Simple, Not Easy

by LJC

Summary

Darcy should have seen it coming. She couldn't hang around the spandex crowd forever and not end up with a great big target painted on her back eventually. She was just surprised it took Loki so long. (AU for The Avengers)

Notes
This story is all Lunik's fault.

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Also, for anyone who got all excited when they saw it had been updated, so sorry! On February 7th, I re-cut it into 20 chapters for flow/pacing. It's still the same story you read--just with two of the previous long chapters cut in half. Sorry for the confusion!

ETA: This story was written in October 2011-January 2012 and as such, as AU for the events of *The Avengers*. 
Chapter 1

Darcy should have seen it coming. She couldn't hang around the spandex crowd forever and not end up with a great big target painted on her back eventually. She was just surprised it took Loki so long.

To be fair, he seemed just as surprised as she was. He'd been expecting Jane to be in Jane's apartment, wearing Jane's bathrobe and eating Jane's Pop-Tarts. One mortal being much like the other, he didn't seem to notice he'd got the wrong one until it was too late.

So now she was sitting in the middle of a rooftop in New York in her pyjamas and Jane's flannel bathrobe, barefoot and clutching her messenger bag to her chest while Loki paced back and forth, wind catching at his green cloak and whipping it around his body.

"So, like, are you gonna kill me?" Darcy finally asked and Loki turned to look at her as if he'd forgot he'd just yanked her out of her best friend's apartment and deposited her on a gravel-covered roof however many blocks away.

He peered down at her, smiling faintly. "I might."

"Okay." Darcy started braiding her hair to keep it from blowing in her face.

Loki gathered his cloak around him, and stared down at her with a faintly puzzled expression. "Why aren't you afraid of me?"

"Are you kidding? I'm totally freaked out. I mean, you killed like four S.H.I.E.L.D. guys last week. One of them was Dave, the guy I bummed smokes off, even. One day, I'm buying him a pack of Reds, the next day he's crushed underneath an SUV in Midtown. There's a part of my brain totally stuck on 'Oh God oh God please don't kill me' but I popped a Xanax when you first took me hostage."

"What is Xanax?"

"It's an anti-anxiety med. I have a stash left over from when I was defending my thesis. You are scary, but trust me—so was the head of my department. The Xanax was pretty much the only way I got through it. So the only reason I'm not curled up in a foetal position sobbing right now is 'cause I'm medicated."

He regarded her like a very clever toddler who had mastered using a spoon for the first time. "You are a strange mortal."

"Pretty much. So, what's your deal, anyway?" Darcy was getting a crick in her neck from staring up at him. She'd never realised from the news footage how tall he was. Or maybe it was just the ridiculous helmet. "I mean, nobody wakes up one morning and says 'I am going to be a supervillain!'"

"Your puny mortal mind cannot compre—"

"C'mon—there's no-one else here." Loki actually blinked at her, caught mid-insult. "And you're probably gonna kill me anyway, so why not just monologue for a while? I'm a very receptive audience, what with the kidnapping and drugs and all."

"And why should I tell you—a silly mortal girl—any of my secrets?"
Darcy shrugged. "Who else you gonna tell?"

The look on his face, Darcy figured she was a goner. She clutched her bag closer to her, as if it were a talisman. She wished she still had her taser. The S.H.I.E.L.D. guys wouldn't let her keep it in her bag (Coulson had said something about Class A misdemeanours and conceal carry laws in New York), so it was currently sitting under her bed in her studio apartment. Not that she would have tried to tase Loki. It was one thing to totally tase a human Thor that one time. He'd been yelling at her. Also, human. But she figured Loki would just shrug it off, and then rip out her spleen or something.

"What if I told you that one day I woke to find out I was not Loki Odinson at all?"

"What do you mean?"

"My father stole me for his own. I bear not a single drop of his blood. Thor is no more my brother than I am yours. And no-one thought to tell me the most important fact of my existence."

Darcy stared at him, eyes narrowed.

"Get. Out. Seriously? That's your thing? That you're adopted? I'm adopted, and you don't see me trying to take over the city."

Loki's face—not exactly easy to read even on a good day—went blank. Then he sat down cross-legged opposite her. Darcy had to stop herself from scooting backward out of reflex.

"Did your parents hide your foundling status from you?"

"Of course they did!" Darcy actually laughed, which she pretty much chalked up to the combo of nerves and drugs. "I mean, I knew since I was in the sixth grade. We had that chapter in bio about genetics, and I pretty much figured it out since my folks both have AB blood, and mine is O and that's, like, seriously impossible. But they sat me down and told me when I was sixteen. Blah blah was I mad, blah blah did I want to find my birth parents, you know. All that stuff. Whatever."

"Did you not hate them for their deceit?"

"What? No. They're still my parents."

"How can you say that?" Loki asked, and he sounded genuinely mystified.

"I dunno. 'cause it's true?" Darcy shrugged. "Mom is still the one who changed my diapers and stuck Band-Aids on me when I got scraped up, and grounded me for sneaking out, and taught me to ride a bike, and the difference between Socialism and Marxism. We're cool."

He appeared to digest this, the corners of his mouth twisted in a frown.

"What about your mom?" Darcy asked.

Loki's frown deepened. "I have not thought of my mother in a very long time."

"I bet she's badass."

That made Loki smile. "When Laufey and the jötnar invaded my father's chamber while he slept, she fought one of them off herself, in her gown and all her jewels."

"I knew it!"

His smile faded again, so quickly she thought she had almost imagined the expression of fondness.
"She would not have had to, if I had not tricked them into the heart of Asgard so I could slay their king."

"Okay, so... I can see why you're conflicted," Darcy tried to channel her therapist Dr Cunningham, instead of gibbering in terror and possibly losing control of her bowels.

"'My King', she called me when they brought me Gungnir. She said it with such pride, and in that moment I wanted to please her so much. To be the king my rash, impetuous brother could never be. A king Asgard would be proud of."

He gazed off into the distance, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

"I would never have let them harm a hair on her head! They should have known—they should have trusted me that much." His voice dropped from an angry shout to a whisper. "But no. The second my brother returned, she looked at me like a monster. For doing what he wished to do, and was banished for trying! For destroying our enemies and protecting the Nine Realms."

Darcy didn't know what to say to that, so she didn't say anything. The only noises on the rooftop were distant traffic sounds from below, and the creak of Loki's leather gauntlets as he curled and uncurled his fingers into fists. His head was bowed, and so she couldn't see his eyes. Only watch his chest rise and fall with each breath as he composed himself.

"So, did you ever... you know, find your birth parents?" Darcy asked finally, trying to keep her tone conversational.

"My father killed my blood-mother in battle, then stole me as an infant from where I been left, exposed, to die. Then I killed my blood-father myself."

Darcy's mouth dropped open in shock. "Wow, that's harsh!"

Loki shrugged. "He was jötunn—my father's greatest enemy. I did it... I did it to prove that cuckoo or not, I was Odin's son. But it was too late." There was the creak of leather again as he steepled his fingers. "My mother, father, my brother... they all reviled me for what I was. What I had no part in choosing—my choice was made for me when Odin took me from the Jötnar and claimed me for the Æsir."

"Oh Em Gee. So you had an existential identity crisis? That's why you totally tried to kill Thor in New Mexico with an evil Transformer? Couldn't you just go on a bender or become a forest ranger or something? No, you gotta raze a small New Mexico town to the ground by fire?"

"It seemed the thing to do."

"That's what I mean. I find out I'm adopted, my Jewish parents totally cave and let me get a tattoo out of guilt. You raze a town to the ground by fire. Again, I ask you... why supervillain? Everybody thought you were dead—why not go with it? Have a fresh start here in Midgardstown?"

"I was raised a Prince of the Æsir. I was raised to rule."

"So why couldn't you rule a desk job, or become a movie star, or whatever? You have mad shape-changing skills! You would totally rock in Hollywood. And you'd never need Botox. But here we are—on a rooftop in... Jesus, are we in Queens? In Queens because you were gonna snatch your brother's girlfriend and got the wrong girl."

"And I am already regretting my mistake. Do you always talk so much when you are in mortal danger?"
"Pretty much, yeah. Look. So your mom and dad lied to you. It totally sucks. I get that. But doesn't the fact that your dad chose you mean anything? I mean, he could have left you to die, right?"

"Would that he had."

"Seriously, Marilyn—you don't need to take over the world. You need therapy. Like, serious face-time with a Cognitive Behavioural Therapist. And possibly psycho-active meds would not go awry. Has it ever occurred to you that you might have Seasonal Affective Disorder? I mean, you could get one of those lights—"

"Do not presume to tell me what I need!" Loki roared, fury coming off him in waves, and Darcy flinched.

"Okay, and now we're back to me wetting myself. Awesome."

Darcy stared at him, sitting there with his cloak wrapped around him, her reflection in his shiny horned helmet distorted and pale. A muscle twitched in his jaw, and she fully expected one of those spiny knife things to flash from his hands and bury itself in her chest. But he didn't move.

"Look, if you're gonna kill me, then can you get it over with? Because I'm gonna be needing more therapy at this rate. And S.H.I.E.L.D.'s medical coverage probably doesn't cover PTSD from getting my dumb ass held hostage by gods."

The fury drained away, and Loki was watching her again with that weird sort of amused smile.

"You're funny, little cuckoo."

"That's me—the funny sidekick. I just never realised being Jane's research assistant would make me Robin the Boy Hostage with her boyfriend's crazy brother. Go, me."

"Do you truly think I'm mad?"

"I don't think going around kidnapping people is particularly sane." She wrapped Jane's flannel bathrobe tighter around her as a gust of wind grabbed at the loose braid and blew hair into her mouth. "So... you're adopted. Is that, I dunno, normal in Asgard?"

"Fosterage? Not uncommon. Fosterage of a frost giant child? Unheard of. I was raised to believe they were monsters. Worse than monsters; unfeeling, inhuman beasts."

"So... not only were you adopted, you're not even the same, um... species? But you look, well, not so frosty and no so giant to me."

"I was left to die—an abomination even to other monsters."

Darcy's mouth dropped open in shock, and she snapped it close with a click of her teeth. She wasn't supposed to feels sorry for the dude, but she almost did. "Wow. Harsh."

"And you? Why were you abandoned?" He turned his green-eyed gaze on her, the intensity of his stare making her want to squirm.

"Oh, it was totally an open adoption. My birth mother was some teen who gave me up for adoption, and my parents picked me from like a line-up of white kids or whatever."

"Do you know who sired you?"

"Nope, but I could find out if I wanted to. If, like, I needed a kidney or some poor bastard knocks me
up or something, I probably would want a complete medical history. But until then?” She shrugged. “It just doesn't bug me.”

"You are a strange girl,” he said after a long moment.

"Tell me about it." Darcy flipped her hair back over her shoulder and started re-braiding it.

"So you discovered you were a cuckoo in their nest, yet you did not resent them for it?"

"Sure I freaked out at first. But I can get why they didn't tell me when I was little." Darcy rested her chin in her hand, feeling weird for talking about things she hadn't talked about with anyone—except her therapist—since high school with the immortal Loki, trickster of Asgard.

"Kids already feel like freaks—why add to that by telling them the person who gave birth to them gave them away? My folks wanted to wait til I was older, and could understand the sitch. It's not their fault I totally could have handled it when I was eleven. They were waiting til I was ready, and I was waiting til they were ready. There was a lot of waiting. I was apparently named 'April'. Do I look like an 'April' to you?"

Loki gave a one-shoulder shrug. "All you mortals look alike to me."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "I think my mom was way more freaked out than my dad. Like she was scared I would freak and be mad. We had kinda a messed up relationship and were always fighting, and she figured I'd reject her. But seriously, she's my mom. In my family, screaming at each other is kinda how we show affection anyway. Not in an after school special way or anything."

"I do not understand the reference, but I think I can glean your meaning. My brother shows affection by striking me—generally on the arm or shoulder. As does Sif, and the Warriors Three. In truth, I prefer words to blows and bruises."

"Exactly. See, you totally get it." Darcy chewed on the end of her braid absently. "It's just I'm wired differently than she is, and she could never figure me out 'cause I wasn't interested in being a cheerleader or whatever. But that has nothing to do with me being adopted. That just has to do with my mom not knowing what to do with a kid who'd rather be inside on her computer than out in the sunshine like normal children."

Darcy made air-quotes around 'normal children' before she realised she had no idea if Loki even knew what air-quotes meant.

"My mother always favoured my brother—the child of her body—over me. The lesser brother. The tricksy one, better in the shadows than on the battlefield. All of Asgard favoured Thor over me," he added bitterly.

"Please. Your brother's like a giant Labrador puppy. Of course people like him. Everybody likes puppies. They bring you your slippers and shit. Whatever. You grew up with him, am I wrong?"

Loki actually smiled.

"Okay, yeah, sure—even his muscles have muscles. If you like that sorta thing."

"And you don't?"

"I am not immune to a little bit of man-candy. But please, he only had eyes for Jane. Even after she hit him with the van. Twice."
Loki’s eyes widened. "His lady love hit him with her car?"

"Hells yes! And I tased him. Oh yeah. I did," she said as his glee turned to a look of pure astonishment. "What? He was yelling at me. I warned him first. Not my fault he didn't listen."

His shoulders began to shake, and a giggle—seriously, a girly little giggle—escaped his lips. "Oh, that is too rich—the mighty Thor, felled by a tiny mortal girl with a toy."

"Hey! It's a state of the art Human Electro-Muscular Incapacitation Device!" Darcy protested, but the god of mischief was actually almost crying with laughter.

Loki was actually laughing. At her. If it weren't for the fact that she was still pretty sure he planned to kill her, she'd have punched him in the nose.

"Your brother totally misses you," she said, and the laughter stopped. "Every time you pull this shit, his big puppy face gets all sad like he's been denied treats."

His face grew very still, and once again Darcy wondered if he was just going to pick her up and toss her off the rooftop.

"I must think on this," Loki said, and then the son of a bitch disappeared into thin air.

"Seriously?" she asked the empty air, and then began digging through her bag for her phone.
Of course they came in a helicopter. Black Widow was piloting (of course Natasha knew how to fly a chopper) and said nothing as Hawkeye lowered a rope ladder for her. He gripped her forearms as Darcy hauled herself up like she was trying to climb the rope in 6th grade gym class. One last tug and Darcy was sprawled somewhat inelegantly into the passenger seat.

"Nice jammies," Clint said, mouth close to her ear so she could hear him over the roar of the wind and rotating blades.

"Shut up," Darcy said, starting to shake. Clint's response was to wrap her in one of those foil blankets like you always saw in clips about astronauts. She felt like a frozen burrito, but it did keep her warm as they headed back to the Tower.

She only threw up once she was back at S.H.I.E.L.D., in the ladies room on the second floor which was far enough away from the offices that no-one could hear her. She rinsed her mouth out at the sink, and dug through her bag for a stick of gum.

After three hours of mandatory debriefing by Agent Coulson, Deputy Director Hill, and finally Director Fury himself, Darcy and Jane got moved into the apartments in the Stark Mansion (which a bunch of the S.H.I.E.L.D. guys were already calling the "Avengers Mansion"), because it was a more secure location.

It was pretty damn secure, Darcy discovered, when she tried to get a pizza delivered and they wouldn't even let the dude into the foyer.

After that, Tony Stark staffed the kitchens with his personal chefs and let Darcy order whatever she wanted, so long as it didn't involve anything needing to be flown in special. Seeing as all she'd wanted was a Brooklyn slice, she decided Stark had probably added that last bit for Jane's benefit.

Which was hilarious, because Jane survived on coffee, Pop-Tarts, and Thor. As if Stark didn't know.

However, security or not, Darcy wasn't particularly surprised when she stepped out of the elevator at work a few weeks later, expecting to see the labs on level seven, and instead there was green grass beneath her feet and something that looked suspiciously like Belvedere Castle off in the distance.

"Central Park, Marilyn? Was stranding me in Queens not enough?"

Darcy turned in a circle and sure enough, there was Loki sitting on a park bench, feeding the pigeons. He was, of course, sitting directly in front of a black and white "Do Not Feed The Pigeons" sign.

"Who is this 'Marilyn'?” Loki asked, flicking shallow handfuls of millet to the birds fighting at his feet.

"You, you drama-llama. Oh my God, enough with the kidnapping shit! Why can't you text me and meet me for coffee at the corner Starbucks like a normal person?"

"Would you have come?" he asked.

"Hell no. A squad of S.H.I.E.L.D. guys would have met you there with a rocket launcher or some shit."
"Then you can clearly see why I found this tactic preferable."

Darcy sat down on the bench next to him, and dug through her shoulder bag for her Xanax. She swallowed one dry, and made a face, before turning back to the god of mischief.

"So why me?"

"You amuse me."

"So get cable. Comedy Central has some hi-larious shows. I'm sure one of them would push your buttons."

"But none would provide such charming company," Loki said with a slightly smarmy smile, inclining his head slightly in her direction.

"Okay, now I know you're lying. People have said a lot of things about me—great rack, mad awesome X-box skills, comprehensive knowledge of Ultimate Fighting World Championships going back the last five years. But charming? Fuck no."

"Are all humans so foul-mouthed as you?" Loki asked as he brushed crumbs from his hands and the bag of seed disappeared into thin air.

"You're in New York. You tell me." Darcy crossed her arms, and glared at him. "Do I need to get a new script for Xanax? I need to know now before this becomes a pre-existing condition."

"Will I kill you, do you mean? Perhaps. But not today."

"Awesome. In that case, I think you should buy me a pretzel, 'cause there's no way I'm getting back in time for lunch. And today was stir-fry day. I love stir-fry day."

Loki stared at her, a cat-like smile playing about his lips. Darcy held her breath until he bowed his head slightly, lifting his hand and gesturing to a nearby vendor.

Darcy stood and put one foot shakily in front of the other, swallowing and lifting her head as Loki fell in step behind her.

The pretzel vendor gave her that apathetic look that most of the park vendors shared—like he couldn't care less if she actually bought something.

"One large regular pretzel, extra mustard, please."

"That'll be six dollars." His tone was just as bored as his expression.

Darcy gave Loki a look, and he handed over the bills.

"They're not going to like turn to leaves or anything after we walk away, are they?"

"You take me for a cheat?" He looked theatrically affronted, and Darcy just rolled her eyes.

"Let's look at your track record, shall we? And anyway, the guy probably has a wife and nine kids to support." She turned back toward the pretzel cart. "Hey, buddy, are you married?"

That, at least, seemed to shock the pretzel guy out of his stupor. "No. Why, you interested?"

"Ew. No. I was just trying to prove a point." They started to walk back to the bench, the warm pretzel dripping mustard onto the side of her hand. "I can't believe I just got perved on by the pretzel
"Cart guy."

"See? You are charming."

Darcy snorted, and caught the drip of mustard on her tongue. "How come nobody notices you wandering around looking like a Renaissance Faire reject?"

"Humans see what they wish to see. Is this better?" One second he was standing there in his helmet and green and black leather get-up, the next he was wearing a suit and overcoat.

"I'd rather be seen with a supervillain than a Harvard MBA," Darcy pointed out, wishing she'd got him to spring for a soda as well. The salty pretzel was making her thirsty.

The suit and overcoat melted back into his everyday finery. "So demanding."

"You're the one who decided to kidnap me. Again. Reap the whirlwind." She licked mustard off her fingers, and tossed the crumpled wax paper wrapping in a garbage bin at the side of the path. "Why did you kidnap me again, anyway?"

"I wished to continue our discussion."

"You kidnapped me... because you want to talk."

"Yes."

"Not, like, use your spooky magical shape-shifting powers to take my place and infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know! You're... you."

"You dare to mock me?"

She pulled a pill bottle from the depths of her shoulder bag, and pointed at the label. "Xanax."

"Ah—your magical elixir of calm."

"Isn't there a club for supervillains where you can hang out with Dr Doom and Magneto, and debate who has the awesomest helmet, or something?"

"You are the only mortal I have met who has had an experience close to my own."

"Don't you have any friends?" Darcy asked, curiosity winning out over panic for the moment.

"My childhood companions were Thor and Sif. I spent most of my time alone with my books."

"Okay, what about a girlfriend? Or, you know, boyfriend. Whatever."

"I nursed an affection in my youth for the Lady Sif, but nothing came of it."

"Excellent choice. She's smoking hot. If I dug chicks, I would totally do her. You should ask her out."
Loki's green eyes widened, and the smug expression slipped off his face for a second, making him look oddly young and vulnerable. Then he shook his head, mask of disdain firmly back in place.

"She is sworn to Thor since childhood. It was arranged by our mothers, though nothing was ever formalised."

"Just because there is a goalie does not mean you can't score," Darcy pointed out. "And anyway, Thor and Jane are joined at the lip. So you totally have a shot with Sif. Okay, once you apologise to her for trying to kill her with a giant evil robot."

"I sent the Destroyer to stop Thor—not to kill him. I only wanted him to stay away... If they had just let him remain in this realm, and me in Asgard. If they had just let me..."

"Commit genocide?" Darcy crossed her arms and glared at him over the rim of her glasses.

He turned back to her, light eyes darkening with anger, but for once Darcy met his gaze and refused to back down.

"Okay, I usually only use this for Internet flame wars, but here's my theory: if you own your shit, that counts for a lot. Especially with people who want to forgive you. So say you're sorry, mean it, and don't do it again. It's simple."

Loki blinked first. Darcy was actually surprised. To tell the truth, she hadn't expected him to be that self-aware.

"As my mother always used to say, a simple thing is still rarely easy."

"I never said it would be easy. But you said your folks lied to you about being adopted, right? So what hurt more? That they lied, or that they tried to justify their bullshit? If they'd said they were sorry, would all the same shit have gone down?"

"I do not know."

"Hypothesise. Seriously, just go with it. If your mom were here—right now—and said 'Loki, I'm sorry I lied to you' without trying to tell you all the reasons why they thought what they were doing was a good idea, would you forgive her?"

"I said I do not know," Loki snapped. "Why do you press me for answers I cannot give?"

"'Cause I'm trying to understand you."

"Why?"

"Because." Darcy shrugged. "If you're gonna keep on kidnapping me or whatever, it would probably help."

"Clearly, this was a mistake."

"I coulda told you that," Darcy muttered as Loki stood, smoothing down the lines of his cape.

"Farewell, Darcy Lewis." Loki began to fade, until she could almost see completely through him. "We shall not meet again."

"Promise?" Darcy yelled to the empty air, but there was no answer. "You could have at least loaned me cab fare," she muttered.
A ten dollar bill floated lazily down at her feet.
Chapter 3

Surprisingly, Coulson wasn't waiting for here when she got back to the office and scanned her security pass. Instead, she'd been whisked directly to Fury's office by six S.H.I.E.L.D. guys, all in black. They didn't answer any of her questions about where they were going, just herded her along in tight formation until they'd dumped her in the conference room with the smoky glass table and giant computer screens.

Director Fury had apparently hung his long black leather coat up in the closet, and just sat there in all black, his shoulder holster pulling his black turtleneck tight at the neck, sipping coffee from a large mug that had the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo on its side.

Thor was sitting next to him, wearing jeans and a tee-shirt, but still managing to exude I AM A DEITY with every breath. She wondered if it was just that thing where his biceps were the same diameter of her head, or just the height combined with the beard.

Clint was there too, and Darcy resisted the urge to sit next to him for moral support. It wasn't that Darcy and Hawkeye were buddies, exactly. It was just that she had spent more time with him than anyone in S.H.I.E.L.D., even Coulson and Sitwell.

After Thor, Sif, and the Warriors Three had disappeared and there had been no sign of the bridge re-opening, Erik had driven them back to the old filling station where S.H.I.E.L.D. had already begin replacing their equipment. The town was still in ruins, but weirdly, the filling station hadn't been touched. Even the lawn chairs on the roof were intact, despite flaming debris from the Destroyer having come down all around them.

The guy clearly in charge of the action had been a stocky boxer type in black tactical gear instead of the anonymous suits that had carted their gear away the day before. Erik had wondered aloud if they'd even had time to unpack it. Jane hadn't particularly cared—just barked orders to the men that had been sent to unpack the vans.

Darcy had hung back and given Barton a long once-over before sticking out her hand. "Dude, my iPod?"

Barton had turned to her, raised an eyebrow, and then dropped a brand new iPod in the palm of her hand. It wasn't the scuffed bright pink Shuffle she'd had since her senior year of high school, but a brand new iPod Touch. It even had new earbuds.

"Hey! I just downloaded 30 songs—"

"Yeah. We know." Barton's look had made her realise her angry email to the address on the card Coulson had given Jane had apparently made the rounds. "Your whole iTunes library is there. And it's been modified for 160 gig of music."

She'd narrowed her eyes at him, and started scrolling. "My playlists had better be intact, buddy."

"You're welcome."

Darcy had figured he was probably a few years older than her, but his face made her think of a tough, scrappy little kid. It was probably the nose. His looked as if he'd had it bashed in a few times. She liked it. It made him real. And it didn't hurt that he had grey-green eyes with flecks of hazel that she could totally fall into if she wasn't careful. And the one thing Darcy really wasn't great at being was careful where cute guys were concerned.
Plus he was cut.

Clint became their primary S.H.I.E.L.D. contact, as Jane calibrated and recalibrated, in an attempt to try and figure out if and where the event that had brought Thor to her in the first place might re-occur. When Jane went to her thrice-weekly debriefs with Agent Sitwell after Coulson was recalled to New York, Darcy and Clint would retire to the roof with cans of Mountain Dew to argue music theory.

Mainly she'd made fun of his love of 1980s hair bands while he tried to convince her that there was life outside Vampire Weekend, Arcade Fire, LMFAO, and Lady Gaga.

She hadn't hung out with Clint as much since they'd relocated to New York. She got the feeling he and Natasha had a thing. Since the Widow pretty much terrified her and made her feel young and stupid and clumsy by being perfect at everything (at this point, Darcy wouldn't have been surprised if she could crochet like a champ, too), she'd given them a wide berth.

"It appears Loki has taken an interest in you."

Director Fury leaned forward, fixing her with his one-eyed stare. Darcy figured Thor was used to it, probably found it comforting or whatever.

"Yeah, no shit," she said before it occurred to her that he'd probably been looking for a little more respect. Whatever. She was still drugged. She could totally freak out about mouthing off to Nick Motherfucking Fury when she sobered up.

"Can you think of any reason why you've been targeted?" Fury prompted, his voice full of gravel.

Darcy shrugged. "He just wanted to talk to me."

"About what?"

"Being adopted." She turned to Thor. "Your brother is seriously emo."

"You were a foundling?" Thor asked, leaning forward as if he was about to pat her hand sympathetically.

"Oh my God, do I have to drag my personal business out for everybody this week?" Darcy said. "I was adopted. No big deal."

"Except to Loki," Fury pointed out.

Darcy shrugged. "I think he's lonely."

"Lonely," Fury repeated, his voice flat and his one visible eye still pinning her to her chair.

"Yeah. As in, alone."

"And he didn't try to kill you, get information out of you about S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Avengers, or otherwise do anything that people like him normally do when they kidnap my people?"

"I'm not really so much 'yours' as 'Jane's,'" Darcy pointed out. "But nope. No murder. No mayhem. He bought me a pretzel."

"Was it drugged?" Clint asked, and Darcy gave him a look.

"Nope. Just a pretzel."
Fury leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "I'm assigning a detail to you."

"No! What? No! I don't want my every move shadowed by one of your jack-booted—"

"I'm assigning Barton."

Darcy blinked. "Oh. Okay."

Clint raised an eyebrow at her, which she steadfastly ignored.

"But I totally want a special permit for my taser. For New York and New Jersey and, like, everywhere."

"I believe that can be arranged," Fury said, a ghost of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "And we're going to implant a subcutaneous GPS tracker, so the next time you blip off the grid, we can send a response team directly to your new location."

"Is it gonna hurt?"

"Probably. But I'll have the doctors give you a lollipop." Then Fury picked up his coffee mug and left. Sensing that was a dismissal, Darcy turned to Thor.

"I think in a weird way, your brother really misses you."

"He is not alone in that," Thor said, his expression surprisingly grave for Thor. Not that the god of thunder couldn't be serious when he needed to be, but usually he was the kind of guy who grinned and laughed as shit blew up all around him. It was weird seeing him so wistful as he patted Darcy on the shoulder fondly.

"Lonely?" Clint asked, voice pitched low as he escorted her out of the conference room. "Seriously?"

Darcy shrugged. "I calls 'em like I sees 'em."

As they left Medical, Darcy was still rubbing her shoulder and griping about the distinct lack of lollipops when Clint produced a raspberry Tootsie-Pop from behind his back.

"You're officially my favourite," Darcy said as she whipped off the wrapper and stuck the candy between her teeth and cheek.

"Yeah, well, never let it be said that Clint Barton doesn't satisfy the ladies."

"And you were doing so well!" Darcy rolled her eyes. "So how does this work?"

"Wherever you go, I go."

"Don't you have more important stuff to do than baby-sit a grad student?"

Clint shrugged. "Apparently not."

"This is so lame. Not that, you know, it's not cool, us hanging out or whatever. But that Eyepatch McBossman doesn't think I can go to the little girl's room without getting my ass kidnapped."

"You're the one who decided to become besties with the enemy."
"What did you expect me to do?" Darcy asked, frustrated. "Last week he handed the entire Avengers Initiative their collective asses. Like a chick with a taser is gonna be any kind of threat deterrent. And we're not besties."

Clint just gave her a look. "He bought you a pretzel and gave you cabfare."

"That's not friendship; that's Stockholm Syndrome."

"Yeah, except isn't it usually the kidnapped that does that stuff, instead of the kidnapper?"

"Fine. Lima Syndrome."

"Whatever, Patty Hearst," Clint said with a grin. "But if you say he's just misunderstood and needs the love of a good woman, I'm taking you back to Medical for a psych eval."

"What he needs is a zillion years of therapy."

"What he needs is not to be a murderous psycho," Clint corrected her.

"That, too."

It was weird sitting in the lab, listening to Jane go on and on about exotic matter with negative energy density while Clint playing Angry Birds on his phone across from her desk. For one thing, he didn't look all that alert. For another, he kept breaking her concentration by flexing his muscles. His biceps were the size of her thighs. She couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Darcy, are you even listening to me?" Jane asked, waving fingers in front of her face.

"Um, yeah. Gross–Pita sandwich equation. On it."

"Gross–Pitaevskii equation," Jane corrected her.

"I knew that," Darcy muttered beneath her breath even as she backspaced and fixed her notes. She would end up Googling it anyway. She always did. Half the time she wished Jane would just invest in an MP3 recorder. But then, if she did, Darcy would just end up stuck transcribing all her notes. And Jane would probably stay in the lab for 12 hours a day without coffee breaks.

Jane was not good when deprived of caffeine.

Jane raked her fingers through her hair, and sighed. "You're not all here today. I get it. I can steal one of Stark's interns to take notes."

"What? No, I'm fine—"

"Go home, chill out, come back tomorrow."

"Sweet," Clint said, already on his feet and tucking his phone in his back pocket. Darcy shut down her netbook, swallowing her anger and trying to look at it like she'd won a free afternoon instead of being benched because she couldn't focus for more than thirty seconds on her actual job.

Pulling her bag up higher on her shoulder, she walked right past Clint, forcing him to break into a jog to keep up with her. He caught her up as she viciously stabbed the elevator "down" button with her thumb.

"Whoa—where's the fire?"
"I'm sick of everybody treating me like I'm deficient. I didn't exactly ask for Thor's creepy little brother to make me his pet project."

"Nobody blames you for being a weirdness magnet," Clint assured her.

"Then why does it feel like I'm being punished?" Darcy snapped in frustration. "I mean, I'm glad Loki didn't kill me and all, but somehow the fact that he didn't kill me has everybody looking at me like I've got two heads. Or that I asked to play Dear Abby with a nutjob."

"Well, look at it this way: you're special. And even Thor's brother can tell."

"Yeah, like dropped on my head as a child special," Darcy muttered as they stepped into the lift and headed down toward the street. You'd think it would take longer to get from the S.H.I.E.L.D. labs to the Park Ave. foyer, but Tony Stark didn't like waiting so Darcy's ears popped as they rocketed to the ground floor.

"Mansion's this way."

"Yeah—and the comics shop is this way." Darcy set off at a brisk walk, still annoyed. This time Clint caught up a lot faster, and actually matched her stride easily as they rounded the corner.

"Comics, huh? So, what's in your pull box?" he asked, and Darcy was surprised he knew the lingo. Last she'd heard, Barton had grown up in a travelling circus, so she figured the magic of Wednesday afternoons would be lost on him.

"**Chew, Hack/Slash, Tank Girl, Tiny Titans, Darkwing Duck—**"

"Seriously, Darkwing?"

"Dude, do not diss Darkwing to me right now! Disney Afternoon is my happy place. I need my happy place."

Clint backed off, holding up both palms in a universal gesture of please don't cut my balls off.

"Okay, okay. We're cool. What else?"

"Not much. There's a new *Extraordinary Adventure of Adèle Blanc-Sec* hardcover that's supposed to be in this week."

"No capes?"

"I get enough of you clowns at work, thanks. I'm more *Ghost World* than *Dark Knight*, in case you haven't noticed."

He chuckled, giving her the once over not too subtly. "I've noticed."

Clint shadowed her all through her trip to Midtown Comics, Starbucks for a pumpkin scone and soy chai latte, and didn't even blink when, instead of taking the subway to the mansion, she walked around the park instead.

Each time she entered a business, Clint lurked in the background, eyes flitting between the entrances and exits, lingering on every person that approached her. She realised that while he'd seemed to totally be slacking inside the Avenger's Tower, he took his job super seriously. When a hipster tried to get her digits, suddenly Clint was there. Darcy hadn't even seen him move. Once second he was next to the tattoo and foreign "adult" magazines, and the next he was between her and the greasy slacker, all glowering and menacing and shit and he didn't even have to say a word before the guy
took off, looking like he was about to piss himself.

"Remind me to take you with me when I hit the bars in Williamsburg. I am like a magnet for those creepers."

"It's the glasses," he said, sliding them up on her nose with the pad of his index finger, and then went back to checking out the a glass case by the wall filled with perverted resin statues of buxom Japanese schoolgirls being menaced by tentacles.

It was almost sundown by the time they got back to the mansion. Jarvis let them in, and Clint held the gate for Darcy, glancing backwards to make sure they weren't followed. Which was ridiculous, considering the mansion was surrounded by a wall that was twelve feet high and almost a foot thick, and that was just the visible security perimeter.

All the cloak and dagger shit would have been fun if it weren't for the part where it just made Darcy feel more like a total loser.

She stomped up the stairs to her suite on the second floor, and Clint followed.

Compared to her tiny studio apartment, the suite in the mansion was palatial. It was easily over three times the size of any place she'd ever lived, and was loaded with every amenity she could possibly imagine. But Darcy felt like she was staying in the world's most insane hotel, instead of someplace she could call "home". The only sign that it was "her" place was a hideous afghan throw that she'd knitted out of boredom one winter. She'd draped it across the back of the black leather sofa, where it looked like graffiti on a Michelangelo.

Dropping her comics and her bag on the coffee table, she started toward the small kitchen. "Want a beer?"

"Working." Clint shook his head. "Are you even old enough to buy beer?"

"I'm twenty-three!" she yelled back over her shoulder before removing a Negra Modelo from the door of the fridge and popping the cap off against the corner of the counter.

"I thought you were still in school?"

"I switched majors." She took a long pull off the beer and then collapsed on the sofa. "Twice."

Like nearly every university student in her first post-dorm accommodations, Darcy was the proud owner of a papasan chair. It resembled nothing so much as a cushioned basket resting shakily on a small rattan base. It was one of exactly three pieces of furniture she'd had moved into the mansion when S.H.I.E.L.D. relocated her, the other two being a rickety bookcase and an ottoman shaped like a giant tomato.

Clint took one look at the papasan chair, walked over to the dining "nook", and returned with one of the straight-backed wooden chairs. He sat down and immediately began balancing the chair on its back legs.

"So you moving in?" Darcy asked as she licked the foam off the inside of the lid of her chai, and then set the empty cup on the coffee table. Clint made a face—probably because ew, beer and chai? But Darcy never let available sugar go to waste.

"I emailed Jarvis to have all my stuff moved to the suite next to yours."

"All your stuff being, what? Skin mags, hair band LPs, and forty-seven different kinds of rifles?"
"Ha ha, very funny. Vinyl's a bitch to transport, and I lost my turntable in Afghanistan."

"Enemy fire?" Darcy asked.

"Card game." He grinned at her, and she laughed. "Good. I was wondering if you could still do that."

"What?"

"You haven't smiled since you got back from the park," Clint pointed out, his customary smugness completely absent. When he looked at her like that, it made her feel weird. Like she had a smear of peanut butter on her chin, or her hair was sticking up all over.

"Yeah, well, I've been having a day," she muttered, kicking off her shoes and wiggling her toes in their rainbow-striped socks.

"What now?" Clint asked as she pulled her netbook out of her messenger bag.

"Now we have the ceremonial checking of the tumblr for photos of baby animals to lower my blood pressure, watching *Golden Girls* on cable, and eating sugary cereal for dinner. It's a thing. You don't have to stay," Darcy added, feeling uncomfortable. It wasn't that she thought he was judging her, exactly. More like she was judging herself for being lame.

"Are you kidding? I love *Golden Girls*. Who's your favourite?"

Darcy gave him a look over the rim of her glasses. "Duh. Sophia."

"Huh. I'd have thought you'd be a Blanche."

"Oh, you are so a Blanche. You'd totes go for Rue McClanahan if she wasn't, like, 80. Or, erm... dead. You know what I mean."

"Actually, I always liked Dorothy. But there was a guy I knew in Special Ops in the Gulf. Crazy mofo. He had pics of Bea Arthur in his rack. Kinda freaked me out."

Darcy reached for the long black remote, and began going through the DVR menu to the saved programmes.

"Well, get over your Bea-Arthur-related trauma, 'cause I DVR'd a marathon last week, and still have like five hours to go."

Clint propped his feet up on the coffee table, and tipped the chair back further.

"Bring it."
Chapter 4

Darcy got used to the new routine. Clint would knock on her door to pick her up, and they'd head over to work together. Before, she would have taken the subway, or gone in with Jane. But Clint preferred to walk, and Darcy figured the exercise would do her good since she sat around on her ass all day in the lab.

He'd been given a desk in the lab, but he barely used it. He would pace, stare out the windows with that weird thousand-yard stare. Darcy figured it was some messed up Gulf War vet thing, until one day he told her that there was a pool on the roof of one of the neighbouring buildings, and he was scoping out a hot blonde. Darcy had smacked his arm (which was like hitting a freaking *rock*) and they'd walked down to the cafeteria—or what passed for a cafeteria in a Stark property, which was more like the most expensive mall food court in the history of the world, only free.

Darcy knew that normally he'd spend half his day at the weapons range and the other half in the gym. She worried that he was gonna get totally flabby hanging out with her, eating Lucky Charms and watching bad made-for-tv movies on cable. But Clint admitted he worked out after she'd gone to bed half the time. She figured his room must be like full of weights or something, but she didn't ask and he didn't tell. Clint stayed super-cut and she got sleep. Everyone won.

Sometimes instead of going straight back to the mansion after work, they'd grab dinner in Curry Hill, or at little hole-in-the-wall diners where Clint knew the names of all the servers and usually got free cheese fries. He had a sixth sense for every place that served breakfast all day in Manhattan, and Darcy ignored his cutting remarks about eating pancakes for dinner.

It was like dating, only without the sex. Darcy wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Still, it was nice to go places full of normal people who didn't travel from place to place via a flying aircraft carrier. It reminded her that real life existed, and that not everything involved life-or-death stakes, insane Asgardian family values, or someone trying to take over the world.

Sometimes, life was just hanging out after work with a dude, munching cheese fries with a side of way too bland guacamole, while watching sheets of late summer rain came down outside.

"I'm just saying—Superman totally sucks at the whole secret identity thing. I mean, at least Batman wears a mask and gloves. All Lex Luthor has to do is run his prints, and the guy's totally screwed."

"This from a guy whose super-secret disguise is *a pair of shades*?" Darcy pointed out, shaking drops of hot sauce onto a guac-laden corn chip.

"It's not a disguise. I'm not a superhero—I'm Special Ops. They help cut down glare. Which is, you know, useful for a sniper."

"Yeah, but you don't wear gloves," she said around a mouthful of food. He tossed her a napkin, and she gave him the finger.

"I don't have Ma and Pa Kent on a farm in Kansas like sitting ducks for any psycho who runs facial recognition on me."

"Where *are* Ma and Pa Barton?"

"Buried in Saint Mary's in Waverly, Iowa."
Darcy winced, wishing the floor would open up and swallow her. "Sorry. Didn't mean to be—"

"It's okay." Clint cut her off with a wave of his hand. "It's not like I talk about it all that much. They died when I was just a kid. My dad was drunk, there was a tree. It happens."

He shrugged, but Darcy was still unnerved by the casualness of his admission.

"You don't have any other family?"

"My brother, but..." Clint pushed the empty creamers around in a circle on the Formica tabletop. "We don't really get along."

"He doesn't approve of the whole Secret Agent thing?"

"It's a really long story. What about you?" Clint asked, clearly switching topics away from Casa Del Barton.

"My dad lives in LA with his new wife and two toddlers." Darcy shrugged. She'd got over her dad ditching them for the Lewis Family Mark II a long time ago. "My mom and I are still okay, though."

"Where does she live?"

"Long Island. She's embraced her life as a bridge and tunnel person."

Clint raised a brow. "How did you end up in New Mexico?" he asked, as if it were the moon or something. Then again, compared to Manhattan, Puente Antiguo was pretty much another planet.

"Compromise. I wanted to go out to California, to put the maximum amount of distance between myself and my folks, but my dad wigged. Which is ironic, considering he's in Orange County now with Bethany or Trixie or whatever her name is. Anyway, UNM gave me a scholarship, and they had a decent Women's Studies programme..."

Clint pulled a face. "You started off in Women's Studies?"

"It's a long story. I switched to English my junior year, and then settled on Political Science last year."

"That's kinda... random."

"It was Albuquerque." Darcy shrugged. "Not a lot to do there unless you're a snowboarder or a stoner. I took a lot of electives. I like learning stuff."

"You gonna stay in school forever?" Clint asked, and Darcy felt her cheeks heat up with how close to the mark his innocent question was.

The truth was, Darcy had bounced around from department to department like a pinball. She had moved to the Southwest with one goal in mind: strike out on her own. But once she'd got there, she had realised she didn't know who she was—or who she wanted to become. She'd figured that was normal. Wasn't that what college was for? Sure, it's about getting a degree, but mostly it was about testing the waters personally and intellectually. That meant experimenting with clothes, experimenting with alcohol, experimenting with sex, and experimenting with her own views of the world and her place in it.

When she'd filled out the paperwork to take the internship with a crazy theoretical astrophysicist out in the middle of the desert between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, it was a whim. She had wanted a
change of pace, a change of venue, and frankly, a change from the Poli-Sci graduate programme. She'd picked the coursework because she was interested—but she had no clue what she wanted to do with that knowledge out in the world. It had just been safe, hiding in academia.

Which made it ironic that she had quit six credits away from a masters degree to move to New York and play sidekick to a bunch of superheroes.

"I dunno. Job market sucks, and as long as S.H.I.E.L.D. is still paying me, I have a handle on my student loans. And as day jobs go, it's not so bad."

"Except for the part where you keep getting targeted by costumed psychos."

"Eh, it happens." She shrugged as casually as she could, and Clint smiled into his mug as he tipped it back to drain the last swallow of coffee.

Darcy wouldn't admit even under torture that her eyes were totally glued to his throat as he swallowed. Nope. She'd take that secret with her to her grave.

Clint pushed the mug to the side, and got up. "I gotta—"

"—go to the little archer's room?" Darcy finished for him, raising a brow. "After, like, 6 cups of coffee? What a shock."

"Be right back," he said, and Darcy dug through her bag to fish out her wallet to cover her half of the cheque. She looked up when someone slid into the booth opposite her, and froze.

"What happened to 'Farewell, Darcy Lewis. We shall not meet again'?"

Loki shrugged. "I lied."

He was wearing a wrinkled white button-down over what appeared to be a faded ABBA tee-shirt and rumpled black blazer, with a green knitted scarf wound several times around his neck and a dusty grey tweed grandpa hat with a sad little feather in its brim.

The problem was, Darcy was pretty sure he was wearing the entire outfit unironically.

"Okay, for the record, hipster ranks even lower on the 'acceptable to be seen with' scale than Harvard MBA."

"I merely wished to blend in."

"Please tell me you are not wearing fingerless gloves. That was so 2005."

He lifted a hand, wagging his fingers in her face. Yep. Gloves.

"You are so hopelessly tragic." Darcy waved the server over. "You know, my friend's gonna be back any minute."

"No he won't."

Darcy's mouth dropped open in shock, and by reflex she reached for her taser, which she was now legally able to carry thanks to Coulson, even though he'd warned her that if she used it on anyone on S.H.I.E.L.D. property he'd personally tase her. "What did you—"

"Calm yourself, little cuckoo. Your bodyguard is fine. Just... indisposed. To give us a little much-needed privacy."
"Tell me you didn't use magic."

Loki leaned forward, looking her straight in the eye. "I did not use magic," he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Darcy rolled her eyes. Weirdly, she wasn't as freaked out as she felt she should have been. Maybe it was the knowledge that Clint was in the bathroom, and she was chipped like Paris Hilton's chihuahua. Or maybe she was just getting immune to Loki, due to constant exposure. Either way she just scooped up another chunk of avocado and cilantro with her fork.

"So how goes your courtship of Lady Sif?" Darcy asked, her face splitting in a wide grin. "See what I did, there? I can talk all fancy too, you know."

"The Bifröst is closed to me. Heimdall would not let me set a foot upon it unless I was under heavy guard, on my way to my own execution."

"Asgard has no email? That sucks. For a supposedly technically advanced people where science is indistinguishable from magic, you'd think you'd at least have instant messaging."

"One of the many ways in which Midgard has surprised me with its cunning and ingenuity, that is true."

Loki leaned back in the booth and flexed his fingers over the empty coffee mug in front of him. Darcy rolled her eyes as steam began to rise from the mug, along with the rich aroma of fresh ground coffee beans that were definitely a grade or three above the burnt-tasting stuff that the server had poured for them earlier.

"Thor said your buddy Heimdall sees everything." Darcy asked as she added another packet of sugar to her cocoa. "Can't he, like, pass her a note when there's a feast, or something?"

"Heimdall never abandons his post. And he bears me considerable ill-will."

"You tried to kill him, didn't you." It was a statement rather than a question because hello, it was Loki. Not really a stretch there. Darcy stared at him over the rim of her cup, and was not at all surprised at the way his eyes slid away from hers. "This is why they don't let you join in all their reindeer games. I'm just saying."

"It was purely in self-defence," Loki pointed out. "I offered him a blissful retirement on a beach someplace warm. He drew steel first."

"Yeah, I'll bet. You're like a walking Xanatos Gambit."

Loki looked confused, and she waved it away.

"Never mind. If you had the internet, I swear to God you'd never actually get around to trying to take over the world because you'd so spend a month in TV Tropes. Okay, on second thought..."

She grabbed the napkin Clint had tossed her, and scribbled down the url. Then, on impulse, she added a phone number and pushed it across the table toward Loki.

"Also, here is the number of my therapist. Only, like, don't tell her I sent you, 'cause it took me forever to find her. And if she's seeing both of us, she might have to drop me and I so called dibs first."

He scowled.
"What? I'm just saying, there are more effective ways of working out your daddy issues than world domination."

"I do not have 'daddy issues',"

This time it was Darcy who raised a brow. They were engaged in a game of chicken, but Darcy refused to be the first one to blink. Finally, Loki glanced away, his green eyes flicking to the cars zooming by outside the diner's windows.

"For all my... issues with what my father did, the truth is, even before I learnt I was stolen from Jötunheimr, I envied my brother his position, his winning charm. Even his woman. All the things I could never have."

"I thought you said that Sif wasn't actually engaged to Thor?"

"All Asgard assumes so, though she has never expressed any desire to be Queen. Sif is ever her own woman. It is something I always admired about her. Even if she chose to spend all of her time on the training field with Thor and those oafs the Warriors Three."

She thought about Thor's friends. "I kinda liked Volstagg, but Fandral's skeevy. Does Hogun ever actually talk?"

"I much prefer Hogun's silence to Fandral's incessant inane chatter."

"I know, right? When it looked like he was gonna be stuck on Earth, he was all 'Are all mortals as fair as you?' with the hand kissing and Mr Suave routine."

"Do you know he calls himself 'Fandral the Dashing'?"

"Figures." Darcy snorted with laughter. "Okay, this is kinda weird."

"What is?" Loki asked as he took a sip of his coffee.

"Um, gossiping with you?"

Loki's green eyes sparkled beneath the shadow of his cheesy hat. "I would not call it 'gossiping,' per se."

"I mean talking like this. Like we're friends." Darcy frowned. "We're not actually friends, are we?"

"I do not know. I find you amusing, and have no immediate desire to kill you. I suppose I am fond of you, as one might care for a small defenceless woodland creature."

"You're saying you think of me like a pet?"

Loki grinned. "Thor has his pet human—why shouldn't I?"

"I had a dog, once. His name was Baker," Darcy said wistfully, and sighed. "Right. So... does that mean you're gonna feed me, and walk me, and give me treats?"

"Is not the pleasure of my company treat enough?"

"You still killed Dave."

"I could bring him back, if you like," he offered with a smile.
"No way, Mister Monkey's Paw! I know how you operate. I'd end up with Zombie Dave, trying to eat my brains. No thank you. How 'bout you try not to kill people to begin with?"

"There are always casualties of war. Do you think my brother's hands are so clean? He has slain many in battle."

"Operative words there, Sparky: in battle. If a dude's trying to kill you, I say you try to kill him right back. But getting off on it is super creepy and so not okay."

"And how do you know that I take pleasure in killing?"

"'Cause you keep on doing it?" she shot back.

"You presume much, little cuckoo."

"Okay, tell me I'm wrong. No, wait—I've got a better idea. Show me. Go an entire week without killing anybody." Darcy leaned across the sticky booth tabletop, smiling widely. "I double-dog dare you."

"What does that mean?"

"It's like a dare times five. You totally can't back down."

"And if I win this wager? What is my prize?" He dropped his eyes from hers down to her rack, and Darcy barely resisted the urge to smack him.

"Oh, just when I thought you couldn't get any creepier." She pulled her flannel shirt closer around her, purposely covering her cleavage. "Okay, you go a week without killing anybody, and next time you totally kidnap me from my home or workplace, we'll go wherever you want. Dancing, drinks, bar-hopping. Just no murder sprees. Also, I am not putting out."

"And if someone is trying to kill me?"

"Easy—do not engage. You're an all-powerful prince of Asgard, right? Just, like, go poof or invisible or whatever it is you do."

"And be branded a coward?"

"Oh please, who of us puny Earthlings could actually hurt you? Just laugh your ass off at anybody dumb enough to try you, and skedaddle. I mean it. Do not engage."

Loki’s lips twitched into something like a smile. "I agree to the terms."

"Okay, now swear. On something that means something to you. Like, I dunno—your Mom. Or Sif's boobs. Whatever."

"I swear by the Lady Sif's creamy white—"

"Oh, how did I know!"

"—bosom that I will not kill anyone for the span of seven days."

"Awesome. Now, I need Clint to pay his half of the cheque. Can you undo whatever you did so he can get out here before I'm stuck paying for his dinner?"

"Which one is Clint?"
"Archer dude. Remember the exploding arrows at the World Trade Center site last month?"

"Oh, him." Loki sighed dramatically. "You know, you can do so much better."

"Shut up, I actually like the guy."

"As you wish," he said with the smile twitching still at the corner of his mouth. With a wave of his hand, he faded from view just as the men's room door swung open, and Clint came sauntering back to the booth.

"What did you do, fall in?"

"What do you mean? I was only gone a minute."

Darcy rolled her eyes, and dropped a ten on the table.

It was only then she realised the damp napkin on which she'd scrawled TVTropes.com and Dr Cunningham's office number was gone, too.
Loki was good to his word. Five days went by with no incidents. On the sixth, Darcy groaned when the Avengers assembled to fight him in Central Park. Apparently, some numbnut brought the bronze statue of Alice in Wonderland to life.

Darcy and Jane watched the whole thing streaming, live, on Channel 2. When the nutjob in question turned out to be Loki, Darcy had both hands clapped firmly over her mouth, trying not to make a sound, while Jane winced every time one of the statues landed a blow. When Alice had flipped off the cameras, it had taken everything she had not to burst out laughing. Or swearing. Whichever.

But not only did the team emerge completely unscathed, according to Clint, when Black Widow had been tossed thirty feet by the Mad Hatter, she had landed in an inexplicably placed bouncy castle. And when Clint got nearly mauled by the Cheshire cat, it could have carved him to pieces with its claws, but instead it licked him with a sandpapery bronze tongue, and then wandered off toward the duck pond.

"I don't get it," Clint said over Thai take-out that night. "I mean, I get the demented sense of whimsy—it's Loki. And he still hit Thor and Cap with everything he had. But me and Tasha? Kid gloves all the way. Not even a scratch."

"What about Stark?"

"Oh, yeah, the news had to censor that part. Nah, Stark's fine, too. His suit just got a little banged up. It's like Loki wasn't even trying."

"Maybe he's in therapy?" Darcy shrugged, and Clint gave her a look. "What? It could happen."

Clint's eyes narrowed. "Do you know something you're not telling me?"

"Nope," Darcy said around a mouthful of pad thai. "Not a thing."

After a full week of mayhem without bloodshed, Darcy started waiting for Loki to pop up and claim he'd won the wager. But nothing happened. She spent an entire day holding her breath, and lying in bed that night, she was deeply weirded by the fact that she seemed to have fallen off the god of mischief's radar.

Shaking herself out of her funk, she snuggled deeper under her duvet and decided she was better off. God knows where he would have taken her. She doubted he'd consider Coney Island, though she'd heard Steve rhapsodising about Nathan's hot dogs non-stop to Stark pretty much since the day she'd moved into the mansion.

No, with her luck, Loki's idea of a good time would probably be lunch in an active volcano, or some other weird shit. She told herself she'd dodged a bullet as she dozed, and by the time she woke up the next morning she almost believed it.

The only person who seemed actually pleased she had a new supervillain bestie was Thor. He'd never out and out asked her how his brother was doing. But he'd had a spring in his step for weeks after the Through the Looking Glass incident. He was the kind of guy who, even when being all business with the hammer and the flying and stuff, still would break into a wide grin and even laugh in the middle of a takedown. So Darcy never really thought of him as a particularly introspective kind of guy.
Yet something had clearly pleased him, knowing that Loki had, for lack of a better term, "reached out" to a human the way he had to Darcy. She wondered if Loki had been paying him visits on the sly, but when she asked him over a massive breakfast of pancakes, French toast, omelettes and Texas toast in the mansion one morning, he shook his head.

"No, Loki keeps his own counsel. But of late, he has been more like the brother I have much missed than the foe I have so often joined in battle since my return to Midgard. And for that, Darcy Lewis, I thank you."

"But I didn't do anything," she'd pointed out, and he'd just clapped her on the back hard enough to knock her glasses askew.

"It is enough that he is back to mere tricks and mischief!"

"Loki's version of 'tricks' cost the city tens of thousands and destroyed a cherished monument," Natasha had pointed out acidly, but Thor only grinned.

"Statues that walk? It is nothing compared to the adventures of our youth. Have I ever told you about the time he turned me into a frog?"

"Yes, Thor," Banner said from behind a thick folder of papers, his cup of herbal tea going cold at his elbow. "You have."

"He's right, buddy. It's going on three, maybe four times at last count," Clint said with a wide grin that Darcy could tell was snarky but Thor answered with a hearty laugh.

"I am becoming like Volstagg the Volumous, recounting past battles. Forgive me."

"You're definitely giving Volstagg a run for his money in the breakfast department," Darcy pointed out as Thor buttered another pancake and doused it in syrup.

"Your Midgard delicacies remain enticing to me, this I admit. Though I miss the small cakes I had when I first arrived in your world."

"I told you, as soon as I can do a grocery run, I'll get you Pop-Tarts," Jane said as she grabbed her bag as she stood, and kissed Thor on the top of his head.

"Aye—so you have said. A fortnight ago."

"Has it been that long?" Jane frowned, and Darcy was reminded of the time she found the expired jar of mayonnaise in the fridge that had been nigh on achieving sentience and making a break for Santa Fe.

Jane normally only ate food when people put it directly in front of her. And only then after whatever physics journal she was reading was forcibly removed from her hands. As a result, shopping for actual food instead of running to the 7-11 only happened about once every other month.

"Just have Jarvis add it to the Peapod order," Darcy pointed out.

"Are you abusing my AI?" Tony called from the kitchen where he was possibly, probably, hopefully not disassembling the toaster oven for spare parts. Again.

"Hells no, we're pals. Right, Jarvis?"

"Absolutely, Miss Lewis," the house computer replied in the serene tones of a snarky British butler.
"And to that end, may I ask how much longer I will be storing the complete collection of 1980s sitcoms on my servers for your and Mr Barton's viewing pleasure?"

"Do we really need to watch Empty Nest?" Clint asked, stealing a slice of toast off Darcy's plate.

"I told you, it's part of the complete Golden Girls oeuvre."

"That's what you said about Golden Palace."

"Shut up, you know you totally have Blanche in your spank file."

The entire table turned to looked at Clint; Banner with amusement, Natasha with a raised eyebrow, and Thor with that confused puppy look that always made Darcy want to rub his tummy to see if his foot would wiggle.

Jane, used to Darcy's mouth, just rolled her eyes and picked up her cereal bowl and coffee mug to take to the sink.

Stark exited the kitchen with what appeared to be a martini glass.

"Tony, what has Pepper told you about gimlets before noon?" Natasha asked, scowling.

"That they're a delicious and nutritious part of a well-balanced breakfast?"

"Aw, is somebody still mad that the White Rabbit tried to fornicate with his shiny super suit?" Clint said with a shit-eating grin.

"Rue McClanahan—wildcat in the sack," was Tony's only response before he wandered off in the direction of his workshop, calling back over his shoulder, "Your BFF owes me a new paint job. I just had that suit detailed."

"He's not my BFF!" Darcy yelled after him.

"Wanna go in to work together?" Jane asked as she rounded the table. "I was thinking about the inconsistent particle data results, and I want to try something new."

"Gotta wait for Shorty," Darcy said, tipping her head towards Clint, who was eyeing Thor's second stack of waffles.

Clint glowered at her. "I'm six foot."

"Yeah, in heels, maybe," Darcy shot back, and Dr Banner almost choked on his cold tea.

Natasha only smiled serenely, and for once Darcy didn't find her quite so terrifying.

Of course, the next day she took down six Hydra guys single-handedly, and Darcy was back to avoiding her in the hallways of the mansion.

When Fury called her and Clint into his office, Darcy was sure he'd found out about Loki's appearance at the diner. She knew Clint would completely lose his shit if he found out she hadn't reported it, but it had been so quick. She figured no harm, no foul, and went back to pretending her life was semi-normal.

But all Fury did was steeple his fingers, lean forward and ask "So, there have been no more... incidents?"

"Good. We're leaving the tracker in, but reassigning Barton back to the Avengers Initiative full-time."

"Oh," Darcy said, the tight coil of dread in her stomach loosening slightly that she wasn't about to get chewed out. But the dread didn't disappear completely. She'd known from the beginning that Clint being assigned to her was strictly a response to the potential threat posed by Loki. But she had just got used to the situation, and now it was changing again.

She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Clint cleared his throat, looking back and forth between Darcy and Director Fury. "Sir, I think—"

"I'm not actually paying you to think, Agent Barton. I'm paying you to follow orders."

Fury had that glare that Darcy interpreted as "Are you trying to get your ass reassigned to Afghanistan, son? 'Cause snipers are a dime a dozen as far as I'm concerned."

Clint must have read it the same way, because he straightened his shoulders, and took it like a man.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I figured you'd be glad to be off babysitting duty. Ms Lewis, you are now once more free to roam the city unsupervised. Please stop throwing yourself in the path of supervillains. Agent Coulson has enough paperwork. Now both of you, get out of my office."

On the other side of the smoked glass doors emblazoned with the S.H.I.E.L.D. logo, Darcy let out a breath in a sigh.

"So, um, I guess I'll see you around the mansion?"

"Yeah," Clint said, his face unreadable. "Look, I gotta go. You gonna be okay?"

"You heard the Cyclops. I'm officially Not Your Problem anymore. I'm gonna head back to the lab, and see if Jane's broken any laws of physics since I took off for lunch."

Clint nodded, and then set off briskly in the opposite direction.

Darcy's shoulders slumped, but she figured she'd gone twenty-three years before having a personal security detail. She'd probably be fine for the next however many decades without one.

Assuming Jane didn't blow her up, first.

Darcy spent the rest of the week in a total funk. Every time she thought of something snarky to say to Clint, she'd turn to the empty chair in the lab, and bite her lip. It was like a weird phantom limb syndrome thing—phantom Hawkeye.

It took her about twelve tries to collate the data Jane needed, and her note-taking was sparse, if that. She just couldn't concentrate. Instead, she kept replaying her last few minutes with Clint upstairs over and over again.

She had always figured that he at least liked her. But obviously being stuck with babysitting duty had driven him nuts, and he was just too much of a pro to say anything. The second Fury gave him the
all-clear, he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

It made her feel stupid. Like a kid in middle school, stuck holding up the gym wall at a school dance while all the jocks and cheerleaders took the floor while some lame DJ played dance music three years out of date.

She hadn't even been that kid when she was a teen. She'd had friends, and boyfriends, and it wasn't until the last six months that she'd looked around and realised she was surrounded by people who were so far out of her league that she really was like a pet or a mascot.

Jane was a supergenius astrophysicist who had helped rebuild the rainbow bridge of Asgard. Her boyfriend was the freaking god of Thunder. Steve was wholesome and built like a brick shithouse and not only was he her grandpa's age and still hot, he could draw, like, really well. Professional artist well.

Dr Banner was a genius nuclear physicist who also turned into a twelve foot tall green rage monster at the slightest provocation. Natasha was super hot and totally lethal, and could take out a squad of bad guys without breaking a sweat. Clint could shoot the tail feathers off a pigeon from like two miles away, and had grown up a carny in a travelling circus, for pete's sake. Tony Stark was a freaking billionaire with supermodels and world leaders on speed dial, and his girlfriend was like a computer on legs, and could keep up with him and keep control of him like Ginger Rogers, backwards in Louboutin heels.

Even Coulson, who was as close to normal as it got in the Avengers Initiative, was a freaking ninja. Darcy had seen the security footage from a Kwik-Mart on Route 60 that Sitwell had sent around as a gag via email.

Compared to the rest of them, Darcy was some perpetual student who could type. When it came down to it, Darcy was just a warm body for Jane to bounce theories off of, while making sure they never ran out of coffee or Pop-Tarts.

Feeling like crap, Darcy ducked Jane and Thor's invitation to dinner Friday night. While normally watching him single-handedly demolish forty seven small plates of dumplings (Thor was addicted to dim sum) would be comedy gold, Darcy wasn't in the mood to put on a happy face for Jane, who glowed with the annoying shining light of a chick whose boyfriend was, well, a god. Instead, after work Darcy went straight up to her room to listen to angry piano chick music while browsing the baby animals tag on tumblr to try and keep from dissolving into tears every five minutes.

Finally, when she had surfed just about every baby sloth video on YouTube, Darcy gave up.

"Hey, Jarvis?"

"Yes, Miss Lewis?"

"Where's Clint?"

"Agent Barton is currently aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. Would you like me to connect you to his mobile device?"

"Um, no. That's okay. But thanks."

"My pleasure, Miss Lewis."

Which was how Darcy ended up curled up under her hideous afghan on her sofa, drinking soda and watching How To Train Your Dragon when Loki materialised in the middle of her living room.
Chapter 6

"Jesus!" Darcy yelped, grabbing for the remote to pause the movie. In retrospect, she probably should have reached for her taser. But in that split second, she wasn't thinking so much oh my god there's an Asgardian psycho in my living room as she was oh for fuck's sake Hiccup just found the Night Fury.

"No, just me."

He was in full Asgardian armour, including the ridiculous helmet. She supposed it was better than Hipster Loki or MBA Loki. But it did remind her that her situation was not normal, probably dangerous, and definitely going to get her ass fired and sent to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s version of Gitmo if Fury found out about it.

"If you're here to collect on our bet, I'm not really dressed for an outing."

"Perhaps I merely wished to check and make sure you have been properly fed and watered?"

"I'm touched."

Loki made a show of peering around the living room. "So, where is your watchdog this fine evening?"

"He's not my watchdog."

"Of course not. Forgive me. Your... boyfriend? Paramour? Lover?" he asked, feigning innocence, and Darcy gritted her teeth.

"Since you haven't taken me hostage lately, he got reassigned. And for the record, we're just friends. At least, I thought we were."

"Is that all you wish to be? Boon companions?"

"This from a guy who's spent a thousand years crushing on a chick and still hasn't made a move? Yeah, like I'd go to you for relationship advice."

"I am biding my time," Loki said loftily.

"I think you're just freaked out because Sif could totally snap you like a twig. What is it with guys always falling for chicks who could take them apart, anyway? I don't understand the appeal."

"Trust me. It's appealing." Loki got a faraway look in his green eyes, like he was picturing Sif beating the crap out of somebody. It was hard to tell with all the leather if he was getting a boner, but Darcy was betting he was.

"Okay—stay or go, but I'm going to finish watching my movie and wait for the guys to get back since I'm obviously not going get laid anytime this century."

Loki opened his mouth, and Darcy held up a hand.

"No."

"You don't know—"
"No."

"Your Clint Barton is a strange one. How can any mortal man resist this?"

With a wave of his hand, Darcy was faced with her mirror image. Only she was wearing a total Bettie Page pin-up girl outfit, complete with platform stilettos and riding crop.

"Dude! That's just creepy!"

It was weird seeing herself roll her eyes at her. Then Loki flexed his fingers again, and he was himself once more.

"Never do that again! Oh my God, seriously. Now I'm gonna worry all the time about what weird-ass perverted shit you are doing with my body. That's just wrong."

"I was only trying to show you what your watchdog sees when he looks at you. I believe the word you mortals use is a 'hottie'."

"If it weren't for the fact that I am totally creeped out right now, I'd probably be flattered. But nope. No matter my cup size, Clint treats me like a kid sister. Also, no way are my boobs that big."

"Continue to lie to yourself, if you wish."

"Did you just come here to make fun of my total lack of game?"

"That was just a side benefit."

"You're a pal. No, really. In fact, I wouldn't be in this mess if you had checked to make sure you had the right hostage back in July."

"I promise, the next time I kidnap you, I will make certain I have the correct human before I leave Manhattan."

"Thank you. So, no plans for global domination tonight?"

"As I said, I merely wished to make certain you are being properly looked after in my absence."

"I'm just peachy. Got my junk food, got my jammies, got my mainstream Hollywood entertainment in HD and 7.1 surround sound."

"Then I shall join you in your viewing of—what is this?" For the first time Loki seemed to register the widescreen TV, which was currently paused on a shot of Hiccup hiding behind a bush.

"It's a kid's movie. You'd be totally bored."

Loki tilted his head, green eyes narrowing. "Why is that child deformed?"

"He's not deformed. It's animation, and all of the human figures are stylised. It's a really long story, going back to Disney movies of the 1930s and post-war Japanese animation and I am so not loaning you my Scott McCloud books so you can berate me for my late-night movie choices."

"All I asked was why his head was enormous, yet his limbs are like twigs."

"Fine—I'll start from the beginning. But you have to watch the damn movie, and not ask a bazillion questions. Deal?"
"Deal."

Darcy went back to the menu, and Loki took one look at her papasan chair before waving his hand. A red velvet chaise longue appeared on the opposite side of her coffee table, parallel to the sofa. She opened her mouth to complain, but then figured hey, if he wanted a fainting couch, at least he wasn't trying to kill her and impersonate her to get S.H.I.E.L.D. secrets.

Probably.

They made it about four minutes into the movie before Loki asked "Why are the Vikings randomly Scottish?"

Darcy paused the Blu-ray again, and dropped her head into her hands. "Really? Really, randomly Masterpiece Theatre-sounding alien? Really?"

Loki opened his mouth and then closed it again, and gestured lazily for her to restart the movie.

When they got to the scene where Astrid was suddenly in slow motion in front of a flaming hut, Darcy couldn't help snickering.

"That's totally how you see Sif inside your head, isn't it."

"I won't dignify that with an answer."

"Silence denotes agreement," she said smugly, wishing she'd made microwave popcorn. She was about to get up and make some when she looked over and saw Loki had conjured up a giant gold bowl of fruit and was lazily munching grapes as he watched.

She held out her hand, and he grudgingly handed her a bunch of grapes. They were the good kind—seedless, and cool, bursting on her tongue as she bit into the tart skins.

It was deeply weird watching a movie with Thor's crazy brother.

For one thing, after the first fifteen minutes or so, he stayed completely quiet, even so much as leaning forward, transfixed. Darcy wasn't sure if it was because he'd never seen CGI before, or because of the story. She figured based on the first time she'd tried to show Thor an episode of Doctor Who that he was having trouble parsing the data. Something about Asgard totally being old school when it came to entertainment, and not understanding stuff like voiceovers, time cuts, and pretending that if something was out of frame, then it didn't really exist.

She used to think it was just an Asgardian thing, except Steve had the same problem and would go on and on about how he missed radio until Tony loaded up an iPod with The Shadow for him. Last time she'd checked, he was actually watching telenovelas voluntarily in the afternoons, with the mumbled excuse that he had always wanted to learn Spanish.

Then there was the part in the movie where Stoic told Hiccup that he wasn't his son.

Darcy stole a glance at Loki. He had gone completely rigid and still, paler than usual (and he was vampire pale already) and Darcy swore she saw the sheen of tears in his eyes. She was about to say "Oh my God, are you crying?" but gritted her teeth and kept her mouth shut because if anything was going to push him over the edge and possibly into a murderous rampage, she didn't want to have to explain to Fury that it was Jeffrey Katzenberg's fault.

She muted the TV when they hit the end credits, even though she was totally loved the song over the drawings even if she didn't know what language half the lyrics were in, and turned to see Loki
staring thoughtfully at the screen.

He'd taken off his helmet, and was sitting cross-legged on the ridiculous sofa, reminding her of kids during story time in the tiny Puente Antiguo public library. The grapes were gone, and her stomach rumbled at their memory. She'd had nothing but pie and cocoa since lunch, which was seriously dumbass move on her part, but she was warm and comfy under the blanket, and slightly sleepy.

"So, what did you think?"

He nearly jumped out of his skin, as if he'd forgot she was even there. The rapt look of attention faded to carefully studied boredom as he stood, the plush velvet chaise fading until it disappeared completely.

"It was diverting enough, I suppose. Even if it is meant for the very young."

Darcy laughed. "Liar. You totally loved it."

"Don't be absurd."

"You barely breathed when you thought Hiccup was dead."

"My mind was elsewhere."

"Wanna borrow the disc? It has extras like commentary and making-of specials and stuff."

"No. It is a story for children. The world... the universe is not so kind to those that are different."

Darcy pulled back the afghan and sat up, setting her glasses down on the glass top of the coffee table before she rubbed at one eye with a knuckle.

"I knew I shouldn't have showed you this movie. It just validates your life choices and worldview."

Loki's mouth quirked in a self-mocking smile.

"Don't try and analyse me, Cuckoo."

"Nah, I'll leave that up to the professionals. Thanks for not killing Dr Cunningham, by the way. It would totally suck."

"What makes you think—"

"I think if I'd had siblings, it would have been a pretty weird scene," Darcy continued on as if he hadn't spoken. Because she was not going to be the one to point out to Loki that he totally had an easy tell. "I totally suck at sharing a room. I mean, they had me in a dorm room my first year with this one sorority-wanna-be chick and she totally moved out into her boyfriend's room, which was awesome 'cause I ended up with a single for the rest of the year.

"So, you know... I think I get it. It sucks to be the adopted kid when you have a brother like Thor."

Loki was silent for a long moment, and then said softly, "All I ever wanted was for my father to look at me and see me as Thor's equal. All I ever wanted was for him to love me as his son."

"For what it's worth, your dad sounds like a dick," she offered truthfully. For all Thor was a total team player now, she remembered all too well how he had acted like a total spoilt brat when he'd first landed on Midgard. It must have totally sucked, constantly being compared to a guy you personally thought was a dick on wheels.
"Did Thor tell you how things ended between us?" Loki said after an uncomfortable pause.

"He said you fell off the broken rainbow bridge."

"Not quite." Loki’s lips curved in something more like a grimace than a smile. "Thor always used to laugh, as he fought. For the sheer joy of battle. I never did, until we fought that last time, my brother and I."

Silence fell, and Loki didn't meet her eyes.

"All would have been well, if we had never gone to Jötunheimr." He closed his eyes and then opened them again, fixing Darcy with his stare. "I let go. I fell for an eternity."

"An eternity? Seriously?"

"Without the Bifröst to speed my journey..." He shrugged, like it was nothing, but it wasn't nothing. It was completely horrifying. No wonder the guy was batshit insane. Darcy shivered despite the perfectly temperature controlled apartment.

"Oh, man. So, like the stuff that happened for us in New Mexico for you was, like, a million years ago?"

"So it felt. I do not know how I survived. In truth, I had not intended to."

Darcy's eyes grew wide. She'd never have pegged Loki for suicidal. Crazy, sure. But he always seemed to love himself too much to try and off himself.

"I am in exile, as surely as if my strength, immortality, and armour were stripped from me and cast out of Asgard by my father as he did Thor."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, and his expression grew hard.

"I do not want your pity, Darcy Lewis."

"You don't have it. You have my sympathy, which is totally different. Look it up if you don't believe me."

She squared her shoulders, ready for him to lose it or turn her into a frog, or whatever. But all he did was look at her, like she was a puzzle and all he had were the corners and edges and he had no idea what the big picture was supposed to be.

"I should go, before your would-be suitor returns." Loki scooped up his helmet, and smoothed the folds of his tunic with one hand.

"He's not my—we're just friends. Why does nobody believe me when I say that?"

Loki rolled his eyes. Actually rolled his eyes. Darcy scowled.

"What about our bet?"

"I enjoy having you in my debt, never knowing when I will call upon you to collect your part of our bargain."

"You're such a douche sometimes," she managed through a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Stay safe, Cuckoo. I'm counting on reaping my reward someday."
He faded out of existence just like the sofa.
In theory, Saturday was her day off. In reality, Jane almost always went into work anyway, and Darcy usually joined her around lunchtime. Mostly to make sure Jane actually ate something.

Still feeling like crap, Darcy stayed in bed as long as she possibly could, and then wandered out into her living room to eat two bowls of Lucky Charms while she watched a Lifetime marathon of attractive-middle-aged-women-in-jeopardy movies.

She couldn't figure out why she was acting like she had broken up with her boyfriend. It wasn't as if they had ever actually made out, or anything. Loki's insistence on misreading their relationship only annoyed her because deep down, she wished it were true. But Clint treated her more like a pesky little sister than anything else.

She'd just got so used to having him around from sun-up to sundown. She blinked, and she could see him all over her place—lounging on the sofa with his feet propped up on the coffee table despite a perfect good tomato-shaped ottoman available for that express purpose. Leaning against her kitchen counter while she made smoothies, or opened beers with the churchkey he'd bought her after she'd used the countertop one too many times to pop the bottlecaps. One of her dining room chairs still sat in front of the TV, where he'd balance it on two legs, always teetering but never falling as they marathonned some TV show or watched an action movie with him bitching about the fight choreography and editing.

It was weird—her first week in the month since Loki had first snatched her from Jane's by mistake without him just being there. She felt like she'd been jilted at the goddam altar or some shit, which was ridiculous. It wasn't like she hadn't seen him around. Hell, she'd seen him in the cafeteria on Thursday, sitting with Banner eating a cheeseburger. He'd even waved. But it wasn't the same.

The worst part was, she knew that if she'd just told Clint about Loki showing up at the diner, Fury wouldn't have called off Darcy-watch. But that didn't really help, because what was mostly bumming her out was that it apparently took executive orders from their boss to make Clint want to spend time with her.

She'd just switched over to an Ace of Cakes marathon on Food Network when there was a knock at her door.

Clint was standing in the hallway, his hands in his jacket pockets.

"Hey."

"Hey," Darcy echoed, suddenly wishing she'd showered and changed out of her Julius the Monkey flannel pyjamas, and maybe actually brushed her hair.

"So, I'm thinking, we've already done the entire Golden Girls oeuvre... How do you feel about Soap?"

"Do I smell that bad?"

"No, the TV show. I rented it." He pulled a DVD in a flimsy white paper Netflix slip out of his pocket, and handed it to her. She automatically flipped it over to read the logline.

"1977? I wasn't even born when this was on!"
"You never saw it on cable?" Clint asked. "I think Comedy Central ran it in the mid-nineties."

"I was seven in the mid-nineties."

Clint started to bang his forehead against the doorframe. Not hard enough to hurt. Just to make a point. Darcy burst out laughing.

"Um, gimmie, like, fifteen minutes? I just woke up," she lied, and he shrugged.

"Cool—I'm gonna get Doritos and soda from the kitchen downstairs. You want anything?"

"Nope. I'm good."

Half an hour later she was clean and dressed and back on her sofa, while a cheerful announcer told her that this was the story of two sisters—Jessica Tate and Mary Campbell.

Darcy couldn't stop grinning. Because Clint was next to her, his feet propped up on her coffee table, his jacket slung over the papasan chair, relentlessly razzing her for making faces at everyone's bell bottoms and being freaked out by the guy from *Empty Nest* being a total skeeve.

After that afternoon, they fell almost immediately back into their old patterns. While Clint no longer sat at the empty desk in Jane's lab during the day, he still met her in the lobby to walk back to the mansion after work, and more often than not they still hung out. After they burned through the first season of *Soap*, Darcy retaliated with *Saved By The Bell*. Thor couldn't understand why suddenly everyone was calling Agent Sitwell "Screech," but he was joined in his confusion by Dr Banner, whose idea of entertainment tended to be meditation, followed by Tai Chi, and topped off with an hour of sitting in the dark listening to Sufi drum music.

"So how come you're still hanging out with me?" Darcy asked one night as they ate slices of pie and drank endless cups of coffee (Clint) and hot chocolate (Darcy) in a diner on 77th while sheets of rain came down outside.

Clint shrugged. "I like you."

"Huh."

"Why exactly is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, it's not like you were around all that much after we left Puente Antiguo," she pointed out, trying not to sound desperate or pathetic despite the fact that she had totally been both desperate and pathetic when she thought he'd only hung out with her because he'd been ordered to. "I figured you were just, you know, over the whole hanging out with the townie thing."

"Not over it," he said, his grey-green eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled at her over the rim of his coffee cup. "And we still have three seasons of *Soap* to go."

"This is true. I need to find out who killed Peter."

"Okay. But we're not doing all of *Benson*."

"Benson got his own show?"

Clint dropped his head into his hands with a moan. "Thank you for taking this opportunity to remind me you young you are."
"You mean how old you are."

"That, too."

"You're just lucky I have a thing for totally cut old guys with Blanche Devereaux fixations."

"What, what?"

Clint looked completely stunned. Magneto could have been blowing up cars all up and down the block, and he probably wouldn't have noticed. He sat there in the cracked red vinyl booth, his mouth hanging open and a forkful of cherry pie halfway between his plate and his mouth, staring at Darcy like she'd just whipped off her top then and there.

"Seriously, you're only just now figuring this out? It's been, like, six months." Darcy couldn't help it. She laughed. All that drama and angst, and he was the one even more clueless than she had been. "Six months during which we could have been having mind-blowing sex, may I add."

Clint raised one hand toward their waitress. "Can we get our check?" he asked in a slightly strangled voice. Possibly because Darcy had hooked her calf around his under the table, her knee sliding against his thigh while she innocently sipped her cocoa.

They didn't actually go back to the mansion and have wild monkey sex, despite Darcy's inventive suggestions that finally got Clint to drag her off the sidewalk. He crowded her into the covered doorway of a closed manicure shop to shut her up with his mouth. Which worked spectacularly well, despite the fact that the rain had turned cold and was dripping down her neck from the back of her coat, and her glasses had fogged up.

The smile he gave her right before he pushed her up against the glass door made a shiver run down her spine and heat pool in her belly, and that was before his lips even touched hers. It was the way his eyes crinkled up at the corners, the way he filled her entire frame of vision, the way he seemed completely present in the moment. It was heady, and it was sexy, and it was part of why she'd been fantasising about jumping him for months.

Clint kissed with intent.

None of that hesitant feeling-our-way-around-each-other bullshit. He gripped her hips in his large, strong hands, kneading them as he did things with his tongue that Darcy was pretty sure ought to be illegal in at least four states. She very nearly melted into a puddle of goo right there on the street.

She wanted to touch all of him, without a zillion layers of damp clothing between them, and she was pretty sure based on the way he was trying to slide his hands up under her shirt, he felt the same way. If it weren't for the fact that alleys were practically unheard of in Manhattan and it wasn't even nine o'clock, Darcy would have had her wicked way with him right then and there.

Instead, they made out in a taxi the seven blocks to the mansion, and then headed back to their rooms to dry off. When he knocked on her door (guys having way less hair to towel dry), he had that look on his face like he's about to call the whole thing off. So Darcy grabbed him by the wrists and dragged him to her mouth. If he'd been having second thoughts, that seemed to clarify the situation nicely. He kicked her door shut at the same time he picked her up like she weighed nothing at all (and as she did not weigh nothing at all, Darcy found that stupidly hot) and she wrapped her arms around his neck and legs around his waist, which brought very excited parts of her anatomy right up against clearly excited parts of his.

Oh my God I'm kissing Clint kept running on a loop through Darcy's brain, making her head spin.
Giddy breathless laughter slipped out between frantic kisses that gradually became less about immediate release and more about the joy of discovery. For example, Clint figured out in about two seconds that Darcy would moan and writhe against him when he sucked hard on her bottom lip. Darcy learned from trial and error that he wasn't particularly ticklish, but dragging her short nails over the base of his skull made him cant his hips against hers and pull her so close it was like he was trying to wear her like a coat.

Despite the open bedroom door, they ended up on the crazy expensive black leather sofa, making out like teenagers. As far as Darcy was concerned, this was pretty damned awesome. Particularly the look on Clint's face when he finally got her UNM sweatshirt off and she was lying on her back in nothing but a pair of yoga pants and her very best red lace bra.

"Jesus, you're amazing." Clint just stared at her with this look on his face that was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. Darcy could feel a flush creeping up her neck. He reached down to cup one breast in the palm of his hand, thumb tracing the edge of the scalloped lace. "So fucking beautiful."

"So how come all those nights watching cheesy tv on this sofa," Darcy punctuated her statement by arching her back, shifting against him in a way that made them both gasp, "you never tried to cop a feel?"

Clint looked sheepish. "You were always reminding me how much older I am than you. I didn't want you to think I was a creeper."

"You dork," Darcy laughed, propping herself up on her elbows. "Jane's boyfriend is over a thousand years old. Like you being born during the Carter administration means fuck-all. You get my sense of humour. You're totally cut. You even live in my building."

Clint raised a brow. "So I'm convenient?"

"Yeah, conveniently hot."

"You think I'm hot?"

"Shut up. You know you are. And funny, and smart, and snarky, and did I mention sexy?"

"With Rogers and Thor around, not too many people seem to think so."

"Yeah, well, clearly they're blind." Darcy rolled her eyes and then, for good measure, rolled her hips. "More for me."

They got back to the serious business of seeing exactly how much or little it might take to get each other off without being naked, aided by gravity, friction, and Clint's utter fascination with her rack. But he pulled his mouth away from hers long enough to lick her earlobe and whisper, "So if you had a thing for me all this time, why didn't you make a move?"

Darcy pulled back, and looked him straight in the eye. "I wasn't sure if you had 'Property of the KGB' stamped on your butt, and the Widow scares me."

"Actually, technically, it would have been 'Property of the FSB.'"

Darcy punched him in the shoulder. Mostly because as a Poli-Sci major, she totally knew that.

"Me and Tasha—that was over a long time ago."

"Then what the hell are you waiting for, cowboy?"
Clint pulled her into a long, wet kiss that left her light-headed and gasping, and they rolled over so she was on top. She had his shirt rucked up so she could check out his six-pack while he was struggling with the three hooks and eyes on the back of her bra one-handed. He might have been the world's best archer, but he was seriously going to need practice with the amazing feats of engineering that were Darcy's underwire date bras. At least if he was relying on the pinch-and-release method.

"Jesus, this couldn't have a front closure?" he finally said into her cleavage, and Darcy buried her face in his neck, laughing.

"Clearly you have never dated a girl who's a double-D," Darcy pointed out with a wicked grin as she reached behind her back and undid the hooks.

As she pulled her arms through the straps and let the bra fall into her lap, Clint looked stunned. As if he'd just seen the face of God, given a lifetime supply of lube and condoms, and told that they were relocating the Avengers Initiative to Hawaii. In that order.

As he closed his mouth around one pink nipple, Darcy decided it was even possibly worth getting kidnapped by a supervillain in the first place. She closed her eyes, her mouth falling open as he swirled his tongue around the tightened bud and sucked—hard. A low groan was pulled out from her lungs as heat flooded through her, and she wiggled against him, desperately seeking more. More of him, more of this, more of everything.

Clint shifted, half sitting up, half pulling her down against him before reaching up to knead the other breast, his callused hands raising gooseflesh along her arms and making the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. Her higher brain functions had pretty much switched off, and her senses were in overdrive. Clint's skin was warm against hers, and it wasn't enough. His neck, his mouth, his chest and arms—as beautiful as they were—just weren't enough.

"More," Darcy panted, not even realising she was saying it aloud at first. "God, Clint—"

He stopped torturing her breast and kissed her again, both hands cradling her face, fingers sliding through her hair, catching on tangles and knots and she didn't care, because it just felt so good. He felt so good. Darcy splayed her fingers on his chest, sliding one hand down, following the light trail of hair, and Clint's hips jerked against hers.

Darcy had just started unfastening his belt when Clint's phone started beeping incessantly at the same time someone started banging on Darcy's door. As soundproof as her quarters were, Darcy could still hear the Widow swearing in Russian as she tried to pull her Lobos sweatshirt back on the right away around while Clint rebuttoned his jeans.

He jerked the door open. Natasha didn't even blink, despite the fact that Darcy was pretty sure anyone with half a brain could see what had been going on. Especially as Clint was sporting a pretty damned impressive, if she said so herself, hickey just about the neck of his black tee-shirt.

"Doom and the Goblin are on Liberty Island with a dirty bomb and fifteen hostages. Wheels up in ten," she said and then dashed off down the hall.

"Shit, I gotta—" Clint said helplessly, and Darcy made a shooing motion with both hands.

"Yeah, I know. Go. Don't get your ass shot up before I get to see it naked."

Clint gave her a jaunty salute, and then disappeared into his room to suit up and meet the rest of the team in the Quinjet.
Chapter 8

Having resigned herself to the fact that there was no way she was getting laid tonight, Darcy brought up the news channels and scanned them for coverage of the Liberty Island hostage situation.

"So this is how Jane feels," she muttered as she muted the annoying anchorman's voice and she concentrated on the fuzzy news footage. Police had closed off access to the island and grounded all the news helicopters, so the best they could do was endlessly replay the CCTV security feeds from the island from before the Goblin jammed them.

She supposed she could have actually gone down the hall to Jane's room, where they could at least be freaked out together. But for all she knew, Jane was in the lab, or not even in the mansion. Both of them had just got used to the idea that Thor was nigh invulnerable; maybe Jane wasn't worried the way Darcy was, what with Clint being seriously mortal and, unlike Stark, wearing nothing but a glorified stab vest and motorcycle leathers in the face of homicidal supervillains.

"Oh yeah, way to make yourself feel better about the situation, Lewis," Darcy muttered, pulling one of the throw pillows off the sofa over her face so she could scream into it as loud as she could.

It helped. A little. But not much.

"Jarvis, can you load the Quinjet feeds on my TV?"

"I'm sorry, Ms Lewis, but you don't have clearance for that information."

"Can you at least tell me if Clint's okay?"

"I am monitoring his vitals, and they appear strong."

"I guess that's something."

Darcy tucked the afghan closer around her, and reached for the TV remote.

Darcy didn't remember falling asleep. One minute she was watching Anderson Cooper giving the entire history of Liberty Island, and the next minute there was an infomercial about non-stick cookware, and the blue LED clock on the cable box was reading 2:37 AM.

"Jarvis, are they back? Are they okay?"

"I believe that while the situation has been resolved with no casualties, the Quinjet is still on Liberty Island while they await transport for Mr Osbourne to The Vault. However, Mr Barton did send a text message, if you would care to read it?"

Darcy dove for her bag and fished out her phone.

AM FINE. DON'T WAIT UP. SEND NAKED PIXS IF YOU WANT, THO. GONNA BE A LONG NIGHT. -CB

She tapped out a short reply:

Never sending topless pics again. Last time they ended up on t Internets. Don't bother w/Google—GONE NOW. You'll just have to wait to unwrap present like a good little archer.
She set her phone down on the coffee table, and swung her legs over the side of the sofa, amazed at how wide awake she was. She couldn't stop smiling. Blowing a breath out to try and calm the pounding heart in her ribcage, she got up to get a bowl and her emergency Haagen-Dazs out of the freezer.

She was halfway to the kitchen when she heard a giggle behind her, and she closed her eyes, trying to will it out of existence.

Turning, she saw Loki smiling broadly at her. From about an inch away, as apparently tonight was not a night for respecting personal space. She clamped down hard on her instinctive reaction, which was to jump backwards and then kick him in the balls which—while it had served her well in similar situations in the past—probably wasn't that great an idea when dealing with someone who could transmute matter with a thought. The last thing she needed was to be turned into a lizard.

He wasn't in the full get-up with the stupid helmet, but appeared to be in some kind of trousers and tunic, with silver plate metal accents that caught the light at strange angles.

"Darcy! I have missed your face!" Loki's face was split with a grin—a genuine happy grin— and Darcy blinked at him for a second.

"Ah. I see someone has found the Internet." Then her eyes began to water from his breath. "And, it would appear, cinnamon schnapps."

"No, no—it's better than that. See? It has flakes of gold!" He held up a nearly empty bottle, the shape of which Darcy instantly recognised.

"Awesome. Goldschläger."

"A charming drink!"

"Only when you don't kill the bottle."

"Why have you not friended me back on the Facebook?"

"Because I didn't know it was actually you."

"Who else would it be? It's the Official Loki Odinson Fan Page! I desire to get more Facebook friends than Thor."

"I can pretty much guarantee you that Thor is not really on Facebook. He can barely use the toaster, let alone a laptop."

"Now you can see why I sought to postpone my illustrious brother's reign. Where is your guard dog?"

"Hostage situation. And he's not my watchdog."

"I assumed as much," Loki said flicking a finger towards her red lace bra, which was still hanging off the corner of her coffee table. Darcy could feel her cheeks heating up as she dove for it and stuffed it between two of the couch cushions.

"Fine. He's kinda my boyfriend, actually. Sorta. Well, he would be, if we could actually get naked.
"It's complicated."

"I forget, with your mayfly lives, how quickly you couple like beasts in the field."

"When you put it that way, it just sounds gross. How many of these have you had?"

"Three."

"Bottles. How does one misuse a toaster?"

"He points at it and yells 'Toast, come forth!'"

"Does it work?"

"No, you dork. Toasters really don't care if you're the god of thunder. They're toasters."

"What did you just call me, wench?" Loki drew himself up to his full height and tried to loom imposingly. However, it was pretty hard to be intimidated by someone whose eyes were practically crossing, centre of gravity shifting as he swayed back and forth.

"I called you a dork, you loser."

"I'm neither a dork nor a loser you... you... minion."

"Hey!" Darcy whacked him on the arm. "I'm nobody's minion!"

"How do you categorise the services you perform for your Jane Foster?"

He had her there. "Okay, fine. I'm a minion. But I'm a highly trained minion." Darcy huffed. "Three bottles? How do you not have blood alcohol poisoning?"

"I am superior in every way."

"You are one drunk-ass bitch. Sit down before you fall down."

Watching the plastered god of mischief trying to land in her papasan chair gracefully was not unlike watching a monkey attempt to have conjugal relations with a football. Darcy leapt forward to catch the frame when it began to tip to the side, threatening to dump him onto his Asgardian ass on the floor.

"Hey there, big fella," Darcy said as she righted him. "Gravity works."

He kept giggling, face pressed into her shoulder.

"You smell good." His voice was muffled by her sweatshirt, and he managed to get her hair in his mouth as she steadied the chair on its base.

"Uh-uh. No way. This is a no-fly zone." Darcy indicated her rack with a circular sweep of her hand. "I thought we'd already covered that."

Loki just frowned at her as she perched on the ottoman across from him, pulling the sleeves of her sweatshirt down over her fingers.

"So, why the binge drinking?"
"I have journeyed to Asgard," he said gravely.

"I thought Heimdall was all 'You Shall Not Pass'?"

"The Bifrost is not the only way in and out of the Realm." He leaned forward again, adding in a stage whisper, "There are secret ways that are known to but a few."

"How can you still talk like Shakespeare while hammered?"

"Natural talent." Loki waved one hand imperiously through the air. The end result was him almost overbalancing the papasan chair again. Darcy had to bite her lip to keep from guffawing as Loki grasped both sides of the rattan frame and struggled to keep both feet on the floor as it rocked like a boat on the high seas.

"So... spill. I want all the deets."

"I appeared to the Lady Sif in her chambers, cloaked in shadows so I could escape Heimdall's prying eyes. I remained intangible, so she could not lay hands on me."

"Okay, so she couldn't throw your ass in the county lock-up. That makes sense. Of course, she couldn't jump your skinny ass, either."

"I had hoped for the latter, but was mindful of the former. At first, she railed at me for my actions, and did indeed threaten to drag me to my father for the Allfather's justice. But in time, I was able to convince her to meet with me in Midgard, under truce, to share a meal."

"Holy shit, you made your move! Go you! So... is this victory drinking? Or drowning our sorrows in cinnamon schnapps drinking?"

"Perhaps a bit of both," he admitted with a giggle, dropping the dead soldier to the carpet where it rolled beneath the sofa. With a wave of his hand, a fresh bottle appeared, and he cracked it open gleefully.

"I like this drink. It reminds me of home."

"Four bottles worth?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Everything seems like a good idea when you're drunk. Driving non-stop to New Orleans, for example. Or getting your nipples pierced."

Loki's eyes grew wide and his gaze immediately dropped to her chest. Darcy crossed her arms reflexively.

"Jesus, not me you perv! Anyway, we're not talking about my drunken sexcapades, we're talking about yours."

"Did you know that Sif's hair used to be gold?"

"'Gold' as in blonde?"

"Yes. That. When I was just a boy, I cut it. I didn't mean any harm. It was just a teasing prank. I did not see why she needed her long, golden curls as a Shieldmaiden. Thor tried to beat me bloody, and she did not speak to me for a fortnight."
"Yeah, I'm kinda on her side, there. How old were you? Like, ten?"

"A stripling of three hundred."

Darcy's mouth dropped open in shock. "A hundred years of puberty? Man, glad to be mortal."

She snagged the bottle from his hands, and took a swig, grimacing at the burn as it went down.

"I stole away to Niðavellir where the dwarves first made Mjolnir and Gungnir, and wagered with the sons of Ivaldi that they could not make a shining raiment that would match Sif's golden tresses. They made hair of gold so fine—finer than the hair I'd cut, and once she put it on, it would grow as naturally as the shorn locks. I lost the wager, but it was a fair price to pay."

"What was the price?"

"They took an awl and golden wire and sewed my lips shut."

Darcy handed back the bottle, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

"That's disgusting! Oh my God, what is with you people? Have you never heard of, like, fines and jovie instead of casual mutilation?"

"Well, Brokkr first asked for my head, and then threatened to turn my tongue to actual silver. So really, it seemed quite reasonable at the time." He gave her one of those heavy-lidded, lazy smiles and, once again, she was weirded by how relaxed he was. "And anyway, it was easily healed. And for once, my father praised me for undertaking a quest on my own, instead of at my brother's side."

"So how come Sif's hair is black, if you gave her a magical weave?"

"She refused to wear it. And when her hair grew back, it was black as a raven's wing."

"She never forgave you?"

"Oh, she forgave me... after a suitable period of ignoring me or trying to kill me on the practice field. She had decided that I was right—there was no room for vanity in a warrior's life. I think she was mostly relieved. With her hair cut short as a boy's, she was left alone to practise unmolested on the field."

"So you did her a favour?"

"I suppose it could be seen as a boon. Speaking of which, I have come to collect mine." He leaned forward, and the papasan chair rocked dangerously on its base.

"You're hammered, and I'm in my jammies. Unless we can get a designated driver, we're not going anywhere."

"No, no, you misunderstand me. I arranged for the Lady Sif to break bread with me tomorrow evening, and I wish you to accompany us. As a sign of good faith on my part, that I plan no mischief, but am truly sincere in my desire for peace between us."

"How the hell am I supposed to do that?"

"You may bring your lover."

"He's not my—you want to double-date? Seriously?"
"Surely your guard dog would not want you to be in my company unescorted. Wasn't that the entire reason he was set to guard you in the first place?"

"But... but... don't you want privacy? You know, some one-on-one time to work your mad skills and get her to like you?"

"I believe that the presence of mortals whom she already knows and has affection for would only aid me in my quest. And you did give me your word."

Darcy opened her mouth to protest, but then snapped it shut again with an audible click. He had her there, she had promised. This just wasn't even on her list of wacky schemes she'd been anticipating.

Wingman. To an alien god of mischief. To a desperate and pathetic alien god on a date with a woman who probably wanted to kill him. Oh yeah, Barton was gonna love that.

"I... Okay. Fine. Sure. But I don't know if Clint will go for it."

"I care little either way. I only require you be there."

"I'll keep my end of the deal. But you have to promise me that no matter what happens, you won't lose your shit and go postal on innocent bystanders. And I am so counting myself there."

"Another deal? Was our last wager not proof enough that I am a man of my word?"

"Those are my terms. Take it or leave it."

"I accept." He took another long pull off the bottle, and coughed before grinning. "I like this drink. It has gold in it. Have you ever had it before?"

"Of course I have. Every idiot undergrad does at some point. It's a cultural thing. I'm just glad no-one introduced you to Glitterbombs. You're gonna have the mother of all hangovers tomorrow."

"I suffer no ill-effects from alcohol."

"No hangovers?"

"No hangovers. Hangovers are for mortals."

"I hate you."

"No you don't. You like me." He smiled widely, and reached out to pat her head. "You're my friend."

Darcy didn't quite know how to deal with that titbit of information. She was used to Loki being a snide, superior, all-around douche when it came to humans versus Asgardians. But he sat there in her papasan chair, green eyes wide and guileless as she stared at him.

"Hangover or no hangover, I'm getting you a glass of water and an aspirin."

She ran back to the bathroom, filled the glass that normally held her toothbrush from the tap, and grabbed the bottle of aspirin.

When she came back, Loki was gone, and a brown, fuzzy baby two-toed sloth was in her papasan chair.

"Seriously?"
The sloth made a little pathetic mewing noise and lifted its arms.

"Fine, you get cuddles." She lifted it into her arms, and it wrapped its arms around her neck. "But only because you're a baby sloth," she muttered, resisting the urge to nuzzle its soft fur.

"So, when you shape-shift, where does your additional mass go?"

It was weird getting the glare of death from a tiny baby sloth.

"Just because I was a Poli-Sci major doesn't mean I don't pick up a thing or two from all the science geeks I hang out with, you know."

The sloth made another mewing noise, and she set it back down in the chair and wrapped the brightly coloured afghan that lay folded over the arm of the sofa around it.

It cuddled the Goldschläger bottle like a teddy bear, and immediately began to snore.

"Why is my life so weird?" she asked the ceiling, which gratefully didn't reply.
Darcy woke up to the grey light of dawn and Clint trying to sneak in. Badly. Instinctively her eyes went to the papasan chair, but it was empty. Even the empty Goldschläger bottles were gone.

"Hey," she muttered sleepily as he crouched down next to her on the sofa and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

"There's a big bed in there—what are you doing out here?"

"Trying to wait up for you." She scrubbed her hands across her face, surreptitiously checking the corners of her mouth for drool. "And failing. You get the bad guys?"

Clint dropped a kiss on her forehead. He was still wearing his gear, and smelled faintly of smoke and ozone.

"We got the bad guys."

"You're okay? Not irradiated or dented or anything?"

"I'm okay. Just need some rack time."

"My rack?" she asked, giving him a sleepy smile.

"I wish." He picked her up, afghan and all, and carried her into the bedroom. "I'm gonna shower, grab some sleep, then Coulson's debriefing us. Go back to sleep. It's Saturday."

"S'too early," she muttered as she curled up under the duvet. But she grabbed his arm and pulled him down for an absolutely filthy kiss before he could leave.

"Cinnamon?" she lied.

"Toothpaste," he murmured against her mouth.

Then he clicked off the light, and she fell back asleep.

It wasn't until hours later, as she rinsed conditioner out of her hair in the shower, that she realised she hadn't told Clint about her late night visit from Loki.

Darcy had been to the Avengers Initiative training gym before. It had been part of the tour when she'd moved into the mansion. But not really being the type to work out, she hadn't been back since that first day.

Clint was at the weight bench, power-lifting when she padded across the floor. No-one else was in there, and sunlight streamed into through a wall of windows that she knew were tinted on the outside so no-one could peer in to catch a peek of Captain America without his shirt, which was a shame because Steve without his shirt was kinda a religious experience.

"Aren't you supposed to have a spotter to keep from dropping one of those on your head?" Darcy asked from a safe distance away, and was rewarded with Clint shifting his grip. Some Special ops guy, if a glorified secretary can sneak up on him, Darcy thought with a grin.

"Steve usually does it, but Tony took him out to Coney Island."
"Don't tell me—hot dog eating contest?"

"Nah—that's in July.' Clint set the barbell back on the stand, and sat up. Darcy couldn't help staring at the rippling muscles of his abdomen, feeling her mouth go dry.

He brought a towel up to his face, patting it dry, and Darcy stepped closer.

"Have you got plans tonight?"

"My plan mostly consists," he said with a wicked grin as he slid his hands around her waist and pulled her closer, "of picking up where we left off last night. After all, I still haven't seen your tattoo."

Darcy wrinkled her nose. "Ew. You smell like sweaty guy."

"Would you prefer Axe body spray and hair gel?"

"Shut up. You know I don't. But you still reek." However, that didn't stop her from straddling him and draping her arms around his neck.

"What's tonight?"

"I kinda promised someone I'd go out to dinner with him. It came up all of a sudden, and I can't back out."

"We haven't even hooked up yet, and you're already cheating on me?"

"No—it's his first date with this... girl he likes. And he wants me there for moral support since I know them both. And he said you can come too—"

"Sure. So long as I don't have to wear a monkey suit. Where?"

"I'm not sure yet, I need to ask him. But the thing is—"

"Darcy!" Thor's voice boomed from the doorway, and the god of thunder bounded in, a wide grin splitting his features.

"Hey, Thor. Kinda in the middle of something—"

"The Lady Sif has sent word from Asgard that she is coming, for to sup with my brother."

Thor ignored the fact that Darcy was in Clint's lap, and swept her up into a bear hug that nearly cracked her ribs.

"Never would I have dreamed that my brother held such tender feelings toward our childhood companion. But this is the first time he has ever made any intentions known, that he might someday mend his relationship with our homeland."

"Wait, Loki?" Clint said, clearly able to add two and two and get five. "This guy you want us to double date—Loki? What the fuck, Darcy?"

Darcy poked Thor's shoulder with one stiff finger. "Okay, lemme down. You gotta lemme down now. Feet. On the floor."

Thor set her back down, and Darcy took a step toward Clint, who looked like his head was going to explode. "It's not what you think. It's not a big deal—"
"This is a huge deal. This is not some cute cuddly stray kitten you found in the goddam park here. This is Loki. How many people have gotten hurt—gotten killed—because of the shit he's pulled? How many times has he tried to kill me, or the rest of the team? Jesus, he tried to kill you that one time in New Mexico."

"I know. Don't you think I know that? Hello—not stupid, here."

"You said his weird thing with you was over. You told Director Fury—"

"—That Loki hadn't kidnapped me again. Which is true, I swear! There was no actual kidnapping! Just...talking. I swear, that's all."

"When? Where?"

"Um... okay, this is gonna sound way worse than it actually is—"

"Seriously, Darcy. I am not kidding here."

"Okay, but you have to promise not to freak out."

"I am already freaking out," he pointed out.

"You have to promise not to freak out more."

Clint's expression remained stony, and he crossed his arms, making his biceps do that thing where Darcy usually lost her train of thought because holy crap, that boy was hot.

"The first time he showed up at the diner, while you were in the men's room. And then, um, kinda, last night... in my apartment?"

"Darcy, what the ever living fuck—"

Darcy actually ducked behind Thor, as he was a convenient wall of godly muscle. Clint probably wouldn't actually throw a punch at her, but if he did, she figured Thor would make an awesome Asgardian shield. "It's not that bad!"

"He was in the mansion and you didn't tell anybody?"

"Well, it kinda wasn't... the first... time. And he didn't do anything! Okay, we watched a movie, and then last night he was drunk and needed to sleep it off. But nothing happened!"

"Nothing. Happened." Clint repeated, and yeah, this was not good. A vein was standing out in his forehead, and he looked about ready to take her apart. "You had a fucking movie night with a guy who has killed people—"

"But he hadn't! I mean, he did, but then we kinda... I double-dog dared him not to kill anybody for a whole week, and then it was weeks and weeks and nothing happened. And you and I were sorta on a break, okay? And I know I fucked up. Believe me, I know. But he's not like... He's different. I don't know. He's not better, exactly. He's just different."

Clint just glared at her, while Thor looked back and forth between them, clearly confused.

"Friend Barton, I do not understand your ire. Surely this is nothing but good news?"

"Look, buddy, I know he's your brother and all. Believe me, I know... better than you think. I get it. But this is Loki we're talking about. He's hurt people. He's killed people. Innocent people who were
just in the wrong place at the wrong time, who got in his way. And I don't care how much you love him and miss him. He's not a good guy. And she—" he pointed at Darcy, who ducked behind Thor's massive bulk at the force of the accusation in his eyes. "She let him have free rein of our home."

"It wasn't like that! He wasn't after Avengers secrets, or up to anything. This is a guy who freaking cried during *How to Train Your Dragon*, for fuck's sake!"

"Dragons?" Thor echoed, and Darcy wished like hell that she'd been up-front with Loki's brother from the start, because that would have made this a whole lot less awkward.

"It's a kid's movie. It's kinda my go-to movie when I'm feeling like—I was having a bad night, okay? And then he showed up, and I was all freaked out and then..." Her shoulders dropped, and she could feel her eyes smarting with angry tears. "We just sat and watched the movie like normal people. I know it sounds nuts. Believe me."

She sat down on the weight bench, pulling her knees up to her chest and hugging them as she looked up at Clint and Thor.

"He doesn't have anybody. And for some weird reason, which I still do not entirely understand, he picked me to talk to. Okay, so sometimes he treats me like a hamster, but that's better than taking me hostage or whatever. And I don't want to be just one more person in this guy's life who let him down and chose everyone else ahead of him just for what he is. For not being, you know—him."

She waved at Thor, whose hair was like a blond halo from the afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows, his blue tee-shirt stretched across his pecs. He was a god. He was the good son. He was her best friend's boyfriend, for pete's sake. And he really was like a giant puppy, in addition to being the heaviest hitter in the Avengers Initiative.

Thor's face softened, but Clint was still glowering at her. He swam in her vision for a moment as her eyes stung and pricked with tears. She blinked and he came clear again.

"Loki trusts me. I don't know why, but he does. And I don't want to fuck that up. Because..."

*Because he's my friend.*

"Because people get hurt when Loki feels alone and betrayed by the people he trusts. All those people you were talking about—they got hurt because he *chose* to hurt people, because once upon a time, people hurt him. And maybe if he isn't alone, then he can be better than he was. I dunno. I had to try."

She could feel her bottom lip quivering, and her cheeks were hot and her nose was starting to run. This was definitely not her finest hour.

Then Clint got down on his knees, and pulled her hands away from her face, brushing away her tears with the balls of his thumbs.

"I get that you just wanted to help. I *love* that you tried to help." He rested his forehead against hers, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "But why didn't you tell me?"

"After the diner, I knew I should have... I knew, but I made a stupid choice. And then I just kept on making stupid choices, because I didn't want you to be mad at me. And..." Her breath hitched in her throat, and she could feel a tightness in her chest as she fought the inevitable tears. "Look, I didn't want you to be with me because you were *ordered* to baby-sit me."
"You're an idiot," he said, but fondly, the corner of his mouth quirking up. Darcy sniffled, wiping the heel of her hand across her eyes.

"Yeah, I know."

"But you're also a good person, Darcy Lewis."

"Please don't tell Director Fury—" she started, hiccuping sobs still bubbling past her lips, "because he's gonna be really mad, and I need this job. Not just to pay my stupid student loans—"

Clint leaned forward and shut her up with his mouth, since that was already a proven method of getting her to stop babbling.

The kiss was short, and sweet, which was good because Darcy couldn't really breathe thanks to her stuffed up nose. She opened her eyes to see Thor looking down at both of them, his broad grin fixed firmly back in place as he laid a hand on each of their shoulders.

"I know that it would not please Fury and the son of Coul, but it means a great deal to me, that you would accompany my brother tonight. If you wish, perhaps I—"

"Oh Jesus, no!" Darcy blurted out, and then clapped a hand over her mouth. "I mean, I think it is really important that whatever goes down with Loki and Sif, you not be there. I just think that would be a really bad plan. The worst. Just... not good."

"I understand. My brother and I... we have an uneasy peace at the best of times, and I do not wish to upset what is clearly a very delicate situation. But should you need me, I swear to you, I will be there at your side as fast as the winds and Mjolnir can carry me."

"Thanks, buddy. I mean that. And we may still take you up on it."

"But—"

"—But like Darcy said, Sif will be there. And we'll be there. And hopefully, nothing bad will go down." Clint turned back to Darcy, smoothing her hair back from her face. "But I am putting my foot down about the venue. I don't want any innocent civilians at risk. If we're going to do this, we're going to do this my way."

Darcy opened her mouth, and then closed it again, and nodded mutely.
Chapter 10

When Darcy came down the stairs, the Avengers were assembled in the kitchen, and all of them were staring at her.

Darcy turned to Clint, crossing her arms and frowning. "You called a family meeting?"

"My way or the highway," Clint reminded her.

Thor, at least, was still smiling, though Jane looked worried. Steve and Tony had come back from their excursion. Cap looked serious, but not too mad. It was hard to tell what was going on behind Tony's shades. Darcy was guessing he was hungover. Darcy couldn't tell Dr Banner was thinking; he was seriously Zen. But there was no misreading Natasha's scowl. Darcy wanted to hide behind Clint, but took a deep breath and stood her ground.

Tony jumped up and gave Darcy his chair. "First of all, mazel-tov. So glad you crazy kids finally got your shit together."

"Tony—" Natasha said, a warning in her voice which of course he ignored.

"Secondly, I've had a little talk with Jarvis about unexpected visitors. Thanks for that, by the way. I'd been wanting to test out the new security system which clearly still needs work."

Darcy couldn't tell if Tony was being serious, or making fun of her. "Um, you're welcome?"

"Let's just say the next time your BFF shows up for a movie or to do shots or whatever, he's not going to find it quite so easy."

"There's not going to be a next time," Natasha said firmly. "Not here. Understood?"

"It's not like I can control how or when Loki shows up, you know," Darcy tried to explain, but Black Widow continued to glare at her.

"Darcy," Steve said, using the Dad Voice. "It was very irresponsible of you, not to notify us immediately Loki infiltrated the mansion. Do you understand how dangerous that was?"

"Yes, sir," Darcy said meekly. Steve looking all disappointed in her made her feel about five years old.

She reached for Clint's hand under the table. He gave her fingers a squeeze.

"Okay, so Tony's volunteered his house in Malibu, because it's isolated, with no chance of civilians being caught in the crossfire if there's an incident."

"Isn't there anyplace closer?" Darcy asked, dismayed. "I mean, at least in the state of New York?"

"Not that we can control," Clint pointed out. "Not in less than a day."

"You guys built that whole base in New Mexico in, like, an afternoon," Darcy said, confused.

"That was S.H.I.E.L.D. We're on our own here."

"But Malibu is six hours away!"
"Not in the Quinjet," Steve pointed out, but Clint shook his head.

"We can't take the Quinjet. For this to work without Director Fury finding out, we have to do this as a side op, off the books."

"Isn't he gonna notice if the entire Avengers Initiative hop on a plane to California?" Darcy asked.

"Not when it's the Stark private jet," Tony said with a grin. "Already filed the flight plan. And it's less than four hours in my jet. I modified it myself. But here's the thing—I just had the house re-done. So you break it, you bought it."

Darcy tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "That would be the fifty million dollar Lautner house built onto the side of a cliff in a part of the country that has earthquakes and mudslides, right?"

"It's completely safe. Architecturally sound. And did I mention I just had it rebuilt? Okay, Pepper did. And, you know, she'll kill me if I break it again. It'll be like that one time I was dying, only she'll actually kill me. And then you won't have Iron Man to play with any more. So you're not allowed to break it. Are we clear on that?"

"We're clear," Clint confirmed, and then turned back to Darcy. "It's just going to be you, me, and Tasha to run point and co-ordinate."

"It's dinner, not the invasion of Normandy."

"Actually, it's kinda a lot like—" Steve began, and Darcy glared at him. "Right. Sorry. I'll just stop talking now."

"Thor, Cap, Bruce and Tony are all gonna stay here, and cover for us. So the next question is, how do we actually get Loki to show up at the secure location?"

"If you tell him Sif'll be there, trust me, he'll show up." It was the first thing Bruce had said since Darcy had sat down, and all eyes turned to him. "What?"

"I forget sometimes that you have a girlfriend," Tony said as he reached for Thor's orange juice. "How does that work, anyway? I mean, with the whole elevated heart rate thing—"

"Tony, focus," Natasha snapped. "So how do we get the word about the new location to Loki?"

Darcy pulled out her mobile. "Hang on, lemme Facebook him."

Clint blinked. "Loki's on Facebook?"

"I know, crazy right? Okay, I messaged him and poked him."

Tony actually lowered his mirrored shades, peering at Darcy from over the frames. "You poked Loki. On Facebook."

Darcy shrugged. "Well, he was making this big deal about wanting more Facebook friends than Thor."

"What is this Facebook?" Thor asked, clearly confused. "You have told me of it before, but I have never been to such a place."

Darcy opened her mouth to explain, but then closed it as Clint gave her a look.

"We'll introduce Thor to social networking later," Clint said. "Right now, we need to keep our eyes
on the prize. Namely, getting out of this with no casualties, or having Directory Fury toss us off the helicarrier over the Atlantic."

"He wouldn't actually do that," Jane said, looking back and forth between Clint and Natasha, whose faces were grim. "Would he?"

"You don't want to get on the director's bad side," Natasha said diplomatically, and got up from the table. "I know the Malibu house inside out. No problem with prep, and I don't see any issues with execution. What else do you need from me?"

"I need—" Tony began, and Natasha just gave him a look. "You know what? Never mind. I'm good. You good, Clint? 'cause I'm good."

"Why are you guys doing all this?" Darcy blurted out. "I mean... I get why Thor would want to help his brother out. But why would the rest of you?"

"I figure, if Loki's getting laid regularly, it'll reduce his murderous impulses." Tony flashed her a grin. "Incidentally, also goes for Clint."

Clint gave Tony the finger.

Steve opened his mouth—probably to verbally smack Tony down—but it was Jane who said "Darcy, we're a team."

Everyone at the table turned to look at the diminutive scientist.

"We're more than a team. We're family."

"I wouldn't actually go that far," Bruce said, and Darcy laughed. Clearly, the absurdity of the situation was finally getting to her.

"I'm taking Darcy," Natasha said, a hand on Darcy's shoulder.

"Taking her where?" Clint asked, and Natasha only smiled at him. It was a scary smile.

"That's need to know, and you don't need to know. Don't worry—I'll have her back in time for us to make the flight."

Darcy let go of Clint's hand reluctantly.

"You'll be fine," Clint assured her.

"Okay. Oh hey, what about the actual dinner part of dinner? Security is awesome, but so's food."

"I can do that!" Tony said with a grin. "That, I can do. I've got a guy—fantastic sushi chef. Thor, does Sif like sushi?"

"What is sushi?" Thor asked, confused, and Natasha took that as their cue to leave.

Darcy figured that Natasha would take her to Bendel's or Barney's, or maybe one of those tiny trendy boutiques on Fifth Ave where they didn't even have mannequins in the windows. So she was a little confused when they got in a cab, and Natasha gave an address in Brooklyn. But whatever—this was the Widow's side op. Darcy was just a passenger.

"Is this the part where you tell me if I break his heart, you'll break my legs?" Darcy asked as they
headed towards the bridge, not knowing whether she should be scared or relieved when Natasha laughed.

"No, Clint and I were a train wreck. A beautiful train wreck, but still a train wreck. I'm actually more worried about him breaking your heart than the other way around, but you're a big girl. You get to make your own choices. And you made a good one when you picked him."

"'Cause he's a really good guy?"

"Well, that. And he's phenomenal in bed."

They got out of the cab in front of a shabby-looking brownstone in a residential neighbourhood. The windows were all covered with heavy drapes, and instead of going to the front door, they went down a short flight of stairs to knock on the basement door.

The door was opened by a tall blonde woman with pale green eyes and high cheekbones. She seemed wary at first, until Natasha rattled off something in Russian, and suddenly they were embracing and kissing each other's cheeks, and the ice queen pulled the door all the way open and ushered them inside.

"Darcy, this is Vasilisa Ivanovna. She's going to help us get you ready for tonight."

"Um, hi," Darcy said.

Ivanovna set a silver tray with three small glasses of clear liquid down in front of them. Natasha immediately picked one up and downed it, and Darcy followed her lead. She then coughed and sputtered as it turned out to be ice-cold vodka that was probably closer to freaking moonshine than Stoli. Ivanovna only laughed, and poured another round.

"In the world of haute couture, designers do not love women. They love clothes. They create clothes to fit women built like hangers, so that nothing spoils the architectural lines of the clothes. Women have curves. Clothing should celebrate women's bodies—not men who hate women's ideals of clothes."

"Ivanovna specialises in clothes for women who are more... zaftig," Natasha explained.

"What does zaftig mean?"

"It's a nicer way of saying stacked. Most of her clients are burlesque performers."

"No way! That's awesome!"

They got up from the sitting room, and followed Ivanovna to another room. This one was larger, with shelves from floor to ceiling. Darcy gasped. There were platform pumps and open-toed slippers festooned with feathers, fans and scarves in every colour of the rainbow, and sparkling jewellery that probably single-handedly kept every Michael's Crafts store in the tri-state area in business. There were closets with their doors hung open to show the bright jewel tones and wild prints of the clothes that hung on padded hangers. An entire standing rack was reserved for leather jackets, sequinned tops, and fur wraps dyed in crazy colours and patterns, ranging from fuchsia leopard print to bright green zebra stripes.

"Oh my God, it's like rockabilly heaven in here." Darcy immediately gravitated toward the animal prints. Natasha carefully steered her back toward a closet full of satin and taffeta.

"I'm thinking something retro, but not necessarily vintage. Something classic, made for the hourglass
"Made to draw the eye and enflame the soul," Ivanovna said completely straight-faced, and Darcy had to cough to cover a giggle.

"Usually we'd go from the skin-out, but we're pressed for time. So we're going to pick a dress and shoes, and then go to Ivanovna's brother upstairs. He will have just the right lingerie to go with the dress."

Natasha was looking at her in a way that made Darcy blush, and she was really regretting doing the vodka shots earlier.

"I'm thinking something with light boning for support, and garters for stockings. Definitely garters."

Or maybe just not doing enough of them. It was a toss-up.

"Okay, let's get started."

By the time they got a cab back to the mansion, Darcy was, if possible, even more afraid of Natasha than she had been before.

When she came back down the stairs in her new dress and shoes, an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, she was focussing so hard on not falling on her ass from the unfamiliar height of the platform heels, she didn't realise that Clint, Steve and Tony were all waiting for her at the bottom.

"Holy shit," Clint said, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

"Way to keep it classy, Barton." Darcy rolled her eyes, but her face felt hot. Her original plan had been to just throw on the one nice top she owned, jeans, and boots.

Natasha'd had other ideas.

The dress was seriously amazing. Ivanovna had called it a classic "wiggle" dress, modelled on vintage patterns from the late fifties. It was dark blue sapphire satin, sleeveless and had a tight fitted bodice and wide straps. The wiggle part came in from the knee-length pencil skirt, though she added an eight inch vent in the back so Darcy could actually walk.

Topping off the whole ensemble were silk stockings with seams up the back. Natasha had done her hair parted to one side and held up with a single black lacquer comb. When Darcy looked down she wasn't used to seeing so much of her assets on display. The wisdom of wearing a corset on a three hour plane ride was highly questionable. But Darcy had decided it was so worth it, from the looks the male Avengers were giving her. Clint seemed to be having trouble forming words. Tony's eyes were practically falling out of his head. Even Steve seemed a bit awe-struck. Score one for the power of cleavage, Darcy thought with a giggle.

"You look like Rita Hayworth," Steve blurted out, and then actually blushed. Steve was ridiculously cute when he did that.

"That's good, right?"

"It's very good," Tony said with a wry smile. "And it confirms what I've long suspected—that Cap actually does have a sex drive. It's just stuck in the era of Esquire pin-ups. Steve, have you ever even seen a girl naked?"
"I did travel all over the US and Europe with an entire troupe of USO girls, you know," Steve pointed out, sounding slightly annoyed. Darcy had noticed that Tony was the only one who seemed to bring that out in Steve.

"I just always assumed you kept your eyes closed when they were changing."

Steve ducked his head, ears going pink. "Well, I did—but I kept bumping into, um, stuff."

"It's too bad you slept through the fifties, buddy. You would have loved them."

Steve turned back to Darcy. "I really wish I had my sketchbook. I'd love to draw you."

"You can say stuff like that and it doesn't even sound dirty coming from you." Tony appeared fascinated. "How do you do that?"

Steve just shrugged, his ears still pink. "I'm just a kid from Brooklyn."

"Even Danny Kaye would get a hard-on from Darcy in that dress, and I have it on very good authority that he didn't even like girls."

That seemed to jerk Clint out of his stupor. "Hey, that's my girl you're talking about, Stark."

"Are you kidding? I gave Tony Stark a boner. Go me!" Darcy pumped her fist in the air. "Even if you are totally old enough to be my dad."

Tony closed his eyes, wincing. "I need a drink."

"You look swell, Darcy. Really swell." Steve at least was keeping his eyes on her face, and his smile was genuine, so Darcy gave him a peck on the cheek. It didn't even leave a Montezuma Red lipstick mark on his face. Apparently that was what happened when you bought lipstick that cost as much as a nice dinner out on the town, instead of $4 from the cosmetics aisle at the CVS. Who knew?

Also, she was amused to note, in the dangerous shoes, she was almost eye-level with Steve's face instead of his sternum. That was kinda weird, but she decided she liked it.

The dangerous shoes also put her at eye level with Clint, which made it all the more noticeable that his eyes were glued to her rack. Darcy smiled fondly, and then slapped the back of his head lightly with her open palm.

"Hey, Robin Hood. I'm up here." She swirled her index finger around her face, and he looked up, blinking.

"Sorry, babe—I just. Goddamn you clean up nice."

"Why, Mr Barton, I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Darcy batted her eyelashes at him. "You clean up nice, too, Stud."

He too had been pounced on by the fashion police, as he was dressed up. Well, dressed up for him, which meant that he was clean shaven, his dark slate blue silk shirt untucked, wearing slacks with neat creases instead of jeans, and his shoes were polished like mirrors. Darcy was betting he would use them to try and look up her skirt any minute and get a sneak peek at the fancy underwear Natasha had insisted she wear.

"Sorry to spoil this Kodak moment, kids." Tony threw an arm around Clint's shoulder and walked him toward the door. "But you've got a plane to catch."
Darcy glanced around, confused. "Where's Natasha?"

"Already at the airfield—she's taking point, remember? She left straight from the mansion after dropping you off."

They filed out to the waiting limo, where Tony's driver Happy was idling. Clint took her bag and his and tossed them in the back, while Happy came around and opened the door for her. Getting into the back seat was a bit more difficult than it usually was, but Darcy managed it without either popping out of her dress or scuffing her heels, so she was counting it a win.

"Wait—what happens when the rainbow bridge opens and deposits Sif in Malibu? How do we keep S.H.I.E.L.D. from storming the complex during the soup course?"

"Actually, Thor cleared Sif's visit with Coulson. So that's one less thing to worry about. It's also part of our cover for going to Malibu."

"What is our cover for going to Malibu?"

"We're furthering Midgardian-Asgardian relations. Also, we told Coulson that Thor was engaged to Jane, Sif was a bridesmaid, and you're the maid of honour. So as far as he knows, Sif's meeting you to help plan a bachelorette party."

"In Malibu."

"That's where they're holding the wedding." Clint mimed airquotes around wedding, and Darcy laughed.

"Thor's getting married?" Happy asked from the driver's seat, and Darcy started. She kept forgetting that Tony and Happy boxed in the Avengers gym, and Happy had met Thor loads of times.

"Probably. Eventually," Clint said absently to Happy, and then turned back to Darcy who was rooting through the mini-fridge built into the back seat. "Look, it was the best we could come up with on short notice."

"Okay. I hope somebody remembered to tell Jane, so when she gets cornered by Deputy Director Hill about getting the guest list cleared or whatever, she doesn't wig."
Chapter 11

It was deeply weird to have an entire jet to themselves. Darcy was used to flying Southwest back and forth to Albuquerque, and it was bizarre to just waltz up to the sleek and dangerous-looking little plane without having to wait on endless lines, while parents and screaming infants boarded ahead of them.

There were two pilots and one flight attendant (who, contrary to what Darcy has heard about Tony's private jet, was wearing an actual uniform and not hotpants and tassels) but they stayed up front, leaving her, Clint, and Natasha completely alone in the passenger cabin as the small plane climbed into the air at a much steeper angle and with more speed than Darcy was used to.

Once they reached "cruising altitude", the flight attendant came around with offers of food and drink—all top shelf—and Darcy handed her back the printed liquor menu with a smile and the words "All of these, please." The woman just smiled placidly (probably used to that sort of thing from Stark) and came back with the contents of the plane's liquor cabinet.

So now Darcy had a tiny line of tiny bottles of booze in front of her on her tray table, but they were all still sealed. Getting hammered sounded great in theory, but she was pretty sure if she tried to walk in her heels anything less than sober, she'd break her neck.

Still. She was totally taking the little bottles with her when they got off the plane. Never hurt to have a stash.

Clint looked a little spooked, and Darcy didn't blame him. For one thing, before today, his current girlfriend and his ex had never spent more than fifteen minutes together outside of really boring staff meetings. Now, for all he knew, they'd spent an entire afternoon doing "girl stuff" and talking about him behind his back.

(Which they so totally had.)

For another, he'd had a lot thrown at him in the last twenty-four hours. He was handling it all really well, but this wasn't exactly how she'd hoped their first real date would go. Not that the team hadn't been awesome and all, but it was weird having it all treated like a super-secret Black Ops mission.

And then there was Loki.

Darcy still wasn't sure exactly why she was helping Loki, except that it felt like the right thing to do. She wasn't an Avenger. She didn't have a fancy suit like Tony, or super-strength like Thor or Steve. She wasn't trained to kill people with her pinkie like Natasha, or from a mile away like Clint. When she got angry, instead of turning into an unstoppable twelve-foot tall green giant, she just dropped the f-bomb fifty percent more than normal and played 1990s techno on a loop on her iPod.

She couldn't fight crime or save the world. But none of the Avengers had been able to help Loki. Aside from Thor, no-one had even really tried. Maybe she could help Thor's brother find a better way to deal with his shit; a way that didn't involve mass destruction of city property, or civilian casualties.

Darcy was jolted out of her thoughts by Natasha pulling out her laptop.

"According to Thor, Heimdall will open the Einstein-Rosen bridge at seven on the dot and Sif will arrive on the Stark helipad. I gave him the co-ordinates, but he apparently didn't need them."
"Yeah—I showered in the dark for a week after Thor explained how Heimdall can see, like, everything."

"Just a week?"

"After I banged my head on the stupid towel rack for the third time, I figured what the hell—let the dude enjoy the show. It's gotta suck, being stuck out there on the bridge all day long without cable."

Clint was quiet, and Darcy leaned toward him, cupping her chin in her hand and smiling.

"You're picturing me in the shower, aren't you." It was a statement rather than a question, and Clint didn't look in the least concerned.

"Yeah," he said, his eyes slightly glassy.

Natasha tapped the laptop's screen again, reminding them they weren't alone. "We'll have the chef evacuated before Loki arrives, minimising his contact with civilians."

"Yeah, about that. I think that part might need rethinking."

"Why?"

Darcy didn't answer, just got up and walked over to the co-pilot, who was in the galley, flirting with the smiling flight attendant as she handed him a steaming cup of coffee.

Darcy smiled at the flight attendant, took the cup from the co-pilot, and then dragged him bodily over to Clint and shoved him down into the seat she'd just vacated.

"Because some jackass decided to hitch a ride on the Stark jet."

Loki waved to Clint, who had already pulled his sidearm. As had Natasha. Darcy just punched him in the shoulder. Hard, from the way Loki flinched.

"Do you even know how to fly a plane?" Darcy demanded. "What if we hit a flock of birds, or weather, or some shit? Did you even think about that?"

Loki was completely ignoring the drawn weapons, and just smiled up at Darcy, who literally towered over him in the platform stiletto pumps.

"The mortal pilot is fine—he's back there," he waved casually toward the aft toilets, "sleeping peacefully. Not even so much as a bruise. And I couldn't let you have all the fun, now could I?"

"Do you know how hard all these nice people have been working, so you can get your flirt on with Sif without starting World War III? Seriously, you could at least say thank you."

Darcy gestured to Clint and Natasha, who still had their weapons trained on Loki.

"Um, guys? You maybe might want to stand down? Just a little?"

Natasha didn't blink, and her gun stayed trained on Loki's head, but Clint kept looking between Darcy and Loki. Probably trying to gauge how likely Loki was to use her as a human shield.

"Dude, tell Clint you're not going to use me as a human shield."

"I would never." Loki actually looked affronted. "The fact that you believe I'd need a human shield—I am offended."
"You'll get over it. And you—" Darcy gave Clint and Natasha a stern look. "Aren't you both supposed to be highly-trained super-assassins? You don't look past the uniform? Seriously?"

"She has a point." The corner of Natasha's mouth twitched, even if her bead on Loki's head didn't. "Also, Loki could have killed us both before now, if that had been his intention."

"The fact that he hasn't—yet—is not enough to warrant me putting my sidearm away," Clint ground out between clenched teeth.

"How about the part where I get super nervous with you waving a gun around, and you might never get laid again?" Darcy said sweetly.

Clint lowered his weapon, put the safety back on, cleared the chamber, and put it back in his holster.

Darcy turned to glare at Natasha, but the Widow had her eyes fixed firmly on Loki. Very slowly, she raised one brow, until he held up both hands.

"I swear to you on my honour that I would never place Darcy in harm's way. She is my sole ally in your world, and I value her company."

Natasha holstered her weapon, but Darcy was pretty sure she still had about twelve knives on her. Still. Progress. She turned back to Loki, the corner of her mouth quirking up in a smile.

"You almost made me sound like something more than your hamster there! I'm touched."

"What is a hamster?"

"It's like a rat, only cuter. Kids keep them as pets."

"Ah. I believe I understand. My father has ravens."

Clint and Natasha just stared at them.

Darcy sat down opposite Loki, and kicked off her heels. "Okay, now that we're being flexible and everybody's firmly in the camp of not killing one another," that comment was mostly directed at Clint, who still looked like he was targeting vulnerable spots he could hit using the cocktail napkin and plastic coffee stirrer he still had at his disposal, "how about we chillax and enjoy the remaining two hours of our flight? I don't suppose Stark has movies on here, does he?"

Natasha hit two buttons on her armrest. A ginormous flatscreen slid down from the ceiling, the in-flight menus already loaded.

"Mr Stark has a wide variety of in-flight entertainment in the system," Jarvis' disembodied voice informed them. "However, I believe a significant portion may not be suitable for mixed company."

"Jarvis, buddy! You're awesome. Show us everything that isn't porn."

The list of titles shrank from about a thousand down to a few hundred.

"Clint? What are you in the mood for?"

"I'm not really—"

"Or we can all keep on getting to know each other," Darcy said sweetly, jerking her head toward Loki, "until we land."
"Got any westerns on there?" Clint asked, and Darcy pulled up the list. It was impressive.

"Natasha, you good with *3:10 to Yuma*?"

She shook her head. "Christian Bale's Batman voice makes me want to break things."

"*True Grit*?"

"Remake, or the original?" Natasha asked.

" Looks like it's the original."

"Figures. Stark has a thing about Jeff Bridges. He won't even watch *The Big Lebowski.*" Clint looked mystified. "Who doesn't like the Dude?"

Darcy turned to Loki, who seemed vaguely bored but not (thankfully) homicidal. "Got a preference?"

"I prefer *The Quick and the Dead.*"

"Why am I not surprised?" Darcy scrolled down the list. "Sharon Stone being badass it is."

Tony Stark’s house was insane. Not only was it built into the side of a cliff, it just went on forever. It looked like a normal (if that was a word that could be used for a modernist mansion built into the side of a cliff) split-level Californian home from the road. And then the car got closer, and Darcy finally got the scale and her jaw dropped. Twenty foot ceilings, curved cast concrete walls that went on for what seemed like a city block, and all of it painted gold, ochre, purple and pink by the approaching sunset.

"How the hell does he manage the stairs when he's drunk off his ass?" Darcy wondered as she hugged the far wall, her heels in her hand.

"My guess? Practice," Clint said as he took her hand, helping her down the last two steps.

Darcy just kept staring at the ginormous living room, with the curved wall of windows showing the spectacular sunset.

"Seriously, this place is *redonkulous*," Darcy said as she peered at the boulders on either side of the fireplace. "He's got a sauna the size of my mom's living room. And did you see the gym?"

Darcy's heels remained off and she was curling her toes in the rug in front of the sofa like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, even though Natasha kept glaring at her as she scurried from room to room, triple-checking the arrangements. Probably it was the part where Darcy was ruining the entire effect of the make-over. But she was currently more afraid of the shoes than she was Natasha.

The coffee table was a slice of tree. Darcy had never even seen petrified wood outside of the Natural History museum. In fact, every bit of art in the place, from the paintings on the walls to the sculptures in the few nooks and crannies were some kind of carved stone, volcanic rock, raw ore, or similar. She thought for a moment about what that might have said about Tony, until it occurred to her that the way he'd probably chosen an interior designer was to find out who was the most expensive and hire her or him on principle.

"On Asgard, it would be considered a modest home," Loki pointed out, hands deep in the pockets of his cheap blue pilot's uniform trousers. He and Clint had just stared each other down the entire ride
from the Stark Industries airfield to the house. Darcy had used the time to chat with Natasha about Sif's arrival, and sleeping arrangements for the night.

According to the Widow, the house had three guestrooms, in addition to Tony's room which was directly above the dining room. Jarvis had already prepared all of them—despite the fact that it was pretty obvious no-one expected Loki to spend the night, and Clint and Darcy would totally be doubling up.

Darcy tried not to think about that, choosing instead to turn her attention to Loki, who was examining the twisted bronze sculpture surrounded by a waterfall next to the stairs, no doubt judging its potential to be brought to life to menace someone.

"Hey—you're not really going to dinner in a polyester suit, are you?"

"I was thinking of donning my usual ceremonial attire," he said nonchalantly, and the pilot's uniform shimmered and flickered, replaced by the black and green leather gear Darcy was used to.

"This is your millennia-old crush we're talking about, here! She's probably seen that getup hundreds of times. Seriously, Marilyn, you gotta make an effort."

Darcy circled him, lips pursed.

"Okay—lose the horns. Lose them. They are ridiculous. Also, they make you look like you're totally compensating for... something else." She decided pointing out Loki might have a tiny dick might actually get her killed, tenuous friendship or not.

Loki frowned, but removed the helm, which disappeared into whatever extra-dimensional portal he had stocked with gilded furniture and a life-time supply of novelty booze.

"How much product do you put in your hair? No chick would go out with a dude that uses more product than she does. Seriously. Are there no metrosexuals in Asgard? Were you looking to be the first?"

Darcy tentatively reached out to touch his hair, and scowled. "What is this stuff?"

"Grease from the great bear that lives at the foot of Yggdrasil, the World Tree."

"Ew!" She made a move to wipe her hand on her skirt, but Natasha got there first and pressed a cocktail napkin into her hand. Darcy hadn't even seen her move. She was just suddenly there.

"Not on the dress," she said, and then disappeared again.

Darcy wrinkled her nose as she wiped her fingers on the napkin about six times, giving them an experimental sniff. They smelled weird. "I can't believe I just touched that."

"I'm lying—it's from LUSH." Loki's green eyes were dancing merrily. "I believe the name is 'Dirty'."

Darcy guessed that he was fucking with her out of nerves. But it wasn't doing much to calm her down any. "Well dial it back some; you look like an extra from a Travolta movie from the seventies."

Loki rolled his eyes, but ran his hands through his hair and held still for her approval. While his black hair was still clearly groomed back, it now curled below his ears and against his neck, and no longer looked like it would leave a stain on the furniture.
"Way better. Also, for clothes, I'd say keep it simple. Show her you mean business, but dress down rather than all Asgard-y with the gold lamé and the capes and shit." Darcy picked up a GQ magazine from the coffee table (Stark was—of course—on the cover) and flipped until she found what she was looking for. Holding the page open to a Gucci suit ad, she handed it to him.

"Can you do something like this?"

"May I?" He held out his hand, and Darcy gave him the magazine. He flipped through the pages quickly, and then handed it back to her. Before she could blink, his crazy Norse god outfit was replaced by a charcoal grey suit, crisp white shirt open at the neck, and casual shoes with no socks. It was dressier than Clint, but didn't make Clint look too shabby, and it made Darcy feel less like she was overdressed. She grinned her approval.

"More Jude Law than Johnny Depp, but it works for you." On impulse, she reached out to ruffle his hair, waiting for him to slap her hand away or scowl, but he patiently allowed her to muss him up. She took a step back, and decided he now looked less like a kid dressed up in one of his dad's suits, and more like the clothes actually belonged to him.

"Much better."

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat behind her, and Darcy felt her cheeks pinking slightly as she realised Clint had just been standing there, watching the whole scene without saying a word.

"Two minutes to FedEx," he said, and Darcy turned back to Loki.

"Sif's on her way. You good?"

Loki looked up at her, looking weirdly young and vulnerable.

Wordlessly he held out his hand, and Darcy dug around in her clutch for the plastic bottle. It rattled when she shook it, and she sighed and placed the single remaining pill in his outstretched palm. He swallowed it dry, grimacing.

He nodded, and Darcy walked over to Clint, and slipped her arms around his waist.

"Hi."

"Hi yourself." He kissed her, just a taste, just a tease, since Natasha was probably watching and Loki definitely was. "Stark went all out—there's quite a spread in the dining room. Thor must have talked him out of sushi—thank God—but there's lobster, prime rib, grilled salmon, you name it."

"Good, because I haven't actually had anything to eat except for three bowls of cereal, and two shots of vodka."

"Vodka?"

"Natasha has weird friends."

"So do you," Clint pointed out, glancing back at Loki, who was sitting, still as a statue, at one end of the cream-coloured sofa that spanned half the room.

"Yeah, well. At least I have great taste in men."

"Hey, what did you give him?" Clint asked, his mouth next to Darcy's ear.
"A Xanax. Probably won't do anything, what with him being an alien and all, but the placebo effect might be worth it."

"Showtime," came Natasha's voice from Clint's comm, just as the sky outside lit up like the Fourth of July. Loki was across the room in about two seconds, but stopped dead in front of the door. Darcy slipped her shoes back on, and tap-tap-tapped over to his side, bumping his shoulder with hers.

Loki gave her a tight smile, and then Clint opened the front door.
Chapter 12

Sif was gorgeous.

Darcy had known that—but she hadn't seen the Asgardian in a long time, and the gut-punch reality of it had faded. Plus the last time she'd seen her, she'd been in her armour, her hair pulled back in a pony tail, getting ready to kick some Destroyer ass.

Sif stood in Stark's entryway, her dark hair loose around her shoulders but held away from her face by a simple silver circlet. She was wearing some kind of Grecian-style gown that was twisted at her shoulders and fell in loose waves to her knees, the deep neckline showing off the fine silver mesh sort of tank-top beneath. Darcy would bet a month's supply of Pop-Tarts that it was some kind of wacky Asgardian kevlar, but somehow Sif made it look like a fashion choice.

"I bring a host-gift." She raised her left hand, revealing two corked amber glass wine bottles. "Asgardian mead."

"I've been wanting to try that," Clint said as he took the bottles from her.

"My friend, it is good to see you again," Sif said, clasping Darcy's hands and giving her a bright smile.

"Hey, you too! You look amazing. This is Clint."

"Agent Clint Barton, ma'am," Clint said, extending his hand. Sif stared at it for a moment, then shook it tentatively, obviously unused to the custom.

"My lady," Loki said, giving her a deep bow. Sif's expression was blank, but she allowed him to brush her knuckles with a kiss.

"Loki."

"Hey, Jarvis, how 'bout some tunes?" Darcy said to the ceiling to try and dispel the tension, and jazz began playing softly in the background.

"So this is the dwelling of the Man of Iron?" Sif glanced around, taking in the details and no doubt marking the exits. Which, seeing as how the house seemed to consist almost entirely of windows, were many.

"One of them. He loaned it to us for the night."

"It is... charming."

Loki gave Darcy an I told you so look, and she just rolled her eyes at him.

They walked into the dining room, which in Stark style was enormous, sparsely furnished, and thankfully full of delicious-smelling food.

"Holy crap, you weren't kidding," Darcy said as she grabbed a plate and perused the mile-long sideboard. There were chafing dishes full of steamed vegetables, an entire prime rib under a heat lamp, and tureens of savoury looking soups.

And then there was the ice-sculpture.
"It's just so... wrong." Clint shuddered.

"It's a pretty good likeness." Darcy tilted her head, studying it. "Who knew you could get the douche-goatee so accurate in ice?"

They loaded up their plates (the plates were even warmed—almost but not quite too hot to touch) and approached the table. There was an awkward moment where everybody tried to figure out where to sit. Darcy took the lead by grabbing a chair, and gesturing for Clint to sit opposite her so he wouldn't elbow Sif as he cut his meat (Clint being a lefty). Then she indicated the chair next to her, and gave Loki a look. He set his plate down, but moved around to the opposite side to pull Sif's chair out for her.

Clint pulled the cork out of one of the bottles Sif had brought, and began filling wine glasses. Darcy took one sip and her eyes widened.

"Holy shit—this is like beer on steroids."

"Honey wine, brewed by the Sjöfn's daughters," Sif said with a small smile. "It is better cold."

"Allow me," Loki said, and took the stem of her glass in his fingers. The skin of his fingers darkened to cobalt blue, and frost began to creep up the glass, etching intricate patterns as it climbed.

"Neat trick," Darcy said, but then she saw Sif's face. She looked completely horrified, and almost ready to bolt, and she gripped her steak knife in her right hand.

"What good is the jötnar blood that runs through my veins, if I cannot use it to my own advantage from time to time?" Loki said, but there was an undercurrent of bitterness beneath his words as he set the glass back down.

"Loki, can I talk to you in the kitchen for a sec?" Darcy asked, forcing a smile. As they rose from the table, Clint gave her a questioning look, but Darcy was intent on her task as she grabbed Loki's elbow and steered him to the ginormous empty kitchen full of expensive shiny appliances that she would bet serious money Tony had no idea how to use.

"I know what you're trying to do, so knock it off."

"And what do you assume my motives to be, Cuckoo?"

"You're purposely trying to freak Sif out. You just went all Frost Giant on her to throw it in her face. Like you want her to reject you. That is such a dick move. Seriously."

Loki opened his mouth to deny it, but then shut it again, scowling.

"I... She is being so cool to me."

"You tried to smite her with a giant killer robot! Did you think this was going to be easy?"

"I had hoped she at least would want to see me."

"She does. She wouldn't be here if she didn't. But you gotta cut her some slack. I know that it's, like, deeply ingrained self-preservation technique, so if she rejects you, you'll feel totally justified in going all supervillain on her. But you gotta give her a chance."

"She cannot even bear to look at me!"

"But I thought you wanted this to work. Was I wrong? Tell me now, and we'll call this whole thing
Loki stared at her, his throat working as he swallowed the words he would have said, and instead breathed out in a sigh.

"I am duly chastised, and shall be on my best behaviour."

"Damn right you will. Turn on the Prince Loki charm! Make her feel like she's the only woman in the universe for you, and keep it sincere. I know you can do it. I have faith in you."

He looked at her with those wide, unblinking green eyes, and a small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Would that you had been born an Æsir, Darcy Lewis. I would have much enjoyed your company."

"Yeah, well, sucks to be human. Now get back in there and charm her socks off."

She turned him around and gave him a shove in the small of his back to get him moving. It felt deeply weird to be manhandling someone who could take her apart with a flick of his fingers, but maybe it was the Xanax at work after all.

"Oh, and FYI, lay off the mead. Xanax and booze equal coma. Got it?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to go into a coma."

"You don't know that. And I'd be on the hook for giving you unprescribed meds."

When they came back, Sif and Clint were animatedly discussing throwing knives. Darcy was not the slightest bit surprised.

"Hey. Sorry about that."

"Everything okay?" Clint asked, reaching down to clasp her fingers beneath the table.

"Peachy-keen."

"So, Darcy Lewis, how did you and Clint Barton meet?"

"He returned my iPod," Darcy said at the same time Clint said, "In the 7-11 checkout line."

Darcy's mouth dropped open. "Bullshit."

"It was the day Thor broke into the S.H.I.E.L.D. crater to get his hammer. You were buying, um, stuff... You cut ahead of me in line. But the chick in front of us was taking a million years buying lottery tickets, and so you started making fun of the covers of the gossip rags."

Darcy just blinked at him. She remembered that day. After breakfast at Izzie's, Erik had convinced Jane to let Thor go off and do crazy cut homeless guy stuff, and they'd come back to find S.H.I.E.L.D. agents taking their equipment. Jane had disappeared into the desert with the van, and so Darcy had wandered over to the 7-11 to buy snacks.

She had the vaguest memory of a scruffy guy she'd never seen before (Puente Antiguo was small enough that after two months, Darcy could recognise just about every hot guy between the ages of sixteen and thirty on sight), laughing dryly as she'd made decidedly uncomplimentary comments about Kim Kardashian while Lupe Alonzo had blown a chunk of her Wal-Mart paycheque on
"Wait—you were Cute Red Bull Guy?"

"Red Bull Guy? Seriously?"

"Well, you had like two cases of the stuff under your arm."

"It wasn't all for me."

"At least I remember you as 'Cute Red Bull Guy' and not 'Random Red Bull Guy'."

"Clearly, it was love at first sight," Loki said dryly.

"What is this Red Bull?" Sif asked, and Clint opened his mouth to answer, but Loki who beat him to it.

"It is a human drink meant to act as a stimulant, much like coffee. Although the taste is very different. It is sometimes mixed with spirits, although I for one cannot imagine why."

"Mainly because frat boys are idiots," Darcy said, thinking not so fondly of one of her exes' habit of ending up in the ER with blood alcohol poisoning thanks to V-Bombs.

"I would like to try coffee. I have heard it is a most wondrous drink."

"It is usually served as an accompaniment to the dessert course, at the end of a meal."

Sif looked surprised. "You seem well-versed in the customs of Midgard."

"I have spent a great deal of time here over the centuries. Mortals can be quite ingenious."

For once, he was talking about humans without the hard edge of scorn beneath his words. Darcy actually felt a twinge of pride.

"I remember the first time I saw you," Loki continued, looking down at the fish on his plate he was cutting into smaller and smaller pieces, instead of at Sif. "Your mother had brought you to court. You ran away from the solar where the women were spinning down to the practice field, to watch my father's Einherjar drill. Afterward, you hid in the library, because you'd torn your kirtle on a nail, and were worried you'd be beaten for disobedience."

"And so I was; I could barely sit for days. You were scarcely older than I. You tried to mend the tear with magic."

"Yes, well. I was young, and not very good. I should have known I'd have done better plying a needle than my silver tongue."

"So you guys met when you were little kids?" Clint asked.

"Our mothers were close. I was supposed to be fostered at court to become a handmaiden—not a shield maiden."

"My mother knew the way of the sword as well as a spindle. I still do not see why it caused such an uproar."

"Why was it such a big deal?" Clint asked.
"There was never a female Einherji, before Sif."

"What about the Valkyries, like in Wagner's ring?" Darcy asked. "Weren't they total badass warrior babes?"

"They chose to live apart from men. I had no desire to..." Sif frowned, trying to find the right words. "Switch teams?" Darcy supplied, helpfully. However Sif only gave her a confused look.

"I believe what Darcy meant was you had no desire to eschew the company of men forever, solely to be allowed to wield a sword."

"Oh. Like the Amazons," Clint said as understanding dawned.

"I never took you for a scholar," Loki drawled, taking a small sip of his wine.

"Oh, he knows all about Amazons," Darcy grinned. "I'm betting he has a secret stash of Wonder Woman."

"Actually, I didn't get into the comics as a kid—but I never missed the TV show."

"Lynda Carter single-handedly catapulted you into puberty, didn't she?"

"She had help from Julie Newmar, but yeah—pretty much."

"Do none of you mortals read actual books any longer?" Loki asked with a sigh, and Darcy nudged his foot under the table.

"Hey—I knew about the Amazons way before I read comics. Or, you know, watched Xena. I just never realised they had them in Asgard."

"The Valkyrie are noble warriors. Brunnhilde, their leader, is as fierce as Thor in battle. But I did not wish to become a woman warrior among other women. I wanted to be seen as equal among Odin's lone warriors. I fought long and hard for my right to bear arms as an Einherji."

"I think both Odin and Thor would have preferred you to me," Loki said. "I was never so proficient at arms."

"I still bear some small scars that give lie to that," Sif said, her mouth curved in a wry smile. Apparently talking about the Good Old Days made her nostalgic enough to release her death-grip on her knife. Darcy relaxed a fraction at that, and Clint gave her a wink.

"So, you guys grew up together?"

"Sif used to join us at our lessons, and after much subterfuge—including dressing in my brother's cast-offs—she was allowed to be trained at arms with us."

"The Allfather was gracious to allow it, though my mother never truly forgave me," Sif smiled fondly at the memory. "She still hopes I will put away my sword and give her grandchildren."

"You're only, what? A thousand? Two thousand?" Darcy waved her concern away. "She's got plenty of time to get grandkids."

"I weep for my unborn children. I have no skill at nurturing."

"I dunno—you put up with him and his brother." Darcy jerked a thumb at Loki, who was spreading
a thin layer of butter on a roll. "If that's not a lifetime of training for how to deal with toddlers, I don't know what is."

Sif nearly choked on her mead, and Loki gave Darcy a black look.

"Oh, and like you weren't thinking it."

"We three were never apart, it is true. Thor always had us at his side—to stay his hand when it was needed, or to guard his back," Loki said softly.

"I never would have thought I would have needed to guard him against you, Loki Laufreyson," Sif said quietly, and the mood plummeted as Sif brought them back from pleasant reminiscences to the cold hard reality of their situation.


"You would blame the Allfather for your acts of cruelty and destruction?"

"How am I any different from Thor? He slew near a hundred in Nornheimr in the heat of battle. How is a berserker rage warranted instant forgiveness, but the day I lost everything—my name, my family, my very identity—and acted out of justifiable anger at being denied the very truth of my parentage, I am to be scorned forever after?"

"You lie, and scheme. That is not the heat of battle, but killing in cold blood. Why can you not see the difference, Loki?"

"Because to me there is no difference."

"Do you feel no remorse at your actions at all? Or are you merely sorry you were caught?"

"I... I have regrets. If I could go back and change what happened, I would."

"Would you? Truly?"

"If we had not gone to Jötunheimr—"

"No, Loki." Sif shook her head. "If you had not led our enemies past our defences in the first place—all to spoil your brother's coronation. That was what began the wheels turning. That was the action I cannot forgive. You believed that day you were a true son of Odin, borne of your mother's body. Yet you treat it so casually, like a little mischief. Leaving Asgard open to the Frost Giants is no small thing. It is not like cutting my hair when we were children. Men died. Men who were their father's sons, with wives and children of their own, died defending the Cask of Ancient Winters."

"You are right," Loki said.
"I—what?" Some of the wind went out of Sif's sails, and Darcy was pretty blown away as well. In all the time she and Loki had been having their little "chats," she never would have thought to hear him admit so easily that he'd fucked up.

"It was my envy of my brother that moved me to act unbecoming of a prince of the Æsir. I brought shame on myself, my name, and all I loved. And I did love my brother. This I swear to you. I never lied about that. As much as I hated his arrogance and his haughtiness—as much as every slight he ever voiced when he belittled me or my abilities—I loved him. And I knew in my bones that he was not yet ready to become king. I wanted only for father to finally see that."

"Then why? Why did you not merely speak to your father?"

"If I had, he would only have dismissed it as jealous envy, with no basis in truth. Tell me true—would not you have done the same? Anything I would have said against him would only have been seen—by my father, and all of Asgard—as the second son griping at always being second best."

"You don't know that."

"But I do. How many times have the bumbling Warriors Three made mockery of my magics—even when they saved their lives on the field of battle? How many times had my own brother called them tricks, unworthy of a warrior? I fight as well as any of you—but I do it in my own way. And my way will always been seen as lesser. You know that. Do not deny it."

Sif looked uncomfortable. As did Clint, forced to play spectator to what was clearly a seriously personal discussion. Even Darcy squirmed in her seat, wishing she could think of a solid excuse to give them some privacy.

"I thought perhaps, as we left childhood behind, that the taunts would stop. But instead, I felt them more keenly when they fell from a man's lips than a boy's. And when you too joined in their laughter... it hurt me more than I could bear."

"But we all tease one another! No harm was meant—"

"But harm was done. When did Hogun or Fandral ever thank me for cloaking them in shadows and mist, to ease an escape? When ever did you or Thor praise my cunning, when we avoided a bloody battle? No—you thrived on mayhem, and hated being deprived of the glory. Even Volstagg, who as arms master when we were children, praised my prowess on the practice field, mocked my 'leaden' tongue to my face."

"Even after our battle with the destroyer, Volstagg still speaks of you fondly. For all your faults, you were stalwart on the field of battle, and your company—if not your lies—have been sorely missed."

"I did not know his heart was so much bigger than his stomach."

"Must you speak ill of him, even as I tell you of his fondness for you?"

"All those little hurts—more than I could ignore or forget—merely festered like a wound until a part of my very soul was diseased. I regret the harm you came to. I regret the rashness that made me believe truly that the only way to change my situation was to keep Thor from ever returning to Asgard. But I cannot forgive all, my Lady. I cannot pretend that I was the only one at fault, and brought the house of Odin no glory ever but shame. It was my right as a prince to demand respect,
yet it was always easier for everyone—including you—to be blind to Thor's faults while taking me to task for mine."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Darcy picked up her glass and drained her remaining mead in a single swallow. After a second, Clint did the same. Darcy made a move to get up, but Loki's hand fell on hers, even though his gaze was still locked on Sif.

"Why did you never speak of this?" Sif finally said, her voice softer, and her dark brows drawn together in confusion. "If not to your brother, or the Allfather—why did you never tell me?"

"You would have thought me weak. And while I could have borne it from the others, not you. Never you."

Sif reached across the table, and clasped Loki's hand in hers. He seemed startled by the gesture, and Darcy watched the tips of his ears go pink at the simple contact.

"Come to Asgard, then. Repent of your crimes, and face the Allfather's judgement. Your mother mourns you, Loki. You were ever her favourite."

"She always favoured Thor above me."

"Then you are blind as well as foolish. She is not the only one."

"I will... I will think on it."

"That is all I ask."

Sif released his hand, and seemed mollified. There was another long silence while they ate, and nobody seemed willing to start up the conversation again. Darcy had just opened her mouth to ask Sif how the Warrior's Three were doing, when Loki set his knife and fork down, put his elbows up on the table, and rested his chin on his steepled fingers.

"Before my father was claimed by the Odinsleep, he told me he wished to forge a lasting peace with Jötunheimr by an alliance. Through me. All my life, I had believed our mothers had struck a bargain for you to marry Thor. But if my father had decreed you and I to wed, to marry Laufey's son to the noblest of Asgard's Shield Maidens—would you have taken me as husband?"

"Holy shit," Darcy breathed, and then slapped a hand over her mouth. But Sif and Loki continued on as if they were alone, her interruption ignored. It was like she and Clint were invisible. At the sparks that were flying between the Asgardians—not romantic, so much as potentially homicidal—dread coiled in her stomach.

"I am loyal to the Allfather, and would have followed his command," Sif said stiffly.

"So you would have come to our marriage bed out of duty, rather than affection?"

Sif dropped her fork on her plate, the sound of metal on china making Clint flinch. Considering he was usually all spooky-sniper-calm, Darcy took that as a bad sign. Beneath the table, she clutched her napkin in a death grip, twisting the poor piece of linen in an effort to keep from screaming.

"Any affection I held for you died the day you ordered the Destroyer to kill me."

"Not to kill you, only to stop you," Loki said, a muscle in his jaw twitching. He held up the knife he had been using to cut his fish, and Darcy couldn't move. She was frozen on the spot, eyes riveted to the silver blade.
"I would sooner see my own blood flow freely than spill a drop of yours, and that is a truth it costs me much to admit."

"Jesus," Darcy gasped as Loki drew the thin knife across his palm. Shocked out of her paralysis, she moved to staunch the bleeding with the tortured napkin in her hand. Loki tore his wrist from her grasp, letting the blood flow down his wrist, staining the white cuff of his shirt livid red.

"I thought—I believed that the only way for father to see me as a worthy son was if I stood in the light, instead of in Thor's shadow. I believed that if I vanquished Jötunheimr, if I killed their king without a single drop of Æsir blood spilled on the field of battle, then he would for once—truly—have seen me as a son of Odin."

"But it was not just a single drop of Æsir blood shed that day, Loki," Sif countered, two bright spots of colour staining her cheeks. "It was mine, and our friends', and your own brother's. And I do not know how long it will take me to look at you and not see Thor breathing his last mortal breath, flung aside like a toy at your hand. And that is a truth it costs me much to admit, for we have been the best of friends since childhood, and it hurts me to see your soul poisoned with such anger and hatred."

A muscle in Loki's jaw worked silently, and he finally picked up his cloth napkin, pressing it to his hand. When he wiped away the blood, Darcy saw that the gash had healed cleanly, without a scar.

"If there can be no love between us, I ask only for peace. Can there be peace between us, Lady?"

"I do not know. And that is my truth, Loki." Sif pushed away from the table, and looked down at Clint, who looked more freaked out than Darcy had ever seen him, probably because this was way more information than he'd ever really wanted about Thor's home life.

"I ask to take my leave of you, that I may reflect on what has happened here."

"Um... yeah. Okay by me." Clint looked at Darcy, who bit her lip.

"Sorry you're going to have to miss dessert," Darcy said sincerely because she was pretty sure Sif would have enjoyed the cherries jubilee because it involved booze and shit being set on fire.

Sif gave her a tight smile. "Some other time, perhaps."

Loki didn't watch her go, but kept his attention on his plate. The sound of Stark's front door closing seemed deafening in the sudden silence. There was a brilliant flash of light, followed by the windows rattling in their frames, and then there was just the clink of flatware on plates as Loki resumed eating.

"Dude, you totally should have quit while you were ahead," Darcy said after a long minute, and Loki shrugged.

"Truthfully, that went better than I thought it would." Loki said softly, lifting his fork to his lips.

"Seriously?" Clint asked, looking back and forth between Loki and Darcy, every line of his body tensed as if for a fight.

"Seriously," Loki repeated. "I had assumed she would try and drag me before my father's throne in chains."

Darcy just blinked at him. "Wow. First-date-wise, you kinda set the bar low, there."

Loki looked at her, the ghost of the mocking smile she was used to crossing his lips. He set his knife and fork down, and stood. Wordlessly, he took Darcy's hand and kissed her knuckles. Clint half-rose
from his chair, but Darcy gave him a look, and he sat back down.

"Your half of our bargain has been honourably discharged, Darcy Lewis," Loki said, and then just like that, he was gone.

"You're welcome," Darcy said to the air where he'd been.

"Perimeter is clear," came Natasha's voice over Clint's comm. "Looks like you guys are on your own."

"Thanks, Tasha," Clint said at the ceiling. "There's still plenty of grub here—you hungry?"

"I'm fine. You two have a candle-lit dinner for two. I'll check back in when we need to head back to Stark in the morning. Also, Tony sent a message: Stay out of his shop. And no glove, no love."

Clint turned bright red, and Darcy leaned forward to speak directly into the comm.

"We've got it covered. Thanks!"

"Okay, that was officially the weirdest first date ever," Clint finally said, and Darcy couldn't help it. She laughed. She covered her mouth with both hands, trying to stop, but it just kept bubbling up inside her until she had to let it out, or scream.

"You know, I knew Asgardian shit was fucked up," Clint continued. "But wow. I had no idea just how fucked up."

Darcy could hardly breathe, she was laughing so hard. It was a combination of nerves and she was pretty sure the mead. Clint came around to her side of the table to crouch down next to her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Darcy wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. "Are you kidding? I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"It's been a really weird day."

Clint rested his forehead against hers, a slow smile curving his lips.

"Yeah. But you know what?"

"What?"

"Our first date? Totally not sucking." He kissed her, and then got to his feet. "C'mon."

"Where are we going?"

"Are you kidding? We're checking out the shop."
"Wow," Darcy said, her breath fogging up the glass doors.

"Look at the suits," Clint said, fingers pressed up against the keypad.

"Screw that—look at the cars."

Clint tore his eyes away from the Iron Man suits to share at her, eyes comically wide.

"I took shop in high school. Like I was gonna take Home Ec," she pointed out, rolling her eyes.

"You have no idea how much I want to have sex with you right now."

Darcy tapped the glass with a fingernail. "C'mon Jarvis, can't we just—"

"I'm sorry, Miss Lewis, but I have strict instructions not to allow Mr Barton into Mr Stark's workshop. Specifically anywhere near the 1932 Ford roadster. Or the Audi R8 Spyder. Or the Mark III, Mark IV, or Mark V exosuits. In fact, Mr Stark has expressed a firm desire that you stay completely in the designated living areas. Preferably while wearing protective clothing."

"But we won't touch anything—"

"Mr Stark's maintenance 'droids are outfitted with UV lights and I have been instructed to scan the area hourly."

"Wow, thanks for the trust there, buddy," Clint muttered.

"Were it up to me, Mr Barton, I would allow you both to copulate in the passenger section of whatever vehicle you wish."

"Just to piss Tony off?"

"Something like that, Miss Lewis."

"Aw, that's okay, Jarvis. We don't want to get you in trouble with the big man."

"But, Darce, look at the—"

"No."

"But that's a prototype—"

"C'mon."

"He built a cyclotron in his basement? Seriously?"

"Clint? Me and my boobies are going upstairs, to get out of this dress. What happens next is totally up to you."

"Oh my God, is that a—Wait, boobies? What?"

Darcy giggled and followed the curve of the wall up the stairs to the second floor. The sound of Clint's footsteps gained on her until his arms slid around her waist at the top of the landing. She leaned back against his chest, sighing as his lips roamed her neck.
"Hi," he said, mouth next to her ear before nibbling on the lobe.

"Hi," she responded, pressing her hips back against his. It would have been easier to get the angle she'd wanted if she'd still been wearing the dangerous shoes, but he didn't seem to be complaining.

His hands gripped her hips, roaming over the slick satin. Darcy moaned as he followed the curve of her stomach down, fingertips pressing against her through the layers of fabric. Darcy made a needy sound in the back of her throat, and turned in his arms to drag his mouth down to hers.

Clint walked them backward, on slightly unsteady feet, to the first open doorway they could find.

"Jarvis, is this—" Darcy managed between desperate kisses.

"—one of the guest rooms, Miss Lewis."

"Awesome. If Tony doesn't want me to rock your world in the hot rod, I'm pretty sure he'd like us in his bed even less."

"Plus I don't want to think about what we might catch from his sheets."

"I beg your pardon," Jarvis said, sounding affronted.

"He didn't mean it, Jarvis. I know you regularly change the sheets and I'm sure Pepper made Tony get all his shots."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence, Miss Lewis."

"Okay, this is like trying to have sex on the Enterprise if the Enterprise computer sounded like Alfred Pennyworth," Clint muttered into Darcy's cleavage, and pulled back to speak to the ceiling.

"Jarvis, is there a privacy mode in this house?"

"Indeed there is. Excellent choice, Mr Barton. Good-night Miss Lewis, Mr Barton."

"Night, Jarvis!" Darcy said cheerfully as the door fell shut behind them.

Even the spare rooms in Tony's house put a five star hotel to shame. The room was lit by a half-circle of indirect lights set into the high ceiling, and a single lamp that arced gracefully over two black leather chairs. They were the kind of chairs that looked like they should have been fifty bucks at IKEA but actually cost thousands of dollars. Pure Stark, Darcy thought with a smile.

Similar to the ground floor, there was a wall of windows, with the lights of Malibu twinkling in the distance. And across from the crazy-huge bed was a solid mahogany dresser with a built-in head's up display. Two orchids sat in a simple black glass vase.

The bed was enormous, and sat on a simple mahogany base which curved up toward the high ceiling in the middle of a smooth white marble floor that was actually warm beneath Darcy's bare feet as they stumbled toward the bed. Clint's mouth on hers made Darcy light-headed as he teased and nibbled, tongue flicking out to stroke hers until she had to tear herself away to breathe.

Clint's pupils were totally blown, ringed by only a halo of grey-green as she pushed him down on the California King mattress, tugging her skirt up around her waist so she could straddle him. He skimmed his hands up the dress, thumbs tracing the shape of her collarbones while the rough pads of his fingers skimmed the swells of her breasts. Darcy reached behind and started inching the zipper down. One strap slipped off her shoulder just as Clint dropped his hands to her thighs and moved upwards, gathering the slick dark blue satin as he went.
"Jesus, are those—garters?" He blinked for a second, and Darcy was worried he was going to laugh. But instead he tugged the dress over her head and rolled her over onto her back, scattering pillows to the floor. The sudden and dramatic tilt of his pelvis against hers drew a long anguished moan from her lips.

The dress hit the floor, and Darcy had started on the buttons of his shirt before he caught her wrists and pinned her hands above her head.

"Slow down, slow down. Jesus, I want to just look at you for a second. Oh my God."

Darcy swallowed, feeling the heat rush into her cheeks.

"Natasha called it a torsolette," she said as he traced the scalloped edge of the sexy black corset, one nipple already half out of the cup from their wrestling.

"I don't know what that means, but I call it a turn-on." He dropped his head to her waiting breast, and Darcy arched her back with a low muttered "Fuuuuuck," as he sucked hard at the peaked nipple, her hands scrambling to clench around the bedcovers.

"I intend to," he said, swirling his tongue around her nipple before starting on the hooks so he could free her other breast. Darcy wiggled against him, practically riding his thigh as she whimpered at the delicious friction.

When he finally got the corset undone (and oh hey, it was really awesome to be able to breathe again), Darcy lifted her hips so he could pull it out from beneath her.

"Huh."

"What?"

Clint ran his finger over the symbol etched in dark blue ink over the inside of her hip. It was a circle with spidery lines at the top and bottom that tangled together in the centre.

"I'd always figured you were the butterfly-on-the-ankle type. Or maybe a tramp stamp."

Darcy smacked his thigh, and he rubbed it, pretending it hurt.

"What is it?"

"Okay... don't laugh," Darcy said, murder in her eyes. "It's a stylised tree of life."

"Any particular reason?"

"I saw it on the wall at the tattoo parlour, and just... liked it. I was sixteen." She shrugged, fighting down a blush, which was slightly ridiculous considering they were half naked and he was about to have his wicked way with her—or maybe she was about to have her wicked way with him. Either way worked for her, really. But she felt suddenly self-conscious about the relic of her teen years in a way she hadn't before.

"Cool," Clint said. Then her breath escaped in a laugh as Clint pulled her up into his lap with one arm clamped around her waist, his other hand tangling in her hair.

He cupped the back of her head and kissed her again, sucking on her tongue in a way that made her shiver all the way down to her silk-clad toes. She could feel his skin against hers, and kept working on the buttons of his shirt until she could push it off his shoulders. He broke away from her mouth
just long enough for her to lick the salt from his neck, and bite the spot where his neck met his shoulder. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but the way he ground up into her made her bite down again, relishing the way his breathing caught and his hand traced the curve of her spine before he grabbed her ass.

She cried out at the loss of contact as he scrambled backwards across the freaking continent of a bed, his hands on her calves pulled her with him until she was on her back in the middle of the bed, hair streaming out behind her in a tangled mess.

"Jesus, you are such a—" The word tease didn't even get past her lips as he ran his hands up her stocking-clad legs, fingers toying with the clasps of the garters. Just the slightest brush of his thumbs against the skin of her upper thighs made her twitch, and she was suddenly intimately aware of the effect he was having on her as he cupped his hand over the soaked crotch of her panties.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" he asked, his voice strained and almost a growl as he started to rub tight circles over her clit through the scrap of lace. Darcy bit back a yell, feeling the muscles of her abdomen tighten in anticipation as he nudged her legs further apart, fingers slipping inside the silky edge of the panties to dip into her teasingly.

"Apparently I turn you into a big hot horny mess. Oh wait, that's what you do to me," she panted, her foot sliding up until her knee was level with his shoulder. She arched her back as he pushed one finger into her slowly, and then out again, setting up a rhythm that soon had her incapable of stringing words together into simple sentences as she gripped his sides with her calves.

A second finger joined the first, and Darcy knew she was babbling incoherently, in various combinations of "Clint", "fuck", "Oh God", "Oh sweet Jesus", and "More."

Then the fucker stopped just as she was on the edge, producing a knife from God knows where, and pulled the waistband away from her skin. She felt the cold touch of the flat of the blade for two seconds before he tossed the remains of her sexy new panties over his shoulder.

Darcy propped herself up on her forearms and glared at him. "Fuck you, Barton, those are brand new! They were part of the set! Also, who the hell brings knives to bed?"

"Sorry," he said, right before he got his arms up under her knees, settled her legs over his shoulders, and proceeded to eat her out until she nearly passed out.

Most guys she'd been with were only really interested in oral sex as the briefest of warm-ups to the main event. Clearly, Clint Barton was a cut above any guy she'd done the horizontal tango with before. Just as he kissed with intent, focussed on his goal and doing every damn thing he knew how to achieve it, the man applied the same principles to cunnilingus with amazingly effective results.

As close as she'd been just moments before, he took his time winding her up again until she squirmed against him. Sweat pooled between her breasts and the small of her back as a steady stream of moans, cries, invectives and obscenities pushed their way passed her lips as his tongue darted in and out of her folds, his nose teasing her clit. She ran her fingers through his spiky hair, and raised her hips until he had just the right angle, but no matter how hard she begged, he kept on licking and teasing, lapping at her as slow as he pleased. Seconds before she threatened to tase him when they got back to the New York, he changed his approach and sucked on her clit, flicking it with the tip of his tongue until she came so hard she damn near forgot her own name.

She was still clenching and shivering as he hummed happily against her before he blew a warm stream of air against her over-sensitised clit that had her digging her heels into his back and gasping.
"Apology accepted," she mumbled as the last of the aftershocks rolled through her, and he mouthed wet kisses up over her belly and between her breasts until he reached her mouth. He wiped his wet lips on the back of his hand before kissing her, but she grabbed his fingers, and took two of them into her mouth, sucking on them hard, while waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"Later. Otherwise, this is going to be way too quick—and I have plans for you right now." He trailed one hand down the side of her neck, between her breasts, splaying fingers across her hip and gently massaging it as his other hand worked open the fly of his slacks. She felt him straining against the black cotton briefs, hot and needy against her thigh. "Plans that involve this bed, you, and seeing every single way I can make you scream before the sun comes up."

"I support this plan," she said, laughing a little shakily, and moved to unfasten the garter belt, but he pulled her hands away.

"Yeah. No."

"Seriously?" Darcy asked, and Clint's response was decidedly non-verbal and made Darcy suck in a breath that she let out in a low-pitched moan.

"Okay, Cowboy," she said when she had her breath back. "Fetish noted."

Clint laughed, and cupped her jaw in his hand, kissing her deeply while she threw one leg over his.

"So you don't think we're going too fast?" he panted as he broke the kiss.

"Oh my God, will you shut up and take off your damned pants?"

Clint laughed again into her hair. "Pushy."

"You love it."

Clint got up and in one motion stripped off his briefs, trousers, socks and shoes.

Darcy curled on her side, and whistled lowly. She knew Clint was cut, but dayum. He wasn't crazy beefy like Thor or Steve, but that hardly stopped her from wanting to lick his six-pack. His shoulders were broad, his pecs were stunning, narrowing to a tapered waist, hipbones in sharp relief, and she itched to trace them with her tongue. A line of sparse dark hair starting at his navel drew her eye to his cock, jutting out from a nest of dark curling hair.

In short, her boyfriend was super hot, and Darcy couldn't stop smiling.

"You like?"

"I like." She made grabby-hands. He started rifling through the pockets of his slacks before coming up with a handful of foil packets.

She started giggling as she counted out the condoms, raising a single brow at the number. "How much sex are we planning to have?"

"All of it," Clint said with a completely straight face. "We're going to have all the sex."

"Wow. Somebody's optimistic about his refractory period."

"Yeah—and somebody's about to find out exactly why," he shot right back as he sprawled next to her, pulling her against him with one arm. She used the momentum to roll him onto his back in the
centre of the bed. She made a big show of tearing open the condom wrapper with her teeth, and then batted his hands away when he tried to take it from her.

"No way—this is my favourite part."

Clint raised an eyebrow, and she flushed crimson.

"One of my favourite—would you just shut up and enjoy the foreplay?"

"Yes, ma'am. Shutting up, ma'am."

She rolled the condom down his length, and then with an absolutely filthy smile, swirled her tongue around the head of his cock. His hips rose off the bed, and he threw his head back against the pillows.

"Darcy—fuck!"

"What?" she asked innocently as she climbed back up his body and straddled him. "Oh, yeah—later."

Clint smiled a sexy shit-eating grin as she ran her hands over his shoulders, fingers tracing the planes of muscle. She scooted backward until his cock was nestled in the curve of her ass, and lowered her mouth to his. Her hair fell over her shoulders, brushing his chest. They kissed lazily and sloppily, her tongue sliding against his as she rocked her hips against him until he wrapped both arms around her, stilling her with a growl.

"Tease," he said against her mouth, and she pinched one flat brown nipple.

"It's only teasing if I don't plan on following through," Darcy pointed out, dropping a kiss on his sternum as she traced every curve and plane of muscle on his chest with greedy fingers. "You're gonna be walking funny for a week, I'm so following through."

"Big talk, little—"

Darcy shut him up by lifting her hips, and positioning the head of his cock between her folds and sinking down on his length in one smooth movement. She bit back her gasp at the way he stretched and filled her almost to the point of pain, but it was a good kind of not-pain and one she hadn't felt in a long time.

His hands tightened on her hips. She was gonna have finger-shaped bruises tomorrow and she was so totally okay with that.

"You okay?" Clint asked.

"Been a while," Darcy admitted, forcing herself to breathe as she tried to get used to the size of him.

"How long?"

"Two years, six weeks, and four days."

"You keep count?"

"No, dumbass. I just made that up."

Clint gulped in air as she clenched around him before rolling her hips for good measure. The cords in his neck stood out as he let his head fall back, eyes tightly shut and mouth slack.
"Jesus, Darcy," he breathed, opening his eyes and reaching up to pull her mouth to his. She sucked hard on his lower lip, taking it lightly between her teeth, and Clint lifted his hips to thrust shallowly up into her. She knew he could manhandle her with ease, but she was enjoying setting the pace, knowing he was getting off on her taking charge.

She pulled back from his mouth reluctantly, but with a wicked smile as she planted her hands on either side of his head and worked on settling up a rocking motion designed to get him off as slowly as possible, just to show she could.

In retaliation, Clint reached for her breasts, which were conveniently hanging pretty much right in front of him, sucking one of her nipples into his mouth while he kneaded the other with his free hand. Darcy ground down against him, rubbing her clit against his pubic bone and moaning. His other hand travelled down her sweat-slicked back to grab her ass, and she felt some of her control slipping as he shifted the angle where their bodies met so that every roll of her hips took him deeper inside her.

"God—fuck," Clint said against her neck, sounding somewhere between reverent and depraved, and he gasped and moaned as she arched her back and quickened her pace. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, and Darcy couldn't help herself. She leaned down to lap them up with the tip of her tongue. He growled against the swell of her breasts, and she laughed as he flipped them over in a flurry of pillows and tangled sheets.

"Somebody likes to be on top," she managed between panting breaths, trying to tug her hair free from beneath her shoulders at the same time he took his cock in his hand and pressed into her slowly, groaning as he bottomed out.

"We'll take turns," he said, dropping a kiss on her chin, then the corner of her mouth as he adjusted the angle and slid halfway out before slamming back into her. "Just like we'll take turns—"

"—fucking each other into the mattress?" she finished, gripping his shoulders, nails clawing at his back.

"God, I think I love you," he said with a shaky laugh, and then there was not a lot of talking, and a whole lot of heavy breathing, moans and the slap of flesh against flesh as he pistonned his hips against hers. Darcy hadn't expected him to bring her off again, but as he thrust harder and deeper, his body arcing above hers like one of his bows, her cries started getting higher and breathier as she squirmed and writhed beneath him.

"C'mon, c'mon," she moaned into his open mouth, not sure if she was begging or encouraging him. He splayed fingers across her hip before he reached between them, thumbing her clit in sloppy circles. His hips stuttered against hers, rhythm faltering as she spread her legs wider, trying to draw him in even deeper.

He came with a strangled groan, muffled by her hair, as he buried his face into her neck, shaking and spasming. Darcy kept her eyes screwed tightly shut, mouth open and breath coming in gasps as he kept on working her clit until she came again, feeling loose and shattered and shaky as he pulled out to remove the condom. She cracked open her eyes, seeing him padding bare-assed naked behind the dresser and heard water running briefly.

His ass was a thing of beauty, Darcy decided as she tried to get her heart rate back under control.

He returned with a washcloth, and ran the warm damp square of terrycloth lightly over her before dropping it to the marble floor where no doubt one of them would step on it when they got up to pee in the middle of the night. Because while Clint Barton was one sexy motherfucker, he was still a guy.
Darcy grabbed one of the pillows half-hanging off the bed and tucked it beneath her head.

"Customer survey time," Darcy said as he crawled back over to her side. "Has your world been suitably rocked?"

"As advertised," Clint said with a sexy smile, draping one leg over hers before he kissed her nose. "Speaking of performances—"

"Yes, it was good for me too." Darcy rolled her eyes. "What part of multiple orgasms did you miss, Agent Sex God?"

"Just checking."

"Just think. If we weren't both total idiots, we coulda been doing this the whole time," Darcy pointed out, and Clint pulled her closer to him.

"Better this way," he said, the faintest trace of stubble scraping her cheek as he tucked her more firmly against his side. "Worth the wait."

She tugged a corner of the sheet loose and pulled it over them, eyes drifting shut as his ran his left hand up and down the curve of her hip.

"Hey, don't fall asleep on me," he said, poking her in the shoulder.

"Catnap before round two," she muttered eyes still closed.

"Round two?"

"That would be the part," she said around a jaw-cracking yawn, "where I suck your brain out through your dick and maybe even make you cry. I bet I could. The first part anyway."

"Promises, promises," Clint said into her hair before he kissed her temple. She felt his eyelashes brush her cheek as he stole half her pillow, thumb still tracing circles on her hip.

They dozed until Darcy turned off the lights (Tony Stark used the clapper. That was weird.), crawled back into bed, and then proceeded to commence round two with no warning whatsoever.

"Good morning. It's 7:00 a.m. The weather in Malibu is 68 degrees with clear skies and a 22% chance of light showers in the afternoon. The surf conditions are—"

"Oh my God, Jarvis, why are you talking?" Darcy burrowed further under the blankets and pillows, trying to hide from the glare of the sun off the ocean as the wall of windows went from opaque to clear.

"So sorry, Miss Lewis. Mr Stark has programmed me to give the surf report and high tide for the area each morning."

"Tony surfs?"

"No, but he enjoys knowing that he could if he chose to."

"It's too early."

"Alas, I cannot control the rotation of the Earth. However, Agent Romanoff has requested that you and Mr Barton be 'decent' and ready to leave for the airfield at 8 a.m. to return to New York."
"Where's Clint?"

"Mr Barton is currently in the kitchen."

Darcy took one look at the clothing scattered across the marble floor, and with a grin, picked up Clint's silk shirt. She could have pulled on the change of clothes she'd brought. But she'd been picturing the look on Clint's face when he saw her wearing his shirt pretty much from the moment she'd walked down the stairs and seen him wearing it.

Darcy buttoned the bottom three buttons, and rolled the sleeves up to her elbows. Pulling up the collar, she buried her nose in the shirt. It smelled like Clint. She wouldn't have thought that Clint had a smell—other than sweaty gym guy. But there was something—maybe it was the smell of his aftershave, or his shampoo—that was just Clint.

She padded down the stairs, squinting in the brilliant sunlight streaming through the windows facing the driveway. She figured that pretty much any hour of the day, Tony Stark's crazy mansion got light. Which would have been awesome for say, a painter, but probably sucked when you were hungover.

She heard the sound of a coffeemaker in the direction of the kitchen, and followed it. She found Clint wearing nothing but a loose pair of drawstring pants that hung low on his hips. He was staring somewhat hopelessly at a giant stainless steel and brass monstrosity that looked like it belonged in a church playing Bach rather than on Tony Stark's kitchen counter, and frowning.

"Huh. I would have figured Stark for the kind of guy where everything looked like it was made by Apple."

"I was trying to surprise you with breakfast in bed," Clint muttered, frowning at the coffee grounds floating in the glass carafe.

"Trust me, I'm surprised."

She crowded him against the counter and got up on her tiptoes to kiss him. His hands went automatically to her waist, and he made a sound against her mouth as he discovered firsthand exactly what she wasn't wearing beneath his shirt.

"So am I," he said, smiling against her mouth. "We've got," he glanced up at the LED clock on the microwave, "forty-five minutes to kill before Tasha gets here."

"People eat in here. Jarvis would have conniptions."

"I have an idea," Clint said, and taking her by the hand, led her back up the stairs past the guestroom they had christened every surface of until dawn, and into what Darcy could only assume was Tony's room.

"I thought you said—" Darcy began, but Clint kept on going, until they stood in the doorway of the master bath.

"Holy shit," Darcy said. "This place is sick."

The bathroom was huge, with shining gold fixtures, a jacuzzi bath that would have been called an indoor pool in any other house, and a separate shower with jets mounted at every angle imaginable.

That definitely gave Darcy ideas. She turned to Clint, grinning as she began unbuttoning his shirt.
"So what's the plan?" she asked, raising a brow.

"We're going to be very, very dirty. And then we're going to get very, very clean."

She shrugged the shirt off her shoulders, and it hit the marble floor with a whisper of silk.

"I like the way you think, Clint Barton."
Chapter 15

When they boarded the jet, Clint and Natasha took special care making sure none of the flight crew had been secretly replaced by shape-changing aliens. It wasn't until Natasha was satisfied that the Stark jet took off back toward New York.

Darcy sat next to Clint, the armrest up and her legs draped across the empty aisle seat as they talked quietly while the Widow sat up front, tapping away on her laptop.

When Natasha had shown up with the Stark car, they'd been ready. Well, they were wearing pants, and considering how much of an effort it had been to get to that point, Natasha was surprisingly lenient with them. Especially given she'd spent time undercover as Stark's assistant. According to her, Tony was a legend when it came to not even being in the correct timezone to be on a plane when he was supposed to be.

Darcy's hair had still been wet, even after towelling it dry, dampening the neck and back of her tee-shirt. Which wasn't a huge problem in Malibu, but Darcy had shivered as the plane's a/c came on. Without a word, Clint had dropped his leather jacket over her shoulders, and she'd snuggled against his broad chest. She had draped it across her lap once they reached cruising altitude, and Clint surreptitiously slid his hand beneath the leather to stroke her thigh.

"It was weird. Seeing you with Loki, I mean."

Darcy swung her stocking feet around, tucking them beneath her as she bowed her head to his.

"How weird?"

"Deeply weird. He was almost like a regular guy. Sorta."

"A regular guy who thinks that razing a small New Mexico town to the ground is an appropriate response to finding out you're adopted, you mean?"

"Well, yeah. But you guys act more like siblings than him and Thor."

"You mean we're, like, bros?" Darcy raised both eyebrows, and Clint shrugged.

"I guess I'm just used to him trying to kill us. I keep thinking he must be playing some angle."

"I think his only dastardly master plan right now involves getting into Sif's pants."

Clint chuckled, and pulled her closer, pressing a kiss to her mop of dark hair before whispering, "Speaking of which... wanna join the mile high club?" in her ear.

"Maybe some time when your ex isn't ten feet away and we're the only people on the plane?"

"Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"Dude. We just double-dated with Norse Gods."

"Fine. But when we get back to the mansion..." Clint slid his hand under her tee-shirt, "all bets are off."

"Deal." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "We were really like bros?"
"Let's just say, if you'd asked me a week ago if I'd ever see my girlfriend manhandling a supervillain like a naughty toddler, I'd have said hell no."

"Oh my God, he was totally being a dork with that whole 'In case I haven't mentioned, I'm a Frost Giant' bullshit. He was never gonna get laid if he kept that shit up. Do you think he has a shot with her?"

"Hard to tell. On the one hand, she did come all the way from Valhalla or whatever for dinner. On the other hand, I was pretty sure, at one point, they were gonna start throwing shit. My plan was to get you outta there, and fuck Tony's renovations."

"Yeah. It was... I guess I'm just used to Thor, you know?"

"Yeah, well, even Thor can be hard to deal with. The first few missions he went out on, Steve had to explain to him that once you've got a guy in custody, you're not allowed to cut their head off, or whatever."

"Fury must have shit a brick."

"Tell me about it. Thor's a great guy to have in your corner when you've got Doc Ock or Doom coming at you. But dude doesn't always get due process."

"Ever wonder about that?"

"About what?"

"I mean, Thor does stuff like throw the phrase 'mere mortals' around, and like you said, threaten to lop off the heads of his enemies or whatever, and we just go 'Oh, it's Thor' and roll our eyes. But Loki does the same shit, and we just... always hold it against him."

"Thor doesn't kill civilians."

"Not now. He's learned not to, 'cause he has all of us to go 'bad dog, no biscuit.' But you should have seen him when he first got to New Mexico. He was kinda a total douche right up until he and Jane took off for the hammer."

"He kicked our asses pretty hard. Did I ever tell you I was there?"

Darcy shook her head.

"Coulson had me up in a crane, ready to pop him if he hurt anybody—I mean, seriously hurt anyone. I was actually rooting for him. But when he couldn't budge the hammer? He just... stopped. Like he was broken. Like nothing mattered anymore."

Darcy whistled lowly. "It was totally a week for existential identity crises for the Odinson boys."

"How do you mean?"

"Thor got sent to Earth 'cause his dad thought he was acting like a total tool and needed a time out. Meanwhile, Loki found out his dad wasn't his dad, and totally lost his shit. As much as shit was blowing up all around us in town, no-one actually got killed. Okay, except Thor. And he totally got better."

"Yeah. I wish I had a force reset button," Clint sighed. "I was laid up with a dislocated shoulder for two months after one of the HYDRA missions. If Thor hadn't shown up with his 'healing stones', I
would have been reassigned from active duty."

"Yeah. Magic rocks from space are hella useful."

"Wait, Thor was a tool?" Clint looked sceptical. "How have you never told me before that Thor was a tool?"

"Total entitled rich dude bullshit. But he got over it. He even took Izzie a mug, to replace the one he'd smashed—he did that whole 'Another!' thing like it was a Greek restaurant or some shit, and Jane was all 'Oh fuck no'."

Clint had a moment where Darcy could tell he was trying to picture the big guy being all, well... *Stark* about shit.

"I dunno. I can see where you're coming from, but I still don't buy it. It all comes down to making a really simple choice. Thor chooses to be a good guy, Loki chooses to be a bad guy. And as long as he does, I guess I'm not really ready to cut the guy any slack."

"It's not that I'm saying we totally invite him to the next Avengers backyard barbecue, or anything. I guess it's just... hard to think of the same guy drooling over Sharon Stone shooting it out at high noon with Gene Hackman, as the guy who tried to take over the world last Thursday. You know? It's like him being a total headcase makes him seem more normal somehow."

"Darce, Loki tried to kill his *brother*. When your brother does shit like that... it's not always an easy thing to forgive."

They fell into silence, and Darcy could tell something else was bugging Clint, but she wasn't going to try and shake it out of him. She figured he'd tell her what his deal was when he was ready to tell her.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that Loki got a bad rap that he did his best (worst) to live up to sometimes. Just to piss his bro off, if for no other reason.

"I'll tell you one thing. I look at Thor and his family, and suddenly being an orphan doesn't suck *quite* so much."

Darcy snuggled deeper into his shoulder, and twined her fingers with his. "You're, like, Batman without the childhood trauma. Or maybe Green Arrow—different millionaire turned vigilante. Were you stranded on a deserted island?"

"Nope. Just joined the circus."

"And yet—surprisingly well-adjusted. I thought all superheroes had a terminal case of manpain?"

"I'm Special Ops, not a superhero."

"So you keep saying. What's the difference?"

"I don't have mutant powers, my hot girlfriend *totally* knows what I do for a living, and I can't afford fancy trick arrows without government funding. As for manpain..." Clint shrugged. "I've got it pretty good. Great job with awesome health insurance, I live in a mansion, and did I mention, my girlfriend is ridiculously hot?"

"*Good* answer," Darcy breathed the second before her lips met his. The tap-tap-tapping of Natasha's nails on her laptop's keyboard didn't even slow down, even though Darcy could practically feel the
Widow's smirk from four rows away.

They made out pretty much right up until the pilot announced their approach into Teterboro. As soon as they touched down, Darcy peered out the window over Clint's shoulder to see an unmarked black SUV outside the hangar with a familiar figure in a black leather trenchcoat leaning against the door.

"Holy shitballs," she said, and Clint gave her a look. She jerked a thumb toward the window and he visibly deflated.

"Fuck. We're so busted."

Natasha just picked up her laptop case and patted Clint on the shoulder.

"Time to face the music," she said with a shrug, and Darcy reached for Clint's hand. Together, they walked down the fold-away stairs to meet Director Fury and possibly their doom.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Fury asked as the SUV pulled away from the airport, the bright afternoon sunshine muted by the smoked glass windows.

"What?" Darcy said at the same time Clint muttered, "No, sir," and the Widow kept her mouth shut.

"I'm not actually asking you, Barton. I'm asking your girl. Miss Lewis—do you think I'm stupid?"

His tone was genial, even friendly. Darcy had a sinking feeling he was—currently—neither.

"No—I mean, no, sir. Of course not."

"Do you really think," Fury continued, that scary smile still in place, "that the three of you could up and take off for twenty-four hours on the pretext of planning a bachelorette party, and I wouldn't know exactly what you were up to?"

"Um... no?" It came out as a question, and Darcy frantically looked at Natasha for help, but both she and Clint were stone-faced, though Clint's hand in hers remained warm and his grip firm.

"Seriously. Do you think there is anything that you people do that I don't know about?"

"And that's not creepy or anything," Darcy said without thinking, and Clint's fingers twitched around hers.

"Loki's... technology, magic, Asgard voodoo, whatever you want to call it, leaves an energy signature. There's a whole cadre of S.H.I.E.L.D. scientists that have been using the data from the Puente Antiguo sites to try and track him."

Darcy winced. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh." The smile was gone now, and Darcy felt pinned to the seat by his one-eyed glare. "Now, I don't always know what they're talking about, in terms of non-ionising radiation and beta particles. But you know what I do understand? Knowing my enemy."

Darcy flipped from chagrin to anger in an instant. Her eyes narrowed, and she actually leaned toward Fury. "So you've been using me as, what, Loki-bait?"

"Let's just say that your relationship with Thor's brother has made it that much easier for us to keep tabs on him and learn more about how his technology functions."
"So is being both bait and your research project covered under the mountain of paperwork I signed in order to keep working with Jane? Or do we just assume it's covered by the Patriot Act?"

Darcy knew she ought to be dialling back the snark since her job and life was pretty much on the line, but she couldn't help it. She was who she was, and Director Fury should have known that when he'd had her cleared for duty in the first place.

"FISA, actually."

Darcy blinked. "The government has classified Asgard as a Foreign Power? Are you shitting me?"

"I am not shitting you," Fury said with a completely straight face.

"Wow. S.H.I.E.L.D. is a class act."

"S.H.I.E.L.D. is an organisation that exists to protect the people of this country—and by extension, the world—from whackjobs like Loki. I'm sure as hell not going to apologise for using whatever resources we have at hand."

"What if I quit?"

"Well, then you have two choices. You can either ask to be reassigned to a different S.H.I.E.L.D. facility, or you can consent to severing all contact with the Avenger Initiative. Permanently."

Darcy's mouth went dry. Her hand tightened around Clint's, and when she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, his mouth was a grim line.

Fury followed her eyeline, and his teeth flashed white in the dim light of the SUV. "Yeah. I didn't think so. But I think it's time we stop keeping you around to baby-sit Dr Foster."

"But—I'm Jane's intern! You can't just fire me—"

"I didn't say we were firing you. The truth is, Dr Foster's research is too important to the Initiative to risk alienating her by reassigning her BFF, or some shit, to Timbuktu. Coulson tells me that maybe we can do a lot more with a young woman of your... myriad talents. So starting Monday, you're being assigned to him as his assistant."

"Wait—lemme get this straight. My punishment for totally trying to hide the fact that Thor's bro was popping in and out of the mansion like he was a latchkey kid is to promote me?"

"Oh, don't think of it as a promotion. We're just reallocating resources."

"So I'm like a freaking piece of office furniture?"

"Much more useful than a desk chair, but slightly less important than a printer. You handled yourself pretty well, according to Agent Romanoff's report."

Darcy's mouth dropped open in shock and she leaned forward to fix Natasha with a glare. "You wrote a report on our super-secret off the books clandestine thingie?"

"Actually, Agent Romanoff was assigned to be my eyes and ears on the ground in Malibu the second Stark filed the flight plan."

"Traitor," Clint muttered beneath his breath.

"Someone had to make sure that S.H.I.E.L.D. was informed, in case there was an incident," Natasha
said, still ridiculously calm. Darcy was pretty much back to being afraid of her. "Just because there wasn't doesn't mean we shouldn't have been prepared had there been."

"So, what? You had three dozen S.H.I.E.L.D. guys in the bushes with bazookas last night, just in case?" Darcy couldn't keep her voice from rising on the last three words, and Clint pulled her slightly closer to his side. She wasn't sure if he was holding her back, or just keeping a good grip on her in case the Widow decided to toss her out of the moving car.

"Just the helicarrier on stand-by off the coast, with Thor, Rogers, and Banner aboard," Natasha said, not looking even the slightest bit guilty.

It was Clint's turn to sputter in shock. "You'd let the Hulk smash up Stark's house?"

"Are you kidding?" Fury grinned again, a scary feral grin. "I was looking forward to it."

"Does this mean we're not, um... grounded?"

"Do I look like your father? You are a grown-ass woman, so act like it. And that goes for you too, Barton. Next time your girlfriend has a plan to wine and dine a crazy alien, it's your job to stop her— not freakin' order the damned wine and cheese."

"Yes, sir."
Chapter 16

Darcy buttoned up the dark red button down shirt as far as it would go, and sighed as she unbuttoned it and grabbed a black tank top from the top of her folded laundry. Pulling it on, she re-buttoned the now-wrinkled shirt and decided it would have to do. Someday, she would find a blouse that fit her at the neck, shoulders and cuffs that would also button over her chest without needing a tank top to keep her from looking like she should be working at Hooters. Today was clearly not that day. She pinned her dark hair into a loose bun, and pushed her glasses further up onto her nose with one knuckle as she studied her reflection in the mirror.

After dropping Darcy off at the mansion, Fury had taken Clint and Natasha back to the tower, probably to ream them out in private. Jane had pounced on Darcy pretty much the second she'd walked through the door, absolutely livid that S.H.I.E.L.D. had stolen her intern. It took two beers and a lot of hugging before Jane calmed down enough to listen to Darcy as she explained she was okay with being reassigned.

For one thing, as Jane tried to unravel the secrets of Asgardian tech, Darcy had been left feeling more and more useless. And for another, her six college credits weren't really an issue any more, and Darcy wanted to stay in New York. Plus, Jane would get way more work done, Darcy figured, having a research assistant who actually understood what Jane was talking about at least fifty percent of the time.

"But we're a team," Jane had said, and Darcy smiled fondly.

"You used to hide from me on the roof."

"Only sometimes."

"Only all the time."

"Only when you were driving me crazy."

"Which was... a not insignificant portion of the time."

"Yeah, but the rest of the time we were a team," Jane wailed, and Darcy patted her shoulder.

"I know, honey. We can still be a team! Just not in the lab."

That was when Jane started on her fourth beer.

By the time Thor had come to Darcy's rescue, Jane was near tears, and reminiscing about all the nights they'd spend in the van in the middle of the desert, arguing about radio stations and whose turn it was to wash the dishes piling up in the sink.

The god of thunder lifted Darcy off her feet in the kind of bear hug that would have crippled her had Thor not been extra careful, then carted the slightly tipsy (Jane was a seriously cheap date) astrophysicist off to bed.

Sometimes it was weird, hanging out with a scientist who forgot to eat half the time and never wore matching socks, and an alien bohunk who pretty much ended every sentence with an exclamation mark.

Other times, it was kinda okay.
By the time Clint got back to the mansion, Darcy had killed three more beers from the second six-pack and was halfway through a *Black Books* marathon on BBCA. Once she'd assured herself that he wasn't a) fired b) being reassigned to Siberia or c) mad at her, they'd pretty much fallen into bed, exhausted. Clint might have been used to getting a full day of sniping and archering in on only four hours of sleep, but Darcy hadn't pulled many all-nighters since she and Jane had left New Mexico.

Of course, when she'd been awakened at the crack of dawn by her alarm clock, the terror had firmly set in.

Coulson. The guy was a freaking ninja. Not to mention, Darcy was used to showing up for work in jeans and vintage tee-shirts beneath layers of cardigans and legwarmers. Somehow, she couldn't imagine showing up for her first day as Coulson's assistant looking a boho grad student on a leave of absence from her master's programme. Even if she technically was a boho grad student on a leave of absence from her master's programme.

An hour, three changes of clothes, and seriously regretting giving Loki her last Xanax later, Darcy stepped out of her bathroom, and struck a pose. "How do I look?"

Clint rolled over onto his stomach, the sheets tangled low on his hips as he gave a low wolf-whistle. "Like every naughty librarian fantasy I've ever had."

Darcy flushed happily as she checked the pins in her hair for the zillionth time.

"Except for the shoes," he added, smiling lazily.

Darcy lifted the cuff of one pantleg, angling her foot. "What? They're Danskos. They're comfy, and totally awesome if you're going to be on your feet all day."

Clint rolled his eyes. "They're clogs."

"Clogs can be sexy."

"Babe, normally I'd say anything you wear is sexy. But they're still clogs."

"I'm not gonna wear five inch stilettos to work. And I'm sure as hell not going to wear five inch heels to work for Coulson."

"Okay, but if you did, that would be so awesome."

Darcy crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at him. "Not gonna happen."

"Oh yeah, baby. Talk stern to me. Tell me no talking in the stacks."

"You're a perv. And everybody knows that the stacks is where everybody goes to get laid."

"Oh really?"

"Well, or the study rooms. Rooms with tables and doors that lock—catnip to the stealth student sexy fun times. Or so I've been told."

"No giant libraries in the School of Hard Knocks."

"If this is your way of asking me to fornicate in Howard Stark's library, you're just gonna have to wait til I get off work."

Clint made a grab at her legs, and Darcy whapped him on the shoulder.
"Don't wrinkle me! I'm freaked out enough as it is."

"You'll be fine. Phil wouldn't have asked for you, if he didn't actually want you under him."

She gave him a look.

"Working for him. With him. Seriously. He's a great guy."

Darcy narrowed her eyes. "What happened to his last assistant?"

"She didn't get killed in the line of duty or anything," Clint assured her hastily. "She actually left to get married."

"Really?"

"Yeah—her wife is some fancy uptown lawyer. There was cake and everything."

"How long ago was that?"

"Um... before New Mexico, but after the Harlem Incident?"

Darcy did some quick mental calculations, and then whistled lowly. "How has he been surviving, with no-one to fetch him coffee?"

"The guy's an expert on surviving tough situations. A few months having to get his own coffee from the cafeteria is nothing compared to Chechnya."

"What happened in Chechnya?" Darcy asked, curious.

Clint opened his mouth, and then snapped it shut again, frowning. "What's your clearance level?"

"I have a clearance level?"

He patted her shoulder, smiling broadly. "Yeah. Don't worry. You'll be fine."

Agent Coulson wasn't as scary as Natasha, but he still spooked Darcy a little. Mostly because of the CCTV footage from New Mexico, but also because for all he appeared to be a forty-something paper pusher, he was actually Fury's go-to guy when it came to herding superheroes like cats. Having spent the last few months living with superheroes, Darcy had a whole new respect for Coulson's cat-herding abilities.

She got directed to his office by one of the bazillion suit-wearing S.H.I.E.L.D. minions as soon as she arrived. It was barely eight in the morning, and he was already there, drinking coffee, with his suit jacket draped over the back of his chair.

"Good morning, Ms Lewis."

Darcy opened her mouth to say 'Good morning, Agent Coulson,' but what came out instead was "Holy shit, is that you and the Obamas?"

Coulson's eyes flicked to the framed photo on the wall of his office.

"It was taken at the National Council of Women's Organisations Inaugural Ball."

Darcy stepped closer to the photo, checking out Coulson's date. She looked like a class act in a
sleeveless dress that sparkled as well as revealed seriously toned arms, blonde curly hair swept up off her forehead. Coulson had his arm around her, and was—for him—genuinely smiling.

"Who's the blonde with the awesome guns?"

"That's the Deputy Director of the NSA."

Darcy's jaw dropped, and she forcibly restrained herself from saying "Shut the front door!", instead looking back and forth between the quiet, deceptively unassuming guy behind the desk, and the smiling man in the photo flanked by the President and First Lady.

"How come you have a picture with the President, First Lady, and the Deputy Director of the NSA?"

"She was my wife at the time."

Darcy blinked at him.

"Don't worry. She's stopped tapping my phones. Mostly. I think technically, she had GCHQ doing it for her. I do miss the dog, though."

"She took your dog? That's harsh."

"She claimed that she couldn't deal with my job. It was too secretive. It's kind of ironic. You're early, by the way."

"I was kinda expecting you to come in, um... later."

"Actually, I was here all night."

"That's hardcore. Does that thing fold out, or something?" Darcy jerked a thumb toward the sofa along one wall.

"No—no, there are guest quarters in the Tower. Trust me—you'll be glad we have them soon enough. I recommend keeping two changes of clothes on hand, a tooth brush, that sort of thing."

"This is pretty much my only pair of 'work pants'. Mostly, I wore jeans and leggings when I worked with Jane."

"Ah. In which case, take tomorrow morning off to get properly outfitted. Personally, I usually go for long-wearing, rather than flashy."

"My finances are kinda—"

"Not an issue." He pushed an envelope across the desk towards her. She fished inside it, and pulled out a charge card. "And before you get any bright ideas, there's a daily limit, and all your purchases are subject to internal review."

"No sprees, no porn, just the essentials. Got it."

Coulson blinked. Darcy figured this was probably due to the fact that, aside from Tony (who didn't need S.H.I.E.L.D. money), and Clint (because he was Clint), very few S.H.I.E.L.D. employees would even mention buying porn with the company card.

"Most of your duties will involve co-ordinating travel, processing paperwork, requisitioning supplies, and some general office work. Can you type?"
"I've been online since I was seven. And who do you think wrote all of Jane's reports, not to mention her grant applications for the last year?"

"I thought as much. You'll also have to go through some S.H.I.E.L.D. training programmes—just the basics. Small arms proficiency, hand-to-hand, that sort of thing. Also, Agent Sitwell wanted to make you take over Dorothy's position as 'Evacuation Warden' for the floor, but I figured, let you actually meet everyone and learn the lay of the land before we give you a blaze-orange vest and ball cap."

"You guys have to do that a lot?"

"Well, we do have fire drills on the first Tuesday of each quarter."

That didn't exactly answer Darcy's question, but considering the last town she'd worked in had been blown up by a giant robot, she figured she was still probably going to be okay. At least the Tower was chock full of heavily-armed agents and the occasional superhero, not to mention Stark Industries security on top of that.

Coulson got up, gesturing for Darcy to follow him back out to the workstation outside his office.

"So, this is yours." Coulson gestured to a glass and chrome desk that was completely bare except for a state-of-the-art computer monitor, and a phone that looked like it could scramble eggs and arm a nuclear weapon from orbit, all with a touch of a button. On the one hand, she wasn't stuck in a cubicle. On the other hand, anyone could totally tell if she was slacking off as they walked by. Not that she slacked much working with Jane. Still. She was going to miss surfing the 'net with impunity.

"All we ask is that you refrain from decorating it on holidays. There was a memo. Otherwise, it's yours to do with as you please, assuming you don't set it on fire."

"Somebody set theirs on fire?"

"I was told it was accidental. Also, S.H.I.E.L.D. has a policy about office-appropriate language. I suggest you familiarise yourself with it as soon as possible."

"You mean, like calling you 'sir'?"

"I was going to say, refraining from some of the more colourful and profane idiom."

"So, no plastic Santas, no incendiary incidents, and no swearing at my desk?"

"Please."

"How does that work with Directory Fury?"

"His assistant has a jar. Last year, the company picnic was actually financed entirely from the contents of the jar."

"Sweet!" Darcy grinned, and Coulson tried to give her the Stern Face. But he'd spent time with her in New Mexico, and knew what he was getting into when he requested her.

"Your email's already been set up, and you'll find a number of documents in your inbox with S.H.I.E.L.D. workplace manuals, codes for the copiers and printers, health insurance and IRA information, and take-out menus for a sixteen block radius of the Tower. They might be a little out of date, though, so I suggest you try Grubhub."

" Seriously?"
"We work a lot of late hours, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Mostly, I was just blindsided by the whole health insurance thing. Doesn't that usually only kick in after three months?"

"Actually, your hire date is retroactive from when S.H.I.E.L.D. took control of the Foster Einstein-Rosen Bridge project. It comes with a nice salary bump too."

"I thank you, and my student loans thank you. Oh, hey—what's my clearance level?"

"As of this morning, your clearance level has been upped to Three, though I have to tell you, your mother's arrest record came as something of a surprise."

"Yeah. She had this thing about handcuffing herself to bulldozers."

"So I gathered."

"So what was my clearance thingie before?"

"Level Two. Which basically meant you know about the Avengers Initiative, and Thor's origins."

"What does Level Three mean?"

"A slightly shorter hold time when you have to requisition more staples."

"You still print out hardcopy?" Darcy was vaguely horrified.

Coulson shrugged. "I'm old school."

Coulson really hadn't been kidding about being 'old school'. Half-way through her mid-morning coffee and Facebook trawl, four bankers boxes full of paperwork needing to be processed appeared on her desk.

Darcy spent most of the morning trying to organise Coulson's files. They suffered from both a backlog of six months and his former assistant's quirky filing system. For example, surveillance reports on Dr Banner in South America had been filed under "Green", while correspondence between Coulson and the CEO of Stark Industries had been filed under "Inappropriate Workplace Crush". Then there was the part where the offsite backups being scrambled due to an unexpected EMP thanks to some dickweed trying to take out Iron Man too close to the server farm.

"Um... can you bilocate?" Darcy called over her shoulder towards the open office door as she flipped through Coulson's shared Outlook calendar.

"Why?"

"'Cause it says here you're supposed to be appearing before a senate subcommittee in D.C. at the same time you're meeting with the Latverian Ambassador at the consulate."

Coulson leaned in the doorway, his tie crooked and powdered sugar from his jelly doughnut dotting both his tie and his knuckles. Darcy blinked. She'd never seen him look anything less than starched, pressed, and lethal. "Reschedule the subcommittee."

Darcy blinked. "Can I do that?"

"Of course you can. You're my assistant. And it took me seven months to set up a face-to-face with
the Ambassador. Senator Stern can wait."

"What's so important about the Latverian Ambassador?"

"Nothing much—just that he's one of Doom's henchmen, and suspected of laundering the equivalent of the gross national income of Peru through the Embassy trade agreements. And importing illegal particle beam weaponry."

"Oh. Are you going in there alone?"

"I'll have Sitwell with me. He's the one who knows how to work the MP3 recorder."

"Shouldn't you maybe have, like, backup?"

"You think I should have Cale and Garrett come along in the car?"

"You're asking me?" Darcy squeaked.

"It's a good idea. Also, Cale's been complaining I never let them out of the van."

"Which one is Cale?"

"The one with no sense of humour."

"Well that narrows it down," Darcy muttered, but started combing through her contacts menu to send an email. "Holy sh-crap—Garrett's the State Fair guy?"

"Do I want to know?"

"What, that we have photographic evidence that Thor can deep-throat a corn dog?"

"You're right, I don't want to know." Coulson pinched the bridge of his nose as if he was in pain. Darcy didn't blame him. "What's my afternoon like?"

"You've got a briefing with Director Fury on the Helicarrier, then lunch at Stark Industries."

"Good. I should be back around four. Or earlier, if no-one is actually at Stark to meet me, despite making an appointment. Twice."

"Gotcha, Chief. I'll email Ms Potts' assistant, and make sure you're on their calendar. I'll text you if it's cancelled."

"Thanks. And Ms Lewis?"

"Yes?"

"Don't call me 'chief.'"

"Okay, Bossman." Darcy gave him a jaunty salute.

"Oh, and one more thing," Coulson said as he opened his briefcase and pulled out a brown file folder and dropped it on her desk. "This is Agent Romanoff's report on your little double-date in Malibu. I think it should make for interesting reading."

The front of the folder read Threat/Vulnerability Assessments and Risk Analysis.

"Awesome," Darcy said with a bright, brittle smile.
"I can't believe they stole you," Jane lamented, stirring another teaspoon of sugar into her coffee. Darcy glanced down and yep—one blue sock, one purple. Though, to be fair, ever since Thor had fallen out of the sky, Jane's personal grooming had been a lot better.

"I told you—it's no big deal. I'm just working on another floor. And I bet the new guy—"

"Kyle Borson."

"I bet he's awesome."

"Well, he's been studying the background radiation of the cube, in relation to Thor's hammer and armour, and he has some interesting theories—"

"See? You've got a new geek pal. You'll be fine. Just train the dude to bring you Pop-Tarts every two hours, and it'll be like I never even left."

"But he's not you." Jane looked genuinely unhappy.

Darcy was touched. She'd never realised how much Jane thought of her as a friend, rather than just the only grad student who'd applied for the unpaid internship.

Darcy patted Jane's hand, and then flipped past the surveillance photos to the neatly typed Threat Assessment printed on dark grey paper with a S.H.I.E.L.D. watermark behind it. She scanned Natasha's summary of the night in Malibu, not really paying attention since she'd actually been there. Then she flipped to the last two pages with the Widow's final findings.

Physical overview:

Subject possesses above-average skill at close-quarters combat, bladed weapons, projectile weapons (specifically: throwing knives), and ability for site-to-site teleportation of self and others without apparent technological means.

Subject exhibits morphogenic abilities akin to other threats currently on file (see attached file, Darkhölme R.). Without tissue samples, it is impossible to ascertain if they are due to alien physiology or the result of a genetic mutation (Xavier, C.F. "The Homo Sapiens Legacy" Oxford University Press, 1962). Blood samples were retrieved onsite, but were degraded before S.H.I.E.L.D. labs could isolate specific genetic sequences. New samples must be obtained for study if possible.

While possessing above-average strength, endurance, accelerated healing, accelerated language acquisition, and markedly above average stamina, Subject rarely engages in hand-to-hand, preferring to observe and direct attacks from nearby whenever possible. Subject shows propensity for animating inanimate objects as preferred form of initial attack, resulting in significant collateral damage to attack sites and civilian casualties, resulting in to date 196 hospitalisations of civilians, 39 hospitalisations of S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel, 5 civilian fatalities, and 13 S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel fatalities since initial contact (see Puente Antiguo Incident Report, 05/19/2011).

Personality overview:

Subject is paranoid, narcissistic, given to fits of extreme violence and benevolence with little measurable warning as to change in mood (microexpressions, macroexpressions, body language/bearing/carriage) and displays few tendencies toward long-term goals and planning. Instead, subject is ruled largely by emotion, given to brief spurts of activity followed by significantly long periods of dormancy.
Subject displays above-average intelligence, and sociopathic tendencies. However, this could also be the result of cultural conditioning as other Asgardians have similar issues regarding acceptable collateral damage/human loss of life in combat situations.

Subject displays deep-seated sibling rivalry where foster-sibling Thor Odinson is concerned. However, despite his professed hatred of his 'brother', in repeated physical clashes, stops short of fatally wounding Odinson. This suggests that despite both implied and declared threats, Subject prefers humbling and humiliating Odinson to an outright termination. In fact, Subject has passed up multiple strategic advantages wherein Odinson could have been terminated, choosing instead to taunt and verbally abuse Odinson (see attached incident reports).

Subject initiated relationship (platonic) with Lewis, Darcy (see attached personnel file) and despite initial threats to her health and safety, appears to have forged some kind of bond with the research assistant, where they have met socially several times (see attached surveillance reports) without collateral damage to Lewis or bystanders.

For more, please refer to CCTV footage from Stark residence, Malibu, 10/09/2011, audio only 00:47:06 - 01:07:56.

Threat assessment: Moderate to High.

"What's that?" Jane gestured to the file with a forkful of salad.

"Just paperwork Coulson wanted me to, um, look over while he's out." Darcy closed the file, and dropped it into her messenger bag, trying to play it off like no big deal. But seeing the body count had seriously shaken her—even if Loki hadn't killed anybody in the last month, it reminded her that she was pretty much playing with fire.

Then again, she'd tased a god that one time. She had a habit of shooting first and asking questions later.

"So tell me what Erik's been up to since he went back to the university?" Darcy asked as she took a long sip off her mocha, and Jane filled her in on what her godfather had been up to since he'd taken off back to his department. Darcy only half listened, making appropriate noises here and there, until her phone beeped, letting her know her 45 minute lunch break was coming to an end.

Jane followed her as they set their plastic trays on the conveyor belt that would take them off to the mysterious dishwashing robots Tony had probably installed in the kitchens.

"Hey," Jane said, touching Darcy's shoulder before they headed off in opposite directions. "Are you okay with the new job? Really?"

"To tell you the truth, I was kinda glad they found you somebody who actually knows what the hell you're talking about most of the time. Not that I haven't learned, like, a ton of stuff the last year. But I think this is more my speed, you know? It's probably good for both of us. And you'll probably get way more work done with New Guy."

"As long as you're happy," Jane said, grave and serious, and pulled Darcy into a fierce hug.

Darcy patted Jane's back awkwardly, and then straightened her glasses.

"It's all good. And it's not like we won't see each other, you know? I mean, we do both still live in the same house and everything."

"Right." Jane gave her a hopeful smile, and then headed off toward the bank of elevators that would
take her back down to her lab.
By Friday, Darcy had stopped feeling like a complete impostor, and was starting to feel a bit more like maybe she was going to survive her new job. At least so long as no-one shot at her, or tried to turn her into plant life. She'd hit up TJ Maxx in the Flatiron district for a half dozen pairs of work pants and work-appropriate tops, two new pairs of sensible shoes that were slightly sexier than her clogs. Tony had even given her an SI smart phone that allowed her to do half her job from bed, if she'd been so inclined. No-one ever really called Coulson's S.H.I.E.L.D. extension, so most of her days thus far had involved learning the ropes, and getting to know the other admin assistants on her floor.

Most of them were older than she was, and all of them were in peak physical condition and could probably take on a squad of HYDRA guys single-handed. One—Belinda or Bonnie or something like that—had even been a field agent for a while. But she'd shattered her femur when she took three bullets, and after they put her back together, she opted for a desk job. Scott brought in bagels on Wednesdays. Christine swore like a sailor (and had the jar on her desk to prove it) spoke six languages, and couldn't make decent coffee. Kelly liked to bake, had three kids, and held the record for sharp-shooting within the department. Colleen had just got married, and thanked Darcy profusely when she fixed her PC so she wouldn't have to wait on IT to show up with a can of compressed air and yet more forms to fill out (S.H.I.E.L.D. had forms for everything—usually in triplicate.).

It made Darcy feel kinda weird. She knew more about the Avengers Initiative than all of them, but they treated her like a noob—but in a good way. Scott showed the secret stash of umbrellas in the back of the conference room coat closet, atop a box of non-dairy creamer. Colleen covered Darcy's phone (as if it actually rang) while she was at lunch, and Kelly walked her through how to un-jam the copier when it ate files it was supposed to be collating and copying.

It should have freaked her out way more, having what her own mother would (in a vaguely disapproving way) call "a respectable job". Except for the part where the following week she was supposed to start physical training in the gym, and Clint had already taken over her small arms training. Mostly as an excuse to grope each other in the middle of the day while the team was on-call and bored.

Darcy had also learnt more about Coulson in the last five days than she had the entire five months she'd been in New York. She found out how he took his coffee, how he ate on stake-outs (too much Burger King for a guy his age—she was going to start texting him maps to Subway), how much it cost to dry clean his suits (she'd expected Brooks Brothers after the lecture he gave her on his first day, but she'd sneaked a peek at the label inside his jacket while he was in the head and was shocked to see it was Dolce). His ex-dog was named 'Sparky' and was 12 years old with lousy teeth, while the only info she could find on his ex-wife was via the NSA's website, since he only ever called her "the ex".

He could sleep with his eyes wide open, spoke fluent Mandarin, and when he thought no-one was looking, he surfed Twitter on his phone. Also, despite the "MIB" vibe, he never actually wore black suits. Dark charcoal grey, muted navy blue—anything but black. Darcy had read once that people had considered black suits strictly for servants and undertakers. She supposed S.H.I.E.L.D. probably fit both descriptions, but Phil was a snappy dresser. Well, for a guy who probably considered three buttons on his suit jacket to be "flashy".

The other thing Darcy had figured out—and which she would never tell another living soul—was that in addition to an inappropriate workplace crush on Virginia Potts, Coulson and Natasha seemed
to have something going. Maybe it was UST. Maybe it was—like Natasha and Clint—in the distant past. But whenever the Widow came by, even if his schedule was packed, Coulson always made time for her. He sat up that tiny bit straighter, and his hands would fiddle with things on his desk like he didn't know what to do with them. Darcy thought it was adorable, and she'd have been worried the Widow would eat him alive if she hadn't come in on the end of one of their sparring sessions in the gym.

Darcy was pretty used to Natasha wiping the floor with pretty much all of the guys—even Steve (who always blushed when he had to fight her, and pulled his punches way too much) and Thor (whom she'd seen multiple times get his ass kicked by Sif, so she was guessing that super-strength or no, he kinda got off on being manhandled by tough ladies). But Coulson held his own. Not only did he not pull his punches, he even managed to draw blood with a fierce jab that split her lip. Natasha grinning with blood on her teeth was a sight that was going to haunt Darcy for years to come. But whatever floats their boats, she decided. And it was kinda cute, seeing them go all kung-fu on one another. No taunts, no chatter. Just the wet, dull sounds of flesh hitting flesh, and muffled grunts and curses when they made contact.

Ah, the sounds of true love.

By Friday, Darcy was also exhausted. Not that working with Jane hadn't been work, but working for Coulson was work squared. When she got back to her rooms at the mansion, she dropped her messenger bag on the floor, kicked off her shoes (high-heeled ankle boots with steel-reinforced toes 'cause you never knew what the day might bring at S.H.I.E.L.D.), and face-planted, fully-clothed, on her bed.

Clint found her there about half an hour later, half asleep. He dropped his gear and climbed alongside her, lying on his side inches away from her face. Darcy's eyes drifted open, and she muttered into her duvet.

"M'wake."

"C'mon. Get up."

"M'comfy." Darcy snuggled into her pillows, and Clint gripped both her wrists and tried to pull her into a sitting position. She resisted, but he could manoeuvre her dead weight easily, and she made grumpy sounds of displeasure until he let go.

"You need to get out in the fresh air and sunshine."

"We're in New York. There's no such thing as fresh air. Besides, it's dark out, you whackjob."

"Since when do you stay in on a Friday night? I think we should celebrate."

"Celebrate what? Getting busted by Fury? Surviving a week of picking up Coulson's dry cleaning?"

"Celebrate your promotion."

"Did somebody give you skittles or something? Are you on a sugar high?" She rolled over onto her back, and stretched out her arms. "Why don't you join me in my luxurious bed, Mr Barton?"

"Darce—I'm serious. I wanna take my best girl out on the town."

"Your best girl, huh?" Darcy couldn't help it. In the last week she'd gone from sexually frustrated bestie to having a super-awesome Avenger boyfriend. Life, complicated as it was, was looking up. "What do you have in mind?"
"Nice dinner, maybe a movie?"

"Make it greasy cheeseburgers followed by dancing, and you've got a deal."

Clint frowned. "I don't dance."

"Then you can watch me dance."

"How exactly is that better?"

"I'm a pretty good dancer. I really get into it, and I get all hot and sweaty and totally out of control."

"I'll get my jacket."

The club was loud. The kind of loud where you felt the bass through the soles of your feet from half a block away, and even in Williamsburg on a damp and rainy October night, people lined the block waiting to get in. However, Darcy ignored the scowls from the assembled young and trendy hordes as she waltzed up to the huge bouncer with a shaved head and a neat black suit on the door, and she gave him a hug.

"Hey, Julio!" She giggled as he lifted her half off her feet before setting her back down on the wet pavement.

"Hey, Dar! Didn't think I'd ever see you here."

"Are you kidding? First chance I got, I dragged Clint's ass up here for some serious dancing."

"Hey, man." Julio gave Clint the kind of look Darcy imagined Clint got a lot—though usually from tough black ops and mercenary types, rather than former AV Club geeks who started pumping iron once they figured out that kept them from getting swirlies and their teeth kicked in.

"Hey," Clint said, giving him a level nod as Julio unhooked the red velvet rope across the door.

Darcy pulled her wallet out of her back pocket to pay the cover, but Julio just gave her a look.

"Fine—but next time I see your mom, I'm totally reverse-mugging her. She'll be finding cash in her pockets for days."

"You know his mom?" Clint asked.

"We went to high school together. I was in Julio's senior project. He made a wicked awesome 12 minute horror movie. I played a zombie."

The inner door opened to allow three scantily-clad smokers outside, and they were hit with a wall of sound—mostly bass. Clint frowned as they fought their way to the bar. Darcy giggled as Clint raised a hand, trying to get the bartender's attention from behind a group of guys crowding the bar. Darcy tapped one of them on the shoulder, and he stepped aside with a goofy grin. She was pretty sure it had more to do with the halter top she was (barely) wearing than any good manners though.

The halter was one of her favourite "slutty tops" as Jane called them, even though she'd practically frozen as they'd walked from the diner to the club. It was backless, and had a low cowl neckline that left very little to the imagination and Clint's eyes had been glued to her sternum pretty much all through dinner in the desperate hope that she'd have a wardrobe malfunction. However, Darcy was seriously skilled when it came to picking out tops that showed off her boobs without actually baring nipple in public. She didn't even have to use double-sided tape—just practice and a lot of subtle
adjusting in the ladies room when the hem rode up in the back.

Clint scowled at the drooling fratboy, but Darcy only laughed as she placed an order for two beers using sign language more than her voice. Luckily, the bartender was fluent in either lip reading or mind reading. In this town, it could have been either.

As soon as she had the Coronas, slim wedges of lime jammed into the tall necks, they hugged the wall as they tried to find a table.

"This isn't really my scene," Clint practically shouted in her ear, and her response was to drain half the beer in one swallow before pushing him up against the mirrored wall, mostly with her lips and hips. His lips were tart with lime juice, and Darcy licked them open greedily.

When they came up for air, Darcy got on her toes so her mouth was level with his ear. "Buck up, soldier."

She handed Clint her beer, and then made sure he had an excellent view of her ass in her tight low-rise jeans as she headed toward the edge of the dance floor closest to him.

And then she began to dance.

Darcy loved dancing. It didn't matter if she occasionally lost the beat, or sometimes lapsed into "generic white girl dance" with her arms up over her head and her body basically swaying back and forth. She danced with everything she had, enjoying every second of it. She let her long dark curls fall into her face as she snapped her hips from side to side, and did a little shimmy in the tiny space she'd carved out for herself among the other sweaty, gyrating bodies.

She made it through three songs before she pushed her way back out of the throng to find that Clint had finished her beer and ordered them two more. He set them on the ledge that ran along the wall that was barely wide enough for a bottle, and stuck both hands in the back pockets of her jeans, caressing her ass through the fabric.

"You are insane," he said, voice pitched just loud enough for her to hear him, and she grinned against his mouth.

"Come join me!"

"Maybe later. Right now, I'm just enjoying the show."

"The house DJ is okay, but the guy who comes on at midnight is awesome. I'm totally gonna get you out on the floor if I have to get you wasted and get Julio to help me."

"That a threat?"

"It's a promise." She leaned into him, lifting her hair off her neck and twisting it into a lose knot. It kept getting tangled around her dangly earrings, but the effect was worth it. She might have let Natasha glam her up for the first date, but tonight was pure one hundred percent uncut Darcy, from her Balinese chandelier earrings to her black shiny high-heeled boots.

"Next time, I'm gonna make you go line dancing with me."

"Bullshit."

"You think I won't?"
"I think you can try, Iowa. But I'll fight you every step of the way."

"Hey! That's not fair."

Darcy began ticking points off on her fingers. "I do not line dance. I do not wear cowboy boots. I do not go anyplace with sawdust on the floor if I can avoid it. Sorry."

"Snob."

"Please. I lived in New Mexico; I know my dive bars. I'd just rather play pool for six hours in a place with nothing but Santana and Elvis on the jukebox."

"Now you're talking. Think we could find one here?"

"Jesus, not in Manhattan. Maybe Brooklyn. We should totally ask Steve."

She sucked on the wedge of lime, and took another long pull off her beer as Clint slid one hand inside the low back of her halter to trace the curve of her spine with callused fingertips.

"C'mon, dance with me," she purred in his ear before she nibbled on the lobe.

"I'm people-watching."

"Really? What do you see?"

"Well, that girl—" Clint pointed to a redhead in a very small dress doing shots, "is totally pretending to be bicurious in order to annoy her boyfriend. Except instead of annoying him, he's totally into it. And that guy—" he jerked a thumb toward a skinny emo guy wearing too much guyliner, "has been trying to work up the nerve to ask the blonde at the table if she would like a drink."

"And how have you arrived at these conclusions, Mr Secret Agent Man?"

"Mostly from the fact that the emo-vampire kid yelled it to his buddy five minutes ago. And as for the drunk chick, it's pure gut instinct. And that guy—" Clint nodded his head in the direction of a tall black-haired guy taking up about a third of the dancefloor, "looks like he's doing Capoiera..." he trailed off, eyes narrowing.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Clint said, and then dropped his head to Darcy's shoulder.

"What? I left my glasses at home. What?"

"It's Loki. Who is clearly still stalking you."

"Maybe he just likes the music?"

Clint gave her a look. Conveyed in that look was disbelief, concern for the safety of two hundred-odd civilians, and bewilderment at the idea that what Loki was doing could actually be called 'dancing.'

"I'll take care of it." Darcy gave him a quick peck, and slithered out of his arms before he could convince her they needed to call it in to S.H.I.E.L.D.. She fought her way past the other dancers to the cleared space where Loki was shaking his groove thing. His black hair was slicked back but curled at the nape of his neck, and he was wearing a black v-neck tee-shirt, jeans, and Docs with flames on the sides. The other clubbers were giving him a wide berth, but several girls whistled and waved encouragement.
"Hey!" Darcy tapped him on the shoulder, and Loki turned to face her. "Whatcha doing?"

"Dancing!" he yelled back.

"You dance like a freak."

He just shrugged.

"Are you having fun?" Darcy yelled over the pulsing bass, and to her surprise, Loki laughed.

"I am!"

"Good!"

Darcy headed back over to Clint, who had his phone out and was furiously texting.

"What's he doing?" he asked as he hit 'send'.

"I'm not sure, but I think it might be the lambada, the forbidden dance," she intoned dramatically.

"Darce—"

"C'mon, he's just out on the town, having fun."

"Coulson's prepping a team. They can be here in ten."

"Is that really necessary?"

Clint gave her another look, and Darcy sighed. Civilians. Right.

"Okay. I'll keep an eye on him." She started back towards the dancefloor, and this time Clint was right on her heels.

"Alright!" Darcy pumped her fist in the air. "Nobody puts Hawkeye in the corner!"

"I'll show you dirty dancing," Clint said, a wicked gleam in his eye.

The circle of dancers widened to give them space—mainly based on the looks Clint was giving them. Loki grinned that slightly frightening grin of his, and then Darcy lost herself in the music again. Her lips curved in a slow smile as Clint's hands on her hips moved her in time to the beat and she twined her arms around his neck.

She knew Loki was probably totally rolling his eyes, but she didn't care. Slowly the circle of dancers tightened again until things got back to what passed for "normal" in a night club full of hipsters. In no time, Darcy and Clint were doing that thing where they were kinda sorta having sex on the dancefloor with all their clothes still on. Darcy wasn't sure exactly how that happened, but she sure as hell didn't mind. Her body felt like one big nerve ending screaming raw and hungry. Her hair was clinging to her face and neck in damp strands, and she couldn't hear herself laughing over the music. But she knew she was.

Five songs later, Clint finally yelled, "I'm gonna get us water," into her ear, and she nodded her approval. As he pushed his way through the crush of bodies, Darcy looked around for Loki for the first time. She finally spotted him dancing with a gorgeous girl with a shaved head and skin like polished mahogany, who was nearly as tall as he was in her stilettos. He caught Darcy's eye, and she gave him the thumbs up.
Halfway into the next song, hands at her waist pulled her up against a muscled chest, but it only took Darcy a second to realise it wasn't Clint's. For one thing, the smell of BOD was practically choking her. For another, the guy was taller, blonder, and younger. He had 'frat boy' coming off him in waves; which wouldn't have been so bad if Darcy wasn't totally over frat boys.

She jerked herself out of his hands, and kept on dancing. He was still totally in her space, but not touching her which was annoying, but fine. However, when the guy pressed up against her back again during the next song, hands creeping around toward the front, she turned on him angrily.

"Dude! Back the fuck off!" she yelled in his ear, and he held up his hands in a classic 'no harm, no foul' pose. Normally it wouldn't have been a big deal, except that now she was really annoyed and there was no sign of Clint. There was a hand at her elbow, and she whipped around ready to cause someone some serious pain. But it was only Loki, the neck of his shirt dark with sweat, his hair kinda all over the place, and his eyebrows raised and lips parted in an unspoken question.

"It's okay," she said, bringing her mouth right up close to his ear. When she pulled back, his mouth was compressed in a thin line, and he was glaring at the back of the dude's head, but Darcy just shrugged it off. It was a club. She was dancing. The guy had backed off when she told him to. It happened.

Loki gave her a tight nod, and she looked around for his partner (she had to be a model. Darcy was sure she'd spotted her on last month's Vogue or on the side of a bus shelter, or something like that.) but she spotted Clint instead. He was holding two water bottles over his head dripping condensation down the corded tendons of his forearms as the crowd reluctantly parted for him.

"Everything okay?" Clint asked as she grabbed one of the bottles, cracked it open, and downed half of it in two swallows.

She opened her mouth to reply when she caught a glimpse of the back of Loki's head. He was making a bee-line for the men's room, right on the tail of the Frat Boy.

"Oh shit," Darcy said. "Shit, shit, shit."

"What?" Clint asked, and she grabbed his arm and pulled him after her.
Chapter 18

Darcy and Clint had just reached the men's room when the door burst open, practically flying off its hinges.

Four guys ran out, two of them still pulling up their jeans, and one with his fly totally unzipped. The last dude was older, and wearing a tee-shirt with the bar's logo, and Darcy assumed he was the men's room attendant. He was grey-faced and making a beeline for Security.

"Darcy, what the—" Clint began, and then the penny dropped. He moved in front of her, automatically taking point.

Loki had the guy by the throat, his feet dangling a foot off the ground, while Loki's other hand glowed with sickly green light. There was a wet stain down the front of the guy's jeans, and he was gibbering in terror.

In contrast, Loki was completely calm. He was even smiling.

Darcy stepped out from behind Clint. "What the fuck?"

Loki just shrugged as piss dripped off the toe of the guy's shoe onto the linoleum floor.

"Just teaching this one some manners," Loki said, his fingers flexing around the guy's neck.

"Let him go!" Darcy snapped, and still smiling, Loki released the fuckwad who had tried to feel her up on the dancefloor. Crawling on his hands and knees, the guy locked himself in the nearest stall.

"So some dude got a little handsy on the dancefloor. You don't threaten to kill them."

"Wait, that guy got handsy with you?" Clint turned on Darcy, who scowled at him.

"Not helping."

"Yes, I do," Loki said quietly.

"Do what?"

"He laid his hands on you."

"That's no reason to assault the guy!"

"Isn't it? Forgive me, but I was under the impression from your films and television programmes that that's exactly what one is supposed to do."

Darcy didn't think. It was like her right hand had a mind of its own. She slapped him—hard—and then again for good measure.

"You fucker, you promised..."

Clint pulled Darcy back, placing himself between her and the Æsir. But Loki only raised a hand to his cheek. His green eyes had gone flat, and he was no longer smiling.

"I promised not to kill anyone for one week, yes. And I was true to my word."
Darcy couldn't believe this. Okay, she could, but it was like she'd walked into a scene from a movie she thought had ended months ago. There was a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that she recognised, and really wished she didn't.

It was helplessness. Even with Clint standing between her and Loki, it was like she was back on that rooftop in Queens all over again. The knowledge that whatever she did, it was going to be bad, bad, bad made her feel like she wanted to puke.

"So instead of trying to be a better man, you just decided to be a better monster?" Darcy spat, almost shaking with a lethal combination of terror and fury. "We're done."

"Done?" Loki echoed.

"You and me and this—whatever this has been. I'm out. It's done. You don't talk to me, you don't pop up in my apartment. You don't come near me ever again."

Darcy turned on her heel and stalked out of the bathroom, pushing past the two beefy security guards heading toward the men's room. The club was still packed, and she heard angry shouts and accusations as she blindly made her way to the entrance. The cold damp air hit her like a wall, and Julio raised both eyebrows as she reached out a hand.

"You still smoking?"

"Nah—I quit."

"Bullshit. Gimmie one." She waved her hand, and Julio just sighed and reached into the inside pocket of his blazer. Pulling a Marlboro red from the pack, he handed it to her and held out his lighter.

"Just don't tell my mom, okay?"

"Deal." Darcy cupped her hands around the flame, and took a deep draw on the cigarette, ignoring the instinct to cough.

"You okay?" Julio asked as she blew out a stream of smoke.

"No. Not really. Can you call me a cab?"

"That guy you were with—he get fresh with you? Want me to mess him up for you?"

"Jesus, has everybody got testosterone poisoning tonight?" She leaned back against the cool cement wall, rubbing her bare arms. "No. I just want to go home."

Darcy closed her eyes, resisting the urge to slam her head back against the wall until she left a stain. Someone plucked the cigarette from between her fingers, and Darcy nearly came up swinging before she realised it was Clint.

"Since when do you smoke?"

"Only when I'm stressed out." She didn't even try to make a grab for the still-burning cigarette, before Clint ground it out beneath his heel. "Give me your phone."

He handed it over, then asked, "What are you doing?" as she started furiously pressing buttons.

"What do you think? I'm blocking the asshole from my Facebook."
"Ah. I thought, I dunno, you might be calling this in so S.H.I.E.L.D. could take him in."

"You saw what he did to one guy back there. I'm not putting the whole club in the line of fire." She handed Clint back his phone, trying to ignore the way her hand shook.

Clint took one look at her and draped his jacket across her shoulders before he pulled her up against his side and tucked her head beneath his chin.

"You okay?"

"I just want to go home," Darcy said, her words muffled by his tee-shirt. Her throat was aching and her eyes stung.

She stubbornly told herself it was just from the smoke as they got in the cab.

It was late by the time they got back to the mansion. Darcy hadn't said a word the entire ride home, and her plan was to put on her flannel jammies and crawl into bed until Monday morning. Just the thought of facing Coulson made her want to throw up, and she was half afraid to ask Clint if handsy-bathroom-dancing guy had called the cops.

However, when they climbed the wide staircase to the second floor, instead of heading to her room, Clint kept hold of her hand and turned to go up the smaller staircase to the side.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he said cryptically.

By the time they reached the top, Darcy's calves were aching and she was seriously regretting both the half a cigarette and her high-heeled boots. Clint punched in an access code into a thick steel door that looked like it could withstand a surface-to-air missile, and then he opened the door and she forgot about her aching feet and the club and everything else.

She'd never been up on the roof before.

Central Park stretched out in front of them, the cold white streetlamps illuminating the trees just starting to turn gold and orange. Beyond the park, the skyline was half-hidden by fog.

Right up at the edge of the roof were two lawn chairs. It wasn't Smith Motors. And so much had happened since those afternoons with cans of soda and bitching about his ridiculous childhood adoration of Jon Bon Jovi. But Darcy suddenly felt an intense stab of homesickness for that stupid gas station in Puente Antiguo and the wide open New Mexico sky.

"Figured you'd like the view," Clint said, dropping down into one of the chairs. "I know it's not the same, but—"

"I'm okay with skipping the searing heat and freakishly cold desert nights, actually." Darcy grabbed the end of the other chair, and dragged it closer to Clint's.

"Yeah, but you could actually see the stars," Clint said, reaching down to intertwine his fingers with hers. He was right. The sky was a solid sheet of amber from all the reflected light of the city, and she couldn't see a single star overhead; a few aircraft nav lights blinking in the clouds, but no stars.

"Yeah," Darcy sighed, and added quietly, "Jane's stars."

"You gonna be okay?" Clint asked softly, and Darcy chewed on her bottom lip.
"I just feel so stupid, you know? Everybody told me—you, Jane, Natasha. Hell, even Coulson. Everybody told me, but I really thought... I thought he was different."

"He was different," Clint said, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles lightly. "And you weren't stupid, or naïve. You wanted to believe he could change, because you're a good person, Darcy Lewis."

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"Don't you ever change," he said into her hair.

The ache in her throat from holding back tears was choking her. She laid her head on Clint's shoulder, and let them come.

"You know what really pisses me off?" Darcy asked.

"When people tie up their dogs outside restaurants when they go in to eat?"

"Okay—yeah. That does piss me off. But I can't even watch my favourite movie when I'm feeling crappy now, because he's totally ruined it for me, now."

"I still can't believe you actually showed Loki a movie about a kid and a dragon."

"Shut up. It's awesome."

"I didn't say it wasn't."

Darcy woke up alone, the smell of coffee permeating her apartment. Her throat felt raw, and her head was pounding like she'd been on a bender. She knew it was dehydration from crying, but that didn't change the fact that her brain was apparently trying to escape her skull via her eyes.

She swallowed three ibuprofen, and then splashed cool water on her face.

There was a note propped up against the coffee pot, written in Clint's slanted hand.

*Left early to work out downstairs. Breakfast is in the microwave. See you for lunch?*

*Clint*

She pulled open the microwave, and found two breakfast Hot Pockets, still warm in their little cardboard sleeves. Despite her pounding head and chapped lips, she couldn't help smiling.

"Classy, Barton. Classy."

Pouring a giant mug of steaming fresh coffee, she warmed up the bacon egg and cheese pastries with a touch of a button. The clouds of the night before were gone, and bright sunlight streamed through the windows.

A whole new day.

"A whole new chance to screw up," Darcy muttered into the depths of the mug with a sigh. Further self-recriminations were interrupted by a knock on her door. Darcy looked down at her tee-shirt and flannel pyjama pants and shrugged. If someone was going to show up at her door before noon on a Saturday, they were going to just have to deal with her monkey jammies.
Of course it was Thor. Why wouldn't it be Thor? Because what her headache really needed was a guy whose default volume was eleven.

"Hey. You want some coffee?"

"Darcy, are you well?"

Oh crap. He was being sincere. He had that meek adorable face on. The same one he'd had after he'd carried Erik home from the bar and made them scrambled eggs. The god of thunder with a tea towel slung over his shoulder—not something she could really forget.

At least he was in jeans and a tee-shirt, instead of his super-shiny armour. She was not really up for shiny right now.

"I kinda have a headache."

"Clint Barton told me of your encounter with my brother."

"Of course he did." She poured him a mug of coffee, and pushed it across the counter at him. "No smashing," she said absently. She didn't actually need to—Jane going off on him at Izzy's had done the trick. But it had become a thing. Particularly after he started hanging out with Tony, who did plenty of smashing all on his own.

"No smashing," Thor promised, taking a long swallow of the coffee.

"So how much did Clint tell you? Like, the Reader's Digest version, or did he give you a play by play?"

Thor gave her that look that meant she was speaking in cultural references he didn't understand. Just one more difference between him and his brother.

"He told me only that you quarrelled."

"Quarrelled. Yeah. That's one word for it." She sighed, and filled him in on the details. When she described the guy trying to feel her up, his expression grew hard. When she got to the bit about slapping Loki, she thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Any answer I can give, I would give it gladly."

"What is it with the whole casual violence thing? Is that just how you guys do stuff where you come from?"

Thor frowned. "It is true that on Asgard, punishment is swift and most often... physical."

"Okay, so next question: would he really have killed that guy?"

"I do not know my brother's mind. But were the situations reversed, and it had been Jane..." Thor's expression darkened.

"But what if it had been Sif? Somebody you know can take care of herself? Would you have felt all macho macho man and stepped up to cream the guy? Or would you have trusted her to do it if she wanted to?" Darcy asked, and Thor's frown was replaced by a look of contemplation. "Because that's sorta the thing for me right now. It's not that I don't appreciate the help when I need it. But I didn't need it. And I never would have asked for it—not like that." Darcy shuddered. "I'm gonna
need therapy just watching what happened."

"I admit, I do not completely understand your dismay, Darcy. You said my brother threatened violence, but no acts of violence were actually committed? Should you not rejoice that no blood was shed?"

"But it isn’t just..." Darcy buried her face in her hands. "Okay, lemme try again. What freaks me out more than anything else is how casual it was. Like, my first instinct when somebody pisses me off is to flip them off—not threaten to use their intestines to tie my shoes, you know? It's the easy way he hurts people that upset me. That it never would have occurred to him that there's a line and he'd crossed it. It's not just about Asgard versus Midgard. It's about me not being able to deal with somebody getting hurt because of me."

"You did incapacitate me with your lighting device when first we met," Thor pointed out.

"Yeah I tased you—but I didn't do it for lols. I did it because a ginormous drunk dude built like a brick shithouse was yelling shit at the sky, and there was no way me, Jane, and Erik were gonna be able to stop him if he got near us."

Thor nodded, conceding the point.

"I guess what upset me the most was that I thought Loki had changed. And he hadn't. And that's as much about my unrealistic expectations as it is his love of violence."

"I would agree with you, save for one thing: my brother never loved violence. Oh, he was trained in arms, and joined with me and Sif and our friends on the field of battle when 't was needed. But he was always looking for another way. He would not raise a hand when raising his voice would do."

"What changed?"

"Power," Thor replied immediately.

"How do you mean? Did he have all his woo-woo powers since forever?"

"Aye, he has been a master of magic for centuries in Asgard. But among our own kind, sorcery is not looked at the same way as the ability to wield a blade. Even my father, who has ruled over the Nine Realms since the time of the beginning, was more renowned for his fierceness in battle than his ability to shift his shape or cast powerful spells. But here in Midgard..."

"Yeah—sorcerers on Earth, thin on the ground. Okay, except for the fact that there are like six of them in Manhattan. But I think I get it. No-one back home thought he was cool, but once he got here, it was a totally different story?"

"I believe that more than anything else, Loki has been corrupted by the power he wields over mortals. He was never able to gain the respect he felt he deserved—but here he has fear. And fear can be a heady drug. Yet he still, I think, craves acceptance among the Æsir. Or else, why court the Lady Sif as he has done?"

"Something tells me getting into Sif's pants doesn't have much to do with winning the respect of his buddies, as it does the scorching hotness of Sif herself. Dude's had a crush for a long, long time. Way before he found out he was adopted. Trust me."

"But why did he never declare his intentions before?"

Darcy placed a hand on his shoulder. "To put it in the parlance of the sacred Midgard custom know
as the John Hughes movie—geeks never mix with jocks."

Thor was giving her that "you are speaking in tongues" look again, and she sighed.

"Geeks are kids who spend more time with books and computers than outdoors engaging in team sports. Jocks are kids who would rather be staked out on an anthill doused in honey than read a book, and live for team sports. Got it?"

"I believe I understand. So, by your reckoning, I am a... jock?"

"And Loki's a classic geek. Unfortunately of the Columbine variety." Thor opened his mouth to ask, and Darcy shook her head. "Long story. But geeks have a hard time getting together with super-hot jocks like Sif. Trust me, my friend, the entire genre of teen cinema is founded on this inescapable fact."

"If his suit is doomed, according to your culture, then why did he try?"

"Possibly I kinda sorta put him up to it. He just kept going on about her, and I was all 'Dude, ask her out already.' I was actually really surprised he did. I mean, you pine for a thousand years without making a move, I figured he was hopeless. Or maybe so deep in the closet he was having adventures in Narnia."

Thor had clearly lost the thread of the conversation. Darcy sighed.

"Sometimes I think he likes her. Other times I think he just wants her because everybody back home thinks of you two as a done deal."

"You believe that he wants her because he perceives her as mine?"

"C'mon, big guy, don't tell me the thought had never crossed your mind."

"I don't know. I know only that my brother grew so... cold in my shadow. I was blind to it until it was too late."

"Okay, before we go into a shame spiral about how you didn't hug your little brother enough when you were growing up, I think we really need to focus on the matter at hand. Namely, Loki threatening to kill a guy in a bathroom. Am I crazy for losing my shit over this?"

"You told me once that you did not wish to be another who rejected my brother for being who and what he is. But is this not what we both have done?"

"I didn't freak out because of who he is. I freaked out because of what he did. What he chose to do. That's different. I mean, that's got to be different, right?"

Darcy felt her throat grow tight again. Figured just as she finally kicked her headache, she'd start bawling again.

"I wish I knew, Darcy Lewis. I will tell you this much—had my brother intended to kill a man, that man would be dead. That he lives still is perhaps proof that my brother can change. Even if you have withdrawn your friendship, it was more perhaps than my brother has known in a very long time."

Darcy chewed on her bottom lip, and Thor put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a hug. Say what you would about Asgardian family values, Thor gave good hug.

"Hey—you making a move on my girl?" Clint said from the doorway, and Darcy giggled into Thor's
"I would never woo your lady, Clint. I swear it by my hammer," Thor said, sounding completely sincere.

"Hey!" Darcy tipped her head back so she could look him in the eye. "You saying I'm not hot enough to be your girlfriend?"

"Don't answer that," Clint said, slapping Thor on the back as he came around behind him to grab a coffee mug from the counter. "It never goes well."

"Good thing you're hot enough to be my boyfriend," Darcy said as Clint poured the last of the pot into his mug.

Darcy gave Clint a smacking kiss, and he set his coffee mug next to hers before he pulled her into his lap. "You feeling better? You eat breakfast?"

"Yes, Mom." Darcy rolled her eyes. "You know that Hot Pockets are really bad for you, right?"

He shrugged. "We'll get some fruit later."

"I should go," Thor said, giving Darcy's shoulder a squeeze.

"Oh, wait!" Darcy jumped off Clint's lap and grabbed two discs from the stack next to her television. "Here. This one will explain all the jock and geek stuff. And, um... this one is the movie with the dragons. Jane's already seen it a bunch of times, and she makes little squeaky noises right before all the good parts. So you might wanna, you know, watch it on your own, first."

Thor took them from her, and gave her one of those megawatt grins. "Thank you."

Clint watched as Thor went back out into the hallway, and carefully closed Darcy's door behind him. It barely rattled in its frame. Darcy climbed onto the stool next to Clint's and stirred another spoonful of sugar into her coffee.

"Did you just give Thor your copy of Some Kind of Wonderful?" Clint asked as he reached for the open box of Lucky Charms and picked out the pastel marshmallows.

"What? If you're gonna pick just one John Hughes movie, it's gotta be that one."

"I'd have pegged you for a Sixteen Candles or Pretty In Pink."

"Hell no. I'll take Watts over Molly Ringwald any day of the week." Darcy grabbed two pink hearts from Clint's growing stack. "Also, Duckie was robbed."

"That's my girl." He scooted his stool closer to her so he could drape one arm possessively around her waist.

"You smell like sweaty guy," Darcy pointed out as Clint's fingers dipping into the elastic waistband of her pyjama pants to caress her hip.

Clint raised a brow. "So, we'll shower."

She gave him a slow smile. "Yeah, okay."
Monday wasn't as bad as Darcy had feared it would be.

She hit snooze three times that morning and Clint had to drag her out of bed by her ankles—and not in a good way.

"Can't I call in sick?" Darcy asked from beneath the pillows as she tried to maintain her deathgrip on the headboard. However, this left her incredibly ticklish sides completely undefended. Clint only stopped her when she threatened to pee on him.

"I could be sick. Feel my forehead."

Clint laid the flat of his hand against her forehead. "You're hot."

"Really?"

"Yep. Super hot." He dropped a kiss on her lips. "But not running a temperature."

Darcy threw a pillow at him. Being Clint, he caught it without even looking and tossed it back at her, sending her glasses flying off the bedside table. Unfortunately, they didn't break. Now that she actually had vision insurance, she was thinking about getting contacts.

She still dawdled as much as she could, purposefully letting people in front of her at the Starbucks, claiming she couldn't decide on her choice of breakfast pastry, and then asking them to remake her drink twice. Eventually Clint gave up and walked the rest of the way to the tower without her. However, he was waiting for her outside the glass doors when she finally arrived.

"It'll be fine," Clint gave her hand a squeeze before he got out of the elevator. Darcy leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes until she reached her floor.

Coulson was (as always) already at his desk. He looked up when she hung up her coat.

"How was your week-end?" he asked.

Darcy just stared at him. She couldn't always tell when Coulson was winding her up. He had that kind of way about him, where he always sounded reasonable and courteous and totally harmless right up until that moment where he snapped and went all spooky ninja on your ass. Darcy had seen it happen at least twice; once when Sitwell took the last sesame bagel, and once when Coulson was escorting a known terrorist from the helicarrier to the holding cells in subbasement four. Sitwell had bought bagels for the office four Fridays in a row; the terrorist had his jaw wired shut and had to consume all his meals through a sippy cup for two months.

"Hawkeye filed an incident report," he offered by way of explanation.

Darcy winced. Of course he had. At least Bathroom Stall Guy hadn't filed a police report. She had a feeling that she would have been called back up to Fury's office, if he had. Research project or no research project, S.H.I.E.L.D. had a thing about civilian casualties.

"It was okay, I guess."

Darcy set her messenger bag beneath her desk and changed from her clogs into the fancy office shoes she kept in her drawer.
"Hey, Boss?" she called toward Coulson's open door.

"What, Lewis?"

Darcy propped her elbow on the edge of her desk and cupped her chin in her hand. "You think I'll ever actually go on a date that doesn't involve somebody having to file an incident report?"

Coulson gave her one of those smiles that she suspected made people underestimate him out in the field. "I believe that's up to you, Ms Lewis."

"Gotcha."

And just like that, it was over. No recriminations, no stern talks. She got down to scrolling through the three dozen emails that had gone out between leaving S.H.I.E.L.D. on Friday night and arriving that morning.

It was Sitwell's birthday on Wednesday, and there was going to be a cake in the conference room on the twentieth floor. Dr Banner had apparently requisitioned several species of exotic plants that were technically illegal to import to the United States. And for a chick with pins holding her femur together, Bonnie was still the first one to get to the fruit and breakfast pastries left over after the Monday morning briefing.

Work was work. Darcy put one foot in front of the other, scheduling meetings and handling correspondence, wrangling junior agents and even making it on time to her hand-to-hand sessions with Clint. What had started as the two of them half goofing off, half serious became all serious. She would never take down six Hydra guys on her own, but heaven help any idiot who tried to snatch her purse.

It was weird. A year ago Darcy was filling out applications for internships. Today she was learning how to handle an opponent in a knife fight.

Most of the time, she wasn't exactly sure what Clint was teaching her—if it was Aikido, Eskrita, Krav Maga, or down and dirty street-fighting. All she cared was whether it worked or not (and praying like hell she'd never have to find out). Most of Clint's training was about not fighting, which Darcy was totally cool with. Had she known S.H.I.E.L.D. special techniques for disarming an opponent with a knife consisted primarily of "throw a chair at the bastard and run like hell" she'd have laughed—until she watched Natasha and Clint drill the moves over and over again. According to the Widow, she'd be fully trained in four months.

Watching Natasha and Clint, Darcy was pretty sure she was never ever going to be fully trained. Not like they were trained. Not like Coulson and Sitwell were trained.

But she wasn't getting so dizzy she was practically throwing up half-way through a session. And while she wasn't losing weight according to the scale, her clothes were loose on her, and she had to buy another pair of black work slacks a size smaller. However, her rack was still, well... her rack. Which continued to fascinate Clint no matter how many times he saw it. But if Clint was a boob man, Darcy was an arm girl and Clint's biceps were epic.

While the sex was phenomenal, what surprised her was how much time they spent just talking. Okay, talking and fooling around. Clint still never talked about his family, but sometimes he would tell her about the circus. He even juggled oranges for her once, and she had to tackle him to keep him from starting to juggle knives.

"I can do it," Clint protested.
"No, you'll cut off your thumbs." Darcy grabbed the knife block, stuck it in the fridge, and then leaned against the door.

Clint made a grab for the door, and Darcy's sneakers squeaked on the tile as he pulled. "I will not cut off my thumbs."

"You'll shoot your eye out!" she said, bracing herself and pushing back against the door with all her weight.

Clint just rested his forehead against hers, hands dangling at his sides. "You are never allowed to watch that movie again."

Darcy laughed, and then tried to juggle the oranges herself. She kept dropping them. Clint just laughed and then tried to teach her. It ended up with a lot of bruised oranges, and getting caught making out on the kitchen floor by Dr Banner, who turned bright red and left without his tea.

One night when they were lying in his bed for a change, Clint kept tracing circles around her tattoo with his thumb as they dozed.

His room was pretty much just as Darcy had pictured it—completely bare except for a weight bench, a milk crate full of porn that he stashed in his closet after the first time he'd caught her going through it, and a hanging heavy bag. But there were surprises—like the acoustic guitar he could actually play, as well as the comprehensive collection of 1930s hardboiled detective fiction and *The Green Hornet* radio plays on cd.

Darcy was pretty sure eventually he'd end up in her place. Mainly because half his gear was in her bedroom, and her fridge was always stocked while his only contained leftover cartons of Chinese and curry well on their way to applying for NATO membership.

"Hey, you were Special Forces, right? So how come you don't have any ink?" Darcy asked.

"Lasered off," he said with a shrug. "No identifying marks, except for this." He tapped the side of his nose.

"I like your nose."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She rolled over so she was sprawled on top of him and kissed the end of his nose. "It's got character."

"Yeah—I'm a character, all right."

Sometimes, Darcy wondered exactly how she'd got so lucky. It wasn't that Clint was perfect. He definitely wasn't. They argued about music, about movies, and about whose turn it was to sleep in the wet spot. There was an epic fight about her mom wanting them to come out to Long Island for her cousin's Bat Mitzvah. Clint stood his ground, repeating he "didn't do family gatherings". Darcy kept on pushing. Jane and Thor took sides, and it threatened to divide the mansion for a whole six days. Then the whole thing turned out to be moot when Darcy spent that week-end working thanks to some whackjob called Kraven The Hunter while Clint was half a world away on a black ops mission.

Darcy was fully expecting a re-match, come Thanksgiving. There was only so long she could put off
introducing Clint to her mom. Especially while they were living less than an hour away.

Clint ate like a teenager, often drank the last cup of coffee in the pot, and tended to forget to actually text her when he was on missions. But he also brought her TheraFlu and home-made matzo ball soup from their favourite diner when she got a nasty chest cold. He understood that sometimes she needed quiet time to look at videos of baby sloths after work, instead of going out on those rare nights when they were actually free and could. And best of all, Clint made her laugh until she was in actual physical pain.

Plus she made him watch Benson all the way through, though Darcy did almost make Clint's head explode by constantly referring to Clayton Endicott III as "Benson's boyfriend". Her unerring ability to detect (or manufacture) homoerotic subtext in everything up to and including Disney movies drove Clint nuts, but he still hung out on her sofa watching stuff with her. Even when he swore she'd ruined Top Gun forever for him. Darcy maintained that guys took Top Gun way too seriously (and also that Iceman and Maverick were totally a couple).

Coulson's weekly "no capes" poker game became a thing, even though Darcy sucked at five card stud and Sitwell couldn't bluff worth a damn. Fury never showed up, but Natasha often did, smoking long black cigarettes and going home with the pot—when she went home. Darcy pretended Natasha and Coulson flirting wasn't both terrifying and hilarious. Everyone else pretended it wasn't actually happening, due to being creeped out. To be fair, imagining Coulson having sex was kinda like discovering your parents' porn stash. But Darcy still thought it was adorable, and made sure to schedule them "debriefings" in a conference room with locks on the doors and blinds.

Interestingly, Coulson was still always the first person at the office. And if Darcy did notice a bruise beneath his crisply starched collar that looked suspiciously like a love bite, she sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to mention it.

It had started out as just her and Jane, but she genuinely liked hanging out with the Avengers and their friends, lovers, support staff, and fellow minions. Darcy even got over most of her fear of the Black Widow, mainly due to exposure and copious consumption of vodka. Natasha could still be scary, but Darcy didn't quite feel so inadequate next to her any more. Sure, she'd never be able to do that thing where she had a guy flat on his back with his neck in a scissor-lock. And it was likely she wasn't going to learn to fly a helicopter. But the times when they hung out were actually pretty great.

It should have been weird, being friends with Clint's ex. While it seemed to freak him out a little, what was weird was how wasn't. Clint never got on her case about it—except when she blew off a training session. Plus her little shopping trips to Brooklyn meant he got to unwrap a lot of presents in the form of daring undergarments and dangerous shoes, so he didn't object too strenuously.

Life with the Avengers was never boring. Occasionally frustrating, always demanding, but never boring. Some days, Darcy actually longed for boring.

Jane got on Darcy's case for getting Thor addicted to cheesy 1980s teen movies. Darcy got on Jane's case for never replenishing the margarita mix. Clint got on Darcy's case for skipping two of her small arms sessions to go shopping with Natasha. Nobody ever got on Natasha's case, though Tony made it his life's mission to get on her last nerve regularly. Which was how Tony ended up in medical with a sprained wrist, two bruised ribs, and a mild concussion. And Darcy got stuck having to tell Pepper, because Coulson was out in the field. Luckily, because Pepper had twelve years' experience dealing with Tony getting on people's very last nerve, once Darcy started the sentence with "Natasha—" Pepper just sighed and asked Darcy to let her know if Tony did anything else stupid enough to land himself in Medical. And then they chatted about shoes for twenty minutes.

Darcy was actually surprised at how she didn't feel like the mascot anymore. She didn't look at the
people around her, and feel like she was going to be declared a fraud and an impostor. She wasn’t sure what had changed—except maybe everything had been that way all along and it was her who’d changed.

"Do you ever think about him?" Clint asked one night as they ate samosas with spicy green sauce and drank beer at one of their favourite curry restaurants.

It had been nearly a month since the club. There was no question about who he meant. Loki was always "him".

Darcy started peeling the label off the Kingfisher bottle with her short fingernails.

"He's off the radar. No sightings for weeks."

Clint nudged her knee with his under the table. "Hey, Townie—that's not what I asked."

"I know," she said with a shrug.

The first few weeks after "The Incident", she'd been hyper-aware. Every time she passed a tall thin guy in the street, there was that half-second of panic before she registered it wasn't him. She'd go to the comics shop every Wednesday, ears pricked for a familiar giggle, always looking to catch a glimpse of green cloak out of the corner of her eye. As she stood on the line at the Starbucks, her eyes would flick to the door every time it opened. But while there were hipsters and MBAs aplenty, none of them wore that familiar smirk, dark hair slicked back with too much hair goo.

After a while, the fear turned to something else that she tried to pretend wasn't longing. She didn't miss the uncertainty, the flashes of terror, the random appearances when she least expected it. She didn't miss the spamming of her Facebook wall with random photos and nonsensical comments involving a lot of umlauts.

But a part of her did miss having someone to talk to, those nights when the Avengers were out in the field. Those nights she usually spent with Jane. It often culminated with hangovers and swearing off tequila forever—or at least until the next time the team boarded the helicarrier and set off for parts unknown.

She would lie awake, listening to her iPod playlists, and pretend everything was fine. And sometimes, it was.

The mansion roof became where she went to think.

Sometimes Clint came with her, and they'd sit and talk the way they'd used to atop Smith Motors. They never dangled their feet over the edge the way they had in New Mexico. Partly because they were higher up, and partly because it tended to freak people out. Especially during the day when people could see them from the street.

When the weather turned cold—really cold, not just "wear a sweater cold"—Darcy still went up there in her giant purple puffy coat that she'd almost never worn in New Mexico. She had purple gloves with rainbow fingers, and a ridiculous hat she'd knitted herself. She liked to watch the sun go down over the park.

Sometimes she would listen to her iPod, and sometimes she just listened to life on Fifth Avenue as it passed by below her. Voices and traffic sounds would carry, but indistinct and muffled. She couldn't quite make out individual voices—just let the sound of people wash over her. People who lived their
lives every day without capes and supervillains. Who ate hot dogs and drank coffee from paper cups, and walked their kids home from school. She wasn't envious—not exactly. But she liked being reminded that there was life outside of the Avengers Initiative.

She would lie back in the lawn chair with its scratchy plastic straps criss-crossing the frame, and watch the clouds be pushed across the sky by the wind, and think about calling her mom. Emailing her dad. Maybe going out for dim sum with Jane and Thor at the place she and Clint had found in the Lower East Side. It had drunken spicy shrimp that totally killed and edamame in a spicy thai sauce that Darcy wanted to take behind the bleachers and get pregnant.

Once in a while she'd come up on the roof to find Steve in one of the chairs, a sketchbook balanced on his knee. He'd show her what he'd drawn since she'd last paged through them, and they'd talk about old movies that he'd seen in theatres and she'd seen on cable. Most of his sketches were of the people he used to know—his friend Bucky, a guy in a bowler hat with a handlebar moustache that Steve called "Dum Dum", page after page of Peggy Carter, and even a few of a guy Darcy knew from the pencil moustache had to have been Tony's dad (there was something about that family and facial hair). But sometimes there were sketches of the team, including hilarious cartoons he'd let her caption so long as she didn't use foul language. Her favourite was a series of doodles of Tony as a shark. And there was a gorgeous one of Natasha's profile that she told Steve he should give to her. He'd just turned bright red and muttered, "I dunno. Maybe," when she handed the sketchbook back to him.

Darcy even let him sketch her once, with her hair tangled by the wind, and squinting from the sun in the clear crisp autumn air. Steve tended to wear tee-shirts all the time because he said the super-soldier serum made him practically impervious to cold. Just looking at his bare arms made Darcy twitch, so she'd given him her oversized Rangers hoodie even though he was more of a baseball guy than hockey.

"No lie—hockey's awesome," she told him as he'd pulled it over his head, mussing up his perfect Brylcreem hairdo. "Both blood and vomit bounce on the ice!"

"Has anyone ever told you you're a very strange girl?" Steve asked as she'd motioned for him to bend down so she could fix his hair.

"Practically hourly," she'd said with a grin.

He kept telling her not to move, but she would pull faces, blow her hair out of her mouth, and finally dozed off. He'd sketched her looking way prettier than she was, but she recognised herself in the curve of her lips and jaw, and she'd been ridiculously pleased when he gave her the page. No-one had ever done that before. It was totally a Keith from Some Kind of Wonderful moment, only in real life.

Darcy really hoped that Steve found his Watts, because he was a great guy, but looked so sad sometimes when he didn't think anyone else was watching.

She'd pinned the sketch to her fridge with kid's alphabet letter magnets, alongside the photo of her and Clint at Coney Island. Tony had rented out the entire amusement park for the day so Steve could go on the rides without being mobbed for autographs (which had totally happened anyway, because all the guys who worked the rides and food booths were fans—or at least smart enough to sell autographs on eBay). Clint had won her a stuffed rabbit with floppy ears, despite the games being rigged, and they'd had so many hot dogs she thought she'd be sick.

(The rabbit now lived on her sofa, and she'd named it "Captain Carrot" which she would never ever tell Steve, ever.)
The roof was hardly private. After all, there was the heliport on the other side, as well as the hangar bay doors for the Quinjet. There were massive glass skylights in parts of it, and it could be seen from certain angles from the street and high ground in Central Park. But it still felt like it was Darcy's Place to her. Or maybe Clint's place he'd shared with her, since she was pretty sure he'd been the first one to drag the deck chairs and cooler up there. Most of the time it was stocked with beer and diet soda (Dr Pepper, which was another side effect of years spent in New Mexico along with the occasional yen for green chile and sopapillas stuffed with honey). It was one of Tony's inventions which kept drinks cold without ice or anything, and weirdly, no-one ever stole it even though it wasn't chained down or anything.

But most of the time, Darcy had the roof to herself. Stark had his workshop, Banner had his labs, Natasha and Clint practically lived in the gym. Thor spent most of his spare time with Jane, and Steve took off for Brooklyn when he wanted some 'me time'. And Darcy had the roof.

So, when she heard the chair next to her creak without hearing the heavy metal blast door open first, she didn't have to look to know it was Loki.
"When I was in the third grade, I stopped speaking to my best friend Carla because she stole my Harriet the Spy notebook," Darcy said, flipping the collar of her coat up against the wind. "We didn't make up until senior year of high school."

There was a long pause. "And this is relevant because...?"

Darcy turned to him, and raised and dropped one shoulder in a shrug. "I can hold a grudge."

Loki wasn't in full armour, just jeans, work boots, a black pullover with suede patches on the elbows, and the yolk of a faded green tee-shirt visible at the slightly frayed neck. The black and white houndstooth scarf was no-where in evidence, and Darcy noticed that his breath didn't fog in the crisp October air. He didn't look cold—but he did have a faint blue-ish cast to his features.

So not MBA Loki, or Hipster Loki. Just Loki, then. His hair was a tangle of black curls, and stubble darkened his lip and jaw. He'd be cute if he wasn't all knife-edges and brittle beneath his smile. Just sitting next to him made Darcy wanted to flinch away. The Xanax bottle in the bottom of her messenger bag was empty. She'd have to ask her shrink for a new script.

"Ten years isn't much to an immortal," Loki said, picking at a loose thread on the knee of his dark jeans.

"Yeah, but ten years is almost half my life so far," Darcy pointed out. "Do you really want to potentially go half your life without a single person in your corner who's there because they actually want to be there? Because from where I'm sitting, it's a very real possibility. A thousand more years of..." She waved her hands in the air, "this?"

He tipped his head back and stared at the sky. It would rain later. The clouds had that greenish tinge to them, and the air was thick with the promise of a storm. The line of his throat was carved from marble as he swallowed.

"You presume much, Cuckoo."

"Yeah. I do that. You may have noticed. But you're here, aren't you?" Darcy pointed out. "You do realise that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been using me as Loki-bait, right? So they can study the frequency of your magic or some bullshit. For all I know, they could storm the roof any second. Why risk that, unless there's something in it for you?"

"Perhaps I merely wished a formal end to our relationship."

"If you were gonna kill me, you would have done it back at the night-club."

"You struck me."

"Yep. Twice. Because you were being an asshole."

"I was defending your honour."

"Last time I checked, I was pretty much honour-free. Try again."
"I do not need to justify my actions to you," he said loftily, and Darcy was glad he was being prissy instead of homicidal because anything was better than Loki being homicidal, when you got down to it.

"I don't really care what your justifications are. You scared the shit out of a guy just because you could. Just because you wanted to." He didn't flinch—not exactly. But Darcy knew she'd scored a point. "That was a dick move, Marilyn. A total dick move."

Darcy watched his hands. The last time she'd seen him, they had glowed with an eerie green fire that she associated with magic. Right now, they were just folded in his lap. The nails on one hand were ragged.

He turned to her, those light eyes nailing her to her chair with the intensity of his gaze.

"Haven't you ever wished you could hold a blade to the throat of your opponent, to see them cower in fear of you?"

"Sure," Darcy admitted. "In high school, or once or twice in college—usually at a frat party."

She propped her elbow on the rickety arm of the lawn chair, and cupped her chin in her hand.

"But guess what? Even if a part of me would love to see all the Captain Date Rapes in the world piss themselves, I don't do it. Even if I had a blade, I wouldn't. Because that's fucking douchey behaviour, and the world has enough douchebags as far as I'm concerned. I don't wanna add another to their ranks."

Loki snorted. "Someone thinks very highly of themselves."

"Not really," Darcy said. "Sometimes I'm a pretty shitty friend. For example, not speaking to my best friend for ten years over a stupid notebook with a picture of Michelle Trachtenberg on the cover. And there was that time I purposely gave Jane decaf for a week, just so I could go out with Kyle from the furniture store. Sometimes I'm selfish, and petty, and do things I know are wrong, just because I want to. But I have limits. Everybody does. And what you did crossed a line."

There was a long drawn out moment where Darcy wasn't sure if Loki was going to toss her off the roof or give in. But he just kept staring at the clouds, his mouth compressed in a thin line until he turned back toward her.

"What if I refuse to be bound by your self-made limits?"

Darcy held up her SI phone. "Then I hit the panic button and Clint, Coulson, your brother, and about fifty S.H.I.E.L.D. guys show up and probably a lot of them get hurt trying to take you down. And I do that every single time I catch sight of you out of the corner of my eye, until they catch you."

"Is there an alternative?"

"You know what the alternative is," she shot back, trying to keep her hands from shaking.

There was another long pause, and Darcy watched Loki's hands as they tightened into fists and then relaxed again. A flicker of green danced along his long thin fingers, and then he folded them in his lap once more.

"I wish I had never gone to Jötunheimr," he said to the sky. "All would have been well, if we had never left Asgard."
Darcy let her breath out in a long sigh. "Except your brother was a total douche and probably would have stayed a douche."

"But I would have still known my mother's love, if never my father's. I would still have a brother. I might yet have wed Sif, to cement the bond between Laufey and Odin's realms. All might have been... if I had never gone to Jötunheimr."

Darcy leaned over and whapped the back of his head with the flat of her hand. Loki stared at her in shock.

"Do you have a death wish?" he growled.

"Oh my God, stop whining," she growled right back at him. "Sif was right—you let frost giants into Asgard. Shit woulda gone down, even if you'd never found out you were adopted. Shit went down. It's time to move past it. Anyway, it wasn't Jane that changed Thor. It was you."

Loki stared at her with wide, unblinking green eyes. It would have been comical, had everything in the last few months not gone down exactly has it had. Darcy took a deep breath, and soldiered on.

"Erik told us how you told Thor his dad was dead, and his mom never wanted to see him again, that he could never go home. That was what changed him. Losing everything—his home, his family. Even you. It kinda de-douched him. He left Asgard a spoiled jerk of a prince, but came back a pretty nice dude. So, you know, I know you tried to kill him and all, but he wouldn't have actually got Myeu-muh or his godlike powers back, if you hadn't actually sent the giant robot after him."

"Mjolnir," Loki automatically corrected.

"That's what I said. Myeu-muh."

"How is it you can remember all of the French lyrics in Lady Gaga, but you still can't say 'Mjolnir'?"

"Oh my God, fuck off." Darcy rolled her eyes, and just like that, the tension drained out of her. There was something calming about sniping at one another. Not back to status quo; not exactly. But something deep in her gut that had been coiled tight as a spring, ready to snap, for the last few weeks relaxed as she practically watched the emotions play across his face.

"Is this your way of telling me I created my own worst enemy?" he finally said, pushing the damp curls back from his forehead with the longer fingers of one hand.

"Oh, honey. You are your own worst enemy. You lost everything, too. You lost your home, your friends—and your brother. Now it's up to you, if you want to stay a douchebag."

Loki traced circles in the gravel with the toe of his boot absently. Darcy reached into the cooler and cracked another Dr Pepper. It wasn't like she was actually going to sleep tonight anyway.

"Someone once told me that forgiveness comes when you accept responsibility for your actions, express true regret, and strive never to knowingly repeat them. That it was simple, particularly when the one whom you wronged wishes to forgive."

It wasn't exactly a heartfelt apology—or a promise not to do it again. But it was more than Darcy had expected from Loki. It might even be more than he expected from himself.

"Yeah, well, someone told me that simple things are rarely easy."

Darcy got her phone back out. Loki watched as she hit a few buttons, and then put it back in her bag.
"Summoning your guard dog and his minions?" he asked, looking stung.

"No, you jackass." Darcy rolled her eyes, and a chime emanated from the pocket of Loki's jeans. He pulled out a slim shiny mobile phone that looked like it was three generations ahead of hers, and swept his thumb across the screen.

"Oh," Loki said, eyebrows climbing toward his hairline. "You just tagged a photo of me on the Facebook."

"Yes, I did," Darcy said as she snuggled deeper into the cocoon of her coat. "Dork."

"Wench."

Darcy nudged his shoulder with hers. "Loser."

Loki looked down his long nose at her. "Minion."

"Well played, Marilyn. Well played. Though you totally owe me a new bottle of Xanax. That shit's expensive, you know."

They leaned back in the deck chairs, and watched lightning flicker across the clouds in the West.

After a while it began to rain, so Darcy went back inside.  

Darcy was curled up on her sofa, every light in the place blazing, when Clint shook her awake. She picked up her glasses from where she'd left them on the coffee table and sat up with a yawn.

"Hey," she said, and Clint smiled down at her.

"Hey yourself."

His hair was wet and stood up in spikes, and there was a wicked looking scrape high on his right cheekbone. His hoodie and jeans were dry, however, so she assumed he'd stopped to change before coming over.

"Time is it?"

"Um... late. Or maybe that's early?" Clint scratched his head and gave her a silly smile, and she looked over at the cable box LED clock, which read 4:21. She took her glasses off again, folded them carefully before she set them back on the coffee table, and held her arms open.

Clint kicked off his shoes and snuggled up next to her on the sofa, pulling the hideous afghan off the back and tucking it around them. Darcy buried her face in his neck, and just breathed. He smelled like sweat and gunpowder and soap. A girl could get used to that, Darcy thought with a sleepy smile.

"You get the bad guys?" she asked, lips brushing the underside of his jaw.

"We got the bad guys."

"S'good." She smiled as his lips brushed her forehead, thus completing the ritual.

After the third time she'd passed out on the sofa waiting for Clint to show up and prove he wasn't dead, it had become their thing. Okay, one thing among many things. But the thing they did when she was asleep, and he wasn't dead.
Darcy was really glad he wasn't dead.

"How 'bout you?" Clint asked. "Had an eventful day?"

Darcy wrinkled her nose. "I take it you saw my Facebook wall."

"Baby sloth with a bottle of Goldschläger—kinda hard to miss."

"At least it wasn't Thor deep-throating a corn dog." Darcy ducked her head, letting her hair fall around her face. "Does it freak you out?"

"Thor at the state fair? Not really. I was there, remember? At least Williams and Garrett didn't get him on camera at the funnel cake booth. Dr Foster is clearly a very lucky woman."

"You know what I mean." Darcy pinched him. "Hey—I was a good little S.H.I.E.L.D. minion and I filed an incident report with Coulson. And he wasn't in the house. He was just, you know, on the house."

"I know—Phil texted me."

"We need to get that man a hobby," Darcy sighed. "Are you pissed at me, for giving him a second chance?"

Clint shrugged. "Everybody deserves a second chance."

"Are you just saying that, or do you mean it?"

"I never say stuff I don't mean."

"So when Tony asked you if it was weird to eat pizza with pineapple on it when he and Steve were having the epic Brooklyn slice argument, and you said 'not really, why?' you weren't actually yanking his chain?"

"That's different. Stark'd probably actually like thai chicken pizza if he actually tried it. Just because you can't fold it in half does not mean it's not actually pizza. Anyway, American Pizza is totally a post-war invention and Steve slept through all that. He was just trying to fuck with Steve, and that's not fair."

"C'mon," Darcy smacked him. "I'm being serious. Focus. Me, Loki, bromance. Suicidal, or just plain dumb?"

Darcy had come down from the roof, typed up her incident report and emailed it to Coulson, and then run a hot bath. She remembered how after Loki had first grabbed her from Jane's, she'd thrown up out of sheer terror. And now she ran a bubble bath and put on her fave playlist while she soaked until the pads of her fingers were wrinkled and her toes itched.

In all the time since she and Loki had stopped speaking, nobody had been all "Glad you finally saw the light" or whatever, about Loki. Not even Stark, who wasn't exactly known for his tact. Or Coulson, who would have been the first person to point out that being besties with someone with a body count was 'unwise'. Natasha in particular had actually been really nice to her, because no matter how weird the whole thing had been, she had been buds with the guy. And it sucks when you fight with one of your buds.

Thor, of course, had been demonstrative in his affection for Darcy. Her ribs nearly got creased on a regularly basis, thanks to his exuberant affection. She knew deep down, Thor would never stop
missing his brother. From the way both brothers had told it, they'd never really been apart. It had always been the three of them—Thor, Loki, and Sif—since they were little kids, back when humans had just discovered fire, or whatever. Thor had the other Avengers, and Sif, Darcy supposed, was dealing in her own way. Probably beating the crap out f Asgardian guys on a regular basis, and hanging out with the Warriors Three.

And Loki'd had Darcy. She still wasn't sure why he'd chosen her—not really. She was just one insignificant mortal, even if they had kinda bonded over the whole adoption thing.

Darcy wouldn't have blamed Clint, if he'd been glad she and Loki had called it quits. She'd braced herself for it, but all he'd ever seemed to care about was if Darcy was okay with it. He could have been all kinds of smug, or an asshole about it. He'd actually been there and seen the whole thing go down—and the aftermath. All he'd ever been was sympathetic and kind to her about it, agreeing to let the subject of Loki drop when she just couldn't deal. Letting her change the subject any time he came up. He didn't push, he didn't pry. He just stayed Clint, which was what she'd really needed.

One of the things she liked best about Clint (besides his ass, which was a thing of beauty) was that he never pulled the 'older and wiser' card. He let her make her own mistakes, and was there for her to lean on if things went sideways. But people had limits. Even Clint would have limits.

So it meant a lot to her, him being okay with her giving Loki another chance—even if it was another chance to totally fuck things up.

Clint rubbed her back with one hand, and twined his fingers with hers. "Look, I'm not gonna be that guy."

"What guy?"

"The guy who tries to manage his girlfriend and control her relationships."

"Yeah, well... Most boyfriends don't have to worry about their girlfriends hanging out with supervillains on a semi-regular basis."

"Yeah, well, most girlfriends don't have to worry about their boyfriends engaging in life and death battles with supervillains."

Clint pulled back, and took Darcy's face in both his hands, looking her right in the eyes.

"Look—are you asking me if I'm happy that you are Loki are hanging out again? I'm not exactly thrilled. Mostly because I don't like the idea of you being in any more danger than you already are, sleeping with an Avenger. But it's your life, Darcy. And no matter what happens, I'm not going anywhere. You okay with that?"

Darcy bit her bottom lip, and the reached up to encircle his wrists with her fingers. She leaned forward and kissed him, then said, "More'n okay."

"Cool." He gave her one of those heavy-lidded half-smiles she found ridonkulously sexy. "So long as your BFF doesn't try and kill me again, I think we're good."

Darcy wrinkled her nose at him again. "You know he's not actually my BFF."

"Whatever, Patty Hearst." He released her face, one hand trailing down her side, coming to rest on her hip. "And hey, maybe I was wrong."

"About what?"
"Maybe what Loki needed was the love of a good woman after all."

Darcy smacked him in the face with Captain Carrot, because that seemed like the only appropriate response.

After a moment, the stuffed rabbit went sailing through the air and bounced off the kitchen counter.

And Darcy was too busy to care.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to thank my Yuletide writer eli, whose Clint/Darcy Yuletide present Compelling Distraction sparked off a fresh wave of Clint/Darcy on ao3 and introduced my fave rare 'ship ever (Coulson/Black Widow) to a lot of people who have embraced it with their hearts and minds.

Thank you Google for making it possible for me not only to actually find shots of Central Park from the roof of the Frick Collection (aka Avengers Mansion)...

...but also introducing me to the joy and wonder that is Jeremy Renner, singing (even if I did accidentally infect my netbook with malware while googling hi-res images of his face to double-check his eye-colour. IT WAS WORTH IT).

Don't click on Russian websites with fraudulent security certificates, children. Learn from my mistakes.

This is the dress Darcy wears on her and Clint's first date (you'll have to imagine it in sapphire blue satin):
This photo is the reason Coulson's ex-wife is played (inside my head) by Felicity Huffman:
This photo is sloth!Loki because I have Photoshop, and too much time on my hands:

Thor and the corndog comes from *Improvise* by jenna_thorn and if you have not read it yet, what are you sitting around here for? GET YE HENCE!

Also, "Tony Shark" (and his fellow *Aquatic Avengers*) comes from *Tamzing* on the Tumblr.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!