye shrugged, and muttered about tricky damsels.

People got up and moved around; taking the chatter as a sign that it was time for a break. Steve went to the restroom and locked the door behind him. He immediately pulled out the phone and opened the attachment to Darcy’s last text. He gasped and held the phone against his chest, as though to hide the screen from prying eyes. A wave of lustful appreciation flowed over him. He muttered, “Oh, my God!” He stared at the phone screen for a minute, his hands itching to commit the image to canvas. His beautiful Sweetheart…

His gaze caught on the little shield on Darcy’s bra. Something primal in him rejoiced at the sight. He stared at it, thinking that regardless of any rational, modern argument Natasha offered, Darcy gave every sign of wanting to be with him and only him. That thought made him smile with satisfaction and pleasure.

When he returned to the conference table, Bucky looked at him, grinning slightly. “So, what’d the little lady send you, Punk?” Steve shook his head slightly. His expression was studiously neutral. Only the blush at the back of his neck and tips of his ears betrayed his feelings. Bucky put a calming hand on his arm, and shared, “it sounds like everyone is scheming to convince you to give R&R for at least a few days. This a good time to ask?” Bucky’s look was one of blatantly mocking false-innocence.

Steve’s head reeled at the thought of days of relaxation and fun with Darcy. He let out a shaky
breath. Bucky laughed out loud, drawing the others’ curious attention. Steve did his best to ignore Bucky’s laughter, but nodded.

He turned to look across the room. “Tony! Ask Pepper to see if we can push meeting with Rusk back a week or two. None of us have had time off in over a month. Let’s take a few days to get our heads on straight.”

There were cheers up and down the table and all around the conference room.

*to be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Pose inspiration. https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/75/e0/cc/75e0cc73880500e36275972d254265a7.jpg

Darcy work outfit- http://www.polyvore.com/darcy_lewis_work_red_outfit/set?id=153917795
"I have intentions."

Chapter Summary

Darcy meets w/Betty to discuss Betty's lab and life changes. Darcy and Steve have lunch out and take a walk in the park to discuss feelings, insecurities... and intentions. Natasha visits, offering chocolates and friendship. After work, it's time for welcoming drinks and other fun...

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU to those still reading. I appreciate you more than I can say (even if I dedicated thousands and thousands of words to the task).

THANK YOU, McGregorsWench for beta help!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy visited four R&D techs that had urgent requests, reviewed progress on the items the Avengers had brought in from DC and the base near Culver, and returned to her office. Betty Ross sat outside the door, waiting. Betty looked around, alertly evaluating the work she saw in progress. Her arms were crossed and she was tapping on the face of her watch with two fingernails, beating out an agitated rhythm.

Darcy noted with a sense of relief that the watch wasn't beeping. She reached out to shake Betty’s hand, “Dr. Ross! Thank you for coming by. Please come in.” She hoped this meeting would go better than their first. The lack of tequila seemed a reason for hope. Betty’s frown wasn't encouraging, though.

Betty stood, towering over Darcy by a good five inches. Darcy realized that Betty must be taller than Bruce, too. The taller woman held herself proudly and had a delicate beauty, despite her height. Betty was quiet, looking around Darcy’s office as though seeking clues. Darcy leaned against her desk and waited.

Finally, Betty asked, “how many offices do you have? Don’t you work with Bruce?”

Darcy nodded anxiously. “I assist him a few hours a day. I’m not scared... well, I wasn’t, but now that I’ve been through an incident, I am just a little.” Betty stared at Darcy as though she thought she was deranged. Darcy blushed, wondering if she could go two minutes around Betty Ross without saying something wrong. She had the urge to blurt words out, one after another. She had a horrible image of herself yelling the words ‘Christmas porn’ and bit her lip, hard.

Darcy shook her head and took a breath, “what I mean is that I started assisting him a couple of months ago. I’ve done that for Jane, Dr. Foster, for years. I was her intern when she first met Thor in New Mexico. That put me on SHIELD’s radar... apparently Hydra’s too, the bastards. Then, we had crazy times in London with portals and such, and that really got attention. And now we’re here, at first for safety and Thor convenience; and now because it’s our home.”
Darcy was gesturing a lot, channeling some of her nervousness into her hands. She swallowed hard. “I wasn’t chicken shit about being around Bruce. Pepper found out about the work I did for Jane when she was sulking over Thor’s absence. So, Pepper had me look into working with R&D and in Tony’s lair. I have work spaces in all three of those labs, but an office here with the R&D minions. I’m the Labs’ Manager now.” She shrugged, “No offense! But, a lot of scientists get so caught up in discovery that they forget basics like hygiene… much less administrative reports and requisitions.”

“What’s your background, and your specialty? Weren’t you a humanities student at Culver?” Betty stared at her, nodding, but looking puzzled.

“I did my undergrad work in Poli-Sci at Culver, and even had you for an intro to Cellular Biology. I scraped a B, and was pretty damned proud to get out that well!” Darcy noted uneasily that Betty was still frowning. "I was still six science credits short for graduation, though, so I took the internship with Dr. Foster. I already… well, babbled… what happened after that. I finished a Business degree at Oxford recently. I’m studying online through SI for my MBA, and taking other courses just to learn about different things. Early on, Bruce suggested I look into more studies so I wouldn’t feel so trapped here. Anyway, color me the scientist wrangler.”

“Please, tell me about your work and what you need. I want to make it happen. We all do.” Darcy took a deep breath, walked around behind her desk and sat in the chair. She was anxious. Betty wasn’t doing much to put her at ease, and this mattered. She knew that she was babbling, but she couldn’t seem to stop. She liked Bruce so much that she wanted to get along with Betty, for his sake, if nothing else. She listened to Betty talk about her work, watching to see what topics Betty warmed to most. She asked more about those. She opened a file on her computer and made a list, from Betty’s descriptions, of features and items needed in the woman’s lab. She added in a few things from her earlier message from Tony, printed it all out and handed a copy to Betty. Betty scanned the printout.

Then, Darcy reached into a cabinet behind her and pulled out a StarkPad and handed that to Betty. “The list in your hand is what we’ll work from to start, so make any changes you like. I’ll email it to you, too. Take the pad to the tech device support office on thirty seven, and they’ll make it shiny for you. I’ve also set up for HR to expect you today. They’re on thirty six. That’ll take a while. Everybody has to do testing for background, so don’t be surprised. Just take comfort that it means you’re less likely to get attacked by a fellow employee.”

Darcy bit her lip as she took in Betty’s nervous expression. She added, “I recommend you talk to Bruce and the staff in the Healing Ward about getting a GPS locator tracker. At least see if it might be possible! Maybe while you’re at it, you could do one for Bruce. No one else will. It’s for security, given what happened with Hydra. Bruce wants to schedule some lab work to get data for his experimental studies on you, too. Today would be great, if you have time after HR. If not, then at your earliest convenience. You also need to go by Tony’s workshop and get scanned for a suit of armor. It only takes about ten seconds! So, don’t let him bullshit you into giving him the chance to play twenty questions with you about Bruce. He’s the nosiest friend a guy could have, and he’s head-over-heels for Bruce. They’re science-bros. If you want me to go with you into Tony’s lair, or anywhere else, please ask. I’ll clear my calendar to help you.” Darcy looked over the notes again.

Betty looked dumbfounded. “I don’t have to justify any of the requests on my list?”

Darcy chuckled. “Welcome to Tony Stark’s sci-candy store, Dr. Ross!” She felt awkward since Betty didn’t acknowledge her offer to go with her. She leaned forward and whispered, “now’s a good time to add dream items to your list, if you want! He’ll get you anything!”
“What does he want in return?” Betty breathed in and out slowly.

Darcy sat back, and thought for a moment. “He’d be thrilled if you come up with something that will make the world better. He works a lot on clean-energy projects, for instance. He loves tech that helps people with disabilities, cures for anything, ideas that make life happier and better. We’re all about things that help with Avenging, so stuff that’s useful to any and all of them is a big win. I give candy rewards for anything that’ll piss off Hydra, or make their evil lives more difficult. That’s the general thing. From necessity, there are also defensive weaponry and equipment projects.”

Darcy watched the play of suspicion and curiosity in Betty’s expression. Darcy kept her tone even. “From you? Tony wants Bruce to be happy, to know that life doesn’t have to suck for him because he had one experiment go wrong. And, once Tony gets to know you, he’ll probably want you to be happy, too, regardless of Bruce. He doesn’t like your dad much, but he’s pretty excited you’re here. Tony’s the nicest asshole you’ll ever meet.”

Betty looked skeptical. “But what’s the catch? Where’s the part where I have to sell my soul?”

Darcy sighed. “It’s NOT a normal life. That’s for sure. But it’s a good one. I’ve had a few unfortunate meetings with Hydra. I’ve been given what I need to get over it… physical and mental health care, a safe place to live, good work, friendship, self-defense training, weapons, armor, and then some.” She smiled and shrugged. “The Avengers are like a dysfunctional family. Your role with them is up to you.”

She took another deep breath. “Your OTHER role with them is up to you, too. Tony’s jazzed about adding another ass-kicking woman to the roster. Bruce is shooting him green glares.” Betty’s eyes narrowed. Darcy hurried to add, “but that’s your business and your decision! Don’t let either of them give you any crap. Steve, I mean Captain America, leads the Avengers team. He’ll look out for you, no matter what. Talk to him about it, if you want.”

Betty nodded and asked, “and what is your role with the Avengers? Bruce mentioned you and Steve…”

Darcy nodded, blushing. “Most people know Steve as Captain America. He was one of the two handsome super-soldiers who got you out of Hydra trouble. He leads the Avengers in battle. And, yes, Steve’s my guy.” She mused, “Thor’s like my big brother, the godly kind who’s in love with my best friend. The rest are my friends. I’ve heard people in all different kinds of jobs here say they’re here to help Avenge. They might heal their wounds, or work on their battle equipment, or gather info. Or just make them good food and drink, or rebuild when parts of the building get smashed. But, it’s kind of everybody’s thing here.” Darcy bit her lip again. “Do you want me to shut up yet?”

Betty let out a chuckle and shook her head.

“So,” Darcy continued, “for me, it means making sure that Jane eats and bathes, even during a science haze. It means trying to get Steve to laugh and relax. It means treating Bruce like a human being, even when he’s not so sure he is one. It means putting up with Tony’s shit, and keeping the techs from pestering him when he’s trying to think of his next world-saving idea. It means calling in Pepper when Tony needs reining in.” She shrugged again. “You make of it what you will. I hope it works out for you.” Darcy had reached a point where she felt she’d made enough gestures of reaching out, at least for this encounter. Her smile faded slightly, and she looked business-like. Her nerves settled, too.

JARVIS spoke, “Excuse me, Darcy. Miss Potts has arranged an appointment with Jai for Dr. Ross.
Jai will see the doctor at her convenience.”

“Pepper’s going all fairy godmother on you, Doc! Jai is her stylist, mine too, on Tony’s dime. She’s awesome, and will set you up good,” Darcy smiled.

Betty remarked, “Your outfit is very polished.”

Darcy chuckled, and looked at herself. “I’ve gotten kind of used to these grown-up lady clothes. Who would’ve thunk it?” She couldn’t get a read on Betty’s expression. “Thanks. You okay there? You look kinda stunned, like Steve does when Tony tells a dirty joke or something.”

All was quiet between them for a long time. Finally, Betty asked, “what if I don’t make Bruce happy? What if things are too far gone between us for that?”

Darcy nodded, “Ah. I get that. Well, Hydra and other assorted bad guys of the week don’t give a damn for nuance. They know about you and Bruce now. He tried staying away to keep you from getting target-painted, but it didn’t work out. Your dad messed that up. So, if things don’t pan out with Bruce, you still need safe-keeping. Ya know? It can be here or back at Culver, if you like. Just… with guards. I’d guess you get to keep armor, too, but tech is Tony’s thing. So, don’t quote me on that.”

“It’s not like anyone is saying you have to play nice with Bruce, or else! The Avengers are the good guys, after all.” Darcy leaned forward urgently.

Betty nodded. “Who told you to tell me these things?”

Darcy looked her in the eye. “I had a memo from Pepper. She talked with Tony, Steve, and Bruce. I was told to give it to you straight. Bruce is all-in with Tony on the lab part. He’ll do whatever Tony wants, so long as you get anything you want, anything at all. He told us that you can take or leave him, so long as he doesn’t ruin your life any more than he already did,’ and I quote. Betty’s expression shifted as she held back tears, from a combination of anguish and anger. Betty’s struggle caused Darcy to reconsider and try once more to reach out. “Wanna go grab some coffee or tea or something? Chocolate?”

Betty sniffed, and almost smiled. “I’d rather not go around people, thank you. I’m not all that comfortable being in large groups at the moment.” She tapped her nails on her watch face again and Darcy realized it was a tell of nerves rather than impatience.

Darcy sat back and grinned. “Listen… I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot. I can be a little much sometimes, and there was some really good tequila involved. But, if you want to talk I’d…”

Betty waved for her to stop. “That would be nice. Can we get coffee here? Maybe chocolate, too?” She wiped a tear from her eye.

Darcy nodded. “Hey, JARVIS? Can you get us a delivery from the baristas downstairs? A couple of those little salted caramel chocolate things they pretend don’t exist anymore, a skinny hazelnut for me, and…”

Betty perked up, “Cinnamon Latte.”

Darcy repeated it to JARVIS. “You’re way lucky on the metabolism, if you can have those. You look fantastic. I learned to love me some skinny drinks.”

“We all have our vices.” Betty smiled through her tears.
Darcy replied, “Yeah. Well, I’m scared my vices will make me fat!” She sighed. “Some of the others say I should maybe even put on some weight, but I don’t want to lose control and get huge!”

Betty burst out laughing, and Darcy blushed beet red as she realized what she’d said. She sputtered, “oh, SHIT! I’m sorry! I…”

Betty snorted a laugh and wiped her cheeks. “Don’t apologize! I need a laugh. It’s been a… hard week.” She grinned and sat back, chuckling softly. “You’re lovely. The reason I reacted negatively to you before was that I was jealous. You’ve spent time with Bruce, while I haven’t. It has been… so long. I moved on for a while, and wondered if he’d finally done the same. I wondered if you two…”

Darcy quirked a smile, and shook her head. “Nah! He looks at me funny when I remind him of you. Something about our lips? But, he’s just a friend.”

Betty admitted, “I saw you with him on TV once while the reporters were talking with Mr. Stark.” She touched her lips and looked at Darcy’s, then smiled slightly. It had worried Betty to read about Darcy in Bruce’s journal. Darcy’s explanation put that into a different light, one that further erased Betty’s lingering suspicions.

Darcy made a face. “He was just trying to keep me from getting trampled by crazy paparazzi, looking out for me as a friend. Tony creates a ruckus wherever he goes, and the three of us were grabbing dinner outside the Tower together.” She huffed, “I already had this discussion with Steve, so I know it looked like something it wasn’t. It was when Steve and I were just getting together. Tony was scheming, a power play of some kind. Steve was scared I would prefer Bruce because he’s more gentle.” Betty chuckled. Darcy shrugged. “For the record, though not to TMZ cuz they suck and nearly ran me over, I’m in love with Steve Rogers up to my eyeballs and beyond. To me, he’s the best, sweetest, most honorable, sexiest thing going. He’s my guy. To me, Bruce is a sweet soul, awesome yoga master and deeply sad guy who’s head-over-heels for you.”

Betty stared at Darcy for a long moment. She picked her words carefully. “Bruce is different than he used to be. He’s always been brilliant. And, I suppose he’s always been sad. There was too much darkness in his childhood for him to be easygoing.” She mused, “he’s more confident now. I don’t know if that’s just because he knows that Hulk will protect him, or if it’s because he’s more in his element here with the Avengers than he’s ever been before.”

“I don’t know about his childhood.” Darcy cleared her throat.

Betty nodded once, “Oh. Well…” For the first time since they’d sat down together, Darcy saw a flash of red in Betty’s eyes. Betty breathed in an out in a controlled fashion, and it disappeared.

Darcy heard a noise in the vent over her head. She relaxed and moved her wrists apart, then glanced up and shook her head. Darcy took a quick breath. “I think his love for you hasn’t changed.”

Betty frowned, “No. It’s definitely changed, especially now.” She stood and paced. “I’m finding my change far easier to accept than Bruce’s. Hulk frightened me at first. Red She-Hulk makes me feel safer and… powerful for the first time in my life. I’ve been under my father’s thumb for too long. Red She-Hulk takes charge! That’s a change I’m ready to embrace.” She turned and faced Darcy, jutting out her chin. “I think it’s a good time for me to re-think a lot of things.”

Darcy mused, “you should mention that to Jai. You’ll see her within a day or two. She’s into personality profiling to help develop your look. Having pretty clothes helps me feel good.”
“Speaking of clothes, I’d love to get my lab notes from Culver. I’ve been saving a micro-fiber cloth alteration as a gift for Bruce.” Betty grinned. "I need it for myself now. Red She-Hulk will be taken more seriously if clothed, I think.” Betty looked at her reflection in the wall mirror behind the office door. “Powerful,” she whispered, her lips curling into a self-satisfied smile.

Darcy made a note to send for Betty’s lab notes from Culver.

Betty turned and looked Darcy up and down. “You have a bit of ‘bombshell’ to your look now, Miss Lewis. I don’t remember seeing you that way when you were in my class. You seemed… quirky. I remember hats. I liked your hats.”

Darcy grinned self-consciously. “Before Jai found me things that really fit, I would’ve never worn an outfit like this. I wore lots of sweaters and big shirts… and, yes, hats. Mamaw was big on knitting. She made sweaters and hats. I still have them. I’ll probably pull out a few favorites when the weather turns cold again.”

Betty nodded, “I remember that! You layered a lot and covered your figure. What happened to give you so much more confidence?” Her expression was eager, almost hungry.

Darcy considered the question. “Like I said, I’m getting therapy. I’m also learning to defend myself. I’ve fallen in love for the first time, too.” She smoothed her skirt.

“You mentioned Hydra. What unfortunate encounters have you had with them?” Betty tilted her head.

Darcy’s head shot up and she grimaced. “I wandered into their path on my own after SHIELD fell. Hawkeye brought me to safety. More recently, they tried to take the Tower. I was in their way then, too.” She heard another noise from the vent and sighed.

Betty made a face. “I heard something about that on the news.” Darcy looked down again, rearranging things on her desk in an uncomfortable manner.

A barista knocked on the door and Darcy waved her in. “Geez, Nikki! Did you fly Thor’s hammer up here, or what?”

The breathless barista laughed, and set the order on the desk. “Don’t I wish! That man lives up to the title of a god!” Darcy signed the bill on Nikki’s StarkPad while the barista handed out the drinks and pastries. Nikki’s phone beeped and she ran out, waving over her shoulder as she went.

Darcy held up her drink and smiled hopefully. “Cheers! Welcome to Avengers Tower, Dr. Ross. I hope you’ll be happy here. I’d like it if we can become friends, too.”

Betty lifted her drink and replied, “Cheers! Please, call me Betty. I look forward to working together with you and the others.” Her smile was fierce and full of steely reserve.

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A while after Betty left her office; Darcy looked up at the sound of a light knock. She grinned and blushed as she saw Steve standing there. He walked in and closed the door. He had his hands on his hips and a rueful grin on his face. He nodded, “You’re gorgeous. Of course, I like it!” Darcy laughed at the look on his face, and dropped her gaze as she saw the way he looked down her body as she stood. He was focused and attentive. He nearly vibrated with intensity. She almost expected for him to ask her to go back to his place instead of out of the Tower as he’d mentioned.

Thinking about all that Natasha had brought up, Darcy was tempted to proposition Steve, to delay
the discussion. But she resisted the temptation, and followed him out of the Tower. She switched to sunglasses and enjoyed the feeling of the sun on her skin as they walked. She knew that Steve was alert enough to dangers for both of them. She felt safe with him by her side. Looking around, she also saw SI guards trailing them at a discreet distance. Then, she heard a human whistle and glanced up and saw Hawkeye in a tree half a block away. He winked at her, and she smiled back.

Steve murmured, “you look very pretty today, Sweetheart.”

After Steve and Darcy finished their lunch, he asked if she’d walk in Central Park with him. As they walked, she felt tension rolling off him. She hedged, “what’s on your mind? You’re not upset about my training, are you?” She knew that wasn’t the issue.

He shook his head, “No. I don’t like that it’s necessary, but I’m proud of you.” He cleared his throat and looked at her with a plaintive expression. “There are some things we haven’t talked about.”

Darcy frowned, “I’m sorry for all the insecurity stuff Natasha dredged up! I’m still not sure what set her off. This morning she told me that she worried that it would come between us. I don’t understand why she’s pushing so urgently.” She peered up at him. He was frowning and looked guarded. She had come to recognize the look. He knew something and would share it soon, but was waiting to let her talk first.

She swallowed hard, and blushed as she admitted, “as to the ‘star-spangled girl’ thing? Natasha was right. Jane was just teasing, and I blew it out of proportion. It was the first time I met Natasha. She made me uncomfortable then. You were away tracking Bucky. You and I had just met and talked a few times. You told me about being with those chorus girls, and in my mind they were all glamorous, sensual, and gorgeous. I WAS jealous. I was scared I couldn’t measure up. Scared virgin, remember?”

He interrupted, shaking his head. “No! I never…!” She shook her head and sighed. Steve stopped walking, and looked at her with a serious expression. “I was so stupid in the USO. What I had with those girls was nothing special. I… was … almost indecently thrilled when you told me that you were a virgin.” He hung his head and looked around to make sure of their privacy. He looked vulnerable as he admitted, “I love that you haven’t been with anyone else that way, Darcy. I know it’s old fashioned and… un-enlightened by today’s thinking. But I…” He swallowed hard, his grin fragile. “I’m not as modern as I try to act sometimes, Sweetheart. I get tangled up trying to act like I think I’m supposed to. But it’s an act a lot of the time, too much.” He gave a shaky chuckle. “Please don’t talk like that was a bad thing. It wasn't to me, at all.” He struggled to find adequate words. “I've never had more pleasure or happiness than when I’m with you. I've never felt so good.”

Darcy smiled, touched. She ducked her head and let out a shaky breath, “that’s good to hear. I feel like… everything feels right when we’re together. I want…” Her expression shifted. “I don’t have the words, Steve.”

“I love you.” The corner of his mouth twitched to a grin.

“I love you, too.” She nodded, relaxing a bit.

They walked along in silence for a few minutes, both needing a chance to settle their emotions.

She sighed. “But that day when Natasha rescued my star scarf after Jane’s ‘star spangled girl’ comment? I still found it hard to believe that you were paying attention to me. I didn't mean to give away any of your secrets. I didn't know she was so invested in your love life.”
He shook his head. “I don’t understand Natasha’s interest in my personal life, either.” He looked pained. “I try to let nicknames and name-calling roll off. It’s just a thing people do. I can see why you wouldn’t want to be called a ‘star-spangled girl’, though. You’re not one. It’s never been like that. You’re so much more to me!” He looked at her expressively.

She leaned closer and admitted, “I’ve never understood why you’re with me, instead of someone more perfect, but I didn’t want to be a ‘fling.’ I think you probably could have seduced me for that, but it’s not what I want. I want you.”

“Please understand! You’re brave, funny, smart, generous, and gorgeous. Yet, you still don’t see why a guy would want you? Why I adore you?” He shook his head ruefully.

She looked up and admitted, “I don’t see myself the way you say you do. I’m not a classic beauty. In a world of trim athletic beauty, I’m a curvy girl. I’m no blonde angel! And you’re not just any guy. You’re YOU.”

He looked at her sharply, and mused, “when you say that, it’s the closest you come to treating me the way other people do.” She frowned as he explained, “when you express your feelings for me, you treat me differently than anyone ever has. You treat me like a man named Steve who you love. But, when it comes to my feelings for you, you act like Captain America is out of your league! You can’t believe that he could think you’re pretty, want you, or love you!”

Darcy gasped, looking dismayed. “No! Please, don’t turn my insecurities around that way. They’re mine. It’s that I don’t think I’m as pretty as you are handsome; as selfless and wonderful as you. I don’t think I’m as special as you are, Steve! It’s not just because you’re Captain America!”

She saw a food vendor stare at Steve in recognition, obviously having heard her words. Steve pulled his baseball cap lower, and walked faster. Darcy glanced back and saw the vendor watching them go, gaping unabashedly. The man pulled out his cell phone, and frowned at it when it wouldn’t work. She sighed.

Steve took a deep breath. “All I ever wanted when I was a kid was to be bigger, stronger, and more capable of doing good things. I wanted to help people. I never wanted to be famous. I couldn’t imagine having money. I wanted to fight for what’s right. I wished that someday I’d meet a nice girl, though I didn’t believe it could ever happen. I never imagined they could do what they did to me. THAT science was beyond anything but my most hopeless dreams.”

He shook his head, his expression resigned. “I never imagined people would go straight from treating me as less-than-a-man, to treating me as more than one.” He sighed. “I signed on for the experiment, desperate to help in the war. Dr. Erskine and Howard changed me. Dr. Erskine was murdered the next minute, and I chased down his murderer, a Hydra agent. The Army was gonna send me to a lab, but a Senator used me to sell war bonds instead. I felt ridiculous, but at least I was helping some. It was better than being a lab rat. I always had a lot of distrust for medical facilities. I was a burden before the serum… a burden in a time when society didn't treat such people well at all.”

He cleared his throat, “I had never been around girls much. Suddenly, I was in close quarters with a lot of them. They were pretty and I noticed. I didn’t even think about trying anything, though. Some of the girls were married. Some were dating guys serving overseas… and I wouldn’t have known how to start with those who weren’t rationed. One night, I woke up as a girl slipped into my room. I was as awkward as anyone could be, but she started kissing me, and it went from there. None of the girls knew that my hearing was enhanced. So, they didn't know that I heard them talking about, ‘getting into Captain America’s bed,’ or saying ‘I have Captain America’s patriotic-stamp of approval now’.” Steve’s words were anything but amusing, but his use of air quotes
caused Darcy to smile slightly, sadly. He looked from her expression to his hands and shrugged.

Steve’s expression twisted. “None of the girls who came to me gave a damn about who I really was, beyond the fact that I was polite and safe, and available for sex. They liked this body, and the idea of being with a guy on stage and in films. Famous. They wanted Captain America.” She saw long-accepted hurt in his expression.

Darcy groused, “well, that’s stupid! Captain America always has wars to win, and a whole world of people who expect him to give his life for them. It’s that part of you that’s ‘the soldier’. Don’t get me wrong. Cap’s great, I mean… not like you’re separate people. Okay. It’s a little confusing. But, Captain America’s great because you are so good. YOU, Steve- you’re my lover! You’re the guy who got rid of a scary hospital pitcher and got me a sport cup, who told me I’m more than I know, paints and sketches beautifully and makes me want to be better. You’re the guy who brings flowers, and took me dancing even though you’re not really comfortable with it, the guy who treats me like a lady and gave me a necklace with a symbol for ‘forever’ on it. Those girls didn't know what they were missing!”

He kissed her cheek, and his lips shifted to a small smile. “You’re the first girl to say that I was always special. Peggy knew me both before and after the experiment, always liked me, and was almost always friendly. But, we never had much time to just talk or anything. She liked me before the serum, but paid more attention after. She encouraged me to be the soldier she believed that I could. If I hadn't disappeared, I believe we would have at least dated.”

Darcy rolled her eyes at Steve, and frowned with skeptical disbelief. He grinned and corrected his words. “No. You’re right. That’s a lie. I believe we would have gotten married and made a life together.” Darcy nodded, a lump in her throat as Steve shifted so that their arms touched. He sighed, “I did what I had to. When I woke up, the world I knew was gone. Most of my friends were gone, enemies too… or, at least I thought they were. Peggy had lived a whole lifetime, married and had kids, helped start SHIELD. During the war, I dreamed of a life with her. Since I woke up again, I've grieved all that I lost. While it’s a lot better now, I still grieve. I guess I always will.”

Darcy nodded her agreement and understanding. “Of course you will!” She swallowed hard and decided it was time to discuss Steve’s grief and her reaction to it with Dr. Chau. Maybe Chau could even talk to the two of them together, or suggest a couple’s counselor. Though, how could anyone have experience with THIS exact situation? No one could. Darcy supposed they’d just have to look at it in broader terms of grief and loss, and living on.

A woman walked past them, muttering angrily at her iPhone, “battery needs charging? What do you mean? I just charged it. It was working fine until I crossed the street!” Darcy guessed that their security detail had jamming equipment that disabled electronic devices nearby. She realized then that she rarely saw videos of the Avengers on YouTube. Her respect for Tower security climbed a few notches.

Steve continued, “a few weeks later, Loki and the Chitauri happened, and I was told that I had the chance to save the world again. I wondered for a long time if that was all that I had left to look forward to- helping save people. It’s a fantastic thing and an honor, but lonely.” He led her to a bench, and they sat together and he held her hand tightly between them, out of view. “I tried to let it be enough after I came back from Europe. I worked hard, doing whatever SHIELD ordered. I tried to catch up on things, reading for hours, watching movies and programs, and listening to music. I tried to use those things to pick up on the threads of all the souls that had come and gone while I was under the ice.” She noticed that he turned his head towards her and didn't move his lips a lot as he talked. She looked for Hawkeye and shifted directly in front of Steve so that Hawkeye wouldn't be able to see her lips.
She interrupted, “I asked Bucky something like this, but never you… Did you dream all those years?”

Steve shook his head. “No. I guess my brain function was too low. If I dreamed, I don’t remember. I liked how you put it once, that time-on-ice shouldn't count against me since I didn't get to live much.” He looked up, watching a plane in the distance. “Fury came to me after he was first attacked in DC, and let me know that SHIELD was compromised. Soon after that, I was on the run, and then working with Natasha and Sam to stop Hydra from killing all those people with the Insight program.”

She mentioned, “My name was on the list. So, thanks.” Darcy watched a dog playing nearby, “I was in London, but they would have gotten around to me, sooner or later.” She shuddered.

His eyes widened. “Of course your name was on it!” He shook his head. “That’s another time I could have lost you without knowing…” He closed his eyes and uttered a short prayer. “After I got out of the hospital after SHIELD fell, Tony came to see me and talk about coming to the Tower to work together. His phone rang, and JARVIS told him Dr. Selvig was calling for help and to report your capture. Tony pulled out his StarkPad and that image came up. YOU. Just the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen… sexy and sweet looking, with a smile that promised trouble, eyes full of wit, and a body out of my dreams! I swear that my heart stopped. I was confused for a second, because I remember the original pinup. It was in a calendar Bucky had.” Darcy bit her lip and hid a smile.

Steve kept talking, “There were other images too, lots of them. Pictures of you with Jane and Thor, SHIELD surveillance images, license and student ID images, pictures from internet sites, pictures of things you liked and did. It was like a quick glance into your life, some I didn’t understand, but all of which I wanted to know more about. I wanted you to be safe… and to meet you… so badly that I could taste it.” He sighed and admitted, “it was unlike anything I’d ever felt before. When I looked at pictures of women, like in Bucky’s calendar, I never thought about who those girls were as people, any more than the USO girls thought beyond Captain America. But I wanted to know you. The calendar girls never seemed real, just fantasies. They seemed as untouchable and impossible as all women seemed to me before the serum. I ended up depressed if I even dreamed about them, they were THAT impossible to me…” She looked at him sympathetically.

He chuckled mirthlessly, “after Hawkeye got you out, I tossed a few things into a bag, and ordered Tony to bring me to New York with him. He was shocked by the way I was acting and, of course, let me know. I didn't give a damn. I needed to see you… and know that you were okay.”

He looked down and shook his head. “I went to Healing and sat outside your door, occasionally looking inside; always listening and making nurses run to your side any time you cried out. Dr. Chau helped me realize that a small part of that initial need to protect someone, and help with their healing, was transference of my grief over what happened to Bucky. But that was certainly not all it was.”

His expression was fervent. “There was a lot coming from love at first sight. I didn't know I even believed in that until it happened to me! Then, finally, I met you and could only stare like a crazy person. You were even better than I’d hoped. You were so brave, concerned about Erik even while you were hurt… light and open… and you looked at me so sweetly. Best of all, that night, I found out you were the easiest person to talk to that I've ever met! You even got me to talk about times with Bucky that I never told anyone about before. I never opened up to a dame that way, never before you. Then, I heard you correct Jane when she referred to me as Captain America. You told her my name was Steve… and that was it. I was completely head over heels. I began to see that maybe I’m not just here to save the world; maybe I could have something worth living for in this time. It was something I never could have known in my early years… the chance of a relationship
Darcy smiled through tears. “I thought it was JARVIS or Security sending help those first few days in Healing! I didn’t know you were there. The only thing I remember wondering about? When the nurse explained Sesame Street to someone in the hall, I wondered who in the world didn’t know about that!” She chuckled. He kissed her, and then wiped a tear from her cheek.

He leaned back and admitted, “I was absolutely on fire the night you let me wash your hair. It killed me not to be able to hold you close and comfort you, both because I hardly knew you, and because of what you’d suffered. I finally gave in and picked you up, though. I was so close to kissing you when I set you back on your bed. And you told me that I made you ‘tingly’ and you wanted to kiss me, too. Then JARVIS found Bucky and I had to go after him, but first I had to kiss you. Kissing you made me see stars, and would have brought me to my knees had I been standing. Nothing less than Bucky, or the end of the world, could have pulled me away. When I got back, and you came to greet me and I got to hold you against me, I was ‘home’ for the first time in a very long time.”

She shifted closer to him. He was quiet for a long moment, then added, “you were kind to Bucky even when everyone else thought he was a lost cause. It gave me hope. You showed me how to act, and helped bring him back to me. I think he responded to both the way you treated him and just… your goodness.” His eyes blazed with such adoration that Darcy felt shy again.

Steve begged, “so, please, believe me when I say that there’s no shadow for you to stand in with me. I’m not trying to pretend you’re Peggy, and you’re not just a substitute, or a consolation. I loved Peggy and the idea of a life with her, but I hoped for something with her that wasn't meant to be. She was my first best girl, but you are the love of my life.”

She smiled and assured him, “I love you, too. Thank you for sharing so much.” She kissed him lightly and explained, “It wasn't just insecurity, though. I admit I didn't want to seem like a desperate Peggy wannabe. But, I also didn't want to make you sad! You've had too many reasons to be sad, and not enough to be happy. I want to make you happy.” The longing in her eyes filled him with giddy joy.

He grinned. “The way you say my name… That makes me happy. They way you reach for me, and seem delighted to be near me? It gives me a reason to wake up every day, something to fight for and come home to. The way you looked at me on our first dinner date took me past happy, all the way to delirious. The sounds you make when I kiss you or touch you light me up and fill me with passion.”

He started to kiss her again, but stopped himself. His grin turned rueful. “When I promised the Security detail we wouldn't make out in the middle of Central Park it sounded easier than it is.”

Darcy laughed. He looked at her lovingly.

Then, he looked down and his expression turned serious. “I know you saw the painting I did of Peggy. She came up to me and Bucky in a bar, to relay a message from Howard. For the only time up to that point, a girl ignored Bucky and looked at me. It’s a good memory.” He chuckled, “at least it’s good for me. Bucky described it as a bad dream, at the time.” His mouth twisted and he shook his head, thinking of how terrible things got for Bucky later.

Darcy took a deep breath. “When I saw your painting of Peggy, I was overwhelmed. You told me you only paint things that mean the most to you. I read about her, too. She seemed larger than life. She was strong, noble, and fierce, like the perfect match for Captain America. I also once thought that Sharon looked perfect for the Captain, with her classic blonde beauty.” Steve shook his head.
Darcy admitted, “sometimes the fact that you’re Captain America makes you seem larger than life. I’m a lot more at ease with the man behind the shield, Steve.”

Steve looked pensive. She tilted her head and asked, “what?”

He watching children playing, as he murmured, “maybe you need opportunities to get more comfortable with Captain America. I’m still working on understanding the changes I went through, to be honest. I’ve come a long way, but… Chau and I discuss it a lot. Maybe my issues with that dichotomy influence you.” Darcy stroked his arm. Steve smiled. “I haven’t been around you in uniform much.”

He looked eager. “Would you come with me tomorrow? I’m supposed to visit a children’s hospital out in Bayside, in uniform, of course. The kids are really nice. Some of them have special-needs and a lot face complex challenges, but they’re so sweet!”

Darcy marveled at how his face brightened. She smiled, “I’d love to!” Steve pulled out his phone and texted Pepper to let her know that Darcy would accompany him the next day. Darcy frowned. “If electronics around us are being jammed by Security, why does your phone work?”

Steve’s smile was tight. “I carry a StarkPhone equipped with special programming by JARVIS. You do, too. Our phones and StarkPads aren’t affected by the jammers. Little things like that make me glad that Tony’s not a villain, or even a corrupt businessman. He could corner the device market so easily!” Darcy nodded, equally glad that Tony had a conscience.

Steve sat back and looked around, savoring the sunshine and the warm breeze. It was a beautiful day.

Darcy asked knowingly, “one thing… do you have any idea what set off Natasha last night?”

Steve nodded slowly. “She has concerns about my… intentions.” He met Darcy’s gaze with a soft, but unwavering look.

Darcy blinked hard, “intentions?”

His smile was sweet as he ducked his head. “I have intentions, Sweetheart.” He looked up again, his smile wider.

“Good,” She gripped his hand a bit harder.

Steve took a deep breath. Then, he kissed her hand, and spoke in a low tone. “I’ve been thinking about our future.” She sighed and found that she was shivering with emotion. He told her, “there are lots of things… I don’t know. I don’t know how long it will take to bring down Hydra. I don’t know what other ridiculous threats are coming our way, or even if the team will hold together or not. I don’t know how I’ll age, or if the effects of the serum might change.” Darcy startled and looked distressed. He assured her, “I AM aging, but there’s no way to know how things will progress. I know that since the serum, I’m no longer infertile, but I don’t know when or if I’ll be ready for kids. I only know that I’m happy with you, and I want to make you happy.”

Darcy frowned as she recalled Bruce and Jane chuckling over Steve not liking to give sperm samples. She guessed he must have discovered that he was infertile in the lead-up testing during Project Rebirth. That explained his discomfort. And it made her sad that people jumped to conclusions about him, rather than considering how hard his life had been.

He squeezed her hand, and Darcy’s heart beat a little faster. She looked him in the eye. “I don’t know if I can have kids, or want to, either, Steve. The age thing is a little scary. It would be hard to
speed past you on the age highway, to get so old you couldn't want me anymore. But it would be impossible to step away from you now, and give up what we have. You make me outrageously happy.”

Steve let out a nervous breath. “Like she advised you, Natasha told me that my intentions are selfish. She said I should urge you to see other people, that I shouldn't deprive you of new experiences, that…”

Darcy interrupted him, “Steve! Please stop. I… I have intentions, too. I have intentions towards you.”

Steve’s smile broadened and she felt his muscles relax against her. “I love you, Darcy.”

She replied, “I love you, too!” She could see how much he wanted to kiss her.

He laughed and admitted, “It’s a relief that we’re on the same page.” He was trembling, too. He twined his fingers through hers.

“I understand that relief. Natasha’s suggestions freaked me out. I even wondered if she was urging me to do that because YOU wanted to see other people.” She nodded giddily, grinning at him more.

Steve shook his head, “not at all! I only want you, every minute with you, every day and every night.” Darcy smiled with open pleasure.

Steve paused, “so, like I said. I have intentions. But I have tried to listen to Natasha’s concerns to check if there is anything valid in them. The only concern that I see, is that maybe things are moving a little fast? Most people today would say so. We’ve only known each other a few months and we ARE still getting to know each other. We haven’t had enough time to just be together. Also, I agree that it’s on me to convince you of my feelings, how MUCH I love you. I want to prove my love so much that there’s no way you can doubt it.” She leaned up and kissed him, deeply and with feeling.

He groaned as he pulled back. He looked nervous, and took a deep breath, “would you like…?” He took another breath and finally looked her in the eye. “I don’t want anyone else. I want you. I want you with me every minute that we can be together. And I want you to know without any reservation whatsoever that I love you more than anything.” He sighed. “I want so much to do better at that!”

He looked down, “I found a song. I’ll send it to you.” He pulled out his phone again and sent her a message that included the lyrics of the attached song, ‘In My Life’ by the Beatles. He mentioned, “I went back and listened to all of the songs you gave me again. It gave me some perspective on your feelings. Even the ones where you question why I would love you are precious to me. But, I love you so much!”

Darcy turned on the song he’d sent and listened to the lyrics. He kissed her hand again, gently.

*But of all these friends and lovers*  
*There is no one compares with you*  
*And these memories lose their meaning*  
*When I think of love as something new*  
*Though I know I’ll never lose affection*  
*For people and things that went before*  
*I know I’ll often stop and think about them*
In my life I love you more

After the song ended, she murmured, “thank you…” She felt raw and exposed.

He sighed. “Compared to what I hope for with us? As we get better at understanding our feelings for each other… this feels…” His expression twisted, almost helplessly.

Darcy nudged his shoulder. “Does your question today have something to do with what I said about my place feeling like a closet to me these days? If so, please keep talking…” She bit her lip and blushed, then smiled encouragement to him.

“Move in with me?” Steve leaned over and kissed her on the temple.

Darcy smiled. “Yes. I’d like that.” They both laughed nervously, smiling at each other with matching goofy grins.

His grin faded. “I need to talk with Thor again about my intentions, but I wanted to make them clear to you first. I meant what I said. This is special to me, very special. I want to show you how much I love you, how much I need you.”

He leaned in and kissed her again. “I want to ask you a different question sometime. The sooner, the better! My old-fashioned side has been ready…” He shook his head. “I love you, Sweetheart. I’m willing to wait until I’ve courted you properly… and improperly, God forgive me. But I am courting you with serious intentions and thoughts of a future. My plan is for us… forever.” He pushed her hair back from her face and cupped her jaw in his hand with tender care. She blinked back happy tears.

Darcy glanced over and saw that Hawkeye looked misty-eyed. “You forgot to hide what you were saying.”

“No. I didn’t. I really didn't.” Steve grinned and shook his head.

“Informing the busy-body troops in an efficient fashion, Captain?” Darcy laughed aloud.

He shrugged, his grin a bit saucy, “Oops!” Happiness flowed from him. “So long as we’re together on this, Sweetheart! THAT is what's really important.”

She teased, “yes, O Captain, my Captain!”

“Like I’ve never heard that one!” He shook his head.

She winked, “looking on the bright side, you could try giving me orders and see what happens…”

He stared at her, a heated look in his eyes. He put his hand by his mouth so no one could read his lips. “As lovely as that outfit is, I warn you that my first order, when we’re alone at OUR place tonight, will be the removal of your skirt and blouse. I have an intense need to express my feelings about that little red ensemble you were wearing in the pic you sent me earlier.”

Darcy giggled, “yes sir, Captain.” She quieted as a jolt of desire sparked along her skin.

Steve looked surprised, blushed, and raised his brows. “I didn’t expect to like the sound of that quite so much!”

Darcy mused, “same here…”

He looked at her, a slow smirk emerging as he murmured, “I like the idea of new experiences…”
together with you, Sweetheart… a lot.”

***

Darcy returned to her office and caught up on messages and reports. She set aside things that would require a lot of focus, jittery and distracted from her talk with Steve. She found herself zoning out and reliving parts of it, thinking of how much he had opened his heart to her, and where their relationship was going.

She heard Natasha clear her throat and looked up. Natasha grinned slightly, “is that good distraction or bad?” She held out a box of Swiss chocolates. “A friend just got in from Switzerland, and I always pay my debts.”

Darcy laughed, and opened the box, took one bon bon for herself and held the box out so Natasha could pick one out, too. They both let out appreciative moans as they tasted the chocolate.

Darcy grinned and nodded. “Thanks! It’s good distraction. I had lunch with Steve, and he pretty much talked my ear off. Who knew that a man of few words could talk so much?”

Natasha made herself comfortable in the guest chair. “Did it help? I hear that you’re moving in with him.” She winked. “A little bird…”

Darcy rolled her eyes, “Yes, damn you. It helped. I can’t really think straight, but it helped.” She sat back, and unconsciously glanced at her left hand.

Natasha laughed, “Wow! He told you why I wanted the air clear between you! Your mind probably IS blown.”

Darcy nodded and smiled softly. “And, yes. I’m moving in with him, for now.” She felt serene and peaceful as she thought of having a future with Steve.

Natasha grimaced, “if you’re sure that’s for the best.”

Darcy had another bon bon and then asked, “what have I said or done that made you think I’d want to play the field?”

Natasha admitted, “Nothing! But I wanted to make sure you at least consider the idea that you could. From what I hear, this is your first serious relationship, the first sexual relationship you’ve had. That’s… nice.” She took another bite of chocolate and then shared in a low tone, “I didn’t have any say in my first sexual experiences, Darcy. I was programmed to avoid emotional involvement, not to feel. I was trained in seduction and pleasuring techniques, the mechanics of sex. It was part of my arsenal as a spy. It took a long time for there to be anything else in it for me, at all.”

Darcy blurted, “I’m so sorry!”

Natasha’s expression revealed little, but there was a hint of sadness that spoke volumes. She shook her head. “Don’t be. I don’t respond well to pity. I’m only telling you this so that you’ll understand my point of view.”

Darcy shook her head, “I don’t pity you now. You’re awesome! I’m just sorry that they hurt you when you were young.” She wrung her hands with anxiety. She was overcome with an urge to pull the little girl that Natasha had been close in a hug.

Natasha stared at her for a long moment, and nodded. “I can accept that. I know that you mean it
kindly. I look back and feel sorrow for what I went through as a child, too.” She took a careful breath and shared, “I took revenge for it. I have accepted it. It was a long time ago.”

Darcy pursed her lips, knowing that Natasha wouldn't answer if she asked how long. Natasha’s grin was flinty and sad.

Natasha’s voice was low as she explained, “So, I think it’s important for someone as young as you to consider options, and know that you have choices. You have every choice. You are not powerless.”

Darcy nodded. “I know. But I don’t think that Steve takes power from me or limits me in any way. I think he goes out of his way to empower me. He’s practically tying himself in pretzel knots whenever anything comes up that brings out his protective feelings. Yet he tries so hard to listen and encourage me!”

“He fussed at Hawkeye for not doing a better job explaining the defensive moves he was trying to teach you in the arena. Steve laid it all out step-by-step, until Hawkeye got so frustrated he yelled that Steve could just train you himself.” Natasha smiled.

“Steve made that one move CLEAR to me so easily. He would be very good at training.” Darcy frowned slightly.

Natasha nodded. “He’s outstanding. There are few better. But it’s too much for him to focus on bad things that can happen to you in such detail. It’s the stuff of his nightmares, you know.” She grinned. “So, Hawkeye will continue to help you.”

Darcy nodded.

Natasha admitted, “Hawkeye fussed at me for projecting my control and power issues onto you and Steve.” She grinned. “While his ego’s stinging that you drew blood, he appreciates that you worried about his feelings when I told you about me and Yasha. And he’ll always look after you because of how he met you. You got to him with all of your drug-addled babbling on the flight here from London. You don’t remember any of it, but you two ended up holding hands half the trip, with him shushing and reassuring you. He’s every bit as protective towards you as Thor!”

Darcy had a flash of Clint telling her she was safe, and that he would see that she stayed that way. A wave of affection flowed over her. She assured Natasha, “I have no illusions that I could have caught him off guard if he didn’t worry about me and my feelings.”

Natasha nodded. “I hope you understand my intent, too.” She shifted in her seat, a rare look of discomfort on her face.

Darcy nodded and smiled. “Thanks, Natasha. I disagree with you on this one, but I appreciate that you’re my friend.”

***

When she left her office that evening, Darcy felt awkward. From what Steve had said earlier, she guessed she should go to his place. Strike that. THEIR place… first. JARVIS confirmed that Steve was home, so Darcy went there. She stopped when she reached the door. She usually knocked or asked JARVIS to let Steve know that she had arrived. She gasped when Steve opened the door, smiled and told her, “Welcome home!”

She grinned. “So, what flower means ‘welcome home?’” She looked around expectantly.
He nodded, “pineapple… so I made piña coladas. Hope you like them!”

“Yes! I’m surprised though, that you’re off work so early… and that you know how to make mixed drinks.” She laughed.

He shrugged. “JARVIS is a big help.”

She grinned, “thanks, J!”

JARVIS replied, “I am always glad to help. I have observed much mixology over the years.”

Steve handed Darcy a drink. She sipped it appreciatively, “mmmm… I could get used to this.”

Steve sipped his and sat by her. “I was nervous! There’s no good reason for it. You’ve been here every night I could get you here. But…”

She nodded. “Same!” She took a bigger sip of the drink.

He quirked a grin. “As to being home early? The Avengers are taking R&R for a few days. I’m aware that we’ve been over-stretched and over-worked recently. I was already considering the idea. But Bucky peeked at your text, NOT the picture of course, just the text… and he may have decided it was a good time to ask the question on everyone else’s minds…”

Darcy blushed and grinned. She drank more of her drink and sighed, “aahh… Good job on the drink. It ranks right up there with flowers. I’m starting to feel less nervous, too.”

Steve sipped the last of his drink and set it down. His expression became more serious. “Miss Lewis?”

Darcy downed the last of her drink and set it aside, savoring the nervous flutter in her belly. “Yes, Captain?”

Steve bit back a grin. “We discussed orders earlier. Remove your top and skirt now.”

Darcy rose and shifted so that she stood in front of him. He blinked quickly and swallowed hard as she pulled her blouse free from the skirt. She bit her lip, then lifted the blouse over her head and set it aside. He made an appreciative noise and wiped his hands down the legs of his jeans as he stared at her with open lust. He reached out one finger and touched the shield emblem attached to her bra. She began to work the buttons down the side of the skirt, but took her time. His jaw shifted and he let out a slight groan as she leaned forward and pushed the skirt down her legs. Then, she straddled his lap and began to massage his shoulders. He moaned and tried to relax his muscles, settling his hands at her waist.

She sighed, “feels like you’ve been carrying the weight of the world, my love. Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head. “Not really. Maybe later. I want to enjoy you now.”

She kept massaging his shoulders and asked, “how many times over the past few days did you have to rein it in, Steve? How many things did you keep to yourself to spare someone else, or help them somehow?”

He admitted softly, “many…”

She gasped as he leaned forward and teased at her neck with his teeth. She whispered, “do you
have further orders, Captain?”

His grin had an edge to it. “WHEN you cry out with pleasure, don’t call me Captain.”

She shuddered and teased, “sir?”

He rasped, “or Steve…” He abruptly stood, easily lifting her by her thighs. She squealed, and held onto his neck and wrapped her legs around him as he carried her to the bed.

He laid her on it gently, but fell upon her with an urgency she’d not experienced with him before. He seemed to demand responses from her, groaning with pleasure each time she moaned or cried out… as though he needed to hear her vocalizing her pleasure. He lavished attention to the sensitive skin of her breasts, touching and nibbling insistently through the bra while she writhed and moaned. She pulled at him and scraped her nails up his neck and into his hair. He moved one hand between her legs and shifted the panties aside to explore her firmly and thoroughly, dipping one and then two fingers inside her, and slowly encircling her clit, gradually faster and faster. He didn't tease or hold back as he had other times. He quickly incited her to pleasure until she was crying out, shuddering with release. She moaned his name, almost stunned with delight.

Voice tight, he ordered, “remove your panties.” She complied, moaning appreciatively as he shucked his clothes. His pupils were blown, dark, as he commanded, “now, lay back again and put your legs over my shoulders. Get comfortable. I intend to take my time pleasing you, Sweetheart.”

She was shaking and squirming as he kissed his way up and down her thighs. He shifted down and kissed the sensitive skin behind her knees, stroking a finger up the back of her thigh just the way she liked best. She cried out, “fuck!” as one of his fingers grazed over her center.

He chuckled, “I’m the one giving the orders here, but that suggestion has merit. Later…” She whimpered as he moved his mouth to her center and began to explore her thoroughly with his tongue, lips, and teeth. He kissed and licked, nipped and scraped. He brought her closer and closer to bliss, then slowed his movements and shifted to trail open-mouthed kisses down to her ankles and back up again. She twined her fingers in his hair tightly, and thrilled as he teased with increasing intensity. He played fingers against her entrance, slowly making his way to her g-spot with a steady pulsing that drove her insane. His talented tongue was swirling with aching steadiness. Sparks of gratification flashed through her.

Darcy babbled pleas, “oh, Steve! God! Please don’t stop this time! Steve! Just… please! Please let me come! Please! Oh, please!” Her words trailed into a long moan of bliss. She wasn't sure where one orgasm stopped and another began, or if she just experienced incredible, unending pleasure. She nearly passed out, her body lax.

He moved up to kiss her again, desperate with his need. His kisses were insistent and demanding. So were his strokes as he shifted her legs apart and entered her, hard, again and again. The pace was fast and powerful. Darcy saw white at the edge of her vision as she came again. He continued at a frantic pace, coming apart with a fierce cry.

Darcy was stunned as Steve pulled out, and immediately began to stimulate her with his fingers again. She looked up into his face, and his expression was ferociously focused. She began to keen with pleasure, the sensations against her clit on the edge of nearly too much. She shifted away slightly, catching her breath. Steve gently rolled her onto her stomach and kissed his way down and up her spine. His breathing sounded harsh and needy.

She shuddered with anticipation as he grabbed a pillow and put it under her stomach. He gently parted her legs, and then pushed in very slowly, filling her completely. He pulled back out just as
slowly, almost all the way. He continued moving in and out so slowly, the angle perfect, until she was begging again. “Please… please, faster… please… Steve…” Hot sensations curled throughout her body. Her breathing was a series of frantic gasps of want.

He sighed against the back of her neck, licking and sucking the tender skin as he continued the tortuously slow pace. Her skin tingled with pleasure. Then on every other stroke in, he shifted and twisted his hips in a way that caused Darcy to scream with pleasure. She kept begging for him to go faster, squeezed him tightly inside her, and writhed frantically. Finally, he picked up the pace and intensity as she shuddered more and more. For the first time, they peaked simultaneously. It went on for so long and felt so good that she cried.

Steve moved to lie beside her, and shifted her so that they faced each other. He held her close and murmured repeatedly, “I love you. I love you.” He kissed away her tears.

She whispered, “I know. And I love you.”

Reassurances of his love echoed in her ears as she drifted off to sleep.

_to be continue..._

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it's taken so long to update.

Spent last weekend in Las Vegas for a first visit. NOT sorry about that. Had a fantastic time there with Hubs. We got to witness the Vegas chapel wedding of one of my best friends, a lady I met in Jane Austen fandom years ago. :) It was as awesome as you can imagine. Kitschy, cute, joyous. It's good to see her so happy w/a wonderful guy who loves her so much and treats her so well. :) 

So, got back and took til Tuesday or Wednesday to finish writing this chapter. And, yes, if you guess that Vegas inspired me to write 3 pages of straight up smut, you'd guess correctly. :) 

Then poor McGregor'sWench wasn't feeling well, so it took a couple of days for her to comb through this 11k words. I remember writing short chapters, once upon a time... unlike this one... again, thanks for reading and commenting!
Now, it was time to go home.

Chapter Summary

Darcy uses some of her training during a night on the town and goes with Steve for a Captain America children's hospital visit. Tony's behavior rubs Betty the wrong way. The Avengers are all ready for some time off from crisis mode.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy woke a few hours later, refreshed, but hungry. Steve was sitting up in bed beside her, reading on his StarkPad, and resting one hand on her ass. She groaned, “what time is it?”

He smacked her bottom and replied, “time to wake up and get some dinner. Did I use too much rum in your drink?”

“No! You wore me out.” She giggled and snuggled closer to him.


She snorted, “Wow! You’re really pleased with yourself tonight.”

He set the pad aside, and shifted down to pull her into his arms and kiss her deeply. “I’m happy! You’re here, and you’re staying! You love me, and are giving me the chance to love you. There’s not much more I could want.”

She smiled into the next kiss. “You’re too cute! We’d better stay away from the others. We’ll make them sick.”

He made a face. “It looks like everyone is doing late dinners. We have invitations from Tony and Pepper to eat French, Thor and Jane to eat seafood, Clint and Natasha to eat burgers. Bucky and Sam are taking Betty out for pizza.” He frowned, unable to hide his concern.

Darcy groaned and rubbed her eyes. “I’m so hungry! It all sounds delicious!” She pouted. “I feel like I’ve hardly seen Jane, but I’m probably more in a pizza mood.”

He touched her chin almost chidingly. He was grateful that she responded to his concern, but didn't want to deprive her of time with Jane and Thor.

Steve picked up his phone and texted Thor and the others. Darcy smiled fondly at his attitude of intense concentration. After a moment, his phone buzzed. He looked up again at her and smiled. “Done! Thor and Jane will join us with Bucky and the others. Pepper is calling to reserve a special section for us, a Mezzanine that overlooks the main dining area. She and Tony are still eating French. Natasha and Clint are sticking with burgers. But, I think everyone else is going for pizza now.” He seemed pleased.

Darcy stretched. “Did you include Bruce?” He nodded, and shot her a look. She smiled, “Good. Having a bunch of us there will take pressure off of him and Betty.” She grinned, “and I thought he was giving Bucky stink-eye last night. Might be best to keep an eye on those two.”
“Isn’t that kind of thing my job?” Steve grinned.

She raised her brows and shook her head. “Nope… at least not just you. I don’t think they’re going into battle with each other.”

Steve groaned, “God! I hope not.” He kissed her forehead and threw back the covers. She rolled on her side and watched him walk out to the living room, an appreciative grin on her face. He returned a moment later with her skirt and blouse. He shook his head. “Keep looking at me like THAT, and we’ll miss dinner.”

She laughed and rolled out of bed. He pulled her close and held her. Both of them sighed at that satisfying feeling of skin on skin. He leaned down to kiss her, and it quickly escalated. She pulled back and giggled, “I thought we were trying to make it to dinner!”

He leaned down and kissed her hard once more, then pulled back and nudged her towards the bathroom. He felt like he couldn't stop smiling.

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Darcy stopped by her place to change into black lingerie, a black blouse with white dots and a nice little cleavage plunge, jeans, and silver-studded boots. It had been a while since she’d worn the boots. She loved them. They made her feel more confident. She took a few minutes to toss some necessities into a bag to take upstairs later, her first items to move in with Steve.

The restaurant was a newer one, and the smell of the food was amazing. Apparently, one section was set aside for walk-ins, so the line down the sidewalk outside was long and boisterous. The bar area was overflowing with happy patrons. Steve was just glad to be out of the cars. His smiles had faded as he assessed the group dynamics. Betty flirted with Bucky during the entire ride from Avengers Tower. Bruce had done nothing but to watch them and brood.

Betty was still standing closer to Bucky than was necessary. Steve wished he could rein in Bucky’s natural responses, but his friend was ignoring his silent pleas and indulging in flirtation. Bucky had lost none of his game since the 1940’s. Apparently, flirting was a muscle-memory activity for him. Sam watched the proceedings with a look of awe. Betty was laughing more and more, obviously enjoying Bucky’s wit and timeless charm. She looked as though she’d like to have Bucky for dessert. Bruce, meanwhile, looked as though he was trying hard not to throw up.

As the Avengers group headed to the spiral staircase to the Mezzanine, Jane grabbed Darcy’s arm. “Bathroom?” Darcy shrugged, but nodded that she would go with Jane. She gestured so that Steve would know where she was going, and then followed Jane past the bar and down the short hallway. Jane bumped along on crutches, glad to be out of the wheelchair.

Jane all but ran out of the bathroom afterwards, thumping quickly along on her crutches. Groups of women doing make-up and bragging about their sexual conquests of the night confounded Jane, like vapid behavior in any form. She turned back to make sure that Darcy was following, and bumped into a man by accident. Jane nearly fell but took the fault as her own, “Oh! Sorry! I should really watch where I’m going.”

Darcy nearly ran into Jane, but stopped and steadied her as the man took a step closer and leered, “Tiny angel! You can throw your body up against mine, anytime.”

Jane recoiled. Darcy moved forward and shifted Jane behind her. Then, Darcy smiled an icy smile she’d seen Natasha use, and moved forward. “Excuse us, please. We want to rejoin our friends and the guys we came with.”
‘Leering guy’ had severe beer breath, and seemed to be sweating beer, too. He shifted so that he blocked them from leaving, and slurred, “and a little devil! I bet you’re a wildcat in bed.” Guys with him laughed encouragingly, also eyeing the two women. Darcy could feel Jane start shaking.

Darcy took one step back and held out a hand in front of her, grousing, “Ew!” She was comforted that she shifted automatically to threat assessment rather than fear. She thought of things that Natasha had listed for her to evaluate so that she could decide if this was a serious threat, or just a jerk who’d had a few too many. She felt fairly certain that it was the latter, but that was enough to anger her.

His gaze dropped and his leer got worse.

How many times had Darcy seen that look? How many times had she dressed to hide her figure to avoid it, felt shamed by it? How much had that look dented her confidence over the years? Darcy’s jaw shifted as her anger spiked.

‘Leering guy’ put a sweaty hand on her arm. She shook her head and warned, “No! Back off! You’re gonna be sorry if you don’t remove your hand, get out of our way, and leave us alone.”

Darcy nudged Jane back further with her free hand as ‘leering guy’ laughed, “Aw! Don’t be a cold bitch, little devil! Give us a kiss!” One of his friends looked uncomfortable, but the other three were laughing and egging him on. His hand trailed up her arm.

Darcy was vaguely aware of unexpected motion above and behind the men, but focused on her next moves. She yelled as she pushed his hand away, then stepped into his space as she threw a punch that caught him in the jaw, and sent him falling back against his friends. With that punch, she hurt her antagonist and disorganized his group, precisely as she’d been trained. She fell into a crouch, ready to fight more if necessary. She let out a surprised yelp and shook out her aching hand as she realized that Steve had jumped from the Mezzanine above them to the floor just behind ‘leering guy’ and his buddies.

Steve took in the scene and scowled fiercely. He growled, “what the hell d’ya think you’re doin’, fellas?” He was angry enough that his Brooklyn accent was thick.

The guy who’d looked uncomfortable looked Steve over and yelled, “did you see that jump? Holy shit!” He held up his hands to indicate surrender, and fled.

The other, drunker, guys bumped against each other almost comically. ‘Previously-leering guy’ was holding his face and whining, “she punched me! I can’t believe she punched me!”

Darcy gestured at Steve. “You should be glad it was just me! I warned you. I told you you’d be sorry if you didn’t leave us alone. Now, go away!” She shook her head at Steve and assured him, “totally not worth your time or energy!” She had her hands on her hips and feet planted firmly. She was mad, but prepared for trouble.

The restaurant manager approached cautiously. “How may I be of assistance?” Steve turned to him, angry as he explained the situation. Thor was standing at the bottom of the stairs. They all heard thunder crack outside.

The manager paled and swallowed, gasping, “I can’t apologize enough, Captain! I’m sorry that your friends were treated disrespectfully!”

The next-least-drunk of leering-guy’s friends, a beefy guy with a Stark-style goatee, grabbed him and urged him to shut up. The guy offered in a stage whisper, “Shut up, asshole! I think they’re
Steve moved so that he was between the drunks and Darcy. Darcy cradled her hand. Jane took a look at it and dragged her back into the Ladies’ room to clean the broken skin on Darcy’s knuckles. By the time they came out again, leering guy and his friends were gone. Thor and Steve were waiting, wearing identical glowers of protective outrage.

Jane was the first to speak. “Thor! Drop out of lightning mode! I’m fine. Darcy took care of it.”

His expression shifted to one of gentle gratitude. “I am once again in your debt, good Sister. I am glad that your training has prepared you so well.” He pulled Jane close, then held her against him to carry her up the spiral stairs. Jane’s expression was strained.

Darcy grinned, “me, too! Sometimes I get discouraged when I compare myself to Natasha or Clint. It’s nice to know that I can throw an effective punch now, at least!” Thor smiled at Darcy.

Steve closed his eyes and sighed deeply. “You did great!” He swallowed hard. “I asked them to bring a clean cloth and some ice. Come on.” She smiled at him. He hovered close.

Darcy’s grin was shaky as she sat by Steve. He told the others what had happened. He put an arm around her, and held her as adrenaline passed and fear hit. She wasn't the only one struggling to relax. Thor and Steve were still tensed, both trying not to scowl. Jane had her head tucked against Thor’s shoulder. Bruce was pale. Betty was watching him intently. Bucky’s jaw was tight and his eyes stormy. Sam was speaking to Bucky in a low, soothing tone.

Waiters and waitresses arrived. One brought ice and clean cloth napkins for Darcy. It felt good to chill her hand for short periods. There were also several bottles of red wine, two ice buckets with bottles of white wine, and a large bucket stocked with an assortment of craft Italian beers on a side table. The manager apologized again and offered the group drinks compliments of the house.

After a few drinks, everyone began to relax. Jane finally admitted, “how strange is it that I immediately thought they were Hydra?” Thor handed her a glass of white wine and leaned his head against hers.

Sam, one hand still clasping Bucky’s shoulder reassuringly, replied, “sounds like a fair assumption. Hydra’s been after you for a while. Are we sure they weren't? I only saw them heading out with their tails between their legs. I couldn't hear anything.”

Darcy shook her head. “There was nothing professional about them. It was just a guy who'd had too much to drink… and his stupid posse.” She gestured for Steve to pass her red wine. He poured a glassful and handed it to her. He was handing a white wine bucket down the table towards Betty when Jane spoke next.

Jane shook her head. “I was useless, especially after he said that about you being a wildcat in bed.” There was a screech of metal as the top edge of the white wine bucket buckled in Steve’s grip. He set it down abruptly. Darcy rolled her eyes at Jane, and Jane apologized.

Thor admitted to Jane, “I struggle against the urge to roar a warning to all that you are my mate, and I will not tolerate anything less than the most respectful behavior towards you.” He nodded grimly to Steve. “I see that the Captain understands the effort it costs me to refrain.” Steve’s mouth twitched as he repressed a grin.

Sam asked, “Hey! Who pays when Stark’s not around? Just that bucket’ll set us back a fair amount! We should have insisted the creeps who hit on the girls get it. With as much as you and Thor eat,
that’d be a pretty good revenge.” He glanced at Bruce. “You haven’t transformed today, have you? If so, that’d REALLY hit ‘em in the wallet.” Bruce shook his head. His brow was furrowed and he kept glancing at Betty. She put her trembling hand on his arm. He covered her hand with his.

Steve finally managed to speak again. “I’ll get the bill and apologize for the bucket, too. They kicked those creeps out.” He shook his head angrily and huffed, forcing himself to relax enough not to break anything else. “Those guys had better hope that I never have to decide whether or not to save their sorry asses.”

Bucky’s expression was dark. “The manager should thank his lucky stars we didn’t trash the whole place. I pulled a gun and two knives when you parkoured over the damned railing.”

Bruce let out a shaky laugh. “It was a near thing over here, too. I went with the Hydra attack assumption… and I wasn’t in the best mood to start with.” He frowned, and looked away from Betty.

Betty crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “Sorry.” She glanced at Bucky with an apologetic half-smile.

Bruce looked at her and grimaced. “Karma. Revenge. Whatever. I get it.”

Bucky huffed a sigh. “I was poking at you cuz you wound up Steve before.” He shrugged and returned Betty’s look of apology with one of his own. She shifted closer to Bruce.

Steve shook his head. “Oh, for God’s sake! Please don’t! Provoking a hulk-out is not gonna make me feel better about anything.” He grabbed a beer and took a swig. He turned to Darcy. “I heard you tell him to back off and remove his hand. I tried to get a sight line using the mirrors, so I’d know the best way to get you two to safety. But then he cussed at you, and said to give him a kiss. I went over the railing at about the same time that you yelled and punched him. Good punch, by the way. Put the lead guy into the rest like bowling pins…”

Sam was texting quickly. “Natasha and Clint are cheering as I give ‘em details. Both taking all the credit, of course.” His grin widened.

“I need more alcohol.” Darcy set her glass down.

Bruce grinned and opened a beer and pointed the bottle at her. “I think you need to send Steve suggestive texts more often, so we can get more R&R. We’re all wound up to the point of insanity!” He handed Betty her favorite beer.

Darcy shot Bruce a look. Then she turned to Bucky. “For the gods’ sake! How un-subtle were you?!” He grinned at her, un-repentantly teasing.

Jane grinned, “Sexting gets the Avengers time off?”

Sam swigged a beer and shook his head. “My money’s on a naughty picture, one of those tasteful ones that causes Cap to lose his mind. His ears went red.” He laughed as Darcy blushed.

Steve snorted. “Pay for your own damned dinner, Sam!” Sam laughed and grabbed another drink. Darcy saw his expression change to one of startled interest. Bucky’s hand trailed over Sam’s thigh.

The food and drinks were excellent. In addition to several gourmet pizzas, the group ordered meat entrees and the entire dessert menu. The manager fell all over himself thanking them for their patronage. He had four of his wait staff assigned to the Mezzanine, so the service was perfect. Two waitresses set up a sideboard with all of the desserts and a variety of coffee options.
Darcy was getting coffee and a dessert when she overheard the waitresses admiring her boots. She smiled, and continued listening while she fixed her coffee just the way she liked it. She froze in place when one squealed to the other, “you should have seen her knock out that creep that was harassing us so much earlier! It figures that Captain America would go for someone tough and perfectly-gorgeous like that.”

Disbelievingly, Darcy felt like she could hardly breathe. She stayed still as a blush crept up into her face.

Steve walked to her and poured himself some coffee. He leaned close and whispered, “please tell me you heard that, Sweetheart.” She turned to him, eyes wide with shock. He smiled, and kissed her.

When they returned to the table, Darcy was pleased to see that Betty and Bruce were talking to each other. It was good to see the soft smile that overspread his face. She kept touching his arm to punctuate her words. His gaze caressed her lovingly.

Thor and Bucky continued to empty the bucket of craft beers. Sam was laughing loudly, telling jokes and sitting closer to Bucky. Bucky’s concentrated charm was now focused Sam’s way. It still appeared to awe the handsome flier.

Jane was finishing off one of the bottles of white wine on her own. She pressed more wine on Darcy, daring her to prove her worth as her ‘lightning sister’. Thor offered a heartfelt and rousing toast when he learned that Darcy was moving in with Steve. He was more emotional about it than anyone expected, given his high alcohol tolerance. He addressed Steve as ‘Brother’ several times, and clapped him on the shoulder again and again. Jane was so tipsy that she cried at the thought of Darcy leaving their floor. So, Darcy felt free to laugh at them both. She also allowed herself the great pleasure of leaning against and touching Steve, his arms and chest, his knee, occasionally just grabbing him by the neck and pulling him close for a kiss. Those kisses added to the wine-induced sensation of floating.

Darcy noticed that Steve stole occasional sips from her wine glass, likely more to protect her from herself than from thirst for the wine. Happily buzzed from the four glasses she’d already had, Darcy snuggled into his side. She murmured, “first time I’ve seen love expressed with alcohol theft, but it’s adorable.” He chuckled and kissed the back of her head… listening, watching, and scanning around them to check continuously for potential threats.

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The next morning, when Darcy’s eyes opened, she groaned and pulled a pillow over her head. Steve was sitting up in the bed, looking refreshed and utterly happy. Her head was still fuzzy from too much wine and the late night. She vaguely recalled Jane and Thor singing a Norse drinking tune. Thor’s singing voice was much better than Jane’s. She prayed that she hadn’t joined them, but the words seemed too vivid in her head for that to be the case.

She moaned, “No gun range today! I don’t care what Natasha threatens. Nothing could be worse than the NOISE.”

Steve laughed and offered her a glass of water. She sat up long enough to accept it and some ibuprofen (that she realized he must have on hand just for her). She moaned, “Okay! You’re forgiven for being so chipper, since you’re using your powers for good. Thanks.”

He urged, “drink your water. After you come back from the bathroom, I’ll rub your back and head. Maybe that’ll help.”
She stumbled from the bed, covering her eyes. When she returned to the bed, Steve caught her as she was about to fall face forward to the bed. He lifted her shirt up over her head. She peeked at him. “Getting frisky?”

He grinned and sighed, “Tempting! I promised to try and help you with your hangover, though. Lay down. If I use lotion, it’ll feel better.”

She let out an “umph” as she lay down. He put lotion on his hands and began to rub it onto her back. She moaned and savored it for a while before turning her head so she could offer a muffled, “you don’t have to try so hard. I’m happy to be here.”

He chuckled, “I’m still a little nervous. You’re right.” He continued massaging. “It’s nice for me to get to take care of someone else sometimes. When I was a kid, I had to let others look out for me a lot more than I liked. Poor Ma!” His touch gentled as he skillfully worked at her neck. “One of the best things since the serum is that I can look after other people instead of always being a burden.”

Darcy moaned with pleasure as her head began to feel better. She murmured, “you’re too good. Boyfriend jackpot!”

He chuckled, “well, you’re tough and perfectly gorgeous…”

She shook her head, a slight motion in deference to her hangover. “If only they could see me now!”

He laughed, “I don’t think it would lower anyone’s opinion of you if they saw you nearly naked, Sweetheart.” He leaned over her, and kissed the back of her head.

She sighed and lifted her head. “Okay. I’m about ready to face the day. What time is it?” She sipped more water.

Steve replied, “7:30, a late start. I already texted Natasha and Clint to say that you wouldn’t be at the gun range or in the arena today. I hope that’s okay.”

Darcy giggled. “I’d just lie down and play dead if they tried to make me go into the arena today. Gods! You guessed right. I’m sure you were pretty impressed with how tough I was when I passed out on you last night.”

He laughed. “I was more impressed that you made such a determined pass at me.”

Her brow furrowed. “Did I get anywhere?”

He pouted. “Not far enough! You got me going, and THEN passed out.”

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back to the bed. “Well, shit!”

He nodded. “That’s what I said… but I understood. It’s the thought that counts?”

She lifted her head again, and apologized, “I’m sorry! I’m sorrier than sorry. I promise I’ll make it up to you tonight. Ya know, when we’re back here together, in our bed, in the place we now share.” He grinned. She crawled out of the bed again. “I’ve got to get to work. If I’m supposed to get Betty set up and have things in place to take time off this weekend.”

He swatted her bottom as she passed him. “And we leave at 11:00 for the children’s hospital.” She let out a strangled noise. He laughed, “I’ll make breakfast. I’m starving, and you should try to get something on your stomach.”
She shook her head. “Just toast for me. Then I’ll take coffee and hot chocolate to Erik’s. If I get there by 8:15 he should still be around. I don’t want to neglect him.” She scurried to the bathroom to start her shower. Steve smiled and headed to the kitchen.

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As Darcy waited for the elevator, Bucky’s door opened and Sam stumbled out. He had his hand over his eyes, so he didn’t see her as he groaned and made his way down the hall to his apartment. Bucky stood in the doorway, an affectionate smile on his face, and nothing but boxer briefs on his body. Darcy whirled towards the elevator again, letting out a slight, “Eep!” She was glad she had travel mugs for her hot drinks; else she was sure she would have spilled something.

Bucky chuckled as Sam cussed and muttered, “impossible to keep anything secret around here…”

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At about 10:40, Darcy scurried out of her office to the elevator. Inside, she drank some water, and then pulled a compact from her purse and did what she could to touch up her makeup. She was glad she’d chosen a work-appropriate, pretty red dress for the day. It had a modest neckline, but hugged her figure. The red did good things for her complexion. Natasha was right about that, of course.

The elevator’s other occupants were all about the same age as Darcy. One of them, a striking, stick-thin brunette with a stylish, short wavy cut with red-gold highlights, was pouting to the point of stomping her foot. Darcy recognized her from the gym. She was one of the gossips that Darcy tried to avoid. Darcy sometimes joked to Jane that you could bounce a quarter off any of those ladies’ asses, and that she had a hard time resisting the urge to throw coins at them to prove it.

The man standing with pouting lady shrugged and looked bored by her behavior. “I know! But I won’t argue with Miss Potts for you. If you want to take it up with her…”

Pouting woman looked surly. “We have a routine! I ride in the car with him, and help him prepare. It’s part of the duty of Publicity personnel. And, I can tell that he likes me more all the time! Just because some department head wants to meet him doesn't mean we should lose out on our time together!” Darcy kept her eyes trained on her reflection, and tried not to seem overly attentive to the conversation.

The other woman grinned. “Well, any nefarious seduction plans will just have to wait until next time!” She waggled her brows at her friend and gestured at pouting lady’s mini-skirted suit. “Are you even wearing anything underneath your suit this time?”

Pouting lady smirked at her friend and shook her head.

Darcy finished powdering her nose and snapped her compact shut and put it away. She kept her eyes on the door.

Just before 11:00, Darcy joined Captain America in the back of a limo to leave for St. Mary’s Children’s Hospital. It took forty minutes to drive there with no traffic. Darcy and Steve spent the first half of the ride working on their StarkPads. But when Steve turned his off, Darcy looked up from hers. She asked, “do you have something you do to prepare?” She finished typing a message, and set her StarkPad aside.

Steve sat back and considered the question. “I always stop doing reports and taking calls about twenty minutes out, so that I can try to relax. I don’t want to upset any of the children with my
tension. People read a lot into my moods. It’s all about the kids and their families for me. Not the photo op.” He shrugged.

She nodded. “Are any of the kids ever afraid of you?”

He frowned. “That’s rare… and usually a sign of something bad in the home environment. I do everything that I can to avoid intimidating them. I don’t usually run into any problems like that in specialty hospitals. Children’s hospitals, like St. Mary’s, are not the first stop most kids make. They start out at hospitals nearer their homes. But, when things turn serious, they transfer to centers where they can see all of the pediatric specialists they need in one place. Too many times one problem leads to another…” He gestured at his helmet. “I don’t wear the helmet until someone asks for me to put it on, usually for a picture. Most kids want pictures with me both with and without it.”

She smiled. “Your hair must get messy.”

He shrugged. “Yeah. They don’t care. I carry a comb, and neaten up as I can.” He pulled her onto his lap and kissed her cheek. “You can mess it up, if you like.”

She shook her head. “Not enough time for more than cuddling. Can we check ‘cuddled with Captain America’ off my bucket list?”

He wrapped his arms around her, and nuzzled his nose against her cheek. “Definitely!” He sighed. “You look beautiful, Sweetheart. Feel wonderful, too.”

She shifted a bit. “The suit’s not cuddly. I like you out of it better.” She winked at him.

He kissed her lips lightly, grinning into the kiss. “I can appreciate that. But, part of the reason you’re here is to get more comfortable with the Captain.”

She tilted her head. “Part?”

He nodded. “I like spending time together. I wanted to share this with you- what the visits are like. I know you’ll understand.” He grinned, “and don’t knock the suit. It’s bullet-proof and dulls impacts.”

She kissed him, and ran her hand down from the star in the center of his chest, along the center vertical red stripe over his stomach, stopping at the metal of his belt buckle. “Then, I love the suit.” He watched her expression carefully as her fingers trailed along the leather of his tactical belt. She shook her head as though to escape a daze.

“Have you been shot many times?” Her lips twisted.

“Yeah… It hurts.” He nodded.

“Yeah… It hurts,” Darcy raised a brow.

Darcy nodded. “I only got grazed, and I’ve had enough. It hurt like crazy!”

He kissed her cheek and made a face. “Yeah. I’ve had enough of you getting shot, too.” His arms tightened around her. “I looked at that video again, from the lab invasion. Bucky took one bullet that would have been fatal to you, and deflected the shot on the one that hit you, so it wasn't worse. I asked him about it. He’s still pissed you got hit at all. He’s been training like crazy on moves for defending people around him. Hawkeye’s the best on those techniques. It’s nice to see them becoming friends.”

“It looks like Bucky is becoming better friends with Sam, too.” Darcy raised a brow.
Steve grinned and shook his head. “Bucky’s enjoying playing the field. I think he’s still seeing Sharon, too, but, yeah. He’s been flirting with Sam lately.” He shrugged. “Sam’s a good guy. Bucky could do a whole lot worse.”

Darcy smiled, “so, it doesn’t bother you for your team members to fraternize?” She wasn’t sure if Steve knew Sam had stayed with Bucky the previous night or not. She thought she’d let him figure it out for himself, if he hadn’t already.

Steve shook his head, frowning slightly. “I’ll admit that there are complications, but there’s not much I can do other than try to work around it. Betty and Bruce joined some of us in the sparring gym this morning, and everyone had to leave to give them privacy after they transformed. I get that they’ve been apart for a long time, but it concerns me that their first reaction when they transform is… about each other.”

“Does it really look like ‘Christmas porn’?” Darcy’s eyes went wide.

Steve huffed a laugh. “Jesus! Where did you hear that? And what else did you hear?” He winced. “Pepper… and that it’s ‘unrestrained.’” Darcy made a face.

Steve frowned, glanced at the driver, and closed the privacy partition. “Yes. It’s a startling blend of red and green. So, Tony was right on THAT, I guess. But, the other stuff he says is NOT right.” He sighed. “I do NOT feel like I’m missing out because I can’t ‘dent a floor’ having sex. I… I have enough violence in my life that I don’t want it during lovemaking. I do worry sometimes that I might hurt you, given how much I lose control. Everything feels so good with you! But, I don’t have any interest in Red She-Hulk, or any kind of open relationship… or, God forbid, ‘swapping.’”

Darcy sat back and stared for a long moment. “Wow. You really jumped to conclusions about what Pepper told me! And, wow! Tony is an ass-hat!” Steve’s face flamed red. Darcy chuckled and looked pensive. “Are you sure? I don’t mean about Betty or… swapping.” She shook her head. “But, are you sure that I’m not holding you back?”

Steve kissed her deeply and nodded as he pulled back. “I’m sure.” His face twisted as he glanced at the partition. He whispered in her ear, “I actually feel… the most intense pleasure… when I force myself to go as slow as I can bear. Like last night when you were lying on your stomach.” He groaned and leaned his head against hers, sighing ruefully. “I need to stop thinking about that now, Sweetheart.”

She quirked a grin and whispered, “we’ll revisit the topic later. I’m getting ideas.”

He groaned, “me, too.” He shook his head and shifted her to the seat beside him. “Need to cool down now.”

Darcy laughed, “okay. Um. Think about a nun who scared you when you were a kid. Or…” She shrugged.

Steve grinned, “you can’t even THINK of things to turn me off, can you?”

She batted her lashes with false innocence, “aren’t you always turned on?”

He rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you think so. I seem to be… whenever we’re together.” He frowned and took her hand in his.

“You’re worrying again, aren’t you? It’s so cute!” She held back a laugh.
He looked down as he chuckled at himself. “It’s good that you think so. I… tend to worry.”

Darcy nodded. “I noticed… Captain.”

“Always worried.” He frowned.

She grinned again, cajoling. “It’s as much your fault as mine that I’m not more ‘at ease’ with the Captain. You can’t figure out whether or not you like for me to call you that, Steve!”

He quirked a rueful grin. “You’re right.”

She looked at her watch. “So, a few minutes more. Alphabet game?”

He furrowed his brow. “I don’t know that game.”

She started to exclaim with surprise, then caught herself. “Of course, you don’t! You never took car trips when you were a kid.”

He shook his head, his grin wry. “Never took any trips. Never traveled until the USO and the war.”

Darcy nodded. “Since it became popular to take family trips in cars, kids got bored and looked for ways to pass the time. When I was little, we didn't have electronic devices yet. I read books, or played the Alphabet game. You start with A, of course, and look for a sign that has a word that starts with that letter.”

Steve looked out the car window. “Apple.”

Darcy frowned and looked at him oddly, then looked and saw a speck of a sign up the road. “Do you mean that the word apple appears on that tiny postage stamp of a sign a mile or so that-a-way?” He nodded slowly and shrugged. She sighed. “I forfeit.”

“Sorry!” He grinned.

She laughed. “It’s my fault for forgetting that you’re different!”

He looked pleased. “I like that you do that.” His expression shifted. “Even when you call me ‘Captain,’ I like the sound of it better than when other people do.”

“That might go back to last night, before dinner, obviously.” She grinned.

He laughed, “Stop!” He saw a sign indicating they were getting near the hospital. “We’re almost there. First I’ll have to listen to the Publicity and PR people for a few minutes, and have pictures made.” He tried to shrug off his annoyance. “I have to greet the Administrator. After pictures, they’ll hand me off to the hospital Publicity Director, and hopefully someone with Nursing.” His expression softened. “Nurses run the important stuff in hospitals. They get to know people, and know who needs cheering up the most. They take care of everyone.”

Darcy smiled, “like your Ma did.” He nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat. She grabbed and held his hand. As the car slowed, she asked, “how important is it that our relationship stays secret?”

He looked confused. “I wouldn’t like to have it in the newspaper, for your safety’s sake. But, I wouldn't call it ‘secret’.”

She nodded. “When someone flirts with me in front of you, like in a Tower elevator, you let them know we’re together. Right?” She pulled a packet of clean tissues out of her purse.
He nodded, puzzled. “I kissed you in front of a guy who flirted with you a few times.”

She nodded back. “That kind of thing is okay?”

The car stopped. The PR staff approached, and Darcy looked at the brunette pointedly. Steve followed her gaze. “Oh! I see where you’re going with this line of questioning.”

She smiled brightly as he turned to her and pulled her close. He kissed her deeply, holding her closer as the door to the car opened. They both heard a feminine voice cursing. He pulled back, and kissed Darcy one more time with reverence. “I love you, Sweetheart.”

Darcy smiled brightly. “I love you, too!” She handed him a tissue, which he used to wipe lipstick from his lips. She nodded. “You’re perfect.”

He shook his head. “Far from it.” He helped her out of the car, kissed her hand, and then turned to the others. “Where do you need me?”

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At first, Darcy watched how people reacted as Captain America approached them. The hospital administrators wanted pictures of themselves shaking hands with him. Support staff fell all over themselves to offer him food and drink, and ask if there was anything they could do for him. The SI Publicity and PR Staff behaved in a similar manner, though they also tried to insinuate more of a relationship between them and the First Avenger than existed.

Steve relaxed when a nurse introduced herself. He leaned down so that she didn’t feel that she had to raise her voice to be heard. Darcy knew he could have told her about his enhanced hearing, but that he chose not to share that information because he didn’t wish to intimidate people with reminders that he had abilities beyond most people. The nurse’s hands were shaking, regardless.

She led them out of the administrative wing of the hospital. As they passed from offices into the clinical setting, carpet ended and they walked on tile floors. Captain America’s boots thumped on the tile, though Darcy thought that it seemed as though Steve was trying to walk more on the balls of his feet to dampen the sound. Her black, peep-toe heels clicked on the tile. She shifted her weight forward, mimicking Steve’s efforts. He glanced back and smiled at her.

The Publicity and PR staff lagged further behind, looking at their phones and StarkPads, heels clicking loudly. The brunette saw Darcy looking at them, and frowned. Darcy turned back to Steve. He paused at a waiting area. There were not many people inside, but those that remained were tense. A man paced a small stretch of carpet in front of a woman who stared at the floor, unseeing. The nurse approached them and spoke. The man stopped pacing. “What? The Avenger?” The woman looked up at Steve with red-rimmed eyes.

The man turned as Steve approached. They shook hands, and the man spoke in a low voice. Darcy couldn’t hear what he was saying, but saw concern in Steve’s face. Steve turned and sat by the waiting woman and listened as she talked, hands gesturing shakily. The man walked over to where Darcy stood. He looked back, his face weary. “My wife hasn’t talked at all since they took our son to the Operating Room. It’s a relief that something can break her silence.”

Darcy nodded. “Has it been long?”

The man’s expression was blank, almost stunned. “Forever.” He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the clock.

Darcy cleared her throat, unnerved. “Did they give you any idea of how long to expect it to take?”
He nodded, his brow furrowed. “Seven hours. It’s been five.” He shrugged. “You can’t help but hope they’ll finish sooner. You know? He’s just five years old…”

Darcy hoped her slight smile was encouraging. “I can only imagine.”

He made a face, then blinked as his wife smiled, showing Steve a picture on her phone. “That’s amazing. She’s barely even made eye contact with anyone since they told us about the tumor.” Darcy’s face crumpled at the word ‘tumor’. The man grimaced. “Not my favorite word. I keep thinking the word ‘benign,’ like I can will it to happen.” Darcy realized that worry made him appear older than he was.

Darcy replied, “I get that. I’ve had moments where I did the same thing.”

He glanced at her, and then returned his gaze to his wife. “Did it work?”

She nodded. “I’m here. So, yeah.”

The man paled and turned stiffly as the desk attendant called, “Herron family.” He walked to the desk and accepted the telephone receiver from the attendant. After a few seconds, he turned to his wife. “He’s in recovery. The surgeon will be here soon.”

Steve spoke to the couple for a moment longer, and then told the nurse he was ready to go. Darcy glanced back and waved goodbye to Mr. Herron. He nodded acknowledgement and sat by his wife, their hands tightly entwined.

Next, the nurse led Steve to a playroom. There was a TV showing cartoons, several tables with crafts, art supplies, and games. A serious-faced boy and girl played in a miniature kitchen. Other children read books, played with puzzles and dolls, and were lost in play at an elaborate train table. What set the room apart were the signs on the walls that detailed the conditions that must be met for a child to use the room, posted safety precautions, and the fact that the children all wore pajamas and/or robes (many Avenger-themed). Some of the children were bald. A few had IV bags on wheeled poles trailing them, tubes attached to their small hands. One boy carrying a toy shield stopped playing with his iPad and stared as Captain America entered the room. Steve knelt by a boy playing with blocks on the floor. The boy looked him over in a matter of fact way and asked him to hand him a block. Steve sat, cross-legged by the boy and did as he said for the next fifteen minutes. A woman sitting in a chair by the wall alternated between watching them carefully and dozing. Several parents hovered at the edges and corners of the room.

Darcy used the hand sanitizer dispenser by the door, and walked to a table where a girl was drawing with crayons. One of the figures on the page had a shock of red hair and wore black. Darcy asked, “is that Black Widow?”

The girl nodded. “She kicks butt and has great hair.” She glanced at her mother and smiled at the disapproving look on the woman’s face. “Sorry. Bad word.” The girl looked up at Darcy again. “When I have hair again, I hope it looks like hers. Mine was red, too.”

Darcy couldn’t fault the girl’s taste. “She wears a red belt buckle, by the way.”

The girl glanced up at Darcy, added some red to her drawing, glanced at Steve shyly, and asked, “do you know her, too?” Darcy nodded. The girl drew stick figures lying on the ground in front of Black Widow and signed her name with a flourish. “I’m Alyssa, and I’m going to beat cancer like Black Widow beats bad guys.” She looked far away. “And then I’ll get to ring the bell.” The girl stood up from the table and walked over to say hi to Captain America.
The nurse explained, “when a child completes cancer or leukemia treatments and goes into remission, they ring our bell as part of their Going-Home-Healthy party.” Darcy nodded, watching Alyssa light up as Steve praised her drawing. The nurse smiled. “He’ll be a wonderful father someday.”

Darcy glanced at the woman quickly, but didn't respond.

Next, she followed as Steve visited individual patient rooms. Kids who were awake and able greeted him with looks of excitement. There were lots of photos taken, some with his helmet on and others without, as predicted. At rooms he had to gown-up to enter, Darcy stood outside and watched from the hall. Many children touched Captain America’s shield as though they thought it might give them luck or protection. Steve held it carefully close for weaker patients. He talked to some kids about how sick he was as a child, and how little he liked staying in bed then. With others, he joked about the movies they were watching or games they were playing, assuring gamers that they were much better at that sort of thing than he was. One mom asked to take a picture of Captain America holding her infant. The sight of Steve tenderly holding such a tiny baby left Darcy breathless and made her heart hurt.

Some parents were openly weepy as they watched Captain America brighten their children’s days. Other parents were too weary to give more than the barest acknowledgement of other people’s presence as they kept vigil. Parents with healthier children chattered with excitement, took pictures with their cell phones, and sent giddy messages to friends about the ‘up side’ of their time at St. Mary’s.

Next, they visited the hospital’s rooftop garden. As they walked from the elevator to the outside door, they heard chattering voices and laughter. Some of it was hearty laughter, while some was the lighter sound uttered when strength of humor is greater than strength of body. Warm rays of light drew one towards the door, towards a feeling of hope. Between benches and along one wall, there were container gardens overflowing with blooms. The walls were stone to low-waist level, then fiberglass up to ten feet, then open. One section was shaded by a large pergola. Children in wheelchairs and special transport carts blew bubbles and pinwheels, filling the air with bubbles of all sizes. Inside a fiberglass case, there was a giant, antique music box that chimed songs when a button was pressed. It was beautiful. Darcy was proud to see that it had been donated by Stark Industries.

A therapy dog played fetch with one boy while other kids watched intently. Darcy was impressed that they resisted the temptation to interrupt and pet the dog. They even cheered the boy to do as the therapist urged. But, she saw that the lady with the dog occasionally gave other children a turn, encouraging them to throw a durable bean bag for the dog to catch in mid-air. Many of the kids seemed to be patients of hers as well, gauging from their reactions to her and the dog, ‘Ginger.’

After they left the rooftop garden, the nurse led them to a patient room they’d skipped earlier. The Herrons were in there now, with their son, Sean. His mother sat at the bedside, singing softly. He was still unconscious. His hand was wrapped with a diaper. Steve asked about it. Mr. Herron explained that it was to keep Sean from pulling at the IV site. A Cap bear lay on the bed beside the boy. Mrs. Herron asked, “would you please sign Sean’s bear’s shield? He’d love that...” She murmured, “please sign ‘Steve Rogers’, if you don’t mind. Knowing that there was a serum that helped a boy overcome health challenges gives me hope that things like that can be done again.”

Steve did as asked. As he straightened up, Steve noted, “his breathing just changed. I think he’s waking up.” They all watched as the boy’s eyelids began to flutter. He let out a tired cry, and then opened his eyes. When he saw Captain America standing by his bedside, the boy stopped crying, and his mouth fell open.
Mrs. Herron, gaze focused solely on her child, spoke. “Sean? Baby? Wake up. Captain America is here to see you and wish you well.”

The boy’s mouth closed and he smiled a tiny, weak smile. Mrs. Herron whispered, “you’re his favorite hero.” Sean looked at his bulkily-covered arm with an acceptance it was sad to see in a child so young, and looked around at the equipment with weary tolerance. Then, he shifted his gaze back to Captain America.

Darcy saw Steve tremble as the boy stared at him adoringly. Steve replied, “and I’m in awe of the courage I see in his eyes… I know a fighter when I see one.” Sean’s smile grew stronger. Steve pointed out, “I like your bear, Sean. Another of my favorite people has one just like it.” He glanced at Darcy, and grinned. Sean reached for the bear, hardly able to move his arm. Steve nudged it closer to him.

The boy touched his bear with one finger and rasped, “Cap beh.”

Steve smiled and nodded. “He’s a lucky bear to have a good boy like you to look after him.”

Sean’s eyelids fluttered. Steve stepped back, and shook Mr. Herron’s hand. Mrs. Herron hugged him. Steve urged, “you get some rest now, buddy. I hope you feel better soon.”

As they left, Darcy asked, “will he be okay?”

Steve frowned. “I don’t know. They have to wait a few days for the biopsy results. He had his adrenal gland removed along with the tumor, which is a tough surgery. It went well, apparently, and he seems to be a strong little guy. He has Down syndrome. Kids with genetic differences like that often run into other challenges. As if they need ‘em!”

They heard a bell ringing, and people clapping and cheering. Steve’s smile widened. “There’s a good sound!” Darcy agreed. They peeked into a lounge and watched as a family smiled happily and hugged nurses and therapists goodbye. The mother caught sight of them, and ran to hug Steve, and then introduce him to her daughter. Steve took a knee and congratulated the girl.

As Darcy watched, she texted her doctor’s assistant and asked for an appointment to evaluate her fertility. It wouldn’t hurt to learn more, she hoped.

Finally, they followed the nurse to the elevator, and Steve thanked her for her help and good work.

After the doors closed, it was just them and the Publicity/PR people. Steve sighed, and turned to Darcy. “So, what do you think, Sweetheart?” He reached for her hand. She saw that the others noticed, but quickly looked away.

Darcy threaded her fingers through Steve’s. “I think you made a lot of people happier today.” He looked down and murmured that he hoped so. She added, “and it’s a cool hospital. The rooftop space was amazing.”

“I love that having a place like that helps them heal and just feel like kids.” Steve smiled.

She smiled back. “I love seeing how energized and recharged you are from spending time with them.” The smile that lit his face was as bright as the sun.

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For the first half hour of the ride back to the Tower, Darcy looked over the projects list for the SI Biologists. She wanted to see what there was in the works regarding cures, vaccines, and other
medical advances. Seeing the variety of concerns that children faced also lit a fire in her, one that made her want to see that something got DONE to help.

She became conscious that Steve was reading over her shoulder when he leaned down and kissed her. He rasped, ‘gonna save the world, Miss Lewis?’

“Not personally. But, I might shift things around a bit so that someone else can.” She grinned.

Steve moved to the seat facing her and lifted one of her legs so that her foot was in his lap. She’d kicked off her shoes the moment they were back in the car. He began to massage her bare foot, saying, “I love that your reaction is to jump in and look for a way to help.”

She met his gaze, her eyes wide, startled. “How else could a person react after seeing all that?”

“You’d be amazed.” He rolled his eyes.

She laughed softly. “Maybe not. How many times has someone tried to seduce you after watching you be sweet with kids?”

He shook his head. “I usually stay busy on my phone all the way back to the Tower.”

“What’s so different this time, Captain?” She smirked.

The phone rang, and Steve put the driver on speaker. “Captain? I’m afraid that there’s a problem with traffic. The President and Secretary Rusk are on their way to a meeting at the UN, and their motorcade is closing exit from the Midtown tunnel for the next hour or so. I’m afraid there is no way around.” Steve thanked the driver and told him that they would watch a movie while they waited. He exchanged messages with the security detail, but seemed unperturbed.

Darcy replied to one email, and then another. When she finally looked back up again, Steve was staring at her. She removed her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Do you really want to watch a movie?”

He chuckled silently and shook his head, still staring. He turned and snapped open a pouch on his tac belt. He removed a pair of fingerless gloves from it and slipped them on his hands. Her mouth went dry. He spoke. “JARVIS? Can you start a movie for us? Volume medium loud.”

JARVIS asked, “which movie, Captain?”

Steve shrugged. “Put on ‘Casablanca’.” He pulled Darcy’s other foot into his lap and began to massage both of her feet with his glove-clad hands. Darcy set her StarkPad down on the seat and bit her lip as she felt the leather slide over her skin. Steve smirked. “You like the gloves?” Darcy nodded, and stared at his hands. Steve moved his hands up her calves, still rubbing the leather against her soft skin and taut muscles. His expression was faux-innocent. “You’re tense. This could take a while.” His hands slid to the inside of her knee, circling.

She felt the ridged seam of the edge of the glove rubbing against the backs of her knees. Darcy swallowed hard. Steve’s hands slowly moved up her thighs, rucking the fabric of her skirt up as he went. She bit back a moan. He pulled her skirt down smooth again and resumed massaging her calves.

He grinned. “I don’t want to mess up your pretty outfit, Sweetheart.” He shrugged. “I do… but, I don’t.” He reached out a hand and pulled her across to sit on his lap. He kissed her passionately. His thoroughly-distracting, gloved hands moved from her shoulders to slide down to her ass and back up. She could feel the ridges of the gloves through the cloth of her dress. One of his hands...
slid around to glide up to her breasts, teasing and rubbing over them. Her skin felt too tight, and warm desire pooled in her belly. She pressed into his kisses, wanting. They continued kissing and caressing each other, both panting with need and arousal.

Her hands were at the back of his neck, and then one tangled in his hair while the other slid down the chest of his uniform. When she reached the belt buckle this time, she worked it open. His kisses grew more frantic as she pulled his belt open. Then, she shifted herself to the seat across from him and asked, “help me get into this uniform, Captain.” He nodded and worked at the fasteners, his hands trembling. She bit her lip, smile full of mischief. “Would you put your helmet on?”

His laugh was low. “I suppose.”

She shrugged. “You want for me to be more comfortable with the Captain!” He nodded, and put his helmet on, sighing ruefully. She knelt in front of him and urged, “why don’t you put one hand on the shield, in case you need an outlet for your strength.” She searched what she could still see of his expression beneath the helmet.

“I’m not planning on bringing the shield to bed at home, Sweetheart.” He chuckled dryly.

She laughed, “that’s fine. But, bring the gloves sometimes, like tonight, would you, Captain?” He nodded agreement, and moaned appreciatively as she lowered her lips to him.

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When they reached the Tower, Darcy grabbed a sandwich from the café on her way in and ate hurriedly as she made her way to Tony’s lab. Betty was inside, an annoyed expression on her face as Tony talked and gestured wildly. Darcy was amused that Tony actually seemed nervous around Betty. She stepped past them with waves to both, and frowned at the size of the pile of papers at her work station.

Tony turned and saw her frown, calling out, “well, you neglect me all this time, you pay a price, Lewis!”

Darcy nodded absently as she began to sort the papers. “I swear that you’re deliberately making it look worse than it is. I’ve done a lot of these reports and requisitions already. I’ll check to make sure you didn't add anything, but I worked on them remotely.” She glanced at him. “Is this your way of saying you miss me when I can’t get in here every day?”

He jerked his head away. “I won’t dignify that with a response, Lewis. The only person I ever miss is Pepper.”

Darcy shook her head. “Liar.” She grinned as he frowned.

Betty asked Tony, “so, when can we have samples and begin testing?” He gestured towards Darcy. Betty turned towards Darcy and tapped on her StarkPad.

Darcy opened the message on her pad, read it and thought for a second, and then forwarded it to the appropriate developers and Jai. “Give us two days.” She had a reply message from Jai. “Jai is on her way to the R&D labs to meet with the chemist, textile engineer, and the machinist. You should have your ultra-stretchy microfiber samples in two days, no problem.” She stared at attached images from Jai. “Wow! I like the costume ideas!”

Betty crossed her arms over her chest and smiled darkly. “Bucky helped me with those earlier today, and Jai refined them.”
Darcy nodded. “Bucky’s a talented artist. And I told you Jai is awesome.” Betty nodded and smiled. Darcy worked some more on transcriptions and reviewed the reports. She laughed when she saw a few things that Tony had scribbled in, obviously trying to trip her up. She shook her head and commented, “you’re gonna have to do better than that, Stark.”

Tony made adjustments to the suit he was upgrading. “I hate it when you call me Stark. It means you’re channeling Cap.” He shifted to his computer, and typed a few lines of code. “So, I hear you’re taking on groups of grossly-drunk misogynists now. How’s your hand?”

Darcy sighed. “The hand’s okay… a little tender, but okay.”

Tony nodded. “Well, I’m glad you weren't trained and flitting around the New York bar scene during my party days!”

“I was still in middle school during your wildest party days. You were held up as the bad example-who NOT to date as I got older.” Darcy grinned.

Tony put a hand over his heart. “I don’t know which is worse; that you’re that young… or that I can’t ever change Mamaw’s mind and make her love me, instead of hating me.”

Darcy did some editing and then reassured him, “Mamaw never hated you. She worried about you when you were in Afghanistan, followed the news reports and talked about the investigation like you were family. I think she always suspected there might be more to you than just charming rougishness.”

Tony smiled, “maybe… but, then again…” He asked Darcy to bring him a tool. She found it and set it on a stool near him. He mused, “I wonder what Mamaw would think of you living in sin with Captain America.”

Darcy grinned. “She’d flip out.” Tony pretended shock, his mouth open in a silent gasp. Darcy laughed. “She’d probably be more upset with Steve than with me. She’d understand why I’d let a guy like him ‘turn my head.’”

Tony turned to Betty. “Did you tell the General in person when you moved in with Banner the first time?” Tony pitched his voice high. “‘Hey, Daddy? Remember that grad student who’s a million times smarter than you and hates male authority figures? He’s screwing me daily now.’”

Betty shook her head. “No. I told him over the phone, but only after my cover story fell apart.” Her pulse meter began to beep. Darcy glanced at Betty cautiously.

“Gee! Why didn't you want to tell HIM the truth?” Tony raised a brow, teasing.

Betty shook her head. “I’m trying to see it, but I do NOT understand why Bruce likes you so much!” Tony gave Betty a wary side-eye.

Darcy grimaced, “maybe because they both resent male authority figures?”

“Bruce has good reason.” Betty’s watch began to beep faster.

Tony stilled, expression dark. “So do I!” Betty bit her lip, and tried to breathe more steadily.

Darcy looked up from her work. “You okay over there? We should probably change topics. You don’t respond well to discussion of Bruce’s past.” She shot Tony a warning look.

Tony interjected, “you know what? I think Cap’s wrong to worry about what the Hulks do. I think
you guys put on such a show that the bad guys would just have a seat and open up their raincoats.”

Darcy shot Tony a dirty look. “Ew! I’ll pick the new topic! Hey! I went with Steve to a children’s hospital today and watched him make sick kids smile. They have a gorgeous, old-style music box out in this rooftop garden. It’s got a rolling cylinder with... teeth, I guess, but gigantic. Stark Industries donated it, and when it played, it sounded like magic.”

Tony nodded, his expression blank as he watched Betty. She glanced at Darcy briefly, but then turned back to Tony and raged, “I don’t understand Bruce’s friendship with you, at all! And I don’t think anything could justify how disrespectfully you behave. Bruce admitted that this morning wasn’t the first time you’ve seen us together. You watched our reunion on surveillance cameras! You joked about it and showed the video to other people, without asking permission from either of us!” Betty stepped closer to Tony. “Why couldn’t you just tell me I needed Darcy’s help? Why do you have to argue the merits of naked Hulks?”

“Unlike you and Bruce, the Hulks are satisfied to the point of purring from all their angry fucking. Why hinder that?” Tony shrugged.

Betty growled, and her eyes went red. Darcy heard banging in the vent overhead and looked up. A vent cover popped open, and Hawkeye reached an arm down towards her. She grabbed her StarkPad and stuck it in the belt of her dress. As Betty began to transform, Darcy grabbed Hawkeye’s arm and held on tightly as he pulled her up into the vent and began to all but drag her away from the transforming Red She-Hulk. Darcy scurried helpfully, and only lost one of her shoes in the process. As they climbed out of the vent in a storage room, she took her other shoe off and carried it in one hand, walking barefoot.

Hawkeye looked her over. “I’ll find the other and bring it to you, if it survives the rampage.” He pulled out his phone, checked the screen, and handed it to Darcy. “Tony lived. Cap wants to say ‘Hi’, I guess.” He grinned.

Darcy took Hawkeye’s phone. “Steve! I’m fine. How’s Tony?” They talked for a few minutes. She assured him several times that she was fine, and would see him soon. After she ended the conversation, she returned the phone to Hawkeye. “You’ve been lurking around, waiting for Betty to have a Hulk incident... haven’t you?” She pulled her StarkPad out of her belt and took a deep breath.

Hawkeye brushed dust off her shoulder, texted a vent-cleaning request to JARVIS, and nodded. “Yep. It was just a matter of time. I was glad she got over her jealousy of you, and your meeting with her went well. Now, she’s working through her ‘science brothers’ jealousy. Tony got a suit on in time and didn't die, so it’s all good. I can stop following her around so much.”

Darcy sighed. “You think she’ll go see Bruce after she’s back to herself?”

Hawkeye nodded. “More likely he’s gone to her already, along with Cap and Thor. Tony’s behavior is just one of the MANY topics Betty and Bruce need to hash through.”

Darcy nodded. “I’m gonna run back by my place and get another pair of shoes. Then, I’ll head to my R&D office to finish up the workday... and get a crew into Tony’s lab to see what’s left.”

Hawkeye nodded. “I’ll stay with you until I get the signal that Red’s calmed the hell down.”

After a quick stop by her old place, Darcy headed back to her office. Hawkeye sat in a chair, tossing a knife in the air and catching it, over and over. Finally, his phone buzzed. He sheathed his knife, and stood. “Adios, kid. I hope you get enough stuff done so you can enjoy the R&R. A
bunch of us are heading upstate to one of Tony’s estates to escape the city. I hope you and Cap come along. You can see the stars there. It’s not quite as good as New Mexico, but close.”

Darcy looked up from her work. “I’d like to see the stars. I miss that.”

Hawkeye nodded. “I imagine the Hulks will stay here to work on their issues, vaccinate her against that drug Hydra made to tame her, test out new stretch duds, and more.”

Darcy made a face. “Forgive me for saying it, but I hope so. Two hulk-outs in as many weeks are a bit much!”

Hawkeye chuckled. “Be glad you weren’t in the gym this morning! It’s… instructive… but...” His expression was wryly rueful.

Darcy shook her head at him. “Don’t let Betty hear you say that!” He nodded firmly. She added, “thanks for pulling me to safety, by the way.”

He grinned. “you’re welcome. Maybe it’ll get Cap off my ass for smurfing you in the crotch the other day!”

Darcy laughed. “I’ll mention it to him.”

Hawkeye saluted her, “thanks. See ya!”

Darcy stayed late working. Between the visit to the children’s hospital and all of the attacks and other interruptions recently, she had a lot to do. Finally, Darcy went to her old place to shower and change. She grabbed more things, including a beautiful silk chemise negligee, and shoved them into a bag to take with her. She looked around and sighed. “Crap. I just got it all UN-packed!” She laughed at herself, and decided she would worry about that later.

Now, it was time to go home.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to McGregorsWench for beta help! Thank you readers & esp. commenters for the support and encouragement. I’m working hard on the next chapter now. It took me a few days to get back to it after this one. One of my kids was in a children's hospital for a few weeks when he was five. It was a hard time. Bringing it to mind so much took a lot out of me.

The shirt Darcy wears when they go out for pizza- http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/736x/87/b2/4b/87b24b4f01bae756471e76a15bddd19c.jpg


McGregorsWench wrote that I worried her that something bad was going to happen to/with one of the children, so please let me share... 2 pix of my younger son from 3 years ago when they found a tumor and had to do a very scary surgery. I’m delighted to say that it WAS benign. :) 
https://41.media.tumblr.com/eee815d4effbb22ef43943bd8cdc6ee9/tumblr_nniwzikL6A1u0gns6o1_
https://40.media.tumblr.com/74e1ba05459805697b6cd7124b35bd18/tumblr_nniwzikL6A1u0gns6o
"We have time."

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and their friends take some much-needed R&R. Steve and Darcy enjoy uninterrupted time alone together. Betty shares more with Bruce, and they regain some of their previous closeness. Thor and Steve talk about Steve's intentions and future. A formal dinner/dance party evening for the group includes some nice surprises.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, McGregorsWench for doing beta for this LONG chapter! :)) ((HUGS))

Thank you, readers (& especially commenters) for your patience. I'm sorry it has taken an extra week to update. The last chapter touched on some draining personal times in my life (surgery/hospitalization of my younger son), and took a lot out of me. Then AoU hit, along with canon changes that are not my cup of tea, and a lot of wild distractions w/the AoU press tour and fan-opinion fallout. Just as I get back on my feet from that, tumblr begins to assault us w/behind the scenes photos and clues to Civil War. Oh, the FEELS!

Anyway, my story is more AU from MCU canon than ever. *shrug* Author's prerogative. :) (FWIW, I decided on upstate New York before I saw AoU. I looked at a comic database listing of Stark residences and found that Tony has a place up near Oneida. It seemed like a logical weekend getaway and possible new base.)

And the chapter is LONG. I couldn't find a good place to split it. Am working on the next. THANK YOU for reading! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few days later, Darcy and Steve joined most of the others at Tony’s estate in upstate New York. They rode up together in Steve’s Porsche for the four and a half hour drive, via country roads. It wasn't quite as free a feeling as riding the motorcycle, but they were out of the Tower and the City. It was good not to have people around. The green of the trees and the rays of sunlight filtering over the forest floor refreshed in a way neither had known they needed.

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Darcy didn't realize that she missed being outside. She was so busy with new and important things that she hadn't noticed.

In London, she had her own flat. It was tiny, but hers. So, she took the Tube to school and work daily. A friend from one of her classes worked a tourist boat on the Thames, giving her free rides whenever she wanted (so long as the launch wasn't full). Still, she walked a lot in London. She didn't exercise like in the Tower, but she walked enough to stay fit. When Dark Elves attacked, she even ran a little (and fell over that time when Ian saved her, though she didn't like to think about
Before London, there was New Mexico. In Puente Antiguo, Darcy wasn't fit at all. The town was too small for her to walk much. She and Jane ate a lot of Pop Tarts. Hiking the surrounding desert held no appeal. The most she moved around there was when they met Thor and helped evacuate the town during the attack of *The Destroyer*.

But, they were outside a lot in Puente Antiguo, and despite Jane’s belief that the rooftop was her personal sanctuary, Darcy spent time up there, too. She watched the glittering night skies with a childish fascination. Erik taught her about the constellations, amused by her interest in the mythology behind each. He shared the Northern European lore of his youth and the view he’d had of the night sky, explaining that when he was a boy, the belt of Orion was known to him as Friggerock. He told colorful tales of the goddess Frigga, goddess of love, fertility, and destiny. Darcy loved that Frigga was also a goddess of intuition. Intuition had saved Darcy’s ass more times than she could count. As an honorary member of Thor’s family, she liked to think that Frigga had been on her side from time to time. Darcy remembered those cold desert nights with a sense of incredulity as she recalled staring up at an imagined portrait of Thor’s mother.

So, that Thursday evening when she and Steve arrived and guards directed them to their guest house, she stopped to stare at the sky. After he turned the car off, everything was peaceful, soothingly so. Steve got out of the car and noticed the rapt expression on her face. It tugged at him. He walked around the car, stood by her, and looked up.

She whispered, “Look! It’s been a couple of years since I’ve seen stars so clearly!” Steve did as instructed. She gasped, “was it even clearer when you were in Europe during the war?”

He nodded. “There’s more light pollution here, from the manor and the other guest houses. I guess we had better air quality then, too.” He sighed. “I didn’t get to enjoy it often. It’s nicer here with you, regardless of the damage of time.” He took her hand in his and squeezed gently.

She tugged him close, so that he stood behind her and she was wrapped in his arms. “You were too busy for a lot of stuff back then.” She felt tension fading as she looked around the sky in wonder. The still, cold beauty of the stars promised mystery. It was so quiet! The lack of the low-level hum and sounds of the City was a relief. The air was fresh and crisp. She breathed deeply. “No offense, Mr. Brooklyn, but I’m in love with being out of the City.”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. “None taken! Today’s New York is not where I grew up. I don’t have the same feeling for it now. I like this.”

The guest house and the surrounding area were beautiful, too. Darcy looked forward to seeing it by day. They could see lights from nearby guest houses through the trees, each at least a quarter of a mile away. The manor house was over a mile from the others and the estate grounds extensive, so each guest house had its own electric cart for getting around the property easily. Steve chuckled to himself when he noted that their guest house had a white picket fence. He’d once told Tony that he wasn’t sure if he’d ever have a relationship, or if he’d given up on the idea of a house with a white picket fence altogether. So, he wasn’t surprised to see this new fence. He could easily imagine Tony instructing, “Hey! Put a white picket fence in front of Rogers’ quarters. I need to mess with him.” It was one jest from Tony that Steve could appreciate. He followed Darcy up the steps to the wide, covered front porch. It had a porch swing and two rocking chairs, as well as decorative planters with beautiful flowers.

Inside, the house was the cleanest place either of them had ever seen, and beautifully decorated. The entry led to an open great room with wide-board wood floors. There was full kitchen space with every appliance they could want (and a fully-stocked pantry and refrigerator), and a table for
four. The kitchen adjoined living space with a wood-burning fireplace and a flat screen TV. There were many candles, a water and rock fountain, and interesting sculptures. A door led to a half bath. Off the living room was a covered deck with a private hot tub, a grill, and a café table and chairs for outdoor dining. The deck faced an unbroken section of forest.

The master bedroom was dominated by a king-sized bed with an adjustable-firmness, split mattress (Darcy dreaded how firmly Steve would set his side), and a large window also facing forest. The bathroom was spa quality… with heated floors and towel warmers, a huge shower with multiple shower heads, and an over-sized, separate Jacuzzi tub. There were two smaller rooms- one guest room with a smaller bath room, and an office.

Darcy looked around, eyes wide, exclaiming, “I could get used to this!” She went to the closet in the master and kicked off her shoes; then unpacked, and changed into shorts and a t-shirt.

When she returned to the living room, Steve was at work in the kitchen, barefoot and at ease. She joined him, smiling over how relaxed he seemed already. He was preparing a platter with sliced French bread, paté, hummus, smoked salmon, olives, cheeses, apples, and strawberries. Darcy helped wash and slice fruit. He opened a bottle of blanc de noirs, and directed her to grab champagne flutes from the shelf, fill them, and take them out to the deck along with bottles of water. He set the champagne bottle in a small bucket of ice. He brought the food platter and the bottle on ice. Outside, he set things down and lit candles in the lanterns there, while she ran back in to get knives and napkins.

They sat down at the café table and toasted each other, enjoying the quiet sounds of night along with their impromptu picnic. At a distance, Darcy heard the sound of a suit drone in flight. She frowned. “What security measures should I know about here?” She ate bread with pate and apple slices. The contrasting textures and flavors blended beautifully.

Steve sipped his drink and shrugged. “Drones fly the perimeter. Electronic fences rigged with EMPs disrupt any unauthorized vehicle that tries to cross estate boundaries. Security forces patrol outside the fences, and there are security cameras along all of the paths and interspersed at intervals in the woods.” He had salmon on bread with olives.

She grinned, “so, no skinny dipping in the pond?”

Steve chuckled, “not unless you want to put on a show! It’s been done more than once.” He grinned. “Hawkeye makes sure to moon the cameras daily whenever he’s here. It makes Stark squawk.”

She laughed, nearly spitting her drink. She set it down and let out another giggle. “Can you imagine how Tony would flail if YOU did that?” Steve looked at her with a deadpan expression. She gasped and covered her mouth. “Oh. My. God. You didn’t!”

Steve’s mouth twitched. “Natasha dared me… and promised to destroy the evidence afterwards.”

Darcy’s giggles grew into full laughter and she wiped tears from her eyes. “You and dares! How do you know it was destroyed?”

He winced. “I trust her. And, if anyone had it, it would have been made public by now.”

She shook her head. “I’m sincerely shocked, Captain. And, you’re right. No one could resist showing footage of the Captain’s ass, if they had it.” She looked him over appreciatively.

“That was more of a Steve move than a Captain one.” Steve sipped his drink.
She giggled. “Punk move!” She ate strawberries and cheese slices.

Steve's grin twisted. “Purely a punk move!”

She finished her glass of blanc de noirs. He gave her another half glass. Darcy grinned, “cutting me off already?”

He made a face. “I have my hopes up that you’ll stay conscious longer than you did the other night.”

“Can cameras see us here?” Darcy looked around.

He shook his head. “No. They can’t see into the guest houses or into the decks. JARVIS is only in operation on request. We’re free from surveillance.”

Darcy relaxed more, sighing with contentment. JARVIS was awesome, but it was intrusive when every word and move could be exposed. She waggled her brows. “Strip poker? Truth or dare?” Steve grinned and shook his head ruefully. She shrugged. “No? How about hot tub time?”

He nodded, and leaned over to flip the cover open. He stood and checked it, then turned it on to heat up. Darcy had another piece of bread and bites of salmon. Steve sat down again and ate more, too. When he told her enough time had passed for the water to warm, Darcy let out a nervous breath and grinned at him. She sat up and removed her top and then her bra, feeling bold to do so outside. He removed his shirt, then stood and shucked his pants and boxers. He put a hand in the water, making sure it was right. She watched the mesmerizing way the flickering candlelight played over his body. He stepped up into the hot tub and she held onto the table for support as she watched the play of the muscles in his back, ass, and legs.

She groaned, “Gah! You have the most beautiful back and ass I’ve ever seen. What I lacked before in practical experience, I made up for in ill-advised Internet browsing. So, that’s actually a decent compliment.”

He shook his head and made a face. “I’ll take your word on it. My eyes aren’t exactly virgin when it comes to the Internet, either, though I don’t have time or inclination for it to be a hobby. Once Tony let me know the breadth of things out there, I was curious though. I learned how to erase my browser history, too.” He sighed. “Nothing could prepare me for how pretty you are, Sweetheart.”

She grinned, and removed her shorts and panties. She grabbed a hair tie out of her shorts pocket and put her hair up with it. He sighed as she climbed into the hot tub beside him. He pulled her close and kissed her, easing along her exposed neck. He reached for their drinks and some strawberries. After they finished those, he set the glasses back on the table and grabbed water for them to sip. He shifted so that he could massage her for a while, and then settled her on his lap. She kissed his lips tenderly. Their hands roamed, caressing along with the roiling water. She shivered where her skin was exposed. He moved her down beside him so that she was more covered. They drank more cold water. Then, they made out for a while longer.

He finally rasped, “instructions say we shouldn't do this for more than fifteen minutes at a time.”

Darcy giggled, “foreplay?”

Steve snorted a laugh. “Hot tub! Far as I know, there’s no limit on foreplay, except patience.”

She climbed out and turned back, smiling, “or need.” She grabbed a towel from the cabinet by the hot tub, dried quickly and wrapped it around her body, then picked up her clothing. “Join me in that awesome-looking shower?”
Steve nodded as he stepped out of the hot tub. “Love to.”

Again, in the shower they came together tenderly as their bodies cooled to normal temperature. They took turns lathering each other, soapy hands gliding silkily over muscles as tension eased more. They kissed and teased continuously, savoring the arousal as they each began to soak in the sense of ‘want’ as surely as their bodies soaked in warmth. When they finished showering, each combed out their hair. After he was done, he shifted to take over combing her hair out. She sat on her towel on the vanity stool and leaned into his touch, marveling at the way he looked at her in the mirror. He continued, combing out her hair, a look of contentment on his face.

“It takes a long time to dry naturally,” she apologized.

Steve smiled at her in the mirror. “We have time.”

After a while, he walked into the bedroom, pulled back the covers, and hooked his StarkPad to the dock. He put on the playlist that Darcy had given him, clicking for his and Peggy’s song not to play, and then added songs from his playlist to her. Darcy sat on the bed, still towel drying her damp hair. Steve took the towel from her and spread it across a pillow (there were many), and indicated for her to lay back. He lay on his side next to her and kissed her gently. He asked, “what’s your pleasure, my lady?”

She smiled and twisted a piece of her hair around one finger. “You.”

He kissed her again. “I’m yours.” He noticed a blush creep into her cheeks as her expression turned cautiously impish. “What mischief do you have in mind, Sweetheart?”

Darcy sat up further, keeping her hair on the towel. “I wondered something.” He tilted his head, waiting patiently. She breathed in and out nervously. “The other day in the car going to the hospital, you said…” He raised a brow. She spoke hurriedly, “you said it pleases you to make yourself go slow. I couldn't help but wonder…” Darcy swallowed hard. “I couldn't help but wonder if you might enjoy being the one to follow orders?”

Steve looked surprised. He looked down for a moment, gathering his thoughts and composure. Finally, he met her eyes again and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

She stifled a squeal, rubbed her hands together, and laughed at his look of alarm. She kissed him reassuringly. Shakily, she ordered, “please lie on your stomach for now… and stay still.”

Steve complied, then groaned, “oh, God!” as Darcy shifted onto her side and ran one hand from the back of his head to his ass. She moved over him and slowly placed open-mouthed kisses all down his spine, across his ass, and down the backs of his legs. He shuddered under the touch of her lips and tongue. She worked her way back up, kissing into every dip and hollow, sometimes nipping at him, concentrating on sensitive areas, paying careful attention to his response. His muscles tightened, and she saw goose-bumps rise on his skin. She lifted up so that her breasts grazed over him as she moved. He moaned. The sound gave her a frisson of pleasure. She shifted to the side and leaned in to kiss his lips.

He started to move into the kiss, but she shook her head. “I didn’t say you could move.” His pupils were blown. He trembled as she licked lightly at his bottom lip, and then sucked it between her own. Her grin was almost feral as she ordered, “roll over on your back. Then, stay still again until I order you to move. I will, you know. I look forward to it… but it’s gonna be a while. At first, well, maybe for longer than ever before, it will be… slow.”

He closed his eyes tightly, and his hands fists in reaction to her words. He rolled, conscious of her
gaze on him. Darcy whispered suggestively, “You want to move, don’t you?” He didn't react.

Her breath shuddered. “Nod or shake your head, my love.” Steve let out a harsh breath and nodded. She leaned over him, touching her lips to his, and whispered, “are you okay?” He opened his eyes and nodded. She kissed him, a simple, sweet kiss. “I love you. And, you can talk… or make any other noise you like, please.”

He breathed out heavily. “Fuck!”

She giggled and threw that back like he had done to her previously. “Nice suggestion… but I’m the one giving the orders.” He groaned. Darcy continued to giggle as she kissed down his neck and chest, running one hand up to drag her nails across his scalp. Steve sighed. She kissed further down, again exploring each dip along his abdomen. His tension created more contrast. She murmured, “gorgeous.”

He replied, “Science!”

Darcy laughed, and then ran her tongue along his hard length. He groaned again, cussing under his breath. She used her lips and tongue on him, with an occasional light scrape of teeth, wringing moans and whimpers from him as she teased. His tension increased, and he began to plead for more pressure and speed. Instead, she resumed her exploration of his abdomen and chest. She teased, “so many muscles. It could take a while to kiss them all.”

Finally, she pulled him into her mouth again. She swirled, hard, with her tongue. Steve struggled not to writhe, and cursed a blue streak. As she moved him in and out of her mouth very slowly, he began to beg again. She held off as long as she could stand to. When he verged on discomfort (and teetered perilously close to whimpering), she sat up and straddled him, lining him up at her entrance while staying up on her knees.

He cried, “oh, God! Please! So good. Please, Darcy!”

She threw her head back and let out a moan of her own as she felt his hardness against her entrance. His body vibrated with tension as he held himself still. She lowered herself the slightest bit, moaning with bliss, while he cried out wordlessly. She circled her hips, watching his jaw and neck visibly strain. She continued, watching his struggle with a rapt expression. His noises were incredible, almost making her dizzy. She lowered herself onto him, then stilled, though she clenched and pulsed tightly inside. He moaned, long and low while she pulled at him that slight bit. Then, she lifted and lowered herself over and over again, as slowly as she could. His face was a study in concentration and want, his moans incoherent. She trembled with heady pleasure.

When she moved off in deference to her thigh muscles, Steve whimpered at the sense of loss and stared at her, silently pleading.

Darcy lay on her back next to him, kissed one of his hands, and whispered, “do what you want.”

His head jerked, a wild look on his face, a growl escaping him. He pulled her close and kissed her deeply, demanding. In a quick series of motions, he shifted them both so that he was sitting at the edge of the bed and she straddled his thighs. He urged her to keep her legs on the bed, relaxed, while he bore her weight with one hand. She leaned back, trusting him to support her. He entered her fully, then held her by her hip and thigh and pushed her back and pulled her to him faster and faster, nearly slamming their bodies together where they joined. Steve's jaw clenched tightly and he grunted loudly as he thrust and pulled her closer. His entry angle was blindingly pleasurable, and the sensation of being entirely in his control overwhelmed. Darcy came apart after Steve came for the first time. He yelled her name and moved her more slowly while he recovered, then more
quickly than before as he chased satisfaction again. She cried his name, almost like a chant.

After he finally came for the second time, he pulled her close and turned them, so he lay her on the bed. Darcy was encircled in his arms protectively. He breathed heavily and shook. He put his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. Darcy noticed that he was sweaty, a rare occurrence. She kissed him tenderly. Steve's shaking increased.

She was concerned. “Hey! Are you okay, there? You’re shaking like a leaf!”

Tears glistened in his eyes. “You’re so wonderful! I never imagined…”

She let out a shaky laugh. “You’re pretty awesome, too. I…”

He cut her off with a deep, slow kiss. He kissed her languorously as he stroked and caressed down her body. He was gentle and thorough with his dexterous fingers, alternating kisses on her lips, neck, and breasts as pleasure built for her again and again. He didn't tease, just sated. Later, she felt his hardness against her leg again. He lifted one of her legs over his hip so they could lay together while he continued to touch and kiss her, stimulating her to a point of pleasure overload. With her next orgasm, Darcy’s vision went white and she lost consciousness.

When she woke, Steve was cuddling her close, murmuring endearments and compliments. She shifted against him and sighed, content.

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Betty Ross was ecstatic about her new lab. All of the equipment was state-of-the-art. She had things to work with that she had only dreamed of touching.

Before leaving for vacation, Natasha and Clint paid a visit to Betty’s old lab and home at Culver University. They took an SI Security Team to help evaluate the damage, and brought in Stark Movers to salvage anything that they could. Betty kept and hid backup copies of her work, had since Bruce’s first ‘incident’. She sent a list of hiding spots with the assassins, pleased by the praise Black Widow heaped on her for maintaining the habit. While Betty’s lab had been stripped of computers, samples and hard files, some personal items remained. Her home was ransacked, too. The SI team salvaged everything possible; while the assassins searched Betty’s hiding places. Clint was especially appreciative that Betty had secured jump drives at Stanley’s Pizza parlor. The chance to combine work and lunch was a nice touch, in his opinion. The assassins ordered twenty pizzas for the moving and security detail members.

So, now, Betty had many of her clothes, her prize orchid, personal books, photos and music, and data backups that were less than two weeks old. She also had the peace of mind that came with knowing that after two incorrect password attempts, her lab and home computers would re-format. Moreover, she had nothing vital on hard drives. Nothing about Bruce or Hulk was in her missing hard files. Her most important work was on the backup jump drives now in her possession.

She stayed up late unpacking, taking pleasure in the familiarity of having some of her own things. When she went to bed, she expected to sleep through the night and wake to continue the soothing work. She did not expect to wake to her own shrieks of terror and anguish after only a few hours. Betty leapt from the bed and threw on jeans and an old t-shirt, and ran to her lab.

The bright newness of the space was what she needed, the cocoon of work. Uniform material samples had been delivered since she’d left. She changed into a uniform sample made for her, noting that her heart rate immediately calmed. She wiped stray tears from her eyes, put a lab coat over the uniform, and settled in at her microscope.
Bruce heard hard strains of Aerosmith’s ‘Walk this Way’ as he approached. Betty was swaying in place, uploading files to her new system. JARVIS automatically muted the music when Bruce spoke. “That was a good concert.”

Betty’s gaze stayed on her computer screen. She adjusted settings on a microscope and looked into it. “I’m surprised you remember!”

He grinned and blushed, looking down shyly. “I remember every date we had, Betty, regardless of what substance I may or may not…”

She replied in a softly chiding tone. “I’m not the cops or the University Dean, Bruce!”

He looked back up, smirking. “That was never in question. Dr. Ozment never looked so pretty.” He gestured at Betty’s outfit. He admired the form-fitting black (with red panels down the sides) halter top and pants, noting idly that her feet were bare. He liked the intimacy of seeing her barefoot. It was an odd juxtaposition with the lab coat, though.

Betty continued looking into the microscope. “Uniform sample number one. Look in the gray box on the counter to your left.” Bruce’s eyes narrowed as he realized that Betty had not let him see her face yet. He looked in the box and found a pair of pants. They were the same lightweight material as the clothing Betty wore, but dark purple. She took a deep breath. “I wouldn't want to see Dr. Ozment in those, either. But, you…” He noticed a slight tremor in her voice.

Bruce held the pants up, frowning. “What is this? Why would I wear it?”

She gesture to a monitor. He clicked to play the paused video. The pants in his hands were shown on the screen, being stretched out to Hulk size and then shrinking back to the size of Bruce Banner. He stared at the video and clenched the pants tightly in his hand. “Betty!” His tone was one of awe.

She sighed. “The #GAAH! fans online will be angry to have fewer Green-Ass Avenging Hulk photos to discuss. And the #SizeMattersBigGuy fans may send me death threats. But, you regain a measure of dignity and control. We’re making you an assortment… bike pants, shorts, briefs. For testing, try the Speedo first. That’s partly because of fabric expense, but more for my amusement.”

Bruce frowned. “Speedos are…” He knew she was messing with him. He’d railed and ranted against men wearing those swimsuits forever.

Betty chuckled. He heard a catch of melancholy from her. “They’re less revealing than the public nakedness you’ve done over the past several years. Why in the world hasn't your darling Tony done something about it already?”

Bruce looked at the fabric under another of her microscopes. “He probably thought it was too funny to have me lumbering around naked and hiding behind Thor’s cape.” He shook his head. “This is amazing. You’re amazing!” He looked up. Betty still wouldn’t let him see her face.

He shrugged. “Tony’s been the only person here who understood what I was talking about, until now. My thoughts make more sense when I can bounce ideas off someone else. He treats me like a person rather than a monster, like you always have. And, while he’s obnoxiously childish about some things… he cares about me and always tells me the truth. That’s part of how he upsets people. He speaks his opinion, whether you want to hear it or not. I lost my patience with dissembling a long time ago, so I appreciate that.”

He looked out the window, expression almost dark. “Tony also devotes himself to good on a
broaden scale. He was willing to die to save Manhattan. He proved for many years that he didn't have to do anything but play and take from the world. Then, he turned everything around and started to give of himself. It’s not unlike Natasha’s desire to get red off her ledger.”

“I imagine that you admire him for overcoming alcohol addiction, too,” Betty whispered.

Bruce’s smile faded, all traces of humor leaving his tone. “That’s admirable.”

Betty left her microscope, and walked over to a window and stared out. In the reflection, he saw that her expression was sadly broken. “I admire you, Bruce. I admire your pain-in-the-ass nobility and selflessness. I admire your work to make the world better, to heal it. I admire your devotion to your new friends. I admire your brilliant mind, and the boyish man I first loved. I admire the world-weary man here with me now.” She swallowed hard. “I admire the man you became after all that you survived from your father… even before the incident.” She sniffed, struggling not to cry.

He sighed and frowned cautiously. “Thank you.” He looked around them. “I thought you went to bed earlier. I thought I heard you leave.”

She nodded. “You did.”

He whispered her name. “Betty…”

She crossed her arms over her chest, breathing deeply to control her pulse.

“Nightmare?” Bruce moved closer to her, hands in his pockets.

She trembled. It hurt him to stay still and not touch her. Silence stretched out between them for a long moment while she breathed in and out, slowly and deeply. He breathed along with her, encouraging. They found a soothing breathing rhythm and held to it, together.

She whispered, so softly he had trouble catching the words. “My father… hates me now. I never thought he… could do that.” Her volume increased slightly, but her voice was broken. “I thought contempt was all I felt for him after what he did to you, Bruce. But… I was shocked and… hurt… when I realized… He wanted them to kill me, to dissect me.” Her head fell forward, forehead touching the glass. “My father turned to Hydra because he knew they would do that. He used my stupidity to lure me. He thinks I’d be better off dead.”

Bruce rasped, “Betty! Please, may I hold you? May I…?”

She turned and threw herself against him, hard. Her words were muffled. “That’s what made me angriest with Tony. He joked about my father and made light of yours. I know what you went through with your father’s abuse, the horrors. I understand it more now.” She shuddered. “I didn't want to admit this. I feel so ashamed, so much less human. I didn't want to face it. The look on my dad’s face, the tone of his voice… the hate he feels, and what he did.”

Bruce sighed and touched her soothingly. “Tony’s dad was abusive, too, Betty.”

“I’ll apologize to him, then!” She choked a combination laugh and cry.

Bruce frowned and shook his head, then bridged the remaining distance between them and leaned up to kiss her lips with the tenderness of homecoming and the desperation of a man who fears strength. He pulled back slowly. “I wasn’t chastising you. Tony can be a jerk, but he can also be a good friend. I want you to understand a small part of why Tony’s my friend, why he’ll understand what you’re going through now. He’s faced it, been there.”
She smiled against his lips, still crying. “First, tell me that YOU understand. I’ll try to do better and make friends later. First, I want...”

He nodded. “I understand, Betty. I’m sorry that your father hurt you. He can’t hurt you anymore. Tony won’t let him out. Pepper’s handling the legal side. I’ll make the situation clear, though Tony probably guessed already.”

She quieted and looked around them. “It’s different with the others away. It’s peaceful being here, alone with you.”

“We’re never alone, Betty. THEY are always trying to get out.” Bruce looked rueful.

She hooked one hand around the back of his neck and ran the other hand down his back in a soothing motion. “They have incentive. Let’s show them that we can be together.” She leaned down so that her forehead touched his. “I missed you.”

He shifted so that he could nuzzle her neck. “Scent memory.” He quirked a brow. “I’m sorry to say that I think we should take it slow.”

“I agree. Bruce and Betty need to take it slow. On the other hand, Hulk and Red She-Hulk need to test their new uniforms.” Betty chuckled.

His brow furrowed. “Yes. It stretches, but does it rip?” She grinned. He groaned. “You’re going to make me wear the Speedo, aren’t you? If it’s the cost factor, that’s another reason to like Tony. He has a nearly endless supply of money.”

“Wear whatever you like, Dr. Banner. Just want me around, and work with me. Work with me on ‘taking it slow’ testing. Work with me to test the uniforms. Talk to me! Do yoga with me, the way we used to. Show me how to calm myself with music and breathing. Be with me.” She laughed and cried, kissing him.

Bruce grinned into the next kiss. “I want all of that. I want you around, Dr. Ross. Please stay. Please work with me. And, please, be with me.”

They held each other tightly, letting the loneliness of their years apart go.

***

Darcy woke, disoriented. Steve had left the bed, and it was after 2:00 am. She called to him, and heard him reply from the kitchen. She winced as she rolled onto her side, tender about the hips. She grabbed his shirt from the floor, threw it on, and padded into the kitchen, grinning when she found him eating. He had a plate with a few Turkey Club sandwiches. His voice was muffled as he chewed. “Want one?”

She nodded and took half of a sandwich. “I’m hungry, too, though I don’t have your metabolism.”

Steve apologized smilingly, “Sorry! I need midnight snacks sometimes. I’ll try not to wake you.” He got her a glass of ice water and glanced at her, trying to seem casual in his concern. “You okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Darcy nodded.

“I don’t think it’s common for women to lose consciousness while making love.” Steve shook his head.
She sipped the water, realizing she was thirsty. “Their loss! I think it’s because I can only handle so much pleasure.” He frowned. “If you like, I can consult Jane about it. She’s a good resource since she’s been sleeping with Thor for most of a year now. He’s a big, powerful, godly guy. I’m pretty sure she’s said stuff about him banging her unconscious. And, she’s open-minded and adventurous. She’s the one who suggested I start giving you oral.”

He choked on a bite of food, swallowed, and blinked hard. “I should get her a gift.”

Darcy laughed. “All she asks is coffee and uninterrupted lab time! Maybe you could invite Thor to do something like sparring, or a mission with you sometime when Jane is in a deep science haze and would rather do *Science(!)* than Thor. I can give you a heads up, if you’re serious.”

Steve snorted. “I’ll keep it in mind.” His brow furrowed. “I guess I’m glad you can talk to her. I can’t imagine you going to Sharon, though she’s been with Bucky.”

It was Darcy’s turn to snort. “No, thanks! Even now that I’m not scared she’s gonna seduce you, I don’t like her much. There’s something cold about her.”

Steve frowned, considering. “I see hardness in her, too. But, Bucky likes her well enough.”

“I still don’t see us becoming friends. I’m sorry.” Darcy shrugged. “Peggy’s got a lot more of a sense of humor than her niece, in my opinion.”

Steve nodded and smiled. “She does.” He seemed thoughtful. “What about Betty? Do you think you two will get along?”

Darcy leaned against the counter, took a bite of sandwich and considered the question. “I hope so. I want her to like me, for Bruce’s sake AND because I’ve always thought she was cool.” She had more to eat. “It’s hard to tell right now. She’s going through a whole lot of crap. Everybody is so focused on the RED of it… I haven’t heard anyone acknowledge how that happened, or how she got ripped away from her life by Hydra, and whatever happened with her dad. She’s trying to figure out who she is now, what with a second identity inside. She’s trying to get over Bruce staying away for the past, what, seven years? And, she’s pissed at her dad and scared of Hydra, since they were able to drug her. She mentioned that Red She-Hulk makes her feel protected and powerful. I hope she and Bruce can fix it so that Hydra can’t take her down with whatever they used at Culver. I get the feeling she wants to stand tall, roar, and kick bad-guy ass a lot. I admired her when she was my professor, so I’m curious to get to know her better.”

Steve nodded. “Good analysis. The fact that she came into the sparring gym with the rest of us so soon told me that she wants to become an Avenger. I hope she and Bruce can fix it so that Hydra can’t hinder that. She can’t join us in the field if enemies can tranquilize her. She’d be vulnerable. Hulk would be, too.” He looked down and frowned, “and Tony’s stupid hope that enemies would stop to leer at Hulk sex rather than taking advantage of their distraction, is beyond naïve.”

Darcy covered her full mouth with a hand as she yawned. She meandered to the refrigerator and pulled out the milk and poured herself a small glass, then toasted Steve. “Well, even Hulks can’t keep me awake. I’m heading back to bed. Need more sleep, lover!”

He smiled and finished his sandwich. “Sounds good.” He pulled her in for a hug, and then lifted her into his arms. “I don’t NEED it, but I want to sleep more, mostly so I can hold you close for several hours.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her head against his shoulder as he walked to the bedroom. “Hold me close for several hours any time. Just ask!”
He kissed her head and laid her on the bed, then climbed in after her and snuggled close. “I just did, Sweetheart.”

***

Just after Sunrise, Steve left for a run. As he stepped off the patio to the trail head, he heard Thor call, “may I join you, Captain?”

He stopped and looked back. Thor was wearing running shorts, a t-shirt, and running shoes. His hair was tied back neatly. Steve replied, “of course! I didn't know you would be interested, Thor, or I would have invited you.”

Thor smiled. “I have led fast marches and fleet hunts, Brother, so I should not slow you. I thought the shared activity might grant us the opportunity to talk while our Ladies take their rest.”

Steve nodded. “I’d like that, Thor. I want to talk with you. Thank you for going to the trouble of purchasing appropriate clothing and accompanying me.”

“’Tis worth the effort, Brother.” Thor clapped Steve on the shoulder.

They began to run side by side. Thor moved with the heavy footfalls of a sturdy, heavily-muscular man. He challenged Steve, “do not slow your pace for me.”

Steve sped up, grinning. “No insult intended.” After they’d gone about two miles, he asked, “I've noticed that you refer to me more as ‘Brother’ these days. Why?”

Thor nodded and increased their pace a bit more. With a pensive air, he shared, “by Asgardian laws, you have become legal Mate to the Lady Darcy. By those same laws, and my own royal decree as a Prince of Asgard, she is my sister. Therefore, by my unopposable laws and customs, you are my Brother. You are every bit as much my Brother as Loki or Balder. It is a balm to my spirit to have such a good and noble brother in you, Captain.”

“How am I Darcy’s legal Mate?” Steve raised his brows.

Thor explained, “you have declared your love for her, remained faithful to her in every way since you met, have joined with her intimately, and have asked her to share your home and hearth. Also, you took Vengeance on her behalf, despite my presence, and in my stead.”

Steve looked at Thor sharply. “I would not have my brutality to her tormentor bond us.”

Thor nodded and slowed the pace. “I understand. Asking her to share your home is the most binding thing. I have never taken Vengeance for the Lady Jane’s sake, yet she is legally and bindingly my Mate, without a doubt.”

Steve looked relieved. “Good. That sorry excuse for a man… When the time comes, I wish to discuss further vengeance against him with you, if that’s acceptable.” He shook his head. “I knew that I was usurping your place when I helped interrogate him, Thor. I’m sorry. I meant no disrespect. My actions had nothing to do with you.”

Thor smiled, “I know that, Brother.” His smile faded. “That man’s role in tormenting both your Mate and Bucky, your longtime friend, justifies your actions beyond question. I acknowledge the depth of your ties to the Lady Darcy. They are unbreakable. You treat her as ruler of your heart. That bond is one of much beauty. I appreciate beauty, almost as much as I appreciate cleverness. When beauty delights one I love, it is precious to me.”
They ran in silence for a few miles. Steve asked, “How many brothers do you have?”

Thor laughed. “We have seven, including you and Loki. Frigga bore three of us. Odin brought Loki home from Jotun to be raised alongside me.”

“How many brothers do you have?” Steve looked startled.

Thor replied quietly. “Wherever Loki may be, whether in Asgard, or Valhalla, or Niflheim. He is our brother. So long as he abides by the laws of Asgard… so long as he honors the throne.” There was a peculiar darkness to Thor’s expression.

Steve chose not question it. He thought of the saying about not being able to choose family, but held his tongue out of respect for Thor. Steve’s brow furrowed. “What is my responsibility to my new brothers? What is my responsibility to Asgard?”

Thor’s grin was like a grimace. “Brothers are duty-bound to protect each other’s lives. Should one call for our help, we would be expected to go to them, or answer to Odin for treason.” Steve started to say something, but closed his mouth and waited to see what Thor would say next. Thor sighed. “Loki stabbing me was nearly as serious a crime as his attempt to conquer Midgard, or his desire to commit genocide on Jotunheim. In addition to attempting murder, it would have been fratricide and treason against Odin and Frigga. It gave me a say in his punishment, if I desired to claim it. I did not. I merely plead with Frigga to temper Odin’s retribution and spare Loki’s life. We never spoke of it, but it put him eternally in my debt. He knew of his debt to me.”

Steve nodded. “I’d want to do that for you, regardless, Thor.”

As they leapt a fallen tree, Thor’s eyes sparkled. “Your vow of fealty makes me proud, Brother. Lady Darcy has chosen well.”

Steve assured Thor. “I love her beyond everything, Thor. I intend to ask her to be my wife by Earth laws and customs, as well. I’ve told her that my intention is for us to be together forever, at least for every moment of forever that’s possible.

“It is that which makes this life worth living, Brother.” Thor smiled more broadly.

***

After Steve and Thor parted ways, Steve stopped by Sam’s guest apartment in the manor house. He was glad to find Sam alone.

“Good run?” Sam smiled welcome.

Steve nodded, breathing easily. “The trails are well maintained. It’s a nice change of scenery.”

Sam laughed. “The deer smell a little better than some of the people you trip over on a run through the City, too.” Steve shrugged. Sam tossed him bottled water. “So, what brings you here with that guilty look on your face, man?”

Steve sat on a stool in the small kitchen. “… uh… I wonder if you could spare some of that new bruise cream that the biologists in R&D came up with for you, Tony, and Hawkeye. I’ve read in your reports that it’s helpful.”
Sam chugged some water and looked Steve up and down pointedly. “YOU need help healing bruises?”

Steve regarded him balefully. “It’s for Darcy.” He swallowed hard, meeting Sam’s accusing look, obviously uncomfortable.

“She’s hurt?” Sam’s voice was low.

Steve winced. “Not badly. She’s not… complaining about it.” His cheeks flooded red. His lips tensed into a thin line.

Sam shook his head, grinning with calm understanding. “You just had to try something with her that only a strong guy could do, didn’t you?”

Steve let out a heavy breath. “Yes.” He looked ashamed.

Sam continued kindly, “And you’re willing to brave whatever I might dish out to help her feel better. You take all the fun out of being mean, Steve.”

“If I were just looking to be razzed, I’d go to Tony!” Steve looked down.

Sam laughed. “And if you were looking for someone willing to hurt himself to try to hurt you, you’d be talking to Hawkeye.” He noted Steve’s tight posture, the way the larger man folded in on himself guilty. Sam went to his bathroom and searched his kit. “I’ll need this back later. I’m learning that Barnes gets rough, too. Kind of hard for you super-strong guys to avoid bruising regular people.” He looked at Steve, assessing his friend’s reaction.

Steve’s head snapped up. “Does it make you angry with him?”

Sam stared, amused that Steve’s only reaction was in relation to Darcy and what she might feel. “No. I push some; want to know that he’s really into me, that he goes for it and gets his satisfaction, too. I bring it on myself that way.” He sat down on the stool next to Steve. “I’d feel worse if he didn't find me exciting enough to lose control a little.” He raised a brow, watching Steve’s shifting expression. “I’m glad you’re not jealous.”

Steve sat back. “Jealous? Oh! You mean of Bucky’s affection!” He shook his head. “I know what I mean to Bucky. I want him to be happy and whole. I wouldn't want him to be alone or to isolate himself. How sad would that be?”

Sam chuckled. “Sad, ‘Captain Expert-on-the-subject!’ You were on that sad path for a long time.” He handed the tube of healing cream to Steve.

Steve accepted it. “Thanks. I’ll get it back to you.” He looked thoughtful. “I was mourning. I lost a lot, so that justified it in my mind. I guess I was depressed, too.” Sam chuckled and looked at Steve disbelievingly, nodding at the observation to indicate it was an understatement. Steve shrugged. “I stayed busy with important things, doing work that I felt I owed to the world, since I was made the way I am for the purpose of protecting people. I didn't trust the counselors SHIELD provided enough to talk freely. And, I didn't know how to get past the losses on my own, even before I found out Bucky survived the fall from the train.”

Sam shook his head, smiling. “And then you met Darcy…”

“Yeah. Then I met Darcy.” Steve grinned softly.

Sam asked, “So, why haven’t you talked to her about HER feelings about these bruises?”
Steve admitted, “She was sleeping when I left. I got up because I was thirsty. I noticed the bruises on her hips as light filtered in with the sunrise. It scared me.” His expression twisted. “She needs rest. I had to leave so that my activity wouldn't interrupt THAT again. I accidentally woke her in the night when I was up for a snack. I was starving.”

“I imagine she does need some rest, Tiger! Have some coffee and first breakfast before you head back.” Sam laughed.

Steve watched as Sam moved easily around the kitchen, getting coffee and cooking omelets for them. Sam admitted. “I’m glad you don’t have a problem with bisexuality, Steve. I didn't want to make you uncomfortable by bringing it up when we were just getting to know each other. Your generation’s not known for…”

Steve shook his head as he swallowed some coffee. “I differ from assumptions about my generation a lot, Sam. I was looked upon as a useless cripple until I was twenty four, an Irish immigrant widow’s child, and an art student to boot- until I became a weapon against Nazi Germany and Hydra. A lot of my close friends before the war were like the people who were forced to wear yellow and pink stars as Hitler took power. I don’t have tolerance for bullshit, less for self-righteous bullies. It's none of my business what any adult does in their bedroom… or wherever, so long as there’s mutual consent. I hate racism and sexism and a lot of other ‘isms’ that have nothing to do with content of character.”

“Wish there were more like you, Cap.” Sam smiled.

Steve snorted. “They literally broke the mold with me.”

Sam asked, “What did the experiment feel like?” He put an omelet on a plate and set it in front of Steve, then started cooking one for himself.

Steve’s expression sobered. “Hurt like hell. And I don’t mean that lightly. I mean… it burned, and I felt like my bones and tendons shredded and came back together. It hurt like HELL.” He ate a few bites of the food. The toaster popped up, and Sam threw a piece over his shoulder for Steve to catch. Steve set it on the plate and buttered it, then ate half.

Sam set his toast on his plate and flipped his omelet. He turned back to Steve and pointed an accusing finger. “You’re not gonna go all ‘Honeymoon Edward’ on Darcy now, are you?”

Steve stopped mid-bite, and stared. “What?”

“Don’t you know about ‘Twilight’? Didn't Darcy compare you to Edward Cullen the day I met her?” Sam frowned.

Steve nodded. “I know what it is, but Darcy told me not to waste my time reading it.”

Sam laughed. “Ask girlfriend how many times SHE read it!”

“What?” Steve’s brow furrowed.

Sam shook his head, and flipped his omelet onto a plate. “Everybody says they hate it, but it sold millions of copies, and they made the three books into four movies and sold millions of tickets. It got trendy to hate on it, but people read it and watched it in droves. I liked the romance of it. I won’t pretend it’s great writing, but I read the series more than once. I need easy reading every now and again.”

Steve chuckled. “Okay! So what’s ‘Honeymoon Edward’?”
Sam sat at the counter next to Steve. “So, Edward’s an old vampire and really strong, while Bella’s a normal girl. Right?” Steve shrugged. “Well, after the first time they make love on their honeymoon, there are bruises all over Bella from his hands.” Steve frowned. “Edward freaks the fuck out, and won’t do it with her anymore, even when she’s paradin’ around in little lingerie and askin’ for it. For the rest of the damned honeymoon he takes her hiking and plays fuckin’ chess with her… until she has a sexy dream and begs him, so he gives in to what they both want… and gets her pregnant. But that’s a whole other thing.”

Steve shook his head, brow furrowed in puzzlement. “Pregnant? But a vampire…”

Sam laughed and put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Eh. You just go with it. You should really watch the movies. People make fun of ‘em, but there are a lot of references that girls eat up. Watch ‘em sometime.” He cleared his throat and his expression turned serious. “But, man… if you think it’s my business what I do in a bed, then you should give Darcy the same respect, and NOT act like a real pussy the way Edward did.” Sam ate some of his omelet.

“You may overestimate my self control.” Steve laughed.

Sam put a hand in front of his mouth as he finished chewing, “Good! Then take the healing cream and go tell her that. Or, show her…”

***

When Steve entered their guest cottage, he heard music. He walked into the bathroom and smiled. Darcy was in the tub, hair up in a messy bun, singing along to a country-sounding song about ‘Holding Out for a Hero.’ She blushed as she sang ‘a Superman to sweep me off my feet…’ Then, she bit her lip and looked at him, obviously trying to push down anxiety. “Join me?” Her eyes were open wide, and he thought she might be holding her breath.

Steve nodded. “Sure! Just let me rinse off from my run first.” He set the healing cream on the counter and watched her expression as she saw it. As he threw off his shirt and moved past her to the shower, she let out a relieved breath and closed her eyes. He shared, “Sam says ‘Honeymoon Edward’ was a real pussy, and that I need to watch those movies so I’m ready for conversations like this one.” He looked Darcy over carefully, assessing her physical condition for himself.

Darcy laughed with obvious relief. “Oh, God! Sam is my hero! I’ll watch with you. We can make out in between making fun of it together.”

A minute later, he slid into the tub behind her. “So, you’re okay?”

She nodded and laid her head back against his shoulder. “Some bruises on my hips and ass. I guess you saw. They’re probably from both the pressure of your hands AND my weight… but nothing serious. Well worth it!”

He feathered kisses down her neck while she fidgeted. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I borrowed a new bruise-healing cream that Sam, Clint, and Tony use. I need to return it to Sam later.” He winced as he eyed the bruises.

Darcy turned around and straddled him, kissing him eagerly. “I’m so glad you’re not acting crazy! I saw the bruises and freaked the fuck out, went through my lingerie stash to prep, and everything. I hope you understand if I kiss Sam the next time I see him!” Steve chuckled as she kissed him passionately. His body responded. Darcy reached down and positioned him at her entrance and shifted onto him with a groan of pleasure. “I need to feel you! I was scared!” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held to him as tightly as she could. He let out a ragged breath.
They made love with a slow intensity. He was careful of her bruises, but made a point of holding her close and kissing her hard. He rasped, “I love you, Sweetheart… and I respect you. If you say you’re okay, then I believe you. There’s nothing to fear. Please…trust me.” He moaned as their bodies continued a slow slide together.

She grinned, “I’m sorry. I do trust you. Of course, since you can’t move me much right now… I think you’re the one that’s gonna have to exhibit trust.”

He laid his head back and groaned. “You’re going slower and slower, aren't you?” She nipped at his lower lip teasingly. He groaned again and moved one hand to her clit. “Maybe I can change your mind.”

She started laughing throatily, “oh, God!” She gasped as he sped his motions. “Ohhhh.” She shuddered hard as she tried to hold still. “Steve!”

He let out a moan of mingled frustration and bliss. He writhed and bucked up repeatedly, as she tightened around him and tried to resist the urge to move faster. She was gasping, trying not to come. She shifted, but he held her fast with one hand on her back and the other circling her clit with insistent pressure. She moaned louder as a wave of pleasure hit. She laughed as he moved more and she lost her battle. She joined his rhythm and came, despite her efforts to hold off. “So… amazing… Steve…” He came, groaning aloud and shuddering so that water splashed out of the tub.

He kissed her with tender affection. She groaned as she shifted off of him and lay with her back against his chest. She craned her neck so that their lips could meet for soft, slow kisses. Finally, smiling, she suggested, “breakfast?”

He nodded. “I’m famished.” He held one of her hands while she climbed out of the deep tub, then followed. He commented. “You know I want to see you in that lingerie you mentioned. Right?”

She smirked at him and winked.

They both toweled dry. He helped apply the healing cream to her bruises, kissing her and taking a moment to hold her close afterwards. She threw on sweat pants, a comfortable bra, and a t-shirt. They made their way to the kitchen and worked together. Darcy put the first ‘Twilight’ movie on the TV and they sat on the sofa to eat and watch, occasionally laughing together. After the movie, they finished cleaning the kitchen and went out on the front porch to sit in the rocking chairs, enjoy the sunny day, and talk. She brought out a backgammon set and water for both of them. Steve wanted to know more about Darcy’s childhood, her parents and grandparents, friends, and favorite memories of her life before they met.

Darcy was especially animated when telling him about her first months working with Jane. She related that Jane was nearly as lost with modern pop culture as he was, from sheer SCIENCE(!) tunnel vision. “Jane didn't even know what I meant when I assured her that Han shot first!”

Steve’s grin was filled with mischief. “It LOOKED like the other guy got off the…”

Darcy yelped, “I swear! If you go there, I’ll divorce you!” She gasped and made little choking sounds as Steve laughed silently, an expression of delight on his face.

He gasped, “to do that… first, you have to…”

They heard a cart approaching, and saw Pepper pulling up close to the guest house. Pepper smiled. “You two look relaxed! Enjoying your time off?”
Darcy blushed from misspeaking. “It’s amazing out here. I’m so blissed-out that I can’t control what I say anymore!” Steve laughed at her.

Pepper looked at Darcy, amused and puzzled. “Good! I think. Anyway, the forecast is favorable, so tomorrow night we’ll have the formal party that I mentioned. Dinner, dancing, the works… on the main back patio of the manor. Can we count you two in?”

Steve nodded. “Wouldn’t miss it! Tony’s already heckled me about it several times.” Darcy giggled and nodded.

Pepper smiled ruefully. “That’s a bad habit of his.” She winked at Steve.

Steve laughed. “I’ve noticed! I can’t turn time back and urge Howard to bring me up as an example less. So, I’ll put up with it.” Pepper’s look to him was serious. He nodded that he understood.

Pepper smiled more as she turned to Darcy. “I have spa staff coming tomorrow, late morning. Will you join me, Natasha, and Jane for a girls’ spa brunch?”


Pepper nodded. “I sent Betty and Bruce messages about the party tomorrow night. I’ll make sure to extend the spa invite to Betty, too.”

***

The next morning, Darcy lay on a massage table on a covered deck behind the manor house. She was relaxed and rejuvenated from the time away from New York City and Avengers Tower. She also felt a new closeness with Steve. They had made it through the rest of the ‘Twilight’ movies, though they ignored much of ‘New Moon’ while shamelessly kissing each other into near frenzy. They made love again and again. They cooked meals together, played cards, walked forest trails, star gazed, and enjoyed the fire pit nearest their cottage (Steve loved s’mores!). For the first time in longer than she could remember, she slept for ten hours straight. Steve slept six hours, a long stretch for him. While she slept more, he ate, ran, snuck in a bit of work on his StarkPad, and sketched.

Darcy was nearly asleep again, the massage was so relaxing. She heard Pepper exclaim over something, so she lifted her head. Betty was walking towards them, wearing a short black mini skirt, a tank top that looked like black chain mesh with white underneath, and extremely high-heeled nude pumps. Her legs went on for days and her expression was different, somehow more open. Her hair was cut and styled differently, too, with thick, dark fire-engine red streaks on either side of her face. Her lipstick matched her hair. She carried herself with more confidence.

Darcy gasped, “you look amazing!” She saw Jane lift her head from her massage table and wave lazily at Betty.

Betty’s lips curled into a tough smile with the barest hint of shyness at the edge. “I feel amazing. So, thank you for the compliment.” She sat. A tech started on her nails. With her free hand, Betty sipped juice. She explained her refusal of a Bloody Mary by sharing, “we’re inoculating me against that compound Hydra used to control me. I want to ensure that I’m ready for duty, to keep my system clean, not complicate the incredible work Bruce is doing.”

Her intensity was jarring after a few days of relaxation. Darcy yawned, realizing that she would return to that state all too soon. She put her head on her hands and looked at Betty carefully. The other woman glowed with vitality, looking strong and energetic. Darcy asked, “did you still have
that drug in your system before? It’s more than a hair style and cute clothes. You look a million
times better.”

Jane craned her neck and put on glasses. “You do. You look better than I’ve ever seen you look,
Betty.”

Betty nodded. “They injected me with several drugs that were dragging me down. Bruce… He’s so
amazing, so brilliant! I’m lucky to have him on my side.” Something about the way she said
Bruce’s name was intimate, as though they had bridged a gap.

Darcy noted, “he must be pushing really hard to fix things for you.”

“He’s going above and beyond any expectation or hope I could have had.” Betty’s expression was
tender.

Once Betty’s nails were done, she excused herself, saying that she and Bruce were going to take
advantage of the chance to enjoy yoga outside. A bit later, Betty and Bruce set their mats out near
the lake. They were both dressed in form-fitting fabric of some sort. Darcy and Jane had put on
robes and moved to chairs for pedicures. From their seats, they could see the couple as they
stretched and assumed the first seat. With every motion, Betty and Bruce touched one another. He
stroked her back. She ran fingers across his leg, then shifted position and ran one hand down his
chest.

Pepper and Natasha joined the others. Pepper swallowed hard. “I suppose we shouldn’t stare.”

Natasha chuckled. “It’s mesmerizing. They’re making love with small touches, continuous motion,
and un-tempered longing. Beautiful!” She let out a gasp as Bruce ran fingers from Betty’s ankle up
past the inside of her knee.

Jane put her glasses on. “I take it back. Yoga can be sensual. It’s not pornographic, but…”

Darcy sipped a Bloody Mary. “It’s like erotica.” She shook her head. “Steve and I have made love
more times than I can count since we got here… and I’m still feeling… inspired.” Natasha glanced
at her and smiled.

“You two ARE in the honeymoon phase. It’s cute.” Pepper chuckled.

Jane laughed. “Except when it’s nauseating.” She fell silent again as she turned her gaze back to the
lake and the yoga session. Every now and then one or another of the ladies sighed appreciatively.

Bruce and Betty partnered each other in poses Darcy had never seen before. Betty lay atop his
body and arched her back while he kissed and lapped at her neck. He shifted so that he could lift
her with his feet. Betty then laid her head back and kissed him so that their lips barely touched.
When he returned her to the ground, they slowly rose to sitting and faced each other, softly stroking
up and down the other’s legs. They moved towards and away from each other in a sensual dance.
Betty shifted up onto Bruce so that she was straddling him and they each touched lightly up and
down the other’s back. Every move was slow, deliberate, unhurried.

“Inspired. Yes. Inspired.” Jane shook her head.

Darcy chuckled with embarrassed disbelief, and put her hand over her eyes. “I had no idea what
Bruce meant when he explained the concept of ‘Namaste.’ I get it now, and can’t help wonder
what he thought my intentions were when I asked him to teach me yoga.” Pepper started laughing
so hard that tears came to her eyes. Darcy joined in helplessly.
Jane giggled with them. “Oh, my God! I’m imagining what Steve’s reaction would have been if he’d known what Bruce’s previous yoga experience with a woman was like.” Natasha nearly choked on her drink.

Darcy groaned and shook her head. “I’m going to apologize to both Steve and Bruce later, just in case.” Natasha nodded and gave Darcy a thumbs up sign as she shook with silent laughter.

***

Darcy was excited about the party. She looked forward to seeing the manor decked out. But, she was more excited to be on the guest list of a legendary Stark party. When she was younger, she read about Tony’s parties in People and Us magazines. There were often tidbits of entertainment news from them on TV. Mamaw followed celebrities and royalty fervently, and spoke of the Stark family as though they fell into both of those categories. Mamaw disapproved of Tony’s womanizing, speaking of it in scandalized whispers, but had a soft spot for him and held out hope that he would ‘shape up and make something of himself, if only so his poor, beautiful mama could rest in peace.’

Mamaw gleefully scrutinized information on Stark parties. She read magazines during her weekly appointment at the beauty salon. Darcy went with her every few months, and was intrigued by anything that excited her Mamaw so much.

Looking in the mirror in the second bedroom, Darcy turned to watch how the light caught at the starry sparkles on her dark blue dress. It was mid-thigh length, with tulle over-layers with beads inset so that it looked like she was wearing the night sky. She felt like a princess. Tears nearly pricked her eyes as she imagined how her Mamaw would react if she could see Darcy dressed so beautifully for a Stark party. She finished her makeup, applying red lipstick with care. Finally, she slipped on black high-heeled sandals.

When she stepped out into the living room, Steve was sitting on the sofa. He wore a dark royal blue shirt with black trousers and a black jacket that somehow made his shoulders look even bigger than they were. He stood as she entered the room, and Darcy smiled appreciatively. “You look gorgeous!”

He chuckled. “That’s my line! That’s a lovely dress, Sweetheart, almost as pretty as you are.” He grinned nervously and offered her two blue boxes. “I’d be honored if you’d wear these with it.”

“Tiffany’s again?” Darcy's fingers trembled as she accepted the boxes.

His brow furrowed. “My ma talked like it was the dreamiest store in the world. Pepper says the quality has held up well. I got her to approve my choices this time, since she knew about your dress.”

Darcy smiled. “I’m not complaining! I’m just a little overwhelmed. It sounds like how my Mamaw got so star struck about the Starks and their parties. She would be out of her skin to think I’m going to one! Me getting things from Tiffany’s might have been too much for her!”

She opened the smaller box. Inside was a breathtaking pair of earrings, platinum and diamond geometric hearts. Darcy gasped. “Oh, my God! These...! I...” Steve nodded to the other box. Darcy thought she might faint when she saw that it held a matching bracelet. She briefly wondered how much they cost, but pushed the thought from her mind so she wouldn't freak out. She looked up and recalled her manners, noting the faint anxiety on Steve’s face. “Thank you. They’re beautiful.”
Steve let out a breath. “I’m glad you agree. Finally! I found something I like with hearts for my Sweetheart.”

Darcy chuckled to herself, realizing that Steve meant exactly what he said. Cost was immaterial to him so long as he gave her a present that fit his feelings. She felt fluttery as she put on the earrings and then the bracelet. It felt cool, almost heavy on her wrist despite the fact that it wasn’t wide or heavy looking. She turned to a mirror and shook her head in wonder. “I’m sparkly!”

“You’re exquisite. You’ll be the most beautiful dame at the party.” Steve smiled adoringly.

She shook her head. “There’s stiff competition, love. But I’m glad you’re pleased.”

“Trust me. Captain America never lies.” He kissed her cheek.

She snorted a laugh. “Steve Rogers does! And HE’s the man I’m in love with.”

Steve grinned, took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I don’t lie to you or about you.” She thought he still seemed slightly nervous as he asked, “ready to go?” As they rode to the manor house in the cart he mentioned, “We should try to explore the area tomorrow. Tony and I did that today, while you were with Pepper and the others. There’s a great coffee house and a nice little deli in the closest town.” He cleared his throat and added, “I suggested that we move the Avengers’ base out of the City. I don’t like the collateral damage risk there.”

Darcy couldn’t help but show surprise. “Leave the Tower? Wow! Would we live here?”

Steve was pleased that she didn’t approach the idea negatively. “We’re considering it. It’s not a done deal. But, I like it here. I figure if we can get a Chinese take-out to open nearby, it’d be workable.”

Darcy chuckled at that, but frowned. “Would I have to commute to the City for work, or would the labs move, too?”

Steve sighed. “There are a lot of things to figure out, but most of your work would move with the base. I’d be surprised if your work doesn’t eventually expand to other SI labs worldwide. Tony bought a nearby tract of land today, several hundred acres. We’re talking about underground facilities, for security purposes. The Tower is an exposed target. I’d like for everyone to be safer whenever we’re away on missions, you most of all.” They arrived at the manor. Steve parked and explained, “I’m sorry to break the mood with work talk, Sweetheart. I find, however, that it’s safer to assume that Tony will blurt things out. I wouldn’t want for you to be caught off guard, or feel like I’m keeping things from you.” She squeezed his hand and nodded, touched.

The manor was sumptuous and richly appointed. The house looked to be fairly old. Darcy wondered if Howard Stark built it, or purchased it from some other billionaire. Her heels echoed loudly on the marble floors. She heard music and voices as they approached the back patio. Under a huge pergola, a long dining table was set with silver, china, crystal and candles. Twinkling lights dotted the pergola and small decorative plants and trees. Torches burned further out along the slate patio. To one side, a DJ station was set, playing light jazz. An extensive bar was the busiest area at this point.

Darcy ran forward to hug Jane. “Jane! You look like a goddess.” Thor, wearing Asgardian robes, murmured agreement, proud of Jane’s beauty. She wore a strapless golden silk with a ballerina skirt, embroidered with heavy designs in the bodice, topped with a gauzy golden shawl draped over her shoulders. Darcy’s gaze darted from person to person. Everyone looked beautiful (or handsome). Betty wore a red lace, knee-length sheath with a sweetheart neckline. Her hair was
swept to one side in a long wavy curtain. Natasha wore a vintage 1950’s dark-purple taffeta gown with a provocative neckline that put an un-flatteringly dopey look on Clint’s face. Sharon, laughing with Natasha, wore a sleeveless burgundy mini dress with delicate, tall, black sandals. Pepper wore an ultra-modern, sleek silver dress with a broach at the waist line. She was talking with a striking, dark-haired woman in a pink strapless dress that came to mid thigh in the front, but swept to full length in the back. It was embroidered with intricate blush flowers. Her beige shoes had a cross strap and a thick strap around the ankle.

Steve led Darcy in and made introductions. “Hello, Maria! This is Darcy Lewis. Darcy, this is Maria Hill. She’s SI’s Director of Security, and an associate director with the Avengers Initiative.”

Hill had a firm handshake and a direct gaze. She seemed weary, but smiled. “It’s nice to make your acquaintance, Miss Lewis. I’m sorry I haven’t been around the Tower enough for us to meet sooner.” She sipped a martini. Phil Coulson approached. He greeted the Captain and complimented the ladies, kissing Pepper’s cheek, smiling at Darcy, and nodding smartly to Hill. He moved on to join Natasha and Clint, apparently in work-related discussion, judging from their serious reactions.

Steve put a hand at Darcy’s back. “May I get you a drink?”

“The martinis are amazing, if you like ‘em dirty. They have a variety of olives. These are blue-cheese stuffed…” Maria held up her toothpick.

Darcy licked her lips. “Sounds perfect. The dirtier, the better.”

Tony turned away from Rhodey and grinned. “Lewis! You’re gonna get me trouble talking like that!” He stopped, looked her over, and nodded. His open look of approval brought a smile to her face. “Good look! Woman is as mysterious as the secrets of the universe.” He lifted her hand and kissed it, then gawked at her bracelet and whistled, “Holy crap, Cap! Did you spend all of your back pay at Tiffany’s?” He shook his head. “Nice ice, Lewis.” Steve winked at Darcy and walked to the bar.

Darcy pulled her hand back and shrugged innocently. “He wanted to give me something with hearts…” She bit back a grin as Pepper laughed.

Tony’s eyes twinkled. “It’s a good choice. Gonna cost me, though. Now I have to reassure Pepper. She’s wildly insecure, you know.” Pepper rolled her eyes and shook her head at Tony.

Darcy snorted. “You may be projecting.” Hill laughed.

“Had enough of Capitol Hill, Hill?” Tony turned to Maria Hill.

Hill grimaced. “That was old and tired the first time, Tony.”

“But it gets your goat every time.” He grinned.

Hill sipped her drink, “Fitting! Dogs, ponies, asses, gorillas, monkeys… goats.” Her gaze scanned the crowd, evaluating in a way that reminded Darcy of Steve’s crowd scans.

Tony’s grin was hard. “Tell us how you really feel about Congress, Maria.”

She sighed. “Tired. They’re ridiculous… until they surprise you by doing something right. I thought I saw light at the end of the tunnel dug by the fall of SHIELD. Then, the Captain brought in Hydra’s most-feared asset and I had to help them understand THAT situation. As if that wasn’t enough fun, you took an Army General prisoner under charges of treason.” She tilted her head and stared unabashedly as Sam and Bucky arrived together.
Tony commented. “I think they’re together, Hill. You should probably put your tongue back in your mouth.”

Hill laughed easily. “I never thought I’d have a chance to urge you to be more open-minded, Tony. But, you should loosen up your perception there. Thanks. I need the laugh after all that I’ve had to handle for you and the Captain. I deserve some fun.”

Sam caught sight of her and smiled broadly, leading Bucky towards them. Sam trotted up to Hill eagerly and gave her a hard, long kiss. “Hill! I thought you’d never escape the fat cat bureaucrats! You look hot as ever, of course.”

Bucky sidled up alongside Sam, nodded to Hill, and turned to Darcy. “You look gorgeous, Doll. Save me a dance later?”

Darcy nodded. “Of course! It’ll give Steve a break from his least favorite activity.” Bucky laughed.

Hill grinned. “I’m glad to hear some things stay the same! I’ve only been away a few months, but much has changed in that time. Phil and May updated me.” She glanced at Bucky. “The Winter Soldier has come in from the cold and become an Avenger. New aliens invaded New York. Hydra tried to take Avengers Tower. Foster and Banner have made alien tech to protect the Tower. R&D has a new manager. Cap’s no longer a virgin, and is in love with someone under Hawkeye’s protection and Black Widow’s tutelage. Banner’s sharing his lab floor with Thunderbolt Ross’ daughter. HULK has a lady friend.” She laughed. “DC has been boring by comparison.”

Sam leaned in and murmured, “remind me to tell you about Steve’s time in the USO. It’ll fry your brain.” Hill looked titillated, nodding agreement that she would remind Sam.

Hill opened her clutch purse and pulled out a stiff envelope. When Steve returned, she handed it to him. He opened it, pulled out papers and read. He stared for a long moment, blinked back tears, and kissed Hill on the cheek and offered her heartfelt thanks. He gave Darcy her drink and turned to Bucky. “Buckle up. I’ll share this when we sit down to table.” He nodded between Hill and Bucky. “Hill, meet James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky, this is Maria Hill. Make friends. Hill has dealt with Congress on your behalf since we got you back.”

“Sorry.” Bucky made a face.

Darcy giggled at his expression.

“Make it up to me by teaching me to swing dance later. I’ve read everything there is to read about you. All the stories say you’re a hell of a dancer, Barnes.” Hill chuckled.

His grin was faintly shadowed. “It’s been a while, but I’d gladly give you a whirl.” He looked Hill up and down suggestively, his eyes doing that thing that caused Darcy to fan herself every time she saw it. Steve frowned at her expression, and she laughed at him.

Hill nodded smartly. “Least you can do. Congress lost their minds when I told them they owed you an apology.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed. “I imagine so…” He shook his head. “I don’t understand what you mean.” He glanced at Steve reproachfully. Steve sighed and looked pained, shrugging an apology for keeping painful information from Bucky.

“Hydra infiltrated Congress, of course. They diverted Defense funds into the Winter Soldier program. Taxpayer money mis-appropriation for the purpose of harm to a US Army P.O.W.? Kind of a big deal.” Hill grimaced.
Bucky gaped at her. “I… uh. Wow.” He swallowed hard and shrugged towards Steve. “Okay. I get it. You’re off the hook, Punk. I guess if Congress can pardon me, I can pardon others.”

Hill sipped her drink and raised a brow. “I hope so. But let me know if I’ve misrepresented you in any way so far… and I’ll fix it.”

Bucky grinned at her. “Sam was right. You’re tough as nails and gorgeous as they come. I like people who are tough enough to deal with my stuff. We’re gonna get along fine. Save me a few dances, if you think you can keep up…” Hill laughed and agreed.

Steve walked over to Tony and whispered something to him.

Tony signaled Pepper, and then tapped on his water glass. “Find your places, people. The chefs have made a feast to give us all energy to dance the night away. Cap has an announcement, too.”

The Avengers, their friends, Director Coulson and Agent May of SHIELD, and a few SI staff members (Dr. Chau and Jai among them) found their name cards and sat down at the table. Darcy was seated by Steve and across from Jane. After everyone was seated, Tony called to Steve. “You have the floor, Cap.”

Steve stood, the envelope from Hill clasped tightly in one hand. He took a deep breath, emotion plain in his face. “I owe Maria Hill a personal debt of gratitude, along with a professional commendation for her hard work on behalf of the Avengers with the United States Government and Military. I also want to thank her for following up with Congress on testimony I gave them last month regarding my friend, James Barnes.” He looked down for a second, glanced at a puzzled-looking Bucky, and smiled brilliantly. He looked at the envelope in his hands. “Hill brought news, good news. It’s always good news when lawmakers see sense and express themselves well. First, James Buchanan Barnes’ Honorable Discharge papers have been approved and are in transit.” Sam cheered and whistled while Bucky indulged a faint smile. Steve chuckled. He held up a hand. “Second, he will be the first recipient in history of three Medals of Honor, the country’s highest military award.”

There was a gasp from the company. Phil Coulson stood and clapped, others following his lead. Bucky shook his head, eyes full of confusion. He looked plaintive. “What for?”

Steve’s smile was tremulous. “The first is for honorable service with the Howling Commandos. The second is for saving me from sniper fire during WWII, so I could live to fight another day. The third is for surviving as the longest-held P.O.W. in US Army history.” Steve’s expression was bittersweet. “You’re a survivor of Hell on Earth, Bucky. You deserve honors.” Steve held up his wine glass. “To James Buchanan Barnes, honorable survivor.”

Sam held up his glass. “To Bucky!” People stood and raised their glasses, all but Bucky. He sat still, hardly seeming to breathe. Those who knew him well could see how he struggled to process and respond to the emotions. Many of those present, all military personnel, saluted him. He finally made it to his feet for them, returning the salute. Darcy tearily kissed his cheek. He held her, partly to steady himself, for a long moment.

Dinner was delicious and everyone seemed relaxed. Darcy thought that Steve acted nervous about something, but she wasn’t sure. After dinner, Tony approached them and teased Steve. “I told the DJ to bring it with a wide variety of music, Old Man. What do you say?”

“I fed him a few suggestions, too, Tony. Don’t worry ‘bout me.” Steve grinned in a way that made Darcy wonder what he was up to.
As the DJ started a song with a catchy beat, Steve let out a nervous breath and held out a hand to Darcy. “May I have this dance, Sweetheart?” People were making their way to the floor, some moving with an inebriated lack of sense, others stiff, and others with innate skill and finesse. Coulson and May danced together like pros. Bucky and Hill took the floor together, while Sam partnered Sharon. Darcy felt from the moment they reached the floor that something was different. Steve suddenly pulled her hand so that she twirled to him. She giggled from surprise, and then gasped with delight as she realized that Steve had learned how to DANCE. He smiled. “I’ll send you this song for your playlist. I’ve practiced Swing dancing to it. Keep up.” The song was called ‘Wonder What You’re Doing with the Rest of Your Life,’ (by Train).

Darcy followed his guidance, her delight growing as they moved together. Tony’s warning held true. Each song over the next half hour required another dance style. Steve was up to the challenge. Darcy was grateful she’d had lessons so she could keep up. They earned several whistles and catcalls from the others. Natasha looked smug and proud. Bucky couldn't stop smiling; occasionally laughing with wonder as he watched his formerly awkward and sickly friend cut a rug with the woman he loved. Darcy hadn't pushed so hard on the dance floor ever before. She’d never had so much fun dancing, either. Finally, there was a slow song, ‘What Other Guy’ by Adam Cohen. Relaxing with Steve, she smiled at the lyrics, ‘I know what you taste like when the night ends. I know the kind of thing that makes you laugh, the way you tilt your head for a photograph. What other guy knows you like that?’ Darcy felt sure that her playlist from Steve would include the song by morning.

Bucky claimed Darcy for the next dance, happier than she’d ever seen him. He still seemed shaky from Steve’s announcements, almost incredulous, but proud. When Steve begged Darcy’s hand again, Bucky asked Sharon Carter to dance.

As Steve led her again, Darcy asked, “How long have you been studying dancing?”

Steve smiled. “I started a few days after we first danced together. If you can learn self defense, I can learn to dance with you.” He looked at Natasha and winked. “Natasha has hardly had any time to herself these past few months.”

Darcy smiled happily to Natasha and mouthed ‘thank you’ to her. Then, she noticed Tony making faces. “Tony acts like he had something to do with it, too.”

Steve winced and laughed at once. “Routines come easily enough to me since the serum. Like I can learn a fight discipline, I can learn the mechanics of dance styles. My natural rhythm best fit the description ‘dad dancing,’ however. So, I went to Tony for help. THAT was excruciating!”

Darcy glanced at Tony, pushing down laughter. He smirked, and blew her a kiss. She laughed and kissed Steve. “I love you. I don’t see anything ‘dad dance’ in what you’re doing, so congrats!”

Steve groaned with pleasure as he held Darcy close again. Al Green was singing, ‘I, I’m so in love with you, Whatever you want to do Is all right with me, ‘Cause you make me feel so brand new, And I want to spend my life with you…”

“I’d do anything for you, Sweetheart. I love you!” Steve stopped moving to savor and deepen a kiss.

Darcy smiled against his lips. “I know. I believe you. I love you, too!”

“I’m glad you believe me.” Steve looked at her seriously.

Darcy caressed Steve’s cheek and stared into his eyes. Certainty of his love for her, her love for
him, and their future together filled her with peaceful joy.

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

Because dress up is fun:
Darcy’s dress https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/15/77/88/157788566c2dd9f8a6ef4333619f94e5.jpg

Earrings

pp+100+9&search=0&origin=browse&searchkeyword=http://www.tiffany.com/Shopping/Item.aspx?
fromGrid=1&sku=33725906&mcat=148206&cid=1638643&search_params=p+1-n+10000-c+1638643-s+5-r+tt-ni+1-x+lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-
pp+100+9&search=0&origin=browse&searchkeyword=

Bracelet

http://www.tiffany.com/Shopping/Item.aspx?
fromGrid=1&sku=33725884&mcat=&cid=1638643&search_params=p+1-n+10000-c+1638643-s+5-r+tt-ni+1-x+lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-
pp+0+6&search=0&origin=browse&searchkeyword=

Jane’s dress- https://shard1.1stdibs.us.com/archivesE/jewelry/upload/386/600/386_1397526476_2.jpg


Betty, party look- https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/fd/84/05/fd840540cc5009f46e75e00716f66686.jpg

Hill’s dress-
https://41.media.tumblr.com/417ba1f2a1fe34a0ef461cbf840d7b7c/tumblr_nml6g7bEjXL1rrzmi2o2_
“They say it’s for better and for worse…”

Chapter Summary

The Avengers return from R&R to Avengers Tower. Hawkeye has a bad day. A specific threat during an attack against Hawkeye results in Darcy being given a special Security detail. Hydra causes damage wherever they go. Tony and Pepper ask Steve and Darcy to go out on a double date with them. Jane opens a portal to Yggdrasil, which looks disturbingly familiar to Steve. Darcy has a surprise that she hopes will cheer Steve, and finds her confidence increasing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day after the party Steve and Darcy slept in, weary from the full night of dancing. Steve woke Darcy with a massage and a gentle round of lovemaking. As planned, they drove into town for brunch. They arrived late morning. The little coffee shop, Java Haven, had a large variety of bean flavors and a homey ambiance that put them at ease. There was an over-sized fire place and a lending library that included old science fiction and fantasy titles that caught Steve’s eye. The Hazelnut Latte was even better than that at the Tower Café. As Steve and Darcy finished their coffee, she urged, “Have Tony fund a satellite franchise on the base and you’ll be able to convince everybody they can survive out here.”

Steve shook his head. “I won’t believe you can survive out of the City until we get a Chinese restaurant, or Tony hires a chef that makes good Moo Goo Gai Pan and Hunan Chicken.”

Darcy grinned and shook her head. “Puente Antiguo lacked Chinese food, and I survived... barely. I felt more threatened by The Destroyer than a lack of good Moo Goo, though. The Avengers have gotten spoiled on the variety of take-out options available in the City. If you move them out, all the Tower restaurants are going to take a huge financial hit!”

Steve grinned, but then frowned. “You may be right.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I’ll talk to Pepper. I want to reciprocate loyalty to them as much as we can.” He shrugged. “Some will be relieved to have the Avengers’ ‘bull’s-eye’ move away, regardless.” He looked out the coffee shop window. “We’ll have to come up with safe-guards and protection for this town. The base is a few miles away, but…”

That afternoon, Darcy hated to leave the guest house. A break from work and the stress of ‘Avenger life’ was something she knew she would come to treasure even more than she already did. Steve was quiet as he closed the gate and they got into the car.

Looking back, Darcy swallowed hard. She choked out a giggle. “I just realized it’s the only guest house with a white picket fence! Tony’s messing with you again, isn’t he?”

“Yeah… He does that.” Steve let out a slight chuckle.

Darcy noticed that his voice was tight, too. She sighed. “I should send you more naughty pix, if it gets us time together like the past few days. I lost count of how many times we made love. “ He cut a glance at her, and she smirked. “Don’t tell me the exact number! It’ll freak me out.” She was
pleased to see that her teasing caused him to relax. She looked back as they left Stark property.
“Bye, Paradise!”

“We’ll be back. Even if we don’t move base up here, we’ll take time off here again sometime.” He spoke in a reassuring tone.

“It won’t be the same living and working here. We’ll have to find other places to turn into Paradise together.” She sighed.

He nodded. “I like the sound of that. Where would you like to go… together?”

They daydreamed most of the way back to the City, talking about trips to take together to beaches, islands, ski resorts, places across the US, and other countries. They decided one of their first trips needed to be to Paris and London. Steve loved the art museums. Darcy wanted to visit the world’s most romantic city with the man she loved. They both liked the idea of returning to London and sharing it with each other. Steve was pleased to see that mention of London didn’t seem to upset Darcy much. She barely paused as she thought of her last day there, when she’d been captured. She shook it off and focused on all that she wanted to share with Steve from the city she’d lived in for nearly two years.

Talk then turned to plans for moving Darcy’s things into Steve’s apartment, and how everything should be arranged. Steve seemed so giddy at the thought of mingling their belongings and their lives that it nearly made Darcy laugh.

As they saw New York’s skyline coming into view, Darcy got a text message from Pepper. She requested that they join Pepper and Tony for a night out on the Town soon, for a play and dinner out together. If they were interested, Pepper would make the arrangements. She checked with Steve, and then replied that they’d love to go.

They took it easy that night, ordering takeout, watching a movie (‘Say Anything’), and holding each other close as they got used to being back in the Tower. They made love and fell asleep tangled together.

It was hard to get up and go their separate ways. Steve was going for an early run with Thor before a day full of meetings. Darcy headed to the gym, and then to the range and arena for training before work.

Darcy kissed and hugged Steve hard. “We’ll see each other at home tonight, at least!” He caressed her cheek, kissed her, and wished her a good day.

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Darcy enjoyed Cardio-Dance that morning. A few of the songs were ones she’d danced to with Steve at the party, so they put a smile on her face. Strength training was getting less odious; about as good as she thought she could hope. Hawkeye met her at the range. He explained tersely that Natasha had been called into a meeting with Steve, Tony, and one of Coulson’s people. His expression was tight, but Darcy didn’t give it much thought, at first.

Again, it appealed to Darcy to have training from someone human. Hawkeye’s name was earned, as his aim was perfect. But, it was the result of long and arduous training, building on natural talent. Regardless of Natasha’s silence on the subject, or maybe because of it, Darcy believed that the Red Room gave Natasha some kind of serum. That serum must be one that enhanced her beauty and longevity, as well as strength and healing. Even though she now counted Natasha as a friend, she still thought the other woman’s beauty almost too perfect.
Hawkeye filled one center hole of a target with round after round. He seemed on edge, evaluating Darcy’s performance with stern intolerance. Every now and then he shifted aside, grabbed his bow and took practice shots with it. Even when shooting arrows, he scrutinized Darcy’s moves for flaws to correct. He fixed Darcy’s grip minutely. He stopped her every so often for adjustments and critiques, more than ever before. When she asked if he was okay, he didn’t answer.

He had her switch guns to work with her ICER. He instructed her to default to shooting the ICER twice at any target, in case her target turned out to be enhanced in some way. He shrugged, “better they sleep longer than not at all.” He frowned at the gun. “I should test that thing on Cap, Barnes, and Thor. I wonder what would happen?” He muttered, “I can think of someone else I wouldn’t mind knockin’ out, too.”

“Natasha?” Darcy queried.

“I don’t like the couch that much, Lewis.” Hawkeye barked a laugh.

She grinned. “Uh huh…”

He nudged her. “Arena time, tricky damsel.”

She frowned uneasily. Darcy knew that Hawkeye had been razzed a lot since she frantically pistol-whipped him, and his mood seemed off. She wasn’t shocked that he stepped things up. Her arms were covered with blue marks from the training knife in no time at all. She WAS surprised the first time he body slammed her. It knocked the air out of her and put her on edge, but she didn’t complain. She got up and took ready position again. Their next bout ended the same way, as did the third. She began to lose her temper. His look was far away, as though he was dwelling on something bad from another time and place.

“What the hell?! Is your ego really that fragile?” She made her way to her feet again and growled. Hawkeye stepped back. “What?” His cold tone caused the hair on the back of Darcy’s neck to stand on end.

She tried a combination move. He blocked her kick and grumbled angrily, “trying to trick me again, kid? Not gonna happen. I’ve had enough of betrayal to last me a while.” He came at her with a thrust that she was able to block using the move that Steve had cleared up for her after her last session. He muttered, “Good! I see super teacher DID get that through to you.” He shifted and knocked her backwards, painfully hard. “Let’s work something else now.”

Darcy rolled from the impact and came up to block his next stab attempt. She scurried back from him testily. “You’re either pissed at me for the crap you’ve taken since our last bout, pissed at Steve for tearing you a new one, pissed at something I don’t know about, or all the above.” He body slammed her again. She grunted, seeing stars. “Oof! Damn it! What is wrong with you?”

Hawkeye frowned. “This fight would end with you dead… or captured and back on that table.”

Hawkeye stepped back. “What?” His cold tone caused the hair on the back of Darcy’s neck to stand on end.

They both looked up to the observation gallery as they heard Steve’s voice. “Actually, it would end with her attacker being bludgeoned by my shield.” He leapt over the railing, landed next to them, and reached down a hand to help Darcy to her feet. “You okay?”

She nodded once, but held onto his hand tightly to calm her fearful shaking.

Steve looked furious, a tic prominent in his jaw. “I thought your ex-wife was just jerking my chain when she implied that you’re working out your anger against her in the arena.” He looked Darcy
over. “Sorry, Darcy. I think it’d be better if you call it a day on training. If you want to watch us for a few minutes to learn more, that’d be fine.” Darcy was impressed that Hawkeye didn’t back down or duck Steve’s angry gaze.

She kissed Steve and nodded curtly to Hawkeye, stepped out of the arena, and took the stairs to the observation gallery. From what she saw next, she guessed Steve had been watching for a few minutes. He’d seen enough to inspire him to body slam Clint two times while he re-enacted attacks Clint had used towards her. She studied Hawkeye’s responses, trying to memorize his moves and match them to things he and Natasha had taught her. She could tell that Steve was reading a silent, tight-lipped Clint the riot act as they circled each other and began again. She glanced back to the entrance of the gallery as Natasha and a stunning, blonde, Amazon-like woman entered. Darcy frowned at both of them, and turned her attention back to the sparring. Natasha moved up by Darcy and nudged her, shoulder to shoulder, in silent inquiry. Darcy shrugged a grumpy reply. The next time Steve slammed Clint to the ground, Clint finally started talking to Steve.

Darcy turned to the women, crossing her arms over her chest.

The blonde gave her a rueful smile and apologized. “Sorry.”

Darcy looked back into the arena. Steve and Clint were still talking. She turned back to the blonde. “You must be the ex-wife.”

The woman nodded. “I must.” She glanced at Natasha. Darcy rolled her eyes as the two women had a conversation of eyebrows.

Natasha frowned. “Did he slam you like Steve just did him?” Darcy nodded, avoiding Natasha’s probing gaze. Natasha uttered a curse in Russian. “Bobbi! You should have told me first. I wouldn’t have let him work with ANY trainees this week, much less Darcy. He’s gonna be furious with himself when he cools down. Knocking the wind out of her is on the list of psych triggers we learned to avoid before we started training. And he’s the most protective of her, after Steve and Thor. He brought her out of an interrogation, and, unlike today, usually remembers that she’s a civilian.”

Bobbi sighed. “I said sorry.” Her mouth did a funny thing as she watched Hawkeye start attacking Steve again, fury plain in his motions. Steve blocked the worst of the blows, but was baiting the smaller man to attack more and get his negative energy out.

Darcy winced at the way Steve took on Hawkeye’s anger. “I’m Darcy, by the way. I heard Natasha call you Bobbi. Does that make you Bobbi Barton?”

Natasha snickered, while Bobbi swore. “Hell, no! Bobbi Morse, SHIELD.” She held out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Darcy Lewis, Labs Manager.” Darcy shook Bobbi’s hand.

Natasha ordered, “Come early tomorrow. I guess I’ll go into the arena with you.”

Darcy made a noise of dissent. “Could Sam do it instead?”

“I’ll see if he has time. It’d be good to mix up fight styles. He’s scrappy and direct, not elegant, but gets it done.” Natasha shrugged.

Bobbi was still watching as Clint roared with rage and lashed out.

Darcy winced. “What’s up with him?”
Bobbi sighed. “When I went undercover inside Hydra I had to give up SHIELD intel to be convincing. This morning I explained that I gave up a safe house where there were a few agents, some of Clint’s trainees. He says I should have given up a location where more people would have been compromised, instead. My choice got kids he was working with killed, except for those who were brainwashed to do Hydra's bidding.”

Natasha watched the men below fighting. “He came to New York a few days after SHIELD fell. He knew the safe house was taken. This is new information, though.” Darcy could see sadness in Natasha’s face as she watched Hawkeye angrily grieve.

Bobbi frowned. “Captain America wasn’t much happier than Clint. I thought he would be more pragmatic and hardened, less driven by sentiment.”

Natasha’s gaze shifted to Steve. “The Captain is a straightforward defender. He intended to destroy SHIELD along with Hydra, thought that best for protecting the populace. He has issues when it comes to people being brainwashed, too.” Darcy wondered how much anger Steve was working out alongside Hawkeye. She was well aware of his nightmares; saw the rage and anguish in him sometimes when he looked at Bucky.

She leaned over the railing and spoke softly, knowing Steve would hear. “I’m sure you told him he shouldn’t have come into the arena with me while he’s angry. And, yeah, I didn’t like him mentioning my capture, or appreciate the body slams. Feel free to do another of those on him for me.” She grinned as Steve surprised Hawkeye with a body slam. He glanced up and winked at her, before returning his attention to Hawkeye. “But, he’s pissed for something you’d go out of your skin over, too. So, I forgive him, and you should, too. Maybe you can teach me something later to help me evade getting slammed like that. You’re a fantastic teacher.” Hawkeye got in a complicated combination move and took Steve down. Darcy winced. “Ouch! I’ll stop distracting you now, Hon. Play nice and make up when you’re both ready. I’m going to work. I love you, lust you, and look forward to kissing your bruises all better later at home. Bye.” As he pushed Clint away, Steve waved at her.

Natasha raised a brow. Darcy glanced at Natasha and rolled her eyes. “Eavesdropper!” She nodded to Bobbi. “Nice to meet you. Excuse me. I need to get to work.”

Darcy dressed for the day in a simple, black dress topped with the dark red jacket she’d put away for so long. Her Infinity necklace showed nicely against the colors. She fiddled with it from time to time. She started in Jane and Erik’s lab, arriving with lattes for the three of them. Erik had enjoyed his long weekend of near-solitude to consolidate his work on the Convergence. Darcy helped him transcribe and render. Erik chattered with great animation and fervor as his work came together. He was nearly the way he’d been before he met Loki. Darcy was delighted.

Taking a personal moment (secure that Erik and Jane were oblivious), she followed up on earlier communication with her doctor’s assistant. Following referral, she electronically chatted with a Healing Ward OB/GYN nurse and requested an appointment for a fertility evaluation. The nurse shared that a complete evaluation could span several appointments. She offered Darcy an afternoon time that had come open due to a cancellation. Darcy would answer questions, have blood drawn for testing, talk with the doctor, and undergo an ultrasound of her ovaries and uterus. Darcy accepted. The nurse asked when her partner wished to set an appointment for semen analysis. Darcy replied that was unnecessary, and shut down the chat.

Jane was hard at work tweaking calculations and settings to open a portal to Yggdrasil. She only paused to complain that she thought the coffee tasted bad. Darcy was sure that Jane would find nothing right with her world until the latest portal opened. Erik gave her tea to enjoy instead, and
Jane got back to her 3-D renderings. Darcy muttered to herself that Jane was trying to *floo network* the entire Universe. She suppressed giggles when both Jane and Erik heard her, but looked confused. She chided them. “Come on! Harry Potter? Even my 96-year-old boyfriend knows about THAT!”

Jane went into full calculation mutter-and-cuss mode, with Erik also circling and chattering. Darcy enjoyed their give and take, savoring the relative normalcy of the morning. She got a lot of work done for the two scientists, and was satisfied with her progress as she left them.

On her way to R&D, Darcy stopped by Betty’s office. She verified the status of all equipment and resources, and gained more familiarity with Betty’s priority work. Darcy was impressed with the uniform samples, and with Betty’s improved mood. She walked away singing along to Aerosmith’s ‘Dream On.’

Darcy lunched at her desk in R&D while looking over messages and requests that had come in while she was away. She was researching answers for SI grant paperwork when Natasha and Bobbi entered the area outside her open door. Bobbi looked around, scanning faces intently. An intern froze, dropped materials, and pulled a gun on the two women. Darcy’s hand dropped to the pocket of her jacket to grasp the ICER inside. She made a mental note to request future shooting practice from a sitting position, pulled the ICER, and took the shot. The intern dropped, unconscious. Natasha moved to the woman’s side and cuffed her wrists.

Heart racing, Darcy tried to keep her voice steady. “JARVIS? Could you pull up the Security paperwork I need on my desktop? This is my first time shooting one of my employees.”

“Of course, Darcy. I hope that it’s the last.” JARVIS replied.

Darcy let out a breath of frustration. “Thanks, J. I need to know about everything Ms. Branson touched and did. Please pull together anything you can. Security will be on it. But, I want to do a review with Dr. McCann, Branson’s supervisor, so we can see what’s potentially compromised.” She cussed as she saw the thoroughness and length of the incident form that popped up.

She pulled up Dr. McCann’s file, too. She grimaced. McCann was vain and self-aggrandizing, not one of Darcy’s favorite scientists. Darcy’s main impression of Branson was that she was snippy, a good fit for McCann, and she had a cute teddy bear collection.

“Nice tag. You okay?” Darcy’s frown deepened as Bobbi congratulated her.

Darcy nodded, but still grimaced. “Clint’s gonna be pissed I only shot her once! I need to drill more on quick double shots with the ICER. I imagine he’ll see that I get plenty.” She raised a brow at Bobbi. “Are you planning on pissing him off again?” Bobbi laughed.

Security removed the unconscious intern. Natasha entered Darcy’s office. “What’s funny?”

Bobbi turned to her. “She says Clint’s gonna be angry she didn’t shoot twice, and asks if I’m gonna piss him off again.”

Natasha shrugged. “Bobbi always pisses Clint off. He used to like it more than he does now.” Bobbi rolled her eyes. Natasha half grinned. “He *will* be pissed you forgot. You had no way of knowing if Branson has had something like Extremis. Yes. He’ll drill you on rapid fire with your ICER, a LOT. And, yes, Bobbi will piss him off even more. She hasn’t told him she’s sleeping with her other ex again yet.” Bobbi shrugged and grinned.

Darcy’s frown deepened. “Should I go after them and shoot her again?” Bobbi laughed shortly.
Natasha chuckled. “It would mean another incident report to file, so resist the temptation. Clint ought to be a lot better with you tomorrow. He doesn’t want Steve to intervene again. If Steve has to admonish him again he’ll make a point of leaving Clint painfully bruised.” She turned to Bobbi. “We need to get moving before others catch wind of your presence and flee.”

“How many Hydra operatives have you found?” Darcy’s gaze swept over her R&D employees. She wondered what else she’d missed, if there were other traitors.

Natasha frowned angrily. “We got two from Security, one from maintenance, and now the one here in R&D. We’ll finish the rest of the labs. Reload and stay on guard. Copy your list of people for reveret to Hill, Pepper, Cap, and me. Tony’s hubris in thinking he did enough on that front just crumbled again.” Natasha and Bobbi said goodbye and left.

Darcy started on her incident report, relieved that she hadn’t been forced to kill. She thought of a good deed; then emailed Coulson her thanks and copied the email to Steve. She knew that the fact that Steve was copied was the important thing to Coulson. Savoring her relief at not having to take a life, she was just fine with that.

Busy at work in the office of his new base, Coulson read the email and smiled so broadly that Simmons stopped in her tracks and stared.

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Darcy entered Tony’s lab. “Do you have to fill out incident reports, Tony? If so, you must have a short-cut template or something. That’s an obnoxious form!”

Tony shrugged. “Hill’s efficiency coupled with Cap’s thirst for detail… a scary thing. My short cuts wouldn’t help you much. I default to repulsor burn or explosion for everything. Not your usual modus operandi.” His hands flew over a keyboard as he worked on drone programming.

Darcy grumbled. “This day’s not over yet.” An alarm sounded. Tony froze in place, and then started messaging on his phone. A few minutes later, the doors to the lab banged open. Hill entered with two Security agents, a petite African-American woman, and a stocky, heavily-muscled, dark-haired man. Darcy stared at Hill, eyes wide. “What now?”

Hill put a finger by her ear and spoke. “I have eyes on Lewis. She’s in Lab One with Tony, as JARVIS reported. Safe. I’ll set her detail in place and then head to Control.” Hill stood to the side and gestured at the two agents. “This is your Security detail, Miss Lewis. Besides the mole discovered in R&D today, we have an outside threat.”

Steve’s voice sounded from Tony’s in-lab speaker. “Avengers assemble. Falcon is in pursuit of a Hydra team in Central Park. JARVIS has coordinates. Head to cut off- likely Brock Rumlow, former SHIELD STRIKE lead, now wearing an Iron Man imitation. He attacked Hawkeye and made specific threats. I’m on motorcycle to join pursuit.”

“Howaveye’s having a crap day! I hope he’s okay.” Darcy groaned.

Tony stepped away from his computer and flicked his wrists, muttering ‘Iron Man imitation’. He stared at Darcy, expression grim. An Iron Man suit assembled onto Tony while an outside window slid open. Hill stood still, unflinching. Darcy’s agents shifted between Darcy and the opening. After Iron Man was gone, the window slid shut again.

Darcy took a breath. “Is Hawkeye okay? Specific threats?”

Hill turned to her, somber. “The suspect, probably-Rumlow, grazed Hawkeye with a shot. He said
that he’d ‘rather kill Cap or that stacked brunette Cap’s sweet on, but killing Hawkeye wouldn’t be a bad day’s work’. Hawkeye is on his way in for clean-up; transfusions, stitches, and implant repair… but should recover. Falcon intervened.’ She gestured to the agents flanking Darcy. “SI Security Agents Riella Jones and Stephan Dernier, this is Darcy Lewis. Lewis, I’ve sent files about your agents to your StarkPad. Jones leads the detail. Let me know if you have questions. I’ll get back to you later to discuss protocols and answer any questions.”


Hill shrugged. “My life is easier if Cap’s happy. Since I first heard about you, I’ve had this contingency plan ready, though I just shared your files with the agents. I know history, and I have an interest in Howling Commando legacies. These two were Level Five SHIELD agents of mine when Cap blew it all apart. I trained them both from the day they started. They guarded… an important friend… while I went to get Cap, Widow, and Falcon out of Hydra custody. I trust them to protect you. The Captain will, too.” She nodded and gave Darcy a slight smile as she turned to leave.

Darcy called after Hill. “Thanks!” She looked at the agents nervously, and turned to her desk to work again. The two agents were silent, assessing the room and Darcy.

Agent Jones approached Darcy. “Pardon me, Miss Lewis. Are you armed? I understand you’re being trained, and that you assisted in a capture earlier today.”

Darcy looked up from her work, startled. “I have an ICER in my pocket. I was just in the right place at the right time this morning.”

Jones called the range and asked for Darcy’s Glock and belt holster to be sent up at once, along with information on her training. Jones was polite, but firm, another in the legion of agents trained in the mold of Phil Coulson. “We ask for you to be fully armed and guarded when out of living quarters, Miss Lewis. I will coordinate for JARVIS to advise us on all weapons people around you carry. I’m uncomfortable with the number of R&D personnel that have weapons access on site at any given moment.”

“A lot of them MAKE weapons. I’m not sure how you’re going to get around that.” Darcy raised a brow.

Dernier’s French accent was thick. “We must. We will not fail in our duty. We will minimize the dangers in your immediate vicinity as much as possible.” He muttered something under his breath about ‘the Captain.’

“Have you read about me? Do you know what I do?” Darcy made a face at him.

Agent Jones’ tone was apologetic. “We have not had the opportunity, Miss Lewis. This was an emergency appointment. We accepted it without hesitation, especially given the reason you need protection. When you are out of public spaces, we will review your files.” She looked around again, seemingly satisfied with what she saw. “This work space is easy to defend. There are drones and weapons, but they are well controlled by Mr. Stark.”

Darcy chuckled. “Mostly! It can go spectacularly wrong, though. And, I have four workspaces with an irregular schedule. Don’t get too comfortable.” She smiled as the agents exchanged a look. She swiped at her StarkPad and entered data. “I prefer to be called Darcy.”

“I apologize. We are required to maintain a level of formality, Miss Lewis.” Jones sighed.
Darcy grumbled. “What about keeping me happy?”

Jones’ grin flashed and disappeared. “Not in our job description. Sorry.” Her attention turned to the door as someone knocked. Dernier took position in front of Darcy. Jones opened the door to the range master, Kaplan, holding Darcy’s holster and Glock. He looked around Jones and nodded a greeting to Darcy. Jones spoke with him quietly. After he was gone, she turned back. “Your proficiency scores are good, I’m glad to see.”

Darcy raised a brow. “Me, too! My trainers are sparing with the praise.” She put on her belt holster and checked the Glock over before putting it in place. She sent a note to Jai that she would need more pants outfits for work, or other outfits that would work with the belt holster. Annoyed by the necessity, she texted Kaplan to send her other holsters to her new quarters so she could still wear dresses. She let Jai know about them, too.

Dernier showed interest. “Who trains you?”

Darcy looked up from her messaging. “Natasha for the most part. Hawkeye and Falcon, too.”

The agents exchanged a glance. Jones whistled. “Add Barnes and Rogers to that list and you’ve got most of the top ten living shooters.”

Darcy shrugged and signed off her work station. “All I asked Natasha for was some self defense. It escalated. Next thing I knew, I was at the gun range and sparring in the arena.” The agents suppressed knowing grins.

“It often does, Miss Lewis. Protectors can be predictable that way.” Jones was matter of fact.

Glancing at the clock, Darcy frowned. She gathered her things, silent as she considered her options. Finally, she huffed a sigh. “I have an appointment, uh, a checkup.” She looked at the agents and frowned, fretful. “Who do you report my daily activities to? Is my privacy just gone, or what?”

Jones’ tone offered reassurance. “We file daily reports to the Director of Security. We are under strict orders to maintain confidentiality. This covers your work, activities, innovations discussed in our presence, or your personal life. Any indiscretion is an immediate firing offense with possible jail time. Worse, the Director threatened that we’d have to answer to the Captain.” Darcy almost chuckled as both agents shifted uneasily.

Darcy accepted the necessity. “Good. I have a checkup with the lady doc. Do we all have to go into the exam room together?” She eyed Dernier.

Jones shook her head. “Dernier can guard the exam room door from the outside.” She apologized. “I will be inside the room. Sorry. There are air vents.”

Darcy winced, fighting not to blush. She cursed Rumlow (whoever the hell that was) for making something awkward worse. Her agents would think she was pregnant for sure, Hill too. On the plus side, they’d be super protective, but it was embarrassing. She walked out of Tony’s lab to take the elevator down to Healing. People gave her agents a wide berth.

Having a stranger in the room during an OB/GYN visit was almost excruciating to Darcy. First, they drew several vials of blood. Usually, that was something to dislike, but it was the easiest part of this appointment.

Darcy blushed throughout the entire visit. Jones noted how she hid her underwear in the pile of clothes on the chair. There was a deliberate lack of expression on the agent’s face as Darcy answered the standard questions. *When was Darcy's last menstrual period? How often did she and...*
her partner have intercourse? What did she know about his semen analysis results? If Jones went
to tabloids, the agent would be set for life; just from knowing how often Darcy and Steve made
love. Never having had intercourse with anyone else, Darcy forgot Steve's recovery time was
unusual.

During a lull in the visit, when Darcy was waiting for the Ultrasound tech to arrive, Jones
apologized again. “I’m sorry it’s necessary for me to be here, Miss Lewis. I swear on my
grandfather’s grave that I will protect your privacy, as well as your life.”

“Thank you.” Darcy whispered. She avoided Jones’ sympathetic gaze.

The ultrasound of her ovaries and uterus was strange. There was a mess of cold jelly applied to
Darcy’s abdomen, and the images on the screen made no sense to her. Yet, it opened the
possibility of future scans. Darcy felt a combination of exhilaration and terror. Having children
with Steve would be amazing, but… What kind of target would be on the woman who carried his
child? Even worse, how big a target would there be on the child? As they finished, the tech took a
cloth to the sink to dampen it for Darcy to use to clean her abdomen. Darcy jerked to sitting, her
breathing sounding panicked. Her reaction startled Jones. The agent drew her weapon. The
ultrasound tech froze and held her hands up, the towel dripping on the counter.


Jones stood still, frowning with concern.

The tech went white as a sheet. “I’m sorry! I didn’t know. I didn’t mean…”

“Give me a minute.” Darcy did her best to pull herself back together.

Once Darcy was dressed and calm again, she talked with the doctor. The first blood test had
confirmed that she was not pregnant. Preliminary findings on the shape and structure of her uterus,
and the scanned appearance of her ovaries were encouraging. Her other blood test results would be
transmitted to her soon. Then, they would discuss further testing and appointment options.

As they left, Darcy heard Dernier speaking to Jones softly in French. She knew little beyond ‘yes,
no, and sweet dreams…’ but understood Jones’ emphatic reply of “Non”. She knew he’d asked if
she was pregnant. She sighed, hoping Jones’ discretion extended to not telling Dernier everything
said inside the exam room.

Next, Darcy went to the nurses’ desk and asked where she could find Clint Barton. She knocked on
his closed door and waited through a long pause. Finally, she opened the door. Dernier put an arm
out to stop her from going in first. He stepped inside and used American Sign Language to
introduce himself and ask if Darcy could enter. Dernier turned to Darcy. “You may enter, Miss
Lewis.”

Darcy stepped inside, feeling timid. “Hi.”

Hawkeye, a bandage around his head, looked to Dernier for translation and signed, “Hi, Lewis.”

Darcy stood at the foot of the bed and slowly signed. “I don’t practice much, but I can speak for
myself.”

“Cool.” Hawkeye flashed a small, weary grin.

Darcy’s lips trembled. “You got shot in the head?!” She spoke while she signed.
Hawkeye shrugged. “Yes. Close thing, but I have better reflexes than most people, so it wasn’t fatal. I got him in the shoulder. Joints are the only option with a handgun against armor.”

Darcy nodded. “I’ll remember.”

“Like you remembered to double-tap with an ICER?” He grinned.

“I forgot that. Sorry.” She rolled her eyes.

He rasped a laugh. “We’ll work on it. I’m sorry I was an asshole to you.”

She stared at him. “Thanks. I understand why.”

He held up his hands and signed furiously as he spoke. “Don’t make excuses for me. Whiny, self-indulgent excuses negate an apology. I’m more of a man than that, Lewis. I fucked up. I’m not just saying this for Cap’s sake.”

“Okay! I accept your apology.” Darcy smiled.

He nodded firmly. “Friends?”

“Always.” She smiled.

Hawkeye signed. “Good. Now, while you were right that it sucks on TV and in movies when a patient kicks people out. I’m tired. Blood loss.”

She waved. “Rest well. Feel better.” There was an explosion in the distance. Darcy’s head turned towards the window.

“What was that vibration? Explosive?” Hawkeye frowned.

Dernier looked at his phone and replied with quick, fluid signs. Darcy read his words. ‘Collateral damage distracts the Avengers from pursuit.’ She shuddered and waved again as she left.

As they stepped out the door of Hawkeye’s room, Darcy turned to the agents. “Have you met Dr. Banner before? I work in his lab next.” Darcy waved at some friendly Healing Ward staff as she passed them on her way to the elevator.

Jones’ face was inscrutable. “Lead the way, Miss Lewis.” Dernier was silent, a shade paler.

Stepping into the elevator, Darcy turned to them. “What do you know about Rumlow?” She noted that both agents put a hand on a weapon.

Jones shook her head. “Please do not distract us in transit, Miss Lewis.”

“Thank goodness it’s not far.” Darcy muttered to herself.

As they entered Bruce’s lab, he was in the middle of an experiment. Darcy moved to her work area silently and started on transcriptions. She was far behind, having been away while he stayed and worked most of the weekend. He had done a lot of work on Betty’s blood tests and the drugs that Hydra used on her. Darcy let out a strangled cry at one point.

Bruce glanced at her, looking at what she was doing. “Evil, aren’t they?”

Darcy sipped water carefully. “I already knew that, but… yeah. Date-rape drug? All sorts of wrong! Skin-crawling wrong!”
“It’s best I don’t dwell on it. Why do you have a Security detail? I’ve never had enforcers in my lab before, and I don’t like it. What’s their exit strategy in case of an ‘other guy’ incident?” Bruce’s tone was careful and sounded mild, but Darcy could hear his indignation clearly.

Darcy’s tone was clipped. “One more mole found this morning in R&D, and a ‘specific threat’ against me by a Hydra goon named Rumlow this afternoon.” Bruce’s eyes flashed green and he let out a low growl. She raised a brow. Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy saw her agents shift nervously, though Jones hid her concern fairly well. “These two are Howling Commando legacies. Hill hand-picked and brought them to me while the threat was still hanging in mid-air, like words in a comic book. So, I don’t think that an exit strategy has been devised for them, though I imagine they’re giving it thought right now. You probably SHOULD keep a lid on things today.” She winked at him.

Bruce’s smile was scary. “I can only DREAM that they’d try for you here, Darcy. The ‘other guy’ has been close to a boil against Hydra ever since they took Betty prisoner. Rebuilding costs be damned! He’d shred them. I don’t care if Rumlow IS a top goon.”

“That’s disturbingly sweet and reassuring. Thank the big guy for me sometime.” Darcy nodded. Bruce chuckled. “Hey! I so rarely get to indulge in a testosterone display in this form. Don’t I get any credit? I promise. You’re safe here.”


“You don’t. He was the ring-leader when they tried to capture Cap in the elevator at the Triskelion… the guy on the video we watched who said it wasn’t personal.” Bruce grimaced in agreement.

“The bastard with the taser batons! Sam told Steve he should’ve killed him then.” Darcy took a deep breath.

Bruce turned back to his work. “I imagine Steve wishes he had.” He made notes and passed them to Darcy. “Do you know what the specific threat was? I heard Cap’s Assemble call. Neither the ‘other guy’ nor Red She-Hulk join a pursuit starting in Central Park. Too many people.”

Darcy gasped. “Central Park! I wonder if that’s where they saw us, when we went walking there last week? This Rumlow guy took a shot at Hawkeye, but first said he wished it were Captain America or the… brunette he’s sweet on.” She muttered thoughtfully. “They must have had a long-range lens or an old-school camera… what with all the Security jamming.”

Bruce’s expression was grim. “First, they took Pepper last year. They’ve targeted Jane many times, then Betty, now they threaten you. I detest Hydra. Going after family is amoral and classless.” He shook his head. “Darcy? You okay?”

She shrugged. “This isn’t my first day as a target, Bruce. It feels… bigger… today, but, I’ll be okay.” Bruce handed her more papers, his expression changing to a semi-smile. She forced a smile. “You’ve been busy.” Her brow furrowed as she examined the papers.

“Some of that is Betty’s. We’re trying to take advantage of your good nature and trick you into assisting her, too.” He confessed.

“You’re not subtle.” Darcy smirked.

Bruce smiled… a rare, broad smile. “Subtle’s not really in our wheelhouse. I know you mentioned
the possibility to her, but the need is immediate. She’s hit the ground running.”

Darcy returned the smile. “You should know better than to think I wouldn’t help Betty! I think some changes are coming. I’ll work her into my day. Let me give it some thought.”

Bruce glanced at the agents, evaluating how Betty would react to their presence. “We could bring her here during your time in my lab. I don’t mind sharing my admin time with her, for a while. We have work we’re collaborating on, anyway.”

Darcy grinned, a slight blush in her cheeks. “I think we need to talk about yoga, though. I saw you two by the lake over the weekend. That’s NOT what I thought yoga looked like! When I asked you to teach me, I didn’t…”

Bruce laughed. “I know!” He shook his head. “I remember the first day you wandered in here, exploring the Tower. The instant that JARVIS said Cap asked for you, I could see that you were falling for Steve. Your expression was a sweet mix of hope and passion… for him. Sensual yoga is less commonly done than meditative, so I didn’t assume you meant anything provocative. It had been a while since I thought of anyone that way. Betty and I are testing sensation and desire boundaries between the two of us.” He smiled softly. “Meditative yoga is beneficial to me, Darcy, perhaps more than ever. I want to keep on an even keel so that Betty and I can progress towards… each other.” He looked sheepish.

Darcy sighed. “It looked intense. I hope you… progress.” She did some transcribing. “Do you want to change our time? It’s not like I get to keep a regular schedule more than one day at a time, considering all of the Avenging, etc. But, it’s nice for me to know where I should be IF the stars align enough that everyone is in the Tower at the same time.” She made a face. “I don’t want to antagonize Betty in any way, either.”

Bruce looked puzzled. “Betty likes you!” Darcy raised a brow, skeptical. He nodded. “She does. Or, at least she’s starting to. She was sorry for losing control while you were in range that day in Tony’s lab.”

Darcy heard Dernier groan. She shook her head. “I understand. Tony’s provocative. He’s jealous of your friendship, and she’s jealous of your love… and something about dads.” She shrugged. “I don’t know! Hawkeye was yanking me up out of harm’s way, and I lost a shoe, and there was growling. I wasn’t thinking all that clearly. But, I didn’t take it personally. I went by to check on her earlier today. I’ve been singing Aerosmith ever since.”

Bruce’s smile was soft. “I appreciate you checking on her. Anyway, since you don’t object, I’ll have Betty work here, as she wishes, in the afternoons during your time. She can keep working while we do yoga, join us if she wishes, or leave to work in her own space. Okay?”

Darcy nodded and got back to work. By the time she changed and they began yoga, she needed help to relax. She felt behind on her work, especially work that had piled up while she was away. There was no signal that Steve and the others were back from their latest Hydra chase, and she worried what was happening. The fact that she was in danger enough to need guards was a new pressure. And, she still felt on edge about her friendship with Bruce and how it was interpreted by Betty.

When they were done, she wished Bruce a good evening and went back to her office in R&D. It was late, so she didn’t care about her outfit (thought wearing a holster over yoga clothes felt weird) or sweatiness. She came to a stopping point at about 8:00 pm, her head aching from hunger. JARVIS told her that Steve was still out on his mission, so she ordered a sandwich and headed home. Jones and Dernier asked her to let them know when she wished to leave the residential
floors. Jones asked her to read over the protection detail protocols, too. A few minutes later, Jones returned with her food. Darcy saw Jones looking around, obviously looking at Steve’s belongings.

Darcy sighed. “I’m sorry if my working late makes your job harder. My hours are odd. I work a lot on the weekends. Would it help if I work from home more?”

“Please read over the Security protocols. I appreciate your concern, but it’s unnecessary. We’ll manage.” Jones cracked a smile.

Darcy was restless as she ate and read. She thought about calling someone for company, but put that thought out of her head when she turned on the TV and saw the news reports. Hydra had used missiles on a passenger train and an elementary school to facilitate their escape. The Avengers had been rescuing people from the flames and debris for hours, with emergency services personnel assisting. Worse, they were now pulling bodies from the debris, few living. There were hundreds of casualties. The scene at the school was especially horrific. Small bodies were laid in rows while family members gathered, many wailing with grief. The AP took a dark profile shot of Captain America, head bowed as he brought a child’s body out of the debris. It was shown repeatedly. They kept referring to him as a symbol of strength in a terrible time.

Darcy turned the volume off after a while, unable to bear the reporters’ unthinking commentary. She did class work on her laptop, looking up from time to time to check the activity on TV. Every now and then, she saw Steve frantically working. The helmet and mask went a long way in disguising his expressions, but she knew he was distressed. It set her on edge. After a few hours, she finished her homework and studying. She showered, dried her hair, and got in their bed. She turned on the bedroom TV, sound off, and played online for a while. She finally dozed off with the TV still on.

It was after 2:00 a.m. when Darcy jolted awake as the bedroom door opened. Her hand automatically went to the ICER on the bedside table. Steve stopped in his tracks. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, a rueful expression on his face as he stared down the ICER’s barrel at her. Darcy set the gun down. “Sorry. Getting used to the new place… and…”

Steve rasped scratchily. “I’m sorry to wake you. I need to shower again. I can’t get the smell of smoke out of my hair, but I want to be… home. Try to sleep.” His voice sounded awful. It was damaged from smoke exposure. She was reminded that healing took time, even for Captain America. Darcy rested fitfully while he showered, but gave up on sleep the instant the water stopped.

She padded to the bathroom, shielding her eyes from the light as she opened the door. Steve stood in front of the mirror, a towel around his narrow waist. Livid bruises and scrapes stood out against his skin. His head bowed. She couldn’t help but compare the reality of the anguished man in front of her to the symbol she’d seen on the TV throughout the evening. She walked up behind him and put her arms around him. As she leaned her cheek against his bruised back, she heard him choke down a nearly-silent sob.

“Come to bed? You need to rest.” She whispered.

He nodded mournfully and followed her. Once bedside, he let the towel fall to the floor and crawled between the sheets. She lay beside him. He curled into her with his head down just below her shoulder… a clear, if unspoken, supplication for comfort.

She felt the damp of his tightly-closed eyes, and carded her fingers through his hair soothingly, murmuring comfort and words of love. A ragged sigh escaped her as she absorbed his grief and pain.
When Darcy’s alarm went off, she hit ‘snooze’ and groaned. Next to her Steve apologized again, his voice soft, and less rough. “I’m sorry.” She could still hear sorrow in his voice. If anything, it seemed worse.

She shook her head and nuzzled closer. “Don’t!” As she began to wake, she noticed that he was sitting up, reading his tablet, tensed. She rubbed her eyes. “Is there something new?”

He cleared his throat, but didn’t answer. She looked up at him, puzzled. He obviously wanted to say something, BADLY, but wasn’t sure what to say.

“What are you reading?” She pushed up on one elbow.

He admitted uncomfortably, “Jones’ report to Hill about your new Security and their first day with you.”

Bleary with fatigue, she shook her head. “Did I do something wrong?”

He didn’t answer.

Darcy bolted upright and punched his arm. Belatedly, she remembered his injuries. She yelped, “Shit! I didn’t mean…” She looked and saw that his arm had healed. She sighed with relief, and then glared at him. “Steven Grant Rogers!”

He set the pad down. “I’m sorry! I won’t do it again. I supervise Hill, so I have clearance, and… I was impatient, but I shouldn’t have… and…” His brow was furrowed. He looked stricken and close to tears.

Darcy took a deep breath. “What?” Her glare softened.

“Are you okay?” He asked in a choked voice.

She nodded. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

He closed his eyes, forlorn. “They have to report it if they draw weapons. I read that you panicked when an ultrasound tech wet a cloth in the sink for cleanup at the doctor’s office.”

She grimaced and nodded. “Oh. I’m not pregnant.”

“Clint body slammed you yesterday. You were threatened… and then you went to the doctor…” He let his head drop forward.

Darcy gasped, shocked. “Oh, my God… NO! I’m not pregnant, and I WAS not pregnant. I wouldn’t spar if I was! I… went on a fact-finding appointment to see if I can get pregnant… and this really isn’t how I intended to tell you about it.” She frowned. “No!” She put her hand over his. He stared at her intently and sagged with relief. A multitude of emotions passed over his face.

He apologized again. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have invaded your privacy. I won’t abuse my authority that way again.”

“Oh, Honey! How long have you been waiting to ask?” She half-grinned sympathetically.

“Nineteen minutes.” He sighed.

She shook her head. “You’ve been punished enough, then, nosy Captain.” She sat astride his lap,
and wrapped her arms around him. “Sucky timing, eh?”

He let out a long sigh. “I… want… someday. But, yeah, with… what happened… It made those parents’ grief even more real to me. I was terrified that another life… our…” He swallowed hard. “I put you in heightened danger.”

Darcy made a face. “You sure it wasn’t the intern they planted in R&D?”

Steve looked uncertain for a second, but shook his head. “He described you… like he would. He’s seen you. Our walk in Central Park last week…”

She interrupted, “or at dinner out with the gang before we left the City. I looked good that night, too… and you looked sweet on me then.” Steve frowned, torn. Darcy kissed his cheek. “You didn’t ask him to threaten me. Nothing he chooses to do or anyone else in Hydra chooses to do… is your fault. He’s an evil asshole.” Steve heard her underlying message about the missile attacks, but still looked anguished. Darcy glanced at the clock.

Steve hugged her. “I’m sorry I kept you from getting good sleep after a bad day.”

She kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry you had such a terrible day, Hon.”

He hugged her close. His voice broke. “Does your ‘fact finding’ mean you’re closer to us making things official?” She nodded against him, shy to meet his gaze. He whispered. “What did they say?”

Muffled against his chest, she replied, “ovaries and uterus look good on ultrasound. First blood test confirmed I’m not pregnant, apparently a baseline measure for this sort of thing, since I had no reason to think I was. They seemed to think things sound positive from the questions I answered. I’ll hear about other blood work soon, maybe today.” She pressed her face against him even tighter as she blushed so much that he still saw. “And, your friend’s granddaughter has been so well trained in the ‘Agent iPod-Stealer school of facial expression control’ that she didn’t even look startled at the apparently HUGE amount of sex we have. The doctor’s eyebrows jumped up so that they nearly fell over the back of her head.” Steve snorted helplessly. Darcy stifled a choked laugh of mortification. “I forget that your recovery is unusual.”

Steve nudged her so that her face wasn’t pressed into his chest, and kissed her cheek. “I’m sorry for the loss of privacy, Sweetheart. I’m so sorry for so many things.” He cupped her jaw in his hand and gazed into her eyes.

She kissed him, and then pulled back and put a hand over her mouth. “Oh, shit! I’m sorry for morning breath!”

“I couldn’t care less. You’re here. I need you… and you’re here.” Steve chuckled and hugged her close.

Darcy kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear. “They say it’s for better and for worse.”

He sighed, his broad shoulders dropping with the release of tension. “I’m going to hold you to that. I don’t think I could stand it if anything happened to you; and it makes me sick to think of something happening to our child. But, to hell with them! I’m not gonna let them take any of it away, Darcy. I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you, too. And I’m late starting my day. My Howling Commandos legacy entourage is cooling their heels in the hall by now. I know they dread covering me during Cardio-Dance. They’re probably plotting to break my ankles so I can’t go to class for a while.”
Steve sighed. “I’m still trying to absorb the thought of Gabe’s granddaughter hearing all about our sex life. Don’t get me started on theoretically avenging your ankles.” He kissed her cheek and dotted kisses down her neck.

“Okay. By the way, I’m adding French to my course load next semester. Jones and Dernier are using it to talk about me behind my back. It’s not at all sexy, and I can’t let them get away with that.” Darcy laughed.

“Some things never change… Maria’s smart to pull in people we can trust so implicitly… but, it’s still odd. Grandkids!” Steve shook his head, bemused.

Darcy stroked his cheek. “Well, you can prove how able-bodied you are, despite being surrounded by legacy grandchildren, later. I also intend to put a smile on your face again as soon as possible.” He blinked hard and shook his head, doubtful. She kissed his cheek, ducking his attempt to kiss her on the lips again before she brushed her teeth, and crawled off him.

Darcy dashed to bathroom, took care of essentials and got ready for Cardio-Dance. When she entered the living room, she found Steve, dressed and cleaned up, talking with a star struck Jones and Dernier. Darcy was grumbling about her thigh holster. She was glad Natasha had ordered so many options, but hating the weight of the Glock. She mentioned, “I prefer the ICER, which is stashed in my bag for now. I don’t like killing people.”

Steve walked over and pulled her in for a hard, dizzying kiss. “Thank you for wearing the Glock. Hydra operatives are evil assholes, so I hear. We also have to be prepared in case of enhancement. Please aim at vital areas, head or heart, if you have to shoot.” He reached down and checked the fit of the holster and inspected the gun.

“Thank YOU for the positive reinforcement.” She grinned.

He kissed her forehead. “I love you, Sweetheart, more than I ever knew I could love.”

Darcy pulled him close and kissed him. “I love you, too.”

She glanced at the agents, noting that they were standing even straighter than before, with determined looks on their faces. She shook her head at Steve. He looked back with false innocence (instead of like someone guilty of using his image, and friends’ grandchild fealty to incite agents to heightened levels of watchfulness). She sighed as she pulled away. “You really are a Punk. Have a much better day, please.”

“I’ll try. You, too.” He nodded wearily.

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Jones and Dernier were dressed more casually than the previous day. People noticed the agents’ demeanor, though. Since talking to Steve, they were both crazily focused and zealous for Darcy’s safety. Dernier stood closer to Darcy, ready to jump on her and cover her with his body at any instant. It was unnerving. Darcy thought of Tony’s darling bot ‘Dum-E’ spraying Tony with the fire extinguisher. She couldn’t sell Dernier to a City college, but the wish was beginning to occur to her. She gave him a quelling look. He shook his head, not moving back at all.

Jones shifted back and forth by the windows as Darcy danced. Darcy realized that the movements put Jones’ body between Darcy and outside danger. It put a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. The agents were more at ease during Strength training. That room lacked windows.

Sam looked half-dead on his feet. He stood outside the Range waiting for her. His arms were
crossed over his chest. “Good mornin’, Darcy! I’m gonna work on some shooting with you, but after that I’m headed home for shut-eye. I was at the school all night. Steve was sending out weird-as-shit messages earlier… that you wouldn’t be sparring today. By the time he took it back, everyone was busy.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Don’t ask! He got nosey and learned not to do it again the very hard way.” Because she was observant, Darcy saw Jones’ expression flicker.

“I should have clarified the chain of command better. My apologies.” Jones murmured.

Darcy gave her a sharp look. “He won’t do it again. He assumed the worst and was too freaked out to wake me to ask.”

Sam looked curious, but shrugged it off. He turned and introduced himself to Jones and Dernier. “You must be the lucky people Cap refers to as ‘the grandkids’. I’m Sam Wilson, Falcon.”

Dernier grimaced, but Jones laughed. “I didn’t believe Grandpa’s tales of Captain Rogers’ smart mouth.”

Both Darcy and Sam replied at once. “Believe it!” They traded smiles.

“I’m thirty six. I believe that is older than the Captain’s conscious age.” Dernier’s mouth twitched.

Jones pointed at him. “I didn’t see you reminding him of that fact earlier. You said ‘anything for you, Captain.’” The agents exchanged self-deprecating, embarrassed looks, and chuckled.

Sam laughed. “My line with him was about how since Captain America needed me, I wouldn’t hesitate to go active duty again.” He grinned fondly at Darcy. “SHE sees him first as Steve, and doesn’t get hung up on the Captain thing.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “I just don’t want the Captain’s responsibilities to take him from me.” Sam nodded and patted her shoulder comforting.

The agents relaxed as they all moved out of the hallway and further into the range. Darcy noticed that they chose an end bay and shifted privacy shields into place so that she wasn’t visible from outside. She grinned. “I wish I’d known privacy was an option here. More than one shot has been embarrassingly bad.”

Sam asked what she wanted to work, other than double shots with the ICER. She mentioned shooting from sitting, lying down, and other positions. He was amused when she shared that she almost tranquilized Steve on his arrival home during the night.

Her phone buzzed. Tony texted that he and Pepper planned to go out that night, and Steve and Darcy were invited. He ended his message with an admonishment. ‘We can’t let Hydra scare you into staying inside for all time. Yesterday was evil. I don’t know about Cap, but I don’t think I’ll ever smile again. Not that putting you out in public will relax him. Shit! Guess he’s never smiling again, either.’

Darcy decided that it was time for her to share a surprise she’d planned with Steve. It might help take his mind off things. If it did that even a tiny bit, she’d be happy.

Since Sam was too exhausted for the arena, Darcy took a quick shower and dressed for work. Her outfit was all black… blouse, slacks with gun belt, and jacket. She called to see if the stylist could work her in, and ran down with wet hair for a trim and style. She showed the hairdresser the inspiration photo, and trusted her to get close without hacking off hair. She would curl it and finish
the styling that night before they went out. Thinking of what she intended to wear; she wondered if she ought to dress for the date at her old place. She still had most of her things there since she was too busy to move everything yet. She texted Jai.

She grabbed hot chocolates and a latte on her way to work with Jane and Erik. She hoped the hot chocolate would be more to Jane’s taste than the previous day’s latte. When Darcy entered the lab, Jane looked tired, almost under the weather. Darcy got fruit from the refrigerator. When she returned from the refrigerator, she handed the fruit to an indignant, snarling Jane. “What are AGENTS doing in my lab, Darcy?”

Darcy sighed. “We’re a package deal these days, boss lady. The Hydra scum who shot Hawkeye said he’d rather shoot Cap or Cap’s girlfriend. Apparently they saw us together last week. With the way things have been going, I’m surprised you don’t have a set of your own.”

Jane looked distressed. “Sorry, Agents, but SHIELD stole all of my work the first time we met. It left an impression.” Both looked at Jane, nonplussed.

Darcy assured her. “They’re discreet, Jane, trustworthy, even. Their grandfathers were friends of Steve’s and Bucky’s during the War.” That caught Erik’s attention.

“I’m sure that’s a comfort to the Captain.” Erik nodded.

Jane frowned. “Thor was so upset by the attacks yesterday! I think lightning will strike first and questions will be asked later, if anyone from Hydra shows their face.” She made adjustments on a machine.

Darcy nodded. “Bad stuff. I…” She stopped talking as Jane twisted a knob and let out a cry of triumph and began a silly, manic dance of victory.

Darcy looked up, awed. In the portal field, it looked like all of Space itself had entered the lab. The agents gasped aloud. Erik began excitedly naming formations and pointing out stars. His face was alight with the excitement of discovery. He cried, “this brave o-erhanging firmament!”

“Going Danish on us, Erik?” Darcy giggled.

Erik smiled back at her. “I’m glad you recognize ‘Hamlet’, but Shakespeare is universal, dear girl. This is a universal moment. Behold, Yggdrasil! This is the tree of cosmology, on which the nine realms exist!”

“It’s beautiful,” Darcy sighed.

There was a knock, which Jones answered. Steve stopped in the open doorway, mouth agape. He yelled. “What?!” He looked around wildly as he sped to Darcy’s side and put himself between her and the portal field. She didn’t understand. He was horrified, grasping at her, desperate to protect her from something, absolutely battle-ready. The agents were taken aback and confused.

Jane glanced away from the stars, planets and moons, her tone matter-of-fact, “Yggdrasil. It’s the worlds’ tree, the cosmic nimbus, the framework of the Universe.” She smiled. “Isn’t it amazing?!”

Steve dissented, visibly shaking. “No! It’s what I saw over Red Skull after he grabbed the cube, before he died on the Valkyrie!” Darcy was startled. She took hold of Steve’s arm, trying to get his attention away from the memories.

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Erik turned to Steve, frowning. “A mortal held the Tesseract? How did he die? What happened next?”
Steve shrugged. “It looked like he melted away… He was yelling, in pain…” He looked all around, agitated. “Can’t you CLOSE that? What if something… or someone… came through and attacked?” He noticed Jane touch one hand to her abdomen as she frowned. Steve shuddered.

Then, Steve’s expression shifted to one of dreadful understanding. He stared into the portal, his voice filled with anger. “Send something through. Let me see! What does it look like when something goes through a portal to THAT place?”

Darcy pulled away, shushing Steve. She pulled a guinea pig out of the cage, apologized to it, and nodded to Jane. Jane closed the portal. As Darcy moved to the field area, Steve gasped. “Careful!” Dernier let out a tense breath. Darcy rolled her eyes and put some lettuce and carrots on the ground for the guinea pig. The guinea pig waddled to it and began to eat. Darcy walked back to Steve. He grabbed her, hugged her to him with quick desperation, and shifted her behind him again. Jane twisted the knob. The guinea pig began to transfer into the portal, a small column of silver energy vanishing into the cosmos.

“Ah! That does look like it disintegrated. I understand your confusion. But, it’s not dying.” Erik nodded.

Steve shuddered, horrified. “That’s NOT dying?”

Jane shook her head, looking at him with visible impatience. “Don’t act like Dr. McCoy out of Star Trek! It’s not like the atoms are scrambled. If I put a return sensor on him, I could bring him back… and he’d be fine.” Darcy pursed her lips and gave Jane a pointed look. Jane grinned. “Okay! PROBABLY fine, if he didn’t happen to drown or get eaten. Put a return sensor on the next one and we’ll try it.” Darcy retrieved the sensor and handed the others lab aprons.

Jane struggled her apron on. “It’s just Quantum Field Transfer. He’s in Yggdrasil now.” She frowned and made notations. Her tone was full of distraction. “It looks different, depending on how the portal opens, and which realms are involved, variants in the energy flow… many factors.” She looked at Steve over her glasses. “You saw how it looked when Thor and Loki used the Tesseract to return to Asgard. That was somewhat different than THIS.” She gestured at the beautiful sight of stars and nebulae. “THIS is Yggdrasil. I think… I think that based on what we know of the Tesseract…” Erik moved closer to Jane. She looked at him. “Do you see what I do in the energy signature? I think the Tesseract is associated with Yggdrasil, maybe was formed there. The Aether had an affinity for Svartalfheim. Maybe the Tesseract has a similar affinity for Yggdrasil.”

“It sounds like these energy swirly things blend together to make the whole Universe when you talk about that affinity stuff, Jane.” Darcy frowned.

Jane whispered in awe. “The power of the entire universe in a handful of gems? Scary thought, Darce.” She began to make notes about the energy signatures they were discussing.

Darcy laughed to Jane. “My scary thought would pack one heck of a punch! Whatevs. I’m just blowing smoke.” She smiled at Steve. “Welcome to our weird universe, Steve…”

Steve looked at Darcy sharply. “Welcome to my nightmare.” She moved closer to him and realized that he was shaking.

Erik opined. “The cube fell from the plane into the ocean, didn’t it?” Steve nodded. “So, it did NOT go with Red Skull, but fell from his grasp, perhaps was too much for him. You’re right. It may not have killed him then. I’d think he SHOULD be dead since he grabbed the cube, something so far beyond mortal man… but he had an Erskine serum, too, didn’t he? Maybe you’re not just
C:

mortal, Captain! Maybe you’re something… MORE.” Darcy looked taken aback. Erik stopped, thoughtful as though trying to remember something. Erik muttered, “Fury touched it, too… I think.”

Steve’s impatience showed. “So, either I can’t die, and he didn’t… or we CAN die. I hope we can. I prefer Schmidt dead.”

Erik scratched his head. Then his hand dropped to his belt buckle. Darcy cried out, “Stop! Don’t you dare, Erik!”

He rolled his eyes at her sheepishly. “Helps me think…” Darcy glared at him with stern ferocity. Erik grinned slightly. “Or, you’re both just HARDER to kill… and he didn’t touch it long enough.” He looked speculative. “I wonder what that indicates about Nick Fury.” Jones shifted uneasily.

“Damn! Just… damn!” Steve hung his head, hands on his hips.

Jane looked at him. “What?”

Steve grimaced, pale. “Red Skull… Red Skull might be alive. Damn!” He stared into Yggdrasil.

Darcy put the sensor on the guinea pig. Jane closed the field. Darcy put the guinea pig down with some food. “There, poor guy. Have a little something for the road… before the mean trick.”

She stepped out of the field, back to Steve’s side. Jane rolled her eyes at Darcy’s sentimentality, and opened the portal again. Steve knelt to stare at the way the guinea pig transferred to Yggdrasil. Darcy looked at her watch as thirty seconds passed and signaled Jane when it was safe to retrieve the animal. Jane and Erik both worked controls. The animal returned, still eating. Steve looked like the wind had been knocked out of him. He put his head in his hands and cursed under his breath. Jane and Erik were ecstatic over the success of the transfer of the animal to and from another realm. They began to sci-babble. Darcy stepped to her computer and took notes that they were too excited to make. She would send the notes to both scientists to help them recall inspirations and notions that came so fast that they had a hard time remembering it all. Normally, this was an exciting time. But Steve’s distress called to her.

After Jane and Erik settled from their excited sci-babble moment, Darcy moved back to Steve’s side. She touched his shoulder. He was so deep in thought that he jumped at the contact. She spoke wryly. “I’m sure a penny’s not enough for your thoughts right now. I don’t have a hundred million. Maybe I could get a loan from Tony?”

Steve rose to his feet again and pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry. I thought he was dead, without a doubt. Now, I have to question a lot of things. If he’s alive, he’s been out there all this time, and up to no good. He was the founder of Hydra.”

“Source of all evil?” Darcy nodded.

Steve shook his head. “I don’t want to give him too much credit. He… was… just a psychotic bastard with horrible visions of what he thought the world ought to be, what he thought HIS role ought to be.” He leaned down and kissed her tenderly, clenching her against him.

Darcy smiled into the kiss. “So… other than having your worldview reshaped, what brought you here?”

Steve sighed, looking into Yggdrasil again. “I wanted to talk to you about the double date that Tony and Pepper want us to go on tonight. Are you comfortable going out? Or, would you prefer
not to? I support your decision, either way.” Jones looked attentive.

“I want to go, but I don’t want to add to your tension. This week isn’t off to a good start.” Darcy sighed.

Steve huffed at the understatement. “It’s not.” He shook his head as he looked into Yggdrasil. “Security will be tight. But, I agree with Tony that we can’t hide inside. I won’t try to do that to you. Also, I want people to drop any notion that the Avengers should feel shame about yesterday and other invasions. Like you said, we’re not the ones deciding to hurt people. We fight off the evil bastards who do that sort of thing. We’re helping with clean-up this afternoon, but people seeing us out and about is good, too. It gives them confidence.” Darcy kissed him and stroked fingers down his spine. He sighed and relaxed a bit against her.

After a moment’s pause, he cleared his throat. “I AM moving ahead with plans to shift our base Upstate. We’re working on base design with the architects this morning. Come up with your wish lists for the labs and R&D. Any that can be left in the City, leave. Recommend someone to be your assistant manager over those concerns, so you don’t have to commute much. But ones with the most vital security concerns will move to the new base. I’m pushing hard to get a rapid timeline. Yesterday was…” He shook his head, mourning.

Darcy leaned up and kissed him. “I love you, Steve.”

“I love you, too, Darcy.” He sighed.

She stroked his cheek. “I’m glad you can say that there’s no reason for you to feel shame. I’ll be happier when you believe it and stop blaming yourself.” He nodded once, dropping his gaze. She kissed his cheek. “I look forward to seeing you smile again.”

A pale imitation of a smile flitted across his face. He tightened their embrace and kissed her again. “Back to the rather-literal drawing board… Send me your thoughts for your labs. I’m trying to make things nice for you. I got the Chinese food settled. Your favorite Chinese restaurant? The owner has a son who wants to move Upstate and open a restaurant on the new base.” Steve looked at his watch. “I’ve got a full day. I’ll come back from the work site and dress in the Avengers changing room, with little time to spare. I’m sorry. It seems rude, and I hate it, but can I meet you in the lounge, along with Tony and Pepper a few minutes before seven?”

She nodded. “Of course! I can’t wait.” Steve kissed her again, waved to the others, and left.

Darcy turned to Jane and Erik, both standing with their mouths agape and staring at her. “You heard the Captain! Start on your vision of your ultimate lab! I’ll edit it for all the practical stuff you forget, and see if I can think of anything fun to add.” She waved her hands at them, gesturing for them to start.

Darcy sent messages to Betty and Bruce, asking the same of them. She jotted down notes. For one thing, she didn’t want Bruce and Betty’s lab underground, at least not far. They needed to feel as free as possible, and to go outside whenever they wanted. They would need privacy screens for those moments when Hulk and Red She-Hulk came out to play together. An image of a Japanese rock garden, a serene space, came to mind. She shared her thoughts with Bruce and Betty, encouraging them to ask for their space to be anything they could want or need. The happier they were, the less cause for re-building. An argument could be made that giving them the moon might be less expensive in the long run than starting with a ‘reasonable’ plan.

When Darcy arrived at her office in R&D, there was an arrangement of delicate, old-fashioned mixed-color pale pink and peach roses on her desk. The card read, ‘Sweetheart, Thank you for
being my light in dark times. I Love You, Steve’.

The day went by quickly. Darcy worked hard and long in R&D, not only catching up on work but also planning for the move Upstate. She met with the scientist whose intern had been apprehended the previous day, and then left for Tony’s lab.

Tony was repairing drones and sending them back out to help with cleanup. He shared, "Pepper got tickets to see the revival of ‘Wicked’." He looked at her balefully. “How’s Cap today?”

Darcy shook her head. “He had a natural reaction to an unnatural tragedy, Tony. It’ll take time.”

Tony made a derisive noise. “I don’t know if I will. I cried all over Pepper last night. I can’t believe they took out a school.” Tony seemed vulnerable. “Did it upset Cap that way? Does he suffer when stuff like that happens?” He shook his head. “Mr. Symbol of strength…”

“Of course it upset him! I thought you knew him well enough by now to realize that.” Darcy rolled her eyes at Tony.

“He seems in control whenever we meet, or when he talks to the press. He seemed cool as a cucumber talking to them as he left the school to go home.” Tony turned back to his work, trying to seem carefree.

Darcy shook her head. “He was upset, but he pushes himself to do whatever needs to be done. I wish I’d had more time with him. I hope that going out tonight will help get his mind off of it some. I have a surprise, an outfit for tonight that I hope will cheer him up. It’s inspired by an image in the same Elvgren calendar that had the sheet shot he liked so much. Bucky tells me he liked this one even more.”

Tony’s eyes went wide. “You’re going out dressed like an Elvgren pin-up? Awesome! If he can’t act human in other ways, maybe he can indulge in public sex. I recommend it.” Darcy looked at Tony with disbelief. He laughed. “I’ll have to warn Pep that you guys may ditch us even before the play to go back to bed.”

Darcy raised her brows. “That would be rude to you and Pepper. Steve’s too polite. That’ll never happen.”

“You may underestimate your power, Lewis. I’ve heard you’re crazy that way, thinking you don’t match up to the idea of his former almost-flame. You’re dead wrong. You? Dressed like a 40’s pin-up? You’ll bring him to his freakin’ knees!” He chortled, “Mr. ‘I’m always in control’ might act human for a change!” Tony smirked.

Darcy huffed in disbelief. “No one is always in control. You’re buying into the Cap image too much.” She then muttered to herself about Tony’s idea of what it meant to act human.

Tony shot back. “My dad believed Cap was always perfect, unbreakable, always righteous, and always in control.” He glanced at the agents as though seeing them for the first time today. Neither of them reacted to his words or acted as though they were listening.

Darcy shook her head. “Then your dad was wrong, and didn’t know Steve as well as he thought. Steve’s a good man, but he’s a man. Just because he heals, doesn’t mean he never hurts! Of course he hurts! Of course he loses control! He just tries to do what’s right.” She was agitated by Tony’s obtuse words.

“Yeah. It’s annoying!” Tony nodded.
Darcy snapped. “You’re annoying. Why don’t you deal with your own issues, and stop making excuses for yourself by dragging other people into it?”

“I take it all back. Peggy was way hotter. I’m sure she was nicer, too. That was rough, Lewis!” Tony frowned at her.

Darcy shrugged, stung by his words but trying not to show it. “Peggy would kick your ass instead of just hurting your feelings. That’s for sure.” They both returned to their work. Darcy kept her eyes resolutely down on reports.

Tony peered in Darcy’s direction every so often, annoyed with himself. Finally, shamefaced, he muttered. “You’re hotter.”

Darcy shook her head. “I’m really not, not in general. Her features were classic, and she was more of a fighter. I’ve seen the way he paints her, too. But, thanks for saying so. Crappy non-apology accepted.” She typed more and then added, just a touch of smug confidence in her voice. “I might be hotter tonight.”

“I can’t wait to see.” Tony’s eyebrows went up.

With a half-smile, Darcy waved goodbye as she left for Bruce’s lab.

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Betty and Bruce were excited about the move. The opportunity to plan adjoining labs in the new facility, along with outdoor access and space made them giddy. They couldn’t wait to move out of the City. Meditative yoga helped Darcy focus and calm in preparation for the evening. She wanted to set stress aside as much as possible, and to encourage Steve to do the same. Betty watched the session for a few minutes while finishing some work, and then went to work in her own lab.

After yoga, Darcy went to her old place and took a nap. She had not moved the outfit she had in mind for the evening, because she wanted to surprise Steve with it. It would also, once and for all, satisfy Natasha’s point about Darcy wearing red. The dress was red, vintage-styled, and sexy. She had tried the dress before, but not the entire ensemble.

From the calendar Darcy found and Bucky approved, Jai had designers make a custom replica of the dress that Miss December wore, tailored perfectly. She also tracked down shoes, stockings, garters, jewelry, and a hair bow that matched. At Darcy’s request, Jai found a wrap to go with the outfit.

While the lines of the dress were simple, the detailed sweetheart neckline drew attention to her breasts, arms, and shoulders. The designer captured the look of the original dress, but added straps so Darcy could wear it comfortably. According to Bucky, Steve liked the December image even more than Miss June and her trusty sheet. Darcy hoped he would like her homage. If she was honest with herself, she was sure that he would. She wondered if he felt this excited when he got her pretty jewelry.

Darcy took a long shower, shaved well, and got out the rest of the pieces of the outfit. She went to work on curling and pinning her hair back to somewhat resemble the hairdo in the original picture. It took a while, but she was pleased. The result was a curled up-do held in place by a black bow above the crown.

Darcy shook off nerves as she donned a white bustier with matching lace panties and applied makeup. Jai arrived on schedule, and was able to help her with the seamed stockings and black
garters. They worked together to add the thigh holster. Jai helped her into the red dress, sighing with satisfaction as Darcy put on the strappy white heels and added the jewelry. Jai stood back to admire the ensemble. “Your arms are more muscular than they were when I first measured you. This dress shows off the strength you’re developing beautifully. It looks even better than when you first tried it.”

Darcy stared at herself in the mirror. She had never looked or felt so beautiful before. She nodded, satisfied that her outfit would be memorable, and excited to see Steve’s reaction to this ‘gift’. Jai arranged the white shawl just so, teaching Darcy how to fix it correctly herself. Darcy applied bright red lipstick.

“With the wrap it’ll be like I’m an early Christmas present!” Darcy joked.

Jai laughed. “You look better than the original. Fierce. I imagine that the Captain will be thrilled.” Jai took a picture of Darcy for her portfolio.

Darcy mimicked the model’s expression in the next shot, and they both giggled. “Thanks for your help! I could never have done the stockings on my own.” She holstered her Glock on one thigh and tucked the suit bangles into her left pocket (an unheard of luxury, except in a custom dress). She grabbed a white clutch containing her ICER, lipstick, phone, and other basics. She walked Jai out, thanked her again, and went to the garden terrace to scrape the bottoms of her shoes before going to the lounge.

Jones and Dernier followed her from her door, both silent and watchful as she approached public space. Jones stopped her at the door, went out and checked the balcony, and then returned to tell Darcy she could go out.

When Darcy stepped out to the terrace she was unsurprised to find Bucky there reading, Iolaus purring in his lap. Bucky seemed to like the garden as much as she did. He blinked a few times as he looked at her, almost puzzled as he noticed her hairstyle. She saw when he realized what she was wearing. His expression shifted. “Can I see what you look like without your wrap?” She quelled nervousness, and undid the wrap. Bucky gasped. “Holy Christmas!”

“So, I got it right?” She smiled hopefully.

He leaned back and whistled. “That’s lethal, Doll. Steve won’t know what hit him.” He looked her up and down and his brows went up even further. “Oh, my God! Turn around, Doll.” She twirled, enjoying his attention. He sucked in harshly. “Seams! Punk never got his hands on ‘em before. By wartime there was a shortage. Garters, too?”

She glanced back over her shoulder and grinned. “Of course. I don’t hold back when I’m trying to make my guy happy.”

Bucky laughed and cussed. “Lucky bastard! Sorry, Doll! I’ve never seen anyone look so gorgeous. I heard you had something special planned, but didn’t know it was this. I may have to change my b… Well, you look beautiful in red.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Bucky. I needed to hear that.” She noticed that Jones and Dernier seemed shy of Bucky. He glanced at them and nodded, then turned back to Darcy.

He looked her in the eye. “You’re prettier than the model, as brave as that Agent, and more loving than he imagined could exist. You’re everything the Punk ever dreamed, and more.”

Darcy kissed Bucky’s cheek and then wiped away the mark with her finger. She whispered, “thank
you.”

She went to the lounge. Natasha looked up from reading. “Now, THAT’s a red dress to remember! Nice. It’s lovely, strong, sexy, yet still almost sweet. Tony blabbed about the pin-up homage. Good job!”

Sam peered around the corner from the kitchen. “Wow, Darcy. Just… wow.” He walked into the room and leaned against the wall, waiting to see Steve’s reaction.

Darcy walked over to a window and breathed deeply to calm the butterflies in her stomach. “Thank you!” She looked out at the setting sun for a moment. “What’s the bet?”

Natasha shook her head. “I can’t tell you. You might influence the outcome. You cost me a lot of money on the bet of whether I could get him to go on a date with someone.” Sam laughed. Darcy nodded and turned back to the window. “Glock in your thigh holster, and ICER in your purse?”

Darcy nodded and fixed her wrap. “Wouldn’t it be too unimaginative of them to attack us at a play called ‘Wicked’?” Sam grumbled under his breath.

Natasha shrugged. “Let’s hope so.”

Tony and Pepper stepped off the elevator. He wore all black, and she was dressed in a backless white gown. He whistled and chortled. “Christ, Lewis! You were right. You’re gonna give Cap a heart attack. You need to be more careful. He’s an old man, you know.” Sam made a dismissive noise at Tony.

Steve stepped off the other elevator at that moment scoffing, “hilarious, Stark, hila…” His voice trailed off. Darcy turned towards him, opened the shawl, and let the ends trail down her arms. She lifted her chin, meeting his stunned gaze. Pride flowed through her as she basked in the others’ attention, but especially the look on Steve’s face. There was silence for a long moment as he stared at her, his expression as openly wanting as she’d ever seen it. For the first time, Darcy felt Steve’s gaze rake over her with such hunger that she felt truly eye-fucked. A blush crept into her cheeks. She dropped her gaze demurely for a moment, and then looked back up at Steve.

“Darcy! You look amazing. I think Tony needs to give Jai a raise. What a beautiful outfit!” Pepper broke the silence.

Tony murmured, “I’d offer you a drink, Cap, if it would help.”

Steve let out a shaky breath. Tony laughed. “Oh, good! He can breathe again. But can he talk? Maybe to say… ‘let’s skip the theater and head home now?’”

Steve blinked a few times, took another shaky breath in and out, and rasped, “Beautiful,” his voice low and husky. His tone made Darcy tremble. He swallowed hard and spoke quietly. “Thank you.” He was completely still, set his jaw, and then looked down.

Tony smirked. “If you asked, she’d go home now.” Steve’s expression shifted as he shook his head and gestured to the elevator. Tony sighed, “Spoilsport! Let’s get to the theater then, for a long night of just sitting by each other.” Steve flinched. Natasha laughed softly while Sam grinned. Darcy guessed that Tony bet that Steve would be so bowled over by the pin-up outfit that he’d take her straight to bed. Tony underestimated Steve’s polite reserve. He wouldn’t disrespect Pepper that way.

Or, maybe Steve wasn’t as affected by her in the pin-up outfit as she’d hoped?
Darcy put her shawl back on and walked to the elevator. Steve’s gaze ran down her body again as she passed. As he saw the seamed stockings, he made a noise she had never heard from him outside the bedroom. She blushed with pleasure, dismissing her moment of self-doubt as her confidence rose again. Inside the elevator, Tony directed JARVIS and talked with Pepper. Steve put his arm around Darcy’s waist as she sighed and leaned into him. He trailed his fingers down the outside of her hip and thigh, noting the ICER and then the garter there. She heard a soft moan catch in his throat. Through the dress, he trailed his fingers over the garter.

He leaned down and whispered, “Je te desire. I want you so much, Sweetheart. I can’t believe you went to so much trouble for me. You look… incredible tonight, like a dream come true.”

She smiled wickedly and whispered. “Watch it! I want you, too. I can hardly wait, I’m so eager.” She felt his eyes shut tight as he leaned his face against her head. His muscles were tensed. For a second, she wondered who placed money on Steve making it to the elevator, but not to the car. His breathing was tight, ragged. She shifted so that she pressed against him. He uttered another soft noise. She couldn’t help feel gratified to have such an intoxicating effect on him. But, she was affected, too. They’d grown accustomed to gratifying each other’s desires.

Steve swallowed hard again and shifted away. She licked her lips, enjoying the heated tension, and looking forward to making love at the end of the evening. She began to wish Tony had offered her the drink that would do Steve no good. She got her wish in the car. Tony opened champagne and poured some for each of them.

He toasted, “an evening to remember, one that will bring smiles back to our faces for days to come!” Tony yelped as Pepper tickled him. Darcy laughed.

Finally, Steve smiled for the first time all day, at Darcy. She returned the look, happy.

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to take so long to update. This final stretch of the story is tough to write. I also need to look back a lot to try to keep details of my little world straight. I now have a note list at my elbow of things I need to remember (i.e. "Bucky has a cat", "Darcy had a training drone for like 1 session. Trot it out again.", and "9000 chapters ago, Tony drew up plans for a Yinsen drone. Work that in.") THIS chapter was partly draft 1, but mostly new. Believe it or not, I cut another 7k words from it and dropped them on the next chapter, which I'm working on now.

Thank you, dear people reading/giving kudos/leaving COMMENTS (yum, comments!). I APPRECIATE you, and any encouragement you give me.

Thanks to McGregorsWench for editing and encouragement. :)

Darcy's simple black dress and favorite dark red jacket- http://media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/05/e3/ed/05e3ed61e6eb6cb8d5b88152d4f6dea.jpg http://media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/c1/ce/ca/c1cecaf42139169ee6d981b76ad2395e.jpg
Darcy's all-black work outfit-
http://41.media.tumblr.com/c5cc5739c8d8219eadfd637bcafe045a/tumblr_mgdugeldZi1qbc7czo6_2
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/da/d1/b2/dad1b2f20db24840b497e1eced77e309.jpg

Yggdrasil, the last time Steve glimpsed into it, and what it looks like to portal there-
http://nerdreactor.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/tesseract-600x254.png

This ensemble came from http://www.trashydiva.com/post/Holiday-Pinup-Lingerie/ December, 1943 fictitiously. Really a 1956 image, but too awesome to pass up.
Wrap would be similar to this, but white-
https://img0.etsystatic.com/000/0/5132500/il_570xN.267691572.jpg

Confession: Renner doubling down on his slut-shaming comments when he went on Conan angered me. I nearly killed Hawkeye as a result. I'm torn. I still love Hawkeye and always loved Renner until this publicity tour, but he's achieved "problematic" status with me. (lol, fwiw) So, Hawkeye acted out, was injured, then apologized for acting out... all because Renner's been a jerk lately. Forgive me, Hawkeye fans!
“...You live here now. What’s mine is yours...”

Chapter Summary

Steve & Darcy, and Tony & Pepper go out to a play. Hydra attacks again. Captain America is the man with a plan.

Chapter Notes

Thanks McGregorsWench for beta help!

Thank you to those who read, etc., ESPECIALLY those who leave Comments that encourage.

On the way to the play, they all drank champagne. Pepper kissed Tony and asked him work questions, causing him to whine that she was negating his toast and taking away the fun. Darcy could feel Steve trying to relax next to her. He managed another small grin. “Do you know anything about tonight’s play? I didn’t have time to look it up.”

Darcy nodded. “I’ve heard a few of the songs from it. It’s supposed to be wonderful. I think it tells the story of the witches from the Wizard of Oz.” Steve looked surprised and pleased.

Pepper explained, “It’s a revival from a few years ago. I thought it might hold more appeal for you than some other shows. Tony complained that I’m ‘no fun’ for not wanting to take you to the Rockettes, or one of the raciest plays.” She made a face at Tony.

“You’re a class act, Pepper. Not sure how he got so lucky.” Steve toasted her, and smiled.

Tony smirked. “I was born under a lucky star, and she’s the most forgiving woman on the planet.” He kissed Pepper’s hand, looking at her with near reverence.

Steve smiled. “Must be!” He looked around them as the car slowed. “So, Happy, one of Pepper’s guards, and Jones in this car. A separate security vehicle behind us with Dernier, and two more SI guards. Your suit and Darcy’s in the trunk.” Tony shrugged with faux nonchalance, and then nodded.

“My protective suit over this? That’ll be interesting.” Darcy looked down at her outfit.

Tony mouthed silently, ‘Boobies suit!’ and smirked at her. Darcy rolled her eyes at him. Pepper put a hand over her mouth, hiding a grin.

Steve ignored Tony and squeezed Darcy’s hand. “Just precautions… like carrying your guns.”

Pepper smiled and placed a hand over Steve’s. Her hand glowed. “We look after each other.” Darcy’s eyes widened. She’d never seen Pepper do that before.

Tony had seats in a private box just for the four of them. There was a table in the center, with more
champagne, and two chairs on either side of the table. Pepper entered first and took the seat closest to the stage, a look of excitement on her face. Tony sat by her, and poured champagne for her, Darcy, and Steve. He filled his champagne flute with Pellegrino on the sly. Darcy sat across the table from Tony. Steve took the seat closest to the entrance to the box.

Darcy noticed that tell-tale line appear between Steve's eyes, the one that meant he was looking to see if something was out of place. She leaned closer. “Problem?”

He squeezed her hand, looking around. “It’s hard to relax in a crowd.” She watched him for a moment, admiring the set of his jaw and how focused he appeared. When he finally glanced at her again, she saw a flash of heat in his expression before he continued his perusal of the theater. She blushed with pleasure.

Jones was sitting nearby, undercover as a theater patron, but Darcy wasn’t sure how the others were deployed. She just knew that they were keeping them safe. Darcy was excited. She loved plays, but had never been to a Broadway show before. Steve scanned the room to ensure everyone was what they seemed. While he was occupied, Darcy admired the detailed carvings and other decor, the atmosphere. She exchanged happy smiles with Pepper while Tony ran a hand up and down the bare skin of Pepper’s back. Then, Pepper closed her eyes and arched into Tony's touch.

Darcy tucked her shawl over the back of her chair and read the Playbill, seeing who the actors were, and letting Steve do as he needed. She looked around and admired people’s clothing, conscious of how others looked her over in return. When Steve took her hand again, she smiled at him. “Done with your recon?”

He chuckled. “You’re tolerant of my habits. Thank you.” He lifted her hand slightly as though to kiss it, but only squeezed it instead. Darcy’s brow furrowed for a moment as she wondered why he changed his mind. Then, she glanced over as Tony cackled. Steve’s breath shuddered. He held her hand almost too tight. Darcy suspected it was to prevent himself from doing anything less innocent. Her imagination had suggestions.

“I am. It would be a horrible pain in the ass for you to break in someone else for dating you. You may as well stick with me.” Darcy winked at him, then looked him over appreciatively.

Steve sighed. “Yeah...right. THAT's why I’m with you. It has nothing to do with being head over heels in love.” He glanced down at her, and then looked determinedly up and away again. A tremor passed through him. She looked around the audience, noticing people who were staring into their box. Many sets of eyes focused on Tony. She kind of loved him as he gestured wildly and did his best to draw as much attention as possible to himself. Many people also stared at Pepper, who ignored them and focused on Tony. Darcy guessed that people wondered who she and Steve were, because they were with Tony and Pepper. Or, maybe because Steve looked so amazing. She knew she looked good, too, but couldn’t think she compared to his perfection. At least some people might realize that Steve was Captain America. New York was proud of their favorite, heroic sons. She looked at him, so handsome in a charcoal gray, three-piece suit with a dark blue tie. It made his shoulders seem even larger than they were.

She leaned closer. “You look fantastic, by the way.”

He squeezed her hand again, and shook his head in wonder. Steve bit his lip. “You look better than fantastic. You’re beautiful all the time, and in any outfit, but extra stunning tonight. The effort you put into making me happy takes my breath away. It makes me feel...loved.” He swallowed hard. When she stroked his hand, he gasped and gripped her hand in his, stopping her motion. His words made her wonder, for the first time, if he had as much difficulty accepting her love for him as she had believing his for her. The image most people had of ‘the Captain’ might seem as daunting to
him as his idealized image of Peggy Carter seemed to her.

The play was magical, with beautiful music, funny dialogue, and heartbreak all wrapped up in one package. At intermission, Tony asked if the story disturbed Steve’s black-and-white worldview. Steve laughed at him. “Cut the crap, Stark. You know me well enough by now to know that’s way off. It’s a good story. The performers give it passion and bring it to life.”

Tony shook his head. “I’m still learning that you know the meaning of passion, Cap. My whole life, you seemed like this too-good, righteous, stick-in-the-mud figure. Now…” He chuckled.

Darcy put her hand on Steve’s thigh as she leaned over to Tony. “Now, you’re learning that Steve is a real man, not some icon from your comic books or trading cards.” She made a face at Tony. “And it’s a lesson that’s coming to you pretty slow, for a genius.” Steve laughed, but quickly lifted her hand from his thigh.

“Dad forgot to mention that Captain Perfect could be an asshole.” Tony glared at Steve.

Darcy sighed. “Well, then Dad got a few things wrong.” Tony appeared mollified, giving a quick nod to that. She winked at Steve again.

They stood along with the rest of the audience to offer an ovation at the end of the play. Darcy wiped a tear from her eye. “I love the way they changed it from the book. I love a happy ending! Thank you for inviting us, guys!”

Tony preened as Pepper applauded with enthusiasm. He turned to Steve. “Let’s get the ladies something else to drink while Happy brings the car.” Darcy saw Tony speak into a tiny microphone at his wrist.

Pepper touched Darcy’s shoulder. “I need to visit the women’s room. Come with me? There’s one with limited traffic up here.” Jones walked ahead, inspecting the restroom before allowing them entrance.

Darcy followed Pepper. “Do you get to plays often?”

“Not enough! I enjoyed this one.” Pepper shook her head, her smile soft.

They both used the facilities and touched up their makeup, and made their way to the lobby. Someone stopped Pepper almost the moment they were out of the restroom. Darcy stepped to the side, near a wall. She looked across the room, admiring the architectural features, and watching the departing crowd. Jones stood beside her. Steve and Tony had two drinks each and had drawn a crowd of hangers-on. Darcy watched Tony flirt with the girls around them. Steve looked at them uncomfortably, his smile polite and tight. She smiled at the sight. One of the girls close behind Tony swayed into him, dizzy or pretending to be dizzy so she could touch him. Darcy admired how Tony could smile while admonishing someone. There was no doubt that he was telling the confused-looking girl to back off. She took a large step back and stared at Tony, almost pitiful.

Not wanting to leave Pepper, Darcy stayed still and looked around the room more. A fantastic, painted mural covered the ceiling, and the columns were elaborately carved marble. She’d taken a few arts and design courses, and tried to remember which kind of columns she saw.

There was a flash of light near the base of one. It didn’t belong. Darcy took a step towards it. Jones shifted closer by her side.

The light puzzled her. Instinctively, Darcy spoke. “I see something wrong.” Steve’s gaze shifted to her. Darcy turned to Agent Jones. “Look! At the column behind and to the left of Tony.
Something’s flashing.” Jones stared at it, and then moved ahead as Darcy began to edge closer to
the light. The crowd around Tony blocked Steve and slowed his movement. The flash occurred
again. Darcy walked towards the column, towards Steve. She put her hand in her clutch and
gripped the ICER, releasing the safety. She saw the flash again and fired blind just above it, a
quick double shot around Jones. There was a ‘thump’ as a body fell. When Darcy fired the ICER,
an alarm signal went to JARVIS.

Steve saw Darcy fire, dropped his drinks and disregarded outcries, and pushed his way past the
throng. He walked to the column and lightly kicked something there. He glanced back at Darcy
again, spoke into a microphone at his wrist, and then moved past the column into the darkness.
Jones grabbed Darcy by the arm and urged her to stay close.

Dernier hurried to them, murmuring, "oui, mon Capitaine." He drew his gun and stood with his
back to Darcy, covering her.

Other SI security people picked up a woman from the floor by the column and cuffed her hands.
An unfamiliar device lay on the floor beside her. A few moments later, Happy Hogan took off his
coat and wrapped it around the object and carried it out. One of the SI guards stayed by Tony,
while another went to Pepper’s side. Jones and Dernier stood on either side of Darcy with weapons
drawn.

Darcy held out her hand to Tony, and took Pepper’s drink from him. She cursed when Dernier
knocked it from her hand, but then shuddered as she considered his proper caution. Tony was silent
and still, with a strange look on his face. Darcy called Bruce, updated him, and asked if he would
spearhead analysis of the strange object when it came in. Tony’s continued silence puzzled her.
“You okay? Tony?”

He nodded and smiled pleasantly at her. “Whatever you say...” He put a hand to his neck, touching
a tiny dart pricking his skin there. His expression shifted, like he was struggling.

Over the phone, Bruce gasped. “He’s not okay!”

Darcy shook Tony and cocked her head, staring at the dart. She held out her purse. “Hey! Hold this
for me, would you?” Tony obediently took it from her hand and held it in mid-air. She cussed,
while he smiled in a bemused fashion. She was shaking. “What happened to your usual prissiness
about taking things, Tony?”

His eyes were glassy and his mouth upturned into a smile. “Whatever you think is best... I’m sure
that’ll be fine. Please tell me what you want me to do.”

She yelped. “Shit! If they broke his brain, there will be hell to pay! Bruce, we’re incoming, too.
Tony’s smile is creepy. There’s a little dart in his neck, and he’s taking orders from me!” Tony
stumbled back from her, turned and threw up all over the floor. Darcy groaned. “Now, he’s
throwing up. Ick.” She jerked her purse out of Tony's hand, out of range.

Pepper yelled, “Tony!” and ran to his side. She looked ferocious and terrified all at once. Tony fell
to his knees on the floor and threw up again, and then began to cough. Darcy put her ICER in her
clutch, pulled the Glock out of her holster, and stood by Tony and Pepper with it held in front of
her. People who had been standing around Tony and Steve fled at the sight of anxious guards and
drawn guns. The SI guards were looking all around them.

Darcy spoke into her phone. “Second floor lobby... When will help be here? Steve’s in pursuit, or
something. He went off down the hall, last I saw. SI guards are with us. Pepper and I are with
Tony.” She frowned, wishing she knew where Steve had gone, and that he was okay.
Thor arrived about twenty seconds later, carrying Natasha and landing on the nearby balcony. Sam flew in after them. Natasha prowled around the room, looking for other operatives and for clues. Sam fell to his knees by Tony. “Okay there, Stark?” Tony shook his head, moaning. Sam wrapped the dart, holding it in place so that a doctor could remove it and evaluate it at the Tower. He stood, opened his wings, and pulled Tony against him. “I got ya, man. Let’s get out of here.” Sam flew out, headed back to the Tower.

Tony cried out, “Pepper!” as he was lifted away.

Thor pulled Darcy close. “Stay by me, Lady Darcy.” She nodded and moved closer to him, happy to be safe by his side. Pepper shifted into a posture Darcy had never seen her in before. Her hands glowed.

One of the girls who had been flirting with Tony approached Thor. “What do you want me to do?” Thor looked confused and taken aback.

Darcy stared. “Are you flirting, or is your brain fried?” The girl smiled in reply. Darcy looked at Natasha. “I think this one got between Tony and the flashy thing.” Natasha nodded agreement. She turned the woman and pointed to a dart on her neck.

Then, Natasha shoved Darcy behind Thor. Pepper jumped twenty feet across the room and grabbed someone from behind a column there. She took a gun from them, and it melted in her grip as she smashed it. Darcy gaped, stunned by the speed with which Pepper had moved, and the angry look on her face. It looked like Tony’s Hulk-crush was handily satisfied by his lady love’s temperament. The man whose gun Pepper destroyed fell to his knees and put his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Then, he fell over dead as he bit down on a cyanide-filled ‘tooth’. Pepper was so angry that she kicked him.

Natasha turned to Thor. “Get Darcy back to the Tower. I’m going after Steve.”

At that moment, Steve came back into the room, dragging an unconscious pair of men dressed all in black. He dropped them, crossed to Darcy, and pulled her into his arms. He begged. “Please, go with Thor. We’ll help secure the scene, get these guys in, and then I’ll find you. By the way, that was a nice shot you took.” Steve took off his suit jacket and wrapped it around Darcy.

As Darcy stepped back to Thor’s side, Steve shared what he’d found. “Bucky and Hawkeye captured a Hydra transport van out back, and will take it back to the Tower after it’s been cleared. I’m not quite sure how they planned to get Tony away from me and Pepper, but his capture and control was their play tonight.”

The lady with the dart in her neck turned to Steve. “What do you want for me to do?”

Darcy sighed. “He was taking orders like her, not in control of his mind. They could have just TOLD him to go. Isn’t the men’s restroom down that hallway behind where the weird machine was? Towards an exit?” The Avengers were outraged.

A few minutes later, Darcy entered the Healing Ward, two SI Security guards she’d met a few times before flanking her. She missed Navarro’s habitual greeting, and sent up a silent prayer for both Navarro and Chau. She went to the Triage area, following the sound of Tony yelling. “I’m fine! I know my name, your name, and the names of everyone in this building! I know the periodic table of elements, and how to make new ones! I know the presidents, what day it is, what happened on this date for the past fifty years, and how many fingers you’re holding up! I know more than almost anyone!” He sounded extremely anxious. “What I don’t know is where Pepper is, why I was acting weird at the theater, and what caused me to throw up! Let me go! JARVIS! Suit me! I
Darcy walked faster. She was pleased that JARVIS understood to disregard Tony’s request for an Iron Man suit. Darcy looked into the room. Tony was sitting up on the gurney, shirtless and red with anger. Sam struggled to keep him from hurting the medical personnel. Even without armor, Tony Stark was strong and dangerous when provoked. Bettyhovered just inside the door to the room, her expression anxious, but determined.

Darcy touched Betty's arm to reassure her, and walked to Tony's side. “Hi, Tony.”

“Where’s Pepper? Is she okay?” His tone was tight with panic.

Darcy nodded. “Thor just brought me in, and went back to the theater. When we left, Pepper was fine, but doing a fair Hulk imitation that made people not want to try to tell her what to do. Her hands were reddish. She crushed and melted a handgun one of the bad guys had drawn. She was safe with Steve and Natasha when Thor brought me out of there.”

Tony was shaking all over, and his complexion went gray. “What happened to me? Why did I throw up? I hadn't even sipped that drink. We were too busy fending off my adoring public.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “You got zapped with something. I don't know all the details, but Hydra was trying to abduct you. They hit you with some sort of mind-control drug and device. Tricky, nasty stuff!”

“Mind control! Me? What the hell?!” He put one hand on the other arm, trying vainly to still the shaking. It worsened.

She put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “A lady who got tagged like you approached Thor and asked what to do. I expect they’ll bring her in here, too.” She sighed. “You scared the crap out of me when you let me hand you my purse and smiled nicely, saying that you’d do whatever I thought best!” His brows went up, and he looked furious. She opined. “If it could affect your brain, it could affect most anyone, oh manly-stubborn genius. Happy brought the gadget back to the Tower for Bruce to evaluate. You need to let these people do tests so we can get you in the lab to work on it. I’m guessing, though, that a CAT scan, MRI, some blood tests, vitals checks and stuff need to get done first. The data will help you figure things out, so you can avenge this attempt on your awesome brain.”

Tony quieted and nodded, disgruntled. “I hate it when you manage me, Lewis.” He looked around and blinked back tears. Sam backed away, looking hopeful. Tony glared at Darcy and groused. “Okay. Get the data we need so I can get back to work with it. Make it snappy!” Sam turned and walked out, saluting Darcy as he went.

The nurses closed in. One put a thermometer in Tony’s mouth, another took his blood pressure, and a third took blood samples and then hooked him to an IV. After they had his temp, Tony asked, “Water?” Darcy got a sport bottle out of the cabinet, filled it with ice water, and set it on the table next to Tony. He looked unsure of himself, and his eyes were bright with unshed tears. He murmured, “My mind… theirs.” He shuddered, and his teeth chattered.

“You want a hand to hold?” She sighed.

“Sure... Will you do to me whatever you did to Cap after the Vorm attack?” His expression was wan.

She grinned and shook her head, whispering. “Nope! If I put your hand inside my bra, Steve’d
break your fingers."

Tony looked down and rocked with quiet laughter. “Oh, my God! Outstanding! Interesting way to try and wake a pseudo-coma patient, Lewis! I approve your methodology. I knew it was something that turned him on. He probably would break my hand if you duplicated the experiment, though! Still… Might be worth it… Wanna find out?”

“No, thanks. You’re bucking for me to report you to HR, worse… Pepper. Still, I’m glad you’re okay.” Darcy sighed.

He shook his head, still laughing. “Jury has always been out on that one.” He stared down at the floor, trying to piece things together. “We got drinks. People flocked around to talk to us. Girls flirted, businessmen reminded me I know them, paparazzi, the usual.” He shook his head. “Then, what?”

She put a supportive hand on his shoulder. “Someone shot a dart into your neck. I’d guess the tip carries SOMETHING that Betty will figure out. There was a lady with a device behind a column over your left shoulder. I was trying to remember the difference between Ionic and Doric columns since I was bored while people cozied up to Pepper. I saw something flashing near the base of that column.”

“How were you looking at the base of the columns? The Ionic detail is near the top; and those are Ionic, for what it’s worth.” Tony looked exasperated and scornful.

She smiled. “I’m not as smart as you are. Or, maybe it was just that the flashing caught my eye? It didn’t belong. I feared it was a bomb at first, but then… I thought I saw someone in the shadows. I spoke so Steve could hear me, but he was having a hard time getting past your admirers. So, I took a blind double shot with the ICER Coulson gave me, and hit the lady zapping you.” She made a cheering gesture. “Double tap! No angry Hawkeye for me! Yay!”

Tony gasped. “You saved my brain?” He exclaimed. “Between that and admitting you made Rogers feel you up when he couldn’t move, I may adopt you! You’re at least in the will now. I don’t care how unsound my mind is at the moment!” He continued to shake all over. His eyes were almost wild as he struggled to control himself, in vain.

He looked around, obviously seeking a distraction. He checked his watch. “Damn! I had Cap down as either nailing you the minute he saw that outfit, or the minute we got back. I knew I could manipulate things so we’d get back at Midnight, so that’s my bet time. Where is he? How long can it take for them to clear the scene? Even if I have to share the pot then, it’d be something…”

“Insane! You people and your gambling addiction! You already have all the money, Tony. You have your own sex life. Why are you so interested in ours?” She groused.

He rolled his eyes. “The guy was backed up for seventy years, limber and loud-mouthed USO girls be damned. How is that not worth some speculation?” He managed a grin. “It was close earlier. He looked like he’d hit himself in the face with his shield when he saw that sexy-sweet getup. Whatever you said in the elevator almost shattered that legendary ‘Captain America’ self-control. Cap was so looped that my dad would have pissed himself seeing that… especially since I’m pretty sure that Dad’s interest in Cap was… well… I thought his knees were gonna buckle. It’s like your superpower! Pepper almost jumped me just from being within three feet of all that sexual tension.” He grimaced. “Up until the part where Hydra tried to turn me into Winter Soldier redux, it was one of the best double dates ever. You guys were so intent on not misbehaving, that we were getting up to all kinds of fun without you noticing. I had plans! Eh, and if Cap heard some dirty talk, it’s not the first time. Took him a week to ask for better sound-proofing at his place!” Tony’s smile was
Darcy rolled her eyes. “You’re being YOU, again, Tony. I’m delighted and appalled.” She hugged him to offer comfort. He was still shivering and hot to the touch.

Tony’s shoulders sagged as he clutched her. “I was such an ass to you earlier when I said that Peggy was hotter. You were right that you’d look hotter tonight, Lewis, no ‘might or maybe’ about it! I hope you’re over that crazy insecurity stuff now, and will put Cap out of his misery. Marriage is awesome.” He released her, laughing as she stared at him.

Steve walked into the room. “How are you, Tony?” He stopped by Darcy, gripping her hand in his. He glanced at her as she squeezed his hand to offer reassurance.

Tony griped, “I’m delightful. How’s your *fuck-’em-up for the sake of revenge* plan coming, star-spangled man? I want these bastards deader than dead. First they dare to shut JARVIS out of here and hurt my people; threaten Bruce’s girl, gun for Hawkeye, and now they come for my fuckin’ brain? They can’t ever get dead enough.” He looked more belligerent, and yelled. “I want to talk to the ones you brought back here, right damned now! I’ll put a suit on and pound them! I want details on what they did to me… and what they thought they were going to do next. Was I going in some damned refrigerator between missions killing people? Did they intend to turn my work against me so I would be an ultimate weapon?” He sagged, let out a sound like a sob, and whispered, “Shit! I can’t believe Barnes can even walk upright. Another damned man out-of-time to come up short against.”

Steve shook his head and sighed with sympathy, standing stone still. “You can talk to the prisoners after you’re sorted out, and Natasha’s done, if you want. Let her work them over first. You have other stuff to do now. We need to gather data to work with, data from what they did and how it affected you.”

Betty worked up the courage to approach Tony. “I need some blood and tissue samples, please.” A nurse handed Betty vials of blood and a container that held the dart that had been in Tony’s neck. She studied the dart, frowning.

“You want me to just peel my head open and give you a crack at my brain, too? Is it open season?” Tony’s voice rose as he turned on Betty savagely.

Steve barked. “Calm down, Tony!” They all gasped as Tony complied against his will, his face losing all expression. Steve’s eye widened, and he paled. Horrified, he apologized. “God, Tony! I’m sorry! I…”

The shaking increased again, and Tony’s expression shifted from calm to manic. He gripped the edges of the gurney. “Shit! Shit! Make it stop!” He looked like he might vomit again.

Steve rasped at a whisper. “You have free will, Tony. You don’t have to follow orders.” He looked tearful.

Betty pushed past the others, and did an exam, reassuring Tony as she looked him over. “It’s okay, Tony. May I call you Tony? I have experience dealing with strong emotions. I’d like to help, if you’ll allow it. Please, would you look into my eyes?”

“How are you going to go Red?” Tony gulped hard.

Betty’s smile was gentle. “No. I’m not. Are you afraid of me? There’s no reason to be. I’ll transform faster than you can scream ‘Christmas Porn’ if Hydra tries again. Otherwise, I’ll stay almost back to normal.
human and help you. I’ll help take care of you until you’re okay again, if you’ll allow.” She touched one of his shoulders, rubbing with an easy circular motion.

Tony nodded and leaned closer to Betty. “Help me.” He sounded plaintive, like a child. She put her hand over his and stared into his eyes with a gentle smile. He whispered in a mournful tone. “I feel like an exposed nerve. I don’t like it. When I fight it, I feel sick. But, I have to fight…”

Betty’s breathing was slow and rhythmic. Steve and Darcy noticed that Tony unconsciously matched the rhythm of her breathing. His color improved. Her voice calmed and soothed. “You’re here in your Tower, Tony. You’re safe. You’re with friends who want to look after you, who brought you out of danger to safety. You’ll see Pepper soon. Everything will be okay.”

“Where’s Pepper?” Darcy turned to Steve, whispering.

Steve touched her arm. “Pepper’s watching the interrogations. She’s pretty pissed off.”

Betty scowled at Steve as Tony screamed. “Don’t you dare put her in there with them!” He breathed in and out heavily, struggling to rein in his emotions again.

“Never.” Steve shook his head, somber.

Betty’s tone was comforting. She stroked Tony’s arm with light touches. “Pepper is in your Tower, Tony. She’s close by, but checking to make sure that the bad guys are locked up away from you. She’ll be with you again soon. Everything’s going to be okay. You’re okay, Tony. Steve would never put Pepper in danger. She’s safe. He’s sorry that it’s taking so long for her to get to your side. We all are.” Tony gasped for breath. Betty glanced at Darcy again, indicating she wanted help.

“Darcy’s sorry, too. She asked Steve about Pepper so that we could tell you how soon she’ll be here. Darcy’s your friend. She does the reports you don’t like and puts up with your teasing.” Betty smiled wryly.

Darcy moved closer to Tony and called his name softly. Tony grabbed her by the arm, holding tight to her. He blinked back tears and tried to smile again, turning to Steve. “I’m thinking of adopting your girl, Cap. She saved my brain and made you human. It’s awesome.” Tony started to cry, then looked horrified that he’d let that happen in front of Steve. He glanced up at the taller man with an expression that spoke of shame. Steve tried to look supportive and calm, non-judgmental. Tony stopped as suddenly as he’d started. “Okay, Betty. Do what you need. Scrape, draw blood, whatever. We need to put our brains together, while we all still have them, and figure this damned thing out.” His voice was stronger as he turned to Steve again. “How do they stay ahead of us?”

“They started out that way by stealing Asgardian tech, probably Vorm and other races’ tech, too.” Steve put a steadying hand on Tony’s shoulder.

Tony growled, glaring at Darcy. “Why can’t we get some? Why does Asgard use the Star Trek Prime Directive against us?”

Darcy put up her hands. “Don’t ask me. I’m only an honorary family member. Try Thor. I’m pretty sure the answer will be a resounding ‘NO,’ though. Odin’s never been the nicest guy, and Thor’s on thin ice with him since the treason. Odin doesn’t think much of us mortals. He called Jane a goat.” Both Steve and Tony looked puzzled, and then shook it off. Their eyes met, and Steve grinned at Tony.

Tony grumbled. “Hydra seems to like Odin these days. They find him ‘more approachable’ than he used to be.” He watched Steve, but glanced at Betty from time to time and matched her
breathing rhythm.

Steve sighed. “Maybe Thor could ask Odin to stop helping others, if he’s doing anything that shifts the playing field in their favor.” He started pacing, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Tony babbled to Steve. “Maybe it’s time I got my hands on something like that cosmic cube. We need a powerful advantage to help us maintain peace here on Midgard!” Darcy winced, while Betty tightened her grip on Tony’s hand and shook her head.

Steve stopped and shook his head with earnest concern. “That thing wouldn’t let you keep control of your mind, Tony. We need you fully functioning and on our side. I’m sick thinking how it would gut the Avengers to lose you. We’d lose our friend and ally, JARVIS and all he knows, our base, the drones, funding for our tech and hardware. Most importantly, we’d lose the crazy edge that makes us more than just soldiers and spies.”

Tony looked surprised and touched by Steve’s words, but shook his head. “JARVIS would find his way back. If I went crazy, he would shut me out. Pepper has control of SI and all my assets. If something were to happen to her, it would all go to Rhodey. If Rhodey was out of the picture, it would go to Bruce, then you.” Steve’s brows went up in surprise. Tony continued, “If Bruce and you were out of the picture, the world would be gone. None of it would matter worth a damn anymore, so that’s as deep as that goes. But I wouldn’t put all the Avengers’ eggs in one basket. I’m that smart… still.” He blinked hard. He put a hand over his eyes as tears fell again. Betty made soothing noises. Tony nodded in reply.

Pepper walked into the room, and Tony moaned. Steve and Darcy moved back, and Betty stepped to the side so that Pepper could pull Tony tightly against her. She kissed his head several times, murmuring, “I can’t lose you. I can’t lose you.” They kissed. She kissed the tears from his cheeks and laid her chin against his shoulder at the crook of his neck. “Oh, Tony!” He closed his eyes, sagged against her, and sighed with relief.

Steve took Darcy’s hand. “We’ll leave you two now.” They edged towards the door.

Tony looked at the clock and exclaimed. “Move fast! My bets were for the moment you laid eyes on her tonight, or midnight. I figured you’d crack immediately, or make it all the way home. Of course, with the midnight-at-home bet, I have to split with Barnes. It’s the only time he’d wager on. Smart bastard wouldn’t bet until after I did, knowing I could effect our return time.” Pepper uttered a mixture of a laugh and a cry.

Steve glanced at the clock. It would be midnight in fifteen minutes. He glanced at Darcy and wryly sighed. “Bucky has a lot of faith in me.” He looked Darcy up and down appreciatively.

Tony laughed. “I already won one bet, though. I knew if the sight of her didn’t break you immediately, you wouldn’t be able to kiss her at all until you could be alone. Sam thought you couldn’t go so long without kissing her.” He kissed Pepper’s cheek, his hands running along her back.

Steve smiled and nodded as Darcy raised a brow at him. He pulled Darcy out as she wished the others good night. Bucky was in the elevator. Bucky looked at his watch and smirked. As the elevator rose, Darcy thought she heard Bucky whisper very low, “almost there, Punk.” Darcy raised a brow as Steve’s fingers drifted down to toy with a garter through the material of her skirt again.

Bucky asked Steve, “Stark okay?”
Steve grimaced. “He’s pretty raw. Whatever they dosed him with is doing a number on his emotional control and has ugly physical effects, too. A taste of the kind of shit Hydra can dream up has given him a new understanding and respect where you’re concerned.”

Bucky looked surprised, and then shrugged. “Okay.” He smirked as he caught sight of Steve’s fingers against Darcy’s thigh. “Well, I’m gonna change and go for a night run with Sam and Thor. I guess we all have excess energy to burn in the next few hours.” He raised a brow at Steve.

“Guess so… I see you’re not inviting me along.” Steve choked on a laugh.

Bucky laughed. “Your dance card’s full up, Punk.” Steve’s grin twisted. He squeezed Darcy’s hand.

Darcy shook her head. “I’m right here between you… testosterone-fest guys.” Steve intertwined their fingers. She glanced at him and was entranced by the overt desire in his gaze. She blushed, and let out an impatient breath.

Bucky’s grin was suggestive. “You wanted a reaction, Doll. You’re about to get one.” The elevator doors opened to their floor. He gestured. “Please, ladies first. It’s time for you two to be home. Good night!”

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Darcy wasn’t sure what to expect when they reached their apartment. After Bucky’s reactions in the elevator, she half expected Steve to slam her against the door as soon as they were inside. For most of the evening, Steve had either stared at her heatedly, or not at all, as though she was irresistible.

Against the door would be fine by her, and the sooner, the better. She’d missed his kisses, not noticing before how common it had become for him to kiss at least her hand. Her lips tingled with want. It left her breathless to think that he didn’t trust his self-control, if he kissed her before they were alone. The low level sense of ‘want’ that had shifted aside during Hydra’s attempt on Tony returned as they headed home.

Steve opened the door, and Darcy walked in ahead of him. He closed the door behind them, and took his jacket from her shoulders to hang on a peg by the door. She glanced back at him, feeling almost shy, handed him her wrap to hang, and then continued down the hall to the living room. She was interested to see that his expression was one of deep concentration. It was the closest she’d seen in private to what she thought of as his ‘Captain’ or public face. He walked past her silently and turned on the fireplace, but no other lights. He stared down at the fire for a moment. Then, he moved to the stereo and turned it on to a Blue October album, ‘sway’. He took a deep breath, using the music to calm himself.

Darcy lifted her chin and focused her attention on Steve as she walked into the room. He turned to watch her. She removed the holster from one leg and set it on a table with her clutch purse. She sat on the sofa with her legs angled and together, pulling her skirt up enough to that a garter showed a little bit. His breathing hitched.

“I want you, Steve.” Darcy looked up into his eyes and smiled.

His voice was husky. “I want you desperately, Darcy.” He leaned against the mantle. “I want you, only you. You’re the only woman who has ever brought my fantasies to life, and the person who gives me soft comfort when life is too hard. You’re the love of my life. You’re everything to me, more than fantasy. You devote yourself to growing as a person, looking after others, and making
the world better. I couldn’t wish to be with anyone else now. You’re the woman I want.” He let out a tense breath. “I love you so much.”

She shared, “I’m hanging onto what you talked about last week. It’s like we were meant to be. Knowing you makes me happy. I want the man behind the shield, need you. I want to be better, and to delight you. If I can give you things you never had before, like seamed stockings and garters you can undo…” He closed his eyes and looked down. “I want to make you happy.” He looked back up at her intently.

Darcy’s smile was impish. “I hope you like the other ten ‘outfits’ as much as you seem to like this one, and me with the sheet.” He gasped, and his shoulders did a sort of roll like he’d been punched. She mused teasingly. “Most of them will have to stay behind closed doors just between us, of course. For one, I even have to look like I know how to bake! Why do you think a woman would knead bread dough topless, though?” She liked the bemused grin he quirked at that.

He finally crossed to her. He knelt and reached to cup her face in one hand. She held her breath as he slowly leaned in for a kiss. They both sighed as their lips met. But for the heated trembling behind it, the kiss was almost chaste. His hands were not so innocent in intent. He slid one hand under her skirt to touch above her garter. He held still so that the only movement she felt there was the trembling of his fingers against her bare skin. She shifted and gasped. At that sound, he again closed his eyes and leaned his head down to touch hers, forehead to forehead. He breathed, “love you, Darcy.”

He took it slow, displaying the same steely control he’d forced on himself the first time they made love. He kissed her cheek, then her lips again with a slight touch. His breath warmed her ear and the skin below it. Darcy gasped, “Oh, Steve, please… I feel like I’m on fire.” She ached for more. “Please.”

“We have all night. I need…” He stopped and put his cheek against hers. His voice was low and barely controlled.

Darcy thought about his words, ‘fantasies to life’. Before the serum, he thought his dream girls wouldn’t give him the time of day and that women only viewed him as a weak kid. After the serum, they only seemed to want Captain America. Now, she and Steve were in love and she wanted to give him everything he’d ever desired.

“Steve, my wonderful Steve. I love you. I need you as much as you need me. I desire you.” Darcy whispered heatedly, “want you.”

He moved his hand out from under her skirt and trailed his fingers along her thigh, down her leg. Then, he traced the seam up the back of her leg while she moaned. At the same time, he leaned forward and touched his lips to hers again. She wrapped one hand around the back of his neck and held his head close so that she could deepen the kiss, nearly desperate with wanting him. She murmured again, “I want you.” She took control of their kissing, letting passion flow freely between them.

Steve matched her ferocity with his own, and trailed his fingers up along the back of her other leg. His intensity increased. He nipped his way down her neck, with open-mouthed kisses that left her skin tingling, wanting more. Both of his hands moved down and up her legs. When his fingers again reached the garter under the skirt, he used the other hand to push her skirt up. She lay back weakly as he kissed the bare skin above the garter, still taking his time. She reached down and tugged at the sides of her panties to release the Velcro tabs that held them together. Steve groaned, reached up, and pulled the panties away, and growled. “Good plan!”
She smirked at him. “Of course!” Darcy's smirk faded as his kisses and touches became more intimate. Soon, she was chanting his name and arching against his mouth. She wasn’t even sure when her trembling legs shifted over his shoulders. She writhed with pleasure, and moaned. The night was a blur of heat, touch, kisses, love, and overwhelming bliss. They made love for hours.

When Darcy’s eyes finally closed for sleep, Steve sighed. “Good night, my beautiful Darcy. I love you more than anything.” She snuggled into his embrace and murmured a reply. After her breathing evened out, Steve whispered longingly, "wife... " He watched her for a long time, savoring her peaceful beauty as he drifted to sleep, too.

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Darcy woke alone in their bed the next morning. Steve was in the living room. He worked on the computer, a multitude of windows and tabs open on the screen. He also read and made notes on a paper pad with many filled pages. He typed notes, and sent messages. Books lay open on the desk around him. It was obvious that he’d been working for hours. More than that, much of the work was long-term and in depth. Darcy went to the bathroom and threw on his t-shirt, walked up behind him, and kissed his cheek. He pulled her into the chair next to his, leaned over and kissed her, then returned to his work. He made detailed notes on population-defensive battle techniques. He scanned the latest report from JARVIS on Hydra and SHIELD files that Natasha had leaked to the Internet. A separate file detailed private Avengers tech data.

Tony’s medical test results were on the screen, along with a second set for comparison. Darcy startled when she realized the second set was from early testing on Bucky, soon after Steve had found him. The list of drug ingredients in the compound found on the dart was long. Many of the ingredients had been in Bucky’s system when Steve brought him to the Tower. Darcy also recognized some of the drugs used to control Betty, so that she couldn’t transform into Red She-Hulk. The list of those used on Tony also included several drugs that would elevate heart rate and pain response. Darcy shuddered to think of Tony in Hydra custody and under those influences.

Steve had sketched proposed Arc-powered weapons. He noted that Mjolnir could supercharge an Iron Man suit Arc reactor and wondered how they could use that power to their advantage. His notes included detailed suggestions for Arc-powered guns and spears for each Avenger. Somehow his ideas related to mythology. There was a note about flaming arrows cauterizing things. It lay on a book open to a painting of Hercules and the Hydra. Darcy saw the name Iolaus on the page.

She whispered. “Bucky named his cat Iolaus.” Steve grinned and nodded while typing more.

She looked at him to make sure he wanted to let her see what he was doing. He lifted her hand and kissed it, reassuring her. “Read all you want.”

In the document he was typing, Steve proposed that Sam and Natasha provide air cover during upcoming Hydra base assaults. Natasha would fly the smaller jet, and Sam would use his wing pack. Tony and Thor would focus on research labs to identify alien tech, and confiscate any unknown items or artifacts.

Another window showed a message exchange between Steve and Coulson. Steve wanted more ICERs, other SHIELD weapons, and a better understanding of artifacts that Hydra might have accessed. He had entered negotiations with Coulson, knowing it would mean a fight with Tony. He proposed trading Aesir-like prisoner containment-field generators for access to weaponry and artifacts. He had studied archaeology finds, and had lists of items that SHIELD had been storing in places named The Hub and The Fridge. Darcy read that Coulson had something called a Plasma Particle Beam weapon. It was derived from the power of the Tesseract.
In a printed report on the desk, Steve listed qualities of the Tesseract- it could enable quantum field transfer. It MIGHT kill a mortal if touched, served to power weapons, and more. Steve suspected that the weapon used against Tony at the theater was Tesseract-powered tech. Hydra had the cube in their possession for a long time. He had notes to discuss with Erik. There were files and files of Erik’s research from when he worked with the Tesseract. Steve had jotted a note at the margins, questioning whether Erik had suffered more from Loki’s mind control due to long exposure to the Tesseract before it. Steve had tagged several files and sent them to Tony for comparison to notes he had from Howard’s work with the artifact. Loki’s spear obviously worked as an energy weapon, so, could the Tesseract itself? It put off energy, was pure energy according to some descriptions. He had notes to ask Thor to verify that the Tesseract was still on Asgard in Odin’s care.

There was a separate report on Loki’s spear. From painful experience, they knew that Loki’s spear worked as a mind control device. It affected Erik, Hawkeye, and many others. He devoted pages to it. He questioned its current location, and its relationship to the Tesseract. He had a quote from Erik. ‘The energy... The Tesseract can't fight, but you can't protect against yourself.’

Steve wondered if the Tesseract and the spear’s orb were part of a larger entity, or somehow connected. The name Thanos appeared on that page. Per Steve's notes, even Nick Fury realized that Humanity was not ready to handle items as powerful as the cosmic cube. Steve contacted Bruce, asking about an energy-signature trace program he and Tony had developed. Steve wanted to know what they would need to duplicate and update it.

There was another half-finished report onscreen. Steve found info about flashes of a different energy signature, one just as powerful as the Tesseract. He included latitude and longitude coordinates for it. It was on Earth briefly the previous November. He wondered if its defensive capabilities equal the offensive capabilities of the Tesseract. He wanted to verify its location, if possible. He wondered if there was residue of the item anywhere on Earth. Darcy saw that he was watching her closely while she read that information.

Per an open email, he had looked into stealth tech, and sent Tony a request for stealth suits for all Avengers, minus Hulk and Thor. They were incapable of stealth. He privately wondered if Tony was capable of stealth in an in-program note.

Darcy could see an underlying mistrust of Odin in many of Steve’s notes, observations and plans. She figured that was going to lead to uncomfortable discussions with Thor.

There were several windows open on his desktop about diplomacy and peace. He had reviewed texts of speeches Pepper had given, with key sections highlighted. His notes emphasized that Hydra and SHIELD never worked towards the same goals. Hydra wanted to control the power and funding of both sides of every conflict. They sewed chaos. SHIELD intended to live up to its name and protect people. The Avengers needed to be a force for peace, canceling out Hydra’s long-time investments in chaos. He thought that Pepper would be most effective to lead those efforts. She would need to coordinate with ambassadors throughout the world. It would mean even more travel and work than she already did. Another in-program post it had a reminder for him to set aside sparring time with Tony after he proposed having Pepper travel more.

Steve had lengthy notes about alien races SHIELD had interacted with over the years. He believed that Hydra included beings from other worlds, as well as enhanced humans. He wondered if there were enhanced humans who might work with the Avengers or SHIELD. He had compiled evaluations of people formerly with SHIELD that caught his eye for one reason or another. An image on his monitor showed a wall filled with lines and circles of unknown origin and meaning. One set of tabs were articles authored by Betty Ross about the human identity at the cellular level.
Darcy exclaimed, “Wow! You didn’t sleep much! People who think you’re just muscle are idiots.”

Steve chuckled. “It strikes me as funny when people act like muscles dull brain power… and then turn to me, and ask what my plan is.” He continued jotting notes. He yawned and stretched. “The data dump Natasha made has actually slowed JARVIS’ function. It’s immense. I could read for the next seventy years, and not get through it all. So, I have to pick and choose, based on what we need. We need to accomplish a lot. Hydra knew they’d come to light someday, and planned accordingly. They were planning things the whole time I was in the ice. That stunt they pulled last night needs to be answered with harsh retribution, as soon as Tony’s well again. But, Odin’s treasures are not a good option, not for us. I don’t think they’re that stable for Hydra, either, for what it's worth. Followers of Hydra worshiped Schmidt. He was a prime example of how power can go wrong, when humans jump the gun and try to twist power to their own ends.”

Steve sat back in his chair, pulled Darcy into his lap and kissed her. He muttered. “I hope Tony’s emotional control is better today. His serotonin levels, and those of the girl who got in the way, were incredibly low. She took the brunt of it. The flashing device projected light waves that interacted with some of the drug ingredients. She was in the way, between the device and Tony. He kept shaking and acting manic and then depressive, but she sobbed all night long. Poor thing! He may have to put her in his will, too; if that’s the sort of thing he thinks he should do for people who save his brain.”

Darcy nodded at his work. “You have a lot of things in your plan that would piss Tony off if he was at 100%, you know. With him wobbly…”

Steve chuckled, sighed, and kissed her cheek. “Don’t underestimate me! I’m gonna piss off just about every single member of the team.” His expression darkened. “And then... the team is going to go about the business of severely pissing off Hydra.”

She nodded. “Take your shield to the meetings, especially when you talk about the anti-Tesseract residue. If you think I don’t know the coordinates for Greenwich? Or, that I don’t remember what happened there last November, you’re delusional. I'll help with that, anyway.” He leaned his head against hers, and then kissed her. She asked, “so, are you keeping work where I can see because you’re giving me a heads up that wild and crazy team dynamics are on the way? You’ve never left this much open for me to see before.”

Steve kissed her again. “I’m not gonna put away my work every time you enter the room, Darcy. You live here now. What’s mine is yours. It affects your social connections, your life. It’s going to play into your work responsibilities, too. When Jane was going crazy while trying to create the force field, I was the one tightening the screws on her. You told me how nuts she was acting over it, and I felt dishonest for not admitting it was my fault. I don’t want to live that way. I trust you. I want you to know how much I trust you, how much you’re part of everything I do.”

She kissed him. “I can’t believe how lucid you are after what, an hour of sleep?” He shrugged. She sighed and smiled. “I, for one, am properly worn out.” She leaned her head against his shoulder.

He grinned. “I should hope so!” She swatted him. He teased, “completely worn out?” and ran a hand up her thigh.

She grinned, shook her head, and mused. “If my bosses yell at me for being late, I’ll remind them I saved Tony’s brain last night. That should give me at least an hour’s grace.” He moved his chair back and lifted her easily as he stepped away from the computer and back to their bedroom.

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When Darcy went to work, she started in her R&D office, and then went to check on Bruce’s progress with the Hydra device used against Tony. Steve’s guess was correct. It was Tesseract technology. Darcy also saw that Bruce was working on a program. She looked at the screen. “How much do you need Tony’s input on that energy-signature trace program?”

“You know what it is.” Bruce took his glasses off and looked at her with raised brows.

She nodded. “Steve and I talked about plans this morning. I need to know what resources you and Tony need, so I can help. And… well, I live there.”

“Tony can’t be much help yet. He’s struggling. Betty’s been with him and Pepper all night, soothing them through it the best she can.” Bruce rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Darcy gave him an appreciative smile. “She was doing an awesome job when we left them. Steve hardly slept, too. Tony asked him for a plan to kill them deader than dead. Steve’s OBVIOUSLY been considering a lot of things for a while now. He wants to put things into play to respond to this attack. He wants to end that feeling Tony mentioned of always being behind the curve with Hydra. You guys will be busy.” She grimaced.

Bruce looked at the projection of the programming he’d begun to recreate. “He doesn’t want to just take the bases that they didn’t hide as well. He wants to shake them up. I’m fine with that.” She could see that he was still seething from Hydra bringing Betty into things.

They both turned as Tony growled. “I want to shake their damned heads off, every single one.” He was pale, now wearing jeans and a black t-shirt.

Darcy grinned, “and cauterize the stumps so they can’t grow more?”

Tony stared at her for a moment, and then shrugged. “Yeah. Something like. Why are you spouting mythology?” He looked brittle and angry.

Darcy walked closer to him, leaned up, and kissed his cheek. “Say the word, Tony. I’ll wrangle whatever, and whoever you need. I can only help a bit on the edges, I know that. But I’ll give it my all, and even use my suit to throw people out windows if they don’t give it theirs. Like Pepper told us, we look out for each other.” She wanted to hug him, but didn't for fear of invading his space while his emotional control was fragile.

Tony touched Darcy’s arm briefly, and then shoved past her, grousing at Bruce. ”No! No! We used this, not that.” He began to shift images around and work with Bruce. As Darcy started to leave, Tony turned to look at her. “So... what am I gonna hate in the meeting Cap called for later this morning?”

“Anything that wasn’t your idea to start?” Darcy stopped and grinned.

He chuckled shortly, and made the gesture indicating that his eyes were on her. Then, Tony looked at her uncertainly, as though he didn’t want for her to go. “What are you doing now?”

“I’m getting you a turkey sandwich and some chocolate. What do you think I’m doing?” She shrugged.

He shook his head. “Tryptophan makes me sleepy.”

Darcy shook her head. “You’re always hyper, and the dart cocktail included uppers. I think you’ll stay awake. Besides, it helps restore serotonin.” She muttered to herself, “and chocolate helps
people recover after meeting the Dementors…” Bruce grinned at her and nodded.

“I guess you can’t help but play Team Cap on me, takin’ charge,” Tony grumbled.

She shook her head. “Team Avengers!”

He stared at her uncertainly, almost angry. “It’s been Team Stark all my life!” Bruce froze, and looked from one of them to the other.

Darcy stared at Tony for a long moment. “You’re not alone anymore. Your friends are on your team, and you’re on theirs. Like Pepper said, we look after each other.” When Tony couldn’t respond, Darcy turned and walked out so that he wouldn't see that his vulnerability had moved her to tears.

'to be continued…'
“You shouldn’t have, Mr. Secretary! Welcome to Avengers Tower.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy moves in with Steve. The Avengers begin to take the fight to Hydra. Steve, Thor, and Tony meet with the US Secretary of Defense, Dell Rusk.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, McGregorsWench, for beta help and reassurance. I knew this one would be trouble, and I tied myself in knots over it. Your encouragement means so much! :)

Thanks, readers, kudo leavers, especially those who COMMENT. COMMENTS are life's blood.

Darcy's favorite print (that Steve hangs over the mantle of their place)-
http://fineartamerica.com/featured/starry-night-brooklyn-bridge-margaret-stewart.html

Over the next several days, Darcy moved into Steve’s apartment- between long hours of meetings, training, and work. He insisted they put her favorite print over the mantle first thing. As he was hanging the print, Steve commented on it. “I love this. When we first met, you acted as though having this up over your mantle defined the space as your own. I want for you to feel that way here in our apartment.” He smiled.

“You’re such an adorable sap! You work the phrase ‘our apartment’ into conversation on a regular basis, now.” Darcy kissed him, giggling.

Steve deepened the kiss. “Call me any name you like, Sweetheart. I love sharing a home with you.” She shook her head and kissed him again. He shrugged. “You know your print’s perfect to decorate ‘our apartment’, anyway.”

“Why?” It was Darcy’s turn to shrug.

He smiled in disbelief. “Don’t you recognize it? The bridge in the foreground is the Brooklyn Bridge! This print takes a piece of my first home and juxtaposes it against a space backdrop. Studying space brought you into my life. It’s perfect!”

“So, instead of just being a cool-looking picture, it’s an indicator that we’re meant to be?” Darcy laughed again.

He cut off her laughter with another kiss. “We’re definitely meant to be!” He looked at her searchingly, willing her to believe that.

Darcy began to intersperse her things with his, a little bit more each day. The apartment took on a looser, warmer feel. Seeing Steve’s smile every time he entered and noticed something new that she’d added gave her tingles of affection. He emptied half of the dresser drawers and more than
half of the closet, putting items he moved in the closet and a chest of drawers in the second
room/art studio. Darcy drew a firm line against taking from his art space, though she asked to move
one of his portraits of Bucky laughing before WWII into their front hall. She found an over-sized
antique partners desk online for them to share in the living area. It gave them each room for a
computer and file drawers, with the bonus that during the rare hours they both sat there, they could
peek around their screens to see each other. She enjoyed teasing him, flashing him when he was
working too late and she was ready for bed.

Natasha and Hawkeye joined the others focusing on Avengers’ planning and weapons preparations.
They reviewed SHIELD files that led them to check various ‘SHIELD’ bases for Hydra
occupation. For each, the assassins printed out schematics, topography of the surrounding area,
lists of known armaments, personnel lists, and more. Darcy began to have an appreciation for the
planning that went into the spy-sassins’ perfectly deadly work.

Darcy’s self-defense training shifted to every other day with Sam, for the time being. Sam pulled in
the self-defense teaching drone that Tony had made for Darcy when she started training, and went
back to basic self-defense maneuvers for review. Darcy was excited by how much progress she’d
made. Darcy still practiced with her gun daily, sometimes with Sam, and sometimes on her own.
Kaplan kept a respectful distance. Not only had Darcy shown that she could take care of herself,
but she had a Security detail, and seemed to always be with one or another of the Avengers.

One day when Bucky showed up, Darcy thought Kaplan might faint. Darcy had forgotten how
scared many people still were of him. Bucky watched Darcy work with her Glock and her ICER for
a round on each gun. Then, he rebuilt each weapon, subtly customizing them to Darcy’s grip and
physiology. The difference blew her mind. Once that was completed, he stood by her with their
right arms locked side-by-side while she shot again.

After he watched her next round of shooting and noted improvements she made, Bucky joked. “My
apologies to Steve, but you’re on your way to bein’ an ace, Doll. I’ll come back to work you again
after you spend a few weeks doing every shot drawn from concealment, and better your time.
There’s a rhythm to shooting, like good sex.” Darcy laughed as she saw Bucky blush, a rare thing
in her presence. He grinned ruefully. “Forgot who I was talkin’ to. Sorry!”

“Don’t be! I’m a fan of good sex. I understand exactly what you mean.” Darcy laughed more.

Bucky raised his brows and nodded. “O… kay. Go, Punk!”

“Don’t I get any credit?” Darcy’s brow furrowed.

He shook his head. “Fine! Stop bustin’ my balls and distractin’ me, Doll! Here’s what I want you
to do.” He demonstrated a drill and sent her a text message with the sequence for reference. “Use
this drill and practice making shots with your support hand. Start learning to count eight seconds
without looking at a timer. That’s your time for all the shots, total. You’re qualification level is
almost pro now, but for the support hand.”

Darcy gaped while Bucky took her gun and demonstrated the drill again. As he turned to leave,
Bucky eyed the range master. “I don’t know why you look so edgy, pal, but I hope you know
enough to mind your manners around the lady.” He patted a terrified-looking Kaplan on the
shoulder.

Darcy grimaced and teased. “Are you sure I’m a lady, Bucky?” She loaded her Glock again and
made a fearsome face at him.

Bucky grinned. “You’re getting dangerous, I’m happy to say. That doesn’t change the fact that
you’re a lady.” He winked at her, and stepped outside the range to meet Sharon as she walked in looking for him. Darcy watched the pair walk away, and wondered if they still dated. Sharon pulled Bucky close and kissed him. Darcy saw Sam pass the pair on his way to work with her. Sam smiled and waved, looking carefree. Darcy couldn’t hide her confusion.

“You’re so monogamous, it seems like a foreign language to you, doesn’t it?” Sam laughed.

Darcy paused, taken aback. “Yes?” She sighed. “Does that make me wrong?”

Sam winked and smiled. “Nope! You’re made one way. We were made another. It’s that simple.” He urged her towards the arena. “Now, let’s get to work. None of that matters when the bad guys come a callin’! I’m curious to see if that drone, ‘Mr. Cheesy’ as you call it, has anything new to say to rile you up. Stark’s creativity never fails to amaze…”

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Hawkeye spent time with Tony discussing mind control, and what Hydra had attempted on Tony. They got together every other day for a few weeks. Tony approached Bucky one time, too. They didn’t talk much, but Bucky assured Tony he’d get past it. Tony realized that while the attempt rocked him to the core, what Hydra had done to Tony seemed little more than a scratch to Bucky. Tony clapped Bucky on the shoulder, and volunteered to work on arm improvements and additional weaponry for him. Bucky took that in the spirit it was intended, appreciative. It took more than a week for Tony’s equilibrium to return to normal. Even then, he and Steve were at odds again as they worked through plans for the future of the Avengers Initiative. They were united in their desire to annihilate Hydra, but many of Steve’s proposals brought up any and all disagreements the two Avengers had since they first met.

Darcy and Pepper made sure to have each other’s backs so they didn’t get unnecessarily drawn into the fray. They started have mani-pedi time weekly, and took a coffee break together every two or three days so that they could protect themselves and each other from getting run over by team dynamics and differences. While each woman’s first loyalty was with the man she loved, they understood that cooperation between the two men was good for everyone, and did what they could to promote understanding. It pissed Tony off and amused Steve.

The Avengers set about the business of tearing down every bit of Hydra they could find. Hydra facilities were demolished so that nothing could be salvaged. The Avengers took out an average of one base every week, bringing in alien and advanced human tech for study. Darcy had to send some out to other SI lab locations just because she feared running out of storage room on site in Avengers Tower. SI Engineers worked at a feverish pace. Darcy set mandatory breaks for rest to prevent them getting sloppy and over-stretched.

The Avengers spent time in-between raids debating their plans for diplomacy, training, and recruitment of potential Avengers. They argued over development and deployment of the drones and an AI Drone that Bruce had ideas for, and argued over their relationship with Coulson’s SHIELD. They brainstormed use of new Arc-powered weaponry, and more. Tony liked the idea of his Arc technology as a signature weapon for the Avengers. He hated to add ‘world peace’ to Pepper’s job description, knowing it would take her away from his side even more. He was apoplectic that Steve was negotiating a tech trade with Coulson, regardless of how much they might ever need the SHIELD group and its resources.

A night Tony spent on the ICERs, taking them apart and understanding the simple beauty of their construct, ended badly when he learned that a Hydra mole on Coulson’s previous team caused the brilliant scientist who created the ICERs to be brain damaged. Pepper was the only one able to bring him down from that horrified fit. It became apparent to all that the combination of Hydra and
people’s brains was a supremely-tender trigger for Tony.

The next day, Steve volunteered to spar with Iron Man, provided the bout was not broadcast. It took Steve two days to recover from his wounds, and the team was forced to complete a Hydra base raid without their Captain. It was one of the few raids where they were forced to destroy tech rather than recovering it for study. They agreed that sparring would be limited for the good of the mission, as much as possible.

The first time that Red She-Hulk joined the Avengers on a mission, Bruce paced the confines of his lab the entire time she was out of the Tower. Steve wanted to use the Hulks one at a time with the rest of the Avengers team, to start. He didn’t want to risk them being distracted by each other in the field. To her Security detail’s chagrin, Darcy chose to spend the day working in Bruce’s lab. She accessed paperwork for R&D from her work station for part of the day, but also spent a good chunk of time trying to distract Bruce from his worries. She asked about projects that he’d set aside and encouraged him to devote some of his energy to them, asking him questions to spur him on. She did yoga with him. She even turned on music and coerced Bruce into dancing out some of his excess energy. Bruce’s style had definite tones of ‘dad dancing’ to it, but he laughed when she teased him for it, so that was fine.

As it turned out, the only surprise the Avengers experienced with Red She-Hulk in the mix was in how obvious it was that she was still Dr. Betty Ross. Red She-Hulk brought almost as much physical force to their attack as Hulk, but instead of turning away from a lab to continue smashing the enemy, she stopped and spoke to Captain America. “Cap! Pull back! Bio-weapons! That looks like a Chimera Virus of Botulinum toxin and its antidote, lethal. And, don’t go near the little rabbits. I’d put money on them carrying Tularemia. If that can be made airborne…”

Stunned to hear scientific observations from a Hulk, Steve took her advice and had those labs sealed for later analysis by bio-hazard teams. He watched her defeat five Hydra soldiers single-handedly, and then turn back to him. “Orders, Captain?”

Steve smiled admiringly, “As you were. And, thanks for the heads up on the bio-tech!” He shielded her as plasma fire nearly hit them. Red She-Hulk growled loudly and took a huge leap across the compound to the heavy plasma-gun turret, crushing its operators and shrieking with rage. When she completed the task, she turned to him and smiled savagely at Steve. She loved helping tear down Hydra and being a powerful heroine.

“Okay. It wasn’t just to get back at Bruce. She’s pretty hot.” Bucky shook his head.

Steve rolled his eyes at Bucky and suppressed the urge to ask Bucky if he was talking about Betty or Red She Hulk. “Don’t you have enough going on without tempting Hulk to smash the hell out of ya’?” He responded to ASL signals from Hawkeye that things were under control in the northeast quadrant of the base.

Bucky shrugged. “Guess so. They seem pretty tight these days. I’m not one to mess with practically-married ladies or gentlemen.” He shot a Hydra soldier off a wall across the compound. “Speaking of married… when…”

Steve sighed. “I wish we already were. You know that. I’m biding my time ‘til it seems right for her.” He responded to signals from Natasha that the northwest quadrant of the base was secure. He ran heat-signal scans of the southeast and southwest quadrants. No movement showed on his scanner. He directed Tony over the comm to check both areas one more time.

Bucky made a face. “She’s not the most modern girl, Punk. She’s the right one for you, and you’re the right one for her. Don’t forget to go for what YOU want. I know that before the serum you
thought it’d never happen for you. You’ve changed, and not just from the serum. You swept your
girl off her feet, and have courted her with about as much romance as a guy can. She’s said she
doesn’t want anyone but you. She’s in your bed, sharing your home now. When will you believe
that she loves you, the real you, as much as you love her?”

“I’m working on it, Jerk. Working on it.” Steve sighed.

Bucky shook his head and smiled sadly. “Of all the things that are unbelievable in our lives…
serums, living in the future, rage monsters, gods, flying armor. Why is it the hardest thing of all to
believe that your girl loves you? You really are a Punk!”

***

During planning discussions, Thor was insulted by any and all references to Odin’s cooperation
with others against him and the Avengers. He visited Asgard to pay his respects to Odin, and visit
friends. He found Odin rather more unpleasant than he’d been in the past, not even seeming to
recall some things they’d discussed previously. The others were sure that it gave him concern and
guilt for not shouldering the burdens of the throne himself. Steve tried to tread carefully, but
sometimes irritating one’s teammates was a necessary burden for a leader.

Darcy knew the instant that Steve mentioned the possibility that Jane might have some residual
affect from her possession by the Aether, and that studies of her cells might give the others clues
for development of defensive tech. The thunderstorm that swept New York that day was startling
and ferocious.

When Steve came home looking rather worse for wear that evening, Darcy cried out in dismay as
she saw his expression, and held him close. He rasped brokenly. “Thor didn’t take it well when I
asked if we could study Jane’s cells for Aether residue. Some of the tests we need to do can be
painful.”

Darcy carded her fingers through his hair. “The lightning took out a fair chunk of tech equipment
on the roof. Ironically, he toasted one of Jane’s arrays, and is in trouble pretty deep.”

“Yeah. I wish he wouldn’t do that.” Jane’s tone was wry.

Steve jerked away from Darcy, startled. “I didn’t realize you were here.” Jane was sitting on the
couch in their living room. Steve’s expression shuttered as he shifted from thinking he and Darcy
were alone to realizing they weren’t.

Jane snorted on realizing she’d surprised Captain America. “I wanted to let you know that I’m
going in for a spinal tap, to have an MRI, and to give the blood samples you need. There are a few
tests you want that I’ll complete later, not right now. But I want to help. It’s interesting to me, too. I
saw the Aether up close and learned a lot about it, but I always like to learn more.”

There was a heavy knock at the door. Steve took a breath and turned to answer it. Thor stood in the
hallway. “Hello, brother.” Steve shifted aside and gestured for Thor to enter. The god did, his head
bowed and his expression somber. He stopped when he saw Jane inside the apartment, smiling
softly at him. He stared into her eyes and saw the nod she gave. He turned to Steve. “Please accept
my apology. When you suggested that my mate undergo painful procedures, I became
unreasonable. I am protective of her well being.”

“I understand. Apology accepted.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck, looking rueful.

Darcy smiled from one man to the other. “Well, let’s not just stand here. Come in the rest of the
way, Thor. Jane hasn’t been here long. Take a load off and admire our apartment now that I’m mostly moved in.” She made a face at Jane. “Can I get you something to drink? Wine? Beer? Water?” She raised an eyebrow and quirked a grin at her friend.

Jane looked down with a secret smile. “Water sounds good. I doubt it would help us learn more about the Aether if I pollute my body tonight.” Thor put a huge arm around her delicate frame and pulled Jane against him. His posture was more protective than ever.

Steve and Darcy exchanged an amused look.

The four friends ended up having dinner delivered to enjoy while they watched the movie ‘Groundhog Day.’ As they went to bed that night, Steve and Darcy made a game of imagining the perfect day. Time they’d spent in the guesthouse of the Stark estate Upstate during Avengers R&R time came pretty close.

***

The first time that the Avengers obliterated a Hydra base that didn’t feel handed to them was a momentous occasion. As Bucky described it, “We’re not just playing their game now. We hit them where they didn’t expect it, and they were the ones knocked on their asses. It’s fuckin’ glorious.” He found great camaraderie with Hawkeye and Sam, competing to see who could come up with the most frightening quips and put-downs when disassembling the enemy strongholds.

Betty developed an antidote to the poisons Hydra operatives had long used for suicide when captured. The confusion those prisoners expressed as they realized their suicide attempts had failed was one of the sweetest of revenges. Hydra could no longer count on death to protect its secrets. Anything that took them off-balance and put their security at risk was a win. As promised, Darcy gave Betty candy prizes for inventing a way to hurt Hydra.

***

On a sunny June day, the Avengers were scheduled to meet with the US Secretary of Defense, Dell Rusk. He’d expressed an interest in seeing Avengers Tower and discussing the Avengers’ relationship with the US Department of Defense.

Mid-morning, Pepper Potts exited the elevator to the roof of Avengers Tower, a professional smile and a cordial greeting on her lips. She shook hands with the lead Treasury Secret Service agent who had been on site for the past few hours, and heard updates from her own SI Security personnel. She’d been on top of arrangements for this visit for weeks, but always liked to do a final, in-person update when a top government official or other VIP was coming to Avengers Tower.

Her brow creased when the Secretary’s plane landed. She had never seen a ship quite like it. It was larger than she’d imagined. The department of Defense accepted another bid for it rather than that of Stark Industries, and Pepper had never understood why.

***

In her lab, Jane began freaking out. Darcy looked up from her work. Erik frowned with concern.

“That can’t be right! It just can’t be right! That’s not the way it works! Something is giving off energy readings like… Impossible! It seems to match the definition, but that’s impossible…” Jane kept muttering.

Darcy interjected. “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth!”
Jane flapped her hands, frustrated. “Don’t quote Sherlock Holmes to me right now!” She was making those cute noises she always made when she was puzzled, but near a solution.

Darcy made a face. “I thought that was Mr. Spock, on Star Trek!” Dernier rolled his eyes and chuckled.

Erik laughed, “Spock was quoting Holmes… or Doyle.” Erik’s one pop-culture guilty pleasure was Star Trek (the original series).

Jane yelled, “Shut up! If these readings are right, the universe has stopped making sense. This is not Nidavellir! This is Midgard!” Darcy took note of Jane’s sudden mood shift.

Erik stopped laughing. “Nidavellir?!” He rushed to Jane’s side. “Let me see!”

Jane turned to Erik. “There are energy readings that defy logic. If it’s even one tenth true… the magnitude…! I can’t believe that ANYONE would be crazy enough to bring an imbalance of that magnitude here…” She beat on her equipment. “Please be bad equipment!”

Darcy scowled. “Hey! Your machines cost more now, and the equipment budget is blown to smithereens already, since we had to replace your sensor array after Thor’s last lightning fit. Stop that!”

Jane shook her head. “I need to go to my dish array on the roof and check the sensors. This is crazy.” She ran for the door, calling back, “Send engineers up to do the heavy lifting for me, Darce! And, pray for a tech failure while you’re at it!”

***

Secretary Rusk disembarked a moment later. He was a large man who seemed to smile almost all of the time, at least in every photo taken of him. Today, as he looked around him admiringly, he seemed especially ebullient. Age didn’t touch Rusk. People in the media had attempted to trace his lineage to see if he and Dick Clark were related. His trademark black suits were impeccably tailored with nearly-military perfect lines, and the physique beneath them was impressive. He wore an over-sized military watch that glowed orange through the dial and around its timeworn edges.

Pepper remembered him best from before Tony became Iron Man, back when Tony was known as ‘the Merchant of Death’ and she was his Assistant. Rusk’s company had been a frequent Stark Industries client then. He’d had a cordial relationship with Obadiah Stane. After Tony’s transformation, and especially since Pepper took the reins of the company, Rusk worked with SI less. He went into politics around that time, so Pepper hadn’t given the fact much thought. Now, looking at Rusk, she remembered how chauvinistic and inappropriately friendly he was- and how little she liked the man.

She held out her hand, poised for a handshake. Instead, Rusk twisted her hand flat so he could kiss it, his smile more pronounced as he invaded Pepper’s personal space. He gestured to his assistant, took a package tied with a ribbon from the woman, and handed it to Pepper. “I’m delighted to see you here today! You look lovelier than ever, my dear Miss Potts! Beautiful, svelte perfection, sweet Virginia!” He spoke softly, with a higher-pitched voice than one expected from so large a man.

Pepper suppressed a grimace and what Tony jokingly referred to as a ‘hot-stuff flash’, and accepted the box of chocolates graciously, with a slight ironic twist of a grin. “You shouldn’t have, Mr. Secretary! Welcome to Avengers Tower.”
They took an elevator down to the retail floors and made their way back up, with Pepper giving the Secretary an edited tour of Avengers Tower. Occasionally, the Secretary asked about an area they were passing. Her smile held no nonsense as she informed him. “Captain America did not want to take too much of your time, Mr. Secretary. The Avengers understand that you are a busy man.”

Rusk’s smile became almost manic when she mentioned Captain America. Pepper, veteran of more than a decade witnessing Tony Stark’s mania, recognized the look. Her inquiry was polite. “Are you a longtime fan of the Captain’s?”

Rusk uttered a hearty laugh with an undertone that she didn’t understand. “Oh! Yes! You could say so! His heroics… astonish me. I ravenously devoured the exhibit at the Smithsonian, learning so much about him. I have read his comics, marveled at the memorabilia… and even seen his films. I am a great fan. He is… impressive. Dr. Erskine achieved much.” He hummed a discordant tune, softly.

Pepper stepped into the main R&D lab. She glanced towards Darcy’s office. Seeing it empty, she looked at her watch. “I’m sorry that our labs manager is not in at the moment. She’s working with one of our lead scientists in a different laboratory.” Pepper gestured around the room. Interns and scientists mostly ignored them, though a few looked at Pepper with interest. None of them seemed to recognize Rusk. His gaze was locked on Darcy’s office.

Pepper continued her routine explanations. “The R&D unit previously worked solely for Stark Industries production. Now, we prioritize projects that assist the Avengers’ missions and work. We have lab spaces spread over more than a dozen floors in this location, with developments ranging across almost all of the sciences and engineering disciplines. With a staff of more than one hundred, including interns and assistants, it’s one of the most productive R&D operations in the world.”

“I don’t imagine the Captain’s orders allow me to see more of these operations. I am interested in the sciences. You might call it a hobby of mine.” Rusk looked rueful.

Pepper chuckled. “I’m afraid not. Scientists are often easily spooked, Mr. Secretary. And even their early work and projects that don’t succeed the first time around are classified. Prototypes that benefit the Avengers’ relationship with the Department of Defense will be presented per the usual protocols.” She turned as a door burst open.

Darcy, flanked by Jones and Dernier, hurried into the lab and moved at speed down a hallway, towards a closed engineering lab. Her attention was fixed on her StarkPad. Dernier turned and stared at Rusk as he read weapons alerts from JARVIS on his phone. As the engineering lab door closed behind her, Darcy yelled. “Heads up, people! I need the crew most familiar with Dr. Foster’s new sensor arrays to…” The door closed. The Secretary continued to focus on the door, almost as though he could hear what was being said through it. His frown was severe.

Pepper touched his arm. “Mr. Secretary? Shall we continue?” She wondered where his insincere smile had gone.

He turned his gaze back to Pepper. “Who was that loud, curvaceous woman?” His smile slid back into place, not touching his eyes at all.

Pepper’s expression was inscrutable. “That was our labs manager, Miss Lewis. It sounds as though she’s busy wrangling help for one of our lead scientists.” Rusk pulled a cigarette case out of his pocket and tapped it against his hand. Pepper frowned. “I’m sorry, Mr. Secretary. Avengers Tower is a no-smoking complex. I’m sure you understand.” Rusk’s demeanor was odd enough that Pepper’s hands glowed.
His eyes narrowed as he noticed. He hurriedly spoke as he put the cigarette case back in his pocket. “Miss Lewis must be more formidable than she appears at a glance. I notice that she’s armed, and she certainly has a take-charge attitude. I’m surprised that such an attractive young woman manages so much of importance to Stark Industries and the Avengers, though.” His tone was dismissive. “I imagine that she has impressed the Captain in some way…”

Pepper’s brow furrowed for a micro-second until she schooled her features back to their usual workday mask of perfect competence. “Miss Lewis is bright, capable, intuitive, and uniquely able to manage a variety of temperaments and technical working styles. She also manages the laboratories of all of our lead scientists and Mr. Stark. We’re lucky to have her.”

“As I said, she must have impressed the Captain in some way…” Rusk smiled so that his teeth showed.

Pepper lifted her chin, defensive. “She reports to me. The Captain has great respect for her, as do Dr. Banner and Mr. Stark.” Pepper wondered if there was any way that the Secretary of Defense could be aware of Darcy and Steve’s personal relationship, and if he was implying what she thought he was. Her hackles were not only raised on her friend’s behalf, but her own. She would never give a person responsibilities that they were not qualified to handle.

Rusk’s smile grated on Pepper’s nerves. He very nearly leered as he noted. “She is attractive in an old-fashioned way, rather intriguing, if a bit Semitic in appearance.” He put his hand back in the pocket with the cigarette case and began to hum again.

As he started from the middle of the movement, it took Pepper a moment to recognize Chopin’s Funeral March. Pepper filed that fact away for later contemplation of how many ways this man irritated her. She was internally planning a girls’ night out with Maria, Darcy, Jane, Betty, and Natasha. She couldn’t wait to see and hear their reactions. His comments on Darcy alone! She managed to smile at him again. “Let’s continue our tour. I wouldn’t want to make you late for your meeting with the Captain, Thor, and Mr. Stark.” Again, he stood closer than she liked. They made their way up further.

As they passed the Avengers’ sparring gym, Natasha and Bucky were engaged in a match. Rusk stopped and stared, the smile falling from his face again. Pepper turned to him politely. “Are you well, Mr. Secretary?”

Rusk nodded… looking thoughtful. His voice sounded different, louder and harsher, as he observed, “What finely honed weapons!”

Pepper frowned and turned her gaze to Bucky and Natasha. Both of them stopped moving, more or less frozen in place. Bucky turned and walked to the window, obviously out of sorts. Pepper led the Secretary away from the room, continuing towards the Avengers Conference room.

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Inside the sparring gym, Bucky held his flesh hand over his heart. He was breathing hard and fighting panic.

Natasha didn’t look much better. She spoke brusquely. “I’m going to get cleaned up now. I have things to do.” Sam stared at her, concerned by how upset she seemed. He glanced from her to Bucky. Both looked as though they’d seen a ghost. He wondered what it was about their sparring match that had triggered them both so intensely. He texted a quick note to Steve, asking that he review video of the match when he had time, and see if he could pinpoint a cause. Sam had been watching them, but was at a loss.
“Yeah. I think I’m done for now, too. I need to go see my headshrinker.” Bucky managed to reply.

“You okay, Bucky?” Sam startled.

After Natasha had left the room, Bucky murmured to a concerned Sam. “I had a flashback. I heard the voice of one of my old handlers.” He swallowed hard and suppressed shaking.

Sam frowned with sympathy. “What did it say?” He put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

Bucky’s face twisted with pain. “What finely honed weapons…” He shook his head as though to clear the memory from his mind. “It seemed so real!”

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Tony could see the tension around Pepper’s eyes as she entered the Avengers Conference room. He frowned and stepped close to her. “You okay?” He knew when he saw her most professional smile slip into place, that he wouldn’t get truth from her until later when they were alone. He bumped his hand against hers. “Thank you, Miss Potts. You’re the best.”

Pepper turned and offered her hand to Rusk again, twisting his back for shaking rather than letting him kiss her hand again. “Mr. Secretary… I hope your meeting is productive and that you enjoyed your glimpse into life in Avengers Tower.”

Rusk’s laugh filled the space. “There’s a lot of that. So much life.” He rocked back on his heels, hands locked behind his back. He looked pleased, like the cat that had eaten the cream.

Steve looked up from his notes, stood, and nodded politely as Pepper left. Rusk and Tony shook hands brusquely, familiarity having bred contempt on both sides of that equation over time. Steve moved forward and offered his hand. “Mr. Secretary. Thank you for allowing us to reschedule this meeting. I’m sorry for any inconvenience.” Steve’s thoughts drifted back to the R&R the Avengers had taken instead of keeping their first scheduled meeting. He couldn’t help but smile, remembering.

Rusk grasped Steve’s hand firmly. He rasped in his soft voice. “Captain America! I’m a great fan. Thank you for the small glimpses you allowed Miss Potts to show me of your Tower.” Steve noticed the over-sized watch that Rusk wore. Its orange gleam drew his gaze. The glow stirred something in Steve’s mind. It was familiar, but not familiar. Rusk smiled at him. Again, Steve felt a sense of familiarity and a lack of it all at once. It was as though the Secretary was a walking déjà vu display.

Tony splayed into a chair, rolling his eyes. “It’s not his Tower. He’s just the boss. I’m one of the big brains, and the money. The Tower belongs to Pepper. If she told you Cap wouldn’t let her show you something, it was her polite way of telling you to mind your own business.”

Steve gave Tony a quelling look. “Tony, please! The Secretary is a busy man, but made time to reschedule with us. Please treat him with the respect he deserves.” Under his breath, he added. “And I know that I’m only the boss in the field. Don’t start another fight with me.”

Tony shrugged, his careless attitude indicating that he thought he was giving Rusk as much respect as the man deserved. Steve sighed. He’d seen Pepper’s expression, too, and knew that was a source of Tony’s antipathy. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, and turned again to Rusk. “I understand you have some things that you would like to discuss with us.”

Rusk shook Thor’s hand cautiously, sat at the conference table, and snapped his fingers. His aide
handed him a briefcase. Tony snorted a laugh and muttered under his breath. “When I think someone is imperious…” Steve shot him another look.

Rusk presented what was essentially a list of demands from the Department of Defense. Tony sat up, at attention. “You know… the last time the US Government asked for my tech, the Senator leading the charge turned out to be with Hydra!” He scanned the list with his StarkPad and sent it to several people, including Rhodey. From then, his attention was split between Rusk and messaging back and forth with others.

Rusk turned his head slowly to sneer at Tony. Then, he turned to the Captain. “Captain, you are not a democratically-elected government leader. You were not appointed by one, either. The Avengers are a para-military group, based on US soil. Some call you vigilantes, and insist that you operate outside the law. During some altercations, there is collateral damage to vital corporate interests, businesses… and the civilian population, too. With your history, you understand the chain of command’s significance. You understand the need for oversight. I ask you to report to the American people, Sir. It is your duty as a patriotic American. Or, do you set yourself above your nation’s flag now?” Steve swallowed hard, his stomach queasy.

“What if I’m not feeling patriotic?” Tony gibed.

Rusk continued to ignore Tony, his eyes trained on Steve.

Steve took a deep breath. He glanced at Thor and used an easy tone. “Some of the Avengers are not American, Mr. Secretary. They claim no dominion over Earth. It seems polite to return the favor.”

He ran a mental inventory. Thor was a prince of Asgard who had a hard time telling one Earth nation from another, and was selective about who gave him orders. Natasha had her issues having been a tool of the Russian government. Bucky only wanted to be free. Sam had left military service to recover from loss of his dearest friend (likely more, Steve had never asked). Thanks to Howard, Tony had enough problems with authority to keep Chau busy for the rest of her life. Bruce had been hounded and hunted by the US military, knowing they wanted nothing more than to dissect him and duplicate the Hulk. Betty had been threatened in similar fashion to Bruce. And for himself? He had given his innocence for his country, given his life for the world. He still wanted to stand up to bullies and keep the world safe… so he could enjoy a life with the woman he loved and have a family of his own. No. He didn’t want to be under the thumb of the US military complex again.

Rusk turned to look at Thor, too. His expression chilled. “We are aware of that, Captain.” He cleared his throat. “We are also aware that another of this… creature’s… family held different opinions.” Thor bristled with dislike and resentment.

Steve’s expression turned stony. “I consider Prince Thor to be my family, both as a fellow warrior and personally. If you disrespect him, we will have a disagreement, Sir.” Thor eased back into his seat, his hard expression easing as he looked at Steve with liking and respect. Steve pulled out his phone and typed in a message. “Given the breadth of the topics you wish to discuss, Miss Potts, Assistant Director Hill, and members of our Legal team will join us.”

Tony bit out, “We can discuss topics all day. You’re not taking my tech! Rhodey can retire from the Air Force. He can use War Machine armor, and I can activate Iron Patriot’s self-destruct mechanism. Stupid paint job, anyway! There’s only one Captain America. And, Rhodey will be happier out of it and its jingoistic expectations. It’ll be good to have him here full-time, too. So, thanks for that.” Tony’s glare intensified. “As to the Avengers’ patriotic duty? We’re not your beck-and-call heroes, Rusk. We’re here to protect our entire planet. We’re not going to wait for red
tape and your orders before we go out to do what’s right!”

“Tony? Pepper, Maria, and people from Legal will walk through that door any minute. You really want them to find you running your mouth?” Steve sat back and put a hand over his mouth to conceal his grin.

Rusk leaned towards Tony. “You reported to SHIELD, who also turned out to be Hydra. You were their beck-and-call heroes, Mr. Stark. You served their purpose.” His manner was deliberately intimidating, almost bullying.

Steve’s jaw shifted. “You’re not strengthening your argument with us, Mr. Secretary. Outside, complex agencies can be infiltrated rather easily. That’s the experience we’ve had, and struggle with here, on our own. And, even if they’re not infiltrated, they can give orders we’re forced to put our lives on the line to correct… like when the World Council had a nuke fired at the heavily-populated civilian island of Manhattan. Mr. Stark nearly died to send it against our enemy instead.”

Rusk hissed. “I consulted on that decision, Captain, and I stand by it. Your team did not appear to have the battle in hand, far from it! You were vastly outnumbered! The Chitauri invaders continued to arrive, in ever greater numbers and force. We were not willing to watch YOU lose the entire planet when we had a hope of closing the portal to the Chitauri home world with a weapon of our own. It can be argued that the World Council gave you the means to end your battle with the Chitauri when they sent in that weapon.”

Tony barked a laugh. “I don’t think that was the intent, and neither do you. You wrote us off, and the millions who live here, too. Just because we can make lemonade from lemons…” As ever, Tony seemed more brittle when reminded of his near-death experience.

Maria entered the room. “Captain, Mr. Stark, Prince Thor, and Mr. Secretary. Thank you for inviting me to sit in on your meeting and for sending me the agenda, too.” She frowned at Rusk. “Why are you here doing this? We’ve already discussed many of these issues, Mr. Secretary. If you hope for a different answer because you are speaking to different leaders within the Avengers Initiative, you will be disappointed. SI and the Avengers Initiative have conferred on these topics as a group. In fact, you lessen your chances of success by bringing the matter up with those whose lives would be most directly affected by some of your desired changes.” Pepper and a Legal team entered the room.

Rusk continued to ignore the others and address his concerns to the Captain. They went over each item on Rusk’s list. Steve did his best to hold his temper and cooperate with the Legal team, while preventing Tony from escalating the tension. But, even Steve’s temper was frayed by the end of the meeting. It almost felt as though the Secretary was deliberately wording things in ways guaranteed to anger them. As Pepper interjected and began an impassioned argument about the status of the War Machine armored suit, Steve sat back and shifted mental gears. He began to evaluate Rusk with dispassionate clarity. He organized facts and observations in systematic fashion.

It took time, but after discarding several possibilities that didn't fit all aspects of the situation Steve settled on one conclusion that did. His lips set in a hard, implacable line as he accepted the truth. When Steve reached his conclusion, he sent instructions to JARVIS. His jaw tightened more as he had JARVIS give him estimates of the number of people in different parts of the Tower. There were too many people near them now. They needed to be somewhere away from others, as far as possible. The least populated area of the Tower was the roof. While giving the outward appearance of being calm, Steve was frantic on the inside. He felt desperate to remove Rusk from the most populated areas of Avengers Tower.
As Rusk rose and took his leave, Steve stood. His tone was calm and even. “I’m sorry, Mr. Secretary, that our interactions today have been so acrimonious. Please allow me and Thor to accompany you back to your plane now. I hope that when we talk again, our discussion will be more productive.” Tony looked at Steve with open disbelief, too aggravated with Rusk to even spare him another glance.

As they left the Conference room, Steve grabbed his shield and settled it on his back. Out in the hallway, he slipped his gloves on, set his helmet in place, and adjusted the chin strap carefully. Then, in the elevator, he sent a text message to Darcy and pocketed his phone. Thor noticed these movements and tightened his grip on Mjolnir, alert. He recognized Steve’s preparations. Rusk’s guards opened the door to the roof and preceded him, along with his assistant.

As Rusk stepped onto the roof, Captain America spoke. “What’s your play now, Red Skull?”

Rusk stopped in the doorway, silhouetted by the sunlight. He turned and smiled, his voice deeper and less affected. “Play, Captain? I do not play. I bring destruction.” He touched his watch. The face opened, letting an orange slice of an ethereal gem shine forth. Red Skull stepped out the door at the same time, waving his left hand in an arc. Rips appeared in the fabric of the sky over Avengers Tower. He pointed one of them out to his team members.

Captain America’s shield flew true, until it didn’t. It slowed to a stop in mid-air, suspended. Red Skull turned and walked away from them.

Steve started to run to his shield, but Thor put a hand out to stop him. Thor rasped. “The flow of time is interrupted. Wait, Captain!”

Red Skull’s ship split into multiple ships, a large transport and a multi-pilot Vorm fighter with a small cargo hold. His people boarded the larger as he turned back and laughed. “Time is not your friend, Captain! It is mine.” He pointed at the smaller ship he was leaving behind, as the larger ship’s engine came alive. “Some energies are not meant to be free outside their own realm, Captain. Nidavellite is one such force.” Thor groaned in dismay. Red Skull nodded, taunting. “There is a minuscule speck embedded safely in the core of the hammer your Asgardian friend wields. There is a mass as large around as your beloved shield in that alien ship. I have just destroyed its containment field. It will destabilize and implode in minutes. I am sorry not to see the effect in person. I will savor the news footage from my office in Washington. Mr. Stark’s effort to save Manhattan was as much in vain as your sacrifice after we last met. Life is a zero sum for you both. Manhattan will perish, your beloved Brooklyn as well. But, best of all, your Avengers Tower and all its inhabitants will be instantly vaporized. I will crush all that you hold dear under my heel, Captain America. Your friends, your lover, and all of your plans for good and peace… all will cease to exist.”

SI Security personnel approached Red Skull from behind, weapons drawn. He drew a plasma weapon and vaporized them.

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On the next section of the roof, Jane Foster, Erik Selvig and a team of engineers were going over her sensor array with a fine toothed comb. They heard weapons fire and turned to see what was happening. The engineers hit the deck. Ilsa moved to stand in front of Erik.

“Oh, my God! The readings just spiked! It’s really Nidavellite. HERE. This is a disaster!” Jane cried out, her voice shaking with terror.

An alarm sounded, urging employees to seek the protection of the nearest Safe Room.
Steve heard Jane’s voice. He spoke under his breath. “Thor… this is bad. Jane’s on the roof. Schmidt’s a psycho bent on mass murder. Get Jane clear.” He looked Thor in the eye. “Protect your mate… and your child.”

“Jane did not wish to share our news until after the third month.” Thor’s eyes glistened.

Steve nodded. “Save them.”

Thor took a deep breath. “I will take her as far as she deems necessary, then return to help against this enemy.” Thor was uneasy as he noted the set of Steve’s jaw. He rasped, “Take care, brother.”

Backing towards his transport, Red Skull laughed. “It took time, but I gained the trust of the overlord Thanos. When he saw that I had touched the Tesseract and knew its location, he spared my life…and supported my efforts to sow seeds of chaos across the galaxies. It took all of my persuasive powers to convince him to allow me to use a slice of the Time stone to remain young and continue to serve him. Time allowed me to come here to destroy you today, to rob your life of all meaning. I was…and will be victorious over you, Captain. Hail Hydra!” He entered his ship and it took off, disappearing into one of the rifts in the sky.

Steve’s shield finally fell to the ground, the noise of its impact startling. Steve grabbed it and ran to the Vorm ship and opened the door. Jane approached them. Thor pulled her to his side. She paled and stared at the mass of energy visible in the Vorm ship’s cargo area.

Steve looked at it and then back at Jane. “Is there anything we can do to contain this? A way to neutralize it?”

She continued to stare at the Nidavellite. “If I had hours, I could restore the containment, but… look at that instability! With the readings I’m getting… especially now that the containment field is gone? Nidavellite is beyond unstable. It’s just a matter of a minute or two before it explodes!” Tears came to her eyes and her hand dropped to her abdomen. She gasped. “Oh, Thor!”

Steve nodded to Thor. Thor pulled Jane against him, then swung Mjolnir and took flight. She cried out with surprise and dismay.

Steve watched them fly away, nodded resolutely as he thought of Darcy inside the Tower, and laid his shield on the ground. He spoke in a matter of fact tone. “JARVIS? Please ask Bucky to look after my shield.” Steve squared his shoulders, walked to the Vorm ship, and entered the cockpit. One of the sky rips that Rusk had opened disappeared from sight. He looked at the others, seeking one large enough for his purpose.

Steve studied the controls for a few seconds, recalling his previous efforts to fly a Vorm ship. He closed the door to the ship, and took off. He piloted towards an open rift in the sky, a portal. He blinked hard, his face crumpling with pain.

Spurred by the alarm and JARVIS’ info that Steve had called it, Tony ran out the door to the rooftop. He was nearly run over by the fleeing engineering team and Erik. He grabbed Ilsa.

“What’s happening?”

Tears streamed down Ilsa’s cheeks. “The Captain is removing the threat before it can destroy us.”

Erik’s tone was hollow. “He’s… taking the Nidavellite into space, hopefully before it kills us all…” Erik moaned. “Oh, Darcy!”

Tony’s head snapped up. He stared at the portal and called out, “JARVIS! Suit me triple. Iron Man, Space Exo, and then Space Cap… NOW!” He chafed against the delay, swearing to himself that he
would work on improving suiting time as soon as possible. As he waited, he noticed the shield laying on the rooftop. He began to shake with emotion. Suit pieces hovered around him as he was covered, first with his trademark red and gold, then with a silver and red suit layer, and finally with a larger blue exo suit with red and white markings. He accelerated into pursuit. As he gained speed, he followed the Vorm craft into the portal. The final external pieces clicked into place over him as he flew.

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After Steve realized that Dell Rusk was the Red Skull, he shared that fact with Darcy. His message read, ‘Dell Rusk = Red Skull. Tell everyone. No matter what happens, I love you. Please go to a safe room. You are the love of my life.’

Darcy nearly fell out of her desk chair. She texted back to Steve, her fingers flying over the letters. ‘I love you! Wait for the others. Don’t face him alone. Don’t sacrifice yourself. Don’t leave me!’ She saw Pepper approaching her office. Pepper began to run when she saw the look of horror on Darcy’s face.

“What is it?!” Pepper threw the door open.

“Where’s Steve?!” Darcy’s voice shook.

Pepper grimaced. “He and Thor walked Rusk out to his plane… on the roof.”

Darcy felt like she couldn’t breathe. “The roof? Jane and Erik are on the roof! About ninety minutes ago she started getting wacky readings. She said to pray for a tech glitch and ran to check the sensors in her new array.” Darcy’s eyes widened. “When did Rusk land?” She waved a hand at Pepper to shush her. “JARVIS? Did Rusk land at the same time Jane freaked out?”

“Yes, Darcy. Those two things occurred at nearly the same time.” JARVIS replied.

Darcy moaned. “No! No! Rusk is Red Skull, Pepper!” Pepper took a step back, gasping with horror.

An alarm sounded, urging everyone into Safe Rooms. Scientists and Engineers scurried to safety. Darcy spoke quietly. “JARVIS? Who sounded the alarm?”

JARVIS explained. “The Captain asked me to sound the alarm once Secretary Rusk reached the least populated area of the Tower. I did a check on all areas of the Tower and determined that to be on the roof.”

Darcy turned to the video screen on her wall. Her voice cracked. “JARVIS? Show us what’s happening on the roof, please.” Darcy and Pepper watched, horror-struck, as Red Skull monologued at length, taunted Captain America, and departed with a Hydra salute. They watched Steve and Thor talk with Jane, and saw Thor fly Jane away. When Steve laid his shield on the ground and started walking towards the Vorm ship, Darcy began to cry. She moaned. “No! Oh, God… No! Please!” She wanted to run to the roof and stop him, or go with him Anything, but to watch...

Frantic, she banged her wrist bangles together and asked, “JARVIS?! My suit?”

JARVIS sounded almost mournful. “Thor and Dr. Foster indicated that the ship’s cargo is going to explode, Darcy. I am programmed not to let you use your suit to put yourself in danger. If I send your suit, it would be for the purpose of flying you away from the Tower. Do you request that?”

Watching the monitor, Pepper yelled. “Tony! Tony’s out there!”

They saw Tony’s suit, and more, arrive and assemble on him as he ascended to take chase after Steve in the Vorm ship. Darcy’s hands were fists. She chanted, like a litany. “Please, oh, please!”

Tony groused. “I’m going as fast as I can, Lewis. He’s makin’ speed. Shit! I can’t believe I’m flying into a portal. How is this my life? God damn it, Rogers! I’m almost there!”

“It’s getting shaky at the edges! The portal’s closing! Tony!” Pepper shrieked.

Over the comm, Tony screamed, “I can do this! Pepper! I can do it!” He continued to rocket towards the Vorm ship, faster and faster, reaching to catch it with all his might. The portal began to diminish in size as he closed his fingers on the edge of the ship and called out, “Cap! Out here! Let me take you back!”

In the blink of an eye, the ship and the armored figure disappeared without a trace. The portal was gone, the sky clear and blue where it had been.

*to be continued*...
“Each step is a little less horrific than the one before it.”

Chapter Summary

Darcy, Pepper, the Avengers and others try to understand what happened to Captain America and Iron Man, develop plans to search for them, and grieve their loss.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, McGregorsWench for beta and support! :)

Thank you Readers, and those kind enough to Comment. It's nice to see that there are more than 5 people reading this! :) THANK YOU.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The portal was gone. Steve and Tony were gone. Darcy’s mouth opened as though to scream, but no sound came out.

Pepper reached into her pocket and grasped her phone. She stared at the screen, nearly unseeing. “Tony?” For the first time that Darcy had ever seen, Pepper babbled. “I missed his call when he flew into the portal against the Chitauri! I didn’t mean to. I was watching the battle on TV… much like now.” Tears ran down her cheeks. “And he was gone! I looked at my phone and it said ‘missed call’ … from him… and…” She looked ill.

Darcy sat back against the edge of the desk, struggling to breathe. She put a hand to her chest and stared at the monitor. Onscreen, she saw Thor return.

When Thor landed, he looked around the rooftop. He noted that the Vorm craft was gone and that Captain America’s shield lay in the middle of the roof. His expression fell. “JARVIS? Where is Steven?”

“JARVIS explained. “He attempted to aid the Captain after the Captain flew the Secretary’s Vorm ship into one of the rips in the sky, Prince Thor.”

“They’re gone?!” Thor cried out in dismay.

“JARVIS replied again. “It would seem so. I have searched for Mr. Stark’s GPS tracker all over the world. I do not find him anywhere on Earth. I am running self-diagnostics now to verify that I am functioning within normal parameters. So far, results indicate that I am.”

Thor trembled with anxiety. He looked around, assessing. “All is well here, then.”

JARVIS paused before answering. “Other than the absence of Sir and the Captain, all seems well.”
Thor swung Mjolnir and took to the sky, going in the same direction he had before. When he landed again with Jane, she asked Darcy’s location, and ran to be with her friend. He followed. Jane stopped as she saw Pepper and Darcy through the glass of Darcy’s office wall, both stunned and distressed. Erik was sitting in a visitor’s chair close to Darcy and holding her hand, looking up at her brokenly. Ilsa waited for him outside the door with Darcy’s agents, all three protectors uneasy.

Jane let out a ragged breath, and approached. “Darce? Pepper?”

Darcy’s eyes were wide and brimming with tears. She leaned against the edge of her desk and seemed as though she was having trouble breathing. She looked up as Jane called her name.

Pepper was pale, gripping her phone tight in one hand and staring at it. She was in shock, hardly blinking.

Jane ran forward to pull Darcy into a tight embrace. “Darce?” Thor stood back, his expression grim. Erik wiped tears from his eyes.

Darcy pushed to standing and cried in a desperate, pleading tone. “Jane! Bring them back! They went through a portal. You’re like the queen of portals. Bring them back!”

Tears flowed down Jane’s cheeks as she choked. “From where?” Her expression filled with anguish. “I don’t know where they went! I don’t know where that portal led! The possibilities…!”

Darcy’s voice caught. “Figure it out! You’re the smartest…” She struggled to get a breath. “What do you need? What can I get for you, so you can figure it out? What can I do?!” She grasped Jane’s arm with tight desperation, focusing intently on her friend. Jane could feel Darcy shaking.

Pepper finally looked up from her phone, her tone fiery. “Your resources are unlimited. I authorize you to spend any amount of money towards finding Tony and Steve. If we have to bankrupt Tony, we will!”

Erik cleared his throat. “I’ll review all energy scans for the area for the past few hours. Hopefully, we can discern readings for individual rifts in the sky. If we can isolate that data…” Darcy looked at him and nodded encouragement, her eyes glistening and wild with need.

Jane nodded. She looked from Erik to her grieving friends. “We’ll try. Of course, we will!”

Thor interjected. “JARVIS scanned this planet in search of friend Stark’s implanted tracker. He has not met with success. He informed me that he checked himself for errors and found none.”

Pepper nodded. She bit her lip. “Tony has an implant…” She put a hand to her chest as though to control her heart rate.

“We have to extend JARVIS’ range! Can we add JARVIS to satellites? If we transport them to other realms, could we search for them that way?” Darcy swallowed tears.

Thor blinked, nonplussed. “The Universe is vast, Lady Darcy.” He frowned, troubled by thoughts he didn’t wish to voice. He exchanged a look of understanding with Erik. Erik sighed, and then looked at Darcy again. It was obvious that he wanted to find a way to help, but thought the situation hopeless.

Jane looked thoughtful, then frowned and spoke slowly. “We should also search for the Nidavellite explosion. It’ll be devastating. The energy mass was so big! A Nidavellite explosion of that magnitude ought to register on sensors, away from Nidavellir, that is…”
“So, we need to set up sensors to search for that signature and for Mr. Stark’s tracker. Who can program JARVIS?” Erik nodded eagerly.

Pepper gasped in dismay. “Tony! He’s the only one…”

JARVIS interrupted. “Pardon me, Miss Potts. That is incorrect. Sir has allowed both Dr. Banner and Colonel Rhodes to access my base code, and informed me that if something like this should happen, I am to allow them access. Given the circumstances, I will allow them to work on projects related to the parameters you have discussed, and others related to Sir’s safe recovery. I will do what I must to facilitate the search for Sir and the Captain. For any requests beyond those parameters, I will seek your approval.” Pepper and Darcy both thanked him. Pepper sent a text message to Rhodey, explaining the situation, and asking for him to return to the Tower as soon as possible.

Jane and Erik looked at each other, then Darcy. Erik spoke in a gentle tone, but his words were terrifying. “That explosion would have destroyed all of Manhattan, Brooklyn, parts of New Jersey, too. It would obliterate everything within a ten mile radius of it, and was likely to happen with ninety seconds. No one, not even the Captain or Iron Man, could survive it.”

Darcy argued. “Tony took his suit that’s capable of space travel… and a space one for Steve, too. They could fly away from the energy thingy with those. The suits can fly fast! I’m sure Tony made them to withstand all kinds of space energy. You can look at some of the other space-going suits Tony made for comparison. He even made one for Pepper!” She understood that it was unlikely that they could survive the explosion, but chose to cling to hope. She couldn’t bear to think that Steve and Tony were dead. If they were, she wasn’t sure that she wanted to live.

Pepper nodded and tried to smile. “If they were able to get Steve into the suit before the Nidavellite exploded and move away…” Her face fell as she worried. “If they had… time…”

Thor’s phone rang. He answered. “Yes, Lady Natasha? Yes.” He looked at the others. “I will bring Jane, Erik, Darcy, and Pepper with me. They are planning ways to search for our friends.” He hung up. “The Lady Natasha leads the Avengers in the Captain’s absence. She calls for me to join the team to review Security recordings from the past few hours, and gain a full understanding of what happened. We also need to prepare for the inevitable return of the Red Skull and his forces.”

Everyone was somber as they made their way to the Avengers Conference room. When Darcy entered the room, Bucky moved to her side immediately. His jaw was set, his expression intense. He touched her cheek to wipe away a tear, hugged her briefly against him, and then stayed by her side, protective. Darcy saw Jones and Dernier exchange a wary glance as they moved back out to the hallway to wait. Ilsa stood with them, her mouth set in a grim line.

Sam also needed to hug Darcy, though his hug lasted longer, and almost warmed her. He also seemed to need to stay close to Bucky and keep an eye on Natasha, too. He behaved as though worried about many of the people in the room. Clint seemed glued to Natasha’s side, but looked at both Darcy and Pepper with concern. Betty’s eyes were full of compassion as she held Bruce’s hand tightly. Bruce seemed the closest to tears of all those in the room. Maria Hill looked angrier than anyone had ever seen her before, and it quickly became obvious that it was because she was angry with herself.

Hill bit out. “Well, that bastard’s probably noticed that we’re still here by now. Should we let the world know that Dell Rusk is the Red Skull? Can I make a statement throwing some of his words back in his face by announcing that Captain America thwarted his plan?”

Natasha’s phone rang. Irritation crossed her face, but when she saw the caller ID, she glanced at
Hill, took the call, and put her phone on the table. “You’re on speaker, Nick. Avengers, we have Nick Fury on the line with us.”

A wry voice spoke. “Gee, thanks, Romanoff! Sure! I’d love to let a bunch of people know I’m alive today! What is it with you people and your lack of regard for careful planning? First Coulson, now me?”

“Sir! Your tendency towards secrets has become problematic.” Clint’s expression darkened.

Nick Fury’s chuckle was dry as tinder. “I’m calling to tell you that the Defense Secretary just assassinated the President of the United States! And you’re suggesting I become less secretive? No, thanks, Barton! I think I’ll keep doing things my way.”

Natasha interrupted. “Nick? Dell Rusk is the Red Skull.”

Fury growled. “Well, isn’t that something? Looking at the two names side by side makes me feel pretty stupid about now.”

“Join the club, Sir.” Hill spoke up.

Darcy noticed that Jane and Erik weren’t paying attention to the conversation. They were evaluating energy data, arguing and scanning through readings. Her attention was drawn to their work more than anything else. She clenched her hands to stop from shaking. All she could think was how badly she wanted Steve back, safe and together with her. His name echoed inside her head, again and again, a litany.

Clint accused. “Do you report to Fury or to the Avengers, Hill?” Sam winced.

“We’re on the same side, Barton.” Over the phone, Fury’s tone was smooth.

Clint sat back and nodded. “Thanks for confirming my suspicion.” He glared at Hill. “I’ve had enough mind games, guys. We just lost Cap and Iron Man! I’m not in the mood for lies, no matter what side you’re on.”

Fury choked. “What?! Lost them?! What do you mean? I’m seeing some wild shit on the news about holes in the sky over Manhattan earlier. Then, just now, I had a call from one of my people on the President’s Secret Service detail. I thought I’d share the news with Romanoff before it hits the airwaves. I couldn’t reach Cap, and had a message from Hill that we need to talk. How is all this related?”

Natasha turned to Maria. “Write a statement for us to discuss. Then, we’ll get you on TV. People need to be informed about Rusk.” Hill focused on her StarkPad, tapping words into it quickly and revising. Natasha sighed. “Nick, Rusk came to meet with the Avengers earlier today. Apparently, his ship carried something that would blow up the Tower, and he had a way to open portals in the sky for his escape. Cap flew the ship into a portal to remove the threat. Iron Man tried to help Cap, but they both disappeared. We just sat down together to go over video of Rusk’s every move while he was in the Tower… and to discuss our plans. He expected us to be dead by now. He’ll attack again. I wouldn’t be surprised if he killed the President when he discovered that his plan here failed. He’s known to be impulsive when angered, Red Skull is. I remember from my history studies on Hydra.”

Fury sounded agitated. “He ran off after he took out Ellis, only God knows where. He’ll attack again, alright, sooner rather than later, once he realizes Cap and Stark are gone.” He groaned. “Hell of a thing! What happened to Cap and Stark?”
Erik spoke. “This is Selvig, Director Fury. We don’t know where they went, or precisely how long they had before the Nidavellite exploded. But, it wasn’t long.”

It hit Darcy then that the Nidavellite had already exploded. She put her head in her hands and struggled to focus on what was being said, to breathe, and to not pass out. Sound muted for her and the world swam before her eyes.

Erik swallowed hard. “We’re trying to narrow in on energy signatures of each of the rips in the sky, particularly the one they entered. The energy radiated by the Nidavellite is interfering with our efforts.” He glanced at Darcy as she made a pained noise of understanding. “It’s enormously powerful. There’s a speck in Thor’s hammer. The mass Rusk left on the roof was a few feet round in diameter. It would have obliterated everything for more than ten miles. That’s why the Captain removed it. We’d all be dead if he hadn’t.” Erik glanced around the table, stopping on Thor, Bruce, and Betty. “Most of us would be dead, anyway.”

Bruce groaned, and then cleared his throat. He gestured from himself to Betty. “Can we take a look at the energy readings? Do you have any other ideas we can try?” He glanced at Darcy, sympathetic as she looked up at him, shaking and gasping for air.

Darcy dug her fingernails into her palms, wound tighter than she’d ever imagined possible. “What about extending JARVIS’ range so he can look for Tony’s tracker? Can we send satellites out through portals?” It irritated her that her voice was shaking so much.

Bruce frowned. “That would require programming that I’m not that good at. I’ll do what I can, if JARVIS will allow it.” JARVIS confirmed that he would and again shared that he would also allow Col. Rhodes to assist. Bruce sighed. “I’m glad Rhodes can help. Our two needles are lost in a big haystack. We could go through a LOT of satellites in our efforts.”

Pepper spoke quietly. “Cost is not an issue.” Her eyes were red-rimmed and she looked as though she was struggling not to throw up. She still held her phone in her hand.

Natasha turned to Thor. “How would Midgardian satellites or probes be viewed by those in other realms?”

Thor fidgeted. It was strange to see. Finally, he admitted. “Many will ignore Midgardian technology as primitive. Some will resent it and seek to stop us, either by destroying or sabotaging the devices, or by attacking Midgard.”

“We don’t want to invite trouble.” Natasha’s brows came together as she frowned.

“Trouble has a way of inviting itself,” Nick Fury observed.

Bucky interjected. “I don’t give a damn what might happen! Finding Steve is my primary goal. If the Avengers’ opinions differ? Accept my resignation, and get out of my way. I’ll go knock on the door of every Hydra base left, and look for a way to get to that sadistic bastard and torture him until he tells me where Steve is.” Under the table, Darcy put a hand on Bucky’s arm. She bit her lip, swallowed hard, and struggled not to burst out crying.

Natasha’s gaze was flinty. “Stop the dramatics! Steve’s mission was…”

Darcy gasped as though she’d been punched in the gut, and interrupted. “Is.”

Natasha stopped and stared at her, then continued. “Steve’s mission IS to shield people from Hydra and other evil. I don’t want to fail him.”
Darcy let out a shuddering breath. “But... right now... Is there anything we should be doing today to clear up the readings? If there’s even a chance, we need to find them and bring them home. Is there anything urgent... anything that has a short window of opportunity for getting data that could help us find them?” Her thoughts felt murky, like panic was short-circuiting her mind. She blinked away more tears and her voice broke. “What can I do to help find him?!” Bucky let out a sigh and nodded.

“I’ll go up to the roof and see if I can narrow the radiation band readings. I’d like to access Stark’s sensors, too, if I may.” Erik stood.

Pepper blinked hard. “You may. Do whatever you must, doctor. JARVIS? Give Dr. Selvig full access. He’s trying to find Tony.” JARVIS agreed.

Erik leaned down and kissed Darcy on the cheek. “I’ll count on you and Jane to fill me in on what’s said here in my absence.” Darcy couldn’t keep the plea out of her expression. Erik frowned sadly and kissed her forehead, then left. Ilsa trailed him, as usual.

Natasha asked that JARVIS cue up all surveillance he had on Rusk’s visit. Pepper flushed with angry embarrassment as she watched herself unknowingly interacting with one of history’s worst villains. She and Maria traded rueful glances. Maria leaned over. “Don’t feel bad. I actually sat through a State Department dinner next to the bastard once in DC. I even danced with him!” Natasha blanched and stayed silent. She looked ill, too. Darcy saw Clint lean closer to her, whispering.

Darcy asked, “JARVIS? Can you show us what was happening in Jane’s lab at the same time stamp as the video onscreen of Rusk?” JARVIS complied. They watched Jane and Erik discussing strange energy readings and Nidavellir. Darcy swallowed bile. “I should have reported your suspicion! Instead of assuming the new equipment was off, I should have let Steve know you’d noticed a potential problem.” Her attention was transfixed by Rusk’s manner as he and Pepper discussed Captain America.

Bucky tensed beside her. “A lot of that same stuff he’s saying there, he said to Steve the first time they met, the day Steve rescued me from him and Zola after they first captured my unit.” He shook his head, scoffing. “Except he claimed that HE was Erskine’s greatest achievement! Deluded bastard!” Haunted, Bucky also remembered how Zola had looked at him, zealously noting the initial ‘success’ of his serum.

Sam’s expression was grim. “He’s looking for Darcy there at her office. He must have heard about her and Steve, probably from that prick Rumlow and the moles Hydra had in the labs.” Bucky stiffened and put a protective hand over Darcy’s as they saw Rusk’s expression as she and her detail ran past to the Engineering lab onscreen. Rusk’s interest in her was plain to see.

“I’d keep an eye out for whatever he has in that cigarette case. I suspect its ill effects aren’t limited to second-hand smoke. He handles it like a weapon.” Natasha frowned.

JARVIS paused the video as Fury interjected. “Rusk blew some sort of smoke in the President’s face. It caused him to seize up and start screaming. Then, his hair fell out, and his skin did something weird until his whole head was shrunk tight and red. Soon after that, Ellis fell over dead.”

Darcy stared at the screen. Rusk had pulled out the cigarette case when he saw her. Bucky tightened his hand on hers as he felt a tremor of fear pass through her. Under her breath, she muttered, “Thanks for the fucked-up nightmare material!” JARVIS resumed the video. Rusk spoke to Pepper about Darcy. Darcy blinked hard as she heard.
When Rusk implied Darcy had gotten her job by granting Steve sexual favors, Sam half laughed and half groaned. When Rusk said she looked Semitic, Bucky nearly came out of his seat. Darcy was startled at the gut-level jolt of fear that ran through her. She rarely gave her Jewish heritage thought. But, given that Red Skull was a Nazi and one-time aide to Hitler, she knew it wasn’t a compliment. He saw her as someone who ought to be dead.

Watching the video of him as he referred to Bucky and Natasha as weapons caused Sam to cuss violently. “I should have put it together that both of you were reacting to something real!” He slapped the table with one hand.

Bucky sighed. “It was a long time ago. For a while, early on… he was one of my handlers. I never knew his name. To him, I was ‘Asset,’ and to me he was ‘Master.’” Sam growled angrily. Darcy turned her hand to grasp Bucky’s. He was trembling as he rumbled. “I think I’d really like a piece of that guy! I hope he attacks us again, soon, so I can put a bullet through his heart, if he has one. Or slice his throat. I’m open to all sorts of possibilities.”

Natasha’s voice was quiet. “Get in line. He trained me, too.” Darcy thought Natasha seemed smaller as she made this admission. Clint put a hand on Natasha’s arm. She didn’t pull away. The others stiffened, knowing that Red Skull must have tormented her in some particular way for her to react openly.

Jane’s eyes were drawn to Rusk’s watch. “The glow from his watch reminds me of the constant swirling of the Aether when I first saw it.”

“Like the Tesseract... I helped guard it in New Mexico while Selvig worked with it.” Hawkeye’s voice was nearly a whisper.

Thor’s voice was quiet. “The Universe is always in motion. It is complex.”

Natasha spoke with authority. “JARVIS? Please ask Dr. Selvig to study footage of Rusk’s watch. Steve had… HAS… theories about the connections between the Tesseract, the Aether, Loki’s spear, and other such items.” She glanced at Darcy apologetically as she slipped into past tense again.

Maria cleared her throat. “I just sent multiple drafts of a statement to your devices. Please read them and critique, make suggestions. Are we sharing everything? What do I tell the media about Captain America and Iron Man?”

No one answered for a moment. Hawkeye spoke up brusquely. “The third one’s close to what we need, Hill. Just tell them that Captain America, once again, proved that he’s willing to sacrifice himself to save people. Today, he saved Avengers Tower, Manhattan, and millions of us in a ten mile radius… from being murdered by the Red Skull, founder of Hydra. Red Skull infiltrated our government disguised as Defense Secretary, Dell Rusk. Iron Man attempted to retrieve Captain America. Before they could return, the portal in the sky closed. We hope that with the Captain’s strength and skill, and Tony Stark’s genius and ingenuity, they find a way to stay safe, fare well, and come home. The Avengers’ first priority is to continue to shield people as the Captain always has, but we also seek the safe return of our teammates. We will search for them as long as it takes.” He gave Darcy and Pepper a reassuring nod.

Sam added, “We understand that when Red Skull learned that Captain America foiled his murderous attack plan, the Hydra leader assassinated President Matthew Ellis. We will avenge his murder. The Avengers’ thoughts and prayers are with the President’s family and friends, the people of the United States, and the people of Earth.”
Natasha sighed. “That’s accurate.” She looked at Darcy and Pepper, and a flash of feeling crossed her face. “Of course we’ll try anything and everything to find them! We’ll search the entire Universe…”

Pepper sighed. “I hope that the new Vice President is better than the last.”

Hill nodded. “I’ll get you everything we have on him. Raiford. Much better.”

Thor spoke reluctantly. “I am concerned that most of you use the word Universe differently than I do.” Jane nodded agreement. He pointed at the video. “Red Skull claimed that orange sliver is part of an Infinity Stone, a Time gem. He claimed it held a portion of power comparable to that of the Tesseract. I have never seen this Time gem before today, but I have heard legends. I saw it hold the Captain’s shield in place in mid-air, stop it in time. That is what kept us from Red Skull while he escaped.”

Thor approached the screen, pointing at Red Skull. “I fear the consequences when a novice wields power so much greater than they understand. He carelessly ripped holes in Midgard’s reality. He did not need all of those openings, just one. He recognized the one he needed, and pointed it out to his crew. But, he was unconcerned by the rest. I doubt he knew what the others were or where they lead. I think that, even after his experiences, he uses the word Universe in reference to a one-dimensional plane. The true size of the Universe, of the Cosmos, is far more. It is exponentially more complex. Asgard is not merely FAR from Midgard. It is in a different dimension. That is why one must have a portal or bridge to cross from one to the other. If you add muddled time to that equation, it expands exponentially again.”

Jane let out a shuddering breath and tears came to her eyes. “The Universe is still so far beyond my understanding.” She looked at Thor and stilled. “Muddled time? They could have gone to the past or the future? If they did, there’s nothing we can do. We’ll never find them, or know what happened.” Tears ran down her face.

Darcy gasped in pain. She looked Thor in the eye. “Wake Heimdall!”

Thor shook his head. “It is not possible. He wakes when he wakes. It could be weeks, or it could be decades.”

“I’m begging you!” She let out a shuddering breath.

He shook his head, distressed. “You would never need to beg. Steven is my brother! If I could wake Heimdall, I would.”

Onscreen, Steve squared his shoulders and walked to the Vorm ship to fly it away. Bucky cursed under his breath. Darcy’s shaking increased as she watched again. She understood what motivated Steve, was rendered breathless by his selflessness. She understood that she would be dead, one of millions dead, and she was proud of him. But, she wanted him with her. Then, Tony flew after Steve, valiantly straining to bring him back and just reaching the Vorm ship as the portal began to waver. As they all silently watched the portal close again, numbness fell away and Darcy felt her heart shatter. She watched the others, breathless as she saw grief and understanding claim them. Her eyes met Pepper’s, and both turned away from the pain they saw in the other.

Sam grieved, nearly sick. Bruce was crying, while Betty grasped him even tighter and wept. Natasha seemed stunned. Hawkeye sighed heavily, discouraged. Thor’s expression was one of mingled pride in Steve and Tony, and great sorrow. Jane still had tears streaming down her face and seemed hopeless. Bucky… looked lost. Bucky’s gaze stayed on the sky onscreen, where the portal had been. He tightened his grip on Darcy’s hand.
Natasha’s face was pale as she looked around. She cleared her throat. “Search for Tony’s tracker… where that portal went, and for the explosion. We need to find out as much as we can. Darcy, talk to your other scientists and engineers. See what they can come up with. Bruce, Betty, Jane… work together and with Dr. Selvig and explore every possibility. Bucky, please rein in your feelings, and believe me that we’re not giving up on Steve and Tony. They’re our friends, too. We need you to look over Tower Security and defenses. Help us prepare for an attack. We’ll discuss offensive attacks later. I’m going to ask JARVIS to enact pre-lock-down procedures tonight at 10 pm. I want as many civilians out of the Tower as possible.”

She turned to Pepper. “We’ll continue what Cap put in place, and keep the Upstate base as secret as possible. Let’s go with the extreme measures that he suggested and start public construction on Avengers bases in Canada, Africa, and Asia. The construction crews Upstate are longtime SI employees staying on the construction site, secure.” She sat back. “I’ll do my best to live up to the temporary, and unwanted, responsibility of leadership. I appreciate everyone’s help and best efforts.”

Natasha turned to Darcy. “Red Skull acted as though he knows about you and Steve. He’s an evil, vengeful, disgusting son-of-a-bitch. Trust me. I know. Between that and my guess that your schedule may become irregular, I’m doubling your Security detail. Jones will lead one shift and Dernier the other, if that meets people’s approval.” Hill nodded, as did Darcy. Darcy glanced towards Jones and Dernier. Bucky squeezed her hand again, and she returned the gesture.

Bucky’s expression was stony and stubborn. “If the Tower comes under attack, my first priority will be to keep Darcy safe. I’ll protect her.” Everyone heard the unspoken words, ‘for Steve.’

Natasha nodded. “Understood. Thank you for being up front about that, so we can plan accordingly.” She looked at Pepper. “Pepper, everyone knows about you and Tony, though Red Skull didn’t have a grudge against him previously. He might now that he sees that Iron Man is Cap’s ally. Your detail needs beefing up, too.” Pepper shrugged, her expression dangerous. “Congratulations!” Natasha then turned to Jane.

Jane let out a breath and grinned ruefully. “Thanks. Is that for my pregnancy? Or, for the new Security detail I’ve just gained?”

Hill chuckled. “You’re expecting both.”

Darcy managed a smile for Jane. “Told you he’s a god of fertility!” Jane’s look to Darcy held mixed emotions. They hugged. Darcy looked up at Thor. “Congrats! I can’t wait to be an Auntie and spoil your kids.” Thor’s smile to her was tinged by the grief they all felt.

Natasha looked at her phone. “Nick? Please come to the Tower. We could use your eye for detail about now. Any resources you can bring to the table would be appreciated. What is your title now? Are you with SHIELD?”

Fury chuckled dryly. “I’m a consultant, but I’m pretty sure that Stark can afford me.” Hawkeye rolled his eyes, and Natasha managed a small smile. She looked at Hill piercingly. Hill’s expression was unreadable.

Thor shared with Darcy. “Once made, your satellites and probes may fly immediately throughout Midgard, but take care not to attract attention of the races in the Large Magellanic Cloud, the Andromeda Galaxy, or the Triangulum Galaxy, especially those first two. The Shi’ar in the Triangulum know of Midgard and have sent peaceful explorers here already. I must visit Asgard. There are things I must investigate.” He and Jane exchanged a charged look. “While there, I will
petition Odin to allow us to search Asgard, Vanahem, and Alfheim. I will also ask Asgardian
scientists for suggestions regarding the realms of Nidavellir and Jotunheim.”

Darcy spoke softly. “You may need to apologize for the way we’ve been using Svartalfheim as a
prisoner dumping ground without permission. I kind of think of it as New Australia.”

“Perhaps.” Thor smiled at her.

Hawkeye spoke up. “Including Midgard, that’s seven. You sound like Svartalfheim isn’t as big a
deal to Odin as some of the others.”

Thor shrugged. “They declared war on Asgard. They paid the price. It’s a world without a leader,
with few surviving advanced native inhabitants now. That is the most common result for a realm
unwise enough to war on my people.” His frown deepened as he remembered Frigga’s death.

Betty asked. “What are the other two realms?”

Thor frowned. “Muspelheim is Surtur’s, a home to fire and rock demons. It is hostile in every way.
Surtur does not bend to Odin’s will. Niflheim is the frozen realm of the dishonored dead, and home
to most unappealing wildlife. Some of its moons are ‘ruled’ by ice dragons. It is adjacent to Hel,
Loki’s daughter’s realm. Hela will not trouble us. She and I last parted ways amicably.”

Bruce blinked a few times. “Huh. Loki’s daughter has her own realm while he didn’t?”

Thor looked uncomfortable. “Hela is uniquely suited to her work. Odin decreed it when she
reached the age of majority. As to Loki… Loki was born of Jotunheim. Odin brought him home
after finding him abandoned in a temple there, rejected for his slight stature as a babe. He was
raised Aesir, alongside me and beloved by us all. Odin intended for him to provide a link between
Asgard and Jotunheim. Loki sowed discord between the two realms, instead.”

“I’m sure that Tony would have something very inappropriate to say about now…” Bruce shook
his head.

Pepper laughed, and then began to cry. She gripped her phone with both hands.

The door to the conference room opened and Rhodey walked in, moving quickly to pull Pepper
into his arms. He rocked her and murmured reassurances about Tony’s ability to cheat death.

Betty sighed. “Other than the Nine Realms, are there other places we should consider?”

Jane spoke up. “There’s Yggdrasil. Steve thought that the Red Skull was transported there by the
Tesseract at the end of their battle on his plane, just before Steve crashed it.” Natasha asked for
more information. Jane continued. “Yggdrasil is the worlds’ tree, the Cosmos. The worlds lie in its
branches. Everything is there… everything… and nothing. It’s unending.”

Darcy asked shakily. “What about a throne of the galaxies? Is there one of those? I was told that
Hydra sits at the foot of such a throne. Maybe that was ‘Hail Hydra’ guy babbling about Red
Skull.” She shuddered, remembering.

Natasha lifted her chin, a dangerously angry expression on her face. “Red Skull used a Vorm ship
today. Steve wondered who the Vorm commander on Earth was. He meant to ask Pierce about it.
Pierce mentioned the Infinity Stones, and gave us the name Thanos, but didn’t give up Red Skull.
He could have warned us about Dell Rusk!. We wouldn’t have let him land a ship here if we’d had
any reason to suspect him. Steve and Tony might still be alive, if not for him…”
Bucky shifted in his seat and growled. “You mean Pierce, Jr.? The scientist?” At his side, Darcy closed her eyes, tight. Natasha nodded, watching Bucky’s anger rise. He looked at Natasha pointedly. She nodded again, frowning. He sat back, took a deep breath, and touched Darcy’s hand to reassure her.

Thor interjected. “Red Skull said that he gained Thanos’ trust by revealing the whereabouts of the Tesseract, and received the slice of Time from him. It keeps him young and gives him power he doesn’t deserve. I wonder if Thanos is the one who controlled Loki? Loki fell from the Bifrost into Yggdrasil. Someone then gave him that spear…”

Bucky followed a train of thought. “So, when Red Skull touched the Tesseract, he fell into Yggdrasil, met up with this Thanos. He served him, but also kept his hands in stuff here. Hydra infiltrated SHIELD, and Red Skull eventually infiltrated the US government, or maybe he did that multiple times and Rusk was just his latest identity.” He let out a string of curses.

Betty returned to the topic of the realms. “Back to my question, please. Are there other realms we need to explore?”

Thor mused. “Valhalla is ruled by Odin, but it is only accessible to those warriors Odin chooses, and impossible for others to access.” He looked uneasy, unwilling to discuss Valhalla. He changed the subject. “Nornheim is an Asgardian province ruled by Karnilla, the sorceress, and guarded by her humanoid immortals and guardian demons. It is also home to the goddesses of destiny. I have tried the might of those who guard that land before. We can search there, but carefully.” He laughed at himself. “Not so long ago I was still arrogant enough to claim that I fought my way past one hundred of her warrior demons alone. Now, I am wise enough to admit that it was the smoke enchantment that Loki illusioned that brought us all out safely…” Thor sat back in his seat, his expression serious. “Illusion can give safety, even that created by Loki.” Jane nodded, remembering how Frigga protected her from Malekith.

Thor looked up and saw that Hawkeye’s penetrating gaze was trained on him. “There’s a saying, Thor. Chomsky, I think. ‘If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion.’”

Thor nodded agreement. He glanced at Darcy. Her eyes were shadowed with grief and pain. He could see that her pain was overwhelming, despite her efforts to hold it at bay. Thor was somber. “As I said, there are things I would investigate.”

Natasha sighed. “Let’s get to work.” As everyone left to work on battle and defense plans and search and recovery efforts, Pepper stopped Darcy. They pulled each other into a desperate, tight hug.

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Darcy went to her R&D office. She put out a call for all astrophysicists, astronomers, extraterrestrial physicists, energy and propulsion specialists, aerospace engineers, software engineers, data management and communications engineers, circuit designers, and technicians. An hour later, she arrived in an auditorium a few floors down from her office. She could see that Jones and Dernier were nervous about the crowd. When she moved to the lectern at the front, Bucky stepped where she could see him in the back of the room. He looked around pointedly and gave her a thumbs-up sign, then left. It was easier to start talking then. She knew that Bucky took her safety seriously and was outstanding at assessing for trouble.

She started by referring to Hill’s statement to the press. Every social media site had crashed midway through it. Most were still down, and the world was reeling from scary-news overload. So, Darcy was unsurprised that her employees had questions. She fielded them as patiently as she
could, and then re-directed attention to her priority. “I understand your concerns. Our assignments are related to them. Dr. Foster, Dr. Selvig, Dr. Banner, Dr. Ross, and Col. Rhodes are already working, but we need your ideas and input. We need your help. Come up with ways for us to understand the rips in the sky from earlier today, specifically the one that Captain America and Iron man entered. Dr. Selvig and Dr. Foster lead this project.” There was a lot of rumbling, some disbelieving, and some interested and excited.

She looked at faces, seeking those that held hope. “I want for you to develop ways to extend Mr. Stark’s personal AI’s range so that we can search for the implanted GPS tracker Mr. Stark has. We also need to search for the energy signature of the mass that… the Captain flew away from the Tower. Col. Rhodes and Dr. Banner will make programming changes, and lead this project. One idea we’ve already discussed is the use of satellites, transporting them to other realms via Dr. Foster’s portal technology. We wish to avoid drawing hostile attention or seeming provocative with our search efforts, more in some realms than others. We’ll begin in our own realm, with specific parameters I’m sending to you via internal messaging.” She added. “Thor will seek permission for us to search other realms, and is sharing vital information to help us work safely. We want to search as many places as possible, as quickly as possible.”

Darcy stepped out from behind the podium. “I know that many of you have the desire to stand out and impress Mr. Stark. Here’s your chance. I speak from experience when I say that he likes people who save his life. So, do that! Come up with a way for us to find Mr. Stark and the Captain. Save their lives the way that they have saved yours so many times. My office and inbox are open. Let’s get to work.”

She stayed feverishly busy the rest of the day, working late into the evening. She heard proposals, passed some on to the lead scientists, and sent others back for more clarification. She made a summary list of all suggestions to share with the lead scientists in case she misunderstood or didn’t recognize the significance of something. Betty came in and listened to some of the proposals with her. It was nice to have someone with scientific experience and brilliance to give input.

Darcy was restless and wound up as the day came to a close. The thought of entering their apartment alone was almost too much. So, she walked down to the retail level and forced herself to buy something to take home for dinner. She saw Happy Hogan walking the floor, looking restless and nearly as lost as she felt. As she passed a florist shop, she saw that they only had one Cap Bear and two Iron Man bears left on a mostly-empty shelf. It looked like they’d had dozens and sold them all that afternoon. Thinking of Jane’s news, she stepped inside and pointed to the bears. “Are those for sale?” She glanced around. The flower bins were picked-over, too.

The owner, a friendly woman with a sad smile and a no-nonsense, short, hair cut nodded. “They’re my last! Since word came out about the Captain and Iron Man, people have been buying them like crazy. There’s a memorial out in front of the building already. It’s the worst way to do good business. It just breaks my heart. To lose such amazing heroes! Such good men!” The woman took the bears off the shelf. “But, when you watch that video they have on the TV, it’s hard to deny that they’re gone. Whatever the Captain flew out of here was deadly. They say he gave his life for everyone for ten miles.”

Darcy nodded numbly, thinking of make-shift memorials she’d seen on the news over the years. She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. “I want the pair as a gift for my friend. She’s expecting a baby. The second Iron Man Bear… well, I have a few of the other Avenger Bears. I’d like to have him in my collection.”

The lady smiled. “Oh! A baby! How precious! Congratulations to your friend. The cycle of life goes on that way. As one life ends, another begins.” She rang up the bears and put them in a bag.
Darcy handed her credit card to the woman and was startled by the change that came over the woman’s face. The woman’s eyes filled with tears. She called to her assistant. “Rachel!” The woman turned back to Darcy and held out her hand to shake. “I’m Eliza Manson. Steve Rogers was one of my best and most darling customers ever. Rachel! It’s her! It’s the Captain’s Darcy!” The assistant poked her head out from the curtain behind Ms. Manson, and gaped at Darcy. Ms. Manson wiped the tears from her eyes.

Ms. Manson handed Darcy her credit card without running it through the machine. “Today of all days, you don’t have to pay here, Miss Lewis. We’ve enjoyed your romance with the Captain more than I can say. Watching the care he put into selecting flowers for you, from your first dates through the first time he apologized for something, from friendship and affection through to love! It’s the kind of thing that florists live to see.” She gasped and put a hand to her heart. “I’m incredibly sorry for your loss. They don’t make men like that anymore. He was just… well, you know. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Darcy tried to speak, but couldn’t get a breath. She was overwhelmed by the woman’s concern, but more by her assumption that Steve was dead. The kindly-meant words cut. Fortunately, her audience wasn’t demanding. They were sympathetic and filled the silence for her, gushing more about Steve and his romantic gestures.

She left the shop with the bag of bears and made her way to the elevators. She felt trapped in the elevator, close to tears and struggling to hold her emotions together until she made it home. Finally, she was there. She didn’t speak to her Security agents. She just pushed inside the apartment and closed the door behind her.

It was quiet.

The realization that Steve and Tony might never return, might be dead, fell over her like the heaviest of weights. Her despair was silent, hopeless, and still… at first. She set the takeout food in the kitchen and left the bears for Jane in the bag. She took one Iron Man bear and put him on the shelf in the bedroom closet with her other bears, her protectors. She took down the Stevie bear and held it close.

Unable to stand the empty loneliness of the bedroom, she went back to the living room, sat on the sofa, and kicked off her shoes. Darcy began to shudder as tears came again. Then, she began to cry out, mournful wails of agony, screams, questions and denials, and Steve’s name. One of her hands was curled around the pendant on her necklace, the other wrapped around the bear. The tears fell steadily until she sobbed herself to sleep.

A few hours later, she woke, disoriented. She reached for Steve, and he wasn’t there. What was reality, and what was nightmare? The truth pinned her through the heart. Reality WAS a nightmare, one of the worst. She couldn’t breathe. The silence was too much. The air seemed thick. She stepped into her shoes, and ran out the door.

Her Security agents were posted in the hall. They followed her without comment. When she ran to the rooftop garden, they made her wait for them to check the space before allowing her outside. Finally, she went out. She stopped when she saw Bucky sitting on a lounge chair, staring up at the sky.

He looked at her, both understanding and puzzled. “You have a nightmare or something?” He gestured to the bear she still held in her arms. “What’s that?”

Her eyes were wide, like a child’s. Her voice quavered. “Stevie bear.”
“Not Cap bear?” Bucky’s face crumpled into a tearful smile.

She shook her head. “I’m kind of irrationally angry at Cap.” She ducked her head and swallowed a sob.

Bucky shook with mournful laughter. “No. You’re really not. It’s rational. I’m no expert on sanity, but… Steve’s tendency to take on every fight, every bully, to right every wrong… is a frustrating area of expertise for me, going back about ninety years. I used to threaten to put him on a leash.”

Darcy sat on the lounge chair next to his and hugged Stevie bear tight. Bucky shook his head, pulled out his phone, and took a picture. She grimaced. “I look like shit. What are you doing?”

He grinned again. “I’m gonna send it to Steve to see when he gets back. He’ll love it that you’re clinging to your Stevie bear when you’re down. He gets wound up sometimes thinking that everybody loves Cap, kind of like you wind yourself up thinking that Peggy Carter hung the moon.” He texted the picture to Steve’s phone.

Darcy sagged with relief at his use of present tense, and ignored the rest, for the moment. “Earlier someone told me that they were sorry for my loss.” Her sniffles crossed the line to sobs again.

“Who?” Bucky’s head shifted, and he looked alert.

“The florist Steve uses…” She sighed.

Bucky nodded. “Ah. Nice busy-body, doesn’t mean any harm. She peeks at the notes he writes you, every time. He says that it gives her a thrill, so he doesn’t give her any grief.” He stared up at the sky.

Darcy followed his gaze. “Is that where they disappeared?” She stared into the darkness.

He nodded. “Uh huh.” He offered her a hanky. “Keep it, ya sweet mess.”

She accepted the hanky, and startled as Iolaus jumped up beside her. She petted the handsome cat’s silky fur and listened to his soothing purr. Iolaus settled against her leg, a warm comfort. She cautioned Bucky. “Don’t expect me to stop crying anytime soon, Jerk. Call me all the names you want.” She wiped her cheeks and let out another sob.

Bucky shifted, looking at her and the cat fondly. “It’s okay. I’d probably be kind of mad if you didn’t cry. It’d seem like you didn’t love him so much.” He looked up again. “You get any sleep?”

Darcy sniffed. “Not much. I had a nightmare. Then, I woke up and realized that the worst part is true.”

“What was the rest?” Bucky sighed.

Darcy pressed damp eyes against the teddy bear’s head. “I was wearing a yellow star of David on my gray winter coat. Rusk was there. I thought I was going to a gas chamber, but he pulled out a cigarette, and smiled an awful smile. Steve was gone…”

Bucky groaned. “When did you last wear that coat?”

Darcy almost gagged. “I was wearing it when I got captured by Hydra, the day they interrogated me.” She wiped her face and tried to calm her breathing. She muttered, “I can’t breathe right.”

Bucky nodded. “You’re panicking, have been most of the day. And your subconscious was paying
attention today, Doll. I know you’re part Jewish. You ever have a Holocaust nightmare before?”

She shook her head. “I never gave it that much thought. Now, I want to research all my ancestors and find out what happened to them.” She looked up at the sky. “Wouldn’t it be great if the rift opened again right now, and they flew out safely?”

Bucky stared at the sky, too, waiting. “Yeah.” They stayed like that for a long time.

***

The next morning, Darcy lay in the bed, curled in on herself, eyes closed against the new day. Bucky had walked her home, and urged her to try for more sleep. Every time she woke throughout the short night, she’d been confused. Every time, she realized again that Steve was gone. She felt battered, as though her heart had burst into shards that cut her inside.

She dragged herself from the bed, showered, and dressed for work. As she dressed, she stopped and pulled one of Steve’s shirts to her face, inhaling his scent. To her thinking, training could wait. Work might help bring Steve back. She looked at emails and grabbed her purse, dumping the previous night’s unopened food into the trash. There was a knock at the door.

She almost smiled when she opened the door to find Erik standing on the other side holding a latte for her and a hot chocolate for him. He’d also brought a baguette for them to share and yogurts to eat. He held the latte out to her. “Good morning. Thought I’d come help you get your day started. I brought crossword puzzles. Help me?”

She nodded politely, and asked him in. He looked around. “I haven’t been to visit since you moved. It’s nice.” She followed his gaze to her print over the mantle, the Brooklyn Bridge against a backdrop of starry space.

Darcy moved to the kitchen table and sipped her latte. Erik ripped off some bread and handed the rest of the baguette to her. She forced herself to take a bite and eat the yogurt, to be polite. They worked the crossword puzzles, with Erik doing most of the work and the talking. She couldn’t muster enthusiasm or concentration. Her last nightmare had been of the Vorm ship that Steve was piloting. In the nightmare, it exploded and obliterated both him and Tony.

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As they left the apartment, Erik offered Darcy his arm. The gesture reminded her of Steve and brought tears to her eyes.

Darcy headed to R&D first. As she approached the entrance, she saw Phil Coulson waiting in the hallway. He stood as she approached. She nodded to him. “Director.”

He grimaced. “I wish you were in a good enough mood to chastise me about your iPod.” He glanced at Jones and did a slight double take of recognition.

Darcy swallowed hard. “I wish that, too.” She looked around. “Are you waiting for me?”

He nodded. “May I come in to talk?” He was sympathetic as he saw the dark circles under her eyes and the faint pallor of her complexion. What stood out most was her silent sadness, such contrast to when he’d last seen her.

She nodded and led the way to her office. He looked around at the work stations nearby. The scientists and engineers worked with intensity. A few moved towards Darcy as she entered. She turned and looked at them, assessing. She pointed to them in turn. “I need to meet with this
gentleman first. I’m eager to hear about your ideas and your progress on proposals we discussed yesterday. If you don’t have any objection or give me a reason to approach this differently, I’ll see you, then you, then you.” She looked at them steadily for their reaction. All three nodded agreement and shifted away. Coulson felt people’s curiosity about him. It amused him that their attitude was one of wondering how he merited first meeting with their boss. He thought that it was nice to be unknown sometimes.

Inside the office, Darcy glanced at the phone and computer. She set her StarkPhone on the desk and sat, gesturing for Coulson to sit, too. She looked at him expectantly.

He sighed. “I want to help. This is for your satellites and probes.” She cocked her head and waited. He handed her a jump drive. She plugged it into her computer and glanced over the contents.

“Your information is good. Hill?” She sat back and almost smiled.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to draw hostile attention from other realms, either, Miss Lewis. If our cloaking technology can help you locate the Captain and Mr. Stark without endangering our planet, I’m delighted to share.”

She did manage a grin. “So, all he had to do was to disappear! That’s what makes you cough up this tech. You were pretty hard-nosed about it when you were negotiating with him before.”

Coulson’s expression warmed. “I knew Mr. Stark’s position, and possessive tendencies. I needed to build value for my tech. You know that I have nothing but admiration and respect for the Captain.”

On a monitor outside Darcy’s office, MSNBC was showing amateur video of the previous day’s events in New York on a split screen with an image of mourners at the White House. It was rare to have two cataclysmic events occur at once. The assassination of a President had never shared attention with another headline before. Next, Darcy saw a reporter standing in front of the make-shift memorial in front of Avengers’ Tower. All around the front entrance, there were flowers, balloons, candles, Captain America and Iron Man bears, action figures, toy shields, hand-printed and computer-printed posters. There was gorgeous artwork of the two heroes. It was moving… and heartbreaking.

She murmured. “That trading card went up in value yesterday.”

“It’s beyond price as far as I’m concerned.” Coulson closed his eyes.

She gestured to the jump drive. “What’s the price on this?”

Coulson shook his head. “It’s a gift. The only thing I want is for you to find them and bring them home.” He stood. “I won’t take any more of your time today, Miss Lewis. You have others lining up after the most eager go-getters. I hope that they have good ideas, and that you make quick progress. And, please, don’t hesitate to call me if I can do anything for you. I’m at your service.” He offered her his card. She scanned it with her phone and handed it back.

She sighed. “Thank you. Can I call you Phil?”

He smiled. “I’d like that. I might prefer if you return to calling me ‘Agent iPod Thief’, but having you call me Phil is nice, too.”

She nodded. “Then, call me Darcy. I always feel like I’m in trouble when people call me Miss Lewis too much.” She sighed. “Tony would say that you did me a favor since his products are superior to Apple’s…”
“He would!” Coulson chuckled.

They shook hands, and Coulson left. Darcy copied the cloaking files to Rhodey, and told the others about them. Pepper was flabbergasted by Coulson’s generosity. Darcy then met with the engineers waiting outside her door. Some of them suggested developing cloaking technology; others discussed satellite specs and protocols. Two introduced a new propulsion system compatible with a satellite. One suggested that they use a combination of satellites and drones to search each realm. Darcy found that idea exciting, and shared it with Rhodey and Bruce. Rhodey messaged back for her to come by Tony’s lab later to discuss some of the ideas she was sending. He also mentioned that he was going through Tony’s many works in progress and had found some helpful things.

Her day was full. In a distant way, she realized that the techs and scientists had come to accept her as their administrator. They relied on her, and expected her presence and direction. She thought she ought to be glad. But, she felt removed from everything except her anguish. Steve’s name continued to echo in her head, as though by saying it she could conjure him.

Many techs seemed glad to see her, bringing her pads for signatures and asking mundane work questions. Some were worried about the disappearances of Tony and Steve, especially what it meant for their work. A few of the most oblivious had no idea what had happened. Almost everyone was abuzz about it, but Tony had disappeared before, so they knew the company could continue without him.

When Darcy got to Tony’s lab, she moved to her work station from force of habit. The lab seemed too quiet without Tony’s loud music… and his loud personality. Dum-E seemed terribly glad to see her, reminding her of a puppy who missed its master.

James Rhodes was busy at work on a drone. He turned as she took her seat. “So, you’re the reason that Tony’s lab isn’t even half as disastrous as usual. Nice work!”

Darcy replied quietly. “Thanks.” She looked through the small piles of papers left from the previous day. She worked her way through them as Rhodey continued to work.

He finished what he was doing, and grinned with hopeful satisfaction. “What about that, JARVIS? Is he ready to power up, now?”

The drone began to move, turning its head and flexing its joints. “My name is Yinsen. Where is Stark? I expect to be a good assistant to Mr. Tony Stark. I have been programmed with his image and other characteristics, preferences of speech, history, protocols, expectations, and more; all he needs for me to know. I want to help him. He needs the reminder not to waste his life.”

Rhodey sat back on a stool. “I’ll be damned. Tony! You amaze me.” He stood and approached the drone. “I’m Colonel James Rhodes, Tony Stark’s friend. He’s missing. We’re trying to find him, and bring him home.”

The Yinsen drone nodded. “Hello, Rhodey. Nice to meet you. I know your secrets, pal. How may I help Mr. Stark?”

Rhodey muttered. “We’ve got plans for you, buddy. Don’t worry. You’re gonna be a big help.” He called out. “JARVIS? Please run full diagnostics on Yinsen here. Pay particular attention to his fitness for serving in the vacuum of space and other atmospheres. I want him to do an orbital flight test as soon as possible. Give me reports. Also, tell me if we can duplicate Yinsen so that he can be in multiple places at once, multiple realms.” He turned to Darcy. “How are you holding up, Miss Lewis? I know you’re close with the Captain.”
“I’m not sobbing like a baby at the moment. I count it a win.” Darcy continued her work, her chin jutting out.

Rhodey shrugged. “Yeah. Same here.” He looked the Yinsen drone up and down as it walked around the lab, exploring and assessing the environment. It was smaller than Tony’s battle drones, its motions more fluid. It was a comforting pale amber color with ridges around the eyes that resembled eyeglasses. It had a gray line along the jaw line. The face was not threatening. Rather, it looked intelligent and soothing. White bands at each wrist of the drone bore a red cross.

Rhodey shook his head in wonder. “A medic and forensics investigation drone! Who would’ve thought to make that?”

Darcy kept typing. “I wonder what the real Yinsen would think.”

“You know about Ho Yinsen?” Rhodey turned to her, stunned.

She nodded. “I was working here on the anniversary of Tony’s capture. He told me about Yinsen and Gulmira. I suggested he commemorate the man with a helpful drone. He took it from there.”

The Yinsen drone approached Darcy. He spoke. “You are Darcy Lewis. You do boring reports, and are not to get ideas about managing Mr. Stark. May I assist you? You seem to be in distress.”

Darcy bit her lip. “No, thank you. My… distress… is emotional. There’s not much you can do about it, right now.” The drone offered Darcy some anti-anxiety medication, causing her to laugh. “Gee, pal! Don’t you need some sort of medical license to prescribe stuff like that? What are your qualifications?”

The Yinsen drone considered the question. “I am a Medic. I have steady hands. I am durable enough to withstand extreme temperatures. I am bullet resistant. I can walk through both fire and water. I do not require oxygen. I have doses of all pain killers and anesthesia, carry multiple IV bags of fluid, possess a thorough knowledge of first aid and the Heimlich maneuver, can perform life-saving surgeries, and dispense everything from medicines to hearing aides to contact lenses, as needed. Does that answer your question?”

Darcy sighed. “I suppose.”

“Tony’s not bothered by trivialities like licensing and… well, laws. I’d bet Pepper could answer your question, though.” Rhodey shrugged.

Darcy nodded. “Of course she could! I heard you ask if you can duplicate this guy for use in multiple realms. Is he programmed to search for life signs, energy signatures, and Tony’s GPS tracker?”

Rhodey stared at the drone. “I’ll get to that. Just got him up and running. Your engineer’s suggestion of combining satellites and drones is sound. This drone just seems like a good choice for the mission. By the time we find them, they may need medical attention. And Tony would take comfort in seeing this guy coming for him. Tony was close to testing on him. I did a few last tweaks and will work next on adding the specs you mention. Tony already laid groundwork for linking this guy to JARVIS.”

Darcy mused. “So… a cloaked satellite in a fixed position that we can retrieve as needed, and a drone to extend the satellite’s range in multiple directions and report to us through it? Is that the plan?” It felt good to move towards DOING something.

Rhodey smiled. “Let our advance worrying become advance thinking and planning.” He shrugged.
“Churchill.”

Darcy nodded. “Let me know what needs doing. I’ll push people and resources that way. I’d like to set a meeting between you and Dr. Kelman, the engineer who suggested the combo plan. He’s getting a raise! Also, I’d appreciate it if you’d talk to the propulsion and communications techs. They need attention.”

Rhodey chuckled. “Plug it all into my calendar. I’ll start with Kelman. After we brainstorm some more, I’ll talk to the rest.”

Darcy finished the stack of papers she’d been working on. “Let me help you with your reports, requisitions, and other assorted nonsense. Just because you’re more patient than Tony, doesn’t mean it’s a good use of your time. I can do that for you, and free you up for the more important stuff.”

“Tony must have taken full advantage of that!” Rhodey shook his head.

Darcy closed her eyes briefly. “Tcha! He will again and again, I hope.” Tears threatened again, but she resisted. Seeing her affection for Tony caused Rhodey to warm to her even more.

When they were done, Darcy headed back to her office in R&D to check on people’s progress once more before heading to work with Bruce. The R&D labs were busier than usual, but almost the same as ever. She watched people bustling around, most hard at work. Some exchanged pleasantries or made plans for the evening as the day wound down. It was stunning to her just how normal it seemed. It was suddenly unbearable. She rushed out.

As she walked the hallways, she found herself searching around every corner for Steve. She’d seen him during her workdays so often! It felt strange for him to not be there. Then, she was struggling to hold herself together. She wasn’t going to make it far before she started to cry again. She quirked a tragic grin as she thought she ought to take up working punching bags…

She stepped into the relative haven of Bruce’s lab. He stopped working at the sight of her, “Darcy! It’s good to see you. You okay?”

She shook her head. Her teeth were chattering as she met his eyes. She saw him flinch, and figured she looked terrible. She tried to explain and couldn’t. Her breath shuddered. Bruce crossed to her and pulled her into a hug, sighing. “Anything in particular? Something new? Or, just…”

She shook her head again and looked down. Finally, she managed. “The world is going on like nothing happened…” She began to sob again.

His tears fell on her head as he rasped. “Yeah… It does that. Even when your personal world tilts on end, other people don’t feel it. They keep working and playing. They don’t mean to diminish anything. It’s just that they don’t know.”

She nodded, and pulled away, swallowing sobs that threatened to escape her again. She sniffed. “I managed most of a day this time. I’ll… I’m sorry.“ She was shaking, “I’m worn out… but sleep is…”

Bruce hugged her again. “Is there anything I can do?”

She shook her head, and then reconsidered. “Could you email me an update on what you’re working on? I assume if you had big news, you would have shared it already, if only to stop me from blubbering all over you. Send me any busy work you can, too. I might need it later.”
“Whatever you want… You never have to be afraid to show your feelings with me, Darcy.” Bruce squeezed her hand.

She wiped her damp cheeks with her hands and chuckled at herself. “Good thing!” His smile was understanding and kind, but she still felt ashamed as she left. She put in a special request and went to Dr. Chau’s office. She didn’t have to wait long.

Dr. Chau welcomed her, and asked, “May I hug you, dear?”

Darcy accepted the hug, stiffly at first and then tighter as she began to cry. “I’m sorry.”

“Cry it out, dear. Cry it out.” Dr. Chau rubbed her back and soothed.

Darcy continued for a long moment, then pulled back and gave Chau a thumbs-up signal. “I’m all into that, doc. Bucky says I’m a mess.” Chau gestured to the chair and handed Darcy a box of tissues. Darcy continued. “He also says I’m having constant panic attacks. I just totally flaked on Bruce. And earlier, one of Tony’s drones offered me anti-anxiety meds.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, Darcy.” Chau chuckled and shook her head.

Darcy cried on and off through the rest of the session, as they talked about grief and the idea of an ambiguous loss. Dr. Chau shared that the challenge facing Darcy and Pepper was learning how to live with that ambiguity. Darcy shared that some people already referred to Steve in the past tense, and others made a point of only referring to him in the present tense. She confessed that she wasn’t comfortable with either. She hated to hear him referred to as of the past, but she wasn’t sure if referring to him as present was true. She felt silly verging on insane when doing that, like her wishful thinking was running amok.

Chau encouraged Darcy to give herself time, take care of herself, and reach out to people, especially Pepper. She gave Darcy information on support groups to check out when she felt ready.

Darcy shared that it seemed difficult for her to breathe. They did meditation together, and discussed possible causes for the sensation. As they were finishing, Darcy had a text from Pepper. Pepper wanted to get together for dinner. Dr. Chau was pleased.

Darcy and Pepper ate little, each urging the other to stay healthy, but neither interested in food. They didn’t talk much at first, either. But they were comfortable that the other knew their thoughts, at least to some degree. Darcy understood Pepper’s continuing need to cling to her phone. They sat together after dinner and watched the 90’s comedy movie ‘Clueless’. Pepper liked the Jane Austen book that inspired it.

When Pepper started crying as the movie ended, Darcy shifted closer, cried with her, and shared Chau’s advice. “Cry it out, Pep. Cry it out.”

***

Weeks passed. Darcy cried more than she thought a person could cry. Dr. Chau listened, when Darcy could talk. The priest who blessed Steve at the Memorial service after Hydra attacked the Tower came by the apartment to pray with Darcy and offer her comfort. She felt as though his words bounced off the shield of her grief, but she was polite for Steve’s sake. Every day people behaved more and more as though Steve was dead. They acted like they never expected to see him or Tony again. Whether they died when the Nidavellite exploded, or they were lost in the universe with nothing but titanium suits, many people seemed to think they were gone forever.

Work offered some solace. Darcy was delighted when the first satellites and Yinsen drones
'launched.' Sending them out gave her hope.

Nights were cold and lonely, endless. She lay in their bed; awake most of the night. Sometimes she called his phone and listened to his voice recording. Occasionally, Darcy left messages. Finally, his voice mail was full. She sent text messages every night like she had when he was away on missions before, though it hurt more now. Texting to him was like keeping a journal, with tears. Dr. Chau urged her to write out her grief as much as crying it out, and she knew that the text messages served that purpose.

The media remained in absolute frenzy over the disappearance of Tony Stark and Steve Rogers. Darcy couldn’t channel flip for fear of hearing horrible speculation and misinformation. She couldn’t look at headlines at all, and social media sites were the worst of all. The first time she saw meme that read, ‘RIP Captain America and Iron Man,’ she threw up.

Darcy didn’t need help imagining miserable scenarios, some in which Steve died, and some in which he lived in a whole different time. She wrote one message specifically for him to find if he was in the future. She left it on a chip inside his pocket watch, guessing that relic would always find him.

One night, she sat down at his computer, and clicked on his playlist for her. When a song he’d not sent to her (‘Forever’ by Ben Harper) began to play, she clicked the list to see what else was there. There were several songs he’d not sent yet. She listened to ‘Forever’ fairly calmly. With ‘God Only Knows’ by the Beach Boys there was a questioning note beside it, ‘first line doesn’t apply, but rest is good.’ That made her smile, as did the lilting tune. ‘Something’ by George Harrison caused her tears to start flowing again. The lyrics left her too wistful. ‘Stay With You’ by John Legend had too many broken promises in it, and made her cry more. The last two songs, ‘Marry Me’ by Train and ‘Just Say Yes’ by Snow Patrol, were almost too hard to listen to. She put a note with ‘Just Say Yes’ that read- ‘Just come back, and ask me!’

She closed the music player and sat still, staring at nothing for hours after that.

***

Thor gave Darcy godlike hugs every time he saw her, until he left for Asgard. Erik brought her lattés or frappes daily, and did puzzles, asking her help and continuing to work on them when she didn’t reply. Bruce was kind and understanding, even when Darcy cried through yoga every day, since it opened her mind and emotions. Betty tried to interest Darcy in games and Netflix shows, anything to pass the time. Crushing candy left her numb, so she did that a lot.

Bucky invited her over to hang out with him and Iolaus sometimes. They sat and let movies play (God only knew what). They stroked the purring cat, and waited for Steve’s return together. Sometimes Sam or Sharon joined them. A few times, Sam and Hill were there. Darcy noticed sensual undercurrents between that trio that caused her to go home early to give them privacy. She longed for Steve’s touch so much that it was painful.

Jane became a tyrant to Darcy’s personal care. She was appalled when she realized how irregular Darcy’s diet was during the first week after Steve’s disappearance, and put her foot down. Darcy gave in to Jane’s pleading and prodding. She showered daily, and ate a few bites of food at every meal time. Everything was tasteless and difficult to eat. There was a permanent lump in her throat. She didn’t touch alcohol, fearing that if she started she might never stop.

Darcy and Pepper got together even more than they had before. They still got mani-pedis done together. They cried through some massages and slept through others, since both of them were driving themselves hard. They took coffee breaks and watched movies after hours. Sometimes,
they talked about Steve and Tony. Sometimes, they cried. Sometimes, they laughed together. Sometimes, they were just silent together, grieving and waiting.

Darcy was impatient with herself. She was jumpy and irritable, staring at every report for signs of hope, waiting restlessly for news of Thor, and hoping every day that Heimdall would awaken and find Steve in the blink of an eye.

Natasha forced Darcy to return to Cardio-Dance, Strength training, the gun range, and the arena. Hawkeye and Sam took turns working with her. She improved her shooting accuracy and speed, even passed the drill that Bucky had assigned and started to work on shooting more with both hands. He gave her tougher goals and worked with her more. She knew that it was a tremendous honor, given the way that others stared at him and hung on his every word and action when he had a gun in his hand.

A few days after Thor left, his friend Fandral came to the Tower to visit and guard Jane during Thor’s absence. He assured Jane that Thor had arrived in Asgard safely, met with friends and made fruitful inquiries, then dispatched Sif and The Warriors Three to do favors for him. Thor had begun the process of petitioning for a private audience in Odin’s throne room. Since Thor had left Asgard for Midgard, this was a lengthy ordeal. Unlike other recent visits, Thor wanted privacy when he met with Odin this time.

Fandral was jovial and pleasant company, but sometimes his admiring behavior made Darcy uncomfortable. When he greeted her after his arrival, for instance, he kissed her hand and complimented her. “The rose bud has bloomed beautifully. It is indeed good to see you again, fair Lady Darcy. I hope to see much more of you.”

Bucky frowned at that, and greeted Fandral pointedly. “Nice of you to come and help out while we search for Lady Darcy’s lover…”

Whenever Darcy looked up from her work in Jane’s lab, Fandral was watching her and smiling as though pleased by what he saw. One day, he brought her a latté. “I have heard it said that this is your favorite of beverages, my Lady. I would please you, if you would allow it.”

Darcy blinked, unsure if his words were an innuendo, or just his habitual speech pattern. She decided that he was a common flirt, and accepted the latté. “Thank you for the coffee.”

When he left to spar with Natasha later, Erik leaned over to Darcy with a confidential air. “In case you were wondering, what Fandral said about pleasing you earlier was a come on.”

Jane smiled. “Totally! He’s flirting his socks off. If he doesn’t change his behavior when Thor returns, he’ll be reprimanded for staring at you all the time instead of guarding me and the baby.”

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One day, Darcy went out to the rooftop garden at lunch time. She chuckled slightly as Jane sent her a message asking what kind of sandwich Jane had ordered for her. She opened the bag and replied, ‘Turkey Club, Miss Bossypants. Thanks.’ Darcy sat at a café table, sipped water from her sport bottle, and ate some of her sandwich.

She heard the building door open and stay open for a long moment. Darcy turned and saw a nurse pushing Peggy Carter’s wheelchair towards her. Darcy stared into the eyes of the woman sitting in the wheelchair. The air seemed to ‘whoosh’ out of Darcy’s lungs. She couldn’t say anything. Part of her wanted to jump up and run away. She blushed as she thought of how disappointed Steve would be if she did that. Darcy sat still. She felt self-conscious of her hands, unsure what to do with
them. She wondered if Peggy would recognize her or not.

Peggy looked at her, sharp-eyed, noting, “You’re eating. I’m glad to see that, Darcy.”

Darcy nodded, and wiped tears from her eyes as she realized how much Jane and the others were doing for her. She took a deep breath. “I have good friends.”

Peggy nodded once. “Are you keeping too busy to think about things?”

“Yes. I’m trying to, at least. Not many people knew about me and Steve, outside of the Avengers. But, I… I know I have to…” Darcy’s lips trembled. Her eyes filled with tears. “How?” Her glasses fogged over. She shuddered as she removed them and wiped the lenses on her shirt. Then she set them down on the table beside her, wiped her eyes and forced herself to stop crying. “How do I go on, Peggy? I know I have to… and help the others do what’s needed. With him AND Tony… gone… I miss him so much, and I’m so scared…”

A tear tracked down Peggy’s face, and she sighed with bittersweet remorse. “I remember this grief, Darcy, and it’s one thing I’d LIKE to forget. I remember loving him and losing him. I’m sorry… truly, deeply sorry that you have to go through this. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.” Peggy was wringing her hands. She sighed, and patted Darcy’s hand. Darcy grasped Peggy’s hand, feeling the strength that was still part of the older woman.

Peggy sighed and smiled fondly. “He remained my friend, though visiting with me is… difficult. Even without my dementia, it was rather awkward at first… to say the least!” Her smile widened. “It’s one more thing to admire about him, one more thing to miss.” She looked stronger. “I lived a good life, even after losing Steve. I thought he was the love of my life, at the time… and he was a love, but not the love of MY life, after all. It took time, but I loved again. I led such a life!” She sniffed, looking impatient with herself. “You’ve already taken the first step, Darcy. You’re letting people in, letting them work through their grief by looking after you. You realize that you have to stay strong, and do what Steve would want. It gets progressively easier with time. Each step is a little less horrific than the one before it.”

Darcy felt hollowed out. She looked into Peggy’s eyes and admitted, “I’m scared. I’m scared to hope too much, and scared not to hope enough. I’m not as strong as you… and I’m… tired, thinking of trying to go on, of making my way without him.”

Peggy nodded. “Then you have an accurate picture of the journey, my dear. It’s a long, hard one.” She smiled again. “It’s worthwhile, though.” Darcy couldn’t keep the doubt out of her expression. Peggy sighed. “This may sound strange, coming from me, but I’m so glad that he found what he did with you, Darcy. Steve deserved that kind of happiness. It was good to see him really living, finally getting to love the way he always wanted. His time with you was the best of his life.”

“I worried that it couldn’t compare to what he had with you.” Darcy couldn’t help the tears that came to her eyes.

Peggy shook her head. “Tsk! Don’t be silly! He and I almost had love, but not quite. I know. I was there. Later, I finally had all the passion, laughter, tears, and close contentment of love with my husband. Do you have any idea how long it took for people who knew about Steve in my life to get past fear of the idea of him? He cast a long shadow, but almost is not the same thing as really loving. Steve, sweet man that he is, visited me every week he could over the past few years. And, finally, after he met you… he was happy, and knew what it was to love and be loved. I’m so glad!”

“Thank you.” Darcy blinked back more tears.
Peggy frowned. “And, don’t make assumptions about people’s strength. You’re strong. It’s just doing what you have to, after all. I had some interesting times in Europe, and again later working with the SSR and then SHIELD. But, I hurt and cried plenty over Steve. It took me a year to even look at anyone else.”

Darcy frowned. She couldn’t imagine being interested in someone else. It seemed impossible, but maybe a tiny bit less so as she looked at Peggy’s radiant smile. It was filled with steel and strength.

Peggy nodded, “I’ll go, then, and let you eat. I’ve managed to hold together rather nicely today, don’t you think?”

“You’re amazing,” Darcy choked out.

Peggy rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Hardly! Just stubborn, and occasionally lucky.” She squeezed Darcy’s hand. “I hope he comes back to you. But, I hope that if he doesn’t, you find love and happiness again.”

Darcy struggled to respond. “Thank you.”

Peggy turned to her nurse. “Take me to the rail. I want to see the City skyline. Seeing the changes helps to remind me of the time that’s passed.” She looked back. “I’d like to visit with you again sometime. Take care, Darcy.”

Darcy realized that at some point she was going to talk with Peggy and have to explain again what had happened to Steve, probably more than once. It was going to gut her. She blinked hard, her hands tightening into fists. Lips trembling, she swore to stand by Peggy the way that Steve had, for him.

Darcy felt exhaustion at the thought of the empty days to come.

***

After training the next day, Darcy got mocha frappes to take to Erik and Jane. Thinking of Jane’s constant urging for her to eat more, she got herself a blueberry muffin and a mocha frappe with whipped cream. Darcy nodded to Bucky as she got into the elevator. He stood in the back corner, where he had the vantage point on all other passengers.

Darcy was nibbling at the muffin when a man who had spoken to her before stepped into the elevator and stood next to her. He nudged her arm and murmured, “Sweet stuff for sweet stuff.”

Darcy stepped away from the nudge. The guy sighed. “Sorry. I mean… Let me start over. I think you’re pretty, and I’d like to get to know you.” Darcy blinked hard, shaking her head. He held up a hand. “I know that you were… seeing… someone… and that he’s gone. I’m sorry about that. He was, well, amazing. I’ve been a fan since I was a kid.”

The guy ran a hand through his hair, nervous as he considered what he’d just said. “Not that I’m interested in you because you dated him! I don’t mean… I…” He took a deep breath. “I know it’s only been a short while, and I doubt you’re ready to hear this. I’m fine with waiting. You’re so pretty! And you seem interesting, too. I wouldn’t want to miss the chance when you ARE ready… I’d love to have coffee with you one morning, for instance.” He stepped aside to let a lady exit the elevator and glanced back. He froze in place when he saw Bucky staring daggers at him.

Bucky sent a text to Steve’s phone. ‘Watching other guys act dizzy for your girl is getting old, Punk. You gonna come back and do something about it?’

“Thank you. I appreciate the compliment. But…” Darcy blinked back tears as she shook her head.
The guy glanced at Bucky again and let out a shaky breath. “I’m Scott.” He held out a hand for Darcy to shake.

She managed a slight grin. “Sorry. My hands are full.” He made a noise of realization. She sighed. “I’m Darcy.” She shifted from one foot to the other and then blurted what was in her thoughts. “And it’s more than dating, and I won’t ever be ready.”

Bucky texted to Steve’s phone again. ‘On the other hand, watching her slap them down is kind of entertaining. Zero interest on her part. You owe your girl a ring.’ He grinned to himself, then pocketed his phone and closed his eyes against the powerful sensation of missing his friend.

Scott raised his brows, his expression matter of fact. “Forever is a long time, Darcy.” He glanced at the symbol on her necklace and frowned.

Conscious of the Infinity emblem against her skin, Darcy nodded. “I know.”

Bucky reached in his pocket and took out the phone again. ‘She never takes off the necklace you gave her. I see her touching that infinity emblem over and over.’

Scott sighed and nodded, dissatisfied with the outcome of the conversation. He took a step back, and stayed silent until he exited. He smiled sadly at Darcy. “Take care, Darcy. I’ll see you around. If you change your mind, look me up.” She shook her head. Scott waved and left.

***

Darcy entered Bruce’s lab for work after lunch. She moved to her station and started to work. At first, she didn’t see him. When she looked up from her work, she saw Bruce and a radiant Betty locked in an embrace by the entrance of the supply room. Betty was giggly as she teased. “What if I don’t want to leave? What if I want to savor our success some more, instead?”

Bruce’s smile was unlike any Darcy had ever seen on his face. He was content. His whisper was too low for her to hear. Betty pulled him in for an intense kiss. Darcy swallowed hard.

Success.

This must mean that for the first time in seven years, Bruce and Betty were able to make love as themselves, not just as Hulks. Tony would nearly weep with joy if he could see them now. Steve wouldn’t know how to express his unreserved happiness for them.

She ought to be ecstatic. Instead, she jealously missed feeling content. Even more than she missed making love, Darcy missed the contentment she felt when she was with Steve.

Her work blurred before her eyes. She fought the feelings, and cleared her vision with an impatient swipe of her hand. When she looked up again, she saw that Bruce had noticed her and understood. He looked at her with cautious sympathy, wary of causing her to cry.

Betty waved. “Oh! Hi, Darcy! I was just leaving…”

Around the lump in her throat, Darcy managed, “Nice to see you. Happiness suits you, Betty.”

Betty stopped uncertainly. Bruce shook his head at her, and she waved again. “Um… Thanks. Bye.”

After Betty left, Darcy kept her head down in her work. Bruce seemed afraid to speak, worrying about saying the wrong thing or upsetting her somehow. Her hours there passed slowly. As her
time there ended, Darcy cleared her throat. “I’m glad you’re happy, Bruce.”

He smiled sadly. “I’m sorry you’re not.” He sighed. “I remember the way Steve glowed the morning after you two… first spent a night together. It hurt to see so much happiness when I was so miserable. And, I hated myself for feeling that way, especially given all that he’d been through. Don’t do that to yourself. I’m really sorry that you’re unhappy. I understand, all too well.”

Darcy swallowed tears and waved as she left.

***

When Darcy woke in the middle of the night, she sat up and wrote messages to Steve, poured her heart out to him. She wished that there were some way for him to get the messages and to answer her. She couldn’t sleep. She threw on sweatpants and grabbed Steve’s bomber jacket from a peg near the door to cover up. Steve’s scent surrounded her. She breathed it in, taking the first full breaths she’d taken in weeks.

Bucky was in the roof garden again, smoking. He put his cigarette out when he saw her. She raised a brow. “Don’t stop on my account.”

He grinned. “I’d get in big trouble with Steve if I took even a minute off your life, Doll. Besides, you don’t want smoke to mess up that jacket. You’re almost huffing the lining.” She shrugged. He shook his head. “Stupid Punk! How could he have any question about whether you love the real him?”

“I love him.” Darcy frowned.

Bucky nodded. “I believe you.” They both stared up at the sky, where Steve had disappeared. Bucky was idly curious. “Where did you two meet? Who introduced you?”

Darcy shifted on the lounge chair. “Healing Ward, my room after Hawkeye rescued me from Hydra. I guess Hawkeye was the first to tell me who Steve was. The first thing Steve said to me was to correct the introduction of Captain America, and tell me his name was Steve Rogers.”

“How did you figure out he was interested in you? He sucks at getting that kind of thing across.” Bucky smiled.

Darcy leaned her head back and sighed, smiling. “We kept staring at each other. I couldn’t get over how handsome his face was. His smile was the nicest I’d ever seen, and the look in his eyes made me feel warm all over. Have you ever noticed his eyelashes? They’re just unfair! He has prettier eyelashes than any man or woman I’ve ever seen!” Bucky chuckled. She was silent, remembering. “That night, I woke up scared. He came to check on me. He guessed that the sound of rainwater splashing outside my window might bother me. So, he sat with me and we talked. He was so easy to talk to! I was telling him my secrets before I knew I meant to. I got him to tell me about you, the two of you when you were rowdy kids. When he relaxed and kept talking, it was like I saw everything about him, like I knew him. I was so comfortable with him, that I grabbed his hand and held on. I never want to stop holding onto his hand…”

Bucky shook his head. “You know that the serum didn’t change his looks, right? His eyes, those girly lashes, his smile… all those things are pretty much the same. They just fit the body the doc gave him better than they did the one he was born with.”

Darcy giggled for the first time in days. “So, he just became more Steve?”

Bucky chuckled silently. “Yeah. His body matches the rest of him.” He choked a laugh. “The
lashes were ridiculous when he was little.”

Darcy shrugged and nodded. “Though he gets awkward about the changes sometimes, for the most part it all fits together beautifully. He’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

“I know. But, Doll… someday… if he doesn’t come back…” Bucky cleared his throat.

Darcy stiffened. “Steve’s coming back!”

Bucky’s face was a study in agony. “I want that, too! You KNOW I want that. But, we don’t know if he can. We don’t know if he survived the explosion. We don’t know if he was hurt by it, and then killed by the vacuum of space. We don’t know where he is in the entire Universe. We can’t even be sure that the portal opened into our time. He might be back with the dinosaurs, or a hundred years further into the future. We don’t know, and we may never know. He wouldn’t want for you to…”

“No! I don’t want anyone else! I want Steve!” Darcy shook her head.

Bucky murmured, “Oh, Doll…” She turned away, shaking her head. Bucky sighed. “I’m not saying you should jump on that guy from the elevator earlier today. He’s not good enough for you. But, Thor’s buddy who has a yen for you would be a pretty good choice for romance. He’s sort of super-human. I know you haven’t slept around, Darcy. I also guess that a regular guy might have a hard time living up to the sex life you’ve had with Steve. The recovery time alone…” He shifted awkwardly. “I’d do anything for you, Doll. If you…”

Darcy shook her head. “Stop! Am I wearing a sign that reads ‘desperately horny’?” Bucky snorted a laugh. Darcy shook her head. “I’m monogamous, and you’re not, Bucky. I want you to be happy, too, and I’m not right for you. You’d be miserable trying to take Steve’s place. Besides, no offense, but you can’t. You can’t, because you don’t love me that way. I miss the sex, oh God, do I ever! He’s amazing in bed! I’ve heard other people tell stories, claiming their lovers are good… but they don’t sound a tenth as amazing as Steve. But, what I miss most is lovemaking. I miss the way Steve looks at me. I miss the way he touches me, almost reverently. I miss the need for me that I see in his expression. When Steve and I are together, we both want to make the other person happy; both want to show our love for the other. I miss that. I miss trying to make him happy.”

“I wasted so much energy worrying that I could never compare to Peggy!” Darcy shrugged. “That seems like a silly thing now that Steve’s nowhere to be found.” She stared at the sky, willing it to open. “I miss feeling content and knowing that being with me caused Steve to feel content, too. I want to hold him close and love him.”

Bucky stared at the sky. “I hope he finds his way home again soon, Doll. I’m sorry if I hurt you, saying those things. I want you and Steve to be together! I just care too much about you to expect you to join a nunnery or something, if the worst happens.”

Darcy’s voice cracked. “Don’t give up on him, Bucky! We’re just getting started with the satellites and drones. Yinsen number who-knows-what might be talking to Steve and Tony right now!” She shook her head. “And, I can’t be a nun. I’m not Catholic. I was just a virgin because I hadn’t met Steve yet. Maybe I’m just Steve-sexual. I’d bet there’s a name for that.”

Bucky nodded. “Probably…” He reached for her hand, and held it in his. “Whatever happens, I’ll be your friend, Doll.”

Once inside the door to their home, alone again, Darcy sank to the floor, back against the door, staring into the empty apartment. She whispered. “I miss you so much.” There was only silence.
She sighed, thinking of the days to come, and getting through them one painful step at a time. Her emotions were tangled. She was sad, scared, discouraged, wistful, lonely… and angry.

She was so angry that she could hardly stand it.

***

So, the next morning when Hydra attacked the Tower, Darcy was almost glad for the chance to fight.

She was in line at the café on the retail level. Jones and her other agent raced to get between Darcy and danger. They urged her to flee. Darcy didn’t cower behind them or run, though. She pulled her Glock and her ICER, one in each hand, and began to fire at the invading Hydra operatives. Her time at the range paid off. She ICE’d three soldiers and killed two others. She was pleased to take out one Hydra operative menacing the florist who had gushed so much about Steve. Her previous qualms about killing were dampened for the moment. Her anger flowed.

When the first enemy robot entered the store level and opened fire, people began to scream in terror. Many were killed. Darcy reconsidered her opinion on the taste of righteous anger, then. Her heart almost stopped when the red, white, and blue shield flew through the air and took out several Hydra robots in front of her. She followed its arc as it flew back to Bucky’s hand.

His look to her was one she knew he’d given Steve many times, one of mingled exasperation, fury, and affection. She needed no more encouragement. Darcy turned and ran for safety behind Bucky and Captain America’s shield. She was angry and she hurt beyond measure, but she wanted to live.

*to be continued…*

Chapter End Notes

- the Large Magellanic Cloud (home of the Kree), the Triangulum Galaxy (home of the Shi’ar), the Andromeda Galaxy (home of the Skrull). The Kree, Shi’ar, and Skrull Empires are three major interstellar empires in the known universe. More on Marvel.com: http://marvel.com/universe/Shi%27ar#ixzz3dvEUpfrX

The Kree are the blue-skinned race that Coulson's 'cure' was drawn from. on Agents of SHIELD. They are responsible for the Inhumans’ development (per that show). Per comic sources, the Skrull are a war-like race that have had conflict with the Kree.
HYDRA forces advanced into the Retail level, firing both conventional weapons and advanced lasers. Darcy did a double take as she realized that many of the lasers fired from the robots’ eyes.

Bucky cleared robots that were in range while Darcy ran to get behind him. She dragged the florist she’d saved along with her. Bucky’s breathing eased when they were out of his path of fire. He held the shield in his metal hand and a new arc-powered assault rifle in the other. The gun was identifiable not only by its SI logo, but also by the tell-tale miniature arc reactor in the stock. The arc rifle was small enough for easy use, but more powerful than any weapon Darcy had ever seen. Arc-powered weapons held endless charge. Bucky obviously found it more fluid to wield than a sniper rifle, perhaps as easy as a handgun. The results were deadly. Especially now that she knew more about firearms and self-defense, Darcy was in awe of Bucky’s prowess.

He yelled for Darcy and her agents to take the express elevator reserved for access to Avengers’ floors, and seek out Jane. Darcy knew that he was counting on Fandral to protect her. Otherwise, he never urged her near the Asgardian. When the doors opened, Betty Ross stepped out. She had shed her outerwear on her way down and left clothes on the elevator floor to retrieve later. She wore a one-piece stretchable uniform. Her eyes glowed red.

When she saw Darcy, her expression became ferociously protective. She snarled. “Get to safety, now!” Darcy ran into the elevator, dragging the stunned florist. They pressed against a side wall, half-hidden from sight. Betty transformed into Red She-Hulk. Ms. Manson sagged against Darcy, gasping with terror and pain. Jones called out frantic instructions to JARVIS. Darcy’s other agent stood between her and danger.

The female Goliath turned to look into the elevator and growled. “Go!” Then, she leapt across the retail floor, grabbed a Hydra robot and shredded its metal and wire components to scrap. She howled at the attackers. “How dare you come here?!” Conventional fire was useless against her. The lasers hurt her just enough to increase her anger. Some of the laser fire bounced off the shield
as Bucky moved in close to protect his ally while taking out more enemy forces. As the elevator
doors finally closed, Darcy heard Red She-Hulk shrieking with rage, her language coarse and to
the point. Darcy remembered then that Betty Ross grew up on Army bases.

***

Outside of Avengers Tower, Hulk engaged a squadron of robots led by Crossbones (aka Brock
Rumlow). The robots were fast, strong, and durable. They were proficient in hand-to-hand combat,
but no match for Hulk’s strength. The most dire problem he faced was the number of attackers.

Natasha and Hawkeye piloted Quinjets. Falcon and War Machine flew circles around attacking
Vorm ships. Together, they all blasted enemies from the skies. With JARVIS’ help, War Machine
directed drones to attack the incoming Vorm craft. As soon as the Avengers had all taken flight,
Jane and Bruce's Aesir shield came online to protect Avengers Tower. A Vorm ship collided with
the shield and turned to dust.

Spectators throughout New York and the world watched with bated breath; wondering how the
Avengers would fare in battle without Captain America and Iron Man.

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Darcy stumbled out of the elevator and made her way to Lab Eleven, searching for Jane. JARVIS
shared that Jane and Erik were in the 77th floor safe room. Jones led the way there and entered the
necessary codes to gain entry, and then urged Darcy and the florist inside the room. Eliza Manson
collapsed, crying, the moment they were inside. Her arm was singed from laser fire, she was
terrified, and she was going into shock. Darcy’s second agent got a first aid kit and sat by the florist
to help.

Jane and Erik were at a table, working with her laptop, the safe room's wireless printer, and a stack
of data readouts. Jane was focused on her screen to the point of being almost unaware of others in
the room. Erik was muttering to himself and fiddling with his belt buckle. Fandral stood behind
Jane, tensed. His look to Darcy was welcoming. He was relieved to see her safe.

Other employees sat on couches watching news coverage on the television, though some ignored it
in favor of their StarkPads, or resting. Darcy noticed Ms. Basak, her provisional employee, huddled
in a chair. Her eyes were closed tight and hands holding ear buds in place, so that she could retreat
from the world and shut out all signs of danger. There was a snack station stocked with plenty of
fruit, crackers, granola bars, chips, and popcorn. Someone had brewed coffee. It smelled good,
almost homey.

Pepper stepped forward to hug Darcy. “Thank goodness you’re safe! Where were you when the
attack began?”

Darcy explained. She felt Jane’s glare even before she saw it. She opened her mouth to justify
herself when the florist, Ms. Manson, interrupted. “Thank you so much, Miss Lewis! Without your
help, I’d be dead for sure.” Jane sighed with resignation. She understood Darcy's need to help
others rather than flee danger.

“You are brave and strong, Lady Darcy, a fine woman.” Fandral grasped Darcy’s hand and kissed
it.

Darcy snatched her hand back, blushing. “Thank you.” She turned back to Pepper. The older
woman coolly evaluated the flamboyant warrior’s flirtatious manner.
Fandral gestured to a love seat by him. “Won’t you have a seat? I would see to your comfort.” Jane rolled her eyes and muttered under her breath, setting one data set window aside to come back to later. Darcy pulled Pepper with her to sit together on the love seat. When they were seated, Darcy put her hands by her temples, rubbing away the start of a headache. She jumped when Fandral put his hands on her shoulders and began to massage. “I would gladly reduce your tension.”

Darcy shifted forward and to her feet. “Oh, my God! I’ve had it! STOP with the innuendo! STOP touching me! STOP staring at me! I’m in love with Steve. I just want him back! I don’t want you to be anything but my friend, for Thor’s sake, if you can be that. Otherwise, back the hell off!” She put a hand on her ICER, wondering if it would affect an Asgardian. She was conscious of others in the room staring at her. Ms. Basak opened her eyes and watched, her mouth agape. Ms. Manson looked teary again. Weary of pity and skepticism, Darcy turned pleading eyes towards Pepper. Pepper nodded in return, supportive, her expression intense.

Fandral straightened to full height, hand on his sword hilt. “I respect your requests, Lady Darcy, and I offer my friendship and my sword. If you should ever change your mind, please tell me. Otherwise, I will honor your wishes.” His expression was even more admiring than before.

“Thank you. Now, keep your eyes on Jane where they belong.” Darcy gestured him away with her hand and pointed at Jane.

Fandral’s lips twitched to a smile. “I will not stare, per your request, but I still find you pleasing to my sight, friend Darcy.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Whatever! Thanks, I guess. Just…. Shoo!” She sat by Pepper and rubbed her temples again.

Fandral moved to stand against the wall, closer to the table where Jane and Erik were working. He stared at the screen. He pointed at one set of readings, his expression tentative, but interested. “What is that? I have not seen its like, even in our primitive archives.”

“JARVIS? Have you ever seen that unknown variable before, or anything similar?” She nodded thanks to Fandral for speaking up. He smiled, glad for her approval and hoping, with time, to earn it more.

JARVIS took a moment to reply. “It has some similarity to readings I received from Secretary Rusk’s watch when he came to the Tower.” Erik began to look for it among the many energy signature files they had from the day that Steve and Tony had disappeared. He grunted as he grabbed printouts that graphed its fluctuations. Erik's eyes lit up with interest. It was look that Darcy seized upon.

She texted again to Natasha. 'It might be Rusk's watch/time gem.'

Jane noticed, and pointed out one reading on the graph. She asked JARVIS if he could generate a 3-D rendering for her to work with, and was frustrated when he replied that she would need to move to a lab that supported that capability. Grumbling, she tried to draw a spherical clock divided into nine parts rotating around a fixed point.

Darcy’s breath caught and her voice shook with excitement. “Can you pinpoint its current location and share it with Natasha, JARVIS?”
She turned to Jane and queried. "Is the watch the fixed point? Is the blasted thing really a slice of time?" Jane's excited look of discovery caused Darcy's heart to beat faster. Darcy swallowed hard. "I find your brain crazy attractive at this moment, Jane. It's pretty sexy."

Jane's smile was fervent. She admitted. "I enjoy leveling up in my game of mastering the Universe."

"I have given the Avengers that information, Darcy. They will initiate a plan they discussed regarding the Time gem, and see if we are correct." JARVIS replied again.

Darcy ground her teeth together. "Good! Nail him, Natasha! Tear him to shreds." She let out a nervous breath and turned her attention to the news footage, watching to see what would happen next.

Pepper put a hand on Darcy's arm and held to her tightly. They were both shaking. They murmured words of support to each other.

Jane stared at the footage, too. "Someone grab that watch, while you're at it…" Darcy wished that were possible.

***

In the street in front of Avengers Tower, Bucky Barnes and Red She-Hulk had pushed the invaders out of the building, and were decimating their ranks. Hulk joined them, smashing a robot that fired on Red She-Hulk from behind. He commented, "Robot lack honor!"

Red She-Hulk leapt to Hulk's side. "Robots. More than one. We need to work on your talking."

"Mine." Hulk glowered at her.

She grinned back. "On the other hand, you do get to the point." Side by side, they ranged into battle.

Bucky shook his head as he watched the Hulks smashing with abandon. He looked at the info that JARVIS was giving them, and coded messages from Natasha. They tagged Red Skull's ship among the many over the Tower. He cussed to himself, noting that the other Vorm ships flew formations that always put that ship at the center or back, protected. He was sure that Steve would have noticed, despite the ships' apparent similarities to each other. Steve's tactical thinking was beyond his. But Steve wasn't here, because of the occupant of that ship, the man commanding Hydra.

Bucky had flashes of memory, the word 'Master' ringing through his head. He called out. "Sam! I need a lift! Get me to the roof where that bastard can get an eyeful of the shield." He placed the shield on his back.

Sam also carried arc rifles like the one Bucky was using. He strapped one against his leg, and then flew down to street level and lifted Bucky by his left arm. He teased. "You're gonna owe me for this, Bucky! You're not as heavy as Steve, but you're no light-weight, either!"

Bucky shook off the comment as he dropped to the roof and rolled to a halt. He pulled the shield off his back and held it out in plain sight, deflecting enemy fire and angling it to catch the gleam of the sun's rays. Sam landed behind Bucky, and pulled both his guns to fire at an approaching Vorm ship. Bucky noted that Red Skull's ship was on approach to him, as expected. He took out one of its guards with the shield and stood his ground. Sam tried to hide his agitation as the Vorm ship barreled down on them. Bucky grinned. "Just like a bull charging a red cape. Olé!"
Sam muttered under his breath, wondering which ingredient in super-soldier serum induced insane bravery.

Red Skull was so intent on Bucky, and Captain America's shield, that he didn't notice Natasha's Quinjet taking position behind him. He realized that Bucky had intentionally distracted him for her when she locked her targeting computer on his ship. To escape, Red Skull did what he had to. He activated the Time gem slice to create a portal in front of his ship and fled Natasha's missiles by entering. He hoped her missiles would take out his former 'Asset' after he disappeared. It would please him for those traitors to eliminate each other.

When the portals opened, Red Skull disappeared into the one in front of him. Meanwhile, the sensors atop Avengers Tower were fully prepared. Without interfering Nidavellite in the area, the scientists hoped to discern the destinations of each portal, especially one like Steve and Tony had entered.

***

Inside the safe room on the 77th floor of Avengers Tower, Darcy and Pepper hugged each other with delight as Jane Foster screamed. "They did it! We're getting signatures for the portals! Red Skull went into Yggdrasil again! That's one location eliminated from the search!"

Jane went quiet when the door to the safe room nearly gave way. Fandral activated a true Aesir shield, tripled to protect Jane from any enemy fire. She struggled against its restriction. He took up position in front of the door, all joviality set aside as he prepared to face any and all attackers.

Ilsa pulled Erik behind Jane and her shield, covering him with her weapons. Jones and Darcy's other agent shifted in front of her. Jones looked around at all the others gathered in the room. "This could get really ugly, fast. From the sound, I'd guess we're facing more than one of those robots, plus soldiers." Pepper's hands glowed. She moved forward with the agents.

Darcy looked around the room, at the fearful civilians. Many were her employees from R&D. She clicked the bangles on her wrists together and murmured. "JARVIS. Suit me! This is defensive. I'm not going out into a battle. It's coming to me. Can you help me use the suit's capabilities to protect myself and other people here? Please!"

JARVIS's reply was succinct. "It would be my pleasure, Darcy, and I believe the Captain would approve heartily." He gave her a countdown to arrival of her suit pieces. They were traveling through special secured vents that led into the safe room. She closed her eyes and waited.

When the door to the safe room gave way, the Hydra soldiers and robots faced the considerable strength of Fandral, who justified all of the notoriety of one of the Warriors Three with his skill and might. He cried, "For Asgard!" As he battled the first robot to its destruction, no one doubted his loyalty to his home world.

The second robot fell to repulsor fire from Darcy's drone suit. She then aimed repulsor fire at the human invaders, careful not to singe her allies. They joined battle with Hydra soldiers, Pepper by hand, and the others with careful aim.

Cheers erupted from those cowering behind them as the last of the Hydra combatants fell, dead. People thanked Fandral, Darcy, the Agents, and Pepper again and again. It felt strange to Darcy. She tried not to think about how many people she'd killed.

Erik and Jane dove into combing through the new data. They began deciphering secrets of the Time gem's portals, and scouring all of the openings for traces of a Nidavellite explosion. They
would need ages to begin to make sense of it all.

***

That night, the Avengers celebrated the success of their battle and information gathering plans. They watched action movies and jeered at the false fight moves while eating their usual variety of takeout foods. Darcy stayed for one movie, missing Steve more than ever as she sat alone with their friends. Even favorite foods like Moo Goo Gai Pan seemed flavorless to her.

Fandral joined the group for the feasting and movies, or 'electronic image tales of valor' as he proclaimed them to be. He was true to his word and toned down his attentions to Darcy, but seemed more admiring of her than ever. She overheard him telling Bucky that the way she chided him and then fought by his side taught him more respect and liking for her character than he'd previously imagined feeling.

She blushed when Bucky gave her a knowing look and replied to Fandral. "She's a lot like her mate. They're both admirable pains in the ass." As Fandral moved away from Bucky to talk with Hawkeye, Bucky watched him and frowned. He pulled his phone out and began to type in a text message.

"Do you do that a lot? Send text messages to Steve's phone?" Bruce glanced at the phone.

Bucky shrugged, defensive. "The Headshrinker says it's not crazy, that writing stuff down is good for processing grief." Sam frowned, but nodded tentative agreement.

Darcy sidled closer and nudged Bucky's shoulder, reassuring him. She admitted. "I text or email him every night." She and Bucky shared sad smiles.

Bruce touched Darcy's arm, gently smiling. "Hope is good. I kept a journal file of letters to Betty for years, despite all logical evidence that we'd never be together again. I'm not criticizing either one of you. I just thought that if Tony and Steve are out there and a Yinsen finds them, it might be good to program for updates to their phones to be transmitted to and from them. JARVIS has any alerts, emails, texts, voice messages, etc. that have been left for them since they disappeared. They have arc reactors that would power their phones for years." Darcy's eyes lit up at the thought.

"Message in a bottle, 21st century style!" Bucky made a comical face.

Darcy grinned. "I'm not sure that Steve wants to read that much whining from me, especially all at once!"

Bucky shook his head. "Steve wants everything from you." His words warmed Darcy. Bruce smiled at the way that Bucky and Darcy supported each other. He started singing the chorus to the Police song 'Message in a Bottle' under his breath, his eyes unfocused as he thought of the programming needed.

Sam stepped closer, a look of concern on his face. "Guys? I miss him, too. I miss them both. But, I hate to see you setting each other up for more of a fall. That explosion..." Bucky's mouth twisted. Sam faltered as he saw angry green in Bruce's eyes.

Bruce growled. "If anyone could survive, it's Tony Stark and Steve Rogers!" Betty came close and put a soothing hand on Bruce's arm.

Sam took a step back. "But, it doesn't sound like anyone could survive it! A huge amount of something that there's a speck of in Thor's hammer?" His mouth was set in a firm line and he took a deep breath. "I hate it. I miss them every day, Steve especially. But, there was a reason he flew that
stuff away from here. The data showed it was about to explode and destroy everything around it for miles. I respect that Tony tried to save Steve, but he should have just let Steve go do what he had to."

Rhodey frowned, grim. "He couldn't do that! Tony did what HE had to. A portal to nowhere was his worst fear. He couldn't abandon someone, especially a friend, to that." He raised his glass and spoke with feeling. "To bravery. To sacrifice. To Tony Stark and Steve Rogers."

"To fallen friends." Sam turned to Rhodey and raised his glass.

Rhodey frowned and shook his head, doubtful. "I never bet against Tony." He set his glass aside and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I understand your logic, Sam. I get what you're saying. It just goes against every instinct to follow it. You don't know Tony the way I do. And I have faith in Cap, too. They're resourceful." He looked at Pepper.

Pepper walked over to the window, her back turned to the others. Tears came to Darcy's eyes. She swallowed hard, trying not to cry. Bruce set his glass down on a table with a loud slam, and hugged Darcy. "I'm going to work on that message in a bottle phone programming now. See you tomorrow." He turned and left the lounge without looking back.

Betty watched him go, worried. She turned to Sam and raised her glass, toasting in silent agreement with the evidence. She saw Darcy look stricken as she took in the gesture. Betty sighed guiltily.

Natasha reluctantly raised her glass. "I've talked to Dr. Chau about this, obviously. I've asked her to advise me on how to lead a grieving team, and how to approach and support everyone here. She cautioned me. Everyone grieves in their own way. No matter my intentions, I shouldn't try to force people to my point of view."

"What's your point of view, Natasha?" Sam turned to Natasha, his arms crossed over his chest.

Natasha glanced towards Darcy and Pepper apologetically. "I think you're right, Sam. I think the explosion would be too powerful, even for them. I think the best we can hope for from the search and data gathering is a better understanding of the Universe. And, maybe we'll find the location of the explosion." Her expression crumpled as she set her glass down again. "I want to be wrong. I really want to be wrong."

Hawkeye didn't raise his glass. "I disagree. I think they got away, but are stuck in another galaxy or dimension waiting for us to find them and bring them home." He looked up at Fandral. "What do you think?"

Fandral glanced quickly towards Darcy. "I apologize, Lady Darcy, Lady Pepper. Nidavellite is powerful, like the force of a star. The amount shown in the video record would have proven deadly to me, to most Asgardians, except perhaps Thor... and Odin, when he was younger. I cannot imagine how one of Midgard could survive it, even an enhanced being."

Darcy turned to leave the room. Bucky followed. "Let me walk you home, Doll."

As they walked, Darcy wiped her eyes. "So, what were you texting to Steve?"

Bucky's chuckle was dry. "If he gets THAT message in a bottle, he'll attack Fandral even before he kisses you. For you to get mad enough to tell him off, the guy must have crossed a line he shouldn't. Regardless of what you said, he seems even dizzier. Now, he's drooling over your body AND taken with your spirit." Darcy was caught between laughter and tears, shaking her head.
Bucky shrugged. "Of course, Steve'd have to finish strangling me, first. I told him how you shot down my well-intentioned offer..."

"You told him THAT?" Darcy's eyes went wide.

Bucky laughed. "You didn't?"

She spluttered and shook her head, not meeting his eye.

When they reached her door, Bucky kissed Darcy on the cheek. "Sweet dreams, Doll." Her grief hurt to see. He watched her go, wishing he could stop the tears he knew would flow when she was alone. Helplessness and frustration fueled his anger. The pleasant expression he'd held for Darcy's sake faded to reveal his rage as she turned away.

Unable to speak, Darcy nodded to Bucky. She stepped inside the apartment and closed the door behind her. Remembering a happier movie night, she whispered. "Fait des beaux rêves." She struggled to shake her melancholy, but couldn't. She checked her messages, hoping for word of progress from Erik or Jane. She did a status check with JARVIS on the lab and search efforts. His only news was that a Yinsen bot, number eleven, had returned from the edge of the Larger Magellanic Cloud in need of repair. JARVIS had notified Rhodey and expected the work to be completed the following day.

Darcy went into the kitchen and had a glass of water, hoping to calm down. It had been a wild day, disquieting. It took her a long time to settle down for the night. She finally climbed into bed, hooked her phone to the charger and stared at it for a long time. She thought back over messages she'd texted to Steve and imagined him reading them. She sent a quick message to Bruce, thanking him for still hoping, and for holding out hope to her.

Then, hugging Stevie bear close against her side, Darcy texted to Steve.

*Today, in a defensive situation (only defense, of course, Captain!), I used the suit that Tony made for me and helped save people's lives when Hydra attacked our safe room. They busted in and got more than they bargained for! I'm glad I could help Fandral (seeing him fight helps me understand why he and Thor are such bros) and the others stop the Hydra dudes and their robots (laser eyes, really? looks scary as fuck!).*

*I confess, I'm pretty sure that while they always want Jane and her unlimited (not dependent on one crazy guy's watch) and direct-able Universe/dimension portaling voodoo, they were likely after me, too. Rusk acted like he knew about us THAT day when he was in the Tower. It's beyond scary to think that a bad guy like that, someone who worked with HITLER, wants to capture me. Bucky says not to think about it, but I still do. I'm part Jewish. You think I never had nightmares that Hitler was hiding under my bed, ready to snatch me, when I was little? OH. MY. GOD. I used to pretend that Captain America would come and punch Hitler out to keep me safe. THAT's embarrassing now. LOL And, in a way it's gratifying, because you totally WOULD. :) But, I'm not telling Bucky about it because he'd laugh his ass off.*

*Anyway, scary stuff. Scary day. Weird to be thanked for saving someone's life! Guess you're the EXPERT on that weirdness. :) YOU take it a step further and give up your life to do it. No half measures for you! First, during WWII, then again busting Hydra/SHIELD... and, now, to save the Tower and everything/one for miles around.*

*I haven't thanked you for that. I've been too caught up in missing you, wishing you were here. Well... thank you. I miss you so bad it's agony, but I'm glad to be alive. I wondered for a while if I wanted to live anymore. But when Bucky gave me that look... YOU know the look! (he invented it*
for you) Anyway, he gave me the look because I was PISSED and didn't run away when today's invasion started while I was in the coffee line. I saved our florist (that nice busybody who cries every time she sees me since you...left...). I ICED a few Hydra guys and shot two (killed, not thinking about it... They totally deserved it. Hydra SUCKS. Who am I kidding? You know. But I'll cry about that later, and tomorrow is another day, and I know you get that reference!). But, then the killer robots started in on us and people started dying, lots of people. It was awful. Fire, blood, screaming. And I was in the middle of things where I should NOT have been. Your shield took down robots stomping my way, and my heart stopped.

For a split second I thought it was YOU. Wished it. Wanted it. Prayed. Begged. Bargained.

But, of course not. You left me.

It was Bucky. Don't get me wrong. Plenty glad to see Bucky at that moment. But, I'd rather see you.

It's harder all the time to keep hoping. I try to do stuff to find you. Every day people add to the memorial out front. They already rebuilt it after killer robots trampled it. Every day someone else refers to you in past tense. Tonight, at movie night, Avengers came out and said what they think. Sam, Natasha, Betty, & Fandral think you're dead. Rhody's struggling, logic against knowing Tony. Hawkeye says you're alive and stuck out there. Bruce won't consider Tony dying, and holds out hope that you're ok. Bucky believes you're ok. Or, at least says so to me. I'm still texting to you. I really want you to be ok, to come home. But...

I'm afraid you died in the explosion.

I haven't admitted that before. I hate the way the words look and feel.

Long story short? Thank you for saving my life. After Bucky gave me his patented "what the hell do you think you're doing? This is dangerous! Get behind me! If you die like this I'll kill you!" look... I realized that I want to live. And it's as hard as Peggy says. And I feel guilty. You'd be mad at me for feeling guilty, but you're GONE. You're not here with me. I'm afraid you never will be again. I miss you so much.

Please... live. Please be alive. Please come home. Crying now. I'm the crying-est crier. Love you.'

Darcy lay awake in bed for a long time. She despised herself for the way her hope was fading.

***

After leaving Darcy at her door, Bucky returned to the Avengers Lounge. He was more wound up than most of those who'd fought that day. He'd kind of enjoyed the first film, 'True Lies', stupid-ass missile- into-a-helicopter shot aside. It looked like the second film, 'Commando' had the same guy as the lead, but the action was cornier with every shot. Sam promised that the third movie, 'Terminator' would be much better.

During 'Commando', Bucky loaded up a plate. He wasn't the kind to stop eating when upset. He downed a beer, wishing it could affect him. He thought it a huge oversight on Erskine's part that Steve couldn't get drunk. He knew Zola didn't give a shit about a test subject, but Erskine seemed to have been a different sort. He wolfed down the food.

Natasha approached. "You pissed at me?"

"Nah. I don't like what you said, but I'm not pissed. I know you want Steve alive, too. You're just better at dispassionate analysis of this situation than I can be." He shook his head.
"Thank you for baiting Red Skull for me earlier. I know you wanted to take the shot." Her expression shifted, many varied emotions passing across her face.

Bucky stopped, his gaze fixed on hers. "I'll set up that shot for you, any time. I have a pretty good imagination, Natalia. I know the thoroughness of the Black Widow training. I was only used to train you to kill, but I know that others trained you to lure and captivate. They made you practice on someone."

She nodded once. "I thought his mask was to keep us from being able to betray his identity. I didn't know that he was Red Skull. I would have told Steve if I knew that Red Skull survived their confrontation in 1945."

Bucky's grin was shark-like. "I didn't ask about that! No need." He shifted his gaze, looking out at the empty sky. "If I thought you'd kept that knowledge from Steve, you'd be dead." His voice pitch dropped. "Anyone who had a hand in taking Steve from us deserves to die." The air between them shifted, charged with the desire for revenge.

Natasha shot Sam an apologetic look. "Agreed." She also looked out at the empty sky where their friends had disappeared. "I promised, gave my word to Steve, that I wouldn't kill Pierce."

"I didn't." Bucky snapped.

She nodded. "Chau recommended against letting you go in with him. She thought it was dangerous."

Bucky shrugged. "More to him than to me. I didn't argue then because I was scared. I'm over it now, too pissed. I feel guilty that I let Steve get his hands dirty that way."

"He needed to, for both you and Darcy." Natasha sighed.

Bucky growled. "I need to now." His tone was dark and dry. "Whenever people tell me Steve's dead, I turn into a monster."

***

Moments later, Natasha entered the Solitary confinement cell, her expression shuttered. She stood by the door and looked at the lone occupant fixedly. He looked up from his book, impatient annoyance at the interruption showing in his face, though he tried to mask it.

“Do you have any regrets, Dr. Pierce? I think you should.” Natasha crossed her arms.

He set his book down. “That is the first time you have used my name, Widow.” His smile chilled her.

She smiled mirthlessly, equally cold. “It is. When we questioned you before, I didn’t want for my friend to think of you as a person, regardless of how awful you are. I wanted him to feel only his rage… and let it loose to encourage you to talk.”

“You think of me as a person now?” He raised a brow.

Her smile hardened. “I think of you as a coward who took the easy way out every time he had the chance. You took a position with SHIELD, really Hydra, so your father would advance your career. He didn’t acknowledge the relationship in any of the videos I’ve watched where the two of you interacted. I believe he thought you were a coward and a parasite, too.” Pierce flinched.
She took a step closer. “You assisted in an already-established program, maintenance of the Winter Soldier, because it allowed you to ‘work’ in DC, regardless of what it meant you did to another human being. You fell into portal research because you worked with Dr. Selvig for a short time when you were a graduate student.”

Anger showed in her face. "When the Captain and I questioned you, you omitted the name of the Vorm commander on Earth, and distracted us with a reference to Odin, instead. You chose to conceal the fact that the Red Skull lives on as Secretary Dell Rusk.”

“Rusk?” He shifted in his seat, his voice higher.

“That cover is blown.” Natasha grimaced.

Pierce seemed to hold his breath as he saw angry tears come to her eyes. He breathed out shakily. “I have heard that you feign vulnerability as you are about to strike, Black Widow.”

She asked again. “Do you have any regrets? Do you regret touching Cap’s girl, innocent and harmless as she was? Do you regret treating his best friend like a thing rather than a person, using him as a weapon? Do you regret holding back info that led us to allow Rusk to land his ship here and endanger the Tower? Rusk's explosive would have killed you, too, if Cap hadn’t given his life to remove the threat.”

Pierce shook his head and smiled with zealous relief. “The Captain is dead?! Wonderful! I wish I could have killed him myself. As to the rest? If I had known at the time that she was dear to him, I would have raped his woman. I would have ordered others torture her brutally and send her back to him one piece at a time. And the Asset? I’m proud of my work with the Asset. It was a gift to mankind. We all understood what it would mean to the Captain, if he knew. We ridiculed his ignorance. Every time he wrecked a plan of ours, we used the Winter Soldier as the Captain's whipping boy, and laughed at them both. I regret nothing!” He sat back, grinning.

Natasha looked down at Pierce and spat . “I have regrets. I regret that I believed in SHIELD when it was infested with Hydra. I regret that I wasn’t the one to put the bullets through your father’s heart, though I’m proud that my distraction helped Nick Fury do it. I regret that I promised Steve Rogers that I wouldn't kill you.”

Pierce laughed again, mocking, delighted by her frustration. Then a shadow fell in the doorway and his laughter stopped.

Bucky walked into the room.

Pierce gasped, “Asset?” He scrambled back, but soon found that he was against the wall, with nowhere to go. His book fell to the floor, forgotten.

Bucky snarled chillingly, and shook his head. “No, doctor. Not ‘Asset’. My name is James Buchanan Barnes. My friends call me Bucky, like they always have. You… should just think of me as an Avenger.” He put gloves on both his flesh hand and his metal hand.

Natasha glared coldly at Pierce. “For a man of intellect, you’re slow when it comes to learning about regret. I brought in an expert to teach you.” She turned and walked past Bucky. “I’ll wait for you, Bucky. Take as long as you like.” She sauntered to the door.

Pierce screamed. “You promised! What about things I know?! You need me!”

Natasha looked back, expression filled with disgust. “I promised you would not share a cell with any other prisoner. I promised Captain America that I would not kill you. I promised myself that
you would pay for not telling us about Rusk. I keep my promises."

Her gaze met Bucky's. "As to any information you might trade for mercy? That's up to my friend Bucky. If he thinks you deserve mercy, he can grant it. If he thinks you deserve to suffer every nightmare that your treatment of him revealed you fear? That's up to him, too. He heard every word you said just now about how you would have treated the girl. She's under his protection. He heard you jeer Captain America's death. Bucky heard you brag that you punished him as your 'Asset' when you were angered by the Captain."

She grinned. "You may learn regret yet." She closed the cell door behind her. Natasha sat in the observation area, watching and listening as the scientist began to scream. And kept screaming.

***

Thor is not stupid. He allows people to assume he is, to their detriment. But he has the mind of a leader, the training of a thousand years, and the interest necessary to finding wisdom.

When he arrived on Asgard, Thor greeted the temporary guardian, Balder, with all due ceremony. Then, he formally requested to visit Odin and be granted a private audience. As he expected, he was kept waiting. Days passed. He met with friends. He visited Odin's Treasure Room and other places. He met with people, made inquiries, and satisfied his curiosity. He dispatched friends on errands vital to his cause and his safety. He restlessly thought of his friends on Earth and their grief. He was ready to visit the throne room whenever he was called. He waited.

One evening, he was told that Odin would see him the next morning, so he went to spend the evening with Volstagg. They ate and passed jovial time together in fellowship. Thor was aware that they were observed, especially as Volstagg questioned his sanity. "Why do you think that Odin would help your mortal friends in any way, Thor?" Thor winked at the serving girl and slammed his tankard to the ground, asking for another drink… well aware that she would carry tales.

After she was gone, Thor turned to Volstagg. "Be off now! Safe travels, Brother! I thank you, and promise that I will honor your service and that of our other brothers with all my might for as long as we all shall live."

"Let us pray to Odin that we live long." Volstagg nodded and laughed.

Thor smiled with irony. "Yes. It is in Odin's hands. May he have mercy upon us."

***

The next morning, Thor dressed with extra care. He wanted to give every outward appearance of paying proper homage to the King of Asgard as he petitioned him. He was kept waiting while Odin met with other people, a continuing slight that did not surprise him. Thor comported himself with the utmost dignity and poise, regardless. He noted that the guards behaved with respectful wariness towards him.

When guards walked him in, Thor took a knee before the throne. "I thank you for the honor of an audience… mighty Odin."

Odin's expression was serious and unsmiling. "What is this impertinence, Thor? Why do you waste my time? I understand that you have lost some of your Midgardian friends. What concern is that of Odin’s? What does it matter to your true home, Asgard?"

Thor stared up into Odin’s face, marveling as he had many times before. He petitioned. "For my services in upholding peace in the Nine Realms, and for respect to my beloved lady mother, I
humbly beg the unparalleled honor of a private audience, esteemed All-Father.” His voice was louder than usual, giving deference to the titles for the benefit of others. Odin's eyes danced with pleasure.

The guards were waved away. “Leave us, then. Thor, for the sake of Frigga and your previous deeds for the Nine Realms, I suffer this foolishness… for a few moments.” Odin glanced at the watchful crows nearby and chuckled. He saw Thor look at them as well. Thor's expression was somber.

When doors shut, and it was certain that they were alone, Thor lifted his chin and observed. “From all the reports I have had, you have ruled Asgard wisely since allowing me to depart for Midgard… Loki. Congratulations, Brother.”

Odin’s face broke into a manic grin. “What is this?” He stood at the ready, spear pointed at Thor's head.

Thor stared up at Loki sadly. “I grieved you, mourned your death and brave sacrifice. That, I cannot like. But, you made it possible for me to be with Jane, whose life you protected, and you have done well by our people. I understand that this guise protects you from the wrath of Thanos and his followers. I do not want you dead; do not wish to truly mourn you. And after all of the assurances that our… that MY father gave you about growing to be a King, though we now know he spoke of Jotunheim's throne… it has been satisfactory to me to leave Asgard in your hands. You are more suited to this work than I.”

Odin’s form flashed away to reveal Loki. He shook his head and sat back on the throne grandly. “You surprise me, Thor. I did not think you capable of such insight… or generosity.” His brow furrowed. “You kneel to me? You do not ask what has become of Odin?”

Thor smiled darkly, “If you harmed him, I could not forgive it and would be honor-bound to destroy you, so I thank you. I am not proud of my willingness to allow Odin to languish in Yggdrasil. However, I know that he is not uncomfortable, in fact that he is well in the dreamless sleep you have conjured. I have spoken with your mate, the Lady Sigyn.”

Loki rolled his eyes, frowning and angry. “So much for her celebrated loyalty!” He stood again and stalked restlessly back and forth in front of the throne, never taking his eyes off of Thor. He passed Odin's staff, Gungnir back and forth between his hands. He relished its power and debated how best to wield it during this unexpected confrontation.

Thor eyed the spear, shook his head ruefully, and chuckled. “Her loyalty to you is boundless, as you well know. When I revealed my presence, she sought to reassure me that Odin is well and begged that I not reveal your hiding place. She, too, wishes for you to remain safe from Thanos’ wrath.” Thor swallowed hard, frowning, “Odin is not all that he once was. Frigga’s loss and the ravages of time have seen to that. But, you have not been vindictive. You treat him mercifully, I imagine, for Frigga’s sake, perhaps even a bit for mine.”

Loki looked away, unwilling to admit Thor was right. “He might not see kindness in my actions. He wishes himself dead with Frigga. How did you locate him? I thought him hidden rather well.”

Thor looked Loki in the eye. “I accessed the Tesseract, the item that was at the center of your crimes. You are nearly as ironic as mischievous, Brother. It seemed a fair guess.”

“It looks as though vault security is still something of a problem…” Loki smirked.

Thor smiled, “Aye! You should take care who you assign there. The weak willed can be overcome
with even the meager magic I possess.” Loki looked intrigued. Thor laughed. “Am I not also a son of Frigga? You might have been her star pupil… but it does not follow that I would learn nothing of her ways.”

Loki laughed. “You want something VERY badly, Thor. What is it?”

Thor looked into Loki’s eyes. “I want you to continue as you have, but resist the temptation to aid the enemies of Midgard. Do not turn a blind eye when they steal Nidavellite, for instance. Odin can be petty and vindictive. But, he does not suffer others attacking those he calls family… even when they live in disgraceful self-exile among mortals.”

“Easy for you to say! You are not the one trying to avoid Thanos’ attention.” Loki chuckled. Thor pointed out, “The All-Father has never feared that tyrant, nor any other. He dealt with mad despots harshly. You may raise more suspicion by behaving differently than the Odin of legend. Age and grief only excuse so much, and if shown overmuch they might tempt others to try your might.”

Loki made a face and shrugged elegantly. “You have a point. Will you leave me to rule on your throne in peace if I do this?” Loki smiled and waved a hand in a grand gesture. “THIS has you kneel before me? I think not. I think you want my help in finding your lost friends. I think you dare to ask me to find them, the Iron Man and your Captain.” His smile faded.

Thor grinned, “I grant that friend Stark insulted you… after you murdered countless Midgardians. But the Captain shielded you from the wholly justified ire of the other Avengers after the Chitauri battle.” Thor stood. “I now call the Captain my Brother, too. He understands that he is duty bound to all others I honor with that name, Brother. Even after you led the Chitauri to attack his world, the Captain stood by me and treated you with the dignity that just men accord prisoners of war.”

Loki raised a brow. "Prisoner of war? Is that how you think it was?” He readied Gungnir. Thor tightened his grip on Mjolnir. Loki’s expression darkened as his anger built. "And who would petition to have me returned to them? Who would claim Loki?!” His words rose in pitch, ending with a bellow of pained rage.

Thor's expression twisted with anguish. "I claim you, Brother! I always do, cannot stop caring despite my best effort and your worst. I understand your ire. I know that learning you are of Laufey and not the blood son of Odin and Frigga gave you pain. I know that envy of me and all my good fortune poisoned your soul. I know that Thanos and his minions harmed you beyond measure. I know that you grieve Frigga, and always will."

Thor gestured out the windows. "On the other hand, none of that excuses murder and attempted genocide! Your twisted desire to prove yourself to Odin by murdering all of the Jotun, all of those who first rejected you, was attempted genocide. Your mad quest to rule the Earth I love is also beyond reason, beyond excuse. You killed again and again!” His hands were fists, his desire to protect his brother at odds with his sense of justice.

Loki lifted his chin, defiant. "Not your friends! I had many opportunities to snuff out those who band together as the Avengers and defend Midgard. And, much as you might think it was all about you, I was sent to the Earth with specific orders, burdened with Thanos' glorious purpose. He wanted the Tesseract. He wanted to control Midgard for its many passages to other Realms. Your Jane is clever, but the construction of the Universe, the porousness of her dimension, aids her work."

Thor shook his head, growling. "You forget Son of Coul! I watched you stab him through the heart
with the spear you wielded then." Thor felt no guilt for omitting the fact of Coulson's return.

Loki rolled his eyes. "You refer to the man whose death was the righteous glue that forced your stubborn Captain and your vainglorious Man of Iron to set aside their differences and work together? His death was a regrettable necessity. Someone needed to defend the Earth from Thanos' Chitauri invaders. Someone needed to protect the Universe by keeping that tyrant from controlling the byways that cross it so readily!"

Loki shook his head, his tone derisive. "I controlled Barton. He accessed SHIELD data and told me where they hid your precious Jane and her assistant that you have collected as family. I did not reveal their whereabouts. Under my control, Barton shot the SHIELD director instead of killing him as was his instinct, and certainly his capability. I know all Barton's secrets, but did not force him to kill agents who were his friends, lovers, or former mates. He has several, by the way. He even has young children. I left them out of it all, protected his deepest secrets from Thanos and 'the Other'."

Loki held up a second finger. "Agent Romanoff took risk after risk during the battle. I did not order the Chitauri to end her life. I distracted them with other goals."

"I had Stark by the throat! It would have been the easiest thing imaginable to crush the air out of him, gratifying on some level, too. He can be annoying, sometimes more arrogant than even you!. But, no! I threw him out where one of his suits of armor was ready to catch him and return him to his place in the battle!" Loki held up a third finger.

Thor spoke dryly. "I suppose you will claim next that Dr. Banner's inner beast only bested you by your leave."

Loki's chuckle was rueful. "Hehe. No. THAT was unfortunate!" He rubbed his head, remembering. Thor's expression softened for a second. Then he accused. "What of Erik Selvig? You drove him mad when you used him in your schemes!"

Loki sighed. "That was not solely my doing. From the first, I saw that the Tesseract had an unusual hold on the good doctor. I have observed that it maddens advanced minds. You should keep your mate far from its grasp, Brother! I hate to think what it would do to her, though she is stronger than she appears!" Thor's look of gratitude embarrassed Loki for his slip of tongue. Loki growled. "You observed how the Mind gem in the spear that Thanos foisted on me affected your friends. Even with your simpler tastes, it compromised your reasoning."

Loki paused, his look plaintive. "Think what it did to me!" He turned, sighing deeply. "I tried to open the wounds in Selvig's mind so that the poisonous afflictions of the Tesseract could pour out. I even convinced him that the 'fail-safe' of being able to close the Tesseract portal with the Mind gem was his idea!" Loki snarled. "That notion went far in his healing, as far as I could act against the effects of two Infinity Stones!"

Loki held out his hands in supplication. "I was observed by Thanos, not safe within my own mind. Yet I did all that I could to bring together those who could protect Midgard and stand up to the invading forces Thanos sent. Thanos' ambition would destroy the entire Universe as a gift to Mistress Death. I am of that Universe, so the selfishness you believe of me stands. But my efforts to thwart Thanos were more vital to the greater good than the deaths of a few mortal strangers."

Frustration radiated off of him as Thor looked ready to protest. "How careless do you think me? Fury's hold on the Cube was more tenuous than he knew. There were those in his organization who would have used its power for evil, who would have put it in Thanos' fist."
Thor was brought up short, remembering Hydra's extensive infiltration of SHIELD. "I want to believe in you, Loki! I've always wanted to. But, you have abused my trust, my love for you, far too many times. Thanos did not wield the blade that you put into my back! You took many innocent lives, which you dismiss as unimportant, even now. You are not blameless. You are not reasonable, not good. " Thor's expression was one of conflict and torment.

"Why the charade? Why bow to me as Odin? Why not avenge the wrongs I've done? Why are you here talking with me?" Loki sat again on Odin's throne.

Thor's quieted. "Another of Thanos' minions troubles Midgard, one called Red Skull."

Loki scoffed. "He lacks creativity. Don't you think? The name is literal to the point of banality. He's also mad, in every way. What has he done?"

Thor stared up into Loki's face. "He tried to destroy Avengers Tower with a mass of Nidavellite." Loki blinked with recognition, not surprise. His posture eased, and a grin graced his handsome features once more. Thor tensed. "To protect millions of human lives, Captain America flew the Nidavellite into a portal, to a destination in the cosmos unknown. Iron Man followed to try and bring the Captain back safely. The portal closed before either of them could return home. Stark shared the Captain's fate while trying to prevent it."

"I return to my original question. What of this concerns Odin and Asgard?" Loki sneered.

Thor's face hardened. "I call the Captain 'Brother' now that he is mate to my shield sister, the Lady Darcy. He acknowledges me and even you as his brothers. So, he is Loki's concern, if you wish to be on good terms with me. As to Midgard, the Captain is one its most dedicated protectors. Odin cares for its fate. He chose to suffer the ill effects of harnessing dark energies when he sent me to thwart your Chitauri invasion. That which makes Midgard desirable to Thanos, makes it valuable to the peace and prosperity of Asgard."

Loki laughed. "You are like your father, Thor! You collect people like toys. What is the Captain to me?"

Thor grinned with ferocious pride. "You did not mention him in your diatribe against my friends. You know that he is pure of heart, a good man. Being called brother by such a man is an honor. If you reject that connection, you reject your connection to me for all time. I will never forgive it. If you do that, things cannot stand as they do now. Make the resources of Asgard available to me. Allow my Jane's search instruments safe passage in all of the realms. Use any resource you have to help me. Access Heimdall."

"Thor! You know that I cannot wake Heimdall!" Loki rolled his eyes.

Thor shrugged. "Yes. You speak true on that, Brother. I meant for you to access him when he wakes on his own, if we do not find answers before then. If Heimdall's rest was your doing rather than of his own volition and need..." The skies rumbled.

Loki shook his head. "I am grateful for the timing, but it is natural."

Thor nodded. "I know. I checked with his lover, Amora, to be sure. I have been busy." Loki nodded with grudging respect.

Thor intoned. "I wish to consult freely with the scientific minds of Asgard. There was an explosion of Nidavellite at an unknown location. If it was away from Nidavellir, then we may track it. I hope that my friends survived. Stark is clever and wore an extra protective metal suit for the Captain. If
they survived, they should be somewhat near that energy signature. Give me access to images and
data for my Jane to survey, so that she might find them.”

Loki laughed derisively. “Do you intend to survey every such explosion on Nidavellir itself as
well? Your Jane does not live forever… which raises another concern.” His frown deepened.

Thor rose up to his full height. “You worry what I will do after her life ends? Fear not, Brother. She
is with child. I hope to be blessed with generations of family to protect on Earth.”

Loki shook his head, stood and paced. “I do not like uncertainty, Thor.” He grinned slyly, “and I do
not like loose ends. Why should I not end your existence here, tonight? You are in Odin’s seat of
power. As far as the Universe is concerned, I am Odin. He is not always kind to family. Ask my
children!” He pointed Gungnir at Thor again.

Thor smiled openly. “And, as far as Dr. Banner is concerned, you live under false illusion here in
Odin’s place. I left him instructions as to when and how to broadcast that information to catch the
attention of others in the Universe. At the least, questions would be raised. I would rather avoid
that, Brother, as would you.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “You doubt I could overpower the beast that lives in Banner?”

Thor’s smile had a sharp edge to it. “I have great faith in his strength, Brother, and you might not
have time before the damage is done. He is not the only person to whom I entrusted your secret,
though. There are several others who help me, each at a different place. I cannot trust you with my
life, especially when I have more than ever to protect.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You
have what you desire most… your safety and Odin’s throne. Help me find my friends, and we can
maintain this illusion.”

“You have what you want, and a babe on the way! Why should I fear that you would endanger the
current state of things, Thor?” Loki growled.

Thor looked sad. “I am here because of brotherhood, friendship, and love. Our sister, the Lady
Darcy’s grief wounds me and my Jane. The Lady Pepper’s noble suffering is worthy of the work of
bards. The soldier who was tormented by the Captain’s enemies for so long deserves more time
with his friend, his brother. Good Colonel Rhodes misses his mischievous friend, and no longer
smiles. The Avengers are weaker without their Captain and the resourceful Iron Man. We all long
to know what became of our friends, and hope for their safe return. If they perished, we deserve to
mourn their passing and continue our good work in their names. I miss my fellow warriors, my
friends. Jane is willing to leave Midgard and accompany me here, if you make it necessary by
refusing to assist in our search.”

Loki frowned and stayed silent for a long time. Finally, he sighed. “What would cause Odin to aid
you in a search for mortal friends for whom you abandoned your duties to Asgard and its throne?”

Thor paused, his expression somber. "As I said, Odin would not allow Midgard, which has long
been under his protection, to fall to Thanos. He would discourage the tyrant's minions by working
against them, as he has done before. I pledge all my might and that of the Avengers, once reunited,
to aid Odin's good endeavors. And, I add my word that if Asgard needs me, I will return to her
throne."

"Is that more a promise or a threat… Brother?” Loki's smile was thin and daring.

Thor shrugged. “Help me as I request, and it is only a promise.”
Loki shimmered back into the form of Odin. “Very well, Thor. I will allow you to access resources of Asgard in order to push back the efforts of the tyrant Thanos. Give me your word that you will return to shoulder the burden of this throne if it becomes too much for me, my ungrateful, foolish son.”

Thor tilted his head, and agreed. “Thank you, Sire. If you are unable to continue honorably on the throne of Asgard to the good of her people and the Universe, I will not turn my back on my duty.” His smiling expression held an edge. As I’ve said before, “I’d rather be a good man than a great king.” He lifted his chin. "But, I can be both, if I must." He continued to stare at Loki expectantly.

Loki finally admitted. "There was an unusual explosion in Niflheim recently. Your mate should focus her search efforts there. You may consult with my advisors. I will give them word to cooperate with you fully."

Thor let out the breath he'd been holding and smiled. "Thank you. I do prefer things the way they are. I hope that you speak true, and that we can work together for good... Brother."

***

Since the night the Avengers had discussed their opinions on the fate of Steve and Tony, Darcy had been more on edge than ever. She felt isolated in hoping for Steve to return safely, with her own hope fading. Every day Jane, Erik and the other scientists dredged through piles of data, with no good news. Thor's return from Asgard gave some encouragement. More satellites and Yinsen drones launched throughout the Nine Realms. They sent twenty six drones to search Niflheim, hoping that Loki's information was accurate.

News of the trickster god's survival frightened Erik. He did his best to listen with objectivity to the arguments Loki had made to Thor, considering the role the Tesseract and the Mind stone had played in unhinging him. Hawkeye had guessed on his own that Loki lived. He suggested that when he quoted Chomsky to Thor before Thor visited Asgard. While he was not pleased to hear of Loki's survival, he accepted the confirmation of his suspicion well. Jane and Erik pored over data from their Asgardian counterparts. But, they still lacked answers. Darcy noticed that other scientists in R&D grew restless with the search. They shifted to other projects when they thought she wasn't monitoring them.

Darcy's loneliness and longing increased as time passed. She was on her way to work in Lab Eleven one day when Bucky and Sam entered the elevator, arguing good-naturedly. Darcy was behind taller people, not in their line of sight.

Sam joked. "My favorite so far is when they call you 'Sergeant America.' It's accurate. You're definitely an American hero of lower rank." He laughed out loud.

Bucky retorted. "I like 'Captain Soldier' cuz it shows that the media doesn't know what the hell they're talking about. What IS that?"

"You'd better come up with a good name, or you'll be stuck with that for the rest of your long-ass life!" Sam shrugged.

Bucky shook his head, teasing. "Maybe I should just go by 'Patriot' since Rhodes has ditched that outfit." He tossed the shield from one hand to the other as people stepped off and on the elevator. "It looks more and more like you're right, and I'm stuck with this thing." His smile faded. He shook his head, and sighed with frustration.

When the elevator reached the 77th floor, Darcy pushed past Bucky, and rushed out without a
backward glance. She choked down a sob as she fled. His expression was one of dismay as he watched her go.

Darcy entered the lab and set Erik’s hot chocolate in front of him. He sipped it absent-mindedly while staring at data and doodling notes. She set Jane’s drink by her right hand. Jane looked up from her work when she felt the warmth against her hand. She noticed Darcy’s drink. “Oh! Good! You got something for yourself.” Darcy nodded and sat down at her computer.

The door to the lab opened. Bucky stood in the doorway. “Darcy? I'm sorry, Doll. I didn't mean... Can you come out here, so we can talk?”

Jane looked from him to Darcy, and then noticed that Darcy was shaking and hiding her face. Jane shifted down from her stool, a hand at her back. “Darce? What is it?”

Darcy wiped her cheeks impatiently. “People keep giving up on them!” She choked on a sob.

Erik turned and looked at Bucky. “Mr. Barnes, please come in and have a seat. I don’t think anyone is confused about your identity, or suspects you of harmful intent here today.” Erik rolled his chair next to Darcy’s and reached out. “Please, Darcy.” She turned and fell into Erik’s comforting hug. He patted her back while she sobbed, and then he kissed her head. “Oh! Dear girl! I know you miss him terribly. Falling in love with a hero means feeling lonely sometimes. We know that better than most.” He tightened his hold on her and exchanged a bittersweet look with Jane. Jane started crying, too.

Erik sighed. “Yes. We know that. But, listen to me. I promise you, Darcy, I won’t stop looking for them. I won't ever give up. Everyone knows I’m crazy already. I have nothing to lose on that front. And… I owe you my life. So, I’ll give it to the search effort. I won't give up on them.”

Darcy quieted. “You don’t owe me your life, Erik.” She sat back, accepted a tissue from an anxious Bucky, and wiped her face. “You don’t!”

Erik shook his head. “You didn’t leave me alone when I lost my mind. You didn’t brush me off as an embarrassing, bothersome old fool. You came to visit, and remind me who I am, bringing me scientific journals that focused my thoughts towards my life’s work. You brought hot chocolate because you read somewhere that chocolate can restore happiness. Because of that generosity, you were hurt… in my place. I wish I could take your pain now, but I can’t. What I can do is to search. So, I will, no matter how long it takes.” He hugged her again. "I promise."

Jane whimpered, and hugged Darcy and Erik close. Bucky looked forlorn, sitting alone, apart from them. He began to weep. “I don’t know what to say. I don’t want to give up on him. But, I’m afraid he’s gone off and done the stupid heroics and left me here alone in the future…”

Jane rolled her eyes and smacked Bucky in the head. “Don’t be stupid. You’re not alone. You’re an Avenger, and you’re our friend. I know it’s not the same. But…”

“We have to watch Rudolph sometime so you’ll get it, but you’re here in the land of Misfit toys. We stick together.” Darcy sniffed.

She sniffed again, shook her head with an impatient gesture, and turned to Jane. “Speaking of toys, when are you gonna let me throw you a baby shower?”

Jane uttered a noise that was half laugh, half sob. “Whenever you want?” She looked from Darcy to Bucky. “Can we use either Steven or Stephanie as a Midgardian middle name? To honor Asgard properly, we have to use Aesir names first, but…”
Darcy nodded, a tremulous smile on her tear-streaked face. “He’ll get a kick out of that.”

Jane swallowed hard. “If it’s a girl, she’ll be Adalbjorg Stephanie and we'll call her Addie. If it’s a boy, he’ll be Folkvar Steven Thorson.”

“Adalbjorg and Folkvar both mean ‘guardian of the people,’ don’t they?” Erik smiled.

Jane nodded. “Yes. The meaning is also important, as a message to Asgard.”

***

A few days later, it had been one month since Steve and Tony had disappeared. The morning news shows were devoted to coverage of the missing heroes, 'in memoriam.' Time dragged all day long. Darcy spent half of the morning with Dr. Chau, but still felt almost bruised by the end of her work time that day. She'd gotten past crying through every yoga session, but broke down sobbing halfway through it that day. Again, Bruce cried with her.

That night, Darcy and Bucky went out to the rooftop garden. Darcy invited Pepper to join them and bring Rhodey. One by one, all the others, Avengers and their friends, joined them. Things were getting serious and dreary, the gathering taking on the air of a wake. Darcy set up her StarkPad dock and started some music to take the edge off a bit.

Betty moved to Darcy's side and sat by her. Darcy thought Betty seemed uneasy, which was odd, given her recent successes as Red She-Hulk and her comfort level with the group. Darcy’s curiosity was soon satisfied. Betty opened her purse and pulled out a box. “I feel bad about the discussion last week, and any part I played in denting your hope. I want to apologize. So, I made something for you.”

“I like gifts.” Darcy almost grinned.

Betty looked rueful as she blushed a bit. “I hope you get to like this one.”

Bruce glanced over at the box and laughed softly, then sipped his drink. Betty handed the box to Darcy. “Last week, I was working with portal data and hoping we'll find something soon to bring Steve and Tony home. Bruce distracted me with a kiss, and then I realized something... Steve didn't take pills with him!”

"Poor Punk!” Bucky snorted a laugh.

Darcy’s mind blanked at first. Finally she let out a sound of disbelief. “Tcha! No... I think I'd remember if he excused himself from confronting Red Skull to go pack birth control!” Hawkeye barked a laugh. She looked at the box and sat back as realization dawned. “Super-soldier condoms?” Her brows went up.

"Hey! Let me see. I've been making do.” Bucky leaned in for a closer look.

Betty’s grin was tight. “Yep. I hadn't thought about it before, but this week I adapted the ones I made for Bruce. He’s rigorous about not contaminating my human system with radioactive bodily fluids. Neither of us realistically considered trying to convince Hulk to practice safe sex, and Red She-Hulk seems unaffected...” Bruce rolled his eyes and shrugged, frowning.

Hawkeye sat back, grinning. "Come on! A real man wraps it up, Banner!" Bruce shot Hawkeye the bird and chugged the rest of his drink, muttering for Clint to explain it to 'the Other Guy'.

Darcy’s brows came together. “So... Thanks?” Belatedly, she let out a choked giggle as she
imagined Hulk's reaction if Hawkeye offered him a condom. She made a funny face at Bruce. He grinned at her, and shrugged again.

Betty relaxed. "You SHOULD thank me." She took a packet out and opened it. Darcy frowned and blushed, glancing around at the others, most of whom paid rapt attention. Betty held the condom in her hand. "Sniff." Bucky reached over and stole one and tossed it to Sam, then took another for himself to study.

Darcy snorted a laugh, and then inhaled. "Chocolate?" Sam laughed. Darcy glanced at him, and then stared at Betty, blushing more. To deflect some attention away from herself, she tossed one of the condoms at Jane. Thor caught it and examined the packet, clearly amused.

Betty giggled at Darcy's expression. "There are several pleasant flavors of edible lube… caramel, chocolate, strawberry, vanilla bean… cherry." Darcy almost winced. Betty shrugged. Sam waggled his brows at Bucky. Betty chuckled as she looked around. "They’re delicious, for the record." Bruce choked out a laugh. Hawkeye laughed at Bruce's reaction, and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

Betty continued. "They’re also 75% thinner than any condom on the market, but practically invulnerable. The texture is silky soft. Both the internal and external lubes are non-greasy and increase sensation for both partners. The condom is multi-ribbed to add to your pleasure, with extra ribbing at the base. It flexes well, and is large enough to fit Steve comfortably, per measurements JARVIS took for his medical records.”

Darcy stifled another choked cough. "Wow."

Bucky grinned and gestured from the box to himself and then to Betty. She nodded to indicate that she would make some for Bucky. Then, Betty grinned to Darcy. “You’ll need them for the first two weeks, until his pill is in his system again.” Bruce nodded, confirming Betty's recommendation.

“How many are there?” Darcy looked down at the box, curious.

Betty smirked. "One hundred. I'll make more, just in case. I read Steve’s file... He'll need a fresh one every time he recovers for more."

Bucky burst out laughing. "Oh, my God! I wish he was here for this discussion!" His laughter tapered off. Sam sighed.

Darcy put her head in her hands. “Argh! I can’t think about it. I…” She let out a pained whimper. Jane patted Darcy on the shoulder.

Betty shook her head. "Don’t! Stay positive, and be ready to welcome him home. Thank me. After you try them, thank me again, and then give me a full critique. I think they could be a huge hit in stores.” She raised a brow. “It’s an area where Stark is a name of expertise, after all.” Rhodey and Pepper exchanged a look. Pepper smirked.

Darcy admitted. “I’ve never used condoms before. I’m not the best person to give you a knowledgeable, experienced consumer review.” Bucky chuckled at her fondly.

Natasha offered. "I'll teach you how to put one on, with hands... or teeth... since they're durable and tasty." Darcy put her hands to her reddened cheeks and nodded.

Betty shrugged and glanced around at the others. “I’ll get feedback from others in the Tower, per their customized product. A different perspective is good. Just tell me how it compares to sex without. Take your time. Try them again sometime after Steve’s pill is working. I doubt you’ll be
thinking clearly for a while after he’s back, him either.” She glanced at Bruce.

Darcy stared at the box. She realized after a moment that she was letting the silence hang to the point of awkwardness. She swallowed hard and met Betty’s gaze. “Thank you.” She sighed. “Thanks for talking hopefully. That’s getting to be a rare commodity.”

Natasha and Sam both frowned and exchanged a pained look. Betty shot Sam a look that was defiant, though tinged with discomfort and self-doubt. Bucky looked away from Darcy, his expression rueful.

Betty’s smile held remembered sadness. “I know what it is to wait for the man you love. I thought Bruce was dead. Then, I thought he stopped loving me. I thought it would never be possible for us to be together again. But, I always knew that I loved him, regardless. Though it seemed impossible... we're together again.” Bruce shifted closer to Betty and kissed the back of her neck.

Darcy nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. Her voice was tight. “I know what you mean about waiting on something that seems 'impossible'.”

“I’m sorry.” Betty nodded once.

Silence fell over the group for a long time as they thought about their missing friends.

Darcy began to sing along with the song that was playing (Train’s 'When I Look to the Sky'). Bucky nodded, a pained smile on his face as he listened, too.

Cause when I look to the sky something tells me you're here with me
And you make everything alright
And when I feel like I'm lost something tells me you're here with me
And I can always find my way when you are here

It was the last song on that playlist, so it was followed by utter silence. Like so many other nights, they stared at the sky, waiting and wishing in vain for the rip to reopen and for Steve to fly out, back into their lives. Darcy blinked back tears, her hope fading just a bit more.

She started to open her mouth again to tell everyone 'good night'.

Bruce's phone let out a guitar riff at top volume, startling everyone. He jumped to his feet, gasping as he pulled his phone out and stared at it. The ring tone shifted to a chorus, with Sting's voice singing 'I'll send an S.O.S. to the world! I'll send an S.O.S. to the world! I hope that someone gets my, I hope that someone gets my Message in a Bottle.' Bruce yelped and stared at the others, shocked.

Darcy's phone buzzed to indicate an incoming message. And, it buzzed again, and again, and again. It made noise to indicate that she had emails and voice mail, too. It kept buzzing on and on. Darcy reached into her pocket to pull the phone out and stare at it, lightheaded and nearly hyperventilating. Her hands were shaking as she gasped. "Steve?" She looked around at the others. "Messages! It says they're from Steve!" She began to cry and wailed. "Oh, God! Please! Please tell me THIS is real!!!"

Bucky's phone buzzed repeatedly, too, and he nodded in reply to Darcy's plea. Tears filled his eyes.

Betty, Erik, Jane, and Thor all pulled out their phones to see that they had messages, too. So did Natasha's, Hawkeye's, and Sam's. So did Rhodey's. Everyone exchanged looks of joyful disbelief. Hawkeye let out a cheer and grabbed Natasha, and whirled her around in a hug. Tears streamed
down Sam's face as he fell to his knees, muttering thanks to God. Jane fell into Thor's arms, sobbing.

"Tony Stark! It never pays to bet against you!" Rhodey grinned at the readout on his phone.

Pepper made incomprehensible noises as her phone vibrated again and again in her grasp. She looked at Darcy and tried to say something, but couldn't. A smile nearly split Darcy's tear-stained face. Bucky stared at his phone, grateful beyond measure. He grabbed Darcy and pulled her in for a tight hug and began jumping up and down. She felt his tears, hot against her head. He looked up at the sky and screamed, cheering.

The gathering on the rooftop shifted to a scene of delirious, grateful celebration.

*to be continued...*

Chapter End Notes

Notes-
I, personally, do not excuse Loki's crimes. I have no doubt that he does, though. ;)

***
ValkyriePhoenix commented on 3/4/15 after Ch35.....Natasha notably didn't promise that Bucky wouldn't kill him. I am somewhat surprised HYDRA dude didn't pick up on that loophole, they know Bucky's there...

Agreed. I'd already planned to let Bucky have revenge on one of his handlers, at that point. Thank you for guessing! ;)

***
Message in a Bottle (The Police)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbXWrmQW-OE

*Just a castaway
An island lost at sea
Another lonely day
With no one here but me
More loneliness
Than any man could bear
Rescue me before I fall into despair*

*Chorus-
I'll send an SOS to the world
I'll send an SOS to the world
I hope that someone gets my
I hope that someone gets my
I hope that someone gets my
Message in a bottle*
(Message in a bottle)

A year has passed since I wrote my note
But I should have known this right from the start
Only hope can keep me together
Love can mend your life
But love can break your heart

Walked out this morning
Don't believe what I saw
A hundred billion bottles
Washed up on the shore
Seems I'm not alone at being alone
A hundred billion castaways
Looking for a home

(chorus)

Sending out an SOS...
It’s all or nothing…

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, out on the cold edge of Hel...

Chapter Notes

*waving* Hi, there! Me, again. :) Finally. Sorry for the delay. Real life, blah blah.

Thanks for continuing to read and for all the lovely comments after Chapter 48. :) I need to go back to each one and bask in them again and reply! :)

Thank you to McGregorsWench for beta help and poking at me to write! :) I needed it. Writing's hard sometimes. ;)

When Steve flew the Nidavellite-loaded Vorm ship away from the Tower, he didn’t look back to watch the portal close. He couldn’t stand to see home disappear from his reach and his sight. He felt cold all over, half in his grave and automatic in his actions as he sacrificed himself to save New York again. His breathing was tight and fear sparked through him as he waited for his cargo to explode, but he was resigned to his fate. He tried to focus on the satisfaction of doing what had to be done, saving millions of people, including those he loved most. He had no hesitation about giving his life to save Darcy’s. Others came to mind as well, but always woven into a repetitive chant of her name.

It came as a shock when he heard noise nearby just after everything went dark. He peered out the window of the ship. Tony was clinging to the Vorm craft, wearing multiple layers of specialized flight suits. The outermost suit layer seemed unwieldy on him. Tony banged on the window awkwardly.

Steve shook his head. “What the hell have you done, Tony? Why are you here?!?” He closed his eyes for a second, and then despaired. “Get clear! Save yourself!”

He stilled as he heard Tony using Morse code to communicate. Finding a modicum of hope in his friend’s words, he met Tony’s gaze again and used American Sign Language to reply. Steve wouldn’t wish hearing damage on anyone. But, he was grateful at that moment that Hawkeye’s impairment had encouraged all the Avengers to learn to Sign.

***

It took about one minute for them to argue to a solution and for Steve to seal the force field between the compartments inside the Vorm ship. This separated Steve from the Nidavellite… and the hazards of the space vacuum. Once protected, Steve opened the outer door to let Tony enter the cargo hold. Tony lifted the heavy platform under the Nidavellite mass and eased it out of the Vorm craft. He removed a spare thruster from each outer thigh of the ‘Space Cap’ suit and magnetically attached them under the platform. He set them to activate to full thrust in ten seconds, and shoved
the platform as hard as he could with his suit’s enhanced strength. He counted on Newton’s first law of motion to keep it moving away from them. He prayed the thrusters would take the Nidavellite far, fast… rather than ignite it to explode immediately.

As he was counting to ten seconds, Tony entered the ship again as quickly as he could, and signaled Steve when he closed the outer door. Steve restored atmosphere to the hold while using the craft’s engines to race away from the Nidavellite. Tony bounced around wildly inside the cargo hold. At maximum speed, Steve piloted them through a cluster of moons and asteroids. He flew into orbit on the other side of the furthest moon, counting on the many celestial bodies to shield them. Finally, Steve released the field between him and Tony. When he was satisfied that it was safe, he nodded to Tony, and Tony took off the outer helmet and set it on Steve’s head.

Steve’s voice was muffled as Tony clamped another piece on him. “What’s with the layers, Stark?”

Tony sighed heavily. “The biggest one is yours, you absolute dumbass. It’s safe for short-range space travel. Help me get you ‘dressed’, quick. The suit can handle serious radiation levels. Like what's gonna get to us soon, most likely.”

“Tony! I could kiss you!” Steve was taken aback.

Tony shook his head. “Don’t get any ideas! Not this soon, anyway…” He grimaced at Steve while working as fast as possible to move suit pieces from him to Steve. He missed JARVIS’ help. He missed JARVIS, period.

Steve laughed shortly, and worked fast. “What’s the middle layer? Iron Man space suit?”

Tony slapped pieces in place on Steve as Steve released a chest piece from Tony. “Yeah. I put a space-safe suit over the principle Iron Man armor, then added your space-safe suit on top of it all… in case…”

Steve turned around and let Tony fix the back plate in place on him. “In case we need to function in space?” He rolled his eyes. “How do you think of shit like this, Tony?” They got the last suit piece in place and secured on him. Steve studied the display inside the helmet carefully, trying to figure out how to control it.

Tony shrugged. “Nightmares, Cap… And, I was in a bad mood one day. Darcy said something that took me down this path.” He grinned darkly. “Probably when she was resisting the urge to ask what I saw through the wormhole at the end of the Chitauri battle.” He turned and looked out. “Where the hell are we?”

Steve shrugged. “No idea…” He stumbled back to the controls, awkward in the new suit. Tony followed and sat next to him, watching Steve adjust their orbit. Without warning, the ship was buffeted by the roiling force of the devastating Nidavellite explosion. Both men braced themselves, gazes turned to each other as they wondered if the ship and the moons would protect them, or if they were about to die. If either saw fear in the eyes of the other, they wouldn’t say. They heard the whine of metal ripping from the ship as debris and pressure waves slammed into it. Steve guessed that some of the asteroids and maybe even one of the moons he’d approached were destroyed by the blast.

Tony cursed, panting with anxiety. “Fuck me! That was like a supernova!” He called up radiation detection equipment in his primary Iron Man suit. The meters lit up like a fireworks finale.

Steve struggled to maintain flight control. The suit gloves slowed his reflexes and made adjustments harder. He shook his head. “I don’t like the feel of the ship, Tony. I think we need to
set down on this moon and see what just happened to it. Maybe you can repair it.” He sighed. “See
what you can make of the computers… I only learned enough in one session with a Vorm ship we
captured to fly, land, manage life support some, and fire weapons.”

The ship was battered continuously. Steve fought for control. Tony kept turning his head as he
guessed what was compressing and tearing away, and how it would affect the performance of the
space craft, if it survived. He winced as a part he guessed to be an engine shattered. Tony cursed,
“Fuck! We’ve got a problem.”

When the motion from the explosion waves ceased, the ship was barely manageable.

“Well. Not dead yet. But, we took damage. It sounded bad. I’ll look at the computers, but no
promises. I don’t speak Vorm. Do you?” Tony made a face.

“Not yet… but, if they’ve left anything in the way of files that give context, I can figure it
out.” Steve looked around them.

Tony’s brows tightened. “Really? You’re that good with language?”

“Erskine and Stark made stuff special in their test tubes. Didn’t you know?” Steve grinned.

Tony was studying the control panel. “Let’s hope so… That was BEFORE dear old Dad started
hitting the bottle all the time; so, you should be some of his better work.” He huffed. “You’re still a
dumbass.”

“I’m sure as hell glad you got past alcohol already, Tony.” Steve muttered.

Tony cussed. “Damn! I could use a drink about now.”

They sat down at the computer together, working in tandem. Steve nudged Tony’s arm. “Thanks…
for coming after me.”

Tony sat back and grimaced. “I’m a dumbass, too.” His face was pale. “I saw my life flash before
my eyes a few minutes ago. It wasn’t as entertaining an experience as I hoped. Mostly just
Pepper… and how much I want to see her again.”

Steve let out a heavy sigh. He blinked hard as he tried not to think about Darcy. “I want to go
home, too, Tony. Let’s focus on getting there.” He scanned a screen, trying to pick up patterns that
would help him understand the language. His hands trembled, but he suppressed emotion,
preferring to channel his energy into productive efforts. He was glad the suit concealed his
trembling. He and Tony felt smaller shock-waves from the Nidavellite explosion buffeting the
ship. They made for a bumpy ride. Steve looked over the Vorm ship’s instrument panel again and
winced. He cursed, “Fuck! There’s hardly any fuel. I wasn’t thinking about fuel conservation when
I opened the throttles to get away from the explosion.”

Tony groaned. “Yeah. That was priority then, and it worked, so… Yay! I guess we’d better hope
we can settle down and try to do repairs. If I have a few days, I can rig one of my arc reactors to
power the ship, at least enough for life-support. Maybe there will be a settlement of some sort
around… with fuel for trade. Though, from the look of this rock, it’d be a hell of a surprise if
anyone WANTED to be on it.” He grumbled. “You ever see ‘Apollo 13’, Cap?”

“I have. Good movie. Probably never gonna want to watch it again.” Steve nodded, grim.

Tony sighed. “Houston, we have a problem… and I think it may take more than a few days to sort
out.” He muttered to himself that the movie ‘Castaway’ might be a better comparison.
The landing was rough. When Tony didn’t complain, Steve realized that the genius had already guessed the extent of damage the ship had taken. Otherwise, he couldn’t imagine Tony missing a chance to make fun of him for crash landing a flying ship. They analyzed the moon’s atmosphere. It was thin, but not fatally so. There was gravity, not as much as Earth, but some.

Tony grumbled. “These suits are gonna get rank if we have to stay in them all the time.” He continued to monitor radiation levels, both around them and inside the flight suits.

Steve grimaced. “Lucky for you, you’ve got two. Maybe you can switch off from time to time.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “It took long enough to get three on, too long! When you sacrifice yourself, you go for it at top speed. I didn’t have time to bring the kitchen sink.” He let out a whine. “Shit. Kitchen! I’m starving.”

Steve nodded. “Well, Jane was right about the magnitude of the explosion.” He sat back. “Thank God she was off on her timing guess. She thought it would only hold together for a minute or two. We had three or more.”

Tony frowned. “We got almost four minutes. I hope that doesn’t mean that Rusk’s portal opener screwed with time. I’d hate to think of time slowing while we’re on THIS charming whatever-the-fuck you call it.” He waved a hand to gesture around them.

Steve looked around. “Ice hell?” All around them were ice-covered, jagged gray peaks, a wispy mist across the ground, ghostly silver light that seemed weak and cold. Everything gleamed in the weak light, icy and bleak. Strong winds rocked the ship, and cold leached its way inside. Steve gave an involuntary shiver.

They both looked over the Vorm ship. Tony had the advantage with tech, and Steve had the advantage of having spent time with an undamaged Vorm craft. It didn’t take long to realize that the ship wouldn’t achieve take off again. It had taken too much damage. Discouraged, but unwilling to concede defeat, Tony gibed, “We really need to get you some landing lessons, Cap. You fly okay, but your landings are notoriously bad.”

Steve pointed at the ship. “I landed THAT shredded piece of shit, Tony. Shut it.”

“Yeah, yeah... Next plan. Let’s check out this lovely ice HELL. Let’s get a good look around and see if there’s anywhere better to take shelter. You need to learn to fly that suit, anyway. It’s harder without JARVIS’ help.” Tony turned around to look in every direction.

Steve walked a few feet and stopped. Away from the shelter of the Vorm craft, the wind was worse. “First, tell me how to work the temperature controls in the suit. It’s colder out here than the inside of an Arctic glacier.”

Tony winced. “I’ll take your word for it.” He watched Steve carefully, wondering if the cold would trigger PTSD in the super soldier.

Steve’s expression was stoic. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t see any effect around the portal like that in the air around my shield when Red Skull’s slice of the Time gem suspended it in time. I don’t think he messed with time. I don’t even know how much control he had over what it opened. He just wanted his base portal. He was a scientist, but I can’t imagine he was a good one. No patience. That, and he’s bat-shit crazy.”

“Let’s hope he didn’t have control. If he did, he’ll be here soon to kick your patriotic ass.” Tony barked a laugh.
Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s less about patriotism and more about what’s generally right.”

Tony shook his head. “I know. But it’s harder to come up with a jingle about morality and it’s still annoying. I’d rather sing the shield song from the animated cartoon about you that I watched when I was a kid.” He looked around and admitted. “I’d really rather be sitting in bed with Pepper, laughing over that cartoon.”

“Are you saying that you and Pepper watch shows about me while you’re in bed together?” Steve bit his lip to suppress a laugh.

Tony stopped in his tracks and stared at Steve. He cackled. “Keep it up, Rogers! You little shit! When we get back I’ll show Darcy a few of my sex tapes, so she can see what you’re doin’ wrong!”

Steve shook his head and frowned. “I got no worries. How many sex tapes are there of you, Tony?”

Tony paused. “Not really sure. I went through an exhibitionist phase. I’ve seen four of them. I’m sure there are more. Having a few unlicensed ones on the loose makes people want to see them. Notoriety has worked for me, at least in the past.”

They spent the next few hours working on suit control, including a discouraging sub-orbital survey flight of the moon where they’d landed. Their crash site seemed representative of the entire moon. When they returned to the ship, it was surrounded by a group of ferocious, antlered, silvery quadruped beasts they dubbed Ice Wolves.

Some fled, but most attacked repeatedly. Once the last was dead, Steve turned to Tony. “Start a fire. I’ll skin. Let’s see if these things are edible.”

“I can start fires. I’m good at that.” Tony nodded eagerly.

Steve growled. “If we’re here long, you’ll get good at skinning, too. I only know how because Bucky shot bears and livestock so we could eat well for each Howling Commando’s birthday.”

Tony made a noise of disgust. “I hate you, Rogers. I really, really hate you.”

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Ice Wolf meat tasted terrible. They charred it with repulsors set to minimum, and tried to make jokes about marshmallows and hot dogs cooked over a fire. But, it was awful. Tony glared at a chunk. “The burn is the best part.”

Steve nodded as he chewed the tough meat and choked it down. Watching Tony do radiation readings on everything didn’t make it more appealing, either. He tried to be casual. “Is it bad?” Tony used a suit blow torch to weld a piece of metal from the ship into a bowl. He pulled water filtering tech out of a compartment in the side of the suit, broke off some ice and put it in the bowl and began to heat it to melt for drinking.

Tony shrugged. “Yup. Bad. We can take turns, once you’re good at flying, checking other moons nearby to see if we can find a better option. But, Nidavellite radiation fallout is significant in this system, after that explosion. It extends for a large radius. Likely, it’s more than our flight range.”

Steve sighed, subdued. “Imagine what it would have done to Earth.” In his mind’s eye, he saw the Tower’s occupants, strangers and friends alike. He couldn’t help but focus on those he loved most.

“I already have. You were right to remove it. I still hate you, but you were right.” Tony looked at
him sharply.

Steve finished the last of his meat and closed his visor, trying to get used to the way he saw through the ‘Space Cap’ mask. “You’re probably not alone.” He turned away from Tony’s prying look, screwed up his courage, and pulled out his phone. The suit gloves made everything awkward, so he removed them. He pulled up his last text to Darcy.

His message read, ‘Dell Rusk = Red Skull. Tell everyone. No matter what happens, I love you. Please go to a safe room. You are the love of my life.’ He winced, imagining her reaction.

He swallowed hard as he stared at the icon indicating she replied. He knew it at the time, but ignored it. He couldn’t ignore it any longer. Finally, he opened the message, trying to avoid dwelling on it as the last communication he would ever have from her. It read, ‘I love you! Wait for the others. Don’t face him alone. Don’t sacrifice yourself. Don’t leave me!’ Steve closed his eyes as the words cut through him. He left her. Devastation washed over him. He didn’t just give himself up, he gave up their relationship, gave up Darcy. He hurt her. Darcy would remember him as a man who broke her heart. Like Peggy, she would grieve… and move on. His head bowed and tears tracked down his cheeks. He started to open the visor again to wipe his face.

Tony’s voice was strained. “Don’t open it any more than necessary. It’s low-level radiation, but it’s harmful. It’ll poison us, over time.”

Steve kept his head down, put his phone in an outside compartment of the suit and put his gloves on again. “Huh. So, I’ll get a lingering death from illness, after all. Thought I was past that…” His words sounded thick with grief.

Tony snapped. “And I thought that by creating a new element to power my arc reactor I escaped death by radiation poisoning. Irony is a real bitch.” He threw his head back and groaned. “Oh, Pepper!”

“I’m sorry.” Steve’s voice was barely audible.

Tony stood and moved away, agitated in the face of Steve’s brokenness. He blasted a few rocks with repulsor fire, watching them explode to bits. “I’m sorry I wasn’t faster. I should have caught up with your sorry ass quicker, had JARVIS suit you in time. Fuck! I should have developed a protocol for that with JARVIS! What a missed opportunity! We’d be home right now, warm in our lady-filled beds, with a hell of a lot better dinner in our stomachs. I was too damned slow.”

“Really? You’re gonna fight me for the blame?” Steve choked a laugh.

Tony was quiet for a long moment. “The day I stop fighting you, you’ll know I’m ready for death. What will your surrender sign be, Cap?”

Steve sighed and groaned as he rose to his feet. “I don’t have one. You giving up, Stark?”

Tony shook his head. “Hell, no! We need to fight to survive while we’re both still strong. I don’t know what Darcy said to cut you like that…”

Steve interrupted. “It’s not anything she said, not Darcy’s fault. It’s knowing that… I broke her heart.” His voice caught, and then he forced himself to stand straighter and absorb the pain.

Tony turned to Steve. “Fight to get back home so you can mend it.” He shifted in place. “That’s what I’m telling myself, obviously about Pepper instead of Darcy, since if I were talking about Darcy you’d kill me in my sleep.”
Steve snorted, his tears stopped. “As much as you go out of your way to irritate me, that’s not completely out of the question, regardless…”

Tony laughed. “I know. Another reason to try and get the hell out of here, find a way to get back home…” He shot Steve a look. “Just don’t forget that I flew into a portal to save your sorry ass!”

“You’re right. It’s time to find our way home. Let’s fly again. We’ve only surveyed a small portion of this rock. Maybe it gets better!” Steve nodded, and then walked a few steps.

“Sure! Maybe there’s a warm oasis.” Tony cackled.

Steve shrugged, realized it didn’t show, and spoke. “I just shrugged, so you know. I’m not counting on an oasis. Aren’t they mostly mirages?”

Tony rose a few feet off the ground. “Come on, Cap. Let’s blow this Popsicle stand and see what’s out there.” He watched Steve begin to learn to fly the suit, encouraged him and offered direction.

Steve followed, gradually learning the suit controls. He was glad he’d learned enough to react well when Tony hissed at him. “Turn! I don’t know what the hell those guys are, but I don’t want to fly in blind.”

Steve caught sight of a small group of gray-blue creatures, much larger than Thor. The quick glimpse revealed red eyes and craggy features. He couldn’t be certain, but thought he saw one of them throwing an ice spear that seemed to appear as if by magic in its grasp. As they returned to the Vorm ship, Tony cussed. “Damn! I think those were Frost Giants! I wonder if that means we’re in Jotunheim? That’s where they’re supposed to live, I think.”

“Isn’t that where Loki was from?” Steve winced.

Tony nodded, thoughtful. “Yeah. He didn’t look like that, though. Smaller. He was raised at Thor’s side in Asgard.”

Steve frowned, feeling awkward as he realized that Tony couldn’t see his expression. “I remember. I wonder if his appearance was an illusion, either of his making or by someone else’s magic.” It occurred to him that spending so much time behind an armored mask contributed to the way Tony always seemed to need to make noise. When his face was hidden, so was his non-verbal communication.

Tony spoke curtly. “I don’t really care about Loki. He’s dead and gone, crazy bastard. I do care about our new neighbors, though. They’re enemies of Thor’s people. If their race rejected Loki as not-gianty enough, I’d say we should steer clear of them.” He sighed. “This is a real shit hole. I mean, if you’re a Frost Giant it might seem like Malibu, but for us it’s a shit hole. From what we saw speeding away from the Nidavellite, I take this for a moon, one of many.”

Steve asked, “Does Jotunheim have a lot of moons? Does it have ice moons?”

“How the hell should I know? Do I look like I fuck Thor and poke holes in the Universe at random for fun?” Tony groused.

Steve reprimanded Tony. “Don’t disrespect Jane because you’re in a bad mood!” He paced. “I wonder if it’s common for beings from one realm to inhabit another. I wonder if the presence of Frost Giants indicates Jotunheim or not.”

Tony sat on a rock ledge. “Well, we’re here, and it doesn’t look like any part of Midgard I’ve ever seen. But, I haven’t seen it all, so that doesn’t prove much.” He groused. “Really? I need to make
time to study the entire Universe? That’ll be fun…”

Steve nodded. “We don’t know enough, even about our own realm.”

Tony was quiet for a long moment. “That sounded like a dare. You KNOW I can’t stand to be uninformed.” He wondered if Steve was grinning behind the mask or not. Tony realized anew the limitations that armor brought to communication with others.

They took turns traveling to the edge of their flight range to explore the system. They found nothing familiar and no other worlds, only ice moons and asteroids. A survey of surrounding moons showed the one they were on to be at least as good as the others. It had the advantage of artificial shelter and light in the Vorm ship they crash landed. With little else to do, the men explored the moon.

There wasn’t much to see until they found their way into enormous caverns that cut under the icy mountains. Many of the caverns had story images carved into the rock. Both men documented all that they could. Steve couldn’t help but imagine how excited Erik Selvig would be to see the images. He wrote emails to the scientist and attached image after image, adding to the pile of messages in his Outbox. Carved scenes told the story of a gigantic being that was brought to life when fire touched cold mists that rose from icy rivers. It spent time with a cow-like being and was then joined by other giants. Two smaller beings killed him and spread his pieces across the Universe, or maybe even made the Universe from him. It was hard to tell just from the carvings. Steve vowed to study Norse mythology if they ever made it home.

In one cavern, they found an image of the Tesseract. It was the only cavern where the carvings had been filled in with vivid colors that sparkled in the darkness. The Tesseract was shown with five other items, all different colors that fairly leapt off the walls. Steve and Tony thoroughly canvassed and documented all the images there, discussing them as they went. One item was orange like Red Skull’s watch, and light seemed to pulse through lines in that orb, indicating that it could be divided into slices. Steve stared at that image for a long time, wondering who created it and why. He wondered that about all the objects depicted alongside the Tesseract. Around each item were portrait images that showed creatures being hurt and killed by the power of the unstoppable gems. One alarming image showed all the items gathered together.

“That would be too much power. Like the ‘one ring’ Tolkien wrote about, some things are too terrible to consider.” Tony shook his head.

Steve paused and frowned, remembering. “That scientist, Pierce, mentioned a dictator named Thanos who collects the Infinity stones, seeking all six. He gave Red Skull a slice of the Time gem. Red Skull leads Hydra, but he ‘reports’ to Thanos, I think. From what I’ve gathered, Thanos has been testing us, first with Loki and the Chitauri, and more recently with Red Skull and the Vorm.”

Tony held a light close to the image of all of the gems gathered together. “I remember. I’m going out on a limb and say that we don’t want this Thanos to complete his collection. We need to talk to Thor, and maybe even Odin, about that when we get the chance. I doubt Thanos has our best interests at heart…” Steve nodded agreement while he continued to take images of the cave walls.

Tony frowned and added. “You should do an interrogation with that bastard scientist again, too. He’s a crafty weasel who might be able to shed some light on Thanos’ actions. I don’t understand why he collects the gems, ‘mostly by proxy’ if I remember right, and lends them out in such a careless way. Red Skull and Loki are not two of the most stable and trustworthy guys we’ve ever met.”
Steve grimaced. “Pierce held out on us about Red Skull. The way he looked at me when we asked how Hydra ended up at the foot of the throne of the galaxies? He was thinking about Schmidt’s and my fight before the Tesseract took Schmidt for a ride.” He sighed. “I’ll question him again, if I can. Natasha promised not to kill him… but no one else did. If they hold him accountable for the mess we’re in right now, he may not be available for further questioning.” He didn’t say Bucky’s name, but it hung in the air between them, regardless.

“Point taken,” Tony grunted.

They decided that the Frost Giants they’d seen were a remnant of a Jotun army that had fought against Odin’s armies in this realm, whichever it was. Entire caverns were devoted to images of war between Frost Giants and Asgardians. One image that showed up repeatedly fit descriptions they’d heard of Odin. None of the Asgardians looked like Thor. They didn’t go much deeper in those caverns because they were infested with all manner of savage creatures. The number of images decreased as the population of creatures increased, anyway.

The two Avengers encountered many unpleasant life forms in the coming days. Tony thought the squeal Steve uttered when a creature like a spider with floppy bunny ears took flight and bounced off his suit visor was hilarious. Steve felt vindicated when Tony tried to cook a blobby snake and it burst into about a thousand mini snakes. Tony’s shrill shrieks of revulsion left the super soldier laughing and gasping for breath. It was also funny to see him hopping, so panicked, while wearing Iron Man armor. Steve regretted not getting a video of the incident. Both men reacted badly to the albino monkey rats. The creatures oozed excrement and circled back in their meanderings to ingest it. Neither man suggested trying to cook the disgusting rodents.

Neither of them found the antlered Ice Wolves amusing, though. The animals were a frequent menace, attacking often and in varying numbers. Both men captured images of all of the bizarre wildlife, joking about the course of evolution on the frigid moon. Steve wrote emails describing the creatures and attached pictures and short videos. He put all the messages to Betty (and copied a few of the most alarming images to all of the others) in his Outbox. He tried not to wonder if the messages would ever be read.

Every so often, they heard a sonorous, bellowing roar. When the light levels were at their lowest, they heard the billowing of flapping wings, and thought they saw a shadow pass overhead. They both stayed quiet and hoped to avoid its notice, whatever IT was. All they knew was that it was enormous, winged, nocturnal, and noisy. Given the disgust the rest of the wildlife inspired, they had no desire to see more. Tony occasionally threatened to shine a spotlight on it, purely from curiosity. He managed to control the impulse since the bellowing roar made his skin crawl. He referred to the mysterious creature as *Ice Smaug*.

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The light levels on the icy moon were never above what either man would describe as moonlit. One day as they woke and were putting their armored suits back on, Steve realized that even that dim light hurt his eyes and caused his head to ache. He hadn’t had a headache in seventy years. Steve turned to Tony, wincing. “Tony? I have a headache.”

“Welcome to the party. I’ve had a headache for a solid two weeks. It never goes away, just gets worse.” Tony nodded, his expression blank.

Steve nodded, his expression equally matter of fact. “Oh. Okay.”

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From then, their symptoms worsened. Tony’s cough was more noticeable every day. Both men had low-grade fever. Tony vomited daily, sometimes more than once. Both were weary, to the point of dizziness sometimes. More often than not, Steve fought off and killed the antlered Ice Wolves alone.

The days dragged by slowly. It was cold beyond cold, yet the insides of the suits and the ship began to reek of unwashed men. They used the ship as a shelter from the constant gale-force winds, and gathered ice to melt for drinking water. They huddled together at night, sleeping back to back, and whenever the winds were intolerable.

They were beyond ready to be home. They were both anxious about what Schmidt and the Vorm would do next, and whether there had been attacks on the Tower in their absence. Neither wanted to dwell on how much they missed home. Tony could and would talk every second of every day when he wasn’t coughing or vomiting. But, he began to worry that Steve was going to kill him for it. Tony even talked in his sleep, and Steve’s sanity was fraying at the edges. The constant togetherness was wearing on them both.

Steve often took refuge in writing to the others, putting his full attention on his phone. He was grateful for the arc technology that gave it endless energy, even if the phone was as offline as he was. He listened to music, played mind-numbing games, and tapped in messages, mostly to Darcy. He sent some to Bucky, Sam, Natasha, and the others. He took pictures of the hellish landscape, the frightening life forms in action, and Tony (sometimes captioned, ‘He saved my life, damn it. Else, I’d kill him’). He did work from memory, writing suggestions to R&D and to each Avenger, completing reports about his encounter with Rusk and Tony’s heroism saving him from the explosion (that last part was partly to remind him of the debt he owed Tony).

He wrote to Bucky, regrets and apologies, jokes and old stories to jog his memory, in case Bucky didn’t remember on his own. He wrote to Thor, congratulating the god on becoming a father and talking about how much he envied that and wished to have children with Darcy.

But, his first priority was to write to Darcy. He wrote about the cold, the frightening and dismal beauty of the ice moon, and Tony’s constant babbling. He wrote about the Ice Wolves and how much he missed all food and drink other than radiation-polluted water and disgusting, crisped meat. He wrote about times he and Darcy had spent together, and every time that he’d almost proposed marriage to her. He confessed how many times he’d nearly proposed during sex, aware that doing so would doom him to well-deserved mockery for all time. He shared his nightmares and dreams… even the dark fantasies he had of locking Tony out of the ship so he could have a moment’s peace.

He confided fantasies he’d not shared before, sexual activities he wished they’d tried, role plays and other things he supposed were best categorized as ‘kinks.’ He wrote freely, convinced he was whistling in the dark. He wrote about Darcy… her beauty and quirks, things she said that played over again and again in his memory. On rare occasions, he looked at the picture she’d sent him of her wearing red lingerie. It fascinated him and left him so dazed with want that it hurt. He wrote about dreams he had of coming home to her, holding her close, and making love again. He fantasized about trips they might take together across the US, to Europe, and (most tellingly) a tropical island where they could lounge naked in the hot sun and eat delectable fruits between long bouts of lovemaking. He wrote about his increasing fear of never seeing her again, instead staying marooned forever on this icy moon, long after Tony died of radiation exposure and left Steve alone with the wolves.

Worst of all to Steve was when he wrote of the regret he felt for hurting Darcy, for breaking her heart by leaving. He went through a dismal week when he thought he had no right to ask Darcy to be part of his life, that even if he found a way home she should find someone else. He began to
speculate about who might be better for her than he was, building up jealous fantasies in his mind that nearly drove him mad. But, every time, he came back to his faith in her. She loved him, regardless of anything. It was humbling, but it sustained him like nothing else could. He let go of the dark fantasy of staying out of her life if they found their way home, cursed himself as too weak to do that even if it might be best for her.

He wrote to her—‘Sweetheart, I’m sorry that I’m so selfish where you’re concerned. The worst pain I know is that I’ve broken your heart; I’ve hurt you. I wish more than anything that I could hold you close and make it all up to you. I’d give anything to be together with you again, even for just a minute.’

‘Much as I hate to admit it, Tony was right (!). The night Hydra tried to get to him when we saw ‘Wicked’, he pointed out that you made me human. It was one of those annoyingly on-point remarks he’s so uniquely gifted with.’

‘See, I was born nearly crippled. I felt less-than-human for much of the first twenty-four years of my life. Adults, other than Ma, looked away and tried to pretend I didn’t exist, made it clear that I shouldn’t live and burden her. Girls pitied me. Guys looked down on me. Only Bucky, and then Dr. Erskine and Peggy, treated me like a man at all.’

‘Then, they gave me the serum. For some (then-Col. Phillips, for one) I still wasn’t enough. But, to most people I was bigger than life, more than human. Howard immediately treated me as a friend and equal after I changed. And Howard thought he was better than everyone else in many ways, smarter for sure. The Chorus girls never treated me as human. At first, I was an oddity to them, then a sex object to several. They all realized I was different, something they didn’t understand. They knew that the motorcycle stunt was real, that my strength was super-human. Then, soldiers who saw the show found me laughable, a chorus girl and a freak in my own right, before I proved myself. Most of the soldiers I rescued along with Bucky bought into the comics they read and made a myth of me. Only the Howling Commandos saw me any differently, and even with them… I was their commanding officer, so there was a separation and an ‘otherness’. When I lost Bucky, I felt alone, apart from people, and doomed to stay that way. When I woke up in the 21st century, everyone related to me as ‘Cap’. Even Tony treated me as something other than a man, while he was one of the rare few to treat Banner as a man rather than a monster. With the Avengers, it was kind of like it was with the Commandos. They defined me by my skill set first, as a leader second.’

‘Then, I met you. When I heard you talk to Jane about me, call me Steve, you spoke of me like a man. You were cautious about my attention to you, interested, but not unreservedly fawning. You got me to open up and talk. You caused me to work on building a human relationship. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me. You’re the best thing. So, thank you for making me human. Thanks for treating me like a man, for loving me as a man, more than as a hero. I thought that if I got to be a hero, it would be the best thing imaginable. I was wrong. Getting to be human with you turned out to be better.’

‘I love you, Sweetheart. I wish I had the honor of being your husband. I wish that we had babies together, little humans with your sweet spark and tenacity. I wish that we’d grown old together and had it all, the fun and the fights, and the joys and sorrows… together. I wish I was home with you now. My heart is yours, forever, Darcy. You’re the love of my life, the best part, my home. I wish I was home, Sweetheart. I miss you more than I can say.’

Desperate for something new, Steve shared his music with Tony and listened to Tony’s collection of songs. Some of Tony’s music was too jumbled for Steve’s taste, but there were great songs there, too. He even found a few songs, Pepper-inspired, he guessed, that he wanted to add to his playlist for Darcy. He wished he’d known a Stevie Wonder song, ‘I Believe (When I Fall in Love it Will
be Forever)’, when he first met Darcy, for instance. Tony was, of course, critical of the oldest music that took Steve back to his pre-ice life, but admitted that Steve had managed to get a fair sampling of musical styles of the 20th and 21st centuries, and asked to share songs from Steve’s phone to his. Steve hated to put his phone in the other Avenger’s hands, knowing that Tony could - and would- find his way past any security measures. He knew that Tony read the notes on Darcy’s playlist to him, and guessed the other man read some of his personal emails. He woke one morning to an exclamation from Tony and automatically reached out to take his phone back. Steve wasn’t sure whether Tony exclaimed over something he shouldn’t have read, or over his most-private picture of Darcy. He didn’t ask. He just cradled the phone against his chest and went back to sleep.

The possibility that they might never find their way home haunted both men. Though he tried to hide it, the cold tormented Steve’s psyche, bringing back memories of previous losses and battering at his defenses. Tony’s first captivity had been in the desert heat, something he was nearly nostalgic for at this point. Their constant togetherness bred respect, understanding, contempt, and several incidents which would remain unmentioned for all time- by mutual agreement.

Time passed, and they both felt worse, with hopelessness creeping closer every day. Steve didn’t say anything about it when he realized that Tony had stopped arguing with him.

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One day, they were glumly cleaning an Ice Wolf for cooking when they saw the gleam of an object in the sky. The object was entering the ice moon’s atmosphere and headed straight for them. Steve thought it looked like a smaller version of a drone, but it wasn’t one he’d seen before. They took up defensive stances.

Tony was agitated, watching the approaching object. As he got a reading on it, he squawked. “It’s friendly!” It stopped in the air over them and began to move downward at a slow pace. Tony stared up at the descending drone, disbelief in his face. “Yinsen?” He lowered his hand from aiming a repulsor at the drone.

The drone set down and replied. “I’m glad you didn’t shoot me. It is good to see you, Stark.”

“Do you see and hear that, or have I lost my mind?” Tony turned to Steve, panicking.

Steve replied quickly. “I see and hear it, a small drone that just called you Stark.”

Tony’s voice quivered as he turned to the drone again. “You sound like him.” Steve stared at Tony, puzzled.

Yinsen replied. “Yes, Stark. Rhodey programmed me using all known clips of Ho Yinsen’s recorded voice when he finished your work creating me. Rhodey asks me to remind you that he graduated from MIT, too, and that he knows all your secrets, ‘you big baby’. He and Dr. Banner finished and duplicated me to assist in searching for the two of you. I am Yinsen-27.” Tony made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a cry.

Steve spoke up to allow Tony time to catch his breath. “Where are we? How did you find us?”

Yinsen regarded Steve. “Greetings, Captain. Stark would have me remind you that you are an annoyingly righteous and uptight Capsicle, a name I should only use when your Taser-happy girlfriend is absent. You are on the 46th moon of Niflheim, an inhospitable ice moon. The atmosphere barely supports human life. The air is thin and the gravity levels are different from Earth’s. It is not a healthful place for you. There are low levels of Nidavellite radiation present. I
am the longest-range drone sent on this current mission. When Odin shared that there was an unusual explosion in this realm, Dr. Foster, Miss Lewis, Miss Potts, and Dr. Selvig launched multiple satellites and their largest Yinsen squad to Niflheim.” He turned to Tony. “Miss Potts says to assure you she has not bankrupted you. She would do so to have you home, but it hasn’t come to that. She also asked me to relay that you are not allowed near any more portals, ever.”

Tony chuckled. “Sounds like she’s put a good-sized dent in my accounts, though! Twenty seven of you?” He let out a breath of amazement as he calculated the costs.

Yinsen shook his head, dissenting. “Sorry, Stark. There are fifty of us, or were when I left. And some of us have had to be replaced due to malfunction, unexpected natural phenomenon, and attack by hostile forces. This is my fifth search mission for you since I was commissioned.” He stepped closer. “You created me as a medical triage technician, Stark. May I be of assistance? You are unwell.”

Steve helped Tony stand. “We’re suffering Nidavellite radiation poisoning.” They both removed the upper halves of their suits, groaning with relief as they did so. Steve resisted a strong urge to kick the suit pieces at his feet.

Yinsen nodded. “Dr. Banner and Dr. Ross anticipated that possibility and made necessary preparations. I have injections for each of you, if you will allow me to administer them. They created an antidote. Other steps will be needed, too, such as cleansing showers, but this is a start.”

"Shower..." Steve moaned, imagining.

Tony’s chuckle was dry. “Those Hulks are worth every damned penny, no matter how many labs or sparring rooms they destroy. I’ll have to come up with a special thank you!” Steve nodded thankful agreement. Yinsen continued to examine both men, and administered fluids, vitamins, and medicine. Tony sighed with relief. “I’m not gonna miss that headache. The lack of pain is blissful. What else do you have to make us feel better? You have a way to get us home? A cheeseburger or two?” Tony ran his hands through his filthy hair, slicking it back. He and Steve eyed each other with rueful amusement.

Yinsen straightened up. “I have a Message in a Bottle.”

“What?” Steve stretched, thinking of exercises he’d seen Darcy and Bruce do.

Yinsen stood still. Tony started laughing as music began to play, ‘Message in a Bottle’ by The Police. He stopped laughing as his phone began to buzz with incoming messages, emails, and voice mails. Steve felt his phone doing the same thing and swayed where he stood as Tony choked. “Did you just update our phones with messages from home, Yinsen?” His voice faded as he struggled not to cry at the thought.

“Is that the message?” Steve ignored Tony’s sniffling, stifling his own.

Yinsen replied. “I am also sending your messages back to the cloaked satellite for JARVIS to relay home; to recipients the Black Widow approves under her current security protocols. Dr. Banner worked several hours recently creating the ‘Message in a Bottle’ program. When JARVIS processes your information, the music you heard will play on Dr. Banner’s phone. Then, the others will receive the messages you have sent.”

Steve gasped, reaching for his phone desperately. He couldn't help swallowing hard and wincing. "ALL the messages we wrote?” He tried to set concerns about some of the more risqué things he'd written aside, and shrugged. Then, a phrase caught his eye. With trembling fingers, he pressed a
message attachment and his phone began to play a song, ‘Waiting for You’ by Seal. When he heard the words, ‘There has been no one brighter than you, I can’t deny these things that I do, Feels like the world’s at stake yeah, I have been waiting, I have been waiting for you,’ he fell to his knees and let out a moan of relief.

Tony looked up from his phone and rolled his eyes. “Oh, my God! You stupid jackass! Don’t you know how much she loves you? Just because you’ve been too chicken-shit to ask her to marry you, doesn’t mean she’s not as dedicated to you as my wife is to me!”

“Wife?!” Steve shook his head, wondering if his hearing could be trusted.

Tony snarled. “Yinsen! Erase that from your databanks, Stark protocol AS52z14. That’s confidential! Nobody knows except me, Pepper, Rhodey, and Happy. The guys stood up with us as our witnesses. And, well, Cap knows now.”

Yinsen's tone shifted. “Stark protocol AS52z14 has been activated.”

Tony turned back to Steve. “Yes. She’s my everything. I’m not stupid! I know she’s the best woman in the world for me. Hell, the best woman in the Universe! I had to beg her for ages, but she finally agreed after I helped her heal from the Extremis procedure.” Tony swallowed hard and cut a glance at Steve, his tone sly. “Good thing I already told her everything I ever thought or felt before. Some of what’s about to come in on her phone gets wild, even for me… what with the thinking we were dying, and lost forever, and all that.” His eyes gleamed as he suppressed laughter.

Steve blinked, his cheeks reddening. His eyes went wide as he thought of some of the messages he’d written to Darcy. He saw Tony smirk at him knowingly. Steve ignored the gibe and turned to Yinsen and stood again. “How do we get home?”

“I have sent your coordinates to the other Avengers, along with the ‘Message in a Bottle’ information. They will use my information to plan a rescue.” Yinsen replied.

Tony let out an impatient huff. “I’m ready to get the hell off of this rock. How long did it take you to get here?”

Yinsen replied. “I am sending you answers to questions Rhodes and Dr. Banner anticipated. The information is now available in your visor interface.”

Tony put his visor back on, his voice muffled. “Shit! We’re on the far edge of Hel! Huh, a cloaked satellite as a fixed starting point. Good thinking. It looks like they pried SHIELD’s cloaking tech out of Phil’s tight fists. It took this guy five days to get here from the satellite, using a slingshot method of transport to the far edge of the range of other Yinsen drones. They sent drones out piggy-back, in other words. We’re too far from Foster’s portal to fly to it under our own power. We have to wait for someone to come and get us.” He groaned. “Not that I’m really up to a long space flight, anyway. I feel like shit, even with pain killers.”

Yinsen informed them. “I am sending detailed specifications to the others regarding your location, medical condition, and eagerness for rescue.”

Tony took off the visor again and stepped forward. “Give us a kiss, Yinsen!”

The drone regarded Tony steadily. “I’m not programmed for that sort of thing, Stark. I’d be surprised if you haven’t built a drone that is.” Tony laughed and started to reply, gasping for breath between laughs.

Steve shook his head. “Please don’t tell me about it, Tony. I don’t want to hear it. Imagining it is
bad enough. So, just don’t…” His words trailed off as he wondered how long it would take for their messages and location data to get home to the others.

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When the ‘Message in a Bottle’ arrived, the scene on the rooftop garden was jubilant and chaotic.

“Where are they? What’s going on out there? Are they okay?” Darcy was almost breathless. Every emotion was heightened now. Darcy’s initial joy mixed into a tangle of concern, curiosity, and fear. She looked around at the others, wild with feeling.

Bucky’s hot tears fell on her as he cheered, relieved. He released Darcy, turned and grabbed Sam, kissing the other man with heady joy and unrestrained passion. Bucky chided Sam. “You and all the fuckin’ naysaying! I told you that you were all wet, ya fat head! You were doubtin’ Captain fuckin’ America!”

“You super soldiers always beat the odds, eh?” Sam rolled his eyes.

Bucky grinned. “What? You bet against me, too?! You’re nuts!” He hugged Sam again.

Sam’s smile was gentle and sincere. “I love it when you guys prove me wrong. First, you were the kind that could be saved, after all. Now, Steve somehow survived a huge-ass explosion and a month out in space somewhere.” He grabbed Darcy by the hand as Bucky continued to hug him, rocking, and kissing his neck. Sam laughed as Bucky hit a ticklish spot. “Darcy! I hope you enjoy saying ‘I told you so’ as much as I’m gonna like hearin’ it!” She grinned at him wanly, squeezed his hand, and moved away.

Erik moaned, awed as he stared at images on his StarkPad. “Oh, gods! These carvings! Look at the cave drawings they found! It’s the history of the Nine Realms, but not through the lens of the Human experience. Magnificent! I wonder who carved them?” He gasped. “Ymir! The Creation story! And…. Oh! The Tesseract! The blue is so life-like. There must be plants with vivid dyes there. It’s so beautiful! How I’d love to see it in person!”

Bruce grabbed Darcy and hugged her warmly, his smile brilliant and reassuring. “They’re okay. They survived the explosion.” He turned to Thor and lowered his voice as his look became serious. “Loki told the truth. They’re in Niflheim on one of its many ice moons.” Thor’s smile was accompanied by grateful tears. Verifying that Loki had told him even one truth was encouraging. It warmed his doubt-filled heart.

Betty stared at her phone. “Sorry, Erik! You don’t want to go there, no matter what the images are. The Nidavellite fallout is considerable… Yinsen-27, the furthest flung mission drone, is the one that found them. They’re out of their flight range from our portal.” She reviewed medical readings from the drone and looked at Thor. “We need a way to get there. Maybe a ship of some sort? Could a space-fitted Quinjet go through a portal?” Bruce picked up on her anxiety and began to look at the data from the Yinsen drone.

Jane studied the coordinates. “It takes time for me to prep a portal to a new location. I can do it, but it takes time, usually a few days before I’m willing to test with a live subject.” She grabbed her StarkPad and pulled up a data stream for Niflheim, zeroing in on the area where the ‘Message in a Bottle’ originated. Erik did the same on his pad, and they began to murmur to each other about energy signatures. Erik’s face was pinched as he evaluated the levels of Nidavellite energy in that region. He glanced towards Bruce and Betty.

Bruce shook his head and dissented. “No! We need to move faster than that. The longer they’re out
there, the worse it’ll be for them. I don’t want the radiation levels in their blood to exceed what Human medical technology can handle. Tony...” Betty looked alarmed, too. Bruce showed a screen of medical data, as though he expected everyone to understand it as well as he did. As he noted the confusion on the others’ faces, he explained. “They’re suffering from Nidavellite radiation poisoning. They survived the explosion, but that doesn’t mean that they were able to completely escape its effects. Tony needs help as fast as possible. Even Steve is ill from it!” Pepper moaned. Darcy began to shake from emotional overload. Bucky pulled her close again, holding to her as much as he supported her.

Jane let out a long, slow breath, her gaze fixed on Thor. “The Bifrost.” Her face was pale. “We have to use it. It’s the fastest way.” Her lips trembled. “You’ll have to go to Asgard again, and then to the moon at these coordinates.”

Thor nodded. “I will take the Warriors Three with me. They have suffered Niflheim before, and will not be affected by harsh energies like a Midgardian would. Fandral even defeated an ice moon dragon once. He was punished for an indiscretion with the wife of one of Odin’s friends, banished there...”

Bucky grimaced. “If Steve has time to read my messages, he may punch Fandral out on sight.” Darcy winced.

“It would not be the first time someone has done so.” Thor shrugged, grinning.

Hawkeye chimed in. “I don’t trust Loki. Are you sure you shouldn’t take more help?” He restlessly pulled a knife and examined the blade. Natasha stood close by Hawkeye, listening to everyone’s observations.

Thor put a reassuring hand on Hawkeye’s shoulder. “Loki can be trusted to look out for himself, and to act on his deepest-held feelings. I trusted his rage when we sought revenge for Frigga’s death. I trust his desire to avoid detection by Thanos now. They tortured and used him, a lesson he has not forgotten. I do not, however, trust him with any of your lives. It is bad enough that I must bring the others there. I do not wish to take any of you to Asgard unless I must. Besides, you are all needed here to protect our home. We do not know where Red Skull and his forces will attack next.” Thor looked to Natasha for permission. She nodded.

Jane squeaked, drawing attention from the others. She looked up from images on her StarkPad. “Actually, I do. There’s a Vorm scouting group in Niflheim. They’re heading for the source of our transmission. It’s in these readings.” She took a deep breath. “They must have noticed and followed our search efforts.”

Erik nodded, gripping his StarkPad. He looked at Thor soberly. “Are you sure that Loki didn’t betray us to Hydra?”

Thor looked torn as he considered the possibility. Finally, he shook his head, dissenting. “Loki fears and despises Thanos. He scorns the Red Skull.”

Darcy’s face crumpled. “So, we led Red Skull to them!” She struggled. Her breaths were shallow, panicked gasps as she recalled the effort they’d put into the search, only to have the enemy use it against Steve and Tony. Bucky’s grip on her tightened as the color left her face and she swayed where she stood.

Thor stared back at Erik, and then glanced at Jane. He whispered to her. “I believe in my brothers. I offered Loki safety on Odin’s throne, that which he has coveted most for all our lives.”
Jane’s eyes filled with tears, but she nodded to Thor. “Go.” She stared into his eyes. “I love you.” He responded to her and looked again to Natasha. Darcy blinked back tears, thankful for her friends.

Natasha looked around at everyone. “Yes. Go get them, and take the Warriors Three with you. Given that they will need recovery time, it’d be best to take Steve and Tony Upstate when you return. We’ll try to keep their return a secret, if possible, while they recuperate. I’ll send Rhodey, Bucky, Darcy, and Pepper along with medical staff and support staff to open the manor and Steve and Darcy’s guest house.”

Bruce interjected, “I need to be there to examine them when they arrive. Steve doesn’t trust many people to handle his blood. I’ll return as soon as I’m satisfied that they’re okay, or we’re getting them the help they need.”

Darcy put a hand on Thor’s arm. “They both have faith in you, but illusions are kind of scary, especially when you’re ill. If Steve needs reassurance of your identity, tell him I said that ‘it’s NOT too good to be true.’” He’ll know I said that.” Thor nodded to her, and gave her a reassuring smile.

Thor raised Mjolnir, moved apart from the rest of those present, and yelled. “Balder!” In a flash, he was gone.

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Steve wasn’t sure why he thought Bucky’s messages would be easier to read than Darcy's. Some were, but many hurt. Bucky told him about defensive efforts the remaining Avengers made, and reassured him about their safety. He groused about the media’s desire to give him a heroic name. He couldn’t leave the Tower without being hounded over that issue, day after day and week after week. He griped about the metaphorical weight of the shield, and how he disliked seeing the pain in Darcy’s eyes whenever she saw him holding it.

Bucky also told him about Darcy grieving. The picture of Darcy with her Stevie bear nearly ripped Steve’s heart out. It was bittersweet. She clung to a representation of HIM, not heroic icon Captain America, but her eyes were red rimmed and her expression disconsolate. Seeing her so heartbroken made him angry at himself again. Rage also ripped through him as he read about the next Hydra attack on the Tower after they’d disappeared. It was far too easy to picture Darcy right in the middle of things, risking her life to take a stand and help others. He was proud of her, but it terrified him, unfair as that was. If Bucky hadn’t looked after her… Steve couldn’t bear to think of her dying. Again, his hypocrisy struck him forcefully.

While his messages included general info about everyone, Bucky wrote a lot about seeing men act dizzy for Darcy. It popped up in messages again and again. Steve thought people in Avengers Tower were indecently hasty in their desire to believe him dead… and his girl up for grabs. Bucky confessed to offering to alleviate Darcy’s frustrations, and even to try to fill Steve’s place with her. Steve shook his head at that, wondering how Bucky could misunderstand love so fully. He even laughed at Bucky’s slightly puzzled sense of hurt at how quickly and thoroughly Darcy had turned him down. There was a little relief mixed in, though. Steve knew how passionate Darcy could be, and how lonely HE was without her. On top of that, he’d always thought that Bucky could get any girl he wanted, and it sounded like the two of them spent a lot of time together in his absence.

Steve read about Fandral’s flirtations with Darcy with a sense of annoyance. Bucky’s consideration of Fandral’s fitness as a prospective lover for Darcy filled him with jealous ire. Bucky thought the warrior was handsome and a good protector, and liked that he constantly complimented Darcy. He described Fandral as experienced with women and smooth tongued, pouring honey in her ears at every opportunity. When Bucky wondered what Fandral had done to cause Darcy to chastise him,
and then shared that it resulted in the Asgardian developing more serious feelings for her, Steve spiraled into a sense of helpless depression. While they had hope of getting home now, he couldn't believe it until it happened.

So, he anxiously shifted to Darcy’s messages. Some worsened his mood, as full of grief and pain as he’d feared, but most raised his spirits and helped him feel closer to her than ever before, more aware of her love for him. He read about her lonely days, her growing sense of isolation for still believing he lived, and how much she wished she hadn’t fretted over Peggy, but, instead reached for every dream with him. She shared all that she and Peggy had discussed about him; how Peggy had survived long-ago grief for their ‘almost’, and the way Peggy so completely understood his relationship with Darcy.

Steve stopped reading for a moment, staring at the icy hell all around them and thinking about all that meant most in his life. His time with Darcy was the best, richest part. Wishing for her, he returned to her messages, delighted that she’d written so many to him and kept him part of her days every day since he’d left. Darcy shared her dreams for their future, working together for the greater good, but also enjoying a haven with each other, and a family of their own. He read the note she’d left by the song ‘Just Say Yes,’ and found himself shaking with longing to be with her again.

But, it haunted him when she admitted she thought he might be dead. Her words, ‘you left me,’ sliced him open again. He’d hurt her, and he hated himself for it.

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The Yinsen drone took soil, rock, water, and vegetation samples while Tony and Steve read messages. When it spoke again, they both jumped, surprised, since they’d almost forgotten its presence. Its words gave alarm. “Hostile forces approach this location, Stark. You should both secure your suits in place and prepare for battle. You gave me limited offensive capabilities. I will use them to defend you both as much as I can.”

Tony turned away and vomited, and then put his armor back in place. “Let’s get this party started!”

While struggling back into his flight suit, Steve quipped. “We need to work on your inspirational speaking. The delivery was off that time. Throwing up lessens the impact.”

“Let’s work on this, first. Over the past week, I reconciled myself to a slow, painful death. That’s really pissing me off about now.” Tony took flight as they saw the first Vorm ship approaching.

Steve’s expression darkened as he shot into flight. “Just stay cool and stick to the plans we made in case they showed up. I’m kind of glad to see these guys. I want to repay them for every minute of frustration, cold, and hunger we’ve had for the past month.” He growled. “I miss my shield about now, but I’ll see what I can do with your repulsors and rockets.”

“Turn all your weapons settings up high. You don’t want to go at them with your repulsors set to slow broil. While they might taste better than Ice Wolves, there shouldn’t be enough left for us to find out.” Tony chuckled.

Steve’s reply was terse. “I know better than to fool around. The low light here will give them full power if they leave their ships. I want to blow them out of the sky as quick as possible.” Suit sensors showed that they faced a Vorm scouting group of twelve fighters. He wondered how long it would take for Red Skull to learn their location and send Hydra reinforcements to try to capture him and Tony. Their battle began.

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Within the hour, Thor and his friends appeared on the 46th moon of Niflheim and locked on Tony’s GPS tracker signal.

Volstagg joked. “Shall we hunt ugly, tasteless beasts while we are here?” Hogun grunted, disgusted by the thought.

Fandral laughed. “That would mean staying a moment longer than absolutely necessary. I have passed my trials in this realm. I have no need of more time with the nine primordial ice rivers and the dishonored dead.” He whistled for his steed to finish taking a drink and come with them.

They moved faster as they saw and heard fighting ahead of them.

***

Tony and Steve were using all the flying and fighting skill they could muster, and had managed to bring down three of the Vorm fighters. Having flown one of the ships and studied their shelter closely, both had a new-found intimate knowledge of the Vorm ships’ weak spots. Tony was also able to disrupt the Vorm communications. The Vorm sent out a message that an enemy was engaged and requested reinforcements (per Steve's translation), but were not able to communicate more details. He also prevented them from communicating with the other ships within their scouting group. It hindered them from tactical cooperation.

As he and Steve tried to team up on another Vorm craft, Tony cried out, “We’ve got humanoid life signs approaching on foot, Cap. I sure as hell hope they’re friendly. If the bad guys are already surrounding us, then we’re in more trouble than I thought.”

Steve took shots at a vulnerable spot in the Vorm craft’s hull and replied dryly. “We’ll know pretty soon. They’re just a few meters away. Let’s see if we can take this guy out of the equation first, and then prep to greet the incoming foot soldiers.” He grunted as his repulsor sliced into an engine and caused a satisfying explosion. “I hope they’re friendly, too, but I’m not taking it for granted. I’m not getting captured.” Tony grunted agreement.

With additional help from Yinsen-27, a fourth Vorm craft was destroyed. When three of the ships moved into attack formation and bore down on the approaching life forms, Tony let out a hopeful yell. Steve wouldn’t allow himself to believe they were friendly until he saw the familiar flash of Mjolnir’s lightning. He let out an overjoyed cry and breathed easier as he saw Thor take flight.

“Well met, good friends! May we join you against these attackers?” Thor cried.

Tony laughed. “Be our guest, Thor. Welcome to the edge of Hel! I cut their comm, but they got out a call for reinforcements. I want to finish these guys before their friends arrive.”

Steve yelled while spinning evasively out of the line of fire of a Vorm ship. “Light ‘em up! Have at ‘em! You’re a sight for sore eyes, Brother!” Righteous indignation against the Vorm and their Hydra master energized Steve. The realization that the Vorm fighters were all that stood between them and getting home made him deadlier, lethally focused on enemy destruction. He felt stirrings of vindictive rage against Red Skull, a desire to hone himself so that he could finish his foe for good.

Two of the Vorm ships bearing down on the warrior group engaged the Asgardian prince. The other let loose a steady stream of laser fire aimed towards one of his companions. Steve moved at top speed to get between the Vorm craft and its target. Thor’s other companions veered that same direction. Yinsen and Tony joined Thor.
Steve’s repulsors took out one of the laser turrets on the Vorm ship. It was hit by laser-rifle fire from below. He melted the other Vorm laser turret at close range. Steve cut along the engine block with a laser until the engine broke off and the ship spiraled out of control. He whirled back and landed in front of Thor’s companions, looking to see that they were all okay. The one he’d saved stepped forward. “I owe you a debt, friend! I am Fandral, of the Warriors Three. To whom do I speak?”

Steve took a step towards the warriors, his snarling tone as icy as their surroundings. “I’m Captain Steve Rogers, mate to Lady Darcy. I’ll fight by your side against Hydra. But, Fandral, don’t be surprised if I gouge your eyes or rip your smooth tongue right out of your mouth later, pal.” He took flight again and rejoined the battle. Fandral nodded, as though he thought Steve’s attitude fair.

Volstagg chortled. “Business as usual, I see!” He tucked his battle axe on his back and pulled out a laser canon and began taking shots at the enemies flying overhead. Hogun, grim faced as ever, kept his mace in one hand, but used a laser rifle to offer supporting fire. Fandral grinned as he called his winged steed Firehooves, mounted the beast, and flew into the battle on its back. He wielded a laser spear in one hand and his favorite foil in the other.

Some of the Vorm landed. Hogun and Volstagg waded fearlessly into combat against them. Things were going well for them, but Steve, Tony, and Thor were all aware that reinforcements could arrive at any time. Thor struggled to gather their party in one place so he could alert Balder to recall them to Asgard. Balder, using Odin’s magic to listen for Thor’s call per his king’s direction, could not endanger Asgard by chanceing the arrival of enemy forces with Thor and his friends, as Thor understood. He shouted. "Quick! Let us dispatch all of these fighters before more come against us! My orders from the Lady Natasha are to bring you home without the enemy knowing that you survive!"

More Vorm left their ships to battle on the ground. Thor joined the warriors against the Vorm on foot. Drawn by the scent of blood, a pack of Ice Wolves attacked Vorm, Asgardian, and Human fighters alike. Thor dropped Mjolnir as he grabbed two of the wolves by their necks and threw them off of Volstagg. Hogun yelled as three of the Ice Wolves leapt on Thor from behind, knocking him to the ground. Volstagg swung his battle axe and beheaded one. Fandral dismounted from his panicked horse and joined the fray. Tony and Yinsen held off Vorm attacks from the air, circling and firing wildly.

Steve descended into the thick of the fight on the ground and killed a Vorm with a repulsor shot to the vulnerable joint at the top of its chest plate. An Ice Wolf jumped at him. He started to shoot it, but couldn’t for fear of hitting Thor. Steve grabbed one of the beasts on Thor’s back by the scruff of the neck and hurled it into the one attacking him, breaking their bones. Another beast had fangs firmly sunk into Thor’s shoulder, just below the artery in his neck. Thor’s blood flowed on the icy ground. Thor yelled in pain and thrashed beneath the feral, giant animal.

Steve saw a stick out of the corner of his eye and reached for it, desperate to save Thor by any means necessary. A shock coursed through him as he grasped the stick, lifted it, and swung it against the beast’s head. Unfamiliar lightning ran through the suit, and through him and down his arm to branch out and strike and kill the rest of the attacking pack of Ice Wolves. He then realized that instead of a stick… he had lifted and used Mjolnir. Lightning crackled and sizzled in the air all around them as Ice Wolves fell dead. There was silence in the clearing. Steve stood still, Mjolnir held tight in his fist.

Thor raised his head as the dead beast fell off of him. He stared at Steve as he held a hand over his wound to staunch the flow of blood. “Nicely done, Brother! I thank you.” Thor winced from the pain in his shoulder as he stood and surveyed the scene. Fandral gaped at Steve, and then deftly
dispatched the remaining Vorm foot soldier. He mounted his horse again and took to the air against the last few flying fighters, shouting with glee as he battled on.

“Holy shit, Steve!” Tony froze in mid-air. His visor lifted and he whistled, long and low.

Silent, Steve held Mjolnir out to Thor. Thor reached for it gingerly, wondering if it would return to him. He sighed with relief as it accepted him again. He hefted it with ease and laughed nervously.

“It might be best if we keep this from Odin for the time being, friends.” Hogun and Volstagg looked from Thor to Steve, as though trying to comprehend what had happened. Thor put a reassuring hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Mjolnir is wise. You are one most worthy, Steven. You have sacrificed your life and happiness for others many times. I am proud to call you Brother. I am overjoyed to find that you are a fellow Hammer-bearer. We will be joined by that bond for all eternity.”

Tony shot at one of the Vorm ships that Fandral was fighting, and grimaced. “Oh, for fuck's sake! I’m glad my old man didn’t live to see THAT. He would pee his pants. And, hey… Congrats, Steve! It sounds like you and Thor just got married.” Volstagg shot another Vorm ship down with his laser canon. Hogun ran closer to finish it off.

Steve grinned at Tony ruefully, yelling. “Thor is NOT the person I want to marry.” Thor chuckled and nodded.

The last of the Vorm ships fell from the sky, victim to Tony and Fandral’s efforts. Thor used Mjolnir to light it up until it exploded. He gestured for the others to come close to him. They all drew near, panting with exertion and ready to leave. Fandral rubbed his horse’s neck, murmuring soothing nonsense to the beast. He glanced at Steve from time to time, staying carefully out of reach.

Tony shook his head at Steve. “After listening to you moan over her in your sleep every night for over a month, I know who you want to marry. What are you waiting for? Is it Romanoff sticking her nose in and telling you you’re being too traditional and old-fashioned? Just tell her to get over herself! Darcy might be more old-fashioned than you are in some ways. Don’t miss out on what you want so badly that you cry for it in your sleep. Don’t wait too long, Steve.”

“Oh! Not that you cry in your sleep. I mean… Hey! How about Cap lifting that mystical hammer?!” Tony choked, closed his mouth quickly, and looked around.

Steve sighed heavily. “All I’m waiting for is a way to get home. Can we go now?” Thor clapped Steve on the shoulder and called out to Balder. Other enemy ships approached the ice moon as the Bifrost light faded from sight.

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The party landed in the Bifrost observatory. Tony fell to the ground, cursing his sudden weakness, while Steve struggled for breath and his knees buckled so that he fell against Thor. His body felt like it had at least tripled in weight. He opened the suit visor, warmth welcome against his face. Tony popped his visor open, too, gasping and struggling not to retch.

Thor helped Steve stay on his feet and gestured for the others to help Tony. “Your bodies have been in lower gravity and thinned air for too long. What the enemy could not achieve, your physics can, friend Stark.” Steve shivered violently as warmth penetrated the suit. Thor tightened his grip on Steve.

Tony sagged against the Yinsen drone, his voice weary and weak. “It might be the radiation
poisoning, too, Thor. We’re pretty well fucked up from being marooned in the fallout from that Nidavellite blast. I’m half dead, and even Cap has headaches, fever, and nausea.” He stared at the celestial sights all around them, awed nearly to the point of disbelief. He wished he felt better so that he could savor and explore. It was as though the sights were too much to comprehend. He liked that. New challenges made him feel alive and excited. He used a remote setting to have the Yinsen drone record everything they saw and heard in Asgard, so he could review it later.

Odin swept into the observatory, flanked by guards. Even through the space flight suit, Steve noticed Thor tense next to him. Fandral slapped his horse’s flank, urging it to leave them. The Warriors Three took a knee, as did Balder. Thor apologized. “I am sorry for my impertinence, mighty Odin, and thank you again for enabling our access of the Bifrost. My brother Steven needs my assistance; else I would kneel to you, as is proper. You know that vows to brothers are serious oaths.” He dropped his head in abject humility, but his grip on Mjolnir tightened, and he shifted Steve to one side and slightly behind him. Steve realized that all was not as it seemed. He stayed still and as alert as he could, his clear gaze focused on Odin.

Tony gasped, “It’s like meeting Zeus!” He turned to Thor. Under his breath, he murmured. “Is Zeus real, too?” Steve made a quelling noise to Tony, paying careful attention to Thor’s demeanor.

Odin smiled mockingly at Tony. Tony’s mouth closed as he experienced a disturbing sense of déjà vu. Odin’s expression was serious again as he intoned. “I accept your apology, Thor. You may take your friends to our Healers. Have them tend your wounds, too. I would have a word with you first, though.” Thor stepped close and the two men had a whispered conversation. Odin stepped back from Thor. “I know what to do. The honor of Asgard and its throne must be upheld.”

Thor nodded and bowed his head again as he gestured to the Yinsen drone to follow him. The Warriors Three remained kneeling until Odin gave them permission to rise. He stepped towards Balder and gave orders. A legion of Odin’s warriors joined him and traveled the Bifrost to the outer moons of Niflheim.

Fandral gallantly bowed as he swept from Odin’s presence and sped to Thor’s side. When he reached Thor, he offered. “I’ll take the Captain, Thor. Stark needs your protection more… and I owe the Captain my life and other debts.” He looked Steve in the eye, eager to smooth things between them.

“Some might think you hedge your bets, given his and my new bond.” Thor gave Fandral a knowing look.

Fandral laughed. “That, too! The politics of power have ever been complex and worthy of my attention.” He took Steve’s weight against his shoulder and side while Thor moved to take Tony from the Yinsen drone. Thor glanced behind them, a cautious gleam in his eyes as Odin and his legion disappeared.

Steve gasped, hating the weakness he felt and wondering why Fandral thought they needed protection. “It’s pretty simple to me. You either show people proper respect or you don’t.” Tony was so weary that he sounded almost drunk as he muttered warnings about Steve and righteousness.

“I respect your lady, sir. I apologize for the offense I have given you by coveting that which is not mine.” Fandral bowed his head.

Steve protested. “I don’t own Darcy, but I think of her as my partner, my mate.” They entered a dark room with tables, unfamiliar equipment, and bathing pools.
“She claims you as her mate. When I offered to soothe her tension, she chided me roundly, telling me she loves you and only wants my friendship,” Fandral assured him.

Steve pulled back and growled. “Soothe her tension?” Thor tightened his grip on Mjolnir. Across the room, Tony choked on laughter and began to cough.

Fandral led Steve to lean against a healing diagnostic bed. “Please forgive my impertinence. I have apologized to the lady and now to you. Here we are, Sir. Is there any way I can be of service? Can I help you with your armor?”

Steve removed the metal gloves and the suit helmet, hating the weak trembling now visible in his hands. “I don’t know if it can ever get clean again. Please, leave me. Coming out of this thing is gonna get ugly.” He looked down, disgusted. He ran a hand through his long, sticky hair and felt of the beard that had grown over the past weeks.

Fandral gestured to a pair of healers. “I will step to the far side of the room and allow these good people to assist you, for your dignity’s sake. But I wish to stay close. Your mate accepted my offer of friendship and protection. I would be remiss in my duty to her if I did not extend that protection to you, and thus protect her heart. I am many things, but I am never remiss in my duty.”

Steve nodded stiffly, grateful that Fandral had protected Darcy and the others in the safe room from Hydra. He wasn’t sure what caused Thor to be so tense, but he knew that something was amiss and didn’t wish to slow their return to Earth for even a moment. He let the healers approach, apologized for his filthy condition, and urged Tony to work quickly, too. It was a relief to remove the flight suits and the clothes they’d worn underneath for the past month. They both exclaimed as they savored warmth, and as they bathed. Steve forced himself to move fast even when the heat of the water was almost painful on his icy skin. Tony protested when Thor urged him to finish bathing and dry off. Steve did not. The healers applied salves to his sores and cuts, marveling at the way his body responded to the assistance. He turned to Thor and as subtly as he could, used Sign Language to ask Thor what the threat was. While he waited for a reply, he donned robes the healers offered him.

Thor’s signed reply was simple. ‘Odin is Loki.’

Steve blinked hard, and then barked at Tony. “Stark! Shut your trap and move it! I want to go home.”

Tony flipped Steve the bird, but paused when he saw Steve use Sign Language to spell the word ‘Loki.’ He shut his mouth, grim and serious while the healers worked on his wounds.

Guards entered and bowed. “Odin will see you now, Thor.” Odin approached them, his walk regal and relaxed. Steve didn’t react, his gaze locked on Thor. Tony’s expression shifted.

Thor smiled broadly. “I am honored!” He gestured to the healing diagnostic table. “Please, friends. The healers of Asgard will help you now. Trust me.” Steve nodded once and complied. Tony was dressed by this time, agitated as he followed Thor’s instructions. Both Avengers lay on the tables, feeling helpless.

Thor smiled broadly. “I am honored!” He gestured to the healing diagnostic table. “Please, friends. The healers of Asgard will help you now. Trust me.” Steve nodded once and complied. Tony was dressed by this time, agitated as he followed Thor’s instructions. Both Avengers lay on the tables, feeling helpless.

Steve and Tony watched the healers manipulate energy to ease minor wounds, and cleanse their blood and bone marrow of harmful radiation. They had both lost weight, and were unkempt and ill, but would recover from their current poor health with time, rest, and good nutrition. The worst of the harm to them was easily corrected by the Asgardians. Both were noted to be tense, with rapid heart rates... as though ready to jump into battle. Odin’s eyes gleamed with amusement as he heard that.
Thor again conferred with Odin. He took a knee and spoke loudly. “Thanks to you, Allfather. I know that you disapprove of many of my choices, but the love you spare me by reprimanding the enemy forces that attacked us is full felt.”

Odin nodded majestically. “Odin cannot have others thinking to challenge the might of Asgard, Thor, as we have discussed. The destruction of the enemy force that troubled you today should remind lesser beings of that fact. I wish that he who sent them had been present to suffer the consequences, as well. The creatures attempted to send information elsewhere. I prevented their effort and my warriors destroyed them.” His expression was a mixture of royal pride and mischievous malice as he saw the tension in Steve and Tony as they looked at him. He turned and left them. Over his shoulder he jibed, mocking. “I think I’ll have a drink now.” Tony winced as he glanced at Steve.

Thor let out a heavy sigh and spoke to the healers, allowing them to tend his wounds. He was glad to hear a good report on his friends and their recovery prospects. As he neared Steve’s diagnostic table, Steve stared at him, almost fearful. Thor tried to look reassuring. Steve swallowed hard and asked plainly. “Does Darcy still wear the heart necklace I gave her?”

Thor put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “She wears your Infinity necklace, Brother. Her heart is yours forever, and she urged me to reassure you that ‘it is NOT too good to be true’, should you doubt your eyes. Fear not. I am myself, and you are safe. You will be home with her again, soon.”

Tony laid his head back. “Good thinking, old man. I feel like shit and can’t tell which way is up. It’d suck if Thor was an illusion.”

Thor smiled easily. “May we escort you home now, friend Stark? Brother?”

Volstagg spoke up. “I hope no one would prefer living as you were. Niflheim is the coldest hole of them all. Nothing good to eat there…”

“It’s rather lacking in fair companionship, as well, though not foes. Between your enemies, the wolves, and the dragon…” Fandral grinned, a look simultaneously charming and dangerous.

Tony looked at Steve, dazed. “It was really a dragon! I didn’t know Ice Smaug was a dragon! I was joking. Did you know it was a dragon?” Steve shook his head, chuckling weakly. Tony called out. “Enough ice moon nostalgia, then. Talk later. Get us the fuck home, NOW.”

“You heard him. We want to go home.” Steve sat up, his movements slow, determined, and deliberate.

Thor was pleased. “Lady Natasha asked for me to take you to the new base, Upstate. We hope to keep your return a secret until you recover from your ordeal. Medical personnel, chefs, and your mates and best friends will greet you there.”

Steve stood, frowning as Fandral returned to his side to offer support that Steve hated to need. “Sounds like Heaven… though I want Darcy more than anything else.” His voice cracked on her name. He moved slowly, each step an effort.

Tony chuckled as the healers helped him to stand. “Until today, you’ve hardly said her name… while awake, at least… in a week!” He rolled his eyes.

Steve nodded automatically to Tony and turned to Thor. “Everything okay back home when you left, Thor?” His face was pale. He watched Volstagg lift a bag heavy with the pieces of their three armored suits.
Tony let Thor support his weight on one side and the Yinsen drone help him on the other. “Pepper. Is she pissed? She sounded pretty pissed in some of the messages I got to read from her.” Steve looked at Tony with concern, realizing he’d hardly given Tony a thought once he had messages from the others.

Thor smiled sadly. “Nay! Your ladies have missed you both most grievously. They joyously anticipate your return. They have worked together well to determine your whereabouts and raise each other’s spirits. Colonel Rhodes and JARVIS have looked after Lady Pepper. My Jane has returned years of nurturing care she owed the Lady Darcy, and forced her to take meals and look after herself. It is good practice. As you realized, Captain, my Jane is to bear our child. That news that has encouraged us in the midst of the grief of missing you both.”

Tony looked up at Thor, his smile bright and openly happy. “That’s outstanding, Thor. Congratulations! Steve told me, of course. He had to help me understand why he’s such a self-sacrificing dumbass. Has Pepper ordered extra rooms to be added to your guest house Upstate? We need to get ready for your demi-demi-god or goddess slash science-genius baby! Imagine all that your kid'll be and do!”


They reached the observatory. Balder greeted them again, and looked to Thor for instructions. Thor gave him coordinates. “Send us home now, Balder.”

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After Thor left them, the others went to work. Pepper called on trusted staff from the Healing Ward and Security to prepare the residential and medical care areas needed at the Upstate base. Pepper called in a chef. She ordered comfort foods- good, crusty breads, hearty pasta and potato dishes, broths, vegetable soup, and fresh fruits. They needed to be available at a moment’s notice.

Betty went to her lab to review the medical data and radiation levels. Jane and Erik kept an eye on the activity of energy signatures in Niflheim. Natasha and Hawkeye met with the SI Tower Security staff and put the Tower on pre-lock down status, ready in case of attack.

Darcy went to their apartment and got Bucky to pack Steve’s clothes. She ordered chocolate peanut butter pies from the Southern bakery Steve loved; packed his art supplies, pillow, and favorite blanket; and gathered items of her own. She changed, wondering what outfit most said ‘Hey! I’m glad you’re not dead. I love you. Let’s get married and make babies’. She chose an old-fashioned, flowing tan dress with white polka dots, and sexy high-heeled shoes. She put her hair up hastily, and applied natural-looking makeup. Bucky looked her over when she came out of the bathroom and tweaked a button undone to show a bit more cleavage. She swatted at him, laughing. “Naughty!” But, she didn’t refasten the button. For the first time since Steve had disappeared, she opened the drawer of his bedside table. She pulled out a small blue Tiffany’s ring box and shoved it in her purse alongside the box of condoms that Betty had made for them.

Bucky stared. Darcy shrugged. “Don’t look at me like that! I haven’t peeked. I just guessed that it must be there. I DID peek at his playlist to me.” Bucky stopped packing long enough to pull Darcy in for an intense hug.

The moment she stopped moving, Darcy’s tears flowed again. She gasped. “One way or another, a month of not-knowing ends tonight. Either Thor will be too late and Hydra killed them… or took them prisoner… or, they’ll come home.” She cried, her tears wetting the front of his shirt.

“Steve won’t let them take him prisoner. He knows he’d be too good of a weapon for
them,” Bucky rasped.

Darcy’s sobbing worsened. “I know. So, he’s either dead, or on his way back to me. It’s all or nothing…”

Bucky grabbed the Stevie bear and put it in her arms. “He’s on his way back.”

“I know. But, if it goes bad, it’ll about kill me.” She quieted and hugged the bear with desperate urgency.

Bucky nodded. “Me, too.” She offered him the bear, teasing through her tears. Bucky chuckled. “No, thanks, Doll. You hang on to that. I’m gonna hang onto the notion that all is well.” He sent the packed bags out with Security officers. “If I need to get more stuff, I will. I’ll probably commute back and forth some in the coming weeks.”

Darcy wiped her eyes and looked around the apartment. “I think that’s everything. Let’s go.”

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It was a short flight. Rhodey was an excellent pilot. As they disembarked, Pepper grabbed Darcy’s hand. “They’re gonna be here with us, soon!” The night was balmy. Pepper’s hand was warm, and she was kind enough not to comment on how cold Darcy’s was.

“I bet they’re pretty tired of each other!” Darcy squeezed Pepper’s hand and forced a giggle.

Pepper smirked. “You mean that Steve’s sick of Tony.” Bruce laughed, nodding. Seeing Pepper looking so light and carefree left Darcy self-critical, wondering why she was such a worrier. Her tension continued to mount as she wondered which way the night would end. She was quiet during the ride from the airstrip to the manor.

Darcy went to the guest house to unpack and freshen up. She hung Steve’s shirts in the closet alongside her shirts and dresses, and put their other clothes in drawers. She put the ring box in Steve’s nightstand drawer. She turned on the gas fire so that it would be warm when they came in for the night, or if she returned alone. She gave up on pretense and carried the Stevie bear with her as she drove the golf cart back to the manor. Bucky’s eyes crinkled with understanding affection when he saw the bear in her arms again. He kissed her cheek and tried to reassure her that all would be well.

The five of them gathered on the back patio of the manor house. The staff lit torches and candles, turned on music, and set out a spread of food and drink. Bucky and Rhodey made a good fire in the stone fireplace. There were pitchers of water, fruit drinks, sangria, and Tony’s favorite coffee. Bruce set his medical bag next to a chair and had some tea. They sat in front of the fire, sipping their drinks.

Darcy was too anxious to eat or make small talk, so she read messages on her phone while practically strangling the Stevie bear from anxiety. The others quieted and read, too. Every now and then, one of them would poke another. ‘Did you see the blob snake things?’ or ‘Can you believe THAT?’ Bucky rolled his eyes more than once, muttering the word ‘punk’ under his breath. Pepper and Rhodey had their heads together as they smiled and shared things Tony had sent them. Bruce burst out laughing several times, but refused to explain.

Darcy blushed with heated interest while skimming some of Steve’s fantasies before deciding to save them to read in private. Her temper flared as she read through messages from his week of self-reccrimination. She scoffed at his assertions that she’d be better off with someone who didn’t put
her through sacrificial trauma. The bleakness that seeped into Steve’s words, despite his best
efforts, left her burning with the need to hold him close and comfort him. Again and again, she
read how much faith he had in their love.

She stared out into the grassy field, willing a flash of Bifrost light to appear.

Finally, it did.

The blinding flash of light faded to the darkness of night, leaving a small group of people standing
in the grass atop the burnt Bifrost emblem.

Darcy jumped up from her seat and dropped her bear, hardly able to hear anything over the beat of
her own heart. The noise that Pepper made, a sort of agonized moan at odds with how composed
she’d seemed, was surprising. But Darcy’s attention was focused in the field. She searched among
the figures for Steve. For a second, she thought he wasn’t there. But, then she saw his eyes, as
shadowed with fatigue and loneliness as her own. She realized that the blue-robed, bearded, long-
haired man leaning against Thor for support was her love. She was dizzy with relief. Her heart
nearly pounded out of her chest as she ran to him. She moved into his arms and pressed against him
in a way that made her feel as necessary to him as air.

He lay his head down against hers and breathed her in, rasping. “Sweetheart!” Tears wet Darcy’s
cheeks as their lips met. His lips were dry and cracked, and his beard tickled, but she didn’t care.
Tenderness flowed through her as he cupped her jaw with his hand and murmured, “I love you,
Darcy. You’re even more beautiful than in my dreams.” She cried again, but with joy, as she
murmured words of love back to him.

There was a jumble of voices. JARVIS was greeting Tony and Steve via the Yinsen drone, as
emotional sounding as anyone had ever heard the AI. The Yinsen drone bumped against Darcy as
Tony sagged against it and slid almost to the ground before Rhodey caught him. Tony moaned as
he stared at Pepper and blinked back tears. Pepper fell to her knees by Tony and pulled him close,
her tone fierce. “It’s okay, Tony. You’re back where you belong. It’s okay! I’ve got you.” Bruce
knelt by Tony and spoke to him in a low, gentle tone.

Thor’s voice boomed in the night. “Asgard’s healers accomplished much. They healed the worst of
our friends’ energy sickness, but both of them suffer from the differences in gravity and the air, as
well as hunger and fatigue.” He gestured to his companions. “Fandral, assist the Captain. Volstagg,
help friend Stark. Fandral and Volstagg will stay here to assist your security forces after I return to
my Jane’s side tonight, good friends.” Volstagg set down a large, heavy bag.

Tony gasped and pointed. “Fire! I’m so tired of cold, so fuckin’ DONE with it.” Rhodey and
Volstagg each took him by an arm and helped him stagger to the bench hearth by the crackling fire.
Rhodey added some wood and stoked the flames. Tony’s teeth chattered as he held his hands out to
the heat. Bruce went to work. He took blood and tissue samples and ran a Geiger counter over his
friend, while Rhodey told bad jokes to help Tony laugh and regain his equilibrium.

Steve choked a laugh. “Tony’s stealing my lines. I’m tired of being cold, too.” He gave Fandral a
hard look and grudgingly accepted his assistance, struggling to do as much as possible for himself.
Bucky hovered close, staring at Steve gratefully and wiping tears from his cheeks.

Fandral nodded to Darcy, his demeanor stiff. “Lady Darcy, it is an honor to see you again. Your
esteemed mate saved my life and demonstrated… worthiness… as a warrior and leader that I did
not anticipate.” Darcy nodded, puzzled by Fandral’s manner and wondering what had happened.
between him and Steve. Bucky laughed as he heard the total lack of flirtation in Fandral’s greeting to Darcy in Steve’s presence.

Darcy saw Thor shoot Fandral a warning look, and wondered what it meant. Thor glanced around at the staff waiting nearby to offer assistance, and she understood that there was a need for discretion.

Bucky beamed with pride in his friend. “Yeah. He does that. He’s full of surprises.” Steve reached for Bucky and pulled him in for a warm embrace. Bucky laughed again. “You guys look like death warmed over. Getting marooned doesn’t agree with you, Punk!”

Steve sighed. “Nothin’ warm about it. Just be glad we got to bathe before coming here!”

Bucky nodded. “A month without? Rank! You must’ve been in a pretty bad way.”

Steve looked from Bucky to Darcy, his eyes soft and happy. “Better now.” He joined Tony on the stone hearth bench. “Move over, Tony. Let me in by the fire.” He nodded permission for Bruce to get a sample of his blood and tissue, too. He was relieved to see the safe reading on the Geiger counter. “Thanks for getting Darcy to safety that day that Hydra attacked with the robots.” He turned to Fandral and nodded thanks to him, as well. Bucky shrugged off Steve’s thanks.

Fandral helped Steve get situated and backed away. “I am ever glad to be of help. Let me know if you need further assistance, Captain.” He was as deferential to Steve as he was to Thor.

Fandral’s manner struck Darcy forcefully. She recalled the words Fandral had used since arriving and her mouth dropped open. “Oh! Worthy!” She turned to Thor, panicking. “He doesn’t have to go anywhere because he can do that, does he?” Her gaze dropped to the hammer hanging from Thor’s hand. Bruce stopped what he was doing and looked up at Steve, gaping.

Bucky startled, looked from her to Thor, and then at the sheepish look on Steve’s face. He shook his head. “I swear, Punk! You’re a menace.”

Thor let out a huff of bemused resignation, touched Darcy’s cheek with admiring affection, and whispered to her. “Nay, my perceptive sister. It will not take him from you. The throne of Asgard is crowded enough.” He noticed that Steve seemed taken aback. “Why so surprised, Steven? Your mate’s faith in you is infinite, and your friend’s admiration of you has never known boundary. Your worthiness surprises none but you.”

Pepper brought each man a cup of hot coffee and set a dish of grapes between them. Tony grinned slyly, “Not gonna peel ‘em and feed ‘em to me?” He winked at Darcy and muttered an affectionate greeting to her as she leaned in and hugged him. Steve popped a few grapes into his mouth and moaned appreciatively as he savored good flavor again for the first time. He held the coffee cup in his hands, warming them against it. Darcy noticed that he was shaking.

Pepper winked. “Maybe later… if you’re good.” She turned as Happy arrived, carrying a bag from Burger King and crying like a baby. “Cheeseburger?”

Tony moaned and snatched the bag. “Goddess! You’re a goddess, Pep!” Happy sobbed openly and threw himself on Tony, nearly knocking him over.

“I’m a goddess, too. I brought chocolate peanut butter pie.” Darcy put a reassuring hand on Steve’s shoulder.

He put his hand over hers, marveling at the soft warmth of her skin and how lovely she looked in
the warm glow of firelight. “I know you’re divine. There are words floating around in my brain right now about worshiping you, but I’m too tired to smooth them out.”

“I can work with that.” Darcy grinned.

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After a time of talking and eating, the rescued men were more than ready to call it a night. Fandral rode to the cottage with Steve and Darcy, amused by the cart. He helped Steve into the house, bid them good night, and left.

The silence felt good. Everything did. Darcy had learned that she could live without Steve, but she didn’t want to.

He sat at the edge of the bed and stared at her. “I like your dress. My beautiful Sweetheart.” His gaze raked over her hungrily, despite his obvious exhaustion. “Are you SURE that it’s not too good to be true?” He yawned, fading fast.

She walked closer, so that she stood between his legs and could wrap her arms around him. He wrapped his arms around her, too, and they held each other close. She savored the feel of his body against hers. His beard tickled her face and she let out a choked giggle that caused him to frown. She sighed. “It’s always felt too good to be true, ever since I saw you for the first time. I spent most of the past month wishing that my dreams were true, instead of the reality of you being gone. So, am I sure? No. I just know that I love you, and I’m glad you’re home.” She brushed her cheek against his beard and giggled again, preoccupied with it. It was a shade darker than his hair.

“I hated to hurt you. I’m so sorry.” He tightened his grip on her.

She leaned her face down into his chest, so her words were muffled. “If you try to break up with me now…”

“I can’t. I’m too selfish.” He let out a despairing chuckle.

She snorted with disbelief. “You’re gonna have to come up with a better line than that, Hon. You’re Universally regarded as the most unselfish person in existence. Apparently, even Thor’s hammer admires your selflessness !”

“Don’t talk that way, Sweetheart. I think the hammer only let me lift it since I needed to help Thor. I’m selfish where you’re concerned. I can’t give you a chance to be with someone less likely to break your heart. I need you too much.” He sighed.

She let out a melodramatic cry. “Oh, noooo! Whatever shall I do? The man I love needs me! How horrible!” She pulled back and looked at him piercingly. “This is so weird. The beard changes your appearance, makes you look a little older. It’s almost easier to talk to you without looking at it!”

He smiled ruefully, and she smiled back. “That’s better. Your smile is still the same.” She touched his beard, trying to get used to it.

“I can shave it now, if you want.” He stroked the beard thoughtfully.

She shook her head. “You need sleep too much. I think that would take time and energy that you don’t have to spare yet.”

His eyes drooped and he nodded. “You’re right. But, I would, if you hate it.”
She shook her head. “I don’t hate it. It’s just… different.”

He looked at his pillow, longing in his eyes. “I need to sleep, but I want to shower first. I rushed through the bath on Asgard. There were half a dozen people in the room and I was worried about Loki.” He sighed as he stood. “I’ll be right back.” He had to lean against the wall for support as he made his way.

She got ready for bed in the second bathroom, giving Steve privacy and the chance to get clean. She couldn’t begin to imagine how it would feel to not be able to shower for a month. She chuckled to herself as she heard him using her hair dryer, something he’d never needed before. He returned wearing sweat pants and an Under Armour shirt. His exposed skin was still pink from showering under the hottest setting. As he approached the bed, she chuckled. “So… was the space Snuggie comfortable?”

He snorted. “It felt strange, like I was wearing a bath robe in public.”

“Good color on you…” She shrugged.

He climbed under the covers and pulled up all the blankets, sighing with exhaustion. Darcy chuckled. “You’re making me sweat without even trying.” She snuggled against him.

A shadow of a grin passed over his face. “Sorry. I can’t get warm. The cold feels like it’s in my bones.” He promised. “I’ll put in that effort as soon as I can, my love. God knows that I want…” He groaned and wrapped his arms around her.

She urged. “Sh! Lay on your tummy. I’ll rub your back. I’m not as good as you, but maybe friction will help you warm up.”

Steve rolled over and got comfortable, grunting with pleasure as she pushed long hair out of her way and kissed the back of his neck. “Oh, my God! A bed is good, marshmallow or no.” He moaned as she began to rub the muscles in his back. “You’re good, too. That’s fantastic. I’ll try not to whimper.”

“I like when you whimper for me…” Darcy giggled.

His voice was muffled by the pillow. “Later. I promise excessive whimpering. I hate to wait any more, but I’m beyond tired now…”

She continued massaging him. “So, sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up. I may be zombified because I’m scared if I go to sleep you’ll disappear again, but I’ll be here.”

Steve murmured. “Rest up, Sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere, and you’re gonna need your strength once I have mine back.”

She continued rubbing his back, even after his breathing evened out and she knew he was asleep. It felt good to touch him; it reassured her that he was really there. After she stopped massaging his back, she brushed hair back and softly kissed his face all over, then his lips. She noticed that they were smoother, healing. The sound of his breathing lulled her. She moved back and stared into his face, tracing the familiar lines beneath the beard. She giggled to herself. “Lashes like My Little Pony. I’d know those lashes anywhere, even on you when you’re all beardy! Oh! I love you so much!” He smiled in sleep. She caressed his face more, running her fingers over the skin and the beard, down his neck. She hoped the touches would trail into his dreams. She gripped the sleeve of his shirt and wrapped one of her legs over his, as if to pin him in place by her. Darcy fell asleep staring at Steve, willing him to stay with her, to never leave again.
Darcy felt a stab of fear as she woke. But, when she opened her eyes, Steve was still sleeping by her side. Her breathing eased. She wiped away tears of relief that reality was good again. She pressed closer to him. Want curled through her so heatedly that she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. One of her hands was on Steve’s chest. She tightened it against his muscles, rubbing firmly before she could stop herself. She closed her eyes and moaned, desperate for his touch and to love him. She knew he needed to rest and heal, though, so she forced herself to stay still and not disturb Steve. Memories of the last time they’d been in this bed together flashed through her mind and she groaned, desperately ready to make love with him again. She squirmed, despite her best effort.

Steve stirred, but stayed asleep. He curled against her, holding her around the middle like a teddy bear and laying his head against her stomach and chest. She felt a pang as she wondered where her Stevie bear was. She eased away from Steve, hoping he would sleep for a long time.

She showered and dressed, putting on yoga pants and a tunic top. She had tea and toast to hold her until he woke. Judging from the way he’d eaten the previous night, breakfast would be a feast. She moved out to the porch and sat in a rocking chair, reading messages from Steve on her phone. It would take time to read everything he’d written to her in a month’s time. She heard a cart, looked up, and waved to Bruce as he approached.

He had his medical bag. She blanched, anxious. “Everything okay?”

He nodded, shushing her worries. “There’s no problem. I wanted to check in before I head back to the City. Steve sleep well?”

Darcy let out a tense breath. “Yeah. He’s still asleep, or was when I came out.” She looked around awkwardly. “Want some tea? I can check and see if he’s up.”

Bruce followed her inside the guest house. “Darcy… you’re coming off a lot of tension. If he’s still asleep, do you want to practice some stretches?”

Darcy nodded. She peeked into the bedroom. Steve was still sleeping. She returned. “Was Tony actually up? Seems like he’d need more rest than Steve…”

Bruce sighed. “Tony just got to sleep a few hours ago. He needed fluids, oxygen, and more medications. He was pretty ill despite all that the healers did for them on Asgard. His body is that of a man in his 40’s, older than Steve’s. Though he wore two protective suits, he was hit harder by the ordeal than Steve, and requires more medical intervention. Natural healing from sleep is exactly what Steve needs most. How long has he been asleep?” Bruce sat on the floor and took initial seat and began to breathe easily, in a slow rhythm.

Darcy looked at her watch. “He’s been down over ten hours, so far. He was wiped out last night. He only took time enough to shower before he went to sleep.” She sat like Bruce and relaxed her breathing to match his, then slowly stretched, working her way through all of her muscle groups.

Bruce smiled. “That’s great. He’ll be much more himself today. His serum is amazing. Dr. Erskine should have received a Nobel prize for his work.” Darcy nodded and copied a new stretch that Bruce demonstrated. After that, Bruce held out a hand to her. “Please, Darcy. Let me hug you. You look like you need it.”

She sighed as Bruce wrapped his arms around her. She stayed in her friend’s embrace for a long time, only moving away when there was a knock at the door. She opened the door to find Bucky on
the porch, Stevie bear in one hand. She laughed and took the bear and gave it a hug. “Thank you. Good morning, Bucky! Come on in.”

He pulled his other hand out from behind his back. “One Hazlenut-Mocha latte for the lady!” She kissed Bucky’s cheek, and then took the drink and moaned appreciatively as she had a first sip.

She heard noises in the other room and groaned. “You guys! You woke him!”

Steve came out, wiping tooth paste from the corner of his mouth. “Mornin’, Jerk. I heard you out here seducing my girl with her favorite drink. Thought I’d better get up and stop you.” He padded over to Darcy and hugged her tight against him. He kissed her eagerly. She bit back a moan and struggled to keep her greeting decent. Her hunger for him was apparent, though. She held his hand in hers and stroked his hand furtively.

Bucky laughed. “Fandral tried lattes. Takes more than that.” He smiled, happy to see his friends back together and so much happier as a result.

Steve groaned and buried his head against Darcy’s neck, kissing the soft skin there. She giggled as the beard tickled her. He groaned again. “I’ve gotta shave this thing. Giggles are not what I’m going for.”

She pulled away, smiling. “Let me enjoy my latte. You have guests.” She squinted at him searchingly again, trying to see him past the changes in his appearance.

Steve turned to Bruce and shook his hand. Bruce smiled. “Good to see you up and about.”

Steve nodded. “Thanks for coming to see me. How’s Tony?”

Bruce shared all he’d already told Darcy. He asked for a few minutes alone with Steve to check his vitals, etc. They went into the other room and closed the door. Bucky was sending text messages. Darcy sat by him on the sofa, savored her drink, and waited for him to finish. He grinned. “The chef’s gonna bring down a bunch of breakfast foods. You could be cookin’ all day if you tried to fill the punk up.”

“So, you’re staying for breakfast, too, I hope.” Darcy sipped her latte.

He nodded. “After that, I’ll head back with Bruce. Rhodey’s staying here. Tony’s gonna be bedridden for a few days and Pepper needs backup. You can handle Punk on your own.” He winked at her. Darcy chuckled and sighed, nodding.

Bucky looked at the bedroom door furtively. His expression was curious. “If the beard bothers you, why don’t you just say so?” She shrugged and sipped her drink again; unsure if that was the case. Bucky shook his head at her. He continued, mouth twitching towards a grin. “By the way, I have a message for you from Natasha.”

Darcy was puzzled by his silly smile until he grabbed a banana off the counter and pulled a foil packet out of his pocket. She yelped. “Holy shit, Bucky! You’re NOT about to do what I think you are!” He laughed at her. She stared, eyes wide as saucers as Bucky demonstrated proper condom application, first with his hands and then with his teeth. He winked at her and offered her the banana and condoms for her to try. Self-conscious, she imitated his motions, both ways. He gave her an approving thumbs-up. She shook her head, blushing.

There was a knock at the outside door. Darcy hid the banana in the sofa cushions. Bucky jumped up and answered the door, letting the chef and her staff in with dish after dish of breakfast foods. He filled a plate and sat down at the table. Darcy left the bear on the sofa and joined him. After a
Steve and Bruce joined them. Steve came up behind Darcy and kissed her cheek, lingering. She gasped with surprised delight as she felt a smooth cheek against her own. She looked up and smiled brilliantly. “There’s the face I love!” He was clean shaven and had trimmed his hair, a rough cut but much improved.

Steve returned her smile. “And there’s the smile I missed most.” He filled a plate with food, nibbling as he went. Darcy continued to stare at him, giddy to see him look like himself again.

Bucky nodded. “You’re more like ‘you’ now. Good thing. Darcy thinks she’s ‘Steve-sexual’ only, and that’s why she doesn’t want anyone else.”

Steve grinned at Bucky, one brow raised. “So I read. It sounds fine to me, so long nothing stops her from wanting me.” He nodded to Bruce and pointed to his hair. “Thanks for the help getting the back even.” He poured himself a glass of juice and downed it in one gulp, then poured another. He thought he could never get enough of good flavors again.

Darcy whispered to Steve. “The beard didn’t stop me from wanting you.” He turned quickly to her and met her intent gaze, his eyes wide and his smile beautiful.

Bruce got a plate of food and sat down with them. As he ate, he watched Steve. “Your appetite is strong. That’s good.”

Steve glanced at Darcy with obvious want, and then returned to eating his food. “Yep.”

When they were done eating, Bruce and Bucky gave Steve and Darcy hugs and wished them a good day.

Steve sat on the sofa, groaning wearily as he shifted the stuffed bear aside. “I can’t believe I’m tired again already. I’ll be glad when I’m at full strength.”

“I’m not picky. You’re here.” Darcy sat next to him and snuggled close against his chest, leaning against him so she heard the beating of his heart.

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips, softly at first and then with growing passion. She moaned, and kissed him again and again, her hunger for him fiery. She caressed his smooth cheeks, his strong shoulders, and down his body. Tears pricked her eyes as she savored the familiar feel of him. He shifted her so that she was straddling his lap. They enjoyed each other with ever-increasing delight. She desired him so much that she felt near to frenzy.

She felt his brow furrow, so she pulled back to see what puzzled him. He held up the condom-covered banana. Darcy began to giggle as Steve’s expression shifted. She put a finger against his lips. “Just be happy I know how to put one on now. They’re special, a custom gift from Betty, made for us. I have a bunch in my bedside table here. I made sure to bring the things that ought to be in our respective bedside tables.” He stilled. She dodged his curious gaze, blushing.

He sighed and kissed her again, murmuring how much he loved her. He stood, lifting her against him as she kissed him again. He walked to the bed and laid her on the covers and lay next to her. Their kisses were frantic and hungry, needful. Darcy moaned. “Please! Oh! Need you so much, Steve!” They touched and caressed each other urgently, both shuddering with want. They removed clothing in a hurry. When they finally pressed skin to skin, both whimpered with pleasure.

The first time they came together again was all trembling, desperate need. She cried with broken relief. He struggled not to hold her too tightly. The next hours merely whet their appetite for one another. It only seemed to grow in intensity. They shared a naked picnic lunch on a blanket on the
living room floor in front of the fire. They laughed with delight as they held each other, touched, and kissed again and again between bites of food. They spent time in the hot tub and the bath. He snacked often, savoring the different flavors and textures more than ever before. They rested tangled together. They made love with slow gentleness and with urgent roughness.

“I’ve gone from hell to heaven in the space of a day!” As they drifted off to sleep together that night, Steve shook his head in wonder.

Darcy pulled him closer. “Welcome home, my love.”

_to be continued_...
Beginnings and Endings. Endings and Beginnings.

Chapter Summary

Steve and Tony heal. Steve and Darcy begin something new. The first age of Hydra comes to an end.

COMPLETE.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has read, left kudos, reblogged story links on tumblr, given this story a link at Fanlore (!), and given comments w/feedback, suggestions, and encouragement!

Special thanks to McGregorsWench for beta services, encouragement, and friendship! You stuck with me for chapter after chapter, as they got longer and longer! THANK YOU!

I have decided to leave the door to this AU open so that I can add missing scenes, one shots, and maybe even a sequel someday.

Again, thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Darcy again startled awake. After a month of waking from dreams of Steve only to find herself alone, she was almost afraid to believe that he was home with her again. After they made love and ate breakfast, Steve admitted he needed to visit Tony and see how his friend was doing. Darcy understood that when he said he needed to see Tony, he meant it on a deep level now. They were bound together by their shared experience, and their friendship would never be the same.

Darcy could feel Steve tensing beside her as they approached the manor together on foot. She stopped walking and pivoted towards him, crunching gravel underfoot. “What is it? What’s bothering you, Hon?”

That he didn’t turn to look at her spoke volumes. “You’re about to gain a new understanding of the serum.”

Darcy shifted so that she stood in front of him, and reached up to cup her hand at the back of his neck. “Look at me.” He slowly lowered his head and met her insistent gaze. She leaned in to kiss his lips, reassuring. “I love you, Steve. You’re the man I love. You’re still human. You were crazy and brave enough to let Dr. Erskine and Tony’s dad experiment on you, so you’re definitely not perfect.” His lips twitched, and she grinned. “Their experiment worked. It made you big and strong. It helps you heal. That’s not something that should make you feel guilty.” She scowled at him. “Goodness knows that you’ve used what they did to help people!”
His arms tightened around her. “I love you.” He let out a tense breath.

She smiled. “I love you, too!” She kissed him again, with more reassurance. Then, she took his hand and led him up the path into the manor.

Rhodey heard footsteps and came out of the kitchen, finishing a breakfast sandwich. He blinked when he saw them. “Oh! Hey. You here to check on Tony?” He looked Steve up and down, stunned. He raised his brows and shook his head. Then, he glanced at Darcy and did a double take as he saw the protective anger in her face. Rhodey swallowed hard and nodded to her once, his expression placating. “O….kay. Let me take you to his room. I think he’s missed you, Cap.”

Steve gave Darcy’s hand a squeeze. Rhodey’s reaction to her amused him and eased his tension some.

Rhodey didn’t lead them upstairs to Tony and Pepper’s suite. He led them down the hallway to a guest room refitted as a sort of personal Healing Ward. They heard the sounds of monitors and machines. Darcy’s grip on Steve tightened.

Pepper stepped out into the hall. “Hi! JARVIS told us you were here.”

Darcy could see strain in Pepper’s face, so she pulled her friend into a warm embrace. Steve was pleased to see the two women support each other, and the way that Pepper relaxed as Darcy offered comfort. Darcy spoke at a whisper. “You okay?”

Pepper nodded and wiped tears from her eyes, sniffed once, and straightened to her full height. “Of course! I hate to see him hurting, but I’m just so glad to have him home.” She looked up at Steve. “Thank you, Steve.”

Steve shook his head. “There’s nothing to thank me for.”

Pepper looked down, amused. “I’ve heard again and again how bad the wolf meat was. But, you hunted and skinned the beasts, and made sure Tony ate for at least a week after he could be of much help. You melted and filtered the water. You kept him alive. So, thank you.”

Rhodey chimed in, agreeing with Pepper’s assessment. He and Pepper were both aware by now that Tony had given up and accepted death, that they’d come close to losing him. They exchanged a glance that was full of feeling.

Steve looked from one to the other. “You’re welcome. It was the least I could do. He saved my life. Without his help and the ‘Space Cap’ suit, I’d be dead.” Darcy shuddered. He squeezed her hand.

Tony’s voice was weak, rough, and thin. “Yes, you would, you dumbass!” They saw a bandage-covered arm waving at them as they entered the room. Rhodey chuckled and stood just inside the door to the room, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. He focused on his friend, watching for signs of improvement or decline.

Steve grinned and moved towards the bed. “Good morning to you, too, Tony!” The others saw more respectful affection in Steve’s look to Tony than had ever been there before. Pepper, the one Tony talked to in the dark of night, nearly cried with pleasure to see that Steve now felt as much friendship for Tony as Tony did for him.

Tony got a good look at Steve. “Bastard! I hate you so much.” Rhodey chuckled and looked down. Pepper kept her expression neutral.
Steve nodded and shrugged, awkward and semi-apologetic. “I know.”

Darcy stepped closer and took Steve’s hand again. “Apparently, you can’t live without him, though, Tony. You’d even fly through a portal to keep him safe.” She blinked back shock as she got a good look at Tony. His skin was covered with patches where his skin was pink as though barely healed, and several wounds had opened again. Some of his hair had fallen out. His coloring under the patches of new skin and re-opened sores was pale and bloodless, almost translucent. Both of his arms were bandaged from above his elbows down to just above his fingers.

Tony grinned as he saw her trying to stifle her reaction. “I look like a vampire about to burst into flames, don’t I?”

Darcy tilted her head and faked a ditzy expression. “But… don’t vampires sparkle?”

Tony laughed, and fell into a fit of coughing. After he recovered, he bit out a reply. “Only terrible vampires sparkle, you little troll. Watch it! I might start to hate you, too. You’re all glow-y with multi-post-coital bliss, rather than the green, green glow of radiation poison.” Mischief sparked in his face. “Speaking of all things coital, I have instructional videos I promised Steve I would share with you.” Steve winced. Rhodey groaned, while Pepper rolled her eyes.

Darcy’s expression blanked at the word ‘instructional’, but then she grimaced with disgust. “Are you talking about your sex tapes? Cuz, ew! I saw part of one of them at friend’s bachelorette party. I haven’t stopped gagging over it since.” She shrugged and smothered a grin as she saw the somewhat incredulous look on Steve’s face. For the umpteenth time since meeting him, she pushed the image of naked-Tony out of her brain.

With difficulty, Tony winked at her. “Well, at least you learned a thing or two.”

Darcy winced. “Yeah... Don’t ever touch anything at your Malibu house!”

Tony sighed. “Ah! ‘Malibu Barbie and the Horny Billionaire’, a classic. It was kind of like that Fifty Shades crap, but with less pretense and full, enthusiastic consent.” Rhodey shrugged and made a face as though he thought that was a fair assessment.

Pepper spoke up, her tone dry. “It was awful. I agree with Darcy. Having that ‘film set’ fall into the sea was one of the better parts of the whole Mandarin situation.” She raised a brow and gave Darcy a no-nonsense look. “For all that I would do for this man; I NEVER set foot in THAT room.”

Tony smiled at Pepper. “If you’d asked, I would have bulldozed that mansion for you, and you know it.”

Her expression softened. “Yes. I do.”

Steve looked over all the medical equipment. “So, you’re still getting oxygen, fluids, and electrolytes. Bruce mentioned anemia. How many transfusions have you had?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Seven units! I can’t get enough of those good blood cells. SOME of us don’t have magical healing powers. Dad liked you best!” Steve stifled a grin at the implication that he and Tony were brothers. Tony groaned. “But, don’t forget pain meds. I like the pain meds. Over twenty days of severe abdominal cramping and that damned non-stop headache left a mark.”

Steve let out a tense breath. “I’m sorry. But, your bone marrow cells are repopulating okay, aren’t they?”

Pepper saw that Tony was tiring, so she answered for him. “They are.” Steve relaxed visibly. She
smiled at him. “Whatever they did on Asgard cleansed the radiation from your bone marrow and blood streams, but Tony’s recovery is going to take weeks. More medical attention from them would have benefited Tony, though what concerned you there might not.” Steve’s jaw tightened. He wasn’t happy that his team was working with someone who’d tried to conquer Earth. And, he didn’t like to remember his and Tony’s helplessness when last in Loki’s presence.

Pepper sighed. “I called NASA. Tony has friends there. A flight surgeon is coming here later today. He’ll help with Tony’s post-radiation recovery, and the gravity and oxygen-related weakness. They call it ‘space sickness’. As to Tony’s skin, it is miles better than it would have been without the energy work and salves they used on Asgard. But, Bruce suggested that we bring in a new engineer and geneticist that Darcy hired on his recommendation, Dr. Helen Cho. She developed a process that creates artificial tissue to bond with the human body. She arrived this morning, and did an initial evaluation. Some of the skin on Tony’s arms, especially at the skin creases, was too damaged to recover. She’s going to replace it!”

Darcy unconsciously ran a hand up Steve’s arm as she joined the conversation. “Bruce urged me to recruit Dr. Cho when I began expanding the medical R&D section. Steve took me to a children’s hospital a while back. We met several kids going through chemo. It made me want to put more Stark money into efforts to help people heal, especially kids. I’m glad she can help you, too.”

Tony rasped, weary. “Good use for my money, Lewis. Good call.”

Darcy let out a shuddering breath, anxious. “Will you recover fully, Tony?”

He side-eyed Pepper. She responded for him. “He’ll need regular cancer screenings, and it will take time. But, yes.” Her look to Tony was filled with love. “He’s exhausted, and recovering from dehydration and malnutrition, too. But, he’ll be up and about, driving us all crazy before you know it.”

Tears came to Darcy’s eyes. “I can’t wait! I missed you, Tony!” She stepped closer to the bed and struggled for words. “Tony…” He met her gaze, and managed a smile. She swallowed hard. “Thank you.” She tried to think of something else to say that could adequately express her feelings, and drew a total blank.

Tony nodded once. “Of course!” There was no bluster, no bragging, no bullshit, just his good core.

Darcy still as he let her see past his laissez-faire, asshole mask to the true Tony. Darcy wiped tears from her cheeks and nodded. “Yeah! Of course…” Her grin was tremulous. She wasn’t sure what caused her to look away from Tony towards the door, but when she did, she noticed Natasha Romanoff standing there. Black Widow’s eyes gleamed with unshed tears. Darcy blinked hard, surprised by the sight of so much emotion from the other woman.

Natasha gave a slight shake of her head, forbidding Darcy to expose her sentimental reaction. She ignored the fact that Steve had seen, too, and composed herself. Her tone was nonchalant. “Hey! Welcome back to Earth, fellas. You guys gonna be ready to come back to work anytime soon?” She raised a brow Steve’s way. “I won’t miss all the reports… and the joy of keeping the egos in check.”

Tony rasped. “And, THEY are amateurs! It should’ve been easy with me away.”

Natasha shifted closer. “Easy’s not the word I would choose. I’ll grant that your ego is the most monstrous.” She frowned as she got a good look at Tony. “Not your best look, Stark!” Tony nodded wearily. Natasha went to the foot of the bed and tapped on the data pad there, and scanned the latest update on Tony’s condition. “You could be a while.” She glanced at Steve. “YOU, on
the other hand… Want to spar?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “You’re just saying that ‘cause you want to kick my ass. I’m still weak, doing better than I ought, but weak.”

Natasha shrugged, the gesture stiff as she regained her equilibrium. “In the ‘anger stage’ of grief, I did want to hurt someone. I’m better now. It’s good to see you both, alive.” Her mouth twisted. “So, Coulson has a mole inside Hydra. They say that Red Skull threw a tantrum and disintegrated a few lieutenants after losing two scouting groups in Niflheim to Odin’s Legions. He’s not sure what they were doing there, and has suspicions about why one of our drones was there, too, but no proof. Thor says that ‘Odin’ used his spear, Gungnir, to destroy some of the Vorm ships, including one that may have been there a while.”

Steve shook his head, as though to force a bad memory away.

Tony whispered, “Home, sweet Hell.” His eyes were wide as he turned to Pepper. “There was a DRAGON!”

She gave him a watery grin. “You mentioned it, Tony!”

Steve looked at Tony and nodded somberly. His grip on Darcy’s hand tightened.

Natasha’s tone was matter-of-fact. “While it’s not cheap, I think it worthwhile to have Yinsen drones continue their search for a few more weeks, at least. They’re getting Foster and Selvig good data about the realms, anyway, and it’ll throw Red Skull further off the scent. I don’t want Tony attacked while he can’t take care of himself.” Tony’s gaze turned to Natasha.

Pepper glared. “I can take care of Tony.” Rhodey cleared his throat pointedly.

Natasha glanced at Rhodey and then met Pepper’s gaze again. “And, Volstagg and Fandral are here, too. I know. I had a lot of fun convincing them to wear non-Asgardian apparel for the next several weeks, by the way. I had to pull rank and remind them that Thor reports to me here. Their facial hair, especially Volstagg’s, draws enough attention without the complete Renaissance fair look. I wouldn’t want word that Asgardians are on Stark property to get out and raise suspicion. I doubt Red Skull believes in coincidence. He would investigate, at least.” She sighed. “And, if I were Tony, much as I would appreciate everyone’s determination, I’d want to be able to defend myself before Hydra mounted a mass attack against me and those I love most.”

Tony let out a strained sound. He turned to Steve, nodded, and mouthed, “Please…”

Steve put a hand on Pepper’s arm. “Your willingness to take care of him isn’t the point. Natasha’s right. It’d be best to continue to hide our return from the world until we’re ready to go toe-to-toe with the enemy.” His grin had an edge. “Think of the surprise on the Red Skull’s face when we join the party!”

Tony made an eager noise. “I’d like to blast him in the face!” He grumbled under his breath about wolf meat.

Steve’s jaw shifted. “Get in line.” He looked at Darcy, troubled. She realized that he’d read all she’d written to him about feeling personally targeted by Red Skull. Steve let out a tense breath. “I had too much time to think over the past month. I don’t like that our families can’t move around freely at all. Even with a security detail, they’re in so much danger that they almost never leave the Tower. It’s like we’re asking them to run and hide… when we wouldn’t do that ourselves.” Natasha nodded, thoughtful and glad for Steve’s intensity and guidance.
Steve shrugged. “We won’t be able to keep the new base secret for long. But, even after people know we’re up here, I want Darcy to be able to go into town and get coffee if she wants, for instance. I want Jane to be able to take her baby out for a stroll around the lake, or along a path in the woods. I’m thinking about more security measures for our people and this whole area, but I think we’ve let Hydra affect our actions too much. And, while I have tried not to take their actions personally, that’s not possible with Red Skull in charge and Crossbones as a top lieutenant. They want to make it personal now. I read notes from the day we disappeared, and I want to see the Tower videos of Rusk’s tour for myself.”

Natasha’s expression told him that he wouldn’t like what he saw. She also spared a glance at Tony, knowing that seeing Pepper in close quarters with the dangerous mad man would light his fuse as nothing else could.

Steve asked her. “How did you come here today?”

She shrugged. “I flew a Quinjet during an attack on a Hydra supply depot in Canada, and then stopped here ‘to restock on weapons and supplies’ on my way home. I shared that on an unencrypted comm. channel.”

Steve shook his head and frowned. “How long would it take for Jane to create a portal between the Upstate base and Avengers Tower?”

Darcy’s brows shot up. “We should’ve thought of that! I’d be willing to step through that portal after about a week of calibration and testing.” Steve nodded, resolute.

Natasha grinned. “Aren’t you supposed to be old-fashioned, and favor traditional means of travel?”

Pepper made a noise of almost-distress and turned to Tony. “I suppose you’re allowed near portals of Jane’s making. No others, though!” His eyes were heavy, but he managed a slight grin.

Steve shook his head, his expression full of exasperation. “I got in a pod and let a German scientist pump me full of a serum so mysterious no one has been able to accurately recreate it in the 70 years since. AND, I let Howard Stark zap me with enough Vita-Ray power to dim all the lights in Brooklyn. I was never all that old-fashioned… when it comes to tech.” He glanced at Darcy.

Darcy laughed at his frustration. “And, didn’t you tell me that the last thing you’d seen Howard Stark demo before that was a flop?”

Tony’s face scrunched up and he slurred a weary question. “What’d you see him demo that went bad?”

Steve smiled. “Flying car… I’m in the 21st century, and cars STILL don’t fly. I admit it. That’s a disappointment!”

Tony shook his head and glanced at Natasha before closing his eyes. Natasha nodded. “Coulson’s car, ‘Lola,’ flies. You should ask him to take you for a ride sometime, Cap. I’m sure he’d LOVE to.”

Steve’s eyes brightened. “Really?”

Darcy laughed. “Your face! You have all the enthusiasm of a little boy, my love. Awesome!”

Tony yawned as he smiled at Steve. “I’ll make you a car that flies, and outfit your motorcycle, too…” His eyes drifted closed, and he fell asleep.
Pepper waved her hands, indicating for everyone to leave and let Tony rest. Darcy hugged Pepper again before following the others out. She chuckled as she saw the look on Steve’s face. “You’re jazzed about the car Tony just promised to make, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “I hated to complain. The Internet is handy, and video chat is amazing, but, I was disappointed about that.” She giggled as she hugged him close.

Natasha sighed and changed the subject. “I suppose I’ll last another month while Tony heals. I honestly can NOT wait to hand the reins back, Cap!”

Steve nodded, expression rueful and amused. “I get that. You’ve done a good job, though. Thank you.”

Natasha let out a breath, her smile tight with pressure and tension. “So, lay low until Tony’s better. Three weeks more, four at the outside... Then, it’s all yours, again. Enjoy the break!” She winked at Darcy, and then turned back to Steve. “You’re right. You and Tony will be a hell of a surprise to spring on Red Skull and the rest of Hydra.” She grimaced. “You’re also right that there’s a line of us willing to take him out.”

Steve evaluated her tone and expression. “Point taken.” He swallowed hard. “I admit... I don’t just intend to get back to where I was before Niflheim. I want to work on my strength and my skills and be ready for Red Skull. He had a version of Erskine’s serum, so he’s strong. He’s crazier than I am. I need to offset that by honing my capabilities.”

Natasha smiled with satisfaction. “That sounds like a good idea.” She kept her expression even. “Thor tells me that you’ve already added a new skill to your repertoire.”

Steve winced. “I think it was situational. He was in danger.”

Natasha shook her head as she leaned up and kissed Steve’s cheek. “Thor tells it differently. Don’t wonder! He’ll be here again soon. Test your theory. After you admit we’re right, I’ll tell the others.” Steve nodded, eyes cast downward. Natasha smiled. “Practice with it. I think Tony proved that it would be good for all of us to be able to use suits. I decided we should cross-train with each other’s weapons, too.” Steve’s eyes brightened with interest as she continued. “Clint’s been practicing using Widow’s Bites, and I’ve dusted off my bow skills. Thor’s aim is amazing, but he tends to break bows... which causes Clint to flip out. It’s hilarious. Bucky’s aim is perfect, of course, but he prefers guns. He’s inventive with Widow’s Bites, though, kind of terrifying. He used some on... well, anyway... We’re even learning to use Sam’s flight pack, and I confess that we’ve all taken turns working with your shield. Clint’s pretty good at arcing it, better than any of us save Bucky. On the other hand, I present a smaller target behind it than you do!”

Steve smiled. “I’ll be happy to get a turn with it again soon.”

Natasha nodded. “I imagine you will. And, Bucky will be glad when you take it off his hands.”

Darcy let out a sigh. While she wasn’t in a hurry for Steve to return to combat, she would be happier when Steve was the one carrying the shield. It was jarring to see Bucky using it.

Steve nodded. “I’m gonna ask Tony to come up with a way for me to fly during battle. I’m grateful he made the Space Cap suit for me, but I’ve had enough of wearing a suit to last me forever. Your idea about cross-training sounds great. Send me a stash of Widow’s Bites for experimentation. They’ll come in handy. I’ll put my mind to it, and see what I can come up with. I’d like to use them to disable instead of killing, when I can.” Natasha raised a brow at him and he shrugged, knowing those opportunities were more rare than ever, given Red Skull’s mad determination to destroy and kill.
Steve looked thoughtful. “Does Coulson know we’re back here?” Natasha shook her head. He frowned, contemplating. “I think Jane should also make a portal from Avengers Tower to Coulson’s base, wherever that is, if he’s interested. And, after that, I want to set Jane and Erik to work on letting us use the portal tech in every way you think Hydra would fear most. Think about all the ways you mentioned the night we watched the footage of the Convergence and battle with the Dark Elves. As to Coulson and SHIELD, it’d be good if we could help each other out. He has access to some long-term resources, if I don’t miss my guess.”

Natasha teased. “You just want a ride in Lola!”

Steve grinned. “I do! But, I’d also like to thank him for sharing the cloaking tech that hid the satellites by the portals, and continue to plan ways to support each other’s efforts. I imagine he’ll be pleased that we’re back, too.” Darcy nodded with enthusiastic agreement, planning to refer to Coulson as ‘Agent iPod Thief’ again, happily, the next time she saw him.

Natasha shrugged. “I agree. Hill’s been reporting to Fury all along, but she was in DC when we learned your location, and I’ve forced everyone who was on hand to keep the secret. Loki’s the wild card in our deck, of course. But, the others have stayed quiet, and so far he’s playing nice.” She looked Steve over, assessing critically. “You need some time to recover, too, Steve. I can see that as I watch how you move and breathe. After you and Darcy get Jane and Erik working on transport from the Tower to the new base, we can take care of other concerns. Don’t rush yourself.” She glanced at Darcy. “You have a bad tendency to work too much and not enjoy life enough.”

Steve apologetically kissed Darcy’s cheek. “I know. Like I said, I had a lot of time to think… when I could tune out Tony’s babbling. I thought about what’s most important.”

Natasha hugged him goodbye, and promised to return soon to consult with him, but again urged him to take time to recover.

After they rode back to their guest house, Steve asked if Darcy would like to take a short walk, using a path that wound around past other guest houses. They laughed when they saw that Thor and Jane’s house was already under renovation to add rooms. Darcy shook her head. “I’m still trying to imagine Jane as a mother. She was great with me while you were gone, far more attentive than I ever would have guessed, but… a baby!”

Steve held Darcy’s hand tighter. “Thor mentioned that Jane was repaying years of attention she owed you, reminding you to eat and take care of yourself.”

Darcy shrugged, awkward. “Some days it was harder than others. Food was tasteless, and I had this lump in my throat all the time… made it hard to swallow.”

He stopped and pulled her close. “I’m so sorry!”

She shook her head. “I’m not sorry that you saved everybody. I just wanted you with me, safe. Everyone assumed you died in the explosion. I’ll never forget the first time someone told me they were sorry for my loss. It was sweetly meant, but, talk about killing with kindness! And, the memorial out in front of the Tower! I guess people are still adding toys and posters, poems and drawings. It’s amazing, but every time I saw it… usually on TV… my brain just froze.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to dwell on it. I whined enough in my messages to you. I’m sure you’re sick of it.”

Steve pulled her in for an intense kiss. “No! The thing that shredded me most was the realization that I’d given us up, broken your heart. I NEED to listen to you vent about what you went through.
I NEED for you to let it out to me. Please, don’t hold back.” His smile was sad. “I want to make up
for it.”

Darcy nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. Her smile wavered. “You may regret that
request.” He shook his head. She managed a small smile. “I had some ugly cries, Hon. If you really
want to get into it, we can look at Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook for RIP Captain memes. The
first one I saw made me lose my lunch! And, every channel that can shoe-horn you in has
retrospectives on you and Tony. Biography, A&E, PBS, Smithsonian, the business networks,
History Channel, and all the 24-hour ‘news’ stations run reports every day. Even the sports
channels bring up your death when the Dodgers, Yankees, Mets, or Giants, etc. play! There’s a
new channel devoted to the Avengers that runs an ‘update’ every night, pretty much just adding to
the number of days since you died. Their ratings are gonna get a bump when you let the world
know you’re back!” She took a breath. “So, I haven’t watched network TV, except what I can’t
avoid seeing in public. I’ve avoided social media. I gave up radio and tried to only ride the Tower
elevators with ear buds in and music turned up high. And, still, I heard about your death more
times than I can count, every day.”

His tone had an edge. “You isolated yourself from a lot. And men came courtin’.”

She shrugged. “So what? I told that construction guy that I’d never be over you. I told Fandral I
didn’t want innuendos or flirtation, just friendship… and that, only if he could cut the rest of the
crap.”

Steve watched as her mouth shut tightly, and she pressed her lips together. He teased. “What did
you say to Bucky?”

She squealed. “He really told you about that?!” She groaned. “I told him that I’m monogamous and
he’s not, and he’d be miserable trying to make me happy and take your place… and that, only if he could cut the rest of the
crap.”

Steve shook his head. “He assured me that his offer was honorable. He thinks you’re pretty
and desirable, and he cares about you. He intended to devote himself to you and your happiness, in
my stead. He would marry you, give you a family, and look after you all your life.”

Darcy shuddered. “He would have been so sad!”

Steve cleared his throat, and nodded. “He’s still learning who he is now, Darcy. In some ways, you
may see him more clearly than he sees himself.” He looked into the distance, as they neared their
guest house. “By the way, I had a text from Bruce. I, uh, I can still have kids.”

Darcy’s eyes went wide. “Way to casually drop a bomb! What?” Emotions passed over her face as
she considered the possibility of the news from Bruce going the other way. She wanted to have
children with Steve. While she would have adjusted if it couldn’t happen, it would have been
something to grieve.

Steve put an arm around Darcy’s shoulder. “He recommends that we don’t try for at least four
months, just to be safe, but says I should have undamaged sperm again by then.”

Darcy nodded. Her voice sounded small. “I’m glad.”
Steve squeezed her shoulders. “Me, too.”

She frowned, curious. “Why four months?”

Steve made a face. “Spermatogenesis, two cycles for a human male…”


He smiled, his expression close to giddy. “Yet. I look forward to it, but want a little more time just with you, first.”

She nodded firmly. “So, little humans, but later.” He squeezed her hand at that reference to what he’d written to her while marooned in Niflheim.

They entered the guest house, and Steve turned on the TV and looked on the Internet. Steve disliked seeing himself and Tony remembered in the media. As usual, they were both ill-represented, boiled down to ideas others took as truth, rather than shown as men. Tony was portrayed as irresponsible and lucky, with his intellect chalked up as an anomaly. Steve was shown as a patriotic, buff grunt or an idealistic zealot.

Steve soon tired of it all, preferring to pass the time savoring being close to Darcy while she worked. He read Norse mythology and made a list of questions to ask Thor. He thought it would be best to just have the Avengers gather around a fire and ask Thor to regale them with tales of his family and his battles. Steve decided to ask Erik’s help in guiding the discussion. He hoped that the scientist could encourage Thor to share information about the Universe that would help the Avengers better face the challenges to come. Steve made notes on his StarkPad and started a conversation on the topic with Erik via messages.

Darcy reviewed course offerings, and signed up for Fall classes. She added Mechanical Flight Engineering, French conversation, and an Astronomy course to her required class load. She was amused when the course software prompted her with the list of courses she would need later in order to earn a Physics degree. Apparently, between her intro classes at Culver, her science-for-the-hell-of-it electives at Oxford, and now her work in the Stark Online program, she was over halfway there. She laughed. “I’m gonna get a Physics degree, for the hell of it!”

Steve leaned over and kissed her. “Smart and beautiful. My kind of girl!” He caught her bottom lip.

Darcy was astonished by the wave of ‘want’ that coursed through her at the slightest attention from Steve. She’d missed him so much, been so afraid that she would never see him again. And, now, they were together again. She dropped her pad on the side table and threw herself on him. His pad clattered to the ground as he caught her. She moaned as she grabbed at him with frantic need. “I swear! I can’t get enough of you. You hardly even have to try. I want you so much!” She groaned as she saw his look of mischief. “No! Don’t tease! I’ll combust! I swear to God! I can’t…”

They made love for the rest of the afternoon.

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The third night Upstate was the first night that Steve woke before Darcy. His first thought was to see that he hadn’t called out from his nightmare and disturbed Darcy. Relief washed through him as he took in her sweet, undisturbed expression. He went for a run on the paths of the estate in the middle of the night, while it was still dark, and before he could be easily seen and identified. Security was tight, but Steve didn’t believe it could ever be infallible. He ran to the gym that had
been built on base. He lifted weights and worked a punching bag for a long time before running home, returning just before the sunrise to shower and return to bed.

Darcy couldn’t help but wake up when she heard the shower. She jumped out of bed, and went to the second bathroom to freshen up. At that point, it was just a matter of deciding whether to join Steve in the shower or return to bed to make love with him.

He let a slight beard, heavy stubble; grow in to help disguise his appearance. He wore ball caps pulled low, glasses, and even the occasional oversized shirt to try and disguise his muscular build. After a few days, they dared to go into town and hang out in a brew house pub built in an abandoned factory building. It had all-brick walls inside, original wooden beam floors, and windows that ran the height of the thirty foot tall rooms. The beer was good, and the food satisfying. Darcy was nervous that someone would recognize Steve, but no one did. He told her that he usually got past most adults, even clean-shaven. He left it unsaid that people thought he was dead. With the stubble, he was ALMOST willing to chance an encounter with a child, but not quite. When they passed a boy on the street, Steve averted his face so much that he almost ended up walking backwards. Darcy had to suppress a fit of giggles at the sight.

Darcy liked the stubble much more than a full beard, perhaps in part because she saw it transform him gradually. Unlike the beard he returned from Niflheim with, it wasn't a reminder of time passed apart.

And, in the afternoons, she was sure that no woman in existence could find fault with Steve’s appearance as he worked out. As part of his plan to ‘hone himself’, he visited the base gun range daily, ran, completed obstacle courses, lifted weights, boxed, and exercised multiple times each day. Watching him do push-ups dazed her, especially when he warmed so much that he removed his shirt.

Darcy set her work aside. “I’m gonna quit my job and just watch you do push-ups.”

He smiled up at her. “Why would you have to quit your job to do that?” If he flexed even more once he was aware of her scrutiny, she didn’t complain. Rather, she savored the show of the muscles of his back rippling and shifting so much that her eyes almost glazed over and her breathing sped.

She laughed in disbelief. “Oh! You’re not even out of breath!” He continued, one handed. She groaned. “I can’t think. You’re overwhelming my brain with your sexiness. That’s why!”

He smirked and continued his workout. “Don’t quit your job. Get your reports done, Sweetheart. I’ll make it all better, later. I promise.”

She sighed. “Not TOO much later. That sexy, growly tone of voice just destroyed my panties.” She let out a suggestive moan.

He paused, mid push up, his eyes blown. “Not much later, at all.”

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The first day that Darcy returned to the Tower while Steve stayed at the Upstate base was hard for both of them. They hated to be apart at all. Darcy worked as efficiently as possible, directing staff as they packed up items in Tony’s lab. It was difficult to be around people who assumed that they were closing the lab for good, and that they were packing because Tony was dead. She hated to see the way that people acted about Tony and Steve’s disappearance and assumed deaths. She did her best to ignore the assumptions and focus on the task at hand. She kept her hours as short as she
could. Bucky flew her home to the Stark estate that evening, and had dinner at the guest house with her and Steve. He visited for a while afterwards and it was a nice evening. Steve and Bucky both looked better after a few hours together.

But, Darcy had a hard time falling to sleep that night and woke crying after a few hours, grasping at Steve and begging him to really be there with her, alive. It was even harder to part ways the next morning.

Bucky handed her a hanky shortly after take-off and tried to offer comfort. “Keep your chin up, Doll. Stevie’s fine now. You’ll see him again tonight after work. It’s okay. He’s back home, safe.”

Once Tony’s lab was packed, Darcy shifted her attention to the other lead scientists and their work spaces. Betty moved Upstate next to organize the labs set aside for her and Bruce. Bruce stayed in the City to assist Jane and Erik with creation of a portal lab (Darcy thought of it as the ‘transporter room’) and testing. They implemented Steve’s suggestion to enable people to shift from the Tower to the Upstate base in an instant. As soon as the portal lab was ready, Jane, Erik, and Bruce would move Upstate, too.

A select few scientists and engineers from R&D were also given lab space Upstate, Dr. Kelman (who suggested the satellite-drone search combination), among them. Their labs were in a separate building from those of the lead scientists. Staff who worked on Iron Man suit improvements and drone production moved to underground work spaces, safe beneath the base.

The second night, Hawkeye flew Darcy back home to Steve. He embraced Steve when he saw him, wiping away tears of relief. “Man! Your job sucks. I can’t wait until Nat gives it back to you.” His heartfelt exclamation caused Steve to throw his head back as he laughed. Clint shrugged. “And, I’m glad you’re alive, too. Just…”

Over the next few days, Darcy directed staff to pack everything of Jane and Erik’s that could be moved while they focused on the portal project. Guinea pigs were sent back and forth through the portal without incident. Yinsen drones transferred successfully, as well, and gave detailed readings and reports on the experience. Jane double and triple checked every aspect of the Quantum energy transfer obsessively. Thor volunteered to be the first person to travel Upstate via portal, pointing out that he had complete faith in Jane and her work.

Jane had faith in herself, too. But, she still sobbed with relief when Thor called from Upstate to reassure her that all was well. Natasha and Hawkeye traveled to the Upstate base and back to the Tower next. After that, Darcy used the portal. She swore that she was going to make Jane add Star Trek transporter sound effects, just to lighten the mood. Following the rainbow-tinged path of so many guinea pigs was unnerving, regardless of her faith in Jane.

When Darcy arrived in the Upstate portal room, Thor was waiting for her. They walked to the guest house together. On entering, Thor held out Mjolnir. Steve, standing across the room, stared at the hammer for a long moment before he held out his hand and the hammer flew from Thor’s hand into Steve’s.

Thor smiled. “I doubt Mjolnir will find me worthy almost every time I reach for it, since I was again deemed worthy after my exile to Midgard. If you were easy or arrogant about your worthiness, I doubt Mjolnir would choose even you, Brother.” The next day, Darcy worked at the Tower. Thor and Steve went to an isolated area so that Steve could practice with the hammer and learn what it would do for him.

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When Darcy woke that Saturday, Steve was already awake. In the week and a half since he’d returned to Earth, they’d gotten closer than ever. He massaged her shoulders and back as she slowly stretched awake. She sighed with pleasure, and savored the strength in his touch for a long time.

He whispered, finally. “Good morning, Sweetheart.”

She mumbled a reply. “Is the sun even up?”

He kissed the back of her neck several times, soft and lingering. “Come watch the sunrise with me. Please?” He continued massaging.

Darcy groaned, nodded, and shifted to get out of the bed. Steve caught her as she stumbled. She leaned against him, then continued to the bathroom and got ready to go outside with him. She threw on jeans and a sweater, given the early chill. He hustled her out, fairly dragging her without turning on any lights in the living or kitchen areas. He let out a breath of relief as he closed the door behind them. She assumed he was hurrying to get somewhere before the sunrise.

It was almost silent outside. She heard a single bird call and the crunch of gravel under the wheels of the cart as Steve drove. Darcy hugged herself, shivering. Steve pulled to the edge of the road, walked around, and lifted her into his arms to carry.

Darcy squeaked. “I can walk!”

He kissed her, laughing into the kiss. But, if you walk it’s harder to do this! And, this way I get to hold you close and stop your shivering.

Darcy buried her head against his chest. “Mm’kay. You win. S’nice.” She relaxed, almost feeling as though she could doze if she let herself.

He chuckled; enjoying how cute she was as she slowly woke. He stepped into a clearing and set her on her feet and stood behind her. Carefully, he pulled her back against him and let his arms cover hers.

She automatically twined their fingers. “Ooooh! This is like the first time we watched the sunrise together, that day at the Tower when I couldn’t go back to sleep because I dreamed of making love with you!” He nodded and leaned down so that their cheeks touched. She noticed that he’d shaved so that his cheek was smooth again. Darcy sighed. “I love you, Steve.” She felt him smile.

Steve kissed her cheek. “I love you, too, Darcy, more than I can say.”

The first rays of the day began to creep over the horizon and alter the colors of the sky, from night to dawn. The black faded, first to a chilly dark blue, then to a purple shot with traces of pale and dark pinks, then to brighter sun colors. When the sun rose fully and the day showed to be bright and clear, Darcy turned around and leaned up to kiss Steve. “Good morning.”

He smiled again. “Good morning, Darcy. Would you like to go back home now?” His eyes shone with eagerness.

She jumped up and wrapped her legs around him, giggling as he automatically caught her. She leaned in and kissed him, hard. “Take me back to bed!” He held her tight against him and jogged to the cart. She giggled again. “Is this going to be your newest workout thing? Jogging while carrying me? You seem to be doing every other workout ever invented.”

Steve shook his head. “No. This is too distracting! I’m just in a hurry to get you home.”
She shook her head. “What’s your rush? You hardly finished dragging me OUT, Steve.” He gave her a look, and she admitted. “The sunrise was beautiful. Thank you.” He set her down by the cart and held her face in his hands while he kissed her soundly, deep kisses that made her moan with lustful appreciation. She sighed. “THAT’ll warm me up!”

He drove back to their guest house, and let her precede him inside. She stopped in her tracks. “What’s this?” She realized that he’d been up for a while, and that someone had been there while they were out.

There was a fire warming the living area, with lit candles all around. The candles were tucked in among a variety of flower arrangements. One with lavender roses had a ribbon with a cosmic Milky Way pattern, like the flowers he’d given her on their first date. There were red roses, daisies, an arrangement like he sent her after she stayed by his side after the first Vorm attack, and an arrangement like the one he’d brought the night they went to dinner and dancing together the first time. There were also flowers like ones he gave her just to say that he thought she was beautiful and he didn’t take her for granted, and a bouquet with chrysanthemums, daffodils, and hyacinths… like from the time he apologized for not telling her about Betty’s transformation before she heard about it from someone else. It looked like all the flowers he’d given her since they met were there with them. Looking around the room at all that, as well as the champagne and chocolates on the blanket in front of the fire, gave Darcy pause… and the sense that the day would be memorable.

She slowly turned to look at Steve, eyes wide as she realized what was happening. “Excuse me. I’m gonna freshen up.”

He nodded. “I’ll change, too. Take your time. I’ll use the second bathroom.”

She paused. “Any suggestions on what I wear?”

He stifled a grin. “Nope. Clothing optional.” He shook his head and his expression softened, turning serious. “Actually, that’s not right. Too distracting. Please, wear clothing, whatever you like.” He continued to stare at her, intense.

She left him, muttering. “So, cover up. Maybe I’ll borrow your Space Snuggie…” After she showered and shaved, she chose to wear the dress and heels she’d worn the night he finally returned to her from Niflheim. She heard music playing in the living room. The song was ‘Sentimental Journey’, the first song she’d ever sent to Steve. She waved her hands wildly to try to shake nerves out through her fingers and looked at her reflection, wondering why she was nervous. Her eyes were wide, but bright with anticipation.

When she stepped out, Steve stood up from the sofa. He was wearing dark slacks and a dark royal shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His smile almost blinded her. “Good morning, again, my beautiful Sweetheart!”

She crossed to him, putting a little something extra in the sway of her hips as he dropped and then slowly, lustfully raised his gaze up her body. She grinned and made a show of fanning herself. “A+, Soldier! I felt that one!”

He raised a brow and chuckled, rueful. “Years of Bucky Barnes’ bad influence has to pay off at some point!”

She leaned up and kissed him, pushing aside the urge to throw herself at him. “Good morning, again, my love.” She looked around them. “Breakfast picnic?” He nodded. She kicked off her heels and sat down on a large pillow between the sofa and the fire, her legs folded to the side. He knelt and poured champagne. She accepted it and sipped judiciously. “I don’t want to drink too much.”
He assured her, “Don’t worry. Coffee will be here in a few minutes.”

She raised a brow and smiled. “Good to know. We should try to stay decent, then.” She winked, flirty.

He tilted his head, a rueful grin on his face. “I’ll try my best. You have no idea how difficult I find it to resist you.” He ran a finger along her jaw line. His touch made her shiver in the best way.

She sipped the champagne again and savored a chocolate truffle. Steve went to the kitchen and brought a tray with croissants, baguette pieces, cheeses, jam, ham, yogurt, and raspberries. There was a single red rose in a bud vase in the center of the tray. Darcy grinned. “Nice! I don’t remember having this breakfast with you before.”

Steve nodded. “True. It’s a typical Parisian breakfast.”

Darcy giggled. “Are we going to Paris?”

Steve popped a raspberry in his mouth, chewed and swallowed, and looked pensive. “Well, I don’t take big blocks of time off that much, or at least I haven’t in the past. I’d like to be able to have more time away in the future. That’s a goal I’m working on, but we have a few weeks now, and I want to advantage of it with you. I don’t want to just keep thinking, dreaming, or talking about things. You game?”

Darcy realized he was serious. She nodded. “Of course! I have to take care of a few things with my job first, since I literally disappeared from it overnight for a few days last week. After that, I’m game for whatever you want.” He ate a croissant while she talked.

There was a knock at the door. Steve jumped up and went to answer it. Bucky peeked in and smiled at Darcy. She waved at him, smiling happily. Steve took the coffees and thanked his friend, and then told him to scram.

Bucky laughed and saluted. “Yes, Captain!” He winked at Darcy over Steve’s shoulder before he turned and left.

The Stevie Wonder song that Steve had found on Tony’s phone began to play. Darcy cocked her head, concentrating to hear the words while she sipped a café au lait.

Shattered dreams, worthless years,
Here am I encased inside a hollow shell,
Life began, then was done,
Now I stare into a cold and empty well

The many sounds that meet our ears
the sights our eyes behold,
Will open up our merging hearts,
And feed our empty souls

I believe when I fall in love with you it will be forever,
I believe when I fall in love this time it will be forever

Without despair we will share,
And the joys of caring will not be replaced,
What has been must never end
And with the strength we have won't be erased
When the truths of love are planted firm,
They won't be hard to find,  
And the words of love I speak to you  
will echo in your mind

I believe when I fall in love this time it will be forever

I'm so glad that I found someone to believe in again,

Come on, let's fall in love,  
You're the woman I've been waiting for,  
Come on, let's fall in love,  
You're the girl that I really adore,  
Come on, let's fall in love...

Steve leaned against the sofa, finished his champagne, and sighed. “I can’t believe that I didn’t find that one when I was first looking for songs for you. It expresses so much that I felt… and feel.”

Darcy smiled. “There are a lot of good songs out there. Having one catch you by surprise like that is fun.” She spread soft cheese on a sliced baguette.

He nodded, smiling ruefully as he started on his coffee. “I was arrogant enough once to tell Fury that there wasn’t much that could surprise me anymore. He proved me wrong in short order, and life continues to amaze me. I guess at first, when I told him that, all I could do was to look back and mourn my past. I couldn’t imagine being excited about my future.” The next song to play was the first that Steve had sent to Darcy, ‘You Are So Beautiful.’

Darcy leaned against his side while they ate and drank. “I love the songs you’ve given me.” He leaned his head against hers, letting the music flow over them and thinking over the progression of their relationship.

When they finished eating, Steve put everything on the tray and set it on the kitchen counter. As ‘Sway’ began to play, he held out a hand. “May I have this dance?” He put the pillows on the sofa to clear the floor. Every song that followed was either a gift from him to her or from her to him. When ‘Waiting for You’ played, he stopped to hug her close and tight. “Thank you. This was just what I needed to hear from you when the messages reached us.”

Darcy leaned up to kiss him fervently. “I don’t want to live without you ever again.” She blinked away tears, remembering the grief of fearing him lost.

He lightened the mood by twirling her and leading her through a few fun dance combinations. As the song ended, he swung her into a dip and leaned down to place a soft kiss on her lips. He pulled back and looked into her eyes as ‘Just Say Yes’ began to play. She smiled with delight. He kissed her forehead and touched his cheek to hers. As the tempo picked up, he pulled her upright, and then led her to dance with him through the rest of the song. Both of them were grinning at each other happily as they moved together. Again, Darcy blinked away tears, now tears of joy. He could feel her trembling with excitement.

As the song ended, Steve dropped to one knee, still holding one of Darcy’s hands. He kissed her hand. “I love you, Darcy. You’re the love of my life. You make me feel more human than anyone ever has, and I need you desperately. I want every bit of forever together that we can get. I want to make you happy, to love and adore you, and to enjoy life with you. Please… will you marry me?”

The song ‘Marry Me’ started to play as Darcy breathed the words. “Yes, Steve. Yes. I will marry
He pulled the Tiffany’s box from his pocket, and opened it. “Will you do me the honor of wearing this ring?” She nodded and let him put the ring on her finger. The platinum band was of continuous infinity symbols, encrusted with small diamonds. The setting was a sparkling square base with an intricate diamond-covered fleur-de-lis on it, and a large round bluish diamond in the center. The effect of the setting was like a flower. Darcy nodded, awed by the ring, but more overwhelmed by what it meant.

The next song to play was the Louis Armstrong version of ‘What a Wonderful World’, the first song they’d ever danced to. They held each other close, kissing often as they basked in the joy of being together and finally engaged. After that, they sat together and talked. They discussed their relationship, how long Steve had wanted to propose to her, how soon they both wanted to marry. They decided to ask Pepper to help them make arrangements.

Darcy used the portal and returned to the Tower for a few hours that afternoon to meet with Jai for a closed-door planning session. First, she let Jai know that Steve and Tony had returned to Earth safely and were recuperating in a safe location. Then, she got down to the delightfully serious business of looking at wedding dresses and deciding on what Jai would have made custom for her.

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One week later at sunset, as a pianist played ‘Lovesong’, Darcy stepped onto the back patio of the manor house with Thor as her escort. He wore Asgardian ceremonial dress and a proud smile that lit up the evening. Darcy wore a vintage-inspired, tea-length wedding dress. It had lace sleeves and a lace-covered bodice, with a simple antique veil that covered her face.

At an altar adorned with flowers and candles, the plain-spoken Methodist pastor and the Catholic priest from Avengers Tower presided together. To one side of them, Steve wore a tailored, black tuxedo. As best man, Bucky stood next to Steve. On the other side of the pastors, a delighted Jane, Darcy’s matron of honor, smiled with joy.

Steve’s gaze locked with Darcy’s as she approached him. They smiled at each other, both grateful beyond measure.

It was a simple ceremony, attended only by those closest to the bride and groom. Regardless of the words of Midgardian tradition, Thor did not consider that he was giving his shield sister away. He saw the ceremony as a quaint reminder of his ties to both Darcy and Steve, ties that ran deeper than mere words could express. He hoped that the look in his eyes as he lifted her veil, kissed her cheek, and gave her hand to Steve conveyed some of his deep emotion.

Tony was able to walk unsupported, and even to claim a dance with the bride at the reception. He groused. “I can’t believe he used my recovery to weasel out of the bachelor party of the century!”

Darcy laughed. “He’d do anything ELSE for you… just not that.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I KNOW! He once tied me NOT giving a ‘star-spangled kick line bachelor party’ to him saving my life…”

Darcy’s nose wrinkled up at the thought. “Yuck. That sounds awful. I’d save your life to avoid that, too.”

Tony wagged his brows. “I bet Foster could come up with something inventive. Maybe… force you up onstage during a Vegas review where they make audience members hump the hunky
performers.” Darcy shook her head, eyes closed against that image. Tony sighed. “Probably for the best... It wouldn’t be good for Cap’s image if he attacked the Zumanity or Absinthe casts.”

Darcy’s blank look of confusion made Tony laugh. He kissed her cheek. “You know... I’m still in awe that you made Cap human, Lewis. Good job.” She laughed.

Director Coulson cut in. Darcy was surprised by his dancing prowess, but supposed she shouldn’t be. “Are there dancing courses at spy school?”

Coulson smiled. “There are. Dancing offers an opportunity to get close with someone quickly. Its natural motions make it easy to check a space for security measures, too.”

Darcy made a face. “I’ll take your word on all that, but it’s a big deal to Steve. Peggy promised to teach him to dance, but never had the chance.”

She looked across the dance floor to where Steve and Peggy moved together in the embrace of a slow waltz. Steve’s eyes glistened as he supported his ‘first best girl’ as gently as possible. Peggy’s smile was radiant. Sharon hovered behind them as subtly as she could, keeping a sharp eye on her aunt. When Peggy stopped moving her feet, Sharon brought her wheelchair close while Steve kissed Peggy’s cheek and whispered something to her that caused her to laugh.

Coulson nodded, not commenting on the happy tears in Darcy’s eyes. “So, he learned how to, for you. Natasha is proud of her teaching success with him.”

Darcy grinned, blinking away the tears. “He even went to Tony for advice on his rhythm. Apparently, he had to overcome a ‘dad-dancing rhythm’ tendency.”

Coulson shook his head. “If he would do THAT, he’ll do anything for you, Darcy.”

She grinned and shrugged. “It’s only fair. I’d do anything for him.”

Coulson kissed her cheek. “I’m happy for you both.”

She giggled. “You made him happy the other day. He hasn’t stopped talking about your car.”

Coulson chuckled. “It seems like the least I could do. I wasn’t having a good week. Hearing you refer to me as ‘Agent iPod Thief’ again was an amazingly bright moment during an otherwise dark time. Thank you for bringing me in on the secret, and inviting me here tonight. It’s an honor.”

Darcy kissed Phil’s cheek. “Thank you, ‘Agent iPod Thief.’”

Bucky claimed her for the next, a song from his and Steve’s youth. He kept his metal hand at her waist and held her left up with his human hand. She swayed with him easily, twirling and letting him pull her close.

She smiled. “You’re pretty good, Bucky. I’ve heard you had lots of practice, what with keeping both your dates and their friends happy.” She saw Steve dancing with Jane and looking at her and Bucky with the happiest of bittersweet expressions, obviously disbelieving how blessed he felt to have them both in his life now.

Bucky’s expression was contemplative, as well. “I told Stevie I’d be with him ‘til the end of the line. I couldn’t imagine we’d be here in the future together. I know what I meant when I first said it, but I still don’t have any idea where the end might be.”

Darcy kissed Bucky’s cheek. “I’m grateful he got you back.”
Bucky squeezed her to him. “You helped, Doll. You didn’t even know me, but you brought out every spark of humanity that was left inside. Thank you. And, thanks for loving Stevie so much. You make him happy.” She pulled him against her and stopped dancing to just hug him long and hard. He put his head down against her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek.

After a while, Steve came over to them and teased. “Making moves on my wife, Buck?” Bucky pulled back and gently kissed Darcy on the forehead, chuckling at the way Steve savored the word ‘wife’.

Bucky laughed at him. “Tried that. Didn’t go anywhere, Punk. For some reason, this dame loves you, and only you.” Bucky bowed to Darcy as he backed away. He danced next with Sharon Carter, complimenting her beautiful dress, and how well she had learned to swing dance. She blossomed under his attention.

Steve pulled Darcy against him and smiled as the band started playing ‘What a Wonderful World.’ He savored the moment, grateful to finally be married, and looking forward to the next few weeks. They’d decided to visit a secure island retreat of Tony’s down near the Virgin Islands first, and then planned to spend a week together in Paris. Darcy leaned up to kiss him with insistent fervor that he treasured.

He looked around at their friends, at Bucky smiling and looking relaxed as he teased Sharon. Sam moved easily from one person to the next, making hearts flutter as he chatted and flirted. Natasha’s fierceness faded to the background as she leaned against Hawkeye, allowing him to hold her tight and stroke her back possessively. Thor and Jane were as lost as ever in each other’s eyes; the only distance between them the bump of Jane’s burgeoning belly. Betty, looking ethereal, smiled down at Bruce while he looked happier than any of the other Avengers had ever seen. Pepper looked regal, and Tony seemed as close to content as possible for him, obviously as pleased as Steve to see the other Avengers happy, even if it was just for this slice of time.

Steve and Tony exchanged a glance of understanding.

The song was right. Regardless of the century, it was a wonderful world. Steve intended to treasure those he loved, protect his world, and punish those who tried to tear it down and take it all away. He looked into Darcy’s eyes, savoring the peace he found with her. For him, she was ‘home.’

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All too soon, the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon. Steve flew them to the island, then to Europe in a small Quinjet (with Darcy’s protective suit and an ‘Iron Cap’ suit aboard for safety’s sake), and then home again. He smiled on seeing his motorcycle and a lady’s helmet waiting for them inside the jet hangar. SI Security took care of their luggage while Steve drove Darcy home on his bike. He insisted on carrying her over the threshold. They were both touched to find the refrigerator and pantry freshly stocked, and a note by the phone telling them ‘Welcome Home,’ and that the manor chef was on call for them.

During their time away, Steve and Darcy were too busy enjoying each other to pay mind to news or messages from their friends. In addition to celebrating their marriage, they healed from the grief of fearing they’d never be together again. They savored each other like never before, indulging each other’s fantasies and simply focusing on each other without distraction. They’d asked to be interrupted only by world-ending affairs. They were thankful that nothing like that happened while they were honeymooning.

After Steve expressed his relief that their honeymoon had not been interrupted, Darcy joked. “We should send Hydra a thank-you note.”
The side-eye glance that Steve gave her in reply was deceptively mild. He’d kept up his workout regime, going out each night to train for hours while she slept. On the island, he used natural ‘obstacle courses,’ and lifted and tossed boulders. In Paris, he used the private gym in a building of Tony’s. He lifted weights, worked punching bags (to pieces), did calisthenics, and sparred with drones Tony sent at his request. Video highlights from his sparring matches went back to New York for Tony and the other Avengers to review. The only complaint Tony had was in the number of drones destroyed in the process.

Darcy was enamored of the phenomenal physical results, and naturally inclined to look on the bright side, rather than dwelling on fears that her husband was preparing to battle a mad man to the death. But, her subconscious expressed her concerns through nightmares. She wasn’t sure which she hated more… waking from a nightmare to an empty bed when Steve was out training, or waking to his guilty concern when he was there to ask what upset her. They talked it through until she was certain he understood that she had complete faith in him, but treasured him every bit as much as he did her… so, feared any possibility of being separated from him again.

Their first week back home was relatively uneventful, for Avenger life. Darcy noticed many pointed stares directed at her rings. The engagement ring was stunning enough on its own, but its sudden appearance with a wedding band alongside it had people she worked and exercised with curious. She ignored the stares. She thought of herself as Darcy Lewis-Rogers, but held off on announcing it.

Using the portal to travel from one base to another became commonplace (for those with enough clearance to know about its existence). They compared it to taking an elevator from one Tower floor to another. Erik still lived in the Tower, maintaining daily portal operations from there, while Jane supervised portals from their Upstate lab. Bruce, Betty, Tony, and Rhodey were all trained to run the portals as well… or destroy them, if necessary.

In addition to the daily intra-base portal, there were emergency portals installed in each of the Tower safe rooms for evacuation purposes. Each of the Security team members trained to operate them was first terrorized ruthlessly by Natasha and Bucky. Natasha was so certain of their vetting that she proclaimed that she would retire immediately and take up knitting, if any of those Security staff turned out to be Hydra.

Bucky was Darcy and Steve’s first dinner guest after they returned home again. He updated them on pranks he and Hawkeye had pulled, his varied romantic pursuits, Iolaus’ latest antics, and the team’s recent Hydra entanglements. Darcy and Steve raved about the beauty of the Caribbean and Paris. They all talked together late into the night. Bucky hid smirks as he noticed the other two gravitating closer as time passed, exchanging small touches and hand grasps, and even the occasional kiss or furtive nibble when they thought he wasn’t looking.

Finally, Bucky teased. “Okay, newlyweds. I’ve kept you from your bed long enough that the tension’s getting to ME. Try to get a little bit of sleep later, at least you, Doll.” He laughed as he walked away from their guest house, hearing them frantically come together the instant the door closed.

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Steve and Tony decided to let the world know that they were back by going on a mission to take out what remained of Dell Rusk’s holdings in Virginia. The night before they planned to leave, Darcy was nervous. She was glad to end the irritating misconception that Steve and Tony were dead. She looked forward to life getting back to ‘normal’ on that front. But, she knew that Red Skull hated Captain America. He was jealous of him, resentful that people admired him, and
insane. He would be infuriated that Steve and Tony escaped the Nidavellite explosion. It was a bad combination. She had faith in Steve. He was strong and smart. Her concern lay in the fact that he had boundaries and morals, concern for others… all things Red Skull lacked and would use to his advantage.

While the Avengers prepped for their mission, Darcy was doing her best to stay on task in R&D, reviewing advances in medical tech, and discussing ways to go further. Her scientists loved to talk to her once they understood that her prime interest lay in furthering their work with additional resources. When an unscheduled ‘Assemble’ call sounded, Darcy nearly broke her phone. It slipped from her grasp and clattered across the floor, skidding to a halt against a lab table ten feet away. She scurried to grab it and read the Assemble note, gasping as she did. The new U.S. Secretary of Defense was under attack at a meeting of the United Nations Security Council, just blocks from Avengers Tower. Worse, Pepper Potts was in attendance to represent the Avengers and share her plans for working towards peace among nations, with now-retired Col. James Rhodes at her side. Darcy was sure that Tony was suited and practically at the UN before anyone could say more. She hoped JARVIS got Tony’s lab window opened in time for his hasty exit.

Darcy shepherded staff into the R&D safe room. She breathed a bit easier once Jane and Erik were settled in, close by, working at laptops and conferring excitedly. The TV was turned to news. When people first saw the Iron Man suit racing to the scene, there was confusion and disgruntled grumbling, most people not in favor of someone else wearing what appeared to be Tony Stark’s personal suit. But, as soon as Steve used the flight boosters that Tony had made for him and appeared at Iron Man’s side, people realized what they were seeing and began to scream with joy and relief. It was fun… at first… to hear the gasps and cheers as people saw Captain America and Iron Man on the TV, in the thick of the battle at the UN. Unfortunately, the scene in the streets of New York was the same. People seemingly didn’t care that there was another attack of aliens and robots. Their favorite heroes were alive and there to defend them!

Darcy was sure that it was making Steve insane with impatience as more and more people stopped running away from the danger to cheer and celebrate. It filled her with anxiety.

Someone turned up their feed from local radio. After screaming over and over about the return of Iron Man and Captain America, the DJ played the Thin Lizzy song ‘The Boys are Back in Town.’ Darcy knew that in other circumstances Tony would approve. He’d joked about blasting that song from drone suits, himself. Obviously, with Pepper and Rhodey under attack, Tony was NOT in a playful mood.

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Steve was livid.

He appreciated that people were excited to see him and Tony alive, but wished they would express it differently… rationally. Instead, people were practically dancing and rejoicing into danger’s path. This scenario was part of why he’d wanted for his and Tony’s ‘re-introduction to society’ to be somewhere outside of their City. He’d hoped for people to display more sense, but feared they would not. Today was not a day when he was getting what he wanted. So, people behaved with reckless disregard for their own safety. It put him and his team at increased risk. Much as he loathed the thought, Steve resolved to make a personal statement to the media addressing the problem… at a later time, when he wasn’t facing down legions of Vorm and homicidal Hydra soldier squadrons.

Pepper’s attendance at the UN Security Council meeting was not publicized ahead of time. So, he didn’t think that she was particularly targeted beforehand. But, he was sure that Hydra would
single her out as soon as they realized she was there. What’s more, Tony knew that. Tony was trying to keep his sanity, but it was fraying badly. He was destroying every target he detected with manic urgency, certain that if he missed one… THAT would be the enemy who took Pepper from him.

The problem was that there were so MANY targets.

For weeks, as the Avengers attacked Hydra bases and defended themselves from attacks while Tony healed, they only dealt with foot soldiers and alien grunts, no leaders. Today, Erik and Jane verified that Red Skull was on site at the UN. The energy signature of his slice from the Time gem confirmed his position. Steve guessed that since Hydra’s target was his successor in the Department of Defense, his former Under Secretary, Schmidt had a personal stake in the attack.

Steve had wrestled with his bloodthirsty feelings towards Red Skull and Hydra. He’d discussed the matter with Dr. Chau repeatedly since his return. After he watched the video from the day of his and Tony’s disappearance, he destroyed five punching bags. He wanted nothing more than to personally kill the Red Skull. The way Red Skull had looked at and talked about Darcy was enough to nearly madden Steve. She only mattered to Red Skull as a tool to weaken Captain America. Schmidt saw people as a means to an end. He’d treated Bucky as an object and a weapon for decades, Natasha, too. His comment about ‘finely honed weapons’ when he saw Bucky and Natasha sparring, and the devastated reactions from both Bucky and Natasha, left Steve burning with rage. As far as Steve was concerned, Red Skull’s death would be merited, and the world would be better for it. And, as Natasha had predicted, seeing Pepper alone with the maniac left Tony apoplectic as well. The megalomaniac’s desire to murder people without any evidence of remorse, and to tear down their world for his own purposes was what left the biggest impression on both Tony and Steve.

Steve’s sense of outrage simmered, fueling his training efforts. He knew that he was well beyond his original bounds of shielding people and defending others. As promised, he honed himself into an even more formidable weapon. He had more to lose than he ever had before… he had a team that he regarded like family. He had his beloved best friend back from the dead and regaining his memory more all the time. He had a loving wife whom he adored. While he wrestled with moral implications and the desire to stay ‘a good man’, he was determined to prevent Red Skull from taking any of that from him.

It was satisfying to feel the weight of his shield on his arm again, to send it arcing against enemies to stop them from attacking foolish civilians or tearing their way into the UN building. The Hydra emblem reflected from enemy ships in the remaining mirror-like glass of the building. and called out to Steve for destruction. That part was easy and morally unambiguous. The emotions that came with it were murkier.

Still, he knew that the new Secretary of Defense, Pepper, Rhodey, and the others that had been inside the Chamber when Hydra opened fire on the building, at least as many as survived the initial enemy salvo, were in a shelter below the Chamber. It was not Stark-made, however, so he couldn’t know how long and well it would hold up under enemy fire. He suspected that Tony would insist on installing security measures ahead of time before Pepper visited anywhere again. It would slow their diplomatic efforts, but Steve understood. Given that her mission was by his suggestion, Steve agreed. If something happened to Pepper on a mission he assigned, Steve would never forgive himself.

In addition to his shield, Steve also wielded an arc-powered short rifle. Like Bucky, he was good with weapons. He lacked his friend’s in-born perfect aim, but was powered by a superior serum and had been practicing. Their first day back from Paris, he went to the base range at the same time
Darcy practiced. It felt good to him to be in the same room with her, even if it was a gun range. He was torn, but in the nicest way. She distracted him, but he couldn’t help but want to show off for her. He knew Bucky and Sam trained her, so he pushed himself to his best so he wouldn’t suffer in comparison to them. He was glad to see how good she was getting. Seeing was better than hearing it second-hand, when it came to something like that.

He found himself wishing now that Pepper knew how to shoot, or had long-range capabilities associated with Extremis. If it came to hand-to-hand combat, Pepper could defeat most opponents, but Hydra knew that. They would attack her from a distance. Rhodey usually carried weapons, but Steve knew that protocols would have required him to leave them outside the Security Council Chamber.

Red Skull’s Vorm squads were busy against Iron Man, his drones, Thor, and Quinjets piloted by Black Widow, Hawkeye, and Bucky. Steve got a good look at the vast size of the enemy army. Red Skull was aware that Avengers Tower was just blocks from the UN Building, so he brought a large attack force. Steve squinted in disbelief as he saw some Chitauri small craft join the battle. He needed ground forces and couldn’t afford to pull anyone out of the air. He took out a Hydra soldier with an arc rifle shot and spoke tersely into his comm. “Suit up, please, Dr. Banner and Dr. Ross. I need you on the ground at the UN Building.”

Tony saw the Hulks bounding from Avengers Tower to the UN Building, and crowed. “Merry-fuckin’-Christmas, bad guys!” As the tide of the ground battle turned, Tony shifted towards infiltrating the UN Building to rescue Pepper and the others.

Steve brought down a Vorm ship and caught his shield, wading into a squad of human soldiers. He smiled grimly as they panicked at the sight of the approaching goliaths. Red She-Hulk seemed to help Hulk focus his efforts towards complete enemy destruction, with less collateral damage to the surrounding area. It was also satisfying to see misogynistic Hydra members humiliated in battle by the female Hulk. Steve fought alongside the two until he felt they had a handle on the situation.

Then, Steve put the shield in front of him and cut a path through the squad of soldiers, pushing into the building at a run. The sounds of the battle outside were muffled. His boot steps echoed around him. An automated message Tony had programmed into the building’s PA system urged civilians to exit via the roof. A familiar shadow fell over the street as a SHIELD Helicarrier approached the roof of the UN building from the East River side. Civilians evacuated from the roof to the Helicarrier.

A Hydra squadron of more than twenty armed men attacked Steve, calling out notification that ‘Captain America is in the building!’ Though he was shot a few times and wounded with a knife (regardless of what Howard had asserted, it seemed to Steve that Hydra ALWAYS attacked him with pocket knives), Steve dispatched them with relative ease. As the last man fell, he heard the sound of applause. He looked up from where he knelt, delivering a final crushing blow with his shield. His gaze met that of the Red Skull. Steve jumped to his feet and began to stalk towards the other man.

Red Skull shook his head. “Inspiring performance! I should have known you survived our last encounter, Captain America. Somehow, you and I both always do that.”

Steve shook his head. “It can’t continue, Schmidt. You’ve displayed too much of a disregard for humanity.” He flexed his hands, eager to engage Red Skull, frustrated by how many times his enemy had turned tail to run from him in the past.

Red Skull’s tone was filled with scorn. “Humanity! I am beyond it.”
Steve shook his head. “You’re wrong, but also misguided in your desire. Being human is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” He gestured to Red Skull. “Surrender! Maybe in time you can learn what you’ve forgotten, what it means to be human.”

Red Skull shrugged, nonchalant. “If you are human, you are mortal. You can be killed. In that, I’m glad that you are so human, Captain.” He snapped his fingers and smiled as four squadrons of Hydra soldiers entered and filled the hall from opposite ends, all weapons trained on Captain America. Red Skull’s smile widened. “I have more soldiers than you do. You also forget that Time is on my side.” He waved his watch, creating a force field between them. He stepped into the center of the lobby, smug and safe behind the force field.

Steve shook his head. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that, if I were you, coward!” He took a deep breath and spoke into his comm. “Thor. Please land.”

Red Skull jeered. “Your friends won’t get here in time, Captain!”

Steve used his shield and his arc rifle to defend himself as the soldiers came closer, firing continuously. He spoke into his comm. “Hurry, please.”

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Bucky heard Steve’s words to Thor. Knowing that Steve felt outmanned enough to want Mjolnir available to him left Bucky frantic. He landed his Quinjet and set the auto-pilot to return it to Avengers Tower. Agitation showed in his efforts against enemy combatants. He wanted to get to Steve’s side, and each of them was in his way, so he removed them.

He’d listened in recent weeks as Steve considered and discussed questions of morality in their work. It reminded Bucky of his mission as a Howling Commando, his self-appointed mission. During WWII, Bucky Barnes was most famous as Captain America’s best friend, then as a crack shot in the good fight. The thing that only the other Howling Commandos fully appreciated was Bucky Barnes’ dedication to maintaining the image of Captain America… and Steve Rogers’ sanity. Bucky Barnes did those things that Captain America should not.

He was ready to do it again. Even more than his hatred of Hydra and each of his handlers over the decades, Bucky loved his friend. He needed to fulfill his mission.

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When Cap’s Hydra attackers were close enough that they hesitated to fire for fear of taking each other out, Steve dropped the rifle and held his right hand out. He continued to batter enemies with his shield. Seconds later, Mjolnir came to him. He clutched the hammer and willed lightning to spark through the soldiers. They fell unconscious all around him.

Red Skull stumbled under the barrage of lightning, but stayed on his feet, shaking his head in disbelief. “Who are you? Are you an illusion? Are you the Asgardian in disguise?”

Steve stood straight, holding Mjolnir out in front of him. The lightning sizzled against the Time force field. “I keep telling you that I’m just a kid from Brooklyn. You never listen!” The Time force field began to warp. Steve, jaw clenched tightly, focused Mjolnir’s force against it.

Red Skull laughed. “You think a little lightning can defeat Time?” The hungry look on his face as he stared at Mjolnir belayed his gibe.

Steve shook his head, almost mocking. “Nope. But it can hold your attention… I read reports from when I was gone. You like shiny symbols a lot.”
The Red Skull frowned at that, but then his face glowed with satisfaction. “You prove my long-held assertions with this display, Captain. We are more than men. We are meant to rule. We are as gods!” He held out a hand, beckoning to Mjolnir. Mjolnir, of course, didn’t budge at all.

Steve’s chuckle was full of derision. “You’re no god! You rule nothing of value, Red Skull. You’re not even much of a man. You cower at Thanos’ feet, using the scraps he gives you to eke out just enough power to delude yourself into believing that you’re more than you are. And, I’m no god, you fool! We’re stronger than most men and we heal faster, but that doesn’t make us better than anyone else. That takes heart. I was a better man than you when I was a 90-pound weakling. Like Erskine said, the serum took your bad qualities and made you worse…”

Red Skull growled with rage and lifted the watch high, yelling. “You presume too much, Captain!”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. The air around him began to sizzle even more. Tendrils of power gathered and sparked, spreading around the force field to reach the enemy on the other side of it. Nearby curtains and flags caught fire.

Over the comm., Iron Man yelled. “We have them! The safe room is clear, and the civilians are off the roof.”

Steve let out a tense breath and shifted his grip on Mjolnir. He slammed the hammer to the floor, sending out a shock wave that shattered the ground and knocked Red Skull off his feet. The Time force field collapsed as the madman lost consciousness. The building began to collapse around them, on them. Steve threw Mjolnir to pin Red Skull in place. Then, he held his shield over his head to protect himself from falling debris as he ran towards his fallen foe. He grabbed the other man, willed Mjolnir off of him, and dragged him.

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Those in the R&D safe room gasped as they saw jagged rips in space appearing in and over the UN Building. Darcy gritted her teeth, unable to tear her gaze from the sight. Lightning burst from windows and seams of the skyscraper, and smoke billowed out. It was a hellish sight.

Darcy put her face in her hands as the building collapsed onscreen. People screamed, alternating between watching events onscreen and looking out the window to see what they could spot from a few blocks away. Sirens sounded on the streets. The news commentators turned serious, recalling 9/11 as they watched the mighty building fall and the civilians still in the street fleeing in terror.

Jane jumped up from her laptop, and made her way across the safe room, hand on her back as she scurried to Darcy’s side. “You’ve heard the stories, Darcy! He and Natasha survived a rocket blast inside a building deep underground once, under the shield. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Darcy swallowed hard, pointing at the TV screen. “Thor’s okay. I’m not sure where Mew Mew is… looks like Thor’s looking for it, or something, while beating up the bad guys.” Jane’s eyes widened as she made a face at Darcy. Darcy breathed in and out nervously and continued to search the screen.

Ms. Basak came close. “Are you looking for the Captain?” Her gaze dropped to Darcy’s ring finger, and curiosity lit her face.

Darcy glanced at the other woman and nodded, then returned her gaze to the screen. “Come on!” She exhaled loudly when she caught sight of him, the shield catching her eye first since he was covered in debris and dust. Then, she made a choking noise. “What is he dragging behind him? Is
that…?” She cried out in frustration. “Why did you bring HIM out, Hon? He deserves to be buried!”

Ms. Basak touched Darcy’s shoulder. “The Captain is compassionate. He gives second chances.”

Darcy shook her head, calming from the initial shock of recognizing Red Skull. “I’d guess in this case, it’s more a matter of needing to know. He thought Red Skull died in 1945.” She grinned a bit as Ms. Basak looked at her, wide-eyed and mouthing ‘1945…’ in amazement.

Jane nodded. “You must be right. He wants to lock Red Skull up and turn the key himself.”

Darcy glanced at Jane and made a face. “Or, finish him off. He’s been training like crazy. I don’t think it’s just for the sake of gorgeous muscles that make me happy.” She noticed that more people close to them had stopped talking to stare and listen. “What? Look at him! My husband is fantastic!” Darcy turned her attention back to the screen. She made a choked noise as the figure on the ground behind Captain America moved, standing to stab him in the back. Steve dropped the shield from shock, and then turned to fight.

Red Skull’s strength was apparent as he went toe to toe with Captain America. They each reeled from the punches the other threw. Red Skull missed once and pulverized the remains of a building support instead. But, Steve was Red Skull’s better when it came to hand fighting, and he was even stronger than Red Skull. Darcy almost smiled as he knocked Red Skull to the ground and the people around her cheered him on.

Red Skull came up shooting. He threw a knife that caught Steve in the gut. Then, his ray blast grazed Captain America, despite a quick dodge. Darcy cried out as Steve fell to the ground, clutching his side.

She yelled again as a dark shape hurtled into Red Skull. Bucky went at the Hydra commander wildly, using the strength of his metal arm to its full extent. Red Skull fought back, just a bit stronger than Bucky. Bucky, however, was even more agile than Steve, and a better shot than either Red Skull or Captain America. It evened the match.

Steve struggled to his feet and staggered closer to Red Skull. He fell again, but this time it was because Falcon knocked Steve to the ground as he dropped Black Widow into the fray. Falcon offered Steve a hand up and called a Yinsen drone over to check his wounds, then rejoined the aerial fight.

Red Skull’s back was to a wall and he faced the wrath of the two Avengers whom he had trained. He snarled at them, raised his arm, and froze in place.

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Steve grimaced against the pain of the laser wound over his ribs. The Yinsen drone cleaned the wound and administered a local anesthetic. Around the drone, Steve kept his eyes on Bucky as he fought Red Skull. Natasha managed to get in close, too. Her movements puzzled Steve at first, until Red Skull raised his arm and screamed, standing stock still with an outraged and horrified look on his face.

Natasha’s smile was silky and mocking. “Are you looking for this?” She held the watch carefully as she backed away. Red Skull put his left hand on his right arm. Then, he grabbed Bucky to pull him closer, punching him furiously. They were locked in mortal battle.

The Yinsen drone turned to Steve. “The one you call Red Skull has an explosive device inside his
right arm. He has activated it.”

Horrified, Steve screamed Bucky’s name.

Red Skull whipped his gun up to fire at Natasha, only to have the gun smashed by Bucky’s metal arm. Then, Bucky stepped in even closer and shot Red Skull in the gut again and again, the word ‘Master’ echoing through the recesses of his mind. He heard Steve yell his name, but he emptied the clip anyway. He noticed that Hawkeye, shooting from a nearby perch, didn’t hesitate to put as many arrows in the man as he could. Bucky guessed that Hawkeye’s frustration over not being able to take revenge on Loki had something to do with that, in addition to Red Skull’s past with Natasha. He swore to thank the archer later. Bucky looked into Red Skull’s face, puzzled as the other man’s expression shifted towards mad amusement.

Red Skull clung to Bucky and laughed. Bucky struggled to pull away enough to free his hands to reach for more weapons.

On Steve’s order, the Yinsen drone grabbed Natasha and flew her away. She fought it, cursing in vitriol-filled Russian against the drone and Steve, but Red Skull most of all.

Steve switched on his boosters and rocketed straight at Red Skull and Bucky. He hit Red Skull as hard as he could with the edge of his shield. Bucky took advantage of Red Skull’s stunned reaction. He pulled two daggers, sliced Schmidt’s carotid artery with one, and then put the second dagger straight into the Hydra leader’s heart. Red Skull’s expression changed again, from gloating laughter to puzzled pain as all life faded from his eyes.

Bucky grunted, startled by the abrupt manner in which Steve used his boosters to lift him and fly away as Red Skull exploded. The blast knocked them out of the sky so they both tumbled end over end. When they rolled to a stop, Bucky frowned at Steve. “Punk! Just yellin’ my name doesn’t tell me there’s a bomb!”

Steve rolled to his side and shook his head against the ringing in his ears. “Right. Well, there was a bomb.”

Bucky lay his head back and let out a breath. “Good to know. Thanks.”

They both forced themselves to their feet and back into the thick of the battle.

***

After the Hydra forces were defeated, the Avengers’ debriefing meeting was short and to the point. Pepper and Rhodey were safe, and the new Secretary of Defense thanked the Avengers for saving his life, again. He was glad of the chance to finally thank Steve and the others for saving him once before, when he’d been Under Secretary of Defense, and on the Insight target list. He’d always had a contentious relationship with Dell Rusk, disagreeing with many of his policies and giving him trouble. He eagerly set up opportunities to meet with both Pepper and Hill to discuss a cooperative relationship between the Avengers and the US Department of Defense. He assured them that now-President Raiford was a supporter of both the Avengers and Coulson’s new SHIELD agency, and would work to ease their efforts to protect people and thwart the plans of Hydra and Earth’s other enemies.

Jane and Erik carefully stored the slice of the Time gem in a chamber beneath Avengers Tower, shielded extensively. The Avengers agreed to discuss it and the other Infinity Stones at their next meeting, to decide how best to keep them from Thanos. The moment the debriefing was over; Steve went to the locker room to shower and change. He showered for a long time, needing the
time to process Red Skull’s death and his jumbled feelings about the events of the day. The knife wounds in his back and gut had closed. The wound on his side was livid, but healing. After he dressed, he checked his phone and saw that the team, friends, and family were gathering on the rooftop garden deck for takeout and to celebrate. He made his way there slowly, his expression contemplative.

He sighed with relief as he stepped outside and Darcy ran to him, pulled him close, and kissed him. “Are you okay?” She was careful of his side, obviously aware of the blast he’d taken there. She ran her hands over him lightly, checking to see that he was well with fervent and loving need. The way she caressed him soothed more than the muscles she touched. Her softness was a balm to his soul, restorative. He moaned with contentment.

Up-tempo music played, and the others wore happy smiles. Tony was dancing his version of a jig, celebrating that Hydra’s original and highest head had fallen, at long last. Natasha was laughing, lighter than he’d seen her in a long time. She even kissed Hawkeye as she poked him for telling an especially bad joke. Sam and Rhodey were arm wrestling, while others placed bets and egged them on. Bucky cheered Sam on with loud cries of ‘Huzzah’ and promises of reward if he won.

Steve soaked it all in, and let out a slow breath. “Better now.”

Darcy looked up into Steve’s face and cupped her hand against his jaw. “Thank you for coming home to me.” He nodded, silent, grateful for the love between them. She swallowed hard. “What is it?”

Bucky stepped forward, scowling. “You’re such a PUNK! Everyone else is crazy happy, and you look like you feel guilty! Red Skull was a sadistic bastard… and the Universe is better off without him and his particular variety of Kraut insanity. You know he meant to take me out with him!”

Steve nodded. Bucky gave him a tight grin, apologetic. “I’m sorry you had to break me away from him.” Darcy looked from one man to the other. Bucky’s expression shifted. “I’m sorry if you feel like you were part of an up-close and personal death blow. I meant to kill him… but, I didn’t want to do it like that, with you in the thick of it.” Darcy put a hand on Bucky’s arm, not realizing she was touching his metal arm until she noticed his look of disbelief. She shrugged and patted the arm acceptingly. His lips twitched to a grin.

Steve nodded. “I know. You don’t have to do that, Bucky, never did. I take responsibility for my actions, good or bad. I’m no better than anyone else. There’s no reason for anyone to take on ugly duties in my place.” Bucky shook his head, dissenting. Both men could see that they would continue to have words about this issue. Both were grateful that they still had the chance to disagree and work through things.

Tony nodded, speculating. “Your image is like Teflon, Cap. The world believes you can do no wrong.” He sipped a beer, watching Steve’s frustration rise. Tony was affectionately bemused, but too happy that Pepper was safe and Red Skull was gone to concern himself with the particulars of Steve’s current mood.

Tony moved closer to where Bruce and Betty were both eating voraciously, laughing quietly together. Tony stood by Bruce for a moment and patted his shoulder. “Don’t forget to breathe!” He winked at Betty. She smiled at him.

Sam brought Steve a beer. “Aren’t you glad Schmidt’s dead, Steve?”

Steve shook his head. His expression was pained. “Yes. I’m glad! That’s what’s bothering me. I don’t like to relish a death like I do his...” His expression turned sheepish as Bucky scoffed at him. “It’s confusing, too. I believed he died back in ’45, right up until recently when I got a glimpse of
Yggdrasil in Jane’s lab. I was just getting used to the idea that he survived all that time... and, now he’s dead... again.” He looked at Jane, urgent vulnerability in his face. “That explosion couldn’t have transported him somewhere, could it? I mean... sometimes an explosion is just an explosion? Did you get readings on it?” Jane nodded and patted Steve’s arm, reassuring him as she moved towards the food.

Erik smiled at Steve indulgently. “Our readings didn’t show anything out of the ordinary, just an explosion. I’m glad that we have the slice of the Time gem, though. If he was still wearing that when he exploded, I would worry. Since we have it, I’m not worried. He’s dead, and gone for good.”

Hawkeye blew Natasha a proud kiss. “Nice take, ‘Tasha!”

She curtseyed jokingly, shrugged, and sipped her drink. “There’s a certain satisfaction in hammering that coffin shut.” Her expression was fiercely joy-filled, with no sign of conflicted emotions.

Darcy shrugged apologetically. “I’m happy he’s dead. He was über creepy, and out to hurt you, Hon! I want to take the remaining bone pieces and bury them in separate containers, so there’s no way they could ever come back together and regenerate him, like the Master vampire in ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’.” Bucky let out a dry chuckle and raised his brows, while Natasha shrugged approval. She averted her gaze, as though embarrassed to admit to something as childish as superstition.

Tony winked at Darcy. “Better vampires in that than those sparkle wusses!” She grinned back at Tony, nodding agreement.

Steve looked rueful. “So, who’s going to tell the clean-up crew to do that with Schmidt’s bones?”

Tony smirked. “I’m on it. I’ll send some Yinsen drones to the site and even toss a few bone pieces in a blast furnace. I don’t care if it seems silly or superstitious. Darcy’s right. Your arch nemesis was creepy. Who know what all he got up to over the past 70 years?” He pulled Pepper closer to him. She leaned her head down against his shoulder.

Darcy led Steve to a chair and pushed him down, then sat in his lap. He laughed at her when she asked if she was bothering his wounds. He held her close, relaxing more as he reveled in her nearness. He hated to admit the truth, but finally did. “Today, when Jane and Erik told me that Red Skull was on the scene, I hoped he would be dead by the time we were done. I held back a yell of triumph when he died.”

Bucky made a face. “You sound like you’re at Confession, Punk! He was a bad guy, and he’s gone now. He decided to kill himself. He was as good as dead, even before I stabbed him to make sure.”

Sam sat next to Bucky, letting their knees touch and nodding understanding.

Steve smiled sadly. “I know. Killing gets to me sometimes, though. I’ve been spoiled by having time away from it.” He sighed. “Sorry, everyone! I should thank you and commend you instead of second guessing our good results. Despite an enormous attack force, casualties were low. We saved a lot of innocent people today, and made the world a bit better and safer by ridding it of Red Skull. The first era of Hydra came to a long-overdue end today. Good work!”

Bottles and glasses were raised. Hawkeye toasted. “To the lives we saved!” Cheers were raised. Focusing on the good things obviously reassured Steve.

Tony chuckled. “You being a wet blanket isn’t a new thing, Cap. Maybe we should work on your
inspirational speaking.” He winked at Steve, as Steve chuckled ruefully.

Steve shrugged. “Guess so. At least I didn’t throw up…” Tony nodded. Steve trailed his fingers along Darcy’s arm while she shifted against him. “I’ve changed, though. I want more time away from battles. My life has changed.” He reached up and turned her head so that he could kiss her, softly and lingering.

Tony groaned as he sat down at a table, his expression contemplative. “I know what you mean. I retired once already, and know that I won’t live forever. I’d rather not ‘Avenge’ full-time. I prefer inventing, making things. Downtime feeds the creative beast in me, too. I’ll do what I have to, of course. If someone brings trouble, I’ll make ‘em regret it. But, I think we need to keep our eyes open for more ‘gifted’ individuals, good people to fill out the team roster and protect the Earth for our kids and grandkids.” He tossed a few grapes into his mouth and munched. Grapes were his favorite food now.

Steve chugged his drink, and held up his hand to catch another bottle that Bucky tossed his way. “I agree. We’re gonna have to figure out how to deal with Thanos and the Infinity Stones, and we should keep an eye out for potential Avengers to protect Earth going forward. For now, I’ll do right by our world, and know that all of you will, too. I think of you all like family.”

Tony toasted Steve. “So, Daddy dearest, you think you’ll ever retire? Most people do, by your age.”

Darcy teased. “You told me that Steve was the mommy, and YOU were the daddy.”

Tony snorted a laugh, nearly choking on a grape.

Steve kissed Darcy’s cheek and answered Tony. “Age is relative. But, like I said, I want more time away. So, sure! It’d be great to retire someday. Nobody with any sense wants to be a soldier forever, to stay at war. It’s hard on the spirit. I like being Steve Rogers better than being Captain America. I’d like more time to sketch and paint, to read, to learn new things. I’d like to travel… to enjoy the journey and destination, rather than just battle.” He ran fingers up Darcy’s arm again. “I’d like to have kids, and enjoy time with them.” She kissed his cheek and nuzzled against his ear, while he breathed in her scent and let contentment flow over him.

Bucky muttered under his breath. “The way you two go at it, you should have kids any time now.” Steve shot him a look and gave him the finger behind Darcy’s back.

Sam chuckled. “Don’t forget Ultimate Fighting!” Hawkeye laughed at the suggestion.

Steve shook his head. “Nah. If I get out, it won’t be to go into something violent.” He ran his hand up and down Darcy’s back, savoring the way she leaned into his touch. Pain was fading and anticipatory desire taking its place.

Sam nodded, grinning as he gestured to Darcy. “At least you know what makes you happy, now. That first time you came to the V.A.? Man! You were a repressed mess!” Steve laughed at that description.

Darcy ran a hand over the muscles of Steve’s arm and shoulder as she listened to him and Sam laughing together. She watched the way that Bucky turned towards them, smiling with open affection and happiness. Bucky held himself with confidence and pride, comfortable among friends. Feeling her gaze, he gave her a flirty wink. She winked back.

Then, her gaze was drawn to Tony and Pepper. Pepper was the Sun in his life, the center of his
erratic orbit. Yet Darcy knew how much Pepper adored Tony and needed his wild, loving energy. Steve had shared the secret of Tony and Pepper’s marriage, and Darcy thought that was one of the cutest things she’d ever heard. Sitting next to Tony, Rhodey nudged his best friend and told a joke that had all three of them laughing.

At the edge of the group, Bruce and Betty had their heads close together while they ate and talked. Whether they were discussing science(!), philosophy, or a rock concert they once saw… they were perfectly matched and in sync.

Hawkeye perched on the wall, Natasha standing next to him, neatly finishing a plate of food while they chatted about fighting techniques and the most recent episode of Doctor Who. They rarely touched, but always seemed as intimate as if they did.

Next, Darcy’s attention was drawn by the way that Thor caressed Jane’s baby bump. It eased Jane’s tension. Her eyes fluttered as she relaxed into Thor’s touch. The slight scientist expanded daily, now that she was in the second trimester. She glowed, her beauty even more striking. And Thor, while he was nearly double Jane’s size, handled her with such reverent tenderness, that it was heart wrenching to see. Erik was watching the lovers, too, his fond gaze clear, sharp, and sane now.

Steve brought her attention back to him, with a light nip at her neck. “You okay there, Sweetheart?” He kissed her skin softly, and she sighed with pleasure.

Darcy gave him an eager kiss, just this side of decent. She smiled. “I am. I’m happy! I was just appreciating all that we have now. Six months ago, I had a weird internship, three friends, no home, and an immature boyfriend. I didn’t have any family to speak of. Now… I’m married to the best man I’ve ever known, about to become an Auntie, and I have this super assortment of friends that I love as much as anyone ever loved their family. I’m working on an MBA and a Physics degree. I have a job where I get paid to take care of the people I love, AND to help smart people make the world better. You’re my home and my love. Life’s good.”

Steve nodded and kissed her deeply, savoring the passion that simmered between them. “Life is good. And, I know what you mean. Six months ago I was stuck in grief and depression, dwelling on my past and what might have been. I was working shady missions for SHIELD, more and more dissatisfied with the agency. I didn’t have close friendships.” Darcy stroked his back, soothing and stimulating him as she leaned in for a kiss. He almost forgot they were in public, but stopped before getting too intimate. His voice was husky. “I love you, Darcy. I’m glad you’re happy. You make me happier than I ever knew I could be. You’re my home, too, Sweetheart.”

She grinned. “Wait ‘til we get back home! I’ll make ya happy!” She kissed him again, ignoring Sam’s teasing about newlyweds needing to get a room.

Steve kissed her, stood, and shifted her to the chair. “Guess I’d better carb up, then, Sweetheart.” She laughed and admired the view as he walked away from her. He filled a plate. Darcy followed, and did the same. When she started to move away from the serving dishes, Steve stopped her and added a scoop of pasta to her plate, then winked at her. She chuckled and took a big bite of it.

As they sat down to eat, they heard Pepper cry happily, “Phil! Welcome!”

Director Coulson walked out the door to the rooftop garden, his face covered with bandaged cuts. Hawkeye tipped his beer bottle towards his former boss. “Hey, man! If you’re gonna party with us, you gotta lose the tie and jacket. You’re making me tense.” Natasha chuckled.

Coulson shrugged his jacket off with a pained groan, and loosened his tie. “Don’t mind if I do.” He sat, sighing as he relaxed.
Darcy’s brows went up. “I didn’t know your tie COULD come off, Agent iPod Thief!” Hawkeye barked a laugh and handed Coulson a beer. Coulson smiled at Darcy, still pleased to hear her use that nickname again.

Steve appraised Coulson. “Are you okay, Phil? You look pretty banged up.”

Coulson sipped his beer. “It’s been something of a day. Even YOU looked worse for wear, Captain.” Steve shrugged.

Sam boasted. “Taking down the founder of Hydra, holding back an alien army, and saving over 90% of the civilians present will do that to you. Red Skull is dead.” He shot a proud look Bucky’s way.

Coulson’s frown shifted into a smile. “Excellent!”

Natasha raised a brow. “You’re doing that thing.”

Hawkeye nodded. “Yeah. You’re secretly bursting to tell us something, but doing your damnedest to play it cool. It must be big.”

Coulson sighed, his tone mild. “Honestly? Yes. I’m pleased with how it all turned out. That kind of bothers me, though. I don’t like to rejoice over killing people... even when it’s necessary and beneficial to the greater good.” Darcy stilled, seeing that Coulson was being completely open and sincere for once.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh, my God! There are two of them!” He gestured towards Steve. “The wet blanket club is to the left, please.” Coulson looked at Steve, taken aback at the comparison, and then pleased.

Steve shrugged awkwardly, and swallowed the food he was chewing. “Try to get past it before you talk to your people about the good work they did. If you don’t rejoice enough, you’ll hear criticism of your motivational speaking skills.” Tony made a rude noise, and Steve laughed.

Coulson glanced at Tony and chuckled. “Thanks for the advice.”

Hawkeye jumped to his feet, staring at a text message on his phone. “You guys knocked off HOW many Hydra leaders?”

Natasha read over Clint’s shoulder. “Was there a guy with two names? Or did you eliminate... is it five heads of Hydra?” Sam whistled approvingly.

Coulson nodded. “We had a… situation… earlier, where I was forced to shoot Whitehall because he was about to kill someone.”

Sam interjected. “I imagine they were pretty happy you shot first.”

Coulson shook his head. “Not so much…” He shrugged it off, his expression rueful. “Whitehall was an alias for a Dr. Werner Reinhardt, a German scientist and officer that Peggy Carter imprisoned in 1945. He… came upon a way to regain his youth, and took the alias of Daniel Whitehall, after Alexander Pierce had him released in the 1980’s.” He turned to Natasha. “So, that was one, not two heads.”

Hawkeye started laughing, “You’ll never take me alive?” He showed his phone to Natasha and she smiled.
Coulson grinned and sipped his beer. “Tell May that payback’s coming her way.” He let out an impatient noise. “I know! I improvised, and it was cheesy.” He chuckled. “The Hydra higher-up we were scamming bought it. He wanted me dead pretty badly, so I’m sure that helped…” He set the empty bottle down and gestured for Hawkeye to pass him another. “You, at least most of you, know what SHIELD is meant to be… what Peggy Carter meant for it to be when she pushed for an acronym that spelled the word SHIELD.” Bucky chuckled. Darcy reached for Steve’s hand and gave it a squeeze. Coulson smiled as he noticed the gesture. “SHIELD was meant to have heart, compassion, and… loyalty.” He looked at Steve earnestly. “It occurred to me that as Hydra is the opposite, they lack all that. So, we made Mr. Bloom think that the others had targeted him and Mr. Bakshi, the man most likely to fill Whitehall’s place. Bloom had The Sheik, The Banker, and The Baroness killed. As soon as that was done, two of my specialists went in and took out Mr. Bloom and his guards. Bakshi, I promised to a, pardon me, pain-in-my-ass Air Force General, Talbot, so he was captured again.”

Hawkeye snorted, knowing how much Coulson understated things. Then, he looked at his phone again and showed it to Natasha. She patted his hand and shook her head as he muttered about feeling sorry for Lance Hunter.

Betty looked up from her plate of food. “Glenn Talbot? He’s a General now? That was quick!”

Phil froze, glancing at Bruce to see his reaction with no small amount of anxiety, his beer bottle still poised for another sip. Bruce grinned ruefully and shook his head. Phil gulped his beer. Betty rolled her eyes. “I only went out with him to please my… the… General Ross! It didn’t mean anything. So, stop acting like it did.”

Bruce huffed slightly and went to refill his plate, then sat by Betty again and shrugged. “Sorry. All it meant was that your father couldn’t stand me. We pretty well established that, regardless of Glenn.” Betty grinned and kissed Bruce’s cheek. He took her hand and kissed it, then returned to eating.

Coulson frowned and shook his head, his gaze on Bruce and Betty. “I forgot about that. Sorry.” He shook his head, eyeing Betty and obviously trying to imagine how someone who loved Bruce Banner could have a romance with Glenn Talbot.

Bruce shrugged again. “Sounds like you’ve had a big day, Director.” He turned to Steve and Tony. “And, it sounds like you guys can take that retirement early! Losing so many resources at once has got to hurt Hydra!”

Coulson’s eyes shifted from Tony to Steve, widening with surprise. He cleared his throat and let out a dry assertion. “My team isn’t equipped to handle alien armies.”

Steve grinned, and glanced at Darcy. “I’m not going anywhere yet, Phil. We’re planning for the future, though.”

Weariness showed in Phil’s face. He looked thoughtful. “You’d be hard to replace.”

Tony interrupted. “Maybe I can build a Cap replacement! Bruce has helped me with some exciting ideas.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “Exciting…may not be the right word.” Betty asked him questions in a low, concerned tone.

Steve frowned at Tony and Bruce, and then gave Darcy and Bucky an apologetic look. “A Hydra scientist we captured mentioned that Hydra has Loki’s scepter and is experimenting on people with
it to ‘enhance them as weapons for Hydra use.’ We need to put a stop to that. But, I’d be interested to know more about the results, and would love it if we could help some of those people, and maybe even convince them to use any enhancements for good. It’s been suggested that the scepter might have a stone in it as powerful as the Tesseract.” Bucky made a slight growling noise, while Thor looked from Steve to Coulson with curious interest.

Coulson looked Steve in the eye. “An Infinity Stone?” He smiled when Steve nodded slowly. “We should share research on those sometime.” Coulson made a face, looking around at the others. “I’m working on finding additional Hydra Bases. If I get wind of Loki’s scepter being at one, I’ll let you handle it. As I said, we’re not equipped to handle alien armies, not as well as the Avengers. All-powerful objects of the gods are not something I like for my team to handle any more than necessary, either.” He grinned at Thor. “If there IS a god of cleaning up the mess after battle, I’d love to meet them sometime.”

Thor grinned and shook his head. Jane had fallen asleep against him and he didn’t want to wake her, so he didn’t speak.

After everyone had finished eating and began to talk about going home for the night, Steve offered another toast. “To the Avengers, our friends, and those we love. May we continue to succeed in looking after each other, protecting the Earth, and doing good to make our world better.”

Everyone replied with their own toast response or cheer.

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As they entered their guest house later, Steve pulled Darcy close and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and looked up into his eyes. “You make my world better, Steve. You know that, right?”

He kissed her with soft reverence. “Loving you is what makes me happiest. So, I’m glad to hear that.” He put his forehead against hers. “You make my world better, too, so much better. I feel like I really came back to life when I got to know you.”

She could feel him trembling. Warm and happy in his embrace, Darcy smiled. “Let’s get some rest. It was a long day. It’s almost tomorrow. And, who knows what tomorrow will be like?”

He grinned. “I can take it, so long as I get to come home with you again, forever.”

She led him to the bedroom. “You promised me every bit of forever that we can get.”

He nodded. “I did. And, I always tell the truth.”

She snorted a laugh. “You absolutely do not, Steve Rogers! But, you did when you said that, and I’m holding you to it.”

The End.

Chapter End Notes

Darcy’s Outfit when Steve returned from Niflheim AND when he proposed-
**I Believe (When I Fall in Love), by Stevie Wonder.**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H--_-gPX3Nw

**Just Say Yes, by Snow Patrol.** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGO_Ba9edlo

**What a Wonderful World, Louis Armstrong.** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3yCcXgbKrE

https://img0.etsystatic.com/017/0/5708111/il_570xN.496852560_aieo.jpg

fromGrid=1&sku=GRP04629&mcat=148203&cid=616859&search_params=p+1-n+10000-c+616859-s+5-r+-t+-ni+1-x+-lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-pp+2769+14&search=0&origin=browse&searchkeyword=&selectedsku=27566626#p+1-n+10000-c+616859-s+5-r+-t+-ni+1-x+-pu+-f+false+1-lr+-hr+-ri+-mi+-pp+2769+14
Women’s wedding band 1

**Piano Cover of Lovesong by The Cure.** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wAJ74jfwLE


**Bride Darcy** (I suck at Photoshop, but you get the gist).
https://40.media.tumblr.com/fd0ef86f3d2f732ac8b149286cdef5dc7/tumblr_ntjtppvwIl00gn56o1_5

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